Star Wars: Into The Unknown

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Summary

Out in the Unknown Regions, a mystery slowly unravels that will prove far more dangerous than anyone could have realised. Thrawn, Ezra, Sabine, Ahsoka, Luke and many more will have to find their place in this new and uncertain future.
Chapter 1 - Prologue: Part 1

(NB - This story was first published on FanFiction.net but from now on will also be posted here. The first 7 chapters will be posted immediately and remaining chapters will be released in tandem)

This story is my attempt to continue on from the story of Rebels and explain the fates and futures of Ezra, Sabine, Hera, Thrawn, Ahsoka and the others after the finale. Eventually, it will become more intertwined with the Original Trilogy and even the Sequel Trilogy as well as brushing the Anthology films, Prequels and TCW a little too. I’ve tired to keep it as canon complaint as possible although as we get new stories I’m sure it'll start to contradict things and I’m sure there's more than a few oversights and errors on my part already. I'll do my best to keep it in line with canon but be prepared for some minor diversions along the way.

Each chapter will typically feature a little bit from each of the main characters. Ezra, Hera, Sabine and Thrawn are the main focus to start but over time threads will merge, diverge, be introduced or be ended as the story progresses. Some chapters might focus on one story line or one particular event and I’m trying to make sure that every chapter and section explores something interesting and relevant or impacts the story in a tangible way.

The first two chapters will be prologues of sorts, just to explain what's happening immediately after the finale and to cover one or two things that I wanted to explore but that couldn't be done in the main body of the story. In this chapter: Hera returns to Yavin, Ezra awakens after the hyperspace jump, Thrawn tries to reorganise and Sabine thinks about her future.

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Year - 0BBY, approximately 2 days after the Battle of Lothal and the disappearance of Ezra Bridger.

"Ghost to Yavin 4, requesting permission to land."

"Affirmative Ghost. Senator Mothma has been awaiting your return."

"I'll see her as soon as I'm planetside", Hera said reluctantly as she effortlessly guided the Ghost through atmospheric re-entry down onto the isolated jungle moon that hosted the rebel base.

The ancient structures loomed low on the horizon as her trusty vessel drew closer. It was instinct more than effort at this point. Hera Syndulla was such a gifted pilot that even landing, the most complicated part of any flight, was as natural as breathing. In the cockpit seat beside her the bearded Captain Rex took in the sight of home with a hard sigh.

"Coming back to base is never the same, is it?", Rex asked her quietly.

Hera kept her attention on the controls but her heart sank, "Nothing will ever be the same now."

The statement marked the end of the very brief discussion; she was in no mood for talking. Her hands flicked some switches and controls necessary to bring the ship in to a safe landing as Rex silently stood up from his seat.
The old Clone remained standing just to her side, enough to be sure he was still in view, "I can get everything sorted here if you'd like after we touchdown, let you go off and deal with the big-wigs", he chuckled.

The Twi'lek forced a quarter-smile to him, "If you wouldn't mind, Rex. Thing are just... you know, right now."

Rex eyed her sympathetically, knowing all too well what it was like to lose those close to you, "Of course, General. You won't have to worry about a thing." The old soldier saluted out of habit and began to leave before stopping for a moment, "Listen, Hera... we're still all here for you. Me, Zeb, Kallus and everyone. If you need to talk then you know where to find us."

Hera turned back to look at him but couldn't muster the strength to smile again, "I know, Rex. Thank you."

With a nod, Rex disappeared from the cockpit allowing Hera to guide the ship to ground alone. The towering turrets on the perimeter sighted her as she came in and as she descended the tiny green and orange specks on the ground became pilots and technical crews clearing the area. There weren't any faces she immediately recognised among the crews as the Ghost planted itself onto its landing gear. Not that there were many people left for her to recognise anyway. She powered down the engines and pressed a few switches to open the pressure valves and lower the boarding ramp to the ship.

Sitting for a while before deciding to move, Hera inspected the base they'd built. Y-wing bombers, X-wing fighters and U-wing transports lined the landing area as did a bustling crowd of ground crews, soldiers and general staff working around the clock to keep the Rebellion ticking. A few years ago, seeing such a sight would have been unbelievable, the Rebellion really had come a long way. In the past, she'd have grinned and swelled with internal pride. That last part was still there, somewhere, but it was buried beneath a feeling Hera hadn't felt in a long time: loneliness.

Deciding now wasn't the time to dwell on things, Hera steeled herself and got up, her back aching as it had done for a few days now. The stress was probably taking a toll on her body. The Twi'lek found her way out of the cockpit and slowly climbed down the ladder into the cargo bay where Rex and Zeb were already starting to unload the various pieces of equipment they'd brought back with them. Zeb acknowledged her with a nod of his head and returned to his task. Descending the ramp out of the ship, she was greeted by a young officer.

"General Syndulla, Senator Mothma is requesting your presence", he stated with a crisp salute.

Hera never was one to return the gesture, "So I've heard. Let her know I'm on my way."

After the officer commed ahead, Hera walked past the numerous ships and busy throes of people and headed towards the central temple in which Rebel Command was found. Everything was a blur around her, as much from physical exhaustion as from mental, and as she entered the covered hangar of the temple she could barely recall ever walking the distance to it. Just this debrief, then you're done. Hera very rarely found herself as eager to put aside her duties as she did now. There'd been no time to process everything in the last few hours and days, let alone to sleep as well. Rest was all Hera could think of as she entered the Command Room. She knew what she'd have to tell them but she didn't know if she'd be able to keep her composure to do so.

The door opened to show Senator Mothma, as expected, along with General Dodonna, all stood around the strategic planning map in the centre of the Command Room. Also, around it was the not-too-familiar face of General Draven as well as the holographic figure of Senator Bail Organa, stood beside a woman Hera still recognised as his daughter Leia Organa. They look
nothing alike, she noted as she made her way to stand at the map.

Senator Mothma greeted her with a warm but somewhat rehearsed smile, "General Syndulla, we've been looking forward to your return. There's only so much we can learn from Imperial news sources."

"It's a relief to be back, Senator. The Tie Defender factory has been destroyed and the Empire has been expelled from Lothal," Hera announced with a distinct lack of her usual fire and enthusiasm.

"And what of Admiral Thrawn?", Bail Organa interjected.

"Most of his fleet above Lothal was destroyed and he himself has been... removed." Hera didn't know how to explain it, to tell Rebel Command a flock of space whales had hyperspaced away one of their deadliest adversaries wasn't something she'd expected to ever have to deal with.

"His fleet has been destroyed?", Mon Mothma asked in surprise.

"Destroyed", Hera confirmed. "It's a... long story. One that I'm not sure you'd all believe."

"I'm sure you'll enlighten us some other time. The fact of the matter is Thrawn's fleet has been destroyed and he's out of the game", Bail Organa reached to stroke his beard, "But what of the other... complications?"

**Complications?** To call what happened 'complications' struck a nerve in her and she had to fight the urge to raise her voice at him. Remembering she was a General in a war not a delinquent in a cantina fight, she held her tongue and cleared her throat. "I'm sorry to report that... Kanan..." Hera felt the all too familiar feeling of tears creep up on her but she kept fighting them, "Kanan... gave his life to complete our mission."

There was an unmistakable sense of shock at the news, the Rebel leaders had been hoping the death of Kanan Jarrus was nothing more than Imperial propaganda.

Mon Mothma seemed genuinely sympathetic towards her, placing a hand on Hera's arm in comfort, "I'm sorry, General Syndulla, I know you two were close."

Hera wouldn't let herself cry in front of them as hard as that might be and forced herself to look Mon Mothma in the eye, "Thank you, Senator. Kanan did what he had to do and he wouldn't have had it any other way."

"His sacrifice will be honoured and remembered, I promise you", Mon Mothma let her hand fall and turned back out to the Rebel leaders, "I know this news isn't all good, but at least we've put a stop to Thrawn's plans for the Defender."

Bail Organa sighed heavily, "I understand that but it's not worth losing a Jedi over. This cost was too great."

"That remains to be seen, Senator", General Dodonna sounded disappointed at the news but Hera could tell the old General in him was glad the Defenders never would see widespread production.

There was more to tell them and she knew it was best to get it out of the way now. "There's something more. Ezra. Lieutenant Commander Bridger, he's also... gone."

The news of Ezra's loss seemed to take them all by surprise, Hera could swear she saw the colour drain from Mon Mothma's face. "Gone? You mean the Empire-?"
"It's complicated, Madam Senator", Hera interrupted. "Ezra has disappeared, we don't exactly know where to only that he's gone."

Leia leaned forward onto the map table, joining the conversation for the first time in the meeting, "If there's another Jedi still out there we have to track him down. What help can we spare?"

Bail's hand reached forward as if trying to pull her back, "Relax, daughter. I want to help the Jedi as much as you but the Rebellion doesn't have the resources to scour the galaxy for one person."

Hera found herself struggling to meet the gaze of her comrades, "Ezra... finding him might not be something we can do right now", the urge to sob mounted even more but the Twi'lek would not break. Not here. Not now.

Mon Mothma hadn't been prepared for the sudden disappearance of Ezra either, losing one Jedi was enough to sour the mood let alone two. "I see, General Syndulla. I hope you will keep us updated on any developments."

"I will, Madam Senator." Hera let out a deep breath, glad that the task of delivering the hard news was over. "With all due respect, Senator, it's been a long few weeks. May I have your permission to take some time for... readjustment."

"Of course. You're dismissed, General. And thank you for everything you've done, you and your crew have saved countless lives with your actions on Lothal."

Hera answered with a smile and a nod to the other leaders and turned to leave. It was true, stopping the Defender program had saved the lives of countless pilots, civilians and soldiers alike. Kanan and Ezra would have wanted it that way, they were always willing to give of themselves for others. It was a hard consolation to accept but Hera knew one day she'd be happy with it.

She hadn't gotten more than a few metres from the briefing room door when she heard it open behind her. Hera turned to find Leia Organa catching up to her, concern and worry on her young face.

"General Syndulla“, Leia began.

Hera smiled thinly at her, "Your Highness, it's nice to see you."

"It's been too long, General. I just wish the circumstances were better." Leia looked down at the floor for a second, "I'm sorry about Kanan, he was a good man."

"Thank you, your Highness. I appreciate that."

"And Ezra too… I owe every member of your crew my life. Everyone here owes them a debt we can't ever repay.", Leia said. "And call me Leia. No need to be formal with me."

Hera nodded, "That's kind of you to say, and it's just Hera."

"Well, Hera.", Leia leaned in and placed a hand on Hera's arm, "If there's anything you need, personal or official, I'll do what I can."

For someone the same age as Ezra, Hera was taken aback by Leia's maturity. The feisty rebel Princess had been something else when they'd first met her, sharp and brave with attitude to match. Hera was pleased to see that Leia had kept that same compassion and warmth despite the stress and danger of her life.
Leia slowly took her hand away but kept her face close. "I don't care what they said in there", she nodded back at the briefing room, "If you get any leads on Ezra then let me know right away. Friendly faces are too few these days, I'd like to help you out any way I can."

Hera admired her conviction. True friends really were a rarity these days but Hera knew she might well have another one right in front of her.

"It means a lot to hear that", Hera said and watched her intently.

Leia stood back, "Anyway, you deserve your rest and I've got meetings to drag myself through. Take care of yourself, Hera."

The Twilek smiled at the young woman, "You too, Leia. Don't get in to too much trouble."

"You know me, Hera", Leia grunted a small laugh. "I'll see you soon", the Princess regarded her warmly before turning back towards the briefing room.

Hera watched her go before making her own way back towards the Ghost. Everything she knew about life in the Rebellion would be different now. She knew she could handle it, it was in her nature to pull through, but she wasn't heartless. Right now, all she could do was take some time for herself and come to terms with everything that had happened.

Maybe rest will get rid of this damn headache too, she grumbled to herself.

"GAH!"

Ezra awoke with a scream and a searing pain in his shoulder. He was on his lying on his back, and the sudden jolt upright caused all the blood to rush from his head. If he'd been standing he'd have nearly fainted. His eyes squinted. Everything hurts. Everything feels... strange. Propping himself up on his elbows, he breathed in heavily to fight the breathlessness he felt. Ugh, what happened? After a few seconds, it all came flooding back. Right... purrgil. Hyperspace.

Ezra finally looked around his surroundings to remind himself what happened. He was still on the Chimaera's bridge, in the same position in which he'd been as the purrgil whisked them all away. They're gone? The purrgil were nowhere to be seen, their seething masses of tentacles and tendrils didn't ensnare the bridge as they had in his last memories. Wherever they had taken them, the purrgil had decided to leave him there and move on. Not that he could tell where 'there' was. The emergency shields had come up across the bridge, sealing it away from the cold vacuum of space. Ezra could only guess as to why they hadn't activated earlier, perhaps something to do with the strange powers of the offending creatures or something as simple as them getting in the way. Either way, they were up now and were keeping them alive.

Then his eyes picked up the slumped mass of Grand Admiral Thrawn. He was unconscious, but left sitting upright against the far end of the bridge, his body facing back towards Ezra. His clothing looked slightly torn and even charred, his head oozing small trickles of blood from several minor wounds and an unusual slimy substance covered areas across his uniform. To Ezra's disappointment, the subtle but consistent rise and fall of his chest showed that the Chiss was still breathing. Other bodies were scattered on the bridge too. Soldiers of various stripes and officers of varying roles, all lying unresponsive on the cold floor. Ezra couldn't tell how many were alive and how many weren't. All his mind thought of now was: what next?

His head clearer and his senses returning, Ezra pulled himself onto his feet. The blaster burn on his shoulder was painful but the fact his arm hadn't been blown off told him it wasn't anything major.
Just a flesh wound. With a groan, Ezra turned back to look at the sealed bridge door.

Ezra was relieved to see it was still operational as it opened after detecting his movement. As it slid open, more bodies greeted him. This time of the squad of soldiers that had tried ambushing him in the last moments before the jump. They seemed quite clearly to be breathing yet unconscious all the same despite their lack of direct exposure to hyperspace. Emergency systems were in place for damaged or unusual hyperspace journeys, though Ezra doubted 'hyperspace via purrgil' was a situation the Empire planned for. The fact the ship was still in one piece meant that the failsafe systems had at least activated and saved the life of everyone on the Chimaera and presumably the other Destroyers too.

Great, what now? Ezra took a moment to think of his options. He could stay and do something about Thrawn. Suddenly he realised that there was no telling when Thrawn would awaken and any surviving Imperials were going to check on the bridge as soon as possible. It was out of the question, even with Thrawn's actions and allegiances, to just execute him in his sleep. That left only one option: escape. But where to? Where even was he? Ezra decided such questions could be asked later, he didn't have the time to waste by standing on the bridge pondering.

Reaching down with a pained grunt, he picked up an E-11 from a fallen trooper for protection and limped his way off the bridge. He was still in the process of regaining his footing and balance but every step was making it easier to walk. His shoulder hurt and he must have slammed his hip down pretty hard when he fell, but Ezra was confident he'd avoided any serious injuries. If you don't hurry up, that won't be true for long.

Exiting the bridge, he emerged into a standard imperial corridor. Wisps of smoke flowed across the ceiling and the low-drone of emergency alarms echoed throughout the passageways. Recalling his mental map of a Star Destroyer, compiled by years of infiltration missions, Ezra set off in the direction of the hangar. It was his best hope of escaping, far more so than an escape pod. Escape pods lacked any sort of hyperdrive or advanced navigational systems. Ezra didn't have a clue where the purrgil had left them and he had every intention of finding out as soon as possible.

Turning another corner, the bodies of a few more troopers littered the floors. In the next corridor, several more. All seemed to have been heading in the direction of the bridge. Had the purrgil not come in time, any one of these troopers could have been his end. Without his lightsaber he was barely a match for this many opponents. If only-

"Uggghhh...",

Ezra's heart stopped as he heard the distinct groan from behind him.

"Ughh. What the-?", A stormtrooper was stirring from his rest and pushing himself up onto his hands and knees a few metres behind him. Luckily, he hadn't turned around to see Ezra yet.

Great, out of time. Immediately breaking into a sprint, Ezra pushed his aching body as fast as it could down the corridor towards the hangar.

"Hey! It's the Jedi", came the voice from behind him. Karabast.

Under the noise of his own boots slamming on the floor with each step, Ezra couldn't tell if the trooper had started giving chase or alerted the rest of the ship about his presence. It didn't matter now, sooner or later every surviving Imperial on the ship would be converging on his position. He ran down more corridors and spotted more than a handful of downed officers and troopers, all put to sleep by the very sudden but brief loss of oxygen and violent movement of the ship in the seconds after the purrgil whisked them away. As Ezra pressed closer to the hangar, his legs
screamed at him to slow down. He hadn't had much rest in the last few days and sprinting across an entire Star Destroyer was not something they were particularly eager to do. Closing on the hangar, Ezra charged through the door into the final corridor to his destination and froze. Three stormtroopers, all awake and upright, were staring right at him.

All the troopers raised their blasters. "Blast him!"

Ezra's hand shot out and a wave of force energy sent them all cascading backwards. Ezra ran towards them, bringing his blaster down and dragging the barrel hard into the helmet of one of the troopers. As he leapt over the stunned Stormtroopers, he quickly turned to face behind him. As expected, the other two troopers were reaching for their blasters. Ezra didn't hesitate now. Even when sprinting, Ezra's attuned force abilities told him exactly where to aim and allowed him to get off the perfect shot. He pulled the trigger twice, sending two bolts straight into the visor of one trooper. As the other watched his comrade fall another volley from Ezra put him down.

The final door opened into the hangar but the scene didn't much help his hopes of escaping. The sudden jump had wreaked havoc on the hangar bays - crewmen and pilots were strewn across the floor, a few ceiling-mounted Tie fighters had crashed down and exploded on the ground and plenty of crates, ladders and munitions boxes had been strewn across the area. Regretfully, some Imperials were already up trying to sort out the mess. Ezra darted behind a fallen crate to plan out his options.

Eight troopers, an officer, two pilots. Wrecked tie... wrecked tie... wrecked tie... shut- Aha! Shuttle! Ezra spied a Sentinel-class Imperial shuttle relatively undamaged on the far side of the hangar, possibly Thrawn's personal one. Some debris had fallen onto it and chipped a bit of the armour plating off but it looked to be in good enough condition to fly. Right now, Ezra didn't care who it belonged to or if it had been a bit damaged. Between him and escape, though, stood a small detachment of Imperials in an open area. There was no way he'd get there without being spotted and in a firefight these odds didn't look good. He'd be easily flanked if he tried outmanoeuvring them. He could try for a runner but he doubted he'd even get half-way before they took him out. His only option was to ambush them and hope the element of surprise could save him. Ezra leaned out from his cover, resting the blaster carefully across the crate to get a stable platform to fire from. He watched the Imperials carefully, waiting for the right moment.

"Hey, you have any idea what happened?", one trooper asked the other.

"I've learned not to ask questions about what goes on anymore, makes me feel better about it", the other replied. The trooper then pressed his finger up to his helmet to receive a message. He nodded several times and turned to the others. "Just got word, that Jedi is on the loos-"

A blast from Ezra's rifle ended his sentence prematurely as the trooper's lifeless body crashed down to the ground. The open ground wouldn't have given Ezra enough cover to reach the shuttle, but it also didn't give the Empire any cover either. Before the other troopers could react, Ezra pulled back hard on the trigger and unleashed a barrage of bolts at the squad. They quickly dispersed and Ezra managed to catch two more of them in the chaos.

"Hangar to command! The Jedi is here! Request- GAH!", Ezra got the officer square in the chest and started to manoeuvre out of his cover.

Three troopers down, one officer. Ezra moved forward quickly and dived behind another crate as one of the troopers took pot-shots at him from the other side of the hangar. Out of the corner of his eye, Ezra was relieved to see the two pilots make a break for the exit, leaving him with just five troopers to face. Five versus one, an unfair fight for them.
In unison, two of the stormtroopers stepped out of cover from their crates as the other three rained blaster fire on him. They were hoping to pin him down long enough for the other two to close in. **Bad idea**, Ezra thought as his unorthodox solution presented itself. Closing his eyes and with a calming breath, Ezra focused his mind on the crate he was hiding behind.

In an instant, Ezra was leaping out of his cover and the crate flew forward straight into the approaching troopers. The move had taken them off-guard and both were bowled over by the projectile. Taking advantage of the distraction, Ezra covered a fair few metres of ground between him and the shuttle whilst firing indiscriminately at his attackers. A lucky shot caught one of the three covering Stormtroopers in the chest, knocking him out of the fight.

The two stormtroopers he'd knocked over were scrambling to their feet and jumping for their own cover from Ezra's attacks.

"**Kriff it! Where's our reinforcements?!!**, one screamed into his helmet.

The trooper beside him was just as irate, "**Can we fall back?! This guy will kill us!**"

"**Get your head straight! The Admiral will have us both court martialled if we retreat!**, the other replied angrily.

Taking the chance, Ezra leapt up once again with a series of blaster bolts from his rifle. This time though, the troopers were more prepared. As soon as he stood up he was diving back down again, a handful of shots nearly grazing his arms and chest. **Karabast, I knew this was going too well.**

The troopers were starting to get their act together now. One of the soldiers made some hand gestures to the other three and they all began spreading out whilst firing towards Ezra's position. Even now, he was still too far away from the shuttle to make it without getting shot. He was out of options and out of time, so he reached out to try a new strategy.

Ezra focused on the troopers through the force, reaching out to them to feel their minds. Fear, anger, confusion, shock. He felt it all. Then he got what he was looking for; the trooper he wanted. That same one who seconds earlier had wanted to retreat. **Where there's a suggestion, there's an opportunity.** Ezra remembered Kanan's lessons on Jedi mind tricks. They weren't all powerful, they only worked when the idea was already in the target's head. With immense focus, always conscious of the Imperials closing in around him, Ezra made that link with the trooper.

**You will fall back.**

Ezra felt no reaction and hardened his efforts.

**You will fall back.**

"**Fall back! Fall back!**"

A grin flashed on Ezra's face at the words. One of the troopers started sprinting away from Ezra's position as the other three stared at him in confusion. It was all the time Ezra needed. He brought his blaster up from behind cover and blasted the closest trooper, taking him down in three hits for good measure. By the time the final two opponents had turned back to him, Ezra was running toward the shuttle and firing the blaster with one hand behind him. Realising they'd been outmatched, the two troopers simply ducked behind some crates for shelter, not even bothering to risk firing back at him.

The ramp was already lowered on the shuttle and as he ran up it he found no crew or Imperials present. Ezra smashed his hand against a button in the main hold to close up the ramp from any
pursuers. He found his way into the cockpit and threw his rifle aside, sliding into the pilot's chair and activating all the engines and systems he'd need. Weapons check, shields check, fuel... nearly empty. Ezra wanted to smash his head through the kriffing viewport. Not even enough fuel for an hour's jump. An hour couldn't get you from Krownest to Mandalore, let alone anywhere Ezra wanted to go. He still didn't even know where he was. Now that he was here it started to hit him how lost he truly was. His hands went straight for the navigation system and switched it on. The screen made his heart sink. The Unknown Regions.

His mouth fell open and he felt his face drop. Uncharted territory, days in hyperspace from anywhere he knew in a stolen ship with low fuel and with no hope of someone ever finding him. No... you know you can count on her. Ezra's mind focused on her, on her memory and his faith in her. No matter where he was, she'd come for him some day. With a sigh he skipped over the last few checks and brought the ship off the deck, hovering it towards the hangar entrance, a number of tiles and cables sliding off the shuttle as he did so. The reinforcements the Imperials had wanted were arriving as Ezra left but their weapons couldn't do much against a well-shielded shuttle. Ezra gave them a mocking grin and salute as he sailed the ship out of the Star Destroyer's shields.

There wasn't enough fuel for a long hyperspace jump but putting even a bit of distance between him and the Empire was essential. The trouble was the location. There weren't any known safe hyperspace trajectories this far out in the galaxy. A bad jump could send him slamming into a planet or asteroid belt. It was a risk he'd have to take though and one he could only trust his instincts to see him through. Ezra calmed his mind, trusting the force to guide his actions. Unconsciously, he drifted the ship to the side as he put distance between him and the fleet. Clearly, the crews were still in disarray as not even an attempt was made to shoot down his shuttle.

Staring out at the blankness of space, Ezra felt a twinge in the force. Ezra had no idea what it was but instinctively he followed it and steered the shuttle towards the mysterious source. Activating the hyperdrive of the ship, the stars stretched out in front of him and the ship lurched forward with the familiar feeling of inertia. It was only as his ship entered hyperspace that he realised how much of a mistake he'd just made.

Every defeat is a lesson learned. No warrior can hope to have a career only of victory. Failure is often the greatest teacher in any walk of life and none more so that in paths of war. An error only becomes a mistake if it is allowed to be repeated, a situation any warrior must take strides to avoid. The most unexpected strategies, like the most successful, can only ever be used against a good strategist once. After that, they are merely one more strategy with which a true tactician cannot be beaten.

"Grand Admiral?!", the voice echoed. "Grand Admiral, are you hurt?"

Thrawn's eyes peeled open to see the face of one of his bridge crew staring down at him, shaking his shoulders to jolt him awake.

The officer grabbed his comm and started shouting into it, "Get a medical crew to the bridge, now!"

Raising his head with a faint groan, Thrawn looked up at the officer, "That won't be necessary, Captain."

His face contorted into a look of shock and concern, at least some of it genuine. "But... Sir?"

The Chiss wasted no time in standing himself up and inspecting the state of his command bridge. "My injuries are not serious", he told him dismissively.
His red eyes scanned the bridge for any evidence of the young Jedi who'd condemned him to this fate. He saw chaos around him; a few officers were standing up and recovering from their journey and Thrawn could see a few more of his personnel had yet to awaken. Smashed material from the viewports and pieces of terminals and ceiling tiles were thrown across the ground during the creatures' attack. Thrawn noted his own condition too. A few scrapes and burns but nothing serious, and the oozing stains from whatever manner of creature had intervened. His immediate concern was not any of these things. His attention turned to Ezra Bridger, or more so the lack of him.

"Where's Ezra Bridger?", he demanded as his eyes shot quickly to the Imperial.

The words sparked him to attention and a flash of nervousness appeared on his face. "Uh... he's escaped Sir.", the officer fumbled.

If looks could kill, the bridge officer would have been flayed on the spot. Thrawn glared at him, "Escaped?"

"He awoke earlier, Sir. M-most of the ship was still... incapacitated. He was already in the hangar by the time we knew he was escaping", the man had taken half a cautionary step back from the Admiral.

Thrawn's reaction didn't move beyond a disapproving glare, "Do we have a damage report on the other ships?"

"Uhhh, no Sir."

Calmly, the Admiral walked past the officer and towards the communication terminal. He hailed Captain Pellaeon and Captain Sarlis on the other two destroyers. "Pellaeon, Sarlis, what's your status?"

His hail went unanswered for a few seconds before the blue image of Captain Pellaeon flickered to life around the holographic table. His uniform was torn, his officer's hat absent and his own wounds similarly unattended. Pellaeon was perhaps old among Imperial Officers, easily into his late 50s with a heavy white moustache, but Thrawn had found him to be far more sensible and competent than most others in the Imperial Navy. He was no Vanto, the Captain's mind didn't possess the same talent for strategy and was unlikely to pick them up as much under Thrawn's command, but his military sensibility had been evident as soon as he joined the Seventh Fleet. Thrawn had also found Pellaeon to blend well with his own values, likewise seeking to avoid unnecessary violence and also willing to at least try to see the bigger picture in any situation. Thrawn had developed a certain respect for the man.

"Grand Admiral. My crew seems to be alive and mostly well but the ship has suffered extensive damage. I'm trying to get a crew down to assess the damage, though from here things aren't looking great."

Any response was interrupted by Captain Sarlis' appearance at the holo-table. She, like Pellaeon, had suffered apparently minor injuries, although appeared to have made some attempt to clean herself up. Sarlis was about as new as could be to the Seventh Fleet, having been hastily assigned to Thrawn on his trip to Coruscant mere days ago, and it was already clear that her position was one earned through favours, not by merit. Her black hair was tucked neatly under her cap and her olive skin was clear of blood or dust. A clear symptom of a career that so far had been a matter of appearances over achievement.

She stood rigidly to attention, "Sir, my ship is in chaos. I've got people down all over the ship and
most of our systems look like they're damaged."

"Relax, Captain Sarlis. I want your damage reports immediately, we need to know what we're dealing with", Thrawn commanded.

Thrawn noticed the hesitation in Captain Sarlis a few seconds before she decided to speak, "Sir, what happened? What were those things?"

"Such questions are not our concern right now. The creatures are gone, right now I am only concerned with the state of this fleet."

"Y-yes, Sir. Understood, Grand Admiral. Sarlis out." It was easy to pick out the clear undertones of both fear and confusion in her voice.

Thrawn nodded to Pellaeon, "Same to you, Captain. Full damage report as soon as possible."

Pellaeon gave a weary nod, "Yes, Sir. Pellaeon out."

As he ended the communication, the Grand Admiral saw a squad of Stormtroopers entering the bridge. The Sergeant approached Thrawn with a salute. "Sir, the Jedi Bridger escaped into hyperspace using your personal shuttle."

"I see... thank you, Sergeant", Thrawn acknowledged before making his way to the map display. As the map flickered on, Thrawn's eyes absorbed every detail of it without a word. The Unknown Regions? Not unsurprising for mindless creatures not to stick to conventional routes. He hadn't expected that such an unguided jump would leave him anywhere familiar and now his assumption was confirmed.

The Stormtroopers and other bridge staff all found their eyes drawn to the map. The murmurs and whispering started almost immediately as others realised that they were in an almost defunct fleet floating out in the Unknown Regions beyond known space.

A technician was the first to put the realisation to words, "The... The Unknown Regions."

Thrawn's voice and composure remained stoic and calm, "It would appear so."

"But, how?", the confusion clear in the stormtrooper Sergeant's voice.

"Evidently the creatures possess some capacity for hyperspace which Bridger was no doubt aware of. They've brought us here and moved on, leaving us damaged and isolated without a clear path to the known galaxy." Thrawn's arms were clasped neatly behind his back in an at ease position. "The question now is where will Bridger escape to?"

Snapping to attention, an eager officer stepped forward, "Sir, I can dispatch pursuers along his last known trajectory immediately."

The Grand Admiral waved him off with his hand. "That would not be a wise choice. There are no known safe hyperspace routes in the area and we can't afford to waste resources on such a dangerous task. Also, without a knowledge of his fuel supply and the ship's condition it would be impossible to determine which of the thousands of potential systems Bridger has ended up in. Caution and patience will serve us better here."

The officer shrunk away with the denial, stepping back but keeping his eyes on Thrawn, "What shall we do then, Sir?"
Thrawn furrowed his brow in deep thought, "Focus on repairing our long-range communications. The sooner we re-establish contact with the Imperial Network the sooner we can resolve this issue."

The officer saluted, "At once, Grand Admiral." Turning on his heel, the officer left and the stormtrooper squad peeled off with him.

Thrawn turned and walked back up the command bridge, taking in the chaos around him. This was the second time he'd been foiled by a mysterious, unknown and unpredictable creature. The 'Bendu' as it called itself had prevented the total capture of Phoenix Squadron on Atollon and now these other creatures took a victory at Lothal away from him. As his mind replayed the events of Atollon he came to a sudden realisation.

"I see your defeat. Like many arms surrounding you in a cold embrace."

Despite his losses, Thrawn was almost amused. The Bendu's prophecy had, admittedly, played over in his mind countless times. Never though had he expected it to be so literal, to be seized by a mass of tentacles as they pulled him and his fleet into the cold vacuum of hyperspace. And it was, after all, a defeat.

Begrudgingly, he realised that the Lothal rebels had pulled a victory from almost certain defeat as they had several times before. The fault was Pryce's. In her foolishness she'd undermined Thrawn's own plans, enabled the rebels to thrive on Lothal, achieved their objective for them and gotten herself captured by them to boot. Her incompetence had finally caught up with her and brought her rule of that backwater to what was certainly an explosive end. Rukh had failed him too. Not as completely as Pryce but he'd proved unable to inflict any major loss on the rebels. Indeed Pryce's choice to kill the Jedi Kanan Jarrus was the only significant loss he was aware of inflicting on the Lothal rebels. It was a disturbing and noticeable trend in the Imperial Navy. The glory-seeking Admiral Konstantine had also cost him a complete victory on Atollon. Without the destruction of his Interdictor, there would have been no call for aid to Sabine Wren and her Mandalorians which had enabled escape for the rebels.

Once more, those below him and those he could never have anticipated had undermined his efforts.

The point was irrelevant now. Thrawn had lost. He wasn't above admitting it. It was a new experience, but one he would learn from to ensure it never happened again. If there was one thing that made him feel even a whiff of fear, it was the knowledge that he'd have to answer for these events to the Emperor himself...

Sabine stood on a rooftop of her temporary accommodation on the outskirts of Capital City, staring out at the open plains of Lothal. The same disgusting orange colour still stained the skies of the once beautiful planet, a constant reminder of the devastation the world had suffered. However, where others saw scars and ruin Sabine instead saw work to be done. She wasn't just here to protect Lothal, she was here to rebuild it alongside its people. His people... her people now too.

Ezra hadn't left any idea of how long he'd be gone for or where he'd be going to and Sabine doubted he knew anyway. Not for a second did she doubt that'd he come home though; Ezra's final message made it clear that someday he'd see them all again. She trusted him to follow that promise through, more than she could trust anyone else in her life.

For now, she had to focus on the immediate future and what she was actually going to do with herself. She hadn't been on her own for so long that it felt almost like starting from scratch again. It was probably too early to lay out a plan right now, Lothal was still adjusting to freedom and likely
would be for months to come, but in time it'd become clear what needed to be done. Kicking the Empire out was one thing, keeping them out was another. Defences would have to be built, militia forces trained, infrastructure repaired, emergency plans drawn up and so on and so forth. None of that was to mention all the other non-military tasks of housing, education, transport and more that the new government would have to sort out. Sabine smiled to herself a bit, sometimes it seemed like fighting a war was the easy part.

Thoughts of war drew her mind back to the sky and from there to Hera. She’d left almost a day ago and should be at Yavin base by now. It wasn't the first time Sabine had left the Ghost crew but this was probably the last and watching the freighter fly off into the atmosphere had torn at her heart in a way she couldn't have prepared for. It wasn't as if Hera, Chopper, Zeb and the Ghost were out of her life now - Sabine knew that the bond they'd all built wasn't going to change because they weren't around as much - but it only just started to sink in that the life she'd once known was well and truly over. Things wouldn't have been the same anyway, not without Kanan or Ezra. To not be able to hear Kanan and Hera's marriage-like bickering or to never again spend hours with Ezra just talking about life in whatever corner of the Ghost was quiet enough, it all persuaded her that staying on Lothal was the best choice, even without her duty to Ezra keeping her there.

"Deep in thought?", a voice interrupted from behind.

Sabine couldn't hide a jolt of surprise that caused her head to snap back and see Ryder Azadi, reinstated Governor of Lothal, emerging from the stairs to the rooftop.

The older man chuckled as he walked to her side, "Sorry, didn't mean to startle you."

"It's alright", the Mandalorian smiled, "How's the new job going?"

Ryder sighed with a shrug, "A hundred times more chaotic than I remember. So, about as expected really."

"You sound almost like you don't want it back."

Azadi grunted a laugh, "It's the good kind of tiring. Besides, the first time around everyone knew the Empire was closing in. All we could do was muscle them out of any interests they had on the planet and hope they didn't think we were worth the trouble to go after just yet. Now... I don't know."

Sabine raised an eyebrow at him, "You don't think the Empire will come back?"

"Maybe, maybe not. They stripped Lothal of almost everything they could, there's not much left here. Our loss for now, but it also means there's not much else here the Empire could want. Plus, with your Rebellion kicking up a fuss, the Emperor might not think we're worth the effort."

"That's surprisingly optimistic, especially from you", Sabine pondered a moment. Everything Ryder said was true, and with the destruction of the Temple the Emperor had also lost his own personal interest in the planet. Maybe an independent Lothal wasn't so far-fetched after all.

Ryder cleared his throat, "But that doesn't mean we aren't going to prepare as best we can and that's why I came to find you. How'd you feel about being the Head Training Officer of the Lothal Defence Force?"

That had caught her by surprise. She knew she'd have some role in the new military, maybe a weapons officer or at most a squad leader, but to be in charge of the training for a planet-wide defence force?
She took a few seconds before choosing her answer, "Why me? You could have asked anyone with more knowledge of Lothal or someone who has official military experience. Wouldn't someone like that be a better fit?"

The Governor looked right at her "I don't need just anyone with fighting experience, I need someone with experience fighting the Empire. Someone who knows their tactics and equipment. No one in this sector of the galaxy knows how to fight the Empire better than you."

Sabine considered it for a while longer. She'd handled the responsibility of the darksaber before, a leadership position far more dangerous than this. She was going to be on Lothal anyway and Ryder was probably right in saying that she knew how to fight the Empire more than anyone here. On second thought, it made far more sense than she'd first realised.

"Alright", she shrugged, "I'll do it."

"Thank you, Sabine. I'm glad to hear that. It's not like we'll be starting this tomorrow, there's work to be done first, but when the time is right I'm glad to know you'll help us out", Ryder looked back out over the plains with renewed optimism. "Having you will be good for the troops too. Nothing will whip them into shape like a strict, no-nonsense Mandalorian warrior."

Sabine scoffed at him with smile, "Strict? No-nonsense? Come on Ryder, you know me better than that."

"Oh, I do", he grinned, "But the recruits won't."

The Mandalorian shook her head with amusement and joined Ryder in enjoying the view. Head Training Officer of the Lothal Defence Force. Both of those titles could use some work, but they both represented a future for Lothal and a future for her. If she could use her experience to protect this planet then she'd do it in any way she could. It's the least she could do for her own sake as much as Ezra's.

"There is one other thing", Ryder began after a long silence, "Some of the local leaders and I want something to remember those who gave us our freedom."

Her head tilted to look over at him, her interest piqued. "What kind of something?"

"A memorial for Kanan. We were thinking maybe the fuel processing plant; the area has to be used for something and I can't think of anything more fitting for it." Sabine didn't answer him, the memory of Kanan was still raw and fresh right now. After a few seconds, Ryder continued, "We'd thought we'd ask you and also for you to run it by General Syndulla too. We don't want to do anything that upsets someone."

Sabine swallowed hard, "I think it's a nice idea. I'll ask Hera as soon as I can but I'm sure she'd like it too."

Ryder nodded, "Okay, we'll see what we can do."

She turned away from him, the sudden shift in the conversation still throwing her off a bit. It was strange to think of Kanan in this way, he was a father to her for so long and now... now he was already being talked of like a memory. Still, the Governor didn't settle and Sabine could tell there was something else.

After a minute or so, she was proved right. "It's not just Kanan...", Ryder started, "We also want something as a memorial for..."
"He's not dead, Ryder", Sabine cut him off.

Ryder opened his mouth as if to say something but wisely chose to keep quiet. She wasn't under any illusions about how this looked to anyone else. But no one else knew Ezra, not like she did, and something inside told her he was out there somewhere waiting until he'd be back at her side. It was bad enough to be thinking about Kanan's death and she didn't want to wake up every day to something that even suggested Ezra was gone too.

Looking back at him again, she sighed, "It's difficult to explain... I just know."

"I understand. Or rather I've given up trying to understand things like that", Ryder smiled sympathetically at her, "If you do think of anything we can do for him though, you let us know."

Sabine nodded silently, "Thanks, Ryder."

"Or for you", he continued, "We all know what it's like to lose people we love and we're all there if you need anything from us."

She smiled to herself at that, it was too easy to lose sight of the fact that she'd already helped these people so much. She still felt Ezra and Kanan did more than she ever did, but it warmed her heart to be reminded that people were grateful to her too. Freeing Lothal had been a team effort for all these years, a team effort she was no small part of. Not that she particularly wanted to take much credit, if anything the less public attention the better, but having a bit of pride in what she'd achieved might help lessen the blow of what she'd lost.

"I appreciate that", Sabine replied. "But I doubt I'll be scrambling for a memorial any time soon", she chuckled.

"Well if you change your mind, I'll get things organised", Ryder laughed as he turned back out towards the horizon. "It's getting late, I'd better get back."

"I'd better get down to bed too", Sabine said, looking down to the rooftop beneath her feet. Ryder had been kind enough to give her a house to use for however long she needed, a house she hoped Ryder was prepared to get back under a few coats of paint.

Ryder turned to leave with a warm smile and a nod, walking back towards the stairs off the roof. As he went, Sabine again looked up to the ever-darkening horizon around her. Despite all the destruction and all the painful memories, she knew the planet would pull through and she'd be along for the ride. As she cast a long gaze from east to west, taking in as many details of her new home as possible, a thin but towering speck on a faraway hill caught her eye. A speck that was very familiar. At once, she knew exactly what it was, and not a second passed before a new idea formed in her head.

"Hey Ryder", she called to him just before he disappeared from view, "There might be one thing you could help with."

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I'll say a little something about each section here. Hera's return to Yavin is mainly there to explore Hera's feelings after the finale and to establish her friendship with Leia. I won't explore it too much, that's already seen in a few comics already, but it will be relevant at one or two points in the story going forward. Ezra's section is my first time writing a real action scene and any feedback on it will be appreciated. I didn't want him to stay with Thrawn like in every other story and their separation is essential for their futures. Thrawn was a challenge to write, particularly from his perspective so to speak (without Vanto or Pellaeon...
as an observer). I wanted his section to explore the different ways that he, Pellaeon, Sarlis and the others reacted to failure and confusion. That little paragraph from the beginning of his section is an idea ripped straight from *Thrawn* and I found it quite useful in clarifying what I wanted to do with his section. As for Sabine, I just wanted to explain her thoughts on Lothal and her future plans there. If you didn't guess from the character tags, genre tags or my writing history, then I'll give fair warning of some Ezrabine in this story. It's not the entire plot or anything but it's there and does get some focus throughout.

One other thing, Sarlis is indeed an OC but rest assured there won't be too many of them. A new one will be introduced next chapter but other than that we'll mainly be focused on established characters. They'll be tame too and not Starkiller-esque demigods or evil genius masterminds.

Lastly, a huge shout out to WestwardGlance for proof-reading all of this and being an indispensable source of advice and/or grammar lessons for me. I'm not sure there's anyone here who hasn't read his stuff yet but if somehow you haven't then you don't know what you're missing.

Anyway, in the next chapter and the second part of the prologue: Ezra emerges from hyperspace, Hera makes a discovery, Sabine gets some news and Thrawn answers to the Emperor.
Chapter 2 - Prologue: Part 2

So here's chapter 2 of the prologue before we start the story proper. There's just some things I needed to establish and introduce to let the main story proceed. The length of time that's passed between each section is a bit varied, Ezra's section picks up immediately after last time, Hera's and Sabine's a few days and Thrawn's perhaps a week.

This is a long chapter and I'm not planning to have every chapter this size. I'm aiming for a 8k-10k word target to keep it long enough to progress the story but short enough so it doesn't become too daunting to read.

I should probably say that, aside from the core films and obviously Rebels (The Clone Wars too I suppose), the two Thrawn novels have the biggest impact on this story. It's not nearly as important to it as Rebels or the Original Trilogy, but ideas, events and characters will be referenced or featured. You shouldn't be too lost if you haven't read them, but be aware that some things in the Thrawn sections will mention the events of both books.

*Spoiler warning: Thrawn's section contains several details and spoilers from Thrawn: Alliances. If you haven't read the book or wish to avoid spoiling the details, tread carefully.*

In this chapter: Ezra emerges from hyperspace, Hera makes a discovery, Sabine gets some news and Thrawn answers to the Emperor.

The shuttle shuddered violently as the deafening noise of proximity alarms echoed throughout the craft. The gauges were red, the indicators critical and the controls almost completely unresponsive. The brief few seconds of standard hyperspace travel had quickly descended into emergency deceleration as the twisting blue corridor became a swirling vortex of every different colour on the spectrum. The exterior of the shuttle was glowing white hot and Ezra could see panels of plating being torn violently off the hull. His lessons with Hera hadn't prepared him for this as he fumbled every switch and button in hopes of escape.

It was no use. Nothing in the cockpit was responding. That was to be expected in this situation, he'd have probably sped up his death by trying to mess with anything in hyperspace. He should have done a full systems check before he left, if only he'd spared the seconds. If he survived this, maybe he'd get a chance to piece together what exactly had gone wrong, but as the ship barrelled through space at unimaginable speeds that chance seemed less than slim.

A deep whirring sound came from the ship, making Ezra sick to his stomach. For a second he thought it was the noise of the hull ripping apart and leaving him to a cruel death in the depths of space. To his great relief, it was only the sound of an unexpected emergence from hyperspace, not unlike the one he and Kanan had experienced when leading the Inquisitor to Anaxes. He almost breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of the cascade of colours outside turning into the strangely reassuring blackness of space.

The ship finally dropped out of hyperspace and tumbled into a roll a few times before the on board stabilisation could bring it under control. Ezra shut his eyes tight, the hectic motion already churning his stomach. As he felt the shuttle drift to a more stable position, he cautiously opened his eyes and assessed the situation. The most obvious development was definitely the massive green planet that loomed in front of him, already taking up the majority of the viewport window. That
would explain the proximity alarms, a second longer and he'd have slammed straight into it.

Switching his attention to the controls, many of the dials were burned out or still recovering. Unsurprisingly, the hyperdrive was offline and the system was registering 'critical damage'. The hull had indeed sustained significant damage but he'd miraculously avoided a hull breach. The navigational systems put him no more than a few systems away from wherever he'd been before, but it was distance that could buy him a decent amount of time. After all, no ship could easily be tracked through hyperspace, and it was unlikely any Imperial shuttle was under such expensive and unnecessary surveillance. Sub-light engines seemed to be functional although the lack of fuel meant he wouldn't get very far on them.

With no other options, Ezra initiated a planetary scan as he gently edged the controls towards the planet. The display took longer than usual but the results were encouraging. Gravity, oxygen content and water levels were all within liveable ranges. Life-form readings were high; the planet hosted life, but there was a complete lack of any technology. Whatever life down there was primitive at best and more than likely just wild animals and creatures. The ship drew closer to the planet and Ezra could begin to make out areas of mountains, coasts and flatland, all covered in greenery. More information appeared on the display: the day/night cycle was fairly standard albeit a few hours longer than Lothal, the temperature was perhaps a bit above comfortable but still something time would adjust him too and it seemed the planet was particularly prone to storms and high rainfall. Deciding that the conditions were manageable, though also lacking any other choice, Ezra aimed generally for a coastal area north of the equator, far from the intense heat of the equator.

Atmospheric re-entry was bumpier than usual but the ship held together well enough. The cloud cover in this part of the world at the time was minimal so he was treated to a pleasant view of this new planet as he descended. There was more forestry than he'd expected, he'd go as far as to call it jungle, but it was less than somewhere like Yavin 4 and the terrain was remarkably flat for as far as he could see. Ezra began searching for a spot to land in the more open areas close to the coast. Soon he spotted a clearing large enough to set down, only a few hundred metres from the coast, and cautiously brought the limping shuttle to a rough landing. Waiting a few seconds for any signs of a problem after landing, Ezra gingerly released the controls. A few more second passed before he leaned back into his seat with an exhausted groan, his head hanging back over the chair.

*Where am I? What can I do now? Was I followed?*

There was no way to answer any of those questions. The realisation slowly dawned on him... he was alone. He was lost and trapped far from home. His pulse began racing and his breathing became rapid and heavy. His body tensed as, clenching his fists, he felt a wave of panic and fear threaten to consume him.

*No.*

Ezra focused in on the part of his mind that had tried to reign him in.

*No. Breathe.*

He unclenched his fists and tried his best to slow his rapid breathing.

*Focus... clear your mind. Like Kanan always said.*

Fighting the rush of adrenaline that was trying to overwhelm him, Ezra placed his hands gently onto his knees and sat upright, assuming a position his late Master had shown him so many times before.
Good... now let go.

Ezra tried to grasp at the thoughts of fear and anxiety swimming in his head. At the same time, he steadied his breathing.

First the body, then the mind.

Slowly, the thumping sound of his heartbeat abated and the tension in his back and neck eased.

Now... calm your mind. Focus.

Shutting out the fears of the outside world, Ezra focused in on the realities of the situation. Yes, he was alone. Yes, he was lost. Yes, he didn't know what to do next.

Accept what you can't change... remember what you have.

His mind focused on the events that led him here and what they all meant. Everything he did he'd done for Lothal. His home was free, his friends were safe, his mission had been complete.

"A Jedi must have the deepest commitment."

A phrase Kanan had taught him early on repeated itself, a phrase Kanan had clearly stood by. Commitment to his mission, commitment to his friends and commitment to the greater good. They were what mattered in the end and he, like his Master, had done all he could. If he had to pay the price by living his days alone on a long forgotten world then so be it, he had made the right choice.

Ezra sat for a while to calm himself, thinking about Lothal and his friends. Maybe he'd never see them again... or maybe he would. Perhaps he'd spend the next 80 years or so in isolation or perhaps tomorrow the Ghost would fly down and take him home. Either way there was nothing he could do or change, so there was nothing to worry about. He trusted his friends to do whatever they could and whatever was right.

Slowly, Ezra brought himself out of his trance and readjusted himself. If he was going to live here then sitting in the cockpit meditating wasn't going to help him out much right now. He stood up and looked out of the window. The clearing was only just large enough to land the shuttle in so his view was mostly just of trees and vines. Through them he could see glimpses of the coastline he'd seen as he landed, no more than a few hundred metres away. The sky was still a clear blue from what he could see and it must have been some time around midday. Satisfied he'd seen all he could, the Jedi turned and left the cockpit and walked back into the main hold, picking up the E-11 blaster he'd taken on the Chimaera. Ezra reached the exit ramp and mashed the button, praying it was still functioning. The ramp stalled for a second before falling hard onto the ground. It wasn't the most elegant exit he'd seen from an Imperial shuttle but at least he wasn't trapped in it.

Ezra stepped off the ramp and was immediately taken aback by the multitude of creatures staring back at him. No bigger than a loth-cat, the scaly creatures had two large sunken eyes and an oversized mouth, their short bodies having only the two legs with no arms and ending in a small stub tail.

What the-?

Ezra's thoughts were interrupted by the screech of one of the creatures as it charged past him and straight up the ramp of the shuttle, followed by a dozen or so of its friends.

"Hey! Get out of there!", he shouted vainly.
It was no use. Within a few seconds the creatures had made it clear they were colonising the ship. With a reluctant sigh, he shook his head and turned his back on the shuttle. One of the small creatures hopped up to him and whined.

"Hey, little buddy", Ezra said as he kneeled down.

The creature squeaked in approval as Ezra petted it gently.

"You guys are cute. Not loth-cat cute but...". Ezra laughed at the strange animal staring up at him, "Maybe we can be friends."

Enjoying the contact for a few seconds more, the creature suddenly skipped away onto the ship to join its friends. Ezra watched it go and then stood up. He turned toward the treeline with new resolve. *Maybe I'll be just fine here after all,* he thought as he set off into the trees.

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To say Hera's mood was abysmal would be an understatement. For the last two days, she'd struggled to find much energy to do anything. The Ghost was too empty without Ezra and Sabine, let alone Kanan. Hera couldn't bring herself to clean up the mess they'd left the last time they were here, it was a bittersweet reminder of the family that had gone its separate ways.

The Ghost's Captain was slumped in her cockpit chair, staring mindlessly at the hustle and bustle of the base, a long-cold cup of caf still clutched in her hands. Her mind was hazy and unfocused, a feeling she wasn't familiar with and despised having. This wasn't her, to sit and mope around instead of getting out there and doing something, but she'd never felt so run down. Her heart sunk a little further with every pass of Kanan's cabin door or with every glimpse of one of Sabine's signature emblems. The loneliness of it all, the lack of sleep and the persistent and unshakeable aches in her head and back were driving her mad.

Her isolation was interrupted by the hiss of the cockpit door opening, revealing Zeb standing behind it.

"Hey", the Lasat greeted, "Mind if I join you?"

Hera nodded towards the co-pilot's seat and set her caf down near the console. "Busy day?", she asked as Zeb lumbered into the chair.

"Not really", Zeb shook his head, "Just like usual really. Well... not usual I guess."

She didn't have to guess what "not usual" meant. This was Zeb's family too, every bit as much as her's, and he'd had to see it break apart. Given his previous experience with loss, Hera had to admire his strength in pulling through as well as he was.

Her hand found his shoulder with a reassuring hold, "I understand, Zeb. Things are... rough right now."

"What about you?", Zeb looked up at her with concern in his eyes. "I mean, Kanan was like a brother, you know? But you... I can't even begin to...", Zeb trailed off, unsure how to finish saying what he was thinking.

Hera swallowed hard, "I- I've been better, Zeb. Honestly... I've been a lot better."

"You've done good, Hera", it was Zeb's turn to offer a reassuring hand, "You pulled through and without you Lothal wouldn't be free. You got through it then and you'll get through it now."
Her eyes started to well a handful of tears but she quickly brushed them away with her hand. 
"Thanks, Zeb. I appreciate that."

"Don't mention it, Hera. We're family, we stick together. You need anything, I'm here." Zeb almost laughed, "And if I'm not enough, Sabine's only a comm call away."

Hera's mood softened at the mention of the Mandalorian. She was, after all, safe and sound on Lothal. Hera would miss her presence on the Ghost but it wasn't as if she'd never see her again. Some free time and a hyperspace jump was all that stood between them. It wasn't as nice as having her just down the hall for sure, but every bird must fly the nest and this Wren was no different. Sabine was on Lothal because it's what she felt was right and deep down she couldn't be prouder of her for it, it's what she'd do too. Ezra too, even if she had no idea where he actually was, was still out there. Hera had no doubt that he'd come home and whenever that day was, she'd be there with open arms. Of course she'd have to peel Sabine off him first but the thought lifted her spirits.

"I needed to hear that, Zeb", Hera said after a long while, "It's so easy to get lost in what you don't have that it's easy to lose sight of what you've got."

Zeb squeezed her shoulder gently, "That's more like the Hera I know."

"I'll get there", Hera sighed.

"I know you will, I'll make sure you do", Zeb slowly pulled back his hand.

They both watched the base out of the cockpit window, not paying attention to anything in particular. Hera found herself reminiscing on old times, just any old thoughts that popped into her head. She couldn't help but think of Kanan again. It was the same regrets that played over and over, of being so focused on the Rebellion that she lost sight of what was actually worth fighting for. That wasn't to say they didn't make the most of what time they did get, the rare moments they shared as lovers not crewmates were some of the happiest memories she had.

One of her last memories of him was a perfect example of them taking what little they could. Ezra, Sabine, Zeb and Ryder had gone off to scout the TIE Defender base. It seemed like a lifetime ago but it was only a few weeks at best. With them gone for several hours, Kanan and Hera had been left alone for what would turn out to be their last night together. They'd set up camp near Ezra's tower, waiting for check-ins and reports from the group, but with nothing else to do they'd taken a rare opportunity to enjoy each other's company. They watched the sunrise and sunset, they shared a not-so-romantic meal of bland rations and water. They talked about the Rebellion, the Empire, Lothal and how far they'd all come. When night came, she'd curled up in his arms and just enjoyed his presence. There were other details about the night she could pick out, although some in particular she didn't think were appropriate to think about right now. She smiled to herself, despite their unusual relationship and chaotic lives, they still found time to enjoy each other's company. It may not have been the ideal relationship, but it was their own, and she'd cherish whatever memory of it she had.

Zeb suddenly stood up and cracked his back,"I've got something to help make you feel better. I know your weakness is space waffles."

Space waffles were indeed, as Zeb managed to find out, Hera's guilty pleasure. She loved the things even more than he did. She tried to hide it for a while, Kanan had been completely oblivious, but Zeb had slowly realised why the stocks of the treats had depleted faster than they should have been. This time though, the mere mention of the food filled her with a strange revulsion.
"Um, I'll pass I think", Hera answered, herself surprised at her body's sudden distaste for her secret addiction.  

Zeb stopped in his tracks and cast her a concerned look, "Are you feeling okay? It's not like you to say no to space waffles."

Hera looked at him for a few seconds, every bit as confused as he was. It wasn't like her at all. Even when she was down, it was space waffles that could always cheer her up.

"Yeah... yeah", Hera dismissed him, "You go ahead."

The Lasat shrugged and walked out of the cockpit, letting the door slide shut behind him. Hera turned away from the door and back to the window, raising her hand to her head as her mind was still picking over her sudden change in appetite. Stress had never impacted her like this before, maybe a few more days of rest would make her feel better? Something still wasn't right though, Hera could almost feel it. She was missing something. Then she started going over what exactly was wrong with her. Sudden aversion to her favourite food, a constant headache, persistent backache, fatigue. All symptoms of countless issues and illnesses she could have picked up anywhere. That couldn't be it though, she'd had all her inoculations recently, there was no way she had caught something.

Accepting that sometimes the body just decided to have off-days sometimes, Hera let her hand fall lazily from her head and rest on her stomach. Then, the realisation hit her like a hovertrain.

*Appetite changes, headaches, fatigue, back pain.* Hera's eyes widened, her mind drifting back to that last night with Kanan. It had been cold, it'd been a long time since she'd been alone with him... they'd... it couldn't be. Hera's mouth fell open and her hand reached up to cover it, ready to catch the scream that she was too shocked to let out. Without another second's hesitation, she leapt out of her seat and straight out of the cockpit.

She rushed through the common area, ignoring Zeb's confused questions as she passed, and headed straight for the base's medbay. There was only one way to know for sure. Hera climbed down the ladder as fast as her body allowed and rushed out of the Ghost's cargo bay. She kept a brisk pace, not wanting to draw undue attention by running, as she headed in the direction of the medbay. Her mind raced the whole way there with a mess of anxiety, shock, fear and, above all, hope. As she approached the main temple structure, she brushed past crowds of soldiers and technicians, a few of which looked quizzically at her as she passed. Hera cared less and less the closer she got and she had to stop herself from running the last few metres of corridor before the medbay.

To her relief, it was empty save for the 2-1B medical droid manning the desk.

"Hello, General Syndulla. How may I be of assistance?", the droid inquired.

Hera cleared her throat, "Uhm, I need a medical scan."

The droid slowly began ambling it's way towards one of the beds, "Of course, ma'am. This way please, follow me."

The Twi'lek silently followed and sat on the edge of one of the beds beside a few pieces of medical equipment. The droid was seeing to some of the monitors and displays for a few seconds as Hera sat anxiously.

"Is there any particular query you wish to be investigated, General?", it asked.

She shook her head, "No... no just, a normal scan should do." Hera didn't know how to say it, she
didn't think there'd be scan for unexpected pregnancies, but she figured it's something that a normal one would easily pick up.

The medical droid tapped the dials a few times, "As you wish, ma'am. Please hold still."

The scanner made a whirring noise, followed by a series of beeps and tones. The droid remained silent, watching the results come in with its ever-passive face. Hera didn't speak either, all she could do was sit and wait impatiently for the equipment to do its work. When the beeping stopped, Hera's heart froze. The silence seemed to last forever as the droid processed whatever results he was seeing on the screen.

"General Syndulla", her heart leapt as the droid began talking, "It appears you are in good health." Hera caught her breath in her throat, surely that couldn't be all there was? "There does appear to be one issue though, ma'am", the droid added.

Her heart skipped a beat, "W-what issue?"

The medical droid was silent, as if it was double-checking its own conclusions, "You appear to be carrying a child. You're pregnant, General."

Pregnant? The word filled her with more joy than she could have hoped. After all of the pain and loss, something new and beautiful was yet to come. A million thoughts rushed through her head. How could she raise a child and fight a war? How would she look after him? What would she call him? Where would he stay? The Ghost? Home on Ryloth? Lothal? Hera pushed aside all the questions she had and almost jumped out of the bed. It hadn't really started sinking in yet but she could already feel the tears welling in her eyes. Not sadness, as they had been these last few days, but pure and honest joy.

"The child appears to be in perfect health, no more than a few weeks in development." The medical droid was watching her emotional reaction with an unreadable expression. "Is this causing you distress? I can organise a termin-"

"No!", Hera shouted a bit too loudly. That was not an idea she was going to think about.

"Of course, General. May I then recommend a regular check-up on both of your health?", the droid offered.

"Yes... yes", Hera said ecstatically, "Just let me know when and where and... anything." Hera's mind was still struggling to take everything in.

The droid turned and waddled towards the desk, "As you wish, ma'am. I will forward a regular schedule to you as soon as I am able. Good day, General."

Hera left the med-bay with her head in the clouds and the questions came flooding back. She couldn't answer any of them but she didn't need to yet, she'd have a few months to figure that all out and there were plenty of people around to help her do it. Her thoughts then switched to her existing family: Zeb, Chopper and Sabine. She couldn't wait to tell them they were getting a new addition to their perfectly dysfunctional family.

With a new smile, Hera headed back to the Ghost with the knowledge that things were going to be okay after all.

Sabine stood proudly on a hill, inspecting the old communication tower Ezra had once called home. Ryder had been more than happy to lend a hand in repairing it, offering materials and labour
to help move the project along. Sabine had welcomed the former but politely declined the latter. This was her project to complete and she was committed to seeing it through on her own. The last few days had been a gruelling attempt to clean layers of dust and grime from the outer walls of the tower, ready to be given a new pristine coat of paint. The side walls had all been scrubbed as hard as she could manage and tomorrow she'd turn her attention to the roof. It wasn't exciting work nor challenging but it gave her purpose.

That would only be the first phase though. She'd then have to clear out and fix up the inside of the tower. Crates, boxes, radio equipment, old furniture and Ezra's collection of helmets were still littered about the place. Sabine had to admit she was impressed by how many he'd gathered over the years, a collection that had only grown with every fine addition. Her favourite thing about it was how many of her own he'd kept. Not her own helmets obviously but the ones she'd made her own with a paint applicator and her imagination. At first she knew the offer of the helmet was some childish attempt to woo her, attempts she permitted only for the fun of vandalising Imperial property. Over time it just became something they shared as friends. She'd even tried painting one or two with him but he'd never been particularly good at it. Not that it mattered how good they were, it was the memory that she valued most. The helmets still served as a reminder of what they'd had and, when he came home, what they'd have again.

She thought about him a lot. That was expected given she was in his old house on his home planet. They'd grown so close in the last year or so, particularly the last few months, and now not having him around had left a glaring absence in her life. It was only temporary though, she knew he'd be back one day, and this project was to ensure he had a home to come back to. Not that that was it's only purpose, she'd admittedly planned on using the place herself for the time being. If he wanted it back she'd happily step aside when he was home though part of her didn't think he'd be opposed to sharing with her.

Her comm beeped with a message, saying she had an incoming call from an undisclosed location. Hera no doubt. Sabine knew the Rebel base was on Yavin but it was still a wise security precaution in case the message was intercepted. The long range communicator was in the tower's top level, so she headed down the hill and towards the elevator to the top.

The receiver's flashing light showed that Hera was still waiting for her to pick up. Sabine quickly tapped the accept call button and watched the blue figure of Hera appear above the table.

"Hey, this was unexpected", Sabine started.

Hera looked tired, as she had done when she left a few days ago, but Sabine could tell her mood had improved. "It's good to see you too. How have you been?"

Sabine leaned back against the wall to get comfortable, folding her arms in front of her chest. "I'm okay, it's still a bit, I don't know, strange being here. Without everyone else I mean."

The Twi'lek smiled sympathetically at her, "I know, dear. But you'll get through it, you always do. Do you have any ideas about what you're going to do there yet?"

"I'm way ahead of you", Sabine perked up. "Ryder gave me a job offer: 'Head Training Officer' for his new militia."

Hera looked surprised, "Well that was fast. Can't say it's a bad choice though, you're a good leader."

"I learnt from the best", trying her best to offer some praise to always-humble Hera, "Not crazy about the name though."
She laughed, "I'm sure you'll do something about it. You have a habit of making things your own."

"I can't argue with that." Sabine looked around the old comm tower, "Speaking of which, that's not all I've been up to."

Hera raised an eyebrow, "Oh really?"

"Ezra's tower. Ryder gave me some materials to fix up the place. Sort of a welcome back present for Ezra when he decides to come home."

"You'll have to show me next time I come to visit but it sounds nice. I'm sure Ezra will love it", she insisted.

"I hope so." Sabine looked over to the pile of helmets, many of which were covered in her own designs. She hoped she wasn't overestimating his opinion on her handiwork. "Besides, I wanted somewhere to stay too."

Hera smirked, "You know, some people might read into that. Fixing up his home, living in it until he comes back. Sounds awfully touching", she teased.

"Hera!", Sabine warned with a piercing glare at the grinning Twi'lek.

She put her hands up, "I'm kidding, I'm kidding. Well... at least for now."

Sabine scowled jokingly at her. "Yeah, yeah. How's life on Yavin anyway?"

"It's different", Hera sighed. "I miss having the rest of you around to cause me problems."

Sabine shrugged, "We had to keep you on your toes. But, you look better. Not that you ever didn't look good, I mean, just... you look better."

Hera smiled, "Well there is a reason for that. We're getting a new Spectre."

Sabine leaned forward. She knew Hera would be given new people to fill up her crew. Rex she guessed, Kallus maybe too. "That sounds interesting, who is it?"

The Twi'lek bit her lip, "Not someone you've met yet."

That was an odd way to put it. "Uh... alright. Care to introduce me?", the Mandalorian looked at her perplexedly.

"I can't wait to but it might be a while", she said gleefully.

Sabine continued to eye her suspiciously, "Okay, how long until I can meet them?"

"About 8 or 9 months, give or take."

"8 or 9 months? Why?", Sabine continued to look at her in utter confusion.

8 or 9 months. That was a long-term notice for a transfer. Surely the Rebels coul- no. No way.

Sabine gasped and stood up fully from her leaning position. "Hera?! Hera, are you... don't tell me you're..."

Hera watched her old cremate's reaction with a humoured smile. "Well it's not Zeb and unless you and Ezra had a little secret then that only leaves one option."
"I- Hera that's... that's amazing. How long have you known?", Sabine heart was fluttering with excitement.

"An hour or two. I've been feeling odd for a few days now and I guess it just clicked what it might be."

The news was completely out of the blue and certainly not what Sabine had expected to hear when climbing up to the tower. Hera deserved the happiness; she was a natural mother. After all, she'd almost raised her and Ezra for the last few years. It was only fitting that as her adopted children went off on their own paths that she could get a child that was truly her own. There were a hundred questions Sabine could ask about how she'd manage both the child and the Rebellion, or about the dangers of the life Hera led. Sabine trusted her to figure it out though, if anyone could it was her. One question did stick out to her though.

"Wait wait wait, how can you be pregnant? When could you have... uh... you know?", Sabine's question had sounded far less intrusive in her head.

Conservative Hera shied away slightly, "You all went to scout the Defender base and, well, one thing led to anoth-

"Okay, I wish I hadn't asked", Sabine cut off. Hera and Kanan were still almost parents to her and she didn't need to think about that. "Who knows already?"

"Zeb, Chop and you. I'll have to tell my father soon, maybe tomorrow. As for the others like Rex, I'll tell them in time. Right now I'll keep it in the family.", Hera said. "I still don't know how everything will work yet, I'll have to figure it all out."

"We've got time, we'll work it out.", Sabine reassured her, "If there's anything I can do you call me right away."

Hera smiled, "I'll keep that in mind."

"And if you need a babysitter when you're off saving the galaxy, you know who to call.", Sabine grinned.

Hera cautioned her with a signature mom-glare, "We'll see, I don't want you to have them painting all over the Ghost."

The Mandalorian laughed, "Hey, you let me do it."

Hera rolled her eyes jokingly, "Okay, you have me there. Maybe if some of your talent rubs off then I'll allow it."

"I'll try to teach them for you but no promises.", Sabine conceded happily.

Hera let out a weary sigh, "Anyway, it's been a long day. I should be in bed already but I couldn't wait on telling you."

"I understand, you look after yourself. And let the others know I'm saying hey, don't want Zeb to think I've forgotten about him."

Hera chuckled, "Thanks Sabine, I'll tell them for you."

"Thanks, Hera. It's nice to get some good news for a change."
"We'll keep in touch. And next time I get some leave, we're coming to visit. That tower better be ready.\text{\textquotedblright}, Hera warned sarcastically with a pointed finger.

"It'll be ready. For all four of you."

Hera smiled back at her for a few seconds before she reluctantly pressed the end call button, causing her figure to disappear. Sabine sat staring at the space she'd just been in, absorbing the news. It was a glimmer of light at the end of a long road for all of them, for Hera more than anyone. As Sabine left the tower and headed back towards her temporary house in Capital City, there was nothing that could wipe the smile from her face. Things might not be the same as they used to be but they didn't have to be. This was different. A new different. A good different.

Night came later than he was used to on this world. The daylight had kept him up and exploring for hours, surveying the land and making a mental map of nearby landmarks or locations. He'd kept the infested shuttle as a point to centre himself around and was building up his environment around it. As night had began to fall, Ezra found his way back to the shuttle. For now, he'd use it as a base camp. He'd fought his way through the packs of harmless creatures on the shuttle earlier to retrieve whatever survival supplies he could. There'd been a bedroll, some blankets, water purifiers, an emergency flare gun, a toxicology kit and a few packs of standard rations hidden away in the hold. Plenty enough to get him started.

Ezra lay on top of the bedroll, staring up at the unfamiliar stars and the looming orange moon. It was beautiful here, he'd been lucky enough to have that. The small creatures, which Ezra had decided to call them loth-lizards to remind of of his home and it's weird naming conventions, had also clustered around the shuttle. At first they were curious of their new neighbour but they'd quickly learned he meant them no harm. A few of the loth-lizards had let him pet them as he lay there and he'd briefly tried connecting with a few of them as he did with the loth-cats. It was more difficult with these creatures, they'd never seen humans before and he didn't have the years of experience with them, but he was confident he could get somewhere with it soon.

Still, as he stared up at the sky, something felt off. There was a strange feeling that he just couldn't shake. Just out of sight and just out of reach. It was calling to him. The more he thought about it, the more he remembered the brief twinge in the force as he left the 	extit{Chimaera}. Perhaps it was the same thing calling out to him then, maybe this planet held more than met the eye.

Then, almost on cue, the loth-lizards made a sudden chirp and scurried back towards the shuttle. The sudden noise and movement made Ezra jump and sit up.

Ezra looked over to see the last one running up the ramp. "What's up with you guys?\text{\textquotedblright}, he asked them.

Then another feeling crept in. Not so much a feeling as it was a presence. \textit{They weren't alone.}

Ezra's hand instinctively went to his hip for his absent lightsaber before he realised and went for the nearby blaster instead.

"Hello?\text{\textquotedblright}, he shouted into the darkness.

There was no response other than the cracking of the branches and rustling of the trees.

The young man stood up and held the blaster in a ready position, prepared to meet any opponent with a blaster bolt. He stepped carefully over his bedroll and toward the treeline. Ezra focused and reached out with the force, probing the darkness for whatever being was nearby. As he continued to walk, he could feel its gaze following him with greater intensity.
"Who are you?", Ezra called.

Another sudden rustle snapped his attention up to the trees. The darkness stopped him from seeing anything but the force was another matter. He used his training and all the concentration he could muster to find out what was out there. In a moment of sudden clarity, Ezra found it. Something was hiding in the trees above him and it was about to-

Ezra's trail of thought ended as he shot his hand out and called on the force with it. An angry growl came from the space only inches from his outstretched hand, as the creature that had tried to ambush him struggled to process what was happening. The animal Ezra had caught was larger than the loth-lizards, perhaps closer to a loth-wolf in both size and appearance. It too was scaly and lacking fur but unlike the other locals it had four strong limbs ending in three sharp clawed fingers, perfect for climbing and ambushing like it had just attempted. It's tail was long and thin and it's head was narrow, complete with a mouth of deadly sharp teeth. A predator through and through.

Keeping hold of it with the force, Ezra cast a glance back at the ship. "Hunting my friends, are you? Guess that explains why they love hiding in the shuttle."

Ezra looked at the thrashing creature in his grip and considered his options. As much as he didn't want to harm the creature, he didn't exactly want to let it have his new friends for dinner either. Nor could he give him any of his rations, he didn't want to encourage it to come back. That left him with only one real option: a real test of his abilities.

Calming his mind yet again, Ezra centred his attention on the howling creature. As he'd done on Lothal many times before, he opened himself to its mind. However, he'd underestimated the creature's resistance to him. It's mind wouldn't let him in and he could feel the anger, fear and confusion emanating from within. Ezra grimaced, knowing that the only way to make the connection was to let it go.

Ezra stared into the eyes of the predator, preparing to let it loose, "I hope I don't mess this up, for your sake", he muttered.

Rather than dropping it then and there, he felt it was better to put some distance between the two of them.

"Here goes nothing"

Without hesitating any more, Ezra threw the creature back into the trees but kept whatever link he could with it. He walked backwards towards the shuttle, stopping just before the ramp. All the while he could sense the creature's confusion, followed by its adjusting to the situation and then as it focused back on the hunt. Ezra could hear and sense it as it scrambled to its feet and turned back towards the shuttle. It was now or never.

With the predator's mind free from the panic of the force hold, it was more open to Ezra's probing. He shut his eyes to close out any other distractions and urged the creature to turn back. The snapping of leaves and twigs gave away the creature's advances as it moved closer and closer to the treeline.

Stop, turn back. I mean you no harm.

The snapping and rustling became louder and faster as it picked up the pace and got closer.

Stop hunting us, go home.

The predator gave a menacing snarl as it ran through the trees, showing no signs of slowing down.
Stop, leave us alone.

Ezra tried as hard as he could to influence the creature but it drew closer and closer.

Stop!

The animal charged through the treeline, straight into the clearing, still running directly at him.

"STOP!", he shouted as he screamed it in his mind. "Turn ba-"

He was cut off by the impact of the creature slamming into his chest, sending him tumbling backwards onto the ramp. For a second, Ezra braced himself for the inevitable pain of the animal's teeth and claws but... there was nothing. His eyes shot open to meet the attacker's, barely inches from his own. The creature was on top of him but hadn't made a move to attack him. Their gazes remained locked for what felt like minutes, but was probably only a few seconds, before Ezra felt the creature's legs move and its head sink away. The predator quietly turned its back to him and walked down the ramp, heading back towards the direction of the trees.

Ezra sat up carefully and watched it go, amazed he'd managed to actually pull it off. As the creature just about reached the treeline, Ezra's attention turned back to the rations still sitting undisturbed next to his bedroll.

"Hey, wait", Ezra called after him. The creature stopped and looked back as the Jedi ran over to his bedroll and ripped open a pack of the rations. "Come here", he said, offering a small piece of the preserved food in an outstretched hand.

The animal inspected him with its black eyes for a while before stepping closer, weary of the strange creature now offering it food.

"It's okay, you're only hungry", Ezra remained rigidly still.

The creature edged closer and smelt the offering, backing away ever so slightly before leaning forward for another whiff.

"Here", Ezra gently placed the food on the ground, casting aside the rest of the uneaten packet, and scuttled back from it.

It watched him move away before turning its attention back to the morsel of food. It sniffed once more, then greedily grabbed the piece and swallowed it in one gulp.

Ezra grinned at it, "See? That's wasn't so hard."

Once more the predator looked at the him with suspicious eyes, just as surprised as Ezra was by the situation. The confusion was only temporary as its natural needs took over, causing the creature to eagerly grab the still open packet of rations with his mouth. Wasting no time, the creature darted back off into the night but not before casting one more look at the strange new friend it might have just made.

Ezra watched it go with a satisfied smile, pleased he'd not only remembered his training but hopefully had turned its appetite away from his new scaly friends. The chirping of the so-called loth-lizards resumed as they sensed the danger passing. A few began hopping out of the shuttle again to resume their usual antics as Ezra settled back down for the night.

He'd kept the predator at bay and maybe, hopefully, he'd made a new friend in it. As Ezra settled back onto his bedroll and looked up at the night sky, he still couldn't shake that strange call in the
force he'd felt earlier. Maybe it wasn't that creature, maybe it was still just close-by or maybe there was something else somewhere, beckoning him to follow. Knowing he wouldn't find the answer now, the Jedi rolled over and shut his eyes for the night.

Alliances can be useful in some situations. However, they are almost always based on mutual advantage. While the advantage exists, an alliance will endure, but when such favourable conditions fade so too may the alliance. It may be possible, in some circumstances, to reforge this alliance not based on the previous motivations but on new situations and new realities.

The long-range communication relay had suffered extensive damage during the creatures' attack above Lothal. Thrawn had mustered whatever technical staff he could to work on the project and had to resort to salvaging components from the equally damaged relay aboard Sarlis' Imperator. Almost a week later, the crews finally had the relay operational again.

The Grand Admiral walked slowly and calmly from his office to the hall that used to house part of the Lothal Jedi Temple. It was the same hall he'd led Ezra Bridger to during the Battle of Lothal and the crumbled ruins of the architecture still covered most of the hall. A pity, Thrawn thought, to waste such rare and unique creations. The pressures of the last few days had occupied most of his time, leaving him unable to study the ruins in any detail yet. It would be a valuable learning experience for him. Thrawn had never had the opportunity to study the art or architecture of any force wielders before, beyond passing inspections of the former Jedi Temple during his brief visits to the Imperial Palace on Coruscant. Studying the ruins would surely give him some insight into the minds of those who wielded the force, an area of knowledge he was so far uninformed on.

The Chiss entered the hall to find it empty, as he had instructed. The Emperor was adamant that during any contact he would only permit Thrawn to speak with him. It was understandable after all, the public face of Emperor Palpatine was a far cry from the twisted and deformed figure he was in person. Thrawn was one of only a handful of people to have met the Emperor in person and he was perhaps the only being in the known galaxy he remained almost in fear of. Not terror, he would not turn tail and flee at the sight of him, but Thrawn found the Emperor's single-minded ambition and near complete unquestionable power to be concerning. It allowed him to take decisive action, a contrast with the fatal flaw that made the Republic so weak, yet Thrawn knew that men of his ilk were concerned only with their own position and not with the greater good. For now, the Emperor's goals seemed in part to align with, or at least accommodate, his own. How long that stayed true remained to be seen.

Standing in the centre of the room, Thrawn tapped a button on his communicator, signalling to the communication officers elsewhere in the ship to establish the connection. Thrawn waited in a solemn silence for the hologram projector to sputter to life and waited even longer for the recipient to acknowledge the message. An obvious show of power no doubt but one that lost its impact to those like Thrawn who had come to expect it.

After the extended delay, the hologram projector activated and a large blue projection of the Emperor appeared in the centre of the hall. The hooded figure's face was mostly concealed and Thrawn could only see the lower half of his face and the unnaturally glowing eyes glaring back at him.

"Grand Admiral Thrawn", the Emperor said with hints of malice, his expression unreadable.

Thrawn bowed his head slightly, "Your Excellency, I apologise for the delay in contacting you we have had severe technical difficulties."

The Emperor made no reaction to Thrawn's explanation and glared unfeelingly at him. "More than
technical difficulties, it would seem."

"Indeed we have. May I assume you have read some of the reports?", Thrawn inquired.

"What little there is", the Emperor said. "Who better than you to offer the full story?"

Thrawn straightened himself to address the Emperor. "Upon my return to Lothal the rebels had already infiltrated the Imperial Dome and had Governor Pryce in custody. I offered the boy Bridger a choice as you are already aware."

Thrawn made sure not to make much mention of the Emperor's own role in the events, he had after all failed to achieve his own aims for Ezra Bridger or for the planet of Lothal. Wisely, he felt it would not be prudent to make light of that fact.

"After the Jedi's escape, he ambushed the bridge of the *Chimaera*, whereupon his allies summoned unusual creatures. From where they came from or how Bridger knew of them, I cannot say."

The Grand Admiral could recognise the almost ridiculous way in which events played out, impossible odds, force-wielding children and mysterious creatures appearing from the ether. However, what had transpired was far from a joke.

The Emperor maintained an unflinching gaze with his monstrous eyes, "And that creatures transported your fleet to the Unknown Regions?"

"It would seem so, the creatures have an unusual ability to manipulate hyperspace travel", Thrawn said. He was hardly surprised either that the Emperor had noticed his fleet's location, the Unknown Regions were a point of unique interest for him.

"Most interesting, Grand Admiral", the Emperor said. "For all your talents, Lothal has been seized by these rebels and you command a broken fleet on the fringes of space."

Thrawn did not answer, he'd learned it was often best to say nothing in such situations.

The Emperor grimaced, "However... the failure does not belong to you alone. The late Arihnda Pryce allowed these rebels to flourish whilst you were occupied elsewhere. And, these creatures were a factor that could not have been anticipated."

"Thank you, my Emperor. Your assessment of the situation is appreciated", Thrawn said.

For a moment, Emperor Palpatine watched Thrawn with his piercing eyes. "Unexpected intervention seems to be something of a pattern of late, Mitth'raw'nuruodo."

The Emperor's assessment was accurate, a fact Thrawn himself had dwelt on too. "The Bendu, as it called itself, and Bridger both possessed knowledge of things that are... unknown to me."

"The force", the Emperor stated plainly.

"It goes by many names in many cultures. The force to some, magic to others, to my own people it is known as 'third sight'."

The Emperor let out a malicious cackle, "The force exists everywhere, Grand Admiral. As you will come to appreciate on your new mission."

*New mission?* Thrawn raised an eyebrow and looked up at the Emperor. A twisted smile formed on his decrepit face as he watched the Chiss' surprise.
"Forgive me, your Excellency. I had suspected that my objective would remain the capture of Ezra Bridger and the Lothal rebels", Thrawn said.

The Emperor waved his hand, "Lothal no longer concerns me. The destruction of the Temple was an unfortunate loss and my interest in the planet dies with it. As for that desolate backwater, let the Rebels believe in their victory for now. Lothal will be one of many examples that we will soon use to show the galaxy what it costs to oppose my Empire."

"You refer to the Death Star?", the Chiss asked. Thrawn had already made clear his disapproval of the project, feeling that ability to project Imperial power through a more flexible fleet was far superior to a single battle station.

"I sense your disapproval, Grand Admiral. However, with the failure of your Defender program it is clear that the future of my Empire lies in this project. Director Krennic assures us that it is mere months from completion and will soon put an end to dissenters and rebels. My hold on the galaxy will be complete", the Emperor declared with sadistic confidence.

"Your Majesty, I still do not believe this is the best course of action", Thrawn pleaded, in vain he knew.

"Your objections have already been noted, Grand Admiral. Your concerns, however, are no longer relevant on this issue. Your objectives lie elsewhere."

Thrawn met the Emperor's gaze again, "You intend for me to remain in the Unknown Regions?"

The Emperor looked almost amused, "When I accepted your service, you spoke of threats to us both in the Unknown Regions. Now is your time to deliver on the knowledge you promised. I sent you once on a mission to investigate a disturbance I felt in the force, specific and focused."

"The Grysk, my Emperor", Thrawn remembered the whole mission well.

The Emperor's eyes bore into him, "Once more I feel a disturbance yet this is... different. It grows and simmers like a looming presence, far greater and more powerful than any other I have felt. Although at the same time it is less specific in its location and its nature."

So, that time had come. Thrawn had wondered when the Emperor would finally turn his attention to the dangers outside of the galaxy. In truth, he'd expected to be waiting many years until the rebel threat could be completely dealt with. The sort of opponents that might lurk out of view could not be faced by a power that was divided in itself. The Emperor clearly believed that the Death Star would make him powerful enough to face any threat and it was Thrawn's job to find out what all of those threats were. Thrawn had his doubts about that and when the Death Star failed to meet expectations, as Thrawn knew it would, that illusion of strength would shatter. Any information or advantage Thrawn could gain on what lay beyond would be the key to survival for the Empire, and more importantly his own people.

"You believe there is a greater threat residing in the Unknown Regions?", Thrawn asked to clarify. His worries were already focused on the instability within his home systems and on the Grysk who surely had the Chiss in their sights.

"Was it not my instincts that alerted you to the capture of the Chiss children?", the Emperor spoke with assurance.

The Emperor's force abilities had alerted him to a disturbance in the Unknown Regions and had sent both Thrawn and Vader to deal with it. What they found was a little known race called the
Grysk, who had captured rare force-sensitive Chiss children in an attempt to use their powers for their own gain. Thrawn and Vader had foiled the attempt but Thrawn still knew that the Grysk would turn their attention to the nearest enemy: the Chiss Ascendancy.

Thrawn though for a moment, "Indeed it was, your Majesty."

"I believe this new threat is far more severe, to both my Empire and your Chiss Ascendancy."

Thrawn processed what he'd been told. The Grysk were an actual threat that he knew were coming, the instability in the Chiss leadership was another brewing conflict that he knew beyond a doubt. Whatever the Emperor proposed, however, was an unknown quantity. Did it warrant turning his back on the coming plight of his own people? His mind played through his options, artfully and strategically sorting through his options. The answer became clear. The Emperor's instincts had already led him to one real threat, an opponent that, whilst a threat, had proved its capacity to wait to strike at an opportune time. His own people had endured leadership changes and conflicts and he had admittedly been absent for many years and was working on outdated assumptions. The Emperor's disturbance, on the other hand, was there now. No Chiss shared the level of attunement and precognition as the Emperor. If there was something worse out there, the Emperor would know it before any other. If he wished to protect his own people, this new threat was logically the one that demanded his attention.

"As you wish, your Excellency", Thrawn nodded. "What of the Jedi? He has eluded us but we do not believe he has ventured far."

His face twisted into another menacing grin, "I am glad you raised the issue. Finding Bridger will remain a secondary objective. For you at least."

Thrawn picked up on the specific phrasing. "For me?"

On cue, the hologram of a black clad figure activated beside the Emperor. A female human, her hair cut short and close as most warriors would. She wore black armour from chest to toe, leaving her fair-skinned face bare. Her eyes too had a similar glow to the Emperor's, if much less intense, that despite the blue colours of the hologram Thrawn knew from experience were yellow. The insignia on her arm marked her as Imperial, specifically an Inquisitor. Thrawn was familiar with the group by reputation alone and was under the impression that the group had recently been disbanded. She stood with similar cold confidence by the Emperor's side, her arms clasped behind her back and watching Thrawn with a passive face.

"This is the Fourth Sister. She will aid you in your search of the Unknown Regions and will be of use if you find any traces of Ezra Bridger."

The woman moved her head only slightly to look at him, "I look forward to working with you, Grand Admiral. We'll see if your reputation is well founded."

Thrawn had no patience for boasting or petty rivalries, letting the obvious bait slide by unacknowledged. He gave her only a cursory nod in response, "I was under the impression that the Inquisitorius was recently disbanded."

"Correct, but I still have uses for what agents remain", the Emperor answered.

It was an unexpected answer, the Empire's tolerance of failure was infamously brutal. Evidently the Emperor felt that the mission to the Unknown Regions was important enough to warrant a break from convention. For his part, Thrawn could see the value of another force sensitive to pursue this new threat.
"As you wish, my Emperor", Thrawn obliged.

"I'm already en route to your location, I should be there within a few hours. I will succeed where you have failed, have no doubt of that.", the Inquisitor said smugly.

Thrawn did not let his surprise show to his audience but the fact that she was already on her way was unexpected. Determining their location from the call alone would be easy enough, to have discovered it before hand and already travelled this distance was something else entirely. Tracking any ship through hyperspace was all but impossible with known technology. The only conclusion left was that the Empire not only had developed this technology but it had been set up to track the Chimaera. Director Krennic seemed the obvious culprit, given his distaste for Thrawn and his links with Imperial research projects. Lord Vader and his First Legion could have had ample time aboard to install such surveillance, but even he had no reason to maintain a suspicion of Thrawn's whereabouts. Colonel Yularen's ISB might also possess the means but lacked any clear motive to keep an eye on him. Of course, it could well have been the Emperor himself that ordered the surveillance. Either way, Thrawn maintained his composure and did not draw any further attention to the question.

"That remains to be seen, Fourth Sister. You are no doubt aware that three of your number were defeated on the hunt for the Lothal rebels. The boy Bridger has grown in his power and you would do well not to underestimate him", Thrawn said coldly. His tolerance for bravado was almost nonexistent and he could already say with confidence that his relationship with the Fourth Sister would be abrasive at best.

The Emperor laughed at his subordinates, "Both of you will have the chance to prove your worth. For now, Grand Admiral, make sure your fleet is ready to begin your exploration. As for you, Fourth Sister, I will not tolerate the failure of your organisation once more."

The Fourth Sister bowed her head, "Of course, Master. I will not fail you."

"You have your mission, Grand Admiral. I look forward to what discoveries you make", the Emperor smiled once more as the hologram flickered out.

The Chiss turned away and walked towards the door without a moment's hesitation, there was work to be done. Not the work he was expecting to be allowed to do yet, but he was glad the opportunity had arisen. The fight against what lurked in the unknown spaces of the galaxy was far more important than chasing a band of rebels ever could be. The Fourth Sister's influence, the Emperor's ultimate motivations, the situation with his own people and Ezra Bridger's role in the ensuing campaign were still unclear. In time, he knew, the pieces would make themselves clear and he would be the one to fit them all together.

With these elements set up, next chapter we can move onto what I consider the main story. There'll be a sizeable time jump, skipping right ahead to the epilogue and picking up around the time of that final scene.

Again, a word about each little section. The idea of Ezra living on his own, using his natural aptitude for animals to survive, is something I think makes a bit of sense. I know most of us expect Thrawn and Ezra to ally and spend the years together but I figured we've already got so many stories like that and it suits my own story best if I went this route. Also, I hope some people will recognise the small, annoying, ship-invading bipeds Ezra encountered as he left the shuttle. I didn't intend to split his section into two parts but it was the best way to do it and also it shows there's some actually deadly, or perhaps useful, creatures there. Hera's
pregnancy too was something I just wanted to write if only to do a bit of happy Hera. I tried to avoid being too on the nose with all the pregnancy signs, I mentioned backache and fatigue last chapter and the headaches and food aversions too this time but I'm sure everyone already knows she's pregnant anyway. I originally had her go back to the Ghost to tell Chopper and Zeb too, but I felt I'd be repeating myself and Sabine's reaction was more important to get. Hera and Sabine's relationship is one of my favourites in the crew and easily one of the most under-explored. Lastly, Thrawn's section is probably the most significant for the overall plot. With the Death Star's existence, Thrawn can't risk leading the Empire to Chiss space so he's effectively locked into whatever Palpatine asks of him. It's this section that had to be altered due to Thrawn: Alliances. The events of that book did impact by plans for this scene and will alter some details and choices later on, but the overall plot of this story, to my massive relief, doesn't have to change because of it. The whole hyperspace tracking thing also helps tie in Rogue One and even the Sequel Trilogy a bit, so I wanted that in there too.

As for the Fourth Sister, I know the presence of an Inquisitor might raise a few questions. Bear in mind this is still before Episode 4 and it is consistent with their complete absence from the OT. A force user, as Palpatine says, might prove useful to Thrawn's mission and Palpatine's objectives in the Unknown Regions and her role in the plot is ultimately essential. As for her power level, it's pretty standard Inquisitor sorts of power. She's not going to be ripping Star Destroyers from orbit but she is decently competent with her lightsaber and force abilities. The introduction of the Fourth Sister ensures Palpatine has a loyal agent watching his every move. It's not that the Emperor doesn't trust Thrawn, only that he wants to constantly remind him who he answers to.

That's it for the prologues, next chapter will signal the start of the main story. In chapter 3: Hera has to say goodbye, Thrawn and the Fourth Sister discuss a new revelation, Ezra continues to survive on his own and Sabine sets off with a familiar face.
Chapter 3 - New Beginnings

This chapter is what I consider to be the true beginning of the story. There is a big time-skip here since last chapter: we're now right up to the end of the OT. I know it's a big jump of four and a half years but otherwise I would have had to fill the story with a few chapters of filler while waiting to reach the stuff I wanted. There'll be an explanation as to what people were doing all this time and why they are where they are. The epilogue already made clear what Hera and Sabine were up to and my prologues were setting up what Ezra and Thrawn were doing in this time period. I'm confident that such a jump is ultimately best for the story and I hope I can convince others to agree with me on that.

Another minor thing I just need to mention is the exact timing of the epilogue. There seems to be a split between those who think it takes place just after Endor and those who think it takes place just after Jakku. I'm going with Endor because there's no confirmation that Hera, Rex or the others were still fighting after that time. Sabine specifically mentions Endor over Jakku so I'll ride with that for now. It shouldn't impact the story too much if I end up being wrong about it.

Anyways, in this chapter: Hera has to say goodbye, Thrawn and the Fourth Sister discuss their mission, Ezra continues to survive on his own and Sabine sets off with a familiar face.

Year 4 ABY, approximately three months after the Battle of Endor (About four and a half years after the finale of Star Wars: Rebels).

So the time had finally come. Hera had hung up the call about a minute ago but still hadn't found it in herself to move. It wasn't reluctance, not completely, nor fear. She'd been waiting for years for this moment to come, eagerly looking forward to the opportunity, yet at the same time part of her had dreaded the moment. Hera wanted Ezra back more than she could ever say but it would break her heart if she lost Sabine too.

Hera leaned back against the wall of her small room, staring at the communication terminal. It had been strange to speak to her from there again, in the same place Hera had spoken to 'Fulcrum' all those years ago. Ezra had told them Ahsoka was alive, even if his explanation of it was quite confusing, but seeing her in the flesh so to speak was an unusual experience.

A rapping on the door almost made her jump. "Whorp whorp", Chopper complained from the other side.

"Yes Chop, I'll be out now", Hera shouted.

Swallowing back her anxieties about what she'd have to do, Hera stood up and opened the door. Chopper waited indignantly in the corridor waiting for her while garbling yet another complaint.

The Twi'lek rolled her eyes at him, "I wasn't gone that long, stop being dramatic." Hera moved past him and up to Jacen's door, "It was important anyway."

As Hera reached her hand to open her son's door, Chopper chirped slowly and loudly. Hera sighed and knelt down to him. Chopper understood what was going to happen and shared his owner's mix of excitement and worry.
"It'll be okay, Chop. Sabine will look after herself."

Chopper sounded a reluctant groan of acceptance to her. The old droid still had his attitude, he still drove her up the wall most days, but despite that annoying side of his personality Hera had noticed a change in him over the last five years. The astromech was often more understanding, more patient and more caring when he could tell she was struggling. He also enjoyed seeing Sabine and Zeb more than she'd have expected from him and Hera knew he missed having them on the Ghost. At times she'd find Chopper spending a bit too long in Sabine's old room or Zeb and Ezra's. If she didn't know any better, she'd call him down right sentimental. Then there was Jacen. If one thing surprised her the most about the rickety old droid it was how well he and Jacen got on. Chopper loved being around him and Jacen enjoyed it just as much. Hardly surprising in some ways, Chopper had the attitude of a child most of the time, but there was care from him nonetheless. Chopper had only ever held a baby once before, the force-sensitive Ithorian they had rescued with Ahsoka, yet somehow he was a natural with them.

Her mind going back to her child, Hera stood up and turned back to the door, a door that had once been Kanan's. She'd already put Jacen to bed an hour ago but this was something that was worth waking him up for.

She knocked, "Jacen? Dear?"

"Momma?", he called without a delay.

Hera opened the door and her hands found her hips, "Have you been awake all this time?"

The green-haired boy rubbed his eyes, "No, momma."

She rolled her eyes, "Okay, okay."

Hera walked over to his bed and sat on the edge, reaching out a hand to stroke his face. Jacen's room was full of toys strewn about on the floor and clothes crumpled in the corner despite Hera's best efforts to keep things tidy. Pieces of paper were stuck to the wall around the room, drawings and paintings he'd done with Sabine's help. She really wasn't kidding about trying to pass on her talents and Jacen loved the opportunity to make a mess with paint. Crude stick figures representing himself, Hera, Sabine, Chopper, Cham, Zeb and more were pasted all over the place. A particular favourite of hers was one he'd drawn of Ezra, based off one of Sabine's paintings of him. It was crude and simple with orange for his clothes and a brilliant blue for his eyes. It warmed her heart to see, Jacen seemed almost mystified by the occasional mention of Ezra he'd heard growing up and soon he'd get a chance to meet him at last.

Jacen looked at her with childish confusion, "Are you sad, momma?"

"No dear, no", Hera said, "It's just... we have to go do something for a minute, okay?"

The boy folded his arms and put on his harshest grumpy face, "But I'm tired! I don't wanna get out of bed."

"Not even for Auntie Bean?", Hera smirked.

His bright blue eyes lit up, "Auntie Bean?! Is she coming?!"

'Auntie Bean' had quickly become Jacen's second favourite person in the galaxy. Sabine had kept in regular contact before and after Jacen was born and she remained an immovable part of Hera's life. In a way, the Mandalorian would always be like a daughter to her but these last few years had seen Sabine grow to a point where Hera saw her equally as a sister. In the months after Jacen was...
born, Hera had stayed on Lothal with Sabine to recover and get through the initial difficulties. Even when Hera returned to the rebellion, Sabine continued to be there for them both. When Hera was off fighting, Jacen spent his time either with his grandfather on Ryloth or with 'Auntie Bean' on Lothal. Jacen had created the name, unable to say Sabine at first, and it had stuck. It was going to break his heart to see her go away.

The Twi'lek laughed at his excitement, "No, dear. I was just going to call her."

"Can I come?", the boy's excitement didn't decrease much at all. Any change to talk to her was enough for him.

"I woke you up, didn't I?", Hera said. "But only to say hello, I have to talk to her about some things."

The boy nodded enthusiastically with a beaming grin on his face. Hera stood up and Jacen kicked off his blanket, shuffling to the edge of the bed in his pyjamas. His arms shot out to his mother, his hands grasping at air before Hera picked him up with a smile.

"You're getting big, aren't you?", Hera said as she held him tightly in her arms.

"Yeah! I'm almost four", Jacen giggled.

The Twi'lek rolled her eyes happily, he was only just over three and a half. Hera reached one hand out to open the door with the other still clutching her son protectively against her. His arms were slung around her neck, hugging her as tightly as they could. It was little things like that that made her day and it was things like that that would keep her smiling through, even now. They crossed the corridor into her own room where the terminal sat. Chopper rolled up through the door, watching them both from just inside the room. Hera pulled up a chair and sat down in front of the terminal, Jacen watching innocently and impatiently. Her fingers keyed in the familiar comm address for Sabine and tapped a button, waiting for her to answer.

She must have been at the terminal already since she picked up after only a second or two. Sabine appeared above the table with only her head and shoulders visible. She'd cut her hair since last she'd spoken to her a few days ago, it was short and dyed a slightly different shade of purple.

"Hera?", Sabine asked.

Jacen bounced in her lap, "Auntie Bean!"

Sabine's attention shot to him and her face lit up, "Hey buddy! You've grown so much since I saw you last!"

"I Know! Momma said the same thing!", Jacen titled his head at her, "Your hair is new."

Sabine laughed and ran her hand through it, "Yeah, time for a change."

"It looks pretty, I like it", Jacen said gleefully.

"Thanks, Jac. That means a lot coming from you." The Mandalorian almost blushed, her hair was one of her biggest ways of artistic expression, having Jacen's approval was a good sign to have.

Sabine's smile remained but her eyes found Hera's, a bit of concern lurking behind them, "Is everything okay?"

Hera smiled back at her, "I- yes. Everything's fine. It's just... I had a call from Ahsoka."
The name made Sabine catch her breath in her throat, "You... so does that mean?"

The Twi'lek nodded, "It's time."

Jacen watched both of them obliviously, "Time for what, momma?"

Hera squeezed him tighter to her, unsure of the words needed to explain what was happening. Fortunately, Sabine had found them for her.

"Hey, Jac", Sabine called to him to get his attention, "I'm... going to have to go away for a while."

The boy's face sunk, "What? Why?"

"There's something important I have to do, just for a little bit."

His face still watched her with confused eyes, "But... how long 'till you come home?"

"I don't know", she admitted. "But, I promise when I do I'll have an extra special present for you", she smirked and glanced at Hera.

The boy's eyes brightened a bit, "You mean it?"

"I really mean it", Sabine promised.

"Okay... I guess that's okay", Jacen whined, burying his head back into his mother's side.

Sabine chuckled, "I'm glad it's okay with you, Jac."

Hera let the boy nuzzle into her for a few seconds, letting him take his time to understand. After a while she rubbed his back and gently kissed his head, "I think it's time for you to go back to sleep, hmm? Say goodbye to Auntie Bean."

Jacen unburied his head from Hera's shoulder "Bye bye, Auntie Bean. I'll miss you."

The Mandalorian smiled back at him, "I'll miss you too, buddy. You behave for your mom, okay?"

He nodded lazily, "I promise. Love you."

"Love you too, little guy. I'll be back before you know it", she promised.

Chopper wheeled up to them and reached out his manipulator arms, carrying Jacen carefully in them. He turned his dome to the hologram and chirped a few times, a mix of greeting, attitude and just a little bit of honest concern.

Sabine laughed at him, "I'm sure Ezra is fine, Chop. Now you keep them both safe, I'll blame you if anything happens to them."

The old droid warbled back to her before turning to take Jacen back to bed, rolling out of the door with a series of chirps and clanks as he did so. The door slid shut leaving them alone for what would be their last talk in a long while.

Hera sighed, "Look I know this is short notice, I'm sorry."

Sabine shook her head adamantly, "No, Hera. I've been waiting for this for a long time. Ever since he left I've been waiting for the day to go to get him back... and after Endor and with what Rex said about Ahsoka looking for some lead... I knew it wasn't going to be long."
Ahsoka had visited Rex out of the blue only a few weeks before the fighting on Endor. Hera had told Rex all she knew of Ahsoka's survival, but what little Ezra had told her didn't give them much to go on. At least it wasn't a complete surprise to him when she got in touch with him a few months ago. Hera didn't know where Ahsoka had been for the last six years since Malachor, she didn't know if she'd even told Rex, but whatever she'd been doing must have been important. After their meeting, Rex had contacted Hera as soon as he could to tell her that Ahsoka had found some leads on how to find Ezra and wanted Hera and the others to know ahead of time. Now it seemed Ahsoka had gathered enough evidence to head out to find him. Hera had no idea what evidence she had or how she got it but she trusted Ahsoka to know what she was doing. Hera had Jacen to look after, Zeb and Kallus had obligations with the Rebellion as did Rex. Sabine of course had volunteered to go with her but there was never really a doubt that she'd do so.

Hera couldn't help smile at the girl's commitment. "Sabine... I'm so proud of you."

Sabine looked away shyly, "Hera, quit getting all sentimental."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I just...", Hera trailed off.

The Mandalorian's expression changed into one of concern, "I'm going to be okay, Hera. You know that, right?"

"I know you are", Hera's head drooped. "But I am going to miss you."

"It'll be worth it. I promise I'll bring him home."

Hera's eyes met hers, "There's no one I'd believe that more from."

They watched each other silently for a moment, needing no words to say goodbye to each other.

Sabine eventually decided that the time had come. "I'd better go get ready anyway", her gaze shifting away.

"Sabine", Hera caught her attention, "Be safe."

She huffed with a grin, "No promises."

"Sabine", Hera scowled.

"Fine", she grumbled sarcastically. "I promise. You too."

The Mandalorian lingered for a second longer, meeting the Twi'lek's eyes once more. Then in a flash she was gone. For the second time that evening, Hera was left facing the computer terminal. Years of waiting had finally come to this moment, it was almost surreal. Part of her was scared for them, all three of them, but deep down she knew there were no two people who would have a better chance of finding Ezra. She'd always told herself that one day Ezra would come home, she never stopped believing it, and now that day was almost close enough to reach out and touch.

Hera got out of her chair and headed towards the cockpit. There were people who needed to know what was happening out there with Ezra, Ahsoka and Sabine. Hera knew some of them as family, others as trusted friends and some by reputation alone. Either way, her mission was clear. Hera dropped into the pilot's seat and entered Lira San's coordinates into the hyperspace computer.

_Those who walk the paths of life will never find them straight and easy. Every path will have its dips and slopes, some will speed the journey along and others will slow it down. If that path is_
blocked or removed entirely, many will flounder and lose themselves. However, there are those who do not walk life's paths but instead seek it's destinations. For these people, a change in the path is only a temporary delay for even if the path on which they started is lost, they will create their own instead as their destination is always still in view.

A communications blackout was a regular occurrence over the last five years. Almost every month communications would drop out for a day or more at some point or another. The hazards of space travel, technical issues, entering the atmosphere of certain planets, all of it could cause some issues. On the first day, no one had paid it much mind and their monotonous patrols of the Unknown Regions continued uninterrupted like they'd done for most of their time out there. On the second day, the technicians began scratching their heads to find if something was wrong on their end. As days rolled into weeks, it was clear something was wrong. The fleet feared that a major communications outpost had been destroyed or that some massive cosmic phenomenon was cutting them off. Thrawn knew better. His understanding of the Emperor's personal interest in their mission and of the typical protocol for Imperial communication issues told him that something significant had occurred.

It had taken almost three months before a message suddenly reached the Chimaera, marked as urgent. Thrawn's eyes scanned the screen atop his office desk, double and triple checking the report that had just come through. It had been exactly as Thrawn had suspected.


His brief mental summary of the dispatch was all that he really needed. He wasn't familiar with Endor beforehand, a quick search of the databases however revealed it to be a rather insignificant gas giant. Thrawn knew the *Executor* as Darth Vader's personal Super Star Destroyer, a massive leviathan with an inordinate amount of firepower. 'The Second Death Star' was something that Thrawn had long feared, ever since he'd heard of the original Death Star's destruction. The Emperor had an obsession with the ability to create massive battle stations, ones capable of destroying planets. If anything, Thrawn was glad it was destroyed. The presence of such a weapon made the Empire a threat to the Chiss Ascendancy, something he hadn't know the extent of when he'd first heard of the project several years ago.

As for Darth Vader and the Emperor, their deaths were probably the most surprising to think of. He'd reached the conclusion weeks ago that they had both perished but Thrawn had viewed them both as the type of men with the strange illusion that they'd never die, that through their strange abilities in the force they'd outlive the galaxy. Evidently, they were wrong. As for Operation: Cinder, Thrawn had had no information. However, he could extrapolate a few things. Firstly, it was top secret, due to it not being mentioned in available Imperial records. Secondly, it was some sort of contingency plan for the Empire, given it was only initiated upon the Emperor's death. Lastly, that both of those facts meant it was certainly nothing good. The Emperor was arrogant and ambitious and not the type of man who would let the victors get away lightly. Therefore, it seemed logical that this 'Operation: Cinder' would somehow wreak havoc on the galaxy, burning down everything the Empire had built out of little more than spite.

Thrawn shook his head. This was a major setback in his plans. The only reason he'd aligned with the Empire was because their unity, military strength and willingness to act decisively made them a viable ally for his people. With the Empire shattered, a powerful tool was compromised. Even worse, the severity of the Emperor's contingency plan and Thrawn's lack of awareness of and power over whatever remained of the Empire meant that it might not be a dependable ally.

The Chiss grimaced at the screen, sorting through his options. *Even with the Emperor's death, the...*
Empire still controls most of the galaxy. Many regimes have lost great leaders and endured, although almost as many have crumbled too. The Rebels’ own strength is unclear also; how much of their forces were destroyed at Endor? How many worlds do they control? What other figures have emerged on either side that might dictate the fate of the galaxy?

Thrawn ran through a hundred scenarios in his head, trying to formulate the most likely outcome of the events and, from there, the best path to follow. The idea always remained to return home, to use the Ascendancy's resources to continue his search. Regretfully, he shook his head. No, the Empire already provides ships and crew, the Ascendancy would provide little else at this time. With no established details of the threat the Emperor sensed nor a clear solution to it, they would hesitate to act. Especially in the face of their own concerns.

It was true that, despite their time here, Thrawn had yet to uncover much of substance in the Unknown Regions. Thrawn didn't doubt the existence of the threat the Emperor perceived one bit, but he had found no substantial evidence of it yet. If he was to return to his people, he'd need to have not only a target but a plan. The Chiss could wait, for now what remained of the Empire was his best chance of dealing with whatever lurked out here. If he could unite the Empire to fight this threat, or divide it to stop it opposing his own people, so be it. The Chiss would do what he must, as he always did.

"Grand Admiral, she's here", his door guard sounded through the comm.

Thrawn peeled his eyes off the screen, "Thank you, Sergeant. Send her in."

The Fourth Sister walked calmly through the door, her eyes meeting Thrawn's instantly.

"Grand Admiral, I hope you have a good reason for summoning me here", the Inquisitor muttered as she marched to Thrawn's desk.

"Grand Admiral, I hope you have a good reason for summoning me here", the Inquisitor muttered as she marched to Thrawn's desk.

He held her gaze as she finally stopped in front of him, her body rigid and agitated. It had become clear in their time together that the Fourth Sister had a huge distaste for Thrawn, only protocol and their shared mission kept their interactions civil.

"The Emperor is dead."

Her rigid stance faltered and eyes flickered with shock. The surprise was followed by anger and disbelief as her fists clenched and she gritted her teeth.

"What are you talking about?", the woman leaned forward onto the desk, resting on her still clenched fists.

"It seems rather simple. The Emperor is dead, as is Darth Vader. The communications blackout was no doubt a result of this loss and of the deaths of most of the people who even knew of our mission", Thrawn explained plainly.

The Inquisitor scoffed, "Don't be ridiculous. How can the Rebels touch the most powerful men in the galaxy?"

Thrawn activated the screen once again and showed her the message he'd received. She slowly cast her eyes over it, Thrawn watching her absorb every detail.

"It seems our Emperor could not let go of his Death Star programme", Thrawn continued as she read, "The rebels yet again found a way to destroy the station, this time at the expense of both of their lives."
The Fourth Sister reached out with her hand at the holographic screen above the table, "What's this 'Operation: Cinder'?"

"I do not know", Thrawn admitted. "A contingency of some sort, I don't doubt its severity."

"I see", she slowly moved back from the desk but kept her eyes on the report. Thrawn had never seen this arrogant women look almost speechless as she did now.

Thrawn abruptly shut the display down and leaned in, "The question now is where do we go from here?"

The Fourth Sister scowled at him, "A new Emperor will come, I don't see how this changes our mission."

"Your assessment of Imperial politics is optimistic", Thrawn said as he stood up.

He could see the Fourth Sister's annoyance in her face, "And you're going to enlighten me, are you? The biggest political train wreck in Imperial High Command?"

Thrawn paced quietly to the clone helmet in alcove on his wall, an appropriate point of reference in a time of sudden regime change. "I do not need political support to appreciate the reality of the situation. There are few, if any, figures left with the support or power base left to command loyalty from the entire Empire. At one time, I'd have said Governor Tarkin would take the reins although that option was made impossible years ago."

"Don't tell me you're going to make a claim", the Inquisitor scoffed.

"Certainly not. In fact, my question was not a matter of Imperial leadership. The Emperor may have sent us on this mission but with his absence and the lack of a clear leader, we must reassess our own situation."

"I have my mission and I'm going to see it through", the Fourth Sister said angrily. The woman stepped towards him, "And if you're thinking of turning tail and running back to-"

Thrawn raised his hand to cut her off, "You misunderstand. I agree our mission here is far too important to abandon. However, given the conditions we must adjust our tactics."

A bit of her anger abated, "What are you thinking? I don't know of any other ways to scour a thousand different systems."

"Firstly, the rest of our fleet must be informed of the Emperor's fate and also of our reasons for continuing this mission", Thrawn said. His eyes moved from the Fourth Sister to the piece of painted wall that still sat in the corner of his office, vandalised by the rebels' own Sabine Wren. "Secondly, we must prepare for the likelihood of being pursued. The rebels may find evidence of communications sent to us over these past years and from there they may be able to chart our trajectory. Ezra Bridger's friends in particular might now seek to hunt us down since the fighting is over."

The Fourth Sister looked away for a second in thought, "But they don't know that Bridger isn't with us or that we haven't a clue where he is."

"My thoughts precisely, Inquisitor. This is of course assuming that Bridger has not already returned home, as unlikely as that situation is."

"He hasn't gone home, he's out here somewhere."
Thrawn started to walk back to his desk, "And yet you still haven't any clue as to where?"

The Fourth Sister cleared her throat, "There are a handful of systems near your initial position that I haven't yet searched."

The Chiss slid back into his chair and raised an eyebrow, "And you did not think of searching these sooner?"

"I wanted to but you insisted on moving the fleet out for your 'patrol'”, the Fourth Sister bit back. "If I'd stayed I wouldn't have had enough fuel to reach the fleet again."

"My apologies but Bridger was a secondary objective, my mission was more important", Thrawn countered.

The Fourth Sister huffed, "You know, Grand Admiral. If I didn't think you were so prideful, I'd almost think you don't want Bridger to be found."

Thrawn kept staring unflinchingly at her, "Then allow me to allay your worries. Take a ship and head to those systems, perform your search for Bridger as you see fit. My fleet will join you shortly."

She looked at him suspiciously, "Why the sudden change of heart?"

"As I said, the rebels could easily determine our course from the communication records and would no doubt seek to interrupt us. If we return to our initial position, we can follow a completely new course that they will not have anticipated. You may go ahead of us and search the systems you desire and my fleet will catch up afterwards before we continue our search elsewhere."

"Alright", the woman sighed, "We'll play it your way."

"I appreciate your cooperation, Fourth Sister", Thrawn said.

"If that's all, I've got my mission to deal with."

The Grand Admiral stood up to see her out, "Indeed, I will inform our staff of the turn of events and join you shortly."

The Fourth Sister turned to leave without so much as a salute or formal dismissal. It was what Thrawn had come to expect from her and it didn't bother him, no matter how much she wished it so.

"One more thing, before you go", Thrawn called after her. "If you find Bridger, do your best to apprehend him alive."

She stopped to laugh at him but didn't turn back, "Are you that prideful that you want to gloat to him before he dies?"

Thrawn didn't address her answer, "As you will, Inquisitor."

The Fourth Sister walked out of the office without another word to him. Thrawn watched her go, deep in thought. The Fourth Sister was a prideful and vindictive creature, lacking compassion and eager for power, with an arrogance in her unnatural abilities. It made sense that such people saw these qualities in others. Prideful. Her choice of words to describe him was less that accurate. It is not pride, Inquisitor, only pragmatism and practicality.
Once more he turned the display back on to read over the report. Unsurprisingly, in her haste the Fourth Sister had failed to pick up on one tiny but crucial detail within it. Thrawn, of course, had picked out the word. He had picked out the name: *Skywalker.*

His legs carried him through the forest as fast as they could, the force telling him well in advance of every branch, root, plant, rock or creature in his way. Ezra turned to his right and through the trees he saw Argos, his hunting partner, shoot past him and close in.

Argos was the name he'd given to the same predator that visited him that first night. As it turns out, offering the rations did make him return the next day and the day after that and every day since. Each time, Ezra became better at connecting with him and over time he built a friendship with the creature. Now, more than four years later, Argos and Ezra were an inseparable team. It was on hunts like these that they put that teamwork to the test.

Despite Ezra's reluctance to harm any creature, he had to accept that Argos was a predator that had to feed. Ezra too had to eat and surviving on whatever plants and fruits the toxicology kit deemed safe wasn't the most exciting diet. It took months before, eventually, Ezra came to accept that death was a natural part of life and every creature was to meet its end sooner or later. Whenever they hunted, Ezra always went for the old or sick, those whose death would come soon anyway. Using his abilities, he would calm and clear the mind of every creature and ensure that death came as quickly and painlessly as possible.

The hunt itself was a challenging experience, one that Ezra had taken a long time to learn. Argos had guided him through it, accepting Ezra's observation of his hunts and then his participation. Now, Argos wouldn't dream of it without his loyal companion at his side.

Today, their target was a fast and evasive creature. A herbivore about two thirds of Ezra's height with long legs and a narrow head and neck, Ezra called them long-leggers. They were one of the more common creatures on the planet and lived mostly on the coastlines, preferring to stay out of the denser jungle. This one had strayed from the herd and he and Argos were hot on its tail.

As fast as he was, Argos was faster. However, Ezra's height and force abilities made him the eyes of the operation. In the distance, he could feel the creature's heartbeat through the trees and could feel its every move and intent.

*Just ahead, leap over that fallen tree.*

Ezra sent the instruction to Argos who followed it precisely, his timing impeccable. The duo has become a well-oiled machine.

*You're almost on him... no wait.*

The long-legger panicked and darted off to the right, heading further away from its pursuers.

*Head right, cut it off if you can.*

Argos wordlessly acknowledged every order and shot off to the right, skilfully leaping over logs and rocks in his path. Ezra turned as well, doing the best he could to keep up with the chase. He could feel the long-legger's body begin to tire from the chase and he knew it wouldn't be long. Argos wasn't far behind, his body used to the strain of a hunt.

As Ezra lost any sight of them, he began to slow down. His senses were attuned enough to follow them at this distance; Ezra knew the creature wouldn't run much further. The Jedi focused all of his attention on his abilities and did the best he could to follow the prey's movements and thoughts. He
felt it run and jump through the jungle, he felt its hooves smashing branches and leaves and, more than anything, he felt its fear.

Ezra pitied it, as he always did with the prey. It was the hardest thing to get used to on these hunts but Ezra had come to accept it. Without him, Argos and the other predators would still hunt them and kill them. It was the natural order of things and it was as the force intended. In his time here, Ezra had become absorbed in the amount of life around him. With life, he knew, came death. Without it, many other creatures would not survive. It was all simply part of the balance of the universe and the living force, a balance it was not Ezra's place to upset. Still, Ezra did what he could to make things easier. Argos may hunt and kill but he didn't have to do it cruelly; Ezra had taught him to be quick and to ease the suffering as much as possible. Soon it would be time to reach out and end this hunt mercifully too.

The long-legger was tiring every second and the gap between him and his pursuer was getting narrower. Ezra felt Argos jump up into the tree branches, skilfully leaping from one to another to keep clear of the obstacles on the ground. Using the trees, Argos came within sight of his prey and kept his eyes locked on it. Ezra's mind, still on the long-legger, felt a twinge of hesitation from the fleeing creature, then confusion, then panic. The creature had run itself into a corner, fallen trees and rocks blocked its path forward and it was trapped. The end of the hunt had come.

Argos felt Ezra's understanding of the situation and stopped running through the trees, instead slowing down and watching the terrified animal. It looked rapidly around for a way out but found nothing. The noise of Argos landing a few metres away from it, snarling with his teeth bared, signalled the end.

The prey was frozen with fear, waiting for the inevitable moment to come when it felt a strange feeling.

*Sleep, become one with the force.*

The creature looked at Argos for a second more before its eyes slid shut and it collapsed on the ground. Ezra broke his connection with the long-legger just before Argos moved in to finish things off.

Putting the animals to sleep was a more acceptable solution than letting it suffer. Ezra would always give them a chance to run and escape, many of their targets over the years had escaped and Ezra had no intention of using his powers to bring death to something that otherwise would have escaped it. It was only at the end, when it was clear that there was no escape, that Ezra reached out and spared them the pain. It still unsettled him at times but he knew it was far better than the alternative.

Ezra shook the thoughts from his head and walked over to where Argos was. He trekked through the same trees and bushes that he'd felt the animals run through, his mind always conscious of the jungle around him. Everywhere around him he felt the wonders of life in harmony with the sadness of deaths like the one of the long-legger. It was a cruel cycle yet also one he'd come to understand.

Upon reaching the clearing where the hunt had ended, Argos was sitting patiently by his catch. The animal saw Ezra and whined at him.

"Yeah, boy. I'm coming", Ezra told him as he approached.

Argos got up onto his feet and bounded over to Ezra, affectionately rubbing his head against his legs.
Ezra laughed and petted him, "Stop being all soft, we both know you were just waiting for me to get here so you could eat."

His pet didn't acknowledge him with a response, only looking up at him with wanting eyes.

"Go on then, get started", Ezra said, pointing over to the carcass.

Argos yapped happily and eagerly tucked in to his meal. His human partner rolled his eyes at the creature's habits and planted himself on a rock nearby, watching him contently. Despite looking nothing like a loth-wolf, he couldn't help but notice how similar the animals were sometimes. *I guess some things are the same no matter where you are.*

Ezra laid back on the rock and looked up at the sky, it was as clear as it had been on the day he arrived. Thinking back to that day, it was about the only thing that was the same. This planet was no longer a strange new world, it was now a sort of home. Not his true home to be sure, but familiar enough. He had Argos now too and the other creatures who he'd connected with over the years, but that too wasn't the company he wished he could have. Ezra valued his time here and what little he had and the lessons he'd learned would be carried with him forever. Still, no matter how hard he tried, he could never stop wishing he was home.

As time wore on, his longing really started to get to him. He spent more time thinking of Lothal and of anywhere familiar. Sabine in particular was always on his mind, it was her he missed most of all. At times he swore could almost feel her, one time he reached out to her and she answered, not directly but almost as if she felt him doing it. It was a brief and fleeting moment almost a year or so ago and Ezra had tried in vain to do it again and half of him doubted if it had ever happened at all. Even when doing other things he thought of the whole family. Every glance of the shuttle's cockpit reminded him of Hera, every quiet evening in the jungle reminded him of meditating with Kanan, every strange new fruit brought back memories of grocery shopping with Zeb and every annoying loth-lizard would scream 'Chopper' to him. Not a day passed when he didn't wonder what they were all up to or what was happening in the galaxy at large. He'd done his best to listen to the force and what it told him though it rarely gave him any information.

There were a few occasions where he felt something definite though. Once, about six months or so after he arrived, he felt a horrible shift in the force. It was beyond anything he imagined, a tragedy of unimaginable proportions. In the days, weeks and eventually years after that event, he often worried what that horrible event must have been. After that he felt almost nothing concrete until a few months ago, three or four maybe. At first, he felt the sudden and abrupt feeling of loss. He couldn't quite put a finger on what had happened but it was as if a light, familiar and powerful, had finally flickered out. Ezra knew something was happening out there but he could never be sure what. Then, as he walked down to the river to fetch some water a day or two later, another incredible shift occurred. A feeling similar to the one a few days before hit him but this time it felt better, almost an antithesis of it, as if a great evil had been vanquished. Minutes later, he felt something entirely new: balance. Whatever had happened out there, he knew it was a good thing.

Since that last feeling, he found himself growing more and more restless. It was like the force telling him that something had changed, one age had ended and another was beginning, and Ezra had a feeling that in this new age his place would be elsewhere. Where that place would be or what his purpose would become, he could only hope. Either way, he had the strange feeling that his time on this lost world was coming to an end.

Yet through it all, one feeling has remained. That same strange call he felt when he left the *Chimaera*, the same one from the first night, was still there. At first Ezra had thought it was something on the planet itself, but eventually he'd realised it was never here. It was always in the
stars, from that cockpit or up in the night sky. Whatever he was sensing, it was out there somewhere. In the last few months, since that last major shift in the force, Ezra felt it more clearly. It was like the background noise had been blocked out and now all he could hear was this strange beckoning call from far away.

Argos' contented purring snapped him out of his daydreams, causing him to sit up and look the beast. The animal had eaten his fill and was lazily plodding over to his master for an afternoon nap.

His scaly head nudged at Ezra as the Jedi stroked his back, "You're such a old man. Had your meal now off to sleep, is it?"

The animal snorted and lowered itself to the ground, ready to rest from his hard work.

Ezra smiled at the sight before reaching for his hip. His fingers found his carving knife, crafted from tree bark and a shard of the shuttle's hull, and got to his feet. He approached the long-legger's carcass with a reluctant groan. **Now for the messy bit.**

Sabine rested her head on her arms, leaning onto the railing around the tower's balcony. It was a clear day with bright blue skies, a cool breeze and a glowing sun. She watched Capital City off in the distance, its new towers and skyscrapers glistening in the midday light. The plains looked almost golden nowadays, a far cry from the burnt brown landscape she'd seen only four years ago. The sea was a brilliant blue, with the Imperial pumping stations and industrial reservoirs destroyed it was allowed to flow back to its normal patterns. She'd never have guessed that Capital City was once a waterfront but it made for a great view to wake up to every morning.

Lothal was a picture of hope, a shining beacon of recovery from an age of terror and death. It made her proud to have played a part in it, but her mind still lingered on those who hadn't seen it yet and those who never would. Kanan sacrificed everything to secure this future and Sabine thought of him often, especially at the memorial Ryder had constructed on his behalf. It was a simple plaque, centred in a garden where the old fuel depot used to be. It wasn't extravagant or expensive, just quiet and simple, a perfect representation of the humble Jedi.

Ezra too deserved to see it recover, he deserved to see it shake off the remnants of Imperial occupation. Sabine had wished he was there for the celebrations they had, to see the banners across the streets and the crowds dancing, singing, cheering and jeering after their victory. Sabine thought about him too, not a day went by when she didn't dwell on either of them. She'd done everything she could to prepare for when he'd come home, the tower was completely refurbished and just waiting to welcome him back. Still, as she waited to leave, she couldn't stop thinking that there was more she could have done. Irrationally of course, she'd spent four and a half years preparing for this, yet in the final hour her mind raced with nerves and anticipation.

A low grumble of engine noises came from behind followed by a large shadow moving across her. Her eyes shot up to see two X-Wing fighters flying in close formation overhead, escorting a massive red Clone Wars-era shuttle. **That's her.** She watched it fly away towards Capital City with a smile before turning her back and running inside.

Sabine rushed back into the tower, grabbing her packed bag, blasters and helmet that were already sitting ready on the table. Her blasters slid into her holsters and she slung the helmet under her arm. Her fingers reached into the bag, checking for the millionth time that the familiar metallic cylinder was in there too, before taking the elevator down towards the garage. Her speeder bike was waiting for her in the centre, ready to carry her off to begin her most important mission yet. She threw her bag into the baggage area behind her seat and jumped behind the controls, fired up
the engine and guided the bike out of the door onto the open plains.

It felt strange to rush off to adventure again, she hadn’t used her blasters outside of training since that last battle for Lothal. To their luck, the attack that she’d helped train an army for had never come. Lothal became almost a non-concern to the Empire after Scarif and Yavin, the small plucky rebellion she’d worked with had evolved into a bold fighting force, able to contend with the Empire and eventually to topple its power at Endor. The Emperor’s death and the destruction of the Second Death Star sealed the fate for the Empire and while holdouts remained, it was now a matter of when the Empire was finally defeated and not if.

As her speeder crossed the plains, two of the loth-wolves that lived nearby ran with her. They’d accepted her as a friend immediately after she’d moved in and Sabine knew there was probably some deep force related reason for that. The beasts had an air of wisdom about them that reminded her of Kanan, after all he’d had such a special connection with them in his last days. At times, Sabine felt almost as if they were watching over here like Kanan used to and the two running with her now felt like a goodbye, wishing her well on her journey to come. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a loth-cat watching her with its giant eyes and equally over-sized mouth. If loth-wolves were Kanan then loth-cats were definitely Ezra. The small, annoying, goofy looking monsters had grown on her over the years. The hard-ass Mandalorian had been worn down by their charms and found herself more and more taken with their adorable habits, playful attitudes and love of her attention. Not that she’d ever admit it, she had a Mandalorian reputation to maintain of course, but she knew they’d found their way into her heart. A perfect metaphor for the Jedi she associated with them.

Her speeder drew closer to Capital City and memories of all the people that had brought her to this point flooded back. Zeb, the grumpy but protective old Lasat, remained a close friend and a welcome visitor when he had the time to come by. His duties in the Rebellion kept him occupied these days but he still made time for his old friends. When it came to Zeb’s friends though, the most surprising one was Kallus. The former enemies had become best friends, though Sabine could never stop teasing them as being something more. They were on Lira San together right now, a symbolic gesture of forgiveness from the Lasat people to the person that, in a life long behind him, had hurt them so badly.

Hera also occupied her thoughts, as did her little ‘Jac’ as Sabine called him, two people who became huge parts of her life. Hera was always there for her and Sabine tried to do the same, forging an already unbreakable bond into something that was somehow even stronger. Hera had persevered through so much and still found the time to put others first, risking her own life countless times from Scarif to those final battles above Endor. Sabine had supported Hera however she could, mainly through looking after Jacen sometimes when she was away. At first she’d worried that she’d not be very good at it, she’d never looked after kids before. However, Sabine ended up loving the time she got with him. She’d be as happy to see him as he was to see her and she’d had hours of fun watching him play, teaching him to paint and draw or telling him stories about Ezra and the others.

Her speeder entered the bustling centre of the city and made a beeline towards her destination. Ryder had been told to expect a visitor and the docks had made preparations for their arrival but apparently Ahsoka had asked to meet Sabine in the old senate building instead, understandably wanting to avoid too much publicity over her presence. Sabine’s speeder navigated the city’s winding streets and finally reached the building. She hopped off and slung her bag around her shoulder, bidding her reliable transport a silent farewell before turning toward the building.

As she ascended the steps to the main room, she couldn’t escape some of Ezra’s last words to her. I know I can always count on you. Once, she’d thought that would mean protecting Lothal and its
people in his absence. Now, she realised that Ezra might have always known it would come to this. Ezra might have known that one day he'd need her help and it would fall to her to pull him out of the fire, just like old times. Sabine reached the gaping hole in the building's wall, kept there on Sabine's recommendation to let her creation within look out on the now free Lothal.

The painting covered an entire wall, the colours commanding the attention of anyone in the room. Her masterpiece: the whole family. She'd laboured over it for weeks, getting every detail to perfection. Every colour was chosen intentionally, every symbol a choice and every positioning meaning something. The sapphire-eyed figure of Ezra took centre stage, the one who had brought them to Lothal and the one who still dominated her thoughts and inspiration, with that damn white loth-cat curled around his shoulder. She stood at his side, as she always would, a cluster of loth-cats at her feet. Zeb towered behind them always having their back, his warm smile contrasting his brutish and intimidating appearance. Hera held her pilot's helmet and wore her rank slide with pride, a symbol of her commitment to the rebellion and her gift for flight. Behind her and Ezra, Kanan stood with clear eyes, eyes she now saw in Jacen too. Chopper of course, clambered to the front to be the centre of attention. She was particularly proud of the two loth-wolves on either side, watching over the crew and remembering the role they played in the planet's liberation.

Sabine approached the painting and looked up at it, remembering all the happy memories this family had created. Her attention turned to Ezra and her hand reached out. Tentatively, she drew her finger down his cheek and tapped it lightly. A final reminder of what she'd spent her last few years here for and what she was setting off into the unknown to go and save.

Her reminiscing was interrupted by a strange feeling, like a breeze that she could not feel. Then a shadow cast itself across the painting, blocking out the light from the outside world. Sabine hesitated for a second, unsure what she was waiting for, before turning around.

Standing in a column of sunlight, the Togruta Jedi she'd known years ago looked so much different. Ahsoka stood with confidence and wisdom but not arrogance, the likes of which Sabine had never seen before. She was wrapped in a hooded cloak that covered her montrals and was tied at the neck, flowing down to below her knees. Beneath the cloak, Sabine could see openwork leather wraps around her legs like some figure from ancient history. She wore a grey and silver tunic, fastened by a simple belt with a large circular buckle. Her appearance was completed by the towering staff she held in her hand, topped at the end by another circular symbol. Ahsoka had looked like a Jedi before, legends already at that time, but now she looked almost mythical. The stoic figure watched Sabine intently for a few seconds before gently raising her staff and tapping it onto the ground.

The time had come. Sabine untucked her helmet from her arm, looking briefly at the redone designs of the sapphire-eyed wolf that covered the faceplate. She brought it to her head and slid it on, that familiar feeling of readiness washing over her. Her spirit swelled and her mouth curled into a smile beneath her helmet. The Mandalorian stepped forward and walked towards Ahsoka, ready for whatever journey lay ahead.

Ezra Bridger was out there somewhere and now, finally, it was time to bring him home.

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We're finally where Rebels leaves off so from now on we're treading new ground.

Hera's section is the first time I've done anything with Jacen and I'm not sure I've got a good handle on how to write toddlers yet. Like I said last time, I'm a sucker for Hera and Sabine interaction. I loved the idea of Sabine being a part of Jacen's life too and it helps explain the change in Hera and Sabine's relationship in this story. The Thrawn chapter was a challenge
since I struggled to think of how to handle the Emperor's death and the defeat at Endor, I didn't want a whole other chapter just to deal with that alone but it's something I felt had to be addressed with both Thrawn and the Fourth Sister. I hope I've given enough of an explanation as to why they haven't found Ezra yet, it wasn't all they were searching for at this time. As for Ezra himself, this chapter serves to show what Ezra has been doing these last few years. Learning to become one with the environment around him, exploring the living force and accepting the realities of the universe are going to be lessons Ezra will carry with him going forward. A hunting scene was new for me but I felt it was a good way to show how talented Ezra has become and how well he can apply his talents. Lastly, retelling the epilogue scene with Sabine's actual thoughts was quite a bit of fun if a bit challenging. As an Ahsoka fan, finally being able to write even her appearance in a story was nice to do and her role is only going to become more important over time.

Two name clarifications before we go. Sabine's nickname of 'Jac' for Jacen is with a soft 'c' (basically, it rhymes with 'face'). As for those wondering why Ezra's pet is called 'Argos', it's a vague reference to Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus' dog is also called Argos and I guess the similar situation of both stories' heroes as being far away and longing for home got me thinking of it. There's no narrative similarity for Argos, Odysseus' dog is back home at Ithaca not out with him, but that's the explanation if anyone was curious.

Next time: Zeb and Kallus get a visit from Hera, Ahsoka and Sabine decide their plan, Thrawn and Pellaeon talk about their objectives and Ezra feels something new in the force.
Chapter 4 - The Search Begins

I want to mention something quickly about chapter length. Most chapters are probably going to be around 8,000 words from now on, like this one, since there's a bit less to cover than there has been previously. I'm conscious that this is going to be a long story and having every chapter be 10-11k words isn't very inviting for people to read. 8,000 gets the right balance between long enough to cover enough per chapter and not being too long as to send people running away. It's not a concrete rule, some will have fewer words and others more, but it's generally what you can expect in the future.

This time: Zeb and Kallus get a visit from Hera, Ahsoka and Sabine decide their plan, Thrawn and Pellaeon talk about their objectives and Ezra feels something new in the force.

The Ghost dropped out of hyperspace into the breathtaking orange nebula around the Lasat homeworld of Lira San. The sight still took Hera's breath away despite years of space travel and multiple visits to the planet. The partially obscured silhouette of an Alliance Nebulon-B frigate became visible in front of her and the hail followed seconds later, guarding the route into the hidden planet.

The comm crackled to life, "This is Aspis command, standby VCX frigate. We weren't expecting your arrival. Checking your signatures now", came the voice from the other end. "Signature paints you as the Ghost. Welcome to Lira San, General Syndulla."

"Thanks you, Aspis. Sorry for not sending word ahead, this wasn't a planned visit", Hera told the officer as she piloted the Ghost toward the planet. "I need to speak to Garazeb Orrellios, do I have permission to land on the planet?"

Hera tapped her fingers anxiously on the controls as she waited for the traffic officer to process her request.

"No need, General", the voice finally answered, "He's on board. I'll let him know you're docking."

"Thank you, Ghost out", Hera replied. It wasn't like her to forget to call ahead but there was a lot on her mind right now.

She flew in towards the frigate, a model she'd seen a few of during her time with the Alliance. They weren't exactly a common sight and how Zeb had managed to convince Mon Mothma to spare one for his little escapade was a mystery. The Ghost flew casually into the hangar and Hera set her down gently in the centre, not far from a small detachment of A-Wings.

As soon as the engines were powered down, Hera was out of her seat and heading out of the cockpit. She entered the common area to find Chopper and Jacen waiting eagerly for her. Hera held out her hand towards her son, silently telling him to take hold of it.

"Are we really seeing Uncle Zeb?", Jacen asked as he held his mother's hand.

Hera started walking toward the ladder into the cargo bay with Chopper following them, "Yes, dear. Just like the last few times you asked."

The boy smiled giddily as she skipped beside his mother. Hera picked him up to carry him down the ladder. He really is getting bigger, she mused as she awkwardly made her way down into the
cargo bay. She set him down and made her way towards the Ghost's ramp, hitting the button to lower it.

They emerged into the hangar and looked around for the towering Lasat. It was surprisingly busy with technical crews and even a few pilots seemingly preparing to head out on a mission. Among the throes of people, Hera saw at least a handful of Lasat. She didn't think she'd seen so many off-world before, even if it was only on a ship in their system. If more of them were working with the Alliance, hopefully it meant that the Lasat could start to reintegrate and engage with galactic society.

On the far side of the hangar, a door swung open to let Zeb walk through side-by-side with Kallus. Zeb still wore the same armour and had his large bo-rifle slung around his shoulder. Kallus looked neat and presentable, his Alliance officer clothes ironed to perfection and his hair and beard were meticulously maintained, both evidence of the discipline he'd picked up during his time with ISB. The two men spotted Hera straight away.

"It's them! It's them!", Jacen cried as he pulled his mother's arm.

Hera laughed at him, "I see them. Calm down."

Zeb waved his hand over his head as he approached, grinning down at Jacen as he got closer.

Hera rolled her eyes at the excited boy, "Go on then, go see him."

She released his hand and he ran toward Zeb, arms outstretched.

"There's my favourite kit!", the Lasat shouted to him.

"Uncle Zeb!", he said happily as Zeb caught the running boy in his arms and spun him around.

The Lasat set him down and ruffled his hair, "You're getting big, little fella."

"I'm gonna be as tall as Kallus", the green-haired child pointed to the ex-Imperial. He hadn't been given an affectionate nickname, he was always just Kallus - Zeb's influence, Hera knew.

"Hehe yeah, just not as ugly", Zeb added.

Kallus was about to open his mouth to bite back when Hera interrupted.

"I hope you two aren't setting a bad example", she warned jokingly.

Zeb gave Kallus a brotherly punch on the arm, "You know us, respectable adults."

Hera rolled her eyes, "Maybe when Ryloth freezes over."

Zeb held out his arms to greet her and wrapped her in a warm hug, glad to see his close friend again. The Twi'lek released him and gave Kallus a quick embrace too, a thought that still struck her as unbelievable sometimes.

"It's good to see you, Hera", Kallus said to her. "Still, it's not like you to drop by unannounced."

"This wasn't really planned", Hera bit her lip slightly.

Zeb narrowed his eyes, "What's happened? If you needed something why didn't you just call?"

Hera looked around the hangar and at the crowds of people in it, "Do you have somewhere to
"Yeah, sure", he nodded. "This way, there's a briefing room we can use."

Zeb motioned back toward the door he and Kallus had entered through and let Kallus lead the way. As Zeb turned to follow, a loud metal clank echoed in the hangar and the Lasat jumped up while clutching his foot.

"Wharp wharp whorp", Chopper chuckled as he rolled past and caught up to Hera.

Zeb screamed, "Gah, Chopper! I'm gonna en-"

"Zeb!", Hera cautioned him with a nod to Jacen.

"Oh, uh, hehe... right", Zeb reluctantly powered through his crushed toes and held his tongue.

The group walked through the pristine white halls of the frigate, Jacen watched in awe at the people rushing to and fro. It was his first real time on a major warship, he'd been on Lothal or Ryloth for most of the war and had only travelled between them on the Ghost. A few passers-by looked curiously at the small child walking through the halls but Jacen paid them no mind, staring back with a toothy grin.

"How did you manage to get Mon Mothma to give you a frigate?", Hera asked to satisfy her earlier curiosity.

"Well since my people didn't get involved in the war much and given their treatment by the Empire, she thought sending a medical frigate to help guard the place might get them on side", Zeb explained.

Hera looked questioningly at him, "She thought the best way to build good relations was by sending a warship into their system?"

Zeb shrugged, "Beats me. My people don't need any more reason to dislike the Empire, don't see why she'd go through the trouble."

"It's a power symbol. Its point is to show who is in charge in the galaxy", Kallus intervened. "The Empire did the same thing. I'm sure Mon Mothma wants to project a different image with that power: peace and prosperity and all that. The motives may be different but the methods are the same."

Hera hadn't thought of it like that, she was still getting used to the Rebellion being the dominant side in the galaxy after all. Times really were changing, it would take some time to get used to seeing things from a different perspective. She'd spent her whole life being an underdog whether it was as a fearful young girl in the Clone Wars or fighting an almost impossible war in the rebellion. It brought her happiness to know that Jacen was going in to a better galaxy than she had been born into, she just hoped it stayed that way.

"Here", Zeb said as they reached another door.

Zeb showed them into a small room with a table in the centre and a few chairs around it, a large window covered one of the walls that gave a beautiful view of the surrounding nebula. Chopper took Jacen off into a corner, letting him stare in awe at the sight as well as keep him distracted from the adults' conversation.

"So, what's this all about?", Zeb asked in a hushed tone.
Hera sighed and sat against the table's edge, "We had a call from Ahsoka the other day."

Zeb stepped forward, "Oh, I see. Is she alright?"

Hera nodded, "She's got a lead."

"Ezra?", Zeb breathed.

"Ezra", Hera confirmed. "Sabine knows already, they left a few hours ago."

Zeb leaned against the table, a mix of both pleasant surprise and understandable anxiety on his face.

"I'm sure they'll be safe, Zeb", Hera assured him.

"I know... I just can't believe it's time. Finally we're gonna get the kid home", Zeb's eyes were fixed on the floor.

Hera grunted a laugh, "Kid? You know he's going to be well over twenty by the times he's back, right?"

"You know that's not gonna stop be messing with him", the Lasat chuckled.

"Another reunion", Kallus said. "Hopefully a more lasting one this time."

Hera folded her arms, "After everything, I think we've all earned a chance to settle down."

"Huh, you can say that again", Zeb sighed.

Kallus leaned forward onto a chair beside them, "Do we have any idea when they're coming back?"

"Not a clue", Hera shrugged. "We'll just have to wait and see."

"So... what? We just sit here and do nothing?", Zeb's impatience showed through. The Lasat was never one to sit out of a good fight and he wanted nothing more than to help rescue someone who was like a brother to him.

"Not exactly, there's more than one reason I came to see you instead of calling."

Zeb watched her closely, "What are you thinking, Hera?"

The Twi'lek shifted uncomfortably on the table, her fingers absentmindedly tapping on the surface behind her. "Leia promised to help us with anything we needed when it came to Ezra. I'm sure she'd like to know what's going on and I wouldn't mind some company for the visit."

"Ah, that makes sense", Zeb said with a nod.

"Leia Organa has a lot of influence, she'd be a useful person to have on side if we need anything", Kallus reasoned.

Leia had earned herself a reputation among the Alliance as a goodhearted and capable leader. She'd played a part in almost every major aspect of the rebellion and had earned the respect of countless people, not least of all Hera. Of course, her already formidable reputation was enhanced by some of the company she kept.
Hera looked away and breathed in deeply, "And... she might be able to get help from the right people."

"You don't mean... him do you?", Kallus asked in shock.

Zeb looked at her cautiously, "Hera, I thought you said you didn't want to ri-"

"This is important", Hera wasn't going to let her own issues get in the way. "He needs to know."

The Lasat looked away to the window, "And what about, uh, you know?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it", Hera's voice went low and quiet. "Right now we've got to do whatever we can to help Ezra and Sabine."

"I'm in, no questions asked", Zeb answered.

Kallus stepped forward, "Whatever you need, Hera. We'll do it."

"Thank you. Both of you", Hera smiled at them. "First thing we need to do is go and see Leia, I'll get in touch and see where she is."

Zeb slid off the table and cracked his back, "Not a problem. Been itching to spend some time on the Ghost again, it's been too long."

Hera stood up from the table and wrapped Zeb in another quick hug. She looked over to see Jacen curled up against Chopper in the corner by the window, having drifted off to sleep after such a long journey. Her eyes lingered on her son, the worries she'd hoped to keep hidden bubbling closer to the surface than she'd liked. Reluctantly, she woke him and the group headed back to the Ghost ready to depart after their quick visit. All the while, her mind still couldn't suppress the niggling concerns eating away inside.

Ahsoka's shuttle wasn't the most extravagant vessel Sabine had seen, nor the largest. Space travel in this ship would take a bit of getting used to after spending so long on the Ghost, let alone spending so much time on Lothal in the last few years. Its small cargo hold had two cramped cabins on either side for each of them and little else other than the cockpit. The compact cargo bay was already pretty full with a few boxes of rations and medical supplies as well as several canisters of fuel. *Enough for a few months at least, but not much more. Just how long did Ahsoka think this would take?*

They hadn't really talked much in the half hour she'd been here, only brief greetings and Ahsoka's explanation of the ship's layout. The Mandalorian had disappeared straight into her cabin to deposit her things and clear her head for a few minutes. Sabine was glad to have some private space at least, she still valued the time she had to herself when she could get it. She'd dumped her bag haphazardly into her cabin, leaving it on the bed to be sorted out later. There wasn't much else in there to speak of, the bunk took up half the space leaving only barely enough room to walk beside it. A small cabinet was wedged in between the wall and the bunk, barely as high as her waist. Certainly no luxury liner but Sabine didn't mind even if she had been made to sleep on the floor, she was still glad to be here.

The Mandalorian walked out of the cabin and back into the cargo bay, before turning straight for the cockpit. The door slid open for her to show Ahsoka at the controls and the swirling blue vortex of hyperspace in the viewport.

"Nice little ship you've got", Sabine said as she sat down in the co-pilot's seat.
"Not the best, but it's enough for our needs", Ahsoka answered.

Sabine watched the passing blues of hyperspace anxiously, unsure where they were going or what exactly Ahsoka wanted her to do. Ahsoka hadn't mentioned anything about what lead she had on Ezra or how she'd come across it. She doubted that she'd encountered him but she must have found something when she was off doing... come to think of it what was she even doing these last few years? Why hadn't she been helping fight the Empire?

"You're anxious", Ahsoka stated suddenly. Her voice and demeanour held a certain wisdom to them and Sabine was still trying to figure out how much she'd changed since they'd last seen each other.

"I forget you Jedi can do that", Sabine sighed.

Ahsoka switched her gaze to her, "What's on your mind?"

Sabine leaned back into the chair, "Huh, where do I start?"

The Togruta pushed a button to engage the autopilot and released the controls before turning to Sabine. She'd ditched the cloak and the staff was leaning against the wall behind her, leaving her in a tunic similar in style to the one she'd worn years ago.

"Go ahead, I'll tell you what I can", Ahsoka told her.

Sabine sat forward in the chair, "Okay, aside from the obvious question about how we're going to find Ezra. It might help to know where you've been the last few years too, there were a few points where we could have used you."

Ahsoka listened to her questions quietly and calmly nodded after she'd finished. "Fair enough", Ahsoka began, "how much did Ezra tell you about what happened when he went through that portal at the Temple?"

Sabine tried her best to dissect her memory of what Ezra had told them, "Something about pathways and time portals or something? He told us about you and he said something about the Emperor." The Mandalorian shrugged her shoulders and shook her head, "Most of what he said didn't make much sense to me. I don't even think it made sense to him. But I know it worried him a lot."

"What Ezra went through was a portal to a world between worlds, a world that connects the physical world through the force. Key events, important places, locations strong in the force, all joined together through one place. Those who can access it can influence the past and maybe the future, it's a dangerous tool for anyone who controls it."

Sabine watched her intently, "Only people like you and Ezra could access it? Force sensitives?"

"Force sensitives like Ezra and I", Ahsoka nodded, "Or someone like the Emperor."

Even when dead, the former ruler's name still struck her with fear and revulsion. "That... doesn't sound good."

"Well, that's one way to put it", Ahsoka laughed.

"So what? You used this place to find Ezra?"

"No, it's not something that really works like that", Ahsoka tried to explain. The dumbfounded look
on the Mandalorian's face showed it wasn't a good way to put it, "It's complicated."

Sabine shut her eyes for a few seconds, "Guess I should be used to Jedi with unexplainable goals and knowledge by now."

"I'm sorry, Sabine. It's just difficult to explain", Ahsoka's voice sounded regretful as if she wished she couldn't help her understand.

The young woman opened her eyes with another sigh, "It's okay. I'm definitely used to it by now. I understand that you understand, that's enough for me for now."

Ahsoka smiled at her, Sabine could tell if it was admiration or just relief that she wouldn't have to try and break it down.

"As I was saying, that world is dangerous in the wrong hands. If the Emperor knew about the access point on Lothal, there was a chance he knew about them elsewhere", Ahsoka continued.

"And you didn't get Ezra to help you?", Sabine asked.

"When Ezra saved my life, he only pulled me from Malachor for a time. When I returned, it was to the same time period he rescued me from two years earlier. I knew I couldn't cross his path any time before then so I had to go on my own. I found a ship and went off to make sure the Emperor didn't try to use any other access points in the galaxy."

"So you were stopping the Emperor trying to do what he did on Lothal anywhere else?", the Mandalorian felt like she finally understood Ahsoka's logic.

"Yes, something like that."

_Something like that?_ Sabine didn't even want to try to understand any more of the nuance of it. _Emperor having that power is bad. Emperor not having that power is good. Good enough for me._

The Mandalorian still wasn't done with all her questions. "I still don't see how this helped you find Ezra?"

Ahsoka turned her chair back to the viewport, "A few months ago, I found that the Empire had already arrived at a site I thought might have been an access point. I, uh, found my way to their communication records to do a thorough investigation and found a dispatch sent to somewhere in the Unknown Regions addressed to Grand Admiral Thrawn."

Sabine raised an eyebrow, "'Found your way' to their communication records?"

Ahsoka smirked, "It might have involved a lightsaber."

"I'm glad to see you haven't changed", it was good to know that the lighthearted and good-humoured woman she'd known before was still in there somewhere.

"Anyway", Ahsoka said with the smile still on her lips, "I knew Thrawn had mysteriously vanished from Lothal, it was all I really knew about what had happened at that point but I knew it had to have something to do with Ezra."

"And that's when you went to Rex?"

"Exactly. I knew he'd be able to help and I figured the time was right for me to come out of hiding. 
He filled in the blanks and told me that any lead on Thrawn was a lead on Ezra too", Ahsoka explained.

"Then what were you doing since then?", Sabine asked.

Ahsoka looked briefly at the staff leaning against the wall, "I still had my duty as a protector against the Emperor, but I knew the rest of you would want to know what I'd found. Then, after the Emperor was defeated, I was able put aside my role and tried to follow my lead further."

Suddenly, Ahsoka stood up and walked to the back of the cockpit. She went to a locked crate nestled in the corner of the cockpit and pulled out a small holodisc. The Togruta sat back down and pressed a button on the disc, causing a small map to appear above it.

"You found a map to Ezra?", Sabine gasped and almost leapt out of her seat.

The Jedi shook her head, "Not exactly. It's the points of contact between Imperial Command and a single Star Destroyer out in the Unknown Regions."

, "Thrawn's", Sabine smiled triumphantly.

"I believe so. It's not a route to Ezra, not really, but it's an excellent starting point to begin our search."

"Ahsoka, I could hug you", Sabine said gleefully.

The older woman laughed, "Save that for when we find him."

Sabine controlled her excitement, they still hadn't found him yet, but knowing how much Ahsoka had already uncovered filled her with renewed hope. Her mind still focused on the map, she took in what little information she could from it. The thought slowly dawned on her that this tiny map represented thousand of parsecs of space and three years of travel for the people out there. This was going to take time.

Sabine brushed her short hair nervously with her hand, "Uh, Ahsoka? How do we know where he is out there? I know we have the map but the galaxy is huge, we could spend a lifetime on this route and not find a trace of him."

Ahsoka let the question hang for a while and Sabine could tell she was deep in thought. "There is more I can do but it'll have to wait. I don't exactly know how it'll play out."

"Complicated?", Sabine asked with resignation.

"Complicated", Ahsoka agreed. "I've got some ideas that will help us, Imperial transponder codes and other... hmmm, assets. We'll have to trust the force to guide us on the right path with the tools we have."

The Mandalorian thought of pressing her for more but decided against it. This mission wasn't going to work if Sabine was second-guessing Ahsoka at every turn so she'd just have to trust her to handle it. Accepting that it was a waiting game for now, Sabine put her hands behind her head and settled in for the journey.

"Any good stories?", she asked after a while.

Ahsoka smiled, "Too many to count. I'll trade you some stories about the Clone Wars for some catch-up on what I've missed these last few years."
"Sounds like a plan", Sabine replied contently.

As Ahsoka began recounting an early story about a hutt child she rescued from some monastery, Sabine kicked back to try and relax. Part of her was still nervous about everything and eager to get the real mission started. She was closer than ever but couldn't help feeling more impatient too. *Years of waiting, Sabine. You can wait just a little longer.*

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_The future is always in motion, waiting to move against us or to aid us as it sees fit. Many people believe it is unknowable and unpredictable, that no one can ever anticipate what the next day shall bring. In some ways that is true, no one can know every possible outcome. However, even the most seemingly random occurrences have indicators that a skilled mind can read. The weather has its patterns of pressure and seasons, illness stems from long-term causes and issues, seemingly random accidents are always enabled by a fault or issue that is already present. Recognising these patterns shows that the future is never unknowable. Mastering these patterns shows that the future is never uncontrollable._

Captain Pellaeon marched through the familiar halls of the *Chimaera* as he had done hundreds of times in the last four and a half years. Only this time, everything had changed compared to all those previous visits to the Grand Admiral. Pellaeon had only spoken to Thrawn via hologram in the last few days, both of them were too occupied with dealing with the aftereffects of the Emperor's death and all it entailed as well as their sudden change of orders.

Pellaeon hadn't slept much in the last few days but he doubted anyone else had. The announcement Grand Admiral Thrawn made a few days ago had shaken them all to the core, even experienced officers like him. His work might not have been affected, not in any way he noticed at least, but his sleep schedule certainly had been. He found himself staring up at the ceiling of his quarters all night, wondering if everything they'd built had been for nothing. He'd already lived through one major regime change, Pellaeon had hoped to be dead or retired before another one. Situations like this often descended into conflict and Pellaeon had seen far too much of that in his life already.

Approaching the door, he handed his code cylinder to the door guard. There was no need to announce himself, they'd seen each other so many times that Pellaeon almost counted him as one of his closest friends. He'd never even seen the man under the helmet or had any real conversation with him but internal observations on things like that kept him sane out here.

"He's expecting you, Captain", the stormtrooper said as he handed back the cylinder.

Pellaeon bowed his head to acknowledge him and walked through the door into Thrawn's office. He cast a cursory glance at Thrawn's training room as he passed, still wary of the menacing assassin droids the Admiral kept in there. He entered the Chiss' office to find him with his back turned to the door, inspecting a map projected above his desk.

"Captain", Thrawn acknowledged.

Pellaeon approached the Grand Admiral and stood beside him, taking a look at the map himself. "You summoned me, sir?"

Thrawn's hand brushed his chin, a habit of his when deep in thought. "Indeed I did, Captain. What can you tell me about this?"

Thrawn keyed a code into his console and a number of red dots appeared across the map. They followed a curve around the three dimensional galaxy's outer edges, stretching almost a quarter of a way around the galaxy. All of the dots were well outside any charted system.
"It's a route, sir?", Pellaeon guessed.

"Indeed it is, Captain. Our route."

Pellaeon huffed, "I've never seen a route plan marked like this."

"You misunderstand, Captain. This is a route of our expedition in the last several years, based purely of points of communication. Traceable points where information was sent or received from", Thrawn said.

The aged officer eyes looked over the collection of dots. Is that all we've done? Three years of his life condensed to a small corner of a map. It looked small already, even without considering how narrow their actual path was within it. Each dot already seemed tiny yet that space in reality represented hundreds, if not thousands, of individual star systems.

"An odd way to present that information", Pellaeon said.

"Ah, but you still immediately recognised it as a route, did you not?", Thrawn continued without taking his eyes off the map for a second.

Pellaeon looked at the Admiral from the corner of his eye, "Uh, yes sir. I suppose I did. You're worried someone else will do that?"

Thrawn nodded, "I'm sure of it. With the Empire's recent defeat it is only a matter of time before the rebels can put this together as well. Ezra Bridger's friends will soon be upon us."

"Would take some real commitment to fly off into the Unknown Regions to find one person, even if they are a Jedi", Pellaeon looked at the sheer distance between the nearest known system and any point along their route.

"I agree, but I also know these rebels have that commitment. Even his status as a Jedi notwithstanding, their loyalty to him as a friend is quite admirable."

Pellaeon watched Thrawn for any hints of his feelings. Like every time that he'd tried before, the Chiss gave nothing away. There didn't seem any dislike or desire for vengeance against them, just an objective and measured assessment of them as he gave to every situation. It was something he still marvelled at in him yet it also made him come across as cold and alien, as if the glowing red eyes and blue skin didn't already achieve that last one.

"Why are you sure that Bridger is still alive anyway?", Pellaeon asked. It was a question that had been brewing in his mind since he'd learned of their new orders.

"Jedi have a remarkable will to survive. Ironic, I know, for an order that is almost extinct but even my limited experience with them has taught me that."

Pellaeon huffed again, "Not that it matters anymore, that Inquisitor will be the end of him."

Thrawn turned his head slightly to him, "I doubt that, Captain."

"How can you be sure, sir?"

"Patterns are easy to read. The Fourth Sister is arrogant and eager, too willing to rush in to conflict and far too sure of her own abilities. She thinks Bridger is a child who poses no threat to her. In reality, the threat is right in front of her face yet she fails to recognise it, thinking she will somehow win out in any situation."
Arrogant, eager, sure of herself. Pellaeon had to agree on that assessment, the Inquisitor hadn't won much favour with him or any others during her time here. She rarely spoke to any of them and when she did it was only for orders or in anger. Her strange abilities and violent temperament made people fear her above all and Pellaeon couldn't shake the feeling that she enjoyed that fact.

"Bridger, on the other hand", Thrawn continued, "has not only been waiting for someone to pursue him but has had years to prepare. He will be in a familiar environment with escape routes and back up plans already in place. He might not be expecting an Inquisitor but he will adjust accordingly, he and his rebels have defeated at least three of their number before although I admit I do not know many of the details."

"And that's where we come in? We're there to pick up the slack?", Pellaeon questioned.

"In a way", Thrawn responded. "The battle may not have happened but its outcome is already clear, the patterns and behaviours of both our combatants have already decided it."

It wasn't the most elaborate prediction of a situation he'd seen Thrawn make but it made sense, it was always just simple logic in the end.

"But what if you're wrong?"

Thrawn abruptly switched off the map and turned to face him. "I have ordered her to take Bridger alive so that I may speak with him."

"Do you think she'll listen?", Pellaeon asked.

"No, quite the opposite. However, in her rush to deny me that privilege she will become more rash and is more likely to imperil her mission."

Pellaeon's face hardened, "You intentionally want her to lose?"

Thrawn nodded, "Bridger's knowledge might yet be of use to us, there is a chance that his own abilities have given him an insight into what is out here that has eluded us, insight that has also been denied to our own force sensitive agent."

Pellaeon grunted in approval, "I suppose that makes sense. At least get your enemy to spill the intel before you get rid of them."

Thrawn made no specific reaction to the answer and moved on, "A Jedi is an exceptionally useful tool and ours is a mission that demands such instruments, even if we must go to extreme lengths to utilise them."

"I suppose you didn't tell the Fourth Sister that", the Captain had a hint of amusement in his voice. Thrawn's lips ever so slightly curled into what might almost have been a smile, "I might have omitted that when I assigned her her new mission."

Pellaeon breathed out heavily and nodded his head, "So you send her in, she finds Bridger for us, we come in and clean up the mess."

"A simple but apt explanation, yes", Thrawn answered.

"As you wish, sir." Pellaeon began walking towards the door with Thrawn at his side.

The Chiss remained deep in thought and seemed to only be paying Pellaeon a slither of his
attention. The old Captain didn't mind, the Grand Admiral's mind worked at a hundred parsecs a minute and was probably halfway through another task already. As he reached the door, Pellaeon turned back sideways to him.

"I'll make sure everything is ready for our arrival, best estimates say we'll be back at our original starting point within a day", he told Thrawn.

"Thank you, Captain. Dismissed", Thrawn bade his farewell.

Pellaeon saluted to him before turning away. His mind was already tired without the Admiral's schemes and mind puzzles, now he just wanted to rest. The door guard barely acknowledged his departure as he made his way back to his shuttle.

As he walked, he mulled over his discussion with Thrawn. He wasn't fully on board with the idea of assuming the Fourth Sister's failure but Thrawn's plan to use Bridger as a source of knowledge was a good one. Pellaeon didn't know what Thrawn saw out here or why he was so convinced there was some huge threat lurking but he'd come to respect the man and trust his knowledge. If Thrawn thought something, Pellaeon could trust that he was probably right in thinking it. Besides, Pellaeon had joined the Republic Navy to protect people and had remained with the Empire to do the same thing. If this was what he had to do to protect people now, he'd handle it.

The Captain found his way back to the waiting shuttle to return to his Star Destroyer, the Myrmidon. The aged officer grumbled to himself as he climbed up the ramp. Maybe if I help save the galaxy this time they'll let me start my damn retirement.

The rain blew in just as Ezra got back to camp. The wet season was on the horizon and that meant months of soaked clothes and cold nights, none of which Ezra was a big fan of. Ezra hadn't exactly brought a wardrobe with him, having only the increasingly tattered orange clothes he was wearing and one intact flight suit from the shuttle, the other flight suit had been picked apart for repairs and materials for his own clothes and equipment. Come to think of it, Ezra was tattered and dirty in general. Makeshift razors were only so effective in keeping himself groomed and eventually he'd given up, letting a black beard grow around his lower face. It wasn't as long as Kanan's yet, but he was giving him a run for his money with the rest of his hair. His short buzzcut had grown out to almost shoulder-length, forcing him to tie it into a ponytail at the back of his head. Rain at least meant water for cleaning, Ezra still disliked being caked in mud, blood or anything else if he could avoid it.

Here though, just like on Lothal, rain wasn't the best weather for walking in or doing much else for that matter. Argos didn't mind the rain one bit and he barely seemed to notice it. To Ezra's chagrin, that also meant the creature had no qualms about jumping all over him even with soaked skin and muddy paws. It would have been nicer to see if it didn't always leave Ezra damp and miserable for the rest of the day when he did it. The oblivious animal walked happily beside him, plodding along without a care in the world.

Ezra picked up his pace to get out of the rain and headed straight into the shuttle. It was times like these that he was glad he'd turned it into a make-shift shelter, sparing him a sleepless night on the jungle floor. He entered the cockpit and found the stored meat from the other day's hunt that he'd carved from the long-legger by hand. Hera would have flipped if she saw him using her favourite part of the ship as his storage area, but Imperial shuttles weren't known for being spacious. Long-legger meat wasn't half-bad tasting if he was honest, or at least it was leagues above the other things around to eat. Ezra reached for a large blanket and picked out some meat ready to be cooked. If he wanted to get a fire going, he'd have to do it now. Any longer and everything would be too soaked through and it'd be a boring meal of berries and fruit again.
"Here boy!", Ezra called to Argos.

The animal bounded up the ramp and straight to him.

"Take this and put it by the fire pit, alright?", Ezra said while handing him a wrapped sack of meat to carry in his mouth. "And don't you even think about eating it yet, I know what you're like."

The beast shied away with guilty eyes before carrying the meat out of the ship. Ezra kept a cautious eye out of the window as he sorted through the wood he also kept in the cockpit, grabbing a cluster of sticks that looked decent enough to make a fire. Ezra took them and met Argos outside by a small pit dug into the ground and surrounded by stones. Luckily, the meat was untouched and Ezra gave Argos a rewarding scratch behind his ear as he sat down.

It took a few minutes to get a fire going and Ezra tried his best to shield it from the wind and rain. With the fire roaring, he placed the meat on it and settled in to wait. Argos sat with him, asleep for most of it. The light and smells slowly began to attract loth-lizards as well but Ezra had conditioned them to at least stop taking his food. The playful creatures mostly watched the flames in amazement or jumped around with each other. A few paid Ezra a visit, letting him tickle their chin in the way he'd learned they loved. Some of the other loth-lizards would hop up to Argos and wake him by squawking loudly or chirping in his ear. The disgruntled beast would bat them away with his paw and close his eyes again straight after. It was the polar opposite of how he'd been when Ezra first met him, Argos didn't try to eat them or even hurt them. It was amazing what time and discipline could do to something.

However, to do that Ezra still had to accept other sacrifices. Argos might not feed on the annoying little creatures but he was still a predator, as the food cooking over the fire reminded him of. Ezra couldn't deny his nature, Argos was a predator whether he liked it or not, but Ezra could teach him to control it and use that trait for to help others, in this case to help Ezra and his survival.

Ezra propped himself up into a meditating pose, crossing his legs and laying his hands on his thighs. He straightened his back and took in a deep breath, shutting out the other thoughts from his mind. Meditation was his usual pastime when cooking and it would be no different today.

He let his mind wander at first, allowing it follow whatever path it chose and letting it come to rest naturally. The crackling of the fire brought him memories of the food and the animal it had come from. *Death that feeds new life*. The loss of one life would provide means to sustain not only his life but Argos' too and however many loth-lizards he decided to give a treat to afterwards. A strange and morbid exchange but balanced in it's own way. It was the type of exchange that the universe was particularly fond of.

The complicated ecosystem here was a hierarchy of predator and prey, many animals being both at once, with its own unique attributes and qualities that was unlike any other place in the galaxy. Lothal had its own, as did every other world that hosted life. On each, the force manifested itself as something that was simultaneously familiar and unique. It was a brilliant system, a pattern repeated throughout the galaxy for every world. Like everything in the force, it was all connected and joined in the same complex existence. Ezra, too, was a part of that existence. A part of the force as much as any creature here.

Slowly, Ezra had began to question his own place in the force and these larger systems. The more thought he gave it, the more convinced he became that he was merely a small part of the wider whole. He was not above it, he did not control it, if anything the force controlled him. He was a tool of the force's will and had come to trust it completely. With that acceptance, came the acknowledgement that the force was not his own, it never belonged to anyone, he simply shared in it.
The thoughts of the force and distance brought his mind back to that strange call he still felt. Like a constant noise at the back of his head, all he had to do was tune in to it to hear it. He tried to reach out to it, as he had before, stretching out through the force, not caring about whatever physical distance was between him and its illusive source. As he was close to giving up hope yet again, a new and unfamiliar feeling began creeping into his senses.

Wait, what?

Ezra had surprised himself. Had he really managed to make a breakthrough? Ezra calmed himself and kept his focus, opening his senses again to this new feeling.

Yes... yes. I feel it... I can feel myself reaching out to it... approaching it.

The Jedi felt the feeling grow like it never had, with an intensity he'd never felt from it. As it grew, it became more clear and started to feel ever so slightly different to usual.

Getting closer to it... yes...

Suddenly, Ezra's breath caught in his throat.

Not getting closer to it... getting closer to me.

He felt Argos jolt awake beside him and a low growl came form the beast's throat, feeling the rising fear and confusion in his human companion. Ezra felt it getting closer as he tried hard to home in on whatever was happening.

Wait... no.

Getting nowhere, he tried to shift focus away to something else to clear his head. As he took this new feeling out of focus, Ezra came to a chilling realisation. The call he'd been feeling for so long was still there, unchanged. This was something different, something new... and it was coming straight for him.

The Fourth Sister's TIE Advanced v1 barrelled through hyperspace at maximum speed. It was only a short jump to the neighbouring system but the boredom made it feel like hours. She didn't see any more reason why Bridger would be here than in the last dozen systems she'd tried today or the thousands they'd passed through in the last four and a half years. When the Emperor assigned her this mission, she'd expected a unique and interesting challenge. She was only half right. The challenge was not lashing out and murdering the incompetent fools she had to spend her life around.

What a waste of her talents to be scouring the middle of nowhere for a child. She deserved better than this, she was one of the last force users in the galaxy and had outlived both the Emperor and Lord Vader. She should be deciding the fate of the whole galaxy not doing work better suited to a recon ship.

The Inquisitor gritted her teeth in contempt as the automatic systems began to disengage the hyperdrive.

"Another miserable system, another waste of my time", she muttered to herself.

As the view cleared she saw a large planet appear in her view. It looked habitable with trees and water but nothing special, with a layer of clouds covering parts of the landmass. She lazily tapped her ship's on-board scanners. Life-readings where high but nothing on the electrical
scopes. *Another primitive world with nothing interesting.*

She was about to head closer to look for any signs of settlement that could suggest Bridger was hiding there when something touched her mind. The Inquisitor froze as she felt it.

*What was that?!!*

Then it came again, stronger and clearer.

*Who... what is this?*

She followed the feeling with her mind and her eyes turned to the planet.

*I can almost see it...*

Her face curled into a malicious smile as she saw it in her mind's eye.

"Ezra Bridger... there you are."

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Now the pace can start to pick up as the hunt for Ezra begins in earnest.

For Hera's section, this was a chance to show the relationship Zeb and Kallus have with Jacen and Hera and to show that time hasn't weakened the family bond between everyone. I'm sure most of you have figured out what exactly Hera is worried about and who this other person Leia can connect them to is, though I wanted to show them as having a reputation and even a 'legend' around them already. Sabine and Ahsoka was a new experience, it's not a dynamic that we have much of anything to go off of. I tried to reflect Ahsoka's growth and maturity that her journey has given her without completely getting rid of the personality she already has. Protecting the World Between Worlds from Palpatine seems like a believable explanation for where she is during the OT. I also wanted to show Sabine's growth, especially her ability to let go of her desire to know everything and being willing to trust others, something she had to accept with both Kanan and Ezra during Season 4. Thrawn's section, or should I say Pellaeon's, if how I intend to do Thrawn most of the time. It's hard to write his own thoughts so it's better to use an observer like Pellaeon to keep some of that mystery, especially as Thrawn's plans start to come into play as the story goes on. I wanted Pellaeon to be an old but sensible officer with a little bit of a sense of humour. I didn't want him to be a carbon copy of his Legends self, nor too similar to Vanto. Ezra's section is shorter since there's not much I can do with him just sitting on a planet but things are about to get a lot more interesting for him, as the Fourth Sister's arrival will surely guarantee. I've tried to get Ezra's opinions on the force to echo those seen in The Last Jedi as well as in other areas of Star Wars. 'Death feeding new life', 'the force not belonging to any individual', 'accepting the good and bad of nature' - they're all ideas that have been reflected at some point in the new canon, hence why I wanted Ezra to head down that route.

I feel like I should mention the coinciding events around the search for Ezra. When it comes to 'convenient' coincidences in the plot, Star Wars' solution is just to ascribe it to the "will of the force", basically a by-word for plot convenience. Thrawn's explanations for why the Fourth Sister can go back now to search these systems are true and I tried to make them believable, but at the end of the day Star Wars is filled to the brim with lucky breaks and happenstance just like this.
Next time: Ezra prepares his defences, Thrawn receives contact from the Fourth Sister, Hera pays a visit to a trusted friend and Ahsoka has an important talk with Sabine.
Chapter 5 - Closing In

The exact timing of these little chapter is a bit jumbled. Thrawn and Ezra's stuff is taking place at the same time, all of Hera's stuff so far is taking place only over the course of a few days, meanwhile Sabine and Ahsoka are probably a day or two behind everyone else. It'll be pretty clear when each story converges but keep in mind that every event is not necessarily occurring in tandem with one another. For pacing reasons, they're not in chronological order this time nor last time but I hope things aren't too confusing for everyone.

In this chapter: Ezra prepares his defences, Thrawn receives contact from the Fourth Sister, Hera pays a visit to a trusted friend and Ahsoka has an important talk with Sabine.

His heart pounded in his ears, the long-forgotten feeling of imminent danger. In years past he might have frozen up at this moment, struggled to clear his mind, but that Ezra Bridger had grown up. Without missing a beat, Ezra got to his feet and kicked a flurry of wet dirt into the fire to put it out. The action sent the loth-lizards scurrying away but Argos remained vigilant by his side, still feeling Ezra's instincts as his own.

Clearly, he hadn't been wrong to feel his time here was coming to an end. One way or another, this chapter of his life was drawing to a close. Whatever was coming now would ensure that. All that remained to be seen was how that ending would come. Ezra had prepared for this day ever since he arrived, mentally preparing himself for the day he'd have to fight his way out... or do his best to protect what he could.

Over the years, he'd gone through many plans for how he'd deal with an intruder. With each new lesson he learned and with each new discovery, he'd added or removed something from that strategy. It ended up being quite simple in the end, hardly a tactical triumph that would leave people in awe, only something that should, hopefully, give him enough of a window to escape.

Was it Thrawn that was coming? More than likely. Ezra couldn't be sure of anything other than the malicious intent of the intruder, intent clearly directed towards him. The presence was odd, something a bit different to what he'd felt down here, but Ezra put that down to years of isolation. Part of him had a strange excitement about seeing another person at last, he only wished that person wasn't going to be trying to kill him too.

But... if they've found you, others could too.

A small but honest smile formed on his lips as he ran back into the shuttle. He rummaged around the main hold for a handful of items. A few bits of food from the jungle that he knew would keep, a canteen full of water and a small first aid kit went into a bag that he slung over his shoulder. He also found the old E-11, now with a makeshift sling he'd crafted out of a vine and some leather, and hooked it around his shoulder too. Taking a lingering look at the messed up bedroll in the main hold and the various other bits and bobs lying around, Ezra sighed a weary but long-overdue goodbye to his home and went into the cockpit.

His hands went straight for the emergency equipment box beside the door. Opening it, he picked up the emergency flare gun kept in there and slung it into the bag too. All part of the plan. The Jedi darted back out of the shuttle and went around to the right side of the hull, finding the large metal cap mounted on the side that covered the fuel line. With a bit of effort due to years of rust and disuse, he yanked it fully open to leave the fuel tank exposed. Tearing off a bit of his weapon sling,
he fed one end in through the hole before taking it out and doing the same with the other. When the whole sling was well doused in fuel, he left it hanging out of the fuel tank.

*Everything's ready, now to get into position.*

Ezra finally looked back over to Argos, standing ready by the firepit and watching the forest around him. Sunset had just past and the gathering clouds were eating away at what little light was left. The animal turned his attention back to Ezra as the young man approached him.

"Hey, buddy", Ezra said as he ran a hand gently over Argos' neck. "It's time for that thing I keep talking about."

The beast understood what he meant, Ezra could see it in his eyes and feel it in his mind. Part of Ezra's plan depended on Argos and the connection they'd built. It was a risky strategy on paper but Ezra has complete faith in his companions' abilities and the strength of their bond.

"Round up the long-leggers, just like we practiced. I'll keep in touch, okay? We're going to get off this rock", Ezra smiled at the animal, trying to reinforce what he was saying.

But still, Ezra was understandably nervous about what was going to happen. Ezra's connection with Argos was strong, allowing him to feel whatever he was feeling, but the connection worked both ways. The animal rubbed his head on Ezra's arm, a sign of comfort and trust for him. The display made the boy laugh, playfully rubbing his hand over his companion's head one final time.

Reluctantly, Ezra stood up. "Okay, boy. We need to get moving, I'll find you later."

The animal watched him intently for a few seconds more before slowly turning away and darting back into the forest but not before tilting his head back to see Ezra as he went. Argos then disappeared into the trees, like he had on that first night, though this time Ezra wasn't seeing off a stranger, he was saying farewell to a dear friend.

*It's not a last goodbye, you'll see him again.* Ezra didn't know how much he believed that. It wasn't Argos' survival he was most doubtful about, it was his own. There was a good chance he wouldn't make it out of this. The danger wasn't going to break him though, he'd fight his hardest to win out and hopefully, maybe, he could start making his way home. All he had to do first was hope all his plans worked out.

Ezra reached for the E-11 slung around his shoulder and held it ready with both hands. He turned back and looked up to the treeline, trying to see what he could in the fading light. His eyes picked out the tallest one he could see and he set off into the darkness to reach it.

*Patience is a virtue that is often is short supply. Many are eager for quick victories, to rush in and meet their objective head on. In most cases, these people lack the foresight to win a war. They think of only the next day and the short-term victory to be won instead of considering the wider factors that could secure their victory in the future. True success comes to those who are patient, who are willing to set aside temporary concerns and lay the groundwork for victory in the entire war, not just victory in the coming battle.*

Pellaeon stood at the holographic communicator on the bridge of the *Myrmidon*. The blue figure of Captain Sarlis stood by his side and opposite them Grand Admiral Thrawn was detailing an itinerary for their departure and new patrol routes.

"I would be best that we continue to split our forces into three detachments to search each star system along our path. We will meet again at preassigned systems to coordinate the next patrol"
Thrawn had brought up a map in the centre of the table to demonstrate. A single red dot represented the starting system then three blue lines spread out from it, representing the three patrol groups Thrawn planned. They again joined together at a second red dot before repeating the pattern again. It was the same tactic they'd used previously and Pellaeon didn't really understand why Thrawn was wasting time going into such detail about it again. Regardless, he kept his mouth shut and listened silently.

Thrawn turned his attention to his two Captains, "We will split our two frigates between the two of you meanwhile the Fourth Sister will remain with me. The frigates should provide you with the extra eyes, the Inquisitor on the other hand will remain with me aboard the Chimaera."

Just like before, Pellaeon told himself. Pellaeon could tell Sarlis was as bored as him, though he struggled to think of a time where the young Captain didn't look bored to death whenever Thrawn spoke.

"Any questions, Captains?", Thrawn suddenly asked causing Pellaeon to snap out of his thoughts.

"Hmm, no Grand Admiral", Pellaeon almost stuttered.

Thrawn picked up on his sudden hesitation, "Something more, Captain Pellaeon?"

There was plenty more he wanted to ask. What about Bridger? Thrawn had made it clear he intended to use Bridger's knowledge yet he was making plans even without it. Speaking of Bridger, where was the Inquisitor? They'd had no contact from her since they arrived at their original starting point from all those years ago. She was around here somewhere yet Thrawn hadn't made any specific mention of her mission since their meeting the previous day.

"Sir... if I may", Sarlis spared him the burden of an explanation. "What makes you think this route will find us anything that the other didn't?"

"Nothing in particular", Thrawn replied.

Sarlis' face still gave him an unknowing look, "So, we still don't know what we're looking for?"

"We are looking for any indication of a threat in the Unknown Regions."

"Yes, sir... I know, but what does it look like? What sort of thing are we looking for? A fleet? A weapon? A species?", the Captain's eyes were heavy with bags and her face weary. The fall of the Empire hit a political officer like Sarlis harder than most, if she still had any lingering hopes of progress and power after being out here for so long, Pellaeon knew they must have taken a sharp blow.

Thrawn pressed a button on his end to shut down the map interface, clearing the space above the table. "If you are narrowing your definition of a threat to a specific idea then you risk missing threats that are new or exist outside of your preconception. The galaxy is large and full of dangers, they will take many forms, some of which we will never have anticipated."

Pellaeon smiled wryly to himself, we definitely didn't anticipate it coming in the form of flying tentacled space whales.

A uniformed officer suddenly appeared beside Thrawn with a salute, "Sir, we've got an incoming transmission from the Fourth Sister."
"Ah, at last. Put it through", Thrawn instructed.

The officer nodded in the other direction, to the communications officer no doubt, before stepping out of view. The Fourth Sister's face appeared in the centre of the table facing the Grand Admiral.

"Inquisitor, I trust you have some news for us", the Chiss watched the new arrival carefully.

Pellaeon could see the prideful smile on the translucent figure, "I've found Bridger."

The bridge crew of the *Myrmidon* started murmuring and whispering, having been listening in as much as they could. It was a rather conveniently timed discovery and Pellaeon started to wonder why the Admiral had been so sure that she'd find Bridger on this search in particular.

Thrawn didn't make any explicit physical reaction nor did his tone give any hint of relief or satisfaction, "Excellent work, Inquisitor. Relay your coordinates to us, we're already standing by in the vicinity."

For a moment Pellaeon wondered if she actually would hand over the information, Thrawn had a convincing argument for her just wanting to keep the glory for herself. He knew the Grand Admiral wouldn't abide that one bit, he saw Bridger as too useful an asset to pass up.

Surprisingly, the Fourth Sister sent them anyway. Her head dipped and her body moved as she must have been sending the information back to the fleet. "Here, as you asked, Grand Admiral."

"Thank you, Fourth Sister. We will rendezvous with you shortly", Thrawn nodded to her.

"You better make it quick, I can't promise there'll be anything left of him for you to help with", the woman grinned confidently at the Chiss.

*And there's the catch,* the old Imperial shook his head. He knew she was being uncharacteristically cooperative. She wasn't just being sure of herself, she was taunting Thrawn with a victory she hadn't even earned yet.

Thrawn scowled heavily at her, "You are to await our arrival and apprehend Bridger alive."

"I'm afraid I can't take that risk", she answered smugly. "By all means send your troops, but I'm not giving the boy the chance to escape."

*More like you don't want to give the Grand Admiral what he wants.* Pellaeon rolled his eyes at the immaturity of it all and thought back to Thrawn's evaluation of the Fourth sister. *Arrogant, self-assured, eager* - an accurate description of her actions right now. He also remembered what Thrawn predicted based off of those traits. Was she really rushing off to her own defeat? He found himself less troubled by the idea now, maybe she did need to be brought down a peg or two.

The Grand Admiral kept his composure as always, "I have no patience for your games, Inquisitor. You have your orders."

The Fourth Sister glared back into Thrawn's eyes, "I have my orders. But not from you."

Her hologram flickered out and silence hung in the room. They'd all seen the Grand Admiral's disagreements with the Fourth Sister before but never had she been so openly disobedient. No one dared say a word, not even Pellaeon, as they all wondered if this would be the insolence that finally got Thrawn to crack.

Yet still, the Chiss didn't let any hint of anger or indignation show. "Commodore Faro, ready our
ship to jump to those coordinates."

Pellaeon breathed a heavy sigh of relief, he wasn't a fan of this type of internal hostility.

"Pellaeon, Sarlis", Thrawn said suddenly, "Ready your ships for departure and each of you prepare a stormtrooper detachment for landing, we leave in ten minutes. I do not wish to waste any more time than is necessary."

Pellaeon furrowed his brow, "Sir? We're all going?"

Standard Imperial procedure always recommended leaving a Star Destroyer in any intended rendezvous location if a diversion had to be made. It was a sound strategy, the risk of an enemy seizing their current position might have been low but Thrawn was nothing if not cautious.

Thrawn switched his gaze to Pellaeon, "The Imperator and the Myrmidon will indeed be joining us. As will the light-cruiser Aeternus. The light-cruiser Invictus will suffice as a vanguard here while we deal with this diversion."

Pellaeon didn't like it. To take all three of the Star Destroyers and one of their two light-cruisers as well was more than overkill. *He must really want Bridger to throw all his resources so blindly at it.* The Chiss must have had a plan behind all this. Intimidation? A show of power? Or was he simply not willing to take any chances with capturing the Jedi? After this was all done he hoped Thrawn could clarify it for him.

Pellaeon saw Thrawn turn to his crew, "Relay the orders to the Invictus, inform them that we are departing to these coordinates and to come to us there if there's any emergency. Even so, I don't suspect we'll be occupied for very long. "The Grand Admiral then turned back to the table, "You have your orders, Captains", Thrawn dismissed them and his own hologram deactivated.

Pellaeon and Sarlis watched each other for a second, the look on her face showed that even she found this choice unusual. *Was Thrawn really getting that worked up over this?* Pellaeon didn't think the Fourth Sister had gotten under his skin, though he might be wrong about that.

"Any idea what's going on with him? I've never seen the Grand Admiral like this", Sarlis almost whispered to him.

Pellaeon shook his head and sighed, "Haven't a damn clue, I just know we have our orders."

The older man tipped his head to her and disengaged the hologram. He then turned to the Myrmidon's navigational officer to confirm the coordinates were entered and made his way further up the bridge.

Pellaeon looked to his first officer, "Get Lieutenant Garlund to organise a fire team, I want them ready for ground operations within ten minutes."

The officer saluted, "Yes, Captain. At once."

Pellaeon trusted his crew to get everything ready as he observed the rest of the fleet from the viewport. The four ships were moving into position for the jump as the Invictus moved to establish its own position. The old officer in him was still mulling over the abrupt change in Thrawn's tactics but he also kept in mind all that Thrawn had already told him about the Fourth Sister and Ezra Bridger. He'd hit the nail on the head with his expectation that'd she attempt to take him down without back-up and he needed no reminding of his assessment of her character.

His eyes stayed on the other two Star Destroyers and the light-cruiser as the final preparations were
made for hyperspace. It suddenly reminded him of how similar their designs were to the old Republic Venator cruisers. Pellaeon had served on one during the Clone Wars, one of many non-clone officers who'd brought their experience to the war effort. Back then, the Jedi were heroes that everyone in the Republic idealised. Now, over two decades later, he was off to hunt the last one.

This time Hera had at least made the wise choice to send a message ahead about a visit. She didn't have much of a choice if she was honest, Leia had to be one of the busiest people in the galaxy right now. Leia happened to be back on Home One, Admiral Ackbar's command ship, for a time and had asked Hera to meet her there for whatever she needed. As Hera climbed down the Ghost's ramp, she didn't overlook the fact that such a busy woman had made time for her on very short notice.

"Hera, are you sure you don't want to bring Kallus?", Zeb asked he walked beside her.

Hera turned back to see Jacen waving them off with Kallus standing beside him.

"I need someone I can trust to watch Jacen", Hera reasoned. It showed how highly she'd come to think of Kallus that she'd trust him with not only her life but with Jacen's too.

Zeb kept a concerned look on his face, "It's going to be okay, Hera. Don't worry about it."

"I know, I'm just glad I've got friends like you to set my mind at ease", Hera said.

Speaking of old friends, as they left the ship a familiar face stood ready to meet them. Commander Rex was suited up in his old clone armour, an outfit he wore at almost every opportunity, as if it was a second skin for him. His beard was still large and well-maintained, no longer or shorter than it had been since she'd first met him. Hera had known Rex was still assigned to Home One so decided to contact him as well. It turned out Rex was far more informed on the situation than Hera had expected. Leia had already got in touch with Rex to let him know Hera was visiting and Ahsoka had unsurprisingly contacted her old friend before she'd left as well and caught him up on events with Ezra. He also had the job of escorting Hera to her meeting with Leia which would save her the risk of getting lost somewhere in the massive Mon Calamari cruiser.

"Long time no see, General", Rex greeted with a smile.

"Two months too many", she sighed as she gave him a quick hug.

Rex looked at Zeb next, "How's Lira San, big fella'?

Zeb shrugged, "Feels like home, what can I say?"

The man turned and began walking out of the hangar, Hera and Zeb following close behind. "Well it's good to have some familiar faces around here, looking at Wolff'e's ugly mug never gets any better."

"How is Wolff'e?", Hera asked, always concerned for the friends she had left.

The clone waved his arm as he spoke, "Grumpy, paranoid. You know, he's Wolff'e."

"Hehe, just like usual", Zeb laughed. "What do they have you doing out here anyway?"

"Patrols, patrols and more patrols", Rex grumbled. "Occasionally we get some holdouts to deal with but nothing fancy. Hearing rumours about a strike on some place called Akiva, but no real plans yet that I know of. I think Wedge is going out there for some recon on the place."
Wedge, another familiar face that Hera saw far too rarely. The gifted pilot had really made his mark on the Rebellion, coming to lead the accomplished Rogue Squadron and serving admirably at Yavin, Hoth, Endor and dozens of other battles. In the brief times she'd seen him since Atollon, Wedge always put his success down to Hera's training. Hera, on the other hand, knew pilots like him would excel with their skills no matter who helped to train them.

Rex led them out of the hangar and into the corridors of the ship. It was much bigger and far more crowded that the *Aspis* above Lira San. Hera had seen it busier, she'd spent a bit of time on the cruiser before and after the Battle of Endor, but spending the last few months out of the loop made the crowds more noticeable again.

"So...", Rex began as they walked, "Any word from them?"

The Twi'lek shook her head, "None yet."

"Bah, look at me worrying like an old man. If they needed help they'd tell us", he flung his arms up and chuckled to himself.

Hera was quiet for most of the rest of the walk, silently taking in the activity around her and planning what to say in her head. Zeb and Rex chatted as they walked, a few jokes and prods as soldiers always did. Hera smiled at a few - the age jokes from Zeb, the Kallus jokes from Rex, the harmless boasting from both parties. They eventually reached another corridor, empty of the crowds of people that had cluttered the halls on the way in. A single closed door stood at the far end of the hallway.

"She's waiting for you", Rex told them both as he approached the door.

The others let Hera go first, then Zeb and Rex went in at the back. Hera raised her hand and knocked the door.

"Come in", the soft voice inside called.

The door swung open on command to reveal Leia standing behind a small desk, three chairs already set out in front of it. The room was small and mostly white with a large plane window looking out at the expanse of stars behind her desk. Three chairs were already sat in front of Leia's desk.

The woman quickly walked around the desk and wrapped Hera in a warm embrace, "Hera, good to see you."

Hera hugged her back, "We need to stop leaving it so long between visits."

Leia slowly released her and nodded to Zeb with a smile, "Garazeb, hope you're keeping an eye on that Kallus."

Rex sniggered behind them, "Oh, I'm sure he is."

Present company stopped Zeb from giving Rex a firm but friendly punch.

"Please, take a seat", Leia motioned to the chairs and sat down in her own behind the desk. "How's life been treating you?"

Hera slid into the chair with a sigh, "It's been worse. Definitely not as busy as it was a few months back."
The Twi'lek remembered the lead up to Endor as an exhausting string of drills, intel briefings, recon missions and other preparation tasks that dragged out for months. It was the longest she’d been without seeing Jacen too, him being safely on Lothal with Sabine, and the emotional strain hadn’t helped the physical exhaustion. Still, nothing worth doing was ever easy and what they’d achieved in that battle was worth every draining day and sleepless night.

"What about you? I imagine Mon Mothma has been keeping you busy", Hera asked Leia.

Leia rubbed her temples with her hand, "You have no idea. She's had me running all over the galaxy from Naboo to... I don't even know where, trying to gather support for the New Republic. Won't be much of a government if no one wants to be governed."

"I thought that would be right up your alley", Hera said.

"It is right up my alley, but my alley also involves a lot of shooting these days", Leia muttered.

"Well if you're half as good with a blaster as you are with diplomacy then I'm sure you'll be alright."

Leia chuckled before her expression grew more serious and the woman looked Hera in the eye, "So what's going on? It's not like you to do things on short notice."

The Twi'lek rubbed the back of her head with hand, just under her lekku, "You asked to be kept up to date on any news we had for Ezra."

"You've had contact from him?", Leia's eyes widened and she leaned forward.

"No, no contact", Hera said, "But we've found a lead and, well... Sabine has already left to check it out."

The younger woman pursed her lips, "She went out alone?"

For a moment, Hera didn't know what to say. Then she looked over to Rex sitting on her right, looking for silent confirmation that Ahsoka's involvement could even be mentioned. Rex gave that confirmation himself.

"She's gone with Ahsoka Tano", Rex said.

The name visibly caught Leia off-guard, her eyes suddenly narrowing and the surprise on her face was noticeable. The former Princess then looked over at Rex for a brief moment, sharing a look that seemed to hide something beneath it.

"You know who she is?", Hera asked carefully.

Leia cleared her throat and Hera saw her eyes glance at Rex again, "Yes, I do. The former Jedi."

"I don't know what she found", Hera shrugged, "But she seemed convinced it could lead her to Ezra. She got in contact a few days ago and then before I knew it she and Sabine were flying off to find him."

"How sure are you that they'll find him?"

The Twi'lek didn't have a doubt in her body about them, "I trust them both, if anyone can find him then they can."

Zeb chuckled and made his first contribution in the meeting, "Plus Sabine's stubborn enough to
search the whole galaxy to find the kid."

Leia smiled and shook her head, "From what you've told me about her, I don't doubt that one bit."

Hera paused and moved her eyes away from Leia and out to the window instead. Just under the desk, she nervously rubbed her gloved hands together. Zeb noticed her apprehension from the corner of his eyes and nudged her gently. *It's only Leia and it's all for Ezra.*

"Everything okay?", Leia suddenly asked worriedly.

She swallowed hard, "Yes, it's... okay. There's just... something else I needed to ask."

Leia eyed her carefully, unsure why Hera was suddenly so nervous around her, "You can ask me anything, Hera."

The Twi'lek breathed in heavily, "I thought since you knew him and since Ezra's a Jedi that you'd..."


Hera quickly started to explain herself, "I know he's busy and I know it might not be my place to ask but-"

Leia watched her start to fumble before reaching a hand over the desk to hold the Twi'lek's, "Hera... relax. I promised I'd do anything I can for you and for Ezra and I meant it. I'll get in contact with him straight away, I'll drag him kicking and screaming if I have to."

Hera squeezed the woman's hand back, "Thank you, Leia. I can't thank you enough."

Her brown eyes met Hera's again, "You don't owe me a thank you. You said it yourself, Ezra is a Jedi and Ahsoka is... close enough. Luke needs to know what's going on, if there's anything he can do to help then he'll do it."

The woman's eyes then drifted away for Hera's and it was her turn to look nervous. Something was brewing behind her eyes and another glance over at Rex again raised Hera's suspicions. What did they know that she didn't? Is wasn't like either of them to keep secrets from Hera. Leia swallowed her own nerves back and then looked up at both Zeb and Hera.

"What I'm going to tell you can't leave this room, not yet anyway", Leia finally said. "If Ahsoka is coming back and with everything else, I suppose it would come out sooner or later."

"Leia?", Hera asked with raised eyebrows. This was unusual, she'd never seen Leia as one to shy away from anything.

"Luke", she began, "Well... he's my brother."

Zeb and Hera looked at each other in shock. "Brother?", the Lasat asked.

Leia smiled jokingly, "Same mother, same father."


Hera looked over to Rex, "You knew about this?"

The old clone shrugged his shoulders, "Only after Endor."
"That's not what I thought I'd be hearing when I came to see you", Hera said.

Leia tilted her head with a grin, "I'm full of surprises, mostly the good kind."

Hera chuckled, "You definitely are." She looked back over to Rex, "It's nice to have someone who knew your father then."

Luke's father being the legendary Jedi hero Anakin Skywalker was common knowledge in the Rebellion, if the name didn't give it away then the lightsaber, piloting skills and force abilities did. She'd never asked Rex about it much, she figured it might bring back memories that he'd prefer to be left alone, but now was an exception.

Hera's comments had the complete opposite effect to what she intended. Rex and Leia both visibly tensed up at the mention of her father, the old clone looked mournfully away and Leia awkwardly shrunk back. That was insensitive of her, she knew losing people close to you was tough. Hera at least had been lucky enough to have some memories of her mother, Leia probably didn't even meet her father let alone have something to remember about him.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to make either of you uncomfortable", Hera apologised to them both.

With some hesitation, Leia then sat forward again. "No, it's alright. It's still just... unusual to talk about. No harm done", she said as she waved off the awkward situation. "Now then", Leia said as she stood up. "I don't mean to push you out but I'd better get in touch with Luke and I've got mountains of paperwork and reports to read over."

Zeb, Hera and Rex stood up with her. Leia moved around to the front and gave Hera another friendly hug before walking with them to the door. The meeting has gone smoothly but it wasn't Leia that Hera was so nervous about meeting. If what she'd started to think was true then meeting Luke could be a difficult double-edged sword to manage.

Hera stopped her just before they left, "Thank you, Leia. I really mean it."

She smiled warmly back at her, "It's the least I could do for friends like you."

Zeb and Rex led the way out and Hera followed. As they walked away, Leia was leaning in the doorway to watch them go.

"General Syndulla", Leia called to her, "May the force be with you."

The Twi'lek smiled back, "And with you, Princess."

_They landed on an arid planet, alone and forgotten in the middle of nowhere. She went on without Ahsoka, creeping through the bleak and empty wastes of the desert in the blaring midday sun. In the distance, she saw something. Small and still, lying unceremoniously in the sand. Her legs began running to it, her mind knowing what she was about to find. As she got closer, the sun-bleached orange colour of the object became clearer. She ran closer, making out the vague shape of..._

_No, no, no, no, no!_

_She was metres away from it now. A body. A sand-covered, dried out body lying face-down on the ground. Sabine had never seen anything like it, it must have been there for weeks if not months. Slowly, her hand reached out to the body's shoulder and gently pulled it to turn it over._
The Mandalorian let out a blood-curdling scream when she saw its face.

Sabine shot up in her bed, kicking the blanket off of her sweating body. Another night, another nightmare. Some nights they were of battles she'd won, others she'd lost, some dreams even created a loss where she'd actually won. Mandalore also haunted her, the sickening image of the Duchess wreaking havoc on strangers, friends and family.

Tonight the dreams weren't of war, they were of Ezra. The memory of the dream crept up on her again, the images filling her with dread, anger and fear.

She reached for the water by the side of her bed, hoping to drown out the horrible thoughts. Her heart was racing, her hands were shaking and her undershirt was soaked through with sweat. The Mandalorian looked down at the crumpled blanket on the floor and the ruffled pillow hanging off the bed.

"No sleep for me tonight", she muttered under her breath.

Sabine stood up from the bed and looked around her, unsure what she could do to occupy herself instead. No blaster practice, no running, no painting on the walls, no call to Hera. She sighed to herself; at least she still had stargazing. Deciding the cockpit was as good a place to spend the night as any, she wiped the sweat from her forehead and stepped outside.

"You're troubled."

The voice of the Togruta sitting silently on the floor of the main hold made her jump out of her skin.

Sabine caught her breath after the jump, "Please, don't ever do that again."

Ahsoka had her eyes shut and was sat in a meditating pose in the centre of the main hold, just beside some crates of food. Her staff was laid out in-front of her as were the hilts of both of her lightsabers.

"You're on edge", she said without opening her eyes.

Sabine hugged her arms around herself, "Yeah, just bad dreams."

"Dreams of what?"

The Mandalorian shifted her gaze away from Ahsoka, even though she knew she wasn't looking at her. "Just... things. A lot on my mind I guess."

Sabine watched Ahsoka breathe in deeply a few times more, remaining incredibly still. Then she opened her eyes and picked up her staff with her hand, moving it beside her. She then picked up both sabers with the force and placed them next to it.

"Sit", Ahsoka motioned to the now empty space in front of her.

Sabine cautiously approached her, "You're not going to try and make me meditate, are you? Because Ezra tried that before and it didn't work out."

Ahsoka waited for the Mandalorian to sit down in front of her. Sabine tucked her legs in under her, emulating Ahsoka's own position.

"Tell me about the dream."
"It was just some nightmare", Sabine shook her head dismissively.

Ahsoka continued to watch her, "Dreams can show us concerns and feelings we don't give voice to. They're important to understanding our own thoughts."

"I know... I'm just... they're just dreams. I don't see how it's important?", irritation crept into her voice.

Ahsoka continued to press her, "What was the dream about?"

"Ahsoka it was just a nightmare, I-"

"Sabine", Ahsoka intervened gently, "You're being evasive."

Evasive. The Mandalorian prepared a biting remark but couldn't see it through. She wasn't the closed-off child she used to be, she was better than that now and Ahsoka was only trying to help her. Sabine squirmed in her place. The dream wasn't nice to think about on her own let alone talk to someone else about. She paused as she decided which parts she wanted to share and which parts were best left unsaid.

Sabine sighed reluctantly, "Well... it was about finding Ezra."

The Togruta's blue eyes caught her own, "Understandable, you're anxious about the mission."

She laughed in a futile attempt to lighten the mood, "No points for that."

Ahsoka's eyes still focused on her, "And?"

"And?", Sabine raised her eyebrow at her.

The older woman shut her eyes for a moment and sighed, "You have to control your emotions. Attachments can be difficult to manage, believe me I know, but-"

"Hang on, attachments?", Sabine's eyes narrowed and her voice hardened.

Ahsoka didn't seem to take offence and remained calm and patient with her. "Sabine, you have to be honest with me. You can't have your judgement clouded by personal feelings."

"Okay, first of all why do you even think I have any feelings for Ezra? Can't I just be friends with someone without falling for them? And what do you know about attachments, I thought Jedi weren't allowed them?", Sabine felt her anger rising.

"I never assumed the nature of your attachment to him", Ahsoka replied calmly.

The Mandalorian gritted her teeth, hoping she hadn't just dug herself some sort of hole, "You know what I mean."

Ahsoka carefully observed the irritated young woman, watching her hardened expression and clenched fists. She could feel her emotions behind it all. It wasn't anger, not at her, just defensiveness.

"When I was your age, a bit younger actually", Ahsoka's lips curled into a smile, "I knew someone. Lux Bonteri. We were the same age but we didn't have a lot in common on the surface. I was a Jedi serving the Republic, he was a rising politician for the Separatists. He was the 'solve problems by talking' type, I was the 'solve problems with a lightsaber' type."
Sabine's anger softened, "Sounds... interesting?"

Ahsoka huffed a laugh, "One word for it. We ran into each other a few times, a few adventures, a few close calls, a few... moments between ourselves."

"What happened?", the younger woman watched her with interest.

"The war happened, the Jedi happened. The war kept us apart for long periods and deep down I knew, we both knew, it was never something that could work. Eventually there was another woman but... she didn't make it."

Sabine looked at her sympathetically, "I'm sorry... what happened with him?"

Ahsoka's eyes flashed with a mix of pain and regret, "After I left the Order, I didn't see him again. After the rise of the Empire it was best if I didn't put him in danger. He grew up, had a daughter and even joined the Alliance."

The Mandalorian perked up a bit, "When we get back we should go look for him."

"There's no point... I looked him up on the databases a few months ago. He was killed in an operation a few months after the Battle of Yavin."

Sabine's mouth hung open and she winced, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry."

"That's alright", Ahsoka's eyes hid many memories behind them, "Sorry, I got off track there. What I'm trying to say is that I understand what it's like to be... close to someone and to live your life thinking you might never see them again. These feelings are natural, even the Jedi admitted that, you just have to learn to control them and not let them interfere with your judgement."

Sabine remained silent and shifted her gaze to the floor. Ahsoka watched as she young girl thought it over in her head, not pressuring her further and instead letting Sabine take whatever time she needed. The Mandalorian brought her feet out from under her and clutched her knees close to her body.

She bit her lip and didn't quite find it in her to meet Ahsoka's gaze, "I- I don't want you to get the wrong idea. Ezra and I aren't, um, we're not... we were just friends."

The Togruta picked up on the phrasing, "Were?"

"Before he left, I guess still just friends but... it's complicated", Sabine hugged her legs in tighter. "I thought about it before a few times, especially in the last few months before everything happened. We were getting so much closer, getting every mission together, spending all our downtime together and I just... I don't know, I guess we just clicked."

"Did you ever talk about it?", Ahsoka asked.

Sabine shrugged, "Not really. I mean, I knew how he felt at the start but that sort of died down. I'd mess with him about it sometimes just to embarrass him but we never talked about it seriously."

"Do you think he still felt the same way? If there's a chance he does, we need to keep that in mind when we're out here", Ahsoka said.

Sabine smiled a little to herself as she thought back to some of her memories with him. The jetpack on Concord Dawn, the story her father told her about Ezra's rescue, the lingering gazes they shared more and more often in the final months and so many little moments in the final few days. Even if
Sabine wasn't entirely clear how she'd felt back then, she had a reasonable idea about what he might have felt.

She nodded slightly and smiled, "I think he did, he just got better at hiding it as we got closer."

"A lot of Jedi struggled to handle their attachments. Ezra seemed to do a better job than most"

"Kanan set a good example", the bittersweet memories of Kanan and Hera's relationship flashed briefly in her mind. "Was it common for Jedi to have attachments? I thought it was against the rules?"

"The Jedi couldn't fight nature, all they tried to do was teach people to let go of the attachments and not act on them. Not that it always worked, it wasn't exactly uncommon. I knew plenty of Jedi who struggled with the idea or even outright defied the Code because of it." Ahsoka laughed quietly, "You know he isn't even the first Jedi I've known that fell for a Mandalorian."

"I guess there's something special about us", the Mandalorian replied jokingly.

"You certainly have your charms it seems", Ahsoka laughed.

It was reassuring to open up and honestly talk about it with Ahsoka. She always wondered, even if she did find Ezra, how his Jedi training might somehow change things if they ever really did give them a shot. The talk with Ahsoka had put her mind at ease, at least a little bit. There was still the obvious question of whether he still felt the same way, or even if Sabine still did when they found him, but it was nice to know that it wasn't completely unheard of.

"Thanks, Ahsoka", Sabine said after a long pause, "I'm sorry I was so hostile to you at the start."

"That's okay, these things are tough to talk about", Ahsoka smiled.

Sabine bit her lip nervously, "Maybe after we find him and get back I'll... I'll see how things go."

"That's all you can do. You may find being friends is the best option or things might happen naturally without you worrying about it."

"Yeah, you're right", Sabine sighed, "We have to find him first anyway."

"That we do", Ahsoka agreed, "And to do that you need to be well rested."

The talk had cleared her head more than she could have hoped, enough for her to try and catch a few more hours of sleep. Ahsoka was right, she owed it to Ezra to be at her best, barely sleeping wasn't going to help things. The Mandalorian unwrapped her arms from her legs and got to her feet.

"You're right", Sabine said as she stood.

Ahsoka nodded, "I'll let you know in a few hours when we're getting close."

Sabine began walking back towards her cabin. She didn't need to question Ahsoka's sleep schedule, she knew meditating was almost like sleeping for a Jedi. Before she reached the cabin door, she turned back one more time.

"Hey Ahsoka, just so we're clear. You won't tell Ezra any of this, right?", she asked.

"Hmm, that depends", Ahsoka said.

Sabine narrowed her eyes, "On what?"
Ahsoka smirked to her, "On you promising to send me a wedding invitation. I've never actually been to one."

"Don't make me regret telling you", Sabine smiled and rolled her eyes.

The Togruta grinned back, "My lips are sealed."

With a shake of her head, Sabine disappeared back into her cabin. She picked the blanket off the floor and tidied the pillow before sliding back under the covers. Her head hit the pillow free of the nightmares that had plagued her for most of the night, and the Mandalorian drifted off peacefully with warmer, happier visions of what lay ahead.

Ezra's section is pretty easy to understand and it's him putting years of planning and training into practice. I mentioned early on how Ezra's time on the world and the lessons he learns are going to have an impact on his story and this is one of the first and most direct ways in which it's doing that. Thrawn's intentions had to strike a balance between being believable to the Fourth Sister and avoiding messing up his own desire to capture Ezra alive. Thrawn is always a fair bit ahead of the game and I don't want it to be any different here, there is reasoning behind pretty much all of his actions. Hera meeting Leia is deliverance on Leia's initial promise to help her back in the Prologue. Also, it's the first major crossover between the Rebels stuff and the Original Trilogy stuff in this story. The overlap is going to grow in the future, especially as Hera prepares to meet Luke Skywalker. I sprinkled in some more references here and there, some to others characters like Wolffe and Wedge, some to events like the attack on Akiva or Operation: Cinder on Naboo, just to try and tie it in to the wider story and universe. Lastly, the romantic element of Ezra and Sabine is going to come into play as we go on and it deserved something more than passing thoughts from Sabine or off-hand jokes from Hera. Sabine and Ezra are firmly just friends as of Rebels, according to both Filoni and Tiya Sircar, but I strongly favour the idea that their friendship will grow into something more afterwards, especially based on Sabine's commitment to him in the Epilogue.

Another note on names here: the Star Destroyer names, or all the ship names for that matter, don't always have a deeper meaning to them. Some of them are picked because I just liked the way they sounded. However, that isn't to say there isn't some rhyme or reason to why I picked certain names, but I'll leave that explanation for much later.

If anyone's curious about the ship names -

**Chimaera** (Thrawn's ISD) - A Greek mythological creature usually seen as a lion/goat/snake hybrid.

**Imperator** (Sarlis' ISD) - Latin for 'Commander'.

**Myrmidon** (Pellaeon's ISD) - A tribe from Greek Mythology. Achilles was the son of their King during the Trojan War.

**Aspis** (the Nebulon frigate at Lira San) - Greek for 'shield'. 

**Invictus** (the light cruiser Thrawn leaves behind) - Latin for 'undefeated'.

**Aeternus** (the other light cruiser that stays with the fleet) - Latin for 'unending' or 'eternal'.

So far, each of the main stories has had some progression in each chapter. Next time, however, we focus heavily on a single event and as a result there'll be no Hera, Sabine or Ahsoka in the next chapter. They'll be back in the chapter after next.
Next time: A confrontation ensues as Ezra uses every tool at his disposal to fight off the Empire.
Chapter 6 - Ezra Makes A Stand

So this is a much more focused chapter than previous ones, but it's very important to the overall plot. It's shorter too but a lot goes down in it.

This time: A long awaited confrontation ensues as Ezra uses every tool at his disposal to fight off the Empire.

The tree Ezra was using for his vantage point was harder to climb than he'd expected. Night came fast on this world and it was getting harder to see the sticks and branches he needed to climb up, let alone the rain making everything too slippery to get a good grip of. He scrambled up higher, his blaster and bag hanging loosely off his back and bouncing off him with every quick movement.

Finally, he reached the highest branch. Strong and sturdy enough to hold his weight and giving him a good view of the shuttle below as well as letting him see the thinning trees that gave way to the coastline in the distance. Ezra sat on the edge on the branch, committing as much of the view to memory as possible. Night was coming fast and within minutes he'd barely be able to see half of what he could now. He took special note of the routes to the beaches and the exact details of the shuttle.

After surveying the area for a minute he settled down and put one hand around his blaster, ready to fire at any attacker that might approach. He then focused his mind, reaching out into the forest around him for what might be his final time. The bulk of the creatures were continuing as normal, unaware of the confrontation that was brewing around them. His small lizard friends were making their way back to the shuttle too and Ezra slowly reached out to keep a mental hold of them. His mind focused and reached out for Argos. He felt him running as fast as he could through the outskirts of the jungle, parallel to the beach. The beast was searching for his targets to put the plan into action.

The rain continued to pour down and Ezra thought for a second that he'd heard a low rumble of thunder. The rumble dragged on and as it went on it became louder. That's no thunder... that's a ship.

Ezra's eyes scanned the darkening sky above and around him. In the distance, approaching from the sea, a faint white light was reflecting in the clouds. It drew closer, the whine of its engine becoming louder as it did. The light began to drop faster and it started to break through the cloud coverage. He squinted his eyes to get a better look at the intruder. It was no Imperial shuttle for sure, far too small. It looked like a TIE but different, smaller and with curved wings.

His breath caught in his throat and his stomach churned. He'd seen that type of TIE fighter before. Inquisitor.

Argos panted heavily as he ran up along the coast, his eyes constantly probing the distance for what he sought. The practice attempts had burnt the pattern into his mind and he knew what he had to do. In the distance he saw them, a large herd of the creatures lumbering around near the treeline. Long-leggers.

The beast remembered Ezra's instructions and turned further in to the jungle to hide his approach from the creatures. The herbivores were wholly unaware of the situation as they grazed on the thin covering of plants that marked the boundary between the jungle and the beach. Argos picked up
the pace and went out around them, trying to get behind the entire herd to make it more effective. After a dozen more metres, Argos had cleared most of the herd and lurched back towards the trees.

His paws hit sand and he stalked carefully out of the trees. Giving away his position too early wouldn't let this work. He walked out into the centre of the sand, his eyes giving him a good view of the herd even in darkness. He skulked closer and closer until the position felt right.

Argos opened his mouth and roared as loud as he could. Even with the noise of wind and rain, his cry caught the attention of most of the herd.

The animals perked their slender heads up to look, Argos could smell their fear and confusion. They had safety in numbers though and the herd slowly grouped closer together.

Argos roared again, closing it off into a series of viscous snarls and growls.

This time the animals began to whine back as a chorus of grunts and whinnys sounded from the group.

One more time, Argos let out the loudest howl he could. This one got the attention he wanted. Not from them though, it was his signal to his master.

Argos felt the familiar brush of Ezra's mind on his and then felt it shift its focus away. The long-leggers were still braced against him, ready to defend themselves against the predator. Then, a few of the creatures shrunk away and stepped backwards. Then those same few made a fearful whine and turned tail to run.

In the confusion, more began to break rank and follow suit. Soon, the entire herd was turning itself around and sprinting as fast as their long legs would carry them. Argos let out a triumphant howl and gave chase.

The Fourth Sister moved her TIE down through the cloud layer. The light on her craft wasn't giving a very good view of the jungle and from what she could tell there were no suitable clearings to land in.

"The beach will do", the Inquisitor muttered as she pulled the controls towards the clear coastline beneath her.

The adrenaline was rushing through her. She hadn't hunted for so long and she'd waited so many years for this exact opportunity. If that Chiss thought he was going to deny her the opportunity for this kill, he had another thing coming.

"When I'm done with this maybe I'll give Thrawn the same treatment", she told herself, her mouth curling into a malicious grin.

She could still feel Bridger's presence nearby and he was no doubt aware of her arrival. If their brief brush of each other's minds didn't give it away then the noise and sight of her TIE fighter would. Not that it mattered, part of her wanted him to know what was coming to put an end to him. The boy had led her on a wild bantha-chase in the middle of nowhere for years and he was going to suffer for it.

The ship descended toward the surface and touched down on the sand. The Inquisitor quickly undid the safety harness in the cockpit and opened the hatch. With a final check for her lightsaber, she leapt up from the seat and clambered to the top of her ship. She looked out at the forest, eager to put an end to this charade once and for all.
They dropped out of hyperspace straight into view of a large green planetary body. *Ah, so this is where Ezra Bridger has been hiding all these years.*

"Commander Hammerly", Thrawn called, "What are the readings on the planet."

The officer glanced at his screen, "Generally habitable. Water, oxygen content - all good enough to live in."

Thrawn pursed his lips as he processed the information. "Such conditions do not only support life but favour its development. Order the stormtroopers to be on the alert for native creatures, Bridger has already proved his uncanny ability to utilise wildlife to oppose us."

The creatures Ezra summoned above Lothal, purrgil as he'd since discovered, still stuck in his mind all these years later. They were a valuable lesson on the strange abilities of the Jedi and not one Thrawn would soon forget.

"Yes, Grand Admiral. I'll notify the squads now", Commodore Faro acknowledged before pulling out her comm to relay the information to them.

Thrawn looked to the other Star Destroyers beside his own. The *Myrmidon* flew beside the *Chimaera*, equally prepared for the coming assault. The *Imperator* hung back as if following the others' lead. Sarlis and her crew had seen only minor skirmishes with pirates and such since Lothal and was unlikely to have seen much combat before that, this was an unusual and unfamiliar event for them. Thrawn and Pellaeon on the other hand had seen hundreds of battles, this was certainly a minor engagement compared to most of what they'd seen. However, it could prove to be one of the most significant. Thrawn's red eyes glanced briefly at the *Aeternus* before turning back towards his communication officer.

"Contact the other ships, let them know we are ready to proceed."

The officer wordlessly acknowledged the order and hailed the two other Captains. "*Imperator* and *Myrmidon* on the line, sir."

"Put them through", Thrawn instructed.

The bridge's comm crackled to life with Pellaeon's gruff and serious voice, "Squads are formed up in the hangar and the shuttles are prepared. Ready when you are, Grand Admiral."

"Ready, sir. We'll follow your lead", Sarlis added.

"Commodore, are our shuttles ready?"

"Yes, sir. Sergeant Filmund is awaiting your command."

Thrawn turned back to the viewport, "Excellent. Deploy all stormtrooper detachments to the surface, we want Bridger alive."

Both of the other Captains followed the order and instructed their own squads to depart. Thrawn kept his arms clasped behind his back, carefully watching the planet below.

"The warrior's path lies before us", he trudged out the old aphorism over the communications channel, "let us see where it leads."

The old phrase was a favourite of his but for all the truth it held, it also disguised a fact Thrawn
found so few had understood. This path he walked, like all those he walked, was chosen with the destination already in mind. In truth, he already knew where it would lead. Thrawn watched as the shuttles departed on their mission to capture Ezra Bridger. The Grand Admiral cast another cursory glance at the four ships assembled in his fleet. *And so it begins.*

The Fourth Sister's boots landed with a soft thud on the wet sand. The rain was starting to pick up and night was falling but Bridger would not elude her. She held her deactivated lightsaber in her right hand, ready to meet her opponent at the slightest notice.

"Come out, Bridger", she laughed into the darkness with no real expectation that he'd hear her, "Let's not drag this out any longer than we have to."

She wasn't surprised that her only reply was the distant rumble of thunder and the pattering of rain around her. Stepping away from her TIE, she slowly advanced toward the treeline with her senses on alert. Her eyes watched for any sudden movements and her ears listened out for the rustle of a tree or the snapping of a branch amongst the noise of the rain. She tried to feel any force signatures ahead of her but the bustling life in the jungle made it difficult to pick out anything specific.

Once more she took note of the rising sound of the thunder. *The storm is moving in fast, time to find the boy and get out of here.*

The Inquisitor stepped closer to the treeline and was almost crossing into it when she became acutely aware of a vibration beneath her feet.

"What the-?", she started asking herself.

The noise of the thunder got louder. *Surely the storm can't be that major, can it?* A familiar tingling feeling at the back of her head warned that it wasn't the storm she was feeling.

The Inquisitor turned to look further down the coastline. The darkness wouldn't let her see very far, but she didn't need her eyes to know what was out there. It wasn't a storm that was approaching her it was something else; moving, breathing, pulsing with life and fear. Not just one thing, many things. Her eyes widened in surprise as the barely visible figure of a strange animal appeared in the near distance, followed by another and another and dozens more after that. *A stampede.*

She had little time to react before the creatures were almost upon her. In the darkness she could barely get a look at them but it didn't matter, she'd be dead if she didn't move.

Waiting until the last possible moment, she leapt up into the air and let two of the charging beasts pass under her before landing in a small gap between the animals. The force warned her of another approaching and she dodged to the left, barely avoiding being hit by it. More came charging and she shot off to the right, further than before, now surrounded by a moving mass of the creatures.

She couldn't see any exit from the stampede, no sign of an end to the stream of beasts or a break in their numbers she could dive out of.

Gritting her teeth she leapt over another one, letting her anger and frustration fuel her instincts. Left, right, then left again she weaved through and past each creature in her way. Still her mind searched for an exit somewhere, for a brief gap in the panicked mass that was engulfing her.

For a moment she felt the opportunity coming, the force telling her a few seconds in advance that the horde would break just long enough for her to leap out of its path. She focused her efforts and began to bend her legs, ready for the opportunity as it came. *Almost, almost, now ju-!*
Her mind went blank and the air was knocked out of her lungs, her body tumbling backwards in confusion. A glancing blow from one of the creatures left her on her back on the sand, another wave of the beasts coming back around.

As she regained her senses, she felt the heavy impact of their hooves coming closer. She clenched her fists and gritted her teeth hard.

"Enough of this game!", she screamed.

Kicking herself up to her feet, her hand found her lightsaber hilt. The crimson blade sizzled into life, illuminating the area around her in a menacing red glow.

The horde was about to hit her but this time she was ready. Seconds before the lead animal was on top of her, she swung her lightsaber in a wide arc in front of her, stepping slightly to the side as she did so. The blade caught its target, as she knew it would, cutting clean through the beast's neck and leaving it to tumble headless to the ground.

She wasted no time in swinging the lightsaber around again, using the momentum of her sidestep to do a full turn. She cut low this time, her blade burning through the legs of another. The thrill of combat began to rush through her as she brought down more and more of them. Her blade cleaved into another's chest, she thrust it deep into another's abdomen as it passed, and she began leaving a trail of corpses and dying beings in her wake.

Another break in the stampede gave her a chance to catch her breath for only a handful of seconds. Looking behind her, she must have cut down ten or so of them. Using what little time she had, she searched around her for a way out but found something interesting instead. The creatures were circling back around. It wasn't one massive stampede, something was herding the creatures back on themselves to hit her again. Bridger.

Not Bridger, she saw only a second later, another beast. A smaller one than the long-legged nuisances that made up the stampede. This one was shorter, scalier and had teeth and claws. Her way out became clear: kill the beast.

The herd had circled back around to charge her again but she'd had more than enough of that for one day. With a wicked smirk, she activated the second blade of her saber and turned on it's rotatory function. Pulling her arm back, she grunted hard as she used the force to send the lightsaber flying into the herd. The spinning double-bladed lightsaber cut a bloody swathe into the animals, brutally cleaving and cutting dozens of them as it forced its way through. The Fourth Sister watched with sadistic glee as the animals' lifeless bodies fell over one another. Those on the flanks could see their companions falling and began to break away, giving the Fourth Sister a wider berth as the first few started to run off into the distance.

As the herd began to thin, she held her lightsaber a few metres in front of her with the force. It's red blades cut into any animals foolish enough not to give up their attacks and move on. Eventually, the Fourth Sister caught sight of the end of her torment.

With a sadistic laugh she summoned her weapon back to her hand. The bright crimson blades shot into her grasp and she brought the lightsaber back down to her side. As she did so, a impact slammed into her chest that sent her flying backwards once again.

A gnashing row of teeth was barely inches from her face. The creature that had been directing the herd was now pinning her down, trying to finish the job himself. She struggled hard to hold back it's head, desperately searching around for the lightsaber that had been knocked out of her hand.
Her left arm pushed against the creature's neck, stopping it bringing its head down for a killing blow, whilst her right arm fumbled by her side to find the hilt.

The anger built in her again. "Get! Off!", with all her might and rage she kicked her feet up and sent the creature flying back a few metres.

It yelped as it hit the sand but quickly began to recover and stand up. The Fourth Sister did the same, clambering to her feet in the few seconds she had. Her eyes searched for her lightsaber hilt which lay on the sand about three metres away. She darted quickly to the weapon as the animal pounced toward her.

*Ugh, too late!*

Deciding at the last minute that she wouldn't reach the weapon in time, she instead spun back and brought her leg up to kick the attacker. Her foot connected with its face but the beast found its own mark. As it tumbled past her, its claws drew across her right arm and cut deep into it.

She recoiled in pain and clutched her arm as the animal landed back onto the ground. Thin trickles of blood began running down her sleeve and pangs of pain shot through her.

"You're going to die for that, you filthy animal!", she spat at him.

The animal clambered to its feet and lined up with her again, the blood telling him that his target was wounded. This time, however, the Fourth Sister would be ready. As the creature charged, she reached out her injured arm and pulled her saber with the force. She activated the blade, waited for the right moment, and swung.

"Gah!", the pain in her arm shot through her again and her attack faltered. The blade couldn't make the killing blow, missing the creature by a hair's breadth.

The animal also missed its attack, passing harmlessly over the Inquisitor's shoulder. It landed firm on its feet and turned back to its target. Their eyes met and she held its gaze as they both planned their next move.

Suddenly, the creature looked sharply off to the side and titled its head, as if it heard something. It then stared back at her and snarled.

The Fourth Sister readied her blade, preparing to end this battle and get on with her mission. This time though, the beast didn't attack. It turned back to the forest and ran away, as fast as its legs would carry it.

Cowardice? Boredom? Fear? Bridger's command? The Fourth Sister didn't care. She turned off the blade and straightened up. Her arm still hurt but she knew the pain would only enhance her abilities.

Keeping her weapon ready for another ambush, she set off into the jungle at last.

He hadn't been prepared for an Inquisitor. He thought they were all dead. All of his plans were to deal with stormtroopers and Imperial soldiers, not a force sensitive warrior. The long-legger's thick hides might have survived a blaster bolt but they clearly were no match for a lightsaber. His lack of preparedness has cost him dearly.

His heart still ached with the disaster on the beach. He felt their pain and their terror as the Inquisitor cut through the stampede, bringing a brutal end to dozens of creatures. Innocent
creatures. Animals he'd sent to their deaths for his own sake. His heart felt heavy with guilt and regret.

He'd almost lost Argos too, in the confusion he'd barely been able to tell that Argos had tried to attack the Inquisitor. By the time he'd fully realised what was going on, he was impressed to see Argos had actually wounded her, but at the same time that injury was the only thing that stopped her striking a deadly blow to him. If Ezra hadn't told him to retreat when he had then he might have lost another friend tonight. Wherever Argos had fled to, Ezra had the haunting feeling that they might never see each other again. He really wished he was wrong on that.

Again, the force started to warn him about something else. Another low rumble of what sounded like thunder began mounting on the horizon. Ezra looked out from the treetop, praying that it wasn't another Inquisitor. In the distance, breaking through the clouds, Ezra could make out the faint silhouettes of three Sentinel-class shuttles.

*That's... not good.*

Ezra had expected stormtroopers and had planned to use the long-legger stampede to overwhelm them as they left their shuttles. Then he planned to steal one of the shuttles for his own and make his escape. Clearly, that was going to be much more difficult than he'd planned. His mind began running through new solutions as fast as he could. He sighed when he realised his only remaining option for escape: the Inquisitor's TIE.

That was only half the battle though, he still had three squads of stormtroopers to deal with. At that moment, another solution presented itself as he looked back down towards the shuttle that brought him here in the first place.

His mind reached into the forest to put a new plan into motion. After all, on this world, shuttles had a natural enemy.

Sergeant Filmund hadn't seen real action in years. He'd been part of clean up crews and the odd skirmish with pirates or undesirables as they scoured the Unknown Regions but he hadn't used his blaster outside of target practice in a long while. That was about to change. It was his luck that his first mission in years would be to hunt a Jedi, the very last thing he wanted to encounter on his list of enemies. Under his helmet, he cursed himself and prayed that the Inquisitor could see to the Jedi before he'd have to cross paths with him. It didn't take a genius to know what happened to stormtroopers who got in the way of a Jedi.

His squad readied themselves for landing as the shuttle lurched down onto the ground.

"Alright, check weapons", he commanded his squad, "Grand Admiral wants him taken alive, stun only."

One of his troopers groaned, "You can't be serious? We can't stop a Jedi with stun blasts!"

"Just follow you orders, Corporal", he stared him down, "If you hadn't run away like an idiot four years ago then Bridger might not have escaped."

"I-I-I it wasn't my fault, sir! I don't know what happened, it's like I lost control", the trooper stammered.

Sergeant Filmund rolled his eyes under his helmet, "We've all heard the story, Corporal. Get yourself ready and stop complaining."
The shuttle jolted as it hit the ground, signalling to the teams inside that it was time to go.

Sergeant Filmund leaned his head into the cockpit to talk to the two pilots, "Lower the ramp!"

The pilots followed the order and pressed the button from the cockpit. Filmund looked down at his weapon one more time, double-checking that everything was ready.

"Uh, sir?", one of his troopers called from behind him a few seconds later.

Sergeant Filmund spun around, "What now?"

He saw all of his troopers staring out of the ramp and, through the darkness, hundreds more eyes stared back. A crowd of tiny two-legged creatures were gazing back with huge mouths and shining black eyes.

"What are those?", the same trooper asked.

Another one shrugged, "I don't know but they're kinda cute."

In unison, the whole pack of them let out a ear-piercing screech and charged at the shuttle. They barged into the troopers' legs, throwing many of them off balance. They leapt up the sides of the hold, their teeth ripping into electronics and wiring wherever they could find it.

"Ahh, get them off!", the Corporal shouted.

One of the stormtroopers fired a stun shot at the mass of animals but the fast little targets were too quick and he caught another trooper in the back.

"Damnit! Stop firing!", the Sergeant yelled.

Over the comm and outside, he heard similar sounds of chaos and confusion. It sounded like the other two shuttles had been hit by these creatures as well.

Sergeant Filmund cursed again and kicked a few of the little monsters out of his way, "Forget the shuttles, we've got a Jedi to catch! These things won't hurt you."

Filmund barged out of the shuttle, leaving them to the creatures. His squad followed suit, barring the one stunned trooper that had been caught in a blast.

He pressed his fingers to his helmet comm, "All squads fan out. Alpha go west, Charlie go east. I'll take Bravo to the north."

The Sergeant raised his hand above his head to order his squad into a single file formation before leading them deeper into the jungle.

Ezra's plan had been more successful than he'd hoped, with the loth-lizards overrunning the shuttles and sending the Imperials into chaos. A few of them had got nervous and opened fire, catching a few of their own.

Well, every little bit helps.

The troopers had fanned out, one squad east and one squad west, but that still left one heading straight for him. Or rather straight for the shuttle. It was almost time to put the last stage of his plan into action.
When the time came, he'd have to move quickly. There'd be no second chances. Even if this part did actually work, he'd have to be careful not to run into the Inquisitor too. Everything about this was risky but Ezra did what he could to put the anxieties out of his mind. He trusted the force, there was no changing its will. If he was to escape, he would. If this was where he died, he'd die knowing it was all the will of the force.

Below him, he sensed the troopers approaching the clearing where the shuttle was waiting. It was too dark now to see much of anything but a Jedi didn't need his eyes to see, a thought that very briefly reminded him of Kanan.

"Clearing up ahead, looks like there's something there", the lead stormtrooper said as they exited the trees.

"Woah, is that a shuttle?"

"Congratulations, laser brain. It must be the one Bridger escaped in, the Grand Admiral's one", the leader replied.

Ezra chuckled to himself, it was nice to settle that internal question of whom that shuttle had belonged to.

He felt the troopers move further into the clearing, "Spread out and say alert, the Jedi could still be here."

Slowly, Ezra opened his bag and reached into it with his hand.

He could hear the noise of boots on metal as some of the troopers entered the shuttle. "Yeah, looks like he was living in this thing."

His fingers found the emergency flare gun and coiled around it's grip.

"Sergeant", one of the troopers called from outside the shuttle, "Come see this."

Ezra brought the flare gun out of the bag and began to raise his hand.

"What is it, Corporal?", the Sergeant muttered impatiently.

Trusting the force completely, Ezra raised the flare gun and pointed it at the shuttle.

"There's a tiny vine hanging out of the ship's hull. Wait...sir, do you smell that?", the Corporal asked as the Sergeant approached, "Is... is that fuel?"

"Oh my."

Ezra squeezed the trigger and a bright orange emergency flare soared from the treetop straight into the clearing. The force made his aim impeccable and it flew straight into the open fuel cap, catching the fuel-soaked vine which fed the flame into the rest of the tank. The whole shuttle exploded in a brilliant display of orange fire, shooting up into the sky and taking out the entire stormtrooper team. Sabine would have loved that, he smiled to himself.

Wasting no time, Ezra jumped from the branch and used the force to soften the impact before running in the direction of the Inquisitor's landing area.

And there's Thrawn's stormtroopers, the Inquisitor thought as she saw the inferno that erupted in the sky above her, "How typical."
She was almost impressed by Bridger's plan, using the environment and standard guerrilla tactics to hold them off. Almost impressed, but not quite. These petty attempts were little more than a delay, they would not stop her reaching her target.

Right on cue, she was proved right. In the distance, the sound of heavy breathing and snapping leaves alerted her to the approach of her target. He was running toward the beach, about thirty metres off to her right, the trees and darkness obscuring any clear view of him. It didn't seem like a stretch to assume he was heading for her ship, hoping to escape with it. She was not going to let that happen.

"Bridger!", she yelled into the darkness.

She felt the Jedi notice her as he kept running through the trees and she ran to her right, hoping to intercept him from the side as he passed her. The Jedi was faster than she'd anticipated, outpacing her by a decent margin. As she ran towards his path, the boy leapt over some trees and avoided her.

"You'll have to do better than that to impress me, boy!", she shouted.

She'd just missed him from the side but now she was right behind him. With a grunt, she activated her lightsaber again and sent it spinning through the air towards him. It cut through the trees, sending bark and leaves flying in the air behind him but it didn't catch the Jedi. She began sprinting after him again, catching her lightsaber as she went.

It was his turn to launch an attack. In her haste, she hadn't noticed the blaster he was carrying. The boy turned as he ran and fired back in her direction, a volley of inaccurate shots pelting into the trees and ground. A few lucky shots went towards her but she easily deflected them away from her, he wasn't expecting to stop her only slow her down enough to escape.

"You can't run, Bridger", she shouted at him as she chased.

The boy turned back again, "Doing a good job so far!"

_Time hasn't worn down his childishness._ The Inquisitor narrowed her eyes and doubled her efforts, he would not escape her.

It seemed that all those hunts with Argos had paid off, though not in the way he'd planned. He was used to the strain and difficulty of running through the jungle, even if he was usually the one doing the hunting.

He swung his arm back and fired another handful of shots back at the Inquisitor, hoping to catch her off balance and slow her down enough to let him escape. The trees were thinning and it couldn't be much further now.

The whirring of her lightsaber came again and he knew it meant another saber throw was coming. He waited for the force to tell him the right moment before ducking down as fast as he could. The red blades ripped into the trees around him but yet again had missed their intended target.

Finally, he caught sight of the beach. Sitting on the sand, about thirty metres from the treeline, he saw the idling lights of the Inquisitor's TIE fighter. Ezra charged through the final few metres of plant life and covered as much of the distance as he could between him and the TIE. A few seconds later, a sudden wave of energy sent him face down on to the sand.

"An admirable display, boy. But not enough", his attacker said coldly as she walked out of the trees.
Ezra looked up to the TIE, he was just over half way to it but the Inquisitor was closing fast.

He stared her down and scowled, "I'm not done yet."

His hand reached out and sent another wave of energy back at her. She must have been expecting it, as she kept her footing and only slid back a few metres. It at least gave him enough time to scramble to his feet and point the blaster at her.

"We've scoured whole systems for you and here you were all alone, barely a few parsecs from where you began."

Ezra kept his blaster trailed on her, "You must be really terrible to have taken this long."

"Hmph, your bravado won't save you", the Inquisitor laughed. "Thrawn wants you alive, I think he wants his own revenge for what you did to him."

"Sorry to disappoint him, but I've got better places to be", Ezra retorted.

"Oh, I have no intention of delivering you to him", she raised her blade and pointed it at him, "You're not getting off this planet alive."

Ezra was about to reply with another snide comment when he felt something approaching. It was coming in fast, just behind the Inquisitor, running through the jungle...

no... no! NO!

The Inquisitor sensed it too as her eyebrow raised and she turned to look over her shoulder. Out of the brush, Argos appeared with a snarl and jumped at the Inquisitor, fangs bared and claws outstretched.

"NO!", Ezra shouted in vain, knowing that it was far too late.

The woman's senses had warned her too early. As Argos leapt off the ground, she began to turn and raised her saber with her. Ezra watched in horror as the Inquisitor thrust the blade deep into Argos' torso, a pained yelp coming out of his friend.

"Ah, you mangy beast!", she screamed at Argos as her blade impaled him. She used the momentum of the swing to throw him down onto the sand, the lightsaber still speared through his chest, "Oh, you have no idea how badly I wanted to do that."

Ezra's heart broke as the creature's eyes met his, the life seeping away from him with every second. The animal's eyes then looked back to the ship, understanding what it was for and what Ezra had to do. His companion had given his life to distract her long enough to let him escape. Ezra wasn't going to waste that sacrifice.

Tearing himself away from his friend's dying moments, he shut his eyes tightly and ran for the ship. In the Inquisitor's gloating and satisfaction, she didn't notice him escaping until it was too late.

"No! Dammit no!", he heard her voice as he jumped up to the hatch and pried it open.

He fell down into the seat to see her sprinting fully at him out of the window, lightsaber bared and rage plastered across her face. It didn't matter now, it was too late for her. Ezra flicked on the switches, appreciating that she'd been so kind as to leave the ship's engines on low-power instead of completely shutting them down. The ship was in the air before she could reach him and he watched the anger on her face as he lifted off. He saw her pull back her arm to send her lightsaber flying at him again, but he fired on to the beach beside her to send her tumbling to the ground.
His eyes caught Argos' slumped mass once again, lying deathly still on the shore beneath him. Ezra mentally reached out to him, feeling only the faintest flicker of his dear friend before it ebbed away to leave nothing behind.

With a final mournful thought for his lost friend and a last lingering gaze at the place that had been his home for almost four years, Ezra turned skyward. Getting off the ground was one thing, knowing where to go now was something else.

Ezra is finally putting this world behind him and moving on in the story, things in general can start moving forward faster. As much as I like the idea of this world and the lessons he learned, it was difficult to do much of interest with him on it. His time here was vital to his story but part of me is glad to put this place behind us for now. Using the animals to defend against the Empire is the culmination of his lessons there and the first time in the story where his experiences on the world have directly affected or enabled his actions. I tried to tie in as much as I could from his time there: Argos, the loth-lizards, the long-leggers, just to try and wrap up his time there nicely. The corporal from the stormtrooper section is the the that Ezra mind tricks to send running in the very first chapter. There's no real significance to using him, he's burned to a crisp now anyway, but they're the same character. I know there wasn't much of a direct physical confrontation between Ezra and the Fourth Sister, it's good for Ezra since he's still without a lightsaber, but rest assured that you may yet see that somewhere down the line. As for Argos, I actually did grow attached to him when writing this and it wasn't always my intention to have him in the story. When writing Chapter 2 I just decided to have the predator come back and it was a good way to personify Ezra's talents for making connections. I had to kill him though, there simply wasn't a way for Argos to leave with Ezra and the Fourth Sister is not the type of character to let such annoyances slide by unpunished.

I've never done a chapter where I've jumped around so much like this, I hope it wasn't too disjointed to follow. I considered doing it all from Ezra's perspective but figured it would get boring. Jumping between lots of different events kept up the variety and gave a more complete picture about what was going on.

Next time: Ezra leaves the system, Thrawn discusses the Fourth Sister's failure and how to proceed, Ahsoka and Sabine reach their destination and Hera meets Luke Skywalker.
Chapter 7 - New Arrivals

After last time's more focused and eventful chapter, we pick up the other stories as well as continuing on with Ezra's escape.

I'll say it here before we begin: this chapter introduces Commodore Karyn Faro who will continue to be an important character. She's not an OC, she's one of the Chimaera's officers from the canon Thrawn novels, and I'll be using her more and more as the story goes on. I just thought I'd mention it here so people who aren't familiar with her aren't too surprised.

This time: Ezra leaves the system, Thrawn discusses the Fourth Sister's failure and how to proceed, Ahsoka and Sabine reach their destination and Hera meets Luke Skywalker.

Regret. Pain. Death. They were all he could feel. He may have escaped but the cost was far greater than he’d planned. So many beings had died, among them a friend, all so he could have his freedom. As he soared up into the sky in the stolen TIE fighter, he wasn't so sure it was worth it.

Ezra slowly moved the controls, getting used to the feeling of flying again. Hera's training had taught him well and the basics came back almost instantly, letting him get off the ground and into the air without much difficulty. It took a few minutes to figure all the rest of it out, the TIE's unfamiliar layout was also making things difficult, but as Ezra climbed higher he settled into the task.

The storm was really rolling in now, bringing actual thunder with it at last. The rain and winds howled around him but the TIE held steady and carried him through. Ezra didn't really know where he going. He was no less lost now than he had been when he left the Chimaera almost five years ago. Instinctively, he quickly checked the fuel gauge and to his luck he had almost a full tank. The hyperdrive was also in good condition, sparing him another disaster like the one that had stranded him here in the first place. Confident that the ship was in a good enough condition, Ezra ascended further and finally broke through the thick layer of clouds. A vast expanse of stars opened up before him, taking his breath away and filling him with renewed optimism. He was going to find his way back home; somehow or in some way, he was going to get back.

His hope was short-lived however, as his eyes picked out three large objects and one smaller one all hanging in low orbit. The distinctive arrow head shape and grey colour could only ever belong to Imperial Star Destroyers. Three Star Destroyers and a light-cruiser too? Thrawn must want me bad.

An alert sounded in the cockpit that Ezra at first thought was a proximity warning of incoming fighters. Soon he realised that it wasn't that at all. Instead, he was being hailed... by the Chimaera. Ezra considered answering it, then hanging up, then answering it again. He knew who was likely to be on the other end. Biting his lip and muttering under his breath, his fingers hovered over the comm button before timidly pressing accept.

A hologram flickered in front of his controls, a design choice that he still questioned for safety reasons, showing Grand Admiral Thrawn. The Chiss looked almost completely the same, with no changes to his face or hair and still wearing the same pristine white uniform.

"Ezra Bridger", the red eyes met his.
"Thrawn, its been a while", Ezra replied through gritted teeth.

Thrawn seemed to sense Ezra's contempt, "I see the Fourth Sister has failed in her mission."

The Jedi grinned proudly, "Sorry to disappoint you."

"I'm hardly disappointed nor surprised. Her arrogance knew no limits, it was always going to be her downfall."

"Seeing some of yourself in her?", Ezra wrinkled his nose, "But she's not dead, just stranded and embarrassed in the middle of nowhere."

"I am aware she is alive, I do not know you as one to kill your enemies if it can be avoided", Thrawn responded, "Indeed, perhaps I should thank you for your restraint."

As Thrawn spoke, Ezra's TIE began leaving the atmosphere and entering the cold vacuum of space. He angled his ascent away from the assembled ships, trying to put as much distance as possible between him and any pursuers.

Ezra laughed, "Restraint? For not killing her?"

"No, for not killing me. You had ample opportunity to kill me aboard the Chimaera as you departed yet you spared my life."

The Jedi remembered the thought process, the idea of executing him was never one he'd seriously considered. The Jedi Code was abundantly clear on that issue but Ezra's own sense of right and wrong stopped him too. Even now, Ezra still doubted he could ever kill anyone in cold blood, even someone like Thrawn.

"Well some of us have our principles", Ezra spat back.

"You question my morality and my goals?", Thrawn asked.

Ezra scoffed, "I'm not questioning your morality, I'm denying you have one."

The Chiss' eyes remained fixed on his, "I have my principles and morals. I serve those interests above all else, as I always have and shall do until I meet my end."

"That can't come soon enough", Ezra grumbled to himself. "Do you really think the Emperor cares about your interests? You're not half as clever as you think you are if you believe the Emperor cares about anyone but himself."

Ezra's hand found the hyperdrive switch and began power it up, knowing time was of the essence if he wanted to escape.

If Thrawn had heard the insult, he made no show of it. However, Ezra caught a quick flash of surprise on the Grand Admiral's face before it hardened back into his usual stoic expression.

"Interesting", Thrawn said, "I'd have thought your abilities would have kept you informed."

"What do you mean?", Ezra looked at him with confusion.

The red eyes stared into his, "The Emperor is dead."

Ezra's mouth fell open, "What?"
"About three or four months ago the Emperor and Darth Vader were killed in an engagement over the forest moon of Endor. The Empire as you know it has crumbled for the time being, your rebel friends surprised even me with their achievements", Thrawn didn't express any regret or anger as he spoke, as if he really didn't care either way.

Dead. Both of them? Ezra almost wanted to cheer, they'd really done it! Years of fighting, so much sacrifice and the rebellion had pulled it off. Sabine, Hera, Zeb, Chopper, Rex, Kallus, Mon Mothma, Leia - all of them. The disturbances he felt months ago suddenly all made sense, he'd felt the dark presence of the Sith Lords be destroyed. At last, the force was in balance again. Part of him didn't think if he'd ever see this day yet here it was. Sure, he was halfway across the galaxy with no route home, but what truly mattered was that the galaxy was finally free. Ezra had no idea what could possibly have defeated the likes of Vader and the Emperor, he'd seen their power for himself. Whoever put a stop to them must have been exceptionally gifted. If he got back - when he got back - he hoped he'd be able to meet them.

He quickly glanced down at the hyperdrive computer, waiting eagerly for the drive to be ready to jump.

"The fighting is mostly over", Thrawn continued, "I've no doubt your allies will come to search for you in time. I'm sure Miss Wren or General Syndulla would very much wish to see you. Assuming they have survived, of course."

Thrawn's mention of them lifted his spirits, to hear their names from someone else, even if it was Thrawn, made them seem closer than they had in a long time.

"They're alive", Ezra didn't need to question that, if something had happened he just knew he'd know about it.

"We shall see."

The hyperdrive was nearly ready but any second now the build-up would be detectable on the Imperial's sensors.

"I don't get it, if the Emperor is dead why are you still out here?", Ezra asked.

Thrawn watched him silently for a few seconds, Ezra could recognise when his old enemy was deep in thought. "I have my own goals, as I said", Thrawn answered at last.

The Jedi narrowed his eyes at him, "And what goals are those?"

Thrawn glanced quickly around him and then stared back at Ezra, "I offer you a choice: you can run and hope to be found in some far-flung corner of the galaxy or you can turn yourself in."

It was a blatant dodge of the question, Thrawn didn't seem interested in sharing his goals. Maybe Thrawn just wanted revenge on him, maybe he wanted to reestablish the Empire, maybe there was some other objective the Chiss had. How Ezra fitted into all of them, he didn't know. On the other hand, he also didn't care. The sooner he was away from Thrawn the better.

"Turn myself in?!", Ezra laughed, "Have you gone mad out here? I'd rather not hand myself over and have that crazy Inquisitor throw out me out an airlock."

"I assure you, no harm would befall you. You have my word", Thrawn placed his hand flat over his chest, a sign of promise.

The hyperdrive computer flashed up with an indicator showing it was ready to jump.
Ezra put his fingers to his forehead in a mocking salute, "I'm afraid I'll have to pass, maybe next time?"

"Sir! The ship's about to jump to hyperspace!", a voice called from Thrawn's end.

The Grand Admiral continued to stare at him, "Until we meet again, Ezra Bridger."

With no clear destination, Ezra shut his eyes in the few seconds and tried to think of a plan. Immediately, the obvious option presented itself. The call he'd felt on the surface, the one that drew him from the Chimaera in the first place, was still there. Aiming the ship in its direction and praying the hyperspace route was safe, Ezra pressed the activate button.

Thrawn's hologram watched in silence as the connection dropped out and the stars stretched out into the swirling corridor of hyperspace.

Arrogance costs lives in war, it costs missions and resources. Warriors with great ability or great success are all too often consumed by their delusion of infallibility. When that illusion is shattered, those that don't lose their lives are often broken. Reforging a warrior after such failures is difficult, though it can be done. Alternatively, some are born arrogant and will find that persona all but impossible to shake off. Warriors such as these are a challenge to control but can, if the situation favours it, be every bit as useful as any other.

Commodore Faro stood beside Grand Admiral Thrawn in the Chimaera's hangar, awaiting the return of the ground teams. Thrawn made no mention of Ezra Bridger's escape or the brief exchange the two had shared and Faro had no inclination to bring it up. The Grand Admiral was certainly no Vader when it came to bringing up concerns but she knew better than to make pointless idle conversation with him.

The ground teams had to request alternative transport back to the fleet, their own shuttles had been incapacitated by the local wildlife. Faro had no idea how that could have happened and was almost looking forward to how they were going to explain that one.

They weren't kept waiting long before one of the back-up shuttles that had been sent down was flying back into the hangar. Faro and Thrawn stood with an escort of stormtroopers, ready to receive the returning troops. Faro shouldn't have been surprised when the ramp lowered and a clearly angry Fourth Sister marched out.

"Fourth Sister", Thrawn said to her as she walked off the shuttle.

"Spare me the gloating", the Fourth Sister spat back as she came to a stop in front of him.

"I do not gloat, Inquisitor. I also do not condone complete failure."

Faro saw the Inquisitor's face harden into an angry glare, but the Grand Admiral held firm and didn't flinch. She'd seen plenty of their disagreements, everyone in the fleet had in the last few years, but the last few felt more intense than ever before.

"Bridger has only escaped temporarily, do you really think I don't have the means to track my own ship?", the Inquisitor folded her arms and held her disgruntled gaze.

Thrawn's stance stayed rigid and unmoving, "A ship that size will take time to narrow down with a tracker and it is impossible to do so when Bridger is still in hyperspace."

"Then we wait, even on a full tank he can't run forever", the Inquisitor replied.
The two opponents stared each other down for a few seconds longer. Faro herself stayed still at the Grand Admiral's side, the Inquisitor was no fan of her either, or any of the Chimaera's crew for that matter.

"That still does not address your failure or your insubordination", Thrawn said.

The Inquisitor was indignant, "My failure? Your stormtroopers didn't do much better", she countered with a glare at the stormtrooper escort that was accompanying them.

"Unlike you, stormtroopers are not specially trained to deal with Jedi. They did, however, follow their own instructions to the letter. Had you waited for their arrival and worked together to apprehend Bridger, as you were ordered to, perhaps he would be sitting in our cells instead of flying through hyperspace in your ship", Thrawn said every word with a cold calmness, keeping eye contact with the Inquisitor the whole time.

"I don't care what you ordered", the Inquisitor bit back as she raised a pointed finger to his chest.

The sudden motion caused the escort to raise their blasters at her. Faro almost thought she was going to hit him but the Fourth Sister backed off after seeing the guards.

Her attitude didn't soften though, "I have my orders to kill that Jedi, I was not going to let him escape."

"And yet you did exactly that", Thrawn countered immediately. "I don't need to remind you that the Emperor is dead, basic chain of command would make me your superior officer."

"Don't patronise me, I'm not part of your military structure."

Faro glanced at the Inquisitorius symbol on her arm. The Fourth Sister was technically right, they weren't officially part of the Imperial Navy so, in theory, she didn't actually have to submit to Thrawn's commands. Then again, she was part of the Empire and there was a decent chance that Thrawn was the highest ranking member of the Empire left. Really, you could argue either way and they'd both be equally right. However, Faro knew that whichever side Thrawn stood on was probably the most sensible one to follow.

Thrawn choose neither of those arguments, he chose the simplest one to present.

"You are part of this mission, as per the Emperor's instructions. Not only am I in charge of this mission but the Emperor's orders imply that you defer to my judgement", Thrawn explained.

The Fourth Sister didn't like that, Faro could tell. Her lip twitched slightly and she peeled her eyes off the Grand Admiral.

The surprise didn't last long. "Your judgement?", the Inquisitor said, "Why didn't you pursue Bridger?" The Fouth Sister pointed around the hangar to the numerous TIE fighters sitting unoccupied.

Faro could answer this one, speaking up for the first time in the encounter, "Standard operating procedure doesn't mandate TIEs to be deployed for a single fugitive. Besides, having the TIEs in flight would have used up fuel, which we're not exactly awash with."

The force-sensitive warrior glared at her with contempt but Faro didn't shy away, she knew the Inquisitor would take it as some sort of victory if she did. Still, her unnaturally yellow eyes filled with an instinctive revulsion and she couldn't ignore the sudden feeling the sweat running down the back of her neck.
"The Commodore speaks truly", Thrawn intervened, "The probability that Bridger would even get airborne was minimal. Unfortunately, it seems my calculations did not account for your ineptitude."

If the Fourth Sister didn't like Thrawn before, then she really hated him now. Faro was surprised at the bluntness and directness of Thrawn's remarks, it wasn't the way he usually operated. She could feel the stormtroopers behind them tense up as Thrawn and the Inquisitor stared each other down. The Commodore saw the Fourth Sister's fist clench and for a second she thought she was going to attack again. To her relief, the Fourth Sister just stared at him wordlessly.

Thrawn broke the silence, "If you've nothing else to say, I'd suggest you get to work on finding your ship before the chance to find Bridger is lost forever."

The Inquisitor gave Faro another sideways look before stepping back, "As you wish, Grand Admiral."

She turned and walked away from them, heading towards a corridor on the far side of the hangar. Thrawn and Faro watched her go, the Commodore glad that the woman hadn't snapped and lashed out of them.

"Come, Commodore", Thrawn said after a while before turning heel and heading back the way they came.

"Y-yes, Sir", Faro tore her mind away from the conversation and followed him a half-pace behind.

Thrawn looked slightly back over his shoulder at her, "You are on edge."

The Chiss had an aptitude for reading people and there was no use lying about it to him, "Yes, Sir. I almost thought she was going attack you."

"Even she can recognise her position, attacking me would only turn the fleet against her. She has won few friends here and she knows so."

She couldn't argue with that, Faro hadn't seen her have any positive interaction with anyone. The Fourth Sister kept to herself and the only times she dealt with anyone else were in Thrawn's briefings or out on a mission. Thrawn, on the other hand, earned loyalty through achievements and good leadership. He fostered talent where he saw it and always looked to the root of the problem if he found one. Other officers she worked with before him were always seeking to get ahead, the Grand Admiral simply wanted to protect his people, both the Chiss and those under his command. So far, that desire had aligned with Imperial interests.

Faro hesitated before speaking, "Grand Admiral, permission to speak freely?"

"Of course, Commodore", Thrawn nodded.

"I understand the Inquisitor's failure but... you're not one to berate or insult. Why did you antagonise her back there?", Faro asked tentatively.

Thrawn took the question in stride, "The Fourth Sister takes such slights to heart. As a result, she will work harder and faster to find Bridger not only for her own pride but also in a petty attempt to spite me."

"You annoyed her so that she works harder to prove you wrong?", Faro asked.

"That is the basic principle", Thrawn answered.
"Do you really think she'll find the Jedi?", the Commodore asked as they left the hangar and entered into a corridor.

"I'm sure of it."

The woman glanced up at him for a second, "And what happens when we do find him?"

Thrawn remained silent for a few more metres before slowly coming to a halt, prompting Faro and the stormtrooper escort did the same. Thrawn turned to face her with an unreadable expression.

"Do you agree that our mission out here is of the utmost importance?", he asked.

"Absolutely, sir", Faro answered, noticing he hadn't answered her question.

Thrawn nodded in agreement, "As do I. You are aware that my reasons for serving the Empire are tied to the servitude of my own people in the Chiss Ascendancy."

Faro knew that full well, as the not-so-pleasant memories of their brief work with Darth Vader had reminded her. Even with Vader, the Grand Admiral was evasive and mysterious in his own special way, able to answer or avoid a question without giving much of anything away. Thrawn never went in to much detail about the Chiss or what exactly he sought to gain from working with the Empire, all he'd revealed was that he could serve both loyalties with no issues. Faro hadn't heard many stories about the Chiss other than the odd ones Eli Vanto had shared before his mysterious disappearance, knowing them as a shrewd and intelligent race. She wasn't sure how much Thrawn was colouring both of their perceptions of his people, but she doubted she'd ever find out herself.

"I am aware, Grand Admiral", she answered, "But I'm not sure how this relates to Ezra Bridger."

"Both the Empire and the Chiss have enemies in the Unknown Regions, some we know and others we do not. It is imperative that we use all of our might to prepare for the event in which these enemies seek to strike out at us", Faro noted that Thrawn had again evaded the question and not even mentioned the rogue Jedi.

Faro pursed her lips, "What enemies do you mean?"

The Chiss thought deeply for a moment. "The Grysk perhaps, as you already know. Others... I do not know", Thrawn admitted, "I only know that they are out here. Therefore, we must use every resource to our advantage."

It was another non-answer. She ran it around in her mind, trying to piece together what she could. Thrawn's conversation with Bridger before he left, his desire to capture not kill him, his talk of using everything he could. The pieces fell in to place simply enough. Thrawn wants to use Ezra Bridger to search the Unknown Regions.

Thrawn watched her intently, "Ah, I believe you understand."

Faro glanced quickly over at the stormtroopers escorting them, doubting they had enough knowledge to piece everything together. Working with a Jedi would be a hard pill to swallow for most Imperials, but Faro wasn't most Imperials and neither was Thrawn. The Grand Admiral attracted similar people to himself to his command, people willing to see the bigger picture and take difficult decisions in their stride. Be it bombarding civilian populations to end a conflict that could kill so many more or working with one of his greatest opponents to achieve a larger goal, Thrawn only cared to do what was ultimately the right choice in the end and that was a bottom line that she knew the Chimaera's crew, Captain Pellaeon, herself and many others around here could respect.
The Fourth Sister, on the other hand, might not agree and there would certainly be dissenters elsewhere in the fleet if Thrawn was to bring Bridger on board. It made a lot of sense that Thrawn wasn't making his aims too public.

"I understand, sir", Faro nodded, "I trust your judgement."

"I admire your loyalty and thank you for it, Commodore", Thrawn said as he straightened up and turned to talk again.

Faro began to follow with the stormtroopers a few paces behind.

"For now, we must await the location of the Fourth Sister's stolen fighter", Thrawn continued as if the previous conversation had not happened.

"Of course, Grand Admiral. I'll make sure we're ready to depart the moment we have the coordinates", Faro obliged, her mind returning to the task at hand.

"Two minutes out", Ahsoka said from the pilot's seat.

Sabine stepped forward and sunk into the co-pilot's chair, her helmet resting on her lap. Two minutes from wherever Ezra and Thrawn had been taken by the purrgil. It was surreal, the reality of where she was still hadn't sunk in. She was excited and nervous at the same time, more than ready to find her friend and bring him back home where he belonged.

"Any idea what's near those coordinates?", Sabine asked.

Ahsoka looked at the map screen, "The sensors are detecting a few systems nearby but the coordinates themselves are in the middle of nowhere. No planetary masses or asteroids nearby."

Sabine sighed, "So it's unlikely there's going to be much to go off."

The Togruta turned her attention back to the controls, "We'll have to wait and see but we knew this was only going to be the start of our journey."

"Just the start... right", Sabine reminded herself. It was too easy to get ahead of herself, they were still probably months away from finding Ezra. Closer than ever, sure, but still not there yet.

Another minute later and the alarms told them that they were approaching their destination. Sabine sat up and watched the viewport in anticipation. She wasn't expecting anything but a blank expanse of stars but she held out some hope, just in case. Ahsoka was still on the controls as the inertia kicked in and the hyperdrive wound down. The vortex outside became long lines of pale light before finally becoming the tiny glimmers of stars.

Empty space... exactly what Sabine had expected.

The Mandalorian sunk back into the seat with a huff, as if disappointed that she'd found exactly how much she'd thought she would. Still, it was strange to think that Ezra had been here. It might have been a few years but Ezra had-

"Sabine", Ahsoka said suddenly with a hint of surprise.

The young woman turned to Ahsoka, "Hm?

The Togruta scowled at the monitor, "There's a ship out here."
"What?!", Sabine jumped out of her chair and looked at the screen.

A ship indeed, a light-cruiser to be precise, one of the Arquitens-class ships that she'd seen plenty of over the years. Looking at the scopes it seemed in perfectly good condition, it certainly didn't look damaged and the infra-red sensors were picking it up plain as day against the backdrop of space. The ship was functional which meant one of two things, if not both: either there was a chance Ezra was on that ship or the other ships couldn't be far away.

"Have they spotted us?", Sabine asked with her mind still on the readings.

On cue, the communicator beeped with a hail from the Imperial ship.

Sabine looked worriedly at Ahsoka, "I hope you've got a plan."

"Remember those Imperial transponder codes I told you about", Ahsoka told her as she went to press the button to receive the transmission.

"Unidentified ship, this is the light-cruiser Invictus. What are you doing out here?", the confused voice on the other end asked.

Ahsoka changed the pitch of her voice to something slightly uptight and formal, "Uh, yes. We were sent as part of a contingency plan in the event of a crisis in the Empire."

The voice on the other end took a whole ten seconds to answer, "We were not informed of your arrival. Who authorised this?"

"The Emperor."

"Impossible, the Emperor is dead", the voice answered.

So, they did know that. Sabine had been curious how up to date they were out here on what was happening in the galaxy.

"Obviously, it was set up before he died", Ahsoka replied with the attitude and impatience of an Imperial officer, "Are you going to allow us to land or are we going to have to have words with Grand Admiral Thrawn? We have much to discuss."

The comm went silent before finally crackling to life, "Alright, I don't see how else you could have gotten these coordinates. You're lucky we were here when you arrived."

Ahsoka raised an eyebrow and muttered under her breath, "Is that so?"

"Send your transponder codes now", the Imperial demanded.

"Sending", Ahsoka tapped some buttons and inputed a series of numbers and symbols.

"Alright", the voice said, "All checks out, you're cleared to land in the hangar."

"Thank you, on our way."

"Naturally, an inspection crew will meet you when you land. Standard safety precautions", the voice continued.

"Naturally", Ahsoka repeated. The comm shut off and Ahsoka breathed a sigh of relief, "That went better than I expected."
"What were you expecting?", Sabine questioned.

The Togruta flicked open a tiny cap on top of the controls, revealing weapon triggers on each. Sabine gasped in surprise, "This thing is armed? I didn't see any weapon when I got onboard."

"I had some modifications. Weapons, enhanced sensors, improved navigation computers", Ahsoka ran through the list, "I even have a cloaking device."

"You're joking", the Mandalorian was impressed, "No ship this small has a cloaking device."

"I knew someone who owed me some favours, they pulled a few strings", Ahsoka replied. Sabine couldn't tell if the person she was talking about brought her good memories or bad.

The Mandalorian turned her attention back to the light-cruiser as they drew closer. No TIEs came out to meet them and the turbo lasers didn't track their approach. The Imperials really aren't expecting trouble out here.

"Do you think they'll have Ezra onboard?", Sabine asked.

Ahsoka paused and focused on the ship, "I don't sense him, I don't think he's there."

Sabine cursed to herself but stayed focused, "They mentioned we were lucky they were here. Guess that means they haven't been here long or they'll be leaving soon. Maybe both."

"If that's the case, they might have some information on where the rest of the ships are", Ahsoka suggested.

Sabine gave a satisfied smile, "And that'll lead us straight to Ezra."

"Hopefully", the older woman replied. "We'd better get ready for landing."

Ahsoka set the ship's landing to auto-pilot and got out of her chair. She picked up her staff from beside her and pressed her hands to it, causing the pole to shrink down to maybe a third of its size. Then, Ahsoka slid it into a sling on her back that was usually hidden underneath her cloak.

Sabine stood up with her helmet slung under her arm, "Huh, I was wondering where you kept that."

"I've got to have two hands to fight properly", Ahsoka said with a tap of the lightsabers on her waist.

Ahsoka led them out of the cockpit and towards the main hold where the exit ramp was. Sabine noted the fuel cannisters and ration crates tucked away in the main hold. Right now, it looked like Ahsoka might have overestimated how long this was going to take. She could only hope that was the case.

"So how are we planning to do this? Simple? Stealthy? Mind trick your way through?", Sabine asked.

Ahsoka smiled, "I was going to play it simple, they'll be no match for a former Jedi and a Mandalorian."

Sabine threw her helmet on and smiled under it, "I like it, my type of approach."

"I hope you're ready to fight, I know you've been out of it for a while."
Sabine scoffed a laugh, "I'm a Mandalorian, I'll be fine."

"Hmm, good point", Ahsoka answered. "You stay back and take cover in here. I'll greet our hosts."

The Mandalorian's hands fell to her hips and found their natural place on her pistols, "Just save some for me."

Their ship flew itself into the hangar on auto-pilot as they waited for landing. They felt the pressure change as the ship crossed the hangar shield and then the hard jolt as the ship came to a landing. Ahsoka nodded to Sabine and she hid behind the wall beside the entry ramp, ready to peak out and blast any Imperials she saw. Ahsoka stood in the hold a few feet back from the door, her arms down her sides and her hands inches from her lightsabers.

Sabine found herself grinning under her helmet. *These guys don't stand a chance.*

The door slowly opened and Sabine peered around to see a squad of five troopers walking casually towards them. Ahsoka stood back, obscured by the shadows in the shuttle's main hold.

"That shuttle's not regulation", one of the stormtroopers muttered from outside.

"Who's in there? Identify yourself!", another called.

Sabine waited with baited breath as Ahsoka stood with her eyes closed and a steady breath. Then, Ahsoka opened her eyes and winked at Sabine with a smirk on her lips. In a second, Ahsoka was spinning out of the door as two flashes of white light erupted in the hold. From outside, Sabine heard the familiar hum of a lightsaber and the unmistakable noise of the blades slicing through stormtrooper armour. It was over in seconds without a single blaster shot fired.

She poked her head out to look at the hangar. The smaller hangar of an Arquitens-class was only just large enough to store their ship and only a handful of TIEs hung from the ceiling mounts. Ahsoka stood with her lightsabers in a reverse grip behind her back, around her lay the bodies of five troopers with a single clean lightsaber burn on each of their chests.

"On one hand, that was impressive", Sabine said to Ahsoka as she stepped down into the hangar.

Ahsoka looked back to her, "And on the other?"

Sabine shook her head with an exaggerated groan, "You didn't leave any for me."

Alarms suddenly began to blare within the shape, echoing throughout the empty space of the hangar.

"Don't worry, you can have these ones", Ahsoka told her.

The hangar door was directly in front of them and there wasn't anything in the way of cover for her to use, or so it seemed. She pulled out her blasters with confidence and felt the familiar rush of pre-battle adrenaline.

"You block, I fire", she instructed Ahsoka.

The Togruta raised her sabers to a ready position and Sabine took her place behind her. She raised her blasters and kept her eyes locked on the hangar door, waiting for it to swing open as the reinforcements approached.

"Can you sense them?", Sabine asked.
Ahsoka focused for a second, "Yes, they're close."

"Let's give them a surprise. Can you use the force to open the door from here?"

The Togruta nodded in understanding, "Of course, nice plan."

"Thanks, I try", Sabine answered with sarcastic smugness.

Keeping her blasters pointed at the door, she watched as Ahsoka reached out and pushed the manual activation button with the force. Sure enough, a squad of six troopers were charging down the corridor, about ten metres from the door. They hadn't expected the door to open so early and had no time to react.

Sabine opened fire with her WESTAR-35s into the approaching squad. It was only right that her first combat shot in over four years found its way straight into the visor of the lead trooper and the next two impacted the chest of the stormtrooper behind him. Still got it, she smirked under her helmet. The other four troopers dived for cover in the alcoves of the corridor, two to the right and two to the left. As one on the left popped his head out, Sabine fired off another volley of shots that sent him tumbling to the floor.

The two stormtroopers on the right then poked their blasters out, firing a few inaccurate bolts in their direction. Ahsoka stood firm in front of Sabine and effortlessly deflected the shots away with elegant twirls of her blades. After their volley had stopped, Sabine squeezed off some more shots to catch them as they dived back for cover, getting only a glancing blow on one of the troopers.

"I need to get closer", Sabine told Ahsoka as she raised her sabers again.

"On it."

The Togruta moved forward and kept up the impenetrable shield from her weapons. They edged closer to the door before Ahsoka dropped her weapons again to let Sabine fire. This time, however, she utilised a different method. She pulled a thermal detonator from her belt and chucked it down the corridor. Her aim was faultless and the detonator rolled perfectly down the middle of the hallway. The troopers had no time to run before the device exploded and sent them slamming hard into the walls on either side. Sabine inspected them from her position to make sure that all three were staying down before lowering her blasters with an audible sigh.

"Ahh, it's been way too long", Sabine twirled her pistols around her fingers and slid them back into the holsters. She was going to need them again in a second, but Sabine wasn't above a little showing off now and again.

Ahsoka extinguished her blades but kept the hilts ready in her hands, "I couldn't even tell you've been out of it for a few years."

Sabine shrugged, "As proud as I am of that, I have to admit yours was cooler."

The Togruta smiled proudly, "Still plenty of opportunities to show me up."

"I'll do my best", Sabine promised and looked down the corridor where the troopers had come from. "I've been on enough of these ships to know my way to the bridge, if there are clues to where Ezra is then they're there."

Ahsoka motioned down the corridor, "I'll follow your lead."

The Mandalorian pulled her blasters out again and started down the corridor, Ahsoka keeping pace
just slightly behind her as they headed toward the bridge.

Hera tapped her fingers nervously on the table in a small debriefing room aboard Home One. The room was no larger than Leia's small office, sharing the same white colour all around and having only one large table in the middle with five chairs, another large viewport giving a view of the stars outside. It should have been relaxing but Hera found herself distinctly on edge.

Leia had contacted Luke immediately after their meeting and found that he wasn't far away from the fleet. He'd agreed to stop by and meet with Hera on relatively short notice. The Twi'lek had insisted on meeting him alone, leaving Zeb, Kallus and Chopper on the Ghost with Jacen. Rex had some of his own duties to attend to, leaving Hera to meet with Luke with only Leia there with them. They were due any minute and Hera waited eagerly for the door to slide open. After a few more minutes, she heard the soft noise of voices and footsteps from outside the room. She got to her feet to greet them, unsure of exactly what to expect.

The door swung open and Hera's eyes met Leia's.

"Hera Syndulla", Leia said with a smile as she turned back over her shoulder, "My brother, Luke Skywalker."

Behind her, a man in an all black combat suit and tunic walked calmly in to the room. He was average height with medium-length blonde-brown hair and blue eyes. He walked with wisdom and confidence that sharply contrasted his youthful experience. She's heard he was young but she hadn't expected this. Looking at him, he was no older than Ezra or Leia, probably the same age, yet his gait painted him as so much older. On his hip, the hilt of a lightsaber hung from the belt clip.

"Skywalker, it's an honour to finally meet you", Hera said to him.

"The honour is mine, General Syndulla", Luke bowed his head humbly.

"I've heard so much about you. Yavin, Hoth, Endor - everyone in the rebellion has heard your stories", the Twi'lek sorted through the myriad of tales she'd heard about the rebellion's own Jedi warrior. The most recent one anyway.

Luke raised his hand, "Please, I couldn't have done it without a lot of good friends."

"You can say that again", Leia jokingly nudged him.

"But you, General Syndulla, I've heard much about", Luke walked further into the room. "Your service to the rebellion far exceeds my own, you've been flying for them since before I'd even left my homeworld. Your example has inspired many people, friends like Wedge and Leia all speak very highly of you."

Hera shrugged meekly, "We all do what we can. I just wish we'd beaten the Empire sooner and with fewer losses."

"Don't we all", Luke replied with sigh.

Hera looked at him more, seeing deeper into the legendary figure before her. He had an aloofness to him but a warmth too, a man who wanted to use his knowledge to help people. His eyes were weary though, as if they'd seen many trials and difficulties in his short life so far, which Hera knew to be true. Just like Kanan... just like Ezra.

Hera looked out the window at the galaxy they'd helped save, "I'm just a pilot, you're a Jedi. I think
it's fair to say your achievements outrank mine."

Luke turned to the window and looked with her, "Our actions define us more than our titles, and your actions are exceptional."

"Like you said, everything was done with good friends... with a good family", Hera remembered the whole crew fondly as well as the other friends close to them.

The Jedi paused for her to reminisce a moment before turning his head to her, "I know about the crew of the Ghost. Leia and Rex talk about all of you often, about you and Sabine or Zeb. I've even heard the odd tale about your astromech droid too", Luke chuckled.

Hera grunted a laugh, "Chopper is a... unique droid but I wouldn't change him for the galaxy."

"I understand the sentiment, my own droid has his quirks", Luke smiled before his face became more serious, "And I've also heard about Kanan and Ezra."

The Twi'lek caught her breath in her throat, suddenly apprehensive about talking about them with him.

Luke might have sensed her hesitation, "Kanan sounded like an honourable man, I'm... sorry for his loss. The galaxy is lesser for it."

Hera felt Leia's hand appear from behind and rest reassuringly on her shoulder. In the last few years, Kanan's memory had become less raw and she was more able to focus on the lighter memories she had rather than the less pleasant memories of his final weeks. Of course, Jacen made all of those memories hurt a little more and a little less at the same time, representing both what she'd lost and what she'd never lose.

"Kanan was... wonderful. Compassionate, kind, honourable", Hera began, "He'd never stand by if he had the power to do something to help people. He was always patient and understanding with everyone." Hera smiled with the memories. "Then he could be an idiot too, make stupid choices and say stupid things but, I still... I always..."

Leia tightened her hold on Hera as she struggled to get the words out. Her relationship with Kanan was still a bit tough to talk about out loud and Hera knew that the Jedi Code didn't look favourably on such attachments.

"He sounds like an incredible person", Luke told her, "And a good Jedi. Always thinking of others and willing to make sacrifices for the greater good."

"That's Kanan", Hera smiled, "That's Ezra too", she added, getting to the crux of the conversation.


Hera turned to him, "How much do you know about what happened?"

"Leia told me he's out in the Unknown Region, but I thought it'd be better to hear the full story from you", Luke explained.

Hera breathed in and Leia's hand fell away from her shoulder. Once again, Hera looked out at the stars in the distance.

"Ezra was taken... somewhere by the purrgil above Lothal. We've been waiting for a lead on him ever since, biding our time before we could go and find him."
Luke nodded, "And you found that lead?"

"Ahsoka did", Hera looked at him, assuming he already knew the name.

Luke moved his eyes away for a moment as he thought, "I see."

"Her and Sabine left almost a week ago", Hera continued, "I don't know what lead she found but she seemed sure it would lead to Ezra."

"You've had no contact with him since he left?", Luke asked.

Hera shook her head, "None, for almost five years now."

It still felt strange to say it like that. *Five years.* It seemed like yesterday that they picked up the scruffy but good-hearted street-rat from Lothal. He'd grown so much since then, physically and emotionally, and Hera couldn't be more proud of him. He knew that Hera was proud of him, she was sure he knew, but she couldn't wait for the opportunity to tell him again.

Luke stared out of the window for a while, again saying nothing to Hera. She wondered what he was thinking, if there was anything he could do for Ezra. In truth, she knew there wasn't much he could do right now. However, she needed to make sure Luke was ready when Ezra came back. The Jedi would probably have to be rebuilt and Luke and Ezra were the only remaining members of the once great order. Ahsoka... not quite, but she was sure Luke would want to meet her too. After all, with what she'd learned from Leia about her and Luke's parents, then Ahsoka would definitely want to meet the two of them when she returned.

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention, General Syndulla", Luke said after a long while.

"Please, only Hera", the Twi'lek always preferred names over rank and protocol.

"I'm afraid there's little I can do to help him out from here", he said regretfully.

Hera sighed, "I know you can't."

Luke faced her fully, "I'm sorry I can't do more right now. For the meantime, we have to trust in Ahsoka and Sabine to bring him back safely."

"I understand", Hera nodded in agreement, she had never expected him to fly off into the unknown after him as well.

"However, when he's back, maybe we can start to rebuild what was lost", the Jedi spoke with resolve and hope.

The idea sent chills up Hera's spine. *Rebuilding the Jedi.* For years that idea seemed as far-fetched as anything she could have imagined. Now, against all odds, the hope for rebuilding the guardians of peace and justice in the galaxy was tied up in the person standing before her and in the person she saw like a son. *And perhaps in the one who actually was her son.*

Hera felt her heart race at the thought of Jacen. She couldn't... she wouldn't give him up. Not yet. She would in time, she knew she would, but not now... not yet. He was still too young.

"I- Thank you, Skywalker", Hera said quickly.

Luke and Leia didn't appear to notice her internal conflict or the hesitation in her voice.

Leia stepped forward and looked warmly at Hera, "Keep us updated on anything, we'll do whatever we can for you."

Hera pulled her in for a brief hug with her own friendly smile, "I'd better get back to the Ghost. You know how Zeb and Kallus are, probably wrecked the place already."

"Of course", Leia released her hold on the Twi'lek. "Stay in touch."

Hera nodded and turned to Luke, "Until we meet again, Hera", he said with a bow of his head.

"I'll look forward to it, hopefully I'll have Ezra with me by then."

"We can hope", Luke said.

Hera walked with them to the door of the briefing room. With some final goodbyes, she turned to walk out of the door. Just before she left, she turned back to Luke as familiar words formed on her lips.

"Skywalker", she said, "May the force be with you."

The old Jedi saying didn't catch him by surprise, "And with you, General Syndulla."

Hera left and the door shut behind her. Her thoughts still focused on Jacen, on the last piece of Kanan she had left. With his... gifts, to call it that, she knew he'd have to walk the same path as Kanan. Hera wanted him to do that, she wanted him to become all he could be, but at the same time she wasn't ready. Not yet. It was still too soon, he was still too young and the memory of Kanan was still too fresh. She'd let him go one day, she knew that, but right now there wasn't a thought in the galaxy that scared her more.

Luke watched the door with heavy eyes and a solemn expression after Hera left, not moving or talking for almost a minute. Eventually, his sister scowled at him from the corner of his eye.

"I know that look", she said with her hands on her hips.

Luke didn't turn his head from the door, "She didn't mention him."

"Did she have to?", Leia replied.

Luke grimaced to himself. No, she didn't have to, but she should have. She wanted to in fact, he'd felt it from her, but her own anxieties held her back. She couldn't let go of him yet and Luke could sympathise with that. However, sympathy didn't mean agreement and his promise to Master Yoda still stood: 'Pass on what you have learnt.' There was no better opportunity for that than her son and the chance to rebuild the Jedi had to win out. Hera knew that.

"You know I have to do this", Luke told her solemnly.

His sister sighed heavily, "I know you do, she knows it too."

"I need to speak with her before she leaves", Luke turned to Leia and met her eyes.

Leia winced but reluctantly seemed to agree, "Talk to her but be respectful. Hera has been through a lot in this war and Jacen means more than the galaxy to her. Giving up your only child to let them lead the life of a Jedi has got to be a difficult choice to make."

"This is for the Jedi, it's what Kanan would have wanted for his son."
It was only a guess on his part, based on what he'd heard of the late Kanan Jarrus. Leia, on the other hand, had known the man and still held him in high regard all these years later.

Leia rubbed her forehead with her hand and sighed. "Go then. Talk to her. But if I hear you've upset her then you're going to be answering to me", she warned him.

He reached out a hand to his sister's shoulder, "You have my word, I'll be careful."

At last, Ezra can finally investigate that feeling he's been having and figure out just what was going on. The brief discussion between Thrawn and Ezra wasn't always planned but I felt it would be a good way to fill Ezra in on events and was an interesting encounter in its own right. For the next section, I used Commodore Faro instead of Pellaeon because I didn't want to contrive another situation where Pellaeon would be on the Chimaera. I've been trying to sprinkle names like Faro's and Hammerly's here and there since the Thrawn books give us a pretty complete roster. Using Faro is a bit different since she knows less about Thrawn's plans than Pellaeon but is perhaps more used to the Grand Admiral's strategy. I think she's more willing to accept his judgements and follow orders whilst Pellaeon often wants the bigger picture along with it. I wanted more people to be aware of Thrawn's intentions not to kill Ezra, and Faro seems like the most logical person after Pellaeon. Faro will continue to be used and, over time, she will become an increasingly important part of the plot. For Ahsoka and Sabine, writing a combat scene with both of them was difficult given how differently they fight but it was fun to let them both loose on some Imperials. Hera's meeting with Luke is a big moment for her, she's only heard about him in stories. I did consider having the rest of the crew there but having Leia was more than enough. Ezra and Luke are the last true Jedi left (Ahsoka is, after all, no longer a Jedi) so I think she appreciates how important it is that they help each other out. Hera's anxiety about Jacen has been mentioned before, essentially she's scared that Luke will take Jacen away to be trained. Hera is such a maternal character and letting go of your children is the hardest thing for a parent to do, so I felt it was the most appropriate conflict for Hera to have.

On a side note, Leia's mention of giving up your child to be trained is of course a foreshadowing of Ben Solo/Kylo Ren, and it's actually around this time that she becomes pregnant with him. This story isn't going to feature Ben Solo or anything like that, it was just a little something I snuck in there.

Also, I do want to address something I've been thinking of for a while. Initially, this story was planned to be a massive almost 50 chapter long tale. That's still sort of the case, though I've refined my plan down to 44 chapters for a few reasons, but I am considering some more changes. I've been writing like I never have before for about a month or two and I actually just finished my draft of chapter 17 before I published this. However, I don't have all the time in the world and a major new start in my life is on its way that is probably not going to leave me much time to write for a while. That being said, I'm not going to abandon this story. Instead, I'm going to be putting it on a hiatus at about the halfway point on chapter 20 since it's a fairly natural resting point for the story and it leaves me plenty of time to focus on other things before the new chapter of my life begins. I realise I'm talking of things that are months away for you guys with this publishing schedule. I'll still be publishing the completed chapters on a regular 4-5 day basis well into October or November time but I just wanted to let people know now that I won't be writing continuously.
Next chapter: Ahsoka and Sabine get another lead, the Fourth Sister finds a chance to redeem herself, Luke and Hera talk about Jacen and Ezra explores a new world
Chapter 8 - Moving Forward

In this chapter: Ahsoka and Sabine get another lead, Luke and Hera talk about Jacen, the Fourth Sister finds a chance to redeem herself, and Ezra explores a new world.

Blaster bolts hissed past Sabine's helmet but none of them had found their mark. Pushing up the corridor, she and Ahsoka were charging through waves of Imperial fire without so much as a scratch. Stormtrooper aim hadn't improved since Sabine had last met them and the handful of lucky shots that could have been an issue were easily beaten away by Ahsoka's lightsabers.

"How far to the bridge?", Ahsoka grunted as she sent a blaster bolt back between the eyes of a trooper.

Sabine slid into the cover of an alcove in the wall, "Not far, just up this corridor."

About twenty metres up the corridor was a sealed grey door that Sabine knew led into the bridge. Any trace of Ezra that was on this ship would be found there. Of course, first they'd have to cut through the squad of stormtroopers in their path. There were no other corridors for the troopers to retreat into, just a straight shot to the bridge. The stormtroopers knew that and were digging their heels in, fighting back with all the coordination and anger they could muster.

Ahsoka remained standing in the centre of the corridor, holding back bursts of fire without so much as breaking a sweat. The stormtroopers had learnt though and would fire only one or two shots at a time before diving back into cover, making it harder for Ahsoka to deflect the bolts back at them. Instead she adopted a more difficult tactic. With each burst, she angled her lightsabers differently and sent them back in other directions. At first Sabine thought she was getting tired but quickly realised what she was doing. As another stormtrooper stuck his head up, she caught both shots and sent them back down the other side of the corridor. At that moment, another trooper popped up to shoot at her, only to be met with the two deflected shots flying straight into his visor.

"We need to get moving, this is taking too long", Sabine shouted from the side.

"I'm open to suggestions", Ahsoka shouted back.

Sabine looked up the corridor at the remaining troopers and sorted through her options. Playing duck and shoot with them would whittle them down but take too long and she was out of explosives too, clearly she'd forgotten how many she'd go through in combat. Looking at Ahsoka, she was reminded of a familiar tactic.

"Ahsoka!", Sabine called, "You pull them out, I'll pick them off!"

Ahsoka nodded and kept up her defense with her lightaabers but her eyes closed tight as she focused. After a second, Sabine saw her fingers rise off the hilt and her hand dart to the side. Down the corridor, the closest stormtrooper slid out into the open.

"Ahh! What the-?!", Sabine silenced him within a few seconds.

Again, Ahsoka pulled another out from the other side this time and again, Sabine took him out of the fight. Wordlessly, they both began advancing up the corridor with Ahsoka pulling the enemy out and Sabine shooting them when she did. Sabine wasn't actually counting how many had been in their way, seven or eight perhaps, as her mind was already focused on the bridge and what they
could find within. She ran on instinct up the corridor, her Mandalorian reflexes sending blaster bolt af- er blaster bolt straight at her targets. She didn’t know how many she got and how many Ahsoka had taken out.

By the time she snapped back to full awareness, they were left with one terrified stormtrooper hunching up against the wall.

"No... please", the trooper blubbered before them.

Sabine and Ahsoka exchanged a look, considering what to do about the lone survivor.

"P-p-p-please, I don't want to die", he begged.

Ahsoka sighed and waved a hand in front of his face, "You have to go to your quarters and lie down."

"I... I have to go to my quarters and lie down", he repeated.

The soldier dropped his blaster and began walking away down the corridor.

"Not bad. I've seen better", Sabine said.

"It was better than hurting him", Ahsoka reasoned.

"Whatever you say", she replied and turned back to the door.

The Mandalorian inspected the bridge door and found it locked. These magnetic seals were all but- impossible to open with anything short of explosives or a programming spike, none of which were at hand. Still, they had an alternative tool at their disposal.

"Ahsoka", Sabine motioned to the Togruta.

"My pleasure", she replied as she approached the door with a lightsaber raised.

Her white blade cut through the door diagonally from left to right, leaving a gaping orange gash in it. With a push of her hand, what was left of the door fell away and shot into the bridge to the horror and surprise of the officers sealed inside. The former Jedi and the Mandalorian walked on to the bridge with weapons raised at all of them. There were five officers still in the room. One appeared to be the leader, having the black uniform, rank plague and gaunt appearance of a typical old Imperial captain.

"You", she pointed to the captain with her blaster, "Where's the rest of the fleet?"

"I'll never tell you, rebel scum", the Imperial shot back.

Sabine rolled her eyes, "Look, I don't want to be here any more than you do. Just tell us where they are and we'll be on our way."

The Captain clenched his fists, "You'll never get to the Jedi before the Grand Admiral does!"

So they had found Ezra.

"Where?!", she shouted and kept the blaster pointed at him.

The Imperial crossed his arms smugly, "I'm afraid I won't tell you that."
"Just stop playing games. Tell us", she insisted and tightened her grip on her pistols.

"Never!", the captain shouted and kept a smug, arrogant smile, "Reinforcements will be here any moment and you'll be killed. I don't have to tell you anything."

Sabine gritted her teeth, the Imperial was working himself under her skin. She tried to calm herself but another glimpse of his smug grin and-

"Dammit!", she shouted and pressed the blaster hard into his throat, "Tell me now or I swear I'll-

"Sabine!", Ahsoka's hand grabbed Sabine's shoulder. The Togruta's eyes were full of concern.

Sabine looked around and saw the fear on the faces of the other Imperials. Looking at the man in front of her, he was terrified as Sabine's blaster dug into the skin of his neck. Under her helmet, her mouth fell open and she felt a pang of regret. This wasn't her, fear and intimidation weren't what she wanted. They weren't what Ezra would want either.

"Right", Sabine said heavily as she pulled her blaster from his throat.

Ahsoka watched her sympathetically for a few seconds before turning to the captain. She raised her hand and waved it in front of his face, "You will tell us where the rest of the fleet is."

The Imperial's face gave a neutral expression, "I will tell you where the rest of the fleet is."

The man turned around and walked to one of the bridge's computer terminals. Sabine watched as he tapped some things into it and brought up a communication log.

"The Grand Admiral ordered his Star Destroyers to these coordinates", the Captain told them in a monotone drone.

Ahsoka nodded to her, "Sabine."

"Right", Sabine said and pulled out a small data drive. She slid it into the console and downloaded the set of coordinates,"Got them."

Sabine stepped back and stood at Ahsoka's side, both looking at the five other people in the room.

"What are you going to do with us?", one asked nervously.

Sabine had been wondering about that. In her anger, she'd almost blasted an unarmed captive, she didn't really want to actually go through with that for all of them. On the other hand, they couldn't be trusted not to shoot them down as they left or to warn Thrawn they were coming.

She sighed and looked to Ahsoka, "Ideas?"

The Togruta deactivated her blades and pondered for a moment. Then she closed her eyes and raised her hands out around her.

"There's an emergency in the aft of the ship, you should all go and check it out. You will forget we were here."

All five Imperials straightened up at the words, "There's an emergency in the aft of the ship, we should all go check it out. We will forget you were here", they said in unison.

At once, all five walked quickly out of the bridge and made their way down the corridor. Ahsoka watched them go with a satisfied smile as Sabine looked on.
"I don't know if I found that impressive or just creepy", Sabine muttered under her helmet.

"Let's just be happy it was successful and get going. That should give us enough time to be out of here before they alert Thrawn", Ahsoka started walking out of the bridge.

Sabine followed close behind, "But they're still going to tell him."

"If these coordinates are right, we'll be there before they get a chance to warn him", the older woman said as they walked.

They walked in silence for most of the journey, both on high alert for any remaining Imperials that might be running around the ship. Sabine's mind was unfocused, still dwelling on her outburst in the bridge. Even if they were Imperials, they didn't deserve that treatment. When they finally reached the hangar, Ahsoka stopped and turned back to her. Whether she'd only just sensed Sabine's unease or if she'd only now decided to say something, the Mandalorian couldn't tell.

"Sabine...", Ahsoka started.

The Mandalorian sighed, "I know, Ahsoka, okay? I'm sorry, I don't know what happened I just-"

"Sabine", Ahsoka repeated, "Remember what we talked about."

Let go of your attachments, don't let your feelings cloud your judgement. Sabine almost felt like a Jedi when she repeated those words to herself. This mission was too important, Ezra was too important, to lose her head and get lost in her own anger. They'd find Ezra but she wasn't going to lose herself to do it.

"Okay, it won't happen again", the Mandalorian promised.

Ahsoka smiled and the two headed back into their ship on the far side of the hangar. None of the Imperials had been brave enough, or stupid enough, to try and take their ship in the chaos. Looking at the emptyness of the hangar, Sabine knew that they'd be long gone before the Empire could try and pursue them.

They slid into the cockpit chairs and Sabine reached for the data drive, eagerly keying in the coordinates as Ahsoka lifted the ship off the deck and out into space. Sabine's heart fluttered as their shuttle cleared the light-cruiser and aligned itself with the distant coordinates. Next stop: Ezra Bridger.

Hera sat at the table in the Ghost's lounge with a plate of space waffles that Zeb has so kindly prepared for her. The Lasat sat with her, letting Kallus and Chopper handle Jacen for a while. As Hera picked at the food, Zeb watched her closely with his large green eyes.

Zeb shifted awkwardly in the chair, "So, uh, he didn't mention it?"

Hera shook her head as she chewed, her Lekku shaking side to side.

"Right...", Zeb rubbed his head, "Does he even know?"

She swallowed down her food, "I'm not sure. Leia might have mentioned it to him. He knew about Kanan and I so...", Hera shrugged as she trailed off.

There was a strong chance he did know, Hera's child wasn't exactly a secret in the Rebellion and nor was her relationship with Kanan. Not everyone knew, of course, but it wasn't as if it was top-
secret. Plenty of people knew Hera personally and word just got around and many still remembered her being pregnant while flying for the rebels at Scarif. It wasn't really a matter of if Luke would find out, but when.

When she first heard of Luke Skywalker, she'd never really thought about the idea of him training new Jedi. She'd expected the fight against the Empire to drag on for years longer than it actually did. It was only as Jacen got older, when his unnaturally quick reactions or strange ability to know when someone was coming to the door, that Hera realised Kanan might have given him more than his bright blue eyes. It made sense now, his father was force sensitive so he would be too, but the thought just hadn't occurred to her much at first. Since then, and since tales of Luke became more widespread and impressive, she'd become more and more worried that the Jedi was going to whisk her son away like the Jedi of old. She was all too aware than Kanan never knew his parents, she couldn't bare that to happen to Jacen too. For his sake more than her own.

With impeccable timing, Jacen came running through the door.

"Mom!", he shouted happily as he ran to her.

"Dear", she scowled as she picked him up onto her lap, "Aren't you meant to be with Kallus?"

"I know, I know", he bounced in her lap.

Chopper wheeled in with a metallic grumble followed by Kallus.

"Don't blame me, you were watching him", Kallus told the snarky droid. The astromech gave a series of annoyed groans and wheeled up to the table with Kallus behind him, "Sorry, Hera, he just got all excited and ran outside."

Hera looked at her son with a signature mom glare, "What's got you all excited?"

"I just wanted to say hello", Jacen said happily.

She rolled her eyes teasingly, "Hello to you too, dear."

Her son giggled, "Hi, mom. But I didn't mean you."

Hera's face dropped and Zeb tensed up too, "What do you mean? Who else is there?"

Jacen looked around innocently, not knowing why he'd worried everyone, "Ju-just the man. The one on his way here."

Zeb leaned forward, "What man? Where?"

"Skywalker", Hera breathed. Jacen could sense him, two force sensitives were sure to notice each other, and he was coming to see her about Jacen.

She stood up and held Jacen close to her for a hug before quickly handing him to Kallus.

"Are you sure it's him?", Kallus asked, knowing why Hera was worried.

Hera nodded, "It's him." She didn't have any doubts about that.

Jacen watched his mother with sad eyes, "Mom? Can't I say hello?"

Hera smiled thinly at him, "Maybe another time, dear."
The boy sunk his head as Kallus carried him back towards his cabin with Chopper in tow.

Zeb stood with Hera and brushed her shoulder, "Come on, it's not like he's going to steal him away from you against your will."

"I know", Hera's heart thumped in her chest, "Let's just get this over with."

Hera stepped out of the common room and down the ladder into the cargo bay. Zeb followed cautiously behind her, leaving his bo-rifle behind, there was no need to carry a weapon into what was already going to be a rough conversation.

The cargo ramp was still wide open, giving them a view of the hangar outside. From what she could tell, Luke wasn't there yet. Part of her was glad that she had time to think things through, another part of her was impressed that Jacen had already felt Luke approaching from so far away. Briefly, Hera considered going out to search for him herself but decided that this talk was better had in the comfort of her own ship.

They weren't in the cargo bay for more than thirty seconds before a black clad figure appeared in a doorway on the far side of the hangar.

Zeb nudged at Hera as the figure approached, "Is that him?"

Even at this distance, Hera could make out the blonde hair and the lightsaber swinging at his hip, "That's him, Luke Skywalker."

They tried not to stare at him as he approached but Hera knew he'd noticed them already. Still, Skywalker walked calmly and slowly across the hangar with all the grace of a Jedi. He was almost at the ramp before Hera decided to call to him.

"Skywalker, I didn't expect to see you again so soon", she said with a forced smile.

Luke tilted his head to her, "I'm sorry for the intrusion, Hera." His eyes turned to Zeb as Luke stepped on to the ramp, "You must be Zeb."

The Lasat straightened up, "Garazeb Orrellios, Captain of the Lasan Honour Guard. It's good to finally meet you, Skywalker."

"The same to you", the Jedi replied.

"What can I do for you?", Hera asked him as he ascended the ramp and entered the cargo bay. She knew the answer, Luke knew she knew too, but a little part of her hoped she was wrong.

The Jedi paused before he spoke, "I believe you know why I'm here."

Hera looked down at her feet and rubbed her hands together. "Jacen", she murmured.

Luke looked at both of the rebels in front of him with a solemn expression. "His abilities are unique, I was able to sense him as soon as I came aboard. The force is strong with him, like his father."

"You want to train him", it wasn't a question but a statement Hera knew to be true.

"Yes, in him lies the first steps to rebuilding the Jedi Order."

Hera felt her stomach tighten. There it was, plain as day. Exactly what she'd feared was exactly what Luke wanted.
The Twi'lek's lip twitched, "Skywalker... I can't."

Luke stepped closer to her, "I understand it's a difficult choice but this is larger than any of us."

"I'm just not ready, he's just not ready", Hera said adamantly.

"No one ever is", Luke's voice was heavy with his own understanding of how unprepared people were for life's changes.

Hera felt her emotions crawling up from inside her. She couldn't let him go, he was her only son. He was all she had left of Kanan, she couldn't give him up to never see him again.

"I just can't", Hera's hand reached to her mouth and she started to sob, "I'm sorry... I just can't."

Zeb wrapped an arm around her to comfort her, holding his friend close as she sobbed into his side.

"Skywalker, maybe now isn't the time", Zeb said to him.

Luke didn't make a move to leave. He was committed to his goal, no doubt about it. Zeb did his best to comfort her to no avail, her body was shaking and the tears started to come in full force. Skywalker gave her a sympathetic look, he clearly didn't want to upset her, but his resolve remained unshaken. Hera knew how important this had to be to him.

Hera couldn't think of a way out. Luke knew about Jacen, there was no taking that back. She couldn't ignore it for the rest of her life or try to avoid him. Most of all, she would never be able to hide from her shame if she did that. She'd have let herself down, Kanan down and Jacen down if she didn't let this happen.

"Maybe there's a way to solve both problems at once", Luke suggested.

The Twi'lek looked up suspiciously, "What do you mean?"

"The answer seems quite obvious", Luke looked to Zeb as well, "Ezra will train him."

Both of their eyes went wide in disbelief at the idea. Hera couldn't find the words, Ezra was so young and he was Kanan's padawan he couldn't... She stopped and looked at Luke. She looked at the man who would train Jacen otherwise. He was the same age as Ezra and, when it came down to it, Ezra had been a Jedi for years before Luke had even began his training. She trusted Luke from his reputation and from his actions but Ezra was something else. Hera loved Ezra like another son, there was no one in the galaxy she trusted more than him and only a tiny handful she trusted equally as much.

"As Kanan taught Ezra, so too can Ezra teach Jacen", Luke watched Hera's silent reaction, "No doubt you'll all remain close, so you don't lose Jacen, and the Jedi will survive through them both until I find my own apprentice."

There were a lot of unknowns in there. Ezra might not want to teach Jacen, Ezra might not want to stay nearby, Jacen may not even want to be a Jedi in the first place. Still, it made a certain sense and there was no one she'd rather have Jacen learn under. If he agreed to do it... maybe Hera would actually be okay with it.

"Of course, we're still waiting for Ezra to come back but when he does...", Luke smiled contently, "Things will fall into place."

"I'll have to think about it", Hera finally said.
"I understand", Luke met her eyes, "But please remember what's at stake."

Luke bowed his head and began to leave as quickly as he'd appeared. The brevity of it all shook her the most. In less than two minutes, she'd gone from nervously worrying about Luke taking Jacen away to thinking that she could get the best of both situations. Keeping Jacen and doing what was right - all through Ezra. When he got back, of course.

"That went better than I'd hoped", Zeb forced a laugh, "Ya' think Ezra will do it?"

"I'm... we'll see", she whispered.

Zeb pulled her up to her feet, "Come on, you've had a long day."

Hera appreciated the Lasat's care more than she could tell him. For his own part, 'Uncle Zeb' adored Jacen and was fiercely protective of him. Hera trusted him completely with both of their lives and knew that she could count on him for anything, including things like this. Emotional support throughout the last few years was shared between all the old crew, they'd all leaned on each other to get them through any worries or rough times. This was no different.

"Don't mention this to Jacen", Hera said quietly.

He nodded, "Not a word."

"Thank you, Zeb."

Hera climbed the ladder and went back to the common area. Her appetite for space waffles was gone and replaced with a need to be around her son. She set her own worries aside and spent the rest of the evening with Jacen, embracing this simple time with him while she still could. She prayed that Ezra would accept, the fear of losing him to Skywalker was still lurking deep inside, but part of her was tentatively hopeful that things were all going to work out for the best.

What does Thrawn know about any of this? He's got no place here, an alien in an Imperial fleet with no idea how the force works.

The Fourth Sister paced around her private quarters aboard the Chimaera. It was a simple and dour chamber, barely five metres square. It had no windows for natural light, only four blank grey walls around her. There was one bunk in the corner, on the far side of the room from the door, there were a few equipment boxes and a single meditation seat in the middle of the room just large enough for her to kneel on top of. A desk was pushed against the side of the wall, on top of which sat a computer terminal that was currently trying to home in on the tracker placed in her TIE Advanced. And Bridger too. Who does that boy think he is? Barely a man and barely a Jedi, using animals to do his bidding.

She thought back to the anger and indignation she felt as her TIE lifted off the sands with Bridger at the controls. Her only solace in that moment was the satisfaction of killing his mangy pet. She'd killed a lot of the things he'd sent after her. The thrill of cutting through the stampede flooded back to her, the addictive feeling of drawing her blade through flesh and bone as the animals were cut down around her. She hoped that hurt Bridger, it certainly had the opposite effect on her.

I'd have that whole world burned if it was my choice.

It should be her choice, she reasoned. The Emperor sent them out here because he felt a disturbance in the force and only she was equipped to deal with that. There were no other force
users left, only Ezra Bridger, and he wasn't going to be around much longer. Maybe when she'd finally ended that child she'd take her rightful place as the leader of this mission. Of course, she'd have to deal with Thrawn first. Her mouth curled into a malicious smile: preferably violently. She'd have to deal with his loyal acolytes too. That old fool Pellaeon, a man a few decades out of date in both tactics and usefulness. The blindly obedient Commodore Faro, the personification of the Chimaera's ego-stroking devotion to Thrawn. Or that weak-willed politician Captain Sarlis, still lost and out of her depth even after five years of this mission.

Impatiently, she looked over to see the computer still struggling to get a trace on her ship.

Where could he even go?

There was no chance of that ship getting him back to known space even on a full tank, assuming he could even find a safe route to it. The best hope he had was to wait for someone to come and find him, assuming anyone cared enough. Thrawn seemed convinced that the Jedi's friends would be on their way. The Fourth Sister, on the other hand, didn't think it mattered. There was no way for them to get to him before she did, assuming this damn tracker started to work.

With a frustrated groan she marched over to the terminal and stared harshly at the screen. She wanted to hit it or do something, anything, to it to make it go faster.

Ugh, no use.

She needed to focus and channel her anger into something useful. Eyeing the meditation seat in the centre of the room, the Fourth Sister stepped on and knelt down on top of it. Her hands rested on her knees and she shut her eyes, not as the Jedi had taught her but as Lord Vader had.

While the Jedi preached patience and serenity, the Sith favoured anger and destruction. It gave them real, tangible power in this galaxy that the Jedi liked to pretend didn't exist. Such denial was their downfall, ten thousand Jedi brought down by two Sith Lords and a handful of those wise enough to join the ranks of the Inquisitorius. Wise people like her.

Her eyes shut tight and her breathing steadied as she mouthed the mantra Lord Vader had drilled into their heads.

Peace is a lie, there is only passion.

She thought of the world where Bridger had been hiding, quiet and serene. However, it was merely an illusion as he waited to be found. She'd found him and broken the peace of that world in her relentless hunt for Bridger.

Through passion, I gain strength.

The drive to find the Jedi, her eagerness for the hunt, fuelled her own abilities. Her anger gave her the strength to brush off Bridger's attempts to stop her, crushing the weak creatures he sent at her.

Through strength, I gain power.

The rage and anger those beasts stirred in her only made her more powerful. Each killing blow made the next easier and easier. Even when he escaped, the anger only simmered away within her and strengthened her commitment to killing him. That strength, as it was for any wielder of the dark side, would be her power.

Through power, I gain victory.
A vision of the future flashed in her mind. She cornered Bridger, in a dark and lonely place, fear in his eyes and a lightsaber in her hand. With one swift strike, his life and her search were ended.

*Through victory, my chains are broken.*

With that victory, she would be the only true wielder of the force left in the galaxy. She'd cease to be bound by this mission and could get rid of Thrawn and his allies and take control of these ships.

*The Force shall free me.*

Then, with the force as her tool and the Empire as her followers, she could finally begin to take the power that she deserved, no matter who tried to stand in her way. Ultimate power and the fate of the galaxy would rest in her hands.

Her anger focused in on Ezra Bridger, the boy who'd be the catalyst for her rise to power. He wouldn't get far and it wouldn't be long until-

The Fourth Sister's breath caught in her throat.

A twinge in the force, subtle but persistent. Somewhere out in the stars.

Her mind kept hold of it as best she could. It was small and hard to feel but... it was there. At first, she thought it was Bridger. Quickly she realised it was not but it had a certain familiarity to it. It was as if it was always there in the background since she'd arrived in this system and now, as if the time was right, it was calling to her.

Her lips curled into a satisfied grin. It wasn't just calling her, it was calling him. The force has decided to give her the victory she'd craved for so long. Bridger was being drawn to the same place as her and he'd never know she was coming.

She unfolded her legs on the stool and stood up, the feeling still there in the corner of her mind. She could use it to find him on her own, she didn't need that tracker. She glanced over at it still searching fruitlessly for a lead. *Let Thrawn have it, by the time he reaches me it will be too late. Bridger will be dead and soon, he'll be there alongside him.*

Turning her back on the computer she marched out of her quarters and made her way in the direction of the hangar bay.

Compared to his last hyperspace journey, this one was smooth sailing. Ezra found himself mesmerised by the sight of hyperspace again, it'd been so many years since he'd sat and watched the swirling colours stretch out before him. Memories flooded back of hours spent curled up in the Ghost's nose turret, by himself at first and then with Sabine, or of his time sitting beside Hera and Kanan in the cockpit as the galaxy flew past around them. There was always something cathartic about it and its effect hadn't worn off after all these years.

Ezra was almost disappointed when he felt the force compelling him to stop. He wasn't following a charted hyperspace lane, there weren't many out here anyway, he was simply trusting the force to lead him to where it had been calling him.

"Well, here goes nothing", his hands flicked the switches to power down the hyperdrive and bring the TIE back to a normal speed.

He watched eagerly out of the window to see where the force had led him. The ship smoothly but rapidly dropped back into real space, luckily without any alarms or warnings like last time. Also
unlike last time, he wasn't left feeling as if he'd only just dodged a gruesome death.

Like last time however, the ship had dropped him into view of a planet. This one was a fair distance away still, navigating hyperspace manually meant he didn't emerge as close as you'd usually expect to, and far enough that his hand could cover his whole view of it from this distance. Whereas his last destination was a verdant jungle world, this planet looked much less accommodating. From this distance all he could make out was a deep orange hue to the place, almost certainly it was an arid desert-type world.

The ship drifted closer for a few more minutes, bringing the planet into better view. As he came closer he could make out a few moons, five at least, as well as dozens of smaller bodies orbiting around it. He could also make better observations of the planet itself. It did indeed look arid and rocky, no water anywhere on the surface that he could see. Speaking of the surface, he could see all of it since quite literally wasn't a single cloud in the sky. A large area near the equator had a darker orange colour that faded as it spread out across the planet's whole surface. Asteroid impact, a big one too.

An asteroid impact might explain the number of small orbiting bodies around it and the seeming lifelessness of the place. Ezra activated the TIE's onboard planetary scanner. No water, as he'd already been able to tell, oxygen levels were at least breathable and the temperature survivable, but too much time here would probably prove dangerous. Still, a terrestrial planet with an atmosphere could prove to support life. To Ezra's surprise, there wasn't even the faintest hint of anything alive down there.

Except, of course, the disturbance he felt. It was much sharper and clearer, no longer the hazy background noise he'd felt it as for the last five years. This was real, noticeable and within his grasp.

Ezra let the feeling guide him down to the surface below. That's odd, he noted as he descended, the disturbance feels like it's near the centre of the darker patch of orange around the equator. The ship came closer. Wait, it's exactly in the centre.

The TIE broke into the atmosphere and Ezra kept getting closer to the surface. Eventually the darker shade of dusty orange on the ground stretched out from horizon to horizon as far he could see. The terrain was craggy and full of canyons, ravines and jagged outcroppings of rocks. The feeling grew more intense with each minute, until Ezra knew he was achingly close to whatever had caught his attention so long ago.

Finally, Ezra knew it was time to land and meet this disturbance face to face. The terrain around him was every bit as craggy and broken as it was everywhere on this planet. He eventually found a canyon wide enough to fit the TIE, tantalisingly close to where the call was emanating from, and set the fighter down gently. He wasted no time in slinging his bag over his shoulder, grabbing the E-11 and popping open the hatch above him.

His boots met hard rock on the ground, sending a cloud of fine dust up into the air around him. The canyon walls towered up at least twenty metres all around, closing in around the landing area. A single offshoot canyon from the landing area was the only path out and seemed to be leading him directly to the source of the disturbance.

Ezra held his weapon at the ready, unsure what to expect on this desolate world. Despite his alertness, he saw no animals, no plants, not even a gust of wind blew through the canyon. The whole world seemed to be dead. That might have meant he was safe from an attack or a predator but if anything, Ezra felt more on edge here than ever.
He crept along the canyon, grateful at least that it shaded him from the intense sun of the world, and walked through the unnatural crags and cracks of the environment. The feeling grew closer with each step, still as unknowable and indeterminable as it always had been. Slowly, the sides of the canyon got lower as he went along. He reached a sharp bend in the crevice and stepped cautiously around it.

The feeling seemed to hit him as he rounded the corner. The canyon stopped abruptly and gave way to a large expanse of space, perhaps a kilometre or so in a wide circle. A few other rocky canyons fed into this central area. In the centre of the area stood a small cluster of tall jagged rocks on a slightly raised hill. There... that was it.

Ezra stepped out into the featureless expanse between the canyon exit and the central rock formation. The sun was bearing down on him in the open and he was starting to sweat in the heat. The closer he came, the better view he got of the jagged rocks in the centre. As he got closer, he noticed a large opening within them. A cave. There's a cave in there. That must be what I'm here for.

It took a few minutes to cover the distance but it felt much longer. It reminded Ezra of wandering the deserts of Tatooine to find Maul and Master Kenobi, albeit without a droid companion to keep him company. It was a testament to how lonely this place seemed that Ezra almost wanted Chopper here. He was joking to himself, of course. He honestly missed that annoying metal menace.

At last, Ezra reached the foot of the small hill which the cave was on. It was raised no more than five or ten metres above the ground with a series of stones and rocks leading up. Ezra noted the unnaturally orderly placement of the stones on the hill, they seemed almost like steps. In fact, Ezra was sure they were. Someone, or something, was here once. Feeling a new sense of danger, he tightened his grip on the blaster. Someone or something might still be here now. One by one, he climbed the dozen or so evenly placed steps to the mouth of the cave. Distance had proved deceptive and Ezra had all the proof he needed that this was no cave, it was a building. Carved into the rock with thought and hands not the processes of nature were clear signs of life. The mouth of the cave was circular with smooth sides that could only have been carved by hand. It was completely dark inside and Ezra couldn't see more than a few feet into the structure. Why was this built here? Why out on such a far flung and lifeless planet?

Swallowing back his nerves, Ezra stepped through the doorway into the darkness. The bright reflection of the light outside has made it difficult to see at first but his eyes soon adjusted. A thin corridor led deeper into the rocks, sharing the same smooth roundness as the doorway. A few metres down, it opened up into a small circular room with three other identical corridors leading out from it.

Ezra chuckled to himself, just like the Lothal Temple. Same layout, same method, he shrugged.

He took a hand off his blaster and pointed his finger at the far left corridor, "Loth-rat, loth-cat, loth-wolf, run. Pick a path and all is... done..."

The Jedi trailed off as a faint yellow light crept up the middle corridor. At first, Ezra thought it was a trick of his eyes. In the next few seconds, the pale yellow light seemed to move down the corridor, heading straight for him. Ezra reached out with the force but could feel nothing aside from the strong feeling that pulsated around this ancient ruin.

As panic set in, Ezra stepped back from the middle corridor as the yellow light came closer. It grew stronger and stronger until it suddenly shot into view. Not one light, but a dozen or more, all moving in unison. Ezra froze up and couldn't get himself to pull the trigger at the cluster of strange lights.
For a few seconds, Ezra stared in frightened silence as the lights came to a stop by the entrance to the middle corridor, just inside the large circular room. Ezra felt like they were staring at him for a long while.

"So, you have come at last."

The voice startled Ezra and he jumped back from the light, yet still he didn't pull the trigger.

"Calm yourself, I mean you no harm."

The unfamiliar voice was soft and smooth but with a distinctly masculine quality to it, a voice that held both wisdom and knowledge. It seemed to come from all around him, even within him, not simply from the cluster of lights that hovered in the room.

Ezra lowered the weapon, sensing that this presence really meant him no harm. "Who are you? What is this place?"

"Who I am does not matter as much as who you are, Ezra Bridger."

The young man slung the weapon around his shoulder but still looked suspiciously at the lights, "How do you know who I am? Do I know you?"

"Our paths have never crossed but I know of you and know many who you also know."

"So you're a friend of a friend?", Ezra asked the voice. The strange nature of this place confused him, something tied with the force he was sure. Therefore, it seemed like a reasonable guess, "Are you a Jedi?"

"Once I called myself a Jedi."

"Why are you here?", he looked around the room as if searching for the answer around him.

"I am here because you are here."

"Oh, that explains it...", Ezra muttered sarcastically. "What is this place? Some kind of Jedi Temple?"

"It is one of many confluences in the force, a nexus where the cosmic and living force are intertwined."

Ezra took in the explanation with curiosity. A concentration of the force, which might explain why he felt the presence of this place so strongly. The tension in his body eased as he became more trusting of this new presence, "Why was I drawn here?"

"I cannot speak to the will of the force, I can only assume it drew you here for a purpose."

Ezra squinted his eyes to look around the room. There didn't seem to be much of anything to give him a clue as to what this purpose was. No symbols or statues, no writing and no images, just blank walls carved into perfectly circular rooms and corridors.

"What purpose is that?", Ezra asked.

"I do not know the answer you seek. I can only show you where that answer could be revealed to you."

The cluster of yellow lights began to twirl around themselves.
The lights slowly began to float back down into the middle corridor, imploring Ezra to follow. He looked around, with a strange mix of both hesitation and disbelief, before cautiously following the lights deeper into the depths.

Ahsoka and Sabine are closer than they realised on the path to finding Ezra though a short path can still be a difficult one. I wanted to show Sabine losing her cool a bit as well as show off Ahsoka's force ability. Mind-tricking a whole room of Imperials is no small feat. I wanted to get all of the Jacen stuff out in the open, Hera is torn between her natural commitment to the greater good and her maternal link with her son. It's another situation where her own relationships are in conflict with her duties to a wider idea, just like her relationship with Kanan during Season 4. Hera knows what it's like to miss out on someone close because of a commitment to a wider ideal and she does not want to give up Jacen lightly. That said, I really didn't like the Hera section this time and I don't really know why. It just felt messy and rushed and, even though it went through a few hours of re-writes, eventually I just had to settle. Next, I wanted to give the Fourth Sister some time since all I've really done is kick her around for a few chapters. The Fourth Sister's chapter was just a window into her beliefs and character. She isn't a Sith but Vader teaching them the old Sith Code seems pretty believable to me, it's tenants apply to all users of the dark side anyway. I also wanted to make clear that it's not just Ezra that can feel this call, the Fourth Sister can feel it too. Ezra is finally inching closer to the strange feeling he has had for so long but bare in mind: some things are not a cause but only a symptom of something far larger. Some of you might have figured out the identity of the voice Ezra meets, while others might not know much about it. I'll save it for the author's note of next chapter to state plainly what it is for those who haven't figured it out, but I think there's enough hints in there for people to piece it together without much trouble.

This feels like the time to address Jacen's force abilities directly. I know many people don't want him to be force sensitive and I can sympathise with that, I also want him to keep a lot of Hera in him too. I do want him to be force sensitive in the end but I will make sure that it isn't all there is to him. As Sabine said, Jacen was born to fly and there's plenty of exceptional force sensitive pilots out there, if he ever gets the chance. From a story perspective, I think it just makes more sense for Jacen to be force sensitive since it offers the chance to resolve, create or continue so many ideas and stories in the future.

Next time: The Fourth Sister goes after Ezra, Thrawn makes observations on the force and the Fourth Sister, Ahsoka and Sabine follow their new lead and Ezra has a very unexpected encounter.

P.S - As of this chapter, I'm also posting this on Archive Of Our Own under the same title and username. It'll hopefully get a few extra readers and the tagging options on that site put this one to shame.
Chapter 9 - Trail and Trial

The Fourth Sister goes after Ezra, Thrawn makes observations on the force and the Fourth Sister, Ahsoka and Sabine follow their new lead and Ezra has a very unexpected encounter.

The door to the hangar slid open as the Fourth Sister marched through it. A handful of TIE Defenders, the final remnants of the Grand Admiral's treasured programme, sat unattended in the hangar. She eyed the closest one and set off towards it.

"Inquisitor? What are you doing?", an angry voice called to her over he intercom.

"Lieutenant Xoxtin", she called the voice by name as she paced across the hangar, "I'm taking one of the TIE Defenders." It wasn't a question, she was telling the pedantic officer exactly what she was going to do.

"I wasn't informed", she replied indignantly, "Does the Grand Admiral know about this?"

The Fourth Sister reached the ladder up to the Defender's cockpit, "He'll find out soon enough."

The Senior Lieutenant complained to her over the hangar's intercom as she entered the cockpit and closed the hatch. She couldn't hear a word of what the woman was saying but it didn't matter, she couldn't stop her leaving. The Inquisitor activated the systems for the Defender to prepare for take off. Begrudgingly, she had to admit that she quite liked the Grand Admiral's pet project. The fighter was heavily armed, even more so than her own, fast, shielded and with a hyperdrive too. *It's a shame he managed to let his only factory for them get destroyed.*

Xoxtin's droning voice was drowned out by the sound of the Defender's engine powering up and lifting itself off the hangar deck. She sailed it easily through the hangar shield and out of the Star Destroyer's shadow. Right on schedule, Grand Admiral Thrawn's voice interrupted her.

"Inquisitor, might I ask what you think you're doing?", there was no hologram to speak to but the Fourth Sister could tell he wasn't happy.

"You said to find Bridger, that's what I'm doing", she replied.

The comm crackled again, "You were ordered to relay the coordinates immediately and remain with the fleet. Was something perhaps unclear?"

She focused back on to the part of her mind that was holding onto the disturbance she had felt. *There you are.* She pulled the controls to aim the ship, still impressed with the responsiveness of the Defender.

"I don't need the coordinates", the Inquisitor said cryptically.

Thrawn went silent for a few moments, "Explain yourself."

"The force will guide me", her voiced was thick with self-satisfaction, "I know you won't understand."

"Is that so...", she could feel that arrogant mind sulking away. He knew he couldn't hope to comprehend the force, unlike her.
The Fourth Sister's satisfied grin didn't fade, "Don't worry, Grand Admiral. The computer will narrow down the TIE's location for you soon."

"Again you insist on going alone, even though doing so led to your failure once before", the Chiss reminded her.

Her hands tightened around the controls a bit more than they should have, "That's not going to happen this time."

"And why should I believe that?", the voice challenged.

"You don't have to believe it", she felt the ship find the right vector for where she wanted, "I'll simply prove it."

Before the Grand Admiral could answer, she was gone. The Defender's hyperdrive activated and sent her straight to the source of this call, straight to Ezra Bridger's location, straight to victory.

"No plan survives contact with the enemy. New situations and unforeseen factors always force a strategist to adapt their methods. The mark of a true strategist is the ability to maintain the same singular goal in spite of any changes in their intended path, be they minimal or monumental. Therefore, a good plan must always leave room to be changed and improved as the situation requires. The less rigid the strategy, the more reliable are its results.

From the bridge of the Chimarea, Faro could see the TIE Defender disappear into the distance as it entered hyperspace. The bridge was silent, no one knowing what to say. It was not only a blatant example of insubordination, it was completely nonsensical. All the talk of 'the force' still didn't sit right with the Commodore, she didn't trust religions on principle even if she knew for a fact that there was some truth to the old legends. She'd been an often unwilling witness to the power of the force during her time with the Empire but that didn't mean she trusted its supposed 'will'.

"Grand Admiral?", Faro asked carefully, "Do you have any idea what she's talking about?"

His back was still to her so she couldn't get any indication of his feelings from his facial expression, though that was almost always true.

"The nature of the force still eludes me", the Grand Admiral began, "But we no longer fumble in the dark. Those who use it think it guides their actions by its own unknowable will."

She kept her eyes on the back of his head, "You disagree?"

"Consider: the Emperor claimed it was the will of the force that allowed him to eradicate the Jedi and establish the Empire. Likewise, he believed it was the will of the force that he should rule the galaxy. Yet, despite his belief, fate determined him to die above Endor and his Empire to crumble. If the force has a will, it is fickle."

Lieutenant Argal at the helm station chimed in, "Then what is she doing out there? The Fourth Sister surely felt something."

"Indeed she did. However, I do not believe she is feeling some will of the force, rather a presence."

Faro raised an eyebrow, "A presence, sir?"

"A presence", Thrawn confirmed. "You are all aware that our mandate for this mission was from
the Emperor himself, as it was when Lord Vader accompanied us to Batuu?"

There were a few murmurs of agreement, including one from the Commodore herself. She never liked being reminded of that mission; you couldn't have Vader or Thrawn in the same room without feeling like the towering black figure was going to resort to one of his infamous 'punishments'. Even then, it was unlikely Vader would punish Thrawn directly, it would more likely be one of his subordinates and Faro always found herself to be the nearest person to the Dark Lord at those moments.

"In both cases, the Emperor indeed felt a presence. The nature of this presence, I cannot say. It might be a being, a group of beings, a place or creature. However, they always draw those strong in the force to them. Lothal, for example, had an ancient Jedi site that drew not only Ezra Bridger and Kanan Jarrus, but again the Emperor as well."

They'd only hear rumours of the Emperor's special interest in Lothal. Perhaps naively, Faro had thought that the Emperor shared Thrawn's commitment to the TIE defender programme. It seemed only right that the actual interest was another mystical and unknowable thing that Faro and the others could never wrap their heads around. Thrawn, on the other hand, might be a different story.

Faro continued for him, "So you think there's something specific that's attracting the Fourth Sister?"

"And?", the Grand Admiral barely moved his head.

"And...", the Commodore paused as the final piece fell into place, "Bridger too."

Thrawn nodded, "I do not believe the Fourth Sister is feeling Ezra Bridger, but rather they are both being drawn to something else. The Jedi also escaped on an unknown flight vector, the same one that our Inquisitor also followed."

"Do you think this is the same presence the Emperor felt?", Faro asked.

"Maybe, I cannot be certain. If it is, it is imperative that we find the source at once." There was a long pause, "Commander Hammerly, how long until the tracking computer can narrow down the location of the stolen TIE?"

The officer turned to his display, pressing a few buttons to make a new screen appear, "Another few minutes, sir."

"Excellent", Thrawn turned back from the window and paced calmly back up the bridge, "Contact the Myrmidon and the Imperator. Commodore...", the Grand Admiral looked at her as he passed, "Ready the ship for departure."

"Aye, sir", she acknowledged and set about in the familiar routine that preceded any hyperspace jump.

Meanwhile, Thrawn reached the communication terminal aboard the bridge and waited for the communications officers to do their work. Soon after, Captain Pellaeon and Captain Sarlis appeared as holograms around the table.

"Grand Admiral", Sarlis greeted with a salute, "Was that a ship that just left the system?"

"Indeed it was. Our Inquisitor has determined a location for the Jedi, she has already departed", Thrawn explained.
The Imperator's Captain huffed in surprise, "That was fast. Are we going with her or is she returning on her own when after she kills him?"

Faro picked out the word choice: *kill*. Clearly, Sarlis didn't know Thrawn had his own plans for Ezra Bridger. She assumed Captain Pellaeon already knew since it was common knowledge that Thrawn trusted him immensely. Their partnership reminded her of Eli Vanto at times, the out-of-his-depth officer contending with the Chiss' own strategic genius. She laughed internally, *she knew how that felt.*

Thrawn had not told Sarlis and didn't seem to intend to, "We will join the pursuit once we have retrieved the coordinates."

Faro approached the table by Thrawn's side with a silent nod to tell him the *Chimaera* was ready.

Captain Pellaeon leaned forward with a suspicious look, "If we haven't retrieved the coordinates, how can she know where to go?"

The Chiss smiled thinly, "A pertinent question, Captain. I can only say what the Inquisitor told us, that she felt the force guiding her to a specific location."

"You believe her?", Pellaeon asked suspiciously. Pellaeon, like Faro, was always the cynic.

"She departed on the same vector as Bridger", Faro explained to them, "The Grand Admiral also believes this could indicate a presence similar to what the Emperor felt."

Thrawn continued where Faro left off, "If these phenomena are related, it is crucial that we discover the source immediately. Prepare your ships fo-"

"Grand Admiral!", a comm officer interrupted, "There's a transmission from the *Invictus*... it's on the emergency channel."

The hairs on Faro's neck stood up. *Emergency channel.* Out here? Pirates maybe? Smugglers? Grysk? Another uncontacted species? It wouldn't be the first time they'd run into such things out here. But no, the timing of this was off. Something wasn't right.

"Patch it through", Thrawn replied promptly.

The thin and clearly terrified face of the *Invictus* captain appeared at the table.

"Sir... I...", the Captain stammered.

"Calm yourself, Captain. What is the emergency?", Thrawn inquired.

His gaze shifted uncomfortably and his hands fidgeted, "Well... sir. We... uh, we don't actually know for certain."

Faro exchanged a confused glance with Pellaeon but Thrawn remained fixated on the hologram.

"Tell us the details you do know."

"Right...", the Captain was clearly shaken, "We detected a ship and then there were these two women and... well, the bridge staff woke up in the aft of the ship and couldn't remember anything. We... we went back through the ship and many of the stormtroopers onboard were dead, sir. A few more in the medbay, best guesses say a quarter of our stormtroopers are dead. Most of the general staff were hiding and have no idea what happened."
Two women taking out a quarter of the stormtroopers? A typical light-cruiser carried a crew of seven hundred and fifty, with roughly one hundred of those being stormtroopers. Who could take out twenty five troopers?

"Unconscious in the aft?", Pellaeon repeated the Captain's odd explanation.

"Y-yes, we woke up with no memory of what happened."

Thrawn stroked his chin, "It appears the assailants rendered you unconscious and moved your bodies to the rear of the ship."

That was an odd thing to do, surely. Still, Faro couldn't see any other explanation for what had happened.

"Did you manage to identify any of the intruders?", Thrawn asked the Captain.

He nervously shook his head, "N-no, sir. Like we said, they were women, a few of the survivors heard two female voices but... we don't know who they were."

"I see...", the Chiss sunk his head and seemed to go deep into thought.

"There's something more, sir", the Captain said, "We checked the logs when we returned to the bridge. They accessed our communications records."

Thrawn was one step ahead, "Bridger's allies have come."

Faro snapped her head to look at him, as did Sarlis and Pellaeon. They couldn't be here, not already. How could they have taken out an Arquitens? How could they have even found them here so quickly? If this was true, time was of the essence. If they took Bridger back, Thrawn wouldn't have Bridger's abilities to help him fight this threat and it would make their job much more difficult. They had to move quickly.

"They left you unconscious because they did not wish to see their intentions made known, though in their haste left a trail. They must have been searching for any hint of Bridger's location within the communications records. The fact that they have already left suggests that they found it."

Faro looked at him in shock, "So they're on their way here?!

"More than likely", Thrawn answered.

"Then we've got to stop them!", Sarlis insisted with more vigour than Faro had ever seen from her.

"Patience, Captain", Thrawn looked to her, "They are not our concern at this time."

Sarlis looked confused, "But, aren't they here for Bridger?"

"Certainly, though he is not here. Not anymore."

Sarlis' enthusiasm ebbed away, "So... what do we do?"

"We proceed as normal", Thrawn looked back over to Commander Hammerly, who nodded back with a thumbs up. "It seems we have coordinates for the stolen TIE and have reason to suspect that this location could be relevant to our ultimate goal in the Unknown Regions. We shall not pass on this opportunity to catch a single band of rebels."

Faro nodded in agreement, "Right. And without some like Bridger or the Inquisitor, they'll have no
way to figure out where he is once we leave the system."

"My thoughts exactly, Commodore. Hence, we must leave immediately to minimise the risk of infiltration or interception", Thrawn focused the explanation onto Sarlis. Faro was sure Pellaeon had figured it out with her.

"As you say, Grand Admiral", Sarlis murmured.

Thrawn turned back to Hammerly, "Relay the coordinates to the other ships", his attention then went back to the other Captains, "Prepare to jump as soon as possible. *Invictus*, hold your position and we will rendezvous with you after this diversion."

All three Captains accepted the orders and disappeared from around the table. Thrawn walked back down the bridge with Faro at his side. The Chiss remained completely silent, not uttering a word. Faro couldn't tell if it was surprise at the arrival of the rebels or curiosity at what they'd find at the coordinates, probably both. Either way, at least they were going to be out of the system before the Jedi's friends could arrive. Admittedly, the Commodore herself was interested to see what was drawing the two force users in. It had to be something very powerful or very important, though if it was dangerous or not was another matter entirely.

The former Jedi was silent for most of the trip and Sabine didn't have much to say either. Sabine had hoped they could find Ezra as soon as possible but had never dreamed that they'd be so close to finding him already - not that she was complaining about that at all.

This jump is taking too long. Well... actually it was taking exactly as long as it should have, but still... it was taking too long for her. It was strange that the closer she got the more impatient she became. Ezra was here, at the end of this jump, and they were so close. Yes, there were probably a few Star Destroyers to contend with but nothing they hadn't dealt with before.

The flight dragged on and on with Sabine getting more restless. Eventually, she took to pacing around the cockpit to calm her nerves. Surprisingly, Ahsoka didn't say a word, perhaps understanding that it was best to work the frustration out now to clear her head. Not that it seemed to be helping much, she wasn't any calmer now than she was when they left the light-cruiser.

"Sabine", Ahsoka spoke softly, "We're almost there."

The Mandalorian stopped and breathed in deeply, "Okay... yeah", she sat back down in the cockpit chair.

"Calm down, Sabine", Ahsoka's blue eyes watched her closely.

"I know, I'm trying. Let's just bring him back safe", she stared out of the viewport, waiting for the hyperdrive to disengage.

Ahsoka pressed some buttons on the console, "Cloaking device is engaged, they won't be able to see us."

Without any more words, the ship dropped out of hyperspace. As the swirling corridor became the black expanse of space, Sabine held her breath in waiting for the inevitable view of Star Destroyers.

*Any second and... Nothing?*

There was... nothing. No Star Destroyers, no ships, just one large planet. No trace of the Empire or
Ezra was visible from orbit. They'd... they'd missed him. They'd come all this way and they'd missed him. Her heart sank as she looked around for any sign of Ezra or the Empire. Sabine looked hastily at the sensors to see if they were missing something but there was still nothing. On the planet too, no signs of technology or activity. The place was just empty.

"No... We can't have missed him...", Sabine's eyes scanned the black expanse of space before them, but it was no use.

"We don't know that for sure", Ahsoka tried to calm her nerves.

She slammed her hand on the console, "Dammit! How can you be sure? Where else could he be?"

Ahsoka pointed to the planet nearby, "He could have been hiding down there." She looked at the scanners, "It seems liveable enough."

Sabine sighed and bit her lip nervously, "You think we'll get some leads down there?"

"I don't know", the Togruta shrugged, "But it's our best shot."

The sensors indicated just a little bit of electrical activity in a coastal region to the north of the equator. Sabine didn't hold out hope for it being Ezra but it might at least give them some hint of what happened to him and where he might have gone. The world below was a verdant jungle that might have been beautiful if it wasn't so tied up with her own anxieties. Ahsoka kept her focus on the controls, guiding the ship towards where the electrical disturbance was being felt. As they neared it, Sabine looked out of the window to see what it was.

"Imperial shuttles", Sabine said as she pressed against the viewport, "There's three of them down there."

Sabine didn't know what that meant. Good? Bad? There didn't seem to be anyone else left here so they must have been abandoned. If so, why? And where were the people in them? From the look of them, they can't have been here very long.

Ahsoka did the best she could to get a good view of them, "Hmm, they must be the ones Thrawn deployed to find Ezra."

"Something stopped them going back, but what?", Sabine muttered.

"Ezra...", the older woman pondered for a moment before returning her focus to the controls.

"Can you sense him or something?"

She was silent for a moment, "No. I don't feel him nearby."

That was not good. There were only three explanations for why Ahsoka couldn't sense him: he'd escaped, which seemed unlikely; he'd been captured, which would make their job a hundred times harder; or worse...

Sabine shook the negative thoughts from her head. "There", she pointed to a flat stretch of beach not far from the shuttles, "Should be clear enough to land."

As Ahsoka landed the ship, Sabine got up and pulled her helmet over her head, slinging her bag over her shoulder as she went. She waited in the main hold for Ahsoka to finish landing the ship. The older woman came with the staff in hand but without the cloak, apparently thinking it might be too warm for this jungle world.
They stepped carefully out of the ship onto the soft sand below. Despite her racing mind, Sabine could still appreciate how beautiful this planet was. The glistening expanse of the ocean, the smooth strips of beaches and the lush green jungle would have made an excellent source of inspiration at another time. If Ezra really was here, at least he had a good view.

Ahsoka led the way towards the shuttles that had landed on the beach. They were probably a few hundred metres away from where they landed and Sabine could get a pretty good view as they approached. They were intact with no sign that they crashed. It looked like they were simply abandoned here. She pulled down her rangefinder on the side of her helmet to get a better look. There seemed to be some minimal damage on the exterior but nothing that indicated why they were abandoned.

Sabine looked over to Ahsoka to ask if she felt anything but saw the Togruta staring down at the ground as she walked. "Hey, you okay?", she asked.

Ahsoka hesitated but looked up after a second, "Yes, I'm fine. This place just has a strange feeling to it."

The Mandalorian could agree on that, it felt strange that Ezra was here so recently and the Empire with him. Walking closer to the shuttle, Sabine could hear a chorus of chirps and squeaks from the native wildlife. Soon after, she realised those noises were coming from within the shuttles themselves.

"Well someone has made themselves comfortable", she joked as they approached the shuttles.

She'd been right. As they almost reached the shuttle, Sabine saw a small knee-high creature hop out of the access ramp. It had no arms, two tiny legs and big black eyes that caught sight of the intruders as they approached. Then another hopped out after it, followed by another and two more after that.

Ahsoka laughed, "I think we know why the shuttles were abandoned."

The animals watched with curiosity as Sabine and Ahsoka approached. Peering in to the first shuttle, they could see why these creatures were such a problem. There were probably two dozen or so in this shuttle alone and the interior was filled with scratches, bite marks, ripped wires, smashed dials and as many other small dents and problems that the little creatures could cause.

After a few seconds, a few of them hopped up to Sabine with inquisitive chirps.

"Hey, little guy", she smiled and knelt down to one of them. Gently, she tickled its chin with her finger, "You're kinda cute."

Ahsoka stood back but none of the creatures seemed to even try to bother her, "If I know Ezra, these things probably loved him. He always had something of a talent for dealing with animals."

That was an understatement, Sabine knew. Back on Lothal, every creature there seemed to be eager to follow him. The loth-wolves, of course, had helped them in their final campaign for the planet. Then there were the loth-cats, they'd never be able to leave him alone whenever he was around. Sabine didn't know how many times she'd seen the felines hop up to him for a fuss and some attention when out on missions with him. Even Ezra's final move against Thrawn relied on his connection to the purrgil. If he could get on so well with giant space whales and magical wolves, she was sure these tiny lizards were no problem at all.

"Have you seen our friend?", Sabine petted another one of the lizards. "My height, black hair, big
nose, sort of an idiot”, she grinned under the helmet.

The adorable creature nuzzled into her with a few satisfied squeaks.

"I think he likes you", Ahsoka smiled over to her.

Sabine brushed a hand over the creature's head, "Come on, I think if I stay any longer then I'll have to take some of these with me."

Reluctantly, the Mandalorian stood up and got to inspecting the shuttles properly. They didn't end up giving many clues, all three of the shuttles had been picked apart by the creatures and no records or data were readable. There were no signs of any troopers either nor any blaster marks of any kind. It was about as much of a dead end as anything could be.

When she finally came out of the shuttle, she found Ahsoka again staring aimlessly away. "Hello?", Sabine called to her.

Ahsoka snapped back to reality, "Sorry... did you find anything?"

"No.", Sabine sighed as she walked over. "What's got you so distracted?"

Ahsoka's fingers wrapped a little tighter around her staff, "There's a feeling in the force, a call almost."

"Is it Ezra?", Sabine raised an eyebrow.

"I don't know, I don't think so", the Togruta looked over to the jungle, "It doesn't matter right now. From the look of those marks, I'd say that the stormtroopers went that way", she said while pointing to the treeline.

There was indeed a clearly flattened area of brush and some snapped branches leading into the jungle. Upon closer inspection, the faintest outline of a stormtrooper's footprint could be made out in the ground at the treeline.

Sabine looked further into the trees, "Looks like they went this way."

Ahsoka stood by her side, "Lead the way."

Drawing her pistols, Sabine stepped carefully into the jungle on full alert in case of any surprises. She doubted there were any troopers left here but there was never any harm in being too prepared. Behind her, Ahsoka looked up at the sky for a few more seconds, squinting against the brightness of the sun, before slowly following Sabine into the trees.

After a few minutes of crawling through the undergrowth, Sabine stopped and turned back to her, "Still don't sense him?"

She shook her head, "Still no, he's definitely not here."

The Mandalorian's head sunk down, "Right... okay."

"Sabine", Ahsoka reached out a hand to her friend, "Wherever he's gone, I'm sure he'll be alright."
way into a large open chamber. The lights flew up high to illuminate everything they could. The room wasn't very tall, perhaps four or five metres up to the ceiling and was also a near perfect circle, save for a flat wall on the far side. The floor itself was rocky and natural with a large rock standing roughly in the centre of the room.

On the far wall, Ezra could make out strange shapes on the flattened area. Ezra stepped further into the chamber to get a better look in the dim light. On the flat wall, there were seven bronze rings embedded into the stonework. In each, there was a small break in the ring, only about the size of his hand, in a different alignment on each ring. The larger ring had the break right at the top, the next had it about a third of the way down on the left, the next had it a few degrees to the right of the bottom. The others also had them spread out in other, equally random arrangements. The young Jedi stepped toward the symbols and tried to see if they could help him figure out what in the galaxy was going on here.

"What is this place?", Ezra asked as he traced his fingers across the rings.

"That is for you to discover."

He looked back at the lights, "That's not very helpful."

"I'm sorry I cannot be of more help but the answers are within you to find."

The cryptic responses providing little help, Ezra stepped back from the wall to get a better look at the whole. He stroked his chin with its thin beard and took in every detail he could. If only Sabine were here, she'd work this out without breaking a sweat...

Suddenly, the light seemed to dim. Ezra quickly looked back up to where the cluster of lights had been to find it completely empty.

"Hello?", Ezra called into the darkness.

No response.

"Are you still there?"

Once more, his only answer was the echo of his voice bouncing off the walls.

"Well, guess I'm on my own", he turned back to the wall.

His attention went back to the wall. It was the only thing here so it had to be something. There was no writing, no images, no indication whatsoever of what this place was. He paced back further, trying to see if there was anything that might give him a clue.

"Difficult it is, hmm!", a new, croaking voice from behind said.

Ezra screamed and fell face first onto the ground. He quickly scrambled back up to to his feet to turn around. When he did, his mind froze. That voice. He should have recognised it instantly. Sitting on the rock in the centre of the room was the small, pointy-eared and faintly glowing figure that he'd seen years ago.

"Master Yoda?!"

The old Master smiled and held his cane upright between his small legs, "Long time has it been since last we spoke."
Still shaken, Ezra stepped a few paces closer to him and then knelt down to be eye-level with the old Jedi, "You can say that again."

Yoda's eyes watched him closely, "Changed the galaxy has. Changed you have also", he pointed at him with his stick.

"Yeah... It's been a long few years.", Ezra nervously scratched his head, "Is it really true? Is the Emperor really dead?"

Yoda sighed, "Gone from this life, Darth Sidious has. Tell me, why must you know?"

Ezra looked at him quizzically, "I... I just wanted to make sure. I've been away for so long."

"Hmm, felt it not, did you?", Yoda asked.

"No, I did. I just had to be sure", Ezra thought back to the strange sensations from a few months ago, of balance and loss of both good and evil. A sudden chill went up his spine and his eyes went back to Yoda, "Master, I felt something else. Something... different. Like the Emperor but..."

The old Jedi laughed, "When nine hundred years old you reach, time it is to move on."

"You're - but how are you here?", Ezra stammered.

"Here, am I? Or only because you are here?", Yoda's stick again pointed at him, "No death there is, only the force."

Ezra's eyes widened, "But I don't understand, why here? What is this place?"

The Jedi Master pulled his cane closer and rested on it, "A temple, from long ago."

"A Jedi temple?", Ezra asked, "Or a Sith one?"

"Hmph, Jedi. Sith. All there is they are not", his old eyes looked around the large room, "Know this already you do."

Yoda had a point there. He'd seen Inquisitors, they weren't Sith. Ahsoka also might once have been a Jedi but even she'd distanced himself from the name, as Maul had done with the Sith. Then there were things like the Bendu which walked somewhere in the middle.

"So not a Jedi temple and not a Sith temple, then who built this place? And what happened to them?", Ezra cautiously looked back at the wall and then out to the corridor that led him in, just to make sure that whoever built it wasn't still here after all.

"Trusted the force to bring you here, did you not?"

Ezra nodded, "Yes, Master."

"Then trust it to tell you why", his small green hand waved in front of him.

Taking the advice, Ezra shut his eyes and reached out in the force. If this place was calling him here then there had to be a reason.

"I still don't know what I'm looking for", Ezra muttered with his hands firm on his knees.

"Know I do not", Yoda admitted, "But know you can if open your mind is."
Ezra shut out everything else and felt the environment around him. He felt the smooth contours of the cavern and corridors, built with intent and reverence so long ago. This place was ancient and important - no, it was sacred to the people who built it. The more he focused, the more he understood why. The force swirled here, unnaturally strong like it was at Lothal or on Malachor. As the voice had said, it was a confluence in the force.

"This place is special", Ezra began, "It's strong in the force, very strong. The people who built this place knew it and wanted to preserve and protect it."

"Good", Yoda's voice agreed, "What more feel you?"

He reached further, back out of the corridors and through the temple. It was old and empty too. For all its importance and all the effort made, it sat alone and forgotten on an inhospitable world. Ezra's mind left the cave and felt the planet around him. It was desolate and barren, scorched and empty. Its jagged canyons and unnatural crevices, its looming moons and orbiting bodies, the sheer lifelessness of this place. It all spoke only one word: death.

"It feels dead", Ezra said grimly, "It's like someone destroyed this world and everything on it."

The old Jedi grumbled, "See now, you do."

Ezra opened his eyes again, "But who could do that?"

"The wrong question that is, another must be asked first", Yoda replied.

The young man looked back to the strange circles on the wall, "Why would someone do this?"

"Yes. Something here perhaps?", Yoda's voiced felt like it was leading him.

Ezra looked closer at the circles embedded into the wall. They formed a perfect circle into the rock, not unlike... Lothal. Ezra caught his breath; no wonder this place is strong in the force, no wonder people felt it sacred, no one someone cared enough to try and destroy it. The circles weren't a decoration, they were like the painting at the Temple on Lothal. That's why the force felt so strong and even vaguely familiar here.

"Ah...", Yoda said, "Understand you do."

"There's a portal here to that world. What did Ahsoka call it? Like a World Between Worlds", Ezra finally understood.

"That is its importance", Yoda tapped the stick on the rock to punctuate it, "Called you here to see it did."

"It wanted me to see the portal?", Ezra reasoned.

Yoda's ears wiggled, "Yes, but to see what happened also. Terrible danger, I fear."

"Danger?", Ezra asked worriedly.

"Stirring something is, here in the unknown", Yoda warned ominously.

"Out here? What could be out here?"

"Something ancient, powerful", Yoda grunted, "Hmph, know I do not, but find out you will."

"Me? But I'm... I'm not..."
"Not what, hmm?", Yoda asked, "Not a Jedi are you?"

"No, I am but I'm not... I'm not you", Ezra stammered.

Yoda's ears perked up and he sighed with a smile, "Me? What Jedi am I that you are not?"

Ezra's shoulders sunk down, "You're... you're so wise and powerful."

"Oh?", Yoda interrupted, "Power makes one a Jedi?"

"No", Ezra shook his head, "No... but I'm not... I can't fight this. I can fight the Empire, I can fight an Inquisitor but something that can destroy a whole planet?"

The Jedi Master sighed heavily, "Tell me, Ezra Bridger. What makes one a Jedi?"

Ezra thought back to the first lessons Kanan taught him and the basic tenants of the Jedi Code. Even now, they were still in his mind as fresh as always.

"Compassion", Ezra started, "Honour, sacrifice, patience, honestly, wisdom, humility."

The old Master watched him intently, "Yes, good. Then cruel are you? Lacking of compassion?"

"I... no", Ezra remembered all the people he'd worked hard to save. On Lothal, the people whose suffering he'd set out to end, he'd spent years with the others trying to spare innocent people the pain of the Empire. They'd all used that desire to do good across the galaxy from Kessel to Mandalore, all because of their compassion for every living being.

"Honour... lack you honour? Lie, cheat and steal, do you?"

Ezra chuckled to himself. Once, yes, that was him as the street rat on Lothal. Now, that wasn't the case. Now he was a Jedi with responsibility and integrity. "I suppose I don't do those things."

Again, the Jedi Master watched him, "Sacrifice. Your own life have you not risked? For your home, give up everything did you not?"

Yes, he had. Every mission with the crew could have been life or death yet he'd done it anyway. Then, when the time came to save Lothal, he'd taken Thrawn's ships away with the purrgil and gone with them, knowing he might never see his home or his friends again or even survive the trip.

Yoda took his silence as an agreement, "Years you spent, waiting and watching. Even now, patient you are in waiting for home."

Ezra nodded, "Yes, Master. I waited but... I wanted to go home. I still do. More than anything."

"Hmm, honesty", Yoda laughed, "And what learnt you in your exile?"

That was a hard question. He'd definitely learned how much he missed his friends and how much he'd missed home. Still, he'd learned his place in the force. He'd learned to accept what he couldn't change about the universe. He'd improved his ability to connect to others, such as his friend Argos or the passing wildlife, and learned how brilliantly balanced the whole universe could be. He'd also dwelt on the things he'd seen before coming here. How to manage your attachments properly, to not let fear or jealously cloud you vision, that was a lesson from Kanan that still lingered with him. Most of all, he'd gained an appreciation of the force not as a tool but as something that unified everyone. The force was within everyone and everything and belonged to no one. He still had a long way to go in fully understanding these things, as if anyone ever could do that in the first place,
but Ezra's views had evolved and changed in his time alone.

"Wisdom I sense, hmm?", Yoda prodded.

Ezra rubbed his head meekly, "I guess. I don't know. I guess I learned that the force isn't just some power Jedi have. It's life and death. It's hope and fear. It's predator and prey. It's all of it. It's all just..."

"Balance", Yoda finished for him. "Humility, not a question that is", the old Master pointed to Ezra with his stick once more. "Nothing do I have that you do not already possess."

Ezra bowed his head, "I- thank you, Master."

"Thank you? Nothing have I done. A Jedi you are, Ezra Bridger"

For all his humility, Yoda's words still filled him with pride. Yoda was right, being a Jedi meant doing what was right, it didn't mean power or experience or following some rigid code. Being a good person is what made a Jedi and he'd always try to be the best he could. Right now, the best he could do would be to find out what actually happened out here. If something out here was as dangerous as Yoda believed, then he had to do his part to stop it.

"I think I understand, Master", Ezra nodded his head and steeled himself, "If there's something out here, I'll do what I can to find it. If I can, I'll find a way to stop it."

"Great care you must take in this, Ezra Bridger", Yoda warned, "But know that allies you may yet have."


"Out here, yes, but at home also."

Home? "You mean... I'm going home?", Ezra couldn't help but feel excited.

Yoda cautioned him with his hand, "Hmmm, clouded... hard to see the future is, but others there are who can help on this path. When right it is, guide you all the force will."

Ezra calmed his excitement and refocused on his mission, "I see, Master. Thank you", Ezra went to stand up, "I'll go see what I ca-"

The faintly blue aura around Yoda's cane suddenly moved to the side of his head, hovering a few inches above his right shoulder. Ezra didn't know if it was actually solid, he still wasn't sure about these visions, but he felt compelled not to touch it or push through it.

"A moment, before you leave", Yoda told him as he 'pushed' him down with his cane.

"Master?", Ezra didn't know what was happening.

"One thing more I have for you", Yoda kept his cane above Ezra's shoulder.

The young man's eyes narrowed, "What? Like a gift?"

"Hmph, no gift", Yoda chuckled, "Nothing that is not already yours it is. Only words."

"Words?", Ezra looked suspiciously at him.

Yoda nodded wordlessly and kept his cane steady, "Ezra Bridger, a long time have I watched since
Ezra hung his head slightly. They weren't traits he was proud of but they were common themes in his early days. Even now, he struggled with the odd spike of anger and frustration but he'd learned to control them. Kanan had been so patient with him, helping him to control his emotions and his anger through years of training. Ezra hadn't always succeeded and he hadn't always found it easy but in the end, Kanan had pulled him through. Even now, years after Kanan passed on, it was his lessons and words that helped him out of tricky situations and kept him going when things were tough.

"Now", Yoda continued, "A Jedi, you have become. Wise, patient, honest, humble, noble. Jedi traits are these, a sign of something far greater."

Greater? Ezra looked up at the wise Jedi sitting above him.

Yoda held his cane steady, "For you, Ezra Bridger, your trial have these years been. By the right of the Council", the cane rose over his head and settled above his left shoulder, "By the will of the force. Ezra Bridger, Knight of the Jedi Order, rise you may."

Wait... what?! Ezra couldn't speak as Yoda drew the cane away and settled it between his legs. It felt like hours passed and still Ezra couldn't believe it.

"Only words they are", Yoda laughed at his bewilderment.

Ezra finally straightened up, "I... Master..."

"A Knight you were long before entering this temple, only recognition this is."

Slowly, Ezra stood up and kept his head bowed, "I'm honoured, Master."

Yoda nodded to him, "Go now, Ezra Bridger. Solve this mystery, you must. But heed my words: allies you may yet have. Those you have yet to return to, others you have yet to meet", the Jedi Master paused, "And others you have yet to teach."

With that, the Jedi Master's figure dissipated before him. Ezra was left in stunned silence, mulling over the parting words from the wise Jedi Master. Looking back at the wall, he decided there'd be time later to think things over. Right now, he had a responsibility to uphold. As he did so, he murmured a few quiet words: Thank you, Kanan.

As always, some general comments on this chapter. The first section is just showing the Fourth Sister leaving, nothing extravagant. I did get to use Senior Lieutenant Xoxtin, who makes a brief appearance in the recent Thrawn book, and I might use her again some time. I like referencing other members of the Chimaera's crew, if only for continuity's sake. Thrawn's section was my attempt at showing how Thrawn has learned from his previous experiences with force users and is making reasonable guesses based on that. I wanted to do something where he's bouncing ideas of the Chimaera's crew like he does in the books so I gave it a shot for a little bit. Ahsoka and Sabine just narrowly miss Ezra himself but they get to start to see what happened out there. Next chapter, they'll get a much better view into how Ezra has spent almost five years of his life. The final chapter was a difficult but enjoyable one. Ezra's knighthood had to come and having it through a vision/force ghost is a lot like Kanan's own knighthood. The words used are a mix of the ones used for Kanan and the ones
used for Anakin in the original Clone Wars cartoon. I felt like Yoda would change them slightly and talk a bit more about why Ezra specifically is being knighted since he isn’t a traditional Jedi in some ways. I think that’s why Yoda feels he’s ready, Ezra has walked his own path and has been selfless, thoughtful and kept in the light even if he isn’t an orthodox Jedi Knight who strictly follows the Code. With Yoda's own doubts about the Clone Wars era Jedi, I think Ezra serves as proof to him that a Jedi is not made by adhering to a rigid code but by being a good person and exhibiting traits such as compassion, wisdom and sacrifice. Also, as Yoda alludes to, a Jedi Knight is much better suited to take on their own students...

Also, the voice that guides Ezra from the last chapter is indeed Qui Gon Jinn. He appears as a cluster of yellow lights, as he does to Yoda on Dagobah, and even uses some of the same phrases from his appearances in the Mortis and Yoda arcs in The Clone Wars. There was no reasonable way to fit his name into the story and the name couldn't mean much to Ezra anyway. Also, I didn't want to come out and say it last chapter since it might spoil the appearance of Yoda in this one, but I don't mind clarifying it now. He can't appear in the same way as Obi Wan or Yoda since his training was incomplete but having a force nexus there allows him to influence things more directly. I'll talk a bit about force nexuses in the author's notes of a later chapter, just to clarify what my interpretation of them is and how it ties in to things.

Next time: Ahsoka follows her instincts, Ezra figures out the portal, Thrawn becomes more suspicious of the Inquisitor, and the Fourth Sister closes in.
Ahsoka follows her instincts, Ezra figures out the portal, Thrawn becomes more suspicious of the Inquisitor, and the Fourth Sister closes in.

The jungle was quieter than Sabine had expected, usually these sorts of places were full of life and noise, and she hoped it wasn't a sign of things to come. Through the trees ahead, Sabine saw them thinning out and a few tall black objects sticking up in the distance.

"Ahsoka?", Sabine crouched down behind a log to be cautious, "I see something."

Ahsoka went down as well and looked where Sabine was pointing, "I don't sense anyone, let's check it out."

Keeping her eyes sharp, they moved closer to the tall objects in the distance. A few metres before the trees gave way, Sabine knew what it was. The charred remnants of an Imperial Sentinel-Class shuttle lay in the clearing, the wings folded up but blackened by flames. They got through the trees and entered the clearing to find the answer to a lingering question.

Ahsoka sighed, "I think we've found some of the stormtroopers."

Scattered around the clearing were a number of stormtroopers with large black burn marks across their armour. It looked like they'd been caught in the explosion of the shuttle.

Sabine's stomach lurched, she didn't want to think about who else had been caught in the blast.

"The Imperials wouldn't blow up one of their own shuttles", Ahsoka said, inspecting the wreckage.

Sabine stepped forward slowly to the front of the shuttle, "This was Ezra. Has to be."

She got closer to the shuttle and where the viewport would have been. It looked like the fire had blown it clear or melted it, one of the two. She held her breath as she peered through the shattered canopy into the cockpit... to find it empty. Part of her breathed a sigh of relief that she hadn't found him sitting in the pilot's chair. Putting both hands on the nose of the shuttle, Sabine pulled herself up and slid in through the open viewport. The interior was charred and mangled, it would never fly again of course, but its basic structure was intact.

In the burned out cockpit, she glanced at the emergency box that looked mostly empty save for a few incinerated bandages and pieces of things that were charred beyond recognition. Then she looked into the main hold, hoping that she wouldn't see something she'd rather not have. The ramp was open a bit but the fire and explosion had rocked the ship onto its side to leave it mostly closed. Thankfully, the hold didn't have any cruel surprises waiting for her. Burned material lay sprawled on the floor as did a few seemingly empty boxes. Her hair stood on edge when she realised what this must have been. Ezra had been living here. The mess of material of the floor must have been a bedroll or sleeping bag, the crates probably for food and supplies.

What had been a source of worry now told her that things were looking up. From the lack of weapons or supplies that she could see among the wreck, Ezra must have had time to prepare and escape. The most likely option seemed to be that he packed up and ran when the Empire came, leaving his makeshift home as a trap for the stormtroopers. Not bad, Ezra. Almost impressive.

With a cautious smile behind her helmet, Sabine clambered out of the shuttle. Ahsoka was still
taking a look at the stormtroopers around the clearing, specifically at two bodies thrown to the far side of the clearing beside the ship.

"No Ezra", Sabine said with a sigh of relief, "I think he was living here and blew it when the Empire showed up."

Ahsoka turned back to the shuttle and pointed at the side of it, "I'd agree. Somehow he blew the fuel tank when the Empire turned up. A good distraction if ever there was one."

Sabine's hands fell on her hips, "Then where is he now?"

The Togruta stood up and shut her eyes to reach out with the force. Sabine watched anxiously, accepting but not entirely happy that they were so dependant on the force to solve their problems. After a minute or so, she opened her eyes and looked to their right.

"This way", she motioned with her staff.

Needing no further explanation, Sabine followed her through the jungle but not before giving one long look back at the ruined shuttle. He'd been there, she didn't know for how long or why, but he'd been there. She could reach out and touch things he'd touched, see the same trees he'd seen, walk in the same places he'd walked out here.

She shook away the thoughts and put her mind back on following Ahsoka. The jungle wasn't as dense as she'd seen on Yavin but it had its difficulties; Hard to see branches, low-hanging vines and the odd unsavoury local perched in the trees kept them occupied for most of the trek. They walked for about five minutes before both noticed a change in the jungle. Deep gashes in the trees and branches that were torn and snapped on the ground started to appear as they walked. They didn't look like they were made by any sort of predator and they were too visceral and rough to have been made by Ezra himself.

"Ahsoka?", Sabine asked the woman in front, "Any idea what happened here?"

In front of her, Ahsoka didn't answer. Sabine could almost feel the Togruta's mind wandering elsewhere.

"Ahsoka?!", she called a bit louder.

The Togruta shook out of her distraction, "Sorry... I don't know."

Sabine kept walking behind her but closed the distance between them, "Are you alright? Ever since we got here you've been acting strange."

"I'm sorry, I just can't shake a-", Ahsoka started but cut off abruptly.

Instinctively, both blasters were in Sabine's hands within seconds, "What's wrong?"

Ahsoka put a hand behind to calm her down but kept walking forward. Sabine looked past the Togruta's shoulder to see the trees thinning out before them and the open sands of the beach a few dozen metres away. For a few more steps, Sabine couldn't see what had startled Ahsoka, but then it came into a view. A few metres from the treeline, a scaly body lay slumped on the ground. A medium-sized creature, maybe a bit smaller than a loth-wolf, with a long tail and a narrow head.

The Mandalorian lowered her weapons, a corpse was no threat, but she kept on guard in case there was something else nearby. They both stepped out of the trees together with Sabine staying focused on the dead animal and Ahsoka looking out at the rest of the beach.
"Sabine, look", Ahsoka tapped Sabine's shoulder to get her attention.

Out on the sands, a hundred metres or so away from them was another gut-wrenching sight. Dozens of animals lay dead on the ground, their bodies sprawled and piled on each other. They were too far away to make out many details but Sabine could tell they were a different animal to the one that lay in front of them.

"What happened here?", Sabine took off her helmet and looked out dejectedly.

Ahsoka shook her head, "Something terrible. I'll go check it out."

"Yeah", Sabine sighed an agreement. "I'll be with you in a second", the Mandalorian looked down at the creature at her feet.

As Ahsoka left to see what had happened to the pile of dead creatures, Sabine tuned her attention to the animal beside her. For some reason, she felt a strange pity for it, more so than she would for just any animal. The Mandalorian crouched down and ran a gentle gloved hand over the animal's back, silently mourning it. Her hand and eyes ran over its scaled skin - and stopped suddenly on its torso. Sabine's eye widened and her mind froze. A cauterised hole was burned through the beast's torso. The sort of mark that could only have been left by a lightsaber.

"Ahsoka!", Sabine shouted to her in a panic, "Ahsoka!"

The Togruta hadn't gone far and ran back to her, "What's wrong? What's happened?"

With a shaking hand, Sabine pointed to the wound, "Lightsaber."

Ahsoka knelt down and inspected it for herself, "That's a lightsaber alright. I guess Ezra must have-
"

Sabine cut her off with a stare as her fingers reached down into the backpack slung over her shoulder. Her fingers still trembling, she pulled out a silver and black cylinder from her bag that she'd brought with her: Ezra's lightsaber.

"That's... troubling."

Sabine swallowed hard, "Who else even has a lightsaber?"

Ahsoka and Luke were the only Jedi that Sabine knew of, and there'd be no reason for any Jedi to be out here. Darth Vader was dead and the Emperor too, assuming he even had a lightsaber. Unless Bo Katan was out exploring then there was only one option left. Another Inquisitor.

"I suppose it's not impossible that there's an Inquisitor out here", Ahsoka had reached the same conclusion herself.

"How? I thought they were all dead", her voice strained.

Ahsoka pursed her lips, "The last mention of them I'm aware of was from a few months before Ezra disappeared. Imperial records never gave me a full list of them but I suppose it's possible one was sent after him."

"Dammit...", her gloved hand went to her forehead, "This isn't good."

"Sabine", Ahsoka put her hand on the Mandalorian's shoulder, "You've all dealt with Inquisitors before, he can handle himself."
"I know he can...", Sabine looked down at the lightsaber in her hands, "But now we know there's one out here looking for him and we're completely out of leads. We can't come this close and...", she didn't want to finish her sentence.

Ahsoka went quiet for a moment, "We're not completely out of leads."

Sabine looked up to her, "What?"

The Togruta pushed up on her staff and stood up, "Do you trust me?"

"Of course... why?", the Mandalorian narrowed her eyes as she spoke.

"That feeling I've had since I came here?", Ahsoka looked up at the sky above her, "I think I know where we should go."

Looking down at the lightsaber again, Sabine's fingers traced its familiar ridges and shapes for a while. Then, sliding it back into her bag, she stood up and put her helmet back on.

"Alright, lead the way."

Ezra's mind was still reeling from his conversation with Master Yoda. Seeing the Jedi Master was enough of a shock, even if it was something he'd done before. There was something different about this time compared to the other two times he'd communed with him. He didn't know if Yoda had changed or if it was just him.

Learning that Yoda wasn't exactly alive was still something he couldn't wrap his head around. Someone as old and powerful as Yoda must have carried so much secret knowledge with him but Ezra hadn't expected any of that to let him cheat death. He'd almost wanted to ask if Kanan could do the same thing but a piece of him knew that it wasn't so. If Kanan had the ability to preserve himself after death he would have told Ezra about it or made himself known to him or Hera after he'd passed.

Still, that meant there was much left for Ezra to learn. Not as much as before though, apparently. Jedi Knight. That would take a lot of getting used to. Internally he still doubted himself, he wasn't sure if he really was ready for that title but, then again, if Master Yoda thought it was time then he might be right. Ezra would just have to do his best to prove himself worthy of the honour.

But, "Others you have yet to teach?" That last part stuck in his head the most. Was he really ready for that? Yoda certainly thought he was. At times, Ezra still felt like only yesterday he was a student. It would be a big change to suddenly become the master. Whenever or however that situation came about, Ezra hoped he'd be ready for it.

However, now wasn't the time to dwell on those things, he had a job to do. Turning back to the rings mounted on the wall, he looked them over with knowledge of what they actually were - a portal into the 'World Between Worlds'.

"Seems simple enough...", Ezra looked at the small gaps in each of the bronze rings that were arranged in different places on each ring. Common sense would say that lining up the gaps would open the portal, it was the only sort of pattern to them that he could see.

He centred himself and reached out a hand toward the rings. Starting with the smallest ring in the centre, he felt it with the force and pictured it in his mind. The gap in this ring was about about two thirds of the way down on the right hand side. Therefore, he used the force to turn the ring and line
up the gap at the top of the circle. The old bronze ring was heavy in its own right and years, or
centuries, millennia even, of disuse made it a struggle.

With a bit of effort the ring finally started to move, the motion sending a few clouds of dust out
around it. For something so small, it was very heavy and it took all of Ezra's focus to move it.

*It's only big in your mind.*

He reminded himself of Kanan's earliest lessons for telekinesis. Theoretically a Jedi could move
anything they put their mind to. With focus and effort, the ring slowly slid into the position he
wanted. He opened his eyes to see the gap lined up perfectly in the top centre of the ring. With a
satisfied smile, he let it go with the force... and watched it sink back down to its original position.

"You've got to be kidding", Ezra drooped his shoulders with a sigh.

Once more he tried to move it, this time he struggled a bit less but the weight was still hard to
contend with. When the gap finally aligned, he let go again. Like last time, it fell away and rested
back where it started.

Ezra cursed under his breath. This wasn't going to be easy. He'd have to hold the ring in place while
he moved the others... and he'd have to do it for all seven of them.

Knowing what he had to do now, Ezra reached out and moved the smallest ring into place.
Keeping hold of it, he then started to move the next smallest one. In his eagerness he'd forgotten
that this ring too hadn't been moved in so many years and the extra strain and effort caused him to
lose his focus and drop the smaller ring.

"Karabast", he muttered through his teeth.

It was time for a new approach. Next, he tried his hand at moving each of the rings individually to
loosen them up a bit. The second smallest came loose quite easily, the next a bit more difficult and
the one after that more difficult still. By the time he'd worked through all of them, he was tiring out
and he hadn't even tried moving them all at once yet.

He psyched himself up to prepare for another go, shaking his arms and cracking his neck.
"Alright", he told himself, "You can do this."

One by one, he started to move each ring, smallest to largest. Moving them all at once was not an
option but moving each one at a time could work. The first one found its place without much
difficulty and the second slid into position as well. It was only on the third that the strain made him
drop them all again.

*Karabast.*

He tried again, and again, and again. After that, a few more times too. Each time getting just a little
bit farther and a little bit more annoyed. He worked through every curse he knew as he tried over
and over to move the rings. Karabast, kriff, di'kut, blast and many more he'd picked up over the
years, a few of which Hera certainly wouldn't have been happy about.

At last, after almost an hour of hard work and focus, he was getting so close. Dropping them one
more time, he breathed in deeply to be ready for what he hoped would be the final attempt.

"Well, well", a female voice came suddenly from behind him.

Ezra turned back to the entrance and saw the same Inquisitor he'd escaped from before walking
slowly into the room, her lightsaber bared and malicious intent in her eyes.

"We meet again, Jedi."

Nothing in the galaxy is truly unknown. Nothing in the galaxy is ever truly lost. By these conditions, every question may be answered by those with the resources and commitment to do so. To achieve this, one must be willing to make the connection to what is known in order to answer the unknown. Even if the specifics of a situation - the enemy, the time, the place - might change, patterns exist that may explain any action. It is through these patterns, through prior experience and applied knowledge, that a good tactician can fathom that which might appear to others to be unfathomable.

Commodore Faro had seen many worlds in her time. She'd seen dust bowls like Ryloth, sprawling city planets like Coruscant or tucked away backwaters like Batuu. In all her years though, she'd never seen a world like this.

Lifeless, dead, scorched - just a few of the words she could use to describe the world that the TIE tracking beacon had drawn them too. The whole planet was a shade of sickening orange that could not have been natural, at least from what she could tell.

The Grand Admiral was once more staring out to space, his back to the bridge and his crew. Faro didn't know what was going through his head, she didn't know if the sight was as unsettling to him as it was to her.

"Commander", Thrawn called to Hammerly on the scanners, seemingly unphased by this world before them. "Do you have the precise location of the Inquisitor's TIE Advanced?"

Hammerly tore his eyes away from the large windows, "Uh, yes, sir. I'm picking up another signature too, probably the other TIE Defender nearby."

How in all the galaxy the Fourth Sister had 'known' Bridger was out here, Faro had no idea. The force, obviously, but just... how? Faro was not a complete stranger to it, she'd been around in the Clone Wars and had plenty of experience with the Fourth Sister and Darth Vader too. Compared to the average galactic citizen, she'd seen more alone than a thousand people combined probably had. Still, that didn't mean she understood the force or those who used it one bit.

"Commodore, I want the stormtroopers on the ground and converging on those signals", Thrawn didn't take his eyes off the planet.

"At once, Grand Admiral", Faro didn't let her awe show in her voice or even on her face.

Despite her efforts, Thrawn seemed to almost sense it. After she'd relayed the orders down to the stormtrooper squads, Thrawn motioned her over to him with his hand.

"Come, Commodore", Thrawn said, "Tell me what you see."

Hesitantly, she walked up beside him and stood at ease while looking at the planet. "It's dead, Sir. The whole planet is just... wrong."

"Hmph, you word choice is most interesting", Thrawn said.

She furrowed her brow, "Wrong?"

"Dead."
Faro turned back to the planet, "It looks dead, sir. I don't really know how else to say it."

"I would agree, Commodore. Dead is perhaps the most appropriate term for this world", the Chiss' red eyes scanned over the orange-tinted surface of the world below. "Tell me, what do you make of its moons?"

**Moons?** Faro had noticed a few of them already. Taking a closer look, she started to realise what the Grand Admiral was getting at. Some of the moons were just that, moons, but there were dozens of smaller bodies orbiting the planet. These were smaller and much more rugged, almost like asteroids. A minor asteroid belt around a world, even a terrestrial one, wasn't out of the ordinary. However, something about it still didn't sit right with her.

The Commodore shook her head, "I still don't see what you're getting at, Grand Admiral."

The Chiss finally turned away from the planet but instead to Hammerly, "Commander, initiate a surface-level scan of the terrain."

"At once, sir", the Commander squinted at his display and pressed a few more buttons. "Rocky, sir. The whole world is a mess of canyons and ravines, some craters too."


Thrawn stayed completely still, "No. This is not a natural destruction."

Faro's heart skipped, "Grand Admiral... you don't think..."

"I do not think, Commodore. I know", Thrawn said in confidence. "Do you see the discolouration on the world?", Thrawn pointed to the different hues of orange across the surface.

"I-I do", Faro stammered.

Thrawn pulled back his hand, "They are not just simple variations in the surface's colour. They are different layers of the crust as the one above was torn away."

There were a few murmurs of disbelief and possibly disagreement too among the crew. That was understandable, to inflict that amount of damage was all but impossible. No weapon could achieve such power. Well, expect one that they knew of.

Faro swallowed hard, "You think something happened here like...", Faro glanced nervously around the bridge, "Like Alderaan?"

What had happened at Alderaan was no secret, even out here. Snippets of information about it had trickled through and it was the Grand Admiral himself who actually said it aloud first. The Emperor's secret battle station, the Death Star, had somehow destroyed a whole planet. The Commodore understood the logic, kill a few billion people now to prevent a war that could kill a few trillion more. A cold and ruthless tactic but understandable. That wasn't to say the idea didn't unsettle her, it did, but it was at least something she could wrap her head around. But the theoretical idea of wiping out a planet was nothing compared to the ability to actually do it. To think that a weapon really existed that had the power to do something like that in the first place... that had kept her up at night more times than she'd admit, even if this Death Star had since been destroyed.

A chill ran down her as she looked back down at the planet below. Something had done the same thing out here and they hadn't got the faintest clue who it was, why they did it or even when it was done.
"Yes...", even the Grand Admiral's voice seemed heavy at the mention of Alderaan, "The conclusion would be that some weapon destroyed this world. Hence why it is so lifeless, why the colour of its surface is so unnatural and why so many bodies are locked into its orbit - debris from the impact below."

"But why? What could have even done this?", Faro asked in awe.

The Grand Admiral went silent for a long while, "I believe that we might be on the trail of the Emperor's 'disturbance'."

That was not what she wanted to hear. Part of her was hoping Thrawn would turn around and explain this away as some isolated phenomenon and never mention it again. Of course, she almost knew that this would be the case from the moment Thrawn started to talk about the destruction of this planet.

"I do not necessarily believe that this presence is found on this world but I do believe we are seeing its ramifications in front of us", Thrawn continued. "There is a pattern to such things, a sort of reasoning, Ezra Bridger and our Inquisitor were drawn here for some reason. Perhaps the 'will of the force' as they call it intends them to witness what has happened here."

"So this 'disturbance', if it is what destroyed this planet, had to have a reason to come here. Any ideas, Grand Admiral?"

Thrawn stroked his chin, "I do not know, though I suspect we may find out. Order all stormtrooper squads to be on the alert. When they find whatever is down there, I wish to know about it."

"What if there's nothing down there?", the Commodore asked, "This destruction looks like it happened a long time ago."

"I agree, Commodore. I believe you are correct, this is not a recent cataclysm."

Faro looked quizzically at him, "Then how can you be sure whatever did this was the same disturbance that the Emperor felt? How would the same thing that did this attract the Emperor's attention when it did?"

"There are things in this galaxy that are not worn by time, Commodore", Thrawn said grimly. "However, we may also be dealing not with one individual entity but a threat of a culture or a species. Such dangers are far more likely to survive the pressures of time."

The Commodore looked at the planet and sighed, "I don't know, if they were this powerful then why didn't they come for the rest of the galaxy?"

"With this sort of power it seems unlikely that their interest merely ceased at the Unknown Regions. More likely, something stopped their wrath", Thrawn answered. "Which begs the questions, why is it stirring now?"

"I don't know, sir", Faro shrugged her shoulders.

"Nor do I", the Chiss' face was filled with concern. "The Emperor perceived threats through the force, it would not be unwise to assume that others who wield the force will be essential is unravelling this mystery."

"Like the Inquisitor", Hammerly suggested from his station.

Faro caught the briefest glance from Thrawn before he replied, "Yes, such as the Inquisitor."
"Such as the Inquisitor". Thrawn might not have mentioned Bridger directly but his statement did leave room to accommodate it. In a way, Faro could respect that Thrawn wasn't ever lying to the Chimeara's crew about his intentions. He did indeed want to harness the powers of a force user, just not the one they expected.

For all his aloofness, even Thrawn couldn't hide the fact that something was troubling him behind those red eyes. Faro had seen such a look only a small handful of times before but had learned that if she saw it then it never meant anything good.

"Something more, Grand Admiral?", she asked carefully.

"For now, nothing", Thrawn replied, "Only time may provide us the means to solve this mystery."

Faro folded her arms and sighed. She wanted to question Thrawn about more of this; about how Bridger fitted in, how he thought Bridger could ever help them against whatever he believed was responsible for what happened her. Now wasn't the time to ask such things, however, with so many others nearby.

They watched in silence as a shuttle flew out from the Chimaera and flew in the direction of the planet. The Commodore could only hope that they'd be coming back with more answers than questions this time around. She shook her head slightly and huffed to herself, *I have a bad feeling about this.*

The boy was clearly surprised to see her strolling out of the corridor and into the chamber. Had the Jedi really been so naive to think he'd escaped her already? The large cavern was another circle with a rock in the centre and some strange symbols on the wall behind Bridger, but little else. There was nowhere for him to run and nowhere for him to hide.

"Surprised? So was I when I felt the force calling me here, calling me to you", she pointed at him with the lightsaber blade.

The boy raised an eyebrow to her, "To me?"

The Inquisitor stopped a few feet into the chamber, "You're here, aren't you?"

"You're not too bright, are you?", the Jedi taunted.

She gritted her teeth and clutched her lightsaber tighter, "I've got no patience for your games, boy."

The Jedi quickly raised his blaster to point at her, with the Inquisitor raising her own blade in response. They stared each other down for a few more seconds, just waiting for the other to make a move.

"It wasn't me that drew you here", the boy laughed at her.

The Fourth Sister glared at him, "What are you talking about?"

"You'll have to work that one out by yourself", his blue eyes rolled, "Though I doubt you're smart enough."

The Inquisitor stepped forward one pace, "Your gloating won't save you. There's no escape this time."

Glancing briefly behind his shoulder, the Jedi grinned, "You'd be surprised."
"Hardly", she took another step toward him, "You've got no beasts to do your bidding, no mangy animals to fight your battles for you this time."

For the faintest second, the Inquisitor saw pain behind his eyes. *Ah yes, the beast.* The Jedi clearly had a soft spot for animals, that scaly menace in particular. It must have hurt him to see him die so painfully. She started to smirk - *Good.*

"I've got to say, that animal of yours was brave. Not like you. He fought his own battles", she stepped closer, "You give him a name?"

She could feel the Jedi seething on the inside, "Argos."

"Argos?", she chuckled, "An interesting choice. Not that it matters anymore."

His finger slightly twitched on the trigger but the Jedi kept his anger in check, "If you're trying to mess with my head, it won't work."

"Oh, I know. Watching your friend die in front of you as he tried to save you would have broken you if anything could", she locked eyes with him.

Despite his composure, the Fourth Sister could feel the faintest twinges of anger and pain in the boy. She wouldn't mind seeing him break before he died, to see all that Jedi training unravel before his final moments.

"Such a shame that all he bought you was a few hours. You're still going to die anyway, alone and forgotten, on some far flung world away from home. Do you think your friends at home will miss you?"

"Do you ever shut up?", the Jedi spat back.

"What does it matter", she scoffed, "They're not going to know anyway."

The Jedi still would not break, "If you were half as good at fighting as you were at wasting my time then maybe you'd actually get somewhere."

She laughed, "You're right, now isn't the time for talking."

With a sinister grin, she leapt forward and swung her lightsaber at the Jedi.

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The force warned him about the attack in plenty of time, allowing him to easily slide to the side and out of harm's way. Without wasting a second, he pushed his hand out and sent a wave of force energy at his attacker. The unprepared Inquisitor slammed hard into the wall behind her, taken completely off guard by Ezra's counterattack.

As the Inquisitor struggled to get up, Ezra raised his blaster and started shooting as he backpedalled away from her. Unfortunately, the Inquisitor was ready and her rotating blades caught the blaster bolts, sending them flying back into the stonework.

"You've got some talent, boy, I'll give you that", the woman clambered on to her feet and brandished her double bladed lightsaber.

Ezra gave her a cocky smile, "I wish I could say the same about you."

The Inquisitor scowled and her arm pulled back before launching the lightsaber towards him in a spin across the room. Ezra barely had time to react as he leapt up and over the lightsaber, letting it
pass harmlessly below him. Taking advantage of the opening, he raised his blaster in mid air as the
lightsaber passed under him and sent a volley of blaster fire at the Inquisitor.

As fast as he was, she still managed to see it coming and dived out of the way. The Inquisitor hid
behind the rock in the centre of the room, the one Master Yoda had appeared on, and used it for
cover from his blasterfire. Ezra landed on his feet before he felt the force warning him to keep his
head down. Ezra ducked quickly as he felt the lightsaber pass back over his head and straight into
the Inquisitor's hand.

She was leaping over the rock in seconds and her feet kicked out toward him. The kick got him in
the chest and sent him sliding back across the room. He shook off the landing and got to one knee,
watching the Inquisitor staring him down.

"This has gone on long enough", she spun the lightsaber in her hand.

Ezra glanced quickly over to the rings on the far side of the room, "For once, I agree with you."

Once again she charged at him and he pulled hard on the trigger as she approached. He dodged to
the left at the last second, again barely missing being caught by the lightsaber. She swung back at
him again but he slipped out of her reach to the right. With a hard grunt she turned with all her
force and swiped at him again but his reactions were still too quick.

He was almost starting to get cocky doing this and slid around his opponent again. This time,
however, she cut a bit too close for comfort. Her blade swung and almost grazed his chest, sending
him stumbling backwards. Taking the advantage, she swung up again and Ezra almost thought
she'd take his arm off. Instead, the blade caught his E-11 and cut the barrel in half, taking out his
only means of defence.

Before she could swing again to finish him off, Ezra pushed out with the force and sent her
careening backwards toward the centre of the room. He was directly opposite the portal, the entry
corridor at his back, and knew it was now or never.

Bracing his feet, he jumped forward and flipped over the Inquisitor and the rock in the centre of the
room. As he passed over, the Inquisitor lashed out to try and catch him with the blade but only
found the rock in the centre. Her blade cut straight through it, sending a heavy chunk of stone
tumbling to the ground.

By the time she'd regained her footing, Ezra was standing tall by the portal. His back was to it, his
eyes instead watching his enemy carefully. He put one hand behind his back, trying to visualise all
seven bronze rings in his mind.

Her eyes burned with rage as she stood up, "I'm going to kill you slowly, Jedi. You're going to
suffer for every second of my life I've wasted hunting you."

In his mind, he got a mental grasp of each of the seven rings. Opening this was going to be
challenge. His eyes then went to the chunk of rock that the Inquisitor had cut, lying haphazardly on
the floor beside her. Closing it might be even harder.

Slowly, the Inquisitor took one step towards him, her gaze burning through him. All the while,
Ezra slowly started to move the rings. Being so focused on him, the Inquisitor didn't even notice as
the first and second rings gently slid into position behind him.

"I hope you're willing to waste a little more time..", Ezra winked as the third ring found its place.

"Such arrogance. You're a fool if you thi-", the Inquisitor's attention shot to the wall at last as the
fourth and fifth ring moved into position. "What are you doing?", she pointed the blade at him from a few metres away.

Ezra reached out with the force towards the cut stone in the centre of the room, "You'll find out soon enough." He felt the sixth ring align itself in the wall behind him.

The timing would have to be perfect.

Right on cue, the Inquisitor shook off her confusion and raised her blade, ready to cover the final few metres to her target. As she did so, Ezra slid the seventh and final ring into position. Suddenly, the force seemed to open up and pour out from behind him, almost overpowering with its intensity. The Inquisitor stopped in her tracks, staring wide-eyed at the now open portal behind Ezra.

With the force, he grabbed at the rock at the centre of the room and pulled it toward him as fast as he could.

"See you around, Inquisitor", he gave her a mock salute as he fell back into the portal.

The rock hurtled towards the Inquisitor from behind and she ducked just in time. But the Inquisitor wasn't his target. As Ezra stepped back into the portal, the large rock slammed hard into the rings around it sending out a frightening crackle of light and a crescendo of noise. The last thing he saw was a flash of light as the gateway crumbled behind him.

The Jedi stepped back into the shimmering portal before her eyes, disappearing into nothingness. She leapt out of the way as a chunk of rock flew past her head and smashed into the rings on the wall.

They shattered and a brilliant blue-white light started to shoot out across the room. At that moment, the force hit her like never before. It washed over the Inquisitor in a huge wave, overwhelming every sense she had and bringing her to her knees. In the chaos and confusion, everything seemed to spiral towards one single thing, reaching out and clawing at her mind. Then, from somewhere deep within yet far away, she heard a deep rasping voice.

"Find. Me."

The wall then erupted into a blast of energy, sending rock and metal flying across the chamber and throwing the Inquisitor violently back through the room. The echos of the whisper lingered in her mind as she slowly faded out of consciousness.

Ahsoka and Sabine's called heavily upon the events of chapter 6, namely the destruction of the shuttle, the Inquisitor chasing Ezra, the stampede of the long-leggers and Argos' death. The animal that Sabine and Ahsoka find is indeed Argos and his death not only let Ezra escape but now has also given Sabine and Ahsoka a better idea of what they're up against. I don't think I've mentioned Ezra's lightsaber in the story yet but Sabine does have it in her bag with her. Who knows, maybe she'll use it at some point... Thrawn and Faro's section again tries to establish the unusual characteristics of this world and starts to confirm Thrawn's suspicions that they might well be on the trail of their target. As Thrawn says, the destruction of a planet or the strange allure of the force are familiar ideas that he and Faro are both aware of. Using both of those experiences, he's able to recognise the possibility of what happened here. I do actually know what happened on this world but I'm not sure when it'll really get explained in detail, if ever. I do worry sometimes that having so much of this
planned behind-the-scenes makes it more difficult to write some of these scenes. I know what
happens, but Thrawn and the others don't, so I have to make an effort to ensure that my
knowledge of what happens doesn't seep into the story where it doesn't belong. If I'm doing
that, don't hesitate to raise the concern and I'll do my best to improve in the future.

Another escape for Ezra but a much narrower one this time. I don't want the Fourth Sister to
just be like an 80s cartoon villain who gets beaten easily every time she show shows up. Last
time, she killed Argos and a bunch of wildlife, this time she only avoids killing Ezra because
of the portal to the world between worlds and has still managed to destroy his only physical
weapon. I spent a while on Ezra's first attempts to move the rings since I felt it helped
emphasise the difficulty of it. I didn't want him to just snap his fingers and open a portal to
the World Between Worlds without breaking a sweat. His ability to open it at the end is
earned through effort and immense focus with the Inquisitor right there trying to kill him.

Then there's the obvious question: what's up with the voice? That's an answer that's a long
way off. People can guess away and that's fine but I'm not going to give anything away before
the story does. This chapter really starts us down the path of the big bad of this story,
something that's only been talked about in hypothetical or uncertain terms so far.

Next time: Ezra uses the World Between Worlds, Ahsoka puts her plan into action, Thrawn
interrogates the Fourth Sister and Hera returns to Lothal.
Ezra uses the World Between Worlds, Ahsoka puts her plan into action, Thrawn interrogates the Fourth Sister and Hera returns to Lothal.

"Inquisitor?", a voice echoed in her head, "Inquisitor?"

The Fourth Sister opened her eyes to see a stormtrooper staring down at her, shaking her shoulder to wake her up. She was slumped on the floor on the far side of the room from where Bridger had disappeared.

She hit the trooper's hand away and clambered to her feet in a daze, "What... what are you doing here?"

The stormtrooper stepped back, "The Grand Admiral sent us down, we had no contact from you. There some sort of explosion from the cave about ten minutes ago, then we came in and found you."

Her head ached and her mind was hazy but she clearly remembered the voice. Find me. Find who? What did that even mean?

She looked over at where that strange portal-like thing had been. The strange silvery gateway had closed and only the dull grey wall remained. Pieces of the rings that had been mounted there were strewn about on the floor across the chamber along with shards of rock and stonework. A few stormtroopers were picking over the rubble, clearly having no clue what they had looking at.

"Uh, ma'am?", the stormtrooper beside her asked, "What happened? Did you find the Jedi?"

She didn't answer and only looked over to the sliced off weapon barrel in the corner of the room. So he was definitely here, this wasn't all some strange dream. She still didn't have the faintest clue about what had happened or where Bridger had gone. This place was strange and unusual and this incursion had opened up far too many questions for her liking.

Still, something called to her through the force. In the wave of force energy that overwhelmed her, something was communicating with her. Something wanted her and had called to her. But why? And who was it?

"I-uh", the stormtrooper interrupted her again, "I need to report to the Grand Admiral. He'll want to know what hap-"

"No", she cut him off.

The stormtrooper hesitated, "N-no? I'm sorry I have my orders."

The Inquisitor shot him a harsh look and saw him pull back from her. She raised her hand and waved it in front of his face, "You will forget what you saw here. There was nothing of importance."

He went rigid, "I will forget what I saw here. There was nothing of importance."
She turned her gaze to the handful of troopers looking at the strange rubble, "Troopers, you will leave and forget what you saw here. You will tell the Grand Admiral nothing."

At her words, the other stormtroopers tensed up and repeated the command back to her.

"You will return to the fleet", she ordered them.

The lead stormtrooper turned to his men, "Move out. Back to the Chimaera."

Her yellow eyes watched them march mindlessly out of the chamber and disappear into the corridor. Once more, she looked at the mess Bridger had left behind. She'd never seen anything like that before, this was new territory.

The voice played over in her mind again. Find me. Taking another lingering look at the rubble, she then turned to go back to her retaken TIE. Something out here wanted her to find them and she wasn't going to disappoint. It needed her for some reason and she felt compelled to go to it. Whatever it was, it might be useful to her. Maybe along the way, it'll lead me to Bridger too.

"What do you know about the force?"

"It surrounds and penetrates us, it binds the universe together."

"That force does not belong to the Jedi."

Ezra sat up with a groan, his head pounding with pain. Ugh, that was... uncomfortable. He took a few seconds to regain his composure before finally opening his eyes to the world around him.

In front of him was the portal he'd come through but it looked faded and muted, and he took that as confirmation that his plan had broken the portal and stopped the Inquisitor, or anyone else for that matter, getting through. So that must mean...

Ezra looked up and around him. Here he was again. This... place, this World Between Worlds. The stars in the sky shone brighter than before, making huge constellations across the sky above him. The familiar black walkways lined with white borders stretched around him and above him but this time there seemed to be more than before. In the distance, he could see more portals too, many more than he'd seen in his first visit here.

"Growing your abilities are."

"The force is strong in you."

"It's calling to you."

In the distance he could hear whispers and voices. A handful of them were clear enough to pick out but who was talking and why he was hearing them weren't questions he could answer.

Ezra pulled himself to his feet and checked himself over. The broken blaster was still in his hand, or at least half of it was, and the bag he was carrying was still there along with everything he brought with him. Aside from a few scratches and grazes from the fight and his rough landing, he seemed to be alright.

"I'm being torn apart. I want to be free of this pain."

"The boy you trained, gone he is..."
"It is such a quiet thing, to fall."

More whispers brought his attention back to the present. He had a job to do. Ezra noticed that there were now multiple layers of portals, a tier above the one he was on and another below. Ezra could only imagine the number of places that were joined here and how far apart they all must have been.

He walked slowly down the walkway away from the portal he came in through. Like every other gateway, it was joined to a large central ring. Looking around him, there were probably hundreds of other gateways that he could see. Yoda was right, his abilities had grown and he was able to perceive and understand much more now.

"I'm just glad you're here, at the end."

"Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter."

"I'm one with the force. The force is with me."

He tried in vain to make out the identity of the voices but nothing came of it. It was hardly surprising, who knew how much of the galaxy was tied up in this place. He could be hearing the voices of people a thousand parsecs and as many centuries away from where he was, wherever that happened to be.

The question now became where to go next. He had no indication of what he wanted or of where he was supposed to go. Wait, yes I do. The force had called him to that temple for a reason, it had called him to the portal for a reason. Therefore, there had to be some indication of where it wanted him to go. He let the force guide him with his steps as he walked, trusting it to tell him where he needed to go from here.

Then, like a subtle hand pulling at his arm, he felt the call again. Similar to what he'd been feeling for years but changed somehow. Stronger, perhaps? Clearer? More focused? Ezra didn't know exactly, only that he was starting to feel its pull again. It was as if the same thing from before was drawing him in a slightly different way. Maybe in this world the force acted differently, or maybe the portal that he'd destroyed had been some conduit of it. Either way, it had reestablished itself and was drawing him closer.

He set off in the direction it compelled him to, walking around the large central circle of portals and gateways.

"No, no! You're still holding on! Let go!"

"I have the power to save the one you love!"

"That power will only consume you."

Out of interest he looked at some of the portals that he passed. Each one had a different set of symbols and shapes, each probably representing a different place where the portal led. Besides each, he could feel the faintest glimmers of what lay beyond. The first one he passed had the images of twisting vines and what looked like a cave, with the odd sensation of darkness balanced with a familiar light. As he passed another, one surrounded by pictures of crystals, he started to feel the air grow cold and chilly. The next one felt familiar and warm, like a place he may well have been, with the image of a pyramid-shaped building above the gateway.

Ezra felt pure darkness in the next, as if wherever the portal led was nothing but evil and had been for a long time. He gave that one a wider berth than most and moved on. The next one felt much more pleasant and Ezra could almost smell the scent of the sea and hear the waves crashing gently.
onto the rocks from the other side. He was reluctant to leave that one, it seemed like a calm and peaceful place. The force flowed strongly from the next portal and within it he felt death clawing to get out, perpetual torment swirling like a vortex is some long forgotten place. Ezra kept moving onward, feeling the unique sensations and seeing the distinct imagery around each gateway he passed.

Soon, he reached one that looked different and he recognised it instantly - *Malachor*. The distinctive triangle shape of the portal was unforgettable. This time, Ahsoka's strange flying friend was nowhere to be seen and nor was the Togruta herself. He would have loved her help right about now, even if it was just to see a familiar face.

*Wait... if that's Malachor, then...* Ezra thought back to his first visit to this place. It all came back to him in an instant. *Lothal is that way!* He ran past the Malachor portal in the direction that he remembered coming from years ago. There were quite a few other portals, but he knew he'd have no trouble recognising Lothal. He was right, of course, and stopped before another gateway.

"I will come back and free you."

"A Jedi must have the deepest commitment, the most serious mind."

"I lost my way for a long time, but now I have a chance to change things."

Before him was another tall portal, like the others here. This one, however, went back home. Around the outside, loth-wolves ran around the circle and images of the mounds ubiquitous to Lothal were down at the bottom. It looked the same as last time but unlike the others, there was no overwhelming sense of what lay on the other side, only tiny glimpses. That was understandable, the temple had been destroyed and the portal with it. Part of him wished that wasn't the case and that he could jump through now and be back home where he belonged. Still, the faintest slithers of Lothal were seeping through. Not much, but enough for him to feel his home. Maybe the portal wasn't fully destroyed, or perhaps in time it was repairing itself.

Lothal took over all of his thoughts. The open plains across the planet, the beautiful twin moons hanging in the night sky, the shining sun above them all. All of it was still there and now it was free from the Empire and would be forever more. He wondered what would actually be on the other side. Maybe, with the temple destroyed, wildlife had taken over the place. Were there some loth-wolves there right now? Or some adorable loth-cats playing in the grass? Maybe it was people, a new farm or a warehouse, even a new settlement as people came to live on the world he called home.

Then the people at home came back to him and warmed his heart. Hopefully Ryder was having fun pulling Lothal back together, they were lucky to have a man with his spirit. Maybe Jai Kell was helping, his Academy training would have helped organise the people after the Empire left. He could only imagine how perfect Lothal must look now that it's free, and in its clear skies he thought of the Ghost soaring through the clouds. Hera would love it there, too few worlds gave her such a nice view to fly in. Zeb might like it too, no place would be better to sit back and blast out his music while he relaxed. His heart skipped when he thought of Sabine. She would have a perfect view to paint. The stars, the open fields, the glistening sea; all of it would be so beautiful to put to a canvas. *Almost as beautiful as her...*

He stopped himself from going any further. He couldn't do this to himself.

"I have to sort this out on my own."

"Please, don't go this way."
"You must run!"

With a heavy sigh, he stepped back from the portal. It might not even work in the first place but he couldn't let his mind wander down that path. He wanted to go home, more than anything in the galaxy, but he couldn't. This portal was no use to anyone anyway, not now, and he needed to focus on what he had to do. There was something out here, something dangerous enough to trouble Master Yoda, and Ezra had to find some sort of evidence that could unravel that mystery.

His eyes kept on the loth-wolves for a few seconds before he tore himself away. He didn't let himself look back as he went, knowing that if he did it would only make things harder. Instead he followed the call in the force, walking past the portals and giving the one to Malachor only a passing glance as he went by.

The call became stronger until Ezra reached the portal it was emanating from. It was large and circular, a lot like Lothal's, only this time there weren't loth-wolves around the edges but what looked like people. Crude figures of people decorated the outside of the gateway, their arms sticking up in various positions. Some had both arms pushed out in front of them with flat hands, others had one raised into a tight first, some had their hands pointed or reaching out at each other. At the very top of the portal, there was a single large white circle.

Whatever was on the other side of this portal was where the force had been calling him, or at least it would bring him one step closer. The small inklings he felt from beyond weren't encouraging. There was a coldness seeping from the portal, not like Krownest or winter on Lothal, but something evil, like on Malachor. The cold shook him to the core with fear more than anything else.

"I'm going to end this, once and for all!"

He stared into the opaque gateway, wondering what he'd find on the other side. It isn't too late to turn back...

"I made a choice... I couldn't stay..."

No. I can do this, I'm a Jedi. I'm a Jedi Knight. No amount of fear, anxiety or longing for home could stop him committing to his mission.

"But now I know there's something stronger than fear. Far stronger."

Ezra breathed in and out to calm himself down. At last, he readied himself for the jump.

"There has been an awakening. Have you felt it?"

Ezra threw himself at the portal, not knowing where it would lead him next.

"Cloaking device engaged", Sabine confirmed as Ahsoka began to power down the hyperdrive. "Any idea what this feeling you had is?"

"No", the Togruta answered, "Though I guess we're about to find out."

The inertia kicked in as the ship started to come out of hyperspace. Sabine watched the viewport intently, but she only expected to see another empty world and no sign whatsoever of Ezra. She didn't mean to be cynical but, well, she was being realistic. There was so little chance of them find-

Sabine's jaw fell open as they emerged from hyperspace.
Three massive Star Destroyers loomed in front of the ship with another light-cruiser nearby. She couldn't be more grateful that their cloaking device has kept them hidden from view or those Imperials would make short work of their shuttle.

"Well, looks like my hunch paid off", the woman next to her laughed.

There was a large planet below them, orange in colour and with a number of moons and orbiting asteroids. Sabine punched some buttons on the scanners to get a better idea of what was down there. *Things can live down there... Ezra can live down there.*

"Ahsoka? You sense him?", she asked quickly.

"Hmm", she paused, "It's difficult to tell."

"Okay, okay", Sabine hastily tapped on the console, "I could try using the life form scanner, or maybe the-

"Relax, if he's down there then I think I know where to find him.

Ahsoka moved the ship toward the planet, keeping a good distance between them and the Empire. They weren't shooting, so that meant they hadn't detected them on their scanners. With how small their ship was, it was unlikely they'd be able to spot them by eye. Beneath one of the Star Destroyers, Sabine saw something that made her blood run cold. The large design on the underside of the *Chimeara* was still there. *That's Thrawn's ship alright.*

A proximity alarm started to blare and snapped Sabine back to reality, "What's that?"

Ahsoka stared down at the screen, "We've got ships leaving the planet's surface. They're all heading back to the fleet"

That didn't bode well, not at all. If they were heading back already then that meant... Sabine didn't want to think what that meant. *No, he's not dead.* Sabine didn't have anything concrete to base that on, she just knew. Something within her just knew, she was sure of it.

They were far enough away that Ahsoka could manoeuvre well out of their flight path. The cloaking device kept their shuttle safe from detection whilst they scanned the incoming ships. The first three ships were all Sentinel-class shuttles packed to the brim with lifeforms. Behind them, a TIE Defender seemed to be flying on autopilot with another ship close on its tail. The sight filled her with dread; it was the type of TIE only used by Inquisitors.

"Looks like they're done down there", Ahsoka observed.

"Then shouldn't we follow them? If they're leaving then he's isn't going to be down there."

Ahsoka continued on her course toward the planet, "Patience, Sabine. We'll find our answers."

She didn't try to argue the point anymore. Frankly, Ahsoka knew better than her anyway. Her instincts had brought them here with no hard evidence or coordinates so there had to be something going on with this place. She sat and watched out of the window as the ship flew down to the surface. It was rocky and desolate, hardly a welcoming place to be.

The dreams that had plagued her recently came back to her, of finding Ezra on some desert world. This place was a bit too close to that for her liking and she knew all too well that sometimes dreams could be frighteningly accurate, especially when they involved the force.
From the air, Sabine could see a large open area with a single rocky structure in the centre. She guessed that must be what they were here for, there was nothing else as far as she could see. They set down in a small canyon large enough to take the shuttle's size. As soon as the landing gear hit the ground, Sabine was out of her chair and throwing her helmet on with her bag slung around her shoulder. She was already waiting impatiently at the access ramp when Ahsoka followed with a troubled look on her face.

"What's up?", she asked cautiously.

Ahsoka planted her staff on the ground, "Something has happened. Whatever led us here has... changed."

"Changed?"

"It's complicated. We have to move quickly", Ahsoka lifted her staff and headed out of the ramp.

They walked faster than normal, Ahsoka led her at a pace just too slow to be considered running. Sabine couldn't hide her nerves, Ahsoka wan't one to panic so if she was on edge then there must have been something wrong. Ezra wasn't dead, he just couldn't be, she'd know. Still, as they walked through the canyon and out into the wide open space she'd seen from above, Sabine couldn't stop herself dwelling on those nightmares.

"That's where we're going", the older woman motioned with the staff as she went.

The Mandalorian couldn't tell if it was the heat or her nerves making her sweat, "No surprises there. There's nothing else on this rock."

"Careful, there's more here than meets the eye", Ahsoka kept her focus ahead of her.

When they got closer, Sabine still couldn't see anything interesting about the massive rock. Ahsoka, however, seemed to look more unsettled as she approached. When they finally reached it, Sabine stopped and looked up at is while Ahsoka went around the sides to see if there was anything to find.

"I don't know what you expected to find here but...", Sabine shrugged her shoulders.

Ahsoka called to her from the side of the rock, "Sabine, this way."

With a curious look under her helmet, Sabine went around to see what she meant. In the side of the rock, there was a small crack that led deeper inside. A cave, that's something. Ahsoka was standing at the entrance waiting for her. Wait, not a cave. The entrance was carved into a perfect circle in the rock, leading down into a dark passage.

"After you", she told Ahsoka.

The Togruta carefully led her into the cave, tapping her staff on the ground as she walked. They emerged into a circular room with three other corridors leading off from it.

"I don't sense Ezra here, but this is where the force was guiding us", Ahsoka's eyes scanned around the room.

Sabine also took a look around. The architecture was simple and basic but it had a certain appeal to it. Granted, it wasn't quite her type of art, but it had its own charm. "You know which way to go?", she asked.
"I believe so, follow me", Ahsoka walked down the central corridor and Sabine followed.

It only took them a short while, not even a minute, before they came to another large chamber. This was larger than the previous one and didn't have any other exits or entrances. Only two things caught Sabine's eye; the first was the slab of smoothly cut rock in the centre of the room; the other was the smashed up design on the far wall.

"What is that?", Sabine pointed to the mess of rubble on the floor.

A huge stone lay smashed on the ground like it had been thrown at the wall. Shards of metal and pieces of some decoration were lying broken on the floor as well, all part of some ring-like symbol that had been there. Did the Empire just come to vandalise old ruins?

Ahsoka stepped toward the rubble with her staff in hand, casting her eyes over everything in silence. The Mandalorian could tell something was weighing heavily on her mind.

"Hey, you okay?", she stepped towards the Togruta carefully.

Ahsoka put up her hand to her, "I'm fine."

Sabine stopped but kept looking at her, "I don't think you are..."

"No...", Ahsoka shook her head, "It's just..."

"Complicated?", Sabine finished the sentence for her.

"Not really no", Ahsoka answered. "Ezra was here."

Her eyes widened under her helmet, "Are you sure?"

"Positive", Ahsoka smiled.

"Then where is he?"

The Togruta nodded her head towards the smashed up area of wall.

Sabine looked quizzically at her, "Yeah, you've lost me. He's in the wall?"

"You were with Ezra at the temple on Lothal, weren't you?"

"When he went into the... wait. Is that what you think it is?!", Sabine stepped up to the wall and stood by Ahsoka.

Ahsoka gently pushed her back with her staff, "It was a gateway, yes. Until Ezra got his hands on it."

Sabine looked down at the rock among the rubble and the mess of metal pieces on the floor. Making a mess of everything? Yeah, that seems like Ezra.

"My guess is that he was led here too, just like I was, and probably like that Inquisitor", Ahsoka's lips curled into another smile, "And somehow he figured out how to open the access point."

"Huh, and he didn't even need my help this time", Sabine jested.

"And, the Inquisitor wasn't able to follow him through. He destroyed the gateway after he went through to make sure she didn't get access to its power."
"Wait, you can repair it, right?", Sabine asked hesitantly.

"I cannot", Ahsoka admitted "Best I can tell, these gateways will reform in time but there's no
telling when that'll be."

Sabine felt her renewed hope start to ebb away, "Then what can we do? If we can't follow him then
he could be anywhere in the galaxy."

He'd been here... he'd been right here and they'd missed him again. The Mandalorian felt her
frustration rising again. They couldn't come this close just to go back to square one

Ahsoka gave her a sympathetic look, "I know you're frustrated but there is something I can do."
She looked down at her staff and then up at the wall, "You might want to step back."

Sabine stepped back to the rock in the centre of the room and watched her companion closely. She
didn't have a clue what she was doing but she hoped it would help.

Ahsoka planted the staff firmly on the ground in front of the wall. "These gateways can be tricky,
they can affect time and the force in ways that we can't truly understand. But, during my time with
them, I've learned a trick of two."

"I thought you said they can't be fixed, at least not by you", Sabine said.

"They can't. However, the access point still exists even if it can't be used. With the right knowhow
and the right tools, they can still be useful", Ahsoka angled the circle atop her staff to align with
the broken symbols on the wall. "We may not be able to use it but the force flows through the
gateway all the same."

As she said it, the tip of her staff started to glow with a pure white light. It seemed to form within
the circle and grow in intensity with every second.

"Uhh, Ahsoka?", Sabine stepped back further.

"I need to focus", she glanced back over her shoulder, "Trust me."

Sabine nodded wordlessly and backed away more, stepping over the stump of rock behind her but
still watching Ahsoka. The staff continued to glow until the light burst from the top in an intense
ray. The ray went straight into the wall where the symbols had been. It spread out along the surface
until they formed a complete circle across the entire gateway before the ray seemed to focus in on
the centre of the circle.

Sabine couldn't even guess what was happening, she wouldn't know where to start. Ahsoka was
straining against the staff as the light poured out of it into the wall. Soon, that whole area of the
wall was glowing as brightly as the staff as Ahsoka continued to focus all of her efforts on it.

Without warning, the ray flared and a large burst of energy erupted from the staff. The light pulsed
for a few more seconds and then abruptly cut off with a loud crackling boom. Ahsoka breathed out
loudly and fell to her knees, holding onto the staff for support.

"Ahsoka!", Sabine ran over to help her up.

"I'm alright", Ahsoka breathed as she pulled herself up with the staff.

The Mandalorian looked back to the wall, "Do I even ask what that was?"
"Like I said, I knew a trick or two", she caught her breath and checked the top of the staff, probably making sure it wasn't damaged.

"Want to give me the simple explanation?", Sabine shook her head.

The older woman smiled, "Simple? The world on the other side doesn't obey our laws so things like time don't work in the same way. I could, how do I put this, look back at what happened before we arrived."

"You saw Ezra?", Sabine would have been more than a little jealous of that.

"Not exactly, it's complicated. I did see where he went and even if I can't follow him, the force can. That's what the energy from the staff was for."

Sabine took off her helmet and looked at her in confusion, "You sent the force after him? How does that even make sense?"

"That's not how the force works", Ahsoka laughed, "The staff can send energy through the gateway, energy that someone attuned in the force can feel. I'm not really able to follow Ezra with it but I can use it to follow the gateway he used."

The Mandalorian grinned as she started to make sense of it, "So you can detect where he came out?!"

Ahsoka's eyes narrowed "Something like that. The trouble is that any force sensitive can detect it. The feeling might keep Ezra near the portal but..."

"It'll also draw the Inquisitor", Sabine completed her sentence.

The Togruta turned away from the wall, "The quicker we get moving, the better chance we'll have of reaching him before that Inquisitor catches on."

Ahsoka started walking out of the chamber and back out of the ruin. Sabine lingered for a moment over the rubble. *Just a little longer, Ezra. We're almost there.*

Captain Pellaeon had barely arrived on the *Chimaera* for a private meeting with the Grand Admiral before they received word that the ground teams were already returning. Thrawn had given no such orders and neither had he. As soon as Pellaeon reached his office, he knew that whatever meeting the Grand Admiral has planned would have to wait. The Chiss wasted no time and made straight for the hangar, walking much faster, Pellaeon noted, than he usually did.

"I have to agree, Grand Admiral. This is unusual", Pellaeon grumbled as they headed down the corridors.

"The Fourth Sister's influence I fear", the Grand Admiral kept his eyes forward as they went.

The Grand Admiral has called Pellaeon for a meeting while the Inquisitor and the stormtroopers did their work on the planet below. Pellaeon couldn't say he envied their assignment, that world looked uninviting enough even without the Jedi waiting down there. He'd honestly been expecting to be laying eyes on Bridger by the end of the day but it seemed like they were going to be disappointed again. The stormtroopers were checking in as ordered until about halfway into their mission, while the Inquisitor was being her usual self and not bothering to keep in touch at all. There'd been no further communications since and no warning that the ground teams were coming back until the *Chimera's* own crew scanned the shuttles approaching.
By the time they reached the hangar, the stormtroopers had already returned. Most of them were unpacking their gear and leaving the ships already, bantering to each other as soldiers always did. Pellaeon followed as Thrawn made a bee-line for the stormtrooper Sergeant, marked out by his white pauldron.

"Sergeant", Thrawn said as he approached with an unusual coldness to his voice, "Perhaps you'd wish to explain why you are here and not on the surface, as I ordered."

The stormtrooper straightened up and saluted, "Uh, sir. The Inquisitor ordered us back."

Thrawn's red stare locked onto the Sergeant, "I am your commanding officer, not the Fourth Sister."

"Right, uh, yes. Um, we know that, sir", the stormtrooper stuttered and looked around nervously.

"The fact that you are here in this hangar suggests that you do not", the Grand Admiral replied.

Pellaeon watched the nervous trooper shifting uncomfortably under Thrawn's interrogation. Something wasn't right here and he was getting a bad hunch about it.

"Tell me, what was down there? I hope you at least followed through with those orders", Thrawn pressed on.

The trooper sunk his head and his hand brushed his neck, "Uh, I think... no, there wasn't much down there, Grand Admiral. Just empty desert and rocks if I remember."

Thrawn didn't immediately answer and instead processed everything in his mind. Before either had a chance to continue, a TIE Defender flew in through the hangar shield followed by the Inquisitor's specialised TIE Advanced. If she'd found her ship and had taken it back then that meant... Pellaeon pulled at his collar, swearing that the hangar was getting warmer somehow. This wasn't going to be pretty.

The Chiss instantly turned his attention to the landing TIE and completely disregarded the stormtrooper. Pellaeon dismissed him with a nod and followed Thrawn as he walked to meet the Inquisitor.

As soon as the TIE's hatch opened, Thrawn's voice was echoing around the hangar. "Inquisitor. Explain yourself."

She pulled herself out of the ship and jumped down onto the deck, not using the ladders that most pilots did. Pellaeon had expected her to look prideful and painfully arrogant but instead the woman looked distracted, exhausted and almost confused.

"Must I repeat myself? Where is Bridger?", Thrawn's voice was harder than usual and his words came out harsher for it.

"He wasn't there", the Inquisitor replied.

"Really?", the Grand Admiral glanced at her personal TIE, "I suppose you merely found your ship lying unattended for no reason whatsoever."

The Inquisitor folded her arms in front of her, "He was here. He ditched the ship by the time we arrived and we couldn't find him. Must have gone somewhere."

The answer was vague to say the least and hardly a good excuse. They'd not even been gone an
hour, not nearly enough time to properly search the area for him.

"I will not play your games, Inquisitor. Why do the stormtroopers not wish to tell me anything about their mission?", Thrawn asked but Pellaeon sensed he knew answer.

The Inquisitor's gaze broke from Thrawn's for a second, "Maybe there's nothing to tell. Sorry to disappoint you, Grand Admiral."

Suddenly, the Inquisitor winced and gasped quietly. She stepped back from Thrawn and looked around bewilderingly. *What in blazes is going on today?*

"Inquisitor?", Thrawn eyed her cautiously.

"I... uh", the Inquisitor seemed breathless and confused, "It's nothing."

"I do not believe so", Thrawn watched as the Inquisitor shook off her sudden daze and regained herself.

"If you'll excuse me, Grand Admiral, I must return to my quarters", the Inquisitor murmured before stepping around the two of them and walking away.

Thrawn didn't try to call after her or stop her in any way. Pellaeon knew there'd be no point in that, she'd just ignore him. Whatever just happened with her a moment ago seemed to be as surprising to her as it was to them.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?", Pellaeon sighed.

"I believe so, Captain. The stormtroopers' evasive responses and lack of memory are indicative of a Jedi mind trick."

Pellaeon sighed again, "But why? What did she have to hide down there?"

"I do not know", Thrawn stopped watching the Inquisitor go and turned to Pellaeon, "Something has emboldened her or perhaps distracted her. I do not see how Bridger could have escaped and the Fourth Sister would not abandon her search of the planet so quickly."

The Captain scowled to himself, "Unless she knew she wouldn't find him. He couldn't be dead, could he? She'd be jumping for joy if he was, even if she didn't do it herself."

"I agree. There is something unfolding that we are not seeing", the Grand Admiral said grimly. "Contact the *Myrmidon*. Order them to send another squad to the surface for an investigation. I very much wish to see what was down there. Perhaps then we can start to unravel this mystery."

"At once, Grand Admiral", Pellaeon pulled his comm out from his belt and relayed the orders back to his ship.

"As for her unusual behaviour moments ago, I do not know", Thrawn continued as the Captain barked the orders into the comm.

That made two of them. The Fourth Sister behaved strangely at the best of times but Pellaeon had never seen her behave like this. The sudden look of surprise, the complete changes from smug hostility to confused meekness didn't seem to have an explanation. Something must have surprised her or suddenly caught her attention, but what?

The Captain huffed, "I can't abide these force types. Nothing's ever simple with them."
"Even the force can be understood with the appropriate knowledge or experience. Whatever has occurred with Bridger and whatever has caught the attention of our Inquisitor will be identified, sooner or later."

"That's awfully optimistic", Pellaeon laughed dryly.

"Hmm, perhaps. Either way, we shall do what we can." He pulled out his own communicator and raised it to his mouth, "Commodore, prepare ground scans of the target area. Captain Pellaeon and I will join you shortly.

Commodore Faro's voice came through, "Commander Hammerly will handle it at once, sir."

"Excellent, Commodore. We are on our way." The Grand Admiral walked away and motioned for him to follow, "Come, Captain. Let us see what the Inquisitor wishes to hide from us."

It was strange being back on Lothal. Even with Jacen and Chopper for company if still felt unusual to be here without Sabine or Zeb, not to mention Kanan or Ezra.

Not that it wasn't nice to be here. Standing on the balcony of Ezra's old tower, or should she say Sabine's tower, she was treated to a beautiful view. The sun was setting over the plains and the whole sky was lit up in a beautiful orange. Not like the orange from before, not the horrible artificial colour that had stained everything under the Empire. It was beautiful now.

Chopper wheeled out of the tower and onto the balcony next to her, grumbling in his mechanical voice.

"You better not have woken him up, you know how sleepy he gets when we're travelling", Hera warned the droid.

Jacen was already asleep. Sabine kept a bed here in a small corner of the tower for Jacen whenever he visited and it was almost as much a home for him as his room on the Ghost was. Part of her didn't like that. Not that he felt at home here or with Sabine, she loved that, but she didn't like that Jacen had to jump between different places so often. A month on Lothal here, a month with Cham there, back on the Ghost the next before starting all over again. It was no way to grow up. It couldn't really be helped, duty came first as it always did, especially since it was ultimately Jacen that she was fighting for. He deserved to grow up free of the fear and conflict that she'd have to endure and Hera had helped change the galaxy to make that happen for him.

Thankfully, that chapter was coming to a close. The Emperor was dead and the New Republic was spreading across the stars. Things could always change of course, no one had expected the sudden rise of the Empire for example, but Hera cautiously hoped that things would be different. She couldn't bear the thought of to having fought for so long only to have it all torn away within a few years. Jacen deserved a peaceful life and, honestly, she'd earned a few years of peace for herself too.

Chopper chirped beside her, reminding her that he was still there.

"In a minute, Chopper", Hera rolled her eyes. He'd been promised some joint adjustments this evening, just about the only maintenance Chopper enjoyed. "Just give me a few minutes, it's been a long day."

They'd arrived around midday after leaving Home One almost two rotations ago. With no indication of when Sabine and Ahsoka would return, there was no point in sitting around waiting. Leia, Rex and Luke all had their own responsibilities to attend to but promised to be there as soon
as any word came through. Zeb and Kallus still had some business on Lira San so Hera had dropped them off too. That left just her, Jacen and their grumbling mechanical companion alone on Lothal.

Hera wanted to make sure everything was ready for when they returned. Maybe clean up the tower, repair a few things here and there and make everything tidy to welcome them home. Hera smiled to herself, behind all her worries she was still overjoyed that they were finally going to bring Ezra back.

A few other things had to be done to prepare and she'd spend most of the afternoon attending to some of that. Ryder Azadi had been a good friend to them all in the last few years, giving Sabine a job, a home and all the materials she asked for. He did little things too; the Ghost had docking priorities and Hera would always return to find the ship refuelled whenever she left it there. It was his way of saying thank you and reminding them that he still thought about them, even if his growing responsibilities took up most of his time. She'd visited him earlier to let him know what was happening and that she'd probably be staying here for a while. Ryder had insisted on some sort of welcome back celebration for Ezra, the 'Hero of Lothal' as people often called him, but Hera wasn't so sure. Ezra wasn't much for crowds or attention anyway. They eventually settled on a small welcoming party when he got back to Lothal, a few people like himself, Jai Kell and whatever other familiar faces they could scrounge up. There'd be some official ceremony down the line but Hera felt it was best to wait until Ezra came home to decide on that one.

"Whorp wharp whorp", Chopper grumbled.

"Don't make me give you an oil bath", she glared at him.

She didn't mean the threat, she was far too tired to go through the trouble. Maybe when Ezra and Sabine got back she'd get them to do it, they loved making Chopper grumpy - not that he needed much help doing that.

"Or maybe I'll get Sabine to give you a paintjob."

"Wharp!", the droid waved his arms indignantly.

Hera lay a hand on Chopper's dome, "I'm kidding, Chop."

The droid grumbled halfheartedly, something about not wanting them back if they were going to pick on him again. She rolled her eyes at him, knowing that the old droid missed them more than he'd admit.

"I miss them too, buddy. They'll be back in no time."

When they did get home, things would be different. Kanan obviously wouldn't be there and there'd be no war to fight. For once in their lives, they'd have the chance to sit back and enjoy life. Ezra and Jacen would have their Jedi training of course, assuming Ezra agreed to do it. Then Jacen would follow in Ezra's footsteps and in Kanan's before him. It was a much better arrangement than handing him over to Skywalker to fly about the galaxy away from his family. Kanan didn't ever return to his homeworld, he wasn't even sure where that was, let alone see his parents. Hera couldn't let that happen to Jacen too.

Come to think of it, Hera hadn't thought much about how it would work. She knew Ezra and Jacen would have to spend a lot of time together but Ezra wasn't likely to be on the Ghost like he was when he was a student with Kanan. Ezra would want to stay on Lothal, he deserved to stay on Lothal, so Jacen would have to as well.
Hera bit her lip and looked out at the plains around the tower. It would be a nice place for him to be, for all of them to be. She'd been thinking about it for a while and now, standing here, her decision became final. Hera Syndulla was going to settle down, and she was going to settle down here. Not a retirement of course, she wasn't anywhere near that age and she knew she'd probably be called for a mission or two here and there, but for the most part it might be time to make a home for herself with solid ground under her feet. If Ezra and Sabine were going to be on Lothal with Jacen too, then she wanted to be there with them. Maybe she could even persuade Zeb and Kallus to come too.

Her mind created an image of a small compound around the tower with a few other buildings. A house for her and Jacen, a house for Zeb, a house for Kallus, or maybe just one for those last two. There'd be a courtyard in the centre and, of course, a nice big landing area for the Ghost. She might want to settle down but there was no way Hera Syndulla wasn't going to find an excuse to fly whenever she could. It would be a perfect way to spend the next few years, basking in her family on the world they'd all worked hard to save.

Another smile graced the Twi'lek's lips as she tucked the little fantasy away for now, saving it for another time.

If she was going to stay here though, she'd have to make peace with something. She looked over to Capital City, its lights keeping it clearly visible even as the sun was setting. The familiar skyline was still breathtaking in its own way. The gaping hole left by the dome had been replaced by new skyscrapers and towers and the whole city had been cleaned up and updated. Every single part of it, including the former Imperial sectors. Perhaps the most dramatic overhaul was that fuel depot.

It had been Ryder's suggestion to turn that place into something nicer and there was nothing more fitting than having a memorial for Kanan there. It was a quiet garden, some choice plants and a few decorations donated by the people of Lothal. In the centre of the garden, where that particular fuel tank had been, was a small simple plaque in Kanan's memory. She'd only ever been to it twice. Once was for the opening ceremony a few months after Yavin. Sabine finally persuaded her to go again about a year ago but they hadn't stayed long, she still couldn't really face it. Zeb visited a few times when he was on Lothal and Sabine went there somewhat often, she even had a few paintings of some of the plants there. Jacen, on the other hand, hadn't been there at all. To be honest, Hera didn't even think she'd mentioned it to him. He was too young she told herself.

But now, Hera knew she couldn't shut it away and pretend it wasn't there, not if they were going to be settling down here. It was past time for Jacen to see it and know who his father was. Especially if he was going to walk the path of a Jedi like Kanan had. It wouldn't be easy to go there again but it had to be done - for herself, for Kanan and for Jacen.

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Next time: Ahsoka and Sabine leave the planet, Ezra emerges from the World Between Worlds, The Fourth Sister follows her instincts and Hera takes Jacen to visit Kanan's memorial.

Chapter End Notes

There's a lot to talk about here so I apologise for that. The Fourth Sister doesn't fully
understand what happened last chapter so she's doesn't want Thrawn getting any information just in case. The weird reaction she had when talking to Thrawn and Pellaeon is her sensing what Ahsoka is doing to the portal down on the planet. I felt like that wasn't too clear so that's what it was if you didn't know. For Ahsoka and Sabine, them having a cloaking device was mentioned a few chapters back to prepare for this exact situation, hence why they can slip down to the surface undetected. The weird force stuff Ahsoka does is essentially just her using the World Between Worlds to 'see' where Ezra went and then to send some sort of beacon to it and follow it. It's not the most elaborate way to find him but I felt it could work, it's hardly the most unorthodox solution to a problem in Star Wars. Also, I'll say again that, as always in Star Wars, the force works in whatever way the plot needs it to. Hera's section is there because it helps clarify her choices later on. She wants to stay on Lothal, she wants to settle down and I wanted to cover some of her thoughts on raising Jacen. Next chapter has some more Kanan-focused stuff and this is really just a set up for that.

Now, the World Between Worlds needs a bit of explanation and clarification. The quotes are the easiest to explain. Most should be easy enough to recognise if you've seen the films and there's a couple from The Clone Wars, Rebels, one from KOTOR and one from elsewhere. Kudos to whoever can get every one of them without looking it up. Some of them have some relevance to what's going on in the chapter, others are just there. The World Between Worlds connects all of Star Wars after all and doesn't revolve exclusively around Ezra's story or experiences.

The portals he passes are all actual places too. The one with vines and a cave, a balance of light and dark, is the dark side cave on Dagobah. The cold one with crystals is Ilum, where Jedi have retrieved their lightsaber crystals for generations. The place that is familiar and has the image of a stepped building is Yavin 4 and the Massassi temples there. The place of pure darkness is Moraband/Korriban and the smell of sea and sounds of water are Ach-To. The very last one, somewhere powerful in the force with 'perpetual torment' trapped in a 'swirling vortex' is Ruusan, specifically the Valley of the Jedi from Dark Forces II fame. In Legends, ancient Sith detonated a 'thought bomb' that trapped the tortured souls of Jedi in the Valley of the Jedi until they're freed by Kyle Katarn.

This begs the question: why have those in there? Aside from these things being quite fun to write (I had a blast doing the Ezra section in this chapter) it also helps explain the interpretation of the World Between Worlds that I stick with in this story. I'm firmly in the camp that the places where there are portals to the World Between Worlds are the canon equivalent of force nexuses from Legends. Basically, they're places very strong with the force. Whether they're strong because of the portal or whether the portal forms because the place is already strong, I'm not sure myself. In Rebels, we see the Lothal Temple and Malachor for sure and almost certainly the Sith shrine on Coruscant as being access points to the World Between Worlds. I felt that we had plenty of other good candidates that could host similar portals: Dagobah's dark side cave, Ilum's kyber crystal caves, Yavin's temples, Moraband is the Sith homeworld, Ach-To is an ancient Jedi world and the Valley of the Jedi is a potent force nexus in Legends. It's places like these that are joined in the World Between Worlds and that's how I view them.
Chapter Notes

I'm going to pick up the pace with my publishing and do a new chapter every 3-4 days rather than every 5 days. It gives me enough time to go over and proofread everything and for people to catch up between chapters. I don't want to post a new chapter every day and lose the people who don't have the time to keep up.

Ahsoka and Sabine leave the planet, Ezra emerges from the World Between Worlds, The Fourth Sister follows her instincts and Hera visits Kanan's memorial.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"When we get back to the ship, it should be a simple case of trusting the force to guide us", Ahsoka explained as they stepped out of the cave and back into the blaring sunlight.

Sabine wasn't far behind her, unsure exactly how to fell about all of this. "Simple? Simple for you maybe."

"I got us here, didn't I?", Ahsoka grinned.

The Mandalorian grumbled under her breath, "Sometimes I think you enjoy this too much."

They started to walk across the empty expanse back to their ship. It was still as warm as before but Sabine felt much better on the way out than she had on the way in. They knew where Ezra had gone, or at least Ahsoka knew, and they were going to get there before he had a chance to run off again. To think it might only be hours before she could see that stupid loth-rat grin of his. She still hadn't decided where'd she'd slap him or hug him first, she guessed she'd just figure that part out later.

Her mind wandered as she thought about him and how close he was. She couldn't stop imagining the look he'd have on his face when he saw them for the first time or the torrent of worries, concerns and hugs he was going to get from Hera. Then it came to Jacen, that was going to be the big one. Ezra had no clue about Hera's pregnancy, none of them had back then, so it was going to be more than a surprise for him. The best kind of surprise of course. She'd filled Jacen's head with stories of Ezra and was looking forward to Jacen hounding Ezra with a million questions as soon as he met him. Lothal was waiting for him too. Just imagining how happy he'd be to see it safe and free, looking out over the beautiful plains from the balcony on their... his tower. Am I getting ahead of myself? Maybe a little bit.

She pulled her head out of the clouds and kept her mind in the here and now where it belonged. They were almost at the mouth of the canyon and out of the huge open space where the cave had been.

"So how far away is this beacon of yours telling us to go?", Sabine asked as they walked.

"It's hard to say. We'll know when we-"

Ahsoka cut herself off and her eyes shot up to the sky. Sabine looked as well and saw what the
Togruta had already sensed. An Imperial shuttle was flying down from orbit towards their position. It was pretty far away, too far for Sabine to hear the engines, but it was moving quickly. They might not be spotted easily but it wouldn't be hard to pick out their red and white shuttle among the rusty orange of the terrain.

"We need to run, now!", Sabine broke into a sprint back towards the canyon they'd come down.

Ahsoka followed close behind, slipping her staff into the sling on her back to be ready for a fight. At the rate that shuttle was coming down, it'd be here in minutes and Sabine's most optimistic guesses still told her that the Empire would see their shuttle long before they reached it, let alone got off the ground and escaped. If the Empire found them or captured them now... Sabine grunted under her breath and pushed her body harder. They were not going to get caught now.

She started to hear the sound of the engines as they entered the canyon but the high walls made it impossible to see the shuttle. They just had to hope that they could stop the shuttle sending any warning up to the fleet. If they did it might well be game over.

They reached a fork in the canyon, "Which way? Which way?!", she yelled back to Ahsoka.

"Right!", Sabine followed her directions and went right, her mind too distracted to remember the way.

They ran for another minute or two, Ahsoka having to remind her more than once of which turning to take. It wasn't long before the shuttle engines quickly but noticeably quieted down. She knew what that meant; they'd landed. Sabine had to hope her and Ahsoka weren't too far away from their ship now.

Ahsoka was easily keeping pace with Sabine, "It's not far now, don't worry."

"Don't worry?", she answered breathlessly, "They're going to see our shuttle."

"They were going to catch on sooner or later, at least we know where Ezra is already."

"Yeah but so will the Inquisitor!"

"They don't have a head start this time, we're going to find him, Sabine. I promise."

They turned another corner in the canyon and Sabine stopped in her tracks. She could see their shuttle in front of her, exactly where they'd left it. Only now, a squad of eight stormtroopers was looking it over. They must have arrived only seconds before her and Ahsoka. Their shuttle had set down in a wide area of the canyon with two entry points into it. Sabine and Ahsoka had taken the canyon path that led towards the temple, whilst the Empire must have landed somewhere down the other path.

"Karabast", Sabine cursed under her breath and dived behind a rock nearby to avoid being seen. She watched the troopers carefully as they inspected the ship.

"What is this doing here?", one of the stormtroopers walked along the side of the shuttle and looked up at the cockpit.

"Looks like one of the old Republic shuttles", the squad leader knocked the door of the ship and waited for an answer. "Huh, guess no one is home."

Ahsoka crept up beside her and crouched down behind the rocks next to Sabine.
"What do we do?", the Mandalorian whispered.

Ahsoka peered over the rock, "We have to get rid of them. We can't let them report to Thrawn."

Sabine drew her blasters from her hips and slowly peeked over her cover.

"We gonna blast it open?", another trooper tried the door.

The squad leader paused, "Hmm, better contact the Grand Admiral. Maybe he'll want to-

A blaster bolt burned through his helmet and cut the squad leader off mid-sentence, sending him crumpling to the floor. Before the troopers knew what was happening, Sabine was sliding over the rock with both pistols firing as rapidly as she could manage. The stormtrooper by the shuttle's door took a handful of rounds and tumbled to the ground.

Ahsoka leapt up after her, drawing the attention of the entire squad. They certainly hadn't expected to face anything like her. The white blades ignited as she jumped at the nearest trooper, sliced up through his blaster and then across his mask in a single fluid motion.

The stormtroopers quickly descended into chaos, "Fall back! Get to the ship!" Despite their superiority in numbers, the troopers realised they were completely outmatched.

A trooper tried to run from the area and down the path the Empire had come in through, but Sabine caught him in the back as he went. Their numbers were narrowed down to four now, more than an easy fight. The remaining four were all grouped behind some rocks near the canyon entrance where the troopers had come in. Ahsoka and Sabine moved up, taking cover behind another large rock closer to their shuttle.

Sabine poked out to shoot at them but instantly dived back down as three of the troopers stood up and started manoeuvring out of cover.

"Ugh!", Sabine slammed her back against the rock, "I can't get a shot."

"They're moving out of cover, only three of them", Ahsoka watched them from the side as they moved away from the rocks and towards the shuttle.

Sabine peered out again and saw the fourth trooper, the one that had stayed hidden, get up and start to make a run for it down the canyon path.

"Ahsoka, cover me! I can't let them warn Thrawn!"

Ahsoka nodded and stepped out of cover with her lightsabers bared. She drew the attention of the three stormtroopers and their blasters too, letting Sabine jump out and give chase after the other trooper.

He was fast, Sabine had to give him that. Sabine haphazardly fired a few bolts towards the three stormtroopers as she went past to throw them off but their attention was still on Ahsoka. She ran after the escaping trooper, firing a few more shots at him as they ran up the canyon. The stormtrooper luckily dodged them but didn't risk firing back. Smart move, she thought as she pointed her blasters for another attack. Then, the trooper reached for his belt and his arm flung back, sending a small metal ball back behind him. Wait... is that a... Detonator!

Sabine had barely enough time to slow herself down and ran right over the grenade before it exploded just behind her. The force sent her flying a few more metres forward, face down onto the rough rock below. Her ears were ringing, her body ached and she could feel the iron taste of blood
in her mouth. Her pistols had been knocked from her hands and she couldn't see them anywhere.

"Sabine!", Ahsoka's voice came from her wrist comm, "Sabine! I heard an explosion, are you alright?"

Her mind was still in a daze from the explosion.

Ahsoka's voice came again, more urgently, "Sabine! What happened?!"

She groaned and pressed the respond button, "Ugh, I'm... I'm fine. Grenade." She pushed herself onto her knees as the dust cleared.

"Did you stop him?!"

Sabine's eyes shot up to the trooper that she'd been chasing. She could see the Imperial shuttle further down the canyon and the trooper was still running for it. She looked desperately around for her blasters but couldn't see them anywhere.

"Oh, kriff it", she got to her feet and broke into a run towards the shuttle. She wasn't going to catch him before he got there but she might reach it before he could get a message through the transmitter or get the ship off the ground.

She ran as fast as her aching body would let her. The ringing in her ears was starting to stop but her back was killing her. The taste of blood had stopped a bit too, she must have bit her tongue in the fall. It didn't matter, she had to stop that trooper. But how? No blasters, no extra grenades. She'd have to go hand to hand. Or... He wouldn't mind, would he? Of course he won't.

As she approached the shuttle, her hand reached into her bag and fumbled around. There it is. Out of the bag, she grabbed Ezra's lightsaber hilt and held it in her hand. She hesitated for a moment, giving the weapon the reverence and significance it deserved, before igniting the shimmering emerald blade.

Sabine slowed down as she entered the shuttle, the lightsaber drawn up in a ready position as she walked. She saw the stormtrooper with his back to her, desperately tapping away at the communications relay in the cockpit.

"Hey", she called to get his attention, "Step away from the console. Now."

She stopped a few metres behind him and pointed the blade at the back of his head. The stormtrooper froze and Sabine stared at the back of his helmet for what felt like minutes.

"Step away and we won't have to hurt you", she honestly didn't think he would be stupid enough to try something now.

Clearly, she was wrong. The stormtrooper's hand shot forward to the communicator, "Grand Admiral, there's a Mandalori-ahhhhh!"

She lunged forward and swung the lightsaber diagonally down his back, tearing through armour and putting an end to him. She brought the blade up again and slashed at the terminal to cut off any more communications.

"Oh, karabast", she looked at the console and sighed heavily.

The stormtrooper had sent a partial message, enough for Thrawn to know there were intruders here. Thrawn would even know one of the intruders was her, it wasn't likely that any other
Mandalorians would come out this far. Still, at least Ahsoka's presence wasn't known to him. Having that surprise up their sleeves could help them out.

With a groan she turned around to leave the shuttle. She took a few seconds to deactivate the blade, simply admiring the familiar glow and simple design of the hilt. The noise was different to other lightsabers too, it was deeper than others she'd heard and she sort of liked it. Admittedly, it was far from the first time she'd used it since he'd been gone. Life on Lothal was quiet and that left her with plenty of free time, some of which she'd spent practicing the forms that Ezra had taught her back on Atollon. Ezra's lightsaber meant a lot to her, not only was it his in the first place but it had saved her life, in his hands or her own, too many times to count.

By the time she'd finished musing on the weapon and slipped back into her bag, Ahsoka was already waiting outside.

"They got a message off but not much detail, no mention of you or anything."

Ahsoka scowled at the ground, "It's odd that the Empire came back a second time. There's no way they could have known we were down here."

"There'll be time for that later, we have to get to Ezra", Sabine charged past and kicked up a good pace back to their ship.

"Slow down, Sabine", Ahsoka called from behind, "You dropped these."

Sabine spun around to see Ahsoka holding up both of the Mandalorian's WESTAR pistols in her hand.

"Oh, thanks", Sabine took them both back and gave them a brief inspection, "Sorry, I'm getting ahead of my- oh, karabast."

Ahsoka raised an eyebrow, "Is something wrong?"

Sabine sighed and slid the blasters into her holsters, "Yeah, the paint job is all scratched."

The Togruta stared at her, "That's what you're worried about?"

"Hey", she put her hands on her hips, "Do you have any idea how much time I put into these?"

Ahsoka smiled and shook her head, "Tell me another time. Let's get back to the ship. We need to leave now if we want to get to Ezra."

Returning the damaged, ruined, blasters to her hips, Sabine led the way back. If they were lucky, they could slip out of the system before the Empire could send someone after them. Then, they only had to hope that they'd reach Ezra before that Inquisitor could.

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The Fourth Sister was shaking by the time she reached her quarters. Not fear, she told herself, it's adrenaline.

The first thing was whatever just happened with Bridger. The boy just disappeared into a glowing hole in the wall as if it was some portal. How could the boy have known to do that? Even more importantly, what was that? She'd never heard of any of it so how Bridger had known was a complete mystery.

Secondly, that weird feeling that she'd had when she arrived back on the Chimaera. That was still
there in the background but she hadn't had time to figure out what it actually was yet. It might have been calling her somewhere. It wasn't quite the same feeling that had brought her here in the first place, this one was less a constant drone that she suddenly tuned in to and more like a flare going off in the force and grabbing her attention.

Lastly and most importantly was that voice. As the portal that Bridger disappeared into exploded, the force overwhelmed her and with it came those two words. *Find me.* The voice was raspy and pained but it was there, like the words of a dying man that were strained and harsh. What did the voice belong to? How did it contact her? Why did it want her help? Where could it even be?

She couldn't go after Bridger the same way he left, it was pretty clear that whatever that was it wasn't going to help her anymore. The voice had also given her no real clues, only a vague instruction. The new sensation, the one she'd felt as she got back to the *Chimaera,* could be addressed. It a call in the force had drawn her here, maybe this was another that would lead her to where Bridger went or maybe even the source of that voice.

The Inquisitor knelt on the meditation stool in the centre of her room, just as she did to prepare for the call that drew her here. This was more intense than that and she simply had to clear her mind to listen to it. The last one felt like a subtle hum while this one was almost like an intense concentration of energy somewhere. She focused in on it more. It wasn't that far away. She didn't know what it was but she didn't doubt that this was something worth investigating.

A bit longer and she felt she had a good grasp of it, perhaps good enough to follow. A little more and... that was it. This feeling was new but it was similar to what she'd felt before. It was something different but it was calling her all the same. It was calling her and she knew she could follow it to the source.

She stood up and prepared to fetch her TIE fighter before she abruptly stopped. She didn't know what she was walking in to this time. True, she didn't know before but this was different. A niggling feeling told her that this voice was a much more important task than capturing Bridger. Furthermore, he had some explanations to give about what he did down there. Begrudgingly, she had to admit that maybe capturing Bridger was a better choice than killing him right now. If he had information that was being kept from her then she should have it, and if she was lucky she might get to inflict some pain to make him tell reveal it. Even then, she might inflict pain anyway.

Of course that would mean Thrawn's cooperation. Thrawn still wanted Bridger captured for his own pride. Now, however, the Fourth Sister needed him too. They had the same goal of capturing Bridger even if their reasons were different. She clenched her fists and sighed, she'd have to play his game for now. With a few curses under her breath, she stepped out of her quarters and headed to the bridge.

Thrawn stroked his chin and looked down at the holographic map on the table. Pellaeon watched him intently as his mind ticked away, with Commodore Faro beside him.

"Their landing site looks to be here", Thrawn pointed to a narrow canyon on the display, "Whilst their target would be this odd structure. I do not doubt that there is more there than meets the eye."

Pellaeon looked at the unassuming cluster of rocks in the centre of a large clearing on the map, "Something the Inquisitor doesn't want us to see."

Before any response could be made, the bridge doors slid open and a pair of boots marched hard on the floor. Pellaeon turned and saw the Inquisitor with a less than amused look on her face.
Thrawn quickly shut off the map, "Inquisitor. To what do we owe this interruption?"

The woman came to the table and rested both hands on the edge. The malice and anger Pellaeon was so used to seeing in her was gone and replaced with something that was almost civility.

"Grand Admiral, I believe I have a lead on Bridger's location", she kept her voice steady and her face calm.

Pellaeon and Faro both looked at each other suspicously but Thrawn kept his eyes on the Inquisitor. "Is that so? After our last encounter, I'd have not thought you'd wish to cooperate on this matter."

Their meeting in the hangar less than an hour ago was still fresh. Her open disobedience, her ambiguity and even her odd actions. It didn't take a genius to know that something wasn't quite right here, and Pellaeon didn't like not having a clue what that was.

The Inquisitor shifted her gaze away. "I was perhaps... too hasty. I have come to...", she sighed, "I've come to accept that Bridger's capture might be more achievable than his immediate death."

Now that was unexpected. The Inquisitor's intention to kill Bridger against Thrawn's orders was well known, word of her open disobedience since she first caught whiff of the Jedi had spread throughout the whole fleet. Yet here she was, openly accepting that she was wrong. There was only one explanation for this: she's hiding something. He looked over at Thrawn, knowing that he must be thinking the same thing.

The Grand Admiral didn't let anything show, maybe the Inquisitor was still naive enough to think he hadn't noticed her odd behaviour and Thrawn wasn't going to shatter that illusion for her.

"I see. An interesting change of heart", the Chiss watched her with a passive expression, "Why, might I ask, have you changed your mind?"

She looked away again and adjusted her stance, "As long as I get to kill him later, I don't see why capturing him is a bad choice."

"Is that all?", Thrawn cocked his eyebrow.

Pellaeon could see her mutter something under her breath before she spoke, "I... also realise that I have not defeated Bridger on my own. Perhaps we do need to cooperate and I know you would only do so if I promise not to kill him."

Thrawn didn't comment on her reasoning. "What is this lead you speak of?"

"There's a... call in the force. It's what drew me to Bridger here in the first place and it's drawing me somewhere else now."

Pellaeon narrowed his eyes, "I thought you said Bridger wasn't on the planet."

She looked at Pellaeon from the corner of her eye, "I said he was here but that'd he'd left. I'm assuming the force is guiding me to where he is now."

Commodore Faro has the courage to question her too, "How could he have escaped to another planet without a ship?"

The Inquisitor sunk her head, "He must have found one. Pirates or smugglers maybe. It wouldn't be impossible for them to have been out here somewhere, he probably ditched the ship and took a ride
"I don't agree, it sounds too unlikely", Pellaeon shook his head.

"Unlikely as it may be, Captain, I believe it might be our best lead", Thrawn surprisingly seemed to agree with her. "Bridger is not down there, I sincerely doubt that our Inquisitor would let that opportunity pass her by. By whatever means Bridger reached his next location is irrelevant next to the fact that he is actually there."

Pellaeon looked at him, stunned by his sudden desire to work with her, and the Commodore didn't seem much less surprised either.

Even the Inquisitor hesitated, "I- thank you, Grand Admiral. I'll go ahead in my ship, I'll let you know the route to follow as I go."

"No", Thrawn interrupted, "You shall not go alone. You will go ahead in an Imperial shuttle with a full compliment of stormtroopers."

"You don't trust me, Grand Admiral?", her voice held a small hint of anger that she couldn't quite hide.

"Given your previous actions I believe the precaution is warranted."

She looked him in the eye and shot a glance at Pellaeon and Faro before bowing her head, "As you say, Grand Admiral. I'll leave at once."

Without another word she turned on her heel and marched off the bridge. They watched her go in silence.

"Thoughts?", Thrawn asked after the door had slid closed.

"She's hiding something", Pellaeon knew that much was obvious.

"She could just be trying to get us away from this planet. You said yourself you believed that there was something she didn't want us to see", Faro suggested. The Commodore had only been told in passing about even on the surface but she did an admirable job of piecing it together for herself.

Thrawn clasped his hands behind his back, "You're both correct. She has something to hide on this planet for one and something else she is also keeping a secret. The only reason she would accept Bridger's survival is because she can use him for her own ends."

"And what would those be?", Pellaeon asked.

The Grand Admiral's red eyes looked away, "I do not know, Captain. Though I believe we may start to find answers at wherever the Inquisitor is planning to lead us."

They were interrupted by the beeping of a incoming message.

"From the surface, sir", an officer called from the side.

Thrawn nodded, "Put it through."

The hologram of a stormtrooper appeared above the table, crouched over a terminal. "Grand Admiral, there's a Mandalori-ahhhh!" The stormtrooper's message cut out after only a second in a flash of green light.
The whole bridge ground to a halt to watch and a few of the staff started to whisper among themselves.

"Play it again", Thrawn ordered.

The message repeated, "Grand Admiral, there's a Mandalori-ahhhhh!" This time, Thrawn paused the recording right before it cut out. Clear as day, through the stormtrooper's chest, was the glowing blade of a lightsaber.

"Bridger's allies are here", Thrawn announced.

Faro leaned forward, "How could they be here? That's impossible. And where could they have found a lightsaber?"

"Calm yourself", Thrawn raised his hand. "You forget that Bridger relinquished his weapon before coming to the Chimaera above Lothal. The weapon is in the hands of his friends."

Thrawn played the message again but cut it off earlier, "Grand Admiral, there's a Mandalori-"

"Mandalorian?", Pellaeon finished the last word of the stormtrooper's message.

Thrawn nodded, "Indeed. No doubt it is the Jedi's compatriot, Sabine Wren. The Jedi and the Mandalorian were close friends during their time together and displayed a strong connection with each other. It makes sense not only that she'd be among those who would endeavour to find him but also that she is in possession of the Jedi's weapon. There is a significance to the lightsaber that even I am aware of, only those who one trusts completely should be entrusted with its safekeeping."

Faro sighed, "That still doesn't answer how they found this place so quickly. They couldn't have tracked us, could they?"

The Chiss paused and might have been searching for an explanation. Hmph, odd. You'd think he'd already have an explanation for how they did this. "Hmm. It is possible that they have the means of tracking our ships. If they entered this system undetected, it is possible they intercepted us after their incursion aboard the Invictus and found the opportunity to track us."

Pellaeon ran his hand along his chin, "Or Bridger found some way to contact them. Perhaps with the Inquisitor's ship?"

"Potentially", Thrawn's eyes locked onto the stormtrooper and the lightsaber blade burning through his chest. "Commodore, prepare the fleet for departure, I wish to be ready as soon as the Fourth Sister begins to communicate our route."

"Sir?", Faro didn't move to follow his orders, "Aren't we going to deal with the intruders? How do we know we won't lead them to Bridger again?"

"Consider: either Bridger signalled them personally or they followed our fleet. If the former is true then they will leave and find Bridger as soon as they can, reaching him ahead of us and thereby retrieving him, meaning that time is of the essence. If the latter is true then they have no further route to Bridger and are therefore not a threat if we can get there ahead of them. Either way, it is our best course of action to leave immediately and pursue Bridger before he slips through our grasp."

The Commodore chewed it over, "At once, Grand Admiral."
"I understand your concern, Commodore", Thrawn gestured to her as she left to attend to her orders.

"I don't like this, Grand Admiral", Pellaeon said quietly, not wanting to make an open show of his uncertainty. "It's bad enough with the Inquisitor, but with Bridger's allies here too? Something is going on."

Thrawn stepped over and kept his voice low, "Calm yourself, Captain. Events are under control."

The Captain waited and thought it over again. He was missing something obvious here, something blatant. They all were. How did the Fourth Sister know where to find Bridger? How did he escape? How are his allies here already? And Thrawn... Pellaeon looked at him again. He was clam and measured as always despite the sudden appearance of the intruders and the Fourth Sister's odd behaviour.

"Captain?", Thrawn asked after a few seconds.

Pellaeon snapped back into reality, realising he'd been staring blankly away for a few seconds. "I-I'll return to the Myrmidon and make sure we're ready."

"Be patient, Captain. Things will become clear soon", Thrawn kept his voice low and his face serious. The Chiss watched him for a few seconds before turning around and walking further up the bridge.

Pellaeon watched him go before taking his own leave back to the Myrmidon. Things weren't right and he'd be damned if he wasn't going to figure out just what was going on out here.

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Ezra tumbled onto the ground with a thud. He didn't take quite as long to recover from this portal jump, it was his second one that day and he was almost getting used to it. Rubbing his head, he stood up and looked around.

Yet again, he was in a large cavern but this one was much taller and much less rugged. It was less a cavern and more a room. The portal must have been in the wall behind him but it was too faded and grimy to see much detail. The room was a simple rectangle with short walls behind him and on the far side, with long featureless walls of stonework along either side. The portal seemed to be the room's only real feature and there was just a simple doorway on the opposite wall. The darkness made it hard to see much detail but there were simple patterns carved into the walls.

The most noticeable feature, however, was the dark purple mist that coved the ground. It obscured everything and seemed to cling on to everything it touched, flowing unnaturally across the ground as far as he could see.

"What is this place", he asked no one in particular as he stepped away from the portal.

Ezra slowly walked down the room, unable to see anything of interest. As he walked, he took the useless broken blaster that the Inquisitor had cut in half and dropped it to the ground. It was dead weight, no point lugging it around. He reached the doorway on the far side and found it held up by two ancient looking pillars. They were almost crumbling and it was a miracle they hadn't collapsed and brought the doorway down with it. He stepped through quickly, half scared that the movement would cause the old stone to fall down on top of him.

The doorway led him into a larger room, this one was much wider and much taller. In the centre of the room, raise on a platform of steps, was what looked like an altar. Ezra approached curiously and saw a smashed purple object lying atop it. It looked like some sort of orb had been set on the
altar but it had been smashed and the top third of it lay shatter and broken on the floor and altar. The mist almost poured out of it. Best he could tell, whatever this mist was, it had been in this orb.

Then, Ezra saw what was lying on the other side at the foot of the altar. A body.

Ezra stepped around the altar and crouched down to the body. He was no stranger to bodies but this was something else entirely. What happened here? The body was almost charred, all blackened and shrivelled. It must have been here for centuries, millennia even, just lying here. The whole body looked... wrong. It hadn't rotted away like it should have, the skin still clung to the corpse even if it was blackened and scarred. Ezra could even make out features on the face, including the frightening scream that the face was contorted into.

He stepped back from the gruesome sight and looked around. On the far side of the room to where he'd come in, there was another doorway and it looked like there were some stairs leading up. Hopefully, they led out of this twisted place. Ezra looked again at the altar and the desecrated body before heading to the doorway. The strange mist still lingered above the floor, coming up to Ezra's knees. He squinted his eyes to see where he was going and then stopped a few steps later. Another body lay on the floor in-front of him. Off to his side, there was another. Looking again, there were probably two or three more around him.

"Well this isn't creepy...", Ezra muttered to himself and knelt down to another body. It had the same strange look as the one at the altar. "What happened to you? What could have done this?"

Ezra looked back at the altar and the strange orb on top of it. That maybe? It was the only answer that seemed to present itself.

Leaving the unfortunate bodies where they lay, Ezra made his way to the stairs. The mist stuck to everything and a few more bodies were strewn about in horrible positions up the steps. A few of them had things trapped in their hands but it was too misty and dark for Ezra to see what they were. He covered the final few steps and looked out at the landscape.

Ezra went wide-eyed as he cleared the stairs, "Oh no..."

The stairs led to a hill that looked out over his surroundings. Ezra couldn't tell if it was nighttime or if this world was naturally the same horrible shade as the mist that ensnared the whole area.. In the distance he could see pillars and buildings, all poking out from the fog. On the slopes of the small hill and on the ground below, he could see even more bodies. There were a number of them kneeling and Ezra didn't want to think about how many were lying just under the miasma. It was disturbingly similar to what they'd seen at Malachor. The ancient structures, the unnatural darkness, the fields of corpses and maybe even the involvement of strange force-related weapons. It had to be something powerful to have caused this kind of destruction for so many people.

Ezra noticed that most of the structures were still relatively intact. The ravages of time had crumbled and worn a few but they were all still standing. Whatever transpired here didn't result in the destruction of the buildings in this place, only the people around it.

There was open space in front of him, lined on the sides with a few small buildings and structures. It looked almost like a street, leading up to the place he'd just come out of. There were more bodies here; a few slumped against walls, a few kneeling down with arms raised against... something, others lying flat. Ezra went up to one that was sitting against a wall and took a closer look. It was defiled like all the others with its blackened skin and horrible contortions but as he looked he found something different: a hole. A single circular hole was burnt through the body's chest. Ezra knew exactly what type of weapon left wounds like that. Only lightsabers were that precise.
Lightsaber wounds, ancient ruins, strange weapons wiping out whole battlefields? It was more like Malachor than he first thought.

From there, it seemed reasonable to guess what some of these bodies had been clutching in their hands. He looked at the ground around this body and, sure enough, a dusty old lightsaber hilt was lying only a few inches from its grasp. Ezra picked it up, watching as the mist oddly stuck to it for a moment before dissipating and then tried to activate it. It took a few seconds before the blade sputtered to life. 

Red, the colour of the Sith. The single red blade quickly cut out with a sizzle. It wasn't surprising, this weapon had been lying here for countless years.

He dropped the useless hilt onto the ground and stood up to explore again.

As he walked, he started to think out loud. "Master Yoda said there was something ancient and powerful out here. The planet that the other temple was on was also destroyed and then the force called me to this portal." He stopped and looked around at the destruction around him, "Makes sense to me that whatever is out here had to do with this too. People fought here, people with lightsabers, and they all died... Something horrible must have-"

Ezra turned quickly back to the ruin he'd come out of. What was that? A twinge in the force just flared up behind him, back in the same direction as the portal. For a moment he thought he was sensing someone coming through but that was impossible, no one could have done that. It had to be something else but he didn't have a clue what that would be.

The strange new feeling faded a bit after a few seconds but it was still there. This place is strange, it's probably just a side effect of whatever happened here. Figuring out what happened here was what mattered now. He shrugged off the odd feeling and continued to look around, hoping to find something that might start to explain all of this.

Hera brought the two-seated speeder to a gentle stop at the entrance to the garden. Jacen looked around at the city, he'd never been to this part of it before, but Hera could tell his abilities were letting him feel her own anxieties. She stayed in the pilot's seat for a moment and looked at the garden entrance. It looked nothing like the fuel depot that it used to be. The tanks and huge walls had been torn down and a small white wall stretched around the site.

"Mom? Why are we here?", Jacen asked innocently from the passenger seat.

She reached a tender hand to the side of his face, "This is a very special place, dear. Come on, it's past time you visit."

His bright blue eyes didn't seem to understand but he listened to his mother. She undid the safety harness, no way was she letting him get in the speeder without wearing it, and lifted him out of the chair. She opened the door and put him safely down as she got out of the speeder.

"What is it?", Jacen stared up at the walls and over to the small entrance.

Hera smiled thinly, "Somewhere special." She took his hand and led him into the entrance.

The garden filled all of the grounds that were previously part of the fuel depot. The whole place was awash with bright colours, with greens, reds, blues, yellows and the sweet aroma of a hundred different plants. A path went around the perimeter of the garden and four smaller, evenly-placed paths led in from the outer edge to the centre. In the middle, where all the paths joined, was a small plaque placed there in memory of the person this garden was built for: Kanan Jarrus, Jedi Knight.

She led Jacen by the hand through the entrance and up along on of the centre paths. There were
many people here, locals and tourists all sharing in the beautiful corner of Capital City. Couples walked hand in hand, lone observers sat to take in the view and parents walked with their children around the gorgeous patches of flora. Jacen was instantly taken by some of the plants on their right and dragged his mother over to see them.

"Those ones, those ones!", he pointed eagerly with a smile.

Even here, he could still bring a smile to her face, "What about those ones, dear?"

"Auntie Bean paints those. They're her favourite", Jacen leaned onto the small fence that separated the path from the flowers.

The ones he'd picked out were tall stemmed flowers in a brilliant sapphire blue. Hera had seen the painting of them herself, one of many plants from here that Sabine had put to canvas. Hera knew Sabine came here every now and again to paint and, seeing this place in person again, she understood why. *Sapphire blue*, she thought to herself, *I wonder why they're her favourite...* She smiled to herself as Jacen continued to look at them in awe.

Then the boy turned back to her with pleading eyes, "When's Auntie Bean coming home? I miss her."

"You and me both, dear", she ran a hand over his hair. "She'll be home soon, don't worry."

Jacen kept his hands on the fence and drooped his head, "Why'd she have to go?"

Hera stared at the blue flowers, "Something very important. I promise that when she's home, you'll be glad she went."

She let him stand there for a while and get it out of his system, it wasn't the first time he'd asked about her and it definitely wasn't going to be the last.

"Come on", she gently pulled his hand back into her own, "There's something I have to show you."

Her son obeyed and tore himself away from the pretty sights he loved so much. Hera turned to the centre of the garden and the plaque that stood embedded in a stone plinth there. Jacen looked in wonder the people they passed but Hera's eyes stayed on the plaque as they walked. When they finally reached the central clearing, she stopped Jacen and knelt down to be eye level with him.

His bright blue eyes were worried, after all he could probably sense her own emotions. She brushed a wayward strand of hair from his face and forced a smile, "Jacen, dear, do you remember what we told you about your dad?"

The boy hid his face from her for a few seconds, "Uh, he's my dad... and..."

She laughed quietly, "Well done, dear."

"Auntie Bean said he was a hero", his tiny nose scrunched up, "And then you said he isn't here anymore."

Hera breathed in shakily, "Well... it's time you know why."

"Why he isn't here?", he asked his mother.

She glanced at the plaque and then back at him, "No. Why he's a hero."

Hera swallowed hard and stood up, leading him gently by the hand to the plaque. She could see the
In memory of Kanan Jarrus

Friend, Father, Brother, Jedi, Hero

Who gave his life here so all of Lothal might be free

She kept Jacen close at hand and led him to the plaque.

"Mom?", he looked innocently up at her.

Hera didn't know how best to do this. How do you even make a child that small process something like this?

"Here", she lifted him up to her chest so he could see the plaque. Of course, he was far too young to be able to read it yet but she wanted him to see. "Your dad was a very special person. He helped a lot of people and did a lot of good things." Her voice started to crack as she spoke, "He always put everyone else first. Me, Auntie Bean, Uncle Zeb..."

Jacen buried his head into her shoulder, "But he's gone now."

It wasn't a question. It was strange about people just understood what things meant. No one ever has to be taught what death means, people just know.

Hera didn't want to think about where she was standing right now. That fuel tank had stood exactly where they were at that moment. "He is. That's why they made this place, all for him. All of Lothal wanted something to remember him by."

There was nothing she could say to him to make it right. She knew this pain all too well, her own mother passed when she was barely a teenager. When it happened to her, she struggled to accept that life could be that cruel to you when you were still so young. Yet Jacen had lost out even more than her. Hera might not have had her mother as long as she wanted but she had memories of her to treasure. They might be few and not all of them might be pleasant, but she knew her face, she knew her voice and she still remembered being held in her arms. Jacen didn't have that. He had no memories of his own of Kanan. Jacen could walk past his father in the street or hear him on a recording and not even know who he was and that broke her heart more than anything. Nothing about it was fair or right but there was nothing that could be done to change that.

Just because it couldn't be changed, that didn't mean the pain couldn't be eased. Jacen didn't have memories of his own so the people who did know Kanan owed it to him to share them. Whether that was her, Sabine, Zeb, Ezra or the rest of Lothal, Jacen deserved to know who his father was. She already regretted not bringing him to this memorial sooner, even if he didn't understand where he was or what it was for, but she wasn't going to make a mistake like that again. She wasn't going to try and shield him from his father's legacy because of her own emotions.

"Momma... will I be like dad? Like... a hero?"

"You will, dear", Hera planted a small kiss on his forehead, "I promise."
Ahsoka and Sabine's section is simple enough and doesn't have much to be commented on. Sabine had to use Ezra's lightsaber at some point, even if it was only briefly like here. Also, Sabine remembers how she practiced the lightsaber forms while alone on Lothal. That would honestly make her one of the most talented lightsaber users in the galaxy right now... and therefore a pretty reliable teacher for others. As for Thrawn and the others, they can quite easily tell that the Inquisitor is up to something but there's not enough evidence for them to say what yet. Her cooperation is unusual and they all know it, now it's a case of finding out exactly what she's hiding. However, she isn't the only person in this story with secrets...

I do have a clear idea of what happened on the planet where Ezra is but not all of it is stuff that Ezra is going to know and some of it does need to be kept under wraps for now. Maybe in the future, in the very distant future, I'll give a proper account of what happened here and why things are like they are. For now, everything you need to know will be contained in the story. Also, that feeling Ezra gets at the end is the 'beacon' Ahsoka sent through last chapter, in case anyone was wondering. Jacen and Hera's first moments in the garden are happy, and that's the way it deserved to be. Hera sees the other people enjoying the place and admires how beautiful it is while Jacen goes off to look at the flowers. This place is something good first and foremost, a place for Kanan to live on. There's grief there too but the first thing that Kanan's memory should do is bring happiness to them both, not sadness.

I talked quite a bit about Kanan and Hera's mother too, and what Hera and Jacen have to remember them by. Coming to terms with Kanan's death and Jacen's memories of him, or lack thereof, is an important thing for Hera to do for herself and will be for Jacen when he grows up, especially if he ends up walking the path of the Jedi. I also wanted to link Jacen's loss of Kanan with Hera's own experience of losing her mother, a fact that wasn't given much attention in the show. Losing a parent is something that anyone, especially a child, carries with them for their entire life and both Jacen and Hera suffered through it in their own way. When it comes to writing about more serious topics like this, different people have different ways of approaching it. There's no 'right' way to approach it and no single way that works for everyone. I know my stance on it and all that I'll say is that, in the words of Captain Rex, "experience outranks everything."

A few people have mentioned that they're eager for the search for Ezra to draw to a close. That time is coming very, very soon.

Next time: Ezra makes an odd discovery, Thrawn heads to the new planet, the Fourth Sister closes in, and Ahsoka and Sabine join the fray.
Chapter 13 - Convergence

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a bit shorter as it's all build-up to the events of next chapter.

Ezra makes an odd discovery, Thrawn heads to the new planet, the Fourth Sister closes in, and Ahsoka and Sabine join the fray.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This whole place was every bit as desolate as it had looked when he arrived. Ezra combed through more than a few old buildings in search of anything that might help him understand what happened here but couldn't find anything. Only more desecrated corpses, broken lightsabers and a handful of ancient objects scattered about. As he'd already noticed, most of the buildings were still intact and Ezra explored them carefully, watching his footing through the constant mist that ensnared everything.

Ezra entered another small building to try and find any sort of answer. This building must have been some sort of storehouse since it was one long empty space with a few old crates lying around. Sitting in the corner were two more bodies. These two caught his eye, something about them stood out compared to the others. They were pulled close together and through the fog he could see that their hands were joined. They must have died side by side out here. Ezra cautiously stepped over to them to get a better look. Everything was too... defiled to make out anything about them but Ezra couldn't help but feel bad for them.

"Whoever you were, at least you had company", he mumbled as he knelt down to them.

He saw one of the lightsabers lying flat at their feet. Out of curiosity, he picked it up and activated it. Red? The blade was pure red, like that of a dark sider. It fizzled out after a few seconds like the others and Ezra lay it back down on the ground. It was odd to think some dark sider had the heart to die with company.

"You must have been much nicer than the Sith I've met", he joked to them.

Ezra took another look at them and was about to leave when he spotted a glint of silver between both of the bodies.

He reached in to see what it was, "Hello, what have we here?"

Wedged between the bodies was another lightsaber, but this one was much less worn and damaged than the others he'd seen. Ezra's fingers found the ignition button and he gasped when the blade came to life. Blue. A brilliant cyan blue blade, a bit lighter than the colour of Kanan's lightsaber, came steadily from the hilt. He was surprised that the lightsaber was working so well, the blade was holding fine and must have been protected from whatever happened by being between these two people.

That was what confused him the most though. Two people, side-by-side, yet on different sides of
the force. One red, one blue. Why would they be here and why together? They could be opponents who fell in battle with each other but that wouldn't explain their position. Also, it didn't explain why both fell victim to whatever happened here and not just one of them. They must have been on the same side of this battle, light and dark fighting alongside each other. That only left the obvious question: fighting against what?

Ezra turned his attention back to the lightsaber and the blade still glowing strong. "I guess you won't mind if I take this", he deactivated the blade and clipped it into place on his belt.

It felt unusual to have a lightsaber there again but it also felt natural. *This weapon is your life.* Kanan's words played over in his mind. Ezra might not have his actual saber but he'd make do for now. It couldn't hurt to carry a weapon just in case.

He stood up and gave the two fallen warriors a considerate look before making his way out of the old building. As he stepped out into the street to keep exploring, his heart skipped a beat and the hairs on his neck stood on end. *No... it can't be...*

His eyes shot to the sky but the cloud cover made it impossible to see. Through everything he swore he could feel it for the briefest second, the dreaded feeling of that Inquisitor. *No, it couldn't be her... right?* How would she have found him so quickly? He scowled and then looked back in the direction of the ruin he'd arrived through. Something had called her here again, like it had on the last planet.

Ezra's eye went to his waist and the lightsaber so fortunately clipped there. The first time they'd fought, he'd managed to slip away with the help and sacrifice of Argos and the wildlife. On the second occasion, he'd managed to escape through the portal and only just destroy it in time to keep her from coming through. This time, things would have to be different. He couldn't run forever and he couldn't risk the Inquisitor being prepared for the portal trick this time, her gaining access to that sort of power would be catastrophic. No, there would be no running this time. He had to make a stand and now he had the tools to do it.

He breathed in deeply to calm his mind before going back in the direction from where he came. One way or the other, he wasn't going to be running and hiding anymore.

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Commodore Faro had been surprised that the Inquisitor didn't have any tricks up her sleeve on this journey. As she promised, the Fourth Sister followed her odd instincts and periodically stopped to transmit short-range jump coordinates for the fleet to follow. Faro knew better than to take this as her turning over a new leaf, there was something behind all of this odd behaviour and she, Captain Pellaeon and the Grand Admiral all knew it.

"Hyperdrive powering down, Grand Admiral."

Grand Admiral Thrawn was at the front of the bridge, as he always liked to be, as they emerged from hyperspace. From her own station, the Commodore could get a good view of the space outside as they returned to real space.

*Well, at least the planet is intact this time.* That was her first observation of their new destination. The Inquisitor had given coordinates that put them close to this new planet, close enough to efficiently and smoothly launch their squads to inspect the surface. The world had a dark purple tone to it but it was nothing out of the ordinary. No greenery or water as far as she could tell either. A quick glance at the scanners showed there were no moons or asteroid rings to worry about.

Faro marched up to Thrawn at the head of the bridge and handed him a datapad with the results,
"No moons, no water, no signs of life."

Thrawn took the pad and inspected it, "Interesting, another world with no signs of habitation that still somehow draws our elusive Jedi."

"He might just be stranded there. Assuming he is actually down there, of course", Faro cast a look down at the world.

"I trust that the Fourth Sister is correct in believing Bridger is here", he handed the datapad back to the Commodore. "However, I am most concerned about his reasons for being here."

She glanced at the pad again and then to the planet, "I see what you mean. There doesn't seem to be anything down there."

"Perhaps we are looking for the wrong things", Thrawn turned on his heel and motioned the Commodore to follow him along the bridge. "Contact the Fourth Sister, I wish to speak with her", he ordered the bridge crew as they went.

Obeying the order, an officer tapped away on his screen as Thrawn and Faro reached the communications table. After a few seconds, the Fourth Sister appeared in a hologram above the table.

"It seems my instincts get results, Grand Admiral", the Inquisitor's voice held familiar self-satisfaction.

"I will consider this excursion to have produced 'results' when Bridger is found and not before", the Grand Admiral countered dismissively. "Where is your so-called disturbance located?"

The holographic figure shut her eyes for a few moments. "Near the equator", she opened her eyes and looked down at the console on her end, "I'll give the general location so your troops can land, I'll give more specific instructions when I get there."

An officer on the sidelines nodded to Thrawn to show the data had been received.

"I will caution you only once, Fourth Sister. Do not engage Bridger without the support of your squads and, more importantly, he is not to be killed", Thrawn's voice was cold and steady. Faro had heard the tone only a few times before and knew the consequences that came to those who disobeyed it.

The Fourth Sister seemed less than happy but begrudgingly agreed, "Very well, Grand Admiral."

She shut the link down from her end before any further response could be given.

Faro leaned over to Thrawn, "Sir, any more of an idea on what she's hiding from us?", she kept her voice low so others around wouldn't hear.

"None yet, but I intend to find out", he answered. "Commander Hammerly", the officer straightened up at Thrawn's mention of his name, "Bring up a map of the area designated to us by the Inquisitor."

They waited for the holotable to fill with the image of the surface. When it appeared, it showed a large area of almost featureless rocky terrain. Near the centre of the map, however, was a glaring anomaly. Something was interfering with the scans within a large area, perhaps an area of a few square miles or so by Faro's best guess.
"It seems we have our location", Thrawn zoomed in on the anomaly and waited for the scans to load up.

When the map updated, Faro was surprised at what she saw. The interference suggested some sort of oddly composed chemical fog, it wasn't unheard of for such things to happen, but among it there were signs of artificial structures. The fog seemed to hang about them and flow around the area there, leaving only tiny areas exposed.

"Intriguing", Thrawn stroked his chin in thought.

"It could be radioactive?", the Commodore suggested, "Maybe ionisation if there's something electrical down there. It would explain why the scanners are having trouble."

Thrawn continued to observe, "Informed suggestions, Commodore, as always. However, I suspect the cause of this issue is more enigmatic."

She furrowed her brow, "You think it's something with the force?"

It showed how well the Commodore could adjust to these unusual concepts that she could readily consider such an option. She was starting to agree with Thrawn's thinking that whatever was going on out here was something tied up with that ancient mystical power. Part of her didn't like it very much, she had no background in that kind of stuff, but she trusted her own abilities and those of the Chimaera's crew, not to mention the Grand Admiral's.

"I believe it is a likely explanation, given the nature of how we came to this world and its relationship to both Ezra Bridger and our Inquisitor."

"I'm no expert, but I've never seen anything about the force that did that. I thought it was just mind tricks and throwing things around", she was half-joking about it.

Thrawn didn't get the humour, "The full nature of the force eludes me but it is something far more powerful than that. I have personally seen far more unusual manifestations of its power."

She didn't need him to explain what he was talking about. They'd all heard the stories of Atollon even if they were up in orbit when it all happened. A giant creature, strange storms, lightning that could take down Imperial walkers - it was nightmarish. Faro hoped they weren't walking into another situation like that.

"I'll order the ground teams to make a full assessment", she pulled out her communicator from her belt. "I'll make sure they report to you immediately", she wanted to avoid another situation where the troopers returned without gathering any intel.

"That won't be necessary, Commodore", Thrawn raised a hand to stop her.

"Sir?"

Thrawn turned fully to her, "Notify our ground teams, I shall be joining them on this operation. I wish to investigate this world for myself."

Faro looked wide-eyed at him, "Grand Admiral, we don't know if it's safe down there. We can't afford to-"

"The stormtrooper detachment will keep me quite safe and you forget that I am no stranger to combat. The benefits of seeing this location far myself far outweigh the minor risks to my own safety."
"As you say, Grand Admiral", she pulled the comm to her mouth but paused before relaying the orders. "What about Bridger or his allies?"

The Chiss looked her in the eye, "Rest assured, Commodore, I have made all the necessary preparations."

Knowing that was the best answer she was going to get, Faro set about relaying her orders to the crew while Thrawn took one more look at the map before closing it down. He then slowly and calmly walked away from her and off the bridge. She was watching him go the whole time, praying that he wasn't walking into something that was going to get him hurt, or worse. Their mission was doomed if they lost him and he hadn't personally directed a ground operation since Atollon.

It was pointless to worry about that now. For the meantime, their job was to find Bridger and get to the bottom of this mess. Faro paced up to the front of the bridge, as she liked to do when she had the deck. Her stomach tightened as she caught a glimpse of the Inquisitor's shuttle in the distance flying down to the surface. Something was going to go wrong here, she could feel it. She just hoped they'd be able to pull out some answers from whatever mess they were about to walk into.

The Fourth Sister handed over the controls to the other pilot as they descended. She silently stepped back through the shuttle, relishing in the fear and suspicion she got from the stormtroopers. Each shirked away from her as she passed and spoke about her in hushed whispers as she waited at the entry ramp for landing.

She despised being with these cretins, useless grunts infamous for their inability to get the job done. Still, they were a necessary evil if she wanted to succeed. Thrawn's cooperation, for now, was essential to getting to the bottom of this mystery. Unfortunately, it also meant capturing Bridger alive too. She needed him for her own ends as well, but she'd rather just torture it out of him then and there and be done with it. She grumbled and silently promised herself that she was going to deliver Bridger alive but with at least a limb or two missing. He didn't need his arms to tell them what he knew.

If he knew anything at all, that was. He definitely knew something she didn't, whatever he managed to do with the wall back at that ruin. Somehow, it had transported him here, wherever here was. She was less sure that he'd have answers for that, though she'd do her best to figure out why the force had summoned her to this planet in particular.

Above all, it was still that voice she was most concerned with. Find me. The words played over in her head again. They came to her when that wall exploded as Bridger passed into it. It was possible he knew something at least.

"Twenty seconds", the pilot called out from the cockpit.

The stormtroopers behind her got to their last minute checks and preparations before landing.

"Sergeant", the Inquisitor summoned him with a harsh voice.

"Y-yes, ma'am", she could sense the trepidation in him. Good.

She didn't bother to look at him, "You and your troopers will follow my lead and do exactly as I say. Or else." She dipped her shoulder enough for him to get a glimpse of the lightsaber on her back.

He hesitated and she felt him squirming under his armour, "Of course, whatever you say, ma'am."
The shuttle shook as the landing gear hit the ground and the troopers raised their weapons in case anything wanted to greet them as they left. *Fools*, she could sense that there was nothing there.

When the ramp finally slid open, she could feel the astonishment from her subordinates. She herself was also taken aback by the sight in front of her. The shuttle was set down on a hill that overlooked a dark, mist-filled valley. There were ancient buildings and pillars sticking up through the purple mist and a large structure was carved into the stone cliffs on the far side of the valley.

Through the force, she was equally intrigued by what she felt. The place reeked of death and pain, unlike anywhere she'd been before. Among that sensation she felt the call that drew her here. It was definitely close, more than likely in the cliffside temple she could see. Then, the Fourth Sister smiled when she felt Bridger's presence too. It was hard to find through all the other things but not a problem for her. It seemed like everything was falling into place.

The Inquisitor pointed to two of the troopers, "You two, stay here and secure the shuttle. You are to destroy it if Bridger comes near."

"Yes, ma'am", both troopers saluted her.

"Squad, stay behind me. Eyes open for Bridger and don't get in my way", she barked at them before stepping out of the ship.

"You heard her", the Sergeant followed close behind, "Stay close and follow the Inquisitor! Set blasters to stun, we want this Jedi alive."

She despised hearing that. *He'll be dead in time, but not before he tells you everything he knows.*

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The strange mist was obscuring any view of this place as they walked down the hill. The Fourth Sister did her best to peer through but couldn't see more than a few metres in front of her.

"Ahh, this whole place feels wrong", one of the troopers from behind started to complain.

"I feel you, something's real off about this planet."

"Quiet!", the Sergeant barked at the two troopers, "Stay focused."

They walked a bit longer, getting deeper into the mist and closer to the buildings in the distance. As she stepped over another rock, something odd about it caught her eye. She bent down into the mist to get a closer look and the sight made her skin crawl. A *body*. Not a normal body, this one was corrupted. It looked black and dried up, like it had been here for millennia. Seeing the buildings around this place, there was a good chance it actually had.

"Inquisitor!", the Sergeant cautiously approached her.

"Body", she said flatly, "It must have been here for years...", her eye caught something of greyish-silver lying nearby.

Her hand reached out to the object to see what it was. A *lightsaber*? The hilt was old and the metal was blackened but it was definitely a lightsaber. It was an old cross-guard design with smaller vents on the side, apparently for ventilation.

The Sergeant intrusively peered over her shoulder, "What have you found?"

Wordlessly she activated the blade in the direction of the stormtrooper. The crimson blade sizzled to life, cutting a bit too close to the curious Sergeant and making him jump back on to the ground.
It was only a few seconds before the old blade sputtered out and deactivated. *What was it doing here?* There was no clear explanation for the weapon or the mutilated body beside it. She'd have to find answer here, they might end up being related to that voice too.

"M-maybe we should wait for reinforcements. I don't like this place", the Sergeant said as he scrambled to his feet.

The Inquisitor turned back and saw another trooper nervously step forward, "I'm with him, we'd better wait for extra support."

"We are continuing as planned. If you're too cowardly to keep going then I have no use for you", the Fourth Sister pulled her lightsaber off of her back and activated the blade.

She watched them all step back and look around at each other. She could sense their fear and their conflict about whether to follow her orders or hedge their bets. Wisely, and unfortunately, no one spoke up to dispute. They probably knew that any threat she made would be gladly followed through. She took their silence as acceptance and was a bit disappointed as she put away her weapon.

"I'm glad we have an understanding", she turned and kept walking into the mist.

A few seconds passed before she heard the murmurs of agreement and the sound of them following behind her. The Fourth Sister scanned around with her eyes as she walked. The thick fog made it difficult to see anything below her knees and it flowed unnaturally around every building and wall. She caught a glimpse of a few more slumped and twisted bodies on the ground or leaning up against walls.

"Another body", someone called a few metres behind her.

"Same here", another said.

There was a horrified gasp, "What in the-? What happened to these people."

"We will find out", the Fourth Sister spoke sternly over her shoulder, "Now stop whimpering like a child and keep up."

With a disgusted groan the trooper kept on moving with the squad. They were starting to reach some of the buildings now, most of which were surprisingly intact. From the looks of things, it seemed whatever happened here occurred millennia ago. The black colours were faded and dust had blown into piles at the base of the walls. At least the structures were mostly holding together even if the people who were here weren't so fortunate.

They reached what seemed to be the end of a street. At the far end of the next set of buildings, she could see a large cliff and a set of stairs leading down into the darkness of a temple-like structure.

"That has to be what we're here for", the Sergeant needlessly pointed out.

"Excellent observations, Sergeant", her voice dripped with sarcasm and contempt. "All of you will follow my lead and be on the alert, Bridger is in that temple. Remember, we're to take him alive. Unharmed is less of a concern", she knew she was going to make him suffer at least a little bit.

The Fourth Sister started towards her destination with the squad following a few paces behind her. It was down those stairs that she could feel the strange sensations that summoned her as well as the presence of the Jedi. Her destiny was waiting in there and it was time for her to meet it.
Sabine didn't know how many times she double-checked that the cloaking device was engaged. Ahsoka said they were going to be dropping out of hyperspace any second now and Sabine just wanted to make sure everything was going to be alright.

"We're here", Ahsoka announced softly and began disengaging the hyperdrive.

Ahsoka was guiding the ship manually rather than travelling to predetermined coordinates, she was following her own senses after all. Blind hyperspace travel was almost a death-sentence in most cases, particularly over long distances. With Ahsoka at the helm though, Sabine trusted her to guide them safely to where they needed to be.

Sabine still held her breath as the shuttle dropped to normal speed, silently begging that everything would go smoothly. Sure enough, three Star Destroyers and an Arquitens light-cruiser were waiting above a rocky purple planet.

They knew the Empire had a head start on them, even Ahsoka was surprised that the Inquisitor had caught on so quickly. By the time Ahsoka and Sabine were lifting off on the last planet, the Star Destroyers had already jumped to hyperspace, giving them just a few minutes advantage over them. *A few minutes is all it could take to...* She shook away the thoughts and glanced at the cloaking device indicator again.

"It's working, Sabine", Ahsoka smiled as she saw her checking.

"Can't be too careful", Sabine checked all the system indicators she could see.

Ahsoka slowly guided the shuttle to the planet in the distance, "This is definitely the place."

The Mandalorian stared out of the cockpit window. Her first instinct was to question Ahsoka but she had the odd feeling that she didn't need to. Something just told her that he was there, she just knew. "Yes...", she murmured, "This is it alright."

Ahsoka paid no mind to Sabine's odd sense of certainty, "I can feel the energy from the staff but there's more down there. I think we're in for another interesting planet."

"Hopefully the last one", Sabine muttered.

She started to check over her pistols and her bags to make sure everything was there. *Pistols, check. Detonators, check. Lightsaber, check.*

"Hmm, scanners are picking up a shuttle heading down to the surface", the Togruta said.

Sabine perked up and looked at the scanner for herself, "That's a good sign, I guess. At least it means they probably haven't found him yet." She lingered on it before going back to her pre-battle checks, "We should still hurry, the fewer Imperials between us and Ezra the better."

Ahsoka hesitated for a moment and then turned to face her, "Sabine... I think it's best if you stay on the shuttle."

The Mandalorian immediately glared at her with a fire in her eyes, "Excuse me? I did not come all this way to sit on the ship."

"That's not what it's about. Once we're down there the Empire is going see our shuttle plain as day, someone is going to have to stay aboard and keep the shuttle at a safe distance while the other gets Ezra out of there."
Sabine clenched the bag in her hands a bit too hard, "Then you stay here, I'm going to find him."

"Sabine, I understand you're angry", she reached out a hand to her, "But we know there's likely to be an Inquisitor and, in the nicest way possible, I'm better equipped to deal with them. Besides, if things don't go to plan...", Ahsoka sighed and didn't finish the sentence, knowing Sabine would get her meaning.

For a second, Sabine wanted to argue and shout. She wanted to see him, she wanted to see the look on his face when he knew they'd come to get him. Still... Ahsoka had a point. Sabine trusted her own abilities, she wasn't going to ignore how talented she was, but she'd be no match for an Inquisitor. The last thing Ezra would want would be for her to get hurt or killed trying to find him, it would break his heart. Ahsoka had the best chance of getting Ezra out safe and that was all that mattered.

"Okay", she relented and sunk back into her chair, "I trust you."

"Thank you, I know how much it means for you to say that right now", Ahsoka smiled sympathetically.

Sabine may have accepted the situation and trusted Ahsoka but that didn't mean she was happy about it. "We both know that the Empire is going to send people after us as soon they spot us."

"You're a good pilot", Ahsoka turned back to the controls, "And I'm sure you'll get the opportunity to blow up some TIE fighters while you're at it."

The Mandalorian slumped in her chair and sighed out her frustration. The frustration quickly melted into confusion as their destination came into view. A cloud of fog hung over a valley in the distance, with small buildings peaking out through the mist. Sabine couldn't make out much detail yet but so far everything about it just looked... wrong.

"What happened down there?", Sabine said in awe as the shuttle drifted closer.

Even Ahsoka seemed taken aback, "I don't know but this place is strong in the force."

"Wait... I think I see the shuttles", the shuttle drew closer to the location and Sabine could clearly make out the outline of at least one Sentinel-class Imperial shuttle poking out of the mist.

Ahsoka stood up and slung her cloak around her neck, "Here we go then." She picked up the staff leaning against the wall and checked the lightsabers clipped to her waist.

"We get much closer and they're going to know we're here", Sabine guessed they were less than a kilometre away now.

The former Jedi stood and observed the strange place as they approached. Ahsoka's face was unreadable but her gut told her that the Togruta was just as disturbed as she was by this place. She only hoped that Ezra wouldn't be stuck down there much longer.

"Take us low around the edges of the fog", Ahsoka pointed to a small rise just outside the fog.

Sabine squinted to see it, "If that shuttle down there dropped off any troopers then they'll definitely see us."

"They're going to catch on sooner or later, might as well have it be on our terms", Ahsoka shrugged. "Don't stop to land, drop me off and get out."
"If we're lucky I can draw some of their attention away from you", Sabine could at least enjoy blasting a few TIEs in the meantime to make up for not rescuing Ezra personally.

Ahsoka lay a hand on her shoulder, "Just keep yourself safe, we need a shuttle to come back to."

"I'll be fine", her face became more serious, "But... keep yourself safe. Ezra too."

"I'll protect him with my life", the Togruta assured her.

Sabine's head dropped a bit, "I know you will. Thank you, Ahsoka."

"Save that for when we get him back", Ahsoka met her gaze with another assured smile.

As the shuttle approached the drop-off point, Ahsoka squeezed Sabine's shoulder and walked back to the entry ramp. It would just be a quick drop, Ahsoka would jump out of the shuttle and be on the ground in seconds while Sabine would lead what attention she could away.

Leaning on her staff by the hatch, Ahsoka laughed to herself.

"I'm glad your sense of humour is along for the mission", Sabine called from the cockpit.

"It's nothing", Ahsoka sighed, "I'm just thinking. I'll make sure he saves the first hug for you."

Sabine turned back to her with a smirk as the shuttle finally reached the drop-off point, "You better or I'm leaving you here."

Ahsoka winked and hit the button to open the ramp. Sabine felt the rush of cold air as the door slid open. With a look back at the Mandalorian, Ahsoka leapt out of the shuttle to the ground a few metres below. As soon as Ahsoka was clear, Sabine pulled the shuttle up into the sky. She caught a glimpse of Ahsoka as she pulled away, her pristine white cloak standing out amongst the mist and dark rocks around her.

She still wished she was down there with her, fighting her way to him on the ground rather than buying time in the air. After spending four and a half years on Lothal missing him and then at least a few months out here looking for any trace of him in the middle of nowhere, she was a bit disappointed that hers wasn't the first face he'd see after so long. Still, she had to admit that Ahsoka had the best chance of getting him out of this situation. She would rather play it safe than end up having this whole long, dangerous, frustrating search come to nought.

With that thought, Sabine laughed to herself. She remembered not knowing whether she wanted to hug Ezra or slap him first. Thinking of how much she'd missed him, how long they'd been apart, how difficult it'd been to find him and how risky this whole mission had been, she knew her answer. Hug. Definitely hug. Then a slap. A good one too.

On cue, a handful of ineffective blaster shots rattled onto the hull, probably from an overambitious stormtrooper who caught sight of the shuttle from the ground. Soon after, the sensors picked up a few more ships heading into the atmosphere.

"Well", she flicked open the caps on the controls that covered the weapon triggers, "This is where the fun begins."
A few quick comments. Ezra discovers two long-dead people who seem to have died side by side, yet evidently belonged to opposite sides of the force. Don't expect to have every single answer to be laid out at any one point down the line, but little answers and allusions to the truth are coming up. Everything that you'll need to know for the story will be included and the extra details can be inferred from what happens later. So far, it's clear that people on both sides of the force found something to fight against. When, how, what and why are yet to be answered. Ezra does have a very old lightsaber though, which is bound to be useful somehow... Thrawn and Faro's little bit is brief and shows their first impressions of this new world. This is the first time in the story that Thrawn has decided to handle things personally and he's going to take a much more direct hand in things going forward, starting with seeing this odd world for himself. As we reach the final chapters of the search for Ezra, I might recommend glancing back over one or two of Thrawn's previous chapters - just a thought.

The Fourth Sister's section covers her arrival and the Empire's first glimpses of the mess down on the planet. I wanted to demonstrate the Fourth Sister's contempt for the stormtroopers and her harsh, condescending attitude towards them. After everything with the voice and Ezra's escape, she's a bit on edge and more than eager to bring this search to a close. Finally, we have Ahsoka and Sabine. They've spent 10 chapters on this search now and everyone is starting to converge at the same point down there. The decision to keep Sabine in the shuttle wasn't an easy one but it was the best choice. The shuttle needs to be in position to get them out and Ahsoka is ultimately the safer bet for getting Ezra, especially with an Inquisitor involved. It's also an example of Sabine's growth from when we first met her in Rebels. Not only is she willing to trust others with her life, her emotions and her concerns, but now she's placing Ezra's life in Ahsoka's hands too.

Next time: The search for Ezra comes to a close, one way or another.
Chapter 14 - Confrontation

Chapter Notes

The search for Ezra comes to a close, one way or another.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Inquisitor and her squad crept through the ruined buildings, stepping over more bodies as they walked. There was some sort of battle here, that much had been obvious from the start, and the Fourth Sister was getting more attuned to the sense of death and pain here. They fed here and made her eager for combat.

"Hey...", a soldier from behind turned around, "You hear that?"

"Hear what?", the Sergeant snapped back.

The trooper held up a hand, "Sounds like a shuttle."

"It's just our reinforcements", the Fourth Sister said impatiently.

"Are you sure? It doesn't sound like-", she stormtrooper stopped as soon as he saw the Inquisitor glaring at him. "Uh, you're right. Probably the reinforcements."

She too could hear the noise of a shuttle in the distance somewhere behind them but the fog and buildings were getting in the way of seeing it for certain. The Fourth Sister assumed they must have been reinforcements from Thrawn. At least that's what she thought at first, now she was starting to sense that something was different about this. She brushed it off, this whole world was strange and unusual, and there were more important things to attend to.

"Keep moving", she ordered, "We're almost there."

The squad pressed on towards the ruin they'd seen from above. The Fourth Sister could feel Bridger's presence getting closer with every step. He was down there, for sure, and there was going to be no escape this time. They reached the foot of the hill that led up to the stairs and the Inquisitor turned back to address the squad.

"Remember", she began, "Bridger is to be taken alive. Do your best to not let him kill you. But I warn you, if you get in my way then Bridger will be the least of your worries."

The squads murmured a few things in agreement and none met her gaze. Fear... pathetic.

Without another word, the Fourth Sister unclipped her lightsaber from her back and held it ready in her hand. She reached the top of the stairs and peered into the darkness, unable to see more than a few metres down. It looked like the stairs went on for a while into the ground. The Inquisitor stepped slowly onto the first step and then the next, keeping her eyes open for any sign of the Jedi's tricks. The stormtroopers nervously followed after her.

"Lights", the Sergeant whispered sternly and the stairs lit up with the white light from the stormtrooper's blasters.
The stairs went down about twenty metres and led into a level corridor. The stonework was a dull brown and covered in dust with some meaningless patterns and carvings on the walls, none of it telling her what this place was or what happened here. She reached the bottom of the stairs and waited for one of the troopers' lights to illuminate the way ahead. Another long corridor stretched out with the same bleak brown appearance but in the distance she could see it give way into a large cavern.

The Jedi's presence felt almost within her grasp as did the strange call in the force. They crept closer through the darkness, her eyes looking for any sign of what she wanted. Then, about halfway down the corridor, she thought she could make something out in the cavern ahead. Orange? Orange... the Jedi. Barely visible through the darkness and the mist was the worn and dirty orange clothing worn by Ezra Bridger.

"It's Bridger", she whispered over her shoulder, "Be ready."

The troopers behind her checked their weapons as they approached. The Jedi was motionless in the centre of the cavern and as they got closer she could see that he was simply kneeling there in a meditative pose. No doubt he'd already sensed their presence and probably knew there was no hope of escape.

Even as they entered the cavern, Bridger didn't move. He stayed kneeling near the centre of the room, his eyes shut tightly. A strange altar was at his back with the smashed remains of some sort of object and yet another defiled body lying against it. The Inquisitor strode in and stood just in the doorway, about ten metres from Bridger in the centre of the room. The stormtrooper squad fanned out across the room, forming a semi-circle around the Jedi at roughly the same distance from him that she was.

"Ezra Bridger, how fortunate meeting you here."

The Jedi waited a few moments, "Fourth Sister, right?", he said casually.

"Hmph. How did you get here? What sort of Jedi trick got you out here without a ship", she asked. The Jedi remained calm and didn't even open his eyes, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't play games with me!", she snapped, "Tell me what happened in that temple!"

A smirk formed on the boy's lips, "You lost, that's what happened."

The Inquisitor gritted her teeth, "I could have you executed right here, Jedi."

"No, you can't", he replied instantly.

"Oh really, can't I?"

"No", he said again, "If you could I'd be dead already. You said yourself, Thrawn wanted to speak to me. Besides, it sounds like you want some answers that I think you have to avoid killing me to get."

She folded her arms but clutched her lightsaber a bit tighter, "For the last time, child, what happened in that temple?"

"You're smart. Figure it out", the boy shrugged his shoulders.

"Enough of this!", her voiced echoed off the walls, "Tell me what happened with that portal!"
The troopers looked at each other in confusion and one or two murmured something to each other. She didn't care right now about what they knew, it'd be easy enough to kill them herself and blame it on Bridger.

The Jedi slowly shook his head, "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

Her fists clenched and she had to resist the urge to just strike him down now. With a growl at the back of her throat she ignited one of the blades of her lightsaber and pointed it at him.

"Your bravado won't save you, we'll break you soon enough. You know you can't escape this time, Bridger. Surrender and perhaps I'll consider delivering you to Thrawn unharmed."

The troopers raised their weapons and took aim, waiting for the Jedi's next move.

Ezra felt their weapons drawn on him and their fingers twitching at the triggers, but his resolve remained unshaken. *Just a little longer...*

"That won't be happening", he kept his voice calm and steady.

"Your choice, Bridger", the Inquisitor's answered with smug satisfaction.

"I can sense their fear...", Ezra breathed, "The troopers, they're scared."

A few of the stormtroopers broke focus and looked nervously around at each other, and as they did he sensed their weapons drift off their target.

"I sense their fear. Fear of this place and what it is. Fear of me and what I'll do to them", Ezra reached in and felt the minds of the troopers around him, many of them shaking under their armour. "And their fear of you", he nodded toward the Inquisitor.

He felt the Inquisitor's mouth twist into a smile, "They know what I do to people who get in my way. They fear me because they know I mean my threats, something you'll soon learn as well."

Ezra's hand still lay on his knees in his meditating position, "And I sense your fear."

The Inquisitor stepped back and her expression hardened, "Fear? You have too much faith in yourself, boy."

Ezra scowled, "It's not of me, so what is it of? This place, maybe? It'd make sense. A strange world, death, destruction, no answers. Enough to make anyone scared." His mind tried to probe into the Inquisitor's and sense the emotions coming from her. "But... there's something more", he said slowly, "Something else that you're scared of."

The whole squad of stormtroopers was now looking around bewildered, not knowing what was going on.

"What are you afraid of, Inquisitor?", Ezra asked. "No...", his mind tried to glean what little understanding he could, "Who are you afraid of?"

"Enough!", she screamed, "Troopers! Blast him!"

Everything happened in a flash. The squad had lost their focus as they watched the two of them and they were taken by surprise when the order came. It took them a second to register what was happening and it was all the time Ezra needed. As soon as the order came, Ezra pushed himself up from his meditating position with all his force and leapt into the air, flipping back onto the altar.
behind him. He looked to see a wave of stun blasts dissipate harmlessly into the ground where he had been. With his feet on the ground, he pushed out with the force with all the effort he could muster and sent out a wave of force energy at his attackers. The entire squad was sent reeling back and slammed hard against the walls with a hard crunch, leaving every single one of the stormtroopers unconscious on the ground.

The Inquisitor had been caught unaware and was sent careening back a few metres, landing hard on her back by the entrance. He stepped down from the altar as she scrambled onto her feet.

"I'm almost impressed, Bridger", the Inquisitor grunted and brushed off the dust on her clothes.

Ezra stepped forward a bit more, "It's always 'almost' with you. You'd think after beating you twice that you'd get a bit of humility."

She laughed, "Fleeing is not winning."

"You win by surviving."

The Inquisitor activated her blade again, "Well, you'll be losing soon enough. I don't need the stormtroopers to defeat you. You have no allies to come to your rescue, you don't even have a weapon to fight with."

Amazing, every word in that sentence was wrong. Ezra's mouth curled into a smirk, "You assume too much."

She narrowed her eyes, "Still so naive."

Ezra shut his eyes tight and his hands slowly reached around to his hip. His fingers reached for the ancient lightsaber and brought it round to his front. The Inquisitor's eyes went wide as he activated the blue blade of the old weapon he'd found earlier. He held it in the ready position in front of him, just like Kanan had showed him all those years ago. The weight felt familiar and everything came flooding back, as if he hadn't gone a day without wielding a blade.

"So be it", the Inquisitor said grimly.

Ezra raised the blade across his front in the traditional salute, an honour that the Inquisitor didn't bother to return. They stared each other down, trying to predict the other's first move. Ezra could see the surprise still on her face, she hadn't bargained on him finding a lightsaber and was clearly taken aback. No weapons, no allies? Wrong on both accounts...

Ezra hid the grin from her, not wanting to clue his opponent in in. Ezra hadn't expected it either and had honestly planned on this being his final defiant stand. To say he was surprised a few minutes ago would be an understatement, but the feeling might have been the biggest relief of his life. Their connection was strong, maybe even as strong as the one he'd built with Kanan, and there was no way in the galaxy he wasn't going to notice her arrival. A ship had entered the system not long ago and was already on the surface. A ship that certainly didn't belong to the Empire. A ship carrying Sabine Wren.

The Fourth Sister's feet suddenly left the floor as she leapt into the air. Ezra was ready to meet the attack and the whole cavern echoed with the crackling sound of a lightsaber blade meeting another.

"Approaching the landing zone now, Grand Admiral", the pilot called from the cockpit.

Thrawn's shuttle hovered low above a flat area just outside of the cluster of ruins that the Inquisitor
had marked out for them. The view from above had been unsettling enough and it was essential that they conduct a more thorough investigation on the ground.

They landed on a slight incline that allowed the Chiss to see over the mist and look at the ruins as the ramp opened. It was far more breathtaking on the ground. His assumption that this fog was something new seemed to be true. It flowed unnaturally across the ground and hung heavy over everything, obscuring a clear view of the environment. However, on the far side of the area, nestled into a cliff face and at the end of a long 'street' between the buildings, he could make out an entryway. It was safe to assume that it was there that was the most important part of this ruin. No doubt it is also where the Inquisitor has been drawn to.

On his orders, the stormtroopers moved from the landing site into the ruins. The buildings had little organisation to them aside from the central street he'd seen from the shuttle. The troopers fanned out into the buildings, most of which were surprisingly intact, as Thrawn started to make his own observations.

One of his stormtroopers raised a hand to call him over, "Grand Admiral! We have a body over here."

Thrawn quickly paced over to the trooper leaning down into the mist. Indeed he was right although it was much unlike anything he'd seen before. The corpse was blackened and the skin had been dried out. Decomposition could occur differently in different conditions but this was nothing natural, something terrible happened to this individual.

"Another one", someone called from behind.

A third voice came in, "Over here too, at least three more."

"Unsurprising", Thrawn told the trooper beside him, "The catastrophe that caused this destruction must have been on a significant scale. That there are many bodies which suffered this fate is unsurprising."

Thrawn took another look at the body, not wishing to touch it in case it was somehow contaminated. These wounds were inconsistent with any weapons he had seen.

"Corporal", he called to one of the troopers, "Ensure several of these bodies are retrieved and transported to the Chimarea. I wish them to undergo a more thorough investigation."

"Yes, sir", the Corporal saluted and pointed over to some of his subordinates to begin transporting the bodies.

Thrawn then went to one of the buildings, hoping to gain some understanding of who might have been here. Black stone, simple and reserved. No weathering. No further adornments or decoration. These individuals were not extravagant. Hard and angular designs suggest practicality, perhaps from a military or religious group, if not both.

He ran his blue fingers across the outer walls and inspected them. Interesting, the fog leaves no residue. Therefore, it is unlikely to be of a chemical nature. It is odourless, non-toxic and non-flammable, also ruling out gas, smoke or some sort of fuel. Fascinating. That leaves only one explanation: unexplainable. At least in conventional terms.

It was as he'd feared. The fact that the Fourth Sister had been so mysteriously drawn here had raised his suspicions and now the odd conditions on the surface all but confirmed them. This place had once been inhabited by some manner of force users. It was impossible to tell by eye how long
ago this might have occurred but deeper analysis might provide some answers. However, his own observations told him that his was far more ancient that the Republic and could date back thousands of years.

That left the next question: why out here? Seclusion on a desolate world, far from the known locations where force users might be found such as Coruscant and even from hyperspace lanes. Evidently, the people here wished to be left alone. The scale of the architecture suggests that this was not a humble religious obligation as might be expected from monks. No, this seclusion was necessary. They must have had something to hide. But what?

Thrawn looked around at the bodies scattered about. He moved among the stormtroopers, wordlessly noting the position of the bodies, the structures and their orientation. It was beginning to look even more troubling. Some stood opposed to one another, some stood side-by-side. None, however, are hiding. This was a catastrophe that came unexpectedly nor were all of its victims similar. There were at least two different factions fighting and both were caught by this disaster.

Then that begged yet another question: why is this place now abandoned? If something here was worth having, worth fighting for, why was it left in disrepair? It is unlikely that everyone who knew about this location perished here. However, neither side returned to recover their fallen or return the location to its original function. This place must have been abandoned intentionally, left here and forgotten so nobody would ever return after whatever transpired.

An abandoned world of force users, ravaged by a strange force-based weapon millennia ago, left undisturbed for years and mysteriously drawing force users to it now. There were no more doubts in Thrawn's mind. They were on the trail of whatever the Emperor had sensed out here.

"Grand Admiral", a trooper ran up to him and saluted. "Uh, some of the men from the Inquisitor's squad are reporting that a shuttle passed over. It wasn't one of ours. They say it flew in, stopped over a ridge, and flew off again."

So, they had already arrived. "I see. Thank you, trooper", Thrawn pulled his comm from his belt, "Captain Pellaeon?"

"Grand Admiral", the Captain's voice acknowledged a few seconds later.

"It seems Bridger's allies have arrived already."

There was silence for a few moments, "Already? How's that even possible?"

"That is not our concern. Deploy another squad of stormtroopers to the surface, we must be prepared for their intervention."

"At once, Grand Admiral", the Captain replied.

"As for the shuttle", Thrawn's eyes darted to the ground for a second and then to the sky, "Three TIE fighters should suffice to handle the shuttle."

There was hesitation on the other end, "Only three?"

"Only three. One shuttle is unlikely to evade such odds and we cannot afford to dedicate excessive fuel and munitions at this time."

The Captain sighed, "As you say, Grand Admiral. I'll order them down immediately."

The Captain didn't seem to agree with his strategy. An understandable concern, his own
independent thinking continues to show through. All in due time.

Thrawn keyed in the Inquisitor's comm address, "Inquisitor?" No response. "Inquisitor?", a few more seconds passed without an answer. Sliding the comm back into his belt, the Chiss looked over to his squad leader. "Sergeant, you have a new objective. Take half of your men and move up the central street. There is an entryway there which your squad will need to investigate."

"Of course, sir. Are we looking for anything in particular?"

"The Inquisitor. Or Ezra Bridger. More than likely, you will find both", Thrawn answered.

The Sergeant nodded and took half of his men deeper into the ruins, disappearing into the fog away from them. The other half of the squad remained with the Grand Admiral to retrieve the bodies and aid in his investigation. As he started to observe the buildings again, he could only hope that everything would play out according to plan.

The Inquisitor's lightsaber slammed hard into Ezra's blade, a deep screeching noise emanating from it.

"I'll admit, I hadn't expected you to stand and fight", the woman snarled.

Ezra favoured her with a cocky grin, "I'm full of surprises."

He put all his strength into his arms and pushed the Inquisitor's blade back, breaking the saber lock. Ezra swung his lightsaber at her torso and she hit it away with her blade. As he brought his lightsaber back, he blocked a swipe from the Inquisitor. She pressed the attack, swinging high from the left, then low from the right. The force warned Ezra beforehand and his blue blade was ready to meet every strike.

Ezra started to backpedal as she pressed her attack. Kanan's lessons in Form III came back into his mind and he focused on putting up a strong defence, ensuring that the Inquisitor wasn't given a single fatal opening. The Inquisitor did the opposite of Ezra, committing everything to her attacks in an aggressive and violent attempt to take him down.

She brought her lightsaber down hard again, glaring at him from between the blades, "You're no match for me, Jedi. I was trained by Lord Vader and the Grand Inquisitor."

Ezra met her gaze, "Well I was trained by the Jedi who killed the Grand Inquisitor, so I'll take my chances."

He threw her back again and went on the offensive. He went high but feinted at the last second, going low and only barely being blocked by the Inquisitor. Ezra took advantage of the surprise, bringing his blade up high again while the Inquisitor was still off-balance, making her stumble back in an attempt to dodge the blade which missed her by inches. The Inquisitor slid back and they paused to catch their breath.

"Your form is good, boy, but not good enough."

The Jedi tightened both hands on his lightsaber and held it infront of him, "I wish I could say the same for you."

She grinned maliciously at him, "We shall see."

The Inquisitor held her lightsaber in front of her and activated the second blade. She brought it
down to her side, adjusting her style for the extra blade. Ezra changed up too, holding the saber higher and close to the side of his face like Kanan used to do.

She yelled as she leapt forward again and began striking at him faster. Their blades met for barely a second as they picked up the pace of their duel. She had a favoured pattern that he began to notice. She'd raise her lightsaber and swing downwards, catching him high with one of the blades. Immediately after, she'd pull back and bring up the lower half of her lightsaber, hoping to catch him from below. It forced him to rapidly move and block, denying him much chance to attack for himself.

Ezra kept note of her pattern as she began striking out recklessly wherever she could. Their lightsabers glanced off each other and crackled loudly, sending flashes of light out across the room. Then, Ezra sensed her next attack coming in, following the pattern she'd started to use. This time, Ezra was ready.

Her lightsaber came down from high and Ezra blocked it. As soon as she pulled it away to bring up the lower blade, instead of moving to block it, Ezra sidestepped and stood clear. The Inquisitor hadn't expected him to dodge and the blade cut up into thin air. Ezra then cut up from below with all his strength and pushed the double-ended lightsaber up. The force of the swing was stronger than the Inquisitor had expected and, as Ezra planned, the lightsaber flew up out of her hands and clattered to the ground somewhere behind him.

Using her confusion against her, Ezra pushed out with the force and sent her flying backwards, leaving the Fourth Sister lying on her back a few metres away.

"You've lost, Inquisitor", he walked towards her and raised his blade.

"What are you going to do, Jedi? Kill me?", she laughed as she propped herself up on her elbows.

Ezra met her eyes, seeing the hatred seething within them.

No, he couldn't kill her.

"That's what I thought", the Inquisitor said as her eyes glanced somewhere behind him for a moment.

Ezra lowered his blade but kept it in his hands, ready for if she tried anything. "No, I won't kill you", he sighed, "That's not the Jedi way."

"The Jedi way", she mocked, "How have you still not got it through your head? The Jedi are dead! They were wiped out. All that's left is you and you're not getting off this world alive."

"You'll be surprised", he grinned. Seriously, where are you guys?

Her eyes shot behind him once again. "As will you!", she shouted as her arm shot out toward him.

Ezra sensed the danger before he heard the noise of her lightsaber coming to life. He leapt up into the air and gasped as the Inquisitor's lightsaber spun under him and flew back into her hands. By the time he'd landed, she was charging at him at full speed and he only just managed to raise his saber to block her.

"When you've told me what I want, I'm going to kill you slowly", her eyes burned with hatred at him as their sabers locked.

"You talk too much!", Ezra pressed into the saber lock, putting his strength into pushing her back.

Their blades cracked and sizzled loudly against each other and the light grew more intense as they
forced against each other. Ezra could feel her strength giving in and she was about to break the saber block when his blue blade made a horrible screeching noise. *What the-?*

Ezra looked at his blade and could swear he saw it... *no, no no no no no!* Ezra jumped back and pulled the lightsaber away just in time. It whirred and crackled horribly before it started to flicker in and out of existence. He watched in disbelief as the blade cut out and a thin wisp of smoke came from the hilt. *Dammit, I knew it was too much to expect this old lightsaber to be reliable.*

The Inquisitor gave a satisfied laugh, "Poor Jedi, the force has turned its back on you."

Ezra caught his breath in his throat. This was *not* good.

"Now then, Bridger", the Inquisitor grinned, "Time to end this."

With a grunt she pushed out with the force and threw Ezra against the altar in the centre of the room. His back slammed against the stone with a crack and the useless hilt was thrown away into the darkness. He groaned at the pain and reared his head at the Inquisitor slowly walking towards him. Her blade dragged in the ground as she approached.

"I need you alive but that doesn't mean unharmed", she stood above him and raised her blade. "You've had us on the run for so long, maybe losing your legs would teach you a lesson."

Ezra shut his eyes tight and braced himself. He was too exhausted and dazed to reach out with the force. He had no weapon and he had no energy. *Kanan lasted without his sight... and artificial limbs are so adva-

Suddenly, Ezra's eyes shot open and the hairs on his neck stood on end. The Inquisitor froze up too, her eyes going wide and meeting his.

*No... it couldn't be.*

Everything seemed to stop and the whole galaxy felt like it was taking a breath. He didn't know how long he locked eyes with the Inquisitor above him but he could see the understanding growing in her eyes. After what felt like an eternity, the Inquisitor stopped looking at him and turned her head over her shoulder. Ezra finally broke out of his trance and looked over to the entrance.

*Ahsoka.*

Sabine brought the ship around as the sensors blared to warn her of the incoming ships. Her fingers hovered over the weapon triggers, ready and eager to take on whatever the Empire was going to throw at them. The screens showed her two Imperial shuttles were coming in from orbit and heading towards her to land.

This shuttle was heavier that anything she'd flown, certainly a lot less manoeuvrable than either of the Phantoms, but she'd have to make do. Hopefully, it made up in firepower what it lacked in mobility.

Sabine came in from the side of their flight path, hoping to catch them by surprise. The two shuttles were flying beside each other, one leading the other by a short distance. Sabine lined up her ship with the lead shuttle and waited for the targeting system to confirm the shot.

"Now!", she pressed the triggers down and sent a stream of blue laser fire in the direction of the Imperials.
The shuttles had no time to react and a number of shots caught the first shuttle. Its stabiliser wing crumbled and other shots rattled into its hull, sending it falling out of the sky in a billow of smoke. The second shuttle's pilot saw this and started to try some evasive manoeuvres. The nose of the shuttle went down and it went under the stream of fire from her own ship.

It then banked right to try and evade her and kicked up its speed. Sabine pulled on the controls and turned her ship, holding the trigger and not giving her opponent time to breathe. The Imperial shuttle wasn't too fast or agile but neither was her own ship and she struggled to line up a shot as her enemy weaved side to side to throw her off. She chased after him and got a few glancing blows on her target but wasn't managing to do any major damage.

As they got closer to the old ruins, another proximity warning sounded in the cockpit.

"Ugh, what now?!", she snapped. She rolled her eyes after reading the screen, "TIE fighters. Great."

She looked at the shuttle she'd been chasing and then at the screen. If she kept chasing the shuttle, the TIEs could easily get the drop on her. If she broke off to take the fighters, that shuttle would drop off more reinforcements for Ahsoka and Ezra to deal with.

She bit her lip and sighed, "Sorry you two, I'm sure you can handle it."

The Mandalorian broke off her pursuit of the shuttle and let it go down to the surface. Instead, she pulled the ship around and headed straight in the direction of the approaching TIEs. She could make out their unmistakable silhouette against the clouds already. They wouldn't be expecting a direct head-on assault from an old shuttle - no one but her would be crazy enough to try that.

As soon as they were in range, Sabine sent waves of laser fire at them. All three started to break formation to avoid the attack. As the centre fighter pulled up, Sabine saw the flashes as its hull took several hits before exploding into a fireball.

Sabine took her eyes off the explosion and started looking for the other two fighters. They'd both pulled up and she'd lost sight of them in the chaos. Then, a stream of green lasers shot past the window on the right as one of the TIEs looped around for a counterattack.

"Karabast!", she cursed and banked hard to the left to avoid the attack.

Another volley came from the side as the other TIE joined in. Forced onto the defensive, Sabine pulled down and to the right to avoid the second attacker. They both passed over her without getting a hit.

Sabine brought the lumbering shuttle up and looked quickly at the sensors, trying to guess their next move. Both TIEs were moving quickly and turning around, no doubt trying to get behind her and line up some clear shots. That was the last thing she wanted to happen. Sabine brought the shuttle around to the right, letting the large ship have the space it needed to move. If she wasn't quick she'd-

"Aghh!", the whole ship rocked. "Dammit, for fu-", another impact rocked the shuttle.

The TIEs were already behind her and were closing in fast. They were faster and more agile than her and were now in the last place she wanted. She did her best to buy some time, weaving left and right to throw off their aim, as she tried to inspect the damage. No major damage, at least that's something. The shields had held but they wouldn't last forever. There was no chance of her outpacing the TIEs or outmanoeuvring them like this.

She kept calm and thought back to Hera and her flight lessons. The Twi'lek had given her and Ezra
lots of advice and training over the years and was full of good ideas and methods. Sabine would never be anywhere close to as good a pilot as Hera but that didn't mean the Mandalorian couldn't put some of her tactics to use. Sabine considered her situation and remembered Hera's instructions.

"I hope you're right about this, Hera", she breathed.

She'd have to adapt the technique to fit the shuttle rather than the X-Wing Hera performed the manoeuvre in. Sabine stopped weaving and went straight ahead, waiting only a second for both of the TIEs to line up behind her. It was risky but it was the only way this was going to work. The second that they were in position, Sabine slammed a button on the console and cut out the engines. The momentum kept her in the air while she pulled up, arcing the shuttle up into the air with what momentum remained. The shuttle slowed as the momentum ebbed away but the timing had been perfect. The fast-moving TIEs passed under her at the same time that her shuttle reached its peak and started to fall.

Immediately, Sabine reignited the engines and opened fire. It took a few seconds for them to warm up, so the shuttle started to fall back down. As the shuttle came down, she let out a stream of fire in the direction of the left-most TIE and blew it into pieces. The engines then kicked in and she pulled up towards the TIE on the right. As her ship came up, she fired again and caught the last fighter with another volley and sent it spinning out of control towards the ruins.

Sabine let out an exhausted sigh and leaned back in the chair, "Hera is definitely hearing about that." She looked down towards the ruins and then down at her comm, "Come on, Ahsoka. Where are you?"

Standing in the entrance was the familiar Togruta, a towering staff in her right hand. Her glowing white cloak shined brightly even through the unnatural darkness of this place. Ezra could feel her wisdom and the sense of power she carried with her, knowing that she was leagues above anything this Inquisitor had faced. Even as he sat beneath the altar, he still caught the faintest glimpse of a smile visible under her hood.

"Step away from him", her familiar voice spoke with authority and reverberated around the whole chamber.

Clearly, the Inquisitor had no clue who she was dealing with. "And why would I do that? Who are you to come here and order me around?"

"I'm not here for you, Inquisitor, I'm here for my friend." For the first time, she made eye contact with him as she spoke.

The Inquisitor looked back at Ezra for a second, "A friend of Bridger's? How unfortunate. You and your Jedi friend are going to die here."

Ahsoka calmly took a few paces forward, "I'm afraid that's not going to happen."

The Inquisitor stepped away from the altar and brandished her blade, "You're going to try and fight me, Togruta?"

"No", Ahsoka kept her voice steady and tapped her fingers on the staff she carried, "We've got places to be."

"What do you think this is?", the Inquisitor snapped indignantly and stepped towards her. There was only a few metres between them now.
"Step aside and I'll do you no harm", Ahsoka met the Inquisitor's gaze and held it.

The darksider laughed, "That's not how this works."

"Now you've done it...", Ezra muttered from behind them.

Ahsoka smiled and looked over to him, "Cover your ears, this tends to be loud..."

Ezra listened and shoved his hands over his ears. The Inquisitor lifted her blade to lunge at Ahsoka but the Togruta didn't even flinch. She raised her staff up and thrust forward at her attacker, causing a massive flash of white and yellow light to erupt from it with a deep rumble. Ezra watched as a burst of strange lighting blasted at the Inquisitor in full force and sent her flying over his head. The lightsaber flew out of her hand as she was sent tumbling backwards before slamming hard into the ground. Ezra looked over the altar and saw her unconscious form slide across the floor, aftershocks of the strange lightning still dancing over her body.

"I'm not going to ask", Ezra breathed as he turned back.

Ahsoka stood over him with a wide smile, "When you asked me to come and find you, I didn't think you'd make it this hard."

The former Jedi reached out a hand to help him up and Ezra brushed the dust off his clothes as he scrambled to his feet.

"You look like you're in one piece", Ahsoka smiled, "A bit worse for wear but nothing serious."

"Yeah...", Ezra ran his hand across his beard, "Ahsoka... I... I can't believe you're here. How did you both find me?"

The Togruta cocked an eyebrow, "Both?"

"Yeah", he shrugged, "I sensed Sabine the moment she arrived on the planet."

She smiled down to the ground, "Ah, I shouldn't be surprised about that."

Ezra rubbed his head, "How surprised did you think I was when I felt it?"

"A welcome one, I'm sure."

"You can say that again. But I still don't get it, how did you find me so quickly?", the Jedi asked. She tapped the staff on the ground, "It's complicated. Which also reminds me...", she pointed the staff past him and back towards the corridor which he came in through from the portal. A ball of pale yellow light shot out from the corridor and seemed to absorb back into the staff.

Ezra's mouth hung open, "Again, I'm not going to ask."

"Probably for the best, there'll be time to talk later."

The Jedi paused and took a few deep breaths. Everything had happened so fast that he barely had time to register anything. Almost five years of his life were spent alone out here, hoping that maybe he'd get a chance to go home. Now, that time was finally, definitely over.

Ahsoka sensed his emotions, "Are you alright?"

"Yeah", he breathed, "I think I'm better than alright."
"Good, because we've still got to get to the ship", Ahsoka turned and motioned for him to follow.

His mind was still racing as he followed her, "I'm guessing Sabine is with the ship?"

"Got it in one", Ahsoka replied, "She's keeping the Empire occupied to buy us time. I think she was a bit disappointed that she didn't get to come down to get you in person."

"If I know Sabine, I'm sure blowing up what the Empire sends at us might make up for it", Ezra grinned. There was almost nothing in the galaxy that Sabine loved more than sticking it to the Empire.

They reached the foot of the stairs out of the ruin and Ezra took another look back at the altar and the slumped Inquisitor.

"Ahsoka, do you know what happened here?", he asked solemnly.

She turned back with him, "No, I don't, but it worries me."

"It's just...", Ezra thought back to the instructions he had from Master Yoda and the warnings he gave.

Ancient and powerful, that was how he described what he'd felt out here. This had to be something to do with it, it couldn't be a coincidence. However, Yoda had also told him to expect allies at home to help in dealing with... this. The force brought Sabine and Ahsoka here for a reason, it had to be the way forward in facing whatever was out here.

"Never mind. Like you said, there'll be time to talk later", Ezra decided it was best to talk about everything some other time and turned back to the stairs.

From the corner of his eye, he saw the troubled look on Ahsoka's face but she didn't press him for anything more. They had to deal with one thing at a time and right now all that mattered was getting out of here.

"Here", Ahsoka reached under her cloak and pulled out one of her lightsabers, "You might need it."

Ezra took the saber and admired it up close, recognising the familiar and unusual shape. "I was going to ask, no use finding me only for me to get shot trying to get out", he chuckled.

"I want it back", she warned jokingly.

He shrugged and clipped it to his belt, "That's fine. White isn't really my colour."

"I'm glad your sense of humour hasn't been worn out", Ahsoka smiled. "Come on, time to get out of here."

They left the chamber and started to walk up the steps. About halfway up, Ezra glanced at Ahsoka, "Do you sense it too?"

"Absolutely", Ahsoka answered casually as she slid her staff into a sling on her back. She too could sense the stormtroopers closing in on their position.

Ezra followed her lead as they ascended the stone stairs and walked out into the open. Sure enough, six stormtroopers were approaching the ruin and froze when they saw them.

"Stop right there!", the squad leader barked.
Simultaneously, Ezra and Ahsoka activated their white lightsabers as the squad opened fire. Ezra’s training flooded back and he blocked the shots effortlessly, deflecting them harmlessly into the ground or up into the air. It took him a while before he’d got the hang of it enough to send the bolts back at the troopers. Ahsoka had already taken down two before he’d even got one.

"You know", he grunted, "They're going to send more forces after us."

Ahsoka hit back another bolt and caught a fourth trooper, "Then we'd better move."

They both stepped down from the hill and into the street while the remaining two troopers fired at them. Wisely, the two stormtroopers retreated as they approached. Ezra reached out with the force and got hold of them both, lifted them up, and threw them into the side of one of the buildings, rendering them unconscious on the ground.

"That'll buy us some time", Ezra deactivated the blade and smiled at Ahsoka.

A blaster bolt zoomed past them not even a second later.

"You were saying?", Ahsoka ducked down and activated her own lightsaber.

Through the mist, they could see another full squad of stormtroopers approaching.

The Togruta tapped her wrist comm, "I've got him, ready for pickup."

Ezra was a little disappointed when no real response came through, there wasn't a sound in the galaxy he wanted to hear more than Sabine's voice right now. A few more minutes, that's all it'll be.

"Which way to the ship?", Ezra asked as his blade ignited to deflect a shot.

"Follow me", Ahsoka backpedalled a few paces and then turned to lead the way.

Ezra glanced back over his shoulder as he covered her from behind. The squad was closing fast and there was at least ten or more of them. They weren't impossible odds, definitely not for the two of them, but with the buildings and environment it could be easy to get cornered.

Ahsoka sprinted through the area and Ezra kept pace, not wanting to lose sight of them in the mist. The stormtroopers had an advantage as their visors could probably pick them up through the fog, but the force was all that Ezra needed. Even as he lost sight of the pursuing troopers, the force warned him in enough time to block any shots that came their way.

Even as he was leaving, this place still struck him with fear. He hadn't gotten much in the way of answers about this place, let alone about what Master Yoda had told him. The brief glimpses he caught of the desecrated corpses as they went reminded him that while his exile was coming to an end, something else was only just beginning.

"Not far now", Ahsoka called from ahead.

The buildings started to thin out as they reached the outskirts of the area. They'd put some distance between themselves and the troopers but a few wayward shots were still trailing them. Ezra kept looking ahead intermittently and saw the terrain start to rise higher as they cleared the last of the buildings.

Ahsoka clambered up the small hill and instantly went to her comm, "We're at the pickup, where are you?"
There was no response as Ezra ground to a halt next to her.

"Sabine?", Ahsoka called again into her comm.

Ezra heard the voices of the troopers approach and Ahsoka brought her lightsaber up again.

"There they are! Stop them!", glimpses of white armour appeared between the buildings below as blaster fire started to soar at them.

They both started to block a shower of blaster fire as the troopers closed in. They were exposed up on the hill and there was no telling when more Imperial reinforcements could arrive.

Luckily, it was their backup that got their first.

Ezra turned just before the noise of the ship's engines blared behind him. A red and white Clone Wars era shuttle hovered over head and a torrent of blue lasers poured down onto the attacking stormtroopers. He couldn't tell how many were caught in the blast and soon dust was flying everywhere as the Imperial squad descended into chaos.

The shuttle ceased fire and turned in the air as a small doorway opened up on the side of the hull. Even though it was right there in front of him, Ezra still though he was dreaming.

"After you", Ahsoka pointed to the shuttle.

Ezra stared at the door for a moment before leaping up with the force.

His judgement was perfect and his feet landed on the floor of the shuttle's doorway, before he fell forward onto his hands and knees. The sound of Ahsoka's feet hitting the metallic floor was followed by the hiss of the door closing. Ezra stayed on his hands and knees, panting for breath and trying to process everything that had just happened. This was it. He was safe. Nearly five years... and it was over.

Ezra barely noticed the feeling of the shuttle rising into the sky nor did he really notice as Ahsoka ran into the cockpit. Everything was just... overwhelming. He pushed himself up onto his knees, still staring blankly down at the floor in shock. Finally, he started to stand and accepted it in his mind.

After all this time, he was finally going home. Nothing in the galaxy had ever felt this good.

He was proved wrong a second later as a pair of arms threw themselves around him.

Chapter End Notes

At last! Damn, it feels like Ahsoka and Sabine have been chasing Ezra forever.

A bit about some of the sections. I liked the idea of Ezra being the one to sense fear in his opponent. It seems that it's always the villains sensing the other's emotions and talking about it. I wanted to flip the tables and make it the good guys feeling it. Also, I think it helps establish Ezra's power and, honestly, I think he's more powerful than the Inquisitor and had his lightsaber not cut out I think he'd have won out against her in the
end. I've said before, the Fourth Sister isn't some force god or supervillain, she's just a normal Inquisitor and Ezra's abilities and experience make him a formidable opponent for her. Sabine's final manoeuvre against the TIEs is a real-world tactic I remember hearing about on a documentary a while ago. I did my best to recreate it and noticed how similar it was to Hera's moves in the Battle of Lothal, so it was easy to have it be something Sabine learnt from her. As for Ahsoka, she dismisses the Inquisitor without so much as using her lightsabers. Granted, the staff has its crazy powers, but even without it Ahsoka would have wiped the floor with her. When it comes to Ezra sensing Sabine, I originally planned on Ezra not knowing Sabine was there until after he'd gotten on the shuttle but I realised that the connection he'd built with her would tell him anyway. I sort of prefer it this way, it shows off Ezra's abilities and exemplifies how strong their bond really is. Also, ending on that hug has to be the most personally satisfying final sentence I've ever written for anything.

This is a pretty major chapter since Ezra has just gotten onboard the shuttle and is being taken home. I've said since day one that I've got this story planned out chapter-by-chapter and that's made it easy for me to plan and adapt things. This chapter was once two, being split between the confrontation with the Empire in one half, ending with Ahsoka meeting Ezra, and then their escape in part two. It became pretty clear that it was better to put it into one single chapter. My long term planning has been refined over time and my original 48 chapter plan is now down to 44 and might go down a bit more, all to make the story more interesting and better paced. This chapter is also significant in that it mentally marks the end of the first 'period' of this tale. In my own mind, I've grouped everything up to this point under a mental 'search for Ezra' category. It's probably the longest individual section (although I could be wrong on that) and it's a personal milestone that tells me that I'm really getting on with this story.

Lastly, my upload schedule might be a bit chaotic in the next few days/week, so don't be surprised if the next chapter takes a bit longer than usual. I'm hoping that things will be fine, but I wanted to give some forewarning just in case.

Next time: Thrawn gives a lecture, Pellaeon and Faro have their questions answered, and Sabine and Ezra have their long-awaited reunion.
Chapter Notes

I'm losing track of how much time it's been since I last published but I don't think I'm too out of step with this. As I said, a lot is going on right now so the next few chapters might be a bit erratic in when they're published.

Anyway, this time we get to what might be my favourite chapter of this story so far. Thrawn gives a lecture, Pellaeon and Faro have their questions answered, and Sabine and Ezra have their long-awaited reunion.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Sir...", a stormtrooper approached Thrawn nervously with his head bowed, "The... the intruders have... escaped."

The other troopers inspecting the small building with Thrawn froze up and stopped what they were doing. The Grand Admiral remained calm and composed, as he always did.

"And Bridger?", he only sought to confirm his assumption.

"He's gone as well, Grand Admiral", the stormtrooper kept his head low.

So... Bridger is going home. Thrawn stood completely still, deep in thought and staring unflinchingly at the soldier that had brought the report to him. Their secondary mission for almost five years had been the capture of Ezra Bridger. This trooper's fear at this moment was understandable but, in all honesty, unwarranted.

"Thank you", Thrawn told him, "Dismissed."

The man hesitated and stuttered before turning heel and leaving the building a bit faster than usual. The other men in the ruined building murmured among themselves and nervously returned to their inspection of the area.

Thrawn pulled his communicator from his belt and tried once again to raise the Inquisitor. No response. He'd be surprised if Bridger had actually killed her, though his rescuer's hand in this could have brought her life to an end as well.

"Troopers, with me", he summoned two of the men near him and left the building.

The Chiss made silent observations as he walked toward the Inquisitor's presumed location. A higher concentration of bodies here compared to elsewhere, suggesting that the fighting became more intense as it moved towards the central ruin. Thrawn's position hadn't been far from where he suspected the Inquisitor was and he was almost at the stairs within a few minutes. As he reached it, he noticed another change: interesting, now there are almost no bodies. It seems that the attackers were killed before reaching this location, which suggests something within was worth the effort to keep them out.
Thrawn reached the top of the stairs that descended into the ground, constantly trying to assess his surroundings. He noted the patterns on the walls as he started to climb down. *Not extravagant but their existence sets it apart from the surrounding structures. Perhaps its purpose warranted the extra attention and glorification, or maybe this temple was constructed by someone other than those who built the surrounding buildings.*

The stairs gave way to a narrow corridor which led into a large chamber. The fog that flowed on the ground seemed to get thicker down here and the Grand Admiral began to suspect why. In the centre of the chamber was an altar with a smashed object lying on top of it. This room appeared to be the central chamber of this ruin and several smaller corridors led off of it.

His focus went back to finding the Inquisitor. She was crumpled on the floor on the far side of the room, scrapes and tears across her face and clothing. She appeared to have been thrown across the room and was starting to stir awake as he approached.

"Inquisitor", his cold voice echoed throughout the chamber.

The Fourth Sister started to open her eyes with a pained groan. Her eyes squinted as she looked around the room, likely trying to remember what exactly had happened.

Thrawn watched her in her daze, "Bridger is gone."

Bridger’s name caught her attention as she sat up and she finally focused her attention on the Chiss. Thrawn saw the flash of anger appear in her eyes and then humiliation and regret.

"His allies have left with him on their shuttle and they are already en route home. Your failure is more than complete."

She gritted her teeth and reached out a hand, "Grand Admiral, I..."

"You will listen to what I have say", he cut her off sternly. "Your defiance has cost us Bridger as well as the lives of many of our men. For several weeks you have openly defied my orders, repeatedly failed in your own missions and continually endeavoured to hide things from me."

Wisely, the Inquisitor held her tongue.

Thrawn continued to look down at her, "Our only hope now is that you can redeem yourself for your failures by committing your efforts to my mission."

The Fourth Sister's tensed up, "Your search."

"My search", Thrawn confirmed, "And you shall defer to my judgement and my instructions whilst a part of it or you shall be dealt with accordingly."

"If you're that disappointed, why not just kill me?", she laughed weakly.

"Because, Inquisitor, you may yet be of use to us. The Emperor sensed a disturbance in the force and thus your abilities in that regard may prove useful in the future", Thrawn explained.

The Fourth Sister smirked up at him, "You need me."

"We need each other, Inquisitor", Thrawn countered.

She finally started to stand up unsteadily and winced from pain somewhere in her body. Thrawn made no offer to help her up or aid her, knowing she’d only turn him down.
"If you need my help then you're going to have to-

"At the moment, you are in no position to make a demand of anything, Inquisitor", Thrawn cut her off.

She shrank away and muttered under her breath, far too quietly for him to hear. Even with her arrogance, there was no mistaking her abject failure so far. Good, Thrawn though, let it drive her.

The Chiss watched her resentment simmer within before half turning away, "If you have nothing more to say, I have other matters to attend to."

"Whatever you say, Grand Admiral", she sarcastically exaggerated the title.

There were no more words as Thrawn turned his back and walked away. His mind played over everything in his head again, contemplating how every event had played out and fed into another. As he exited the ruin, he reached for his communicator on his belt.

"Commodore?", he said.

There was a few seconds delay, "Grand Admiral", she answered cautiously. The trepidation, she already knows.

"Summon Captain Pellaeon to the Chimaera and escort him to my office, I wish to speak with both of you there."

"At once, sir", she answered.

The Grand Admiral put the device away and made his way back to the shuttle. It was time for them to assess the situation they found themselves in. More importantly, it was time to give them both some answers.

Captain Pellaeon didn't find himself speechless often. He also didn't see the sensible Commodore Faro as one to be easily silenced either. This, however, was a situation that defied expectations. Despite all their efforts and Thrawn's direct intervention, Ezra Bridger had escaped. Not only had he escaped, but he had been rescued by the allies that the Grand Admiral consistently declined to deal with. For all the Fourth Sister's own failures, and there were many, it was also the Grand Admiral's choices that had allowed the rebels to win out in the end.

Of course, Pellaeon wasn't going to tell him that and neither was Faro. Their brief and hushed conversation on their way to Thrawn's office had seen them both agree to just let Thrawn speak. He'd lost out before, at Atollon and above Lothal, but not after working for so long for one simple objective. This might be a sight to behold.

"Did he say when he'd be here?", Pellaeon asked impatiently as he stood in the centre of the office.

The Commodore was looking at the painted section of wall covered in the young Sabine Wren's artwork, "No, he just said that he wanted us here. I'm sure he won't be long."

The door guard had let them in as soon as they arrived but Thrawn was still on his way from the surface. It wasn't typical of him to make them wait at all, he was nothing if not efficient.

"Do you think he'll be angry?", the Commodore asked quietly.

Pellaeon huffed, "I'm not sure he's capable of it, though I don't want to be within a parsec of him if
"I'm not sure what he's going to do now. There's not much chance of us dragging Bridger back out here, looks like we're on our own", Faro said.

"Maybe", Pellaeon grunted, "We'll have to see what the Grand Admiral has going on in that brain of his."

The woman smiled halfheartedly, "I'm sure he'll have something interesting."

At that moment, the door to the office hissed open and the Grand Admiral walked in. Pellaeon and Faro snapped to attention, a formality that was usually unnecessary for Thrawn when they met privately, but they weren't taking chances today. Surprisingly, the Chiss' face was in its usual calm and composed state. You'd never think that he'd just suffered a significant setback in something he'd dedicated almost five years of his life to.

"Captain, Commodore", he nodded to them both in turn, "I appreciate you meeting me on such short notice."

Faro moved back to Pellaeon's side, "Of course, sir."

Thrawn stepped into the room and held out a hand to them, "Your comlinks, please."

Pellaeon and Faro glanced at each other before taking the devices from their belts and placing them into the Chiss' hand.

"Thank you, merely a precaution. We cannot be too careful", Thrawn removed the power cells from both of them and lay them on his desk and did the same with his own.

Pellaeon cleared his throat, "With all due respect, Grand Admiral, what happens now? We lost Bridger and his knowledge with him. This plan for him it's... it's collapsed."

"No, Captain. The plan has transpired exactly as I anticipated."

Both officers looked at each other as the Chiss took a seat at his desk.

Faro furrowed her brow, "I don't follow, sir."

"Please", Thrawn motioned to the two seats at the front of his desk, "Sit. There is much to discuss and you are certain to have questions. The time has come to explain everything."

They exchanged another confused look before taking their seats opposite Thrawn. Thrawn stepped into the room and held out a hand to them, "Your comlinks, please."

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They exchanged another confused look before taking their seats opposite Thrawn. Thrawn looked at Faro, "Commodore, I trust you remember Commander Eli Vanto."

Vanto? Pellaeon himself had heard the name a few times. Vanto was an aide assigned to Thrawn immediately after his arrival in the galaxy. From what little Thrawn, Faro and others had mentioned of him, Pellaeon knew he'd been a capable tactician and strategist, if a bit unsure of himself. He'd heard him mentioned in a few anecdotes about Thrawn's earlier years with the Imperial Navy but it was common knowledge that the young Commander had mysteriously disappeared over seven years ago. It was months before Pellaeon joined the Seventh Fleet and even before Thrawn had been concerned with the Phoenix rebels.
The name was as much a surprise to Faro as it was to him, "Uh.. yes, of course, sir."

"I am aware that, to others, there is ambiguity surrounding his location in the last several years. Kidnapped, executed, exiled, imprisoned, merely retired - I've come across many suggestions from idle rumours and conversation."

Faro leaned forward, "Are you saying you know where he is?"

"Of course", Thrawn answered, "I sent him to my own people in the Chiss Ascendancy."

_The Chiss? What in blazes is he doing there?_


Thrawn steepled his fingers, "Commander Vanto had a sharp tactical mind that, with years of honing, became a formidable tool to those whom he served. I have made no secret of my concern about threats in the Unknown Regions and the danger posed to my own people. I believed young Vanto would be a formidable asset to them for the future."

"That's a sound move but I don't see how it's relevant", Pellaeon told them.

"Vanto is an example of my philosophy on this matter. I will use talent, Captain, wherever I find it. The two of you, for example, have prospered because of your natural ability and I am grateful for your service. However, in this fight against the unknown I cannot only look to those who serve me. These threats, perhaps the one we are on the trail of now, are more than a threat to just the Chiss or the Empire, they threaten all people of the galaxy. I used Vanto's talent and was able to divert it to my people. Likewise, I wished to use Bridger's talent to further aid my people, to put them both in the best position for everyone." Thrawn leaned back in his chair, "Of course, allying with Bridger would be impossible with the presence of the Emperor. To say he despised the Jedi would be an understatement and I feared he would quickly learn of Bridger's survival, likely informed by our Inquisitor, and find a way to eliminate him."

Pellaeon leaned in, "So that's why you only went for Bridger after the Emperor was dead. You knew he'd never approve of an alliance while he lived."

"Exactly, Captain."

"Wait... how were you even sure you could catch Bridger when the time came? Wasn't that plan a big stab in the dark?", the Commodore asked.

Thrawn shook his head, "I had known Bridger's location almost immediately after he escaped five years ago."

"What?! How?", Pellaeon exclaimed, "Why didn't the Inquisitor find him them?"

"We had no means to pursue Bridger before the Emperor's contact and from there both our larger mission and the Inquisitor's presence became a factor. Finding Bridger was simple enough, do you recall how he escaped the Chimaera?"

Faro paused, "On your shuttle."

"Indeed", Thrawn answered, "Bridger's last trajectory left only one world as a likely candidate for his location."

"You didn't tell the Inquisitor?", Pellaeon eyed him suspiciously. The Captain wasn't too
comfortable with deception no matter when it happened or why.

Thrawn remained calm and steady, "I would have told her if she asked, though she never did. In her arrogance, she overlooked the most basic sources of knowledge and assumed her own abilities would see her to victory, a trait I'm sure you've both come to recognise. By the time she was nearing his location, I insisted that we continue with our mission into the Unknown Regions. Bridger would remain undisturbed until the end of the conflict in the galaxy, it was not in the nature of his allies to abandon the fight for his sake nor would he want them to. I trusted that he would remain on that world until such time as we could retrieve him."

Pellaeon sighed, "So you knew where he was the whole time and had the Inquisitor running in circles for this whole expedition?"

"In simple terms, yes."

The old man stroked his moustache, "Okay, I understand that much. How does this relate to anything either?"

"Because by the time the opportunity came to retrieve Bridger, something vital had changed."

"The Emperor's death", Faro said.

"No", the Grand Admiral pressed a button on his desk and a holographic image of a report appeared above his desk. "Do you know what this is?"

Pellaeon and Faro squinted at it and started to skim over the words. Engagement... rebel fleet... Endor... Vader and the Emperor dead.

"The message you had about the death of the Emperor", the Commodore said plainly.

"Yes...", Thrawn's hand moved to his chin, "Read it. Tell me if you notice what I did."

They scanned the report over as Thrawn watched them wordlessly. Pellaeon was about to give up and just ask him what he was getting at when a familiar name caught his eye.


"Indeed", Thrawn smiled thinly.

"Skywalker? Like that Jedi hero?" The Commodore, like Pellaeon, had lived through the Clone War and everyone had heard tales of the great Jedi hero Anakin Skywalker.

"The relation to Anakin Skywalker was indeed what piqued my interest", Thrawn continued.

"So... what? A brother?", Pellaeon asked.

"No, I believe this Luke Skywalker is his son."

"Impossible", Pellaeon scoffed, "Everyone knows Jedi couldn't have children. They couldn't even have partners."

"Shouldn't, not couldn't", Thrawn's eyes looked away as if recalling some old memory, "I have reason to suspect that Anakin Skywalker perhaps broke such conventions of the Jedi and thus could have fathered a son."

"A name doesn't prove anything", Faro shook her head, "Might be a coincidence."
"Ah, but it is not", Thrawn replied, "It says here that he was brought aboard the Death Star II only hours before its destruction and it also alludes to his survival and escape. The personal interest the Emperor evidently had in this Skywalker, the fact that both the Emperor and Lord Vader were killed shortly after his arrival there and his survival in the first place leaves no room for doubt. Only a powerful Jedi, such as the offspring of Anakin Skywalker, could have pulled off such a feat."

Pellaeon pinched the bridge of his nose, "I appreciate this is interesting, Grand Admiral, but what does this have to do with Bridger?"

Thrawn turned off the display, "Because when I learned this, my plans had to adapt. We were operating on the belief that Bridger was the last Jedi. With Skywalker's existence, a Jedi who even defeated the Emperor and Lord Vader, there was another Jedi who could be of help to us. You see, Captain, I do not just want Ezra Bridger; I also want Luke Skywalker."

The Commodore rubbed her chin, "How would you get Skywalker to work with you? How do you even get him out here?"

"Simple, Commodore. We let Ezra Bridger return home and warn Skywalker of the threat that lurks in the Unknown Regions."

_He wanted Bridger to escape all along._ Pellaeon and Faro looked long at each other. They should have known, if Thrawn wanted something then he'd get it, no matter what. There was no way he would have made so many missteps if they weren't part of his plan.

"If I wanted Bridger at any moment, I could have gone to him and overwhelmed him with numbers. However, it was not enough to capture Bridger nor just let him escape, he needed to have a reason to return here. Perhaps you'd say we had to 'trust in the force' to show him this threat", Thrawn smiled thinly as he spoke. "The Emperor sensed a threat out here years ago. I believed that, given the chance, Ezra Bridger would also realise something was amiss. The force works in unusual ways, it is hard to predict, but some patterns do emerge. If there was something significant out here, significant enough for the Emperor to sense, I was confident Bridger would find its trail."

Faro nodded along, "Bridger finds some trace of this threat and realises there's something out here so, when he does go home, there's still a reason for him to come back out here."

"Precisely. I did not know the nature of this threat yet I trusted Bridger to at least recognise its existence. That is why he was not pursued as soon as he commandeered the Inquisitor's ship to escape and why only token forces were committed to his pursuit on the shattered desert world he reached using said ship. I admit, I do not know how Bridger managed to elude the Fourth Sister on that world but his escape there was ultimately the best course of action. It did, after all, lead us to our current location and to clear evidence of this threat. What matters is that Bridger would be, indeed he already has been, left with unanswered questions that I believe will trouble him enough to investigate. Given their relation to the force, it is only logical to assume that Skywalker will also be drawn to this endeavour."

"Hang on", Pellaeon raised a hand, "If Skywalker is a Jedi and a rebel, he must have he run into someone who knew about Bridger in the last few years. How did you know he wouldn't come out to search for him now? You could have caught them both in one fell swoop."

Thrawn gestured to him, "A wise question, Captain. In fact, I had initially assumed that would be the case and operated on that assumption for several days."

"Really?", Pellaeon cocked an eyebrow.
Once more, Thrawn pressed a button on his desk and a familiar hologram appeared. "Do you remember this, Captain? It is the map I constructed based on traceable points of communication. You yourself anticipated that Bridger's allies could use it to begin a search."

Pellaeon remembered it well, it was in the same meeting where the Grand Admiral had admitted his intentions of capturing Bridger rather than killing him.

"Aye, I do. It seems you were right."

"Indeed. Not only was this map useful in predicting where Bridger's allies would be but also when they would arrive. I used the time it took to construct the map, coupled with the projected time of travel to determine not only where Bridger's allies were likely to be but also when they'd arrive. Their loyalty to him is deep, I expected them to begin searching for information at the earliest opportunity, and therefore it was easy to determine when they'd reach us."

The Commodore leaned in and pointed to the map. "Wait a second", she pointed to the red dot that indicated their initial position, "You had us waiting here while the Inquisitor searched for Bridger. You were killing time waiting for Bridger's allies as much as for the Inquisitor", she was almost smiling.

Thrawn had the ghost of a grin, "I did make a point of reiterating things at length for a while, did I not?"

At the same time, some thing suddenly clicked with Pellaeon. "The Invictus", he said suddenly. "You left it at our initial position, against standard procedure, while we went after Bridger. You wanted Bridger's allies to find the ship. You left them a trail to follow."

The Grand Admiral nodded, "Perceptive. I believed the determination of Bridger's allies would allow them to escape that encounter with enough information to pursue us."

"So when the Invictus was attacked... you planned it", Faro's voice was hesitant. After all, people had died in that attack. Good people.

"As I said, we must go to any lengths to pursue our goal. Their deaths were not without reason", Thrawn replied coldly. "That encounter, however, provided essential information that altered the plan. Do you recall the details of the attack?", he continued unphased by the deaths of the Imperial crew.

"As well as its own Captain does", Pellaeon began to laugh before stopping abruptly. The Captain didn't remember a thing. "Jedi mind trick", he breathed, "There was a Jedi there."

Thrawn nodded, "Indeed. However, another clear detail emerged about the intruders. 'Two women'. Luke Skywalker, evidently, was not one of the allies that had pursued Bridger."

Faro sunk back in her chair, "You mean there was another Jedi."

"That appeared to be the most likely option", Thrawn continued, "Although it had to be tested. Their following of the coordinates to our location was expected, however, rather than allowing them to follow another trail, I devised a test to confirm my suspicions. Both Bridger and the Fourth Sister felt something in the force telling them where to go. I predicted that, if there was truly another force user among Bridger's allies, then they too would follow that feeling. The test proved conclusively that there was indeed another Jedi."

"What other Jedi can there be? They're all dead", Faro's face look troubled.
"Information on the Jedi is... unreliable. The Emperor was intentionally destructive towards records of them and their persecution forced them to ground. It is possible that there were more Jedi that remained undiscovered although it is equally possible that another force user emerged in our time away that wished to aid Bridger's allies. I do not know who they are but, if they are not Skywalker, then I am willing to allow them to return home and bring him to us."

Pellaeon sighed heavily, "So there was another Jedi all along, that's how they managed to keep following us."

"Which is also why you insisted on pursuing Bridger immediately rather than trying to intercept his allies when they ran into one of our patrols", Faro said.

"Partially. My choice not to engage Sabine Wren and whoever came with her at that time was in part because I truly wished them no harm. However, we also needed to ensure that Bridger had indeed found the trail of something that would draw him back here before his allies could retrieve him. Therefore, we needed to reach him ahead of his allies to make sure of that fact. If this planet had not provided Bridger with enough of a reason to be drawn back here then we would have needed to prolong this search until he could be convinced otherwise. If his allies managed to get a head start on us then our plan would have unraveled. Fortunately, things played into our hands."

Commodore Faro leaned in again, "Alright, so I can understand you letting Bridger escape, I can see how you led his allies here and I understand your reasons for doing that. But, you did send troopers and fighters after them after them multiple times."

"A necessary act. The Inquisitor, like many in the fleet, would not work openly with Bridger. If I appeared to be aiding him or his allies in some way then they'd surely disagree. I had to balance the assured safety of Bridger's allies with the need to maintain the illusion of opposition", Thrawn explained. "Two individuals capable of clearing a light-cruiser were capable of handling a lone squad of stormtroopers, although I admit that I had not expected their encounter at our second destination. I had genuinely wished to have the location assessed and not pointlessly engage the intruders."

The Captain then remembered Thrawn's orders earlier in the day. "Three TIEs", he shook his head, "That's why you only wanted three TIEs to go after the shuttle earlier."

Another thin smile appeared on Thrawn's lips, "Three TIEs were the optimal number. We knew Sabine Wren would be the pilot. Not only was her presence confirmed by the recording in the encounter with our troopers, but she was always the most likely candidate to venture out in search of Ezra Bridger in the first place. Their connection is quite robust, an admirable friendship to say the least. Also, since it was not the Ghost that we encountered, we also knew it was not General Syndulla that was out here. It made most sense to send the force user to the ground while Miss Wren remained in the ship, where her piloting ability made her more than a match for three weary and long out of service TIE pilots."

Again, Thrawn's dismissal of the deaths of Imperial personnel was a bit unsettling. However, Pellaeon could see the logic in his plan. He too understood that some times a dozen lives had to be sacrificed to save a hundred.

"Which leaves us in our current situation. Ezra Bridger, Sabine Wren and their mysterious Jedi ally will return to their homes with knowledge of a threat in the Unknown Regions, one deeply tied to the force. They will no doubt meet Luke Skywalker and, predictably for the Jedi, return to confront this threat."

"And we'll be waiting for them", the Commodore's voice was low, but whether from fatigue, shock
or disapproval, Pellaeon couldn't tell.

"The Inquisitor won't like that. A lot of people won't", Pellaeon said grimly.

The Chiss paused, "There will be... disagreement. However, it is essential that this threat is dealt with by whatever means necessary. We shall confront such divisions at a later time. For now, we must learn all we can about what we have found and do our utmost to give ourselves the best opportunity of defeating it."

It was all out in the open now. Thrawn's intentions, his actions, his beliefs. Of course Thrawn must have known where Bridger ended up after leaving the *Chimaera*, they were all just too shocked and busy to devote much time to capturing the Jedi. Instead, Thrawn kept that information tucked away, knowing that Bridger could be of use only when the Emperor wasn't watching his every move. As soon as the Emperor was gone, Thrawn made his move and worked to get Bridger but by then Skywalker had come into the equation, so he adapted his plan. He finally let the Inquisitor loose to find Bridger, not to capture Bridger but to ensure that there was a trail that the Jedi's allies would be able to follow too. He left the *Invictus* in the perfect place for those allies to find, finding that location using the same method of tracking communication points that he knew the rebels would use, while he drove Bridger onward to make sure he knew that there was a threat out here.

Thrawn's assumption that Skywalker had come was corrected by the attack on the *Invictus*, which allowed him to adapt his strategy and make sure that Bridger could be rescued and bring Skywalker out here. When the force guided Bridger and the Fourth Sister, he trusted that it would also guide whoever had come out here on a rescue mission. Thrawn prevented Bridger's capture long enough to make the boy learn about the threat and also avoided engaging the Mandalorian and whatever Jedi had come on two separate occasions. Only when they reached this planet, when it was clear to everyone that there was something dreadfully wrong out here, did Thrawn allow Ezra Bridger to be rescued and return home. All the while, he kept the Inquisitor in the dark and on the backfoot. He played on her arrogance and then antagonised her about her failures, making sure that she failed to kill the Jedi and was too distracted to catch on to his true goals.

The old Captain sighed, "The things we do for the greater good. I'm on board with your plan, Grand Admiral. If there's something out here that's as dangerous as you think then I'm willing to take the risk of trying this."

"Thank you, Captain", Thrawn looked at the officer in the room, "Commodore?"

"I won't lie, Grand Admiral", she said solemnly, "I don't fully agree with the deaths of loyal Imperial servicemen as part of your plan." She looked away for a moment, "But... I do agree that we have to make sacrifices. We need to stop this threat and I'm willing to do my part."

"I value your honesty and understand your reservations, Commodore. I assure you, I will do everything I can to minimise such losses in the future." Thrawn stood up and began pacing around his room, "Of course, it will be a while before Bridger and Skywalker return to us. For now, we must bide out time and learn. It is crucial that no one outside of this room, for now, learns of our intentions. If the Inquisitor caught wind of this then she would not abide our choices and might inspire similar disagreements among others. We must also consider whatever she is hiding from us, and also whatever role this elusive threat itself could play. It is far too early and the situation far too volatile for us to do anything but wait."

A knock sounded on the door, bringing an end to any more explanation.

"Enter", Thrawn went over and spoke into the intercom.
Thrawn's door guard entered the officer, "Sir, the Inquisitor has been trying to raise you. She wishes to discuss something with you."

Pellaeon glanced at the deactivated comlinks on Thrawn's desk and hoped the Fourth Sister hadn't become suspicious of their silence.

"Thank you, Lieutenant", Thrawn dismissed him and turned back to Pellaeon and Faro, "It seems we have work to attend to. You may return to your duties."

Just like that, the Grand Admiral retrieved his comlink, slid it into his belt and left the room with the same passive aloofness he always did. The Captain and the Commodore sat for a few moments, still reeling from everything.

It was Faro who spoke first, "That wasn't what I was expecting."

"No points for understatements, Commodore", he chuckled.

"Let's just hope this works out", the Commodore said in a tone that Pellaeon couldn't figure out was joking or not. "I swear that man is going to be the death of me."

Pellaeon huffed a laugh, "You and me both."

Ezra didn't question who had thrown their arms around his neck. If the feeling of her armour or the familiar smell of paint and carbon scoring didn't clue him in, her beautiful and unmistakable presence in the force made the answer clear. He could feel the hardness of her armour pushing against him, she'd caught him at an awkward angle for their hug, and he was still trying to catch his breath, but he didn't care. He just shut his eyes and slid his hands around her waist, relishing in the hug he'd waited five years to have. It was warm, soothing and everything he'd hoped it would be. Years of worrying, years of loneliness, years of uncertainty - it made it all seem worth it.

"You're an idiot", Sabine's voice was muffled by his shoulder.

"I know", he laughed quietly.

Her arms tightened the hug, as if she was still trying to convince herself he was actually there in front of her.

"Five years. Five years and...", her voice croaked.

Ezra breathed raggedly, "I know. I'm sorry."

"No, no, that's not...", she sighed into him. "I missed you."

"I missed you too", his hands rubbed soothingly up her back.

They held each other for a while longer before she pulled away, letting him see her for the first time in years. Her bright brown eyes met his and he saw the tears that were welling in them. Her hair was shorter, shorter than he'd ever seen it, and dyed a lighter purple colour than last he'd seen her. She'd redone her armour too, hardly surprising to say the least, with darker purples, reds and blues. There was a brilliant rebel starbird on one shoulder and a stylised purrgil on the other. Beautiful... his eyes drifted to hers again, all of it.

Her arms were still draped around his neck as he admired her handiwork. "Are you really surprised that I changed it?", she smiled at him, "Or don't you like it?"
"No... I mean, I-I like it. It's new. You look amazing now...", he started stuttering like a teenager again, "I mean, you always did look beautiful... wait, that came out weird..."

She shook her head at him, "You really haven't changed a bit, have you?"

He laughed nervously, "You can't blame me for being rusty on my people skills."

"Hmmm, but you've have changed a bit", she titled her head and unwrapped an arm from his neck. "Not quite a Kanan beard but...", she slowly drew her hand along his face, "It's still got to go."

"Hey! What's wrong with it?", he brought his hand to his chin defensively.

Sabine shrugged, "It's... not the best look for you."

"Why not? I think it works", he insisted.

She rolled her eyes, "We'll talk about it later."

"Oh really?", he raised an eyebrow and grinned, "And why does it matter? It's my beard."

"Fine. You can keep it if I get to dye it", she smirked.

Ezra sighed, "Alright, point taken."

The laughter died down and they both went quiet. She let her eyes drift away to the ground, "I'm still mad at you. For the purrgil, I mean."

Ezra was still angry at himself for that but he did what he had to do. He remembered the pain in her voice as she begged him to get out of the Star Destroyers before they jumped and he'd kept himself up for more than a few nights wondering how he'd made them all feel. He'd left Sabine, Hera, Zeb and the others in the dark about everything and then just disappeared from their lives. It was the right call, he'd do it again if he had to, but that didn't mean he didn't regret parts of it.

"You should have told us. If we'd known we could have... I don't know... we could have helped."

She wasn't really angry, Ezra noted, she was just hurt.

His arms unconsciously pulled her closer, "I did what I had to do. I didn't know what would happen so I couldn't guarantee anything."

"It was complicated", she muttered unhappily.

"Something like that", he replied quietly.

"But you could have said!", her voice went louder, "If the others had known that you might go... If I knew I might have, we could have...", her anger ebbed away and she let the point go. Words for another time, maybe. "Dammit, Ezra."

He sunk his head, "I'm so sorry, Sabine. I didn't mean to-"

"No, enough with the apologies", she told him adamantly. "You did the right thing, I know that."

The Mandalorian's face brightened into a beautiful smile, "And it did work out in the end. I've got you back and Lothal, it's... you have to see it."

Lothal. Everything he'd done, he'd done for Lothal. His friends too but Lothal most of all. He remembered how he felt near the portal to Lothal and how badly he wanted to reach through if it still worked. Ezra wanted to see the open plains, the adorable loth-cats and his friends that still
lived there. He wanted to see his old tower, assuming Ryder hadn't had the old thing knocked down, and look out from it at a free and peaceful world. Now, he knew he was going to get the chance to do that with the people he cared about at his side.

Ezra's smiled widened, "What's it like?"

Her eyes looked into his, "It's perfect. I can't wait for you to see it."

"What about Hera, Zeb and the others?", he asked.

"They're good, they're all okay. They missed you, Hera especially."

Ezra laughed, "Sounds like Hera. Always such a mom."

Sabine's eyes shifted for a second, like she was about to say something, but she held her tongue. "You don't know the half of it, she hasn't gone more than a few days without checking up on me. It's really sweet of her."

"Wait, you haven't been with her?", Ezra furrowed his brow. He'd thought they'd all stuck together since he'd been gone.

Sabine was confused for a second and it was almost like she'd forgotten he hadn't been around for five years, "Oh, uh, no. We didn't, not like before anyway. Hera had, uh, obligations."

"Obligations?", Ezra asked quizzically.

"Ugh, it's complicated. Hera stayed with the rebellion and so did Zeb and Kallus but they weren't all on the Ghost like before. Most of the others stayed too, Rex and Wedge and everyone, they all kept fighting."

Ezra narrowed his eyes, "You still haven't told me where you were. Didn't you stay?"

The Mandalorian looked away, "No, I didn't feel right staying after everything. Not without Kanan and not without you."

"Sabine, I can't believe that you-"

"Hey", she cut him off, "Someone had to look after Lothal when you weren't around."

"You... you what?", his mouth fell open.

His reaction made her laugh, "You heard me, I was on Lothal, doing your job", she jokingly pointed a finger into his chest. Her joking attitude gave way to a more serious one, "I thought it'd be what you'd want. Besides, I couldn't just let what you and Kanan gave up so much for go to waste."

She'd stayed on Lothal this whole time. For Kanan, for its people, and for him.

"Sabine...", there weren't any words for him to say.

"Hey, enough about me. What have you been doing out here for all this time?", she quickly moved the conversation on. *Huh, she still hates being the centre of attention.*

Ezra took a deep breath. What had he been doing? He'd spent years on his own, working to survive and understand what he could about the force. It had been a learning experience in more ways than one.
"I've been busy, I guess", that might have been an understatement. "Surviving, exploring, meditating"

"Not shaving", Sabine intervened.

"Not shaving", he rolled his eyes sarcastically, "And I've been missing you guys. A lot."

"We missed you too", she assured him. "I can't imagine what it was like for you to be alone all that time."

Technically, he hadn't been truly alone. He'd made connections with the animals, Argos most of all. His heart ached to think of them. So many of them, Argos included, were dead because of him. He hadn't mourned them yet, he'd been so busy since he'd left that world, and his emotions started to bubble up. Ezra pushed them down as best he could, not letting his pain show for now. Despite his effort, Sabine still managed to pick them up somehow. Force bond... right.

"Hey... what's wrong?", she asked sympathetically.

Ezra took a trembling breath, "It's nothing. It's just been a lot to deal with sometimes."

"Oh, Ezra", she reached a hand out and cupped his cheek, "You're back now, you don't have to go through it any more."

Ezra covered her hand with his own and smiled thinly, "Yeah, I know. I think I'll just need some time."

"All the time in the galaxy. And I'm here, no matter what you need", her promise was honest and heartfelt.

He held her hand on his face for a while, shutting his eyes and closing out all of his worries. He was here now, he was safe, and Sabine was right there with him. After a while, Sabine let her hand drop and pull him in for another embrace. Ezra had to admit, Sabine had never struck him as the hugging type before, but right now he was glad he was wrong.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything", Ahsoka suddenly appeared from the cockpit.

They both pulled away from each other, neither knowing exactly why they didn't want Ahsoka seeing them like that. Sabine gave her an odd look, almost like a warning, before clearing her throat, "Uh, no, no. Just catching up."

"I can bet, it's been a while", Ahsoka had ditched her staff and cloak and was smiling at them both. "Yeah", Ezra scratched his head, "I don't know how to really say it but, thanks. Both of you. I can't thank you enough for doing all this."

Ahsoka leaned back against the wall, "You saved my life and I owed it to you to try the same. Let's just say we're even now."

His attention went back to the Mandalorian still standing close to him. "Ezra, you know I'd never let you down. You'd do the same for me", her eyes locked meaningfully on his for a brief moment.

He brought a hand to her shoulder. "I knew I could always count on you", he echoed the words he'd said on the gunship all those years ago.

Sabine's eyes stayed on his for what felt like an eternity. When he'd said he could count on her, he
knew he meant it. Still, it was so much more than he'd imagined for her to have to travel all the way out here and wait so long, all the while protecting his own home in his absence. Yet here she was, standing right there, having done exactly that.

"That reminds me", her eyes broke away and went down to the bag at her side, "I have something of yours."

Her hand reached in and what she pulled out made Ezra's breath hitched in his throat. *His lightsaber*. She brought it out and held it in front of her, letting him see the weapon he'd carried years ago. Kanan had helped him construct it after losing his first and he remembered every single groove and shape on it. *This weapon is your life*, Kanan would say. It was only fitting that he'd get it back and that Sabine would be the one to have kept it safe for all this time.

Hesitantly, he reached out and took the weapon in his hands. The weight and shape were instantly familiar and he took a few seconds to run his eyes over it, remembering every detail.

"You kept it safe?", Ezra breathed as he slowly put it into its rightful place on its belt.

"Of course I did. What did you two always say? 'This weapon is your life'", she sighed happily, "I was going to look after it no matter what."

Ezra couldn't admire her care or her loyalty enough, she'd gone above and beyond for him. She'd been his closest friend, protected his home in his absence, guarded his most sacred possession and then gone off into the depths of the Unknown Regions to bring him home. There weren't any words he could repay her with. Instead, his arms wrapped around her shoulders and pulled her in, holding close the person in the galaxy who meant the most to him.

Ezra saw Ahsoka's warm smile from the corner of his eye. The Togruta was watching them contently and silently, being kind enough to let them have their moment.

Too soon for his liking, Sabine slid out of the hug but kept her arms loosely around him, "So what happens now?"

His heart skipped for a second as he saw the happiness in her eyes. She thought this ordeal was over, that they could go home and be done with everything. She deserved that much, Ezra knew that, but things were far from over. After what Master Yoda had told him, after what he'd seen out here, things were only beginning.

His face sunk and Sabine saw the change in him, "What's wrong?"

"There's something we have to talk about", he said solemnly to them both. "Something important."

Chapter End Notes

A little about each section again. The first section is small and only serves to show the meeting between Thrawn and the Inquisitor in the wake of Ezra's escape, as well as setting up a bit of their dynamic going forward. The Fourth Sister can't laud everything over Thrawn now since her failure to capture Bridger is going to stay with her. There was another small section after this one but I moved it to next chapter because it
flowed better and the word count for this was already getting high.

The last two sections are obviously the big ones and I'll give each of them a bit more attention.

Thrawn's plan has been seeded throughout for the whole story. The Thrawn section of Chapter 3, the first in the main story, ends with Thrawn's recognition of the name 'Skywalker'. When talking to both Faro and Pellaeon at several points, he simply says that he wants the Jedi's help and will go to any lengths for it, but he never says it's only Ezra he wants. As Thrawn mentions, leaving the Invictus to be found by the intruders was his way of leaving a trail to be followed and that's why I had Pellaeon question the plan back in Chapter 5 and why, in Chapter 6, as they go down to capture Ezra he specifically notes the four ships in his fleet. In Chapter 12, Pellaeon notices how Thrawn appears to be trying to think of an explanation as he goes rather than having things already worked out - in reality, Thrawn is trying to think of another plausible reason to explain what he already knows is the case. There's more than a few comments, descriptions, actions and such that were chosen specifically to allude to what Thrawn was planning all along, too many to remember them all here. It wasn't some big secret that something was up but it was nice to finally get it out into the open. I'm sure people figured most of it out, if not all of it, but it was fun to sprinkle allusions as I went and the main aim was to keep things secret to Pellaeon, Faro and the Inquisitor, not the reader. Like I said, I've had this planned from day one and Thrawn's intention of using Luke and of allowing Ezra to be found have been in my mind since the start.

Then there's the reunion. This was, despite my background in writing Ezrabine, one of the most difficult chapters to write. I had to balance the idea that they've missed each other for five years with the acceptance that they're not going to melt into each other's arms screaming 'I love you'. There were a few things I wanted to get in there. Sabine's angry exterior (her first words to him are 'you're an idiot') being broken by Ezra's goodhearted goofiness, the return of the lightsaber, a few jabs at appearances (seriously, who thinks Ezra looks good with a beard?) and an 'I knew I could always count on you' thing. Most importantly, there had to be a boatload of good ole' hugging. Ahsoka is just kinda there this chapter with only a few lines since this had to be about Sabine and Ezra on their own. Ahsoka is important to his rescue and Ezra and Ahsoka do care about one another, but it's nothing like the relationship between Sabine and Ezra. Next chapter will have all the talk about his mission, the Unknown Regions, the galaxy and all that stuff. This chapter, however, just needed to be about Ezra and Sabine.

Next time: Ezra talks about what he found, the Fourth Sister explores, Thrawn is brought a new clue, and Sabine and Ezra spend some time together.
Chapter 16 - Consolidation

Chapter Notes

A little note here, the Fourth Sister's section was originally part of last chapter but I decided to put it here instead since that one was getting way too long. I also think it flows better since last chapter was all about processing and understanding what had already happened while this chapter starts to look towards what happens next. Technically, the Fourth Sister's section takes place during last chapter, just after Thrawn's talk with her and ends with her going to contact Thrawn, which happens at the end of his discussion with Faro and Pellaeon.

Also, a big shoutout to my old friend RagnarDanneskjold for sharing my story to r/StarWarsRebels. You can thank him for getting me to publish this chapter toda and for providing his own unique brand of ideas of this story. Now then, I'm sure that next chapter of 'Crumbling' is due any day now...

Ezra talks about what he found, the Fourth Sister explores, Thrawn is brought a new clue, and Sabine and Ezra spend some time together.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Chiss walked out of the chamber and disappeared up the stairs, not bothering to look back or acknowledge the Fourth Sister any further. His pride was insufferable and now that he didn't get to gloat to Bridger, he was going to make her life as hard as he could. As if it could get any worse than it already was...

*He blames my ineptitude?* It seemed unfair to her. The stormtroopers failed far more than she did. They'd been taken down by Bridger within seconds and done nothing but complain and be fearful since they'd arrived here. Even then, they still escaped past however many reinforcements were sent after them. This wasn't her failing, it was Thrawn's and his soldiers', and one day she was going to make sure he knew that.

She grumbled to herself and looked around the room. She hadn't had much chance to have a look around yet and she might be able to find some answers here, it certainly wouldn't hurt to look.

The force felt different now, much different to how it was when she came here. Bridger's presence had gone and the odd feeling that drew her here was also silenced, though she didn't know why it had. The strange aura of this world still overwhelmed every other feeling and without the other interference she could feel it now with greater clarity. There had to be some answer here for her, or at least some trail to pick up. The force wouldn't have brought her here only to turn its back on her.

She began by inspecting every small corridor that led out of the chamber. The first one was directly opposite the entrance, just on the other side of the altar. It didn't seem to have much purpose, just an empty room. The Fourth Sister didn't give it much of an examination, she didn't have time to waste on stonework and bare walls. The next corridor was mostly collapsed in and, peering through the rubble, appeared to lead to some sort of living area. None of this was telling her much.
Gah, Bridger must have known something. How else could he have found his way here? The Inquisitor thought back to his childish arrogance every time they met, his snide comments, his smug remarks, his blatant lies about not knowing anything. He had to have known something at least, something she didn't. It was no use now, if Bridger could figure it out then she was definitely capable of figuring things out too. She took some pleasure from her encounters with that Jedi. The pain on his face when she ended that animal of his, the terror in his eyes when the lightsaber gave out and she moved in for the kill, it was all so satisfying even if he'd ended up escaping. Not next time, Bridger. If we ever cross paths again, it'll be the end of you.

Another corridor was intact and stretched out further than she could see. Stepping carefully through the mist that lingered everywhere, the Inquisitor kept up her internal complaining.

That damn Togruta too. What in the force was that? Some Jedi trick no doubt. The arrival of Bridger's ally had been a surprise to say the least. How could someone like Bridger be worth venturing all the way out here for? And how did they find him so quickly? Part of her knew that answer. The Togruta was powerful in the force, she'd sensed as much the moment they'd arrived. Admittedly she might have... underestimated the other woman's abilities. That wouldn't happen again. She'd trained with Lord Vader, she'd stood before the Emperor himself, that damn alien was nothing she wouldn't able to handle if the opportunity came up.

A few metres down the corridor, there appeared to be a passageway leading off to her right. It was small and cramped, barely tall enough or wide enough for her to squeeze through. She gave it a cursory look and then moved on, only to find another similar passage about a metre further down followed by a few more entryways carved into the wall.

She peeked into one of them to see what was down there. The corridor only extended about five metres before leading into a small enclosed room. It was pitch black so the Inquisitor ignited her lightsaber to bathe the room in its red light. Storage room... how disappointing. The room was tiny, barely four metres by either wall and also bathed in the strange purple mist. There was nothing in there but rotted crates and other useless miscellany. Disappointed, she sheathed the blade and went back into the main passageway.

"What am I looking for?", she whispered to herself.

More of the small storage rooms were leading off from the centre corridor. She had half a mind to give up and turn back when something seemed to invite her down one of the corridors. She paused and sceptically looked down the corridor.

Blocked, of course. The ceiling looked to have caved in down the only corridor that was catching her attention. She scoffed and began to turn away but stopped halfway. It's worth a look at least. Glancing over her shoulder to watch for any prying eyes, she focused on the rubble in her mind. She clasped her hand and lifted a small piece of rock out of the way and moved it to the side of the entrance, doing the same for a dozen or so crumbled pieces of stone. When she'd cleared enough so she could climb through, she activated her blade to light her way and stepped carefully over the remaining rubble.

This room was structurally identical to the last one she'd been in, just a small and unassuming storeroom. Her blade lit up everything in it for her to see and her first glimpses weren't encouraging. Old crate, torn clothing, degraded piece of old technology... hardly something worth the attention. Once she entered, however, she saw an old table pushed into the corner with another emaciated corpse sitting deathly still with its back to her.

"Why am I wasting my time with dead people?", she scoffed and took a closer look.
It was dead as dead could be, the same unusual wounds and unnatural blackness as every corpse here. An old lightsaber lay flat on the desk beside it, not on the floor or in their hands - which were instead they clasping something tightly.

The Inquisitor reached out her hands to pry the object from its rotten grasp, "I'll take this..."

The body put up a fight before all of its fingers snapped and released the object. It was a small and unassuming little thing but she felt something from it. Yes... this is it. Brushing the years of dust and filth off it, she inspected the small item. It was a tiny circular object, nicely fitting into the palm of her hand. It had a greyish-silver colour and a pattern of etches and ridges on its surface. The most striking feature was a dark purple sphere in its centre that seemed to glow even without the light from her weapon. Her fingers felt around the edge and found a small button that popped open the face of the object. The top layer opened up to show the purple stone in the centre of a series of dials, lines and markings.

It's appearance was unusual but she could recognise what it was easily enough. "A... compass?", she questioned.

It wasn't like any she'd seen and the markings on it made no sense at all to her. She kept it in her hand as she left the room, pondering over what to make of the discovery. It had to be important, she hadn't found it by accident after all.

Reluctantly, she realised that this wasn't something she'd figure out alone. If I'm stuck with that Chiss, I might as well try and use what little talent he has.

Ezra hadn't even noticed that they were already in hyperspace until he walked into the cockpit. Ahsoka must have gotten them out of there while he and Sabine were distracted. The Togruta hopped into the pilot's chair and Ezra sat in one of the rear seats.

"Alright", Sabine asked as she slid into the co-pilot's chair, "What's up with you?"

That was easier asked than answered. The truth was that Ezra didn't really know what was up and that made it all the more concerning. Master Yoda had told him that something was out here, he'd felt the draw in the force and he'd seen the destruction left in its wake but he didn't know who or what it was or anything else that might help them.

"I guess it started when I escaped from Thrawn and then it was there the whole time I was in exile. There was this, I don't know, feeling or call. I kept hearing it calling to me the whole time I was there but I could never figure out what it was", Ezra stroked his beard instinctively, "I knew it was the force trying to tell me something but I didn't know what. When I managed to get off that planet after the Empire attacked, I felt it again and I followed it."

"I understand what you mean", Ahsoka nodded along.

"You do?", he asked.

"Yes, we went to that jungle planet. We found traces of you but the Empire had already left. I'm assuming it was that same feeling that guided you that I felt there. Without it, we wouldn't have been able to find you."

Ezra paused in shock, "You were following me?"

"Yeah", Sabine joined in, "We ran straight into a light-cruiser when we arrived and they gave us the coordinates of where Thrawn's fleet thought you were."
"They gave you the coordinates?", he asked sceptically.

The two women grinned at each other, "It might have involved some blasters and a lightsaber or two."

"Anyway, like Ahsoka said, we got there and everyone had already left. Her... feelings took us to that desert planet with that cave temple but we missed you again. The Inquisitor's ship was already leaving by the time we arrived."

Ezra was quite surprised that they'd walked his path as well. He thought they'd found traces of him and then come straight to find him and hadn't really imagined that they'd been on his trail for days if not weeks. If they'd followed him, then they must have seen so much. The jungle world where he'd lived for so long, maybe even the shuttle or... other things he didn't want to think about right now. If they'd followed him further then...

"You saw the temple too... did you see what was there?", Ezra asked them.

"Yes, a gateway to the World Between Worlds", Ahsoka looked at the staff leaning against the wall. "That's how you escaped", she said.

"Yeah, just barely", Ezra remembered his encounter with the Inquisitor there and how narrowly he'd managed to get away.

The Togruta smiled amusedly, "I have to say, I'm impressed by your handiwork. You stopped the Empire getting access to the gateway."

Ezra shrugged, "I improvised. It wasn't easy and I had some help."

Sabine narrowed her eyes, "Help?"

"You didn't see him when you went there?", he asked. He'd expected Master Yoda to make an appearance, at least to Ahsoka.

"No? Who's 'him'?"

"Master Yoda", the name caught them both by surprise. "He appeared and I spoke to him."

"What, like one of those visions?", the Mandalorian was getting a bit unsettled. She never did like it when all the force related stuff took over.

Ezra rubbed his head, remembering what Yoda had told him. "Not exactly... he's, uh..."

"He's gone", Ahsoka finished for him, "I felt it too."

"Do you know how he managed to speak to me?", Ezra questioned.

Ahsoka turned away for a moment, deep in thought. "I don't, not fully. I only know that if he communicated with you then he had a good reason to. It must have been important."

"That's what's been bothering me", Ezra sighed, "Master Yoda said there was something out here in the Unknown Regions. He said it was ancient and dangerous and that I had to do what I could to find it and stop it."

They all went silent for a while. Sabine seemed lost but still worried while Ahsoka looked deeply troubled. She'd probably felt something was amiss out here already and to know Master Yoda also felt the same must be concerning.
Ezra continued, "He didn't know what it was, not really. But whatever it was, it was the reason that the desert planet was so destroyed, it did something to it and wiped out all the lives on it. And the planet you found me on, that had to be something to do with it. The force wouldn't have led us there if it wasn't."

"This is worrying, I won't lie", Ahsoka said. "That world we found you on, I could feel the pain and the death there. If they're related then...", the Togruta didn't have to finish what she was saying.

"We have to do something. Master Yoda said it was my mission to see what was out here and do what I could to fight it."

There was no missing the pain on Sabine's face, "You mean... you're coming back out here?"

He couldn't find it in him to look her in the eyes, "I-I don't know. Master Yoda did say other people might be able to help me. Something about people I've yet to meet?"

Ahsoka and Sabine exchanged a knowing look. Sabine mouthed something to her but he couldn't tell what.

"I know who he might have meant", Ahsoka said at last, "Luke Skywalker."

"Skywalker?", Ezra asked in surprise, "Like Anakin Skywalker?"

The name seemed to affect Ahsoka and she sunk her eyes away. It was her old master after all, a pain he more than understood.

"Yeah, if the name didn't give it away then the lightsaber or piloting skills did, there's no mistaking it. I've never met him but I think Rex and Wedge have", Sabine seemed to think quite highly of him. "Everyone in the rebellion has heard the stories."

"Rex has, yes", Ahsoka said quietly, "I haven't met him either but I know about him."

"You should see him when we get back", Ezra said hesitantly.

"Yes... we both should. Especially if Master Yoda said that there were others that could help", Ahsoka set aside the pain of her late Master's memory and continued as normal.

*There was another Jedi all this time?* Ezra was surprised, he'd honestly thought he and Ahsoka were the last in the galaxy. If he was related to Anakin Skywalker then he had to be powerful too. *Powerful enough to defeat the Emperor though?* If Luke Skywalker was a Jedi and the Emperor had been defeated then the obvious assumption would be that he was the one who defeated the Sith. If that was true then Skywalker would be a big help to confront whatever was out here.

Another thing that Yoda said also troubled him. *Those you have yet to teach.* The implication was obvious but Ahsoka had to have some answers. Maybe she and Skywalker would help teach too.

"He also said something else, something about teaching", Ezra said.

Ahsoka raised her head, "Teaching?"

"Yeah, he said 'those I have yet to teach'. Who would that be?"

"In my time, the Jedi took young children strong in the force and trained them to become Jedi. If the Empire has fallen, maybe Master Yoda wanted the Jedi to be rebuilt." Ahsoka squinted at him,
"But usually those who teach are Jedi Knights or Jedi Masters."

"Well, I guess that's why he knighted me", the Jedi said causally.

The Togruta smiled, "I thought I sensed something different about you. Congratulations, Ezra. You've more than earned it."

"You made it, huh?", Sabine jokingly nudged him, "Well done, Ezra." Her voice became softer, "I'm proud of you and... and Kanan would be too."

The two friends shared a heartfelt smile, remembering their shared connection to the late Jedi. They both owed Kanan so much and even though it'd been almost five years, it still felt raw sometimes. Sabine's attention drifted away, as if she was thinking about something else. Ezra could feel her thoughts vaguely but didn't dare to probe into them any further.

"We'll have to discuss it when we return", Ahsoka broke the silence, "I'm sure Luke Skywalker will have some things to say about all of this. For now, we need to get you home."

Ezra pushed the worries away, setting them aside for another time. "You're right, there's not much we can do now", he sighed.

Ahsoka turned back to the controls, "You two should get some rest, it's been a long few days."

"A long few years", Ezra muttered jokingly.

Sabine stood up and punched his shoulder, "Come on, nerf herder. We've got some catching up to do."

_We sure do._ He remembered how long it had felt when she'd been away with her family on Krownest years ago, but that was only for a few months. This time, there'd been almost five years, a galactic regime change and separate lives for all that time.

Ezra followed her out of the cockpit but turned back to see Ahsoka's amused face watching them both go. "Uh, Ahsoka?", he asked her.

"It's nothing", she waved him off with her hand.

"Right...", he eyed her suspiciously for a moment before brushing it off and following Sabine.

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Thrawn couldn't recall ever visiting the Fourth Sister's quarters at any point since she'd arrived. One of the old officer's quarters left unfilled after the Battle of Lothal was provided for her use. What little time she spent on missions and at meetings with him was about the only time she wasn't to be found in her small chambers. As he approached, he wasn't blind to the possibility that the Fourth Sister's insistence on meeting him on her own turf might be some sort of power play.

"Inquisitor", he called into the intercom

The alarm buzzed and the door slid open to allow him to enter. Thrawn stepped in and looked around at the modest chamber the Inquisitor kept. There was no art or decoration of any kind and there was little more than a bed and a desk. A meditation stool stood in the centre of the room, though Thrawn admittedly did not know how she'd acquired it. The occupant stood hunched over the desk and didn't turn to greet him.

"Grand Admiral", she acknowledged over her shoulder.
Thrawn stepped closer, "For what reason did you request my presence so urgently?"

The woman stood back from the desk and motioned to the surface that she'd been hunched over. "Take a look for yourself, I though a man of your disposition would find this interesting."

Sat on the desk was a small circular object no bigger than the palm of his hand that was open to reveal an internal mechanism. It was crafted from silver with ornate but deliberate patterns and symbols etched into it, and a large purple gemstone embedded in its centre. *Most fascinating, evidently a compass of some sort. Ancient but valuable and remarkably untouched by time.*

"I found it in the ruins, packed away in a storeroom off one of the corridors from the main chamber", she explained as he inspected the object.

The Chiss tilted his head to her, "How did you find it specifically? Was it kept under particular security or held in a place of significance?"

"Not really", she looked down at it, "Clutched in some corpse's hand in a ruined chamber."

"What compelled you to take it?", he questioned. He had his suspicions as to why she'd been drawn to it but it served to see how open she intended to be with him on this matter.

Her yellow eyes seemed to consider her answer. "The force almost wanted me to find it. I believe it's important."

*Fascinating. Also, concerning. *Is that so?*, his attention returned to the compass. "I must admit, I am surprised you are so forthcoming with such information, given your previous attitudes."

She bristled under her armour, "It's no secret that we don't see eye to eye on many things, Grand Admiral. However...," the Fourth Sister swallowed hard, "I accept that we must put aside our differences if we are to find this threat."

"I agree", the Chiss said, "If we wish to eliminate the threat the Emperor perceived then petty disagreements must not be allowed to interfere."

"As you say, Grand Admiral." She turned her attention back to the object on the desk, "So, this will help us find what we're looking for?"

Thrawn made special note of her wording on both occasions. *Find*, not *confront* or *eliminate*. His suspicions about her ultimate intentions were already there. He had long suspected that her deceptions were somehow related to the threat in the Unknown Regions. Now, it seemed that her mind on the matter had yet to be made up. Her intention seemed only to be the finding of this threat. Whether she wished to somehow harness the threat, allow it to grow or simply decide when she encountered it, her intentions appeared to differ from his own. That led to the most important question: *why?* He was no closer to that answer now than he had ever been and giving the Inquisitor any indication of his suspicions could prove problematic.

Their goals aligned in so far as locating this threat and determining its nature. For now, her aid was essential.

"I believe it will", he finally answered the Inquisitor's question after a long pause. "These symbols", he pointed to the marks and lettering around the inner mechanisms, "They are clearly navigational aides utilised by this compass. I do not recognise the language but the basic format is understandable and still corresponds to the basic cardinal directions as well as the primary and secondary intercardinal ones."
"So it's useful on a planet but nowhere else."

"Not exactly", his finger brushed the central stone, "Do you know what this is?"

"Some gem. Why? Is it important?", she asked.

Thrawn recognised the material. "It is a lodestone, a naturally magnetised piece of mineral. Specifically, it is a supraluminite lodestone."

The Fourth Sister looked blankly at it, "And that's important?"

"Yes, supraluminite takes its name from old legends of it. It is said that the material possesses unique navigational qualities that may be used to guide lost travellers among the stars. Legends, purely, but every legend holds truth. There is an unusual reaction when supraluminite finds itself in certain hyperspace vectors, in that it glows brightly, hence the name. There is no scientific explanation for this property although few tests have been conducted on it given its rarity."

"Certain hyperspace vectors?"

Thrawn grimaced, "Yes... only certain ones and it is said that certain pieces of the material only bear the reaction along certain routes. I cannot confirm such things for myself since, as I've mentioned, the material is exceptionally rare."

She squinted at the stone, "And yet you've heard of it?"

"As someone who had spent their life travelling, I have come across many rumours and stories surrounding ventures into hyperspace. I have only ever seen supraluminite once, though it was enough for me to recognise its appearance here", Thrawn explained.

"We have to follow it then. If it was found in that ruin then it must have some significance to it", the Fourth Sister stood up and folded her arms.

"My thoughts exactly, Inquisitor", Thrawn concurred.

She reached a hand to the compass, "I'll leave immediately."

Thrawn stopped her hand, "No, you will not be going alone."

She snatched her arm away. "I will not drag another hapless squad of stormtroopers about", she spat.

"You have already proved incapable of working with them", Thrawn told her plainly. "Therefore, I shall accompany you."

Her anger turned into surprise, "You'll accompany me?"

"Was I unclear?", he took the compass in his hand.

"No, I heard what you said. I'm just-"

"Good", he cut off any protest from here, "It would be wise to rest before we depart. Report to the hangar in twelve hours time. I shall have a shuttle prepared for our expedition."

Her mouth moved faintly as she considered her answer. Finally, she seemed to admit defeat and slumped her shoulders, "Of course, Grand Admiral."
"Excellent." Thrawn turned and went to the door, "If there is nothing more?", he asked over his shoulder.

The silence was his answer. She stood still and silent but her eyes spoke volumes. Thrawn could read the frustrations and, above all, the resentment. What was she hoping to find alone? What did she wish to keep hidden from others? Thrawn ran his fingers over the grooves of the compass as he walked. Only time and patience will reveal those answers.

Ezra let out a snorting laugh, "And then Ahsoka just blasts her across the room with one push of her staff."

Sabine gasped for breath between her laughter. Ahsoka did have a habit of showing up the Empire and making them look like idiots.

"Ahh, that sounds like Ahsoka", Sabine sighed as the laughter died down.

They sat in her small quarters on the shuttle, both at opposite ends of the bunk and swapping stories about their time apart. Sabine had lost track of how long they'd been here, hours at least, but she wasn't making an effort to count. Having her best friend back to talk and joke with after all this time was the best gift she could have asked for.

"How did you find me, anyway?", Ezra asked after a while.

Sabine leaned her head back against the wall, "That's... a long story."

"We've got time", he pulled his legs up close to him on the bottom of the bunk.

"Well...", she began, "Ahsoka had this map she'd put together, from communication signals or something, and that led us to where you must have emerged from hyperspace. As luck would have it, there was a cruiser just sitting there. Ahsoka had transponder codes and we charmed our way in, they didn't even know what hit them."

He smiled at her, "Wait, you two took down an entire light-cruiser?"

"Not all of it, we got a few stormtroopers but I think we scared the rest off. Ahsoka pulled some Jedi mind trick and sent all the officers running after we got what we needed", she declined to mention her almost snapping and blasting an officer. Some things were best left in the past.

"Some luck running into a cruiser there and for them to have the coordinates too", her friend said.

"Yeah...", she hesitated for a moment, "Anyway, we followed them but we didn't find anyone. We landed to have a look around though, it was a nice place."

Ezra's eyes darkened, "I guess so."

She winced, "Oh, I'm sorry... I didn't mean to..."

"No, it's alright, it was a nice place", Ezra waved it off. "What did you see down there?"

"A bunch of ruined shuttles at first. Oh, and there were these tiny little scaly creatures..."

Ezra perked up, "You saw the loth-lizards?!"

"Um, yeah...", she raised an eyebrow, "Loth-lizards?"
He awkwardly looked away, "Oh, uh, I gave them a name. They were lizards and I missed home so..."

"Why am I not surprised?", she rolled her eyes. "Didn't name anything after me, did you?", she teased.

Ezra smirked, "I didn't miss you that much."

"Oh please", the Mandalorian winked at him with a grin.

"Fine", he raised up his hands, "I named the annoying ones after you."

He was lucky he was too far away for her to hit so she gave him her harshest glare.

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding", the Jedi wisely gave in.

"Hmm, right... they seemed nice anyway. At least you had some company." Sabine's thoughts went to what else they'd found on that world. She bit her lip nervously, unsure if she should ask. "Hey... you mentioned the Empire found you. What happened? I mean, we saw the shuttle so I can guess but, you know."

She didn't push him to answer and he took his time. It had been his home for a few years, having some bad memories about leaving it wasn't to be unexpected.

Ezra started after a while, "The Inquisitor came first and we held her off for a bit."

Sabine picked up on the word, "We?"

His eyes shut tightly, "Argos. I had a... pet, I guess. He was my friend. We had a connection so we were more partners than anything."

Sabine should have expected as much. Ever since she'd known him, he'd had a gift with animals and people. At first, she thought that the animal gift might only apply to Lothal but his abilities with the purrgil and then the krykna showed he was just naturally gifted. That ability to bond applied to people too, he and Kanan had a strong link with each other. Over time, especially in the final few months, Sabine felt like they had built one too. She'd feel what he felt, he'd know what she was thinking before he'd say it. Even out here, she just knew he was safe or when they'd finally found him.

"That's good, you deserved company out there", she said sympathetically.

"We hadn't expected an Inquisitor, we didn't plan for it", his voice cracked. "I blew the shuttle to deal with the stormtroopers and then ran for a TIE but she was on my tail. She cornered me on the beach and for a second I thought it was over but... Argos, he jumped in. He didn't make it"

"Ezra..."

That's why she'd felt the odd connection with that creature. The one she'd found on the beach with the lightsaber wound. That was his friend, his only one out here.

"Sorry, I...", Ezra swallowed hard but couldn't stop the tears.

Sabine scooted over to him and wrapped an arm around his shoulder, comforting him in his grief. It might have been an animal but they could mean a lot to someone at the best of times. To have had them as your only companion and to have been so prone to bonding with other beings like Ezra
was, that had to make it hurt. She ran a hand soothingly along his arm, letting him mourn his friend in his own time.

"I don't know if it means anything to hear but we... we found him. When we were there, Ahsoka and I found him, I know it", Sabine didn't doubt that their mutual connection was how she recognised it. "If it wasn't for him we wouldn't have known about the Inquisitor. We would have gone in unprepared and got ourselves hurt."

He calmed himself down and fought back the tears. "Thanks, Sabine. It's nice to hear he didn't die for nothing", Ezra said after a while. "I wouldn't be here without him. Obviously not without you guys either but, Argos as well."

They sat for a few minutes before Sabine could tell the grief had passed for now. She pulled back her arm but stayed next to him, close enough to almost be touching.

"Tell me about you guys. I want to know what you lot have been doing", Ezra sat up a bit and didn't seem to want to dwell on his own challenges for too long.

Sabine stretched her legs and sighed, "Like I said, I've been on Lothal. Hera has stayed with the rebellion but it's been... complicated.

"Complicated?", he shot her a clueless look.

There was no way she was spoiling that surprise for him. Part of her worried that he'd already sensed Jacen's existence or that he'd somehow read her mind and found out. She knew better, that wasn't how the force works, but she really didn't want him to know ahead of time. The joy and amazement on his face would be worth the pain of keeping a secret from him.

"She'll explain, you'll get what I mean when we get back", she said and swiftly moved on. "Zeb and Kallus were with the rebels too, they stuck together a lot and spent a lot of time with Hera but they had their own stuff to do too. Last I heard they were both on Lira San, Zeb wanted him to see it after the war."

Ezra huffed a laugh, "Kallus on Lira San?"

"Yeah", she was amazed as him, "He deserves to see it though. He's a new person now and the Lasat realised that."

"Do you see them a lot?", Ezra asked.

She nodded, "Yeah, not as much as I'd like to but I see them all. Hera especially, she visits all the time and calls almost every day. Zeb and Kallus come by when they can, which is nice."

A warm smile formed on his face, "And Chopper?"

"Wherever Hera goes, that monster goes with her", she laughed.

"I never thought I'd say it, but I honestly miss him", that was understandable, she'd even missed Chopper sometimes. "I miss it all. Chopper, the Phantom, the Ghost. I mean, she still has the Ghost, right?"

Sabine scoffed, "Does a loth-cat have its tail?" The old Lothal saying fit perfectly for when someone was asking stupidly obvious questions.

Ezra instantly looked at her with an odd expression on his face, "Where'd you hear that?"
"I did say I've been on Lothal this whole time", he could still be an idiot when he wanted to be.

"Yeah, I know but, I guess it only just hit me." His eyes lit up and she could tell where he was going, "How is Lothal? What have you been doing there?"

"Oh you know, this and that. For a while we worried that the Empire would come back and be a problem for us but that never came through. Ryder set up a militia and I spent a lot of the first few years training them."

Sabine had spent the better part of two years instructing and ordering them all about. It wasn't all easy, some recruits were just troublemakers and many days bored her to death, but it was for a good cause. It also got her out doing stuff and kept her skills sharp. It also didn't hurt that she got to put a lot of cocky young recruits in their place in blaster matches or sparring practice.

"Ryder made a good choice, you're a good leader."

"Ugh", she hated people telling her that, "The Empire never came back in the end so we never had to put it to the test. Most of the time after was just spent rebuilding and cleaning everything up."

She smiled to herself, "It's beautiful. I've gotten back into painting a lot. Not just symbols but items, landscapes, even people."

"You'll have to show me when we get back." Ezra always did like her paintings.

"Yeah, I cluttered the t-house with them", she bit her tongue back. She'd almost spoiled another surprise she'd been keeping.

To her relief, Ezra didn't pick up on it, "Really? Where are you living anyway?"

"Uhhh, just a house. It wasn't being used so I fixed it up. You'd like it", she wasn't lying really, maybe about the house, but he'd forgive her when he knew.

"Huh", he shrugged, "I almost thought you'd live in my tower or something."

_Kriff, really?_ She half-considered just telling him but decided the surprise would be worth it.

"Come on, in the state you left it? No one was going to live in the mess you left", she grinned. It was the truth, to be fair. She did have to clean the place for a few weeks to make it liveable.

"Okay, good point", he relented.

She drew her legs up close to her. "It reminded me of you a lot. Lothal, I mean. Everything about it was just... it's your home. The plains we'd sit in when the Ghost was planetside, the markets we'd do jobs in, even the loth-cats reminded me of you."

The Jedi huffed a laugh, "Is that a compliment?"

Her elbow playfully nudged his side, "Only you'd think it was." She didn't really mean that, but she wasn't going to tell him how much the creatures had grown on her in the last few years.

"So painting and training? Sounds like fun."

"Not just that. I explored a bit, helped out on things, spent time with Hera and things", she was trying her utmost not to accidentally mention the babysitting. "Oh, I did lightsaber form practice too. I hope you don't mind", she smiled awkwardly, hoping he didn't find it rude of her.

"Oh, nice. Maybe you'll actually be a challenge now", he gave her a cocky smile.
"Excuse me?", she jokingly glared at him.

Ezra's hand brushed the lightsaber at his hip, "I'm joking, you've always been good." The compliment made her smile, she knew it meant something coming from him. "I'm surprised you didn't paint it or something", he laughed.

Sabine bit her lip, "I... might have considered it. Once or twice." It was more than once or twice. "I didn't think you'd appreciate me covering it in paint though."

He looked back at her, "No, I actually wouldn't have minded. It'd look good."

"Really?", she'd never thought he'd actually be okay with it.

Ezra just smiled, "Yeah, why wouldn't I be okay with it? I love your art."

"Oh, in that case... maybe I will give it something," She wasn't sure what she'd paint but she'd make it something amazing, it had to be. 'This weapon is your life', and she didn't miss what it meant for him to want her to leave a mark on it. "Speaking of redesigning...", she looked obviously at the beard around his chin.

He sat up, "This again? We talked about this."

She sat up with him, "Ugh, I didn't wait five years and come halfway across the galaxy to see your dumb face and have it covered in... that." The comment came out more heartfelt that she'd meant it to.

Ezra paused and met her eyes, "Sabine..."

"I mean... that came out weird, didn't it?", she looked awkwardly away.

"And you say I'm the one with awful compliments", he teased.

Her elbow found its familiar place in the side of his ribs to shut him up. It worked and they both sat there quietly, relaxing wordlessly in each other's presence. It was almost like old times, back on the Ghost or Atollon or Lothal. They'd spent so many hours joking and talking with each others, sometimes with Zeb too, just forgetting their troubles. Except, this isn't like old times. Everything had changed now. The galaxy, their lives, even them as people. They weren't the young rebels on the Ghost anymore, they weren't the two kids in Hera and Kanan's perfectly imperfect family. They were just two survivors of a war that had killed so many and had been kept apart for far too long.

She didn't know how long it was before he spoke again. "Hey, Sabine", his voice was soft and quiet. "I know I said it but... thank you. I can't-"

"Ezra, stop it", she couldn't stand compliments or attention, she never could. Her eyes focused on the floor and didn't want to look at him right now.

"No, you deserve to know", he said adamantly. "What you've done for me, what you've always done, I can't ever thank you enough. It means more than I could ever show you."

Sabine finally looked at him and saw the care in his eyes and the heartfelt smile on his lips. It broke her hard exterior to see him like this, so humbled and genuine about everything. She owed it to him to be the same.

"Ezra, after everything you've done for me and for everyone else, you don't owe me anything. Thank you, Ezra. For everything. I don't think I ever really told you that", his bright blue eyes drew
"It takes a really special person to have your commitment to do something like this", Ezra's voice was hushed but honest.

Sabine let the eye contact break for only a second, "I've had someone special keeping me going."

For the first time since they'd been reunited she looked at him. She really looked at him. Under the ruffled hair and untrimmed beard was still that same stupid loth-rat she'd always known. The same good heart, the same noble spirit, the same loyal friend. Yet behind it all he was just a little broken. Broken by grief, loneliness, heartbreak and self-doubt. She knew him well enough to see it, and she knew it well enough in herself to recognise it. Ezra had gone through so much, she had too, and through it all they still had their friendship to pull them through.

She couldn't help but let her mind wander to the feelings she'd started to accept since she'd last saw him. She'd worried they'd burst through when she found him but they hadn't. Instead, she'd slowly been reminded of them every minute since he'd come back. The trust, the humour, the friendship, the care, the respect, all of it reminded her. After all this time, all these years and all this distance, she still loved him. She wasn't ready to say it, she didn't know when she'd be, but she knew it.

Sabine suddenly became conscious of how long she'd been staring at him and abruptly broke away. She might accept her feelings but that didn't mean she was any better at handling them most of the time.

"Uh, we should get some rest", she said as she shuffled to the edge of the bed.

Ezra moved to, "Yeah, it's been quite the day." If he'd had any inkling of her thoughts, he didn't let it show. She appreciated that. However he felt after all this time, he still respected her enough not to push her too far.

"You can stay here", she said as she stood up, "You deserve a good night's sleep in a proper bed."

"Uhhh...", his voice trailed off awkwardly.

She didn't need to know what he'd assumed. She went to her bag and pulled out the small bedroll tucked away in it, "I'm going in the hold."

Ezra cleared his throat, "Ahem, uh, right."

Sabine opened the cabin door and turned back, "It's good to have you back, Ezra."

The Jedi smiled brightly back to her, "It's good to be back."

"Night, Ezra", she told him as she slowly slipped out the door.

"Night, Sabine", he replied just before the door slid closed behind her.

Unexpectedly, she didn't sleep much that night. She wasn't kept up by nightmares or her anxieties, if anything it was the opposite. She couldn't stop imagining Hera's face when she first lay eyes on him, Chopper's poor attempts to pretend he wasn't overjoyed to see him, Ezra gasping for breath as Zeb half-crushed him with a hug. Jacen too - nothing was going to compare to seeing that, not even him going back to Lothal. Plus he'd get to see the galaxy be free for the first time and enjoy life like normal people got to do, without war or tyranny to worry about.

Whatever they did next. Whatever happened with the Unknown Region, with Skywalker, with
Jacen or with Lothal, it didn't really matter. Whatever the future brought for either of them, from now on they weren't going to be anywhere but at each other's side.

Chapter End Notes

The usual arrangement for commentary.

The compass that the Fourth Sister finds is essentially the same as the one that Luke finds on Pillio in Battlefront II and keeps with him on Ach-To decades later. The key difference being the purple stone on this one instead of Luke's blue one. Thrawn's evaluation of the physical characteristics compass is based on what we actually do know about Luke's compass from the Visual Dictionary, such as the supraluminite lodestone in the centre. The two compasses don't necessarily lead to the same place or represent the same things, but they were constructed in a similar manner, as will be explained going forward. We know nothing solid about the compass in canon and it hasn't really turned up much since its introduction so I felt like it was something that I had some leeway with. Everything about them being used to navigate or the glowing of the stone is entirely made up for the story, but I tried to keep it all as grounded as possible. Also, it allows me to tie in yet another little thing from the wider Star Wars canon.

I felt that the first Ezra, Ahsoka and Sabine section was a bit clunky, particularly the dialogue for Ezra. It's serviceable and there wasn't much else I could think of doing to cover the information that needed to be covered. Things like Luke and the threat in the Unknown will be talked about at greater length soon, so there'll be a better discussion about that coming. The Thrawn and Inquisitor stuff is shorter since the Ezra, Sabine and Ahsoka sections were more important this time. Besides, the Empire had the main focus in the last chapter even with the Ezra and Sabine reunion in it. I wanted to give Ezra and Sabine some time to bond alone and just be normal again. They had their reunion last chapter but I felt they'd need to have a proper conversation about everything too. Also, their reunion had to be a bit more serious and heartfelt whilst here I could start to let them relax a bit. They're telling stories and joking with each other as much as they're being all serious since this is their first time really getting some time alone together again. They've got a fair bit of catching up to do and it lets me get Ezra up to speed on one or two things before he gets home.

Next time: Ezra, Sabine and Ahsoka return home, the Fourth Sister and Thrawn prepare to leave, and another long awaited meeting comes at last.
I apologise for the delay on this one, a lot longer than I'd expected but hopefully it won't happen again. With the release of this chapter, there's only three more chapters for this half of the story, so we're really drawing to a sort of conclusion for now.

Ezra, Sabine and Ahsoka return home while the Fourth Sister and Thrawn prepare to leave.

The trip had taken almost two weeks, as Ahsoka and Sabine had predicted, and it had managed to feel a whole lot longer and whole lot shorter at the same time. Time melted away when he and Sabine sat and talked for hours on end, and he'd spent hours meditating with Ahsoka, they'd even done some lightsaber sparring between the three of them to get him back into the swing of things. They'd caught him up on galactic events too. He'd heard about the heroic sacrifice of the rebels at Scarif and of Luke Skywalker's destruction planet-sized battle station called the Death Star. Sabine told him about the narrow escape of the rebels at Hoth and of their final lucky victory above Endor.

The stories he most liked were the ones about the people he knew. Wedge had flown in almost every major battle and was one of the rebellion's most respected heroes. Rex had served as a commando at Endor, Leia Organa had kept up her relentless drive against the Empire and was one of the rebellion's key leaders. Mon Mothma, General Dodonna and even, to Ezra's complete disdain, that sleemo Lando Calrissian had all kept up their part of the fight.

Things weren't all so uplifting though. Master Yoda had gone, he already knew that, but Ahsoka knew that Master Kenobi had also become one with the force. Ezra had hoped that Obi Wan Kenobi has somehow survived after all this time but from what Ahsoka heard, his sacrifice saved Luke Skywalker and set him on the path to defeat the Empire. A few other familiar faces hadn't made it; Senator Bail Organa, Saw Gerrera, Hobbie and more than a few others had given their lives. For better or for worse, he wasn't going back to the same galaxy that he once knew.

"There's the corvette, just like they said", Ahsoka announced and snapped him out of his trance.

In the distance, a CR-90 Corvette was waiting for their arrival. They'd been able to send a message ahead and Leia Organa herself had promised to personally take a ship to pick them up. Ezra would have rather gone straight to Lothal or had the Ghost meet them but they had things to do and people to see first. All in good time. He'd be glad to see Leia at least, though he still hoped someone else had come out too.

"Hey, you okay?", Sabine asked from the chair in front of him.

His eyes stayed fixed on the ship as they approached, "Yeah, just a bit overwhelmed I guess.

"It's nice seeing you speechless", she grinned.
Ahsoka guided the shuttle to the side of the awaiting ship, ready to connect with the docking tube to take them on board. Ezra felt something as they approached, something that was very vaguely familiar to him.

"Come on, you", Sabine pulled him up out of the seat.

She led him to the hatch on the side of the shuttle as Ahsoka brought them in. Sabine watched him stand impatiently by the door, his agitation and nervousness clearly showing.

"Relax, Ezra", she put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"Easy for you to say. I haven't been back for years", he quickly smoothed out his scruffy hair and ran a hand across his beard.

"You're not that nervous about meeting the Princess, are you?", the Mandalorian smirked at him.

His eyes widened. Ezra knew what she was implying, 'nervous about the Princess'. He'd hoped Sabine might have figured out by now that he tended to prefer a different type of woman. "What? No! I'm just nervous. What if Hera sees me like this", he looked down at his rough clothes.

"I'm joking, I get it. Just relax, people aren't going to care what you look like", she dropped her hand from him.

"Right...", he let her eyes linger on her for a few moments longer.

The ship jolted as the docking tube attached and they heard the hissing from outside as the pressure and air were normalised. Ezra hovered his hand over the open button, waiting for the alarms to give the signal. At last, the buzz told him it was time.

"After you", Sabine stepped back to let him get out first.

His hand stayed over the button for a few more seconds before he shakily pushed it down. He went through the airlock with Sabine just behind him, reaching the white doors of the corvette itself. It opened to a clean white corridor, just like how he remembered. On the far side on the short corridor were a few figures. Some soldiers and two women, one was probably Leia but he didn't really check. Ezra only focused one person. Hera.

The Twi'lek was standing before everyone else, rubbing her hands together nervously. She froze when she saw him, just like he did, and he meet the eyes of his adoptive mother for the first time in years. Despite five years passing, she looked the same. The same caring eyes, the same flight suit, the utility gloves, the same goggles on top of her head.

"Hera", his voice was barely more than a whisper.

They stared for what felt like forever before they both moved in unison. It was a blur but they closed the gap in seconds as Hera's loving arms settled around him.

"Ezra", she whispered into his shoulder.

He couldn't help but let a few tears go too. Hera was a mother to him in everything but blood and he'd missed her as much as he'd missed Sabine.

"You're here... after everything you're here", her voice whispered.

"Yeah", the sob mixed with a laugh, "I'm here. Thanks to Sabine and Ahsoka."
With the mention of the Mandalorian, Hera's head came up and an arm loosened as she reached to pull Sabine into the hug with them. Ezra brought his arms around them both. He had them both back and nothing was going to tear them away again. It was a while before Hera loosened her caring hold and looked at him fully.

"Oh, Ezra", her hand came up to his face, "You're still wearing those same clothes for five years ago."

He smiled at her, "Hera..."

She didn't take notice, "And you hair is all scruffy... and you're full of scars."

"Hera!", he started to laugh a bit.

Her hand went to his face, "And the beard?" She breathed in through her teeth, "You might want to take a look at that."

*Kriff, really?* He could feel Sabine's smug grin without even looking at her.

"Hera!", he said firmly but softly and took hold of her hand, "You're such a mom."

Her green eyes darted to Sabine for the briefest second. "I know, dear, I know. I've... I've missed you so much."

"I missed you too", Ezra squeezed her hand in his own.

"I'm so proud of you, Ezra." The Twi'lek looked him up and down again. "I can't imagine what you've been through out there. I'm so glad you're safe."

"I'm fine, Hera. You're the one who's been fighting a war this whole time."

She smiled, "Not the whole time, and I've had people there with me."

"I didn't realise you weren't all on the Ghost", Ezra said to her.

Hera sighed, "Sabine had Lothal to look after. She was pretty adamant on that, for a few reasons..."

"Ahem", Sabine cut her off with a half-angry half-joking glare.

"Zeb and Kallus had their duties. I still had Chop and... well", Hera bit her lip, "Well you'll see."

Ezra squinted at them both. *You'll see?* Sabine had been evasive about Hera's 'obligations' whenever he'd asked. It was clear they were hiding something from him. His best guess was that she had her own squadron again, maybe even her own fleet at this rate, and they must be saving it to surprise him. That was nice of them to try and surprise him with whatever secret they had, but he was really itching to know.

"Alright, are you going to let me in on the secret?", Ezra asked them both, "You're both up to something and I know it."

"Trust us, Ezra", Sabine put a hand on his arm, "You'll know when you know."

Ezra sighed, "It better be good if you're keeping it from me."

Hera exchanged a look with Sabine, "It's better that good, Ezra."
Before he could get anything else out of them, a familiar voice piped up behind Hera. "It's moments like this that make all the fighting worth it."

Leia still looked recognisable after all these years. She still had the same air of maturity and leadership that he'd seen when they first met, despite being about the same age as him.

"Princess", Ezra gave her a quick hug.

"Ezra Bridger, it's been a while."

*Way to understate it, Princess.* "Too long, Princess. Sabine said you've been busy?"

Leia put her hands on her hips, "We've all been busy for a long time. Me, Hera, Sabine, and not to mention you. It's good to have you back."

"Good to be back, Leia", he smiled to her.

Ezra saw Hera and Leia's attention shift to the corridor behind him. He looked over his shoulder and saw Ahsoka with her robe and staff standing outside the hatch.

"You're right, Princess", she agreed, "These moments are worth fighting for."

"Ahsoka Tano", Leia watched the older woman for a moment with a thoughtful look.

"Princess Leia Organa", the Togruta said as she approached.

The younger woman's was hiding something and Ezra could feel it, Ahsoka probably could too.

"I've heard a lot about you, Ahsoka", Leia stepped forward to her.

"And I you", Ahsoka sighed slightly, "I'm sorry about your father, he was a good man."

Leia's breath hitched in her throat. It must have been hard to think about, Sabine had told him about Alderaan's destruction at the hands of the Empire. It finally explained that feeling of terror he'd felt through the force over four years ago. Bail Organa, Leia's father, had died in the attack, another casualty of the war.

"I-uh, yes. Thank you... Ahsoka", Leia's head sunk down.

Hera stepped in to place a comforting hand on Leia and spoke to the Togruta. "It's good to see you, Ahsoka. It's been too long."

"Hera, it's good to see you in person."

After being sure Leia was alright, Hera pulled Ahsoka into a hug. "You're not escaping either", the Twi'lek laughed. "Thank you for what you've done."

Ahsoka returned the gesture, "Thank you for what you've done. If I recall, I owe you my life already, and Ezra too."

Neither of the women seemed to be able to take a compliment. Ahsoka and Hera both deserved the praise they got but both were too humble to ever take it.

"Besides", Ahsoka continued, "Ezra did a good job of keeping himself alive on his own and without Sabine we wouldn't have found him anyway."
"I wouldn't be here without any of you guys", Ezra told them all, "Thank you, for everything."

"Will you stop saying 'thank you' already?", Sabine groaned at him.

Hera shook her head at the two of them, "Sabine's right, you don't owe us a thank you. We're family, and you gave up a lot more for us."

Ezra wanted to hug them all again, Hera and Sabine in particular, but he fought the urge.

"There'll be time for more catching up when we get back to Home One. There's someone else who wants to meet you first", Leia told them all.

Ahoska and Ezra shared a brief glance, part anticipation and part anxiety. Ezra was definitely looking forward to meeting this Jedi but Ahoska was understandably more wary.

"You mean, he's here?", Sabine asked the question for them.

"Luke's here, yes", Hera confirmed, "He thought it'd be a bit much to ambush you as you arrived but we thought you'd want to speak with him."

"Come on, he's waiting for us." Leia started to lead them out of the corridor before stopping abruptly. "Oh, Ahoska. Someone does want to see you first."

Ahoska could sense that it was Rex before they'd walked through the door into the next corridor. The old clone looked pretty similar to how she'd last seen him just before the Battle of Endor.

"I don't believe my eyes. Ezra Bridger", Rex chuckled as they approached each other.

"Rex!", Ezra met him with a good handshake and a half-armed hug.

"I'll be damned, you're almost going to give me a run for my money with that thing", Rex chuckled and pointed to the beard.

Ezra defensively touched his face, "Is everyone talking about the beard?"

"Don't worry, Rex, it's going", Sabine seemed to be telling Ezra as much as Rex.

Ahoska smiled at the two of them. They really did make an admirable team and were a matched set if there ever was one. She hoped things worked out with them, they'd both earned that sort of happiness, a sort of happiness too few people in this galaxy had.

"Ah, I wouldn't argue with that one", Rex winked to Ezra.

"Yeah, even I know better than that", Ezra nudged back at Sabine.

"Come on you two", Hera came up behind them, "Let's go."

The Twi'lek, the Jedi and the Mandalorian walked past but Leia stopped Rex and whispered close to him for a moment.

"Hey, you guys coming?", Ezra called after them.

"Yes", Leia pulled back, "Ahoska and Rex will catch up. We'll wait for them there."

Rex finally looked at Ahoska as Leia left to join the others, leaving the two old friends alone.
"You actually found the kid, I'm impressed. I mean, I knew you would but, you know, didn't take you long", Rex said as he walked closer to her.

"It wasn't easy but we got him", Ahsoka let out a weary sigh.

"Still got the fancy getup I see", he pointed to the staff and the cloak wrapped around her.

She brandished the staff and smiled, "I told you, they're important."

"Right, right, the force and stuff", Rex raised his hands to admit defeat.

The Togruta huffed and gently pulled him in for a hug, careful not to hit him with the 'fancy' staff as she did so.

"I'm glad you're alright", Ahsoka spoke softly to him.

He tightened the hug before releasing her, "You too."

"How was the fighting?", if there was one thing Rex could talk about, it was war.

His hand unconsciously rubbed his forehead, "Endor was intense but I haven't seen much action since. Mostly had me in for intel briefings and boring patrols."

"Well, maybe I'll take you on some more exciting missions for a change", Ahsoka suggested, "I've got a few places I've still got to secure and a few things I've got to set in order."

"Ahsoka", he scowled, "Don't tell me you're jumping straight back into it. Don't overburden yourself."

"Oh please, remember who you're talking to", she smiled back. Ahsoka wasn't quite sure if she was trying to say she could handle it or trying to remind him that she always overstretched herself.

"Maybe this time you can stay a bit longer and unwind", he suggested. "There's some places in the galaxy you have to visit. Mandalore, Ryloth, Christophis, Onderon", all places she'd last seen in the midst of war.

"We'll have to see, Rex", Ahsoka sighed.

He furrowed his brow, "Something else came up, didn't it?"

"Maybe, it's too early to tell", she looked up the corridor, "We'll talk about it later. Right now, I'm more interested in Luke."

The clone hesitated for a moment, "Like I said before Endor, he's the Gener- Anakin's kid."

Ahsoka noticed the correction. Rex knew what Anakin had become, she'd told him when she'd visited a few months ago. It hadn't be easy for her to tell him and it had been even harder for him to listen to. At first he didn't believe it, then he got angry at himself for not knowing, then briefly at her for not telling him earlier, then back at himself again. The truth was that is wasn't his fault, not one bit. He'd been on Mandalore with her when it happened and couldn't have seen it like she should have. He didn't know anything about how close he already skirted to the dark side... unlike her. He wasn't to blame... unlike her.

"Have you spoken to him?", Ahsoka asked.

He nodded, "Briefly. He knows who I am and he'll know who you are."
"I see", she went quiet again.

Part of her was obviously glad to be meeting him, he was Anakin's son after all and a hero in his own right, a Jedi hero to boot. However, she still couldn't shake the guilt. Maybe if she'd stayed, maybe if she'd been there when he'd needed her...But it was too late for that now. Anakin was gone. She knew that much.

Rex lay a hand on her arm, "Ahsoka, there's something else you should know."

She looked worriedly at him, "Rex?"

"It's Leia... the Princess."

*Leia.* She'd sensed something about her when they arrived but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. Familiar for sure, but that was to be expected from Senator Organa's daughter.

Rex sighed, "Leia Organa, well, she's not Organa. She's Skywalker, like Luke. They're twins."

She let her mouth drop open. Another Skywalker? The shock took a few moments to pass but soon enough, things started to make more sense. The natural leadership ability was a trait from both of Leia's parents, as was the fierce attitude that Ahsoka had heard so much about. There had been something about Leia the moment she'd laid eyes on her when she arrived, but the possibility had just never crossed her mind. Then the rest of it started to make sense. She'd been a friend to Bail Organa for years after the fall of the Republic, and he never wished to discuss his daughter much, especially it seemed when Ahsoka was around. Now, that reluctance made a lot more sense. Bail was one of Padme's closest friends in the Senate and one of the Jedi Order's closest allies, so was a uniquely safe place for someone like Leia, and hiding her in plain sight among one of the galaxy's leading politicians made a strange sort of sense.

"I...", she paused, "Actually, I'm not surprised."

"Really?", he looked at her sceptically.

"I sensed something about her since we arrived, it felt familiar but different", she mused. Ahsoka smiled and thought back to old memories, "Besides, she is exactly like her mother too."

That Padme Amidala was their mother was never really in doubt. Ahsoka knew about Anakin and Padme's shared secret before she'd left the Order, but she'd never said anything about it to anyone. Almost every Jedi had some secrets and attachments they never quite let go of. She had Lux, Master Kenobi has Duchess Satine Kryze, and Anakin had Senator Amidala. A lot of people close to them probably had their own suspicions too. She knew Rex did and Obi Wan must have had some idea. There were just bigger concerns at the time with the war and all. Ultimately, maybe that relationship was a good thing if it brought Luke and Leia into the galaxy.

Rex chuckled, "My thoughts exactly. She's got the fire of her mother and the attitude of her father."

"Now that's a frightening combination", she smirked.

"Damn right it is, and she made sure the Empire knew it", the old soldier could find the humour in any situation.

Ahsoka took a few seconds to take it in. Not only was she meeting Luke Skywalker but she'd met Leia Skywalker too. If what Rex said was true then they already know who she was as well. Perhaps after things had settled down, she have a talk with them properly. They deserved to know about their parents, no matter what became of them in the end.
"Come on", she tapped the staff on the ground, "Let's not keep them waiting."

"With all due respect, I can't overstate how bad of an idea I think this is", Commodore Faro told Thrawn as they walked to the hangar.

"I understand your anxiety, Commodore, but it is unwarranted."

The Grand Admiral had slung a bag over his shoulder with a few supplies in and was donning his white combat armour. He might have looked prepared for anything but Faro couldn't accept that he was prepared for this. Venturing off into the Unknown Regions was dangerous enough without doing it alongside an untrustworthy force user who already despises you. Thrawn hadn't exactly been clear on why he decided that this was the best course of action but she couldn't think of any explanation he could give that would be good enough anyway.

"I assure you, this is the most appropriate course of action at this time", Thrawn said as they walked. "The opportunity to observe these discoveries first hand without the possibility of the Fourth Sister seeking to deceive us is too valuable not to take advantage of."

"How are you so sure that you're going to find anything in the first place? You're not relying on her senses again, are you?", her anxiety was clear in her voice.

"We have alternative means of exploration", the Grand Admiral kept his hand on the bag around his shoulder, "Rest assured, Commodore, this expedition will bear fruit."

The doors to the *Chimaera*'s hangar slid open and a bustle of maintenance crew and hangar staff were seeing to their tasks. Thrawn made a cursory nod to Senior Lieutenant Xoxtin, the pedantic and well-connected overseer of the hangar, and made for his ship. However, it was not his shuttle that he was going toward but the old nondescript freighter he'd liberated from pirates years ago.

"You're taking the freighter?", Faro had to question the choice of transport.

"Yes. The Unknown Regions are uncharted, not uninhabited. An Imperial shuttle would attract attention that a civilian freighter would not", Thrawn explained.

Faro didn't trust the roughed-up old ship. It had been in the Seventh Fleet almost as long as she had and technology wore away much faster than people. She spotted the Fourth Sister already standing near the shuttle, regarding it with disdain.

Well, at least we finally agree on something, Inquisitor.

"How sure are you that this is the right path?", she asked in hushed tone.

The Grand Admiral stopped and turned to her, "It is the only path that has presented itself to us at this time."

Faro glanced over at the Inquisitor, "I still don't trust her. Not without more backup to keep an eye on her."

Thrawn looked as well but seemed untroubled, "I do not trust her either, Commodore, but she recognises her dependence on our cooperation. She cannot achieve her ends without our aid and cannot hope to retain such aid if I am removed from the equation."

For someone trying to allay her worries, he was awfully cynical about it. He was hinging his life on the Fourth Sister's acceptance that killing him would cause more problems than keeping him alive.

"Furthermore", Thrawn pulled a strange object out of his bag, "She is unable to navigate without
this device, which only I posses the ability to understand. If this in any indication then she will also recognize that my knowledge will be essential in uncovering this threat. She lacks the thought for art, architecture and symbolism that are already proving vital in our journey."

The Commodore folded her arms in front of her, "She needs you to achieve her aims, but what are her aims?"

Thrawn slid the object back into his bag, "We shall soon see."

"Grand Admiral!", the Inquisitor's voice interrupted them.

Thrawn turned from her and began walking over to the Inquisitor. Faro followed a few paces behind, unsure if she felt worse or better about this.

"Inquisitor, I see we are ready to depart."

The Fourth Sister turned and followed him, condemning Faro to follow behind. "We're going in this?", the Inquisitor pointed to the shuttle.

"The need to maintain anonymity could prove useful in our expedition", he explained to the Inquisitor what he'd already told the Commodore.

"Hmph, whatever you say. Let's just get going", the other woman sighed. "Do you have the compass?"

"I do", Thrawn answered.

_Compass?_ She concluded that it must have been the object Thrawn had shown her a few moments ago.

The Chiss anticipated her thoughts, "As I said, Commodore. Alternative means."

Faro saw the Inquisitor's head turn back slightly to her and a cold glare shot from her yellow eyes. Under her guise of cooperation, Faro could tell that the Fourth Sister was the same seething, hateful creature that she had always been. Whatever she was hiding, whatever was forcing her to work with them, was something important.

"I'll prepare the ship for take off", the Fourth Sister kicked up her pace and went ahead to the ship without them.

Thrawn slowed and watched her go. "She is eager", he observed, "Anxious and unsettled, intent on beginning this mission as soon as possible."

"Or finishing it", Faro added.

"Indeed, or finishing it", the Grand Admiral kept looking at the ship, "I shall relay coordinates to you and Captain Pellaeon when I believe we have found something of significance."

"Aye, sir. Any orders in your absence?", she inquired.

"Captain Pellaeon will assume command of the fleet in my absence and as per usual you have the Chimaera. Pellaeon has already been instructed to dispatch Captain Sarlis and the Imperator to retrieve the Invictus."

Faro had been wondering what was becoming of the light-cruiser. The Invictus had been holding position ever since it was attacked by Bridger's allies weeks ago. It also made sense that Sarlis was
the one to be sent to retrieve it, it was the lowest risk and lowest difficulty sort of assignment that Thrawn had a habit of passing on to the young Captain. Political appointees, even after years in the service, rarely grew into their roles.

"As for you, I have several samples being brought up from the planet's surface. Bodies, minerals, architecture and the like. Ensure that they are analysed and accounted for. If there is anything they can tell us, I wish to know it."

Faro nodded, "As you say, Grand Admiral."

Thrawn turned to face her, "I entrust the safety of this ship and the fleet to you and Captain Pellaeon."

The Commodore stood to attention and saluted him, "We'll do as you've commanded, Grand Admiral."

"I trust that you shall", Thrawn tipped his head before walking away to the ship.

Faro stood at ease and watched him disappear into the ship, not turning back once. His mind was already moving on to the task at hand, as it always did. The Grand Admiral's suspicions seemed to be well-founded but that still didn't mean she was on board with this mission. Leaving him alone with her was dangerous, especially if they happened to find whatever it was that the Inquisitor wanted.

The civilian freighter lurched off the ground and flew steadily out of the hangar before disappearing out of view into the blackness of space. It was out of her hands now. The Commodore began to make her way back to the bridge to coordinate the analysis that the Grand Admiral had requested. She might not be able to influence this mission with the Grand Admiral or the Fourth Sister, but she and Pellaeon could play their own roles here. It would have to be enough for now.

They were waiting outside the bridge for a few minutes for Ahsoka and Rex to catch up. Sabine and Hera were having a quiet conversation, far too quiet for Ezra to hear them, just a few metres back from the door while Leia and Ezra stood near it on opposite sides of the corridor.

"They never lost faith in you", Leia said suddenly.

Ezra brought his attention to her, "What do you mean?"

"Hera and Sabine", she nodded over to the two women lost in conversation, "They never gave up hope. I remember Hera telling us what happened. She knew how it looked to everyone else but I don't think the thought ever crossed her mind that you might not be okay. She trusted you completely."

Ezra looked appreciatively at the Twi'lek, "Yeah, that's Hera."

Leia watched with him, "And Sabine too. Always holding out hope. I admit I don't know her well but I do know that she almost lived off the belief that you were alright and that you'd come back."

Sabine and Hera seemed oblivious to their conversation and were still whispering to each other. He couldn't tell what about but there was no mistaking the joy on their faces. They were the two people he cared for most in the galaxy and it still hadn't sunk in that he had them back in his life. Losing people for so long can really make you appreciate them when you have them back, even if you already thought the world of them before. Now that he had them back, he promised himself he would make sure they knew. He'd do whatever he could for Hera, help her with anything or spend
any time with her that he could. For Sabine, he'd do the same but that wasn't quite enough. There was something different about her and he wasn't going to miss the chance to show her that. They'd lost five years already, he didn't want to lose any more.

"I know that sort of look", Leia smiled knowingly at him.

He snapped his attention back to the Princess "Huh? What look?"

"Sorry, didn't mean to keep you waiting", Ahsoka's voice interrupted as her and Rex arrived.

"It's no problem", Leia motioned her forward, "Come on, he's itching to meet you."

Ahsoka met Leia's eyes as they walked past and the Togruta gave her a thin smile for a second. _Huh, I wonder what's going on with those two?_

"That makes three of us", Ahsoka took her place next to Ezra as Leia led the way. Sabine was close behind him with Rex and Hera hanging at the back.

Leia opened the door to the bridge, the familiar sight of a Corvette's command centre greeting them. A skeleton crew of no more than five people was manning the bridge, it made sense not to waste many personnel on a casual pickup. The ship was already in hyperspace, heading back to the rebel fleet where Zeb, Chopper and the Ghost were all waiting.

One person on the bridge, however, was no crewmen. Standing with his back to them and staring out of the viewport was a young man with blond hair, clad all in black, with a dark glove covering his right hand. The way he carried himself left no question as to his identity, as if his unique presence in the force didn't give it away - Luke Skywalker.

"Ahsoka Tano, Ezra Bridger", Leia pointed to the man on the far end of the bridge, "Meet Luke Skywalker."

Luke turned to them so they could see his face. His blue eyes seemed older and wiser than his boyish appearance made him look. From the look of him, he couldn't be much older than Leia, probably even the same age.

"Hello there", the Jedi bowed his head and stepped down towards them, "It's good to finally meet you."

"Same for us", Ezra smiled.

"It's long overdue", Ahsoka added.

"Yes, I agree", Luke stepped in front of them and held out his right hand to shake Ezra's. _Cybernetic_, he thought as Luke then moved on to Ahsoka, _interesting_. "You must be Sabine", he said as he extended the gesture to the woman on Ezra's left.

"Guilty as charged", the Mandalorian smiled nervously back.

_You're not that nervous about meeting the Jedi, are you?_ He internally echoed Sabine's own snide comments to him earlier about Leia. Jokingly, of course. He hoped Sabine preferred a different type of Jedi.

"Hera, Rex", Luke acknowledged them both at the back of the room. Ezra wasn't surprised that they'd crossed paths before.
"So...", Luke looked at Ezra and Ahsoka, "Three Jedi."

"Two and a half", Ahsoka corrected, "I'm not really a Jedi."

"So I've heard, you left the Order", Luke seemed to be apprehensive. Understandable, given who he was talking to.

The Togruta let her gaze drop, "I did."

"Still, you know more about the force than either of us. It's an honour to meet you at last", Luke said to Ahsoka.

"I can say the same", the former Jedi replied.

Ezra felt the nervousness from both of them. Anakin Skywalker's legacy still hung heavy over both of them and meeting each other had to dig up some bad memories.

Ezra tried his best to alleviate the tension, "I can't believe you defeated the Emperor and Darth Vader. That's impressive, even for a Skywalker."

"I didn't defeat them, not really. My father pulled through in the end", Luke said solemnly.

"Your... father?", Ezra squinted at him.

Ahsoka stepped forward, "Luke, they don't know. I thought it wasn't my place to say."

"Say what?", Ezra looked quizzically at them.

The mood in the room turned sombre and a few concerned looks were exchanged. It made him feel better than Sabine looked as lost as he did and Hera didn't look much the wiser either.

Leia cleared her throat, "As I said to you before, Hera. None of this is to leave this room, at least for now. Garazeb and the rest of your crew aren't a concern if you want to tell them but there are people who it's better not to tell, at least for now."

"Uhh, Hera?", Ezra looked over to the Twi'lek.

Hera shifted her gaze to Leia as if to confirm it was her place to say, "Uh, Leia is... Leia isn't..."

"She's my sister", Luke finished for her.

Ezra was taken aback in surprise. Leia... was a Skywalker? Ezra looked over to her as the woman dipped her gaze away. She had the spirit and the bravery to match the stories he'd heard of Anakin Skywalker, there was no doubt about that. Yet still she looked almost ashamed about her identity.

"But, what does this have to do about your father?", Hera asked the Jedi. "I-I thought he died in the Clone Wars."

"In a way, he did", Luke sighed, "Though he wasn't dead, not really. Consumed, trapped, imprisoned maybe, by something else."

"Something else?", Sabine questioned.

"Darth Vader."

Ezra turned to the source of the voice, seeing Ahsoka looking mournfully down at the
ground. Anakin Skywalker was consumed by... Ezra's breath hitched. No, Anakin Skywalker was Darth Vader. A thousand things seemed to fall into place at once. It was why Ahsoka had become so sensitive at the mention of Anakin on the journey home, why Leia looked so conflicted about her past, why they'd insisted that the information didn't leave this room.

More things suddenly made sense after all this time. He remembered Master Kenobi on Tatooine, protecting someone as he'd heard Maul say. Luke had come from Tatooine, it was common knowledge. And then... and then there was Malachor. Karabast, there was Malachor. Ahsoka had faced her own Master. Ezra remembered watching her push him away and make a final stand against Vader. He'd heard their voices but had never known what they were saying.

Ahsoka sensed his thoughts, "Malachor. I found out on Malachor. There were... hints before but I only knew for certain there."

"Ahsoka, I...", Ezra's attention went back to Luke and Leia. Anakin might have been Ahsoka's Master but he was their father. "Luke, Leia, I'm sorry. I-

Luke cut him off, "Ezra, my father did terrible things but in the end he came through. I didn't defeat the Emperor, my father did, and I didn't stop Darth Vader, my father destroyed him."

Rex walked around and stood between Ahsoka and Leia, offering a comforting hand to his old friend. "I don't know about you, but I'm going to remember the Anakin Skywalker I knew. The General who fought for what was right no matter the cost. Not... not what came after."

"I appreciate your sympathy but let's leave it at that. Dwelling on the past isn't what we need right now", the young Jedi looked to Ezra, "Your message mentioned that you had something important that you needed to discuss."

Ezra sighed, "Yes, we do." He looked back at Sabine and then to Ahsoka before starting to explain himself. "This is probably going to sound unusual but... I saw Master Yoda."

Luke folded his arms, "It's not unusual, I know what you mean. I've seen him myself, and Master Kenobi."

"Do you know how they do it? I didn't think anyone could live on like that."

The other man sighed, "I don't know. I was hoping you'd know, or Ahsoka."

The Togruta thought for a moment, "There are ways to survive death using the force. The consciousness can be preserved after death and with immense training can manifest itself physically."

"Kanan didn't mention any of that", Ezra replied.

She shrugged her shoulders, "It's not common knowledge, it's not even a Jedi technique."

"Then how do you know about it?", Luke asked.

Ahsoka shook her head, "That's not important right now. What matters is that they did communicate to you, to both of you. Something had to have been important for them to do that."

Ezra continued, "Well, Master Yoda sensed something, out in the Unknown Regions. Something that was powerful and dangerous. He sent me to learn what I could but I didn't find much."

Luke took a deep breath and leaned back against the central strategic table, "What did you find?"
"Only bad things", Ezra admitted.

Barren lifeless worlds, fields of dead corpses, ancient abandoned ruins - none of that meant anything good.

"There were a number of planets that had evidence of some sort of attack or destruction. Ezra thinks one entire planet was ravaged by something, and both of us saw the results of some sort of attack on the planet we rescued him from. There was some sort of battle there but the place was... desecrated. Bodies everywhere, twisted and defiled in a way that had to have be done by the force", Ahsoka explained.

Luke rubbed the bridge of his nose, "The Emperor believed there was something out there too. He'd set up facilities across the galaxy to monitor something out in the Unknown Regions. If Master Yoda sensed something too then..."

"They're related", Ezra sunk his shoulders.

"You said something wiped out a planet. Like the Death Star?", Leia stepped in.

"No", it was Sabine that corrected her, "I saw the planet, it wasn't like that. It was just empty, like all of the life on it had been ripped away. It was still there but everything on it was gone, apart from some temple."

"Master Yoda said it was ancient and it didn't seem like it happened recently", Ezra could figure that much out from the age of the ruins he'd found himself in.

"If Master Yoda and Master Kenobi could survive after death then maybe we're dealing with something similar for this... disturbance. It would explain the link between this threat and all of these ancient sites", Ahsoka's face hardened into a look of concern.

Karabast. Ahsoka made a good point. The age of this mystery had been clear ever since Master Yoda had told him about it. But how could anything still be alive after that time, and how dangerous could they be?

"Perhaps the Emperor wanted that power and that's why he was searching out there", Luke suggested.

Ezra stroked his beard, "If the Emperor though something was out there then maybe that's why Thrawn didn't come back. It wasn't just some punishment for Lothal, maybe he wanted Thrawn to search for it."

"The Chiss are native to somewhere in the Unknown Regions", Ahsoka reasoned, "And it might even explain why an Inquisitor was sent after you."

Luke raised his head, "Inquisitor?"

"Jedi hunters", Ezra explained, "We thought they were all gone a few years back but there's still one out there with Thrawn."

This wasn't good. None of this was good. Life after death, Yoda and the Emperor sensing the same thing, Thrawn probably getting special assignments, long forgotten ruins, and ancient battlefields. This was all so-

"Hold on", Ahsoka said firmly but softly, "We're fumbling in the dark here. We can't start making all these assumptions and acting on them. We know Master Yoda felt something was out there, we
know the Emperor sensed something too and we know that there's a few locations that suggest the same thing."

Luke sighed, "Then what do we do?"

Ahsoka shut her eyes and focused her mind. "We have to be patient. We don't know enough to commit to anything so far. For now, we can't rush into things. An old friend once told me that the benefit of moving slowly is that you always see the path ahead. Right now, we need to take things one step at a time."

"So what do you suggest?", Ezra noticed how naturally Ahsoka became the voice of wisdom and restraint among them.

"Luke, you said the Emperor set up facilities to monitor the Unknown Regions?", the Togruta asked.

"Yes, I found one on Pillio but there's more throughout the galaxy." The Jedi stood up, "I have some leads for more locations but I'd have to investigate them."

"Good, see to it. If the Emperor knew anything that could help us, we'll find the evidence there."


"Ezra", the Togruta turned to him, "You understood this feeling better than any of us. Think on it, focus on it, and see if you can learn anything else. Also, gather what information you can about Jedi history, there might be something in there that gives us a clue."

He looked a bit surprised, "Is that it?"

Ahsoka smiled, "Don't sound too optimistic, Jedi history is hard to track down and even harder to sit through. Though I'm sure you'll have plenty of reading time back on Lothal."

"You have earned some time at home", Hera spoke for the first time in the meeting.

"Besides, I'm sure you'll find your own purpose there", Luke said to him cryptically.

Ezra could feel more than a few eyes on him. What did they known that he didn't?

"What about you?", Luke asked their de facto leader.

Ahsoka seemed to tighten her hold on her staff, "I have a few places that might help us learn something. Places strong in the force that I've been to. I'll see what I can track down."

"Sounds like we have a plan", Leia clapped her hands together, "Or at least, you three have a plan."

Ahsoka huffed a laughed, "We'll need your help too somewhere along the line."

"I'll do what I can", Leia's hands went to her hips.

"That settles it then. I'll track down more of the Emperor's facilities and find out what I can, Ezra will go home to Lothal and gather what information he can, and Ahsoka will set out and see what she can uncover."

"We'll stay in contact", Ahsoka told them all, "We're not going into isolation. Stay in contact with each other."
"Of course", Luke said.

Ezra nodded, "Not a problem."

So, the plan was set. Ezra had to admit, he was relieved that he wasn't being dragged into some star hopping escapade straight away. Like Hera had said, he'd earned a rest. When the time came, he wouldn't sit idle though, and he knew that eventually the time might come where he'd have to venture back out there again. For now though, that time was a long way away.

One of the bridge crew then interrupted, "General Organa, we'll be emerging from hyperspace momentarily."

"Excellent, Captain", she acknowledged him.

Hera came to Ezra's side, "Well, I suppose this is goodbye to the rest of you for now."

"Only for now", Leia pulled the Twi'lek into a hug.

You've earned some time at home, Ezra", Luke smiled to him.

Ezra put out a hand to shake Luke's again, "I'll see you soon. Good to meet you, Skywalker."

"Same to you, Bridger. Don't be a stranger."

Then Ezra turned to Ahsoka, ready to part ways with one of the people who had risked everything to get him here.

Ahsoka laughed to herself, "You know, I spent all this time searching for you and now you're off again."

"I'm not exactly going to be in exile again. I'll be safe."

"I'm sure you will be. After all, I'm sure Sabine will keep an eye on you", Ahsoka smiled to the Mandalorian next to him.

Sabine's eyes rolled playfully at him, "I'll do my best. You know what he's like."

Ezra nudged her, "Hey, what's that supposed to mean?"

Sabine shook her head and stepped toward Ahsoka, "Come on, you." The Mandalorian pulled the Togruta into a warm hug, "Thank you, Ahsoka. For everything you've done."

"You don't have to say a word. Thank you, Sabine. We wouldn't be here without you."

His two rescuers slowly released each other. "Just stay safe, I don't want to have to come and find you too."

Ahsoka laughed, "Hmm, I'll do my best."

There was a flurry of farewells and parting hugs between a few more people - Hera and Ahsoka, Sabine and Leia, Ezra and Rex - before the three former Spectres made their way to leave.

Ezra turned back from the door before he went to look at Ahsoka and Rex standing near Luke and Leia. With the revelations about Darth Vader and Leia's true heritage, they still had a lot to talk about. Ezra wouldn't have minded staying for it and spending some more time getting to know Luke but, at the end of the day, it was time for him to go home.
"Hey", Sabine's hand came to his shoulder, "You ready? Zeb is waiting on that cruiser and you know how bad he is with standing around."

"Yeah", Ezra breathed, "Time to have the family together again."

Sabine's hand fell away and they caught up to Hera, already making her way to leave the ship.

He heard his friend mutter beside him, "You have no idea..."

Chapter End Notes

A lot to happened in a very short space of time so there's a lot to talk about this chapter. Initially, this chapter was only made up of the first three sections but I decided to integrate the Luke meeting as well. I did some restructuring of these final few chapters quite late in development and changed how I wanted to lay some things out.

Hera meeting Ezra straight away was the best choice I think. I didn't want to overwhelm Ezra with everyone but a familiar face needed to be there and no one was a better choice than Hera. That first section had the difficult job of showing both Hera and Ezra's reunion as well as the first face-to-face meeting of Leia and Ahsoka. The focus was intended to remain on Ezra but I did want to get the latter in too. There'll be a more focused Hera/Ezra section later too, to talk about a few more things. Ahsoka and Rex needed a little meeting just so Ahsoka could find out who Leia was before the big meeting and I also just really like their friendship. I grew up on The Clone Wars and this was the first time I'd ever written these two together. The small Thrawn section is just Faro voicing her doubts over Thrawn's expedition with the Fourth Sister. It's only small but I wanted to show Faro's state of mind before Thrawn leaves with the Inquisitor. We won't be seeing Faro or Pellaeon for a chapter or two so it also serves to show what the fleet will be doing in the meantime.

Lastly, as I said, the Luke meeting was initially planned to be in a separate chapter and split into two parts. One for the meeting, one for the planning of the future. I quickly realised that this chapter was too short without it and that the Luke meeting wouldn't need two parts, it'd make more sense to talk all at once. I've never done a scene with this many active characters in it and it was a struggle to get everything across. The big one is the meeting between Ahsoka and Luke, but it also needed Ezra and Luke, the formulation of their plan, a bit of Ezra recounting his story, and the goodbyes between Ezra, Sabine and Ahsoka. This chapter was a tall order and I'm conscious that it's a bit messy in places, but I did the best I could. Them parting ways and doing what they can on their own is the best choice for everyone. It lets Luke continue his exploration of the observatories, it lets Ahsoka use her experience travelling the galaxy and it lets Ezra return home to Lothal. For these last few chapters before the hiatus, I wanted to bring the focus on Ezra and the Ghost crew and I didn't want it overshadowed by Luke and to an extent Ahsoka. This is, after all, a Rebels fic for now so Ezra, Sabine, Hera and the others remain the priority. Next chapter has a section focused on Luke, Ahsoka, Leia, and Rex, but aside from that the story focuses mainly on the Rebels stuff for the rest of this half. Ahsoka and Luke come back in a big way for the second
half of the story, but for now they need to step aside and let the Rebels stuff wrap up.

Next time: Ahsoka and Rex talk to Luke and Leia, Thrawn and the Fourth Sister try to work together, Ezra sees old faces and new.
I'm just going to go ahead and apologise again for how delayed this is. Life is busy yadda yadda yadda. This chapter also had a fair bit of work to do to clean it up, but the final two are mostly complete so I'm tentatively hopeful I won't leave you guys hanging for a week longer than you should have to.

As we're reaching the mid-story hiatus, I'm considering throwing together a sort of "author's note chapter" to talk about some stuff relating to the story. It'll also be my chance to answer anything that's unclear or that people think I haven't addressed properly. So, if there's something that I need to clarify or better explain ready for the second half of the story then don't be afraid to drop me a question via PM or review, especially if it can help me improve things going forward.

This time: Ahsoka and Rex talk to Luke and Leia, Thrawn and the Fourth Sister try to work together, Ezra sees old faces and new.

There was a long silence after Ezra, Sabine, and Hera left the bridge. They were taking the shuttle over to Home One as soon as they could to reunite with the rest of their friends and then head back to Lothal. Ahsoka was happy to see the time come, but right now her mood was anything but positive. She was nervous, unsure and perhaps above all, ashamed.

Her eyes left the door and returned to the other people in the room with her. Rex, Luke and Leia all seemed to share some mix of excitement and uncertainty about what was to come. Still, Ahsoka knew exactly what she wanted to know.

"Did he really come back?", she asked Luke.

The young Jedi was deep in his own thoughts, "Yes. I'd be dead if it wasn't for my father."

So, it really was true. Luke had achieved what she and even Obi Wan couldn't. Anakin had been in there all this time, still buried somewhere beneath the... monster that had consumed him.

"Can you tell me what happened?", her voice was shaky and quiet.

"There was always good in him. I knew it. When my father brought me before the Emperor, I could feel the conflict within him. We fought but I knew he was holding back." Luke delved back into what must have been a painful memory, "But I refused to kill him. The Emperor urged me too but I couldn't. So, the Emperor tried to kill me. I screamed and I begged and then... it stopped."

"Your father?"

Luke nodded, "I saw my father throw the Emperor down into the Death Star's core. The lightning, if that's what it was, damaged him though. I carried him to a ship but...", he trailed off and just shook his head.
So, it was true. After all these years, despite unimaginable darkness and the loss of all her hope, Anakin really had been the Chosen One. Ahsoka had lost faith in the idea not long after Order 66. The Sith had won, she didn't know of any surviving Jedi, and Anakin was dead by all accounts. Now, despite everything, she'd been proved wrong. Obi Wan had been right, his Master had been right, the Father had been right - he'd brought balance to the force.

That still didn't change what happened to get him there, and it didn't change how she'd let him down. If she'd paid more attention, if she'd stayed with the Order, if she hadn't abandoned him then... then maybe none of this would have happened. If she'd gone back to Coruscant and not stayed on Mandalore, if she'd taken the pardon and accepted the Council's apology, if she'd just tried...

"Ahsoka?", her old friend could see her turmoil.

"I'm sorry...", Ahsoka hung her head and shut her eyes tightly, "I'm sorry...

Rex moved closer, "Ahsoka?"

"It's my fault...", she was on the verge of sobbing, "I should have been there for him. None of this would have-"

"Ahsoka, don't start thinking like that. None of it was your fault", Leia pleaded with her.

"I want to think that, Leia, but...", Ahsoka sighed.

"Ahsoka, there's nothing anyone could have done. If Obi Wan and Master Yoda couldn't stop it then no one could have, not even you", Rex assured her. "Look, I know it's hard but this wasn't your fault, not one bit."

"He's right, Ahsoka", Luke chimed in.

"The only person that's blaming you is yourself", Leia had her mother's wisdom.

Rex sighed heavily, "It's not what he'd want you to think, and it's not what you should be thinking."

"I... I don't...", Ahsoka paused. She'd spent years trying to convince herself that it wasn't her fault and still didn't believe it. Hearing it from others helped, but this wasn't a wound to be healed over night. "I... appreciate what you're saying. Let's just... let's just not dwell on it right now."

"You're right", Leia agreed, "I don't want to know about who Darth Vader was, I want to know what my father was really like."

Her lips curled into a smile as she thought of what to say. "Anakin was... kind, he was brave, honourable, selfless, heroic. He wasn't always like the other Jedi but he had a good heart and always looked out for his friends. He wouldn't let an injustice stand if he saw it. Slavery, corruption, crime - he'd fight it wherever he saw it."

"They said he was a pilot", Luke's interest in that part of Anakin's life was understandable, given his own reputation.

"Best in the galaxy", it wasn't an overstatement, "Taught me everything I knew and even impressed Jedi who'd been flying longer than he'd been alive."

Anakin's piloting skills were legendary, already infamous within a few months of the Clone Wars. Master Plo, a gifted pilot himself, had once called her Master 'the finest pilot he'd ever seen.'
Coming from him, that was some compliment.

"You should have seen some of the manoeuvres he'd pull", Rex started to chuckle. "On the ground as much as in the air. He'd stop at nothing to get the job done and you knew as a soldier that he'd never ask you to do something he wouldn't do himself. It's the best way to lead and the men respected him."

Anakin always was unique in dealing with the clones too. Unlike most Jedi, Anakin shared their sense of excitement for a good fight and, as Rex said, would always lead his men in the front. Most of the time, Ahsoka felt he was far more at home among his soldiers than he ever was at the Temple. Part of that rubbed off on her too, she'd picked up her own sense of boredom with Temple life over the years.

"The plans were... unorthodox, to say the least", Ahsoka remembered them fondly.

"You can say that again. You remember Teth?", Ahsoka did indeed remember her second mission as Anakin's padawan. Rex looked at Luke and Leia and let the memories flood back, "Your father scaled a vertical cliff with walkers and grappling guns. To save Jabba the Hutt's son of all things."

"Oh", Leia swallowed nervously, "That's... interesting."

Rex didn't notice her odd reaction, "And then there was Ryloth. Seppies damaged his cruiser beyond repair. Rather than retreat he decided to just ram the thing into the droid command ship and smash the blockade."

Ahsoka remembered that battle well, it was her first real command for both a fighter squadron and a cruiser.

"He was a good man", Rex sighed mournfully. "Whatever happened to him after, it's... he was still a good man. He saved a lot of lives, my own more than I can count. The man I knew would be proud to see what you two turned out to be."

Ahsoka agreed, "Rex is right. You'd have made your parents proud."

Leia leaned against the central table beside her brother, "Do you... do you know our mother was?"

As if there was any doubt... There was something between Anakin and Padme, even his clone troopers knew that, but very few people knew the extent. A surprise ambush on a mission that Ahsoka wasn't actually meant to be on was what finally told her that his affection for Senator Amidala was something much more. She hadn't expected them to be as close as they apparently were, but there was a strong bond between them. Ahsoka had her own struggles with those types of feelings and she'd been almost glad to see that her Master had learned to manage them to get the best of both worlds. Or at least, thought he'd learned to manage them.

"Have you heard of Padme Amidala? She was the Senator for Naboo during the Clone Wars."

The young woman's eyes lit up, "Yes... I've heard all about her. My fath- Bail would tell me about her all the time. I based a lot of my early speeches in the Senate on her work."

"She was a firebrand", Ahsoka remembered her friend fondly all these years later, "She was courageous and worked tirelessly for what was right. One of the finest Senators the Republic had ever seen."

"Handy with a blaster too", Rex added.
For a Senator, Padme always was remarkably skilled for combat. She had the talent and the nerve to face down the Separatists on the battlefield as well as in the Senate chamber. Her reputation for being willing to take any risk for the greater good even caught the attention of the Jedi Council and she became their go to contact for anything political.

Rex nudged Ahsoka on the arm, "Remind of you someone?", he looked over to Leia.

Luke smiled to his sister, "She does sound a lot like you."

The woman breathed a laugh, "I suppose there's a reason why I liked her so much."

"It was good of Bail to keep her memory alive and to give you the chance to follow in her footsteps."

"Thank you, Ahsoka", Leia stood up and reached for the Togruta's hand to hold it in her own, "It's nice to be able to learn about them."

Luke stood as well, "Thanks, both of you. I know it can't be the easiest thing to talk about."

"Not a problem, Skywalker", Rex shook the Jedi's hand.

Ahsoka smiled thinly, "Same here. It's been too long since we talked about them and remembered your father for who he really was."

She took in the sight of them both, the children of two of her oldest friends. Anakin had given her so much and been so important to her and Padme had been a loyal friend that had stuck with her through some of the most trying times of her life. They may not be around anymore but Ahsoka could repay everything they'd done for her by offering the same to their children. Anything they needed, she'd be there. If they needed guidance, she'd do her best. If they wanted allies, she'd follow them to the edges of the galaxy. If their lives were on the line, Ahsoka wouldn't hesitate to give up her own to save them.

Rex then leaned in to Luke, "Hey, now that's done, do we still have the, uh, the surprise?"

Leia's hand released Ahsoka's, "We certainly do, Captain."

Ahsoka looked suspiciously at them, "What surprise?"

"You'll see", Rex grinned at her.

Leia pulled her comm from her belt, "Hey, you two. Get up here."

The Princess stepped toward the door and led Ahsoka there too. Rex and Luke stood back a bit, the old soldier winking at her with a grin on his face.

"Alright, what's going on", Ahsoka was enjoying the mystery, even if she didn't have a clue what they had up their sleeve.

"Just some old friends we thought you wouldn't mind seeing", Rex shrugged happily.

"Old friends? I can't sense any" The door slid open and cut off her trail of thought. Her mouth hung open and breath hitched when she saw who was in the doorway.

A chorus of happy beeps and whines erupted and the familiar friend rolled to toward her.

"Artoo?"
It was him. The astromech had the same blue and white paint job that he'd had since the war and she could still recognise the unique sound of his beeps and chirps. The little droid had even kept some of the same quirks, rocking on his legs in excitement.

"Hey, little guy", she leaned down on one knee and placed a hand on Artoo's dome, "Long time no see."

He beeped in agreement.

"I've missed you too, Artooie", she used her old affectionate nickname for him.

Ahsoka could still understand the series of chirps from the astromech.

"Yeah", she glanced down at her robes, "I grew up. But you haven't changed a bit."

Her attention linger on him before looking up at the other figure that came in. C-3P0, of course.

"Threepio", she swallowed back a wave of nostalgia.

The protocol droid dithered about for a moment, "Greetings, I am C-3P0 human-cyborg relations."

"Senator Organa had his memory wiped, doesn't remember a thing but he kept the personality", Rex explained.

Ahsoka shouldn't have been surprised at that, it was standard procedure after a droid changed ownership. Besides, who knew what Threepio remembered about Anakin or Padme. It was probably for the best that Bail Organa wiped him clean.

She stood up and put a hand on the droid's arm, "It's good to meet you again, I'm Ahsoka Tano."

"Well it is good to meet you, Mistress Tano", the droid replied in his polite way.

Artoo beeped again and came close to her, apparently craving attention from her like he used to. She happily obliged and knelt down to him, listening to his chirping about where he'd been and what he'd done. Apparently he'd ended up as Luke's personal astromech. Ahsoka had to laugh at that, truly no being was outside the will of the force.

"I don't believe it", Ahsoka breathed, "After all these years."

Rex laughed as he watched, "You think you're surprised? You should have seen Wolffe when he saw them. I thought he was going to throw himself out of the airlock."

Ahsoka looked back to the droids. So many memories were wrapped up in them, Artoo especially. It was only right that they'd found their way to serving Luke and Leia. In a way, both were Republic heroes in their own right and, remarkably, they'd manage to see the fight through in a way that almost no one else had.

"Come on", Leia said softly, "Let's all get aboard. We'll have plenty of time to talk later."

The two Skywalker children and Rex lead them off the bridge with Ahsoka hanging back with C-3P0 and R2D2, listening to their stories and inevitable bickering.

Rex looked back over his shoulder and gave her a heartfelt smile. Her closest and dearest companion was in front of her, two of her oldest friends were beside her and the children of two others that meant so much to her were there too. Other friends were nearby, having their own reunions among themselves. Obviously, the Empire was gone too, and a new age was dawning for
the galaxy. An age where the memory of the Republic and the Jedi had a chance to rise again.

It was at that moment that Ahsoka felt something that she hadn't for a long time. Just as Ezra had been saved from the farthest reaches of the galaxy and returned to the people that meant most, perhaps she too had finally come back to where she belonged. Maybe Ahsoka Tano had finally found a home too.

Thrawn could have counted on one hand the amount of words he and the Fourth Sister had exchanged so far on this expedition. It had been approximately ten standard hours since they'd departed and it had given the Chiss ample opportunity to analyse his travelling companion.

_Tension._ Tension was the most obvious signal given off by the Inquisitor. Thrawn could ascertain the source of that tension with reasonable certainty. The journey they were on would put them on a path to what he knew would be the threat the Emperor had sensed. For whatever reason, the Fourth Sister had something to hide. Perhaps knowledge of its nature or its location or some other factor which Thrawn did not know. Either way, there were things she was keeping hidden ever since Bridger escaped her on that strange and broken world.

It was also possible that his own presence was making her unsettled. Their relationship had been abrasive at best in the previous four years but the last several weeks had seen them descend into public disagreement, open insubordination, and deception on both sides. Her hatred for him was obvious and barely masked by the facade of cooperation she was displaying since Ezra Bridger's final escape.

What intrigued Thrawn most was how those two concerns overlapped. She had something to hide regarding the threat and was unsettled by his presence. Was one exacerbating the other? Was the threat making her wary of him in some way? Perhaps she feared he would be able to uncover her secret. If she feared it then it was a possibility to be considered and he had been doing what he could to watch for any signs that could help.

"Enough", the Inquisitor snapped out of nowhere.

"Enough of what?", he asked calmly.

She took her eyes off the controls and turned to him in the co-pilot's chair, "You've been watching me this whole time. I can see you."

"Yes, I have. What of it?"

"Stop it."

He raised an eyebrow, "Why? Does it unsettle you?"

"Yes. It unsettles me", her voice dripped with contempt.

"Why?"

She gritted her teeth, "What do you mean 'why'?"

"What about my observations unsettle you?"

Her fingers absently tapped on the controls as she ran her tongue around her mouth. Anxiety, concern.
"Must you question everything like a child?", she spat.

Thrawn kept his gaze on her, "Everything must be questioned if one is to properly understand the situation. A child asks questions often because it does not know and wishes to learn. In our situation, a situation we do not understand and wish to learn about, asking questions would be the logical course of action."

"Do you turn everything into a sermon?", she shot him a sideways glance. "Just tell me what that damn compass is saying."

The Chiss decided to leave it at that for now and oblige her. The compass remained still on the console, the central stone emitting a faint purple glow. Getting it to work had been a simple matter, as Thrawn had predicted. The inner mechanisms gave a complex form of symbols and dials that, with effort, Thrawn was able to understand. The presentation was unusual but he knew the results would have to be in the form of a hyperspace vector. To move in any three dimensional space required the same basic concepts that transcended cultures, species, and factions. It became a simple matter of determining the specific vectors through the so-called 'X, Y and Z' directions. A simple mathematical problem for a mind such as his. An unknowable puzzle for the Inquisitor.

Thrawn observed the compass, unchanged as it had been for several hours. "Our current course is the correct one."

"Of course it is", she muttered.

The Fourth Sister remained at the controls for the whole journey. Despite Thrawn's insistence that the course was set, she'd remained there in case anything needed to be done. An obvious sign of her lack of faith in him.

It was a long while before curiosity got the better of her contempt and made her speak again. "What do you expect to find?"

There was no delay, "Something of significance."

"Such as?", she looked to him again.

"I do not know", he said.

"Why are you so sure you'll find anything at all, let alone something important?"

Thrawn's eyes went over the compass as he spoke, "You told me that this was found wrapped in the hands of a body, did you not?"

She sighed, "Yes it was. Why?"

"Does that not answer itself? In the midst of a battle, between whomever it may have been, one individual decided, rather than fighting or attempting to flee, to seclude themselves in what you said to be a 'storeroom' with nothing but this. If this individual was cowering in fear, there would be a weapon in their hands and not a compass."

"What does that mean?", her anger couldn't disguise hints of curiosity.

"Obviously, this object was something significant. Worth protecting and preserving, even holding, as conflict closed in around them. This object was worth protecting, therefore it must be worth investigating. A compass' only function is to guide the user to a particular location, therefore this location must be of importance", Thrawn explained.
The Fourth Sister squinted at it, "How does it work?"

"I can only presume this stone is somehow linked with the force", his fingers ran over the purple
centrepiece.

Thrawn watched for her reaction to his assessment. Fortunately, he got one. She shifted
uncomfortably, as if debating whether to say what was on her mind, before she gave in.

"Impossible. The only things that are naturally linked to the force are kyber crystals and that", she
pointed to the stone, "is no kyber crystal."

"Is that so?", Thrawn took the new information into account, "I appreciate your contribution."

"Don't patronise me", she muttered back.

The Grand Admiral inspected the object in light of the new information. Not naturally force related
but somehow linked. He was still convinced it had something to do with the force and that the
centre stone was somehow connected. *Perhaps not a natural connection but an artificial one.*

"Tell me, would it be possible to somehow imbue the force into an object?"

She went silent and looked at the object for a few seconds. Then she looked away, contemplating
what to say and what she was going to share with him.

"Possibly", she answered.

Thrawn furrowed his brow, "Possibly?"

The Inquisitor sighed and released her hold on the ship's controls, for the first time since the
journey began.

"Possibly. I don't know for certain."

"Why do you believe it's possible? Are you aware of a similar process?"

Again, her eyes looked away as she carefully considered her answer.

Somewhat reluctantly, she leaned back in her chair. "Something similar. Kyber crystals take on the
colour of the Jedi who finds them. Most are blue or green and there's a handful of other colours
like purple or yellow."

"And red", Thrawn continued.

She hesitated, "No."

Thrawn regarded the lightsaber slotted into place on her back, "And yet your lightsaber is red as
was Lord Vader's and the other Inquisitors' before you."

"Red isn't a natural colour. To get a red crystal, a force user has to pour the dark side into it. They
call it 'bleeding'", she explained.

The Chiss found it enlightening, "Interesting. So the kyber crystal is imbued with the dark side for
the use of the dark side wielder." Thrawn looked to the dark purple stone, "Then there is
precedent."

"It's possible. But kyber crystals are unique, they're already strong in the force. Colouring it with
the dark side is a far cry from imbuing something with the force from scratch.” She shook her head, "I've never heard of it being done on anything else."

"Just because you have not heard of it, that does not mean it is not possible", Thrawn said.

Her face hardened into a glare, "I didn't know you were an expert on the force. I know what I know, just leave it to me."

"Many arts are lost with time, the force would be no different. Different cultures, different eras, different minds, interpret and utilise their gifts in unique ways. Perhaps the art was lost to the Jedi or the Sith or maybe it was only ever discovered by beings out in the Unknown Regions", he reasoned.

The Fourth Sister huffed and returned her hands to the controls, "Assuming that's even true, why does it matter?"

"It is possible that supraluminite is not naturally a material that is receptive to the force. A technique to apply the force to the material could have been devised as an ancient tool used to navigate hyperspace lanes."

She laughed, "You're really reaching for it now. You can't use the force to travel through hyperspace."

"Yes. You can."

The bluntness of his answer caught her by surprise, "What do you mean?"

Thrawn remembered it well, "It can be done."

"And you know this, how?"

"Lord Vader used the force to help the Chimaera navigate through the Unknown Regions several years ago."

Thrawn intentionally left out the fact that his own people, the Chiss, had pioneered the technique using their own force-sensitives. Chiss did produce force-sensitives but the gift always manifested itself as precognition, rather than the telekinetic or telepathic powers he had seen in force users since. The gift also faded with age and could not be retained by adults, so children were used for navigation. The Chiss had explored the galaxy using these children and charted dangerous hyperspace routes that their neighbours and rivals could not. Interestingly, the gift was almost exclusive to females. Thrawn paused on old memories. Almost exclusive.

The Fourth Sister dropped the argument immediately, "Alright. Why would the people who made it do that? They'd have to have been advanced enough to have developed hyperspace computers."

"Not necessarily", Thrawn said, "But I understand your reservations. Computers retain information that can be used to chart a route to previous locations and are often dependant on using established routes."

"Unless they had a force user to guide them", the Inquisitor added, "Apparently..."

Thrawn paused. "Such an object might prove useful to chart the route to a location that the user wished to keep off the hyperspace navigation system, or perhaps even allow those not attuned to the force to chart those routes."
"That's a lot of trouble to keep somewhere hidden", the Fourth Sister said.

"Yes, it is indeed. Therefore, something must be worth the effort to hide. The only question is: what?

The Fourth Sister had no answer and instead let the question hang. The silence that had punctuated the journey so far returned but now Thrawn had another interesting piece of the puzzle. A force user must have created this object intentionally and, more than likely, it led to something that its ancient creator had wished to keep hidden from the galaxy.

The very brief shuttle ride over from the Corvette to the cruiser seemed like a lifetime. The closer Ezra got the longer it seemed to take. He was used to that feeling from the journey back to the known galaxy, and at least this time he had Hera here too. Well, here as in the pilot's seat of the U-Wing they'd taken to jump ships. The Corvettes couldn't land in the Mon Calamari ship's hangar after all.

Something was nagging at him though. It wasn't unlike what he'd felt when they'd met Luke, but it distinct enough for him to know that this wasn't the same feeling. He'd felt it as soon as they'd dropped out of hyperspace on the Corvette.

"Hey", Sabine nudged him with her arm, "What's up?"

"Something's... I don't know", he couldn't put his finger on it.

The Mandalorian gave him a radiant smile, "Just relax."

Ezra opened his mouth to answer but shut it soon after. He found himself reminded of Kanan's lessons again. Worrying and thinking about what was bothering him wasn't going to help anything.

The brief few minutes of the journey past quietly, Ezra too focused and excited to make much conversation. As soon as he felt the pressure change of the U-Wing entering the hangar he was on his feet and waiting by the hatch. He heard Sabine's humoured sigh from behind him as she got up to follow him.

"Home sweet home", Hera mumbled as she set aside the headset and came down from the cockpit.

"Almost." Ezra's hand reached for the door release button and pushed.

The U-wing door opened up and the hangar was bustling with life. The familiar sight of A-wings, X-wings, even some old Y-wings, greeted him as he set foot on to the hangar floor. Hundreds of people were running to and fro, attending to something or other, and Ezra was taken aback by the chaos of it all. He hadn't been around people for almost five years and stepping right into the middle of so many made his head spin.

As soon as his mind had calmed down, he scanned around the hangar urgently looking for it. Of course, it didn't take him long to spot it. There, on the far side of the hangar, was the Ghost. The ship he'd spent years of his life on and that represented all the time they'd spent together as a family. It didn't look any different from when he'd last seen it, but that was to be expected. Sabine had always nagged Hera to let her loose on the Ghost ever since he'd joined up with them and the Twi'lek still hadn't given in.

Without another word, Ezra barely registered the people in his way as he slid through the crowd, knowing Hera and Sabine wouldn't be too far behind him. The access ramp was wide open, inviting him back to his home and his family.
Sabine and Hera hung back as they approached, letting him have a moment to take in the sight before he went inside. Ezra hesitated at the bottom of the ramp as he saw inside for the first time in a long while. It was all still the same. The same walls, same yellow ladders, same everything.

"Don't just stand there gawking", Hera teased after a few moments.

Ezra stepped on board, feeling the hard metal of the ramp beneath his feet. His thoughts were overwhelmed with memories of all the good times he spent on the ship, as well as something else.

He ran his hands along the walls and looked around the cargo bay for another few seconds. The door that led to where the Phantom used to be was still there and the small walkway overlooking the main floor. Ezra couldn't remember how many times Hera had stood from that balcony, scolding him or Zeb or Kanan, sometimes even all three of them, for causing some ruckus down here. There was hours of lightsaber practice with Kanan here, this room was where he'd learned half of what he even knew about the weapon. Then there were all the memories of them limping back up through here after a mission. A lecture from Kanan about what he needed to improve on, a heart-to-heart with Hera, another shameless flirting attempt with Sabine or another bickering contest with Zeb. It all felt so long ago now, like a whole different life.

Kanan... That was what he was feeling. He'd never forget the presence his Master had in the force. Obviously, he wasn't feeling him directly, but his legacy, his presence, was stronger on this ship and with this family than it would be anywhere else.

Sabine poked him after a while, "Hey, you can explore later."

"Right, sorry", Ezra looked up to the ladder into the Ghost's main hold, Kanan's memory still lingering as he focused on the here and now.

He hesitated at first before grabbing hold of the rungs and pulling himself up. Hera and Sabine followed as he waited before the door, still nervous and unsure of what to expect. It had been so many years, so much had changed. He had to take the time to-

"Ezra!", a booming voice interrupted everything as the door slid open.

Ezra only saw the flash of purple fur, "Zeb!"

Before he could move, Zeb's massive arms grabbed him and pulled him into one of the Lasat's rib-crushing hugs.

Ezra was glad to see his friend but, "Z-Zeb... can't... breathe", he croaked out.

"Oh, hehe, right", the Lasat released him and let him back to the ground. Zeb sighed and ran his massive hands across the back of his neck, "Karabast, I can't believe it."

"You can't believe it? How do you think I feel?", he laughed. Ezra stepped into the common area, followed by Sabine and Hera.

Ezra finally got a proper look at his old friend. To be honest, not much had changed. Zeb wore the same armour as he always did with minor, if any, changes to it. His bo-rifle was still slung on his back and his green eyes and purple fur were unchanged.

"Eh, you don't look too worse for wear", Zeb punched his shoulder, "No worse than usual anyway."

Ezra hit him back, "You too, buddy. Glad you're still around. The smell is still there but, you know, can't be perfect."
Zeb chuckled, "Good to have you back, kid."

"It's good to be home, Zeb", Ezra sighed contently.

"You too, Sabine", the Lasat gave her a brief hug too.

As his two friends said a brief hello to each other, Ezra noticed the door to the cockpit and cabins slide open. There it is again... Kanan... He pushed the thoughts aside as Chopper wheeled in through the door, trailed behind by Kallus.

"Chop! Kallus!", Ezra stepped over to see them both.

"Whorp whorp", Chopper came right up to him.

Ezra knelt down, "Hey, Chopper. Did you miss me?"

The droid stopped warbling for a moment and his manipulators popped out. Ezra thought he was going to be hit but instead the droid stretched the arms out, almost like he wanted to hug him...

"Chop?", Ezra asked in disbelief. "Are you trying to- Ow!", Ezra yelled as an arm spun round and slapped him in the face.

The droid laughed and rolled around to greet Sabine. Ezra rubbed his cheek and smiled a bit. Not as hard as usual... I think that's his way of saying he missed me.

"Well, Bridger, long time no see", Kallus stood above him and offered a hand to help him up.

Ezra took the hand and gave it a firm shake, "Good to see you too, Kallus."

"You look like you're in one piece", Kallus cast a glance over him. "But if you're planning on keeping that then I'd better teach you how to maintain it", Kallus laughed and pointed to the beard.

"Kriff, really?", Ezra groaned and ran his hand across his beard for what felt like the hundredth time.

"He's fine, really. He's getting rid of it", Sabine chimed in and walked past him.

The girl winked at him as she went and stood ready by the door. Hera walked past with her and exchanged a brief smile with Sabine before disappearing through the door. Something is going on, but what? What are they hiding?

Zeb came up behind and slapped Ezra on the back, "You alright?"

"Yeah... I just...", the feeling was getting stronger now.

Kallus and Zeb both looked at him with a subtle smile. They knew too. What was going on here?

"Ezra, relax", Zeb assured him, "It's gonna be alright."

"What's alright?", Ezra shot him a confused look.

Sabine met his eyes before turning her back to him and standing ready by the door. They all waited, everyone in on something that Ezra was completely in the dark about. Then, the door opened.

"Aunty Bean!", an unfamiliar voice came from the door but Ezra couldn't see where it came from.
"Jac!", Sabine knelt down and seemed to hold onto something, "I missed you!"

"I missed you too. You went away for ages", the voice whined. *A... child's voice?*

Ezra saw a brief flash of green hair and tiny hands.

Sabine's happy voice cracked with emotion, "You know I promised to bring something back, right?"

"Yeah?", the voice answered.

*What in the force is a kid doing on Hera's ship.* Ezra looked at Hera to find her staring right at him, tears already running down her cheeks.

"Well...", Sabine stood up and stepped to the side, "Say hello..."

Standing in the doorway was a small child, no older than five. He looked up to Sabine and Ezra couldn't see much of him other than the strong green colour of his hair. *Did Hera adopt a kid?* At last, the kid looked at him with familiar blue eyes and everything made sense.

Ezra's heart skipped as he looked to Hera, trying to mouth the words.

The Twi'lek replied in croaky voice, "Ezra Bridger, meet Jacen Syndulla"

*Kanan. The eyes, Hera's 'obligations' since he'd been gone, everything was just...*

"I-Is that him?", the boy walked forward to Ezra with wonder in his eyes.

Sabine laughed softly, "That's him."

Ezra was shaking as the boy stepped toward him. He came down to eye-level with him but couldn't form a word. *This couldn't be real. How was it possible?*

"I... uh, hi!", the shaking didn't stop as Ezra looked into those familiar eyes.

Jacen looked at him quizzically and tilted his head. Then, with a toothy grin, he reached out his arms to him. "Uncle Ezra!", he yelled as the boy threw his arms around his neck.

The Jedi stammered for a few seconds, "Un...Uncle Ezra?"

"Uncle Ezra", the boy repeated and let go of Ezra while pointing a finger around the room, "Auntie Bean, Uncle Zeb, Uncle Ezra."

Ezra blinked a few times, "You know who I am?"

"Yeah! They talk about you all the time!", he said giddily.

Ezra looked around at his family, "Oh really?"

Jacen nodded eagerly, "Yes! Did you really beat Darth Vader?!"

Ezra rubbed the back of his head. Coming off his recent talk with Luke and the others, that wasn't the best memory to dwell on right now. "I... uh, I don't thin-",

"Can you really control animals?!", the boy pressed on, not caring about Ezra's hesitation.

"I don't really contr-"
"And Uncle Zeb said you'd steal TIE fighters!"

Ezra slowly turned and smiled at the Lasat, "Uh, yeah, sometimes..."

"Auntie Bean said you'd paint them too!"

"Yeah, she'd do the painting. I'd just make a mess for a while", he caught Sabine's mocking nod of agreement.

"You know they love you back on the Lothal! They're gonna be so excited!", Jacen's smile only grew with every second.

"L-Lothal? You know Lothal? You been there?", the sudden mention of his home almost caught him off-guard.

Jacen scoffed, "Yeah, loads of times! That's where Auntie Bean lives."

"So I've heard", the Jedi smiled and looked to her.

Jacen followed his gaze and looked at Sabine too. "Auntie Bean talks about you a lot", he said innocently, "I think she likes you."

Ezra's eyes went wide and Sabine's face flushed red while Zeb and Chopper just burst out laughing.

"Jacen Syndulla", Hera warned him sternly.

The clueless child looked back at his mother, "What did I do? You always sa-"

"Alright, come here", Hera stepped forward and took her son up in her arms.

Ezra marvelled at the sight. It was as Hera had said, 'better than good'. Hera was like a mother to him and she had all the care and love in the galaxy to give, it was only right that she had a child of her own to let her show it. And Kanan... Ezra couldn't put it into words right now. Everything was too fresh and too new to really get all of his thoughts together yet.

There was one thing though that was already on his mind. The thing he'd felt as he arrived on the cruiser, the presence in the force; it had to be Jacen. Jacen was half Kanan after all, and that probably meant... Yoda's words repeated themselves and left him without a single doubt. Those you have yet to teach.

Hera was watching him as he thought and something told him that she knew what was going through his head. This wasn't the time or place to talk about it but Ezra knew it was only a matter of time.

His thoughts were interrupted by a firm pat on his back, "Welcome home, kid."

"Kid?", Ezra pushed himself up to his feet, "You know I'm almost 24, right?"

Zeb shrugged, "Eh, still a scrawny loth-rat to me."

"Hey!", Ezra replied jokingly and punched his friend's arm.

The Lasat raised his fist to hit him back but Sabine put her arm out between the two of them.

"Zeb, don't break him, we only just got him back", Sabine admonished him.
Ezra shot her a sly grin, "Awh, I guess you did miss me."

The Mandalorian glared at him for a moment before rolling her eyes. "Come on", Sabine's hand grabbed his own, "Shut up and let me take you for a look around."

Ezra laughed and looked at their joined hands, "I do remember my way around, you know that right?"

"I know you do", she answered as she kept pulling him towards the door.

Ezra chose to ignore Zeb's whispering as the others fell in behind them. Sabine started to talk through things, pointing out the little things that had changed aboard over the last few years, Hera chiming in every now and again to help her out. Truthfully, Ezra felt like he'd been here yesterday and he still knew every nook and cranny of the ship like the back of his hand. Still, surrounded in every way by his family, it finally sunk in: he was finally home.

Chapter End Notes

Ahsoka, Rex, Luke and Leia needed a meeting to talk about some things. There's so much they have to talk about that I could only ever get a small snippet of things covered in a chapter. This whole section has a bunch of Clone Wars references in it, such as Teth and Ryloth, so I'm using actual canon examples for Rex and Ahsoka's stories. R2 and Ahsoka's reunion has been at the back of my mind for a long time, and it's a reunion that I've not seen many people talk about. Ahsoka and R2 got on really well in the Clone Wars and I simply couldn't pass on the opportunity to have them share a moment. I chuckled in a reference to Wolffe too since I quite enjoyed his interaction with 3P0 in that one admittedly poor TCW episode. There's so many things between these four key characters that I still want to address and I will cover a few things in the second half of this story, but I could never hope to do all of them justice. However, for now, this is the last we'll see of Ahsoka, Luke, Leia, and Rex for this half of the story. They have their roles to play in the story to come though, so if I can persuade some of you to come back then you'll see them all again.

The Thrawn section was a challenge to write with just the compass to drive their conversation and it gave me a chance to explore Thrawn and the Fourth Sister's dynamic in more detail. I mentioned two radically different uses of the force in canon: bleeding and hyperspace navigation. Bleeding is from the Vader comics and is, as the Inquisitor says, the method by which red crystals are made. The force sensitivity of Chiss children and the idea of using the force to navigate hyperspace were things revealed in Thrawn: Alliances. It's not explicitly stated that Thrawn was one of the rare males given this gift, but it's strongly implied and that's the line I'm going with. I do believe he was but I'll leave it sort of ambiguous in the story. It's not an important fact, even if he was once then Thrawn is not force sensitive now, but I wanted to be consistent with Zahn's stuff.

Finally, there's the long-awaited return of Ezra to the Ghost to reunite with Zeb, Chopper, and Kallus - and more importantly to meet Jacen. Jacen means two things to Ezra: he's Kanan and Hera's kid, and Ezra suspects that he might be who Yoda implied
he'd teach. This chapter was about engaging with the former part, of meeting Jacen as the child of two people who mean the world to him. It had to be more lighthearted and cheerful with some humour and excitement to it. The more serious discussions about the implications of who or what Jacen is and what that means for Ezra will be discussed soon, next chapter in fact, as Ezra moves past the initial shock of Jacen's existence. I've lost count of how many reunions/meetings I've had to do in the last few chapters and I'm conscious that there's a lot in a short space of time. There's only one or two small ones to go, and there's a break from them in the next chapter anyway.

Next time: Hera and Ezra talk about Jacen, the 4th Sister and Thrawn investigate the new world, the family spends some overdue time together.
Chapter 19 - Family

Warning: the very last part gets a little bit fluffy. If that's not your thing, be sure to steer your cold, heartless soul clear.

Hera and Ezra talk about Jacen, the 4th Sister and Thrawn investigate the new world, the family spends some overdue time together.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They spent almost an hour showing Ezra around the Ghost again. Nothing much had changed on it, much like the outside, but each room brought memories with it. Ezra loved every minute of it, especially seeing Sabine giddily dragging him here, there, and everywhere to show him around. Hera loved it as well, Zeb and Kallus seemed to enjoy too. Chopper was acting his usual self but Ezra guessed that deep down even the old droid had missed him. Jacen, mostly clinging to Hera or to Sabine the whole time, was more interested in Ezra than the tour of his mother's ship.

At the end, Sabine had gone to her cabin to freshen up, Zeb and Kallus had stepped out to go and fetch a few things before they all left for Lothal, leaving just Ezra, Chopper, Jacen, and Hera on board. The old droid was tinkering with something elsewhere and Hera was putting Jacen down for a nap in the common area. That left Ezra alone to take a look around the ship for a bit. He knew exactly where he wanted to go.

Kanan's old cabin was now Jacen's room. The plain and empty room that Kanan kept was now full of clothes, drawings stuck to the wall, toys, and other things for his son. Ezra was standing in the middle of the room, silently looking around at what he could see. Ezra hadn't had a chance to come here since Kanan had gone, it was still all new for him to see it like this. It was so different but it still felt the same in so many ways.

Ezra took a few quiet moments looking around the room before he felt Hera approaching.

"It's really nice in here", he said to Hera as she reached the door, "At least Jacen puts up some decoration", he huffed a laugh.

Hera smiled and walked through, one arm rubbing the other. "It's the right place for him to be."

"I was just thinking, I haven't really been aboard since... since everything. We were on Lothal and then to Capital City, and then I just never came back for more than a short while", Ezra told her.

Her comforting hand came to his arm, "I know. It must be strange for you."

"Part of me hoped I'd open a door and he'd just be there. Like nothing happened."

"I still do the same. After a long day I just think that I can come in here and see his face again but...", Hera shook her head.

Ezra swallowed hard, "I'm sorry, Hera."

"But I find Jacen", Hera continued her thoughts, "I don't have Kanan but Jacen is there. And then I
realise that I still have him, just a little bit. We still have him."

Hera's ability to power through the hardships and see the light still amazed him. Like usual, she was right. The pain of losing Kanan would never be fixed but the joy of having Jacen would never be ruined either.

Ezra thought of the boy as he took a closer look at some of the drawings. Obviously, there were loads of Hera. Chopper had more than a few and there were at least half a dozen of Sabine too. It had to be her that was encouraging him to draw and paint everything he saw. There were some of Zeb and Kallus, Cham, Numa and Gobi, the Ghost, even Rex. A few were of places he must have seen. There was one with two moons that must have been Lothal, another of what might have been Ryloth and one of a tall tower that looked vaguely familiar. *My tower? huh, Sabine must have showed it to him once.*

"Come see", Hera had seen him looking and led him over to the corner of the room. "Here", she pointed at one of the pieces of paper.

Ezra squinted at the orange figure with black hair and blue eyes, "Wait, is that me?"

"That's you", Hera answered with a smirk.

Ezra laughed as he read the crude words 'Uncle Ezra' scribbled on the side. "Huh, looks just like me."

"It should, it's based off one of Sabine's paintings of you", Hera carefully adjusted the picture, double-checking that it was safely stuck to the wall.

"Woah, Sabine has a painting of me?", Ezra asked in surprise. "Didn't realise she missed me that much."

"She missed you a lot. We all did, but Sabine especially", the Twi'lek took a seat on the bed and invited Ezra to sit beside her.

Especially? Of course his best friend had missed him, he'd missed her too. Ezra didn't want to read too much into it but... especially?

He sighed, "Well I missed her a lot too."

Hera's hand found his back, "You should tell her."

"I've told her I missed her already", Ezra looked at Hera quizzically.

"You know what I mean", Hera's knowing eyes could see right through him, "Make sure she knows what she means to you."

Ezra didn't need her to explain what she meant. There was something about the way Hera had said it that told him she was disguising some pain behind those words. Hera had always been so busy that she'd left it so late when... Ezra didn't want to think about it. All he knew was that Hera regretted not telling Kanan sooner.

He bit his lip in thought. It had been almost five years. His thoughts hadn't changed, he'd accepted that they never would, but she was harder to speak for. Ezra hoped but he didn't know and there wasn't really a way to be sure without making things... risky. Ezra then looked at Hera, still meaningfully keeping her eyes on him. Maybe... maybe he'd just have to say it. It didn't matter what happened after, it only mattered that Sabine knew what she meant to him.
"I will, Hera", Ezra promised.

"Please, for both of you", she said quietly.

Ezra put an arm around his surrogate mother and held her close. They hadn't had any time to themselves since he'd come back and he'd missed her terribly these last few years. He couldn't count how many times he'd thought of what it'd be like to come home and see her, and yet none of those came close to the real thing.

There was one thing, however, that he never could have planned for: Jacen. Ezra was surprised he couldn't sense him before the Battle of Lothal, he was in there somewhere. Things were just too chaotic, too emotional, to have picked up on it. Like Hera said, another piece of Kanan was still here, and Ezra still felt the need to pinch himself every time the thought crossed his mind. He wanted to get to know Jacen, spend time with him, relax, play, show him the galaxy, tell him stories, be the 'Uncle Ezra' Jacen deserved to have.

But not just that. Master Yoda's words came once more. "Those you have yet to teach." The time to act on those words had come.

"Hera", Ezra took his hand and rested it on Hera's, "Is he like Kanan?"

The nodding of her head was the answer he already knew was true.

"How long have you known?"

"A while, about a year or two. It started with him just... noticing things quicker than he should have. Then he started knowing things before they even happened. There's not been anything big, just him sensing things", Hera's sounded nervous talking about it.

The Jedi thought of how he'd sensed Jacen as he arrived. "Does Luke know?", if Ezra sensed it then Luke might have to.

"Yes. He knows. He wanted to take him and train him."

"You didn't say yes?", he had his own suspicions to the answer,

"No", her voice was shaky, "I couldn't let him take Jacen away. Not yet." She hesitated again before continuing, "Luke thought that... and I did too... that maybe, when... when you were back..."

Ezra look her in the eyes, "Hera...",

"I'm sorry, Ezra. I just... I just couldn't. I'm sorry", she sobbed and turned her head back to the ground.

"No, that's not...", he sighed and put his hand over hers, "I understand why you said no." Ezra paused and thought of his next words carefully, "In a way, I'm glad you did."

Her head perked up, "You are?"

"When I was out there", Ezra began, "I had a vision or something like that, I spoke to Master Yoda. You know he told me about what's going on out there but that wasn't all he said. He said I'd come home and that, when I did... it'd be my turn to pass on what I've learned. He made me a Knight and then, as soon as I saw Jacen, I just knew that it's what I was meant to do."

The realisation dawned on Hera's face, "You mean...?"
"I'll do it, Hera. If you'll let me, I'll train him." A small smile came to his lips, "I don't know if I'll be good at it but I have to do it."

Hera breathed in shakily, "I don't want you to feel you have to do this."

"No", he intervened gently, "It's nothing like that. This is about what's right. Master Yoda said it, sure, but that's not why I'm doing it. I'm doing it for you, and for Jacen, and for Kanan."

Hera opened her mouth to speak but the words faltered. A smile grew on her lips and she squeezed his hand, "I am so proud of you."

"Thanks, Hera", Ezra let Hera pull him into a motherly embrace.

Ezra felt nervous and unsure about his ability to train Jacen, but that was understandably. Learning to be a Jedi from Kanan was one thing, passing that on was something else. Kanan went through the same thing when he started to teach. Still, even though he was technically still a padawan when he took Ezra on, Kana had ended up being the best teacher Ezra could have asked for. Ezra had Master Yoda's blessing before he'd even begun, had both Luke and Ahsoka to lean on for advice and support, and, above all, he had the greatest role model to follow from.

It wouldn't be easy and there'd be difficulties along the way, but he had to do this. He had to try... no.

A smile came to his face as he remembered Kanan's words. Do or do not, there is not try.

Thrawn found the long journey to be a useful respite from the chaos of recent weeks. It gave him time to process and reevaluate events and attempt to plan for the future. The Fourth Sister, on the other hand, got more agitated with every passing hour.

"Any changes?", she asked angrily yet again.

The Chiss looked at the compass and found nothing new, "No."

She muttered to herself and turned back to the viewport. The brief moments of cooperation they'd had when discussing the nature of the compass had not, as Thrawn had hoped, given way to any further revelations. She returned to being the tight-lipped woman that she'd always been, talking only to ask again about any changes to their course.

Thrawn was about to settle down again when he noticed a small change in the compass. One of the dials moved slightly and the central stone started to glow more intensely.

"Interesting...", he leaned forward to get a better view.

"What? What is it?", the Inquisitor looked over.

Thrawn stroked his chin as the dial kept moving, moving from the top of the compass in a clockwise direction down the side. The pulsing light of the stone continued to become more noticeable.

"A moment", Thrawn held up his hand to her as he kept studying the compass.

"A moment? What for?", she snapped.

The compass dial kept moving for a few more seconds. The Grand Admiral kept a careful watch, doing his best to judge the timing by eye.
"What are you up to?", the Inquisitor interrupted again.

"Disengage the hyperdrive... now", Thrawn told her.

The Inquisitor huffed but listened to what he told her. The dials started moving slower as the ship dropped out of hyperspace and the twisting blue outside their vessel shifted back to familiar black and white. As Thrawn anticipated, a planet was visible off the starboard side of the ship.

"Our destination", Thrawn pointed to the planet.

The Inquisitor looked at him sceptically, "Are you sure?"

"Certain", he replied, "Take the ship to the surface, we must not delay."

As the woman grumbled and adjusted their course, Thrawn began to check the scanners for any information that might be of use. Had he been shown the details of this world without context, he'd think little of it. Another arid world, not unlike the one Bridger escaped to in the Inquisitor's TIE, with no indication of habitation or wildlife. Most indicators were of little note; breathable atmosphere, temperatures comfortable to most species and so forth. There was no immediate sign that this world was worth the effort someone or something had gone through to hide it. Therefore, it was imperative that they made a closer inspection.

The stone flickered slightly as the ship changed course. He could only assume that is was still directing them to a specific location on the surface.

"What's it doing?", the flicker had clearly caught the Inquisitor's eye too.

"Guiding us", Thrawn took the device into his hands to get a better view. He watched the stone as it pulsed with its purple light. "Adjust your course", he told her, "Follow the compass, as we did before."

She sighed, "Whatever you say, Grand Admiral."

He grimaced as he inspected the surface, "I can see nothing obvious that may be of relevance."

"I'd have thought a man of your talents would have this all figured out", she said sarcastically.

Thrawn didn't take to the slight, "Might I ask if you, perhaps, sense something?"

Still focused on the controls, the Inquisitor didn't answer for a while. The Grand Admiral could see the concentration on her face and knew she was at least doing what he'd asked. She concentrated more and her expression adjusted slightly as she did so. The process was rather fascinating to watch and he wished there was a better way to understand how the force enabled such things.

About a minute of two later, her facial expression shifted quickly. Her eyes widened, her lips parted, and she inhaled sharply.

"Inquisitor?", he asked, seeing the obvious reaction.

"Uh, um", she cleared her throat and looked away from him, "I feel... something, I can't tell what but this is the place."

Thrawn paused, "The place for what?"

She kept her eyes away and focused on the controls, "I don't know."
She's lying. Thrawn already knew she was hiding things, she had been since a squad of his troopers returned from trying to capture Bridger with no memory of what actually happened on the mission. She'd sensed something that had frightened her, but what? If this was what she'd expected to find, why did it unsettle her so? The questions were concerning enough, even without the answers.

Their ship entered the atmosphere, following the directions from the ancient compass. The Grand Admiral looked in vain for anything more to inform him. It might be possible for some form of life to survive in these conditions, though there was no evidence of it. Nothing about the landscape was unusual either, not like the shattered planet that Bridger led them to at first.

The Chiss ran through a few potential scenarios in his head. Subterranean inhabitants? Possible, but to warrant such secrecy they would have to be advanced and there is no evidence to suggest as such. Something lost? It is possible that something or someone had become stranded here but why such things would be located through a compass remains to be seen. It is also possible that something was intentionally hidden to be recovered at another time, or forgotten.

Those questions would soon be answered. The pulsing colour of the supraluminite told them that they were close now.

"Here. Set the ship down", he ordered.

The Inquisitor landed the ship on the peak of a hill. As soon as the ship was on the ground, Thrawn took up the compass in his hands and slung his satchel around his shoulders. The Fourth Sister stood up and folded her arms, eyeing him carefully.

"Where are you going?", she had already regained her composure from whatever had startled her.

"Obviously, we are going to investigate", Thrawn replied without turning to her.

The Fourth Sister stood up and crossed her arms, "We?"

Thrawn turned back to her, "Surely you did not expect me to remain on the ship whilst you investigated this phenomenon?"

Her yellow eyes stared into him before she begrudgingly marched past and toward the freighter's exit ramp. The Chiss watched her contemptuous display without comment, knowing that it meant they were on the right path.

Whatever the Fourth Sister knew, it was making her tense. It seemed obvious then that they were almost within reach of some sort of revelation. Now it was only a matter of discovering it.

"After you, Grand Admiral", the Inquisitor motioned to the door.

He paid no mind to her sarcasm, "What we seek cannot be far."

The old freighter's door opened and retractable steps led down to the ground. The world was hot and rocky, as he'd been able to tell from orbit. Their shuttle had set down on top of a hill giving them a good view of the surrounding landscape. On one side of the hill, uneven peaks and mountains stretched out as far as they could see. On the other, the ground levelled out and opened up across the horizon.

Thrawn took another look at the compass to judge which direction it intended them to go. "This way", Thrawn pointed to the flat expanse ahead of them.

"If you say so", the Inquisitor muttered and pulled out her lightsaber but didn't activate the blades.
"The weapon is unnecessary", Thrawn told her.

"I'm not taking any chances."

*She is on edge.* Planetary scans indicated that there no signs of life and there was little evidence to suggest that anything could survive out here. *Her anxieties do not stem from any simple creatures. Fascinating, and concerning.*

Taking note of her unease, Thrawn then led the way down the slope with the Fourth Sister following cautiously behind him.

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**Damn that Chiss for being here!**

The daunting expanse that stretched out before them could hide all sorts of secrets. Secrets that she had intended to uncover for herself. This was a mystery that she alone was going to unravel and that she alone would prosper from. It was only reluctantly that she'd swallowed back her hatred and worked with the intrusive Chiss. Every second she reminded herself that she needed his help if she was going to get to the bottom of this, and that wasn't going to be a long time coming.

As they'd arrived, she'd felt something in the force. The briefest but clearest twinge had touched her mind, reaching out from somewhere below them. This was it, whatever it was.

They'd only walked a few hundred metres from the hill where they'd landed when the Grand Admiral started his ramblings.

"It is unlikely that anything has managed to stay alive out here", he said to her as they walked.

"Your point being?", she huffed.

"Based on the current state of this world, we may not be here for an individual or a species."

The Fourth Sister planned her response, she'd already given him too much about what they were looking for. "Maybe someone has worked out how to survive in this place."

The Chiss' head shook, "You misunderstand. Even if an individual managed to endure this world, it does not explain the existence of this compass. Such a device would have to have been constructed by a species or a group with intent to return here. An intelligent race could conceivably have fashioned an existence out here but the evidence of such would be obvious. Even if they dwelt below the surface, some evidence of their awareness of travel beyond this planet would be present."

"Do you ever think this could just be some trinket? Not worth you exploring?", she suggested.

"Based off our arrival, you clearly feel it is worth exploring", his reply was sharp and immediate. "Besides, do you doubt that the Emperor sensed something out here as well?"

She bit her tongue and just focused on the comforting feeling of the lightsaber hilt still clutched in her hands.

Thrawn kept his eyes on the compass, only occasionally raising his head to look in front of him. "This object also appears not to have been degraded much by time. That could have implications for what we are expecting to find here..."

The Fourth Sister was tuning out his rambling already, bored to death of his ceaseless attempts to
make sense of thing that he'd never understand. A few more steps and something started to draw her attention. Not from outside, but within.

*What.. what is that?*

Something in the force swirled unnaturally here. It wasn't like before, nor was it the same as when she'd heard the voice weeks ago. It felt like something was stirring somewhere nearby. *It's close, whatever it is, it's cl-*

"Ugh", she grunted as she walked straight into Thrawn. She glared at the back of his head in anger, "Just what do you think you're doing?"

He held up a hand but said nothing. The Fourth Sister then looked past his shoulder to the compass in his hands. The stone in the centre of the device had completely stopped glowing, like the light in it had just completely cut out. *That can't be a coincidence.*

She peered over his shoulder at it, "What happened?"

"It stopped without warning. I do not know why."

Her eyes narrowed at the object, "That can't be-", she paused abruptly as a strange bout of dizziness came over her.

"Inquisitor?", the Chiss turned to her with a concerned look.

She pushed him away with her hand, "It's nothing." The feeling seemed to abate but she was left feeling noticeably tried and drained.

Thrawn watched her suspiciously, "What is going on?"

"Nothing! Figure out that compass", she spat angrily at him.

The Inquisitor stopped to catch her breath. *What was that?* It was a sensation she'd never felt before and not one she'd ever want to again. She took a few moments to steady herself again as Thrawn went back a few paces, focusing his attention on the compass.

From his facial expression, the Fourth Sister could tell he wasn't making any progress.

"I have one idea", he said and knelt down to the ground.

She gritted her teeth, "What are you up to now?"

The Chiss placed the compass down and reached into the bag slung around his body. He pulled out a piece of electronic equipment, no larger than a datapad, with two large sensors sticking out of it.

"A scanner?", she recognised the technology.

The Grand Admiral held it to the ground and pressed several buttons, "Indeed. I have my suspicions."

After a few seconds, the device began to send pulses and waves down into the ground. The Fourth Sister didn't know what had possessed him to try this but she didn't hold out much hope of finding anything.

To her surprise, the scanner sent back a confirmatory ping.
"What's it found?", she went over to his side to see the screen.

"Most intriguing". Thrawn breathed as he looked at the screen.

*There it is.* There was a structure beneath them, buried deep underground. The scanner picked up a thick uniform stone slab about one hundred metres below the surface and a massive cavern below that. The scanner's range was limited to only a few dozen metres around them, but the slab was large enough to cover the whole area.

The Chiss stood up slowly, "I believe we have found what we came for."

"Down there?", she pointed at the ground, "How do we get down there?"

Thrawn looked back to their ship, still visible on the hill several hundred metres behind them. "I will contact the fleet, we shall need heavy equipment to excavate the site."

"Excavate?", she stared at him, "That'll take too long."

"Do you propose an alternative solution, Inquisitor?", he asked.

Her anger had gotten the better of her. "No, I don't", the answer grated in her mind as she said it.

"Excellent, then we are in agreement." The Grand Admiral slid the scanner into his bag, "I will contact Captain Pellaeon." He eyed her carefully for a moment, "You shall remain here until I return."

She didn't object nor make any response as he turned and walked back to their ship. The Inquisitor stayed staring at him for a while until he was far enough away.

*Is this really where you wanted me?* She knew who she was trying to talk to in her mind.

Looking around, she couldn't see anything that could help her out. Then she looked to the ground at her feet and sunk down onto her knees, assuming a typical meditative pose. *There's only one way to find out.*

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The rest of the day was quiet and calm, exactly what Ezra had wanted it to be. Hera made some preparations and took the Ghost into hyperspace back towards Lothal. The trip would still take a few hours, but it gave them all time to relax as a family.

Ezra had spent a while with Jacen and Sabine, watching happily as the boy asked question after question to both of them. His earlier conversation with Hera still stuck with him but they didn't have to deal with it just yet. When Jacen had tired himself out, Hera tucked him away for the night after a long series of goodbyes. Ezra tried his hand at some dejarik against Sabine, testing his skills after all these years. He liked to think he put up a good show but the Mandalorian had little trouble beating him and enjoyed every second of it. Ezra didn't mind though; it was nice to see her happy.

Zeb and Kallus made their way back too, but the ex-Imperial had his own assignments to handle and promised to catch-up with them later. The Lasat sat with the two of them and soon after Chopper finished whatever he was doing and came to grumble at them all.

When Hera finally came back into the common area, she stopped in her tracks when she saw them all together. The Twi'lek leaned in the doorway, looking at her family with a warm and happy smile.
"I hope you lot are behaving", she warned jokingly.

Zeb laughed, "Heh, you know us."

"Come on, Hera", Sabine pointed to the empty space beside Zeb around the dejarik board, "Come join."

The pilot walked over and sat down opposite her, leaning back with a sign into the seat.

"Karabast, how long has it been since we've done this?", Zeb rubbed his head.

"Too long", Ezra sighed.

It really had been too long since the Ghost family had sat down together. Kanan had still been there when they'd last spent some time together that wasn't on the battlefield or planning some upcoming mission. It had been so long that none of them really knew what to do next.

After a while, Sabine laughed, "Really? Five years and no one knows what to say?"

Hera smiled and stood up, "Give me a second. I know how to fix it."

The Twi'lek disappeared into the galley and emerged a minute later with a tray of steaming hot caf for each of them.

"I should have guessed", Ezra shook his head as the tray went down on the table.

"Nothing like a warm drink to settle us back in to things", Hera said as she handed a mug out to each of them. She slid back into her place beside Zeb and sipped on the drink.

Ezra took a moment to savour the taste. It had been so long since he'd been treated to Hera's favourite drink and he'd forgotten how much he loved it. Not as much as Hera did of course, he swore that woman could run exclusively on the stuff.

"I don't know where to start", Ezra set the mug down on the table. "How's it been? The war, Jacen, everything."

"The war has been tough on all of us", Hera began, "No one is coming out without scars, but you know that already. The Rebellion grew in the months after you left. A lot of familiar faces makes for a lot of allies but a lot of pain when you lose them too."

"Sabine told me about Scarif, Hoth, Endor, and all the others." Ezra shifted uncomfortably, "And Alderaan."

Zeb winced and grumbled, "Karabast, Alderaan. Part of me still doesn't think it's real."

"I'm sorry", Ezra saw how much the memory hurt his old friend, "I can't imagine what it must have been like."

Sabine stared off to the side, lost in though, "For a while we weren't sure what was going to happen. Some people feared the worst, that any planet might be next. Lothal was openly independent and we all thought... you know."

The thought filled him with dread. His home destroyed by a planet-sized battle station while he was out in the middle of nowhere. And not just his home, his friends with it, even Sabine. He couldn't imagine what it must have been like to live like that. Ezra gave her a sympathetic look and somehow the Mandalorian managed to force a sort of smile through.
"But they didn't come. They lost, we destroyed that battlestation and that monster Tarkin with it", Sabine's anger at that man was still there even now.

"It's no use focusing on the bad parts. The point is that we won. The Empire is gone and we lived to see it through", Hera told them. "Things are getting better and the future looks good", she looked over to the door that led to the cabins, probably thinking of Jacen.

"I have to ask, where was Jacen in all this?", Ezra asked a question that had been on his mind since he'd come back. "I mean, Sabine told be that you were still flying but of course she didn't say anything about him before I came back."

Hera huffed a laugh, "He was at Scarif. I was heavily pregnant when I flew in the battle."

"Yeah, and I still haven't forgiven you for it", Sabine said unhappily, "You could have gotten yourself hurt."

"Sabine...", Hera's hand reached over to hers, "I told you before. If we didn't get those plans then it all would have been over."

"I know. I just... ugh", the Mandalorian sighed.

"What about later? Sabine said you were still flying at Endor so where was he?", Ezra continued.

Sabine let go of Hera's hand and took another sip, "He was with me at Endor."

Ezra furrowed his brow, "With you?"

"Yes?", Sabine looked almost offended, "Why are you surprised? Did you think I couldn't look after him?"

"No no no, that's not what I meant", Ezra raised his hands and leaned back from her.

Hera scowled at them both, "Knock it off, you two."

Sabine's harsh expression softened but not before her elbow jabbed into his side. He'd barely been back on the Ghost for a few hours and already he was finding ways to annoy her. Yeah, just like old times.

"Anyway", Hera continued, "Jacen went to a few places. I had him on Lothal and we stayed there for the first two or three months. After that, whenever I wasn't on missions then he'd be with me. If I was in the fleet or on base with Zeb and had to go somewhere, him and Kallus would look after him."

"Wait, Zeb? You looked after Jacen?", Ezra laughed in disbelief.

"Yeah, he and his boyfriend were quite good at it", Sabine teased.

"Hey!", Zeb growled, "You've been doing those jokes for years."

"And I'll keep doing them, big guy", she smiled back.

"As I was saying", Hera shook her head at the two of them, "Jacen went different places when I wasn't there. My father had him a few times and, I have to admit, he did a good job. Not what'd you expect from him but Ryloth was safe and, well, he loves his grandson."

Cham Syndulla looking after a baby? Ezra would pay to see that. The old revolutionary never
struck him as the caring child-rearing type. Still, he was glad to hear Hera's father was doing alright and was still a part of her life. He knew first-hand that their relationship had been a tough one and it was good to know that those times had been put behind them.

"And then he was on Lothal with me too", Sabine said happily.

Ezra rubbed his head, "Don't take this the wrong way but... I just didn't see you as the looking after kids type."

"And why's that?, Sabine glared.

"She's great, a natural", Hera tried to defuse the situation. A sly smirk appeared on her lips, "You'll be great when you have kids of your own."

Sabine's ire turned to Hera, "Oh really?"

"Uhhh, so Zeb, how was life?", Ezra asked quickly to avoid making things worse.

The Lasat was just as eager to move things along, "Oh, you know, it's alright."

"How's Lira San?", Ezra forced a nervous smile as Sabine seemed to calm down beside him.

Zeb waved his hand, "It's good. My people are starting to go out into the galaxy again. It'll take time but things will get better."

"I can't believe you're such good friends with Kallus now."

"How do you think I feel? First time I met him he tried to kill me", Zeb laughed. "But he's worked hard to help our people. There's no grudge against him."

"He's family", Hera said, "Doesn't matter that he used to be Imperial. He's still family."

Zeb leaned back in his chair and slung his arms behind his head. "So, kid", he stretched out his back with an audible crack, "Where have you been all this time?"

That was a complicated question. From jungle exile to travelling Jedi Knight, it had been a chaotic few months. The time before that was calm enough, if more than a bit lonely, and it'd been an experience that he'd carry with him for the rest of his life, for better or worse.

Ezra settled in to tell a highly condensed version of the last few years. "Well I woke up after the jump and managed to get a shuttle but the hyperdrive was damaged so I, uh, ended up being forced down on a planet."

"Ezra Bridger!", Hera told him sternly, "What have I told you about always checking the diagnostics before take-off?"

"I know, I know. I was in a rush. I'm sorry", Ezra apologised to her. "Anyway, I ended up on this jungle planet with trees and wildlife. There were these tiny little creatures with two little legs and giant eyes that just took over the shuttle as soon as I arrived."

"What did you call them? Loth-lizards?", she laughed at the name again.

Ezra jokingly pushed her, "I missed home, alright? Yeah, the loth-lizards and I hung out for a while and I made another friend. This predator tried to attack me on my first night and I held him off but gave him some food. He ended up coming back and then", Ezra shrugged, "I made a friend, Argos. We hunted, we hung out, all that stuff."
Zeb listened with interest, "What happened to him?"

His mood soured and the painful memories started to come back, "I was there for years and then this ship arrived. I knew the Empire might come looking for me but... the was an Inquisitor."

"I thought there weren't any of those guys left?", Zeb

Ezra slumped his shoulders, "So did I. More troops came after and we did a good job holding them off but... Argos didn't make it."

Sabine's hand rested on his arm and Zeb leaned forward, "I'm sorry, Ezra. I didn't realise."

"It's alright", the Jedi told him. "I ended up stealing the Inquisitor's ship and escaping. The force guided me to a desert planet in the middle of nowhere. I landed and followed this call to an old temple on the surface. I went in then I had a vision or something of Master Yoda. That's when he knighted me and-"

"Wait a second", Zeb interrupted, "Knighted you?"

"Oh yeah", Ezra shrugged, "Guess a lot has happened and I'm losing track of if a bit." Between coming back, seeing them all again, meeting Jacen, getting the mission from Yoda and everything else, his knighthood wasn't the biggest thing on his mind right now.

Zeb slapped him hard on the back, "Karabast, kid.Congratulations."

"Thanks, Zeb. It was all Kanan's training."

"You know he'd be proud of you", Sabine squeezed his arm a bit.

Hera smiled, "He was already proud of you."

Kanan's memory had been at the front of his mind for most of the day. Seeing the Ghost was enough to do that, let alone meeting Jacen and trying to settle back into things. It would take time to adjust to life here without him but it was nice to think about Kanan now and again, just to appreciate everything he did for all of them.

Hera sipped her car and leaned back in her seat, "When we get back to Lothal, we've got to show you something. Ryder turned the old fuel depot into a garden for Kanan, it's... you just have to see it."

A memorial? It felt a bit odd to talk about Kanan in that way. Still, it was a fitting tribute. Kanan had given his life for Lothal and it was nice to know Lothal had something to remember that sacrifice by.

"We'll be back on Lothal tomorrow anyway, what we do when we're there is up to you", Hera had already set the Ghost on course through hyperspace.

"I bet you can't wait to go home. Five years is a long time not to see it", Zeb said.

Ezra took a moment to look around at his family. At the grumpy droid sitting under the table and probably thinking up ways to cause them problems. At his old roommate and brother-in-arms who went from his greatest rival to one of his closest friends. At the woman who managed to almost raise him and Sabine for years, as well as Jacen after them, whilst in the midst of a galaxy-wide conflict. At the Mandalorian by his side, the woman who he cared for more than he could ever put to words and loved more than he thought was possible.
"You guys are my family. I'm already home"

Sabine rolled her eyes with a smile, "Being sweet doesn't excuse being cheesy."

"Hey, it's me. What'd you expect?", he grinned.

Her disapproving sigh couldn't hide the smile on her face.

"Well then", Hera raised her mug of caf and held it above the middle of the table, "To family."

They all raised their mugs, "To family."

After the toast, they settled down and talked the rest of the evening away. Hours passed of them swapping stories, jokes, and anecdotes about their time apart.

Ezra didn't know when they'd drifted off but he did remember waking up a few hours later. The rest of the family was out cold. Hera, on the far side, slept peacefully with a hand resting on Chopper's dome. The droid must have been powered down, or he'd still be grumbling about something or other. Zeb was next to her and clearly his snoring hadn't gotten any better. Ezra was still used to it after sharing a cabin for so many years, and it was an odd reminder of happier times.

His attention turned to the weight leaning on his side. And then there's Sabine. The Mandalorian must have been fast asleep like the others with her head tipping lazily onto his left shoulder.

Hera's words from earlier that day played over in his head, "Make sure she knows what she means to you." Making every effort not to wake her, Ezra slowly moved his arm and gently put it around her sleeping form. He wasn't trying to wake her or deal with all those feelings right now, but they'd lost enough time already and it couldn't hurt to start to show how he felt.

"Good night, Sabine", he whispered and shut his eyes.

She started to stir and Ezra was scared he'd woken her. Instead, she leaned in a bit closer and drew her arm around him, clearly still awake the whole time.

"Night, Ezra."

Chapter End Notes

Our first section cover a moment that's a long time coming: Ezra agreeing to train Jacen. This is a big character moment for Ezra and is the first step of him moving truly into the position of 'master.' Obviously, he's going to learn it over time and him growing into his role is something we're going to address in the next half of this story. Thrawn and the Fourth Sister's section doesn't warrant much commentary right now. There's ambiguity about what the Inquisitor feels, what happened to the compass, and what happened with the Fourth Sister's sudden dizziness. There might be enough in the chapter to piece it together, but there might not be, it's hard to judge from my perspective. The last section is a bit of a tonal shift but it's meant to be that way. I wanted it to be a nice, quiet moment for the Ghost family to bond. No big mission, no long-term worries, no emotional trauma, just the family spending some long-awaited time together. It's lighthearted, it's fluffy, it's laid back and I make no apologies for
that, it's the only time I've done a scene like this in the story and it was refreshing to go back to my more traditional family/relationship driven stories. I enjoyed partial Ezra's re-telling because it made me appreciate how long it took to get to this point and I'm proud of seeing it through thus far, no matter how it turned out. Ezra and Sabine sharing a half-asleep hug is the fluffiest this story has gone and goddammit I'm happy to do it again. As much as I'm loving this more mystery-focused narrative, I'm a soppy romantic at heart so it was nice to finally do something unambiguously affectionate for these two. Ezrabine is was what brought me into fanfiction and I still enjoy writing it.

In the final chapter: Ezra returns to Lothal, Thrawn rallies his allies, and Ezra and Sabine talk about the future.
Chapter 20 - Homecoming

Chapter Notes

Here we are, the final chapter of this half of the story. There's a mid-story author's note after this so don't forget to check that if that's your thing, I have some explanation as to why I have to take a break and talks a bit about when the rest will come and what you can expect from it.

Anyway, for this chapter: Ezra returns to Lothal, Thrawn rallies his allies, and Ezra and Sabine talk about the future.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lothal.

Ezra stood in awe in the cockpit of the Ghost, staring down at the planet he called home. The world had regained its beautiful bright greens and blues across the surface and soft white clouds enveloped much of it. It was so much different compared to the last time he'd seen it.

"Welcome home", Hera said as she flicked a few switches on the console.

"I still don't believe it", he breathed.

Zeb patted him on the back, "Believe it, kid."

Hera guided the ship down toward the surface. Ezra recognised the area from orbit and knew they were heading to Capital City. He stared out the window and took in the gorgeous landscape of the place he'd longed to return to for years. The clouds were light and clear, not stained orange by the Empire's industry. The oceans were clean and calm, covering large areas of the surface in a glistening blue. The land itself looked refreshed and healthy. It had recovered from the damage inflicted by the Empire and fields of lush grass stretched out into rolling hills along the horizon.

Then he could see Capital City. It looked so much better without the Imperial Dome looming over everything. In its place, new buildings stretched high into the sky, the whole city a beacon welcoming him back home. Ryder clearly worked hard to help clean this place up and the results were showing.

The comm blared with a new voice, "General Syndulla, welcome home. Governor Azadi requests your attendance in the usual place."

"Of course, on our way", Hera replied and steered the ship toward the space dock.

It was funny. In all his years of living here, he'd never once actually landed at the main city docks. It had always been reserved for Imperials and the Ghost wasn't exactly welcome above city airspace all those years ago.

Sabine tapped him on the shoulder, "Come on, let's get to the cargo bay."
He took another awed look at the city before following her and Zeb to the exit ramp, ready and waiting to set foot on his home world. Ezra was more than eager to get going as he felt the Ghost touchdown onto the ground. Hera came down soon after with Jacen tagging along beside her, holding onto her hand as they walked.

"After you", Hera pointed to the door control as she and Jacen came down the ladder.

Ezra didn't hesitate to enthusiastically smash the button down. It opened up to a small welcoming party was waiting on the landing pad. Ezra didn't recognise most of the faces but he could easily spot the trimmed white moustache of Lothal's Governor.

"Well that's a face I haven't seen in a long time. Ezra Bridger", Ryder said as they stepped down from the ramp.

"Ryder!", Ezra greeted him with a handshake, "It's good to see you."

The Governor shook back, "I was beginning to think you weren't coming back."

The rest of the crew walked up behind him, Sabine coming to the front to see Ryder.

"Some of us had to go out there and drag him back", Sabine winked at Ezra.

Ryder chuckled, "A job well done then, Captain Wren."

"Woah, Captain?", Ezra's mouth hung open, "You didn't say anything about that."

"I did say I was working with the militia", Sabine grinned.

"That's... wow. Congratulations, Captain", Ezra gave her an exaggerated salute.

She playfully hit him, "Alright, Mr. Jedi Knight."

"Jedi Knight?", Ryder gave an impressed huff, "It's only right. I'd say you earned it." The man put a hand on Ezra's shoulder, "What you did for Lothal, for all of us, gave this whole planet another chance. All of us owe you our lives and and a debt we'll never repay. And that's true for all of you", Ryder nodded to the rest of the crew, "But especially you, Ezra."

"It was a team effort", Ezra smiled at his family.

"Now, no doubt you want to see how we've spruced up the place. Follow me, this way", Ryder called to them all and pointed to two landspeeders parked nearby.

The rest of the welcoming party let them pass, their suits and attire suggested they were probably some politicians or officials from Ryder's administration. Ryder hopped in the lead speeder beside the driver, with Ezra and Sabine in the rear. Zeb called shotgun on the second, with Hera sitting in the back with Jacen and Chopper.

As the driver turned on the engine, Ryder turned over his shoulder and called to Hera in the rear speeder, "Now, General Syndulla, I have to tell you that this wasn't my idea but once word got out there was no stopping it."

"What wasn't your idea?", she asked suspiciously.

The Governor chuckled and winked at Ezra, "You'll see."

The two speeders drove away from the Ghost and towards the large doors that led out of the dock,
slowing to a halt as they reached them. Sabine's hand found his arm and she gave him a reassuring smile. Again he remembered Hera's words, 'make sure she knows.' Before the doors opened fully, he placed his hand on top of hers but stopped short of intertwining their fingers, the contact was enough to let her know without pressing things too far. Ezra saw her smile brighten before the doors opened and a chorus of cheers, music, and shouting erupted around them.

Ahead of them, the streets of Capital City were lined with thousands upon thousands of citizens cheering as the speeders rolled by. They filled out the roadsides, the alleyways, the windows, even the rooftops were full of ecstatic faces welcoming their return.

"Ezra! Ezra! Ezra!"

"You hear that, Ezra?", Ryder laughed to him over the noise, "You gave them their freedom. That's your name they're cheering."

The crowds waved their arms as the convoy passed. Some had made banners with messages and pictures on them, trying to catch his attention. Placards showing the Ghost were being held up, helmets modelled after Sabine's, lightsabers like his own, even a few images of his own face with affectionate, admiring, and a few... less than innocent messages.

"I wasn't expecting this welcome", he shouted to Ryder and awkwardly raised his hand to wave at the crowds.

"Once word got out that you were on your way, there was no stopping it. Damn near everyone took the day off for this."

Sabine nervously waved back too and behind them Ezra saw Zeb's massive arms waving at the crowds. Jacen looked amazed, staring wide-eyed at the throes of people that had turned out for them.

The speeders went through a long lap of the city. Leaving the space dock, they drove down the main streets past thousands of people that had come out to see them. Then their convoy went through some of the old market sectors, where shopkeepers and staff all came out to watch them go by. The whole city seemed to grind to a halt from them and the Jedi was beyond humbled. Ryder was doing his best to explain what had changed and what they'd built in the last few years, but Ezra was too overwhelmed to take it all in. Next, they came through the residential district where everyone from the youngest Rodian to the oldest Ithorian waved their arms and cheered as the speeders went by. All the while, his hand rested gently on Sabine's.

The buildings and the crowds thinned as they reached the road out of Capital City. Ryder promised they'd come back to the city later, after they'd seen to a few things. Ezra immediately recognised the route they were taking as they turned off the road and went out over the plains. After all, how could he not recognise the route back to his old tower?

The open plains were beautiful again, just like they were when he was younger, growing healthily and naturally as far as the eye could see. Not far away from their convoy, Ezra caught sight of two oversized ears poking out from the grass.

"Hey look, loth-cats!", he pointed out to Sabine.

She leaned over and laughed, "Guess they missed you too."

A few more poked their heads up as they went, drawn by the noise of the speeder engines as they went by. The tiny creatures were every bit as adorable as he remembered. It wasn't long before he
saw another familiar creature standing up on a hill far away, watching the convoy quietly as they passed. *A loth-wolf?* Ezra hadn't seen them so openly before.

"They're more common now", Sabine explained, noticing his surprise. "They're not all over the place but we're seeing more of them."

It was a sign of how much the world had recovered. There was probably still a long way to go but clearly Lothal was moving in the right direction. At last, Ezra saw the familiar tower rising up in the distance. In a way, he'd called it home for longer than any place he could remember. He'd been on his own for almost eight years and this place was all he had. Sure, the Ghost was more like home but the old radio tower would always have a special place in his heart. However, the closer he got, the more he could tell that something was different about it.

His friend's knowing smile caught his eye. "You figured it out yet?"

Ezra squinted at her, "What did you do to my tower?"

The speeders came to a stop a few dozen metres away from the base, giving Ezra a full view of it. He moved his hand off Sabine's and hopped out of the speeder. The others all did the same as Ezra looked up at the towering building. It was cleaner than he'd left it, which probably wasn't hard to do, with new panels and a fresh coat of paint, almost good as new. Someone had taken the time to not just repair it but also maintain it since he'd been gone. There wasn't a question about who that someone has been.

"Sabine?", the woman was already standing at his side.

"Got it in one", she answered.

"Why'd do you do all this?", Ezra still couldn't tear his eyes away.

Sabine shrugged, "It's your home, it was a nice thing to do. Besides, I wasn't going to live there in the state you left it in."

"It looks... wow. I can't imagine how much work this took."

"She did it all herself. All we did was give her some materials", Ryder chimed in.

Sabine must have seen the amazement in his face as he stood gawking at the tower. She nudged him gently, "Welcome home, Ezra Bridger."

Ezra peeled his eyes off the tower and set them on her. The urge overtook him and he slung his arms around her, hugging her close without a care for the others watching.

"Thank you", he whispered to her.

"Alright, love birds", Hera smirked and came up beside them, "There'll be time for that later."

"Hera!", Sabine groaned as she let go of him.

Ezra cleared his throat, "Ahem, yeah, let's go inside."

The young Jedi hastily lead them toward the tower and see for himself what Sabine had done with the place. Seeing Lothal again, the crowds out, the wildlife thriving and his home renewed, all with his friends at his back, made for an exhausting day - and Ezra treasured every second of it.
Meditation. An interesting choice. Thrawn watched the Inquisitor from the hill where their ship had landed, still able to distinguish her black form against the rocky environment. The Fourth Sister had made no attempt to return to the ship with him nor to use the scanner herself to see what else she could discover. That only strengthened the idea that she already knew far more than she was letting on. She felt she could learn more through meditation and tapping into the force, without relying on the two sources of knowledge that had already provided her with information.

What, then, was buried beneath them? Something trapped? Something forgotten? Something lost? Why was a compass constructed to enable one to find this location? None of the answers were clear, but they all pointed back to an old saying he'd learned long ago: some things in the galaxy were purely evil, beyond compromise and beyond understanding, and deserved only to be destroyed. Thrawn feared that this mystery might see this truth played out again. Whoever or whatever was lurking beneath them had to be found, identified and, if necessary, eradicated.

The Chiss climbed aboard the freighter and made his way to the communication terminal in the cargo hold. The small freighter had been taken from pirates by himself and Commander Vanto during the long search for Nightswan. It continued to be an experience that stayed with Thrawn and this freighter served as a permanent reminder of his opponent's talent during his early years with the Empire.

Thrawn keyed in the comm address for his fleet and waited for the three holographic figures to materialise. It took several moments for the figure of Captain Pellaeon, Commodore Faro, and Captain Sarlis to appear.

"Grand Admiral", Pellaeon saluted and the other two followed suit.

"Captains, Commodore", he acknowledged, "What is the condition of the fleet."

"The Invictus had been retrieved and is undergoing repairs", Sarlis said quickly. Proud of her contribution, a rare situation indeed. Thrawn did not despise the Captain but she continued to be a testament to the Empire's propensity for political promotion over military or strategic achievement.

"Excellent work, Captain. Did they offer any further information on the intruders?", Thrawn asked.

She hesitated, "Well, I... uh"

"No, sir", Commodore Faro answered, "I ordered them to be interrogated but they knew nothing more of the attackers."

Sarlis shot her an indignant look, "You interfered in my operation without authorisation?"

Pellaeon's figure turned his head to her, "She had my authorisation and I act with the Grand Admiral's confidence."

"Captain Pellaeon is correct and I commend your initiative, Commodore."

Captain Sarlis' anger relented, "I apologise, Grand Admiral."

Thrawn raised a hand, "I assure you, that is unnecessary. Dismissed, Captain Sarlis."

The woman looked at the other two holographic figures that Thrawn had made no attempt to dismiss. She feels as if she is not trusted, that something is being hidden from her. For now, nothing more can be done.

"Y-yes, sir", she saluted and shut down her connection.
"She's not happy. I think even she can tell there's something going on that she's not seeing", Pellaeon grumbled.

"Our true objectives must remain unknown to as many people as possible. We cannot risk the Fourth Sister catching wind of our intentions." Thrawn glanced at the door, ensuring that the Inquisitor was not intruding on them. "What of the research into the items retrieved from the surface?"

His suspicions about the destruction they found on the world Ezra Bridger had escaped on seemed all the more justified with their discovery of yet another secret structure on a lost planet.

Faro grimaced, "It's like you said, sir. The bodies have no evidence of toxins, chemicals, or radiation. It's also clear that whatever happened wasn't down to temperature extremes or natural decay either."

Pellaeon's hand came to his moustache, "There's no explanation for how they died, certainly not a conventional one."

The culprit was now without question. "Then our suspicions have been confirmed", he said ominously.

"What's our next course of action?", Faro asked.

Thrawn held up the scanner that was still in his hands. "My reasons for contacting you are two-fold. I also have progress to report. The compass drew us to another empty world however our surveying suggests there is a colossal structure buried deep beneath the surface. I have no doubts that this structure is what we have been searching for."

"How can you be sure?"

"Several reasons, Commodore. The compass' mere existence suggests that this is a location of significance and there are no notable features elsewhere on the world." Thrawn cast another cautionary glance out of the door and toward the empty expanse, "Additionally, our Inquisitor has been troubled by something. She is tight-lipped, as was expected, but it is evident that she possesses knowledge of this world or what is to be found here that she is keeping from us."

Pellaeon took on the information with a concerned look, "Can you get into the structure?"

"Our scanners do not detect any access points although we have yet to cover the entire area. I do not, however, suspect that we will find one."

Faro shook her head, "Why bury something so far below the surface, block off any entrances, and then make something to help you find it anyway?"

Thrawn reached for the compass again and inspected it. The glowing of the stone had not returned and the device seemed to be defunct. "It is possible that those who constructed this compass and those who created the structure are not one in the same. Or, perhaps something had to be kept safe here temporarily but for some reason was never retrieved. At this moment, we lack the information to be certain. The Chiss looked again at the centre stone, "However, the point of the compass is moot. It ceased functioning not long after we arrived. There's some significance to that I'm sure, but I do not know what."

"Then what are your orders, Grand Admiral?", the Commodore asked.

The Chiss paused and considered his response. "I need a full accounting of all munitions,
explosives, and heavy machinery amongst the fleet. We will need such tools at our disposal to reach this structure."

"Are you sure that's wise, Grand Admiral?", Pellaeon questioned, "If this is the threat the Emperor perceived, perhaps it's best to await reinforcements."

"Seeking alternative allies would cost us time that we do not have, and the Inquisitor is already ahead of us in her knowledge of what lies beneath. It is only a matter of time until this threat is uncovered and I intend us to be the ones to do so. If we, with the means and intent to oppose this threat, are the ones to discover it, then we avoid the risk of it falling into the hands of those unable or unwilling to do what is necessary."

"Hmm, fair point", the old officer conceded.

Thrawn tapped several buttons on the console. "We are in agreement then. I am relaying our coordinates now", he keyed in the coordinates and dispatched them back to the fleet.

"We'll depart immediately, sir", Faro told him.

Thrawn stood at ease and addressed both of them, "Rest assured, we shall unravel this mystery whatever the cost. And, when Skywalker and Bridger return, we shall ensure that any threat is dealt with severely and immediately."

"As you say, Grand Admiral. Whatever the cost", Faro saluted.

"Of course, sir", Pellaeon gave a gruff laugh, "Though I'm starting to think this is taking too long. I'm still counting on a peaceful retirement after this."

Thrawn's mouth curled slightly into a thin smile, "A well earned reward, Captain."

His two allies' holograms dissipated, leaving him alone once again with the Fourth Sister. Whatever the Inquisitor was hiding from them would soon be forced to the surface. In truth, Thrawn could not conceive of a situation where their alliance wouldn't collapse, but he did not regret it. This threat to the galaxy, to his own people, had to be stopped at any cost.

To that end, they were on the right path. It only remained to be seen how successfully they would all see that path through.

The day had been long and tiring in all the right ways. After their arrival and brief visit to his tower, Ezra and the others had gone back to Capital City where they'd been treated to more crowds and adoration. He'd been shown a few places, both new and familiar, across the city. The site of the old Imperial Dome had been replaced with a collection of new amenities and services. A hospital, schools, stores, and apartments were just some of the things that stood where there'd once been a symbol of Imperial oppression. They'd shown him the markets and residential areas and all the improvements that had been made since.

Daylight was finite though and there were several places that he'd still have to visit in the next few days. The rebuilt area of what used to be Tarkintown was apparently a thriving new settlement. Sabine had promised to take him to the old Republic Senate building where she had some sort of surprise waiting for him. Most of all, he wanted to see the Kanan Jarrus Memorial Garden. Built on the site of the old fuel depot, it sounded like a perfect tribute to his mentor and friend.

Now though, it was time for some much needed rest. Ezra had decided to take some time for himself in his old tower. He'd seen inside briefly earlier on but hadn't had the opportunity to just sit
and take it all in. Hera had moved the Ghost over here and the others were going to be staying there tonight, leaving the tower for him.

It was crazy to think how far he'd come these last few years, and how much had changed in the last few months. Ezra couldn't remember the last time he'd sat up here and had time to reflect on things, he probably hadn't done that since his first months on the Ghost. The Ezra here right now was worlds apart from the Ezra of back then. He'd endured war, life and death struggles, grief, loss, hope, victory, defeat, isolation, and a bantha-load of other feelings that he couldn't even think of right now. There was still some bits of him that would never change though. The optimism, the sense of belonging he felt here, the love for his friends and his family - they were part of who he was and he'd never let them go, nor would anything take them from him in the future.

The Jedi brushed off the self-reflection, he'd done far too much of that in the last few years, and took some more time to appreciate what Sabine had done for this place.

The basic layout was still the same. A large room at the front with two smaller rooms leading off it. Sabine had the main room converted into a sort of living area, one of the rear rooms into a personal bedroom, and the other closed door was covered in paint and colour. Ezra hadn't looked inside yet but was split on it either being a personal studio or Jacen's room. Maybe both.

Sabine's art in its various forms was everywhere. She'd done an amazing job is sprucing up the place and giving its walls a bright new coat of light-blue paint. Her art was also there in another sense. On canvases hung to the wall or mounted on easels were paintings of landscapes and animals, just like he'd hoped she'd make. There were some of flowers, a particularly striking one of a tall sapphire flower caught his eye, and there were others of people. It was sapphire again that drew his attention to the painting Hera mentioned, a carefully done image of himself. She'd done a remarkable job on it, if he had anything to say about it.

Of course, it was still originally his tower and she'd kept some evidence of that. He was surprised to find his entire collection of helmets spread out across the room. Ezra stepped over and took up one of them in his hands, a TIE pilot helmet he'd stolen from a crashed fighter not long before meeting the others.

"Those are gonna be worth a lot soon", Sabine's voice came from the open door to the tower. "No more Imperials to steal them from after all."

Ezra laughed and put the helmet back down in its place, "Yeah, I never really thought of that. I'm surprised you kept them all."

She stepped into the room, "Of course I kept them. It's your home, I wasn't going to throw out all your stuff."

"Maybe it was mine, but you sure made it your own", Ezra looked around at the paintings again.

Sabine shrugged, "I got hit with some inspiration while I was here."

He smirked at her and pointed towards the painting of himself, "Oh really?"

"Ugh, you're impossible", she scoffed and rolled her eyes.

"What? I like it, it's good."

"Thanks", she replied meekly. She stood beside him and nodded to the painted door, "That's where Jac stays when he's here. Gave him a whole room to himself. I think he liked being in 'Uncle Ezra's' tower."
The Jedi leaned against a cabinet by the wall, "I have to ask, what did you guys tell him about me?"

"Oh you know, that you're annoying, an idiot, a constant pain", Ezra halfheartedly shoved her. "I'm only kidding. We did tell him a bit of that but we told him the good stuff too. Brave, kind, honourable, honest, and there were stories too. About how you crossed blades with Darth Vader, about how you mind-controlled space whales, about how you tried stealing from us the moment you met us..."

Ezra cut her off, "Hey, we were both stealing from the Empire."

Her mouth opened and her eyes narrowed, "This again? We had those crates!"

"But they were the Empire's", Ezra replied.

She huffed and didn't give him a reply, "We told him about loads of our adventures. Finding Rex, fighting on Mandalore, Geonosis with Saw, even Hondo."

There was more than a bit of contempt on her face at the mention of Hondo, either from past memories or more recent ones. The Mandalorian had never warmed to the pirate, and it was her loss as far as he was concerned.

"Jac loves it here, the whole planet. I guess because of Kanan and you that he just feels a connection with this place. Thinks it's the prettiest in the galaxy", she sighed happily, "Honestly, I can't say he's wrong."

Ezra intentionally kept his eyes on her, "Sure is beautiful."

Oblivious to his rather obvious attempt to flirt with her, she perked up, "Oh, you have to see Capital City at night. Without the power restrictions under the Empire, it looks amazing."

Sabine grabbed his wrist and pulled him towards the door and out to the balcony. They leaned side by side on the guardrail to take in the sight. The view was staggering, everything that he'd dreamed it could be. Under a perfectly clear sky, the bright lights of the city shone across the landscape, the towering buildings and bustling centres were awash with colour and activity. Neon lights showed where clubs and cantinas had sprung up and the lights of speeders through the streets showed that, even at this hour, the city didn't sleep. The land around was equally beautiful. The moons reflected on the sea across the horizon and its pale light was cast across the plains over the horizon.

The Ghost was sitting on the grass near the tower, Hera having moved it there earlier in the evening. The rest of the crew was using their quarters while Ezra, apparently, was having his tower back. Ezra loved the thought of that offer, he loved what Sabine had done with it, but he still didn't feel right kicking her out of her home.

"Hey, Sabine", he said after a while, "I appreciate what you did to the tower and it's amazing but I don't feel right taking it. You keep it, I'll find somewhere else."

Sabine turned her head to him, "No, it's yours. I did it for you, there's other places I can go."

Still as stubborn as ever. "We could always share", he offered jokingly.

The Mandalorian paused and glanced back into the tower. "Yeah...", she pursed her lips, "There'd be room."

The answer caught him by surprise. "I... I was joking, I mean..."
She looked flustered, "Oh, sorry... I didn't..."

Ezra rubbed his neck, "Well... if you're okay with it then I'd be alright with it. It means neither of us will have to find somewhere else."

The Mandalorian bit her lip and thought for a second, "Sure, I'm okay with it."

Well... that's that then. They'd been on the Ghost for years but in separate rooms on a big ship with other people around too. Living together was going to be completely different situation. Just the two of them, alone. Part of him was excited, moving in with his best friend on his home planet after years of isolation. On the other hand, part of him was a bit nervous. Not because of her, not really, or at least not because of what she'd be like. They'd have a blast together no doubt but living together might bring up some things that Ezra hadn't really dealt with yet. Sabine was his best friend, his teammate, his rescuer and his most trusted companion... and something more. What had begun as a childish crush of a beautiful girl had evolved into an unbreakable friendship, but one that still had some unspoken feelings beneath.

Ezra loved her. There was no question about it. He loved her completely, respected her, would lay down his life for her, and had kept those feelings alive even with years of separation. Going from complete isolation to living with her was going to draw those things out even more than they already had in the last few weeks. There'd been a few times where he thought he'd glimpsed something similar from her, but he'd learned long ago that there was no hope in trying to read Sabine Wren's feelings, and he'd never intrude on her privacy and use the force to sense her thoughts. If they were going to do this, Ezra had to face up to the truth.

Their friendship would endure regardless of whether she returned the feelings, their first few years had seen him get used to the sting of rejection. Still, if he was going to teach Jacen, his mind had to be clear and he had to be at his best. That meant following in Kanan's example and dealing with these feelings head on, no matter what. The best thing to do was not to sit there and pretend his feelings didn't exist but to accept them, accommodate them and, if the stars aligned, manage them alongside everything else.

"Make sure she knows." Dammit, Hera. Why are you so good at making me listen to you?

Ezra's hand started to rub absently on the handrail, "Hey, listen... I know I already said it but..."

"If you're gonna say 'thank you' again then you're not staying with me", she threatened sarcastically.

He laughed at her, "Alright, alright. I just... I can't ever repay you for what you've done for me and Lothal and..."

"You don't owe me anything, it's me and Lothal that owe you." She looked him in the eyes, "Don't sell yourself short."

Ezra smiled back at her and held the eye contact for a few seconds. It was honest, heartfelt and again... maybe a little...

"Uhh, ahem", Sabine looked away quickly, "I... uh, I'll... we should go get your things."

The Mandalorian hastily got up off the railing and went to leave. Without stopping for a second thought, Ezra reached out and gently caught her wrist.

"Wait. Just a second", his voice was low and his nerves started to rise.
She swallowed hard and turned back to him, "Ezra?"

"Hera said something to me the other day", Ezra began and turned back out over the darkened horizon, "About making sure people know what you mean to them when you still have the chance. She told me to make sure I... make sure I don't make the same mistake she did."

Sabine's lips parted slightly as Ezra's hand went back to habitually rubbing his arm. She leaned back on the railing with folded arms, watching him intently and nervously. Ezra didn't know if the realisation had dawned on her yet about what he wanted to tell her.

He kept his eyes downcast, "It got me thinking... I've never told you how I feel."

Ezra let the words hang as he tried to find the right way to say it. She had to have figured where he was going with this by now.

"I think I know."

Her interruption took him by surprise. "Wh-what?"

"I think I know how you feel."

Ezra stood up and looked right at her, "You do?"

"I think so", she unfolded her arms and pushed off from the railing, "One way to be sure..."

Sabine closed the gap between them before he could react, grabbed the front of his shirt with her hands, and pushed her lips on to his. It took him a second to even realise what was happening. Sabine... Sabine's kissing me? What do I do? Where do I put my hands? Do I say anything after? Am I really here or am I kissing Argos in my sleep or something? Ezra didn't know what he'd expected it to be like. It was a bit awkward and a bit clumsy, but in all honesty that was perfect for them. There'd been no romantic admission over a candle-lit dinner, no well rehearsed speech or cheesy poem, just them awkwardly fumbling around the issue before Sabine went all in with the direct approach.

She pulled back and smiled confidently at the bewildered man, "Told you I knew."


"I knew you'd come back one day", Sabine moved her hands from his chest and slid them around his neck.

Ezra settled his hands around her waist, his heart still racing. "I should have told you before it happened."

"Ezra...", Sabine sighed, "What matters is that we're here now. We already lost five years, let's not waste any more time wondering about 'what ifs'."

He squinted at her with a teasing smile, "When did you become good at this 'emotions' stuff?"

"I might be adapting what Hera said to me...", she admitted.

"Wait? Hera knew?" So that's why she wanted me to say it...

"Of course she knew", Sabine said, "It's Hera. I'd be amazed if she didn't have us both figured after Concord Dawn."
Aha, Concord Dawn! He knew it! He knew something changed with them during that mission.

Ezra shook his head, "I should have expected that."

Hera knew them both better than they knew themselves. *Mother's intuition*... Of course, without the implication that he and Sabine were siblings.

"I still can't believe it", Sabine kept her brown eyes on his.

"How do you think I feel? I fell for you the moment I saw you almost ten years ago", Ezra laughed at the old memories of his awful attempts woo her. "It took time but here we are."

She smiled and brought a hand out from around around his neck. "Not that...", she cupped his cheek, "I can't believe I kissed you with this beard on your face."

"This again?!", he groaned.

"You're not getting another one until it's gone. I mean it."

Ezra sighed, "I thought girls liked men with beards?"

Sabine winced, "Yeah, not this one."

He reluctantly brought his hand up and rubbed the beard, "Alright, I'll get rid of it. For you."

"Well aren't you the sweetest?", she teased and hugged him tightly, resting her head against his chest.

They stayed unmoved for a while, taking a much-needed moment to relax and let the galaxy pass them by.

"So what happens now?", Ezra asked after a while.

"We live here. Hera is thinking of settling down too, maybe Zeb and Kallus as well. I said that maybe they could live nearby, our own little corner of Lothal."

Ezra planted a kiss on her head, "That's be nice. Besides, if I'm training Jacen then we'll need to be close by."

"Sounds good", Sabine nodded lazily. "I've still got my job with the militia, can't be too careful even with the Empire defeated."

"You know, *Captain*", Ezra had been using the title all day. Of course he was proud and impressed, but he couldn't help but tease her, "I could use your help for lightsaber training. You did say that you've been practising the forms."

She pulled her head back and glared at him, "We'll see."

"You mean, 'of course I'll help you, dear'", Ezra corrected her.

The Mandalorian rolled her eyes playfully and nestled her head back into him, "What about, you know, the thing with Ahsoka and Luke?"

His mission was still looming behind everything. He may be home now, but their following of the trail to whatever Master Yoda had sensed was only beginning. The time would eventually come where they'd have to confront that threat, even if it meant turning their backs on home and setting
out once more into the Unknown Regions. But that was then and this was now. Ezra would do his part when he was here but right now, this was what mattered.

"We'll deal with it when it comes. For now, let's just have this", he held her close for a few more minutes, staring out at the view from the tower.

"Come on...", Sabine unwrapped her arms from him, "Let's go get your things from the Ghost. Might as well let Hera know that we're... uh."

"Committed?", Ezra suggested.

She clearly liked that choice. "Committed", she repeated. "And then we're coming up here and getting rid of that beard."

Ezra couldn't find it in him to be even jokingly offended. The Jedi just sighed and took a hold of her hand as she went. Sabine was right, they'd lost enough time and Ezra wasn't going waste another second.

Sabine led the way out of the tower and back down to the Ghost. The future was uncertain, for them and for the galaxy as a whole. The fall of the Empire, the restoration of the Republic, the rebirth of the Jedi - all of it made for a galaxy unlike anything he or Sabine had seen. The prospect of training Jacen in the ways of the force, passing down to him the things that Kanan had taught, would be as much a learning experience for Ezra as it would be for Jacen. Coupled with readjusting to life on Lothal and settling into his new future with Sabine, the next few months were set to be interesting ones.

Still looming behind it all was his mission. While he was here, he'd have to exhaust every source of knowledge he could find to root out any information on what was lurking in the Unknown Regions. Meanwhile, Luke and Ahsoka would do their parts, traversing the galaxy and trying to piece together what they could. Then, eventually, the time would come to face whatever was out there.

But that time would have to wait. Ezra was home on Lothal for the first time in years. Reunited with his family after years of exile. With the woman he loved at his side and his own new apprentice to take under his wing, the future, for now, looked bright. How long that would stay true was anyone's guess.

Beneath her, the force surged and flowed unlike anything the Fourth Sister had ever known. As Thrawn went to report his findings to his allies, she was committed to finding out what lay beneath them. The more she meditated, the stronger she felt it rising, awakening, stirring. Eventually, she tried reaching out once more.

"Are you the one I spoke with?", she whispered quietly even though the Chiss was nowhere near. "What is this place? I've come to find you."

Silence. The movement of the force was her only answer.

"Why did you speak to me? I heard your voice at the temple. Tell me it's you that drew us here."

It had to be the voice. Why else would she have been led down this path if not to find it? Those words: 'Find me'. She'd upheld her end of the bargain. She'd endured that insufferable Chiss and his cronies and committed herself to finding what it was that wanted her help. This had to be the place and now... there was nothing.
She gritted her teeth and cursed under her breath. "Talking to ghosts. Lord Vader would be ashamed", she admonished herself.

"You."

The voice came suddenly from within her own head, just as before.

Her breath hitched in her throat, "It's you. I knew it!"

"You found me."

"Y-yes. Who are you?"

"Name... long ago."

"What are you doing out here? Why are you here?", she asked the entity.

"I have been... imprisoned. For so long."

"Imprisoned? By who?"

"Jedi. Sith."

*Jedi and Sith? That made no sense. Why in the galaxy would they imprison anything?*

"Why?", the Inquisitor shook her head in confusion,

"Mmmmm... they feared me. Hated me."

"The Jedi are gone and so are the Sith", her voice became more irritated. Whatever this was, if it was even real, must have been here for a long time.

"For so long I've watched. So long..."

"So you keep saying", she muttered, "How long?"

"Millennia."

The Fourth Sister scoffed, "Don't be ridiculous."

"With time, even death can die."

With a laugh she stood up. "I'm going mad. Talking to the empty dese-"

Her breath left her and unseen tendrils wrapped around her throat. The Fourth Sister's body raised up and her feet searched for ground as she clawed helplessly at her throat, struggling for breath.

"I assure you. I am real."

The Inquisitor struggled in vain as the edges of her vision began to darken and the being's grip tightened around her neck.

"But you are of use to me."

She dropped to the ground, gasping for air and shaken to her core. "I-I will not be ordered around like this! I was trained by Lord Vader himself!"
"Such fire. Such anger."

Without warning it used the force to throw her to the side, slamming her down onto the rocky ground.

"You will submit, child."

"I shall not be- ahhh!"

Her body flew back and she landed hard on the floor again.

"Join me. Serve my will and I shall grant you the power you crave. Power denied to you by the Chiss... and Lord Vader."

*How could it know about Thrawn? Had it been watching since she arrived... or even before?* The Inquisitor pushed herself to her feet and panted heavily. She felt her anger swell but knew there'd be no hope. The power, the hatred, the confidence, surging from this being were beyond what she had faced.

With a pained grunt, she sunk to her knees. "I will do as you command, Master."

"Good."

Her voice was trembling, "How can I serve you?"

"Free me. Release me from this prison and you will be rewarded with a place in my new Order."

Power. That was its offer. Every fibre of her being said to run but she knew there'd be no point. If it was right, if the Jedi were the ones who imprisoned it, then they had a shared goal in destroying Bridger. Then there was Thrawn, it seemed to know she hated him, and maybe it could help her be rid of the alien once and for all.

Besides, it still needed her to be free. She was still the one with the real power and when it was free it would owe her a debt, one that she'd have paid in the death of her enemies. Thrawn would die, Bridger would die, and all who stood in her way would fall at their feet. Then, when the time came and this being had done all it could for her, she could take her rightful place over all others in this galaxy.

Slowly, she pushed her battered body onto her feet and took a weary breath, "How can I reach you, my Lord?"

"Patience. All shall come in time. Now, tell me of this Vader..."

Chapter End Notes

That's it. That's all I've got for a while. The author's notes here are just about this chapter, hop over to the next entry for a bigger rambling about what my plans are and a few other random thoughts.

So, the final comments on the final sections. The return to Lothal comes at last and I
wasn't sure exactly how to handle it. Having crowds come out wasn't an idea I had until I was already writing this section but I rolled with it. I did consider having a whole welcoming party of all the other faces from the show: Jai Kell, Zare Leonis, Ketsu, Hondo and so on. Hondo at least gets a mention later on but I felt Ryder was more than enough. This was about Ezra coming home to Lothal, the rest could wait. I didn't get to do much with loth-cats and loth-wolves but I wasn't going to let this pass without a mention. Their 'tour' had to end at the tower and it feels like things coming full circle from Sabine's first section way back in Chapter 1. Thrawn's brief section is just showing how they're moving forward in the future. I had to get Sarlis in since I don't use her too often and she gets a slightly larger role in the second half of this story. The excavation is going to require a combination of massive logistical work and Thrawn's eye for art and architecture as he tries to piece together what is going on. I've said since the beginning that I've got this planned out and it's still true, I've even clarified and cemented ideas as I've written. Thrawn, being so perceptive and being so close to the 'main plot', gets a lot of the long-term stuff linked with him, such as the multi-chapter scheme to let Ezra escape all along. One or two small things in this section do have an explanation and significance later on, so I wanted to get them talked about in the very last Thrawn section.

That Ezra and Sabine section. At long goddamn last. Do you have any idea how badly I've wanted to have these two let it out? Too long. I always knew it had to happen on Lothal and I always knew it'd be a long wait. Still, it was satisfying to let them kiss and be all cute, they've earned it. I've written loads of Ezrabine, I think this is the third time I've done a 'first kiss' for them, and this story has been particularly challenging. My other stories have been all about Ezrabine while it's only a small aspect of this one. It is, however, an important thing for Ezra and Sabine and it serves to show one way in which they're still learning from Kanan and Hera. I enjoyed writing this scene, it's been a long road to get here but I'm glad we did. Also, that sapphire flower painting that Ezra spots is the one Sabine makes of her favourite flower from Kanan's garden which Jacen points out when he and Hera visit earlier in the story. Not an important detail but it's a little connection.

Then there's the last section. There's nothing much I can say about it without spoiling things really. I'm sure people have ideas, some of those ideas might be right, but anything more will have to wait for the rest of the story. I will only repeat that I know where this story is ending, I know what happens to every character and I know where all of this ultimately leads. Hopefully I can deliver an interesting tale in the end. Also, there's a mental high-five for whoever gets the reference in there to a certain author from Providence...

In the (probably distant) future when I get to part two of this story: Ezra passes on his Jedi teachings but before long, he, Ahsoka, and Luke must face the threat that awaits in the Unknown Regions. Thrawn, Pellaeon, Faro, and new allies work to learn more about the threat as Operation: Tartarus nears completion. All the while, something continues to whisper in the Fourth Sister's ear.
The Mid-Story Author's Note

With today's publishing of Chapter 20, the first half of this story is officially over. What started off as two paragraphs of conjecture on a Discord server became a novel and a half's worth of writing, consuming months of my life, stretching my ability as a writer, and becoming something that I'm immensely proud of. It's messy in places, I made a few missteps, and I still have my characters sigh way too often., but I'm happy so far. There's a few things I want to ramble about so I'll chuck them here, mostly for my own closure than for anything else.

Story and Stuff

There's no use me repeating what happened in the story already and it'd take too long anyway. Going from writing Ezrabine garbage to writing more general garbage was an interesting jump, but people seemed to enjoy it. I had the opportunity to use characters outside of the Ghost crew and this story gave me a chance to experiment with a couple of different things. I wrote Ezra and Sabine in much the same way as I’d written them before, albeit with less focus on how much they make a damn near perfect couple. Using Hera wasn't too much of a change, and I didn't use her as much as some of the other main characters of this tale.

Thrawn, Ahsoka, Luke, and Jacen proved to be the most difficult characters to write, for different reasons. Ahsoka just had no exact frame of reference to base her character on since she could well have changed so much after Malachor. I wanted to do my best to keep some sort of mystery and power about her, hence the crazy force stuff she can do, but also keep the lighthearted person she has been since her Clone Wars days. Luke was mostly based of Jedi Outcast/Jedi Academy Luke since it's the better fit for his role than a more OT Luke or miserable old ST Luke. Jacen was hard because toddlers are difficult, not much to explain there really. Finally, there's Thrawn. I have to admit, Thrawn was the one I enjoyed writing most of all because he's just a fun character to play with. The eloquent language and sense of calm control is just really satisfying to engage with, no matter how well you capture it in the end. His plan for Ezra/Luke has to be my single favourite aspect of this story, it's definitely one of the things that took the most effort to work into dialogue and scenes without making it too obvious or compromising his motivations. Thrawn is sort of the anti-hero of this, he's still the same villain from Rebels but he's the lesser of two evils compared with the Inquisitor and the Voice talking to her.

Before I move on, there is one massive error/omission I made a while ago that I never corrected - Thrawn's journal entries. The first ten chapters had small introductory paragraphs similar to the first canon Thrawn book that functioned sort of as the 'message' of that particular section but I ended up forgetting to add one in for chapter eleven, then twelve, and then for the rest of the story. I don't think I'll pick them up again for the future, they started to get a bit samey in my head so that's probably why I dropped them, but I am sorry for the stylistic inconsistency in that regard.

The Future

The whole point of the second half of this story is to confront the Voice. I'm calling it 'the Voice' because I need something to call it in the author's notes until I get a name for it. The characters will refer to it by whatever they know it as, if they know it at all, but I'll just call it 'the Voice.'

I won't give any massive spoilers for the second half but I will give a general idea of what's to come. The focus moves away from Rebels a bit and becomes something that's more widely Star Wars than the first half was. Rebels is still a huge part of it, whole plot lines are rooted in it, but the second half isn't picking up from Rebels like the first half did.
The first half had three main story threads going on alongside two semi-major ones: Ezra, Thrawn, and Ahsoka and Sabine were the main ones that were in all/nearly all of the chapters, while Hera and the Fourth Sister had their own side-plots. Hera's was pretty self contained and mostly occurred in the first few chapters while the Fourth Sister's came more towards the end and was quite heavily tied to Thrawn's. The second half is focused on three threads, plus one that's deeply tied to another. It's probably no surprise that Thrawn's is one of the main plots and then the Fourth Sister's is linked with him. The other two will be made up of the other characters, but in what combination and what role they have will be kept quiet for now. Suffice it to say, it lets me explore some different character dynamics, as well as some familiar ones, and puts me in the best position to give them the sort of progression or resolution that I want.

My plans for the future of this story have crystallised as I've written, and several ideas that are now core to the story and its characters were barely thought of, if at all, when I set out. The general story is the same but there's a few character arcs and ideas that have developed and made themselves clear organically as I go. In the last few days I've nailed down the last decision I'd been unsure of so now pretty much every single story beat is set in stone. Some of the finer details are still WIP, and the story is pretty much the same as what it is when I planned it at the start, but with these last details locked in I'm clear about where I'm headed.

There's really nothing specific I can give about the future of the plot that I haven't already said. It will tie in to other areas of Star Wars and seek to explain or build on things that have been mentioned before, such as the idea of the compasses that I've started with in this half. I hope I've at least interested some of you enough to come back for the second half. The second half is going to wrap up most questions I've raised, and a few wider ones that I wanted to give an answer to, and I promise it's not a series of events that every character is going to make it out of...

Finally, I will say that work on Chapter 21 has actually begun so I have started chipping away at the remainder, I like to write several chapters in advance of what I publish so don't expect 21 next week or anything, but things are actually moving with it.

Specific Acknowledgements

Just before I go, I do need to mention one or two people in particular. I think the first has to be WestwardGlance not only for his own stories (I probably don't need to tell you guys to go read them now, who here hasn't?) but for all the support he has given to me over these last few months. He proof-read my first chapters, gave me advice on story decisions I haven't been sure on, and has diligently read and reviewed everything I've put out. He has also permanently infected me with the Oxford comma, so he's the one to blame if you love it or hate it. I owe him a massive debt of gratitude... and a whole lot of apologies for taking digs at beards so often.

There's also RagnarDanneskjold who I always owe a thank you to for getting me into fanfic in the first place. I think he was the first person I pitched this idea to months ago and he's also been following the last few months too. I also have to thank him for getting the word out about this story on Reddit. I really appreciate the extra publicity.

All the other writers in our little network deserve a shout-out. SweetSinger2010, ddaulton94, springfieldbluebird, and TheYellowLantern, as well as a few other non-writers whose names I'm not sure I should put here but are still awesome.

I'll Stop Now I Promise

I swear a good 10-15% of this story has been author's notes so I'll put a lid on it here. The last thing I have to say is a thank you to all the regular readers and reviewers who've given up their time to have a look at this. It's hard to communicate how nice it is to have feedback and to know there's
people who check in every few days/weeks to catch up on the stuff you throw together. I'm extremely grateful for all the 25,000+ people who have dropped by since July and I hope I can see a lot of you again for when I get around to finishing this.

Until I get the chance to come back again, thank you,
- Lothcat1138

TL;DR - Loved writing this, work has begun on part 2 but don't expect to see it for a couple months, all you guys are awesome.
Chapter 21 - Peace and Purpose

Chapter Notes

Surprise, surprise, here I am. I thought I'd better usher in 2019 with something. I've decided to change how I'm going to approach this story and rather than waiting months for me to build up a 9-10 chapter lead like I did in the first half, I'm pretty much just going to publish when I'm ready. On the one hand, it'll mean there'll be updates sooner to keep things rolling, but on the other it'll mean there's no regular upload schedule for this story for the foreseeable future. There might be two chapters in one week, and then there might be one chapter in two months - it's really just up in the air. At the end of the day, I didn't want to push off publishing and writing this until months down the line when the audience, and even my motivation, might just not be there anymore. Anyway, serious stuff aside, expect a slow irregular trickle of chapters every now and again when I have the chance.

This is mostly a catch-up chapter to fill in what's happened since chapter 20. There's a time skip of one year so we're not following on directly as we did for most of the previous chapters. I won't lie about it being a bit rusty, but I'm hoping I'll get back into the groove as I go.

So, to kick this off: Thrawn gets a surprise call, Ezra continues to train Jacen, the Voice whispers in the Fourth Sister's ear, and Ahsoka and Luke come to Lothal.

Date: 6 ABY, just over one year after the Battle of Jakku, the signing of the Galactic Concordance, and the return of Ezra Bridger.

Operation Tarturus was proceeding much as Thrawn had expected. Slow, difficult, frustrating to others - but steady. Each cubic metre of rock they moved was one less in the way of their ultimate goal. Slow progress was an unfortunate reality, the structure was buried deep underground and it had taken almost a month simply to get the fleet here and organise their resources. Two months again went by for their initial surveying and planning of the excavation. Thrawn had been on the surface for almost four months before the first excavation began. Caution and care were essential to the operation. It was not a simple matter of setting explosives in the area and blasting their way down. Any poorly thought-out choice, any excessive force, could damage what they came for - or worse.

This tenacity had paid off three weeks ago when they finally cut deep enough to strike the roof of this structure. The dark black monolith offered little detail or information to help, but preliminary scans pointed to an entrance that couldn't be more than a few weeks worth of excavation away. The news had restored some hope to the tired legions serving on this expedition, and more importantly it had brought Thrawn within reach of the answers to this great mystery.

Captain Pellaeon and Commodore Faro had kept their focus on the task at hand in these last few
months, not once had he heard or seen the slightest hint of discontent. If only that had been true for the rest of their fleet. Captain Sarlis continued to look despaired at every moment, thoroughly unequipped for and unhappy with their work. The rank and file were weary and confused about it all, wondering why they were being put to tasks better suited to archaeologists and academics.

None of these reactions were surprising, however, save for one: the Inquisitor. Impatient, arrogant, eager, vindictive - there were many less that favourable words Thrawn could use to describe her. Yet, interestingly, her discontent had faded rather quickly after he announced his plans. The first time he’d told her that they’d likely be here for months, if not years, uncovering this mystery, she’d launched into an angry tirade and stormed off. Then, after several days of irritability, she accepted her position. Soon enough, she'd abandoned her quarters on the *Chimaera* and moved into a solitary prefabricated accommodation on the surface not far from the dig site. Thrawn saw little of her any more, sometimes only at their mandatory progress meetings, and in recent weeks even her attendance to those had declined.

All the while, Thrawn watched for the slightest hints of what she continued to hide. The recent news of the discovery of an entrance had piqued her interest and Thrawn knew there was little chance that the discovery was unrelated to her increasingly sporadic appearances in public.

Even still, her intentions and knowledge eluded him. Although the time was coming soon where everything would be forced out into the open.

The discovery of this entrance was not the only thing that had become a matter of time. Bridger's allies, the young Skywalker and whoever else the Jedi had drawn into this affair, would soon be upon them. Thrawn knew that the enigmatic will of the force would force a confrontation between them and whatever it was that lurked under the surface below.

But such thoughts were not helpful to the situation right now. At long last, though many months too late to be the most useful, a message had been beamed to the *Chimaera*.

"I don't know where it's from, sir", Commodore Faro sighed through the comm, "Just that it's marked as priority."

Thrawn observed the defunct compass in one of the alcoves of his office, as he often did in recent months. "Not to worry, Commodore. Patch it through to my office."

She hesitated, "Are you sure? It could be unsecured. What if it's... Bridger?"

"It is not Bridger. Only a high-ranking Imperial Officer could have acquired the necessary codes to contact us", the Chiss explained as he moved back to stand in front of his desk.

"A high-ranking Officer?", Faro asked. "Who?"

"I do not know", he replied.

Faro went silent, her cautious disposition holding her back momentarily, and then she sighed, "As you say, sir. I'll patch it through."

The comm cracked as the Commodore broke the connection. A few moments later, the hologram projector flicked and struggled for a while to process the incoming message. A combination of distance, encryption, and interference was making it difficult. Thrawn glanced at the signatures and took note of them. *Interesting.*

Finally, a figure materialised above the table - one that Thrawn had certainly not expected to see again. A woman in a pristine white Imperial uniform appeared, with dark olive skin and long black
hair tied firmly behind her head. Thrawn had seen her face in his research on Phoenix Squadron and had seen cursory reports of her in the years before events above Lothal. Focused, loyal, intelligent, efficient - she was definitely one of the best officers in the Imperial Navy. Noticing her rank slide, her efforts had clearly paid off; the rank of Grand Admiral was only held by a select few individuals after all.

"Grand Admiral Sloane."

Rae Sloane's name had first crossed Thrawn's desk after his assignment to the pursuit of Phoenix Squadron. She had been a Captain during a mission on Gorse and had unknowingly crossed paths with Jarrus during her work. The man she'd initially reported as a nuisance had, unbeknownst to her, turned out to be one of the few remaining Jedi in the galaxy. Sloane had pursued Jarrus sporadically for several years after, and the intel she later gave to the Grand Inquisitor had been the basis for much of the Empire's initial data on the man.

The women smiled thinly, "Grand Admiral Thrawn, I see my reputation precedes me."

"Indeed, I'd heard of your achievements several years ago. Besides, you were the first Imperial officer to encounter the Jedi Kanan Jarrus."

"While you were among the last", Sloane replied.

Thrawn nodded, "Such is the way of things. It seems our paths have now crossed again."

The woman narrowed her eyes and inspected him further. "Word around the Empire was that you'd been lost above Lothal. I have to admit, I hadn't expected to see your communication details among the Emperor's records. Even when I did, most of the details are classified beyond even my authority."

"And what authority would that be?", Thrawn asked.

"The highest authority", she answered, "Up until I discovered you, I was the highest-ranking Imperial left in the galaxy. After Jakku anyway."

He raised an eyebrow, "Jakku?"

Sloane let out a sign and Thrawn saw the faintest strain as she gritted her teeth. "I should have known you'd have been cut off out here. Several months ago the Rebel and Imperial forces met at a backwater planet in the Inner Rim called Jakku. All you need to know is that almost the entire Imperial fleet was wiped out."

So there had been one final confrontation. Thrawn had known the remaining Imperials would scramble for leadership and to mass their forces again, vying for another battle after Endor. As was always the case in such situations, the endeavour would be doomed to failure due to a lack of clear leadership, the strength and cohesion of their enemy, and internal strife within their own ranks.

She regarded him carefully before she continued, "A peace treaty was signed after the battle. This New Republic is the power in the galaxy for now, at least until our missions are complete."

"And what, might I ask, is your mission?", the Chiss asked.

"An important one. Almost certainly more important that yours", the woman countered.

Thrawn's hand went to his chin, "Given your rank and the cassified nature of my mission, you must have already determined that my mission can only have come from the Emperor himself."
Therefore, if you still believe yours is more important, then your mission must also have come from his authority."

He thought back to the communication dispatch he'd had over a year ago that told of him of the defeat at Endor, glad to finally have some answers to that puzzle too.

"I can only assume that your mission is some component of the Emperor's contingency, Operation: Cinder, and the result of that is a revived Imperial presence in the galaxy."

"Not revived, Grand Admiral. Reborn", Sloane didn't seem in the least bit bothered or surprised that he'd worked out so much of her mission. "The galaxy needs the Empire if it's to have order."

Thrawn once more glanced at the communication signatures, "The Emperor would agree, and evidently he seemed to believe that the key to that order lay out here, in the Unknown Regions. Hence he sent me, as well as his personal flagship, and then you."

The signatures had given away the identity of where she was broadcasting from: the Super Star Destroyer and Emperor's personal flagship the Eclipse. No communication signal would be strong enough to reach the Chimaera's current location unless the other ship was also in the Unknown Regions. Given that the entire available Imperial fleet would have been mustered at Jakku, and that the New Republic wouldn't have allowed such a powerful ship to escape, Thrawn knew that the ship must have been sent out some time before the Emperor's death.

Once more, Sloane took his deductions in stride, "The Eclipse was sent out here to be a rallying point for Imperial forces if it was ever needed. I suppose we should thank you, it was your hyperspace trajectories that allowed us to construct the path out here."

Thrawn shook his head, "Rallying your forces will mean nothing if survival cannot be guaranteed."

She scowled, "Survival? In the face of what?"

"We do not yet know. Only that survival is what's at stake."

Sloane chuckled briefly, "You like making things mysterious, don't you Grand Admiral?"

"If you could provide additional resources then that mystery could soon be dispelled", Thrawn suggested.

"I can't join you, I have my own work to attend to." She paused and looked away for a moment. "However, I can spare a very limited amount of resources if you truly believe your mission is that important."

His eyes narrowed. "You're awfully quick to trust, Grand Admiral", he said cautiously.

"I've been in this service long enough to tell a good instinct from a bad one. Even on reputation alone, you're just about the only other person I'd hand over anything to," Sloane folded her arms and seemed to look him up and down, "I don't know why a Chiss found his way to the Empire but your record speaks for itself. If kicking some resources your way can free you and your fleet up for my mission, I'll bite."

Thrawn didn't offer an explanation for why he made the choices he did, those answers weren't for most Imperial ears to hear. Instead, he kept his composure and nodded politely, "Any resources you can spare will be most appreciated."

Sloane looked at something off to her side and let out a sigh. "I can spare two Star Destroyers,
the *Solicitude* and the *Cunctator*, and whatever personnel are on them. The *Eclipse* was only accompanied by a few escorts so I can't afford to compromise any more of our fleet."

"My mission requires equipment not just orbital defence", Thrawn said.

Sloane ran her tongue around her mouth, "There'll be some people there too. The *Cunctator’s* Captain for one: Brendol Hux."

It wasn't a name Thrawn recognised. "Will he be of use to me?"

She huffed a laugh, "Hux is a coward but he follows orders, show him you're the one in charge and he won't cause trouble. Truth be told, I only put him in command of a Star Destroyer because we're so short of officers these days. He won't personally be much help, but I doubt he'll be much trouble either."

Thrawn furrowed his brow, "I assume there will be more... reliable assistance among these reinforcements."

"General Maximilian Veers. He'll be assigned to oversee the personnel and ordnance. A soldier through and through, bit dry but his head is in the right place and he commands loyalty. There'll also be the *Solicitude’s* Captain, Canady. Young and inexperienced but sharp, thinks for himself. He'll be useful to you."

Veurs was a name that Thrawn had heard, but not someone he'd personally met. Sloane's description seemed perfectly in line with what Thrawn had heard of him long ago. This Canady was new however, but Sloane's recommendation was at least encouraging.

"Very well, I'll make preparations for their arrival", Thrawn thanked her.

"Hopefully this won't take you long. The Empire could really use your expertise if we're to become strong again."

The Chiss kept up his passive facade, "My only concern for the mean time is dealing with my own mission."

Thrawn could see the faintest hints of dissatisfaction with his answer, but the other Grand Admiral had already learned that he'd never give up anything he didn't intend to show. The Chiss did appreciate her willingness to defer to his judgement. Even when details of what he was doing were sparse, she trusted his word enough to impede her own efforts. In the unlikely event that she could inspire similar farsightedness in her subordinates, rebuilding the Empire would be far easier than one might expect.

"As you say, Grand Admiral. They should be with you within several rotations, and from there I trust you'll get the job done."

"It shall be done, I assure you."

Sloane straightened up, "Until we meet again, Grand Admiral."

Thrawn bowed his head slightly, "Until we do."

Her hologram faded and the blue light it cast over his office went with it. The turn of events had been unexpected but not entirely unwelcome. Additional reinforcements and resources were to be welcomed in the short-term, the sooner they reached the bottom of this issue the better, but the long-term consequences might prove to be far less pleasant. Sloane, despite her talent and sharp
mind, was an Imperial loyalist, endlessly devoted to the success and continuation of the Empire. Her reaction, or the reaction of these new allies, when they realised that he was willing to sacrifice Imperial interests for those of the Ascendancy might prove problematic.

But for now, those questions were academic. Dealing with this threat itself was the core objective, the fallout of that success was a matter for another time.

The Grand Admiral pulled his comm into his hand, "Commodore, summon Captain Pellaeon and meet at my office."

"Aye, sir", she answered almost immediately, "I take it that this is good news?"

"For now, at least", Thrawn replied.

Faro breathed out heavily from the other end, "That's good enough for me, sir. We'll be with you shortly."

The low-hanging sun on Lothal still took Ezra's breath away even after all these years. It cast a beautiful glow over the Spectre Compound that they'd built here over the last year. It had been Hera's idea, a little dream that they'd all pitched in for to make a reality. Around Ezra and Sabine's tower were a number of buildings as well as a nice wide space for the Ghost and the Phantom to be kept. Three of those extra buildings were houses: one for Zeb, one for Kallus, and one for Hera and Jacen. There was a store-shed too, mostly for food, fuel, and their speeders. In the middle of the buildings was a large courtyard that had become the usual place for Ezra's introductory lightsaber lessons for his apprentice.

Jacen's training was much different to his own, but most of that was down to the age difference. Jacen was still young, barely more than six, and Jedi training at this point wasn't much different to a normal kid's education. At least Jacen was allowed to have a childhood as he learned, balancing an innocent childhood with a steady Jedi education. It baffled him that the old Jedi Order had began these lessons so young, drilling an education on history, meditation, philosophy, and doctrine from the moment they could walk. Lightsaber training, however, was easily the one that struck Ezra as the most odd for a child, and the one that caused them the most trouble - just as it was doing today.

"No, you have to bring it higher."

Jacen raised the stick barely an inch, "Like this?"

"No", Ezra sighed, "Higher."

His student raised the stick as high as it would go, "Now?"

"That's too high."

Ezra let his own stick, or 'training saber' as he liked to tell Jacen, drop as he watched his apprentice look curiously at him. The Jedi of old had started lightsaber training at this age, building up the muscle memory and discipline early to make the proper training later easier, but Ezra still struggled to see how a six year old needed this already, and more importantly how they could even manage it without a serious injury

"I'm sorry", Jacen hung his head.

Ezra looked sympathetically at him and lay a hand on his shoulder. "It's alright, you'll get it. Let's
go again."

Once more, Ezra stepped back and went in to the ready position. His young apprentice hesitated and tried to copy him, but again the posture just wasn't right.

Before Ezra could correct him for the dozenth time, Sabine's voice came from the sidelines. "Hey Jac, just a little higher with your saber and put your feet a little further apart."

Sabnie was leaning against the wall of a house, arms folded, watching the two of them like she always did. Hera was there too, the Twi'lek never missed seeing any of her son's saber lessons.

The boy scrunched his nose and shuffled his feet, bringing the saber up in front of him a bit more. **Perfect ready position.**

"There, you've got it", Ezra laughed, "But don't think I haven't seen you listening to Auntie Bean better than you listen to me."

Jacen shrugged his shoulders shyly, "I don't know... I just..."

"It's because I'm a better teacher", Sabine said smugly, "Or just because I'm his favourite."

Ezra rolled his eyes at her, "You know you're welcome to try teaching, Captain. It's not as easy as it looks."

"Come on now, you two", Hera intervened "If Kanan could teach you then you can more than handle Jacen."

Ezra loosened his stance. "I don't know if that's a compliment or an insult", he grumbled

Hera laughed and strolled towards them, "Well you can work it out over dinner, Kallus should be done any moment."

Jacen unceremoniously dropped his stick to the ground and started to run to Kallus and Zeb's house. Kallus' meals were his favourite, somehow the ex-Imperial had picked up culinary skills somewhere along the line. Ezra was just glad someone on the compound knew how to cook. Him and Zeb had long worked out that they were no good at making food, and Hera's talents lay in the cockpit not in the kitchen. As for Sabine, Ezra had learned that her artistic talents had one limit, but also that it was best not to ever risk telling her that.

Ezra kept his mind on the mundane topic as Hera and Sabine walked over to him. He still wasn't used to worrying about who'd be cooking for them tonight rather than who'd be shooting at them. While Ezra missed the excitement and adventure sometimes, it was quiet moments and little things like this that reminded him just why they'd fought so hard for this life. Peace, quiet, calm - all things they'd had far too little of in their lives... and would soon be short of again.

Sabine scooped up Jacen's discarded training saber and handed it to Ezra as she and Hera reached him. "Jokes aside, you're getting good at this."

"Thanks", Ezra replied meekly as he took the stick from her.

Both women could see the anxiety from him, and Ezra could see it in them too.

Hera broke the silence. "We all knew it was only a matter of time."

She was right, as always. Only yesterday, they'd learned that Ahsoka and Luke were heading to
Lothal. It wasn't said specifically, but they all knew what them coming here meant: it was time to get back out there and deal with whatever it was Master Yoda had warned him about over a year ago.

"It's been a year and yet it still feels like yesterday", Ezra said. His mind started to swirl with memories of what he'd gone through for those five years and with thoughts of the challenges still to come.

This last year had gone by far too quickly. Ezra had spent hours pouring over some of the old Jedi texts Ahsoka and Luke had sent his way, and he'd scoured all the fragments of the Jedi Archives that they'd recovered from the Imperial databases. Even then, there was nothing. Luke's search had turned up little too, the Emperor's remaining observatories contained plenty of interesting mysteries of their own but nothing relevant to their own endeavours. As for Ahsoka, Ezra had no idea what she'd even been doing out there. Rex had gone along for old time's sake, but even then Rex couldn't give much of an explanation either.

"They won't be here until morning, we've got some time", Sabine assured him.

"But not enough", he replied. Ezra looked over to the building Jacen had disappeared into, "It's too soon, Jacen's training has barely begun."

Hera cast a glance in the same direction and sighed. "I know it's not ideal but we do what we have to do. If... if you have to go back out there, if we all have to go, we'll do it."

Ezra still admired her determination, even peaceful settled life hadn't worn down Hera's resolve in the slightest. The Twi'lek looked off towards the setting sun for a moment, as Ezra noticed her doing from time to time. It wasn't hard to guess what, or who, she was thinking about when she did it. As usual, she smiled slightly and brought her attention back to the present.

"But that's tomorrow. Right now, let's just have a quiet evening", Hera turned toward the house, "Don't take too long you two."

They watched her go, leaving the two of them alone for a moment.

"He's not ready for me to up and leave him, Sabine", Ezra admitted.

The Mandalorian took the training sabers from his hand and dropped them to the ground, placing her owns hands into his instead. Ezra shut his eyes and focused on her presence, letting it soothe his worried mind.

Her voice came softly and quietly, "We have to do what's necessary, you know that."

"I know, but I can't leave him now. He needs a teacher and he can't just drop this at this stage, it's too dangerous for him." Ezra sighed, "I don't know how long I'll be... or if I'll even-"

"Don't say it", Sabine moved her hands up his arms and wrapped them around his neck, "Just don't."

"But what happens when I have to go?", Ezra kept his voice low and quiet.

"Firstly, I go with you, just like I promised the last dozen times you asked."

Ezra held her tightly, rubbing his hands soothingly up her back, "I can't let you do that."

"Excuse me?", she answered sharply and pulled back to look at him, "I can't let you go without..."
"Ezra", it was Sabine's 'don't answer back' voice. She let it hang for a moment to make sure he'd listened. "We're in this together. Until the end."

Ezra brushed her purple hair from her eyes, now back to the same length it had been before the Battle of Lothal, letting out a sigh as he did. "I just don't know what the right choice is anymore."

"You do, cyar'ika", she answered, "You'll do what's right, I know you will."

Ezra smiled at the Mandalorian endearment, a little piece of her own culture that had become a constant part of their relationship. He took her hands in his own, brushing her bare fingers as he did so. It reminded him of a piece of his own Lothalian culture that he'd want to introduce her to soon enough.

"Hera's right", Ezra leaned down and picked up the two training sabers. "That's for tomorrow. Let's just enjoy tonight."

Sabine led him towards the house and began talking about her latest piece of work. Ezra listened intently, shutting out all the other worries from his mind. She never failed to put him at ease and her love could bring peace in the face of any worries. When things loomed on the horizon, like this mission in the Unknown Regions, her support reminded him exactly why he had to do his duty - for the people he loved and cared for.

Ezra took another look at her bright hazel eyes and beautiful smile. "There is no emotion", or so the Code said. Those words were starting to ring even more hollow by the day.

The Fourth Sister rubbed her eyes and tried to shake off the tired haziness from her mind as she sat up from her bunk. This wait was wearing everyone else down but seemed to be taking a toll on her even more. The anticipation and frustration was leaving her more drained with each passing day as she waited for Thrawn's dig to actually turn up something of value. Their first glimmer of progress came a few weeks with the first signs of an entrance to the subterranean structure, and a sign that her wait was finally coming to a close.

The Chiss had remained oblivious to her communications with her Master below. She'd moved out of the cramped quarters on the Chimaera and into a small prefabricated cabin on the surface, as close as she could manage to the dig site. It kept Thrawn out of view, allowed her some privacy, and ensured there'd be no eavesdropping on her activities, especially her communing with her Master.

Her Master was growing stronger, she could feel it from him, and their communication was becoming easier and more frequent. There were limits though and that was part of why she'd moved to the surface. They could open a bridge quite quickly but she had to be close by. However, despite the growing interaction, she still knew so little. Its name, where it came from, what it's doing down there, and a myriad of other question were still as obscure as they'd always been. One thing that was still clear, however, was that it knew far more than it should for something trapped in a prison beneath the ground. Her Master could feel her thoughts but also those of the other Imperials. Thrawn's mind still proved elusive, but her Master could still get vague ideas of his mood and intent.

But she was getting restless. What she'd expected to be a weeks-long affair had rolled into a year of
minimal progress and tedium. It was no wonder that she'd spent so much time on her own, seeking to unravel all the mysteries through focus and meditation. What is this place? What happened here? Why is my Master trapped here? How long must I wait?

Sliding out of the bunk, she fell into a kneeling position on the floor. Once again, she turned to him for answers.

"Master?", she whispered quietly, "Hear me."

There was a long pause before a guttural sigh came as an answer.

"Once more you call."

"Y-yes, Master. I only wish to know... how long until I can reach you?", she stammered and tried not to incite its anger, she knew all too well what would happen when her Master was frustrated.

"I struggle to see beyond these walls."

"But you've grown so much stronger, every day I feel your power growing."

"Indeed. Your senses are sharp, my young apprentice."

"Surely there's something I can do? Anything rather than sitting here waiting?", she asked.

Another low sigh came from her Master and the force started to shift around her. He was reaching out, like he had done many times before, and each time she felt it stronger and clearer.

"I sense... hmm, yes. Most interesting."

The Inquisitor opened her eyes on instinct, "What? What do you sense?"

"I sense... allies. Yes, the Chiss is expecting aid from allies."

"Allies?", she questioned, "What allies does he have?"

"I cannot see, but he is preparing. There is new purpose in him."

The Fourth Sister furrowed her brow, "Should we be concerned?"

"Hmm, perhaps. But I sense their presence could be a useful tool for us."

She bowed her head, "How, my Master?"

"Patience, my young apprentice. The Chiss' allies may yet become our own."

A smirk came onto her lips. Something about the idea of turning Thrawn's own allies against him was too satisfying to resist. "Tell me what I have to do."

"For now, nothing. The Chiss watches your movements with caution. We must tread carefully."

The Inquisitor let out a frustrated sigh, "As you say, Master."

"Keep me appraised of things as they unfold. An opportunity will arise, my apprentice, and you will know when to act."

A deep rumbling sigh signalled the end of the conversation as her Master broke the connection and retreated back below. She braced herself for the brief bouts of lightheadedness that always came
with the break, let them pass, and then got to her feet.

*New allies? Unexpected, but not unwelcome.* Even she could see the stranglehold Thrawn had over most of the others here. Pellaeon and Thrawn were almost one in the same, and the *Chimaera’s* Commodore served at his feet in everything she did. Sarlis was little more than a political pawn, loyal to Thrawn through protocol and habit more than her own choices. These new allies could be useful, as they didn't owe loyalty to the Chiss already. That left her room to manoeuvre like she hadn't had since she'd joined this expedition almost six years ago.

With her Master's guiding hand, all she had to do was wait and listen, and soon everything would fall into place.

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Morning came far too soon for Ezra's liking. Before he knew it he, Sabine, Hera, Jacen, Zeb, Kallus, and Chopper were standing in the courtyard of their Lothal compound watching as Ahsoka's familiar red shuttle touched down just outside the fence.

It wasn't long before two figures stepped out of the shuttle. Ahsoka led the way with the same staff still in hand. Her long knee-length cloak was cast back over her shoulders, now more a cape than anything, and the outfit beneath was now the exact same one she used to wear before Malachor. Rex, following closely behind her, looked very much the same. His old clone armour was still kept in as good a condition as he could manage, as were the blaster pistols still on his hips. The man himself looked mostly the same, although the signs of his advanced ageing were getting a little more noticeable with each meeting. Still, the two old friends greeted them all with glad smiles.

"You actually did it", Rex chuckled and glanced around their compound as he and Ahsoka walked through the gate. "Your own little corner of Lothal."

"It's really something", Ahsoka added happily.

Sabine stepped forward first and pulled the Togruta into a hug. "It's good to see you in person at last."

"You too", Ahsoka replied and looked at Ezra, "Though I think you've had plenty enough company in the meantime."

"Thanks to you", Ezra smiled at her.

Zeb greeted Rex with a well-meant slap on the back. "I see you're still holding together."

"Yeah, just about", Rex laughed as he pushed back his shoulders with a loud crack.

"Luke shouldn't be far behind us." Ahsoka turned to look behind her just as Ezra peered over her shoulder, "In fact..."

On the horizon, the sun glinted off a fast-moving speck coming towards them. Luke's X-Wing came closer set itself down on the grass outside the compound, just beside Ahsoka's shuttle. Luke hopped out while his astromech came down from the socket and followed him, chirping and beeping about something as they went.

The other Jedi hadn't physically changed much at all since Ezra last saw him. However, the way he carried himself had changed. Since Ezra had met him, Luke had a sense of authority about him but now there was something more to it, a sense of purpose that hadn't been there before. It could have been down to their mission, or simply his focus on helping Leia and the others guide the New Republic, but Ezra thought the most likely reason was similar to his own: a student, a nephew in
fact. Luke hadn't taught him anything yet, Ben was still far too young, but there was no question that Luke would take him under his wing when the time came.

At least it'd be another Jedi, Ezra thought to himself. The cynical part of his mind added on: but five still isn't enough of us.

"Ezra", Luke greeted him with a firm handshake, "It's good to come and see Lothal at last."

"Good to see you again, Luke", he replied.

Luke looked over to Jacen, standing close to his mother behind Ezra. "How have things been?"

"It's been alright." Ezra cast a smile back at his apprentice and saw the young Jedi shy away from the attention, drawing a bit closer to Hera. "I swear he wants to be a pilot as much as he wants to be a Jedi though", he chuckled.

"His mother's influence, I'm sure."

For a moment, Ezra wondered if that was part of the reason Jedi were taken from their parents at a young age back in the Republic. Ezra didn't see the harm in it though, Jacen was doing well enough in his training anyway.


"I hope that's meant to be a compliment. "Luke's hand met hers too, "Good to see you."

"How's Leia and Ben?", the Togruta asked.

The man shrugged, "My sister is my sister, never a moment's rest. Ben is okay, he's with Han most of the time for now."

Hera stifled a laugh, "You're telling me you leave the baby alone with General Solo?"

"Never alone", Luke corrected, "Not without Threepio or Chewie too, preferably both."

Ahsoka shook her head with a grin, "I hope he turns out alright from that upbringing."

"Eh, the kid' be fine", Rex laughed. "I mean, come on, a wookiee and a smuggler's better than the scientists and computers that us clones had."

"Yeah yeah, old man. Blame the Kaminoans for how you turned out", Zeb joked.

"Oh really?" The clone folded his arms amusedly, "Maybe you and sideburns over there can show us how to raise some kids."

"Gentlemen", Ahsoka stepped in before Zeb and Kallus could reply, "You can have a go at each other later."

"I'm sure Zeb and Kallus will", Sabine mumbled under her breath.

The Lasat and the ex-Imperial broke into yet another defence of their entirely platonic friendship as Sabine and Rex prodded them for all they had. Ezra wasn't sure how serious everyone was about it anymore, it'd become so normal to joke about that they never thought about it. He liked that it'd come to that, that the whole family had become so closely-knit and could enjoy each other's company so much.
Ezra saw Ahsoka turn back to him and Luke from the corner of his eye. "We should get to business sooner rather than later, if only to get it out of the way."

He nodded slowly, "Agreed. We'll go to the tower." Ezra cast a look over at the others and spoke up, "The three of us will catch up with you later."

The banter died down and was met with a few mumbles of agreement. Everyone knew what they'd all come here for. Hera locked eyes with him briefly before leading the rest of the group towards one of the houses, leaving Luke, Ahsoka, and Ezra to themselves.

He caught Sabine looking at him with those hazel eyes that never failed to draw his own. Ezra knew she was going to be at his back on matter what would happen, half the time she seemed to be the one who had a better handle on things, but she couldn't hide her own worries from him. Fittingly, their stare was broken as Jacen eagerly walked back and tugged at her, dragging her into the house with the rest of them. His apprentice didn't look over at him, and didn't see the concern on his master's face. Jacen hadn't been told everything yet but the young boy had no idea how important he was in all this.


He cleared his throat, "Uh, yeah. Sorry."

Ezra turned and stepped past Ahsoka and Luke to lead the way to the tower. As he passed, he saw the look Ahsoka gave him, she clearly knew something was bothering him. Not that it mattered to be honest, it'd all be out in the open soon enough.

Chapter End Notes

As I said, a bit rusty but hopefully I'll get things back in order soon enough.

Our Thrawn section sees a major change come to the Imperial storyline. For the first time since Chapter 2, Thrawn is directly interacting with another Imperial outside of his fleet in the form of Grand Admiral Rae Sloane. Sloane, for those who don't know, is a pretty major character in the novels, especially the Aftermath trilogy. The last we see of her is with her and Hux venturing into the Unknown Regions and meeting up with the Eclipse to start rebuilding the Empire. It's been a few months since she reached the Eclipse and in my eyes there has to be more than just that one ship out there. Whether the other ships and personnel were already out with the Eclipse or whether they too were drawn there due to Operation: Cinder isn't really important to the story, only that they're there. I mentioned in Chapter 2 that there must be some sort of hyperspace tracker on the Chimaera for the Inquisitor to have found her way to Thrawn, and it's this data combined with the communication logs (the ones Ahsoka and Sabine use to get out there) that the Empire uses to construct a safe route into the Unknown Regions in this story. Again, not hugely important, but one of the ways in which I'm trying to give canon things an in-story explanation to tie it all together. I won't mention too much about the three Imperials that'll be joining Thrawn until next chapter but most of you should recognise the names anyway.

The short Ezra, Sabine, and Jacen section serves mainly to show the sort of peaceful
life they've been having since we last saw them. It shows a bit of training, a bit of Ezrabine, some musing on Jedi training, and just some calm before the storm. I skipped over a message from Ahsoka telling them she's on her way since I could cover it well enough by just mentioning it in this section. I want to try and trim down the fat a bit in this half and really make sure each section achieves or shows something important, so expect a bit more focus as we go on. I'm trying to find the right balance between not wasting time and not skipping over anything important, so don't be afraid to let me know if I'm not doing something right. The Inquisitor's part is also a sort of catch-up section to show where she is and the nature of her interactions with the Voice, and it's also a sort of setup for her mindset going into the rest of this story. Lastly, we have everyone coming together again. It helps me set up some of the descriptions of their compound on Lothal, a few mentions of things like Ben Solo and Jacen's training, and gives me just a little bit more time to establish the peaceful lull between the two halves of this story. I really have to dive into the meat from now on, so next chapter we'll be right back to discussing the overall mission and laying out a clearer plan of how this story is going to pan out.

As I said before, there's no regular timetable for when the next update will come. I might have one for you next week, I might not have it until March time, I really can't promise anything. Sit tight, watch this space, and I'll keep at it slowly but surely.

Next time: Ahsoka, Luke, and Ezra decide on their course of action, the reinforcements arrive at Thrawn's excavation site, the plan is laid out to the others, and a new discovery is made.

P.S - I make a few Kalluzeb jokes throughout this chapter and the story as a whole, but I'm not personally a fan of the ship. I know some people are so I'm not going to shut it down completely, I'll just leave people to interpret things how they please.
Chapter 22 - Decisions

Chapter Notes

Back again with another chapter. I've managed to find some time in the day to write a bit and I'm finding myself looking forward to any chance I get to work on this story again. I can't promise a massive increase in how often I publish, but work is of course still chugging along on this story.

Before we start, I want to drop a mention to WestwardGlance. I've mentioned him plenty of times before and pretty much everyone will know him from around here already. He's recently started publishing his own original sci-fi series called After Moses over on Wattpad. As anyone who has read his stuff will know, he's a gifted writer and I encourage everyone to check out his stuff. If you do, you'll be able to say "I knew him first" before he inevitably hits the big time in a few years...

Anyway, back to our story. This time: the Imperial reinforcements arrive, Luke, Ahsoka and Ezra decide what they must do, a new breakthrough is made, and Ahsoka and Rex talk about the future.

The sight of two new Star Destroyers and two light frigates was not the source of joy that Pellaeon had long imagined it would be. For years he'd thought of what it'd be like to see other people again, though he'd hoped that they'd be going home to do that. The reality was that they were still stuck out here, and Pellaeon didn't find himself particularly thrilled to meet them as he and Faro marched a few paces behind Thrawn towards the assembly area.

"Brighten up, Captain. At least they're not shooting at us", Commodore Faro joked beside him.

Pellaeon huffed a laugh. "A few months of being stuck here and they might just want to."

He cast a careful look at Thrawn a few paces ahead of them. Pellaeon couldn't tell if the Chiss could hear them, but to be honest he and Faro didn't make much effort to hide their grim humour from him anymore. The Grand Admiral met it with the same aloof indifference that he did everything, but the old Captain had a sneaking suspicion Thrawn sometimes enjoyed his subordinate's banter.

They reached the assembly area just as the incoming shuttle started to appear several clicks to the south, the glistening silver craft easily spotted across the plain, bleak landscape. A number of their troops were formed up in parade to greet the new arrivals, a formality they hadn't had to use for many years. To his surprise, the Fourth Sister was already waiting at the assembly area, her back toward the three of them. On her right was Captain Sarlis, who snapped to attention when she heard them approach.

"Not like you to delay, Grand Admiral", the Inquisitor said coldly as the Chiss fell in beside her.

"There is no delay. Standing idle in this heat serves nothing, I would not waste my time doing it",...
Thrawn responded.

Pellaeon saw her fingers tighten behind her back but the force user held her tongue. They stood in a long, uncomfortable silence as the Sentinel-Class shuttle came closer and came to a hover above the landing area. It descended, sending up a small cloud of dust from the ground as the landing gear made contact. After several seconds, the ramp opened and three uniformed figures appeared from the hold, trailed by the expected contingent of guards.

The first of the new arrivals was hardly an inspiring sight - a pale-skinned middle-aged man with unkempt red hair. That'd be Brendol Hux, Pellaeon reasoned, based on the limited description Thrawn had given beforehand. To Hux's left was an older officer, a General by the rank-slide, with greying brown hair and the solemn composure only ever seen in disciplined soldiers. Maximilian Veers, Pellaeon told himself, a name he'd heard even before he'd left the known galaxy. The younger man on the right then had to be Canady, the youngest of the Imperial leaders Rae Sloane had sent them.

"Grand Admiral Thrawn", Hux said as he approached, blatantly ignoring standard protocol when meeting a superior officer, "It's good to meet you."

"Commandant Hux", Thrawn acknowledged him and the two others behind him, "General Veers, Captain Canady."

The two other officers came to attention just behind Hux, both silent and content to let Hux talk for them for now.

"Allow me to introduce Captain Pellaeon of the Myrmidon", Thrawn said and motioned to him, "And Captain Sarlis of the Imperator." Thrawn then glanced over his shoulder, "As well as Commodore Faro of my Chimaera."

There was barely a moment to say anything before the Fourth Sister stepped slightly forward. "And I'm the Inquisitor."

"Inquisitor?", Hux stepped back half a pace, "I didn't know there were any of you left."

She stepped forward again, clearly interjecting herself between the two groups of Imperials. "I welcome your support, the sooner we achieve our mission the better."

A sloppy display, Pellaeon muttered to himself. The Fourth Sister had her gifts but subtlety wasn't one of them. The obvious display of enthusiasm seemed to take the new arrivals by surprise, unsure exactly how to react to her.

The Grand Admiral instead took control and raised a hand dismissively. "The Fourth Sister was assigned for a different mission although her failure has left her under my command. However, we do welcome the assistance."

"I see...", even Hux appeared to sense the friction between the two of them.

"With all due respect, sir, just what are we here for?"

The unexpectedly direct question had come from the young Captain Canady. Few officers would have the courage to ask so blunt a question to a commanding officer, especially one they weren't familiar with.

Commandant Hux stammered for a second, "Y-yes, what are we here for?"
"Forgive me, I'd assumed Grand Admiral Sloane would have filled you in. Come." Thrawn turned around and began to walk towards the dig site.

Pellaeon and Faro let Thrawn and the others pass, with the Inquisitor giving Faro a sideways glare as she did. He and the Commodore shared a look before falling behind them. The Grand Admiral led them away from the landing area and towards the edge of the hill overlooking the plain below.

"We've been engaged in an excavation for several months", Thrawn explained as they walked, "Our supplies are limited and our equipment ill-suited for the task. Your aid will provide the tools and personnel we need to finish the final stages."

"Excavation?", Canady repeated, "What in the galaxy are you excavating?"

Before an answer could be given, they reached the top of the hill overlooking the dig site. For as far as they could see, the rocky expanse was littered with various small dig sites that they'd tried over the last few months. The underground rock in most of the sites had been too difficult for their limited tools to work with, so they'd had to constantly retry new sites. Oddly, the layers above this structure were unusually inconsistent, and moving a few metres either way would give you a completely different type of material to work with. Pellaeon didn't want to think about why that was the case, he had enough unanswered questions without thinking about the geology.

"It remains to be seen", Thrawn answered at last.

"You don't know you're even looking for?", Hux scoffed.

"Must be important for you have to spend so many men, munitions, and months here", General Veers added drily.

The Chiss continued to look out at the view. "Not knowing what we're looking for makes it all the more important."

He cut-off mid-sentence and Pellaeon saw the man snap his attention to their current dig site. Pellaeon looked too as a deep rumble sounded beneath their feet. A few towering plumes of dust shot out from the shaft and the small specks of stormtroopers and workers started to rush about around it. Thankfully, the rumbling stopped after a moment.

"What's going on down there?!", Hux's voice was already starting to grate a little bit on Pellaeon's nerves.

Thrawn's commlink was already in his hand. "Overseer, report."

A brief silence was interrupted by static and then the sound of coughing.

"Grand Admiral...", the woman erupted into another fit of coughing, "Some sort of collapse down there. We're trying to raise the excavation team now."

A mining accident, wonderful. It was their luck that their first accident would happen the moment more allies arrived. It wasn't doing much to build any confidence.

"Of course, Overseer. I'll notify rescue squads immediately."

Faro was already speaking quietly into her comm before Thrawn had even given her the order.

The Overseer's voice came through a few seconds later. "Scratch that, Grand Admiral, sounds like
they're alright. Wait...

The connection paused for a moment. "Overseer?"

A few more seconds of silence came before the voice returned.

"Sorry, sir, it's the excavation team. They're saying you need to come right away. They've found something."

"It's nice. I like it", Ahsoka said as she brushed a hand over one of the old Imperial helmets that were scattered around the tower. "You and Sabine have really made a home here."

Ezra looked around with a satisfied smile, "She did most of it, I just provided some of the extra bits and pieces."

Sabine's redesign had gone a long way to making this place liveable. A wider living area, a private bedroom, a room for Jacen to stay in when he felt like being with 'Auntie Bean and Uncle Ezra.' She'd put up a few of her paintings on the walls, a few of the environment, some blue flowers, even a loth-cat - although not one of him he enjoyed teasing her about so much. Ezra's mark was mostly in the helmets. His old scout trooper helmet, the TIE pilot helmet Zeb had given him, and a few other choice picks.

Maybe they'd have done more with this place if they could, Sabine and Ezra had been far too busy this last year. The rest of the Spectre Compound had taken a lot of time. Sabine's job with the militia also kept her busy some days, while both of them took part in some official function or job for Ryder from time to time. Ezra's big time sink though was Jacen. It was an important and potentially dangerous time for him. He was only just starting to connect with his powers and taking his first steps into a larger world. He was still too young to fully understand his power but he was also too young to control his emotions. Jacen required constant guidance and attention that Ezra couldn't give if he was busy with interior decorating. Or on the outskirts of the galaxy.

It was only then that Ezra noticed Ahsoka had stopped and was looking in his direction. Kanan did the same thing when something was on Ezra's mind, only their connection was close enough for Kanan to almost read him like a book when that happened. That particular connection had led to plenty of deep, and plenty of embarrassing, conversations over the years. Ahsoka wasn't close enough to figure that much out, he knew that, but there was no hiding his troubles completely from her.

On cue, Luke cleared his throat as he tore his attention away from the helmet collection. "So, should we get started?"

Ezra motioned them both to a table stood against the wall, the three of them pulling up a chair to get comfortable.

After a brief silence, Luke got to the point, "So to summarise: we know almost nothing more than we did before?"

Ezra sighed, "Pretty much, there's no references to anything like what we're looking for. Not in the observatories, not in the records. Nothing."

"Maybe that's a good thing", Luke reasoned, "Maybe that there's no records means that what's out there isn't too dangerous."

"Or it was so dangerous that it had to be erased", Ahsoka said. She brought a hand to her chin, "It
wouldn't be the first time the Jedi have written something out of history. Just look at Malachor."

That wasn't a name Ezra ever liked hearing, but Ahsoka raised a good point. Details about what Malachor was were sparse to the Jedi, Kanan knew very little about it but knew enough not to want to tell Ezra any of it until the last possible moment.

"At least for Malachor the Jedi acknowledged it existed. For this there's nothing, not even a forbidden legend or old story." Ezra leaned forward, "Maybe the Jedi didn't even know what happened out there. Maybe it's something new."

"If it's something new then this is even more important", the Togruta said clearly, "The galaxy doesn't know what's out there and it falls to us to stop it."


Ahsoka's searching eyes were staring into his, "Ezra?"

She knows.

Breathing in deeply, any doubts washed away and were replaced with conviction.

"I can't go with you."

Luke's gaze snapped to him, while Ahsoka's attention barely shifted.

"What do you mean?", the other man looked bemused.

"Jacen isn't ready, not by a long shot, and leaving him now could be dangerous. Besides, the galaxy doesn't know what's out there. Someone needs to be here to spread the word and, more importantly, prepare them if worst comes to worst."

Luke squinted at him, "And by prepare you mean Jacen."

"I can't leave him", his admission was as honest as he could give, "I can't do that to him."

"Ezra, I don't think you can-"

"No." Ahsoka cut Luke off. "No, Ezra's right. It makes no sense for all of us to go."

Ezra let out a mental sigh of relief. Part of him feared they couldn't let him stay and that they'd need him to go out there again. He would have, of course, but deep down this was where he needed to be. It wasn't to stay on Lothal, it wasn't to be with Sabine, it wasn't even to be with Jacen for the sake of who he was - this was for something far bigger.

"We don't know what we're up against", Luke countered.

"Which makes it all the more important that we don't throw everything at it blindly. Not only can Ezra serve as insurance if we fail, he can set up a... let's call it a long-term solution to these sorts of problems."

'Long-term solution.' She doesn't mean... does she?

Ezra's lips parted slightly, "Are you saying...?"

"We don't know how long this is going to take", she continued, "Or if we're likely to come back. Even in the best case scenario where we deal with what's out there, the three of us plus Jacen and
Ben when he comes of age isn't going to be enough. We need—"

"A new generation of Jedi", Ezra finished it for her. "I'll do it", he nodded without a shred of hesitation.

* A new generation, he repeated to himself. A new generation for a new galaxy. A new generation to be trained... by him.

He wasn't quite sure what he was feeling right now. Relief? He was going to be staying for Jacen after all. Guilt? Part of him felt it for not going with Luke and Ahsoka back out there. Anxiety? Definitely. But most of all, he was honoured.

"You are the most qualified", Ahsoka continued, "I'm no Jedi and Luke, as talented as you are, you don't have the same experience as Ezra."

Luke nodded his head, "She's right. You've been training Jacen this past year already. No one in this galaxy is a better choice than you."

"Going from one to... I don't know how many students is going to be a change", he chuckled. "Speaking of which, how I am going to get this all going? I can't exactly put up recruitment posters."

Ahsoka leaned forward, "I can help there. Remember those force sensitive children we came across several years ago? They're somewhere safe, and I've sent a few more that way over the years too. They'll be more than ready for some teaching by now."

Of course Ezra remembered. He, Kanan, and Zeb spent a few hours running through an Ithorian city being chased by Inquisitors. Ezra had kept the baby, a small Ithorian named Pipey, safe while Kanan and Zeb drew away the attention. It'd all been for nought though and the Inquisitors caught up with them just before they got to their ship. Zeb was thrown aside, and Kanan was already worn out and was knocked out pretty quick. Ezra had been... less adept back then and the Seventh Sister had no trouble getting him out of the way. They might have died there if Ahsoka hadn't shown up. She didn't even break a sweat holding them off and letting them all got to safety, children and all.

The Jedi smiled at the old memories. "Feels like a lifetime ago."

"If I remember right, you weren't half bad with the children. You're more cut out for this than you think."
"The Togruta's humoured smile grew slightly, "You know, I hear Sabine is good with kids too..."

He rolled his eyes, "Alright, let's not get ahead of ourselves."

They got enough of those jokes from Hera and Zeb, he didn't need her joining in too. She knew about them, of course. Everyone on Lothal, maybe everyone in the Rebellion, knew about the Jedi-Mandalorian power couple by now.

"That just leaves us", Luke said to Ahsoka.

"Which leaves us", she repeated.

Luke brought his hands together and leaned in. "So what's our plan? Stumble out in the dark until we run into something?"

Ahsoka shrugged amusedly, "Not far off. We'll follow the same route Sabine and I took before. If things work out like last time, we'll find our way. There's quite a few places I never got the chance
to look at properly. We'll start there."

The 'places' Ahsoka meant were ones Ezra knew well enough. One would be the desert world he was drawn to right after escaping the Inquisitor the first time. A dusty, arid, dead world. It'd been destroyed ages ago, almost certainly by what they were chasing now. It was also the site of the doorway to the World Between Worlds - or it had been until he'd shown up - as well as the place he'd been knighthed by Master Yoda.

As for the other, it would have to be the planet he was rescued from. Dead, like the other one, but littered with corpses, old lightsabers, a smashed orb, and abandoned ruins. If anywhere might give some direction to help them figure out what was going on, it'd be down there somewhere.

"I have some ideas that might help as a last resort", he said, but Ezra didn't know what he was referring to. "And we're going alone?", the question seemed to be one to which he knew the answer already.

"Alone", her voice was quieter now, "We can't risk bring anyone else. Not Leia, not Rex."

"Not even Artoo?"

Ahsoka smiled slightly, "As much as I love him, not even Artoo. My shuttle's stealth drive won't hide his signature."

The other Jedi leaned back again and adjusted his right hand. "Well, I hope I'm not bad company."

"If I can deal with your father, I can manage with you", she replied.

Ezra watched Luke for a reaction but found none. It seemed both of them were at least getting comfortable talking about him again. He didn't want to bring it up himself though, it wasn't his place, but it'd be good for the two of them not to have it looming over them for this whole mission.

He let them work out some of the practicalities themselves. Ezra almost zoned out for a while as he got lost in his thoughts. Apparently his time at home wasn't going to be cut short after all. That certainly solved the Jacen problem at least. A Jedi needed attention and focus from their Master, Ezra knew that better than anyone, and he wasn't going to let Jacen down.

Not just Jacen though. Training one Jedi wasn't going to be enough. Taking on a whole new generation of students, on the other hand, might at least be a step in the right direction. It was definitely a daunting task, not one to be taken lightly, but none of them had the luxury of easy choices right now. It'd get easier with time, just as it had with Jacen, and whatever happened he was going to do it right. Still, it might be time to force Sabine into giving those lightsaber lessons, he'd need the help. Hopefully, Ahsoka and Luke would be back before long to help out too. If they weren't... all the more reason to get this right.

This new Jedi Order was entering a different galaxy and it'd have to change too. Kanan had his own problems with the old Jedi Code, Ezra did too, and it remained to be seen how well the old rules would blend with new realities and perspectives.

But those concerns were for another time. Ezra's focus returned to the room as Ahsoka stood up from the table.

"Let's not keep the others waiting."

Luke copied the Togruta and got to his feet. "The rest of them will want to know that you're having a few guests."
"More than guests", Ezra smiled.

"I'm sure you'll all take it in stride", Ahsoka assured him.

He shrugged humoredly, "It's not like I'm giving them much choice."

The thought amused Ezra as they headed back down from the tower. He'd be in a bind if Hera said 'no', or if Sabine wasn't having it. Not that they ever would, they'd probably be more enthusiastic than him. Still, hope for the best and plan for the worst. Whatever obstacles they might face, they'd try and overcome them together.

He paused, and rolled his eyes at the basic rookie error. *Lesson number one: do or do not, there is no try.*

The turbo lift down into the excavation shaft could only take three at a time. Thrawn had obviously gone first, the Inquisitor barged on too, and Hux seemed to expect primacy as well. Faro had slipped onto the second load, with Veers and Canady in tow. She almost felt bad for leaving Pellaeon up there with Sarlis, though from the look of him he wasn't that eager to head down. With what they were going to see, she could hardly blame him.

Whatever the excavation team had found down there must have been important for them to urge Thrawn's presence. That probably meant it was going to open up a whole new box of problems for them.

General Veers turned to Faro abruptly as the turbo-lift platform started to descend slowly, "Just what are you up to out here?"

"I'm not sure even we know", Faro sighed.

"Your Grand Admiral is awfully tight-lipped about it", Canady added sharply.

The Commodore paused and chose her words carefully. "He says what he knows and what he needs to. I trust the man with my life. If he says something's important, it is."

"We'll see, Commodore."

With the blunt reply, the turbo lift came to a half at the bottom of the shaft. They weren't far down, maybe twenty metres at most, but the silence and the darkness were uncomfortably strong. Horrible thoughts of being trapped down here filled her mind, and she was glad none of the excavation teams had been lost in whatever had just happened. Directly in front of them, a small tunnel was lit by a few trail markers. Despite their hardened attitudes, both of the men were more than happy to let her lead the way.

Only a few metres down, the tunnel opened suddenly into an open cavern. A sharp but manageable slope extended downwards another thirty metres or so, and a large pile of rubble was spread out across the chamber floor. *That explain the crash.* On the opposite side of the cavern, she saw exactly what they'd come here for. A lone stone podium and, behind it, a large black door set into the cavern's side. Thrawn and the others were already there, the excavation team filling them in on what had happened.

Faro went carefully down the slope and covered the distance to the podium. It was almost featureless as far as she could tell in this dim light, save for the metal symbol sticking out from the top. It had no meaning to Faro, just a triangle with an opening at the top and a small line sticking up from the bottom.
"The wall just fell through, sir. That's when we saw this", the team leader explained. Faro stepped past the podium and stood beside Thrawn. He and Hux were listening to the solder, while the Inquisitor was taking a closer look at the door itself.

Even up close, Faro couldn't make out anything on the door. It was maybe ten metres wide, four metres tall, without any patterns, symbols, or writing to speak of - not even a clear indication of how it opened.

The soldier shrugged, "I don't know what to tell you, Grand Admiral."

"Thank you, Sergeant, you and your team have made the breakthrough we've all been waiting for."

Thrawn turned his gaze on the Inquisitor, who was silently running a hand along the door as she walked. "Inquisitor, anything to report?"

She was silent for a few moments before dropping her hand and looking back, "It's a door. Nothing else as far as I can tell."

"And what's on the other side?", Veers spoke the obvious question.

Hux adjusted himself and cleared his throat, "Well, uh, let's find out. General, get an explosives team down here at once."

Thrawn raised his hand, "No, Commandant. We can risk damaging this discovery."

"It's a bloody door", Canady muttered, "It's meant to be opened."

"Explosives risk damaging the contents within. Patience and caution are what we need here", he replied calmly.

Thrawn took a few paces forward to the door and inspected it for himself. He cast a discerning eye over every corner, running his fingers along the surface to feel any pattern or abnormality that might give him a clue. From the looks of it, he found nothing.

"I agree with the Commandant", the Fourth Sister interrupted Thrawn's quiet musings. "Blow it through and be done with it."

"I'd have thought you'd have learned your lesson about over-eagerness, Inquisitor", Thrawn countered, "We cannot risk volatile action on such a sensitive mission."

The sound of Pellaeon and Sarlis' footsteps behind her took Faro's attention.

"Another mysterious structure. How original", Pellaeon grumbled quietly to her. "What have I missed."

"Wall fell through and the team found this", Faro explained, keeping her voice too low for the others to hear, "Hux and Canady want to blow the thing through. Thrawn, understandably, doesn't."

She heard her friend sigh heavily, "This day just keeps getting better and better."

Again, the young Captain Canady was eager for answers. "Forgive me, Grand Admiral, but what can't we risk damaging?"

The Chiss straightened up and clasped his hands behind his back. "The Emperor believed something important was to be found in the Unknown Regions. Before his death, he assigned us to
find whatever he had sensed. I believe what he sensed is behind this door."

"Sensed", Hux scoffed, "I didn't take the Emperor for a mystic."

Canady folded his arms, "I never bought that religious nonsense."

"The power of the force is no trick, Captain", the Inquisitor said back, "It is more powerful than you can ever hope to know."

The ominous answer made them back down.

In a rare moment of agreement, Thrawn nodded, "The Inquisitor is right. I have seen the powers of the force first-hand. It is not to be dismissed or underestimated, which is why it is important we take every precaution necessary not to make a mistake."

All this talk of the force still rubbed Faro the wrong way. She didn't doubt it was true, she'd seen plenty to prove it was, but she hated that so much of this mission was tied up in 'feelings' and 'senses.' Although she'd been convinced over the years, it was easy to forget that most people in the galaxy only saw the force and the Jedi as stories an illusions. Their new allies were going to be in for a rude awakening.

"You seem to have arrived at an opportune time", Thrawn said as he turned back to the door momentarily. "Our equipment is too imprecise and ill-fitted for such sensitive work."

General Veers took a step towards Thrawn, "I've got specialised laser cutters and scanning equipment. They're intended for wreckage recovery but they should fit our purpose, more than what you've got anyway."

"Excellent, General. Let's get started right away. We'll also notify all of our excavation teams to converge here. I want this whole area cleared from here up to the surface. Faro, Pellaeon, make it happen."

=They both heard him loud and clear. "Yes, sir."

Thrawn led the way from the chamber and Veers followed him. Faro nodded for Pellaeon to go ahead, she'd take the next turbo-lift up. Hux, Canady, and Sarlis were still inspecting the door and the podium, with the Inquisitor brooding off to the side. She didn't know what they were looking for, and she didn't think they knew either.

As the other three disappeared back the way they came, Faro couldn't help but be fascinated by their discovery. It was rare that Faro found herself so mesmerised by architecture but the door has a strange allure to it. Maybe all of this time with Thrawn was rubbing off on her, or maybe she was just that bored out here. She kept silent as she took stock of the situation, apparently silent enough for her remaining companions to almost forget about her.

"Bah, I still say blast it open and be done with it", Canady huffed.

Captain Sarlis shifted uncomfortably. "Welcome to the Grand Admiral. He's got his own way of doing things."

The young officer cocked an eyebrow, "You don't approve?"

Sarlis half-jumped back, "I- I mean- It can be... frustrating, yes."

"Come now, Captain", the Inquisitor's voice was smooth and slick, "We both have our own
concerns about the Chiss."

Faro gritted her teeth. She'd heard plenty of the Inquisitor's complaints, but venting them to new arrivals was firmly out of line. The Commodore stepped a few paces towards them, crunching her boots on the hard rock just a bit louder than usual.

"Careful, Inquisitor, you all have your orders", she said firmly.

Her interruption caught the newcomers and Sarlis by surprise, while the Inquisitor turned her head nonchalantly to look at her. Faro felt the other woman's eyes scanning her and became acutely aware of herself - clenched fists, hard glare, feet apart. Anger and projection of authority. She was used to the Inquisitor's attitude by now, even Sarlis' rarely-spoken dissatisfaction had become routine, but letting it out in front of new, unproven allies wasn't just improper, it was dangerous.

To her surprise, it was Captain Sarlis that replied to her. "Commodore", the other women emphasised her inferior rank, "You're speaking to superior officers. Outbursts like that are unacceptable."

Technically that was true, everyone there held a rank was above her. Still, rank didn't denote experience, or common sense.

"I speak with the Grand Admiral's authority, Captain. You have your orders", her gaze went to the Inquisitor, "I suggest you follow them."

For a few tense seconds, the Inquisitor's yellow eyes bore into her. She'd told herself that she'd stopped fearing the Fourth Sister, but she was more than a little relieved when the Inquisitor bowed her head insincerely.

"As he commands."

She stood staring for another moment, making sure not to cast her harsh glare on the newcomers quite yet. Without another word, Faro turned on her heel and marched back to the entrance.

Insubordination was always a threat on protracted missions, but Faro hadn't found herself so acutely aware of it as she did now. Had Sarlis, the incompetent political appointee, really become so frustrated in her place here? How many others felt the same as her?

An uncomfortable thought crossed her mind. How lost in their mission had her, Pellaeon, and Thrawn been? It was easy to forget that almost everyone else here was fumbling in the dark, without the faintest clue about what they were searching for or what Thrawn wanted to do about it. Sarlis has just been dragged along for the ride, and now perhaps she was starting to have enough of being kept in the dark. As for the new blood, maybe knowing nothing about what they were actually up to was the better choice. Still, she couldn't imagine how convoluted and wasteful this mission must seem to them.

Shaking the thoughts out of her head, Commodore Faro picked up the pace. All the while, she could still feel their eyes burning into the back of her head.

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The rest of them took the plan about as Ahsoka had expected.

Jacen, who'd not known about any of what was going on beforehand, was ecstatic at the thought of getting some new Jedi to learn with. Zeb and Kallus were an amusing mix of overly excited and absolutely terrified, probably the most appropriate reaction of all of them. Hera was quiet but supportive. There was a lot for her to unpack with the announcement, and Ahsoka was sure Hera
would share her thoughts with Ezra more privately. The pride from the Twi'lek was still
unmistakable though.

Sabine was the mix of emotions Ahsoka had anticipated. She would have insisted on going along
on their mission if Ezra was and the Mandalorian almost looked disappointed that she wasn't going
out there again. Ahsoka shared a bit of it, she'd appreciated her company the last time after all.
Either way, there was no hiding the fact that Sabine was more than happy to have Ezra stay on
Lothal. They had a home here and a duty, and now that duty was more important than it had ever
been.

The downside of every reaction going as expected was that Rex had reacted exactly how she'd
thought he would. It wasn't surprise, Rex knew full well that this wasn't going to be a mission for
him, yet hearing the words out loud probably plucked something in her old friend. He didn't let it
show to the others but Ahsoka could feel in him.

She'd let the news settle for a while before slipping out of the building into the Spectre
Compound's courtyard. It was peaceful here, no doubts about that, and part of her envied the
settled life. Ahsoka hadn't had a place to settle down since her Temple days, if you could even call
that settled. She was glad Ezra, Sabine, Jacen, and the others all got to have that privilege.

It was still mid-afternoon and Ahsoka took a brief moment to appreciate the quiet plains in the
distance. The grass blowing in the breeze, the soft clouds in the sky, the even softer loth-cats
rolling around in the cool afternoon sun. It was a rare moment of peace in her life. At least until she
felt the movement behind her.

Rex was beside her a few seconds later, sharing in the view.

"It's much more peaceful than Coruscant", Ahsoka began, "I'm sure Ezra's students will appreciate
the privacy."

The Clone didn't say anything.

She swallowed hard. "I'm sorry, Rex. We can't risk it."

"If you think I'm staying here again, you've got another thing coming."

His stubbornness made her smile, even if it didn't change her mind. "I can't let you come. Not for
this."

Rex raised his hands and started counting by his fingers, "Separatists, Imperials, Umbarans, bounty
hunters, Krell, Grievous, Ventress, Thrawn - I've fought every one."

"This is something else."

Ahsoka knew what he was trying to say. Rex was one of the most accomplished soldiers in the
galaxy, maybe even the most, but this wasn't his battle. She'd seen the legacy of what they were
facing now: ancient ruins, dead worlds, hundreds of long-dead Jedi. Rex was good, quite possibly
the best, but he couldn't fight this.

As stubborn as he was, her old friend had at least learned she was even more so. There was another
drawn out sigh as Rex realised she wouldn't budge. He was quiet for a while, mulling it over
probably. It wasn't long before he broke the silence with a stifled chuckle.

"You know", he started, "If I'm just too old for this mission, you could have just said."
Ahsoka smiled and raised an eyebrow, "Old? You know you're younger than me, right?"

"Technically, but your bones don't creak like mine do." Rex rolled his shoulder and cracked his neck for effect.

She shook her head, "I'd still put my money on you against just about anyone else in a fight."

"Eh, it's a smaller galaxy these days." He paused slightly and his voice lowered just a bit, "Most of the good fighters have dropped out of it by now."

There was sadness there. They'd both lost plenty of friends over the years, only a handful were still around today. Granted, a lot of them were here on this planet right now, but the days of the camaraderie of the 501st were long over. In many ways, they were both relics of an older era. They'd lasted through both of their great wars, with hundreds of battles to their name. For Ahsoka at least, there was still one more to go.

"Just look after yourself, and Luke too."

She couldn't help but smirk, "That almost sounds like an order."

"Oh, no. You outrank me, remember?", he grinned but it soon faded. "But I mean it."

"Luke will be fine", she promised.

Rex finally turned from the horizon and looked at her. "I know he will, he couldn't be in safer hands, but I'm worried about you too."

She only briefly met his eyes and brushed him off. "You should know better than to worry about me. I've lasted this long."

"Ahsoka", his hand came to her shoulder and gently pulled her to look at him, "Promise me you'll be alright."

The Togruta met her friend's familiar brown eyes. Reaching a reassuring hand up to his arm, she smiled sincerely. "We'll sort this out. I promise."

He searched her for a few moments, not moving his arm or saying a word. Rex trusted her, she knew that, but he'd still worry about her all the same. Ahsoka worried about him too. Friends just did that.

Accepting that there was nothing more she could promise him, Rex's hand fell away and he turned back to the view.

"It's been a long road, hasn't it?"

"That it has." Ahsoka's lips curled into a small smile, "But there's still some of it left to go."

They stood in silence once more, the two friends sharing a rare moment of serenity and peace in two long and chaotic lives. It was beautiful, calm, and quiet - save for the gentle cooing of the convor watching over her from the rooftop.

Chapter End Notes
We open with the arrival of a new trio of Imperial characters, all of which you should be familiar with. Brendol Hux features heavily in the Aftermath trilogy alongside Grand Admiral Sloane, and is the father of the First Order's Armitage Hux. Captain Canady is the First Order officer in charge of the dreadnought in the opening of Episode VIII. Lastly there's General Veers. He's the one who leads the assault on Hoth in Episode V and appears several times in the film. I wanted to use some familiar imperial characters that were active at this time, or at least had the potential to be. Using Brendol Hux and Canady lets me tie a little bit of Sequel Trilogy stuff into this story which I haven't really done much of so far, and Veers is one of the most famous OT Imperials whose fate is unknown. We also get a spectrum of personalities for Thrawn and the others to deal with. Each one has a different perspective that I think the imperial storyline needed. Thrawn, Faro, and Pellaeon kind of blend together at times with their opinions, so adding more dissenting voices to the mix helps keep things interesting, and of course there's plenty of plot-related reasons that'll become clear over time. Also, ship names, since you know I love them: Solicitude is the canon name of Canady's Imperial Star Destroyer, while Cunctator is Latin for 'the delayer.' Don't look for much meaning in the last one (Hux is nowhere near as awesome as Fabius Maximus) I just liked the sound of the name.

I'm sure most people expected Ezra to head off with Luke and Ahsoka into the Unknown Regions. There's a few reason why I didn't do that, most of which will emerge as the story goes on. I've given some explanation in this chapter with the pretty realistic idea that they need a back-up plan if Luke and Ahsoka's goes south. There's other reasons and motives behind it too, but they'll emerge as the story goes.

The breakthrough in the excavation is a relatively simple section to cover. Faro has stood up to the Fourth Sister once or twice before, so that's not new. I will admit that I've only referenced the tension between Sarlis and Faro once or twice, mainly in Chapter 20. Sarlis does outrank Faro, but the Commodore is clearly more competent and the favourite of Thrawn. Sarlis resents it a bit, but she has known better than to openly cross Thrawn or even Pellaeon during their time together.

Lastly, we have Ahsoka and Rex. I originally planned to have this whole section just be them telling everyone else the plan and having this as something separate later. I decided that repeating everything back to the others just wasn't interesting and I could accomplish it with a few paragraphs and spend the words more effectively. Ahsoka is heading off again and Rex is left behind, same as happened after Malachor and with the search for Ezra. I've said before, I adore both of these characters and I rarely get a chance to use them, so getting some one on one time with them was an opportunity I wasn't going to let pass. Their conversation is fairly self-explanatory, and I'm sure I don't need to explain several of the more obvious references during it.

Next time: Ahsoka and Luke leave, Thrawn starts to tie up loose ends, the Fourth Sister seeks further guidance, and Ezra ties something of his own.

P.S - I'm retconning something very minor from Chapter 19. In Chapter 19, the structure is 100 metres below the surface. I changed it to ~50 metres instead. Sorry about that, just something small that I thought I'd mention.
Ahsoka appeared at the top of the door to her T-6 shuttle, staff and travel supplies safely set aside in her cabin. They were all set to go. Rex, Ezra, Sabine, and the rest were crowded around the shuttle to wish them both farewell. The weather was nice enough to give them a warm, dry sendoff. Lothal really was a beautiful planet, and the more time she spent on it the more she understood why Ezra loved it as much as he did.

She stepped down the steps and watched Luke as he tried to say a nice goodbye to Artoo.

"Take the ship back to Leia", Luke told his little friend.

The astromech beeped indignantly and stomped his struts.

"For the hundredth time, R2, no. You can't come with us. I'm sorry, buddy."

Luke patted the droid's dome as he stood up straight, not letting Artoo get in another beep of protest.

Ahsoka went over to give her own goodbye to him. "He'll be back before you know it, little guy", she knelt down, "You know that Leia will look after you."

There was another sad, drawn out beep from him.

"I know. I'll miss you too." She let her hand linger on top of him, her fingers running over the familiar metallic plating. "Take care of yourself, Artooie."

Another chorus of beeps was her answer. *Of course he knows how to look after himself.*

Before she got trapped any further in nostalgia, Ahsoka was back on her feet. "You ready to go?", she looked over her shoulder to Luke.

He nodded. "I'm good", Luke rubbed the strap of the bag around his shoulder to drive home the point.

"All set then." Ezra folded his arms and smiled warmly, approaching the two of them with Sabine
Ezra had changed so much since she'd first met him. He's grown taller, obviously, cut his hair back and filled out from years of combat experience. The long hair and thick beard he'd had when they'd found him had gone - Sabine's insistence no doubt - but he'd still kept it a bit longer than she remembered it being in the World Between Worlds. The Mandalorian was, as might be expected, never to be found outside her armour, but Ahsoka noticed she didn't bother with gloves in downtime anymore, nor her helmet. She wanted to be seen now, and her hands had places to be other than on a trigger or a detonator. Sabine had grown her hair out a bit too this past year, now back to the sort of length she'd had back in Ahsoka's Fulcrum days. It was hard to believe that was almost ten years ago now. Time was moving too quickly these days.

"I believe we are", Ahsoka confirmed with a sideways glance back at her ship. "And you? Ready for your next big adventure?"

"Ha", he chuckled, "Doesn't matter if I am or not."

Ahsoka reached her hand down to her belt and opened a small pocket. "Well, allow me to give you something to help out", she said and extended her hand to him, a small holodisc held safely in it.

Ezra took it tentatively, "Uh, thank you?" He inspected it for a moment, "What is it?"

"A lot of things", she smiled to herself, "I had some files and other data I’ve gathered over the years. Jedi texts, lesson recordings, records from the Temple, even some of my own training notes. It’s not exactly a complete collection, but it’s a better basis to start from than nothing."

His mouth curled into a smile, "I... thank you. I don't know what to say." Ezra put the disc safely into a pouch on his hip but paused before closing it. "How did you throw this together so quickly?"

_You're not half as unpredictable as you think you are, Ezra Bridger._ Ahsoka just shrugged, "I've had it for a few years. Guess I just got lucky knowing to bring it along this time."

"Well I'm grateful. Any help I can get is welcome", Ezra gave Sabine a not-so-subtle nudge.

"He's right", Ahsoka turned her head to the Mandalorian, "You're more than capable of handling a lightsaber yourself."

Sabine rolled her eyes and scoffed halfheartedly, "I'm not getting in to this again, you two." The young woman sighed and looked at her, "Part of me feels strange not going with you this time."

"Let's just hope you never have to go out there again in the first place."

Sabine extended her arms and pulled Ahsoka in for an embrace. Ahsoka returned the gesture to her friend, during which a glimpse of Ezra reminded her of something.

"Oh, and Sabine", Ahsoka said as they pulled apart, "About that thing you promised me. If I'm not back in time, don't worry about it."

The Mandalorian looked quizzically at her for a moment. Ahsoka could almost sense it click in her as she remembered their conversation on the shuttle over a year ago, mere days into their journey to go and find Ezra.

Sabine grinned almost shyly, "When it comes there'll be pictures, I promise. Just get yourselves back safe."
"You kidding? They'll be fine", Rex's voice interrupted from behind Sabine's shoulder, "I feel sorry for whatever's out there. A Skywalker and a Tano make for quite the team."

"Let's hope that's still true", Ahsoka replied.

"Bah", Rex grumbled. "I trust you two."

Luke reached out to give Rex a firm handshake, "I appreciate the vote of confidence."

"A well-earned vote", Rex chuckled. Before releasing his grip, the Clone leaned in to the Jedi, "Look after yourself, Skywalker."

"I'll try my best." Luke nodded back to Ahsoka, "Even if I don't, she'll be there."

Rex gave her a half-smile, "I know she will."

Luke stepped back slightly, as did Ezra and Sabine to give her and Rex some space. Rex reflexively reached his hand behind his head, "So... this is goodbye again."

"We have too many of these, don't we?"

Her old friend forced a smile through, "Let's make this the last one we have to do."

Ahsoka brought her arms up and pulled him into a long hug. She could feel the tension in him clear as day. She didn't know how many times they'd been forced to part ways for one reason or another by now. Four? Five? Every time, he never worried less, and neither did she. At least this time she could promise him some security.

When they let go, she met his familiar brown eyes. "You'll see me again, I promise."

There was a flash of concern, and then acceptance. He trusted her word completely, she knew that.

"You two'd better get going", Rex told them. "Sooner you go the sooner you can both be back home."

"We'll sort this out no matter how long it takes", Luke assured him as he started to climb into the shuttle.

Ahsoka set a boot on the bottom step and looked back to them all. Ezra would find a way to see this through, and Sabine would be right there with him. Jacen, wide-eyed and hiding behind his mother's legs, would grow to understand why things were happening the way they were. As for Hera, Zeb, and the others, they'd pull together and help Ezra and his fledgling Jedi Order with whatever they needed.

Then she took one last moment for her two oldest friends. Artoo was quiet, an unusual event for the little droid, but maybe he just understood what was happening. Ahsoka knew he'd be fine without her or Luke, he'd survived in his galaxy longer than many of the most powerful people she'd known after all. Then, of course, there was Rex. She didn't really need anymore words to assure herself that he'd be alright. But, it seemed, he had a few to make sure she was.

Ahsoka knew what he was going to say before he said it. "May the force be with you. Both of you."

"May the force be with you", Ezra repeated straight after.
"And with all of you."

The Togruta didn't let herself look back too much as she reached the shuttle door. With only a brief glance back, she retracted the stairs and closed the door. Inside the ship, Luke had already thrown his bag down in the spare cabin and was leaning eagerly in the doorway to the cockpit.

"Well, what are we waiting for?", he said enthusiastically.

She breathed a laugh as she walked past him towards the controls. *His father's son indeed.*

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Pellaeon sat and watched as Thrawn's red eyes scanned left to right on another field report from the chief excavator. Beside him, Faro's fingers were absently tapping on her thigh, the Commodore sharing his sense of frustration and unease.

Finally, the Grand Admiral took his eyes away from the datapad and handed it across the desk to Pellaeon.

"Getting through this door isn't quite the easy task we presumed it would be", Thrawn announced.

Pellaeon took the datapad in his hands and skimmed the brief report quickly. The material the door was made of didn't match any of their records. Not steel, not diamond, not even cortosis. Veers' equipment was just barely starting to make a scratch on it, and even the Inquisitor's lightsaber didn't seem to have an effect. Still, they'd have been in a bind with the old tools they had, so at least progress was possible.

He handed it off to Faro with a sigh. "Alright, not quite the jump forward we were hoping for, but at least it's progress."

"We have waited almost six years. We can wait a few more weeks to deal with this discovery."

"An awfully convenient discovery", Pellaeon added.

Faro huffed and set the datapad down on the desk. "I'm with Pellaeon. This was too well timed."

"I'm inclined to agree." Thrawn leaned forward on his elbows and brought his hands together.

"What are you thinking? Fourth Sister?", Faro asked.

"Doubtful", Thrawn replied, shaking his head. "She seemed as surprised as us when the collapse occurred and when we found the door and podium. Besides, if she had possessed some foreknowledge, she'd have exploited it to give herself some sense of credibility in-front of our new guests."

"Can I tell you the truth, Grand Admiral?", Faro asked tentatively.

Thrawn nodded, "Always."

"I don't think we should have brought in the new blood. This late, this deep into our mission - it's dangerous. They haven't seen what we've seen, they don't know what we know, they don't know what the stakes are."

The Captain ran his tongue around his mouth, mostly to keep himself from airing the same concerns. Hux was a fool, and of no practical use for their mission. He was half convinced that Sloane pawned the man off to Thrawn simply to get him out of her hair. Canady was sharp, true, but had the wrong sort of temperament for a slow mission like this. Veers was capable and...
experienced, but the man was a battlefield commander not an overseer or administrator. Pellaeon didn't see much chance of a battle to put his talents to use any time soon.

The Grand Admiral took in a long drawn out breath through his nose. "They are a necessary evil. Our new discovery, convenient as it may be, demonstrates our need for them. We lacked the men, resources, and equipment for this task. Without them, we'd only have stalled out and achieved nothing."

"A few laser cutters and some extra pairs of hands might not be worth all of this trouble", Faro leaned back in her chair, still not completely satisfied.

Thrawn's eyes darted to the small terminal embedded in his desk beside him. "There are additional benefits to our new arrivals."

Frighteningly on cue, the comm on Thrawn's terminal blared into life. "Grand Admiral, she's waiting outside."

Pellaeon exchanged a confused look with Faro, but as usual she knew about as much as he did.

"Excellent, Sergeant. Send her in." The Chiss got to his feet and started to walk to the side of the desk, "As I said, there are additional advantages as a result of our new allies. With the Fourth Sister distracted and with so many extra hands, we can attend to a few loose ends I've been meaning to tie up."

Before Pellaeon could press him for more of an explanation, the door to Thrawn's office swished open and a familiar figure walked in. Fair skin, short blonde hair, average height, and suited up in her black Imperial officer's uniform.

"Reporting for duty, Grand Admiral", the woman then nodded to Pellaeon and Faro, "Captain, Commodore."

"Commander Hammerly", Faro answered, but the hint of surprise was clear in her voice.

The Commander was the *Chimaera's* Sensor Officer and one of the most efficient and vocal of Thrawn's bridge officers. Pellaeon couldn't speak of much personal interaction with her, but he knew her work well enough. As Sensor Officer, Hammerly had played a crucial role in their expedition in the last few years, and she'd become one of Thrawn's most trusted officers.

Hammerly stopped just before Thrawn's desk in the gap between where he and Faro were seated.

"As I was saying", Thrawn continued as he walked around his office and looked over some of his trinkets, "We have some loose ends to tie up. Commander Hammerly here has an important part to play."

The poor woman's eyes widened and Pellaeon heard the hard swallow. "I-I do, sir?"

"Yes. You recall our attempts to catch Ezra Bridger a year ago, do you not?"

Hammerly threw her blue eye around the wall in front of her, maybe searching for some trick in the question. "I.. uh, of course, sir. We found him at Site One but the Inquisitor let him escape. Then we picked up the trail at Site Two but again he escaped and our ground teams didn't report what they found down there. Then we learned that Bridger's allies were out here before heading to Site Three. That's where we...", Hammerly looked at Faro for assurance, "... Where we lost Bridger."

Pellaeon looked back over to Thrawn, who was now inspecting that old piece of Lothalian wall
covered in Sabine Wren's artwork. He wasn't yet sure what this repetition exercise was for, no one in this fleet was going to forget the only excitement they'd had over this years long mission.

"A fair summary. Site One was a rather unremarkable jungle world, while Site Three was catalogued extensively by the three of you and the rest of our fleet."

"And Site Two is our loose end", Pellaeon said, pointing out the obvious.

Site Two was the planet that had really drilled into the rest of the fleet how serious their mission was. Pellaeon had already known, mostly from how seriously Thrawn had been treating it all those years, but Pellaeon remembered the tension on the *Myrmidon*’s bridge when they first arrived above that planet. Their mission changed that day. It went from a wild bantha chase with no point to a relentless pursuit of an elusive, and very real threat.

The Chiss turned back to the three of them and began making his way back to his desk, "Precisely. How Ezra Bridger escaped on that Site Two is a mystery. As is what was down there, since our teams could tell us nothing. Furthermore, the Inquisitor's demeanour changed noticeably after her encounter on the planet."

"I assume that's what I'm here for then, sir", Hammerly observed.

Thrawn slid back into his seat and brought his hands up again, steeping his fingers. "Indeed, Commander. Answers to this mystery still elude this, but might yet be found on that twisted, dead world. Visiting that planet for ourselves, we might yet find some answers as to what happened down there, and what prevented the Inquisitor from delivering Ezra Bridger to us."

Pellaeon caught on to his wording. Thrawn still wasn't openly admitting to the rest of the crew that he'd wanted Ezra Bridger to escape their grasp. Understandable, to be sure, but soon enough this facade was going to have to drop.

"Commander Hammerly", he continued, "I'm sending you and a small contingent of men to Site Two. You're to give us as full an assessment as you can of the location - imaging, scans, mineral tests, and the like, all as you see fit - and tie up this loose end for us. Furthermore, I want you to leave sensors nearby. I want to know if the Fourth Sister or anyone else sets foot there in the future."

Her lips parted in surprise, "I'm to command this mission personally, sir?"

"Yes", Thrawn replied. "My absence, or that of Captain Pellaeon or Commodore Faro, would we too conspicuous for our purposes."

Hammerly seemed to loosen up before looking around at the two other officers in the room. "You mean the Inquisitor, don't you? You don't want her to know."

A silence descended on the room. Being so wrapped up in Thrawn's plans, Pellaeon sometimes forgot that most of the rest of the crew knew very little about Thrawn's true intentions, or of the Fourth Sister's. Her insurrection and abrasive relationship with Thrawn were well known, as was her apparent failure to catch Bridger, but not much else.

"You've known her for years and seen her behaviour first hand. I hope you can understand that our ability to trust her has been... beyond compromised." Thrawn watched her for any reaction. Another silence hung in the air for a few tense seconds. "I understand your loyalty to Imperial protocol. If you're uncomfortable."

"No", she interrupted instinctively before realising the breach of etiquette, "I mean, forgive me,
Grand Admiral."

Thrawn waved it off with his hand, "None needed. Please, continue."

Hammerly cleared her throat and loosened her stance. "May I speak freely, sir?"

The Chiss only nodded in response.

"Kriff Imperial protocol."

Pellaeon raised an eyebrow at the crass language, but his smile betrayed his amusement. Hammerly's lip twitched as she absorbed the tension that must have come with speaking so freely in front of superior officers. Thrawn gave nothing away, as usual, while Faro looked somewhere between shocked and amused. Seeing no response from anyone else, Hammerly continued.

"I've got family back home, friends too. I haven't seen them in six years. I've more than done my duty for the Empire. I don't care what that spiteful mystic has to say about any of this, she failed her mission and she's been a constant source of problems for ours. But whatever this is, whatever we're dealing with out here, I'll do my part to help you fight it. It's not about the Empire, it's not about rank or protocol. We've all seen what happened to those planets. If something that dangerous is out here, I owe it to myself, my family, and everyone else to do my part. You've done right by us, sir, all three of you have. You've been the only leadership and direction we've had out here for years. I know I speak for the Chimaera's crew, probably the Myrmidon's too, when I say I'm behind you. One hundred percent."

*There it is.* Pellaeon looked at Thrawn and saw something he'd so rarely seen these last few years. A small smile, but it's there.

"I'll take that as a 'yes' to accepting this mission, Commander?", Thrawn's thin smile was still clear.

Hammerly cast a careful look around before she too smiled, "Aye, sir. I won't let you down."

"I have every faith that you won't Commander." Thrawn reached for the datapad still lying on the desk. "I'm forwarding some more details to you, for reference's sake. I'll only add that you leave no further trace of your presence, beyond the sensors already mentioned."

"We'll do it right, Grand Admiral."

"Lieutenant Xoxtin has been ordered to prepare my civilian shuttle for your use. A small squad has also been assembled with the necessary equipment and supplies for your mission. You'll leave in five hours, Commander."

"I'll be ready in two, sir."

Thrawn put the pad down again and rose from his site. "Now, I have several other loose ends to attend to. Commodore, ensure Commander Hammerly's absence aboard the Chimaera will go as unnoticed as possible."

Faro stood up and nodded. "The bridge crew will keep their lips sealed, no worries there."

"Very well. Dismissed." Thrawn nodded courteously, their cue to leave.

With a formal salute, Hammerly turned and left the office. Faro left with her, and started to speak quietly into the Commander's ear. Offering some congratulations or advice to her colleague, no doubt.
Pellaeon, on the other hand, stopped a few paces from his chair and waited for the two other officers to leave the room.

"Something more, Captain?", Thrawn asked.

"You didn't explain about Bridger."

"There will be a time to explain everything to the rest of our fleet, but now is not it."

Pellaeon turned back towards Thrawn's desk and came a few metres closer. "You've always said you expect Bridger and Skywalker to come back out here. I'm guessing that's what the sensors Hammerly is going to place are for."

He nodded, "Of course. Our answers are their answers too. It is only reasonable that Bridger will return to a place he knows is of value to him. At the very least, it will be along a familiar path for him when he does return."

Pellaeon had worked that much out already. He liked to think he was getting a knack for Thrawn's way of thinking, but honestly it wasn't too hard to put that one together.

Thrawn looked him up and down, "Why do you ask?"

The Captain looked down for a moment and at the spot where Hammerly had been standing. "The Commander's little outburst got me thinking. For all our worries about the Inquisitor and Hux and all that, I almost forgot how many friends we still have left in this galaxy."

He huffed a laugh, "We might actually pull this off."

"We have more allies than you know, Captain, and many more advantages."

Again, the awfully convenient timing of Thrawn's personal terminal interrupted them.

Pellaeon took it as his cue to leave. "I'll be on the Myrmidon if you need me."

Thrawn gave him a polite nod, "Dismissed, Captain."

He didn't wait to hear what new piece of information Thrawn was receiving. Pellaeon left the office and went through the small corridor, his eyes catching those unnerving training droids as he passed. The motion-sensing door opened up before him, and Pellaeon nodded slightly to the familiar door Sergeant.

As he left, Pellaeon heard the sound of boots down the other side of the corridor. Sure enough, the Chief Engineer was making his way towards Thrawn's office and handed his code cylinder to the stormtrooper.

*Loose ends, hmm?* Pellaeon thought to himself. He tried to think for a moment about what this particular loose end might be. The Captain barely gave it a second of thought before sighing to himself and not bothering. *Maybe I haven't got Thrawn figured out yet after all.*

"Awaken, apprentice."

"AH!"

The Fourth Sister rolled out of her bunk and landed on the hard floor of her small hut, heart racing and sweat covering her body. In an instant, her lightsaber was back in her hand as she scrambled to her feet.
“Ease yourself, my apprentice.”

Her breath hitched in her throat. "M-master?"

"I sense movement."

She stood mouth agape for several seconds. In all her time here, her Master had never reached out to her. It had always been her reaching out to him. It could only mean he was growing stronger. It was happening faster than she'd expected... and faster than she'd noticed.

Realising she was still poised for an ambush, she put her saber back onto the tabletop and sat on the edge of her bunk.

"Yes... movement", she fumbled. "The new reinforcements have arrived."

"I am aware of their arrival. Tell me about them."

"They've all got their traits. Hux is a snivelling fool, Veers is an old fossil, and Canady's a young hothead."

His deep voice rumbled in a drawn out breath. "And what of the Chiss?"

The ghost of a smile came to her lips. "Our new arrivals don't see eye-to-eye with Thrawn or his lackeys. He knows more than he's willing to tell them."

"Where there are cracks, there is opportunity. All it takes to pry them apart is a sharp tool."

"They don't want to be here", she continued, "I can see that clearly enough. They want to go back to whatever Sloane was doing with her fleet."

The Fourth Sister knew little about the other Imperial forces in the galaxy. Thrawn had shared as little as he could with her, but every little bit of knowledge was something. She'd told her Master everything she knew, keeping him appraised of every detail so he could better guide her hand.

"They are loyal to their Imperial ideal, not to the Chiss. They want their mission to be over sooner rather than later. To achieve our aims, we will need to use both of these to our advantage."

"Just tell me how, Master."

"You are the heir to Lord Vader, my apprentice. The future of any Empire, of our Empire, is tied to you. Offer them the idea that they crave and they will flock from Thrawn and his allies to our banner."

She understood what she had to do. Show them that the future of the Empire lay with her, not Thrawn; show them that the answer to this mystery lay with her, not Thrawn. When she had Hux, Veers, Canady, Sarlis too, and all of their resources on side, Thrawn and his disciples would be no match for them.

"I can feel your resolve."

His interruption broke her thoughts. "Yes, Master. I know what to do."

"Good. I had hoped the discovery would allow for... clarity."

Discovery? The Inquisitor narrowed her eyes at the ground. "Discovery? It... it was you?"
He laughed to himself. "Did you think it was by chance that the way forward came as our new allies arrived? My young apprentice, things are in hand."

She swallowed hard. "You didn't tell me?"

"Had the Chiss noticed your lack of surprise he'd have been suspicious."

She leaned forward resting her elbows on her knees. If he was able to influence things up here, to cave in walls, to guide people to him, then her Master was far stronger than she'd thought. How quickly was his power growing? How soon would he finally be able to break free? Apparently not before she convinced the other Imperials to ally with them, he wouldn't have set her on that task if he could escape before it was completed.

But still, he hadn't told her. He knew things she hadn't told him, and was now doing things he didn't tell her. They were meant to be allies. They were meant to cast Thrawn aside. They were meant to rule-

"You're troubled."

"No." She replied instinctively, "I- I'm just considering our mission. We're so close."

"Hmm, that we are. The end of this journey is coming soon, my apprentice. Get to work, and soon you shall have your reward."

The familiar feeling of the connection breaking flared up, but hit less harshly that it did before. Each time, the strain of breaking communication was becoming gentler. Her Master grew stronger, and soon it'd be time to release him from his prison.

She pushed herself to her feet, knowing she wouldn't be sleeping for the rest of the night. There were cracks in the Imperial line, and she was the only tool that was sharp enough to split them open.

"Where are we going?", Sabine shouted over the noise of the speeder and the wind rushing past them.

"I told you", Ezra replied from in front of her, "You'll find out."

Giving in to his stubbornness, she tightened her arms around him and took the time to enjoy the view. Usually, she'd be driving and he'd be the one clinging on to the back, but Ezra had been adamant that he take the controls. Reluctantly, she obliged, since she saw how eager he was. Whatever he had planned, he was excited for it. Ezra had brought a bag of things with him, and from the smell and the noise all afternoon she'd guessed it was edible. Sabine felt compelled to bring a small bag of her own, just in case.

Lothal had always had beautiful sunsets, but tonight's was something else. The few clouds were cast in a vibrant orange that reflected out onto the plains. The deep blue of the sky above them was just about starting to show a few stars. How many times had she'd painted these sunsets? Dozens? Not that it mattered how many times she did them. Each new breathtaking vista wriggled it's way into her heart and then onto her canvas. Tomorrow, this one was going to follow that pattern for sure.

Sabine barely noticed the time pass as they went. It couldn't have been more than another few minutes before Ezra reached a rising hill. Their speed dropped as they reached the crest and Sabine knew why Ezra had picked the place.
On one side, the hill rolled down into a sandy beach beside the glistening blue sea. Down the coast the tips of the towers of Capital City were barely visible, its light too far and too dim to spoil the stargazing they'd inevitably be here for. She couldn't see their tower from here either, not any other familiar landmarks. It was just the two of them.

Sabine unwrapped her arms from him and jumped off the bike. She let Ezra handle the stuff he'd brought with him while she gazed around at the view. A few seconds later, she heard the flap of cloth and him clearing his throat.

"M'lady", he feigned a fancy core accent.

Turning around, he'd laid out a blanket on the ground, with an open bag beside it of food and drink.

"A sunset picnic? Do I need to point out how cliche that is?", she teased.

Ezra grinned, "Hey, people do it for a reason."

She rolled her eyes happily and walked to him, pecked him on the cheek, and pulled him to sit down with her.

"If you told me ten years ago that I'd be happily sitting down with you for a romantic picnic, I'd have slapped you."

Her Jedi laughed as he started to pull out some food. "If you'd told me I'd have slapped myself", he stopped rummaging in the bag for a moment, "Still have to slap myself to make sure I'm not dreaming sometimes."

"Ugh", she playfully nudged him. Sabine had her soft spots, but she also had her limits. "I love you too though", she added, always careful not to be too dismissive of his gestures. Ezra was a hopeless romantic, always had been, and it had admittedly won her over in the end.

Sabine let him get away with a number of cheesy and over the top gestures for the next hour or so. After all, he'd earned it. As they watched the sunset over the water, Ezra proved that he'd been hiding a pretty good talent in the kitchen, or at least a very good cookbook. Loth-prawns, loth-soup, loth-chicken... loth-everything this ridiculous, wonderful planet could name.

The Jedi had also got his hands on a lovely bottle of Corellian ale. It was softer than the stuff she was used to, but it tasted so much better. She didn't let herself drink too much, even in peacetime Sabine didn't want to be caught off guard in an emergency. Still, with Ezra there, she let her hair down a little. By the time they were done with the food, she was draping her head on his shoulder and staring up at the stars, a half-empty glass clutched in her hands.

Before long, the loth-cats came. Sabine thought it was noticeable when she was here alone. One of the little critters would always catch up to her whenever she was anywhere on this planet. Ezra, however, was another matter. Whole families of them must know when he was within a three mile radius and come running for him - it was the only explanation for why so many always came. They tossed them what little food they didn't eat and let the animals settle around them.

A while later, they were lying on their backs, staring up at the night sky, their fingers laced together and bodies close. The one loth-cat she could see in the light from the small lamp besides them was curled up against Ezra's side, purring lazily as Ezra brushed a hand down its back.

"It's so peaceful here", Ezra mumbled quietly.

"I see Captain Obvious has joined us", she teased.
"Very funny."

He pushed himself up onto his elbows, hesitated, and then took his hand away from hers.

She sat up at the sudden movement, sensing the anxiety in him. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing", he placed a calming hand on her shoulder.

Sabine enclosed it with her own, "You're on edge."

He pulled his hand away quickly, "I'm just thinking. It might be a while before we get a chance to be alone again."

Alone? She narrowed her eyes at him. "Uhh, out here? We have a perfectly good tower to-

Realisation dawned on his face. "No no no! Wait, that's not what I meant", he corrected. "I... ugh. I meant that we'll be too busy to just sit and be ourselves for a while."

Sabine smirked and shook her head. Too easy to mess with. Still, Ezra's unusual anxiety was still pouring off him. He sat up fully and stared off at the city lights in the distance, looking back at her for a few seconds before turning away again.

"You remember when I first came home and you got annoyed with me for always trying to say how much I appreciated what you did?", he asked.

Realising this was going to be something serious, she scooted a bit closer and watched attentively, "I wasn't annoyed with you, you just didn't need to say it. You did more for me than I ever did for you."

There was a barely audible scoff, "That's not true, we both know it."

"Hey", she scowled insincerely, "You should know by now that I'm always right."

His eyes came to hers and a smile came to his lips, "You're a lot of things." Once again, she felt his hand on hers. "Brave, strong, caring, smart", he could see her getting a bit awkward with all the praise, "Stubborn, if you want to be. But always perfect."

Few things made her smile like he could, and this was another one of those times where she just couldn't help it. Was he being over the top? Sure. Cheesy? Always. But she knew he meant every word. Especially the stubborn part.

She planted a kiss on his cheek for good measure. "I love you too. As dense as you can be sometimes, I wouldn't change you. You're never angry or difficult, you're kind and calm and caring. I don't know how you do it. You never ask for anything for it, you just do it."

Ezra squeezed her hand gently before letting go, "I guess it's past time I do ask for something then", he said and turned off to his side. She heard the zip of a bag opening, "Just one thing to tie up before we get roped in to this galaxy again."

The calm in his voice was an odd contrast to the nerves she could sense from him. He appeared to be taking something from the bag but she couldn't see what. For what felt like minutes, but was probably seconds, Ezra hesitated. She was going to say something before he turned, something small clutched in his hand. He opened his hands to show it to her and her heart skipped.

"You know what it is?", Ezra asked.
She did. Held in his hand was a chakadi root, a plant native to Lothal. Ezra must have picked it up a few months ago. Since then, he'd carved and shaped it into a shape that meant something to him - a starbird. Their starbird. Sure, it was her design, but it had taken on a life of its own. Now, it was as much Ezra's, Hera's, or Zeb's, as it was her's. It represented every happy memory, every hard one, every fight, every victory, every loss, every face they'd met along the way. But that was only one thing this represented.

On Lothal, the exchanging of chakadi roots was a marriage proposal.

"Sabine?", Ezra asked again, "Do you-"

"I know what it is...", Sabine took the root in her hand and ran her bare fingers over it. She couldn't see much in the low lamp light but she saw enough to know Ezra had poured his heart into it. It wasn't the most intricate thing, maybe a little rough around the edges, but she couldn't think of anything more appropriate. A simple starbird, with a carved beak, tail, and two wings with some carefully etched patterns in them.

Ezra was watching her intently, too nervous to say anything. Her lips started to move but no sound came out. Instead, her attention flicked bag to the bag she'd felt compelled to bring. Without a word, she reached out her other hand and opened it, found the carefully concealed compartment, and wrapped her fingers around the familiar smooth object she'd put there - her own carved chakadi root. She pulled it out and carefully passed it to Ezra.

He took it into his shaking hands without a word. Sabine watched for the reaction as he inspected it in the dim flickering light. She'd put countless hours of thought and care into it. Sabine had certainly had the time since she'd picked one up during her long stay on Lothal during the war. It had taken months for her to decide what she wanted it to be and many more months to make that vision a reality. Ultimately, she'd settled for something that had meaning for both of them.

It was her own reinterpretation of the old Jedi symbol. The lightsaber in the centre, but now surrounded with the double-tipped wings of her starbird. A simple blending of Ezra's old Jedi ideas with her own artistic flair.

"Where... when did you make this?", he almost whispered.

"When you were gone. Guess I had a hunch I might need it some day", she laughed quietly.

She saw him gently brush his fingers over the intricate design, feeling every curve and crevice. His lips moved every now and again but no words came out. It wasn't the first time she'd left him speechless, but this was the one that meant the most to her. It took him a while to tear his eyes away from the chakadi and lock them with hers.

His voice was still quiet when it came, "I'll take this as a yes?"

"Ask me nicely", she said teasingly.

Ezra shuffled up onto his knees and took her free hand with one of his own, the other still clutching the chakadi tightly. "Sabine Wren, will you marry me?"

"Yes", for once she didn't want to mess with him or make him work for it, "Of course I will."

She enveloped him in a hug and drew him in for a deep kiss before he had a chance to react. Sabine kept him in place for a few minutes, something he didn't complain about at all. When they finally pulled apart, breathless and content, they still kept their hands locked together.
"How did you know?", Ezra whispered to her.

"We live in the same tower and I can read you like a book", she shrugged, "But mostly it was just a hunch."

He laughed, "Part of me wished it would be a bigger surprise."

Sabine looked back down at the chakadi in her hand. "It doesn't make it any less special", she told him.

"How are we going to do this anyway? I mean, you know, ceremony, family, all that stuff."

She'd be lying if she said she hadn't thought about it. "Something small. Hera, Jacen, Zeb, Rex, Kallus, my family, a few other people from here or there too." Sabine bit her lip, "But, since we're going to be on Lothal anyway, maybe we could do the ceremony on Krownest. It would mean a lot to my family."

Mandalorians celebrated on only two occasions: victories and weddings. Sabine had only seen a true Mandalorian celebration once after the business with the Duchess and Bo Katan, and she'd been too worn out to truly enjoy it. This time, she wanted to do it properly.

Ezra brought a hand up to brush her cheek tenderly, "Krownest it is. As long as your mother doesn't pull a gun on me again, it'll be perfect."

"You'd better present yourself as good husband material then", she mocked insincerely.

The next half an hour or so was almost completely silent. They needed no words to communicate with each other after all. Instead, they put the chakadi roots safely away, curled up together on the blanket, and took to stargazing again. Sabine was reminded of their evenings sat in the Ghost's turrets all those years ago. She'd never had guessed they'd end up like this; at least not at the start. Sixteen year old her would have slapped anyone who even suggested something like this might happen. Of course, things changed, people change. By the time of the events on Mandalore though, she had her suspicions it might go this way. Turns out those suspicions took a bit longer than planned to become a reality. Still, it was worth the wait.

"So...", Ezra started, "This Jedi business is going to be a lot to deal with."

Sabine lifted her head from his chest, "Wait, this isn't going to be a problem is it?"

"I... no", Ezra shook his head. "I mean, not really", he tried brushing it off.

It wasn't the most convincing answer. "Not really?"

He sighed, "I love you, and I'm marrying you, that's not changing. Anything else will work around that."

Sabine didn't know how Ezra planned on navigating that problem. The Jedi Code was clear about how it viewed attachments. Even so, it hadn't phased Kanan and it didn't stop him. They'd just have to adapt.

Satisfied with his answer for now, she settled back down.

"That wasn't what I was going to ask anyway", he continued. "Since I'll have a lot of students, I might struggle to handle everything by myself."
"I know where this is going", Sabine said, "I know what you're asking me to do."

"Please? I'll need the help."

Ezra had been asking her for months with Jacen. She'd helped a bit, sure, but she always felt that it was just better for Ezra to handle it. Teaching however many students Ezra was asking for, though, was another ballgame entirely. Unfortunately, they didn't really have the luxury of choice right now. She'd support him any way she could. Even if that meant training Jedi.

She sighed, "Do you know how angry my ancestors would be if they knew I was training Jedi?"

Ezra shrugged, "A lot less angry than they'd be if they knew you were marrying one."

He was right, what she'd done for and with a Jedi was far beyond what her ancestors would have approved of. As someone wise once said, 'my ancestors would spit on me but screw them, they're dead.'

"Alright alright, I promise I'll help you out."

"Lightsaber lessons?", Ezra asked excitedly.

"I'll try."

Ezra huffed through his nose. "Okay, first lesson: do or do-"

"If you say what I know you're going to say, this engagement is off."

He chuckled at the meaningless threat and kissed his fiance's forehead, "I love you too, cyar'ika."

Chapter End Notes

A lot to talk about here so let's not waste time. The first section is the simplest as it's just some farewells. The 'thing' Ahsoka mentions in the wedding invite she teases Sabine about in Chapter 5, a well-timed reference given what happens later in this chapter. I agonised a lot about how to do the goodbyes in this section. I had originally planned to have Leia, Han, and some others all here but that was just excessive. It was also important to get some actual Jedi teaching material into Ezra's hands, and it made sense that Ahsoka would be the one to do that. The Thrawn section features a larger role for one of the Chimaera's existing crew: Commander Hammerly. Hammerly has appeared a few times in passing, and I needed someone to be the 'face' of the mission to Site Two in the coming chapters. I need to mention one oversight and minor retcon - I mistakenly referred to her as a he in the first half. I'm sticking with the actual canonical gender for the remainder of the story, especially since Hammerly's appearances are so minor in the first half. Again, I'm sorry about the error. As for the Inquisitor's section, the main point is that the Voice is growing more powerful. This section also helped to better clarify the Fourth Sister's goals. I don't think it's much of a surprise that they're going to try and turn the new arrivals against Thrawn, so I felt there was no point in trying to make any sort of mystery about it.

Lastly, we have the Ezra and Sabine section. The idea of the chakadi root isn't my
own, but from WestwardGlance's excellent Family History. I honestly don't need to plug his fics any more (although you should all go and check out After Moses over on his website, just google the title), but that's where the idea is from. This section felt like writing my old Ezrabine stories again as its whole point is just them and their romantic relationship. While I'm a huge fan of the ship, I'm very aware that not everyone is, and not everyone reads for the fluffy stuff. I'll only say that Ezra and Sabine's relationship does have an important point in this story, and is essential to the story, its characters, and to the wider things I set out to do in this story in the first place. For that end, I hope people can forgive a bit of cheesy romance every now and again.

We'll be taking a little time skip forward a few weeks to cover travel distances and all that for the next chapter. So, next time: Hammerly returns to Site Two, the Fourth Sister talks about the Empire with Hux and Sarlis, Luke and Ahsoka talk about the Jedi, and we celebrate a Jedi-Mandalorian wedding.
Chapter 24 - Traditions and Commitments

Chapter Notes

In honour of #RebelsRemembered, here's the next chapter a bit earlier than expected. There's something appropriate about it just happening to be the one with the Ezrabine wedding... So, happy 1 year finale anniversary!

I'm doing the wedding a bit differently, I'll forewarn you. Mandalorians don't have big ceremonies so there's a very small opening part, and then a larger section for some post-ceremony celebration.

This time: Hammerly returns to Site Two, the Fourth Sister talks about the Empire with Hux and Sarlis, Luke and Ahsoka talk about the Jedi, and we celebrate a Jedi-Mandalorian wedding.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The last few weeks had been a blur for Sabine.

Mandalorians didn't do expensive ceremonies or flashy displays. Most Mandalorian weddings were the exchange of vows, a few drinks, and back to work by the afternoon. A Countess' daughter mandated something a bit bigger, but even then it was a lot less intense than even an average core world couple would have. None of that bothered her though. The fanciest food and the prettiest clothes had nothing on good company.

Hera was overjoyed when Sabine asked her to be her bridal hand. It was about the only traditional role a Mandalorian wedding had outside of a bride and groom. The original intent of the position was as Mandalorian as it could be. The bride hand was something of a witness to a union, but was more so the one chosen to hold onto the weapons in case of an ambush mid-ceremony. Sabine has assured Hera that the last part was unnecessary, and that she should just treat it like a normal bridesmaid.

That meant Hera was her main source of advice for all things wedding related. Sabine made it clear - abundantly clear - that Mandalorians didn't wear dresses. Like for everything, they wore their armour. Usually that applied to bride and groom since marriages between Mandalorians and outsiders were rare. When they did happen though, no one really cared what the other wore. Hera had taken the advice in stride. 'Minimal is maximal', she'd repeated over and over, her way of saying that the best ideas were often the simplest ones.

Sabine agreed and settled on her usual choice - a new paintjob. A dark purple remained as the base colour of her breastplate and leg armour. She'd lined the outside of her knee plates and shoulder pads with a thin gold strip. On her left pauldron, she'd chosen a pure white convor as a memento for Ahsoka, and a little symbol of good luck for her out in the Unknown Regions. On her right, she'd redone her Phoenix-Jedi symbol hybrid in her favourite fiery orange. A sapphire blue streak went down from the centre of her breastplate across to the left, leaving just enough space in the top left for her traditional Phoenix squadron starbird symbol. Even her jetpack's wings had a do over, all to complete the effect. Lastly, for her helmet, she kept the wren on the faceplate with its bright blue
eyes, only adding to it two small wolf-like ears inspired by the ones she'd done for Kanan's mask.

There was a little something for everything. Purple for her, her favourite colour. A convor for Ahsoka, wolf ears for Kanan, a starbird for Hera and the rebels, the wren for her family, the blue streaks and eyes for Ezra, and the Phoenix-Jedi symbol for the two of them.

Before she even knew it, she was there in the main hall of her family's stronghold on Krownest, the ring being slid onto her finger.

Ezra had, to her relief, chosen something slightly different to his usual attire. It was the same basic orange outfit, but obviously cleaner and more presentable. He'd touched up the leg armour and added some pauldrons of his own. Sabine thought that maybe he was playing into the whole armour thing to impress her family, and she had to say that it did look good on him.

Her mother smiled down at her from her throne, watching from her traditional place as conductor of the small ceremony. The Countess of Clan Wren had been well aware of her and Ezra's relationship since he'd come home, and her family held him in high regard for his actions over the years. The pride was clear on her face as her mother told them to recite their vows.

"Mhi solus tome, mhi solus dar'tome, mhi me'dinui an, mhi ba'juri verde", they said in unison, "We are one together, we are one apart, we share all, we shall raise warriors."

"Sabine Wren-Bridger, Ezra Wren-Bridger, I pronounce you husband and wife."

A chorus of applause and cheering erupted from their moderately sized crowd as they sealed their union with a long, gentle kiss. After pulling apart, she stared deeply into his eyes and let the world around them melt away. In that moment, she felt that every problem in the galaxy couldn't touch them.

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**Site Two.** Hammerly adjusted her suddenly tight collar as they drew close to the familiar planet in the freighter. The shattered orange surface hadn't become any more welcoming since they were here last, and this time she actually had to put boots on the ground.

"Do we still have the coordinates?", Hammerly asked the pilot.

She nodded, "Aye, ma'am. There's a large central basin with several canyons leading off it. We'll head as close to the centre as we can."

The previous squad of troopers sent after the Fourth Sister had set down deep in one of the surrounding canyons. Hammerly didn't know why anyone didn't just head straight for the basin's centre. Pretty much all they knew about this world was that what really mattered was found somewhere at that basin's centre.

Hammerly left the cockpit to address her team in the hold. "Everyone ready, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, ma'am. Your sensor teams are all prepared and my troopers are ready to assist."

"Alright, listen in", she still wasn't used to commanding soldiers, "We're here for two things. First, there's something down here that the Grand Admiral wants to know about. We almost had it last time but our lovely Inquisitor decided to pull one of her hissy fits again."

Poking fun at the Fourth Sister was guaranteed to score you some points in their fleet. For the crews of the *Chimaera* and the *Myrmidon*, she was almost universally despised. Arrogant, hateful, shortsighted, incompetent - about the only positive thing most would say about her was that she
tended to keep her mouth shut around most people.

"We're taking images, scans, readings, and just about anything to figure out what happened down there. Sergeant Layley", she nodded to the man on the far side of the hold, "you are your team will set up our sensor perimeter to let us know about uninvited guests."

The Lieutenant beside her raised his hand, "What about my stormtroopers, Commander?"

"Apart from manual labour?", she earned an unenthusiastic chuckle from a few of the troopers, "No, in all seriousness, we have some fallen brothers and sisters nearby. The navpoint will be on your map so take some grav-platforms and bring them home."

"Honoured, Commander", the Lieutenant nodded and went to prepare his troops.

The landing was a smooth one. As soon as the ship settled, Hammerly was on her feet and heading to the door. With a hiss, it opened and she stepped out into the blaring sun.

They were in almost the centre of the basin, the ramp facing outwards towards one of the several canyons that led out of it. The afternoon sun was intense and the glaring orange reflection from the ground was already straining her eyes.

Her Lieutenant passed her with his squad in tow as they headed off to the canyon in the distance. A half dozen grav-platforms hovered behind them for the bodies of the fallen soldiers slain by Bridger's allies over a year ago.

"Layley?", she turned back over her shoulder to get her Sergeant.

"Yes, Commander. All set", he replied.

Layley was one of several scanning officers in the fleet, and one of the few good friends Hammerly had. He was roughly the same age as her, barely into his mid-thirties, and shared the same gloomy sense of the galaxy as her.

Behind him, five other technicians were carrying some boxes of perimeter sensors and other equipment. Hammerly went around the ship and began heading towards the centre of the basin. A large, unassuming rocky structure was in the centre a hundreds metres or so from them. Looks could be deceiving though, and she knew it was what they were here for.

"How many credits says that's what we've come for?", Layley joked beside her.

"None. I haven't got any credits left to bet with."

She led them up to the structure and started to look around it. There must have been a cave or an opening somewhere, why else would this be what they came for? On the far side of the structure, she found it.

"I have something", she called to her squad.

A small circular doorway was cut into the rock and led inside to a dark corridor. Carved into the rock leading up to the opening were a few steps that Hammerly climbed carefully. Her laid back attitude was replaced with caution, maybe fear, and the hair on the back of her neck stood up.

Swallowing back the fear, she focused back on the task at hand.

_Not a trace_, Thrawn had told her. Hammerly looked for some crevices in the rocky structure or for areas of loose rubble. The senors they had were powerful enough to penetrate a metre of so of rock,
so all they had to do was hide them from view from anyone who might come by.

"You two", she pointed to two of her team, "Start laying out our perimeter sensors, as even a spacing as you can. Remember: leave no sign that we were here."

Hammerly took out her handheld scanner and motioned the others to follow her. The doorway was smooth and obviously made by someone's hand. Were they still here? She reached a hand back and grabbed her blaster pistol, just in case.

They crept single file into the structure using what little light seeped in to guide their steps. A few metres in, the corridor opened into a small chamber with several corridors leading off it. The light had all but disappeared and they were soon fumbling in the dark.

"Ugh, lights up", she ordered and fumbled for her own light with the datapad still in her hand. Her squadmates lit up behind her just as she finished attaching the light to her pistol.

"Having trouble?", Layley quipped.

She stepped aside as if to let him pass, "You're more than welcome to take point, Sergeant."

Taking his silence as an answer, Hammerly pressed on. *Now... which way first?* She took a few seconds to mull it over in her head. *Ah, middle one is the safest bet.*

The middle corridor was also smooth and circular, an unusual choice for an old ruin in her opinion. Perhaps a dozen metres into it and she felt the ground start to slope downwards taking them deeper. Her light cut through the darkness and she could make out the end of the corridor ahead of her.

It opened up into a large, dark chamber that their small lights wouldn't be much help in.

"Anyone got a floodlight in one of those boxes?", she asked her team as they filed in through the door.

"Yeah, one moment", one replied.

There was a clank as the box hit the ground and the rattling of metal as they dug through its contents.

"Here", they said, before planting something down on the ground and turning on a powerful white floodlight.

In the new light she could see that the chamber was also circular and quite large, maybe ten or fifteen metres in diameter. In the centre was a small rocky stump that looked almost charred. The most distinctive feature though was the mess of metal and rock on the far wall. A deep black crack was cut through some sort of decorative metal structure. She could see piles of rubble, shards of metal, and a large chunk of stone scattered at the foot of the wall beneath it.

There was something off about this place. Not wrong, but not right either, just off. She found herself eager to be done here as soon as possible. She slowly stepped forward, on alert in case the bad feeling in her gut was more accurate than she'd like. Behind her, the rest of the team was starting to unpack their equipment and spread out around the room.

"Commander, look at this." Laley's voice echoed off the ancient walls and she turned back to see him walking off to the edge of the room.
"Found something useful?", she asked and walked over to him, putting her pistol away for now.

He leaned down and picked up something in his hands. "I don't know", he inspected it for a moment before holding it up for her to see.

It was easy enough to tell what it was. "A stormtrooper blaster?", she took it from him and looked for herself. "Huh", she noticed the damaged barrel of the weapon, "Looks like it was cut right through."

"One of ours?", Layley asked.

Hammerly pursed her lips and winced, "No, we didn't lose any equipment down here, at least not from any of the teams that came to the ruin."

"Say, didn't Bridger shoot his way off the Chimaera?", Layley suggested.

"That he did", she agreed. The Commander was about to set it aside when she noticed the scorching where the cut was. "Hang on...", she'd seen this damage before, "This blaster didn't just break, it was cut in half by a lightsaber."

The Sergeant narrowed his eyes, "Are you sure?"

She looked up at him, "It's just like the damage on the bodies we recovered from Site Three, and I'd bet it'd be the same on the bodies the Lieutenant is going to recover." Hammerly wasn't blind to the implications. "Which means that either Bridger's Jedi friends found one of our troopers here..."

"Which we know they didn't know since the squad had only just arrived when they were set upon by Bridger's allies", Layley filled in.

She'd been on the Chimaera's bridge when news of the squad's run in with Bridger's friends had reached them. A short clip of a stormtrooper calling for help before being run through with a green blade had brought the entire bridge to a standstill. But that squad had only landed a few minutes before, and it was nowhere near enough time to reach this place.

"Then the Inquisitor did this. She found Bridger here. She found him but didn't tell us that she had and made sure no one knew anything about what was down here."

Hammerly didn't know what that meant or why she'd do it, but it couldn't have been good. The Inquisitor was hiding something from them, but what? Thrawn was right in saying that her whole demeanour changed after her visit to this planet, so what about this place changed her?

Shaking her head again, she handed the defunct weapon back to Layley. "Bag it. Let's get everything we can for Thrawn. I don't know about you but I want to be off this forsaken rock as soon as possible."

There were some murmurs of acknowledgement as her team set about their task. Commander Hammerly was again drawn over to the pile of metal and rubble on the far side of the room. What went down here, Inquisitor? She stepped over some shattered pieces of the wall decor trying to find some sort of answer. Sighing, she picked up part of one of the rings in a vain effort to figure things out. What were you trying to hide? Hammerly noticed some parts of the rings still embedded in the wall and wondered just what this odd little display was meant to be. What were you afraid of?

Progress was still agonisingly slow. The doors they discovered proved to be far stronger than
they'd anticipated and they'd spent weeks cutting through the first one. Their scans hadn't been able to penetrate the thick material, so their joy was short lived when they cut through it only to find another identical door behind it. This was going to take a while. That time, however, gave the Fourth Sister opportunity. Every moment of boredom and impatience fuelled her new allies' discontent with Thrawn and drove them further into her arms.

Stepping out of her small hut into the morning sun, she saw the usual mess of activity around the dig site. Thrawn had ordered a huge operation to clear the layers of rock from around the doorway and open it up to the air. The combined hands and tools of their new reinforcements made the job a breeze, and they'd cleared more materiel in a few weeks than they had in a few months previously. Now, their new discovery was more accessible than ever.

The Fourth Sister set off towards the edge of the dig site, barely paying attention to the troopers and officers she passed by on her way. As she approached the edge of the pit, she caught sight of two familiar silhouettes.

"Commandant Hux, Captain Sarlis", the Inquisitor stopped next to Hux and joined him in looking over the dig site. "The progress really shows from here."

"Yes, it does", Hux agreed.

"I was just telling the Commandant about how much more progress we've been making recently", the Captain explained. "Doing my job for me, Captain." The Inquisitor peered over the edge of the pit and could see the podium and the now open door way, all surrounded by dozens of people with all sorts of equipment.

"It goes to show what good Imperial leadership can do", Hux declared proudly.

The Fourth Sister nodded emphatically, "I couldn't agree more, Commandant. It's something we've been lacking for the last few years."

Beside her, the man cleared his throat awkwardly, "I'm, uh, I don't follow."

"Oh come now, Commandant. You know what I mean. Thrawn is many things but a loyal Imperial servant? That's not one of them."

He was taken aback by her open contempt, but the man was too spineless to make a stand of his own. "I... I'll just take your word for it, Inquisitor."

"You don't have to", she replied instantly, "Take the Emperor's himself."

Name-dropping the Emperor immediately caught Hux's attention. "E-excuse me?"

The Fourth Sister cast her mind back to the day she was assigned this mission and the day she first saw the Chiss' face in the hologram, already en-route to his location on the Emperor's orders.

"The Emperor didn't trust him", she explained. "He had a hyperspace tracker installed aboard Thrawn's ship because he knew he couldn't be relied upon. It's what let me track him down after his failure on Lothal."

Admittedly, she didn't know exactly why there was a tracker on Thrawn's ship, or who had placed it there, but the Emperor knew about it so he must have had a hand in it.
"She's right". Sarlis' voice came as a surprise aid to her testimony. "Back on Coruscant, I was quite well-connected with High Command and they didn't like Thrawn one bit. Too reckless they said, too hot-headed, too... opaque, I think the word was."

The extra details were exactly the sort of thing the Inquisitor wanted to hear. Thrawn had won few friends in the Empire, and soon enough it was going to cost him dearly.

"Exactly, Captain. That's why the Emperor assigned someone as well-connected as you to Thrawn's fleet before Lothal, and why I was sent to him afterwards", she knew the obvious platitudes would sail over the Captain's head. "The Chiss was useful to the Emperor but not dependable. He needed people like us to be his eyes and ears in Thrawn's fleet... and if needs be, his hands."

"What are you suggesting?", Hux lowered his voice and cast a cautionary glance around them.

"Nothing, Commandant. I'm only pointing out that we are the Emperor's loyal servants, and that Thrawn is an unknown. He's an alien from a foreign planet whom the Emperor himself had his reservations with."

Sarlis sighed audibly, "I... I have to agree. He might be clever and a good tactician, but I know how the highest levels of the Empire viewed him, and it wasn't well."

The Fourth Sister sensed that the Captain did believe those words, but Sarlis also lacked the conviction to back them up with solid action. At least for now.

"Not to worry, Captain", the Inquisitor assured, "We'll keep an eye on Thrawn. If he proves he can't be trusted, then my loyalties remain with the Empire." She leaned in to Hux and bore in to him with her eyes, "I can trust you to say the same can't I, Commandant?"

He fumbled under the glare and nodded sheepishly. "Y-y-yes, Inquisitor. I... you can count on me."

With a satisfied grin, she pulled back and set her eyes back down into the pit. "Excellent, I knew I could count on you."

She saw the teams below moving hurriedly around the excavation site. Aimed up at the sky was the old podium - whose purpose she still hadn't determined yet, if it even had one at all - around which sensor equipment, laser cutters, and some exhausted workers were clustered. She couldn't see into the doorway from up here, not that there was much to see anyway. What she could feel, though, was far clearer. They were getting close now, so tantalisingly close.

None of them truly knew what they were on the cusp of. Not Thrawn, not Hux, not anyone. Only she knew the power that was almost in her grasp. All she had to do now was take the final few steps, navigate the final few obstacles, and then He would be free. Soon nothing would be there to stand in His way.

The low crackle of Ahsoka's lightsaber's training mode reverberated around the hold with every strike. Luke's form was good, unorthodox but effective, as he deflected every blow with a well-placed block.

Ahsoka was going easy on him, testing out his abilities against her own honed skills. The confined space of her shuttle's hold didn't lend itself to the more manoeuvrable and acrobatic form of fighting she enjoyed, but simple one-on-one sparring was a good way to keep one's reactions sharp.

Ahsoka brought her lightsaber high and then took it down fast, Luke catching the blade with his
own horizontally in front of his face. Their sabers fizzled and crackled again before Luke pushed her back with his saber.

"Good", she lowered her single blade and paused to catch her breath.

Luke switched off his saber and took a swig of water from the canteen on a crate beside him. "Maybe I am, but you're better."

"Possibly, but I had years of training with your father, Master Yoda, and some of the most accomplished duelists of the Order." Ahsoka sheathed her own blade and clipped it back to her belt. "You're really telling me that Obi Wan and Yoda never gave you a true lightsaber lesson?"

He shook his head sat down on the edge of the crate, "Not a proper one at least. Ben taught me some blaster deflection but not much else. Master Yoda was more of a philosopher in my experience. I can't imagine him using a lightsaber."

Ahsoka smiled and remembered the old Jedi Master. "He was really something. By the far the finest swordsman in the Order, even better than Anakin or Obi Wan. I don't think he liked it though. Master Yoda preferred to solve a problem with words rather than weapons."

"I wish I could have seen it. The Temple, the old Order. I don't expect we'll get it all back as it was in my lifetime", Luke said mournfully.

"You don't need a Temple to rebuild the Jedi. They're an idea, not a single institution. Take yourself for example. You didn't need formal classes and archives of old doctrine to become who you are."

"I could sure have used them though", Luke said.

Ahsoka leaned back against the wall behind her, sensing this conversation might take a while. "Lessons have their place, that's why I left Ezra that holodisc, but a certain Clone friend of ours always said that it's experience that outranks everything."

The other man rested his elbows on his knees, looking to the ground and thinking. "Alright, but the Jedi still need rules. If we don't have those then our experiences could take us down the wrong path."

"You and Ezra don't follow many Jedi rules and yet here you are, very much on the right path."

Luke looked quizzically at her, "How do you mean?"

"Take your attachments for example. Ezra has Sabine, Jacen, Hera, and everyone on Lothal. You have Leia, Han, Artoo, and all of your other friends. Those attachments fall outside the scope of what the Jedi would have allowed, but both of you used them and were better for it. They helped you overthrow an Empire. Your attachment to your father was the thing that saved him, and saved all of us."

"If we're better when avoiding our rules then why bother with them in the first place?", Luke countered, "What was the point in giving Ezra those texts if you think he was better off ignoring them?"

A fair question to be sure, but Luke seemed to be missing the point. For a moment, he reminded her of her younger self. The philosophy went in one ear and out the other as a young Jedi, but it'd become more central to Ahsoka's personality as she grew up. In time, she was sure Luke would embrace it too.
"Ezra has experience and perspective that shaped him and his outlook on the galaxy, but that growth came through the challenges he faced. We don't grow by staying in our comfort zones but by stepping out of them. By confronting ideas we don't like, by understanding perspectives other than our own, we grow as people and as a group. He's still young and not a finished product, this journey will be as much a learning experience for him as it will be for his students. Whether or not he'll take to every Jedi rule remains to be seen."

He perked up, "Is that why you left? You didn't see eye-to-eye with the rules?"

Ahsoka was taken aback by the question. She'd never been asked about it so directly.

Luke could see her uncomfortable reaction and seemed to regret the intrusion, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-"

"No, it's alright", she assured him. "There was a lot behind why I left but I suppose the rules were a part of it. If you live by a rulebook for years and then people start to take every rule as unquestionable truth. Most people won't take a step back and actually think about what they're doing, and the few that do will struggle to find a way to express it."

"And which one were you?"

Ahsoka looked off to the corner for a few moments. "I'm not sure I was either of them. It was more a case of being caught between both of those things and not being able to face staying afterwards."

Luke looked sympathetic, "I'm sorry, that must have been hard for you after spending your whole life there."

More than you know. Ahsoka made the right choice in the end, but the right choice was rarely an easy one. Over the last two decades, she'd lost countless hour of sleep wondering how things would have changed it she'd just stayed. Seeing Luke and Leia and the state of the galaxy as it pulled itself back together had helped accept that things worked out in the end, but time was yet to heal every wound.

"It was, but I did what I needed to." She took a deep breath in and out again, refocusing her mind on the future rather than the past. "Still, you and Ezra are lucky in that regard. You came to the Jedi later and have lives outside of them. Maybe that'll give you the perspective you both need to avoid the same mistakes."

He smiled at the more optimistic turn, "We'll do our best."

Luke hopped off the crate and readied his lightsaber for another round of sparring.

Ahsoka smiled and reached for one of her hilts again, "I'm sure you will."

"I might leave the philosophy to Ezra though, I was never really good at that." He shrugged sarcastically, "Maybe when I'm a bitter old man."

"You?", she almost laughed, "You're far too optimistic for that."

Luke shrugged, "Maybe you're right. I am more of a pilot and a fighter."

"Just like your father", the Togruta pointed out. "Lucky for you, a bit him rubbed off on me too", she added as she ignited her blade’s training mode and assumed the ready position once more.
"Mandalorians do two things right", Sabine had told him, "War and parties."

Sitting in the main hall of Clan Wren, tables laid out and covered in plates, bowls, cups, and jugs of all types of food and drink, Ezra had to agree with that last part.

"You were right, cyar’ika", he grabbed his wife's hand and squeezed it, "Your family can do parties."

Sabine grinned and pulled him in for a kiss, "Our family knows how to do parties."

Their guests sounded like they agreed. Ezra wasn't sure exactly how many people had come to the event, but it was more than he was expecting, even with the few people that were unable to make it.

Sabine's family had obviously come, and even more obvious were Hera, Jacen, Zeb, Chopper, and Kallus. Rex and Wolffe, Mart and the Iron Squadron, Rau and his new batch of Protectors, Ryder had cleared his schedule to come along, and even Wedge had used his leave to make the trip.

Sabine had pointed out no less than a dozen representatives or groups from other allied clans, but Ezra'd be lying if he said he remembered any of them right now.

A few people couldn't quite make it, but Ezra and Sabine understood. Leia and a few others from the rebellion sent their best but were too wrapped up in rebuilding the galaxy to stop by. There was also Ahsoka and Luke, off on their mission in force knew where. They were here in spirit, Ezra knew, and he hoped they'd be here in person soon enough.

The most glaring absence though was the one Ezra knew he'd feel: Kanan. The head table they were sat on was designed for six: the bride, the groom, and two sets of parents. Ursa and Alrich were on Sabine's side, while on Ezra's there was Hera and Jacen. There was a certain meaning to having Jacen there instead, and as Ezra's padawan it made a certain sense, but Ezra still half-expected to see Kanan there smiling at him. Kanan would have loved to be here. Ezra could just imagine him telling embarrassing stories about the pair of them, facing down every Mandalorian request for a fight with his snarky indifference, and of course thoroughly embarrassing Hera and himself with his 'flirting' as he got just a little too tipsy.

Before he could let himself get too mournful, a familiar blue armoured man walked up to the table to talk to them, an object tucked under his arm.

"Mr and Mrs Wren-Bridger", Fenn Rau said heartily, "Congratulations!"

"Rau", Sabine smiled at the man as he came to a stop in front of them.

"I think my questions about you were so loyal to him on Concord Dawn have finally been answered. I knew I saw something in you two", he chuckled.

She scowled halfheartedly at him.

"Liar", Ezra interjected, "That jetpack hug definitely gave it away."

She scowled halfheartedly at him.

"Either way, congratulations." He took the object out from under his arm, "Lady Bo Katan sends her apologies that she couldn't attend the wedding. She gave me this to pass on to you."

Ezra got a look at the object as Sabine took it from Fenn Rau. It took a double-take for him to realise what it was. It was a book - an actual printed, paper book. In an age of datapads and
lightspeed communications, paper books were a rarity and worth a fortune.

"I don't know what to say", Sabine marvelled at the object in her hand.

He could read the front cover: 'The Histories' by Polybius of Clan Achaea.

"Can't say I've ever seen a real book before", the Jedi said, reaching out to feel the aged leather cover.

"It's a well-regarded history. It covers some of the ancient wars between the Mandalorians and the Jedi; a fascinating read", Rau explained.

Ezra cast him a half-worried look, "Should I be worried?"

The Mandalorian laughed, "Ha, I'm not sure that was Lady Katan's intent. I believe she wanted you to be reminded what your union represents. Our past is important, we can't forget what brought us here, but remember that you're not trapped by it. You're both... quite unique, and so don't be afraid to embrace it no matter what the past has to say about it."

"Thanks Rau", Sabine carefully set the book down on the table.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I promised your Clone friend I'd drink him under the table. Enjoy your evening", Rau bowed his head courteously and went over to Rex and Wolffe to make good on that promise.

Ezra was about to turn to Sabine when an unexpected figure dressed in red climbed up the small steps to their table. Almost the same grubby clothes, the same eager grin, the same... interesting scent. Wait, it that...?

"Ezra Bridger! Mando Girl!", the Weequay shouted and raised his hands in the air, "Look how much you've grown, oh I am so happy to see you."

"Hondo?! You came?", Ezra stood up from the chair and shook his hand. He'd sent him an invite to an old comm address that Ezra half-expected him to have stopped using by now.

"Why yes, how could I not? How could I miss seeing two of my closest friends become happily married?" Hondo turned to Sabine, "And you, Mrs Wren-Bridger, I must say you look so wonderful. And this home of yours is such a lovely place, so cosy and inviting and expensive."

Sabine still managed a smile for him, "Hondo, how have you been?"

The old pirate took off his hat and held it to his chest, "Oh, my dear, I have had quite the few years. I've been everywhere from the highest parts of Coruscant to the farthest parts of the galaxy's edge. Fought pirates, imperials, and all manner of vile things, but your old friend Hondo has outlasted them all."

His showmanship hadn't decayed with time, and Ezra loved it. "At least you seem alright, Hondo. It's good to see you again."

"And I you, Ezra." Hondo's gaze turned over to Jacen, "And my my, who is this handsome young fellow? Oh how you have grown since I last saw you."

"Hondo!", Jacen practically bounced in his seat.

"Yes it is I, my little...", he sniffled, "little green friend. I hear you are to become a Jedi like fine
young Ezra here."

Ezra exchanged a confused look with Sabine, "How does Hondo know that?"

Sabine shrugged with the same wide-eyed look of confusion. "Beats me."

"Speaking of Jedi..." Hondo leaned over the table and spoke in a hushed tone, "How is our... uh, mutual friend doing?"

Again, he found himself confused. "Mutual friend?"

Hondo waved dismissively, "Oh you know her. Tall, red, has montrals, carries a staff I believe-"

"Ahsoka?!", Ezra whisper-shouted. "How... how do you know about Ahsoka?"

"Oh we go very far back", Hondo said nonchalantly. "I told you when we first met that I am an old Jedi sympathiser. Yes, Ahsoka and I are old friends", Hondo paused and stroked his chin, "Well, I say friend, some might say 'acquaintances', some might say she's my 'former prisoner', the lines are blurred."

Ezra sat back in his chair bemused, "I never expected that you might know each other."

"Yes, we know each other quite well. She even came to me for help a few years ago. She wanted a few things for her ship." Hondo looked up to the corner as he remembered, "New hyperdrive, fuel cells, weapon systems, stealth drive..."

"Hang on!", Sabine leaned forward, "You?! You're the one who modified Ahsoka's shuttle?!

Hondo raised both of his hands, "Oh no, I merely procured the parts. My talents were needed as overseer. Melch and his team did the labour. I am a frail old man after all, better suited to counting money, and spending money... or finding money, investing money even..."

"You are so... Hondo, Hondo", Ezra couldn't think of a better word to describe him.

"Aha, the one and only." Hondo removed his hat again, brought it to his chest, and bowed, "Now I'd very much like to take a look around this wonderful establishment. My congratulations, once again."

With Hondo left and disappeared into the crowd of Mandalorians and others in the hall. Ezra lost sight of him pretty quickly and started to think of how much explaining he'd have to do if his guest started causing a fuss.

Sabine reached a hand to Ezra's shoulder. "Clan Wren will be keeping an eye on him. He won't be making it out of here with half of our treasures stuffed in his jacket."

"You read my mind, dear", he kissed her cheek for good measure.

From amongst the crowd, Hera emerged after her mingling with some of the other guests. As the bride's hand, Hera had one of the few traditional roles to play in the wedding. From the look on her face, she was ready to fulfil one of them.

"All set?", Sabine asked as Hera went back to her chair besides Ezra.

She nodded, "He's all set."

The bride's hand didn't give the speech herself, but was to find someone else to vouch for the
couple's legitimacy and worthiness to hold each other. Ezra had a reasonable suspicion as to who she'd choose, but tradition mandated the couple not know for certain.

Sabine turned to her mother to let her know, and the Countess rose to address the crowd.

"Everyone", her authoritative voice brought the room to silence in seconds, "Take your seats, we have a speech to contend with."

The guests found their way to their places around the hall and the conversation moved to hushed whispers. Hera remained standing, waiting for everyone to be ready, before starting.

"As you all know, it is Mandalorian tradition that the bride's hand organise someone to give a speech about the couple for the after party. There were many, many people who Sabine and Ezra have touched over the years, not least of all myself, but there was someone whose life was changed by both of them, and who understands what it means to cast off old ideas and embrace something new and beautiful." Hera extended a hand toward the table to her right, "So please, Kallus."

Kallus? Ezra had expected Zeb to do it, or even for Hera to break tradition and give her own. But no, it was their old sideburned friend that stood up in his meticulously presentable Alliance uniform, a datapad in his hand that he soon set down flat on the table in front of him.

"Thank you, Hera." Kallus cleared his throat, "I don't need to tell you all what it means to see a Jedi and a Mandalorian joined in matrimony. Their rivalry is almost as old as the Jedi Order itself. They have fought wars with each other, ravaged planets, and taken countless lives in thousands of battles. Surely, if many of their predecessors saw what was happening here today they'd scarcely believe it, let alone approve of it. However, Ezra and Sabine show us that everyone can change. An enemy can become an ally, or something so much more."

Kallus paused and glanced down at his datapad again.

"As many of you know, I myself was a member of the Imperial Security Bureau. When I was assigned to a small insurrection on Lothal, I'd never imagined how it would change everything. Soon, the crew of the Ghost had become the bane of my life. However, two in particular - a young Mandalorian explosives expert with a penchant for graffiti and a young loth-rat going by the name 'Jabba' - became something of an amusement for the men of ISB."

Ezra shrank into his seat, somehow knowing this story was going to be an awkward time.

"When the laughter died down, Kallus continued. "Anyways, we soon learned their real names as Ezra Bridger, Jedi padawan, and Sabine Wren, former Imperial Cadet. They quickly turned from"
the source of our amusement to one of stress, anger, and annoyance. Shipments would go missing, parades were crashed, fuel was stolen, and a whole number of problems were caused by the rebels of Phoenix Squadron. All the while, these two became more prevalent in every report, and increasingly the one combination of rebels that terrified us the most was of a young Jedi padawan and the Mandalorian warrior he was smitten with."

"More than smitten", Zeb joked heartily, earning another round of laughs.

"Given Sabine's rejections, I was surprised to keep seeing the boy trying again and again to wriggle his way into her heart. But still, there he was, every time, still trying", Kallus flicked across on the datapad. "I'll spare you the details, but it was thanks to the crew of the Ghost that I went from a loyal Imperial servant to a prisoner on Thrawn's Star Destroyer, watching as his fleet tore apart the fledgling rebel ships above Atollon. All seemed lost. The Rebellion was going to be crushed, the whole of Phoenix Squadron destroyed, myself thrown out of an airlock, and the tiny glimmer of hope in a galaxy of darkness was about to be snuffed out."

Ezra became acutely aware of the silence in the room. The cheering, the talking, the laughing - it had all stopped.

"But then a few ships came in. Several Mandalorian gauntlet fighters, carrying with them many of you in this room, but most importantly the two people sitting on that table up there. In that moment, in that battle, it wasn't fleets or armies, ships or soldiers, that truly won the day. It was those two. In a time of crisis, when all seemed lost, Ezra turned to the one person in the galaxy he could depend on more than any other. Then, just as Ezra knew she would, Sabine left her home, grabbed whatever hands she could, and ventured into a suicide mission on the far side of the galaxy all on the word of someone who, according to every facet of Mandalorian culture, she should despise. They saved my life that day. They saved everyone's. I don't what would have become of the Rebellion, Mandalore, or the entire galaxy if it hadn't been for those two."

There were a few murmurs of approval from some around the room, probably some of the warriors they'd taken with them that day.

"At first, maybe I was too blinded by years of listening to Ezra's hopeless... 'flirting'"*, he emphasised that last word with air quotes, "But it wasn't long before even I noticed what had happened with the two of them. Zeb had already noticed, as had Rex, Hera, and of course Kanan too. It wasn't just friendship anymore. Every moment of their downtime or work was spent together. Every mission they were at each other's side. Blowing up a relay? Sabine and Ezra. Securing data recordings? Sabine and Ezra. Organising inventories? Sabine watching while Ezra did the work for her."

*That was definitely accurate. Sabine smiled innocently at him. The joke was on her. Making him do all the work meant it took twice as long, giving them twice as much time together.

"By the time of the Battle of Lothal, I think we all knew. Maybe they hadn't noticed but everyone around them had. But then life happened. In the blink of an eye, Ezra was gone. No warning, no plan for us to bank on, he was just gone. Lothal was saved but he was out on the edge of the galaxy. To lose your best friend, the person you spent every minute with, the person that even those around you knew you loved, would break almost anyone - but not Sabine. She kept it together, powered through, and for five years helped rebuild Lothal as the galaxy tore itself apart in war. Then, when the war was finished, there was still no rest, and instead she hopped on a shuttle and set off on a mad adventure to bring him home."

His wife's fingers had found their way between his own over the course of the speech. Ezra was unconsciously squeezing her hand tightly, as if to assure himself that she was, indeed, still right
Kallus fiddled with his datapad for a moment longer before muttering to himself and turning it aside. "My long and laboured point is that you two have endured more than most people would in a hundred lifetimes. You've travelled the galaxy, fought in galactic wars, confronted some of the most vile individuals this galaxy has to offer, and endured the loss of people near and dear to you both. And yet, despite everything, you've been at each other's side through thick and thin. Maybe not physically there, but you've had each other's back without fail. That determination, that grit, that commitment, have pushed you to do amazing things that this galaxy cannot hope to repay you for."

Kallus reached for his glass and raised it in front of him.

"I speak for all of us when I say you've earned our respect, our admiration, our appreciation, our gratitude, and our loyalty a hundred times over. You are among the finest people I have ever had the honour of knowing, and I can give you both no higher compliment than saying that you deserve someone as brave, honest, selfless, and loving as each other to be at your side. So, I'd like you all to join me in a toast to Ezra and Sabine. One together, one apart, sharing all, and sure to be raising warriors of their own soon enough."

The applause echoed throughout the hall while a round cheers and whistles sounded from the throes of guests. Kallus had absolutely been the right choice. Perhaps the unexpectedness of such an honest speech from him had made it hit harder. It was something to recognise love in yourselves, it was another to have those around you be so convinced of it too.

Beside him, Sabine tugged gently at his hand and pulled him in for a deep kiss, to the joy of many of the guests who were watching. "I love you", he heard her say as they pulled apart. Kallus' speech seemed to have stoked the same mess of emotions from her too.

Ezra lost himself once more in his wife's beautiful brown eyes, "I love you too." He carefully brushed a long strand of hair away from her eyes, "But maybe we won't be raising warriors of our own quite yet."

She winked mischievously at him, "You never know..."

Before he could even try to respond to that, Hera moved from her seat beside him and stood in the middle of the new couple. The joyous smile on her face suited her, and it was one of the best sights Ezra could have hoped to see.

"I'm so proud of you, two. Kallus is right, you've been through enough. You deserve some happiness." There was some pain behind those words, Ezra could feel as much, but that didn't mean she meant them any less.

Hera, more than anyone else in their lives now, had done the most for them. Given them a home, given them a family, hope, purpose, love, care, each other, and so much more than they'd ever be able to thank her for. If Ezra was glad to have anyone here with them right now, it would have been here.

"Hera...", Ezra stood up from the chair and embraced her, "Thank you, for everything."

Sabine followed suit, getting both him and Hera in a tight hug. Hera didn't answer with words, only by extending her loving arms around the two of them,

He didn't know how long they stayed like that and he didn't care. The day had been everything
Ezra could have hoped it would be, and best of all he had by his side the people in the galaxy that he loved the most. It was a bliss he wouldn't have forever, but it was one he could enjoy right now. Being a Jedi could wait, if only for a tiny bit longer.

Chapter End Notes

A busy chapter this time. This is the first time since Chapter 8 that Thrawn hasn't made a direct appearance also, so a neat bit of trivia there.

The Hammerly section serves two main purposes. Firstly, it recounts some events from earlier in the story to help remind people what happened as well and secondly, it helps me show a bit more of the Imperials outside of the big players. The Fleet is much more than Thrawn, Pellaeon, Faro, Sarlis, the Fourth Sister, and the newcomers, and I thought it'd be good to try humanising some of the more ordinary members of the Empire. The Fourth Sister's section is relatively self-explanatory. I mentioned the hyperspace tracker since it's an easy way to show off some evidence that Thrawn wasn't trusted. This is where Sarlis' status as a political appointee helps the story, as it's well known in both canon novels that Thrawn is not popular among Imperial High Command. It makes sense that she'd be aware of that reputation, and so unwillingly plays right into the Inquisitor's hands. Again, I've mentioned how the idea that the Fourth Sister is trying to sew dissent isn't supposed to be a secret as it'd be insulting to you guys to try and pass off something so obvious as a surprise. However, hat's not to say it's going to be simple or that it's going to go the way Thrawn, the Inquisitor, or the Voice necessarily expects it to.

Our very small Ahsoka and Luke section is some more commentary on the Jedi, with Ahsoka drawing on her own experiences in Season 5 of The Clone Wars to explain some of her reservations. Again, that Ezra is going to have difficulty with the Jedi is quite obvious at this point, it's just what those issues are and how he resolves them, if at all, that we have to wait and see for. This section for Ahsoka and Luke, and probably the next one too, feel a bit 'removed' I guess since there's not much I can do with them. Obviously, I've already done plenty of 'sitting in the shuttle while travelling' sections for Sabine and Ahsoka, so I'm trying to avoid repetition by using these sections to explore some wider ideas that will be useful to the story.

Lastly, we have the wedding. I agonised over how to do this for a while but decided to skim over the really simple ceremony and focus on the celebrations. Mandalorians aren't much for that anyway, but celebrating is something they're bound to be good at. I created the 'bride's hand' simply to get Hera to have some official involvement, especially since I wasn't going to do much of a ceremony nor have her give the speech. The vows should be quite familiar to many of you, so I don't need to say much about them. The book Rau gives them from Bo Katan is a rather blatant reference to the 2nd-century BC historian Polybius of Megalopolis, whose account of Roman history contains many now famous details like Hannibal's crossing of the Alps, the crushing defeat at Cannae, and a thorough breakdown of Rome's constitution. He's a personal favourite of my mine, and I'm a sucker for little things like that. I had to get some Hondo in, there was no getting around it. Hondo mentions that he modified Ahsoka's shuttle. There is a small story there that, after I've finished this story down the line, I
might put into a one-shot collection set in the ITU timeline. Lastly, there's Kallus' speech. I could have gone a lot of ways with this, namely having Hera give it, but that felt a bit too predictable. This a/n is already too long as is, but suffice it to say that Kallus perfectly understood what it meant to set one rigid tradition aside and embrace a new idea, which is very much what a union between two ancient enemies like the Jedi and the Mandalorians represents, making him the perfect person to give such an impassioned speech at the wedding.

Next time: Thrawn and the Imperials coordinate their activities, Luke asks Ahsoka about Malachor, Hammerly reports to Thrawn, and Ezra gathers his students.
Chapter Notes

This is quite a long chapter so I apologise for that. It's not the longest I've done but it's a good 9,000 words again while I've tended towards ~7,000 in recent chapters. A lot goes on though, so it needs the word count.

This time: Thrawn and the Imperials coordinate their activities, Luke asks Ahsoka about Malachor, Hammerly reports to Thrawn, and Ezra gathers his students.

"Seven crates of E-Web turrets, three hundred DLT-19 rifles, and seven hundred E-11 rifles."

The Fourth Sister wanted to slam her head onto the field HQ's map table. General Veers continued to drone on and on and on through his weekly inventory list, almost identical to the last time he'd done it. The faces around the table, Sarlis and Hux especially, looked as bored and dejected as she felt. Even Faro and Pellaeon, Thrawn's loyal acolytes, might have been drifting off.

Veers slid his finger along his datapad. "Oh, we under-counted our proton bombs too. We're actually at 25 spare crates, not 15."

"Ah", the Grand Admiral said passively, "Transfer the extra crates to the Chimaera, some of my bombers are in need of additional ammunition."

"As you wish, Grand Admiral", the General tapped away on his screen and then went to continue the list.

She couldn't take it any more. "Are we actually doing anything important here or are you just wasting my time?!", the Inquisitor's outburst caught everyone's attention.

Thrawn looked up at her from across the table with his cold, red eyes. "I would not expect you to appreciate the need for careful management in pursuit of success, Inquisitor."

She didn't have the words to describe how badly she wanted to jump over this table and thrust her lightsaber into his chest. Her tongue was almost ready with a scathing insult but a look around the table made her hold it. Sarlis and Hux might be coming around, but she was still outnumbered here.

Confident she had nothing more to say, Thrawn turned back to Veers, "Continue, General."

The Fourth Sister shut her eyes and grated her teeth slowly as the General continued his droneing. How much more of this could she take? How much longer must they wait? She held her tongue for the next few minutes, not registering anything outside of her own thoughts. Master... give me something. Some guidance to bring me closer.

When she finally refocused on the meeting, they'd mercifully finished the inventory and were moving on.
"What of our progress?", Thrawn inquired.

"Slow", Canady answered grimly, "At this rate we'll get through this next door in about a week."

Captain Sarlis opened her mouth to offer one of her rare contributions, "Perhaps we could send more men down?"

Pellaeon shook his head, "Too crowded down there already. More men would only get in the way and slow us down."

Thrawn tapped some buttons on the terminal to the holographic table they were stood around and a 3D map of the dig site rendered itself before them. She could see the large open pit they'd cleared out in recent weeks, at the bottom of which was the podium and the doorway. The Chiss took his hand to his chin and stroked it, as he tended to do when scheming and plotting.

"Captain Pellaeon is right. We are working in a difficult area."

To Thrawn's right, Commodore Faro leaned over and pointed towards the door. "Would it be possible to dig around the door? It'd be slow but we might be able to start planning out a map of the structure while we still try to get inside."

Veers folded his arms, "It's possible, now that the area is opened up. Although we'd need more scanning teams to make sure we don't hit what we aren't meant to."

Without warning, a chill crawled up the Inquisitor's spine accompanied by a quiet voice: "Hammerly."

The Fourth Sister glanced around the room for the source but saw that everyone was still locked in conversation. Then, it dawned on her. Master?

"We might be able to throw together some extra squads from what we have", Canady continued, everyone oblivious to the voice whispering in her mind.

"Hammerly!", it came again and made her shiver, this time drawing a sideways glance from Thrawn.

Master? What's 'Hammerly'? What are you saying? The Inquisitor tried to focus her mind. Was He reaching out to her again? She shut her eyes tightly and dug deep, trying to find out what He was trying to tell her. Sure enough, she felt it coming again, but stronger than ever. It welled up in her, filling her mind, and dominating her thoughts.

Thrawn continued his asinine rambling, "If we can gather the resources yes."

It kept pushing at her. Her Master was reaching out stronger than ever before and straining her will. What was happening? She felt her heart start to race and without warning her mouth opened and spoke words that weren't her own.

"Hammerly!"

Everyone in the room ground to a halt. Faro's heart froze in her chest as everyone's eyes turned to the Inquisitor.

"Excuse me?", Thrawn's voice betrayed no surprise.

The Fourth Sister's eyes shot open and she breathed in shallowly a few times. "H-Hammerly."
Hearing the name again twisted a knot in Faro's stomach. How did she know about Hammerly? The Commodore cautioned a glance at Pellaeon, who looked just as perplexed and uncomfortable as her. Thrawn kept up his passive facade, while the other Imperials looked at the Inquisitor with confusion.

"Hammerly?", Thrawn repeated.

The Inquisitor swallowed hard and spoke shakily, "Yes... yes, Hammerly."

There was something in her body language and the trembling in her voice. Something isn't right. Something really isn't right.

Thrawn offered no response to her, but also gave nothing away. Faro's mind raced with questions. How could the Inquisitor have known about Hammerly? Was someone feeding her information? That wasn't possible, only her, Pellaeon, and Thrawn knew about the assignment... but every member of the Chimaera's bridge crew also knew Hammerly was indisposed. Though none of that explained the Fourth Sister's odd behaviour.

To her surprise, Captain Sarlis was the one who broke the silence. "Hammerly... Commander Hammerly. She's your sensor officer, isn't she? Wouldn't she be of use?" The Captain looked over to the Inquisitor, "I think that's what she meant."

"Yes, yes it is. Thank you, Captain", the woman replied quickly.

"Ah, yes", Canady continued, still apparently confused by the Inquisitor's outburst, "Your sensor officer could be really useful in organising those scans the Commodore suggested."

Faro felt tense all over as she looked to Thrawn. She wondered what he could tell them, he was bound to have planned for an emergency like this.

"Commander Hammerly is otherwise engaged at this time", he answered passively.

The young Captain's face twisted into an odd disbelieving look, "Otherwise engaged? What could be more important?"

"There was a minor disturbance in a neighbouring system. I sent the Commander out to investigate. I believed it to be pirates, nothing more."

The Commodore let out an inaudible sigh of relief. She knew Thrawn would have a cover story prepared if things went south, but she didn't expect that he would ever have to use it.

"Forgive me, sir, but why didn't you let us know? That was your usual procedure for pirates these last few years", Sarlis added innocuously.

The Grand Admiral was already on the ball. "Circumstances were different when we were on limited supplies and constantly on the move. Pirates are less of a concern here, although I didn't see the need to put the troopers on edge with news of a potential disturbance."

His explanations held water, as Faro knew they would, and seemed to satisfy everyone. That was far too close for comfort in her opinion. Faro had always feared what might happen is someone ever managed to poke a hole through Thrawn's plan, and thankfully it didn't look like she was about to find out.

Canady shrugged the odd episode off with a grumble, "Fair enough, though I think the troopers would have appreciated an actual fight to all this digging. I certainly would have."
"You prove my point, Captain", Thrawn replied, "We need to keep our efforts focused here. I'm sure we all want this expedition over sooner rather than later."

"Why Hammerly?" The Fourth Sister's unwelcome voice cut across the room. "Why your sensor officer for a pirate mission? Surely the Aeternus or the Invictus were a better choice, or maybe Captain Sarlis or Captain Canady." A sly grin came to her face, "Sounds to me like you're hiding something."

The Grand Admiral met her gaze and narrowed his eyes. "Dispense with the insinuations, Inquisitor. Commander Hammerly is a perfectly capable officer and one who I'm confident is worthy of her own command in the future. I like to cultivate talent when I see it, Inquisitor, hence why I see so little of you."

Faro bit her tongue, as much to stop from smiling as anything else, and watched the seething glare the Fourth Sister shot the Grand Admiral. Thrawn had made it clear that angering the Inquisitor was often the best choice since it made her act impulsively and irrationally. So far, that had proven to be a reliable strategy.

"However, I agree with Captain Sarlis that Commander Hammerly would be useful. I will contact her and have her return", Thrawn's conciliatory offer would hopefully be enough to placate the others. "Now then, we've many things to attend to."

"Of course, I'll pull together an extra squad or two from the Soliciutde", Canady assured him.

"And I'll get the equipment squared away", Veers added. "Oh, and I'll ensure those extra supplies are transferred to the Chimaera."

"Excellent, General." Thrawn powered down the holographic display table and nodded courteously, "Very well. Meeting dismissed."

Thrawn turned on his heel and made for the door of their field command centre. Faro and Pellaeon exchanged one of their usual frustrated-confused looks from across the table as the other Imperials dispersed. They moved in sync to follow in the direction Thrawn went, waiting until they left the pre-fab building before speaking in hushed tones.

"Any clue?", Faro asked him.

The thoroughly unamused expression on his face was the answer.

Faro sighed unhappily, "I knew you'd say that."

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*Thank you, Master.* The Fourth Sister had to stop herself from grinning as she skulked out of the door on the opposite side of the building to the one Thrawn had used. She hadn't the faintest clue who Commander Hammerly was, or what Thrawn was actually doing, but it was exactly the thing she needed. She was no fool, she knew Thrawn had been hiding something, but her Master had given her the means to show the others how little the Chiss could be trusted.

Her Master's growing powers were proving to be very useful indeed. They were giving her everything she'd wanted and more. A way to take down Thrawn, the guidance to accrue her own allies, and soon enough they'd help her get rid of him all together.

The Inquisitor was surprised to her some footsteps on the rocky ground behind her a few metres down the path.
"Inquisitor", a voice called from behind her.

"Captain Canady", she answered without turning around, waiting for him to catch up with her.

A few seconds later, he caught up to her and kept to her pace. "I wanted to ask what happened in there", he said plainly.

She took a moment to think it over. Then, she clasped her hands behind her back and replied casually, "The force can be a burden at times. A small disturbance, nothing to concern yourself with."

The man's ignorance of the force left him happy to accept the answer. "Hmph, well, yes. However, I think I see what you meant about Thrawn being unusual."

_I have you now._ She smirked subtlety, "Do you now?"

"It seems odd not to have notified anyone about a pirate raid", Canady said grimly.

"Secrecy and half-truths are common with the Chiss. You can't trust their kind to be open about anything. The more time you spend with Thrawn, the more you'll realise that."

Canady came to a halt, perhaps expecting her to as well. Briefly, she obliged him, but didn't turn back to look him in the eye.

"Well, it doesn't sit well with me. I prefer a straight answer."

She kept looking ahead of her, over towards the dig site in the distance. Everything was falling into place. First Hux, Sarlis, and now Canady too. Her Master's plan to sow dissent was playing out exactly as He'd planned.

"Many people share your opinion, Captain", she told him at last, "Far more of them than you know."

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Luke stretched his aching muscles out as he stood up from his meditative pose. There wasn't much else to do on this journey but talk, train, and think.

The small cabin he had on Ahsoka's shuttle was modest and had little room for anything other than a bed, a small table, and his small travel bag dumped in the corner. Luke went over and rummaged around inside for something. _Not the comm, not the compass, not the water... ah, protein bar._ He tore open the packet and bit into the dry, tasteless block of nutrients, grabbing the water to wash it all down. It wasn't quite the fancy food Leia had gotten him accustomed too in the last few months, but it kept him from starving out here.

"I need to get out of this room", he muttered to himself.

Luke loved flying, but loathed travelling. He didn't like not being at the controls of a ship, able to move and explore to his heart's content. He felt useless just sitting here doing nothing in this tiny room. Maybe it was the boredom, maybe it was the occasional whiffs of paint that he smelt in this room and nowhere else, maybe it was just cabin fever. Either way, he hoped they'd be making a stop soon to change fuel cells so he could stretch his legs a bit.

Deciding the cockpit was at least some change of scenery, Luke left his cabin and made his way through the small cargo hold. Opening the door, he was surprised to see Ahsoka sitting in the pilot's chair. She had her odd staff in her hands and was gently running a cloth over it.
"Am I interrupting your cleaning?", Luke asked from the doorway.

Ahsoka beckoned him with her hand, "Of course not, I'm almost done anyway."

He slid into the co-pilot's chair and watched as she put the cloth aside and looked over the tall white object.

"That's some staff", Luke had never really looked at it before, "Where'd you find it?"

The other woman's smile was hiding more than a few stories, "That's complicated. Maybe I'll explain another time."

Ahsoka stood up and went to place the staff in its usual place in the corner of the cockpit. He was reminded of some old stories he'd once heard about the force among the records in one of the Emperor's observatories. They could have strange powers that defied any explanation and could achieve all sorts of ridiculous and outlandish things.

"Say, I heard a story about a staff before. One powerful with the force."

"Oh really?" Ahsoka slumped back into chair and listened intently, "What story?"

"The Staff of Ragnos", Luke said, remembering the old tale he'd read months ago, "You know it?"

Ahsoka stifled a laugh, "The Staff of Ragnos. I do actually. I heard it at the Temple years ago. A powerful Sith Lord, vanquished by the Jedi for his crimes, but his followers used a magic staff to absorb the force energy to try and resurrect him, only to be stopped by the noble hero. If only things were that simple."

"Is it true?"

She shook her head, "No, it's just an old legend. A fun one, they really don't make them like that anymore, but a legend nonetheless."

"I thought you said there's always a bit of truth in legends?"

"Did the Jedi fight the Sith millennia ago? Definitely. Did some Sith probably try to concoct some mad scheme to revive themselves? Probably." Ahsoka turned from him and watched the hyperspace corridor pass them by. "Sometimes, it's best not to look too far into legends. They can lead to some dark places. Places like Malachor."

*There's that name again: Malachor.* "What happened at Malachor? I've heard you and Ezra mention it before." He'd heard it first when they all met after Ezra returned, and both had mentioned it in passing a handful of times during their communications over the last year. "I know you faced my father there but there's gotta be more to it."

Ahsoka brooded for a while, something Luke couldn't blame her for. As Ahsoka had told him when they first met, Malachor was where she'd first learned his father's fate and had been forced to confront him blade to blade. It was also where she became involved in the mysterious World Between Worlds that both she and Ezra mentioned from time-to-time, but what that involvement was he, Ezra, and not even Rex fully understood.

"Back in my Fulcrum days", Ahsoka began, "Ezra wanted to find a way to destroy the Sith. We went to the Jedi Temple on Lothal where Master Yoda reached out and told us we'd find our answers at Malachor. I should have known it wasn't going to be that simple."
He listened in closely, "You'd heard of Malachor before?"

"Yes. Only in legends, but of course there's that bit of truth. There was a battle there thousands of years ago between the Jedi and the Sith, that much was true, but it was clear why the Jedi didn't want it remembered."

The implications drew his curiosity, even though he knew they shouldn't. "What happened there?"

Ahsoka finally turned away from the viewport, but instead looked down at her feet. "There was a weapon there, I'm assuming the Sith wanted to use it for their conquests. During the battle, it misfired and they lost the entirety of both the Jedi and the Sith forces there. It left charred bodies in its wake, killed thousands. All that pain focused in one place made the dark side like a giant shadow there, looming over everything."

"A weapon? Like the Death Star?" Luke used his only frame of reference for what he thought Ahsoka was talking about.

"Similar, but not the same", Ahsoka answered, "It didn't so much destroy everything as corrupt it, defile it even. Everything about the place was twisted and wrong."

Luke swivelled his chair towards the viewport, understanding why Ahsoka found the view more pleasant. "I didn't know the force could do something like that."

"The more you think you understand, the more you're aware of how little you know." Ahsoka paused for a long time, too lost in or too unsettled by her own thoughts. "The force can be made to do terrible things by those who have the power to do so. You can destroy whole armies with it, take down fleets, ravage planets, wipe away someone's mind and destroy their very identity."

"Power requires responsibility." Luke had learned as much the hard way.

"Yes", she concurred, "Which is why what we're doing is so important. Not only do we have the responsibility to use our own powers carefully, but also to use those powers to oppose those who would bring others harm."

Luke looked at her, "Isn't that what the Jedi at Malachor were doing? Using their power to protect those who would hurt others."

"There's a difference between protecting innocents and attacking the guilty."

"But they won the battle?"

She shook her head. "Nobody won."

Luke turned his seat back to her. "They defeated the Sith."

Ahsoka stared unflinching out at space. "Technically, the Sith defeated themselves and the Jedi with them."

He hung his head, frustrated. "Okay, but the galaxy was better off with their fighting over... right?"

She shook her head, "Hard to tell. Our records from that period are limited. Who's to say Malachor didn't make things much worse?"

"Okay, I get it. It's complicated", Luke sighed,

Ahsoka's lightened a bit, "It's not, actually. Acting out of impulse cost those Jedi everything and
might have made things even worse."


The Togruta laughed too, "It never hurts to remind yourself of the basics."

Their conversation was ended by the ship's console beeping with a noise telling them their destination was close.

Ahsoka finally looked back at the controls, "Oh, perfect timing. We'll be there in a few minutes."

"Where is 'there'?", it was a question he'd been meaning to ask for a while.

"The place in the Unknown Regions where Ezra ended up seven years ago. It's as good a place as any to start our search out here. Besides, there's a safe place to set down nearby to change over our fuel cells", Ahsoka explained.

"Great", the thought of getting out of this ship was the best thing Luke could hope for, "Anywhere to get some fresh air."

Commander Hammerly didn't look back fondly on the central structure of Site Two as the last of the crates were loaded back onto the freighter. They'd only had to spend a day here to get everything they needed, and Hammerly had already had enough of this place to last a lifetime.

The last of her troopers finally reached her as she checked the last thing on her datapad. The trooper smiled and saluted, Hammerly having let them ditch their helmets in the ridiculous heart.

"All set, Commander.", he told her.

"Good", she shut down the datapad and looked up, "You're sure the sensors are out of sight?"

The trooper looked back and nodded, "Aye, ma'am. Definitely. Two are slotted into cracks in the rock around the building, and then a circle of eight more are buried just beneath the surface in a perimeter around it."

"It'll have to do."

The trooper went to leave but stopped mid-stride. He seemed to puzzle over his words for a moment before speaking. "Any idea what Thrawn's trying to find with all these sensors?", he asked.

Hammerly had been wondering that herself. Surely Thrawn would know if the Fourth Sister slipped away to come here. She was starting to believe that more was going on here than she first thought. What that was, though, she had no idea.

She wrinkled her nose, "No, can't say I do know. However, if Thrawn wants it done, I trust it's for a good damn reason."

"Fair point, Commander."

The other man walked past her and climbed up the ramp into the freighter. Hammerly took one last lingering look at this odd world before ascending the ramp and escaping the heat. Inside, Layley and his team were triple-checking every box and piece of evidence they'd retrieved in the main hold, while the other troopers attended to the enclosed cargo section in which they'd put the bodies of their fallen comrades.
Hammerly's suspicions about the weapon damage were confirmed by the bodies of the dead stormtroopers. They were both absolutely the result of lightsaber wounds, and the only culprit for the blaster's damage was the Inquisitor. She'd been lying through her teeth to them this whole time. Not that the revelation surprised Hammerly all that much, but having some evidence to back that fact up only drove home the point that she couldn't be trusted.

Trusting that Sergeant Layley could square everything away, she made her way into the cockpit and took the spare seat next to the pilot.

"Ready to go?"

The pilot gave a thumbs up, "Whenever you're ready, Commander."

Hammerly set her datapad down on the console and began to press some buttons on the display before her. "We need to check in with the Grand Admiral before we leave, it won't take long."

She typed in the comm address she'd committed to memory into the communications terminal in front of her. The old freighter's terminal was slow and outdated, but it at least managed to start finding a connection.

As it took its time setting up the channel, Hammerly took a moment to look around the old freighter. It was unusual old thing, apparently taken by Thrawn during one of his earlier adventures. It was a civilian freighter so had no armaments nor slots to fix any, so was purely for cargo transport. That did at least give them plenty of space to use for their mission. The cockpit only needed room for one pilot, with the co-pilots seat being more for navigation than weapons as one would see on a military ship. The rear of the ship was split into three compartments. The large central one with the docking ramp and the cockpit access was mainly for storage or troop transport. Of the two attached compartments, one was another storage area currently being used for the fallen troopers, and the other admittedly cramped space was stuffed with fold-able bunks and sleeping bags for their small team. It was certainly no luxury liner, but Hammerly had found herself in far worse places over the years.

Finally, the terminal sputtered to life and a holographic image of Grand Admiral Thrawn's face appeared before her.

"Ah, Commander Hammerly. We've been eagerly awaiting your report."

She wondered if she needed to salute for a moment. Deciding to ditch the formality for the sake of time, she got straight down to business. "All the sensors are in place and we've left as little trace of our presence as possible, sir."

"Excellent. May I ask what you found there?"

"There's a large basin with a rugged rock structure in the middle of it", she explained, "Cut into that structure is an opening and some sort of small hideout or temple site. It's completely abandoned and there's no trace of anyone in there, but it does look ancient."

Thrawn took the information in with the same stone-faced resolve he did everything. Hammerly remembered his grim assessment of this planet when they first came here a year ago, and that sense of mystery still hung over it.

"A temple, you say?"

Hammerly sighed, "Just a guess, sir. An old dusty ruin, quiet planet, horrible heat - some sort of monastery maybe."
"Possibly, though I doubt we'd be able to determine that for certain now. Did you find anything else that might help us?"

She reached for the datapad she'd placed on the console and brought up the inventory of things they'd catalogued. "Yes, we've got full scans of the site and pictures too. We also managed a full recovery of the recon team."

"Good work, Commander." He stopped for a moment and looked at her more closely through the hologram, "You have something more?"

"Yes", she replied. Hammerly flicked through to the images they'd taken of the damaged rifle and pressed a button to send it through the connection. "We found a blaster", she explained as she waited for the image to reach Thrawn's end, "We thought it was interesting."

Hammerly saw his red eyes look away and absorb the new information he'd been sent. She knew he'd recognise the damage easily enough.

"Cut by a lightsaber", he correctly observed, "From one of the troopers?"

"No", she answered, "We ran the serial number through the database. It was reported missing from the Chimaera almost six years ago. It's the one Bridger shot his way off the ship with."

Thrawn was already two steps ahead of her. "Which confirms both Bridger's presence on the planet and that the Fourth Sister lied about encountering him there. Tell me, did you find anything to indicate how Bridger escaped the planet?"

"Negative, sir. Not a clue", she admitted.

That whole question was completely unanswered. If anything she'd become more confused by that the more she thought about it. They knew the Inquisitor encountered him here and yet he managed to escape without leaving any indication of a ship either here at Site Two or at Site Three. Thinking back to the main chamber of the ruin, the encounter between the force wielders had to have occurred there. Unless Bridger could disappear into a wall and end up several systems away, then she couldn't figure out how in the galaxy he'd slipped away. If she ever had the chance, she wouldn't mind asking him.

"Unfortunate. Perhaps we may find something on a second look at the evidence." Thrawn's curious attitude abated and his tone became more serious, "Now, Commander, I urge you to return as soon as possible."

The pilot beside her gave a worried look and the ominous nature of the warning wasn't lost on Hammerly either. "Is something wrong, sir?", she asked nervously.

"You're not in danger, I assure you, but recent developments have inspired caution that has only been reaffirmed by your discoveries."

*Oh, karabast.* It was her luck that this minor success was going to be immediately followed by some sort of bad news. Despite Thrawn's assurance that they weren't in any danger, Hammerly found herself wishing their civilian freighter wasn't so completely defenceless. Whatever he meant by those words, she knew they didn't mean anything good.

Hammerly took the warning with all the urgency it implied, "As you say, Grand Admiral. We'll depart immediately."

"I will look forward to your return. You and your team have done excellent work, Commander."
With that, the connection broke and the hologram disappeared.

"Excellent work, huh?", the pilot repeated, "It's nice to get some recognition for a change."

Hammerly sighed heavily as she stood up from the chair to go and prepare the others, "Let's just hope we're around to get some more of it."

As soon as their honeymoon was over, Ezra, Sabine, and the rest of them were back down to business.

Two important things needed to be sorted out before Ezra could start to rebuild the Order. Firstly, he needed space. Thankfully, Ryder Azadi had been more than happy to assist. With Lothal rebuilt from all of the Empire's destruction, the Governor had plenty of pre-fab buildings and construction materials to spare for their use, all free of charge on Ryder's own insistence. Sabine, Hera, and Kallus were overseeing the construction of a small training complex right next door to the Spectre Compound on Lothal, and by all accounts it was going well.

"How's it going with you guys?", Sabine's digitised voice asked.

Ezra leaned over the Gauntlet's hologram terminal in the main hold of the ship, talking to the miniaturised figures of Sabine and Hera.

Zeb's gruff voice answered, "Rex said we'll be there any minute."

"Wherever 'there' is", Ezra added.

"I'm sure Ahsoka sent them somewhere safe." Hera was, as usual, the voice of reason and optimism.

The ship's comm blared to life. "Hey, you two. Buckle up, we're just about there", Rex told them.

"You heard him", Sabine said, "Good luck. Oh, and Zeb, don't scare the kids. I know your face has a tendency to do that."

Zeb grinned, "Hehe, no promises."

Sabine looked back to Ezra, "Don't take too long."

"And be away from you? Never", Ezra said exaggeratedly.

Sabine and Hera both rolled their eyes before cutting the connection off.

"Blegh", Zeb gagged exaggeratedly.

Ezra jabbed the Lasat with his elbow, "Come on, nothing worse than you and Kallus."

He turned before Zeb could grab him and made his way back to the cockpit. Zeb grumbled for a moment and grudgingly plodded along behind him.

"Just because you're a Jedi Knight, doesn't mean I won't toss you out that airlock", the Lasat threatened.

Ezra shrugged happily, "Love you too, big guy."

They both entered back into the Gauntlet's cockpit to see Rex powering down the hyperdrive.
"I love this ship, Ezra", Rex happily pressed some buttons on the consoles, "Always wanted to fly a Mandalorian Gauntlet."

The Gauntlet - callsign *Starbird* - had belonged to Maul before Ezra had taken it after Tatooine. After all, Maul wasn't going to need it. It had taken a while for the ship to lose its... Mauliness, but not long after Atollon, the ship had started to feel like his own. While he'd been gone, Hera had given it to Sabine to keep on Lothal as she needed. Obviously, that meant it had been given a makeover. The dull red and black Maul had used were gone and she'd stripped it back to the base white. That white was broken up by patches of sapphire, arranged in a careful pattern across the ship, with two golden-brown starbirds on each wing - a little something for both him and Sabine, Ezra had noticed.

Ezra dropped himself into the co-pilot's seat while Zeb stood standing behind them. "Just where are we going anyway?"

Rex chuckled as he pulled a few switches. "Funny you should ask", he said as the hyperspace corridor before them melted away, giving way to a large white planet orbited by a small moon.

Ezra raised an eyebrow, "Uh, should I recognise it?"

Rex stared up at the two bodies for a few moments, lost in some memories Ezra could tell. "That big planet is Orto Plutonia; an ice planet, very cold, homeworld of the Talz."

"So, what? She hid the kits in the snow?", Ezra couldn't tell if Zeb was joking or not.

"Nah, not there", Rex took one hand and pointed it to the moon, "There. Pantora."

"Pantora?", the name was vaguely familiar to Ezra, though he couldn't recall any details about it. "Why there?"

"It was safe, under the radar, easy to hide in, and Ahsoka has powerful friends there - but you'll see all that soon enough."

Rex guided the *Starbird* towards the moon. Its dark red surface was covered by a thin covering of white clouds, and as they approached Ezra could see a moderate amount of traffic leaving and approaching the moon. The dark side of the planet was covered in clusters of lights, far more than Lothal or Garel had.

The comm suddenly blared to life, "Attention, *Starbird*. Your ship has entered Pantoran space, please confirm."

"We're here on urgent business", Rex explained. "We're expected. Code word: Soteria."

The Clone winked at him as the comm went silent. For about thirty seconds, there was nothing. Ezra was starting to worry before it suddenly came to life, a new voice on the other end.

"Acknowledged, *Starbird*. We're sending an escort to guide you in. Welcome back to Pantora, Captain Rex."

"Escort?", Ezra couldn't believe it. He'd never had an escort before, at least one that wasn't made up of TIE fighters.

Sure enough, two sleek blue fighters approached them from the direction the planet and took positions at the wings, guiding them down to the surface. A set of coordinates flashed up on the Starbird's screen which Rex followed.
Ezra got a good look at Pantora as they descended. The terrain was flat, covered in marshes or thin forests. It wasn't as bright or colourful as Lothal, but it had a rugged natural beauty that he still appreciated. Before long, Ezra saw a large towering city appear on the horizon. The buildings were tall and densely packed, making use of all of the available space. Many of the rooftops had small gardens, leisure areas, and balconies. Clearly, Pantora was wealthy, probably wealthier than any planet Ezra had visited before.

Rex kept flying towards a corner of the city and Ezra could start to see a landing area. To his surprise, a small crowd of people was already waiting on the platform. A few airspeeders were parked nearby and the whole pad seemed to have been cordoned off on a moment's notice just for them. As Rex set their ship down, Ezra could see the crowd were not just curious observes, but officials, politicians, and guards.

Rex powered down the engines and stood up, motioning Ezra to follow. "You look terrified", Rex observed as he led the way towards the exit ramp.

"I don't think I've ever had an official escort before, especially not for such a fancy planet."

The Clone chuckled, "Well get used to it, Ezra. You'll be getting a lot more of them."

The ramp opened up and the three of them stepped out onto the landing platform. A dozen Pantoran guards lined each side of the platform between them and the main welcoming party. At the far end of the platform stood a well-dressed middle-aged Pantoran woman with short pink hair, in an expensive looking purple tunic and with a golden headdress set on her temples. Ezra didn't need to be a genius to figure out that she was important.

"Captain Rex", she greeted as the trio finally reached her, "It is good to see you again."

Rex bowed his head, "Senator, it's been too long." The older man turned back to his friends, "May I present Garazeb Orrellios of the New Republic and Lasan Honour Guard."

Zeb waved his hand awkwardly, "Uh, hehe, hi there."

Rex then reached a hand to Ezra, "And this is Jedi Knight Ezra Bridger. Ezra, meet Senator Riyo Chuchi. Senator for Pantora, and Ahsoka's trusted friend."

Ezra extended a hand to her, "It's a honour to meet you, ma'am."

The Pantoran clasped his hand and smiled honestly, "It is I who is honoured, Master Jedi."

"I'll be honest", he pulled his hand way, "The escort was one thing, but I can't say I expected a Senatorial welcome."

"The Jedi are the heroes of the Republic, are they not?", the woman looked almost amused at Ezra's comment.

He took another look around at the guards and the collection of officials watching him, whispering among themselves. "Yeah... I suppose they were."

"You still are, Master Jedi. The people of Pantora owe the Jedi an immense debt, as we do to Ahsoka personally. We're honoured to receive you." The Senator nodded to her aides, "Now, if you follow me. The speeders are already waiting."

Chuchi turned and led the way towards a trio of large land speeders. Ezra let Rex go first and walked side-by-side with Zeb.
Zeb leaned down with a mocking voice, "Oooh, Master Jedi."

"Don't cause an incident, Zeb", he sighed at his friend.

The crowd of onlookers parted and the whispering continued. Ezra didn't like having so many eyes on him, he wasn't used to it. They reached the front speeder and climbed in. Rex and the Senator facing back towards Zeb and Ezra in the rear. The other two speeders filled up with guards and aides before they pulled away from the platform.

They flew low through the city and Ezra was mesmerised by the scale of it all. Captial City back on Lothal was huge but it was nothing like this. Lothal, after all, was just a quiet mining colony, but Pantora was a major economic, cultural, and political powerhouse.

"So these children", Chuchi said as they headed towards the outskirts of the city, "They're to become Jedi?"

Ezra pulled his attention away from the dazzling view, "Yes, that's the plan."

"I thought as much. Ahsoka was never really clear about who they were, but I had my suspicions."

"How do you know Ahsoka?", Ezra asked curiously.

She looked off to the thinning towers of the city as they headed towards the outskirts. "We go back a long way. During the Clone Wars, the Trade Federation orchestrated a kidnapping attempt of then-Chairman Papanoida's daughters. Ahsoka took it upon herself to rescue them, revealing the Federation's deception and leading to the end of their blockade of our world. As I said, the people of Pantora owe her an immense debt."

Rex chuckled heartily, "The Senator's leaving out the part where she went along and helped bust 'em out too."

"I wasn't the one cutting up battle droids with a lightsaber", she told the Clone. "I thought she was dead after the Fall of the Jedi, so you can imagine my surprise when I returned to my office several years ago to find her waiting in the corner, coming to ask for my help in hiding some strangers."

Ezra relaxed a bit in the comfortable seat, "Forgive me, Senator, but why did she come to you?"

The speeder lurched downwards as they cleared the last of the city, now taking them low across the open plains and marshes.

"I asked myself the same question. That we were already friends was part of it, I suppose. More practically, I wasn't involved with the Rebellion. Senator Organa and Senator Mothma did approach me but the Imperial presence on Orto Plutonia made it too great a risk." Ezra sensed some reluctance and maybe guilt from her, maybe she had wanted to fight the Empire too. "Besides, the Empire was a lot less reserved about cracking down on non-human worlds like our own", she explained.

In the distance, Ezra could see a small town through the morning fog. That seemed to be where they were heading.

Chuchi noticed him looking at the town. "Pantora has always been fiercely independent, but we will help those in need. When Ahsoka approached me, I was already overseeing a refugee resettlement programme. With my influence, it was easy enough to slip a few extra families into the lists and keep them safe. We hoped the Empire wouldn't be able to find them, and we were right."
Ezra asked the obvious question that had been on his mind, "How many?"

"Eight children, although the families came too. All in all, it only amounted to thirty individuals; hardly a difficult thing to manage among the thousands we were already accommodating."

The woman's positivity and resolve were admirable. Ahsoka might have been a friend, but Chuchi risking herself and her people to help her and the Jedi was no small sacrifice. Kanan had always told him how much the Jedi meant to the galaxy back in the Republic, but growing up under the Empire meant that Ezra had never seen it first hand. Sure, everyone heard the stories, but they also heard the propaganda the Empire put out. Deciding fact from fiction had become difficult as the Empire's hand tightened. Fortunately, people like Chuchi remembered what the Jedi really were, and now they'd be able to show it again.

Their speeders slowed as they reached the small town square. It was nothing glamorous, just some sturdy houses and other buildings to provide a comfortable living for people. They went low over the rooftops, attracting many gawkers among the crowds below. The pilots brought them down in a small square in the town in which several figures were waiting in doorways and peering out of windows. Some Pantoran guards were already there to receive them.

As soon as they set down, the guards formed up on either side of the speeder. Ezra appreciated the display, but it felt a bit unnecessary.

The Senator surprised him by extending her arm, "After you, Master Jedi."

"Oh...", Ezra looked awkwardly at the line of guards, "Thank you, Senator."

He did his best not to make a fumbling mess of himself like the old days as he stepped out of the speeder, followed by Senator Chuchi, Rex, and a sniggering Zeb.

Ezra took a good look around the square they were in. About a dozen houses were centred around where they landed, and twice as many faces peered at them from doorways and rooftops. A few people moved to the doorways as they dismounted the speeders. As expected, almost every house had a child or two, while a few others must have been for other extended family that came. Ahsoka had clearly travelled far and wide to find many of these children. There were a few humans, Twi'leks, Quarren, even Zabraks, and a few more.

There was no mistaking what these children were. Their presence in the force was strong. Unfocused, but powerful. They could be Jedi, he could feel that potential in them. But that wasn't all he felt from them. There was... anxiety. Uncertainty. Fear.

Senator Chuchi stepped forward to address them. "Citizens of Qadesh. Thank you for being so accommodating to our sudden visit. However, I bring with me someone very important." With a smile, she presented him to them, "Master Jedi, over to you."

Every eye went to him as he stepped past the guards and into the centre of the square. He hadn't been ready to make any sort of speech, so here went nothing.

He took a deep breath, "Hello everyone. My name is Ezra Bridger. I'm sure you-"

"Har'ee oocha mou pouka!", a familiar feminine voice interrupted from a doorway across the square. "Ane'na Pipey!"

Ezra looked to the source. Even after all these years he never forgot a face, even that of an Ithorian. "Oora!", he waved a hand to her as a small Ithorian child ran from the house out to him, "Pipey?"
The Ithorian child seemed to remember him too and crashed into his legs for a hug.

"She says she's happy to see you", Chuchi said from behind. He was relieved someone here could speak Ithorese fluently, or this was going to be a difficult conversation.

Ezra could never forget Pipey or Oora. It was Pipey that he, Kanan, and Zeb had rescued on Takobo many years ago. It'd been nine years and the Ithorian had grown a lot, but somehow he could still recognise Ezra after all this time. The child let go and ran behind him, attacking Zeb's shins with the same ferocity.

"Oh, hehe, I remember you", Zeb said almost affectionately, "How ya' doing, kit?"

The child's mother, Oora, approached Ezra with open arms and clomped Ezra into a hug too. She spoke to him again in Ithorese, and even though he barely understood a word he could see that she was happy to see him.

"She's admiring how much you've grown." Once more, he appreciated Chuchi's translations.

Oora's obvious trust of him seemed to convince the others in the square to relax a bit. They started to come out of their homes and look curiously at the newcomers. The children were more interested and more willing to approach. The older relatives - the parents, the siblings, the grandparents - were more reserved, and whispered among themselves in basic, Ryl, Huttese, and more tongues. Only one other woman approached. An elderly human woman nervously came forward with a small blue-eyed brunette child beside her, no older than Pipey.

"You... you're a friend of Ahsoka's?", the woman stuttered nervously.

Ezra nodded respectfully, "Yes, I am. What's your name?"

"D-Darja. I don't believe we met, but your friend saved my life, and my Alora's."

The child's name clicked instantly. "Ah, I remember Alora", he knelt down to her level, "Hey Alora, do you remember me? We rescued you before, remember?"

"I think so...", she nodded sheepishly to him and then clutched closer to her grandmother.

Darja hugged her reassuringly with one arm. "It's okay, Alora, they're not going to hurt you. Everything's going to be alright."

Ezra got to his feet. Darja and Oora's friendliness had encouraged the other families to gather around closer and not hide in their homes at least. They must have known why they were taken here and that their children were unique. With his arrival, they might also know what he was here for.

"Do you know why we're here?", he asked Darja.

The old woman didn't look at him, but instead tearfully down at Alora. "Yes", she mumbled. "They're going to be Jedi."

Ezra addressed the whole crowd, "They'll be part of something greater. Once, thousands of Jedi protected the galaxy and shielded it from danger. Now, there's only a handful of us. Your children will start the process of rebuilding what was lost and putting in place something that can hopefully save lives for generations."

Rex cleared his throat and stood with his hands behind his back and chest puffed out, speaking
with all the authority he could muster. "Many of you were around in the Clone Wars, so you know what the Jedi were. We know it won't be easy to give up your children, that's difficult for anyone, but take it from someone who fought side by side with dozens of Jedi when I say that every one of your children will change the galaxy for the better."

Ezra was grateful for Rex's support. He had more experience with the Jedi Order than any of them, and he was someone people could find a lot to trust in. It looked like the parents took Rex's words to heart. There were some whispers and movement, and then tears.

Among the crowd of parents, a Twi'lek woman stood up. She couldn't have been older than thirty or so, her green skin and brown eyes unburdened by age. "You're taking them now?", she questioned in her thick Rylothi accent.

Ezra faltered for a moment. The resemblance was uncanny. Hera...

Rex answered for him, "Yes, the time is now."

The Twi'lek mother sighed, "I... see." She looked back to her young child, a Twi'lek girl no older than ten. "W-we'll need some time. To pack...and prepare, and... you know."

Ezra watched as she quickly turned away and shakily took her daughter's hand. Oora was down on one knee whispering something to Pipey in Ithorese. It was easy to tell what it was when Pipey's eyes widened, his shoulders drooped, and then his arms grabbed his mother as tight as they could. Darja was already leading Alora away, but Ezra could see her wiping the tears from her face as she did.

These parents were proud, he could feel that, and they were grateful for being rescued from the Empire. Even so, their hearts were breaking. These were their children, their grandchildren, the things that meant most in the world to them. Of course they were hurting, who wouldn't?

Hera had hurt too. Even she couldn't bare to give Jacen up to Luke. Hera knew the Jedi better than almost anyone left in the galaxy, knew Luke could be trusted, and was always someone who would do the right thing - yet even she wasn't able to do it. Ezra remembered how she broke down into tears in Jacen's room when he first spoke to her alone since coming back. Hera couldn't do it, and Ezra didn't make her.

Why should this be any different?

"No." He said loudly, making every parent stop in their tracks, "No, this isn't right."

Once again, he felt every eye on him.

"What's not right?", Rex tilted his head and furrowed his brow.

"This", Ezra raised his hands to the families, "Taking them away."

Rex looked at them and then back to him, "Ezra, you know the Jedi take them from their families at a young age. It's just the way things are."

"No, it's not!", his voice was louder than he meant it to be. "It's the way things were. We saved them, Rex. The Inquisitors wanted to take these kids and make them into dark side servants, but we saved them. If we turn around and do the same thing - take them from their families to force them into becoming Jedi - then we're no better than the Empire."

His outburst had brought the whole square to a standstill.
Ezra steeled himself and took a step further into the middle of the square. "I won't make you give up your children. We're not the Empire. If you wish to keep your child here, that's your choice. However, if you choose to let them become Jedi, you won't have to give them up. You can come with us to Lothal. We'll give you a place to stay and you won't have to abandon your loved ones. You have my word."

There was a long silence. The families exchanged looks among themselves. It was Oora who stepped forward saying something in her native language.

"She says...", Chuchi stopped as she translated it, "She says that if you'll have her, she would like to go with her child."

"So would I", Darja shouted.

A Weequay man raised his hand, "Us too."

"Thank you, Jedi!", the Twi'lek mother cried out.

A chorus of shouting and cheering erupted. In the end, it seemed every family would let their child come to train so long as they too could go with them. Ezra was going to have his students, and he wasn't going to tear families apart to do it. The crowd dispersed back into their homes with smiles on their faces and excitement in their hearts.

Zeb lumbered up to his side. "Uh, I'm not sure we'll have enough space back on Lothal for all of the families."

Ezra hadn't been worried about that when he'd offered. "I'll talk to Ryder. I'm sure we can work something out."

"I'm not even sure we'll have enough room on the Starbird", Rex added.

Ezra shrugged, "Then we'll make multiple trips."

"Nonsense, Master Jedi." Ezra had almost forgot Senator Chuchi was here. "Any ships or supplies you need will be provided for you, courtesy of the Pantoran government."

"Uhhh...", Ezra didn't know what to say, "Thank you, Senator. There's very gracious of you."

He clearly hadn't done a good job of hiding his surprise.

Rex slapped him on the back with a hearty chuckle, "Welcome to a new era, Ezra. Get used to it."

Chuchi and Rex walked back to the speeders and started speaking with some of the aides and guards that had joined them. Ezra turned back to watch his future students and their families scramble about eagerly to start packing their things for their new life.

"You think you're doing the right thing?", Zeb asked.

There wasn't a doubt in Ezra's mind. "It's not about thinking that I'm doing the right thing. I feel like I'm doing the right thing, that's what matters."

"Yeah, well for what it's worth", Zeb lay a hand on his shoulder, "I feel like you're doing the right thing too."

Zeb disappeared behind him, leaving Ezra to watch quietly. Rex was right, this was a new era, and he'd have to get used to it. It'd take time, but the Jedi might one day reclaim their place in the
galaxy as peacekeepers and trusted protectors. There numbers might be few now, but these were the first steps into a new galaxy. However, with that new galaxy, that new era, and the New Republic, there'd also have to be a new Jedi Order. Maybe for the first time, Ezra felt like that was truly becoming a reality.

Chapter End Notes

As I said, a long chapter but they'll be back to normal after this.

I switched between a couple of perspectives in the first 'section' which I don't typically do. There's a few chapters coming up where I'll have to do this for story reasons, so I'm trying to get a bit of practice in now and it also worked better for the scene to do it this way. This scene was difficult to do with the shifting perspectives and the whole Hammerly thing. In case it wasn't clear, the Voice is telling the Fourth Sister about Hammerly. The Voice doesn't know what Hammerly is doing, but can sense that something is going on and that it's centred around her, and that Thrawn, Faro, and/or Pellaeon have her on their mind. It's a kind of ambiguous force thingy, the sort of plot-level force use that Star Wars has sometimes, so hopefully it's not too outlandish. Hammerly's short section is just covering her report and establishing that things are escalating after the meeting earlier in the chapter. It also helps with the Imperial characterisation I mentioned before, and confirms some other things I wanted to cover from Hammerly's excursion like confirming the weapon ownership. The Luke and Ahsoka section is short and, like last time, is primarily to engage with some ideas and concepts while they're travelling. They'll start actually doing stuff next chapter, but these last two Ahsoka and Luke sections cover some important conceptual, narrative, and thematic things. There's a few easter eggs in that conversation, such as the reference to the Staff of Ragnos which is a huge nod to the amazing Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy, whose plot is pretty much what Ahsoka describes when discussing the legend. There's also a big Knights of the Old Republic reference in there too.

The really meaty part is the last Ezra section and there's a lot to talk about. I thought a lot about where Ahsoka might choose to send force-sensitives she came across and it was a while before I settled on Pantora. Other candidates were the Togruta colony on Kiros, the village where her and Lux meet Deathwatch on Carlac, or the jungle planet she is hunted by the Trandoshans on. In the end, Pantora worked best for several reasons. Riyo Chuchi is a familiar face from TCW and one of the most prominent Senators who, as far as we know, doesn't join the Rebel Alliance. I've explain some of the plot reasons Ahsoka chose her and Pantora - friendship, Papanoida's daughters, political influence, refugee resettlement, neutrality - so I won't overexplain it again here. Pantora and the Pantorans, as a relatively wealthy and important planet and people, were also the best candidate to give Ezra an impression of the importance of the Jedi to many people. Ezra has spent most of his Jedi life on the run or in exile, so isn't used to the Senatorial welcomes and outpouring of publicity and support that the Jedi received before the Empire. Using Pantora allowed me to expose Ezra to that side of being a Jedi. There's obviously many connections with the Rebels Season 2 episode Future of the Force, in which Oora, Pipey, Darja, and Alora all appear. Attaching familiar faces to this small group of children and families made it easier for Ezra to notice how much it was going to hurt to tear these families apart. It also
reminds him of Hera and her reluctance to give up Jacen to be trained by Luke, and only accepting it when Ezra offers to do it for her. I've made it clear many times that I see family as probably the most important theme in Ezra's story, and Rebels as a whole. If there's only one thing that Ezra would change about the Jedi, it would in my opinion be them taking the children away, even before changing rules on romantic attachment. It's the first major break Ezra makes from established Jedi tradition, and it's one rooted in his own values and experiences.

Lastly, two more obscure references. Riyo Chuchi mentions the name of the village as Qadesh. As always there's a meaning behind it, as Qadesh was the main settlement of the Jews during their Exodus according to the Old Testament. Soteria, the codeword used by Rex, is the Greek goddess of safety, protection, and preservation from harm, which was quite appropriate as a codeword for this secret mission to protect the children.

Next time: Ezra welcomes his students, Thrawn and the others consolidate their knowledge, Ahsoka and Luke make a plan, and the Fourth Sister plays on ambition.
Chapter 26 - Learning

To say Ryder had been helpful would be understating it massively. The Governor had barely questioned him when Ezra asked for space for about two dozen extra civilians. The families had been put up in a small corner of Capital City about twenty minutes away from the Spectre Compound; far enough to give them space, close enough to be there when needed.

More impressive was Ryder's work in and around the Spectre Compound itself. An extra house had sprung up in their courtyard for two new residents: Rex and Wolffe. They'd both decided to set aside soldiering after Jakku and were ready to put their feet up somewhere quieter. They both were going to help out Ryder with his Defence Force, and Rex had offered what help he could to Ezra when he needed it.

Next to the Compound, another collections of buildings had sprung up. Several pre-fabricated buildings had been put up to give Ezra a functioning training academy to get started with. In the centre was a main hall for meetings and some lessons. There was a storeroom, a small library for him to start filling up, an eating area, and an accommodation block that could handle twice as many students as he had now. It was no Coruscant Temple, but he didn't need it to be. A bed for his students to rest in and place for them to learn was more than enough.

The students were to stay there during the week but return to their families over weekends. It gave Ezra the perfect balance of contact time and peace of mind, as well as some private time of his own. There was a lot less for his students to do here than there would have been on Coruscant, and seeing their families would remind them what they were all there learning to protect.

With a few days for the new arrivals to settle in, it was time to formally begin their training. They were summoned just after dawn to the main hall, ready to take their first steps into a larger world. Sabine, since she'd be an important part of their training, stood up front with him. The others - Hera, Zeb, Kallus, Rex, and Chopper - came along to see the occasion.

"Pipey?", Ezra read the first name on the register.

The small Ithorian waved his hand and spoke something in Ithorian. Reminder: get those translators from Hera.

Ezra went to the next one, "Alora?"

"Here", a small child with long brown hair and bright blue eyes answered.
Ezra had known those two already. It was most of the remaining students he'd yet to get acquainted with. "Targual?", he asked aloud.

A young Quarren girl, barely a teenager, waved shyly, "Yes, Master."

He smiled warmly at her before moving on to the next name. "Jakib?"

The tallest student in the room raised a hand and grunted, "Master Bridger."

Jakib was a Zabrak with rough brown skin intersected with facial markings. His horns had already grown in on his forehead. Ezra had briefly looked at the records in the last few days and they had a pretty even spread of age groups. Jacen was their youngest at six, Jakib their oldest at sixteen, if he remembered correctly.

Ezra squinted for a few seconds at the next name. "Ulu...Fayya... Mo'Ragar?", he tried his best.

"Ulu-Fayya Mo'Ragar", a Weequay child corrected.

"Sorry about that", Ezra replied, "Can I call you Ulu?"

Ulu nodded, his long braided hair bouncing as he did, "Of course, Master."

The next name was an easier one. "Safara?"

A young humanoid woman covered in short fur, yellow eyes, and a thick accent answered, "Yes, Master."

Cathar, huh? Ezra had never met a Cathar before, there weren't that many in the galaxy. The next one however was a Twi'lek, and he knew those pretty well.

"You're Ninvere?", he asked the blue-skinned Twi'lek child.

"K-ka... I mean, yes. I am", she said shakily.

Nerves were understandable for her first day. They'd work on that, it would just take time.

Ezra stepped down the line to the next student. It was another human teenager with spiked black hair and brown eyes. "Ro-"

"Rosh Penin!", the boy interrupted eagerly.

Ezra looked up from his datapad at the smiling young man almost bouncing with excitement. Eagerness could be a good thing... in certain situations.

"And then finally", Ezra moved on to the familiar boy at the end of the line, "Jacen Syndulla."

"Yes, Uncle Ezra!", he yelled with a toothy grin.

Ezra scowled alfheartedly, "Jacen."

The boy's eyes widened, "Oh! Uh, yes, Master."

There was no getting around the unique place Jacen had here, but Ezra didn't want to mark him as some sort of favourite. During the day, Jacen was to treat him like every other student did, and Ezra would treat Jacen like every other student. There'd be plenty of time out of hours for him to be 'Uncle Ezra.'
Ezra looked over to Sabine who'd been standing arms folded on the wall behind him. "That's all of them", he said, handing the datapad over to her.

His wife brushed his hand intentionally as she took it from him. "Then you better get started, Master Jedi", she said proudly.

Ezra turned back to his new class. He clasped his hands behind his back the way Kanan would when he was in 'Jedi mode' and started to address them.

"Welcome, everyone. I hope you've all started to settle in here. Before we begin, my name is Ezra Wren-Bridger, and I'll be your main teacher while you're here. I suppose we should try introductions first", he looked at Sabine, "Care to go start, dear?"

Sabine pushed off from the wall. "I'm Sabine Wren-Bridger", she announced. Hearing the new name out loud still felt unreal. "I'll be helping with your lightsaber training and some of your other lessons."

Ezra looked over to the others, "And you guys."

"Hera Syndulla", the Twi'lek chose to ignore Jacen's clear mouthing of 'hi mom' towards her, "I'm here if you need any supplies, have any questions, or need someone to talk to. Somewhere down the line, I'll also be your flight instructor."

Zeb went next, introducing himself as the history and physical training teacher, with Sabine and Ezra helping on the latter too. Kallus had taken on the job of diplomacy and politics, while Rex would be an unclear combination of recent history, hand-to-hand, and whatever mish-mash of advice he came up with on the day-to-day. Chopper, Ezra guessed, would be there to teach them tolerance and restraint.

"Over the next few years, myself and the others here will teach you the ways of the force. You'll also study history, diplomacy, healing, piloting - among other things", Ezra continued.

Rosh's hand shot up. "Master Ezra! Master Ezra!", he asked eagerly.

"Yes, Rosh?"

"When do we get our lightsabers?!"

"Not for a while yet", Ezra chuckled. "Being a Jedi isn't about having a laser sword. It's about discipline and the force."

Ezra saw Safara smirk and crack her knuckles. "Master Ezra, when do we get to the force stuff? I heard Jedi can tear a Star Destroyer out of the sky with just their mind."

"I don't know where you heard such an insane story", he laughed at the ridiculous idea.

Their eagerness reminded him of himself. He'd wanted a lightsaber before he even understood what that truly meant; he'd wanted to know how to throw stormtroopers down hallways before he'd even bothered to ask what the force even was. It was only natural. He wasn't hear to condemn them for it, but guide them away from that.

"The Jedi aren't about power", he told them. "The most important traits for a Jedi aren't swordsmanship or force powers but other things. Compassion, honour, sacrifice, patience, honesty, wisdom, and humility - those are what being a Jedi is about. It's less about fighting the bad than it is about defending the good. But, you'll all have plenty of time to learn that."
Ezra nodded over to Hera. She came forward carrying a small box of holodiscs. Hera took one out and handed it to Pipey, and then began making her way down the line.

"I've put together some of the basic texts from my collection", Ezra explained. "Read them, learn them, discuss them, and come to me with any questions you may have."

He let Hera finish passing out the holodics and then for the whispering among his students to stop. They were all copies of the basic Jedi tenants including the Code, some basic rules and ideas, and some very basic theory on the force that he'd compiled himself and from the stuff Ahsoka had given him. It wasn't much but it was enough to get started until he could refine and order everything he'd been given.

"You'll be split into three groups for your training. Jacen, Pipey, and Alora, you're the youngest so you'll be one group. Ulu, Tarqual, and Ninvere will be our second group. The rest of you - Rosh, Safara, and Jakib - you're our last group."

"Great! When do we start?" Rosh's impatience was clearly something they'd have to work on.

"Relax, Rosh. Patience is a virtue you'll need if you want to become a Jedi", Ezra counselled. "As for when we start: now. On those holodiscs is the Jedi Code. Today, I want you all to read it and think about what it means. Over the next few days and weeks, we'll discuss what it means."

The students started to exchange a few worried, excited, or confused glances and whispers.

"That's all for now. Talk within your groups and beyond. I promise that this is not the simple task it might appear to be", he instructed. Ezra had found out that latter part for himself years ago.

Hera gently pulled at his shoulder, "Hey, you forgetting something?"

Ezra took a second to realise what she meant, "Oh, yeah. Good luck, and may the force be with you."

*Short and sweet. *Ezra didn't want to lay too much on them, those holodiscs were going to give them enough to digest over the next few days and weeks. It also bought him time to really look at how he wanted to approach this. What to teach, when to teach it, how to teach it - he hadn't quite figured that out yet. His own lessons hadn't exactly typical either, so he'd just have to do it on the fly.

He swallowed hard, more anxious than he wanted to admit. Still, he knew he could do this. Not just for his own sake, nor for Luke and Ahsoka's. Ezra owed it to his students to guide them as best he could, no matter what. That was true now, it'll be true tomorrow, and it'd be true for however many more students he took under his wing no matter where they came from.

"Lothal to Ezra?", Sabine interrupted him with a smile. "Staring off into space won't prepare your lessons, Master Jedi", she teased.

Ezra grinned at her as an idea popped into his head. "Speaking of which, I think I just had an idea of where to start."

Pellaeon caught up with Commodore Faro and Commander Hammerly just as they reached the last turning to Thrawn's office.

"Ah, it's good back to have you back, Commander", he called from behind as he closed the gap.
Commander Hammerly let out an exasperated sigh, "I'm glad to be back, Captain."

The young Commander had a datapad in her hand, doubtlessly the one with the details of her report on it. He and Faro had already been given the rundown of the basics that all but confirmed Bridger's brush with the Fourth Sister, but there were still too few answers to too many questions.

The door Sergeant saluted as the three officers approached and opened the door, far too used to their faces to bother with code cylinders any more. "The Grand Admiral's just finishing up, he says to go on through."

They entered into the corridor to Thrawn's office and saw that the door to the room was already open. Inside, Thrawn and a black uniformed man stood with their backs to the door, looking at a holographic schematic of the Chimaera. Pellaeon could hear the end of their conversation as they approached.

"And how long is this cycle?", Thrawn stroked his chin as he analysed the schematic.

It was the Chief Engineer, Lieutenant Torbal, again. "Ten minutes at best, hard to tell."

Thrawn turned his head to the other man, "Is that enough time?"

The Chief Engineer looked at his datapad and then up to the schematic again. "I think so", he said uncertainly, "I'm not sure why we'd really bother trying though."

Thrawn glanced back over his shoulder, hearing Pellaeon, Faro, and Hammerly approach. "It is simply good to know." Thrawn turned around and motioned towards the door, "Now, I must see to another urgent matter. Good work, Lieutenant."

With a salute, the Chief Engineer began to march out of the office. He gave Pellaeon and the others the expected formal acknowledgement before disappearing down the corridor and out of sight.

Pellaeon looked at the schematic still projected above Thrawn's desk. It was the Chimaera, as he'd already assumed, with a single red point marked towards the aft of the ship. What that point marked though, it didn't say.

"More preparations?", Pellaeon asked as Thrawn switched off the hologram.

Thrawn nodded, "Nothing exciting, I must say. The Chief Engineer has done a thorough systems sweep and scoured every inch of the ship, all to make sure things are working as intended. Several maintenance cycles are being run to ensure the Chimaera's performance is optimal. " The Chiss went to his seat behind the desk, "Commander Hammerly, I hope the return journey was comfortable."

The Commodore took her usual seat in the left chair, while Pellaeon chose to stand and let Hammerly take the right. The Commander deserved the chance to get off her feet after such a long mission after all.

She huffed a laugh, "That freighter of yours isn't the most comfortable ship, Grand Admiral. Still, if I wanted luxury I wouldn't have joined the Empire. Here", she handed her datapad over to him, "Your report, as requested."

Thrawn took it and scanned it quickly, already knowing the jist of it.

"We confirmed the serial number again. The weapon she found is definitely the one Bridger took in his escape", Faro explained as he read.
"I see." Thrawn put the datapad down on his desk. "And the sensors are hidden in place?", he asked the Commander.

"Yes, sir. If anyone goes within a quarter of a click of that place, we'll know."

Thrawn's mood was sullen and reserved, even more so than usual. Pellaeon had hoped that some answers would be something to be happy about.

"Exemplary work, Commander." He stood up and walked over to the statue behind his chair, "Tell me, Commander. In your report, you refer to the structure as a 'temple.' Why?"

"That's just what it looked like. Quiet place, not much decor, simple architecture and all that." She pursed her lips, "And it had... I don't know, this aura, I don't know how to say it. It just felt like a temple, if that makes sense, sir."

"It does indeed, Commander." Thrawn turned back to them, "If I was to ask you all how you'd describe Site Three, what would you call it?"

They'd all had plenty of time on Site Three after Bridger got away there. He and Faro had spent several days analysing and cataloguing the ruins and... other things down there. The central structure though, with that altar, mist, and smashed orb, had always struck Pellaeon as some sort of temple too.

"It was a temple", Faro was on the same wavelength, as usual.

"I'd agree. Do you also recall what the Emperor's personal interest on Lothal was?"

That too was well known.

"There was a Jedi temple there. He had part of it brought aboard the Chimaera, if I remember correctly", Pellaeon answered.

"Yes, he did", Faro said.

For some reason, the Emperor had a small section of the temple rebuilt aboard the Chimaera. Unfortunately, all that was left after the battle was rubble. Bridger had left the thing a broken mess of rubble that had been useless to them, even despite Thrawn's many attempts to study it in the first few months of their mission.

"I may not know the force but I do know patterns. The Emperor devoted a huge amount of attention to uncovering and recovering Lothal's temple. Ezra Bridger and Kanan Jarrus, according to Imperial records, had both visited the site at one time or another. Then, we come out here, and Bridger manages to inexplicably disappear at one temple only to reappear at another. Quite the coincidence, it would seem."

"There's no such thing", Pellaeon had been with Thrawn long enough to know that, "What are you thinking?"

Thrawn returned to his chair and picked up the Jedi Temple Guard mask set on the stand to his right - an oddly appropriate object for him to have to hand.

"There is something in these temples. Maybe not all of them, but certainly some of them. What that something is, I do not fully know. At the very least, Bridger's escape leads me to believe that there is some form of transport available to certain force wielders there. Furthermore, it seems that many force wielders are drawn to these temples for one reason or another. They are being guided there,
but I do not know for what purpose."

Pellaeon had heard crazier theories from Thrawn over the years, but this was certainly right up there.

"Do you think that's what the Fourth Sister has been hiding from us? This... temple power?"

The Grand Admiral set the mask down. "Not entirely, there’s something more. Assuming the likely reality that both Site Two and Site Three have some link with this power, if she was hiding this power then it’s Site Three she’d have been concerned about, not the smaller area of Site Two. The fact that she herself also didn’t use whatever means of transport Bridger did suggests that either she was prevented somehow, or, that she doesn’t fully understand this power herself, possibly both of these. Either way, something happened at Site Two that did not at Site Three."

Commodore Faro knew where this was going. "I suppose you have a theory about what that something was, Grand Admiral?"

"Not something, Commodore. Someone."

Pellaeon leaned forward with both hands on the desk, "Someone?"

"You weren't with us at Atollon, Captain, but you two were", he said to Faro and Hammerly, "The creature, the Bendu, was powerful in the force, far beyond Bridger or Jarrus. There exists in the galaxy things beyond our frame of reference. It is possible that whatever the Emperor sensed out here is not as much a thing as a who. The Emperor sensed the Grysk, a species of individuals not an arbitrary power in the Unknown Regions. He sensed something similar for our own mission, only focused and more powerful as he put it. Perhaps, focused in a single individual or several individuals."

Faro had her hands on her forehead, eyes shut tight. "How... how does any of this even begin to make sense?"

Thrawn shrugged his shoulders, "Many small things point to the same conclusion. If my theory is correct, then this new being would have to be immensely powerful in the force. The Fourth Sister is many things but not, admittedly, a coward. Not for bravery mind you, she's simply too naive or overconfident to be a coward. However, she did fear the Emperor and Darth Vader, not for their authority but their power. Something similarly or even more powerful than them would, quite rightly, strike fear into her. I believe it was fear, as much as a desire for secrecy, that led her to hide Site Two from us."

Pellaeon's head was starting to hurt. He pinched the bridge of his nose to ease the tension, "So... what? Someone else was at Site Two?"

"No, I don't believe so. However, she must have become aware of it somehow. The Fourth Sister was led to Sites Two and Three by the force, as if it was communicating to her. Maybe it was this being that drew her there. If so, that would suggest it has an ability to communicate and influence things beyond its physical reach. If force users can compel people to do their will through mind tricks, implant thoughts and ideas, or coordinate and share information as Jedi like Bridger and Jarrus did in battle, then it's possible that this being has been communicating with the Fourth Sister somehow."

"That's... how do you even-?", Hammerly stammered out.

"It would explain her unusual behaviour, her enigmatic desires, and perhaps her ability to know
things she should not otherwise be aware of", he said, referring to the Inquisitor's outburst at their recent meeting. "She is ambitious and served the Emperor for fear of his power and the promise of her own. It is probably no different here."

Faro sighed and raised her hands, "It's an interesting theory, Grand Admiral, but I'm not sure there's enough there to prove any of it."

"Nor can I provide it", Thrawn responded, "But even when an answer satisfies one question it fails to answer others. Take, for example, this ruin below us. It seems to have been constructed to make it as difficult as possible to get in to - or out of. We all saw the destruction wrought at Site Two and Site Three. Both of those locations led us here. If what happened at Sites Two and Three was somehow caused by or involved with whatever is below us, then it would explain the creation of such a secure facility. Any means necessary to contain it would have been taken."

"I...", Pellaeon hung his head, "$... don't know, sir."

"No other explanation can answer every question. Of course, there are still gaps in our knowledge, but given that we already know of powerful force users hidden in the galaxy, that force users can communicate with each other to influence behaviour and action, and that something very real destroyed both Site Two and Site Three - two locations that led us to to this hidden and very secure location - the only answer is that someone is below us. It is communicating with the Fourth Sister, it is helping her to coordinate against us, and is, without a doubt, a threat to every living being in the galaxy."

Pellaeon had heard Thrawn make outlandish claims before. He'd seen the man concoct theories and prove them right, or adapt them later to uncover the truth. In all his years though, the Chiss had never proposed something so utterly ridiculous, so completely far-flung, so unbelievably insane, as he had now. That would have been fine if it wasn't for the fact that the theory held water. There really was nothing else that fit every odd circumstance of this gods-forsaken mission.

"Then what can we do?", Pellaeon asked reluctantly.

Thrawn thought for a moment. "Unfortunately, we are still waiting for some pieces to fall into place. However, Commander Hammerly's mission has all but confirmed my worst fears."

"So we just sit here and cross our fingers, hoping...", Pellaeon looked over at Hammerly and decided she'd be owed an explanation soon anyway, "hoping that Bridger and Skywalker turn up before this thing breaks free?"

"No", Thrawn replied, "The Fourth Sister will probably want us out of the picture before that. It's already no longer a matter of if our division descends into open conflict, but when. I believe all we can do is prepare for this schism and for the arrival of our new allies."

"What about the others? Sarlis, Hux, and everyone else. Where do they fit in all of this?", Faro asked.

"With the Inquisitor's aid from this being and their inexperience with what we've already encountered, Grand Admiral Sloane's reinforcements will be hard to convince of this threat. More than likely, they will side with her."

Pellaeon furrowed his brow, "And Sarlis?"

Thrawn paused to think, "She might be able to help us."

"How so?", Pellaeon had never seen Thrawn present Sarlis as being useful at all.
The Grand Admiral stood up from his chair and turned around again to the statues behind him. "I will speak with her", he didn't turn around, "At the very least, I might be able to ensure she does not ultimately join the Fourth Sister."

Pellaeon didn't like the sound of that plan one bit. Sarlis was a lot of things but not dependable nor clever. Relying on her was going to be a gamble that Pellaeon prayed would pay off.

"Then that leaves us", Faro said dejectedly.

Thrawn turned back, "We will need to make our preparations. Commodore, ensure a thorough accounting of all men, materials, and resources aboard the Chimaera. Increase shifts as well. The extra time on duty will ensure our crew are in the correct mindset when the inevitable occurs."

"What about the Myrmidon?", Pellaeon asked.

"The same, increased shifts and full inventories. Get your Chief Engineer to do a thorough sweep of the ship, as I did for mine, and ensure it is in optimal condition", he commanded.

"Aye, I'll get it done", Pellaeon sighed, "What about you?"

Thrawn went back to his chair and steepled his fingers. "We have a few tools at our disposal. I will get Lieutenant Xoxtin to resupply all of our ships with the surplus proton bombs General Veers transferred to us." He paused and looked at Hammerly, "I will also get them assigned to the freighter, putting every possible ship into a useful condition." Thrawn moved on swiftly, "And of course, I will handle Captain Sarlis."

"So what is this place?", Luke asked as Ahsoka brought the shuttle low over the horizon.

After reaching their initial destination, Ahsoka had set a course for a nearby system to change the fuel cells. Luke had never thought to ask how she knew that there'd be a good place to stop over there. It was a lush jungle world with expansive blue seas. Ahsoka made for an area far north of the equator and along the coast, setting their shuttle down on the smooth white sands that lay between sea and jungle.

"This is where Ezra spent five years of his life", Ahsoka explained.

"Here?", Luke admired the view from the cockpit, "There's worse places I suppose."

Ahsoka flicked some switches to turn off the engines and rose from her chair. She didn't grab her staff nor double-check her lightsabers, meaning this was definitely a safe place. Luke still checked his weapons on instinct, just to be safe.

He was first to the shuttle's door to get out into the open. The entry stairs dropped but Luke just jumped down to the sand himself, using the force to cushion his impact.

"Ahh, fresh air", he shouted as he took in a few blissful breaths.

It was nice to feel wind on his face and sun on his skin again. The shuttle was nice but it got claustrophobic quickly, and boring since he wasn't at the controls like he'd prefer. This planet was as nice a place as any for Luke to stretch his legs. It reminded him a bit of Yavin IV with the jungles, and a bit of Dagobah with its quiet isolation.

There was a charm to this place that he could already see. The galaxy felt so far away here and it'd be easy to shut everything away and live a quiet and peaceful life. The gentle crashing of the waves
on the beach, the noise of the wind blowing the trees, the distant chirping of animals in the jungle - it was a rare moment of tranquillity in a galaxy of chaos. Luke enjoyed the thought of retiring to a quiet place like this. Not that he ever would, his life was certain to be far too busy for that, but in another life he might have looked forward to settling down somewhere like here.

"It is beautiful", Ahsoka observed. The Torgruta sat on one of the bottom steps to the shuttle, watching Luke take in the surroundings. "Lonely though", she added.

"I guess it would be", he agreed.

The thin brush at the edge of the jungle rustled with slight movement and a quiet chirp, followed by another, and then some more. Then, a small two-legged creature with beady eyes and scaly skin hopped into view.

Luke pointed to the animal, "Not so lonely after all."

Ahsoka lifted her head and smiled, "Oh, I was wondering when they'd show up."

It scurried over to him with inquisitive squeaks and tilted its head curiously as it looked him up and down. Luke reached out his right hand to touch it, which it sniffed and then recoiled from. It jumped back a step before coming forward and inspecting his hand again.

"Jittery little thing, aren't you?", Luke laughed quietly.

"They like you", Ahsoka called out to him. "They liked Sabine too. Ezra was always great at connecting with animals, I'm guessing he had a hand in making them so trusting of us. I think Sabine told me recently that he named them 'loth-lizards.'"

Luke raised an eyebrow at the odd name, "Loth-lizards?"

Ahsoka shrugged, "Well, you can take Ezra out of Lothal..."

The animal nuzzled into his metallic fingers and squeaked affectionately. Soon enough a few others started to make their way out of the jungle to gawk at the new arrivals to their little world.

"So, what are you thinking next?", he asked over his shoulder, "Any ideas about how we start?"

She sighed, "Honesty? Part of me was hoping we'd just sort of stumble our way into it. That's what happened last time."

"What you're saying is that you don't have a plan?", Luke clarified.

"Not quite", Ahsoka replied. She looked around and then up a the sky. "Last time, there was a call in the force that became clearer after we came here. It led us to the next leg of the journey."

Luke thought hard to remember Ahsoka's account of her previous journey to the Unknown Regions. "Which was the planet with the gateway to that... thing, right?"

"Yes, to the World Between Worlds."

*The World Between Worlds.* Ezra and Ahsoka had to run it by him several times before he'd even begun to understand what they were talking about, let alone accept it. The way Ahsoka told it, it was a sort of 'dimension' in the force, a physical manifestation of the galaxy's interconnectedness, that linked places powerful in the force. Lothal's Jedi Temple, Coruscant's Jedi Temple, even the cave on Dagobah; all of them were somehow linked. It took force users to access it in the first
place, and all sorts of crazy tricks were needed to figure out how to open a gateway.

Ezra had used one to save Ahsoka at Malachor, and to escape once while on the run from an Inquisitor out here. The way Ahsoka would speak and think about the World Between Worlds made him think that it was somehow involved with where she'd been during their struggle against the Empire. If the power contained within the World Between Worlds was as dangerous as Ahsoka and Ezra believed it to be, then Luke completely understood her making such a tremendous sacrifice to guard it so long as the Emperor lived.

"Wait a second...", Luke recalled the details of Ezra's time out here, "Wasn't that where he spoke to Master Yoda?"

Ahsoka smiled, "You're way ahead of me. In times like these, your father and I always turned to someone like Master Yoda or Obi Wan to help us out."

Luke hadn't communed with Ben or Master Yoda in a long time, not since he saw them at Endor. He'd just been busy with wrapping up the remnants of the Empire and getting on with his search of the Emperor's observatories. He hadn't quite figured out how that whole force spirit thing worked yet.

"How do you know we'll be able to contact them?", he asked.

"It's easier for them to reach out to us, and vice versa, from places strong in the force like at the gateway. It's not guaranteed, but it'll be much easier", Ahsoka explained.

He squinted at her, "I thought you destroyed the gateway? Would it still even work"

"Not quite. They can't really be destroyed, only sealed or damaged temporarily", she replied nonchalantly.

Luke sat up more, "How do you know so much about this stuff? Gateways and force spirits and all that?"

She smiled down at her feet. "A good question, but for another time."

Luke was curious, but didn't want to push her. He trusted Ahsoka wholeheartedly after all. If it was important, then she'd tell him when it mattered. Maybe she never would, but that was her choice.

"Come on", Ahsoka got to her feet, "Let's change this fuel cell and then we can take a walk for a bit. I'd like to stretch my legs somewhere too."

Brushing off the sand on his clothes, Luke stood up and went to follow Ahsoka into the shuttle, sending those loth-lizards scurrying away. The sooner the engineering work was over, the better.

He'd only put one boot on the step before he felt compelled to turn back for a moment. The loth-lizards were still hopping about on the sand, skittering around and fighting each other playfully. The wind was calm and the skies were clear. Everything seemed perfectly normal. He was about to turn back when a small shape of white and green caught his eye on one of the tree branches.

A bird? Luke couldn't take his eyes off it for some reason. Its slender tail, smooth feathers, and bright green eyes looked oddly familiar. Say, haven't I seen that before?

"Luke?", Ahsoka poked her head out from the top of the shuttle, "You coming?"

He brushed it off as nothing. "Yeah, yeah, sorry."
Luke hopped up the last few steps and headed straight for the fresh fuel cells stacked in the corner of the cargo hold. His thoughts had already moved on to other things, so he didn't notice the extra few seconds Ahsoka spent at the door before joining him. Nor did he notice how her spirits slightly lifted for the next few hours as the ghost of a smile lingered on her lips.

Sarlis pulled on her officer's cap and tucked the last wayward strands of black hair under its rim. After all these years, she still made sure to dress well. It had been expected on Coruscant from every good officer and the Captain wasn't going to let it slip now. It was all about making a good impression, it always had been.

Not that her quarters lived up to that standard. There was only so much you could do with such a plain room on the edges of the galaxy. Just a simple bed, a simple desk, and a boring view of the same orange-brown planet they'd been over for months. Sarlis had used up the last of her stockpiles of actually good wines and food years ago. If she'd known she'd be out here this long, she might have kept some aside - certainly the Alderaanian wine would have been a rare vintage when they finally got home. Alas, she was denied even that small luxury now. All she could do to remember better times was dress like she was still in them, and not stuck out here for more than half a decade doing archaeology.

"Look at you, Amita", she told herself in the mirror, "Prime of your life, destined for a good rank and a comfortable living, but you get stuck with this."

She ran her fingers over the bags under eyes. Sleep was hard and brief out here. It had done a number on her mind, let alone her body.

Glancing at the clock, she sighed and went over to her desk. She grabbed her code cylinder, slid it into its pocket on her jacket, and made for the door. Sarlis waved her hand absently over the sensor to open it. _Another day of-

"Hello, Captain."

"Ah!", Sarlis stumbled back and covered her mouth with her hand.

The Fourth Sister stood at ease in her doorway, watching her recover from the fright. "Apologies, I didn't mean to startle you."

"No", she straightened up, "It's fine."

The Inquisitor stepped inside her quarters and glanced around. Sarlis waited until she looked like she was done, checking the clock as it ticked ever closer to the start of the day.

"Is there something I can do for you, Inquisitor?", she asked eventually.

"Yes, I was hoping to speak to you in private before the day starts", the Fourth Sister said.

"In private. Right!", Sarlis reached for the door sensor only to have it close before her hand was in range. All she saw was the Fourth Sister slowly retract an outreached hand and put it behind her back. "W-what about?", she asked.

The Fourth Sister walked over to the large window. "I can trust you can't I, Captain?"

"Why... yes, of course", she answered. Sarlis waited a moment before joining her at the window, "Why do you ask?"
The Inquisitor simply watched the view for a while. From her window on the *Imperator*, Captain Sarlis could see the *Chimaera* and the *Myrmidon* hanging in low orbit above the planet. The *Solicutde*, the *Cunctator*, and the four frigates were over on the starboard side, out of sight for now.

"You were at the briefing yesterday. Thrawn is lying to us. He's hiding his true motives and now we know he's manoeuvring behind our backs."

Sarlis fumbled over her words, "I-I mean, I- I was surprised he didn't tell us about Hammerly." The other open question came to her mind, "How did you know about her?"

"You know it was the force that told the Emperor about this mission, don't you?" Sarlis nodded in response, "And it was the force that told me about Thrawn's plans. It is guiding me now, not the Emperor, and it's showing me Thrawn's lies."

The Captain habitually adjusted her uniform, "I'm sorry, I'm not sure I understand why you're telling me this."

"Because...", the Fourth Sister turned to look at her, "I want to make sure you're on the right side."

"The... right side?" Sarlis kept looking forward. After all these years, she still didn't have it in her to meet the Fourth Sister's unnatural yellow eyes.

The Inquisitor leaned in closer, "Our side. It's only a matter of time before Thrawn betrays us."

She swallowed hard. This was open conspiracy.

"I'm not sure I."

"His precious Commodore and that old fossil Pellaeon are lost causes, but I know you're more loyal than that", the Inquisitor lay a hand on her shoulder. "You know the Emperor didn't trust him, you know High Command didn't trust him, and we know better than to trust him. He lied to us, hid things from us, and I guarantee that, as soon as we're no longer useful then he'll turn on us. I want to make sure you'll stand with me when the time comes."

Finally, the Captain looked at her. Not so much from bravery as from shock. "What do you mean?", her voice barely more than a whisper.

"Thrawn wants whatever is locked away down on that planet. He wants whatever knowledge or power is there for his own ends; he wants it for his people. He's an alien, he was never loyal to the Empire. You, me, Hux, Sloane - we're all just obstacles to his true ambition." She leaned in closer, "I won't let him get away with it."

Sarlis tore her eyes away. Her head screamed at her to leave and not listen to this talk. If the Grand Admiral heard this then there'd be retribution. Still, she stayed. She'd seen how little trust people had in him back on Coruscant, she knew he'd hid things from them for his own ends. It was also clear that he had favourites. Pellaeon and Faro were his closest advisers while she had been kept out of the loop. She'd been loyal to the Empire and well-connected with its leaders, yet the Grand Admiral barely even consulted here.

"The force gave the Emperor the knowledge that sent us on this mission", the Fourth Sister continued, "And it was the force that told me about Thrawn's lies in the meeting yesterday. I am its vessel now and I know that the future of the Empire is in danger so long as Thrawn is here. The future we want, the future we deserve, he'll undo it all."
She didn't know the force, but she did know the Empire. She'd been loyal to it for years and had been destined for greatness in its ranks. However, the Inquisitor was right. The way Thrawn did things was not how the Empire did them. The future she deserved under the Empire was not what Thrawn had given her or looked likely to give her; but the Inquisitor might.

Sarlis shut her eyes and sighed. "What are you going to do? Who'll support you?"

The Inquisitor turned back to the window and took her hand away. "Commandant Hux and Captain Canady are of the same mind and I'm confident they'll stand with us, as will General Veers. They'll ensure the loyalty of the frigates as well. That'll give us the advantage in numbers and firepower."

"What are you planning on doing?", she asked cautiously.

"For now? Nothing. The time will come though, and I'll need you to be ready when it does." The Inquisitor again turned to her, this time pulling her a bit closer to look her in the eye, "Can I trust you to be loyal to the Empire? To me?"

Sarlis looked at the *Chimaera* and the *Myrmidon* in the distance. Then, she looked at the Inquisitor standing beside her. Her choice had already been made.

"You can count on me, Inquisitor. For the Empire."

The Fourth Sister smiled, "I knew you could be trusted, Captain. For the Empire."

"What do you want me to do?", she asked with her voice no longer hidden in a whisper.

"As I said, we must wait for the right moment", the Inquisitor told her. "Keep me updated, I want to know if you see anything that might help us understand what the Chiss is planning."

Sarlis nodded quickly, "I can do that."

"Good", the other woman said gratefully. "Now, Captain, we both have work to do."

"Y-yes", the Captain replied weakly.

Sarlis looked back out the window as the Fourth Sister made for the door. The Inquisitor didn't utter another word as the door to Sarlis' quarters opened and then shut a second later.

Her heart was racing and she'd broken into a sweat that she only now noticed. Things were going to change around here very soon. Maybe, at last, she'd be able to go home.

Then, she happened to glance at the clock on her desk. *Late. wonderful.* The Captain adjusted her uniform and sped out of the room towards the *Imperator's* bridge.

"You're doing the right thing, Amita", she whispered to herself as she went. *You're doing the right thing.*

Chapter End Notes

A busy, slightly messy section that I'm not entirely happy with but there we are.
The Ezra section is the true beginning of his new Jedi academy. This section was mainly an introduction to his cast of students and establishing a bit about how he's organising his academy. It made sense for the others to all pitch in and help, particularly Sabine and Rex, but Hera, Zeb, and Kallus have stuff to offer too. As for the students, we have 8 aside from Jacen. There's a little description of ages and race in the story and we'll spend a little bit of time with them in the future. Obviously, I won't be able to give each one loads of time or sections of their own, but they'll be recurring characters among the Lothal sections. I will mention two specifically here though. Safara is a Cathar which is the same race as Juhani from Knights of the Old Republic, and is pretty heavily inspired by her. Secondly, many of you might recognise Rosh Penin. Rosh was featured in Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy and he's pretty much directly transplanted here appearance and personality wise. I've taken plenty of inspiration from that game and will continue to do so, and Rosh is my most blatant homage to (i.e ripoff from) it.

Next, we have the Thrawn section. This was a very difficult section since I had to have Thrawn make logical deductions to reach the conclusion that we as readers already know is largely true. It's often difficult to stop my own knowledge of what's going on seep into the wrong places, and that was a huge challenge here. The whole Imperial storyline is obviously heating up and Thrawn is really starting to square everything away between his theories, Site Two, checks with his Chief Engineer, and resupplying all of his ships. This idea is clear enough to the Fourth Sister as well, which leads us on to Sarlis' section. Sarlis has never had a section before so it's a new experience to write. She's always been the political officer among the fleet so that needed to be clear in the way she acted and the way she thought. The Fourth Sister is walking all over her with ease, but from Sarlis' perspective I don't think she'd really see that. However, she does at least come to the decision to support the Fourth Sister herself. Sarlis, like many political appointees in the Empire, ultimately wants prestige and reputation. The Fourth Sister, combined with Hux, Sloane and all the rest, provides that opportunity for her in a way Thrawn just doesn't in her eyes... at least for now.

I'll finish with the short Luke and Ahsoka section. Finally, they're actually starting to do stuff and make some actual plans for going forward. The force nexus with the gateway (Site Two, as Thrawn calls it), is their next destination. Given what we already know about the place recently, you can draw your own conclusions. Setting this conversation on Ezra's exile planet at least gave them a break from yet another ship conversation. Loth-lizards (Gizka) are there because I love them and I finally had the opportunity to reference Lothal's weird naming conventions. Also, Luke's musing about living in seclusion on a quiet planet somewhere is an obvious reference to his eventual exile to Ach-To. I did briefly entertain the idea of this planet actually being Ach-To very early on, but I decided before even publishing Chapter 1 that it wasn't the right choice. I've always said that this story is intended to fit into canon as much as possible, so Luke's eventual exile and the events of the Sequel Trilogy, regardless of how people feel about them, are always in my mind.

Next time: Ezra and Sabine give a lesson, Thrawn deals with Captain Sarlis, and Luke and Ahsoka head to the force nexus.
Chapter 27 - Choice and Consequence

Chapter Notes

Back again for another chapter. In the last few weeks, I've gotten quite a lot of writing done on this story. There's still more to go, but I'm getting quite close to end of this. That should mean that I'll publish with something resembling regularity soon enough. I'm hoping to publish maybe one chapter every week from now on, though there is a chance that'll change based on my schedule. Any fears I had about not seeing this story through are completely gone, and it's only a matter of time until it's all wrapped up.

This time: Ezra and Sabine give a lesson, Luke and Ahsoka head to the force nexus, and Thrawn deals with Captain Sarlis

Sabine set down the wooden box on a table in the corner of the Academy hall. Ezra watched as she hovered her hand over the latch, hesitant to open it.

"Hey", he lay a hand on his wife's shoulder, "You don't have to do this if you're not comfortable."

"I do want to do this", she insisted. "It's just... you know."

"I understand, cyar'ika."

Sabine waited a few seconds before gently flipping the latch with her fingers and opening it up. Inside lay Kanan's old lightsaber. The hilt hadn't picked up a scratch of a pinch of dust over the years. Hera had kept it safely in a beautiful ornate wooden box she'd had around, keeping it safe if it ever needed to be used again. Now, it would be.

Ezra brought his arm around her, "He'd be so proud to see you using it for this. He'd be honoured that you helped train a new generation."

She carefully picked it up in one hand and inspected the hilt. The design had always been simple and practical, just like Kanan himself.

"I know he would", she agreed. For a moment she looked longingly at the weapon. Then, a faint smirk appeared on her lips. "But, he'd be even happier if I knocked you down a peg or two with it."

"Oh?", he grinned, "Is that a threat?"

"A promise", she winked.

Ezra was interrupted by the feeling of the students reaching the door to the hall, ready for their lesson. If Sabine wasn't so averse to public affection, he'd have hugged her by now.

"Sorry we're late, Master", Jakib shouted from the other end of the hall.

Ezra turned back and Sabine fastened the lightsaber to the back of her belt.
"That's alright", he told them. "Come on", he motioned the ground in front of him, "Take a seat."

The three students in the oldest class - Jakib, Safara, and Rosh - jogged over and sat down on the ground. He'd split the classes into three based on age to make sure everyone got the training that they needed. For this class, he could dive right into some of the more complex things while the younger students would need a normal education as much as a Jedi one.

Pleasingly, everyone seemed to be settling in quite well. Ezra hadn't enforced dress codes like the old Jedi, but some of his students had decided to find something echoing the traditional robes. Rosh wore a plain white robe over an orange underlayer; Jakib had chosen a plain brown tunic and black boots like the Jedi of old; Safara had found a blue jumpsuit with a red tunic, boots, and gloves. The trio also appeared to be getting on quite well, exchanging jokes and laughs among themselves as they waited.

"You good?", Ezra asked Sabine quietly.

She smiled, "Ready when you are, Master Jedi."

Ezra clapped his hands and turned to the class, "Alright, settle down. You all ready for your first real lesson?"

"Of course, Master Bridger!", Rosh exclaimed back.

"Jakib? Safara?", he asked the other two.

"Definitely", the Cathar answered.

Jakib nodded, "Yes, Master."

"Good...", Ezra observed their excitement, "Then let's not waste time."

Ezra reached behind his hip and took a hold of his lightsaber. He hadn't worn it around the Academy since they'd arrived, for good reason. He wanted it to have the intended effect. He brought the hilt around and showed it to the three of them. They all stopped the moment they realised what it was.

"Ahh...", Ezra said, seeing their reactions, "Just what I wanted to see. You all know what it is?"

"That's your lightsaber", Rosh said in awe.

"Exactly."

Jakib's strong voice was quiet and awed, "I've never seen one before."

"But you all knew what it was?", Ezra asked.

"Of course, everyone knows", Safara answered.

"You're right. People do know, and most of them will react exactly as you all just did." Ezra put one hand behind his back and started to pace as he spoke, "A lightsaber is a weapon and a tool, but above all it's a symbol. All symbols represent something and this symbol represents peace, justice, and safety. That should be the first thing you think of when you see this - not a laser sword, not a door opener, but a symbol. Its presence can defuse situations and give you the advantage before you even have it in your hands."

They nodded along, eyes fixated on the weapon in his hands. It was easy to forget how rare
lightsabers were, especially now. The myth that surrounded the weapon could be a strong advantage, but every myth was drawn from some level of truth. For the lightsaber, there was a clear reason it had the reputation it did.

"That's the first thing you need to understand before you even think of beginning to train with a lightsaber." He looked over to his wife as he put his hilt back on its clip, "Now, Sabine?"

Sabine nodded and went to the desk right behind her. She picked up an old and heavy piece of metal plating and approached the students.

"This is a piece of beskar, often called Mandalorian iron", Sabine explained as she handed it to Rosh. "Mandalorians have made our armour out of it for thousands of years. My own armour has taken hundreds of blaster bolts, thousands of pieces of shrapnel, sandstorms, animal attacks, fire, acid - and the only lasting damage was to my paintjob."

Rosh passed the beskar onto Jakib, who felt the weight in his hands.

"Do you all feel the weight? The strength of the material?", Ezra asked.

The Zabrak whistled, "Wow, that's some metal."

"It's some of the strongest material in the galaxy", Sabine explained as it passed to Safara, "Almost nothing can destroy it."

The Cathar had a look before passing it on to Ezra. "You all feel that?"

"Sure did, Master Bridger", Rosh replied over-excitedly.

Ezra smiled, "Good."

He took the piece in his right hand and held it out towards Sabine. Without a second's delay, Sabine pulled Kanan's saber into her hand, igniting it mid-swing as she swung up and through the beskar. The students gasped and screamed at the sudden noise and flare of light, but Ezra didn't flinch, trusting Sabine would hit the mark perfectly. A hunk of beskar fell to the ground with a thud, leaving about half of the plate in Ezra's hand. He held the remaining piece in front of him with the smouldering lightsaber burn on one edge.

"Second lesson: think of it as a symbol, but don't forget that it's also a weapon. Beskar is one of the toughest materials we know of and lightsabers cut through it like loth-butter." Ezra tossed the charred piece to Safara, "I don't need to tell you what that would do to a person."

The Cathar woman ran her gloved finger carefully over the burn. Ezra could still feel their shock from the display, and now fear. Few people had ever seen a lightsaber, and far fewer had seen them in action - even fewer of those lived to tell of it.

"With power comes responsibility. This weapon is dangerous and you need to be careful not just how you use it but why. If you allow the dark side to cloud your mind while you're using it, it can get dangerous." Ezra let the warning sink in. "Speaking of which", he decided to check up on other aspects of their training while he was here, "What sorts of things do I mean by the dark side?"

Ezra gave them a second to get their head into the right place. If he wanted them to learn the basic, they needed to become instinct. They needed to be able to keep them in mind no matter what they were doing.

"Anger", Jakib answered before long.
"Hatred", said Safara.

Rosh raised a hand, "Fear."

"Good", Ezra was glad to see they'd been studying, "What else?"

"Jealousy?", Jakib said uncertainly.

Ezra nodded, "Absolutely. Anyone else?"

He sensed some uncertainty from Safara. "Is passion one?"

"Good, Safara. The Jedi count passion as a dark side emotion too. Any more?"

There was silence. Jakib rubbed his forehead, running his fingers along the horns there as he thought. Rosh crinkled his nose and his lips motioned words as he tried to remember. As for Safara, she seemed almost confused. Ezra could feel a question coming.

Safara raised her hand, "Master? Can I ask you both a question?"

Sabine piqued an eyebrow, "Both of us?"

The young woman's request was odd, but Ezra didn't see any reason to decline.

Ezra shrugged, "Alright, go ahead."

Safara pursed her lips and squinted. "You two... you have the same surname, right? But you're not siblings?"

Oh... Ezra knew this was going to come up sooner or later.

"Of course they're not siblings, laser-brain", Jakib joked.

"Yeah, we're married", Sabine said loudly and openly, "What's the question?"

The student brushed her neck uncomfortably, "Well, I just... The Code says passion is bad, right? And you just said that passion is a dark side emotion."

Ezra wasn't sure where she was going, "Yes?"

Safara laughed nervously, "I mean... if passion's so bad then, well, what about you two?" She looked at Sabine, "Forgive me for asking but is he not, you know, 'passionate'?"

Ezra's jaw fell open slightly, "Uhh..."

"Eh", Sabine shrugged with a smirk, "Passionate sure is one word for it."

"Sabine?!", he stared at her, mortified.
Safara and Jakib tried their best not to laugh, but Rosh didn't have such discipline.

"What? Jedi are meant to be honest, I'm just setting a good example."

Ezra sighed. "Alright, alright, very funny", he let the sniggering die down, "I think I know what you're trying to ask."

Ezra opened a hand and Sabine knew to pass him Kanan's lightsaber.

"The problem with passion or attachments in general isn't the attachment itself but how you manage it. Fear of losing someone you love can drive you down a dark path, but only if you let it. You can also use your love of something or someone to inspire good. My Master, Kanan, taught me that your love and care for those around you can be your greatest strength. It inspired him to do great things. Myself, Sabine, Jacen, Hera, Lothal itself - none of it would be here if it wasn't for Kanan's devotion to protecting those he cared about. He embraced and understood his attachments, and was a better Jedi for it."

Passion was one aspect of attachment, and one mostly associated with romantic attachment. Still, the wider lesson applied here.

"I spent five years in the Unknown Regions, and my attachments kept me going. Whether that was an animal companion I made to keep me sane and fed, or if it was the prospect of seeing one particularly beautiful Mandalorian again...", he saw Sabine roll her eyes, "My attachments to those around me or far from me kept me going. Without them, I'm not sure I'd have made it through."

"But the code says there is no passion?", Safara questioned.

"Well, I disagree. In my opinion, there definitely is."

His rather blunt response caught them off-guard.

"So... the Jedi are wrong?", Jakib looked perplexedly at him.

"The Jedi weren't perfect", Ezra told them. "Don't take everything you read at face value. This is why I asked you to think about the Code, not just read it. Don't be afraid to form your opinions of the world around you. Do what you feel is right, not just what you're told is right."

Safara looked away and though about what he'd said. "I- I think I understand, Master."

"Good, and this isn't just a Jedi lesson. Remembering to think about something for yourself will be helpful to you as people, and not just as Jedi."

Was that okay? Ezra wondered if Kanan, or anyone else for that matter, felt so internally unsure of themselves when outwardly projecting confidence and wisdom. Maybe that was the secret; act like you know what you're doing, even if you don't truly know yourself. Ezra knew his love for his home and his friends kept him going, no matter what the Jedi had to say about them. What was one little rule broken, one little phrase ignored, one small line changed, next to all the other stuff the Jedi had to teach them?

"I don't know about you but that's enough philosophy for me", Sabine said and went over to the desk again.

He breathed a laugh. "She's right", Ezra agreed.

The Mandalorian turned back with a bundle of long sticks - training sabers - in her hand.
"Wait... are those what I think they are?", Jakib asked.

"If you think they're your lightsabers for the next few weeks, you're correct", Sabine passed one to him.

Jakib took it and looked it up and down sceptically, "It's not very... lightsabery."

Sabine laughed at him, "Kid, that'll be real word before we let someone handle a lightsaber on their first day. Believe me, I've been there."

Ezra waited until they'd been given their training sabers before taking out the real thing in training mode.

"Now", he began, "Let's try ready position."

The swirling hyperspace vortex slowed down and then gave way to a sea of stars among the blackness of space. Luke was instantly drawn to the orange-tinted planet in the distance, the one they were here for. The surface was blotchy with different shades of orange and deep cracks ran across its surface. Checking the scanners, there were no energy signals down there, nor any other signs of life.

"At least the Empire isn't here", Ahsoka observed.

As Ahsoka brought them closer, Luke started to feel more uncomfortable. This whole world was wrong somehow. It was too quiet, too empty. It felt uncomfortably similar to the remnants of Alderaan, and he didn't like it one bit.

"What is this planet? It reeks of death", he said breathlessly.

Ahsoka brought the shuttle along one of the canyons that he could see would lead into a large central basin of sorts. In the middle of it stood a solitary rocky structure with a distinct presence in the force.

"So that's what we're here for", Luke pointed to the structure.

She nodded, "Good eye."

"It's about the only thing on this planet", he muttered.

Their shuttle slowed to a hover about a hundred metres from the structure and set down gently onto the ground. The rocky cluster looked plain enough, but Luke knew it hid a powerful secret. One of the many, many things Luke had learned from Master Yoda was that looks could be deceiving.

Luke double-checked the bag he'd already slung around his shoulder. All it had was his water for obvious reasons, some food, and the small compass he'd taken from Pillio. The little curiosity was
still an enigma, but Luke brought it with him on instinct in case it might ever come in useful. Beside him, Ahsoka pulled her cape over her shoulders and picked up her staff from its place beside her chair. She double-checked the thick silver brooch that held her cape in place before signalling that she was ready.

Ahsoka led the way out of the shuttle and onto the surface. The heat hit Luke as he stepped out of the hold and the intensity of the light reflecting on the plain surface strained his eyes. Giving his eyes a few seconds to adjust, Luke looked around at the empty expanse and ragged canyons in the distance.

"Something destroyed this place", Luke could feel the hollowness and the pain here.

"Ezra and Master Yoda believed that whatever destroyed this place could be what we're out to find."

The answer was the thing Luke had prayed she wouldn't say. Part of him already knew it was too much of a coincidence to not be true, but he didn't want to believe it.

Luke turned to the structure and led the way. "Well we'd better get moving then."

Ahsoka followed behind wordlessly, tapping her staff on the ground with every other step. When they finally reached the structure, they were in front of a few small steps cut into the rock leading up to a small circular opening.

"After you", Luke stepped aside to let Ahsoka lead the way.

The Togruta stepped into the dark opening. The opening led to a corridor that took them deeper into the rock. Ahsoka tapped her staff on the ground and a pure white light flared up in the circle at the top, illuminating the way forward.

"I have got to get one of those", Luke joked.

Ahsoka smiled and shrugged, "If I find another one, you'll be the first to know."

With Ahsoka's guiding light, Luke could get a good look at the temple. The long circular corridor led to another circular room, which itself had three circular corridors leading out of it. *Talk about variety*, he thought to himself. The same unnatural silence hung over everything in here as it did outside. Luke at least got the impression that this place was safer, and thankfully it was out of that awful heat.

Ahsoka paused at the corridors before heading right down the middle one. It went down and opened into yet another circular room, but this time not as empty. A cracked stone sat in the middle of the room, and on the far wall was a mess of rock, dust, and metal shards beneath a ruined wall fixture. *No... not a wall fixture."

"That's the gateway?", Luke asked in awe.

"Was the gateway", Ahsoka corrected.

The woman gently pushed her staff forward and the ball of light shot out from the tip and up to the ceiling, bathing the whole room in its light. Luke could get a good look at the mess near the gateway as he approached it. Some bronze rings were partially stuck into the wall but a deep crack and scorch marks were clear in the centre. Most of the bronze rings were shattered on the ground amidst piles of dust and rubble. A single huge chunk of rock lay there too, a chunk Luke guessed used to belong in the centre of the room.
"Ezra's mess?"

Ahsoka smiled, "The one and only."

Luke ran his left hand along the damaged wall, feeling the rough stone and the odd sensation in the force. "At least he stopped that Inquisitor getting to this", Luke was thankful for that. He finally turned back to her, "So how do we do this?"

"Just remember your training", Ahsoka told him.

She knelt down near the centre of the room facing the gateway, laying her staff flat in front of her. Luke went over and knelt beside her. He knew what she was trying to do. Meditating would open them up to the force and hopefully make it easier to reach Master Yoda, Ben, or even his father.

Luke shut his eyes and opened himself to the force. The force was still strong here even if the gateway had been destroyed. There were echoes left behind. Peace, harmony, purpose, and then pain. They were all ingrained into the aura of this place. Far more recent were feelings of wonder, conflict, and fear. Luke couldn't sense what caused them or why they were here, but they'd made their mark on everything in this ruin. These emotions - peace and pain, wonder and fear - balanced each other out.

He let his mind feel its way around the ruin. He felt the smooth contours of the walls and hallways, the emptiness of the other chambers, and the warm stone of the outside. His senses wandered further, now outside. It felt like he was feeling the rough rock and jagged canyons with his own hands and he instinctively clenched his eyes a bit tighter at the thought of the brightness outside.

Then he re-centred himself before he lost focus. He focused on the room, on himself, and then on Ahsoka. She was perfectly still save for slow gentle breaths. Her mind was completely at peace and free of interruption or distraction. Luke could even feel the sense of power and wisdom she held, more akin to Ben or Yoda than himself or Ezra.

_Yoda, right._ Luke pulled his mind back and tried to focus again. He slowly plucked every other thought out of his mind and cast them aside, leaving only purpose and intent.

Still, there was nothing.

"Do you sense anything?", Ahsoka said suddenly.

"No", he replied.

He felt movement from her. "I hoped this would work."

Luke opened his eyes and flexed his right hand. "Haven't you ever done this before? How'd it work then?"

"Hmm", Ahsoka thought it over, "Last time we were all separated when we had our visions."

"It's worth a shot", Luke shrugged and got to his feet. "I'll be in one of the other chambers."

Ahsoka nodded and smiled, "Alright. Good luck, and may the force be with you."

Commodore Faro twiddled her fingers behind her back as she stood waiting in the _Chimaera's_ hangar. For some reason, Thrawn had decided that she - alone, save for two silent stormtroopers - would welcome Captain Sarlis to the ship and take her to her meeting with the
Grand Admiral.

In the military for many years by now, Faro had learned that anything less than ten minutes early for something was late. Captain Sarlis, on the other hand, was meticulously punctual if nothing else. That left the Commodore waiting patiently in the centre of the hangar with nothing but her own thoughts.

At least the hangar was busier than usual. The increased shift patterns that Thrawn had ordered meant that the ship was bustling with more life than it had done in years. The hangar was the obvious place for it to be. All of their fighters were being checked over and resupplied. 'Standard protocol', Thrawn said - but Faro knew better. Things were tense and they weren't going to get any better.

Lieutenant Xoxtin had done an admirable job of overseeing everything. Despite her age, she remained in control of her little province of the ship and her word was second only to Thrawn's. A political appointee like Sarlis, Xoxtin had proved that anyone with the right guidance and mindset can earn their place. She'd been given the responsibility of managing everything on this end, from TIE resupplies to that banged up old freighter Thrawn kept around. It had been tucked away in the corner ever since Hammerly returned, with some of the engineering crews checking it every now and again for some minor repairs when they had the time. It was clearly a low priority for everyone though. Many of the crates of proton bombs were stacked near it to be out of the way while the more important tasks were attended to. Thrawn's personal projects were starting to have to give way to military needs. Faro hoped that wouldn't come to bite them in the future.

The sight of Captain Sarlis' personal shuttle finally gave her something else to focus on other than the desperate state of their fleet. It landed in the clear area of the hangar in front of her and the ramp opened to let the Captain disembark with two troopers as an escort.

"Captain Sarlis", Faro greeted, "I trust you had a good trip."

"It was fine", she replied coldly. "Where's the Grand Admiral?"

The Commodore was more than used to her frosty attitude. "He's waiting in his office. Please, follow me."

They walked side by side with their combined escorts behind them, but the two didn't utter more than a few words to each other for the long walk up to Thrawn's office. Captain Sarlis had never liked her, Faro never quite knew why. Maybe it was the Captain's pampered elitist lifestyle and career, maybe it was Sarlis' sense of superiority for commanding a Star Destroyer of her own. The rank of Commodore was nominally superior to a Captain, but the Imperial Navy tended to prioritise ship command as the highest distinction. A Commodore First Officer was lower down the chain that a Captain of a Star Destroyer in many people's eyes. Sometimes that was warranted - Pellaeon was still a Captain but had earned deference from Faro herself, plus the man had turned down promotions several times just to stay with the *Myrmidon* - but people like Captain Sarlis made that informal view seem misplaced.

Faro wanted to breath a sigh of relief by the time they reached the office. The door Sergeant cleared them through quickly and they entered to Thrawn standing patiently before his desk.

"Captain Sarlis, I appreciate you meeting me on such short notice."

"Of course, Grand Admiral." She sprung to attention as per usual.

Thrawn looked at the guard escort, "Leave us."
The four troopers turned on their heel and marched down the corridor, leaving the three of them to their business.

"Please, take a seat", Thrawn motioned to the chairs and went to his own.

Sarlis sat down awkwardly on one chair while Faro took the other. She couldn't remember the last time, if ever, that the Captain was summoned to a private meeting at the Grand Admiral's office. The Captain looked far out of her depth. Then again, so was Faro. Thrawn hadn't told her what he needed the *Imperator*'s Captain for, but it must have been important.

"How are affairs aboard the *Imperator*?" Thrawn asked calmly.

"They're... perfectly fine, Grand Admiral." She looked tense and uncomfortable.

Thrawn watched her flustered reaction for a second. Then the man leaned onto the table and clasped his hands together. "You are tense, Captain", he stated the obvious.

She swallowed hard, "Oh, I- Apologies, Grand Admiral."

"Nonsense", he waved it off with his hand, "These are difficult times and much is at stake. In fact, that is why I asked you here."

Sarlis paused, "I don't follow, Grand Admiral."

Neither did Faro, she had to admit. Thrawn hadn't mentioned a special need for Sarlis, and he'd certainly never had one for her before.

"We are on the verge of uncovering whatever is buried below. Soon, we will have the answers to questions we have waited years for. However, it is no secret that my relationship with the Inquisitor has been... less than productive." Thrawn leaned over the table a bit further. "Frankly, Captain, she cannot be trusted."

Sarlis glanced over at her and then back to Thrawn, "I see..."

"What I say to you is not to leave this room, at least not in its exact form. It especially can't reach the Fourth Sister", the Grand Admiral's voice was low and quiet to emphasise the need for secrecy.

Faro saw the Captain hesitate before nodding gently, "Understood, sir."

"Good", Thrawn smiled to her. "Now Captain, as I'm sure you're aware, we are on the trail of something extremely important and potentially dangerous, if it falls into the wrong hands. We know as much, the Fourth Sister knows as much, and Ezra Bridger knew as much."

The mention of Bridger instantly caught the Captain's attention. "B-Bridger?", she repeated in shock.

Thrawn nodded, "After the Fourth Sister's failure to catch him, Bridger did manage to escape us but I strongly believe that he caught wind of our mission. I also believe that, as the Jedi tend to do, he will return soon to uncover more about this mystery."

Faro hadn't been expecting this angle. Thrawn avoided any mention of Bridger at all around anyone but her and Pellaeon. Obviously, he was leaving out the fact that Thrawn wanted him to escape and return, but Faro knew Thrawn wasn't really trying to bring Sarlis into the fold. This was something else.
Thrawn pressed the holoprojector on his desk and a projection of several stars and star systems appeared above his desk. Faro could read the labels of Site Two, Site One, and their origin point after Lothal marked out on the projection.

"This map illustrates some of our course during our search for Ezra Bridger", Thrawn explained. "If the Jedi does return he will probably avoid places he believes we may be and choose a more direct path." Another planet, a few parsecs away from Site Two, lit up on the display. "This planet sits along a faster route towards us and would provide a safe stopover for fuel changes. More than likely, if we are to catch them, we will catch them there." He looked away from the map and over to Sarlis, "You will catch them there."

Faro remained silent but noted everything she could about the map and Thrawn's explanations. At first glance and to an untrained mind, which was all that Sarlis could give, everything made sense. To Faro, the holes in the explanation were obvious.

Sarlis went wide-eyed and her jaw dropped at the plan. "Y-you... what? You want me to-?"

"Catch them, yes", Thrawn repeated.

Her mouth moved a few times before words came out. "Why? Why catch them? Why me?"

"Perceptive questions, Captain." Thrawn powered down the map to get a better view of her. "Firstly, if what we are chasing is related to the force then a Jedi like Bridger might have knowledge that can be useful to us. As for why I chose you, the answer is quite simple: the Fourth Sister cannot be allowed to know. If I sent Captain Pellaeon or our Commodore here, the Inquisitor would get suspicious since it is well known how closely we work together. After the two of them, you are my next most loyal and trusted officer. The Imperator will be more than enough to catch an unsuspecting Bridger off guard and apprehend him."

Again, the Commodore picked out the weaknesses that flew right over the Captain's head.

The woman looked utterly baffled. "You're sending me? Alone? For this?"

"I trust that you can get the job done in absolute secrecy", he insisted.

Captain Sarlis looked to be in shock at the importance of the assignment. Sarlis wasn't part of Thrawn's close circle and yet was being given one of the most essential tasks of this years long mission. Faro was confident that she'd figured out why.

The Captain looked down at the floor, then up at Thrawn, then away again. "I- I don't know what to say."

"Do you accept this mission, Captain?"

Sarlis looked at Faro, the shock on her face overcoming the usual disdain the Captain had for her.

"I-", Sarlis breathed in and calmed herself, "I will. I'll do as you ask, Grand Admiral."

"Good", Thrawn smiled faintly.

Faro watched the Chiss' reaction carefully. His eyes flicked over to the Commodore for a split second, and then back to the Captain.

"What do I do? W-where do I go?"
Thrawn stood up from his desk, "I will send the coordinates to you. Once there, I will relay further instructions."

"I think I-"

"Now, Captain", Thrawn interrupted, "We cannot afford to delay. Every second we wait, and every second you spend on this ship, is a second that the Fourth Sister could use to catch wind of what we're doing."

The Captain stood up instinctively, but was clearly surprised to be pushed out so quickly. She started to stammer, "Grand Admiral, I'm not sure I-"

"That you can do it?", Thrawn tilted his head to her.

She started wringing her hands, "N-no, that's not-"

"Captain", the Chiss reached a hand out to her shoulder, "I have every faith that you will fulfil the task I need you to."

The Commodore watched them both. It was obvious to Faro that Thrawn wasn't telling the whole truth to Sarlis, but the Captain would never figure that out even without being rushed out the door like this. Faro thought over everything she knew about Sarlis and this whole mission. Slowly, she started to put together what she thought was going on.

Sarlis looked over to Faro and then to Thrawn. Something changed in her stance and her look. Perhaps this was what the Captain looked like when given true purpose. Maybe, she wasn't so useless after all.

"I'll do what needs to be done, Grand Admiral", Sarlis promised, "For the Empire."

"Good", Thrawn said, not returning the patriotic gesture. "Now, you'd best get underway. Safe travels, Captain."

Sarlis went to attention and saluted, "Aye aye, Grand Admiral."

The other woman didn't look back as she followed Thrawn's instructions and hurried out of the office. Thrawn stood and waited for the door to close behind Sarlis. Then, he waited for the muffled sound of the second door opening and closing, all to make sure that the Captain was gone. Finally, he turned back to her.

"Only an idiot would come out into the Unknown Regions and not use a path they're familiar with if they know one", Faro said plainly.

Thrawn nodded as he started to walk back to his desk, "Exactly. That's something Sarlis wouldn't notice."

"And she is not your next most trusted officer after Pellaeon and I. Hammerly, Agral, Xoxtin, probably Veers - there's a dozen or more that come before her."

The Grand Admiral took her deductions in stride. "The Captain has spent barely any time aboard the Chimaera and knows only a handful of our officers, and then only in passing. Besides, she commands a Star Destroyer, which many Imperials take as a sign of trust and responsibility regardless of the legitimacy or merit of the command, or who bestowed it."

Faro leaned back in her chair and sighed, "And then obviously there's the fact that you don't want
Bridger to be 'caught' as much as 'recruited.'"

"Again, knowledge she can't be trusted to hold. For now", Thrawn added.

She pursed her lips and thought for a moment. She figured she what he was trying to do. It was obvious.

"Thank you."

The Chiss was almost surprised, "What for?"

"For getting her out of the way."

Faro had gone along with everything Thrawn had done over the years. She'd willingly obliged as he bombarded hundreds of civilians in order to try and end a conflict that might kill thousands more. She'd agreed to a plan that let a Jedi and a rebel, the sworn opponents of the Empire she'd served for years, escape. The one and only time she raised a true objection was when she found out that Thrawn had planned on giving up Imperial lives aboard the Invictus just to bait Bridger's allies into following him. For the greater good, she understood that, but it hadn't sat right with her. Now, it seemed, Thrawn had taken that objection to heart.

"She needed to be out of the way. You yourself have witnessed her affinity for the Fourth Sister, have you not?", Thrawn stated.

"I have", she agreed, "And I'm under no illusion about whose side she'd choose. She's loathes me, always has, and barely knows Pellaeon. Besides, she's a politician, and you were anything but popular with them back on Corsucant", she almost smiled at the thought of that last part.

"My thoughts exactly. Additionally, with Hux and Canady's likely alignment with the Inquisitor, their link to Sloane's vision of an Imperial future would offer her exactly the familiar path she'd like. The promise of a restored Empire with all the pomp, luxury, and cronyism that she is accustomed to."

"I know she would", she said quietly, "But still, thank you. If or when the lasers start flying, she doesn't need to be caught in the crossfire, nor does her crew."

"We do not need the Imperator's guns firing back at us. Its Captain might leave much to be desired but a Star Destroyer is still a Star Destroyer." Thrawn's cold logic was still sound all the same.

"So you're confident she won't be here when things boil over?", she asked.

"I am", Thrawn assured her. "However, I will remind you that some sacrifices will be needed in the future, from ourselves or from others - willingly or not."

Faro let out a deep sigh. Thrawn's grim warning was uncomfortably true, but she'd known that for a long time. All she could hope was that there'd be as few needless deaths as possible by the end of this. Even more worrying was the obvious implication of Thrawn sending Sarlis now. He must be convinced that this internal conflict was going to erupt sooner rather than later.

"What will you tell the Inquisitor and the others?"

"Pirates", Thrawn replied nonchalantly. "The issues at the meeting several days ago actually made it easier to manoeuvre. Canady or Veers might take it as an attempt to be more transparent by sending Sarlis and her ship openly to handle the issue."
Faro squinted her eyes, "Surely they'll figure out very quickly that there aren't any pirates?"

"They will. I do not expect that our false pretence will need to hold water for long."

She knew what that meant. "I understand, sir."

"I trust that you do", he said as he got up from his chair and was drawn once again to the old painted piece of wall.

The Grand Admiral brushed his hand across the old faded loth-cat, a symbol of the planet and the rebels that had ultimately brought them here. Faro couldn't tell if she should have been thankful for that now. On the one hand, they'd spent almost seven years of their lives out here in the middle of nowhere. On the other, their presence here might just be what the galaxy needs to stop whatever, or whoever, was out here. On second thought, maybe she was thankful after all.

"Commodore, I want you to contact Captain Pellaeon", Thrawn ordered as his hand fell away from the art piece.

Faro reached for her comm, "Of course, sir. What do I tell him?"

Thrawn turned back to her with a determined face. "Tell him to gather every senior officer aboard the *Myrmidon* and report here at day's end. You shall do the same for the *Chimaera.*"

She paused. "Every one, sir?"

"Every one", he reiterated, "The time has come to end this charade."

Captain Sarlis' mind was still racing by the time she returned to her quarters. So many questions, so many options, and so little time.

After all these years, Thrawn had only now decided to give her a proper mission of her own. Only now had he finally let her into his inner circle. It was just her luck. Her choice was now apparent: join Thrawn's schemes, or stay with the Inquisitor.

She went to her window and stared over at the *Chimaera*. For years she'd felt spurned and undervalued, passed over in favour of that arrogant Commodore, ignored and left out by a man reviled by every person in High Command she'd ever met. Her other option was to stay loyal to the Inquisitor, someone trained by the Emperor's most loyal agent, Darth Vader. With her were Commandant Hux and Captain Canady, two loyal officers who had the ear of Grand Admiral Sloane - a leader who promised a clear and familiar rebirth for their Empire.

Her choice had already been made.

The Captain went to her desk and slowly typed in the code for the Fourth Sister's quarters on the surface. A few seconds later, the force-wielder's hologram materialised on the desk.

"Captain Sarlis", she smiled, "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"Inquisitor, I have something I thought you'd be interested in."

The Fourth Sister tilted her head, "Oh?"

"I just got back from a private meeting with Thrawn", she told her.

"Ahh", the Inquisitor's smile grew, "I see."
"He tried to recruit me for some mission of his. He wanted me to go in secret to these coordinates", she typed them in and sent them over to the Inquisitor, "Thrawn thinks Ezra Bridger will be there."

The Jedi’s name struck a nerve in the Inquisitor. Her glare hardened and Sarlis saw her teeth clench. After all, the Fourth Sister was specifically trained to hunt Jedi and had her own grudge against the boy. Then, the coordinates came through and the Inquisitor read them carefully. She jerked and turned off to the side, typing something in on another terminal.

"They're near Site Two. Thrawn didn't want you to know", Sarlis continued.

"That they are...", the Inquisitor suddenly turned back, "Why didn't he want me to know?"

Sarlis took a deep breath in, "He doesn't trust you. I... I think he has his own plans. He doesn't want you to know about them."

She smirked at the Captain's answer. "Quite the accusation, Captain, and just like I warned you he would."

The Fourth Sister really had been right. Thrawn had a secret agenda that he was hiding from the Fourth Sister. Who knew what the Chiss really wanted the Jedi for? Perhaps he wanted to use the Jedi's knowledge to advance his own power, or maybe unlock the power below for his own alien ends. Sarlis knew that none of the possibilities would end well for them or the Empire.

Thankfully, the Chiss was so lost in his plans that he'd underestimated her. Maybe Thrawn really didn't think much of her after all, and thought she'd blindly follow his orders to the end. He was about to pay for that mistake.

"What do I do? Do we move now?", she asked urgently.

The Inquisitor shut her eyes and started to think. Sarlis had seen her do it before, it was some force user trick they used for focus and concentration. At last, the other woman opened her eyes.

"I want you to play Thrawn's game for now. Let him think that he has you on his side. Go to those coordinates and await further orders. I have some idea of what he's really planning."

Sarlis sighed in relief, "Are you sure?"

"Certainly, Captain. Thrawn is playing right into our hands."

Chapter End Notes

The first section is the first proper lesson we see for Ezra's new Academy. Fittingly, it's the first of the lightsaber lessons Sabine promised to give with him. She's using Kanan's lightsaber which felt appropriate, but it also felt like something that shouldn’t have passed by casually. I like the idea of Sabine joking about knocking him down a peg or two, since it links Kanan's memory with more pleasant feelings than the misery I usually write about it with. The lightsaber training covers two main points: lightsabers as a symbol and lightsabers as a weapon. The core message here is of how to treat the lightsabers safely and with respect. Anyone who's had weapons training in real life will know that the most important lessons are the ones about safety with a
weapon, so Ezra had to open the lessons by showing the dangers and stressing proper control. The lesson leads into a brief aside about passion and relationships. Ezra and Sabine's relationship is obviously Code breaking, but I like to think it's been established as something positive and strengthening for both of them. The Jedi are good, but love is good too. This is the first time Ezra is forced to nail down, explain, and pass on his own unique perspectives on the Jedi Code - and we see him cast that Jedi Code aside in some ways. How he reconciles his beliefs with other Jedi teachings will be an important thing for him moving forward. I'll mention something quick about the students. This is the oldest class of the human Rosh, the Cathar Safara, and the Zabrak Jakib. Rosh's clothes are intended to be the same as he wears in Jedi Academy. As for Safara, I tried to make her look like Juhani from Knights of the Old Republic. Lastly, I'll mention that beskar is not lightsaber resistant in this story, which it apparently was in Legends.

Luke and Ahsoka's arrival at Site Two/the gateway planet had obvious implications given what happened there in the last few chapters. Making Ahsoka's staff usable as a light is hardly the weirdest thing I've done with it and I wanted to show that Ahsoka can still have some surprises up her sleeve. This section mainly serves to remind y'all of Site Two since we're spending a little bit of time here again now. There's not much to talk about this chapter for them, but I guarantee that'll change next time.

There's a small paragraph in Faro's section about ranks and how Star Destroyer Captains are informally superior to Commodores. This is there purely to make up for a mistake I only recently realised. I've always thought Captain was the higher rank and that Commodore Faro was below Pellaeon and Sarlis, when in fact the reverse it true. I can't go back and change all of that now, but I could at least try and give an in-story explanation to try and smooth over the error. Faro's problems with sacrificing Imperial lives was first seen back in Chapter 15 when Thrawn revealed his plan to let Ezra escape which involved sacrificing lives on the Invictus. Faro does share Thrawn's 'ends justify the means' mentality but she's more conscious of sacrificing others. She's been in the Empire for many years and doesn't like throwing lives away if it can at all be avoided. Even if Sarlis and her don't get on, Faro doesn't wish death upon her. That section ends with Thrawn gathering the senior officers on his and Pellaeon's ships. Obviously, things are spiralling towards something in the Imperial storyline, and it won't be long until there's some pretty major changes.

Next time: Thrawn gathers his allies, the Fourth Sister gets a warning, Luke has a vision, and Ezra takes Jacen for a lesson.
Chapter 28 - Laid Bare

Chapter Notes

Actually keeping up with a schedule this time! I might move the releases to Wednesday from now one because it's easier for me, but here's this week's chapter on time anyway. One of the sections in this chapter is... unique, so be warned. It's not something I've done before nor something I'm going to do again, but it needs to be done here. It's quite a long chapter too, though there's a bit author's note at the end to explain some of the stuff that goes down.

This time: Thrawn gathers his allies, the Fourth Sister gets a warning, Luke has a vision, and Ezra takes Jacen for a lesson.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Pellaeon and his entourage of officers marched up to Thrawn's office amidst hushed whispers and chatter. Over the years, some of the others might have been to Thrawn's office once, if that, and always in Pellaeon's company. For all of them to be summoned together said only one thing: something big was happening. Pellaeon was in the unfortunate position of being able to guess what that 'something' was.

Walking beside him was his First Officer, Senior Lieutenant Handel, who had been silent for most of the walk. The man was similar in age to Pellaeon but bald as a Bith and the two had become good friends over the last few years aboard the *Myrmidon*. Also with them were the Sensor Officer Lieutenant Yara, a young prodigy of a woman whose 'lucky' appointment at a young age to the *Myrmidon* had proved to be anything but that. The Helm Officer Commander Kenic, a short pale man with thick ginger hair had come too, as had Lieutenant Henri, his weapons officer. At least a dozen others from the *Myrmidon*'s highest ranks had come with Pellaeon, not knowing what they were about to walk in to.

Thrawn's door Sergeant didn't bother checking code cylinders and Pellaeon couldn't blame the man. The Captain led the way into Thrawn's office to find the expected crowd of officers from the *Chimaera* too. Commodore Faro was closest to Thrawn's desk, waiting patiently for everyone to join them. Pellaeon recognised Chief Engineer Torbal, - a familiar enough face from the last few days of his visits - as well as old Lieutenant Xoxtin, Helm Officer Agral, Weapons Officer Pyrondi, and several other faces from the ship's crew. Almost every face Pellaeon would know was there, save for Commander Hammerly and the Grand Admiral himself.

He made his way to Commodore Faro as the rest of his officers spread out around the office to talk and gawk at the trinkets Thrawn kept there.

"Does this mean what I think it means, Commodore?", he asked, quietly joining her in front of Thrawn's desk.

Faro nodded, "Yes. Thrawn thinks it's time."

"Shame, I was almost starting to like this planet."
The door to the office hissed open making conversations stop and every one in the room spring to attention. Thrawn walked in with a datapad in his hand and Commander Hammerly following closely behind, the woman looking as uncertain as everyone else.

"My apologies for the wait, officers", Thrawn announced as he entered the room.

Everything was silent as Thrawn made his way towards his desk. He gave Pellaeon and Faro a cursory nod as he went between them. However, instead of going to his seat like usual, the Grand Admiral turned around and stood in front of his desk in full view of everyone.

"Let's not waste any time", he began. "You are all wondering why I have summoned you here. The fact of the matter is that our situation is far more significant than many of you might believe. In our hands are decisions that can and will shape the future of the galaxy unlike any we've previously made before."

Silence still hung over the room. Pellaeon could feel the uncomfortable jostling of some of the other officers.

"You are the most trusted officers aboard the Chimaera and the Myrmidon, and what I am about to tell you must be kept in the utmost secrecy", Thrawn commanded.

There were several murmurs of agreement in response.

"Thank you", Thrawn bowed his head respectfully. "Now, I do not need to tell you that our mission is focused on finding something potentially significant. It was powerful enough for the Emperor to sense its presence, and it is almost certainly linked to the many scenes of carnage and destruction we have found over our years here. Based on the evidence we've recover, however, I do not believe that we are looking for something as simple as a weapon or a location. I believe we are looking for a being; one that is ancient, powerful, and a threat to everyone in the galaxy."

Pellaeon had heard this theory before, but it didn't sound any less unsettling now. The others in the room however weren't as used to Thrawn's more outlandish claims.

A nervous and uncomfortable Lieutenant Xoxtin cleared her throat from the back of the room. "Grand Admiral? I don't think I understand."

"The finer details are too numerous to explain. Suffice it to say that the scale of the destruction seen at Sites Two and Three, the nature of the threat the Emperor sensed out here, our prior experience with creatures such as the Bendu on Atollon, and the increasingly unexplainable behaviour of the Fourth Sister all point to a single explanation. Whatever is below on this planet is a being powerful in the force and a threat to every living thing in the galaxy. It is imperative that we destroy it, by any means necessary."

One of the Chimaera officers Pellaeon didn't recognise cleared his throat, "Uh, isn't this something for the Inquisitor to hear?"

"No", the Chiss answered bluntly. "She cannot be trusted. I believe that the Fourth Sister is, willingly or unwillingly, in league with this being."

Some whispers came from around the room. Most of those were sceptical, Pellaeon could tell. He'd
expect nothing less from such a ridiculous theory, and he'd had the same reaction at first too.

Thrawn continued, no doubt aware of how ridiculous all of this sounded.

"Force users have the ability to forge connections between each other to communicate and coordinate. The Fourth Sister's unusual behaviour and ability to know things she should not suggest that she is somehow involved with this being. For those reasons, and the already difficult relationship between us, she cannot be trusted", Thrawn explained.

Another few murmurs were the response. That last part was a far easier thing to sell to them. The Fourth Sister had won very few friends with her behaviour over the last few years and most of the officers he knew were scared of her. Getting them to turn against her wasn't just going to be easy, it was already done.

"However, if I accuse the Fourth Sister of being untrustworthy, then I must prove myself to be more deserving of that trust." Thrawn set the datapad down on his desk and gave the room his full attention. "To that end, I do need to be honest about several things."

Pellaeon exchanged a brief look with Commodore Faro. They both knew what he was talking about.

"I believe that, during his time in exile and on the run from us, Ezra Bridger also became convinced of the dangers that lurk out here. Bridger is a Jedi and they are predictable in their actions. If he senses something dangerous is out here, he will return to confront it", Thrawn explained. "I came to believe this long before we caught him, and it is time I tell you all the truth: I fully intended for him to escape us."

The words hung in the air for a long few seconds. Many here had spent years of their lives facing Bridger and the Lothal rebels even before Bridger caused them to be stuck out here.

"You let him escape?", Commander Hammerly was the first to voice what everyone was thinking, "Why?"

"You all read the report of the Emperor's defeat at Endor, did you not? You may recall the name of the one who defeated him: Luke Skywalker. This Luke Skywalker is clearly a Jedi of significant power if he was able to defeat both the Emperor and Lord Vader. Therefore, he would stand as the best hope for defeating this new powerful threat. I predicted that Ezra Bridger would come in to contact with Luke Skywalker and they would work together to confront this new danger in the Unknown Regions."

Thrawn's cold, methodical explanations must have been a lot to take in for the others.

Lieutenant Handel stuttered behind Pellaeon, "Well- I... You want the Jedi to come back?"

"Yes", Thrawn confirmed. "They have proven to be capable warriors alone, even apart from the other allies like Sabine Wren or General Syndulla that they might bring with them. If they, like us, are convinced of the scale of this threat then we can hope that they set aside old grudges and stand with us for the greater good."

"Why are you telling us this? Why now?", Chief Engineer Torbal asked. Despite the meetings Pellaeon kept seeing him have with Thrawn, the Chief Engineer clearly wasn't in the loop either.

Thrawn picked up the datapad from the desk and tapped it with his finger. "Many of you will be aware that Commander Hammerly here was dispatched on a private mission recently, ostensibly to pursue pirates. That too was a deception. The Commander was sent, on my orders, to Site Two.
Her and her team's work there confirmed my suspicions about this threat and the Fourth Sister's actions, but more importantly she set down a perimeter of sensors to let us know if anyone set foot in the temple on the planet's surface." Thrawn turned the datapad around to show them the notification on the screen, "Less than an hour ago, someone did."

_They're here. At last._ Pellaeon let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. _Bridger and Skywalker were here._

Poor Commander Hammerly looked just as shocked as everyone else. "Wait... Bridger and Skywalker were who you wanted to catch?!"

Thrawn nodded, "Correct. I believed, as any logical person would, that Bridger would stick to familiar paths if he returned here. Site Two seemed like the obvious place to monitor, something I am very grateful for your work on, Commander."

"How do you know they'll work with you?", Lieutenant Agral asked, "And what will the Fourth Sister say?"

"I suspect they will see the urgency of the situation, and we shall give them ample reason to believe us", Thrawn didn't explain how he was going to do that last part. "As for the Fourth Sister, that is why I stress secrecy. She will not work with Skywalker and Bridger, and so she will openly oppose us. I strongly believe that Commandant Hux and Captain Canady will find cause with her. Working with the Jedi, the sworn enemies of the Empire, will almost certainly turn Grand Admiral Sloane and many others against us too. I have already set in motion a plan to deny the Fourth Sister the use of Captain Sarlis and the _Imperator_, but we will still be significantly outnumbered."

The silence was palpable.

"W-what are you saying?", a terrified officer asked from the back.

"It's us or them", Pellaeon said grimly.

"Captain Pellaeon is right", Thrawn said, "If we wish to confront this danger, we will inevitably have to confront the Fourth Sister, Commandant Hux, Captain Canady, and whatever other forces they and their allies can muster."

Silence had become the defining feature of this whole meeting. The officers exchanged looks of fear, uncertainty, confusion, and more. What Thrawn was asking of them was not to be taken lightly. He wanted them to join with people they'd spent years fighting to fight a threat they didn't understand, and turn their weapons on people they'd served besides for years - all on his word and scraps of inconclusive evidence from almost a decade of time out here.

"I understand that I have brought you a lot of difficult information. For this reason, I will offer you a choice: you can stand with me against this threat, or you can choose to step aside. There is no shame in the latter; you have far exceeded your mandate and have endured years of immensely difficult service. For security reasons I would place you under guard for the next several hours, but at the earliest chance you will be given a ship, coordinates, and fuel to return home. The choice is yours."

There was no debate for Pellaeon. "I'm at your service, Grand Admiral", he affirmed loudly.

"As am I", Commodore Faro added, "To the end."

With their two expected support announced, they were left with uncertainty. For a long time, no one moved or uttered a word.
Thankfully, Commander Hammerly joined them. "I stand by you, Grand Admiral."

"Thank you", Thrawn told her.

The next silence was longer than Pellaeon liked, but it was a difficult choice.

Finally, another person cleared their throat.

"I-I'm with you, sir", Lieutenant Xoxtin said shakily.

"As am I", said Lieutenant Agral.

Behind him, Pellaeon's First Officer Handel piped up, "I am ready to serve, Grand Admiral."

"Aye." Agral.

"Count me in." Pyrondi.

"You can count on me, sir." Yara.

They were followed by two dozen more people throwing in their support. When it came down to it, Pellaeon wasn't that surprised. He trusted the Myrmidon's and Chimaera's crew completely, and had every faith they'd rally behind them. When the shouts finally stopped, not a man or woman in the room had declined their support. They were in this together, no matter what.

"I appreciate your loyalty. All of you", Thrawn's gratitude was as sincere as Pellaeon had ever seen it.

"Just tell us what to do, sir", the Commodore said.

Thrawn turned back to his desk and pressed the holoprojector on it. A map appeared, showing several planets including Site Two.

"Time is of the essence. You are all to return to your ships and make immediate preparations for departure. We will go to Site Two, meet with Bridger and his allies, and then coordinate what to do from there."

"What about the Fourth Sister?", Pellaeon asked.

Thrawn looked over his shoulder, "She will notice something is wrong, I'm sure of it. I will meet with her one last time while you all make your preparations. I will do everything I can to make sure she plays into our hands."

Pellaeon sighed and nodded to Faro. She returned it with a cautious smile. They'd been waiting for this moment for months and now it was upon them. All they could do was hope that Thrawn's plans would see them through this minefield too.

"The warrior's path lies before us", Thrawn dragged out that old favourite aphorism of his before he sent them away, "Let us see where it leads."

The Fourth Sister mused over recent events as she meditated in her private quarters on the planet's surface. The last few days had been busy and the next few promised to be even busier.

Hux had been easy to manipulate. Showing her strength and playing on the man's snivelling loyalty to the Empire had put him in her pocket. Canady was smart enough to align with her after the
meeting a few days ago, her Master's help regarding Hammerly helping to show how Thrawn simply couldn't be trusted. Lastly, Sarlis was probably the easiest of them all. The pampered little politician would take whatever path got her what she wanted. The Fourth Sister was indifferent about whether Sarlis would actually get the advancement and prestige from her Master or Sloane, but as long as it was useful to her own ends Sarlis could believe what she wanted.

What a useful tool Sarlis had proven to be, too. Thrawn thought too little of the Captain to think she had a mind of her own. The Chiss had supposedly trusted her with a secret mission, one to catch Bridger no less, and hinged his future plans on Sarlis' loyalty. However, she saw right through that. Sarlis might not have, but she did. Sarlis was being used as a distraction to hide Thrawn's real goals. *He really is a fool... or was.*

Her thoughts were interrupted by the familiar feeling of something stirring below.

"Ah, my worthy apprentice. You have something for me."

"Yes, my Master", she told him. "There's something you should know."

"The Jedi?"

She paused. "Y-you knew?"

"Mhmm, I sensed their coming."

"T-then what do I do? Thrawn wants to catch Bridger for himself and use him against us. We can't let that happen."

"Oh, it shan't."

"Then what do I do, Master?"

"Bring the Jedi to me. I will... have uses for them."

*Bring them? How would she do that?*

She knew better than to ask such a menial question. She could figure it out herself. With all the others on her side, all they'd have to do was swoop and drag Bridger kicking and screaming to her Master. She clenched her fists at the mere thought of seeing Bridger again. How satisfying it'd be to end his life once and for all. Whatever her Master needed from the Jedi, she hoped he'd give her the gift of taking his life.

"I will do as you command, Master. Soon, nothing will stand in our way."

His voice rumbled, "*Hmm, don't be so certain.*"

"Master?", she asked curiously.

"There is something else. Something powerful."

"What do you mean, Master?"

"I do not know", He replied. "*It matters not. The end is near, my apprentice. Soon nothing will stand in my way.*"

*Our way."Of course, My Mas-"*
"Careful, apprentice", He interrupted, "If Bridger is here, he must be brought to me. Unlike the Chiss, I will not tolerate your failures."

She swallowed hard. "I- I won't fail you, Master."

"Hmm, we shall see", the connection started to break, "We shall see."

The Fourth Sister was left alone again with her Master's warning drilled into her mind. She could not fail. She would not fail. After all, Thrawn had played right into their hands.

A knock on the door interrupted her.

"What?!", she got to her feet and smashed the door control.

A terrified officer stood shaking at the door. "F-f-forgive the interruption, Inquis-"

"What do you want?", she asked impatiently.

"The Grand Admiral sent me", he said quickly, "He wants to see you. Down at the dig site."

Interesting. "Fine", she barged past the officer without waiting for his response.

The Chiss probably wanted to gloat before his presumed victory. Thrawn was always arrogant and eager to wallow in his success, what little of that there was. She'd happily oblige him, knowing that he'd fallen perfectly into her trap, and remember his smug confidence when she choked the life from his body.

Thrawn wasn't half as clever as he thought he was. He thought he could distract her by sending Sarlis away, but she was smarter than that. She knew exactly what Thrawn was trying to do. In his arrogance though, he'd overlooked one tiny crucial detail. That detail would be his undoing.

Luke picked the corridor on his right after heading back into the centre room. It would be as good a place as any to try and reach out for advice. It too was a plain circular corridor like the last one, but it didn't slope downwards or go on for very long. Luke grabbed his small flashlight from his utility belt and shone it in front of him to light the way. The small light couldn't reach the end of the corridor until he was a few metres in. I really need a staff like Ahsoka's.

It fed into a much smaller circular room with a smooth slab of stone - some sort or altar of table - set in the middle. There was enough room between the entrance and the stone for him to work with, so he placed the flashlight on the flat grey stone and got down onto his knees. All of the walls were plain and empty with nothing to give away the history of this place. Wanting to cut off any other distractions, Luke turned off the light and put it back on his belt.

"Well this isn't creepy...", he muttered to himself.

The darkness, the isolation, combined with the powerful sensations in the force were enough to put him on edge. Focus, Luke.

Luke remembered every lesson he'd been taught by Yoda and Ben. Placing his hands on his knees, Luke steadied his breath and slowed his mind. One by one, Luke focused on every errant thought in his head and plucked them away. Slowly, he sank back into his trance.

Once more, he felt the hard stone around him. He felt the thin layer of dust beneath his knees, the stagnant air flowing through his nose, the scattering of heat on the rock beyond.
It didn't take long for the material sensations to give way to the immaterial. Luke felt the history of this place pulling him in. For whatever reason, meditating here seemed much better than it had in the other room with Ahsoka. The feelings of peace, silence, and serenity faded quickly and were replaced with far more intense sensations of pain, fear, and death. The ruin almost seemed to come to life around him as centuries, millennia even, of this place's past flooded into him.

"Now... reach out."

Luke's focus shattered. "Hello?"

That was a voice. It had come with warning but it was definitely a voice, but whose voice?

He turned back over his shoulder, "Ahsoka?"

There was no answer. It hadn't sounded like Ahsoka's voice if he was honest. It sounded like a man, an older but strangely familiar man.

"Focus, Luke. Focus."

Luke shut his eyes before his focus completely left him. Once more, he centred himself and opened up to the force.

"The force is trying to tell you something. Listen to it."

Luke looked around again. It was so sudden. This voice was different and not one he recognised. It was coming from around him but within him too. What's going on here?

"I see him... in my mind's eye..."

That one was deeper, angrier, more intense. Whatever was happening, Luke started to think it was something much more than just meditating.

"Follow the light, the light will be your guide."

Luke was about to get up and go when he remembered something Ahsoka had told him. The World Between Worlds connected everything, and its gateways could never be destroyed. This might be some sort of residue left over from it. Ezra had mentioned hearing voices when he travelled through there, was this the same thing?

"Luke... Luke"

That voice he recognised. "Ben?"

The stone alter in front of him started to draw his attention. What... is this? Luke couldn't help but focus on the altar, feeling himself drawn inexplicably to it. The force seemed to compel him to reach out. He brought up his left hand and stretched it out slowly towards the altar. His fingers just brushed the stone and-

"They're here!"

The room was flooded with light and the force twisted and turned on itself for a few seconds. Luke's vision cleared and he saw that he was in the same place at the altar but everything else was different. It was brighter, cleaner, purer. Like a different place entirely.

The biggest different was the person standing before him on the other side of the altar. A tall Cerean man with a long white beard down to his chest looked at the air above Luke with a grim
face. His arms were together and tucked into the sleeves of his plain white robe.

"The time has come. Warn the Grandmaster. We will not let them have it", he said urgently.

"At once", a voice replied from behind Luke's ear.

Luke looked up and almost jumped at the sight of another person standing over him. No... not over... in. A grey-haired human woman in an identical white robe was standing right where he was... and she didn't notice him. What was going on here?

She bowed her head, "Father give us resolve."

The woman turned and hurried back up the corridor. Looking down it, Luke saw that it was bright and lit by small white flames in tiny wooden braziers along the walls. It was all so familiar and yet all so new.

Luke got to his feet and looked back at the Cerean man. His eyes were shut and his hand was resting on the altar as he quietly whispered some sort of prayer or chant to himself. Then, with new resolve, the Cerean opened his eyes and moved around the altar. Again, the man passed through Luke without any reaction.

This was some sort of vision, Luke was sure of it. But why? And of what? Who were these people? What are they worried about?

Before he lost sight of the man, Luke followed him back up the corridor into the central circular room. The Cerean had stopped in the centre next to another individual in another identical white robe, this time an Ithorian. Luke slowly walked to stand in front of the centre corridor to the gateway room, listening to the two people talking.

"They are on their way", the Cerean told the Ithorian.

The Ithorian shut its eyes and uttered something in its own language.

"And Son give you strength, sister", the Cerean replied, seeming to understand what was being said.

Like the small altar room, this centre room was clean and bright. There was no dust, no darkness, no decay - only plain smooth circular walls and tiny white flames. This wasn't just any vision, Luke realised, this was a vision of the past.

The sound of footsteps from behind made him turn around. The woman from before was hurrying back up from the centre corridor. She passed right through Luke and stood with the other two people in the centre of the room.

"He is ready", she told them, "We will not let them have it."

Who was 'them'? What won't they have? The gateway? Any answers were cut off as a figure appeared in the temple's entrance, cutting off the stream of bright light from the outside. That figure was followed by three more. The lead one filed into the room and two others fanned out to the side, with the fourth lurking back near the entrance and shrouded in shadow.

The leader was a Zabrak with long thick black hair and a forehead of sharp horns. Her burning yellow eyes gave away what her presence in the force already confirmed: she was a Sith. A lightsaber hung on the belt around her black robes, her hand hovering over it. On her left was a man with the same yellow eyes and aura of darkness. He was bald, his skin dark, and he wore a
similar set of black robes to the Zabrak. Lastly, there was a blue Twi'lek. The same darkness showed with him, but he didn't look the part. Instead of black robes he wore long white-brown ones more like Ben used to wear. Luke couldn't get a good look at the figure in the back.

"Where is your Grandmaster?", the Zabrak spat.

"Here."

An old and frail voice answered from the corridor beside Luke. Walking slowly up the corridor from the altar room, resting on a cane, was another old man in another white robe. His face was gaunt and wrinkled, his hands visibly old, and he moved in pain and discomfort.

Wait a second... where did he come from? The man was coming from the same corridor Luke and the Cerean had exited, but no one else was down there. Besides, the woman had gone into the gateway room to fetch him, not back to the altar. What in the force was going on?

The three monks stepped aside to let their Grandmaster through to meet the intruders. Luke moved around the side to get a better look at the confrontation.

"Why are you here?", the Grandmaster asked in a strained voice, "We are not Jedi. The Sith have no business here."

"Hmph", the Twi'lek wearing the Jedi-looking robes laughed, "You are not Jedi, and we are not Sith."

Luke saw the Grandmaster shut his eyes and hang his head. "So, it is true."

"You cannot stand against Him. Join us and we shall bring the galaxy to heel", the Zabrak said. The Grandmaster sighed and looked at the other monks. They didn't say anything, only nodding solemnly.

"We will not serve your foul master", the old man tapped his cane silently on the ground, "He should have died at Malachor."

Malachor? Luke's heart stopped when he heard it. What has Malachor got to do with any of this? He'd have to ask Ahsoka when he got out of whatever this was.

The Zabrak's mouth twisted into a smirk. "Then you will be destroyed."

Her lightsaber flew up from her belt and entered her hand. She ignited its red blade and the dark-robed man beside her did the same. In an instant, she lunged forward in a sweeping motion with her saber, only for it to stop mid-swing as the old female monk caught it in her hand.

The dark-siders stared in awe for a moment as the old woman pushed the blade aside as if it was nothing. The old woman then thrust out her hand and sent the Zabrak flying back towards the entrance. As she did, the Twi'lek dark-sider ignited his own cyan blade and threw it across the room.

"Sister!", the Cerean monk cried in vain.

They watched helplessly as the Twi'lek's blade flew into her chest, sending the woman down to her knees.

"Kill them all!", the Zabrak shouted as she scrambled to her feet.
The Twi'lek pulled his blade back with the force as the woman's body slumped dead on the ground and brandished it at the three remaining monks. Then he charged at the Ithorian, who also caught the blade in her hands. However, the other dark side man took the opportunity and closed the gap in seconds before slicing the Ithorian across the chest with his red blade, ending her life.

"No!", the Grandmaster shouted in horror.

Luke took the briefest second to look at the entrance. Still, the mysterious fourth intruder remained shrouded in the corridor's shadows.

The Cerean pulled the Grandmaster back and stood in front of him, hands raised at the attackers. By now, the Zabrak was on her feet and glaring at the two remaining monks with a seething hatred.

Briefly, Luke could swear things were getting just a bit quieter. He blinked his eyes a few times as well, feeling as if his vision was just a little off.

"Rargh!", the Zabrak's hand erupted with a torrent of Sith lightning towards the two men.

Reacting instantly, the Cerean moved his hands and caught the bolts as they flew. Luke watched in amazement as the Cerean's hands glowed a bright blue as the last of the lightning dissipated harmlessly into his palms. The Zabrak looked as surprised as Luke was, stopping her onslaught for a moment. Then, a bolt of lightning shot back out from the Cerean. It went straight for the man with the red lightsaber, hitting him square in the chest and sending him flying back with a sickening thud into the wall.

"You'll pay for that, monk!", the Twi'lek spat as the last sizzles of lightning ebbed away from his friend's body.

The Grandmaster had backed up almost to the corridor by now, apparently helpless to stop his friends being slaughtered. It was just the Cerean against the Zabrak and the Twi'lek now, as well as the mysterious figure that was hiding in the shadows by the entrance.

Simultaneously, the Zabrak and the Twi'lek swung at the man. Miraculously he caught both of their blades in separate hands with the same strange power his fallen friends had used. Luke watched in suspense as the man's strength struggled against the attackers. The Cerean held onto his opponent's weapons with all his strength, unscathed by the power of the lightsaber blades.

Then, Luke saw movement in the corner of his eye. Out of the shadows by the entrance stepped the final figure. It was no human. It had a tall elongated neck and head buried beneath its long purple robe. The only place not covered by the robe was its face - or rather its mask - and its hands. A black metallic mask with glowing blue eyes covered where its face should be. It walked slowly and silently from the entrance towards the Cerean, carrying in its chitinous hands a red crystalline orb. The orb felt... wrong. Horrible. Unnatural. Whatever it was, Luke knew it was important, and purely evil.

Both the Zabrak and the Twi'lek raised their lightsabers up, pulling the Cerean's arms with them as he clung onto the blades. They both seized an arm each before he could let go and restrained him as the purple-robed thing walked up to him. The Cerean's passive face now became one of fear as this mysterious figure stared down at him through the mask, the orb clutched safely in one hand. Without warning, the thing's hand shot out and grabbed the Cerean's face. It's chitinous fingers dug harshly into his skin while the other hand raised the orb and held it in front of the Cerean's face.
Luke felt something terrible in the force before it started to happen. The orb started to glow. Then, the Cerean started to scream. The thing's grip held firm as the Cerean screamed in pain and terror. A faint red mist started to form around the thing's hand that then drifted into the orb. All the while, the Cerean kept screaming.

Then the screaming stopped as suddenly as it began. The thing released its grip and Luke was mortified by the face left behind. The man's skin was black and dry, shrivelled as if it was a corpse left to rot, sucked dry of any life and warmth he may have had. The Zabrak and the Twi'lek let the emaciated body drop unceremoniously to the ground, and turned to the Grandmaster standing alone by the gateway room corridor.

Luke felt another shift in the force. The vision before him got a little bit quieter and he felt like his eyes were starting to go out of focus. The vision might have been fading ever so slowly, but Luke didn't know why.

"Last chance, old man. Join us, or die", the Zabrak stepped a pace closer.

He looked down at what was left of his friend, but his resolve remained unshaken. "I will never serve Him."

The Zabrak stepped forward and raised her lightsaber for a final blow. "So be it."

The Grandmaster didn't flinch as she took in a deep breath and steadied her footing, before finally thrusting it forward through his chest.

He also didn't flinch as it passed harmlessly through him.

"What?!", the Zabrak stepped back, stunned.

The old man smiled, "You have failed."

The Grandmaster's form disappeared before their eyes, leaving no trace behind. Luke was overwhelmed with questions, far too many to answer on the fly.

"No...", the Zabrak stared at the empty space where he'd been, "No!"

She broke into a run down the corridor and the Twi'lek followed behind. Luke ran after them, passing the silent and motionless thing in purple standing over the corpse. The Zabrak and the Twi'lek stopped in their tracks as they entered the gateway room. Luke did the same when he saw what was in there. The far wall was shimmering brightly - the gateway was open. Even more shocking was the sight of the Grandmaster on his knees before the gateway, clutching his chest and gasping for air.

The vision seemed to keep getting quieter and more out of focus every second. What in the-

"No! What have you done!", the Zabrak screamed.

The Grandmaster raised his hand shakily towards the gateway. "You... have... failed."

His hand tightened and one of the bronze rings on the wall moved. The shimmering portal faded away and all that remained was a plain wall.

"No! NO!", the Zabrak screamed.

The Grandmaster's hand dropped, a few final gasps for air echoing around the room. Then, he too
faded away, leaving behind just his simple white robe as Ben and Yoda had when they passed.

"What do we do?", the Twi'lek asked desperately.

The vision started to fade completely and every sound became muffled.

"Dammit...", the Zabrak's voice sounded distant, "Prepare the weapon. Then... tell Him we failed."

"Ahhh!"

Luke screamed and fell back from the altar. It was dark again and the odd sensations of the vision were gone. He looked around quickly for any sign of what just happened but saw nothing.

He sat up and rubbed his eyes, breathing fast with sweat dripping from his forehead. "What... what in the galaxy was that?"

Ezra felt Jacen cling tighter to him in the backseat of the speeder as they flew low over Lothal's open plains.

"When will I get to fly a speeder?", the boy whined.

"When you're older", Ezra chuckled. He really is like his mother.

Jacen buried his head into his Master's back. "I want to be a pilot", he mumbled against Ezra's clothes.

Ezra rolled his eyes, "I thought you wanted to be a Jedi?"

The young boy scoffed. "Ugh, I can be a pilot and a Jedi", he said adamantly, "... right?"

"Of course you can, Jac." Ezra started to remember some of the things Ahsoka had given him about the Jedi. "You know, Ahsoka's Master was a great pilot, 'best in the galaxy' they called him."

He felt Jacen wiggle about in excitement, "Oooh, I want to be like him."

Ezra winced a bit. Obviously, Jacen didn't know everything about Ahsoka's old Master. The truth that the guy who once taught Ahsoka was also the Sith Lord that terrorised the galaxy wasn't something a six year old needed to know.

"How about Master Plo Koon?", Ezra offered instead, "He was one of Ahsoka's friends too. A Jedi Master, a good diplomat, Council Member, and an amazing pilot."

"He sounds pretty cool too", Jacen held on a bit tighter as they cleared the last small incline before their destination. "Where are we going?"

He smiled over his shoulder as he went down the final hill, "I'm glad you finally asked."

Ezra brought the speeder to a halt at the base of the tiny hill. The area in front of them was flat and featureless, without trees, rocks, or buildings. The distant horizon was covered in a thin fog that seemed to be there every time Ezra visited since he came home. Hopping off the speeder and helping Jacen down too, he checked the ground for the spot he wanted. Sure enough, it was still there, as he knew it would be. A perfectly circular patch of clear ground, connected by a thin strip of more clear ground to the web of lines and circles that covered the site. It was the same place he and Kanan had stood to open the Temple all those years ago.
He lay a hand on his apprentice's shoulder and waved out at the view with the other, "Jacen, this is Lothal's old Jedi Temple."

Jacen looked around with a curious look on his face. "Uhh, where?"

Ezra chuckled, Jacen wasn't exactly wrong to be confused. "Well, it was the Temple. That's gone, but it was here once", he explained. "Your father took me here years ago when he wanted to see if I'd really be ready for the next steps."

Jacen tilted his head to him, "What next steps?"

"Important ones, one you'll take too one day. That's still a few years away though." Ezra turned his back to the old Temple site and got on his knees. "Kneel", he motioned to the ground in front of him.

The boy obliged and fell to his knees, doing his best to copy Ezra's exact pose. "O-okay", he said.

Ezra let him settle for a moment before continuing. "The Temple is gone, but the force remains. You've been training with me for about a year now. I want to see how far you've come, and how far we still have to go together."

"What do I do?", Jacen asked.

"Calm your mind and focus. Stretch out with your feelings, just like we practiced."

Jacen breathed in deeply and then shut his eyes, just like they'd practiced. For several minutes, Ezra was silent as he let his apprentice focus and quiet his mind. The occasional twitch of his mouth or wrinkling of his nose showed Jacen slowly calming down and letting out any last bit of tension.

Ezra waited until he could see that Jacen was ready. "Now, what do you feel?"

"I... see...", Jacen furrowed his brow and crinkled his mouth, "I see... the sun, and the sky, and the grass."

"Good", Ezra gently encouraged him, "What else?"

His apprentice went quiet again and the concentration showed on his face. "There's... hmm", a tiny smile appeared, "Loth-cats!"

"Somewhere, yes." The little balls of cuteness were never far on this planet. Jacen had always loved them, Ezra had too, and even Sabine had opened herself to their charms.

"And I... I feel you. You're happy!", Jacen started to grin some more.

Ezra couldn't help but smile, "Yes, I am happy." Still, Ezra knew what was happening and gently nuzzled Jacen back on task, "Don't just feel what you want to feel, tell me what you do feel. Open yourself, listen to what the force is saying to you."

Jacen went quiet for longer this time. His face showed concentration as he worked hard to focus his mind. This must have been difficult for him at such a young age, Ezra had struggled with this when he was more than twice as old, but Jacen was doing really well all things considered. Ezra left him alone for a minute, then two, then five more. They weren't in a rush, and this deserved all the time they had.
"If it helps, recite the Code we learned", he suggested.

Jacen nodded and started to recite it. "There is no emotion, there is peace."

"There is no ignorance, there is knowledge", Ezra continued.

"There is no passion, there is... ser-ser-"

"Serenity", Ezra finished the word for him.

He didn't want to say anything about that passion line right now. Ezra'd made his stance on that clear yesterday with the older group, and it didn't need to be repeated again just yet.

"Serenity", Jacen repeated.

"There is no chaos, there is harmony."

Jacen finished the last line, "There is no death, there is the force."

"Now, do you feel anything?", Ezra asked, hoping that reciting the mantra would help him focus.

Again, his apprentice was quiet. This time though, his lips moved ever so slightly as he started to sense something.

"The force is... really strong here", Jacen said finally.

"Good, what else?"

His face was calm and it seemed to be coming easily to him. "This place is old. Really old. Years and years."

"Thousands of years old, maybe older", Ezra explained.

Ezra didn't know how old exactly the Temple had been. Maybe no one knew. Kanan mentioned that it had been abandoned by the Jedi for centuries by the time of the Clone Wars. In the last year, he'd spoken to Ahsoka about this place many times. Ahsoka was quick to remind him that the Jedi were only a few thousand years old in a galaxy hundreds of times older than that. It was entirely possible that the gateway to the World Between Worlds within the Temple had attracted people long before the Jedi came to it. It was a shame that it was gone now. A necessary sacrifice, but unfortunate.

"Master?", Jacen said suddenly, "I-I think I see something?

Ezra was surprised. "You see something? What?"

He nodded slowly, concentrating on whatever he was seeing. "I can't... I can't see what..."

"That's alright, take your time", Ezra assured him.

Feeling something was one thing, seeing it was another. Jacen's powers were growing faster than expected if he was starting to see things already, especially given the slower pace of Jacen's training compared to Ezra's own. This was encouraging and a good sign that things were going well, so long as they could manage it properly.

Understandably, Jacen was struggling to make out what the force was telling him. Ezra knew his apprentice could do it if he tried, and tried his best to encourage him.
Ezra began to recite a shorter version of the code, "No emotion, but peace. No ignorance, but knowledge. No passion, but serenity. No chaos, but harmony. No death, only the force."

The mantra seemed to help Jacen focus his mind. His apprentice's face softened as things appeared to be getting clearer.

"I see... someone", he started, "Someone... familiar."

Ezra nodded and started to push him gently, "Can you see who?"

"I...", Jacen paused, "You."

"Me?", Ezra was surprised, "What about me?"

Jacen's brow furrowed again and Ezra could feel Jacen pushing himself to go deeper. "I-I think it's you but you're... different. I... you're smaller? Younger!", he said it a bit louder and with more confidence.

Younger? Jacen must have been seeing one of his earlier visits to the Temple. It was an impressive achievement for him to be able to see something like that.

"That's great, Jac!", Ezra told him.

"There's someone else there... older... a girl", Jacen breathed in and then out heavily again, "A-Ahsoka? It's Ahsoka! She's excited but... sad. Like she's... sorry?"

Jacen must have been seeing their visit to the Temple before Malachor. It was the only time Ahsoka went there as far as Ezra knew, certainly the only time he remembered her being with them. Jacen had even managed to sense her emotions. It was here, on this very spot in fact, that Ezra found out that Ahsoka wasn't technically still a Jedi. She'd left the Order for reasons Ezra only found out years later. That would explain the sadness, and Ezra knew Ahsoka still regretted parts of the decision. That Jacen was able to sense so much was unprecedented. Something was really helping him connect with this place.

"There's something else..."

Ezra's attention went right back to Jacen. "Something else?"

Jacen didn't move or answer. His face strained and his breathing started to become more rapid. "It's... I'm almost...", his words dropped off into almost a whisper.

"Jacen?", Ezra straightened up, sensing something wasn't quite right, "Jacen? What?"

"Dad?!"

Ezra's heart froze.

Jacen's mouth fell open. "D-dad? I... I can see him!"

Oh no... Ezra leant down to him. "Jacen? Jacen, come on back it's just a-"

"Dad?!", he repeated again, "I see him, Ezra! I see him!"

Ezra dropped any pretense of training and put both of his hands on Jacen's shoulder. "Jacen? Listen to me, it's just a vision. Come back to me."
"No!", he yelled. "I...", Jacen's hand twitched, "I... I think I can reach him!"

"Jacen!", Ezra pleaded, "It's not real, it's just-

"I... Dad...", Jacen's shaking hand reached out and Ezra could feel the boy's heart racing.

Ezra quickly cupped his face, "Jac, come back. It's not-"

"Dad!"

Jacen's hand grabbed Ezra's side and his eyes shot open. The boy's eyes locked on Ezra's as he tried to catch his breath, but seemed to be seeing right through him. Ezra could feel Jacen shaking. Jacen looked at his hand, and then back at Ezra, then to his hand again. Ezra covered it with his own.

"Jac? You there?"

Jacen blinked a few times and at last really saw Ezra in front of him.

Ezra squeezed his hand a bit tighter, "Jac?"

Jacen's lip trembled, and then the tears came. Ezra pulled him straight into a hug as Jacen's sobs became louder. The boy buried his head into his Master's chest, and all Ezra could do was hold him. Every sob tore into Ezra's heart like knife.

_This is my fault... all my fault. He wasn't ready._ Ezra should have known better. This place was powerful. He should have known Jacen wasn't ready for this, he should have known this was a mistake. He should have known better, and he'd let Jacen down and done... this, made him see that.

"It's not fair!", Jacen screamed into his chest, "It's not fair!"

Ezra knew his pain all too well. "I know, Jac. I know it's not", he whispered into his ear. "It's just a vision. It's all over now."

Jacen kept crying and it was all Ezra could do to try and comfort him.

_This was a mistake. You let him down._ Ezra regretted ever bringing Jacen here today. Maybe it was okay for the Jedi before, but not now. 'There is no death, only the force' - the words couldn't have felt more hollow than they did now. That might have been fine for the philosophers of old, but not them. There was death, and both he and Jacen had been forced to know it far younger than most.

Ezra wasn't counting how long they were there for after that. It was a long time before Jacen started to calm down and even longer before Ezra even suggested moving him and taking him home. After what Jacen had just seen and been through, he needed rest. The sun was starting to set before he helped Jacen back to the speeder and started the journey. Jacen was out cold for most of it, secured safely in his seat with his arms tightly around his Master's waist. The vision might be over, but Jacen would take a long time to process it and come to terms with what he saw. Doing that was going to be a long and difficult thing to manage. _And it's all your fault, Ezra._

Chapter End Notes

Many, many things to talk about here. I'll leave the discussion of Thrawn's and the Fourth Sister's sections for next chapter because they're quite simple and there's so
The Luke section is one of the most unique I've ever done, and is obviously going to raise a ton of questions. I have to be careful not to give too much away too early on this. First of all, it's obviously a vision of the past and what happened at the Temple all those years ago. The defenders are a sect of force monks, not Jedi or Sith. They're neutral in the force, hence the white robes, and are sort of guardians for the World Between Worlds and the gateway there. Every force power they use is established in canon somewhere: catching lightsabers is done by the Father and the Son in the Mortis but also Satele Shan in Legends; absorbing and reflecting lightning is seen in Attack of the Clones; lastly, force projection is obviously in The Last Jedi. That last one is particularly important since it's the first time Luke sees it in my mind, and it's obviously a power that ends up becoming important to him later on. I've been conscious of only doing things in this story with a canon precedent, or a not-so-crazy Legends one. I want this story to line up with what we already know as much as possible. I'll also explain that the Grandmaster (not the same Master the Fourth Sister is talking to) manages to seal the gateway to the WBW, denying the attackers what they want and breaking the connection that was letting Luke see such a powerful vision.

The question remains: what about the dark siders? Firstly, the Twi'lek with his blue saber and Jedi robes was once a Jedi. Long-term readers might remember Ezra's discovery of blue and red blade wielders dying side-by-side at Site Three back in Chapter 13. These aren't the same people, but the point is that some Jedi and Sith (or ex-Jedi/Sith) were working together. This section also quite clearly implies some sort of conflict. I feel like I can say that, yes, there is a conflict thousands of years in the past of this story, but it's not a simple Jedi vs Sith one. There's both Jedi and Sith on both sides of that conflict. Why? That's a bit more than I'm willing to say right now. Finally, there's that mention of Malachor. I can only say that it too will be explained later, but there was a reason for its inclusion here and also the discussion Luke and Ahsoka had a few chapters ago. As I've always said, I've had this story planned for a long time. That includes a pretty hefty chunk of stuff that connects the ancient stuff in this story and from elsewhere in the canon. Somewhere, either in the story or in these author's notes, that whole side of things will be explained too.

The other question that last scene might leave is about the purple robed figure. That's something I won't answer directly, but someone who digs hard enough can answer a lot of that question. Maybe not all of it, but a lot of it. It's not the Being that the Fourth Sister is communing with, I will say that. I did take some liberties with the orb and some other stuff, but let's just say that the bulk of 'it' isn't my own creation. That's all I'll say on that.

Skipping to the last section, Ezra and Jacen's visit to the Temple is the first proper lesson we've seen for the two of them, and it's one that ends in what Ezra considers to be failure. Even though it's physically gone, the place where the Temple was is still powerful in the force and is still linked to the World Between Worlds. It's mainly through that link that Jacen can look back and see the visit Ezra, Ahsoka, and Kanan make in Season 2's Legacy of the Force. The Jedi always insist on letting go of attachments, but even a glimpse of his father shows Jacen how difficult that can be. It's not just that Jacen is seeing Kanan but feeling his presence too in a way he never has before. Jacen is only a small child still and feeling something like that is going to seriously overwhelm him. When things start going wrong, Ezra drops the formal training talk and becomes 'Uncle Ezra' again. I've mentioned many times that family is
important to Ezra, and in that moment comforting Jacen is infinitely more important to him than training his apprentice. Despite what the Jedi say about letting go, Ezra understands how difficult or even impossible that can be. It's a difficult line to walk and Ezra can't keep brushing off the huge incompatibility there forever.

Next time: Thrawn has a final talk with the Inquisitor, Ahsoka has a vision, the Fourth Sister prepares to act, and Ezra confides in Sabine.
In keeping with my new schedule, here's this week's chapter. They'll all be Wednesday from now on since that's easier for me. However, I'm unable to post next Wednesday so I'm going to be doing next week's on Tuesday again. Awkward, I know, but after that it'll be a Wednesday affair.

This chapter was originally titled 'Clarity' but I chose 'Face the Music' because I just really like the saying. It means to face the (usually unpleasant) consequence's of one's actions, which perfectly captured most of this chapter, particularly the Ahsoka and Ezra ones.

This time: Thrawn has a final talk with the Inquisitor, Ahsoka has a vision, the Fourth Sister prepares to act, and Ezra confides in Sabine.

Opening up a large pit around the entrance to the ruin below had proven to be a good choice, as Thrawn knew it would be. Even in the dim evening light, he could see far more than he had the first time while this discovery was still buried underground. The small utility lamps left here by the digging crews also allowed him to assess the situation one final time.

The lone podium in front of the door remained a mystery. The blank brown-red stone pillar told him nothing, and the triangular shape atop it had eluded him too. It matched no known languages, cultures, or religions. As for the structure itself, the first door had been completely cut away with powerful laser cutters. All that remained of it was a charred outline around the edges. Interestingly, no locking mechanism had been found nor any other indication of how the doors opened. The plain heavy metallic material was bereft of any clues and was simply disposed of after he'd spent many fruitless hours analysing what remained.

They were no more than halfway through the second door now, and progress would resume the next morning - assuming those that remained stuck with the shift patterns. At best, it would be another week before this door was removed. Beyond that? Multiple doors would suggest a need for security. Two would be uncharacteristically few given that both doors seem to lack any distinguishing artwork that might suggest ritual or spiritual significance. No, at least one more, if not many. Adjusting for lower staff numbers but greater familiarity with the work, a minimum of three weeks is what we have to work with.

Thrawn grimaced. Let us hope that three weeks is enough. Things were already sliding into place - the Myrmidon and the Chimaera were in final preparations for their imminent departure, Sarlis and the Imperator were already away, and only one final thing needed to be ensured.

The sound of hard boots hitting the steps on the slope into the pit told him the Inquisitor was here. She had come alone, as he knew she would, just like he had.

"It is a fascinating place, isn't it?", he didn't turn back to greet her as she approached from behind.
She stood at ease next to him. "Yes, it is."

They silently stood and admired what they'd spent years trying to find. What we are also about to come to blows over.

"Why did you ask for me?", she said bluntly.

"I did not ask, I ordered", Thrawn corrected.

She didn't rise to the obvious slight, "Why?"

Interesting. Thrawn noted her stance. Arms behind her back, feet apart, shoulders slightly slumped - relaxed. Confident.

"I will be departing for a short time", he explained to her. "Both the Chimaera and the Myrmidon are needed for an important mission elsewhere that will greatly help us. It will not take us long."

"What sort of mission?", she turned to him, "Where?"

Thrawn shook his head, "That is none of your concern."

"Oh?" She moved to the space in front of him and bore into him with her glare, "And why's that?"

"Because...", Thrawn met her eyes unflinchingly, "We cannot afford to let your failures repeat themselves. This is far too important."

The anger he'd grown so used to was clear on her face, but this time the Inquisitor didn't vocalise it like she used to. There were no attempts at a biting counter, no attempted insult, just the same grinding of teeth and slight clenching of her fists. Good.

"General Veers, as the ranking officer, will retain command of the operation in my absence", Thrawn continued.

"I've been on this mission the longest, I should be in command", she replied indignantly.

"No", Thrawn replied instantly, "This is a military operation and you've stressed many times that you are outside of that military structure. No, General Veers is a far more reliable and well-equipped leader for the time being."

She held her tongue and stared at him for a few long moments. The Grand Admiral stared back, unmoved by her unnerving appearance or any physical threat. She couldn't raise a hand against him right now, and she knew it. Instead, the Fourth Sister eventually turned her back to him and focused on the structure before them.

The very brief encounter had confirmed everything he'd already theorised, and laid the final seeds for his own plans.

Firstly, she'd only pressed him once for further details of his mission. She was clever enough to put up at least a pretense of ignorance, but not enough to make it convincing. She was eager, selfish, arrogant, and ambitious - she wouldn't give up on such tantalising new information about a mission so quickly. Therefore, it is not new.

That fed into the next conclusion he'd drawn: she knew about Sarlis. Not once did she question the fact that the Imperator and its Captain had left several hours ago. Thrawn had notified General
Veers, Commandant Hux, and Captain Canady, but not her. Any information she had did not come from him, and the other three officers had been indisposed all day. It had been exactly as he'd predicted: Captain Sarlis had told her, against his explicit instructions.

If Sarlis had fed her the information, then everything was already in place

"I can't delay any more. I must return to my ship", Thrawn announced.

The Fourth Sister didn't turn back, staying facing the structure with her head down to the ground. "I sense our expedition is almost done, Grand Admiral."

"I am inclined to agree, Inquisitor."

Thrawn looked at her, then at the structure. Finally, he turned and made his way towards the steps out of the pit. He wasn't halfway there when the Fourth Sister called after him one last time.

"Safe travels, Grand Admiral."

Thrawn didn't stop or look back. "Oh, they will be."

The faint echoes of the gateway were still clear around her. Ahsoka had become intimately familiar with the sensations over the last few years, and even these weaker, altered currents were recognisable. Ahsoka had been to many of these force nexuses over the years and each one was unique. Here, Lothal, Malachor, Coruscant, Mortis, and countless others - each one familiar yet wonderfully unique. A diverse universe unified by a common presence in the unifying cosmic force.

She smiled to herself. The Togruta always waxed philosophical during meditation, especially near gateways. Perhaps it was the experience she had with them, perhaps it was Morai, or maybe it was just her training. Whatever it was, a younger version of her would have been shocked. In her Temple years, she'd always enjoyed the active roles more than the academic ones. Now, it seemed, she needed both.

Ahsoka focused her mind on the questions she needed to answer. Show me what I need to do. Show me how I can help.

Nothing.

I am one with the force, the force is with me. I am one with the force, the force is with me. She repeated the ancient mantra of the Guardians of the Whills in her mind. Of the many force religions she'd encountered over the years, it had been one of the most enduring in her memory. Of course, no one group could ever hope to fully understand the force. Accepting the limits of your knowledge was an important part of becoming as close to it as one could get. Ahsoka knew more than most and there was so much she had yet to learn, and so much more she could never hope to.

Time got fuzzy when she meditated and Ahsoka didn't know how long she'd been on her knees at the gateway before she felt the slightest new twinge in the force. It grew stronger over a short period until she felt it was time to open her eyes.

Sure enough, a small familiar face was standing just before the ruined gateway. That faint blue aura around him aside, Master Yoda looked almost identical to how she'd remembered. One change that she could easily see though was his smile. It was the sort of happiness she hadn't seen in him since her younger days, before the Clone Wars.
"Master", Ahsoka bowed her head on instinct.

"Young Ahsoka", he smiled warmly.

She laughed, "Not so young anymore."

"Hmph", he tapped his stick on the ground, "Nine hundred years old was I, not forty are you. Young, you are."

Ahsoka smiled at him. "It has been a while, hasn't it?"

"Indeed", Yoda nodded, "A difficult path have you walked, one untraveled by many. But more to go, there still is."

"I know, Master. We came here to seek your guidance, like you gave to Ezra before us."

Yoda shut his eyes and sighed, "Difficult to see, the future is. Bridger, clear his path was, but less so you."

His eyes opened and searched her for a moment. Ahsoka couldn't get a good sense of what he was thinking. There was happiness in him, but also regret. Pride, but guilt. Whatever he had to tell her, she couldn't figure it out alone.

"What do you mean, Master?", she asked.

"Out of our hands, many things are. Not with me the answers lie", Yoda admitted reluctantly.

Ahsoka's heart sank. "You're saying you can't help us?"

"Oh?", Yoda tilted his head, "Said that, did I?"

Ahsoka paused, "Well... no."

She'd missed the old Jedi's unique way of teaching. Never telling but guiding, helping others to see clearly the things that were right in front of him. Even if Yoda usually showed people answers they already had within them, that talent alone was what made him wiser than any of them.

Yoda pointed to the door with his stick, "Being given what he needs, young Skywalker is, but know not I what that is. Far older than me, this mystery is."

It was something at least. Ahsoka hoped whatever was happening with Luke could begin to give them some actual answers here.

"Thank you, Master", she said gratefully.

That was only half of what Yoda had to say though. Ahsoka could sense it from him. His small brown eyes with their faint blue glow watched her closely, and she started to suspect what he was talking about.

"As for you, young Tano. Something more", he said at last.

Ahsoka nodded. "I think I understand, Master."

The ethereal figure turned slowly with his cane to look at the gateway. "The great mystery is the force. A great many things it hides. Knowledge, power, peace, war, safety, danger - all in balance. As there is life, there is death. But as there is death, there is life." Yoda paused and admired the
ornate bronze rings. "Yet, walked part of that path already you have. As I did, as Master Kenobi did, and others before you."

She knew exactly what he was referring to. "I never finished. I came close, but there was a final step I never completed."

It had been a strange journey. Ahsoka still thought of it as a dream. It was like Mortis again but she hadn't had Anakin or Obi Wan at her side that time. Alone, she ventured to places she'd never even dreamed existed, and encountered things she'd never known possible. However, the galaxy got in the way and kept her from completing that journey - the journey to learn how to maintain her consciousness after physical death.

"To complete you journey, one more task you must overcome", Yoda then turned back around to face her.

She nodded assuredly. "Tell me and I'll finish what I started. If the force allows me."

"Not in the force is it to succeed, but in you", he pointed the stick to her. "To know yourself, you must face what you fear. Face all that haunts your soul!"

A sudden, blinding flash of light came from the portal. By the time her vision had cleared, Yoda was gone. She was still in the same room, the same stance, and nothing else had changed that she could see. *What did you mean, Master Yoda?*

*Ahsoka."

A chill shot up her spine.

*Ahsoka."

"No...", she whispered under her breath. *It couldn't be...*

*Ahsoka." This time, it came from behind her.

Her eyes shut tight and she couldn't look. "Anakin..."

It was him. She couldn't turn to face him. She still wasn't ready... not after everything that happened. Not after everything she'd done.

"I'm sorry...", she croaked, "I wasn't there. I wasn't there when you needed me-"

"You had to make a choice, Ahsoka", Anakin interrupted, "You couldn't stay."

She'd told herself that before Malachor, before she finally admitted what she knew was true. Years of isolation had given her plenty of time to think about it. Ahsoka should have seen it on Mandalore, should have seen what had happened to him, but she was blind. She hadn't been there for him, to support him, to listen, to be the friend he needed when things were at their worst. If she had been, she might have stopped it.

Instead, he'd fallen. Many of her friends had fallen. The Jedi had fallen. The Republic had fallen. The entire galaxy had been forced to suffered the consequences of what had happened - and it was her fault.

Ahsoka looked mournfully at the cold ground, "I abandoned you. I failed..."

"Ahsoka, it wasn't your fault!"
"Yes, it was!", her voice broke as she shouted, "I wasn't there for you. I fail-
"

"You didn't fail me, Ahsoka!", Anakin's voice broke as her's did, "Neither did Obi Wan. Neither did Padme - I failed all of you."

Her words left her and she could only think them. No... I could have...

"You have to stop blaming yourself, Ahsoka." His voice sounded closer, as if it was right behind her. "Please. Don't let it haunt you."

Please. The strains of his voice stuck with her. He was pleading with her to let go of her guilt.

More and more, she felt the urge to turn around. She didn't know what she'd find when she did. The same face she'd known all those years ago? An older one, what would have been if left untouched? Or would she see what he became? Would she see that dark mask or what had been beneath it?

She couldn't bear it anymore. Finally, she turned around.

Ahsoka could barely believe it. It was him, just with that same faint blue hue about him that Yoda had. He looked just like he had on Mandalore and not a day older. The brown hair coming down to his ears, the dark Jedi robes, and the clear blue eyes. Maybe it was her own perception of him that made it happen, she didn't know. The thing that caught her attention most though, as it had with Yoda, was his smile. He was happy. He was glad to see her.

Anakin took another step forward, barely an arm's length away now. "I am so proud of you, Ahsoka."

Ahsoka struggled to form any words. To see him again, like nothing had changed, was almost too much for her.

"I... I didn't...", she stammered.

"What? Didn't do much?", Anakin smirked, "Come on, we both know you've got enough to be proud of."

Maybe... maybe she did. "I mean... I...", she breathed a laugh, "I guess I've done a few things right."

Anakin folded his arms and tilted his head. "Modesty? Didn't think you'd get that in your old age."

"Old?", her mouth curled into a grin. It amazed her how quickly she fell back into their familiar rhythm. "I'm not that old."

"Maybe not", Anakin shrugged. His smile became more sincere and less humoured. "You're definitely wiser though. More patient, more focused, more in touch with the force. Still a bit... rash sometimes, but..." he trailed off.

"What can I say? I learned from the best."

Anakin stifled a laugh for a moment. The happiness, the laughter - it was like old times, if only for a little while.

Her Master sighed and he grew more serious. "And... I can't thank you enough for what you've done for Luke and Leia. You've been there for them, that's more than I ever was."

It was so strange hearing their names on his lips. Anakin had never been given a chance to know
them. Even if *everything* else hadn't happened, the Jedi Order never would have let it happen. Still, despite everything, Anakin loved them. The concern in his voice, the sincerity and honesty in his presence, they all proved it.

Ahsoka smiled warmly up at him. "I don't have to do much. They can protect themselves. Take Luke - he's got your skill combined with...", she paused carefully, "With Padme's determination."

Anakin looked at away at the mention of Padme's name. Ahsoka knew there was something there, she'd known ever since that escapade with the shuttle and a Separatist fleet, but they'd never spoken about it. Ahsoka didn't know what happened to Padme, at least not the full details. Part of her knew better than to ask.

"I know he can look after himself, but Luke is lucky to have someone as wise and skilled as you are at his side for this. Whatever 'this' is."

*This.* With that, she was brought back to the mission at hand. As much as she'd give to spend so much more time here with him, she had a purpose elsewhere.

"Are you sure you don't have anything for us?", she asked.

Anakin shook his head, "This isn't my fight, Ahsoka. I don't know what's out here or what you're doing, but I trust you more than anyone else."

Ahsoka was about to say something when his hand came up and rested on her shoulder. To her amazement, she could feel it as if it was really there. Ahsoka hadn't thought you could manifest physically after death, only spiritually. The sensation was brief and fleeting, but every bit as real as anything she'd felt.

"I won't fail. We won't fail", she promised.

"I know you won't."

Her eyes met her Master's again as if to drive it home - Anakin was proud of her, Anakin didn't blame her, and Anakin would always be with her.

"Well, what are you waiting for?", Anakin smirked the way he always used to. "Get going, Snips."

After all these years, after all this time, after everything she'd been through - she finally liked hearing that nickname.

There weren't any words left to say. Ahsoka knew that she had everything she needed. Instead, she shut her eyes and embraced the feeling of her Master's presence being with her once more. When she opened her eyes at last, she couldn't see him. However, she could still feel him. Ahsoka didn't need to see him to know he would always be with her now, no matter how much longer the road was.

It was a feeling of peace and balance unlike anything she'd felt. She felt like a completely different person and, in a way, she was. The old Ahsoka had finally died, the one racked with misplaced guilt, regret, and fear. In its place were peace, serenity, enlightenment, and balance. Those things would bring them the victory she, Luke, Ezra, and the whole galaxy needed. Not victory over this threat, but victory for all time.

The Fourth Sister made a point of watching as the *Chimaera* and the *Myrmidon* made the jump away from the planet. At long last, Thrawn was gone. She had to wait a short while to confirm her
suspicions, and the moment she'd proved herself right she was marching out of her quarters with her comm out, keying in General Veers' address.

After a few seconds, it crackled to life.

"Inquisitor?", he asked in his gruff voice.

She put on her most placating voice, "General, there's something important I have to tell you."

"Then spit it out." Veers had taken to Thrawn more that the others had, and the Fourth Sister always felt that the man didn't like her. *Good, maybe he fears me instead.*

"Not here. Summon a meeting with the other officers, it's very important."

Vears huffed. "You don't give me orders, Inquisitor."

"General, I mean no disrespect", she insisted, "But our lives and futures depend on it."

With reluctance, the General obliged and summoned a meeting of the top remaining officers in the field HQ. The Fourth Sister was waiting around the central holographic map before the rest of them starter to trickle in, waiting eagerly by the terminal. General Veers came first, Hux and his two frigate captains next, then Canady, followed by the captains of the *Aeternus* and the *Invictus*. When they'd all arrived, Veers cut straight to the point.

"Alright, what's so important", he asked bluntly.

The Fourth Sister planted her hands on the map table and leaned in. "We've all been deceived. Thrawn is moving against us and if we don't act now then we're all doomed."

Her words sent a silence over the room. The frigate captains exchanged nervous glances, Hux looked even more awkward than usual, Canady didn't seem bothered, and Veers narrowed his eyes with a grimace.

"What in blazes are you talking about?", he scoffed.

She looked around at all of them as she spoke. "Thrawn told you he's going to deal with some pirates, didn't he?"

They nodded. The Inquisitor looked down at the terminal on the table and pressed the comm address she needed. Then, the holographic figure of Captain Sarlis materialised next to her at the table.

"Captain?", Veers was taken aback.

The Fourth Sister smiled at Sarlis. "Tell them what Thrawn told you."

Captain Sarlis cleared her throat, "The Grand Admiral sent me to catch the Jedi."

The word hung over the room. The frigate captain exchanged worried looks, some of the mixed with anger.

"Jedi?", Canady repeated, "Why?"

Sarlis shrugged, "I don't really understand. Something about Bridger being useful to him."

"Thrawn wants to work with the Jedi", the Inquisitor explained, "Why? How? I can only guess he
wants to try and use Bridger's power for himself and deny us, deny the Empire, whatever we're trying to find."

Hux looked confused, as usual. "Why would he lie to us?"

Vees squinted at Sarlis, "Why did he tell you? Why did he trust you?"

"Ah", the Fourth Sister interrupted, "I'm afraid that you too have been deceived, Captain."

Sarlis looked at her befuddled, "What?"

The Fourth Sister reached into her pocket and pulled out a small data disc that she'd been given on Coruscant years ago. She slid it into the receiver at the map terminal and pressed a few buttons. A star map appeared marking several locations, among them Sarlis' position, their current planet, and the planet they'd designated as Site Two. In short, it had been everything she'd needed to confirm her suspicions.

"Here", she pointed to Sarlis' position, "Is where he sent you. I noticed that the coordinates were awfully close to something else: Site Two."

Vees watched with interest at the presentation. "Site Two? What's Site Two?", he asked.

"Just a planet Bridger stopped on during his escape from Thrawn. It's not important really", she waved her hand dismissively, careful not to reveal too much about her encounter there.

Canady pursed his lips, "Why does it matter?"

"Good question", the Fourth Sister smirked.

She pressed another few buttons on the terminal, making a small red dot appear on the map a short distance from their current position - a dot marking the Chimaera.

"That, my friends, is the Chimaera", she said with a smug grin.

Vees looked amazed, "You're tracking it through hyperspace?!"

Indeed she was. The Emperor had personally ordered one of the experimental trackers to be placed onboard the Star Destroyer on the Chiss' final visit to Coruscant. Its signal had allowed her to find the Chimaera all those years ago. As it began her painful, arduous time with Thrawn, so it would end it.

"Experimental technology developed under the Tarkin Initiative. It isn't quite perfect but it works", she explained what little she'd remembered of what the Emperor told her. "At first, I thought the Chiss was heading to Captain Sarlis' position but...", she pressed a button to make the ship's trajectory appear, "His precise course puts him towards Site Two."

"W-what am I here for then?", Sarlis stammered.

"I'm afraid he tried to use you as a distraction. Your position is very close to Site Two. The distance is too small for us to detect based on his trajectory when he left earlier today, but the hyperspace tracker shows the slight alterations made to their course. Thrawn put you in that system to make us think he was going to you when he was actually going to Site Two. Maybe he wants to catch the Jedi there, maybe he even arranged to."

Canady clenched his fists on the table. "He's lied to us, misdirected us, and now he's trying to align
with the enemy? I don't know about those Jedi, Inquisitor, but I don't take kindly to deception."

"That traitor!" The surprising outburst came from the Invictus' Captain. "The Jedi massacred dozens of my troops when they came out here last time. Those criminals need to be executed not worked with."

She'd almost forgotten how much of a help that frigate's Captain might be. Some of Bridger's friends, the Togruta she presumed, had run into the Aeternus on their way out here and had killed many of the people on board.

Seeing them finally open their eyes was pure ecstasy. "I completely agree, Captain. Thrawn's clever, I'll give him that, but not that clever. He underestimated us and he will pay for his treachery."

"What are you suggesting?", Commandant Hux asked cautiously.

"Thrawn doesn't know about the tracker; the Emperor never told him. That means we can catch him off-guard. I say we go in guns blazing and hit him with everything we have", she proposed.

"Hold on", Veers raised his hand, "I am in command here and I will not start a civil war on mere speculation. Perhaps we should see what the man has to say."

"No!", she was starting to get tired of Veers' attitude, "There's no time. Thrawn will talk his way out of it, that Chiss is at least good at that. If he gets those Jedi, we're in trouble."

Captain Canady gave a gruff sigh. "Reluctantly, I have to agree with her", he told Veers. "This feels a bit underhanded to me too but Thrawn has clearly done a lot worse to us. Better to strike now than give him a chance to escape or strike back."

"I'm with you, Inquisitor. For the Empire", the Commandant said.

The Invictus' Captain looked irate. "No question. We're making that Jedi pay for what they did, Thrawn or no Thrawn."

All three of the remaining frigate Captains nodded in agreement. With that, she had everyone she needed.

General Veers sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Alright, what's your plan?"

She'd already made that before the meeting even started. "Myself, Captain Canady, and Commandant Hux will take the Solicitude and the Cunctator, some of the frigates too, and we'll intercept Thrawn. He'll have one chance to surrender before we blast him and his ships to pieces."

"Thrawn will never know what hit him." Canady's voice was an odd mix of regret and enthusiasm.

"What about me? Maybe I could go and cut him off?", Sarlis asked.

"No. He has two ships, you have one. He'd overwhelm you and flee before we get there." The Fourth Sister looked back at the tracking dot of the Chimaera, "However, I do have a use for you. I will contact you soon."

"Very well", Veers said reluctantly.

Canady straightened up, "I'll make preparations aboard the Solicitude."

She nodded, "Good, we'll need to leave immediately if this is to work."
With a cursory nod, Sarlis' figure disappeared from the table. The rest of them also dispersed to attend to whatever they needed to do so they could get going as soon as possible. She'd be aboard the *Solicitude*, she could only suffer Hux's snivelling incompetence so long anyway, and they'd bring the *Aeternus* and the *Invictus* with them.

At last, at long last, Thrawn's time was done. She was finally going to be rid of the insufferable Chiss, as well as his two loyal acolytes. All those years of grating under his arrogance were about to be done. Even better, they would get Bridger and whoever he brought along too. Her two worst enemies, together facing a slow, agonising, and painful death. Soon, nothing would stand in her way.

*Nothing will be there to stand in His way,* her mind corrected.

History had never been Ezra's strong suit, even on good days. Having to teach it himself to the middle group - Ulu, Tarqual, and Ninvere - all afternoon was a challenging as it was exhausting. They'd started at the beginning with the stories of the Jedi on Tython and part of their training over the next few months would be covering as much of the remaining history as they had at hand. It was useful to remember where ideas and groups came from, to learn from mistakes they made and the successes they had, but that didn't mean it was always easy or enjoyable. At the end of today, he wanted nothing more than to crawl back into the tower and collapse on the bed. In fact, that was *exactly* what he planned to do.

It was what he'd done last night too, and the night before. Ever since that visit to the Temple with Jacen, Ezra hadn't wanted to spend any time doing 'nothing.' He'd either worked or slept. It still haunted him - the tears, the pain in Jacen's eyes, the way he'd reached helplessly for someone who wasn't there - it tore at his soul whenever he thought about it. Ezra had brought him there, made him reach out, and made him experience that. All he could do to forget that was work himself to death in the day and collapse into bed at night, never giving himself a moment's downtime to remember it all.

What little time he'd spent thinking about the problem had made it worse. He'd briefly thought that the Jedi would have an answer to how to deal with things like that, but Ezra soon remembered it. *Ignore it, let go.* The wise counsel of the ancient Jedi Order to any emotional trauma or attachment was to just shut down and ignore it. Move on and let go as if it didn't mean a thing. That was never going to be an option.

He trudged the last few steps into his tower and palmed the door control. It cheered him up to see Sabine sat quietly on the couch in the middle of the room, that old book Fenn Rau had given them at the wedding in her hands.

"Was wondering where you were", Sabine set the book down on the desk in front of her, smiling as he walked over and sat down on the couch.

Ezra fell into the couch with an exhausted sigh. He looked at the book Sabine had put down, seeing a long page of text. "What you reading?", he picked it up to look for himself.

"History", she shrugged.

He rolled his eyes, "Ugh, I've been doing that all day." He skimmed the first few lines. "Huh, Mandalorian Wars. Should have guessed really."

The Jedi had fought many, many wars with the Mandalorians over the years. Many of the stories were lost to time, many more were too filled with legends or falsehoods to figure out the truth from
the fiction. Nevertheless, they made for fascinating reading, even if they didn't really happen exactly how they were said to.

"Any good?", he asked and put the book back down carefully.

"Yeah, but different to the Jedi stuff I helped you put together. It's crazy how different Mandalorians present it than the Jedi did. It's hard to tell who's telling the truth and who's lying to make themselves look better."

Ezra shrugged, "Truth's probably somewhere in the middle."

The Jedi shut his eyes and leaned back, too exhausted or too unwilling to think much more about it. For all their talk of honesty and integrity, Ezra was sure the Jedi account of their wars with Mandalore didn't line up with fact. Ezra had been there and seen what little was left of that planet, and seen the way the Jedi carried such stigma among their people. There was no reconciling those facts with what the Jedi said had happened all those years ago.

They weren't sat long before he felt Sabine watching him. He didn't need to look to feel her concerned eyes hovering over him.

"What's up with you?", she asked softly, "Last few days you've been really distant. Ever since you came back from that thing with Jacen."

His connection with Sabine had only grown stronger with time, and it was becoming instinctive to them both. When she hurt, he felt it, and vice versa. He knew she'd be able to tell something was wrong quite quickly. Sabine had been working the last few days or taking separate classes and they hadn't spent much time alone together as a result. Now that they were finally alone together with no other distractions, there was no way she could miss the change in him. A part of him was probably counting on it for his own sake.

"I took Jacen to the Temple", he admitted.

Sabine shuffled closer, "And?"

Ezra shut his eyes, the memories flashing before him. "I took him to meditate. I thought that maybe it'd help me see how far he'd come and how much he understood. I didn't think..., he swallowed hard, "I didn't expect that he'd see so much."

"What do you mean? Like a vision?", she asked.

"Not just a vision. He saw the past."

Sabine lay a hand on his arm, "I don't see what's so bad about that?"

"He saw Kanan."

Kanan's name caught her off guard. Ezra felt the hitch in her breath and the hesitation that came with it. Kanan was like a father to them both, and as much as they enjoyed his memory they both missed him enough for it to still hurt all these years later.

"It hurt him, Sabine. Jacen felt him, and saw him, and he wasn't ready for that. I don't know if he'll ever be ready."

Sabine soothingly brushed her fingers on his hand, a gentle bit of contact that usually helped put him at ease.
"You didn't tell me", she said after a while.

Ezra hid his face from here and looked down to he ground. "I'm sorry... I just... I couldn't talk about it."

"This isn't like you." She cupped his cheek and made him look at her, "You never hide things from me. What made this different?"

He hated not telling her things. They were always completely open and honest with each other, trusting each other with everything. Ezra hadn't intentionally been hiding it from her as much as he'd been running from it himself. It hadn't been that he didn't trust her, but that he'd lost all trust in himself.

Her worried eyes staring into him broke any thoughts of evading the question. "It was all my fault. I failed him."

"Ezra, it's not like that."

"Yes it is!", he snapped loudly. He regretted raising his voice instantly. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-"

"It's okay", she looked more concerned than anything. "Just talk to me. Please."

Ezra took a few deep breaths and centred himself. This wasn't him, he was better than this.

"It's not just that I didn't foresee what he'd be capable of, it's that I know I couldn't make him do what he'd need to do", Ezra explained as calmly as he could. "The Jedi always say to let go of everything, but how can I expect him to do that when I haven't? How can I justify it knowing how much Kanan meant to me? Why should Jacen detach himself from his own father?"

"Then don't make him", Sabine answered. "You've changed some things about the Jedi already. You did it for us, you did it for all the students' families, why not this?"

She was right, like always. Ezra had flaunted Jedi rules on romantic attachments for her, and didn't regret it one bit. He'd skipped over the expectation that Jedi started as children, both personally and for his own students. Then, rather than taking the kids from their families he'd brought them along to, refusing to put others through the same sorts of pain he felt. Even the Jedi Code wasn't secure, with Ezra actively encouraging his students to question whether it was truly as faultless as the Jedi or old believed it to be. He'd made some changes to the Jedi ideas plenty of times - and that was starting to be the problem.

"That's missing the point", Ezra sighed. "I've changed one rule, then another, then another. If I keep abandoning every rule then what's the point of having any in the first place? When do we stop being Jedi and start becoming something else?"

Ezra sunk back into the couch. Had he really been cut out for this? Luke and Ahsoka were counting on him to rebuild the Jedi and he couldn't find it in himself to follow half of their damn rules. Maybe I should have just-

"Can I teach you something about Mandalorians?", Sabine asked suddenly.

He squinted at her, "I married one, didn't I? I know a lot about you already."

"That's sort of my point." Ezra lifted his head and looked at her confused. "Ugh", she rolled her eyes, "Just let me explain. I'm a Mandalorian, right?"
"Yes...", he answered the obvious.

"There's this old saying that Mandalorians aren't about our armour or our fighting, but about an idea - it's honour, strength, loyalty, and things like that. It's not about old rules, it's not about heritage, it's not about leaders or locations, it's just the idea. Sure, some things like hating Jedi and always fighting have become a part of our society and our image, but that's not what's at its core."

"That's awfully philosophical for Mandalorians", Ezra laughed dryly.

Sabine bit her lip, "Uh, the rest of it comes down to ideas being invincible but our enemies aren't."

"Oh, there's the Mandalorians I know", Ezra laughed, trying his best to inject just a little humour in the situation.

"Very funny", she rolled her eyes halfheartedly, "The point's still the same. Everyone thinks of us as these Jedi-killing mercenary thugs and, while there have been many of those, that's not all we are. Me, Fenn Rau, even Bo Katan, we're all friends of the Jedi but we're still Mandalorians. Bo Katan is Mand'alor, the first in years, and she got there because she's still a true Mandalorian - loyal, strong, and honourable. That's what matters. Not what we wear, what specific rules we follow, what things we say. What matters are the ideas - loyalty, strength, honour."

Ezra sat up more, thoughts swirling in his head. "You're right..."

The Jedi were an idea, not a set of rules. Attachments, war, politics, love, loss - all of that was superficial. What made a Jedi was those seven key things Kanan always talked about: compassion, honour, sacrifice, patience, honesty, wisdom, and humility. It didn't matter if a Jedi fell in love, it didn't matter if they had their family, it didn't matter where Jedi drew their purpose from - all that mattered was the idea. Kanan flaunted every rule on attachment he could think of, and he died the most noble, pure Jedi Ezra could imagine. Sabine might not have been a Jedi or force sensitive, but even she could see it.

"You're right", he repeated again, "Forget pointless rules and regulations. Becoming a Jedi isn't some sort of checklist, it's about being a good person. Love who you want, stand for what you want, be who you want. All that matters is that you try to be honest, compassionate, patient, wise, humble, honourable, and be ready to sacrifice for the greater good."

Sabine smiled and squeezed his hand, "Part of me was scared that Mandalorian thing would come out all wrong."

"No, it was exactly what I needed to hear." He looked away for a moment, "I can't undo what happened with Jacen, but I can make sure we don't make that mistake again."

"That's all you can do."

"I just hope Ahsoka and Luke understand", he sighed. Luke especially might have his issues with Ezra taking some radical new steps, but then again Luke too had his attachments. Ahsoka wasn't a Jedi either, and had plenty of her own ideas that stepped out of the bounds of Jedi rules. Maybe this'll work out better after all.

"You know better than I do but I'm sure they'll understand." His wife leaned in closer, "You can do this, I know you can."

Ezra smiled at her, still unsure sometimes if he was really just imagining all of this back on that jungle planet. Being back on Lothal, in his own tower, with his own students, Sabine at his side, the rest of his family with them too, and Jacen to top it all off - it felt unreal sometimes. Best of all,
it was times like this that reminded him that no matter what problems he faced, he'd always have Sabine watching his back, easing his mind, and slapping sense back in to him when he needed it.

"I guess I'll be taking another look over my lesson plans", he joked, hiding how much of a task that was actually going to be. "Not sure where to start though."

"Well...", Sabine moved closer with a mischievous smirk, "I think I know one rule you can definitely put aside."

"What's that?", he asked as she pulled him closer.

Her lips found his own and he was reminded of their lightsaber lesson a few days ago. Oh, he thought as his mind started to focus on his wife, 'there is no passion' has definitely got to go...

Chapter End Notes

A lot to discuss here.

Thrawn's conversation with the Fourth Sister is just Thrawn getting a measure of the Inquisitor before he leaves. Thrawn has said many times that annoying the Inquisitor gets her to be sloppy and over eager, so he can use that to undermine her but also judge how confident she is. Obviously, Thrawn has a plan up his sleeve, and it's one of those ones that it might help to glance over the previous Imperial sections to understand... As for the Inquisitor gathering the others and turning on Thrawn, we all knew it was coming. Veers is resistant at first but he doesn't know Thrawn all that well and evidence in front of him does point to Thrawn as a traitor. Thrawn had done plenty of things in good faith that might look to the Empire as betrayal - take his meeting with Nightswan in the first canon novel which Yularen oversees - but usually manages to salvage it. Obviously, he's not there to do damage control now. Canady, for all his role as a 'villain', is still quite an honourable man. He'd find Thrawn's half-truths and backroom scheming unsavoury, so he falls quite naturally into the anti-Thrawn camp. I also brought up the Invictus and its Captain. Way back in Chapters 7 and 8, it's the Invictus that Ahsoka and Sabine land on, attack, and find the clues to lead to Ezra on. As we know, Thrawn left it there intentionally, but the mere prospect of Thrawn working with the Jedi who'd killed so many on that frigate isn't something its Captain can agree with.

Ahsoka and Luke's visions went through several iterations. At first, it was the two of them talking with Yoda, Anakin, and Obi Wan, but that quickly became far too chaotic and busy. Then, I thought of maybe doing both of them having separate conversations with all three in different rooms. Eventually, I settled on splitting them up with Luke having a vision to help them learn more about the origins and aims of this new enemy, while Ahsoka speaks to Anakin. The journey Ahsoka and Yoda talk about is all referring to the long and difficult path towards becoming a force spirit. Ahsoka is absolutely powerful enough to do that and I guessed she'd have come across the power to do so during her years travelling. Yoda's dialogue and Ahsoka's thoughts reference what the force priestesses tell Yoda in Season 6 of The Clone Wars, and her final thoughts are combination of what the priestess tells Yoda as he wakes up and what
Yoda tells Mace and Obi Wan in the closing moments. As the force priestesses tell Yoda, to complete the journey you must face "all that you fear, all that haunts your soul", and for Ahsoka that had to be Anakin. The beginnings of their conversation is an inversion of Ahsoka's vision of Anakin in Rebels, with Anakin trying to reason with her and Ahsoka blaming herself. After Malachor, I felt Ahsoka's stance would change and she would blame herself. Her guilt over Anakin's fall has been mentioned before such as in Chapter 17, so dealing with it was always going to be important to her character. A conversation with Anakin's spirit fills that important narrative role, and allows her to complete the training to be able to manifest herself after death. I'll remind you that Yoda and Obi Wan both learned this power many years before they needed it, so don't expect Ahsoka to need to use it tomorrow or anything. It's just an ability I think she'll almost certainly end up with and it shows how truly powerful she has become.

Lastly, there's Ezra and Sabine. I've worried that I overlooked Sabine in this second half, so I wanted to make sure she still fills an important role. Here, I had that perfect opportunity. Ezra has flaunted many Jedi rules so far. One or two is fine, but it seems Ezra is ignoring everything. It takes Sabine and her knowledge of Mandalorian culture to remind him that, at the end of the day, they're both aspiring to ideas, not rules. Sabine channels the awesome speech by Mandalore the Destroyer in Imperial Commando: 501st, about Mandalorians being an idea, not just a people or an army. There was something appropriate for Ezra and Sabine, themselves a representation of moving on from the Jedi-Mandalorian past, to use an idea so Mandalorian to help understand and maybe begin to reform the Jedi. As for the last part, I don't put 'that' sort of implication in lightly (at least not in this story), so it does serve a purpose. What's that purpose? You never know...

Next time: Tensions boil over.
Chapter 30 - Schism

Chapter Notes

This chapter is shorter and similar in style to Chapter 6 as it jumps between different perspectives, but it needed to be that way for it to work. There's also no Ezra or Sabine, perhaps for the first time in this story, but it's still a very busy chapter nonetheless. Some of the sections overlap a bit, such as the end of one section occurring during part of the next one, but it should be pretty easy to tell when things are happening. For example, the second Faro section overlaps with the first Pellaeon section. Hopefully it's easy to follow.

Also, just to remind everyone of some key terms since I use them a lot in this chapter:
- Port - Left side
- Starboard - Right side
- Stern - Rear
- Bow - Front
- About turn - 180 degree turn

This time: A schism in the Unknown Regions changes everything.

Luke stumbled back down the corridor almost in a daze. His mind was still reeling from whatever had just happened to him with that vision. Ancient force users, the World Between Worlds, Malachor, mysterious cloaked figures, force powers unlike anything he'd seen before - this whole mission had just gotten a lot more complicated.

Finally reaching the centre room, he paused to catch his breath and centre himself. He was no use to anyone with his mind so unfocused. It took a few seconds to calm himself, after which he felt Ahsoka approaching from the centre corridor. She emerged with staff in hand and her cloak draped behind her like a cape, her other hand absently brushing her brooch, with a contented smile on her face.

"Well, I'm glad one of us is happy", Luke quipped tiredly.

Ahsoka saw him looking dishevelled and exhausted. "What happened? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I have no idea what I saw", Luke breathed, "The past I think."

"What did you see?", Ahsoka asked.

He shook his head. "Nothing good."

Where to begin? Luke could barely make sense of it himself and he'd been the one to see it. Explaining it to someone else almost felt like a lost cause.

"I saw what happened here", Luke began. "I don't know when, ages ago I think. There were monks,
dark Jedi, this orb of some kind, these crazy force powers..."

"Anything that can help us?", there was urgency in her voice.


She straightened up, "What do you mean?"

He shut his eyes and tried to piece together the details he could. "I think whatever's out here is old, really old. I think it sent the people who destroyed this place here to get access to the World Between Worlds, but the people here sealed the portal just in time."

Ahsoka sighed audibly and leaned her weight on her staff. "That's... worrying."

"There's something else...", Luke reluctantly met her eyes, "One of the monks from this place mentioned Malachor. He said that whoever the attackers served should have died there."

Ahsoka went quiet. Malachor already haunted her enough without this new threat being tied up with it too. Whatever the involvement was though, Luke hoped Ahsoka of all people was best equipped to deal with it. Between its interest in the World Between Worlds, its power in the force, and its link with Malachor, this threat seemed almost tailored to Ahsoka's talents and past. At least, Luke hoped it was that easy.

Finally, the Togruta sighed. "I don't know what's happening, not yet, but at least this gateway won't be useful to them." She grabbed her chin with her hand in thought, "Say, you mentioned some sort of orb, didn't you?"

The memory sickened Luke to his stomach. "Yes", he said reluctantly, "Why?"

The Togruta pursed her lips and thought for a moment. Her eyes darted between the gateway room corridor, the floor, and Luke himself.

"There was something in the place we found Ezra that might be a good clue. It's better than any other lead we have", Ahsoka reasoned.

"What about you?", Luke asked. "What happened with you? Did you see anything?"

"I did see something", she looked back down the corridor with a faint smile. "It won't help us, at least not for now."

"Anything less cryptic?", he asked.

Ahsoka chuckled quietly, "I finished a long journey. Now isn't the time to talk about it, but I'm sure you'll come to understand it one day too."

The only issue with having Ahsoka along had been her occasionally cryptic answers. She had her reasons for them surely, but it left Luke puzzling over what she meant for days, weeks, or months after half of their conversations. Master Yoda and Ben had done it too. Luke was starting to think that finding ways to avoid easy answers to every question was some sort of requirement past a certain point. No doubt he'd be doing the same thing some day, assuming he survived this.

Accepting that Ahsoka was going to be as mysterious as ever, Luke just let her lead the way out of the ruin and back to their ship. After what just happened in there, sitting around in the quiet, uneventful shuttle for a few days was sounding much more attractive.
Commodore Faro slightly braced herself for the inertia as the *Chimaera* fell out of hyperspace. The view that greeted them of the scarred planet they'd called Site Two wasn't a reassuring one. Faro had loathed the place the first time, and doubly so now. Standing with Thrawn at the front of the bridge, just as they had the first time, Faro's gut twisted with anxiety. *I've got a bad feeling about this...*

The atmosphere aboard the *Chimaera* had been tense for the whole journey. While Faro and the other officers had been told about everything before they'd left, the announcement about their true intentions was only made to most of the crew mid-journey. There was shock and surprise, as would be expected, but no hint of dissent. The unanimous support of the other officers for Thrawn's plan probably helped that, but honestly Faro already had faith in her crew to see the bigger picture. The Empire was gone, and they weren't. If they wanted to stay that way, then Thrawn had earned their trust as the best option.

Still, *something* was wrong. She could feel it. Thrawn had been quiet all of the journey, having only brief comm calls with one part of the ship or the other. Most of the crew had been quiet too, scared and nervous about what was about to happen. There would be no going back after this. Even if they did agree with Thrawn's plan, that didn't mean it wasn't a daunting prospect.

"*Myrmidon* checking in", the voice of the other ship's First Officer chimed over the comm.

"Acknowledged, *Myrmidon*", Thrawn replied. The Grand Admiral looked over to Lieutenant Agral at the helm station, "Bring us forward several clicks and then a full about turn."

"Aye, sir", Agral nodded and set about his task.

"*Myrmidon*, follow our lead", Thrawn ordered over the comm.

"An about turn? We're not going back are we?", Faro asked.

"Of course not, Commodore. Merely a precaution in case we were followed", Thrawn explained.

*How would we be followed?* Faro muttered to herself.

Thrawn moved on and keyed in another address to his comm. "Chief Engineer Torbal?"

"Yes, sir?", the man answered promptly.

"You have ten minutes."

Faro watched Thrawn closely. *Ten minutes for what?* The Grand Admiral didn't take a moment to explain what he had up his sleeve, merely moving on to the next address on his mental checklist.

He raised the comm to his mouth once again. "Lieutenant Xoxtin? Is everything ready?"

"Per your specifications, Grand Admiral", the hangar's overseer answered. The older woman's voice betrayed some uncertainty of her own.

Thrawn lowered the comm. "Then everything is in place", he said to himself.

The Commodore looked at him suspiciously. *What was he planning?* There was something going on that he hadn't explained to her, that much was obvious. Thrawn turned on his heel to walk back down the bridge. Before the chance passed her by, Faro stepped back slightly to catch his attention.

"Grand Admiral? What's going on?" She wasn't used to being in the dark with Thrawn's plans.
His red eyes focused on her closely. "We will do whatever we need to defeat this threat, Commodore." His reply was evasive, blunt, and barely answering her question.

"Of course, Grand Admiral...", Faro nodded slowly.

Thrawn lowered his voice, "I promise I will explain it to you when we are out of this mess." His tone was odd, Faro noticed. It was quieter and heavier. If Faro didn't know any better, it might have almost been sad.

"Alright, Grand Admiral. I trust you", she replied in a hushed voice.

Thrawn nodded slightly, "Thank you, Commodore."

The oddly sincere exchange was over as soon as it began. Thrawn was marching back down the bridge with the same single-minded purpose he always did. Whatever was going on, she just had to trust him. She'd been doing that plenty enough these last few years, why stop now?

"Grand Admiral!", there was a sudden shout from Commander Hammerly's station.

Faro snapped her attention over to the Sensor Officer, as did the Grand Admiral. "What's the issue, Commander?", Thrawn asked.

She turned back to her screen, "Sensors just picked up an energy spike on the planet. It's consistent with a small ship, sir... The signal matches the shuttle that we encountered a year ago."

_Bridger._

"It is them", Thrawn confirmed.

The quiet chatter of the bridge stopped instantly. Every eye went to Thrawn, Faro's included, as they waited for his next move.

"Hail the shuttle", Thrawn ordered the Comm Officer. "Time is of the essence."

Faro stood at the top of the bridge for a few more seconds, staring down at the planet below. Somewhere down there, apparently, was their best hope at bringing an end to this mission once and for all. Not wasting any more time, the Commodore walked quickly back down the bridge towards the comm table, ready for whatever the future was about to throw at them.

Luke was surprised to find that it was dark outside by the time they left the Temple - time did have a habit of slipping away when meditating. The good part of that was that this planet's nighttime temperature was perfectly comfortable, and the view of the stars above was completely clear. Luke found himself oddly drawn to them on the brief walk back, as if the force was compelling him to watch the sky.

Ahsoka went first and climbed the stairs back into the shuttle. Luke followed and sealed the door behind them, before joining Ahsoka in the cockpit. The shuttle was completely dark and Luke almost tripped over into the co-pilot's seat.

"Ugh", he grumbled and sat down, "Let's keep the lights on next time."

"And waste that much fuel idling the ship?", Ahsoka countered.

He didn't answer and instead shrugged off his bag and placed it down on the floor. Ahsoka had ditched her staff too, probably hiding it in its usual place in the corner of the cockpit. Luke looked
out the viewport again, still intrigued by the view before him. *What about that sky was so interesting to him?*

"I'll power us up." Ahsoka started to flick some switches on the console.

Luke didn't take his eyes off the sky, "Yeah..."

Ahsoka pressed a few more buttons as Luke kept staring upwards. *There's... something...* He heard her press down the final ignition button, before she too froze in place.

"You feel it too?", Ahsoka turned to look at him.

"Yeah...", the engine started to power up, "Feels like-"


Ahsoka's eyes went wide, "Proximity alarm!"

They both looked at the sensor readings as they loaded in. They saw the last thing they wanted to see. *Star Destroyers.*

"Do you think they've seen us?!", Luke shouted.

The pinging of the comm channel was their answer. *We're being hailed.*

Ahsoka reached for the console and read the address. Her lips parted in surprise. "It's the *Chimaera.*"

*Thrawn...* They stared at each other for what felt like minutes. This whole mission had gone south in the blink of an eye.

They had two options. First, they could ignore it and try to flee before the two Star Destroyers in orbit could take them out. Given that they weren't even off the ground yet, Ahsoka and Luke's chances there didn't seem good. The other option was to accept and listen to whatever the Imperials had to say. At the very least, it might buy them some more thinking time while the Grand Admiral gloated.

After silent deliberation, Luke sensed the agreement between the two of them. Hesitantly, Ahsoka pressed a button on the console to receive the call.

The shuttle's centrally mounted hologram projector spurred to life slowly. A man in a pristine white Imperial uniform, wearing a rank slide Luke had never seen in person before, appeared before them. The extra blue tint of his skin and hair, and the unsettling red eyes marked the Chiss out among any Imperial officers Luke had seen. Although this was his first time seeing him, Luke could easily recognise Grand Admiral Thrawn after everything he'd heard about him.

"Thrawn..."

The Imperial scanned them both with his eyes. "Forgive me, I'd expected Ezra Bridger as well."

Ahsoka's eyes narrowed, "What are you doing, Thrawn? You failed last time and you won't sto-"

Thrawn raised his hand and cut her off, "You misunderstand and we have little time."

Luke leaned forward, glaring at the Imperial. "What are you talking about?", he scoffed.
The Chiss sighed quietly. "I know that you do not trust me."

"Yeah, and for good reason", Luke retorted. He'd heard about what Thrawn had done - on Batonn, on Atollon, on Lothal - and the Imperial would get no sympathy from him.

Thrawn wasn't bothered by the biting remarks. "I know why you're here, Jedi. There's something out here, something dangerous to all of us."

They both stopped. How did Thrawn know? Luke looked at Ahsoka, who was equally taken aback. Ezra had suggested back when they'd first met that Thrawn might have been out in the Unknown Regions for the same reason they were. Maybe Luke didn't want to believe it, but that sort of power in the hands of someone like Thrawn would have been catastrophic.

But that's not what he wants. Above all else, that was the most surprising thing. Thrawn described it as 'dangerous', and he wasn't blowing them up on sight. Whatever was going on, it might be more complex that Luke assumed.

"I know Bridger found evidence of it", Thrawn continued, "And I can only assume you are now here to learn more, if not destroy it. I think that you see this threat as a serious danger not just to yourselves but to all life in the galaxy. I share that belief."

Ahsoka scowled, still unsure what to think, "What are you suggesting?"

"We are not natural allies, I concede that. However, I believe that this threat is larger than any of us and it is moving against us as we speak. My people are in danger just as much as yours are."

Bold words, but there's no proof. The Empire had used pleasant words and noble goals to lure people into evil deeds and traps before. Luke wasn't going to fall for Thrawn's bait that easily.

Luke leaned in, "Hang on, 'us'? There is no 'us.'"

"Skywalker..." How in the force did Thrawn know his name? "The war is over and I am no longer your enemy. If we are to destroy what's out here, we must work together."

"How stupid do you think we are?!", Ahsoka snapped, "You'd gun us down in a second."

Thrawn remained unphased by their mistrust. "I understand your fear, my people fear you Jedi as well, but we do not have the luxury of fighting among ourselves." Thrawn looked down and pressed some buttons on his end, "I am sending you a set of coordinates. If you truly want to confront what's out here, I beg you to meet me there. Not as enemies, but as potential allies, if only against this threat."

The coordinates came through for a nearby system. Luke was surprised to feel the conviction, even the honesty, in Thrawn's voice. Force, this guy might be telling the truth.

"Why should we trust you?", Ahsoka asked suspiciously.

"Because we have no other choice", Thrawn replied. "Failing that, I believe there will be an immediate opportunity to show you that things are not as simple as you presumed."

Luke narrowed his eyes, "What do you-"

"Grand Admiral!", a woman's voice interrupted from the other end, "We have incoming ships!"

Thrawn kept his eyes on the two of them. "You have the coordinates, I hope that you make the
right choice."

The hologram disappeared, leaving them both in stunned silence. What just happened? Thrawn had not only known they were here, but known their mission and even Luke's name. Most surprising of all, he hadn't blasted them to bits from orbit. Something was going on... and the crazy thing was that Thrawn might have been telling them the truth. Luke hadn't sensed a hint of deception from him, only sincerity.

"Uhh, Ahsoka?", he looked over to her, utterly at a loss.

The Togruta was still staring at the coordinates on he screen. "I... I don't know what just happened", she stammered.

For the third time in five minutes, the beeping of the ship's alarms interrupted them. Luke glanced at the screen to see four more ships had just dropped out of hyperspace.

"Oh karabast", Ahsoka breathed.

Without a moment to process what had just happened, Ahsoka hit the engines and lifted them off the ground. Literally anywhere was better than here with this many Imperial ships in orbit. This day's getting worse all the time...

Commodore Faro stared out of the window as multiple signals approached from hyperspace from the same vector they'd come from. The Chimaera and the Myrmidon had completed their about turns and were now facing in the direction to greet these new arrivals. Or shoot at them.

She couldn't say she was surprised when they finally appeared. Two large Star Destroyers and two Arquitens-class light frigates appeared several clicks in front of them. Faro knew what ships they were without needing the confirmation: Solicitude, Cunctator, Invictus, and Aeternus. In other words: the Fourth Sister.

"How did they find us so quickly?!", Lieutenant Pyrondi at the weapons station yelled as he started to ready weapons, already knowing where this was probably going to lead.

How did they find us? Some sort of tracker, surely. Dammit... Faro thought about all the little tidbits of seemingly useless information Thrawn had told her over the years and the little things she'd wondered about herself. All the way back at the beginning of the journey, the Fourth Sister had found them remarkably quickly - far too quickly by any measure. Faro hadn't had any idea how the Inquisitor done that. Thrawn, however, had mentioned it to her only once years ago. Hyperspace tracker. On Coruscant just before the Battle of Lothal, someone had placed some experimental tech on the Chimaera. After the Fourth Sister's arrival, it didn't seem to be relevant anymore. No one else was left who could access that data that would need it. Now, the Inquisitor had found a need for it once more.

"Lieutenant Torbal?", Thrawn called to the Chief Engineer over the comm, "Is everything set?"

"Aye, sir", the Chief Engineer replied.

"Excellent." Thrawn pressed some buttons on the terminal beside him. "Lieutenant Xoxtin, I'm sending you a set of coordinates very close to us. Launch the ship and have it wait there."

"Y-yes, sir", Xoxtin answered nervously over the comm,

Faro eyed Thrawn carefully. "You're launching a ship?"
"The civilian freighter. It has been slave-rigged ever since the Nightswan days with Ensign Vanto", Thrawn explained calmly.

That damn freighter had a habit of popping up everywhere these days. From Thrawn's brief journey with the Fourth Sister or Hammerly's incognito mission to Site Two, it had been essential. Faro also remembered what Thrawn had mentioned to them in their meeting after Hammerly came back. Thrawn had ordered the freighter to be equipped with some of Veers' extra proton bombs. For once, she actually thought about that plan. Wait a-

"Grand Admiral!", an officer called, "Incoming transmissions from the other ships."

Faro looked at Thrawn, waiting for an order. He nodded. "Patch them through."

The Comm Officer pressed some buttons on his console to approve the transmission. Faro stood next to Thrawn around the holo-table, waiting for the transmissions to clear. As expected, the Fourth Sister's vile face appeared in holographic form on the opposite side of the table. On the Inquisitor's left came Captain Canady and the Captain of the Aeternus; on the other side they were joined Commandant Hux and the Invictus' Captain.

"Inquisitor", Thrawn started with his usual calm voice.

"Quiet, Thrawn", the Fourth Sister snapped, "You know why we're here."

Thrawn remained calm and steady as all five of the new figures stared him down. "I do, Inquisitor. I stand in your way, and so you wish me to be removed", he paused for effect, "Or, perhaps I should say I stand in 'its' way."

The Fourth Sister's face hardened and her yellow eyes narrowed at him. It's true. Faro could see no other explanation for her reaction. Thrawn was indeed right about what was in that ruin. Someone else was pulling the strings. Someone that had to be stopped.

"What are you on about, Thrawn?", Canady spat. The man had abandoned rank, she noted. His verdict had already been rendered.

"She didn't tell you?", Thrawn raised an eyebrow, "Of course she didn't. Do you want to know what's really in that ruin, Captain?"

"Silence!", the Inquisitor shouted. "You're trying to say I hide things, and yet here you sit in another system, lying about your intentions, and here to catch Jedi."

The word hung in the air. Faro knew that the Inquisitor had somehow figured out that the Jedi were involved. She also knew there was only one way the Inquisitor could have found out: Sarlis. None of the other officers would have had a chance to tell her, and Sarlis' loyalty was always flimsy. At least Sarlis is out of the way for now.

Thrawn was hiding nothing, the time for that had long since past. "What you would bring upon the galaxy is far worse than what the Jedi would. Your Emperor could not ultimately defeat them, Darth Vader could not defeat them, and I'm sure whatever you are hiding will fail as well."

"So you admit it?!", the Invictus' Captain shouted suddenly. "You're working with the Jedi?!"

"I plan to cooperate with them for all of our safety", Thrawn replied, "Any of you who wish to also-"

"See!", the Inquisitor looked around at her allies, "I told you he couldn't be trusted."
Canady glared at Thrawn, "You're a liar and a traitor, Thrawn." Then, he looked contemptuously at Faro too, "And you, Commodore."

"The Empire is dead, Captain", Faro countered, drawing everyone's attention. "I'm loyal to the people on this ship, on the Myrmidon, and the people at home. I will not allow whatever the Inquisitor is hiding to repeat the same destruction we've seen."

"I'm afraid you won't live to see how wrong that statement is, Commodore", the Inquisitor smirked at her.

Faro leaned forward and glared at her. "With your track record of failure, Inquisitor, I think we'll be fine."

The Fourth Sister met her eyes but the Commodore didn't flinch this time. The yellow tinge of the Inquisitor's stare didn't frighten her like it used to.

"Surrender now and we'll only execute your leaders", Hux said, emboldened by a belief in victory.

"That won't be happening, Commandant", Thrawn told him.

The Inquisitor looked down at something beside her before laughing sinisterly. "Well then, we'll just have to kill you all."

Canady also looked away, as did Hux. Something was happening on their end, but Faro couldn't tell what.

"I doubt that very much, Inquisitor", Thrawn started calmly. "You see, you are not the strategist you think you are. The most fatal flaw of any tactician is not hubris, nor stupidity - although you possess both in sufficient measure - but predictability. That, I'm afraid, is a flaw you exhibit consistently. A flaw shared by both you, and Captain Sarlis."

Sarlis. The Commodore looked to Thrawn at the mention of the Captain's name. The Inquisitor was even more surprised, her lips parting in shock.

"Grand Admiral!", Hammerly's voice came suddenly again, "There's another ship incoming from port-side!"

Faro quickly looked over her shoulder and out of the port window of the bridge where the new ship was approaching. Then, she looked over to the starboard side too, spotting the silhouette of the freighter off in the distance. Oh no...

Pellaeon and Senior Lieutenant Handel watched the small civilian freighter that Thrawn had just launched from the Chimaera as it flew silently off to their starboard side, about halfway between their own ships and the newly arrived ships of the Inquisitor.

His Communications Officer was listening in to the exchange between the Chimaera and the Inquisitor, Pellaeon himself was unwilling to endure any more of her gloating. He trusted Thrawn to have a plan, and maybe it was unfolding right now.

"So what's up with the freighter? Who's flying?", Handel asked him.

Pellaeon sighed, wondering why Thrawn hadn't mentioned any of this before they left. "Probably slave-rigged. Thrawn's been fascinated with the tech ever since his early days. Something about vulture droids, Umbara, and that old friend Vanto of his."
Thrawn must have recounted the story before, but Pellaeon couldn't recall the details right now. All that mattered was that slave-rigging was a form of remotely controlling a ship with a transmitter signal. Early Trade Federation droids had worked from a similar remote command ship signal, but the slave-rigging of ships was far simpler and less costly.

The freighter slowed a fair distance away from the Myrmidon, far off to their starboard side and roughly halfway between the opposing fleets. If Thrawn was planning something with it, Pellaeon hadn't been told.

"What's it for?", Handel asked.

"Last I heard, Thrawn equipped it with some proton bombs from General Veers' surplus", Pellaeon recalled. "Not sure what good firing one or two proton bombs at two Star Destroyers and two Arquitens is going to do though."

"Captain!", they were interrupted by Lieutenant Yara, his Sensor Officer, calling from further back in the bridge, "We're picking up another ship coming in from port side."

Pellaeon turned back quickly. "What? What ship?"

The Sensor Officer turned back to her screen. "It's a Star Destroyer...", she gasped, "Sir, it's the Imperator!"

Sarlis, goddammit. What was she doing her? Was she helping Thrawn? Something was telling him that wasn't the case. Dammit, Thrawn, you better have a plan. Pellaeon looked back out of the viewport. The faint visual distortions were just starting to appear off their port side of a ship coming out of hyperspace, about halfway between the two opposing fleets.

Handel tilted his bald head curiously. "Huh, strange..."

"Can't say I agree. We should have known better than to trust Sarlis", Pellaeon muttered.

Handel shook his head, "Not that, Captain. The freighter."

Pellaeon put his eyes back on the First Officer. "What about it?"

"I thought it was a civilian freighter?", Handel asked innocuously.

"It is...", the gears in his head started to turn.

Handel looked at Pellaeon and shrugged. "Can't say I've ever heard of a civilian freighter with proton bomb bays. Didn't realise this one had them."

Everything clicked at once in his head.

"It doesn't."

The Lieutenant was still a few steps behind, but not many. "Wait, if there's no bomb bays, then where are the...", Handel stopped as he put two and two together.

At that exact moment, the Imperator dropped out of hyperspace. Coming in from port side, Pellaeon was surprised as it came to a halt directly in front of their ships, not off to their side, blocking their entire view of the opposing fleet. Simultaneously, a flash of light shone from their starboard side as the civilian freighter's engines flared into life again. Pellaeon realised exactly what was happening.
"Raise deflectors! Now!", Pellaeon shouted.

Pellaeon could only watch as the civilian freighter surged from their starboard side as fast as its sub-light engines would carry it, right towards the Imperator. For a few silent moments, all of the Myrmidon's bridge watched as the freighter closed with Sarlis' Star Destroyer. It was too soon and too fast for any of the Imperator's guns to take it down before it would hit its mark. The freighter soared over the bow of the Imperator at high speed, carrying with it its deadly payload. Then, it arced downwards just as it reached the base of the bridge structure.

The Imperator was engulfed by a colossal explosion, as the dozens of proton bombs inside the freighter detonated all at once.

"No- AHHH!"

The final choked words of Captain Sarlis echoed across the comm channels.

"Brace!" Canady's shout barely reached the rest of the Solicitude's bridge before the shards of shrapnel started slamming into the hull.

The Fourth Sister didn't move as the ship jolted at the impacts. Instead, she stood motionlessly watching as what was left of the Imperator continued to break apart, pieces of its hull erupting in a series of secondary explosions. Among the many tiny specks in the distance was Captain Sarlis, dying a sudden and pointless death in the farthest reaches of the galaxy. Thrawn had played them all.

However, while Thrawn might have drawn first blood, this battle was far from over over.

"Why aren't we firing?!", she screamed to the crews.

"Sarlis' damn Star Destroyer's directly in our way!", Canady growled. "Scramble our fighters! Now!"

The Inquisitor grimaced and went back to watching the Imperator break apart in front of them. Through the chaos, she could see Thrawn and Pellaeon's Star Destroyers turning.

"Captain!", the Solicitude's Sensor Officer called, "The Myrmidon and the Chimaera are changing course. Sensors indicate their hyperdrives are powering up too."

Canady looked irate. "Where are those fighters?!"

"They're leaving the hangar now, sir", the Flight Officer said.

From below, several dozen TIE fighters and a few TIE bombers poured out of the hangar and flew in formation towards Thrawn's ships. If they could take out their engines before the Chimaera or Myrmidon made the jump, they could still pull a victory here.

The Fourth Sister paused and felt the force forewarning her. Wait... something else...

On cue, the Sensor Officer started shouting again. "Captain, we're picking up another ship leaving the atmosphere. Looks like some sort of Republic Shuttle."

Bridger.

"There!", the Fourth Sister rushed over to the sensor terminal. "It's the Jedi." She looked over to the Flight Officer, "Divert all of our TIEs there. Thrawn loses everything if we can get them."
The Flight Officer didn't look up from his screen. "I don't take orders from you, Inquisitor. TIEs remaining on course."

"You idiot!", she screamed at him. "If they get away then Thrawn gets everything."

She wanted to strangle him. The insolent man looked at her and then over to Canady.

The Captain hesitated before letting out a sigh, "Do as she says."

The young officer reluctantly obliged, "Aye, Captain. Diverting now."

Walking back to the edge of the bridge to watch, the Fourth Sister clenched her fists in anticipation. They were not going to fail Him.

Alarms blared on the Chimaera's bridge as shrapnel bounced loudly but harmlessly off the ship's hull and shields. Thrawn had already leapt into action, barking orders and navigation instructions to a stunned bridge crew.

Commodore Faro just watched from the map table. Captain Sarlis was dead. So were the Imperator's crew. Thousands of lives snuffed out in an instant. At last, she knew exactly why Thrawn had kept her in the dark about this plan.

"Lieutenant Agral, do you have the coordinates?", Thrawn asked loudly.

"Y-yes... yes, Grand Admiral", the Helm Officer stammered.

"Good, relay them to Captain Pellaeon and make a full port side turn. Let us be gone from here before they can exploit their advantage."

Thrawn finally turned back towards her. She barely acknowledged him as he approached, her eyes still glued to the scene of carnage before them.

"Commodore?", Thrawn asked gently, "We cannot afford to lose what little time we've bought."

She peeled her eyes away and fixed them on him. As usual, there wasn't a hint of emotion - no remorse, no regret. Right now, she had no words for him on this.

"Aye, sir", she obliged weakly.

Thrawn leaned in. "We will discuss it when we are safe. You have my word", he said quietly.

Faro shut her eyes and sighed. "Sarlis had your word too."

The Commodore didn't wait for an answer and pushed past him. She knew how to set her own feelings aside and get on with her job. They weren't out of danger yet, and she'd rather not lose another Star Destroyer full of people today.

"You heard him get us moving, Lieutenant", she shouted to Agral.

"Grand Admiral! Commodore! Picking up a flight of TIEs on the scanners", Hammerly informed them.

Faro was on the ball. "Pyrondi, are the auto-turrets ready?"

"Wait...", Hammerly interrupted, "They're not going for us."
"The Fourth Sister is predictable", Thrawn said calmly. "She will waste her time on the Jedi's shuttle and give us the opportunity to escape."

"Will the Jedi be able to handle them?", Faro asked.

Thrawn looked down to the planet. "Let us hope that this Skywalker shares his father's gifts as a pilot."


The Togruta looked at the sensor screen and inhaled sharply. "I... it's a Star Destroyer. I think Thrawn did it."

They shared a baffled look and then turned back to the explosion. They might only have been reaching the edges of the atmosphere, but it was large enough for them to see it quite easily in the night sky.

"I guess Thrawn was right. Things weren't as simple as we thought", Ahsoka observed.

Any chance of a reply was cut off by yet another proximity alarm.

"Ugh, what now?", Luke looked at the screen in a huff. His attitude changed when he saw the warning of multiple TIE fighters heading right for them. "We have TIEs", he warned.

Ahsoka cursed under her breath, "How many?"

Luke went wide-eyed as he read the number. "At least twenty, probably more."

With a sigh, Ahsoka released the controls and stood up. "You're better than I am. Think you can handle them?"

"Are you kidding?", Luke smiled and enthusiastically slid into the pilot's seat. The tops of the sticks clicked opened to reveal weapon triggers, and Luke pitched the shuttle left and right to get a feel for the weight.

Ahsoka went to the co-pilot's seat. The gunner positions had been taken out long ago and replaced with living quarters. They might have been essential for long journeys like this, but Luke wouldn't have missed the extra firepower right about now. All Ahsoka could do was keep an eye on the scanners and call shots if she saw them. Not that Luke needed much help with that.

"Incoming, dead ahead."

As they broke the atmosphere, the light of the sun was starting to glimmer over the horizon, letting Luke see the first few silhouettes of the approaching TIEs. They were approaching in a swarm. Luke grinned, seeing an easy exploit. If they were approaching in a wall, only one or two of them would be able to line up a good shot. The rest would have to circle back around, or risk adjusting their course and slamming into the TIE next to them.

Luke waited for the targeting computer to check the range. *Almost there... almost there... now!*

A barrage of blue laser fire soared out of the shuttle towards the incoming ships. Their shuttle had a range advantage and one of the TIEs was caught in the volley, exploding almost immediately on impact.
"Nice shot!", Ahsoka called.

"Not done yet." Luke flicked a few switches to unlock the wings from the main body, usually only moved for landing. "Watch this..."

Luke set the wings to rotate around the ship, pulling back hard on the trigger. The guns on the wings kept firing as the wings turned, spraying laser fire in a circle in front of them. The spinning wings also made them harder to hit, and the static cockpit let him keep all of the stability. Two more fighters went down before dozens of pairs of green lasers started flying at them.

He banked left, then dove down and straightened out, throwing off their aim.

"Huh, spinning", Ahsoka breathed a laugh, "Good trick."

"What's our plan, Ahsoka?!, Luke grunted. He managed a quick glance to her, and the look on her face told him the answer. "Thrawn? Really?"

"Any better ideas?", she countered.

The swarm passed over them and started to break up to pursue them. "No...", he admitted.

Ahsoka quickly started fiddling with the navicomputer. They were all clear of the stratosphere now, and Luke could get a good view of the mess the Empire was making in orbit. Two Star Destroyers - Thrawn's, Luke assumed - were banking hard away from the planet. In front of them was what remained of the other Star Destroyer, secondary explosions still tearing through the remnants, its wreck providing a shield from the other ships. Two more Star Destroyers and two Arquitens-class frigates were also trying to manoeuvre around the ruined Destroyer, but it looked like they were going too slowly to catch up.

A stream of green lasers skimmed past the left side. "Gah!", Luke banked to the right, "They're back."

"Just a little longer for the hyperdrive", Ahsoka hurriedly brought everything they needed online.

Luke cursed as two more streams of fire came around both sides. He was good, but skill only got you so far with such a massive number disadvantage.

"Any other tricks that can help?!", Luke asked.

Ahsoka didn't take her attention away fro the hyperdrive. "Big blue button."

Luke glanced between the viewport, the scanner, and the console as he tried to find it. Tucked behind the controls was actually a small blue button. Luke smashed it, not bothering to ask what it did. A small indicator reading 'launched' flashed on the console, but nothing else.

For a moment, nothing happened.

"Ahsoka?", another TIE started trailing them with fire, "That didn't do anything."

"Wait a second", she told him.

A few agonising seconds of silence were broken by the deep sound of an explosion. The sensors behind them read a huge pulse of energy and heat, and a massive explosion caught four, five, or maybe more TIEs.

"Seismic charges. Courtesy of an old pirate friend", Ahsoka explained.
"Wonderful, Luke tore himself away from the sensor screen, "But where's that hyperdrive?!"

She pressed the last few buttons. "There, punch it!"

Luke smashed the hyperdrive button. A pointless stream of TIE fire briefly appeared on their side as the shuttle lurched into hyperspace and left the planet behind them. Whatever Thrawn had planned for them, they were about to find out.

"That's the Jedi gone", Pellaeon watched the space where the shuttle had been seconds before off their starboard side. "Us next."

The *Myrmidon* was almost lined up for the coordinates Thrawn had given them. Pellaeon couldn't be happier to leave this sordid place behind them.

The TIEs that had been chasing the Jedi changed course and headed for their Star Destroyers, but Pellaeon knew it was too late for that now. The *Myrmidon*'s shields shrugged off the first blows easily.

"Sir? Do we fire back?", his Weapons Officer asked.

Pellaeon grimaced as he watched a handful of TIEs approaching. The *Myrmidon* was almost lined up with the right trajectory, there was no point.

"Negative", he ordered, "Let's not waste the ammunition."

Its guns silent, the *Myrmidon* started to straighten out with a few TIEs still attacking in vain. One or two went for the *Chimaera*, but it too didn't bother firing back.

Pellaeon gave one more pitying look at what remained of the *Imperator* off their starboard side. The bridge, Sarlis and its officers included, was gone. The tip of the ship was at least distinguishable, but everything else was a broken, burnt, mangled mess providing a convenient shield from the *Solicitude*’s and the *Cunctator*’s guns. *That’s all it is.* Despite her betrayal, Pellaeon felt pity for poor Captain Sarlis. Years of time out here, only to be drawn into the Inquisitor’s scheme and then used as a human - or Star Destroyer - shield. The universe was many things, and pleasant certainly wasn’t one of them.

Finally, Pellaeon looked ahead. The *Chimaera*’s engines flared before it blinked away. Pellaeon nodded to his officers to follow. The space outside the *Myrmidon*’s windows became filled with long blue lines, before they too disappeared into hyperspace.

*They're gone. Thrawn, Pellaeon, Bridger - all gone.*

The *Solicitude*’s bridge was silent after the Myrmidon disappeared from view, leaving only a burning Star Destroyer and whatever TIEs remained in their viewport. They’d failed.

The Fourth Sister didn’t know how to react for a few moments. They’d lost everything. Thrawn had escaped, Sarlis was dead, and now the Jedi were here too. Someone was going to pay for this.

"Flight Officer", she said suddenly.

She felt the disobedient young officer’s surprise. "Inquisitor?"

"Step forward", she ordered.
There was a delay before the Fourth Sister heard him get off his chair and make their way up the bridge. She didn't turn around for him as he approached, waiting until he was right behind her.

"Yes, Inquisitor?", he asked cautiously.

That caution had come too late.

In one motion, she pulled her lightsaber from her back and swung around. The foolish man didn't notice what had happened until the blade was already buried in his chest. She had the pleasure of seeing the realization in his eyes before his life slipped away. The Fourth Sister pulled the blade out and let the body drop heavily to the floor. The others on the bridge only watched.

The Inquisitor glared directly at a shocked Canady, and then around at everyone else. She didn't need words to explain her message. She let it sink in for a few seconds before returning the hilt to its place and turning back to look out of the window.

"T-take us back to base," Canady ordered shakily.

They followed his orders quietly and without bothering her. No one even came to pick up the man's body for the rest of the trip. If that Flight Officer had listened, they might have been able to use those extra seconds to stop the Jedi. Now, everything that could have gone wrong had. *My Master will not be pleased.*

Chapter End Notes

A busy chapter that irreversibly changes the course of events in this story. Plenty to discuss so let's get on with it.

The big thing to talk about is Thrawn and his plan. As people will have noticed, Thrawn has been scheming and planning for much of the second half of this story but Faro and Pellaeon have both been in the dark about it. It's easier to break down the three key components of this plan and talk about each individually.

Firstly, there's the freighter itself. The civilian freighter has turned up several times in the story and originates in the first canon Thrawn novel. It's the ship Thrawn and the Fourth Sister take in Chapter 17 for their compass journey and Hammerly takes it for her visit to Site Two. Slave-rigging is another thing that turns up in the Thrawn novel and it felt like a logical thing to link the two together. In Chapter 25, Thrawn offhandedly mentions taking some proton bombs from Veers' surplus. In Chapter 26, Thrawn also mentions that he's having them installed on the freighter too. Obviously, civilian freighters don't have bomb bays but he only mentions it quickly and sandwiched between other, more important information so Faro and Pellaeon don't think twice about it.

Secondly, there's the hyperspace tracker. This seed was planted all the way back in Chapter 2, knowing that it'd need to be used for this event as well as to explain how the Fourth Sister finds their fleet. The meeting that Pellaeon, Faro, and Hammerly walk in on in Chapter 26 is between Chief Engineer Torbal and Thrawn about the tracker. While Thrawn brushes it off as a maintenance thing, it's in fact crucial to his...
plans. Torbal, as the Chief Engineer, was set the task of finding the tracker and analysing it. In The Last Jedi, the FO hyperspace tracker works on a 3 minute cycle so this older version works on a 10 minute one, as it=s referenced in this chapter and 26. Basically, there's ten minutes between each pulse. The ten minutes that Thrawn refers to in this chapter is for Torbal to have the tracker moved from the Chimaera and on to the civilian freighter to help lay the trap.

Lastly, there's Sarlis. Faro and Thrawn know that Sarlis can't be relied upon, but Faro at least hopes that they've gotten her out of the way. Thrawn of course knows better, and knows that the Fourth Sister will tempt her with promises of Empire and advancement and play off Sarlis' exclusion from the Thrawn/Faro/Pellaeon circle. Thrawn sends her away to specific coordinates so that she comes in from the correct trajectory. To explain, it's easier to just summaries the whole thing.

Thrawn has all the proton bombs stored on the slave-rigged freighter. As soon as they drop out of hyperspace, a ping goes from the tracker to let the 4th Sister adjust her course and that gives Torbal 10 minutes to move the tracker. Thrawn also has Agral move them forward and swing them around to face where he knows the Fourth Sister will emerge. As soon as it's moved, Thrawn launches the freighter to bait Sarlis. The next ping goes off when the freighter is off to their starboard side. When Sarlis comes in, coming from the specific trajectory Thrawn had placed her at, she wants to be on Thrawn's flank and cut him off. However, the tracker is already in the freighter and actually puts her right in the middle of the two fleets. Then, Thrawn can use the slave-rigged freighter packed full of proton bombs to do a suicide run that takes out Sarlis and the Imperator. Not only does this prove a point to Luke and Ahsoka, but the Imperator's wreckage provides convenient cover for them to escape from the Fourth Sister's fleet. This is the best way I can sum up the plan and if it's not clear let me know so I can try and explain it better in the next chapter.

The death of Captain Sarlis is the first major death in this story (unless you count Argos from back in Chapter 6). Given it's my first major one, I wasn't sure how to handle her death. I considered doing a POV section with her as she died, but I felt like that would lessen the impact of what I was trying to do with her. Faro, the Fourth Sister, and Pellaeon all note how unceremonious her end is, and I felt like doing it from her perspective lessened that a bit. Still, Sarlis is dead and gone. The first of many casualties...

Next time: Thrawn meets Luke and Ahsoka, Faro needs some answers, the Fourth Sister returns to her Master, and Ezra begins to make some changes.
Chapter 31 - Course Correction

Chapter Notes

Here I am again, back on schedule.

This time: Thrawn meets Luke and Ahsoka, Faro needs some answers, the Fourth Sister returns to her Master, and Ezra begins to make some changes

Their shuttle slowed to a halt as they dropped out of hyperspace. The coordinates Thrawn had given them led to the middle of nowhere, with not a planet or asteroid in sight from the viewport. Luke couldn't tell if that was a good sign or not.


"I'm still half convinced he's going to kill us and leave", she shrugged

Luke huffed a small laugh. Part of him worried about that too, but there was no denying that things weren't as they'd first seemed. The exploding Star Destroyer had proved that things were much different out here than Luke expected. It was too early to tell if it was a good sort of different or not, but Thrawn hadn't tried to kill them yet. That was something.

Ahsoka perked up as an alarm blared. "I think that's them."

A few seconds later, Thrawn's Star Destroyer dropped out of hyperspace just in view behind them. Another Star Destroyer followed shortly after. Luke and Ahsoka turned the ship around to face them, but didn't try to approach just yet. There was a long period of nothing, just the two of them staring apprehensively at the looming Imperial ships.

"Jedi shuttle", a new voice interrupted over the comm, "Please approach the hangar. You're cleared to land."

They exchanged a look before Luke fired up the engines and guided their ship to Thrawn's Star Destroyer, the unusual insignia on its underside setting it apart. From the other Star Destroyer, a Sentinel-Class shuttle launched and started to make its way over. At least it's not TIE fighters.

"Can't say I've ever landed in one of these as a friend", Luke said, trying to lighten the mood.

It earned a small chuckle from Ahsoka. "Not sure I have either. Well, maybe they thought I was a friend sometimes."

"Let's just hope no one's lying this time around", Luke replied.

Their shuttle reached the underside opening of Thrawn's ship and came to the hangar. A spot was marked out for them in the middle of the hangar and a few figures were on the deck waiting for them. Luke switched the shuttle into its landing configuration and guided it carefully over to the landing area. He felt the eye of every pilot, trooper, and officer on them as the gear hit the deck.
Powering the engines down, an uncertain silence hung over the cockpit. If the Imperials wanted to harm them, then they’d had plenty of opportunities. Of course, it was entirely possibly they needed the two of them alive for some reason and were just waiting to spring a trap. Still, Luke sensed no danger, only apprehension.

Beside him, Ahsoka picked up her staff and slotted it into its sling. She draped her cloak over her, concealing the staff underneath it, and fastened it with the silver brooch.

"We're really doing this", Luke muttered as he rose from his chair.

"I don't like it either, but we have no choice." She checked the sabers at her hips and smiled encouragingly at him, "Guess we'll find out if it's a good idea pretty quickly."

Luke nodded and checked his own weapon before following her out of the cockpit. Ahsoka opened the door and stepped out onto the exit stairs. No blaster bolts were firing at them, at least not yet, so Luke followed her out. A number of Imperials were dotted around the hangar all pretending that they weren't staring at the Jedi.

It set Luke on edge immediately. Every instinct he had told him to prepare to fight. The stormtroopers, the TIE fighters, the officers - all of it spoke danger to him. Resisting the urge to duck for cover, he followed Ahsoka slowly and carefully down the steps.

In front of the shuttle, they saw the handful of figures Luke had spotted on the way in. Two stormtroopers, fewer than he expected, flanking an officer. The woman had fair skin, medium-length brown hair, and wore a similar nervous expression to Luke.

"Welcome to the Chimaera, Jedi", the Imperial greeted courteously.

Ahsoka nodded very slightly. "I'd expected Thrawn to meet us."

The Imperial huffed humorously, "And we were expecting Bridger. I'm Commodore Faro, Thrawn's First Officer."

Neither Ahsoka nor Luke made an effort to introduce themselves. They were both still feeling out the situation. Luke figured that they already knew who he was, and he didn't think Ahsoka was all that eager to give out her name just yet.

Realising they weren't big on introductions, the Commodore cleared her throat and looked away. "We're waiting for one more, then we'll take you to see Thrawn", she explained apprehensively.

On cue, the shuttle they'd seen leave from the other Star Destroyer entered the hangar's shields. It touched down in the landing area next to them. Luke, Ahsoka, and the Imperials watched in awkward silence as an older man with grey-white hair and a well-groomed moustache exited the shuttle.

The man smiled thinly, if a bit uncomfortably, as he walked over. "So you're our Jedi, hmph? Captain Pellaeon of the Myrmidon."

The Captain extended a hand to them. Still not sensing any threat here, Luke decided that they might as well try to be civil and shook the Captain's hand briefly.

"Luke Skywalker", he glanced at the Commodore too, giving her the introduction she'd expected earlier.

His name was familiar to them, he already knew that. Still, Luke felt like saying his name out loud
had put them on edge even more than before.

"We'll take you to see Thrawn in his office. If you'd follow us", Commodore Faro motioned behind her.

Ahsoka and Luke hung back and let the Imperials go first, just to keep an eye out. The Stormtroopers walked rigidly and on alert ahead of them, clearly on edge. The two officers fell in beside each other and were whispering among themselves. While Luke couldn't hear what they were saying, he could feel some of their thoughts. There were nerves but also surprise and shock. From what he could tell, whatever just happened with that Star Destroyer and the other Imperials had been unexpected for them too.

"I don't sense anything dangerous here", Ahsoka mumbled quietly to him.

Luke nodded along, "Me neither."

"I guess we'll just see what Thrawn's planning this time." Ahsoka's hands went to her hips instinctively, "At least they let us keep our lightsabers."

Luke had noticed that too. Maybe it was some unspoken attempt to show some trust. Sure, a whole Star Destroyer's worth of Stormtroopers might still win out in a fight, but Luke had enough faith in Ahsoka's and his own abilities to know that they'd have a fighting chance to escape if things went sour. However, combined with the chaos in the last system and the lack of deception he felt here, Luke started to think Thrawn might really not be their enemy. Whether he was an ally though was another matter entirely.

They were silent as the Imperials led them out of the hangar and through an endless maze of corridors to wherever Thrawn was waiting for them. Every step they took, Luke and Ahsoka could feel the eyes on them. The stormtroopers too nervous to look back, the officers sneaking a glance as they passed, the engineers taking their eyes off their work - it made him uncomfortable. All the while, the Commodore and the Captain were locked in quiet conversation.

A few minutes of bustling corridors and a short, cramped, awkward elevator ride later, they turned left into a corridor with a stormtrooper standing guard at the door. The two officers came to a stop by the guard and produced their code cylinders. Wordlessly, the trooper checked them both into the device by the door and handed them back.

The Commodore turned to the stormtroopers around them. "Leave us", she ordered.

The troopers nodded and turned around, marching off back down the corridor. Alone, Luke thought, interesting.

Pellaeon motioned at Luke, "This way. He'll be waiting inside."

The two Imperials led the way in through another short corridor. Several pieces of art, vases mostly, were placed on small podiums on each side of the corridor. Then, the two Imperials reached the last door. It opened for them automatically, revealing Thrawn's office behind it.

Sitting at his desk, a neutral and unreadable expression on his face, was the Grand Admiral himself. Luke had seen him through the hologram, and had seen images of him elsewhere too, so the cold red eyes and pale blue skin were no shock to him. Thrawn rose from his place, and motioned politely to the two chairs before his desk.

"Please, take a seat."
Faro and Pellaeon entered ahead of them, but Luke and Ahsoka held back. They knew better than to jump in so trustingly with him.

"I assure you, you're in no danger here", Thrawn said, apparently reading their body language.

Ahsoka narrowed her eyes at him, "We still don't exactly have a reason to trust you."

"You have your weapons and we are only three officers. You could quite easily kill us and escape, I'm sure. As I said, there is no danger for you here." Thrawn withdrew his hand and held it behind his back at ease, "Do you still believe this is some sort of trap? We have nothing to hide from you. Please, take a look around if you wish. I promise you our intentions are genuine."

Luke shared a look with his friend and then glanced carefully back to Thrawn. Ahsoka was thinking it over before casting her eyes around at the trinkets in Thrawn's office. Instruments, paintings of Lothal, ancient stonework, sculptures of unusual reptiles - Thrawn seemed to live up to the stories of being an art enthusiast. Luke was particularly interested in the statue behind Thrawn. Standing up, the small reptilian animals of the statue behind him look like they were resting on the Chiss' shoulders.

One of the alcoves on the far edge of the room caught Ahsoka's attention. She took a few steps towards it, casting a suspicious glance and Thrawn, and then continued.

"Ahsoka?" Luke's question went unanswered as she silently approached whatever had caught her eye.

Looking past her, Luke saw an old helmet from the Clone Wars set on a stand in the right-hand corner of the room. Luke recognised it as one of the later Clone Wars designs, and it was marked with a green design similar to Rex's blue one.

"Where did you get this?", Ahsoka breathed, placing her hand gently on the visor.

Thrawn's face was unreadable as he titled his head to her. "It was gifted to me by ISB Colonel Yularen as a sign of good faith many years ago. He knew of my interest in art and history and rightly thought I'd be interested", Thrawn explained. The Chiss watched her for a few moments as she inspected the piece. "CC-1004. Clone Commander Gree of the 41st Elite Corps. Killed on Kashyyyk during the execution of Clone Order 66, likely by Jedi Grand Master Yoda."

Yoda? Luke squinted at Thrawn, surprised. He'd never seen Yoda use any sort of weapon in all the time he'd known the Jedi Master. Then again, maybe he shouldn't have been so surprised. Yoda had fought in the Clone Wars, just like Ben, of course he'd have had to fight. Ahsoka had even called him the finest swordsman she'd ever seen. As for Clone Order 66, Luke only had a vague idea of what happened. He'd made his assumptions, but he'd never asked Rex or Ahsoka directly.

"Displaying the equipment of dead friends isn't the most encouraging first impression, Thrawn", Ahsoka muttered.

"Then allow me to show you things from one who is very much still alive", Thrawn offered.

The Chiss brought their attention to a large slab of concrete emblazoned with graffiti and paint of all sorts of colours. The colour was intense, if a bit faded. Luke had seen plenty of graffiti in his time but this was definitely something else. It had time, nuance, effort, and care put in to it. It helped that Luke already had a good idea of who'd painted it.

Ahsoka squinted at it and then smiled almost imperceptibly. "Sabine's."
"As I told Ezra Bridger, she's quite talented", he mused. "I was not surprised to see that time had not worn her creativity or skill when she was out here a year ago."

Luke folded his arms, still wary of the Grand Admiral. "You say you admire her but you kept trying to kill her, and Ezra too."

"Yes. They threatened the Empire. At the time, they were my enemies. Just as I was theirs." Thrawn remained calm, collected, and completely emotionless as he spoke. Ahsoka turned away from the artwork and looked at Thrawn, "You really don't hold anything back, do you? You tried to kill our friends and have no problem talking openly about it to our face."

"Would you rather me be dishonest?" His question didn't need an answer. "If we're to cooperate I will give you the truth, no matter what. I hope you will do the same for us."

Luke watched the Grand Admiral carefully for a hint of anything, but there was nothing. Thrawn's mind was an enigma to him as the Imperial kept looking over the art piece. Nor could Luke sense anything suspicious from the two other officers watching them from the side of Thrawn's desk. Ahsoka kept her eyes on Thrawn a few more moments, probably considering what their next move should be.

The Togruta looked back and gave a Luke a nod. "Alright", she said to Thrawn, "What do you want with us?"

Thrawn looked to the empty seats again with a gentle nod. "Thank you, Jedi. I appreciate your willingness to listen."
Not that we have much choice, Luke thought to himself as he took the right-most chair before Thrawn's desk. The Imperial sunk down into his own chair, steepling his fingers as he prepared to speak.

"After the Battle of Lothal, the Emperor assigned us a mission to uncover a threat he perceived in the Unknown Regions." Thrawn paused for a moment, as Ahsoka sat down too. "I'll spare you many of the superfluous details, but suffice it to say that shortly after Ezra Bridger's escape we found our way to a planet, on which was buried a large structure. I believe this structure is some sort of prison. I can only assume that whatever caused the destruction in the system we both just left and on the planet where you retrieved Bridger is somehow linked to, or even is, the thing buried on that planet."

Luke silently ran through it in his head. As far as he could tell, Thrawn was on the money. Luke knew about the horrors left at the world where Ezra had been rescued and had felt them for himself clearly enough on the previous planet. Luke also knew that they were pursuing someone as much as something. Some individual was behind this, his vision at the temple had all but confirmed that.

Thrawn's theory did raise a few questions: how did Thrawn find his way to this planet with a structure on it? Why did he jump to the conclusion that it was some sort of prison? Thankfully, Ahsoka was already on it.

"Why do you think there's something or someone down there?", Ahsoka asked sceptically.

"Purely conjecture", Thrawn admitted. "The signs point to it. In particular, the Inquisitor that you encountered possessed knowledge and abilities beyond her scope to know and seemed to be communicating with something. It was the only logical answer. Of course, I don't know the force as you do, so I needed your help to get any further. The help of the Jedi who defeated the Emperor
Thrawn looked almost surprised at his reaction. "You are the son of Anakin Skywalker, are you not? The man who became Darth Vader?"

_Ah, in the galaxy did Thrawn even know that?_ Ahsoka shot him a shocked look, but Luke didn't have the words.

Captain Pellaeon seemed just as surprised. "Hold on, what?"

"Anakin Skywalker became Darth Vader." Thrawn looked to the Commodore too, "You remember our mission with Lord Vader, don't you Commodore? It involved Batuu, the same planet I visited with the Jedi during the Clone Wars. His actions there, or rather his reactions, combined with his piloting abilities, left no room for doubt."

_Was Thrawn serious?_ In one mission, Thrawn had managed to figure out one of the most closely-guarded and galaxy-shaking secrets to have ever existed. More than that, he'd put two and two together and figured out exactly who Luke was and what he'd done. As shocked as Luke was, he was also impressed. If Thrawn could work out so much from so little, how much else could he figure out that could help them in this.

"Y-you knew my father?", Luke asked, his curiosity still getting the better of him.

"Yes. Both as Anakin Skywalker and as Darth Vader. It is not far to assume your mother was the Senator involved in said mission, the young Padme Amidala."

_Mother, too._ If nothing else, Thrawn was clearly clever. Ahsoka looked even more surprised that he was. Her mouth was open and her eyes were a bit widened. Thrawn noticed the brief show of surprise and tilted his head to her.

The Grand Admiral searched her closely with his eyes. He took in a careful breath before he spoke, "Which also confirms my suspicions of you, Miss Tano."

_Seriously?_ Luke's eyes went wide this time. Knowing Luke was one thing, knowing Ahsoka was a whole other story.

Ahsoka's surprise quickly turned to defensiveness. "How do you know who I am?", she asked sharply.

Thrawn kept his eyes on her and said two words. "Marg Sabl."


Ahsoka blinked a few times and her eyes sunk away to the floor. "A Togrutan flower", she said slowly.

"And a fleet tactic - quite an ingenious one at that - which a certain Commander Ahsoka Tano pioneered in the Battle of Ryloth", Thrawn added. "Utilise the strong armour of the Venator-class cruiser's underside to protect your fighters from fire and enable them to launch from the dorsal hangar unmolested."

_That's... not a bad idea, Ahsoka._ Luke had heard crazier tactics, but it was certainly up there.
"Senator Amidala told me many years ago", Thrawn continued. "I also noticed your name in the records relating to Phoenix Squadron, and noticed the synchronicity with their appearance and Darth Vader's personal involvement in the hunt for the rebels. Only Ahsoka Tano would be so closely involved with both Ezra Bridger and Luke Skywalker."

"Huh...", Ahsoka didn't really seem to know what to say.

Again, Luke had to admit that he impressed. Any doubts he'd had about Thrawn being the calculating and thorough analyst he'd heard about had been completely exceeded. That also meant that Thrawn probably wasn't so foolish as to think that whatever had been behind all of that destruction could be anything good for the galaxy. Luke started to think he understood why Thrawn had asked them here after all.

Luke folded his arms, feeling just a bit more at ease. "So what do you want from us?"

"We need powerful Jedi to confront this danger", Thrawn answered.

"Which is why you tried to catch Ezra", Luke filled in for him.

Thrawn shook his head. "You misunderstand. I wanted Bridger to escape."

Ahsoka looked up instantly. "Excuse me?", she said almost indignantly.

"If I wanted Bridger captured or dead, I could have done so years ago. The same is true of you and Sabine Wren", Thrawn explained casually. "I let Bridger remain long enough to catch wind of a threat in hopes of him luring you out here after he returned home, which he did."

Luke found himself speechless again. All he could do was look at Ahsoka and wait for her reaction.

"You... you let us get away with him"

"Yes. I admit, I'd hoped that Bridger would be here now too. Let us hope the two of you alone are enough."

Ahsoka leaned back in her chair and sighed. Luke wasn't sure if she'd be angry, disappointed, or just confused. Turns out, it was none of those. Instead, Ahsoka chuckled ever so slightly.

"Well I'll be, we were really proud of that rescue...", she mumbled.

Thrawn leaned over the desk, "May I ask where Bridger is?"

Ahsoka eyed Luke carefully and he caught her meaning quickly. Just because they were considering working with Thrawn, that didn't mean they were going to spill everything. What Ezra was doing with the Jedi on Lothal was beyond important and Thrawn did not need to know about it, certainly not yet. Besides, Ezra, Sabine, Hera, and the rest of them had a far longer, harder, more tragic past with Thrawn. It wasn't Luke or Ahsoka's place to tell the Grand Admiral what had happened to them.

With no answer, the Chiss went off on his conjecture again. "Lothal then, I presume. Leaving a vanguard is a sound strategy in case you both fail." Thrawn paused, "Although, he must have an important purpose regardless. A personal one maybe? Signs of infatuation are clear in many species, and both Bridger and Miss Wren displayed-"

"It doesn't matter where Ezra is", Ahsoka cut him off, "He's safe and where he needs to be."
"And the same is true for you", Thrawn countered. "Despite your worries, you are also safe and where you need to be. I have told you what I know and my reasons for drawing you here. I hope you can see that I do truly wish to ally with you, despite our pasts."

Ahsoka went quiet, inspecting Thrawn for a long while and mulling over their options. Luke did the same, weighing up the few choices they had. They shared a look, and then a nod. Thrawn might not be an easy ally, nor a pleasant one, but he was a useful one. It was time to let the past go and focus on the here and now. They needed Thrawn's help, and Thrawn needed theirs.

"You might be on to something", Luke said finally. "There... a good chance that there's someone out here that's ancient, powerful, and responsible for the destruction out here."

He wasn't going to mention the vision, Luke barely understood it anyway, but Thrawn's theories did line up too well with their own knowledge for it to be a mere coincidence.

"I see", Thrawn leaned back in his chair and stroked his chin, "Would it really be possible for something to live for that long? Even a long-lived being would need food and water that its prison wouldn't provide."

"It's possible", Ahsoka supposed. "Some beings that are truly powerful might be able to sustain themselves for a long time, sometimes even after death."

Thrawn nodded, clearly intrigued. "And what of the Inquisitor? Do you think it could be possible for her to be influenced by this being?"

"Absolutely. I've seen it before...", she cast her gaze off into the corner. Luke knew there was a memory there, but not one she wanted to share. Ahsoka blinked away the reaction, "This being, if it's as powerful as we fear, might be capable of influencing or manipulating weaker willed people. Maybe even controlling them out right."

Thrawn shared a look with his officers. "Then it is as we feared", he said remorsefully, "There is a powerful ancient being, one that has wrought immense destruction in the past, that is now almost certainly manipulating an aggressive and easily manipulated Inquisitor - an Inquisitor with significant military resources now at her command."

_Well, when you put it like that..._ Luke's brief sense of hope that had crept up during the meeting fell apart just as quickly.

"So what's your plan?", Luke asked, "You want to regroup and go back there before they can reach this thing?"

"No", Thrawn raised his hand, "Even with your help we are outgunned and outnumbered. We'd only get ourselves killed. We have neither the ships nor the men at this time."

Ahsoka scoffed jokingly, "We can't exactly snap our fingers and give you more ships and troops."

"I know you can't. However, there are some who can."

Beside the desk, Captain Pellaeon huffed, "The Chiss?"

"Yes", Thrawn confirmed. "Lieutenant Agral has already been given the coordinates to Csilla. My people will be difficult to convince but the testimony of two Jedi, two decorated Imperial officers, and myself might be enough to get at least some token resources. With any luck, that will be enough for our purposes."
The Chiss? Luke, like anyone, had only heard of the Chiss and their homeworld Csilla in stories. An isolated, frigid world perfectly suited to its reclusive, cold inhabitants. They lived far in the Unknown Regions and had barely any reaction with those beyond their borders. Even most of that interaction was with small-time traders, and as far as Luke knew there was no official political contact with anyone. Still, the Chiss were known in those handful of stories for being shrewd, intelligent, and effective. So far, Thrawn was surpassing even those high expectations. If Thrawn was certain he could muster some support then... this might not actually be a bad idea.

"The journey will take some time." Thrawn rose from his seat and looked at them both, "I expect it's been a long and draining day. You are both welcome to quarters aboard the Chimaera, if you wish."

"I think we're fine as we are, thank you", Ahsoka denied him quickly. They weren't quite ready for that level of trust just yet.

"Very well. I have much to attend to and all four of you have earned some rest. We will resume in the morning."

Luke and Ahsoka took that as a dismissal. The whirlwind meeting had been surprisingly short, but it had been productive. New answers, new allies, new opportunities, but also new worries and new questions.

However, like Thrawn said, it had been a long day. Luke hadn't slept since before he reached the temple world. Between the vision, the battle, and the meeting with Thrawn, it was long, long past time that he got some rest.

Whatever Luke had expected from this mission, it wasn't this. Honestly, he'd hoped they wouldn't run into the Empire out here. Failing that, he'd certainly not expected to start working with them. Thrawn was hardly a typical Imperial, but he was still an Imperial. Luke had heard the stories of the massacre on Batonn or the bombardment of Lothal. He knew Thrawn almost killed Ezra, Hera, Wedge, and others on Atollon, and knew that Kanan had given his life to end Thrawn's schemes. They'd have to tread very carefully here, even if they shared a common enemy for now.

Silently cursing his luck, Luke followed Ahsoka out of the office, ready to fall into bed and try to process this whole mess.

The two Jedi were far quicker to leave than they were to enter. Faro had to admit, she wasn't all that comfortable with the Jedi either. Of course, she valued their help and appreciated how important it was, but they were powerful and potentially dangerous, and that wasn't just the Imperial propaganda talking.

Pellaeon went to leave when he'd made sure there was a good bit of space between him and the Jedi. The Captain looked to her to come with, but she shook her head. She wasn't done here. Their hushed conversation on the way up here would have made it clear that she had a few questions for Thrawn first. The older man wrinkled his nose and walked out of the office without another word.

Thrawn was focused on the terminal at his desk, but Faro knew he was just waiting for the privacy.

"Take a seat, Commodore. I know there's a lot to discuss", he said, not looking up from the terminal.

"Why?", she folded her arms from the far side of the room, "How?"

"The latter question is easier to answer", Thrawn replied. The Grand Admiral lifted his head and
looked at her, the same cold and remorseless expression on his face. "The Emperor had a
hyperspace tracker placed on the *Chimaera* years ago, it's how the Fourth Sister reached us so
quickly. Chief Engineer Torbal was assigned to find it and assess it. Once it was found, he learned
that it worked on a ten minute cycle. In the intervening time, it could be moved. Moving it early
would alert the Fourth Sister, so it was transplanted to my freighter as soon as we dropped out of
hyperspace. Her fleet would still be drawn to us, and the *Imperator* would be drawn into position."

"You baited her", Faro said bluntly. "Just like Bridger, just like Tano and Wren and Skywalker.
Except Sarlis wasn't going to walk out of this trap."

Thrawn looked away, "I had not planned for a lethal trap initially. However, our options were few.
Once General Veers informed me of the surplus of proton bombs, an opportunity presented itself.
The hyperspace tracker, the bombs, the freighter, and a slave circuit - quite a simple equation."

Faro ran her tongue around her mouth. "You weren't sending Sarlis away to protect her or deny the
Fourth Sister her forces. You were just lining her up to come in at the right angle so you could use
her as a shield."

"We both knew Site Two was a likely place to find the Jedi, and there was only one trajectory from
which the Fourth Sister would come. Finding a place to... manoeuvre the *Imperator* into was quite
simple."

"But why?", she leaned over the desk, glaring right at him. "Why kill them? Why not put that
hyperspace tracker on the ship and lure them somewhere else? We could have got the Jedi, avoided
this fight, and not killed an entire ship's worth of people!"

Faro felt her jaw clenching and took a deep breath. She was angry, but she should know better than
to let it show so plainly. Thrawn had intentionally let Bridger's allies take out the *Invictus* a year
ago and she'd been uncomfortable then. Now though, Thrawn was personally destroying entire Star
Destroyers of people who were just doing their job out here. The anger was warranted but...
unprofessional.

"The destruction of the *Imperator* was regrettable but necessary", Thrawn admitted. "The Jedi
needed to see proof that things weren't as they'd assumed, and needed a reason to trust us."

Faro narrowed her eyes, "You killed thousands of people to prove a point?"

"Just like we did on Lothal, Commodore."

Faro paused. Her anger faltered. *He was right.* That had been why they'd bombarded Capital City.
Yes, innocents died, but the war they would have ended would have killed far more - at least, that
was their plan. These Imperials did sign up for this job, so why did this bother her so much more?
It was a question she already knew the answer to. Sarlis, the *Imperator*, the *Invictus* - they were all
means to an end for Thrawn. Was she one too?

"I apologise for keeping you in the dark, Commodore. I felt it was better for everyone to only know
a fraction of the plan, especially since less trusted figures like Lieutenant Torbal and Lieutenant
Xoxtin were involved. If they showed some awareness of a larger plan, the Inquisitor might have
cought wind of it or been alerted." Thrawn paused and sighed, "Also, I did not wish to implicate
you in an action I knew you would find morally disagreeable if I did not need to."

The Commodore sighed and shut her eyes. There weren't easy choices in this life, but there were
right ones. Whether or not the *Imperator's* crew died in vain depended on whether she, Thrawn,
Pellaeon, and the Jedi could actually stop whatever was out here. It was up to them to make that
involuntary sacrifice worthwhile.

"You did what needed to be done. I know that", she conceded.

Thrawn raised an eyebrow, "But?"

Faro opened her eyes and met Thrawn's. "But, if I have to die, then let me make that choice on my own. Or at least don't let me walk blindly into it. Not like Sarlis."

Thrawn's face showed the faintest flash of concern, maybe even sadness. "Let us hope neither of us are forced to make that choice."

The Fourth Sister's fleet had limped back to the planet in a sour mood. They'd lost. There was no getting around that. Sarlis was dead, they were down a Star Destroyer, and Thrawn had fled with the Jedi in tow.

There were a few good things out of this. Finally, the rest of the Imperials were listening to her about Thrawn not being trustworthy, even if it was a bit late now. General Veers had come to heel too, as had Canady and Hux more fully. With Thrawn gone and her power clear, the Fourth Sister was now the highest authority among these Imperials.

The highest authority after Him, of course.

Her Master would not be pleased with this. She'd failed to get the Jedi, failed to kill Thrawn, failed to deliver him all that he needed. As she skulked back to her quarters on the surface, the Inquisitor could only hope that her Master would be merciful.

"Apprentice."

She didn't jump as she entered through the door. The Fourth Sister was getting used to Him being able to reach out so easily and so secretively.

The Inquisitor hung her head, "Master, I..."

"The Chiss is gone."

*Of course he already knows... "I... yes, Master. We also lost Sarlis and her shi-"

"I do not care about the ship, child", He spat. She felt him pulling into her mind, feeling around and probing it. "And yet, there's something more... the Jedi."

The Fourth Sister sunk to her knees just through the door of her quarters. "Forgive me, Master", she pleaded, "I didn't - Hgh." Her breath left her as the force tightened around her neck. Her Master's power began to squeeze at her throat. It lifted her from her knees as she went to claw helplessly at her throat. "M-Master, I-"

"My disappointment in you cannot be overstated."

The grip became even tighter. Her legs started to kick in the air, unable to reach the ground, and she began tasting hints of blood. "I'm... please."

"Please?", He growled. "You beg for mercy?"

"Y-Yes!", she gasped, "P-please!"
Mercifully, His grip loosened. "Pathetic."

He threw her violently against the wall. She didn't have time to react as her back slammed against the plas-steel with a crack.

"I believed you would be the one to bring about my freedom. Perhaps... I was mistaken."

She panted for breath, each movement sending shoots of pain up her side. "M-Master, I-

"I care not for you excuses", He growled. "Thrawn and the Jedi will move against us now. The New Republic or the Chiss themselves might see fit to join them."

"What... what do we do?", she said meekly.

"Hmph. Perhaps with my guidance you might yet redeem yourself."

"I will do whatever you ask, Master."

"If Thrawn finds his support then we will need to buy time."

She lifted her head weakly. "Buy time for what, Master?"

Her Master didn't dignify her with an answer. "Contact the Imperial, Sloane. Her devotion to her Empire might be of use to us."

That was a good call. Canady and the others would know how to reach her and word of Thrawn's treachery would definitely anger the last Grand Admiral. If they could get Sloane to commit some ships to them then they'd be able to crush Thrawn and the Jedi if they dared to challenge them here.

"I will, Master", she obliged weakly.

"As for the Jedi, your instructions remain...", He breathed in deeply and harshly, "Bring. Them. To. Me."

For Ezra, the next few weeks felt like the beginning of something new. Rolling back on the stricter Jedi principles, Ezra started to embrace his reservations not as things to hide but things to share. Not offering rules but ideas to his students, trying to make them think for themselves rather than learn everything by rote. It wasn't easy and every day had to be taken as it came, but slowly and steadily things were falling into place. Even Sabine was feeling the hard work. She'd even had to sit this one out because she was so worn out these last few days.

That being said, life certainly might have looked easy right now. The nice weather persuaded Ezra to test out some of the new lessons on one of his favourite topics: Lothal. Gathering the middle group of the Weequay Ulu, the Twi'lek Ninvere, and the Quarren Targual, Ezra headed out to a quiet spot in the plains to talk about nature, Lothal, and of course, loth-cats.

The felines crowded around the class, curiously pawing and mewing at them as Ezra went about his lesson. His hand absently stroked a particularly curious one as he spoke. A family sat and slept nearby, three more fought playfully in the grass, and several others plodded around with the same wide-eyed wonder the little creatures always did. Maybe they'd sensed the lesson Ezra was trying to give and had come to help, or maybe they just wanted the attention. Knowing the loth-cats, it was probably both.
"Life is a cycle", Ezra continued to his class, "And it's cycle that exists in the living force. In some ways it is the essence of the living force."

Targual giggled to herself as she played with one of the loth-cats, barely seeming to be paying attention to the lesson. The young Quarren had been on Mon Cala all of her life until she went to Pantora, so she'd never seen anything like the little furballs before.

"Targual?", Ezra caught her attention gently.

"Hmm?" She raised her head and looked at him. "Oh, uh, sorry."

"It's no problem", Ezra assured her, "Just keep your focus here."

The Quarren nodded exaggeratedly, "Okay, Master. I will."

Ezra watched her sneak a few extra glances at the animal as she began to focus back on him.

"Like I was saying, life is the essence of the living force. It's something we're all part of and that we can all reach out to and feel around us."

Ninvere nervously raised a hand, "You meant... m-meditating?"

The Twi'lek's basic was still a bit rusty and she had a habit of slipping into Ryl at time. Hera was taking some time to teach the fellow Twi'lek a few times a week. They did have translators, but the young girl had insisted on not using them yet. She wanted to make sure she could speak basic and hear it normally, and Ezra admired the commitment.

"Meditating, yes. That's one way at least. Sometimes it's simply opening your mind as you do other things. Other times, it's just opening your eyes and seeing the physical signs the living force gives you."

"Living signs?", Ulu questioned, "Like... what?"

Ezra smiled and looked over to the loth-cat still waiting next to Tarqual. It's head was titled to the side, its paws pointed to her, and its tail wagging lazily behind itself.

"See the loth-cat?" He made sure they all looked over, "What does it want?"

Tarqual was quick to answer, and even quicker to give it a quick pet again. "It wants attention", she chimed happily.

"Exactly. How did you know that?", Ezra asked.

She looked at him then back at the cat, "Uhh, it... looks like it does. I don't know."

He shook his head, "No, you're right. It looks like it does. The living force is everywhere. Sure, you can sense it, but remember to look with your eyes too. You don't need your force powers to know when most things are happy, sad, hurt, tired, or anything else."

Ulu squinted uncertainly at the ground, "So, we just look at stuff?"

"You look and you feel at the same time", Ezra told the Weequay.

"That sounds hard", the boy groaned.

Ezra laughed as a story came to him. "You know, when I was out in the Unknown Regions a few
years ago, these lessons saved my life. On my first night there, I was almost attacked by an animal. It snuck up in the middle of the night and ambushed me. I sensed it with the force just before it got me and caught it. Ended up making a connection with it, calming it, and sending it on its way."

*Argos.* Barely a day went by without him remembering his own loyal companion for those five years of solitude. Ezra could still remember him perfectly. The smooth scaly hide, the long slender tail, the searching but endearing eyes. He remembered what Argos was actually like too. Strong, fast, powerful, but also intelligent, loyal, and a big old softie when it came down to it. Ezra missed him, and appreciated what he'd done to help Ezra escape even more.

"That was the sensing part", Ezra continued. "That was important. However, I saw that all it really wanted was some food. I ended up giving it what it wanted that night, and the next, and the next. It ended up being my only friend out there." Ezra stopped for a moment, lost in bittersweet memories. "And it never would have happened it if I wasn't using both my senses and my eyes."

Ulu pursed his lips, somewhat taking the lesson on board.

"I think I understood...", Ninvere added, clearly a bit unsure herself.

Seeing their uncertainty, Ezra thought of a better idea. "How about we try it together?" Three enthusiastic nods were his answer. "Alright then", he scooted forward on his knees and held his left hand to Ulu and his right to Targual, "Join hands and lets see what we feel."

Ulu and Targual took his hands with Ninvere in between them. The class shut their eyes and slowed their breathing. Ezra felt them trying to focus their minds, just like he'd taught them. They were new to it, undisciplined, and lacking experience, but they still had years to work on that. Together, and with his guidance, they might start getting somewhere today. Ezra focused his own energy on the life around him, both loth-cat and student, hoping he could guide them on this first try.

"I don't feel anything", Ulu grumbled immediately.

"Be patient. Feel."

The loth-cats around them started to get more impatient at the lack of attention. Ezra heard one's paws gently tapping the grass as it approached Targual. It nudged her hand, purring loudly.

"Focus", Ezra told them. "Reach out."

He felt their thoughts, their intent, their focus. Ezra gently led their thoughts towards him and the force that he could feel everywhere around them. The loth-cats, the warmth of the sun, the cool breeze through the grass - Ezra opened himself to all of it and let it through to them.

"Now... what do you see?"

"Warmth", Ninvere answered, her usual timidness gone.

Ezra nodded, "Good. What else?"

"Cold", Ulu answered, some uncertainty on his voice.

"Also good", Ezra told him.

"Softness." Targual's mind might still have been on the loth-cats, although at least it was sort of on topic.
Ezra felt Ulu second-guessing himself, "Hardness. Metal."

The lightsaber perhaps, or the landspeeder they used to travel out here.

"Old things." Ninvere might have been feeling the old Temple site not far from here, or maybe the older residents of the nearest town.

Ezra didn't have to push Targual for the next answer. "Young. New."

They were on the right lines, to Ezra's relief. He'd hoped that they'd notice it themselves. All it required now was a bit more prodding.

"They're all right answers. But what are they? Warm and cold; soft and hard; old and new - what are they?"

"Opposites?", Ninvere suggested.

"Close, but not quite. What do opposites do?", Ezra kept nudging them closer.

"Attract?"

Ulu gasped excitedly, "Oh, balance."

"Perfect, Ulu", Ezra said with a smile on his face. "Balance."

The session brought him back to his time out in the Unknown Regions. How many hours did he spend meditating just like this? Thousands? More? That feeling of balance - the old and the new, the sick and the strong, the quiet and the chaotic - had been perfectly expressed there. A bit of him missed the place. Not that he wasn't glad to be home, but the planet and its inhabitants had left a permanent mark on him.

"The force isn't just a power Jedi have", Ezra continued, "It's an energy. It's a tension. It surrounds us. It penetrates us. It binds the universe together. It doesn't belong to us, but we're a part of it. Every one of you, every loth-cat, every blade of grass - we're all luminous being united in the force."

"That's...", Targual sounded awed, "Wow..."

"You feel it", Ezra could sense her wonder, "A little bit of everything. Warm and cold; soft and hard; old and new. It even goes larger. Life balances death. Light balances darkness. Harmony balances chaos."

The faintest twinge in the mind of one of his students drew Ezra's attention. Uncertainty, confusion, questions. Ezra opened his eyes and looked at Ulu, his pursed lips and furrowed brow showing what the force was also telling Ezra.

"Ulu?", he asked gently, "Question?"

The boy's eyes fluttered open. "Oh, um, yeah. I- I thought the Code says there is no chaos?"

It sure does. It wasn't the first time one of his students had raised a question like this - Safara's thoroughly uncomfortable question about passion had that honour - but this time Ezra had been expecting it. He also had the perfect answer.

"Hey, you see those loth-cats having a scrap in the grass over there?" Ezra pointed over to his right at the playing animals he'd spotted earlier. "Tell me what you feel. Do you feel the chaos?"
Ulu went quiet and watched the scrap for a moment. Remembering the earlier part of the lesson, the boy also shut his eyes and focused his mind on them too. "I... I guess."

"Good. Now, do you also feel harmony somewhere?", Ezra asked.

He felt all of their minds feel out around them. They were drawn to the family of loth-cats sleeping peacefully together behind them. A small kitten was curled up tightly between two contented sleeping parents. The feeling already in their mind, they all opened their eyes and looked over to see what the force had already told them.

"Harmony", Ezra confirmed for them. "It's not that there isn't chaos, it's that there's also harmony to balance it out." He reached the crux of the lesson. "Everything about the force is balance. Balancing your senses in the force with your common sense, accepting the balance between things like life and death, or just accepting the balance of good and bad that the galaxy will throw at you - it's part of almost everything you'll learn over the next few years. Take your time, be present. Recognise what the universe is actually showing you and telling you, not just what you want it to."

There were some mumbled noises of agreement as they took the words on board. They were all still young, maybe too young to fully understand, but they might feel his meaning. In time, they'd come to understand it too.

Having given them plenty to think about, Ezra let the class relax and enjoy their furry visitors again. After all, the more in tune they became with these creatures, the more in tune they became to the force and the planet itself.

Ezra took the rare moment to relax too. He let one hand stroke the nearest loth-cat and took some time to muse on the finer parts of life. Lothal, his students, Hera, Kallus' cooking, and of course Sabine. He wished she hadn't taken this lesson out today. She'd have loved it. Come to think of it, it was quite unusual for her to do that. Still, who could blame her for being tired? She was also still doing stuff with Ryder's militia on top of this. Sabine had earned some rest. Give it a day and Ezra was sure she'd be as full of life as ever.

It wasn't long before he was interrupted by a small pawing at his leg. The small kitten that had been sleeping with its parents had sneaked over and was doing its best to get his attention.

"Hey little guy." Ezra ran his hand over the kitten's head. "You're curious, aren't you?"

It nuzzled affectionately into his hand. The tiny thing couldn't have been that old, maybe a month or two, and it was still a bit wobbly on its feet. It was odd that something so young was so comfortable with him, although Ezra put it down to his bond with this place. It's golden-brown fur was broken by small blotches of black-blue circles that would grow as the kitten became older. The little things never ceased to amaze him, and he happily gave the loth-kitten the attention it craved.

*Life really is beautiful,* Ezra mused. *New life especially.*

Chapter End Notes

Busy yet again, so let's get to it.
The first meeting between Thrawn, Luke, Ahsoka, Faro, and Pellaeon is obviously a big moment for the story. Two key sets of characters have joined forces in an essential if uneasy alliance. This first meeting had plenty of little pieces and details to talk about. Luke pays special attention to the stone statues behind Thrawn's desk and how they seemed to rest on his shoulder. These are of course statues of the Ysalamiri, the force-resistant reptiles Thrawn had on his shoulder in the Legends Thrawn trilogy. They aren't canon anymore, but this first meeting between Luke and Thrawn felt like the right time to give them a mention in passing. We also see Gree's helmet brought up. Ahsoka and Gree were both on the mission with Luminara to escort Gunray in Season 1 of TCW, so I knew that Ahsoka would have to notice if she was in the room. It's not a big moment, but it's one that had to happen and helps break the ice a bit.

Another major reference to TCW and Thrann: Alliances in Marg Sabl. As mentioned, Ahsoka uses this tactic in TCW and it's mentioned very briefly by Padme to Thrawn during the novel. This tiny bit of info is enough for Thrawn to piece together who she is. Interestingly, the manoeuvre itself actually originated with Thrawn in the original Thrawn trilogy, so it felt appropriate that it would serve a purpose in this meeting too. Lastly, there's yet another very vague TCW reference. When discussing whether the Fourth Sister could be influenced by a powerful force user, Ahsoka says she has seen it before. Here, Ahsoka is referring to her own time in the thrall of the Son on Mortis. Finally, the last big thing to discuss is that they're all heading to Csilla to get some help from the Chiss. I'll save the talk about that for the next few chapter. I will say that they're not going to spend a huge amount of time there. As said earlier, there's only 38 main chapters in this story plus one epilogue, so we don't have time to spend chapters and chapters there, as fascinating as the place is.

The Faro section is her giving voice to her issues with Sarlis. Ever since the revelation about the Invictus back in Chapter 15, Faro has set herself apart as the voice of empathy among the Imperial trio. While she does accept the reasoning, she definitely isn't thrilled about it. Faro also doesn't like being in the dark about the plan, which Thrawn explains that he did intentionally for a few reasons. I just felt like this event couldn't pass without some serious questions from her, so this covers that base. I'll mention the brief Fourth Sister section here as well. Basically, she failed and her Master is getting impatient. As people may have noticed, this section is much shorter and less full of her own thoughts and opinions. That's an intentional choice since I want the Voice to really dominate those brief interactions, and filling it with mountains of exposition would lessen that impact.

Finally, Ezra's section. This is Ezra taking some steps outside the normal Jedi Code and putting his own spin on things. I'm sure many of you noticed the similarities between what Ezra teaches and what Luke will say to Rey in TLJ. I mentioned this briefly back around Chapters 3, 4, and 5, but I'll reiterate that Ezra is sort of moving down that more sceptical, all-encompassing Jedi path that Luke will one day also go down. There's obvious call-backs to Ezra's time in exile and specifically to Argos, the loyal pet who was killed by the Fourth Sister in Chapter 6. I also tried to do a little bit with the students too since I don't spend much time on them. Ninvere is shy and slips into Ryl, which she does do back in Chapter 26. Targual is playful and curious while Ulu is inquisitive and eager. It's not much, but I wanted to spend just a little time on these other students too.

Next time: Thrawn and the others arrive at Csilla, Ezra and Sabine face the future, and Luke and Ahsoka take stock of the situation.
I need to mention a few quick things about the release schedule for the remainder of this story. I can confirm that there’ll be 38 chapters in this story, plus an epilogue chapter. My original plan was for 50 but much of that was trimmed down, combined, or otherwise altered to bring it to where it is now. I'm mentioning it because I've got some real life stuff coming up in a few weeks so in a few weeks I'm going to be putting this story on hiatus for 3 weeks (i.e, missing 2 weekly submissions) to focus on that stuff. So, ITU will take a break from the 12th June until ~3rd of July. After that, the story lends itself to quicker releases so I'll be doing a chapter once every four days for Chapters 35-8, followed by a shorter two day gap for the epilogue. Ultimately, that schedule means I'll be finishing on the same day I would have if I'd been able to keep up this weekly release schedule. I know it's still a few weeks away for you guys, but I wanted to let you know in advance.

This time: Thrawn and the others return to Chiss Space, Ezra and Sabine face the future, and Luke and Ahsoka take stock of the situation.

Pellaeon hadn't spent much time on the Chimaera's bridge. Not that there was much else to see than on the Myrmidon's, or any other Star Destroyer's for that matter, but each one had a different atmosphere. Whatever that atmosphere was usually like though, he wasn't about to find out. This mission was anything but normal. Most people hadn't even heard of the Chiss before meeting Thrawn, let alone expected to visit them. Come to think of it, Pellaeon couldn't think if anyone ever had visited Chiss space and returned to tell about it. The entire species was like a legend to most of the galaxy. *Though there's always a bit of truth in legends.*

The Jedi standing silently at the front of the bridge weren't helping things either. They weren't causing problems, but even Pellaeon didn't feel comfortable around them yet. He didn't feel unsafe, after all a Jedi would never strike down an unarmed person, but people as powerful as Skywalker or this Ahsoka Tano might have all sorts of secrets and powers that could spell danger if things took a turn.

The Captain was thankful to be huddled around the bridge's holographic table for most of the final leg of the journey. Thrawn was quiet, maybe watching the two Jedi talking quietly at the front viewport. Commodore Faro was quiet too. Her reservations about Sarlis seemed to have eased up a bit, which was something at least. Pellaeon had been just as shocked to see Sarlis go, but he couldn't say he felt much sympathy for her in the end. They had to make a choice of where they would stand, and Sarlis chose wrongly.

"Destination approaching, sir", Lieutenant Agral called at last.

Thrawn turned his head to Commodore Faro. "Are the shuttles prepared?"

She nodded, "Yes. As soon as we're cleared for landing we can go."
"Good." Thrawn clasped his hands behind his back, "Raise deflector shields."

Faro and Pellaeon paused and shared a worried look. *Well, that's encouraging...*

"I thought your people would be glad to see you again", Skywalker observed drily. The two Jedi were walking back down the bridge and joined them at the table.

"It's just precautionary", Thrawn clarified. "We are heading into a potential warzone", he added.

Tano squinted at him, "What war?"

"Grysk", Faro grumbled unhappily.

"Potentially. It never hurts to be prepared."

Pellaeon knew of the Grysk. He hadn't encountered them himself but he knew Thrawn and Faro had run into them a few months before he joined the Seventh Fleet. They were a race of expansionist alien warriors causing trouble in the Unknown Regions. Thrawn believed they might pose a threat to the Chiss or even the Empire itself, but open war already? That didn't bode well for their chances of getting help.

"Hyperdrive powering down", Agral called again.

Pellaeon looked to main viewport, not sure what to expect here. A world of people as enigmatic and clever as Thrawn? An army of alien warriors ready to kill them? A hail of laser fire?

What he saw was far more tame. As the hyperspace corridor melted away, a large planet came into view. Csilla, the homeworld of the Chiss, shone a bright white against the backdrop of space. Its surface was freezing and covered in snow and ice, a nice departure at least from all the arid rocky worlds they always ended up on. Even more interesting were the array of stations in orbit around the planet. A number of orbiting facilities could be spotted ranging from small privately owned fuel stops right up to military-grade shipyards.

Then of course, Pellaeon saw why Thrawn ordered their shields up just in case. A large fleet of Chiss warships was in orbit around the planet. Most of them seemed to be of a similar design. They were dark purple in colour with a long bow and all of the engines and weapons towards the rear. The shape of them reminded him of the old Trade Federation battlecruisers, albeit slightly smaller in size. However, the array of turrets and the particularly large dorsal cannon showed that they weren't any less formidable in battle. That was either a very good thing for them, or potentially very bad.

Seconds later, a dozen different alarms blared as every Chiss ship in view locked their weapons on them.

An unfamiliar, heavily accented voice came over the comm. "Imperial Star Destroyers, you are trespassing in space under the control of the Chiss Ascendancy. State your intentions or we will fire upon you."

Thrawn reached for the communication console. "This is Mitth'raw'nuruodo. We come as friends. The Chiss Defence Fleet can stand down."

There was silence from the other end. "Mitth'raw'nuruodo?", the voice repeated, "Hold."

Pellaeon let out a sigh. Better to be put on hold than put under fire. Thrawn looked calm at least, but that Chiss always looked calm. The Jedi didn't give anything away either. Thankfully,
Commodore Faro shared his entirely rational reaction - anxiety and confusion. He hoped Handel and his own crew over on the *Myrmidon* were managing to keep themselves calm too.

The alarms finally cut out but a few of the ships were manoeuvring towards them. Another alert sounded as the *Chimaera* was hailed again. Thrawn let the message through.

"Another friend of yours?", the Togruta asked Thrawn.

"We shall see."

A hologram appeared above the table of a Chiss woman. Her uniform was pure white and her blue-black hair was tucked up neatly above her head. The blue skin and red eyes he was used to in Thrawn were just as pronounced on her. Pellaeon hadn't seen enough Chiss to make any judgement of age, but she was clearly someone of importance.

"Mitth'raw'nuruodo", she nodded her head respectfully.

"Admiral Ar'alani", Thrawn returned the gesture.

"You're not expected", Ar'alani said abruptly.

Pellaeon was relieved that she spoke basic. This Admiral probably chose to given how many non-Chiss were around this table too.

"It was not safe to send communication to you ahead of time. We have been occupied with important matters that have proved critical to the Ascendancy."

She furrowed her brow suspiciously, "And what matters would those be?"

"Important matters that are far too sensitive and complex to explain to you here. They are for the Ruling Families to discuss", Thrawn explained.

Pellaeon didn't know what most of this meant. Chiss Defense Fleet, Ruling Families, Ascendancy - Pellaeon could only make educated guesses. He was never much of a politician or a diplomat at the best of times, let alone now. He just had to trust that Thrawn knew how to handle his people's politics better than he had the Empire's.

Ar'alani looked around briefly at the rest of them. "I don't doubt your conviction, Mitth'raw'nuruodo, but we are at war. The Ruling Families have many-"

"I bring Jedi to vouch for the severity of this threat."

That caught her attention. The Admiral's face betrayed surprise, the only sure emotion Pellaeon had seen in her so far. Skywalker and Tano looked like they hadn't been expecting to carry such weight either. The other Chiss looked off-screen and mouthed something quietly to someone on her end.

"I see", she said at last, "You have permission to land. We're sending you coordinates for a shuttle hangar. I will arrange what I can for your Star Destroyers and crew as well."

"That's a relief. Pellaeon almost muttered it under his breath. He had a hard enough time reading one Chiss before, if this Ar'alani was anything to go by then this would be a stressful visit for him. Any bit of help for their fleet that Ar'alani could organise while they were here was just more weight of his shoulders.

"Thank you, Admiral."
"Welcome home, Mitth'raw'nuruodo." The Admiral cut the connection without ceremony.

Skywalker folded his arms beside Thrawn. "Huh, I thought they'd be happier to see you."

"Why would they be happy?", Thrawn replied passively. "They would know that I'd only return bearing dire news, something of which they already have enough of."

The Jedi was taken aback by the answer. It was amusing, Pellaeon had to admit. Thrawn and the Chiss took some getting used to. His ruthlessly logical, practical, and analytical mind made him come across as cold and appropriately alien at times. Pellaeon was sure Thrawn was happy to be back, or at least as happy as the man could be, even if he wasn't showing it much.

"We shouldn't delay", Thrawn told them all. He turned over to the scanning station, "Commander Hammerly?"

The young Commander looked up from her station with surprise. "Sir?"

"I am taking the Commodore with me to the surface. The deck is yours."

The Commander almost choked on thin air, "I... Aye, sir. As... as you say."

Thrawn paid no mind to the woman's obvious shock and turned to the Jedi. "You will have to come with us on our shuttle. They will not condone a second unauthorised arrival."

Tano pursed her lips, "Alright, if you say so."

The Jedi still weren't comfortable, that was obvious enough. In time, he hoped they'd ease up. As for Pellaeon himself, he'd just have to suck it up. He'd worked with Jedi way back in the Clone Wars and he'd just have to swallow his discomfort and get used to them again.

"I will warn you that my people will be... on edge, in your presence. To my knowledge, a Jedi has never visited Csilla, definitely not two of them. They will not be a danger to you, but you will be regarded with curiosity and suspicion."

No different to here then, Pellaeon observed silently.

"I thought you said we're meant to vouch for you. Why would they believe us if they're so fearful of us?" Skywalker didn't have a bad point there.

"I did not say they will not respect you or trust you. The reputation and power of the Jedi has reached us even if its members have yet to. I still believe your word will carry the weight we need it to."

"What about us? Does Csilla get many visitors from off-world?", Pellaeon asked.

Thrawn looked at him, "Not many. No more than a few dozen every year, and most of those tend to be either trusted traders or prisoners. My people will certainly not harm you, but they will be wary of you too."

"I'll just be sure not to take it personally", Faro said jokingly.

With that, Thrawn led them down towards the hangar. Faro gave Hammerly a reassuring nod as they left, leaving their ships in the Commander's hands as they headed for the surface. In all his years, Pellaeon never imagined he'd end up doing something like this. At most, Pellaeon expected to grow old commanding a Star Destroyer and retire peacefully. Yet here he was, heading to the
Chiss homeworld with Thrawn and two Jedi, seeking help against an unknown force-being with the potential to ravage the galaxy. Life was full of surprises, he supposed. He hadn't made up his mind yet about whether this was going to be one of the good ones.

The shuttle ride down to Csilla was quiet. Faro, Pellaeon, and Thrawn stood in the cockpit with the pilots while the Jedi preferred to wait in the hold and have the view from the electronic screens.

Faro couldn't make out any signs of life down on the surface. There weren't any bustling urban centres that she could see, no expansive oceans, no flowing rivers, no deserts or forests either. The planet was blanketed in white, the only features being either clouds or mountains peaking up through the snow. She'd never have guessed from appearances that this was the homeworld of one of the most powerful and enigmatic species in the galaxy.

Thrawn must have seen her watching as they descended. "The Chiss dwell below ground. Climate issues, as you may be able to see, forced us to long ago" , he explained.

The Sentinel-class shuttle went low over a mountain range. Faro caught glimpses of something artificial in the snow. Turrets? Sensors? Watchtowers? She couldn't tell. Ahead of them, nestled into one of the mountains, was a large oval-shaped metallic hangar door. The architecture was smooth and clean, a departure from the utilitarian grey the Empire favoured. It opened quickly as they approached.

They sailed in and set down on the shining silver floor. The hangar wasn't large, you could probably barely fit a TIE fighter between the shuttle and each of the side walls, and it was only a few dozen metres or so from their ship to the main exit door in front of them. Already lined up between the shuttle and that door were two columns of black uniformed Chiss. At the far end, stood at ease, was another man that seemed to be waiting to greet them.

The Grand Admiral was already making for the hold as the pilots powered down the engines. Thrawn went first down the shuttle's ramp, Faro and Pellaeon just behind, and the Jedi at the back. For once Faro, shared their feeling of uncertainty. She was hit by cool air as the ramp opened, warm enough to be pleasant but also having the smooth crisp feeling of a cold night.

They stepped out into the hangar and Thrawn led them straight up the middle of the two waiting lines of black-uniformed Chiss guards. The Chiss soldiers carried rifles that managed be both recognisable and alien at the same time. To be honest, that described most of what she saw. The plain yet aesthetically elegant uniforms, the simple but pleasing architecture of the hangar - everything was familiar but different, all showing the balance of utility and artistic flair that she should have expected from Thrawn's people.

Speaking of familiar yet different, Faro focused on the man she'd seen standing at the far end of the hangar. He wore a similar black uniform to the Chiss guards, but with a few extra decorations that Faro assumed denoted rank and prestige. Most noticeable of all was that this man wasn't a Chiss, but a human, and a familiar one at that.

"You know the CDF doesn't like surprises", Vanto quipped as they approached.

"Some surprises are beneficial. This one, I hope, will ultimately be so", Thrawn said coolly as they came to a halt.

Eli Vanto had changed in the eight years since Faro had seen him last. The almost boyish look to the young man had disappeared and was replaced with a confident stature that carried a clear sign of authority. The former supply-officer-to-be now had all the appearance and style of a respectable
military leader. Despite how much his tanned skin, brown hair, and brown eyes made him stand out among the Chiss, he looked as at home here as he had back in the Empire, if not more so.

Ensign Vanto, later Commander, had been Thrawn's aide since the Chiss' arrival in the Empire. What Vanto had expected to be a small distraction from his mundane path turned into a life-altering, even a galaxy-altering, career at Thrawn's side. It was rife with political intrigue, insurgency, piracy, and all manner of the ridiculous schemes Thrawn had a reputation for. Faro had been younger then, but no less of a pessimist. She'd been wary of Thrawn like everyone, and hadn't expected much of the young Ensign. However, it didn't take long for both men to prove themselves to her. The Commodore had a huge amount of respect for Vanto and was sorry to see him go just before they began pursuing Phoenix Squadron. She'd known for a while now that Thrawn had sent him to the Chiss, and Faro was happy to see him once again.

Vanto smiled and shook Thrawn's hand, "It's good to see you."

"Likewise, Eli", Thrawn returned the gesture with uncharacteristic warmth. The Chiss looked over his shoulder at her, "I believe you two already know each other."

The recognition showed on Vanto's face, followed by a smile. "Commodore, it's been too long."

"Good to see you too, Commander", Faro shook his hand.

Vanto looked at the Myrmidon's Captain with a polite smile too. "You must be Captain Pellaeon", Vanto said.

Pellaeon huffed a laugh, "My reputation proceeds me."

"And a good one at that", Vanto smiled. The man then looked over at Ahsoka and Skywalker, apparently still oblivious to their true identities. They'd arrived too quickly for everything to be explained to Vanto, and there was no way Thrawn would share such sensitive information with anyone unless he was in person. "I don't believe I know the two of you though."

Skywalker bowed his head politely. "Luke Skywalker, good to meet you."

"Ahsoka Tano", followed the Togruta.

Faro noted that they were just a little bit more open and trusting now than they were when she'd first met them a week ago. Maybe the urgency of the situation was starting to convince them to open up a bit. She couldn't blame them for their initial suspicion to be honest, she sure wasn't all that comfortable with them either, but she was warming to them, if slowly.

Vanto furrowed his brow, his lips moving slightly as if saying something to himself. "Skywalker?", he repeated quietly.

"Like father, like son", Thrawn declared.

"You're... Jedi? Both of you?", Vanto asked in disbelief.

"Believe me, it's as surprising to us as it is to you that we're here", Ahsoka assured him.

"I see...", Vanto turned back to Thrawn with wide eyes.

"Now you understand the gravity of the situation", the Chiss said.

Vanto nodded and said something to the guards in another language. They all turned in sync and
filed off to their respective sides of the hangar, marching into two identical white corridors on opposite sides of the room.

"This way", Vanto motioned them to follow towards the main door behind him. "So", he started as they walked, "I think it's time you filled me in."

"Our mission has taken a turn", Thrawn began, keeping pace with his old friend. "The planet we arrived on, the one I told you about, I believe it does indeed contain the threat the Emperor sensed years ago."

Faro wasn't surprised that Thrawn had been keeping Vanto informed to some extent. Thrawn clearly trusted him, and must have been in contact with the man at several points over the last few years. The events of the last few days and weeks were probably too sudden to keep Vanto up to date on, which would explain why he seemed so surprised to see them.

"At least we finally know where it is. Still, that doesn't explain why you're here", Vanto responded. They reached the door out of the hangar and entered a long corridor sloping downwards. It was a pristine white everywhere save for the black material in the middle of the floor and a thin strip of silver marked by intricate gold patterns running down either side of the corridor at waist-level. Faro felt the pleasant warmth hit her as they went through, which must have been some thermal regulation the Chiss would need to be able to survive on this planet. The corridor led down deeper into the planet for a long while, and she could only barely make out the sight of another door at the far end.

"Our partnership with the Fourth Sister and the other Imperials collapsed, shall we say. We retrieved the Jedi and came here. There is a threat unlike anything we have seen before somewhere on that planet and the Fourth Sister and her allies would unleash it on the galaxy. We cannot let that happen."

"Dammit", Vanto sighed. "You know the Aristocra doesn't like this kind of stuff."

"Which is why I brought the Jedi", Thrawn replied. "Not only will they help us defeat this threat, but I hoped they would motivate the Ruling Families to help us."

Faro saw the unhappy expression on Vanto's face. "I don't think they'll offer much. The war with the Grysk has us pressed on all sides."

The Commodore leaned forward, " You aren't losing are you?"

Vanto shook his head, "Hard to tell. We think we're holding our own, maybe winning, but it's taking everything we have. The Defence Fleet is spread thin as it is, I don't think they'll want to send away their troops and ships now."

Faro winced. That didn't sound encouraging. From her own very brief encounter with the Grysk years ago she knew them to be nasty opponents. She could hardly blame the Chiss for pouring their all into a full-fledged war against them. Still, it didn't bode well for their chances of getting much help here.

"We do not need whole fleets, merely enough resources to give us the advantage we need." Thrawn looked briefly over his shoulder, "Let us hope the testimony of you Jedi can convince them."

"I'm not sure what to say", the young ex-Imperial said grimly. "They won't want to move against a prospective threat, especially since there's a very real war going on right now."
"This fight already began long ago", Ahsoka spoke up suddenly from behind them, stopping them all in their tracks. "One way or another, it'll be over soon. If we want it to end our way, then the Chiss will have to support us. If not, we're all doomed."

Tano was quieter than Skywalker, but she knew how to choose her words carefully. Although Faro, Thrawn, and Pellaeon had been the most active in uncovering this threat, the Jedi had the edge in truly understanding it. The Togruta was fully convinced of the danger they were facing, and maybe that conviction would be enough after all.

"From what Thrawn's told me, I'm sure you're right", Vanto concurred. "Even so, a meeting with the Ruling Families will take a while to set up. For now, I can offer you some quarters to get some rest. I can't imagine how worn out you all must be."

Faro chuckled to herself as they started back down the corridor. You have no idea...

Oora and Darja were already waiting outside the training hall as Ezra emerged with the youngest class. Lothal's sun was almost setting and the twin moons were just appearing over the horizon. Their lesson had run a bit late. Ezra had pushed through to wrap up the last of the Old Republic Jedi history, at least the last of it they needed at this stage.

Pipey and Alora ran to their mother and grandmother respectively, always happy to head home for a weekend's rest. Having weekends off was good for the students and for himself, giving him time to relax and spend time with Sabine and the others or get some extra preparation and meditation in.

"They're making great progress", Ezra approached the two adults and their children, "I'm really proud of them."

Darja gave her granddaughter a prideful smile. "You hear that, Alora? I'm so proud of you."

"Thank you, Master Bridger", the young human girl beamed up at him.

Ezra smiled, "It's all you, Alora. Go on now, get some rest and I'll see you in a couple days."

Alora nodded eagerly. "Bye Jacen", she waved at the other boy still standing in the doorway.

Jacen waved back at his friend with a toothy grin, "See you soon. You too, Pipey!"

The Ithorian student waved too as his mother led them back over to their speeder. Darja and Alora made their move too, and Ezra stayed to see them off. Ezra had tried to make sure he got to know the families as best he could. In the six weeks they'd been training, he'd spoken to all of the parents, grandparents, and guardians plenty of times. Family was an important grounding for anyone to have, and he felt it helped him to understand his students just a little better.

The two speeders hovered out of the Spectre Compound's main gate and off over the horizon back to the city. The perimeter gate closed automatically as they left, signalling the end of another busy week.

Ezra beckoned Jacen to follow as he led him around the training hall back to his tower.

"You're doing really well, Jac", Ezra told the boy as they walked.

Jacen dipped his head, embarrassed. "T-thank you, Uncle- Master."

"Uncle Ezra's alright now, Jac", he laughed, "Training time's over."
They reached the foot of his tower and saw Hera just making her way out the bottom. The woman looked happy, like she always did these days, and her eyes lit up when she saw them.

"Mom!", Jacen ran over giddily and wrapped his arms around her.

Hera received her son with open arms. "I missed you too, dear. Good day?", she put on her gentle mothering tone.

"Yeah, great!", Jacen answered happily.

Ezra reached the two of them just as Jacen released her from the hug. Hera's smile managed to brighten even more as she looked over to him. Ezra always felt like he never saw her as much as he'd like these days. Sure, he saw her every day, but he rarely got to spend much time with her given how busy the last two months since the wedding had been. It was one of the reasons he liked having these weekend breaks that gave him the rare time he had to spend with her.

"Running late tonight, I see", the Twi'lek tilted her head at him.

He scratched the back of his head. "Yeah... sorry about that. Busy day."

"It's alright", she assured him, "You're doing good work."

Ezra shrugged off the compliment. "How about you? Been with Sabine all day?"

"Yeah", Hera smiled and looked up at the tower above her, "It's been lovely. We needed the peace for a bit."

Her mood was encouraging, but Ezra's question had been for two reasons. For a couple of days now, Sabine hadn't been herself. It'd started with tiredness that made her sit out of lessons earlier this week, but it didn't seem to improve much at all in the last few days. When they'd woken up this morning, Sabine felt even worse and he'd had to almost force her to eat something. The Mandalorian was too stubborn to go to a doctor - even though it was free on a civilised planet like Lothal - and was adamant that she'd just tough it out.

"She feeling any better?", he smiled thinly and optimistically.

Her gentle nod was good news. "She'll be fine, don't worry", the Twi'lek chirped. "She's been looking forward to seeing you, too", she added.

Ezra rolled his eyes jokingly, "And she says I'm the one who craves affection."

Hera huffed a laugh, "I better not keep you then." She extended her arms and pulled him in for a hug, "I'll see you in the morning, dear."

"You too, Hera", Ezra said softly as he returned the gesture.

As they pulled apart, he caught the glimmer in her eye. Hera and Sabine had always been close, especially since he'd come back, so he wasn't surprised to feel the happiness and warmth radiating off her like he did now. Hopefully, the Twi'lek's high spirits had rubbed off on his wife too.

Ezra crouched down to Jacen. "Come on, you too."

"See you tomorrow, Uncle Ezra", Jacen mumbled into him as he hugged him tightly.

"Yeah, you too, Jac. I'll tell Aunty Bean you're saying 'hey' too."
Ezra watched them go hand-in-hand back to their house just on the other side of the courtyard. Then he walked into his tower and took the lift up to the top, ready to just switch off after a long week of hard work. He was still working out how his new take on the Jedi would work, so his lessons were a bit off the cuff right now. A weekend to clear his thoughts and get his head straight was going to be a blessing.

He ran his hand along the railing as he came around the front, admiring the view of the city faraway in the dusk light. Reaching the door, he waved his hand over the sensor and walked into the main room of the tower. Sabine was lying quietly across the couch to his right, watching out the window they'd installed on one side. Her face lit up as he entered.

"You took your time", she tilted her head as he walked over.

"Lots to do", he sighed and leaned over the back of the couch to kiss her cheek. "Just spoke with Hera, you have a good day?"

Sabine sat up and hugged in her legs, just like she used to do when they were younger. "Yeah, it was good. I don't get to spend enough time with her."

"I know that feeling," Ezra lifted his head and looked over to the kitchen area to the left, "Caf? I'm barely awake here." He stood up and walked over without waiting for the obvious answer. Ezra dumped his bag at the foot of the counter and went to grab a mug. "Sabine?", he repeated, not hearing an answer.

"Uh, no, thanks."

No? Ezra set the cup down. Sabine never turned caf down unless she was preparing to fight; caffeine wasn't the best thing to have in combat after all. Ezra looked back at her, but she wasn't looking at him. She was just sitting still and huggings her legs, a sign Ezra should already have recognised as worry. Taking a second to focus on her, he felt an unusual anxiety from her.

"You feeling alright?", Ezra took a step towards her. "I thought Hera said you're feeling better."

"I am", she answered quickly, "It's just..."

He walked over to the other end of the couch and sat down, laying a hand over her knees. Uncertainty. Worry. "What's wrong?", he asked softly.

Sabine's gaze flickered between him, the window, and the floor. "Nothing's wrong."

"Sabine", he repeated, "Talk to me."

The Mandalorian finally focused on him. He saw the corners of her mouth tug up in a smile and just a little bit of her worries melted away. She let down her legs and shuffled over to him, sitting closely but still puzzling silently over something. Ezra took her hands again, fingers absently stroking soothingly on her own.

"Cyar'ika", he knew the endearment had a way of getting through to her, "What's up with you?"

Sabine swallowed nervously. Ezra couldn't get his head around the bizarre mix of emotions and body language he was getting from her. Worry, anxiety, and uncertainty were all mixed in with happiness, relief, and hope.

"Did Hera say anything?"
Ezra squinted at her, "No? About what?"

Sabine didn't pay much mind to his answer. "No, of course she wouldn't, why did I even ask?", she muttered, now frustrated with herself again. "Ugh, I don't-"

"Sabine", Ezra interrupted her again, "Calm down. What's wrong with you? You're starting to worry me..."

Her mood changed yet again to something happier. She opened her mouth to speak but held her tongue for a second. Her eyes searched his for a moment before she chose her words.

"Ezra, you don't need to worry. We're both fine."

He sighed. "I know I'm fine, cyar'ika", her concern for him was touching, but it was her he was worried about now.

She looked almost amused. Sabine moved her hands and took a firmer hold of his.

"I didn't mean you."

She gently drew his hand closer to her and then down, resting it on her stomach. Even he didn't take long to work out what she was showing him.

_No._

_It can't be._

A fog seemed to clear in his mind, revealing the blatantly obvious.

_No. It is._

_Both of them were fine. Sabine... and the baby._

For all his years of Jedi training, discipline, and focus, none of it seemed to help right now. He couldn't speak or even more a muscle. All he could do was freeze up as Sabine watched his reaction.

"I found out this morning", she said gently. She seemed to be enjoying watching him completely freeze up.

His mind tried it's best to put together a coherent thought. "H-Hera?", he stammered.

Sabine breathed in shakily, "Why do you think I asked for advice?"

Ezra managed to choke out a few more words, "How? I mean... when?"

The Mandalorian smirked and looked away for a second. "Remember a few weeks ago when we had that talk about the Jedi?"

_Ah... he definitely remembered._ That night had given him the clarity he needed to forge his own Jedi path. It seemed as if that night would be remembered for quite a few reasons.

"I don't know what to say..." At this rate, Ezra wasn't sure if he'd ever recover from the shock.

"How do you think I felt?", she half-laughed, "Signs don't usually show up in the first two or three weeks, but guess I'm one of the lucky ones. Or unlucky, depending on your point of view."
Ezra didn't know the first thing about this kind of stuff. He'd never had much of an education after his parents were taken, and Kanan sure hadn't put any of it in the Jedi training.

"I... do I need to do anything for you?", he offered, "Help you with-"

"No, Ezra", she squeezed his hand, "We're months away from that kind of thing. I'll be mostly fine for a while, save for some fatigue and a bit of morning sickness. Hera gave me something for those. Nothing can help the moodswings though, you'll just have to deal with me being grumpy one minute and loving the next."

"Oh, so just like normal?", he teased.

She scowled, "Careful. I have an excuse for it now."

Sabine's confidence and certainty definitely seemed like Hera's doing. Not that Sabine wasn't naturally confident and sure of herself, but Hera had obvious experience in this. The Twi'lek had the talent of making any issue, no matter how daunting, seem easy and manageable. Ezra promised himself he'd speak to her tomorrow and get some of that calming advice too. Force knew he needed it.

"So what happens now?", he asked, the shaking in his hands starting to die down.

She shrugged her shoulders lazily. "Tell everyone. Start buying some stuff. Ween me off five cafs an hour."

Ezra chuckled and slung an arm around her. "We'll figure it out, I'm sure."

They spent hours there for the rest of the evening, talking and thinking about their next steps. Their family.

It felt weird to talk about. They both had their family in the Spectres and Sabine had her own back on Krownest, but now they were going to have one of their. They'd both lost members of their own family over the years. Gaining family members, however, was quite a new experience.

Like he often did, Ezra couldn't help but think of Kanan. His Master hadn't been lucky enough to see Jacen born or grow up. Kanan must have felt the boy before he passed, Ezra was sure of that, but feeling and living were two different things. Ezra was lucky to have this and he wasn't going to forget that. Ezra felt like he understood Kanan more and more as time went on. Ezra understood the anxiety Kanan had felt about training an apprentice, the frustration of actually doing it, and the pride of seeing a student succeed. More importantly, he'd understood even more than before why Kanan made the choices he did. Like Kanan, Ezra was willing to lay down his life for those he loved too - he liked to think he'd shown them that already years ago - but through Sabine, and through their new addition to the family, Ezra understood his Master and that conviction more than ever.

The galaxy might be a lot safer now than it was when Kanan was around, but that wasn't to say there weren't dangers out there. Ezra knew that better than most, and hardly an hour went by where he didn't think of Luke and Ahsoka out there confronting whatever it was that was stirring in the Unknown Regions. It was an ever-present reminder not to be complacent and think that the peace they'd won would be that way forever. The best way to keep peace wasn't to pretend everything would always be fine but remember how fragile and easy to lose peace could be. The more vigilant they were, the more secure peace would be.

Ezra, Sabine, Hera, Zeb, Ahsoka, Luke, and everyone else - they'd all promised to do anything to
keep the galaxy safe, to keep the peace. After tonight, Ezra was more steadfast in that promise than ever. He'd keep the galaxy safe, he'd keep Lothal safe, he'd keep Sabine safe, and he'd keep their child safe. No matter what the cost.

As cold as the planet and its people were, Csilla at least had warm rooms. That might have been the only outright positive thing from this whole experience so far.

Maybe Luke was being too harsh on them. Thrawn and the other Imperials had been welcoming and honest enough, definitely more than any other Imperials he'd met over the years.

Luke shoved the worrisome thoughts out of his mind and took in a deep breath of the cool, fresh air. A ventilation system was filtering in and warming up air from the surface. The Chiss had adapted to their predicament excellently. Luke would have loved to have their ingenuity back on Hoth. Warm rooms, warm food, and warm beds were three things Echo Base hadn't offered them.

Thrawn's friend Vanto had been true to his word and got them all a place to rest their heads before their meeting with the Chiss leadership tomorrow morning. Luke wasn't offended that he and Ahsoka had been put in a small block separately from the others, nor that their rooms were the ones under triple guard. The Chiss just weren't welcoming to outsiders. Given the state of the galaxy these last few decades, who could blame them? He also couldn't blame them for the half dozen cameras and recording devices he could feel around the room. He felt the electronic hum of the microphones and the eyes on the monitors watching his every move in some far-off security centre. Luke had no intention of causing them problems, but he didn't think that'd be enough to convince them to knock it off.

Still, the rooms were nice enough. Both he and Ahsoka had an actual bed to themselves in separate private rooms. Both rooms backed on to a larger living space with a dining table, refresher facilities, and a few potted plants that Luke didn't recognise. Even for a species as isolationist as this, Luke admired that they kept facilities at hand for any unexpected guests. Thrawn's infamous level of foresight and planning might be something shared between all of his people.

The elegant white surfaces of the walls and floor with their fine silver-gold patterns were bathed in the closest to natural light that an underground city could manage. A large 'window' was set into one of the walls. In reality, it was just a large screen playing a high-quality video feed and audio recording of the surface far above them. Luke enjoyed it nonetheless.

The window showed a scattering of tall snowy mountains under a clearing sky, letting the faintest slithers of sunset through as two of Csilla's three moons started to peer over the mountaintops. Again, Luke thought back to Hoth. As unwelcoming as that planet had been, its undisturbed beauty couldn't be overlooked. Csilla too, for all its harsh climate and unusual inhabitants, was still a sight to behold.

It wasn't long until he sensed Ahsoka coming out of her room before the door opened for her.

"It's quiet here", Luke said to her as she joined him at the window.

Ahsoka let out a long contented sigh, "After the last few days, I appreciate the calmness."

The Torgruta had the staff folded-down in its sling on her back, and her cloak-cape was fastened with the same elegant silver brooch she'd been wearing since they set out. Her sabers were gone though, as was the worried and reserved expression she'd worn for most of the last few days. It looked like she felt safe enough to let her hair down for once. *Montrals... never mind.*
"You know anything about the Chiss?", Luke asked, curious if she'd come across them before.

The Togruta subtly shrugged. "Not much", she admitted. "Only legends from the Outer Rim. Tales of a mysterious people with pale blue skin and bright red eyes coming to trade and then disappearing for years at a time."

Luke turned his head and half-smirked, "Always a bit of truth, right?"

"It's not the strangest place I've been, or the strangest species I've dealt with. During the Clone Wars, there were times when I had to deal with people and planets I didn't know even existed up until I was in the same room as them." Ahsoka must have had so many stories to tell. One day, Luke hoped to hear them all. "At least these ones aren't trying to kill us. That's something", she added.

"Always a plus", he agreed. "What about this war? Or the Grysk? Know anything?"

"Not a clue", Ahsoka admitted.

Luke sighed and turned back to the window, "Same here."

His friend folded her arms. "The galaxy's a big place. Wars happen all the time that we never hear about."

She was right about that for sure. Still, Luke found these Grysk to be just a bit too disturbing for his own liking. A savage warrior race looming at the edges of the galaxy, unknown to almost anyone, and waging a successful war against another enigmatic yet powerful people. If something should happen to the Chiss and they couldn't hold the Grysk back...

"You're worrying." Ahsoka was obviously sensing his thoughts.

He flexed his robotic hand instinctively. "These Grysk might be a problem for us. I know it's not the same kind of problem as what we're already dealing with but if they break through, how do you think the New Republic will manage? We're nowhere near recovered from the Empire yet."

Ahsoka mused on it for a moment before shaking her head. "Let's focus on one fight at a time. First this, then we'll think about if we need to worry about the Grysk."

*Still looking to the horizon.* Ahsoka was right, it was a problem for another time.

"You're right", he shook away the thoughts, "I'm getting ahead of myself."

Ahsoka and Luke took a quiet minute to enjoy the artificial view again. It was a short while before Ahsoka spoke up again.

"I've been thinking, I'm sure you have too", she began. "I think we can trust Thrawn and his people. I haven't sensed a hint of deception and they seem genuinely worried about what's going on out here."


Luke was convinced that Thrawn was really invested in defeating this threat, as were the Captain and the Commodore he worked closely with. It was too soon to be sure of Vanto, but all the signs indicated that he too was of a similar mind. Besides, the image of a Star Destroyer exploding in orbit still stuck with him. If that didn't prove a commitment to solving this problem by any means necessary, Luke didn't know what did.
"He's had plenty of opportunity to kill us if that's what he was planning." She paused, "Well, maybe he's still planning on doing that, but afterwards."

"Now you're focusing on the horizon", Luke laughed, "Here and now, Thrawn's on our side."

Ahsoka chuckled and turned her head to him, "Master Yoda always loved that saying, didn't he?"

Luke had a treasure trove of lines and lessons from the Jedi Master that he always remembered. One day, hopefully soon, he'd start passing them on to people.

"Still", Ahsoka looked back at the window, "Never hurts to keep an eye our for anything amiss, just in case."

"True...", Luke folded his arms as his thoughts went back to Thrawn and his allies. "I do wish Ezra was here though. Not just for the familiar face or the extra Jedi, but he knew Thrawn far better than either of us. They knew him too. Would have been nice to have someone who actually knew which way was up."

Ahsoka took in a deep breath but didn't say anything straight away. Instead, she was gazing out at the mountains through the window. The sun was disappearing now, and the visible twin moons were looming larger in the sky.

"Ezra will be where he needs to be", she said resolutely. "Wherever that is, whenever that is, the force will guide him."

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Chapter End Notes

A busy chapter with a lot to talk about here.

The first two sections focus on everyone's arrival on Csilla, so I'll talk about that broadly first. Canon has very little information on the Chiss, and even less on their homeworld. For most of the details, I've dipped into Legends as best I could for the environment, political terms, military, even the uniforms. There'll be more on the Chiss and their society in the coming chapters, so this was just a first foray into their planet and some of the immediate concerns. The Chiss Defense Fleet orbiting the planet is comprised of ships that Pellaeon compares to old Trade Federation Cruisers. That's the best description I can give of the Chiss ship we see briefly at the end of the comic adaptation of Thrawn. That leads me nicely into Admiral Ar'Alani, who also appears in the Thrawn novel very briefly and is a bit more prominent in old Legends material. She won't really turn up much again, but it felt right to put a familiar Chiss face in, however briefly. Following on from that too, we get to Eli Vanto. Vanto was the aide of Thrawn in his early years in the Empire during the Thrawn novel, and was sent to the Chiss at the end of that book. I'm sure many of you are familiar with him already, and he's been mentioned several times in the story. All of those mentions were leading towards this event, where Vanto rejoins the story. He's not going to have as major a role as he does in the books, nor one as large as Faro or Pellaeon, but I felt he needed a place in this story somewhere. Lastly, there's the Grysk. I wrote the outline for this story before Thrawn: Alliances came out, and I only read the book after publishing Chapter 1. Chapter 2 underwent some minor changes as a result of the
book, and here again it had an impact. Since the Grysk first turned up in that book, my story never planned for them. For that reason, the Grysk conflict is more of a side thing that is happening outside the main events of our story. It needed to be there and be happening for continuity's sake, but it ultimately isn't the story I'm trying to tell. Besides, with Thrawn: Treason on the horizon, I'm sure we'll get more out of the Grysk, Vanto, and the coming conflict there instead.

The final section is the first chance Luke and Ahsoka have had to really stop and talk since Site Two. They needed a section where they both agree that, at least for now, they can trust and work with Thrawn against whatever is out here. It is a pretty major decision after all, and it wasn't something I felt should just be taken as a given after a while. Luke references or mentions a few things from his past, like Hoth and Yoda's famous "always looking to the horizon" line, and I'm sure I don't need to offer any explanation for those. Luke's worry about the Grysk just felt like something sensible for him to think. Besides, many people see the Grysk as the new canon's Vong, so it felt right to have Luke worry about an invasion of alien warriors from the Unknown Regions from them too. Also, Csilla does have three moons, but only two happen to be visible during this section, just in case anyone wondered why I only describe two.

Speaking of twin moons, that leads me back to Ezra and Sabine. To the surprise of none of you, Sabine is pregnant. I've done a first kiss for them, a proposal, a wedding, and now a baby. I'll say again for the millionth time: family is the central theme of the story of Rebels, Ezra, and Sabine. Finding that family in each other was half the battle for them, now it's about making a family of their own. Having a child of their own was important for both of their journeys regarding family, and for their transition from the 'kids' back on the Ghost to grown adults and now parents. A child is also a pretty visual representation that Ezra isn't a typical Jedi. After all, the revelation of Padme's pregnancy was key to Anakin's fall and everything that happened as a result. However, unlike Anakin, there's no reason for Sabine and Ezra to hide or worry. The rules against children are just one other rule Ezra can't abide, and one more thing that'll motivate him to act as a Jedi should: honourably, selflessly, and bravely. There's also the obvious Kanan and Hera parallels of the two awkward crewmates turned love interests becoming lovers and then parents. As for how far I'll take those parallels, you'll have to wait and see.

Next time: The Chiss leadership learns of the threat, the Fourth Sister contacts Sloane, and Ezra feels the force.
Chapter Notes

Our next chapter. Remember, only one more after this before a short break, then we'll be hitting the final stretch and bringing this story to a close.

I feel like I should mention that all these sections aren't necessarily taking place at the same time. Ezra's stuff, for example, if occurring before the Thrawn, Ahsoka, Luke etc stuff, if only by a week or two. It's not important right now, but I'll mention it so you can keep it in mind.

This time: The Chiss leadership learns of the threat, the Fourth Sister contacts Sloane, and Ezra feels the force.

Pellaeon ran his fingers around the collar that now hung a bit too loosely around his neck. Strenuous work and finite supplies were a recipe for losing a few pounds. At least that was a silver lining from all this.

The Captain took a moment to look at the over sixty year old man staring back at him, with heavy bags under his eyes and hair that had long since turned white. He'd thought he'd be sitting back in a cosy retirement on Corellia by now, or on a nice plot of land on Sulon. Life just had a way of changing your plans. As much as he'd love to be retired right now, he was glad he was here. Not excited or thrilled, but he was glad he was here. He'd take a noble end fighting unimaginable evil than a heart attack during a boring pazaak game any day.

He double-checked that his rank slide was lined up well and glanced down at his boots. Pellaeon was never usually one to waste time on appearance, but this was no ordinary day. He had no idea what to expect from these Aristocra, or Ruling Families, or whoever they were about to meet with. For all the time the Empire wasted on superficial things, making yourself look good never hurt when trying to make an impression. It was about the only diplomatic trick Pellaeon knew.

Given that they were asking an alien race in the midst of a war to send their ships and troops to fight a mysterious force-wielding entity on the word of one Chiss, two Imperials, and two Jedi, he felt the need to pull out every trick he could find.

"Best they're going to get", he grumbled and turned away from the mirror.

These rooms might not have been the most extravagant, but they were miles better than his cabin on the Myrmidon. A little material comfort went a long way to lift his spirits. That he was only mildly dreading today was thanks to such a good night's sleep.

Pellaeon opened the door - a real wooden one with hinges - into the centre room. Commodore Faro was already up and ready to go, also appearing to have put some extra time into presentation. Vanto was with her too in his Chiss uniform. It wasn't reassuring that he too looked awfully on edge.

"Ready for the big day?", Pellaeon asked sarcastically as he joined them around the large table.
"If by ready you mean terrified, I think so", Faro quipped.

Vanto let out a light-hearted chuckle, "The Ruling Families aren't that bad. So long as you tell them the same truths you've told me, I'm sure they'll realise the right choice."

"The real question is whether they'll make the right choice", Pellaeon replied grimly.

"All we can do is what we've done, Captain. We need only guide them to make that right choice."

Thrawn's voice was distinct and unmistakable as he came in through the door. Pellaeon didn't actually know where he'd been all night, and he didn't know if he should ask. To be honest though, that wasn't the first question on his mind.

The Chiss came in not in the white uniform Pellaeon had known on him for years, but an entirely new set of pristine Chiss dress clothes. They were a similar material and composition to an Imperial uniform, but almost completely black. On the collar, two gold bars must have denoted his rank. On his right shoulder was a patch marked with the insignia of the Chiss Ascendancy - a central white-blue orb with tendrils reaching out connecting three other smaller orbs, representing the interconnectedness of Chiss space.

Pellaeon whistled, "That's quite the wardrobe change."

"If we want them to support us, I must come as a Chiss, not an Imperial", Thrawn explained. He looked to Vanto, "Are we ready to proceed?"

The man produced a small box from one of his pockets. "An escort shuttle will take us along the tramway to the chambers as soon as we're ready", he explained. Vanto opened the box to show four small pieces of electronics, "You two will need translators. There's some for the Jedi too."

Pellaeon and Faro both took the small device. It was almost completely clear and looked like it would fit just fine in a human ear, Chiss were near-human after all. Pellaeon placed it in like any other translator and moved his face a bit to settle into the new sensation.

Commodore Faro finished fiddling with her own translator too. "Speaking of the Jedi, where are they?", she asked.

Just then, the door to the room opened and the two Jedi came to join them. Tano had the white cloak with the curious silver brooch she always wore but the staff was nowhere to be seen. Skywalker was in that same black tunic with the lightsaber fastened to his belt, having no uniform or anything to switch out to.

"We all ready?", the Togruta said with more warmth than usual.

"Yes...", Vanto hesitated before handing them both translators, "You'll need these."

Skywalker took the gadget and placed it in his ear. Tano just chuckled and declined. Ah, Togruta. No human-like ears.

"I have my own, I'll be fine", she said graciously.

Pellaeon decided it was better to just not question it.

"If we are all ready, it is best not to keep them waiting", Thrawn announced.

Thrawn led the way out of their quarters and down the long white corridor. The Chiss guards
saluted as he passed. They took a left turn and the corridor opened out into a tunnel with a platform. A hover-tram was already waiting for them. Two guards stood waiting beside it and a pilot sat unmoving at the controls.

The two guards snapped to attention. "Sir!"

The translator was instantaneous and seemed to process things into the same voice that had said it. Imperial translators were usually a bit more crude, so he was impressed.

Thrawn approached the tram and motioned for them to join him. There were three seats up front and three behind. Faro went up front with Thrawn, and manners dictated that Pellaeon let Vanto through. The Captain rode in the rear three seats alongside Skywalker and Tano.

Without a word, the pilot fired the engines and got the tram moving. With comfortable leather seats and a shining blue finish, the vehicle was one of the nicest Pellaeon had seen since his days on Coruscant. Unlike that planet though, Csilla didn't have the same nice vistas to distract you with. The long tunnel stretched out ahead of them without a window or a distraction in sight. Pellaeon'd thought the Chiss of all people would appreciate something nice to look at as they travelled. Then again, maybe be just didn't know them as well as he'd thought he did.

In the front seat, Thrawn and Vanto were having a hushed conversation about something. Pellaeon couldn't hear it over the sounds of the tram, leaving him silently back here next to the Jedi. They were nice enough, sure, but things were still... awkward, at times.

A voice made him jump out of his skin. "Captain, may I ask you a question?"

Pellaeon looked over at Tano on the far side of the seat. "Of course", he answered, taken aback by the sudden decision.

"I know you've been in the Empire for a long time. Did you serve the Republic before that?"

Pellaeon let out a sigh. That was a long time ago. It made a certain sense that Tano, who herself served the Republic, might be interested. At least it was something to talk about on this boring journey.

"Yeah, served in the Home Fleet during the Clone Wars." Pellaeon let a thousand different memories float through his mind. "Joined up a few years before the conflict started. I was one of the experienced officers drawn in to form the Coruscant home fleet."

Pellaeon was on an Acclamator-class cruiser, the Leveler, for his Clone Wars days. The ship was decommissioned pretty soon after the war, and he never saw anyone from it again.

Tano smiled down at her feet, "I meet so few people who fought in the war these days. Feels like a whole other life sometimes."

"There's a quite a few of them in the fleet. Commodore Faro served", Pellaeon nodded to the front seats, "But I don't think she saw action."

"Shame not all of us were that lucky", the Jedi said dejectedly. "You mentioned you were in the Home Fleet. Were you there for the Separatist attack?"

Pellaeon shook his head, "No, my ship got rotated out just a few weeks before. Outer Rim sieges had the Republic stretched thin and they needed us to reinforce the Siege of Saleucami. Spent the last months of the war stuck in orbit of that wretched planet."
Saleucami had been a sordid affair. The Separatists had dug their heels in on that swampy hellhole and dared the Republic to go in after them. The Jedi General, Stass Allie, was short of resources and pressed for supplies. It was a miracle that they managed to get the planet to fall. For all the good that did them in the end. They'd barely held the planet a week before Order 66 came down and cost the Tholothian her life. Pellaeon had admired her, like he had the handful of other Jedi he'd met.

"What about yourself?" Pellaeon almost forgot how much different it would have been for Tano. "How'd... you know, how'd you see it through, if you don't mind me asking?"

The Togruta looked off, her stoic nature giving way to a look of pain and hard memories. She may have been a Jedi, but she had emotions like everyone else.

"Mandalore", she said. "The last battles of the Siege. General Skywalker and General Kenobi were called back to Coruscant after the Separatist attack. I... I was in the middle of the battle... when it happened."

*It* was Order 66. Pellaeon had heard of the Siege of Mandalore. It was right up there with Ryloth and Umbara as one of the most intense campaigns of the war. That was to be expected on a planet known for generations of Jedi-fighting warriors. As bad as Saleucami was, he'd take his deployment there over Mandalore in a heartbeat.

How long had it been since he'd really talked about the war with someone else? Years? Most of the fleet, Faro included, preferred not to mention it. It was certainly easier that way, especially if they served with Jedi.

"It's strange", Pellaeon began in a moment of openness, "Easy to forget that so many of those who served the Empire were fighting side-by-side with Jedi not so long ago. Feels like a lifetime but it hasn't even been thirty years."

"I know the feeling", Tano agreed solemnly.

"People like governor Tarkin almost pretended the Jedi never existed, just wrote them out of history." Pellaeon never knew the man personally, but everyone in the Empire knew of him. "I think most of us remembered though. I know I did, I know others did too. From stormtroopers right up to High Command. I always remember Colonel Yularen's face when he saw the old Temple back when I served under him in the early years of the Empire."

The Togruta latched on to the story, "You knew Yularen?"

Pellaeon smiled a bit, "Oh yeah, served with him for several years as a liaison with ISB. You knew him too?"

He saw the faint hints of a smile. "Yes, he was Anakin Skywalker's fleet Admiral for a time during the war", she explained.

Pellaeon sighed, "Good man. Shame what happened to him."

"What happened?", she asked.

He winced uncomfortably. He'd walked her in to that one. "Thrawn had a report through a few years back. Yularen was on the first Death Star when the rebels got it."

 Skywalker, who had sat between them both in silence this whole time, shuffled his weight awkwardly. *Ah...* Skywalker was a rebel himself. Given the fame destroying the Death Star would
give you, he probably knew of the person who'd destroyed the station, might even be friends with
them. Pellaeon wouldn't hold it against him. The Death Star was... disturbing, to say the least.
Necessary? Perhaps, but deeply disturbing. After what happened to Alderaan, Pellaeon couldn't
feel any anger at the rebels for wanting it destroyed.

"Times have changed, haven't they?", Ahsoka intervened before Skywalker got too uncomfortable.

"All came full circle. Back to working with Jedi in whatever damn kind of war this is", Pellaeon
joked. "Has to be done though, for all our sakes."

"Let's hope the Chiss share your sentiment, Captain", Ahsoka nodded.

Pellaeon huffed a laugh. "It'll be an awfully short war if they don't."

For all the simple beauty of Csilla so far, Commodore Faro found their tram journey to be awfully
dull. No pseudo-windows, no artistic flair, not even another being - just the bland utilitarian walls
of the tunnel.

Thrawn and Vanto had been catching each other up on some things, though she hadn't been paying
attention to what. Chiss politics, she assumed, and the events of the war. Behind her, Pellaeon had
managed to get the Jedi into some sort of conversation, but that too had died down.

"We should be there momentarily", Thrawn told her suddenly.

"Any idea what to expect?", she asked.

The Chiss pursed his lips and looked ahead. "Hard to say. I will present the initial evidence to the
Ruling Council and then they will likely ask for testimonies from the rest of you."

She felt her stomach turn. "You could have warned me about that last part", she grumbled.

"You needn't worry. You know what you've seen and I'm sure they will take your experiences
under the consideration they deserve."

The tram fast-approached a bend in the tunnel listing off to the right. As soon as they cleared it,
they emerged into a massive open space buried somewhere deep underground. The whole cavern-
like thing must have been miles across and at least as high. The entire thing was a city - towers,
traffic, other tramways and docking ports leading out, lights, sound, even greenery. It almost felt
like Coruscant again.

The track was low to the ground and was leading towards the centre of the bustling city. Tall white
buildings of different designs - some smooth and curved, others hard and angular - made for a
unique landscape that somehow managed to keep its consistency. Trees and plants were placed
around the streets and plazas as far as she could see. Even more noticeable were the throes of Chiss
people going about their daily lives. A sea of blue-skinned, red-eyed people in a range of outfits
filled the walkways and windows as they passed. Thankfully, no one paid them any particular
attention. Faro hadn't expected that the Chiss would try to publicise the arrival of such unusual off-
worlders.

She only got a fleeting glimpse of the fascinating city below as they made for the largest tower in
the centre of the city. The tram took several turns off of the main path, passing a few security
checkpoints. Finally, they made straight for a small docking area in the side of the tower. The tram
slowed to a halt as it entered the dock.
They stepped out of the tram onto the platform. A tall Chiss woman with all sorts of medals on her uniform was waiting to receive them. Behind her, two lines of Chiss soldiers covered the path from the tram to the doro behind them. Again, Faro noted how few other people there were around. The Chiss were definitely trying to keep this low-key.

"The Council of Families will be eager to see you", the translator was instantaneous as their Chiss greeter spoke.

Thrawn bowed his head politely, "Let's not keep them waiting."

The two Chiss fell in beside each other with Vanto just behind. Faro held back a moment to let Pellaeon join her. Pellaeon leaned over to her as they walked.

"Part of me thought there'd be more ceremony to this", he whispered as they went, "Seems awfully low-key for something so important."

Faro shrugged. "Makes sense to me. They're at war, they wouldn't want people to know about this just yet. I'm betting they'll keep this need-to-know", she reasoned.

They went through the door into a smaller corridor. It was all in red, reminding her of some of the fancier offices on Coruscant, and she started noticing some sculptures, ornaments, and art on the walls as they went. It was definitely somewhere important and wealthy, as if she hadn't already known that.

It was silent as they walked for a minute before taking a turn into a small hallway. Four Chiss soldiers were waiting for them, standing on either side of a large door. Their Chiss escort stopped and spoke to Thrawn.

"They'll be with you momentarily, I wish you luck." The Chiss bowed her head and stepped aside.

Thrawn looked back to them, "Is everyone ready?"

"Sure", Pellaeon uttered, "Not that we have a choice."

"There's nothing to worry about, Captain. I assure you."

Then Thrawn went first through the door and they followed. The chamber was tall and hexagonal, with dark brown floors and walls. On the opposite side of the room, a large table with six chairs loomed over an open space with three podiums. Orange lights on each of the six walls lit up to the ceiling and showed the second level of observers looking down on them. Faro saw dozens of Chiss watching from the gallery, whispering in their language too quietly for the translators to pick up. These ones were dressed well, some with bright colours and ornate patterns, others in uniforms similar to Thrawn's.

Just as they got through the door, the guards stopped them and motioned everyone but Thrawn to benches on either side of the door. Faro, Pellaeon, and Vanto went down on the left, the Jedi on the right, separated from the main floor by a waist-high divide. The Grand Admiral stood in the walkway between them, presumably waiting to be summoned to the podium.

They weren't sat for more than a few seconds before two doors opened on the far wall behind the risen table. Three figures filed out of each door and sat down at the table, each dressed in a garment of fine embroidery and distinct colours. Their blue skin had deep wrinkles that even the low-light couldn't hide, and the blue-black hair typical of their species was tinged with streaks of silver. In front of each figure was a small plaque in the Chiss language that she couldn't read, along with different symbols with colours matching the clothes of the person in that place. Factional or family
distinctions were Faro's best guesses to explain that.

The woman on the far left of the table, garbed in purple robe laced with gold, raised a hand. "The Council of Families receives Mitth'raw'nuruodo on the subject of...", the Chiss looked down at something on the table, "Operation Tarturus."

Thrawn calmly stepped forward into the centre of the room and took his place by the centre podium. He took a few moments to look down at an electronic screen embedded in the podium before raising his head, placing his arms behind his back as he often did when talking.

"Aristocrates", Thrawn's voiced echoed around the chamber, "I have kept the Ascendancy somewhat appraised of my objective in the last several years. The former Emperor of the now defunct Galactic Empire assigned me a task, of the same nature that allowed me to bring word of the Grysk to you. Now, as then, I bring news of a grave threat to our people, as well as those beyond our borders."

Faro mused for a moment. She'd never thought about it, but Thrawn bringing them word of the Grysk would have been extremely important to the Chiss. They were in open war with the species, and as far as she remembered, Thrawn had little knowledge of them before their encounter all those years ago. The information they gathered on that mission alongside Vader might have been the first inkling the Chiss had of the war they were embroiled in now. Faro hoped that would earn them some credibility this time around.

"On a planet far from here, buried in an ancient structure, is an entity. I can offer no fuller description for it exists beyond our frame of reference. It possesses abilities far in excess of Third Sight. It is ancient, millennia old at least, and powerful beyond our comprehension. It can... defile living beings in ways that are unheard of, it can corrupt and ravage entire worlds, and manipulate those at a distance to an unprecedented degree."

What struck the Commodore most was the reaction of the six elder Chiss sat at the table. Rather, it was the lack of reaction. Their faces didn't change and they took in this potentially galaxy-altering declaration with a blank and dispassionate expression. Any idea of Thrawn being some sort of unique anomaly among his people was quickly fading. The observers above them showed some more visible reactions, but even those were muted and controlled.

Faro nudged Vanto to her left. "Any read on this? They don't seem moved by it", she whispered.

"Hard to tell yet", Vanto kept his voice low. "Chiss don't like of outward shows of emotion. Emotions are a private affair. Their leaders especially can't be seen as being fearful, surprised, excited, or anything really, or else it calls into question their mentality in a crisis. Throw in the Grysk war, and any slight hint of emotion could end a career."

Such a small piece of information explained so much about the Chiss, and answered so many questions she'd had about Thrawn. Chiss did have emotions - Faro was fairly certain of that already - but they were conditioned socially to hide them. Stable and serious minds made better choices, that was a fact. It would take a society sharing a talent for focus and cold logic to achieve everything the Chiss had done.

"Of course, I would not ask you to take such claims on my word alone." Thrawn turned his attention to the keypad in the podium.

Thrawn pressed some buttons and a collection of images were projected above the podium, large enough for all the room to see. Faro recognised them, as some of them she'd taken herself. Most of them were pictures of Site Three, the planet Bridger had been rescued by his allies on, that she'd
taken while Thrawn and the Fourth Sister took their journey with the compass. The twisted bodies
desecrated by an unknown power, a strange mist clinging to everything for mile arounds,
crumbling ruins of temples and altars, and that smashed orb whose purpose they'd never worked
out - all of it had worried her as much then as it did now.

At last, Faro saw some more visible reactions. Not from the six members of the Council, but at
least from some of the spectators above them. There were low gasps and hushed whispering, not
much but enough for her to know they were getting somewhere.

"It is hard to say when exactly this destruction occurred, but you can see for yourselves its scale."
Thrawn let them take some more time to absorb the images. "We know of at least one other planet
that suffered a similar sort of fate that is almost certainly linked to this entity, and countless more
may be unknown to us."

One of the Councillors, a male with a pale yellow uniform and blue shoulder cape, leaned forward.
"And you think this entity is about to strike again?", his frail voice was calm and measured.

Thrawn nodded, "A force of Imperials, under the direction of an Imperial Inquisitor, is close to
unleashing whatever entity is responsible. Also, this Inquisitor is undoubtedly under the sway of
this entity. The moment she is in reach of this power, the consequences would be catastrophic. This
Inquisitor attempted to strike out and destroy us, but we were prepared and outmanoeuvred here,
and thus we made our way here."

Some of the Councillors turned to one another and spoke quietly. Faro had the suspicion Thrawn
had chosen his words carefully.

The one to the right of centre, a bald man in green colours, finally spoke. "Then what do you ask of
us?", his voice was deep and commanding, almost certainly military.

"We ask for little", Thrawn responded. "Our enemies are relatively few in number and we possess
two Star Destroyers manned by sharp, loyal, and talented personnel. However, our enemy possess
a numerical advantage and will no doubt dig in defensively. To achieve our goal of destroying this
threat, we would need you to provide two Arsis-class Cruisers, with crew, as well as a small strike
force of Chiss soldiers and transports to aid our stormtroopers in assaulting the ground, at a
minimum."

The woman in purple and gold who opened the meeting spoke again, "You believe this would be
enough to successfully destroy this threat?"

"Yes. We need only to reach the surface securely. From there, this mission lies in the hands of the
Jedi." That word also got some minor reactions from the spectators, but still the Councillors were
stone-faced and unmoved. "Getting to the surface is our only priority", Thrawn reiterated.
"Escaping is a secondary objective."

Survival was a secondary objective. Faro knew what she'd signed up for. The Empire came with
the expectation that you'd sacrifice yourself in the line of duty. Even before this mission, Faro
would have done that, if not for 'the cause' then for the people she served beside. Now, there was
so much more at stake. If she had to, then she'd die for the mission, and for those she'd served
alongside - human, Chiss, or even Togruta. She could say the same with confidence for every other
person that served alongside them.

The Councillors turned to each other again and spoke in hushed tones. Some of them occasionally
glanced at the images still projected above the podium, analysing them with cold red eyes, before
turning away.
Faro nudged Vanto again with her elbow, "This good?"

"Hard to say", he shrugged. "Evidence is clear though, and Thrawn's not asking for a miracle."

She let out a grumbling sigh, "Well at least-"

"Commodore Karyn Faro."

The hairs on her neck stood up. Faro looked up to see one of the Councillors staring unexpectedly at her.

"Captain Gillad Pellaeon. We would hear from both of you", the Councillor motioned to the two empty podiums either side of Thrawn.

Faro glanced at an equally surprised Pellaeon before getting to her feet. Faro wasn't a nervous person by nature, but a hundred alien eyes staring down at her in any situation would be intimidating, never mind with what they were expecting her to talk about.

They didn't get a chance for another word as Pellaeon went to the right podium and she went left. For an agonising few seconds, no one said anything. Faro didn't even know what specifically they were going to ask her.

Unfortunately, as her foul luck would have it, she was asked to speak first.

"Commodore Faro, do you stand by your Commanding Officer's testimony?", the bald Chiss asked.

Getting to the point so quickly had its merits, but she sure didn't appreciate them right now. She took a second to formulate an answer. Despite her discomfort, she didn't find it as hard as she'd feared.

Faro help her hands behind her back and did her best to look at ease. "I do", she declared. "I've seen what this thing, whatever it is, could do. I saw those bodies, I've seen those planets. We need to stop it, no matter the cost."

"What of this Inquisitor in Mitth'raw'nuruodo's report?", another Councillor asked. She seemed to be the youngest, although still much older than Thrawn, and looked the most elegant in her crimson gown with a cape fastened by a silver chain across her neck.

The abrupt change didn't throw Faro off. She had plenty to say on the Fourth Sister, with most of that being highly inappropriate for this meeting.

"The Inquisitor is... ambitious. She's prideful, eager, selfish, and dismissive of everyone who she doesn't think she has a use for." The Commodore looked down to the ground, "But, she's short-sighted and arrogant. Both of those things make her predictable. We've fooled her before, plenty of times. As long as we can strike fast with the resources we need, we can do it again."

Luke found this whole process fascinating. He'd only truly experienced high-level politics through Leia, and never in such a unique race and society. The Jedi of the Republic used to do things like this - oversee and respond to all manner of dangers and problems and do what they could to help. They were involved with the highest levels of diplomacy and politics, trusted to solve any problem that needed their attention. Hopefully, the Chiss would give them that chance.

Commodore Faro and Captain Pellaeon seemed to be doing a good job of convincing them, at least he hoped. The Chiss were hard to read, especially these Councillors. The audience above them was
a bit easier, but the sharpened minds of Thrawn and the Councillors were still an enigma to his senses. Even Ahsoka couldn't really read them.

After the Commodore's analysis of the Fourth Sister, Pellaeon reinforced some of the finer details of the claims. He also gave credence to some of Thrawn's more outlandish theories of there being something surviving or emerging in such odd circumstances. Luke felt uncomfortable all of a sudden. The memories of the vision in the temple flooded back, and all the unanswered questions as to who or what those monks were so terrified of.

The photos Thrawn had shown really unnerved him. Specifically, the smashed up ornament on an altar in one of those images had caught his attention. Luke couldn't quite place it, but he knew he'd seen it somewhere before.

Luke didn't get a chance to think any more on it now. The questions abruptly stopped and the Councillors conferred with each other. Luke had a good guess at what came next.


Luke took in a deep breath. May the force be with me. Ahsoka stood up and he followed suit, stepping out from their bench into the centre of the room. The Captain and the Commodore gave them an encouraging nod as they passed.

The same Chiss kept talking before Luke even reached the podium on the left. "Our people do not know Third Sight as you do, Jedi. Tell us, with your experience, do you believe this entity is a true threat?"

"I do", Luke responded as she stepped up to the left podium. "The force has been guiding us towards it for a purpose. It definitely deserves your attention, and ours."

The Councillors gave no hint of reaction. Even up on the podium, Luke could feel almost nothing from them.

"And what of you, Togruta?", the balding Chiss looked to Ahsoka, "Why should we trust the testimony of two alien mystics - you Jedi - when we are already facing a serious and visible enemy in the Grysk."

Ahsoka's eyes went to Thrawn, then to Luke, then back to the Council.

"I'm no Jedi", Ahsoka didn't open the way Luke'd expected, "But I grew up as one. Every friend I had for the first sixteen years of my life were Jedi or Clones. All but one or two of them were murdered by the Empire."

Luke furrowed his brow. What are you going for, Ahsoka?

"After that, I joined the Rebellion as the Empire tightened its grip on the galaxy. I spent decades of my life on the run, hunted by people like that Inquisitor, officers like Thrawn, Faro, and Pellaeon, and killing more than my fair share of soldiers."

He gave her a puzzling look. Ahsoka paid him no mind and kept going.

"Luke and I have friends that know Thrawn quite well", she glanced over to Thrawn at the obvious mention of Ezra and his friends. "Thrawn spent years hunting them. He wiped out their base, murdered dozens - if not hundreds - of their allies, and sent them on the run. Some of those friends aren't here now, killed trying to stop Thrawn and everything he stood for."
The eldest Chiss in his yellow uniform raised his hand and cut her off. "Ahsoka Tano, we have no time for pointless stories."

"It's not pointless", she retorted. "I want you to understand how much the Empire has taken from myself, from Luke, and from our friends." She paused and took a breath, "And yet here we are. Despite everything, Luke and I are here, with them, standing beside them, begging for your help."

Ah... Luke understood what that tangent was for.

"Luke and I may not know Thrawn and his people that well, but we know the force. We've seen things you wouldn't believe but this", she motioned to the images still projected above the podium, "This is something else. It's unlike anything we've seen before. It worries us enough for us to put aside years of grudges and pain just to have even a chance of fighting this thing. If we can do that, then surely you can understand how dangerous this thing is. We need your help - you need our help too - and together we can stop this before it's too late."

There was a drawn out silence as the Councillors started to confer among themselves. For the first time, Luke even saw some movement and energy to them. A few seconds later, they all turned back towards the chamber. Luke almost couldn't believe how quickly they seemed to have come to a decision."

The bald Chiss clasped his hands together across the table. "The threat you speak of is theoretical at present and has yet to strike out at us. Furthermore, the war with the Grysk is unprecedented in its scale and demands as much of our attention as possible."

Luke's heart sunk. No... after everything...

"However", the crimson-clad Chiss woman began, "Your evidence of its existence is irrefutable, as is the significance of such an unusual partnership between factions with such deep opposition to each other. Also, while this entity's danger is not yet clear, the aggression of this Inquisitor and their allies towards an officer of the Chiss Ascendancy is. While we cannot in sound mind or good conscience commit forces to fighting an enigmatic and unproven threat, we can respond to blatant aggression towards our officers, particularly if the aggressor is within reach of such concerning power."

This is... good? Luke didn't know.

"Admiral Vanto", the bald Chiss called, "You may take your ship and any resources you deem necessary to reinforce Mitth'raw'nuruodo's efforts. Also, the Arssis-class cruiser Omnipotence and its compliment will be temporarily put under your command, Mitth'raw'nuruodo."

Luke looked back to gauge Vanto's reaction. The man looked relieved, but he also did a double-take at the mention of that extra ship, the Omnipotence.

"We accept your aid and are deeply grateful", Thrawn answered for them from the middle podium.

Simultaneously, all six Councillors rose from their chairs. Again, Luke was struck by the pace and bluntness of Chiss politics. Perhaps it was something he should get used to. Before the Councillors turned to leave, the female in red with the long cape spoke up.

"The warrior's path lies before you all." It must have been some Chiss formality. "We look forward to seeing where it leads."

One more door. That was all that stood between her and her Master. This last one was smaller, or
so the scanning crews said, and different to the others. They'd be through it sooner than they had the others, and beyond that there was nothing to stop her reaching whatever or whoever was waiting for her inside. Days, mere days, and all of this would be over - assuming that Thrawn and his Jedi didn't get in their way.

The Fourth Sister was doing what she could to make sure that wouldn't happen. Canady had their ships arranged in a blockade in low orbit, ensuring maximum defence of the surface. Veers had deployed his AT-AT walkers around the site in case Thrawn and his allies somehow managed to get to ground. Now, all they needed was to reach out to their own allies and her future would be secure.

The Fourth Sister tapped her fingers impatiently across the filed HQ's communication table. Veers was running his tongue around his mouth, holding it back from issuing a biting remark as Hux slowly mashed his fingers on the terminal to get in touch with Grand Admiral Sloane.

"Any time, Commandant", she said through gritted teeth, too focused on other things to berate him right now.

"Almost...", Brendol Hux pressed his finger down again, "There."

Hologram communication wasn't quite instantaneous, and the Grand Admiral probably wasn't expecting any contact. It was almost half a minute before the full-body projection of Grand Admiral Sloane appeared, her white Grand Admiral's a much more welcome sight on her than it was with the Chiss.

Sloane regarded them all with a firm, probing stare. The Grand Admiral's eyes glanced at Hux, and moved on just as quickly. Instead, she went straight to Veers.

"General Veers, to what do I owe the sudden interruption." Again, Sloane looked at the rest of them around the table. Her brow furrowed, "Where's Thrawn?"

Veers cleared his throat, "Grand Admiral, he's-

"Thrawn's gone." The Fourth Sister's interruption drew the Grand Admiral's attention. "The Chiss--"

"And who might you be?", the Grand Admiral demanded, not caring about interrupting her.

The Inquisitor folded her arms. "I am the Fourth Sister, last of the Inquisitorius and servant of the Empire."

Sloane didn't seem to realise how important she was. "Thrawn never mentioned you", the woman replied.

"Because Thrawn was a traitor", the Inquisitor countered.

Sloane's lips parted and her eyes narrowed, "What are you talking about?"

She smirked, "The Chiss lied to you, and to all of us. He was never trying to serve the Empire, all he cared about was his own ambition. I always knew that he couldn't be trusted, and I was right. He betrayed us, attacked us, and fled."

"Really? You expect me to believe that?", Sloane scoffed.

"She's right", Veers affirmed suddenly. "Thrawn had us all fooled. He lied to us and by the time the Fourth Sister filled us in, he'd already laid a trap. Thrawn took the Chimaera and
Myrmidon, along with their crew, and fled", he explained. The General sighed and dipped his head, "And they took out the Imperator to boot."

Sloane turned back to Veers. "You lost a Star Destroyer?", she sounded surprised.

Exactly the reaction we need. "That's not the worst part", the Fourth Sister continued. "He has Jedi."

The Grand Admiral's gaze moved over and bore into her. "Jedi?", she breathed.

"Two of them", the Inquisitor confirmed, "Thrawn managed to escape with them. He probably wants to use their... abilities to take the power here for himself."

Sloane went silent for a moment. "What power?", she asked curiously.

She doesn't know... Maybe the Fourth Sister shouldn't have been surprised. Thrawn was no more honest to Sloane than he was to anyone else. Then again, Sloane didn't need to know everything right now. Once her Master was free, his power would be clear enough to all.

"We don't fully understand, Grand Admiral. However, there's some kind of power here. If I can reach it, we can use it to rebuild the Empire."

The Inquisitor let the information sink in. Like Thrawn, Sloane's face was hard to read. All they could do was wait for her to put every piece together and realise that she had to join them.

Sloane breathed in deeply. "So, let me get this straight, Inquisitor. You've been sitting on a power essential to the future of the Empire with every indication that Thrawn was going to betray you, correct?"

She was taken aback. "I... Well-"

"You failed to mention this until the last possible moment to the other servants of the Empire. Then, under your guidance, despite having a tactical advantage, the element of surprise, and the advantage of an additional Star Destroyer, two frigates, and all the troops, TIEs, and equipment those come with, you failed to capture Thrawn." Sloane took only a moment to catch her breath, "Not only that, you lost one of those Star Destroyers and inflicted no casualties on Thrawn's forces."

"Grand Admiral-"

"And the Jedi - that you, Inquisitor, are trained specifically to fight - managed not only to get out here unharmed but to rendezvous with Thrawn and escape your grasp."

The Inquisitor clenched her fists and bowed her head down. Who did Sloane think she was? She had no idea of the true power here. Fighting every urge to retaliate, the Fourth Sister kept quiet. Her Master would not let her break now and drive Sloane away, not when this woman's help was so important.

Sloane's anger abated but her harsh glare kept on the Inquisitor. "You will have your reinforcements", she said sharply.

Good. The Inquisitor swallowed back her anger and forced a smile to the ground, "Thank you, Grand Admiral."

"Don't grovel", Sloane snapped. "Clearly, you have proved incapable of properly handing this
situation."

Veer leaned in, "You suggest alternative leadership?" The Fourth Sister could swear she saw a smug grin on the General's face.

"Yes, I do, General. Me."

The Inquisitor raised her head, "You're coming here?"

"If this power is as important as your and Thrawn's actions suggest, clearly it demands my full undivided attention. Therefore, I shall handle this personally."

"Will you bring more reinforcements?", Veers asked.

"I will bring everything, General", Sloane confirmed.

"Even, the Eclipse?", Hux asked disbelievingly.

Sloane rolled her eyes, "Obviously, Commandant. What little forces Thrawn might be able to muster will not stand against the might of a Super Star Destroyer or the other Star Destroyers I can bring to bear."

The Fourth Sister was grinning at the ground. This wasn't what she'd wanted, it was better. A Super Star Destroyer and a massive fleet, filled with eager and easily manipulated fools. Her Master will be most pleased.

"We are grateful for your support, Grand Admiral", the Fourth Sister obliged.

"Hmph." Sloane looked down her nose at her, "It'll be a while before I can reach you. You better keep Thrawn and those Jedi away from this power until I get there. For your sake, Inquisitor."

The Grand Admiral lingered on her for a few seconds more before cutting the connection. Sloane's ships were essential and would give the Inquisitor and her Master the fleet they needed to affirm their power, but already Sloane reminded her too much of Thrawn. When He was free, Sloane would have to be dealt with.

For now though, things were looking better than ever. As soon as Sloane's ships got here, there'd be nothing Thrawn and his lackeys could do to stand in His way.

Serenity. For all his talk of reforming the Jedi Code, Ezra had to admit that often there was only serenity here on Lothal these days. There were some obvious troubles building up out there, but day-to-day life was calm and peaceful. He was surrounded by the people he loved, doing the things he loved, in the place he loved.

"Okay, let's bring it down to one!", Sabine shouted through the hall at their three students. "And two!"

Sabine had been adamant that she wasn't going to let the pregnancy keep her off her feet or out of the classroom. As soon as the next week rolled around, she'd insisted on leading the next stage of the oldest group's lightsaber training. There was something mesmerising about watching her work and run through the same basic movements and patterns he'd taught her on Atollon all those years ago.

Ezra was at her side copying her, an extra set of eyes to make sure the class was getting the hang of
it. So far, things were encouraging. They were all learning quickly: partly from their own skill and focus, partly from Sabine's careful guidance.

"Three!"

The class brought their wooden training sabers up with varying degrees of grace. Rosh moved a bit too quickly, Jakib a tad too slowly, and Safara slightly too aggressively, but he was just nitpicking now. Their progress was good, and he was proud of all of them.

"Good", Sabine told them, noting their success for herself. "Alright, let's bring it down to four."

Ezra started to move his saber.

"Ezra..."

Huh? He furrowed his brow but kept up with the saber movements. For a moment he thought Sabine had called him, but she was still stuck in with her lesson. Tired, that must be it. Hardly a surprise, given how much had happened in the last few days.

Shaking his body a bit, he brushed off the odd sensation.

"Five!", Sabine shouted next to him. Ezra followed through, trying to take his mind off it. "Okay, now let's..."

"Ezra."

His breath hitched. That was no hallucination. That was his name. His name called in a gentle and familiar voice.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sabine's curious look. It took him a second to realise he still hadn't moved out of position five. He quickly moved his saber, nodding and smiling thinly to get her to move on.

What's going on here? There was definitely something up, he just didn't know what.

"Ezra!"

It came again. There was no mistaking it now. It was coming from his head, just like it had for his visions before. It was a woman's voice. One he knew. Ezra lowered his saber and raised a hand to his forehead. Sabine noticed him first, and the class all turned to look as well.

"Hey, you alright?", Sabine asked, growing concern showing on her face.

Ezra looked over at her, "I think-"

"Ezra!"

The saber fell from his hand. It was so much louder, so much clearer. So clear he could almost recognise it.

Thankfully, recognised what was happening. "Ezra?!", he felt her hands on his shoulder. "Go get Hera!", she shouted to the students. Ezra barely saw a blur as Safara darted towards the exit of the hall.

The force was reaching for him, trying to show him something. He felt it swelling within him. There was fear, pain, hatred, power. At last, he heard the voice again.
"Ezra! Take him!"

He screamed.

"Ahsoka!"

He only felt Sabine's arms catch him as he fell and the world faded to black.

Chapter End Notes

Another busy chapter that has a lot to talk about.

I took quite a few liberties with how the whole Ruling Council and Chiss families stuff works. The Legends history is pretty vague and the canon stuff is non-existent, so I had a lot of freedom in how I handled it. It helped to have Faro, Pellaeon, and Luke around as POV characters since they wouldn't really understand the details so I could more easily gloss over them. The different colours of the Councillors represents their different families, one of each sits on the Council. How many families there are and who they are is also unknown, so I went for six which is midway between the four or nine suggested in Legends. There's also the whole thing the Chiss have about preemptive warfare. In Legends, Thrawn's violation of this was a big part of his story. As central as the 'entity' needed to be for this struggle, the Chiss can only justify reacting to the Inquisitor who has already struck out and that could potentially get a hold of this power. They're also concerned about the power itself as a threat, but what they're approving is in a way a retaliatory strike for the Fourth Sister's attack on Thrawn which just so happens to allow them to also deal with the threat. It's a difficult line to balance and my explanation is really stretching it, but it's the best I've got. I'm not even sure the preemptive strike stuff is still canon in the same way, so I'm not overly stressed about it.

I wasn't so sure on whether to have the Pellaeon and Ahsoka conversation but I felt like it was a good chance to show some level of bonding between the Imperials, Luke, and Ahsoka. Talking about the Clone Wars would be common ground for them both, and allows them both to focus on a time when they'd have been allies. There's the obvious connotation that they were allies then and can be allies again. I also felt that making them share a mutual friend in Yularen would help build things a bit. Yularen was also on good terms with Thrawn and likely Faro too, so he was a good person to bring up. Pellaeon's service on the Leveler is drawn from Legends, but the rest is mostly my own invention. Having him at Saleucami, the place where Stass Allie is killed in Order 66, was just a bit of extra backstory for him. The line about the Separatists "digging their heels in" is taken from the 501st journals in the original Battlefront 2, where it refers to the battle of Felucia. I also did want to address that Luke, having blown up the Death Star, killed people everyone there probably knew, including Yularen. Pellaeon doesn't know it was him, and I don't think Luke is in a rush to say so either.

As instructed in a previous chapter, the Fourth Sister reaches out to Grand Admiral Sloane. Sloane is, with Thrawn's departure, the Empire's most powerful figure and she
has the firepower to prove it. As we learn in the Aftermath novels and saw in Chapter 21, she's in possession of the Eclipse, the Emperor's Super Star Destroyer, which alone could outgun all of Thrawn's ships and then some, let alone the other surviving Star Destroyers and ships that would have limped their way to her. Sloane is rational, sensible, and sceptical, so that's why she wants to just oversee this personally and not leave it in the hands of the Fourth Sister and people like Hux. Veers is still nominally in charge, but the Fourth Sister is calling the shots after Thrawn leaves, and Sloane can probably read that based on the meeting alone. Time is now of the essence, as even a strategist like Thrawn couldn't hope to overcome Sloane's massive firepower advantage.

Lastly, we have Ezra's vision. He just fainted at the end and he's not dead, in case that wasn't clear. Nothing else to say on that, at least for now.

Next time: Ezra trusts his feelings, Thrawn and the others prepare, Ahsoka and Luke discuss the coming battle, and the ruin is finally opened.
Chapter 34 - The Beginning of the End

Chapter Notes

Here's this chapter before we take a short hiatus. I'll be missing next week's release and the week after's, and will be back around the very start of July. It's not ideal but it needs to be done. When 35 comes, there'll only be a four day gap between chapters for the rest of the story, owing to pacing needs.

This is a longer chapter than usual but there were a few things I needed to cover to get us ready for the next chapter. I'd like to remind y'all that not every section is occurring in sync with the others in this chapter. The Ezra section is actually occurring closer to the events of Chapter 26-7 of Luke, Ahsoka, Thrawn, and everyone else's story. It'll be made pretty clear if/when different plot lines converge.

This time: Ezra trusts his feelings, Thrawn and the others prepare, Ahsoka and Luke discuss the upcoming battle, and the ruin is finally opened.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ezra could sense the people around him as he started to come to.

It felt a lot like it had after the Maul affair on Atollon. He felt cold and tired, but he wasn't hurt. It would take him a little while for his mind to clear, but he'd be physically fine. Emotionally, that wasn't so certain. It was clear that something was happening though. Something important.

"Ezra?", Sabine's gentle voice guided him awake.

"Ughhh...", he groaned weakly.

His eyes fluttered open and five pairs stared back. Sabine, of course, was holding him in her arms with a soothing hand resting on his own. Zeb was on his left, his look of worry becoming one of relief as he saw his friend wake up. Hera was there too, biting her lips nervously, and Rex and Wolffe stood worriedly beside her.

Ezra blinked away the grogginess and sat up slowly, trying to readjust. Hera was ready with some water, and he took a few swigs just to be safe.

"How long was I out?", he asked between gulps.

"Fifteen minutes, bit less maybe", Zeb told him as softly as the Lasat could manage.

Sabine took the water from him when he was done. "Kallus took the students outside. Didn't want to worry the others."

That was good of him. Jakib, Safara, and Rosh would know that something was wrong, but they were old enough to handle that. There was no need to worry the others with their Jedi Master suddenly collapsing with a shout mid-lesson.
Zeb kept his hand on his shoulder. "How you feeling, mate?"

Ezra nodded and took in a deep breath, "I'm alright, Zeb. Thanks. Just... intense."

"Another vision?", Hera asked.

The Twi'lek was wringing her hands together, like she always did when nervous. He didn't want it to be like this again. Ezra'd hoped that sort of life was behind them now.

"What did you see?" Sabine's concern radiated off her, there was no missing it.

Ezra shut his eyes and tried to think. In truth, he didn't see anything. It was just a voice, and a feeling.

"I don't know", he admitted. "I felt something. I- I don't know what it was."

Rex was standing over him with arms folded and mouth wrinkled. He must have heard what Ezra had shouted before he blacked out.

"Sabine said something about Ahsoka...", the old Clone said reluctantly.

Ezra shut his eyes tightly. It was her voice, there was no doubt about that. Ezra could feel her presence, familiar enough with it to be certain it was her. Still, it was different. There was a purpose and urgency that he couldn't miss. It twisted a knot in his stomach.

"I couldn't tell what it meant but it was definitely her. She said my name...", Ezra's voice was quiet and strained.

"Well what does that mean?", Rex asked urgently.

Ezra shook his head as he racked his mind for an answer, "I- I don't know..."

The Jedi took another deep breath and got to his feet. Sabine kept her hands close ready to catch him if he fell, but he didn't it.

"Take him!", the vision had said. What did that mean? Take him as in attack someone? Take him as in take someone away? Who would that be? Luke was the obvious choice, but what if he was wrong? The more important question was: why was he hearing it? It could be a vision of the past, a memory Ezra couldn't quite recall. It could be a command, Ahsoka reaching out to him from wherever her and Luke were. It could be a sign of the future, a glimpse at a moment he'd yet to reach.

That last one stuck out to him. It was his first guess, and it felt like it was the right one. That could only mean one thing.

"I need to go. I need to find her", he announced suddenly.

Zeb went wide-eyed. "What? You can't leave!"

Ezra turned to his friend, "Something's wrong, Zeb. I can feel it. I have to go, I don't have choice."

"Ezra...", Hera's voice faltered, "You can't! What about your students?"

"I don't know", Ezra admitted. "All I know is that I have to do this. I'm going."

"No." Sabine's voice came sharper and louder than he'd heard in a long time. "We're going."
She stared right at him for a few seconds, letting her demand hang in the air.

"Sabine... I- I can't let you do that..."

Sabine scowled at him. "You can't let me? It's not up to you. I am going with you, whether you like it or not."

"No, you're not", Ezra countered,

"Yes, I am!", she snapped. "I'm not sitting here like some damsel waiting for you to come back, don't ever ask me to do that again." Her breathing was ragged and Ezra felt the rhythm of her racing heart.

He opened his mouth to deny her. He couldn't let her come. Not now, not with the child. However, despite every conviction in his heart, the words couldn't come out. Every urge to keep her safe was overpowered by what he could feel from her. Sabine could take care of herself, he knew that, and she would never forgive him if he left her here and never came back.

Ezra could try to refuse her again, but he knew that wouldn't work. Ezra had already learned she was far too stubborn to give in on something even a fraction as important as this. Even if he did try to refuse her, there was a good chance that she'd slip away on the Phantom and come chasing after him anyway. Ultimately, he'd just have to do what he'd already been doing for so long: trust her.

"Alright", he relented, "I trust you."

Sabine's anger receded and she took a second to compose herself. She nodded, "Okay. We'll take the Starbird." Her mind was already planning ahead.

"Hold on, hold on!", Hera interrupted. "Not so fast. You can't just decided to get up and go. You don't know what you're looking for, where you're going, how long it'll take-"

"We know that, Hera", he stopped her.

Hera's hands went to her hips in a show of authority, but Ezra could feel her heart breaking beneath it all. Hera didn't want them to go, not again. She couldn't lose them, but they couldn't lose Ahsoka and Luke either.

"How are you even going to find them, Ezra?" The Twi'lek's worry over the details was sensible, but there was nothing much else they could do.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "I don't know, we'll have to figure it out."

Rex cleared his throat, "Uh, ahem, I might have an idea."

Ezra's mind sprung to attention. "What sort of idea?"

The Clone took his left hand and pulled back the glove covering the lower part of his fingers. On the middle finger of his hand Rex had a tiny ring, so small that the fingerless gloves he usually wore completely covered any sign of it. Rex took it off and held it in his hands, inviting Ezra to look at it. The ring had a thin black metal band and a flat silver station. In its centre, a tiny blue gemstone was set into it, surrounded by a small area beneath that pulsated with a faint turquoise glow.

"What is it?", Sabine asked as they all crowded around.
"A beacon", Rex explained, "To light her way home."


"Ahsoka's idea from when we are out scouring the galaxy for a clue about what's out there." Rex smiled down at the beacon ring, "She told me it was just so neither of us got lost when we were travelling together. Now... I don't know, maybe she knew."

"That does sound like her", Ezra laughed quietly.

Rex retracted his hand and went to put the ring back on his finger. "There is one thing though...", Rex began, and Ezra already sensed what was coming next.

"You want to come too."

Of all the people in the galaxy to trust with going for Ahsoka, Rex was the best choice. Ezra didn't need to doubt how dedicated he'd be to this mission, especially with Luke in the mix too. Besides, it wasn't Ezra's place to tell him no. Rex and Ahsoka had been close friends since before he'd even been born, and their friendship wasn't his to dictate.

"Okay", Ezra agreed, "But no one else. That's final."

Ezra was already bringing two more people than he'd wanted to on this mission. They'd be safer here, he knew that, but there would be no stopping either of them. As for Rex, as much as Ezra wanted him safe, the choice wasn't his to make. At the very least, Ezra knew he could trust them both with his life.

As for Sabine, she'd waited five years for him here and it would break her heart for him to get up and leave again. If the roles were switched, it definitely would have pushed him to his limit. For all his commitments to keeping her safe, he couldn't forget that Sabine was just as committed to protecting him too. All Ezra could do was tell himself he'd be able to watch over her. Not that Sabine couldn't look after herself, but he could never be too concerned for her safety, or their child's. This way, he'd be right there with them. It meant that, whatever happened, he could still do his utmost to make sure Sabine would get home safely. No matter what the cost.

The bridge of Vanto's Arssis-class cruiser Unyielding was much different to an Imperial Star Destroyer. It was quieter and smaller with all of the crew arranged in tiered stations around the central strategy table. The table - doubling as a communication and map table as they did on Imperial vessels - was in the centre of the bridge, an equal distance from the entrance and the main viewport. The chatter and noise common in Imperial bridges was absent as the Chiss worked silently and diligently at their stations. Perhaps it was the newcomers on their ship that made them like that, or maybe Chiss were just that disciplined. Commodore Faro didn't expect to spend long enough here to figure that out.

"It will be difficult to speculate on the behaviour of our enemy in exact detail", Thrawn observed, stroking his chin as he looked at the map table.

A three-dimensional image of the dig site back on the planet - Tartarus as Thrawn had started calling it for convenience - was projected above the table. On it were marked the locations of the ruin, the Field HQ, last known locations of supplies and barracks, and terrain details. It was about all the intel they had.

She, Thrawn, and Pellaeon knew the place like the back of their hands though, that had to count for something. On the other hand, Vanto had never seen the place in his life. As for Tano and
Skywalker, the two people at this table actually heading down to the surface, they too had no prior experience there. Still, Faro had pulled victories out of significantly worse situations.

"The Fourth Sister will prioritise the ruin at any cost. Their defence will centre around it, without a doubt." Thrawn pressed a button on the terminal and the ruin lit up in red.

"Any idea on how they'll deploy their defences?", the Togruta Jedi asked.

Captain Pellaeon stroked his moustache as he thought. "Best guess says Hux will try to put himself where it's safest, while the Fourth Sister will want the man where it's simplest for him."

"The ruin", Thrawn suggested. "Placing Hux and the Cunctator above the ruin will be her choice. Hux will oblige since they all know we will not risk bombarding the ruin outright, and all he will need to do is keep the Cunctator in place and provide cover to prevent a ground assault."

Faro nodded. "He'll keep some of the frigates back with him for fire support too. Out of fear if nothing else", she reasoned.

"I agree." Thrawn pressed buttons on the terminal and three indicators representing the Cunctator and two frigates appeared above the ruin.

"Which leaves the Solicitude. Any thoughts?", Vanto asked and looked to Thrawn.

"Canady is brave and eager, but also sensible." Thrawn's eyes danced around the map as his mind worked. "He'll probably be the first to engage us, in a way that delays us and splits our forces to make it easier to repel for Hux."

"Safe bet that the Invictus and Aeternus will be with him too", Pellaeon added. "They'll hold position and do their best to prevent any of our ships breaking through."

Pellaeon entered something into a terminal in front of him and three more indicators appeared above the map, much higher above the ruin than the first three.

"Every second could matter in this fight. We don't know how close the Inquisitor is to reaching the source of this power. We will need to break through as quickly as possible", Thrawn scowled at the map.

Faro glanced at the Jedi as a thought came to her. "We can use the Jedi to lure them out of position", she suggested.

Skywalker did a double-take and half-laughed, "I thought we were important, but apparently you want us as bait?."

"You'll be fine", Faro assured him before turning back to the map and pressing buttons on the terminal by her. A few blue shapes flew out from the model of their fleet as she started to speak. "The Invictus' crew lost a lot of people last time Tano and Wren came out here. If they catch sight of that Republic shuttle of yours again, they might be tempted to break formation to get some revenge."

"And we will exploit that eagerness to break through", Thrawn agreed, not giving away if he'd already thought of that.

Skywalker nodded approvingly. "I can do that", he agreed. "I'll take the shuttle and lure that ship out of position and get you an opening."
"You sure you can get down to the surface in time?", Vanto asked him.

"He'll find a way", Ahsoka answered, smiling slightly at Luke.

"Very well." Thrawn looked back down at the map, "That leaves only General Veers' position to be determined, and those of the heavy artillery."

Skywalker's face hardened and he folded his arms. "Do they have walkers?", he asked Thrawn.

"Several AT-ATs, yes. Why?"

"Vees will be there. He commands best from them", Skywalker seemed certain of it.

Thrawn cocked an eyebrow, "How can you know?"

The Jedi's gaze seemed distant for a moment as he got lost in thought. "Experience. He'll be there, trust me."

"Very well", Thrawn obliged. "More than likely, the Fourth Sister will want such heavy ordnance near the ruin, which means the walkers will need to be eliminated as soon as possible if the ground teams are to reach it."

Tano leaned forward, "If we can get to the ground then I can handle the walkers."

Faro narrowed her eyes, "Alone?"

"Yes", Ahsoka shrugged almost casually.

Her confidence was encouraging. Faro hoped it was well-founded.

It seemed to be good enough for Thrawn. "So, it's settled then. The Myrmidon and the Omnipotence will engage the Solicitude while Skywalker draws the Invictus out of position. Then, the Chimaera and the Unyielding will break through and pass the initial blockade."

Faro continued where he left off. "Once the Chimaera is clear we'll deploy the ground forces, under your command", she nodded to Ahsoka, "And help the Unyielding drive Hux out of position above the ruin."

"Then it's down to the Jedi and the ground teams to get rid of the walkers and enter the ruin", Pellaeon concluded.


Faro felt her stomach turn. "Wait, you don't know what you have to do?!"

The Togruta remained calm and unphased by the daunting task. "Sounds bad, I know, but you rarely know when it comes to these things. When we're there, the path will become clear."

"I trust that it will", Thrawn replied.

So, this is it. The plan was set, the reinforcements ready, and everyone knew their place. Years of searching, studying, hunting, and planning were about to come to fruition. Still, as Faro glanced briefly out of the viewport at Csilla and the rest of their ships nearby, there was still one small question that remained unanswered.

"May the force be with us then", Skywalker trudged out his own age-old saying.
"Hold on", Faro said over the table, "Chimaera, Myrmidon, Unyielding - we're all here. Where's the Omnipotence's crew? Their commanding officer should be here."

Thrawn shared a brief glance with Vanto. "I am here", the Chiss said.

Faro's words left her. "W-what?"

"The Omnipotence's commanding officer recently died, leaving it in need of a Captain. The Ascendancy wished to reward me for my service and returned my rank, as well as giving me a ship befitting of it", Thrawn explained.

The shock wore off a few seconds later, and it started to make sense. Once this mission was done, Thrawn was done. He had no reason to stay with the Empire. His own people needed him and were engaged in a major conflict. His place would be here if or when they managed to pull this off. Giving him a ship now would be a good way to get him back in the swing of things for that war.

Her mind took a bit longer to make the next obvious leap of logic. "The Chimaera..."

"Will be in the best possible hands", Thrawn kept his eyes focused on her.

*Mine.*

"I... I don't know what to say..."

"I do." Pellaeon extended a hand to her with a big grin on his face, "Congratulations, Commodore."

She took a few seconds to respond. "Thank you...", Faro shook her friend's hand while her mind was still a parsec away.

"You will need to choose a First Officer, of course", Thrawn added.

Faro forced herself to calm down for a moment. She would indeed need a First Officer, and she happened to have an idea for one. Of the many capable officers on the Chimaera, one in particular stood out for her natural talent and contributions to the mission.

"Commander Hammerly", Faro said with certainty.

Thrawn nodded, "I couldn't agree more."

Hammerly was one of the longest-serving members of the crew and a good friend. Her involvement with Site Two also proved that she was willing and able to work closely with Thrawn's unique way of handling things too. Even if it was only for the final battle, the Commander deserved some recognition.

In all her shock, Faro realised she hadn't noticed something. Something small that most people might pass by or not bother noticing: Thrawn was smiling. Not the faint smirks he sometimes gave, not the ghost of one barely seen, but a genuine, warm smile.

"Thank you, Grand Admiral. I'm honoured." Faro bowed her head respectfully, regaining her composure. She smiled to Pellaeon, "Still not sure I deserve to outrank you though."

"Ah, that does lead me nicely to another minor technicality", Thrawn interrupted quickly. "This battle will require fluidity, and I trust all of you with such decisions. Our Imperial ships know to trust you both but the Chiss will find it easier if such imbalances are communicated officially through rank." Thrawn looked at Pellaeon, "To aid in such matters, I have updated your record and
awarded you the promotion to Commodore that you have previously declined so many times.”

Pellaeon almost choked. "I-I..., you did?"

"You were offered the rank before you even came to our fleet, were you not? There is no danger of being reassigned to another ship anymore, and as I said the Chiss appreciate clear command structures. I want both of your words weighted equally in their eyes."

"Thank you, Grand Admiral”, the new Commodore saluted hastily, "I'm honoured that you'd consider it."

"Congratulations, Commodore Pellaeon", Faro said in turn.

Pellaeon huffed a laugh, "Hmph, doesn't have the same ring as Captain Pellaeon, does it?"

"It only needs to be there for my people", Thrawn clarified. "If you wish to go by Captain for the remainder of this mission among our Imperial ships, I see no problem with that."

The man took a moment to consider. "Aye", he decided, "Most know me as Captain anyway, it'll be simpler. Sounds better too."

Faro faked a hurt face, "Oh, sorry Commodore isn't good enough for you..."

Pellaeon chuckled happily. He did deserve the rank and she knew she'd feel strange to get a promotion without him also getting recognition.

Commodore Faro, commanding officer of the Chimaera. It sounded odd. Part of her would always see it as Thrawn's ship, but another part of her felt ready to take it as her own. Not that it hadn't always been her ship as a crew member, just that now it was actually hers to command.

Others might have thought there was a hollowness to being given the Chimaera and a promotion right before the final battle of their campaign. Faro didn't see it that way. She didn't need years of flaunting a ship command to be happy. This was a job worth doing and Thrawn trusted her to command an important part of it. - that was an honour few others could claim.

Assuming they survived, this was all going to make for an long story. Faro, Pellaeon, and the rest of them would hopefully have plenty of time to tell it too. They'd more than earned a peaceful retirement back home after everything they'd been through. Home. When was the last time she thought of home? In a way, all the time. In another, rarely at all. Would her parents recognise her? Did they even know she was alive out here? Faro had asked those questions to death in the early years. If they made it out of this, she was going to find out.

"If that is all, we have preparations to make", Thrawn told them all. Faro already knew what came next. "The warrior's path lies before us, let us see where it leads."

"We won't let you down, Grand Admiral", Pellaeon nodded politely.

Faro copied the gesture, "It's been an honour, sir. No matter the outcome, I'm proud to have served with you."

Tano smiled thinly but sincerely. "Well then, may the force be with us all."

It hadn't taken long to prep the Starbird for their departure. The modified Kom'rk-class was one of her proudest projects, a triumph of art and colour over whatever Maul was trying to do with it.
Sabine had a habit of making sure if was always ready to go, with ammunition and supplies on board in case they needed it for... well, for something exactly like this.

The ship was waiting just outside Spectre Compound, with all their gear and supplies already loaded on. It was pushing on sunset now, just like it had the night Ezra had taken her out to the plains nearby and popped that all-important question. It was hard to believe that wasn't even three months ago. The wedding was a quick affair and planned within a fortnight, their honeymoon less than half that time, and the remaining two months or so had been even more busier. An Academy of Jedi students, hours of lessons, and the most beautiful type of surprise she or Ezra could have asked for. For those few fleeting weeks, Sabine's life had been almost perfect. Maybe she should have known better than to expect it to last very long.

"Don't worry, we'll be back before you know it, Wolffe", Rex had an arm slung around his brother with a confident smile on his face.

The two Clones joined the rest of them as they crowded around the Starbird. Hera, Zeb, and Kallus were watching them nervously as Ezra addressed the students.

"Yeah, you better. I don't fancy dying as the last of my kind", the one-eyed Clone joked.

"Ha, you won't", Rex chuckled.

They sighed. The two of them looked at each other, not needing words to convey the bond forged through war, rebellion, and identical genetics. There were few Clones left in the galaxy and these two weren't exactly on good terms with many of them. From millions upon millions of brothers, now it was down to them.

Wolffe finally placed a hand on Rex's shoulder. "Be safe, brother."

"I will. You too."

Sabine turned away from them and looked at Ezra. The Jedi was addressing the students, carefully skirting around a true explanation of what was happening so he didn't worry them. Maybe it was just her, but the more he avoided the issue, the more conscious of it she became.

"Keep up with your studies. Just because I'm gone, doesn't mean you stop practising. Hera, Zeb, Wolffe, and Kallus will still keep you up on the politics, diplomacy, history, and fitness, and I expect you all to think about the other things too."

"Yes, Master", came a series of unenthusiastic grumbles.

The youngest of them didn't seem to understand much of what was happening. Ninvere, Targual, Ulu, Alora, and Pipey seemed more excited for some fewer lessons than they were worried about their main teachers leaving. That innocence warmed Sabine's heart ever so slightly. It was on them not to shatter that innocence.

The older ones - Jakib, Safara, and Rosh - were understandably less elated. They'd been in the room and seen him collapse, heard him shout for Ahsoka, and now they knew something major was going on. Still, they held their tongues, not wanting to worry the younger ones around them.

"You've taken the first steps and those are the most important", Sabine smiled at them, "You've come a long way."

She caught Ezra's smile in the corner of her eye before he spoke. "We're proud of all of you", he said sincerely.
"Thank you, Master", Jakib spoke for all of them. "And you, Sabine", he quickly added.

One of their students saw right through everything though. With his abilities and his close connection to both of them, there was no way Jacen was going to miss that something was off. His body language gave it away even if he didn't say the word. He was close to his mother, though not hiding as he might have tried to do before, just watching them with heavy blue eyes.

Sabine hated seeing him upset. It had tore at her when she'd left the first time, and hurt twice as hard now. The Mandalorian knelt down to his level and he took it as his signal to approach her, arms extended.

"Why'd you both have to go?", he moaned as he collided with her waiting arms.

Sabine laughed into his green hair. "It's for Ahsoka and Luke", she whispered, "You remember Ahsoka, right? It's for her."

Jacen pulled back as Ezra came down to him too. The boy threw his arms around Ezra's neck and squeezed tightly.

"I'm gonna miss you...", he mumbled.

Ezra huffed a laugh, "I'll miss you too, buddy."

"We have to do this, Jac. We'll be back soon, we promise", Sabine explained quietly.

As Jacen pulled back, he nodded and scrunched his nose. "I understand...", the boy wringed his hands, a habit picked up from his mother. "Good luck, I love you guys."

His shy display melted her heart. "We love you too, Jac. We won't be long, I promise."

Jacen's training had done more than teach him about the force. He was growing up fast and the worried child from only a year ago was becoming more mature by the day.

"You better not be long, can't have the little kit popping out in the Unknown Regions", Zeb said from beside them.

The Lasat chuckled as they both turned to him. The smile on his face didn't hide the worry in him. He absently kneaded his fingers into his fur and his ears were drooped.

"We'll be back, don't worry", Sabine assured him.

Zeb reached a lumbering arm to his neck and nervously scratched it, "Are you sure you're alright to go? As in, one hundred:-"

Sabine rolled her eyes, "For the hundredth time, Zeb, yes. I'm sure. Now stop worrying."

He looked down at his massive feet with a grin. "Heh, been doing that for ten years. Not gonna stop me now."

Sabine sighed happily and hugged the towering Lasat. She felt Ezra come in too, trying his best to wrap his arms around them both. He was making a mess of it, of course, but that felt about right.

"Come back safe, you two", Zeb was trying his best not to crush them in the hug.

"Y-yeah", Ezra's strained stutter proved that Zeb wasn't quite managing it, "We will... big guy. Y-you too."
Mercifully, Kallus tapped Zeb on the shoulder. "You're going to kill them", he warned.

"Oh!", Zeb let them go, "Uh, sorry."

They both gasped for breath for a second. "N-no... no worries", Ezra panted.

Kallus sighed contentedly, "I'll make sure he stays out of trouble, don't worry. Just worry about yourselves."


"And Rex", Sabine added as quickly and obnoxiously as possible.

Kallus folded his arms and scowled half-heartedly, "Just come back safe, you two."

Ultimately, they came to Hera. She had her hands on her hips, head slightly tilted, and a smile that mixed endless pride with a deep pain. Hera loved them both like they were her own, and they almost were. Hera had done more to raise them that either of their parents had a chance to do, for one reason or another. In time, Sabine had come to see Hera equally as a sister and a mother in the years after Jacen was born. Either way, the Twi'lek was one of the most important people in the galaxy to both of them.

Before Sabine could think of way to say goodbye, a thought came to her instead. One that answered a question Sabine had mulled over for years.

"I think I understand why you still flew at Scarif."

Hera smiled knowingly, "I knew you would one day."

"Some things are just that important", the Mandalorian said understandingly.

The Twi'lek shut her eyes and bit her lip, "Do I even need to tell you to be safe?"

"Probably not", Ezra laughed beside her.

"Well, I'm telling you anyway." Hera stepped closer to them both, "Be safe."

Her arms caught both of them and hugged them as tightly as she could. Sabine let herself get lost in it, if only for a moment. A quiet pause with the two people who meant most to her, before life tore them apart yet again.

"I am so proud of you two", Hera whispered. Kanan might not be here to try telling them that all the time, but Hera would be. "When you're back from saving everyone again, promise you'll stay this time, alright?"

"We'll try", Ezra laughed into the hug.

Hera smiled painfully as she let them go. The Twi'lek didn't let herself say another word, knowing she'd only want to beg them to stay. Instead, she stepped back and let them do what needed to be done. Beside her, Chopper watched them for another moment before popping out one of his manipulators. He waved it at them, without a mechanical grumble or an attempt to come up and whack them with it. It was only a small gesture, but it meant a lot coming from that old droid.

Rex was the first to climb up the Starbird's entry ramp. Sabine followed him up, looking back and waving at a supportive Jacen. Ezra lagged behind, waiting at the foot of the ramp for longer than the other two of them.
Sabine let him have his moment. This was his home and he hated leaving. Ezra'd spent five years fighting for this planet, another five years hoping to come home, and had only had a year to enjoy its freedom so far. The sooner they got through this, the sooner he'd get to enjoy plenty more time here. After a last lingering look, Ezra turned his back and came inside.

Sabine hit the button to raise the ramp and waited for the metallic clunk. The last of the brilliant sunlight flowing into the hold was cut off, and they were left with the dull artificial hue of the ship's interior.

Ezra's eyes were low and his mood lower. That vision had shaken him far more than he'd admitted.

"I'll go ahead and get the ship in the air." Rex looked to Ezra quickly, and then back to her. It didn't take a force bond to know that Ezra and Sabine needed a moment.

The Clone slipped into the cockpit and made sure to have the door close behind him. Ezra turned to look at her with uncertain eyes.

Sabine took his hands in her own. "Talk to me", she said softly.

His sapphire eyes looked down at the ground, unable to hold her gaze for too long. "The future is... unclear, Sabine. I don't know-"

"Most people don't know the future, Ezra", she half-joked. "It's nothing to panic about."

Her husband forced a smile through anyway. Ezra put his hands on her waist and touched their foreheads together. "Your choices affect the two of you, don't forget that", he whispered.

"I'd never forget that."

"I know." He kept still for a moment, she could hear his steady breathing as he tried to clear his mind of his worries.

Sabine couldn't help but remember how he was before the Battle of Lothal. Cryptic, uncertain, quiet - the same signs were cropping up all these years later. Sabine didn't think he was hiding something from her, she liked to think she could tell even if he was, but he wasn't letting on how much the vision had shaken him to his core. Whatever he'd felt had terrified him more than anything she'd seen before. For him, that was all the more reason for her not to come with him. For her, it was all the more reason to insist on it.

Whatever was out there, whatever Ahsoka and Luke had run into, her and Ezra would face it together. One together, one apart, just like they promised.

Sabine pulled back to look at him, "Promise me you'll be alright."

Ezra breathed a laugh and brought a hand up to cup her cheek. "I promise I'll try my best."

He took the chance to kiss her quickly, pulling away with a heartfelt smile. Sabine didn't try to hold him back. Ezra went ahead and joined Rex in the cockpit, probably sensing that she wouldn't mind a bit of time alone to think things through.

As the sensation of his lips lingered on her own, she could only think of that stupid Jedi line. *Do or do not, there is no try.*

Something was happening. Luke had felt it for a while now.
Obviously, *something* was happening with them, the Chiss, Thrawn, and everything else for a long while now. However, over the last few weeks, Luke was sure he felt something else. It might be good, it might be bad - but Luke knew that somewhere things were in motion.

Luke looked out at the stars from his private quarters on the *Chimaera*. Ahsoka had suggested that it'd be better to spend the next night or two en route to this battle in a decent bed than in the claustrophobic cabin on their shuttle. Commodore Faro had been happy to provide something for each of them, and next door to each other too.

The Imperials, or ex-Imperials rather, were proving pleasant enough. Luke knew better than to judge everyone by their past, but it'd been hard to settle in around people who'd served the Empire and never quite renounced it. To his relief, these Imperials had proven honest, reliable, and trustworthy. It was a good reminder that there were good people on both sides of any conflict, and that eventually the survivors would have to bury the hatchet and figure out how to live together. After his time here, Luke felt more optimistic about that than ever.

Thrawn had surprised him the most. The tales of a ruthless, faultless, unbeatable tactical genius weren't far from the truth. The Chiss was sharp-minded, calculating, and unrepentant of his previous actions against the rebels, but in no way averse to working with them now. Thrawn was the definition of a pragmatist. There was another more genuine layer to him though, strange as it was to say, as the Chiss clearly had a fondness for his closest allies: Vanto, Pellaeon, and Faro; as well as a more general devotion to his own people. It didn't excuse what Thrawn had done in the past, but Luke's brief time with the infamous Grand Admiral had forced him to rethink many things he'd heard.

As for the others, Luke wasn't working off of any preconceptions. Commodore Faro he liked, not just for giving him a place to rest his head, but right away from her first meeting with them he'd warmed to her. The Commodore was polite and didn't hold her grudges, despite her past with Jedi and rebels. Like the others, Faro was wary of the Jedi, but there was a mutual respect there. As for Captain Pellaeon, he reminded him of so many other elderly military men he'd known: to the point, cautious, and with the blackest of humour. Ahsoka liked him too, if only for their brief but illuminating talk on their way to that meeting with the Ruling Families. Lastly, Luke had seen the least of Vanto, but the young man shared a mix of traits from all of the other Imperials. Hints of Thrawn's logical gifts, streaks of Faro's kindheartedness and principle, and signs of Pellaeon's forward-thinking and humour.

It was an odd combination of personalities that they'd thrown together in this makeshift fleet. Hopefully, the concoction would be a potent one.

Before he could muse anymore, Luke was interrupted by a familiar presence at the door.

"Enter", he called, willing the door open with the force.

Ahsoka's familiar voice filled the room. "Commodore Faro says all the preparations are done. We'll be leaving Csilla and getting under way any minute now."

The Togruta joined him at the window. She wasn't wearing her cape and only had that staff collapsed into the sling across her back. Interestingly, Ahsoka's lightsabers weren't even on her hips. Clearly, she felt safe enough to relax a bit.

"Do you feel that?", Luke turned his head to her, wondering about that movement in the force he'd been feeling.

Ahsoka smiled humoredly at him, "I feel many things. Care to be more specific?"
Luke looked back out at the stars. "There's something happening, something small. I've felt it for a while now." Luke shook his head, "I don't know what it is. I might just be going crazy."

Ahsoka watched him ponder over it. She didn't seem to know what he was talking about, or maybe she'd become so used to it that she didn't notice anymore.

"Maybe it's just this mission", he shrugged away the unusual feeling, "I never did like big battles."

Luke had memories of many nights before a big mission or daunting engagement back with the Rebellion. The feeling of foreboding he'd had on his way to Cloud City or in the lead-up to Endor had been signs of the life-altering events to come. Now, Luke had that same feeling.

"I never liked the build-up to a battle either", Ahsoka said. "I admit, I revelled in the fighting sometimes back in the Clone Wars. Chopping up battle droids left and right was a dream come true for an excitable child raised in the confines of the Temple. But, no matter how much I enjoyed that, I never liked the days before as we travelled."

Luke understood that all too well. "I know the feeling", he muttered.

"Never knowing which friends would be coming back from the mission, which ones you'd never see again, which ones would never be the same. Sometimes, it was as simple as wondering if you'd win, sometimes it'd be wondering if the fight would even be worth it in the end."

"Guess that last question isn't so hard this time", Luke observed.

"Definitely", Ahsoka agreed. The Togruta was lost in the stars for a moment. "I think the one before that isn't so hard either."

Luke turned his head to her again, "You're confident we'll win?"

"I believe so, yes", Ahsoka answered after a long pause, "But that isn't to say it'll be easy."

"If saving the galaxy was easy, everyone would do it", Luke joked lightheartedly.

She breathed a laugh, "I suppose you're right. But I have to admit, I'm not sure we'd have stood a chance if we hadn't had Thrawn's help."

"I agree", Luke could see the Omnipotence from the viewport, "It's fortunate that our paths crossed when they did."

"It seems that all the paths are coming together now." Ahsoka's voice had a heaviness and finality to it that Luke hadn't seen in her before.

He smiled thinly, "Well, wherever they lead, let's hope it works out."

The Togruta seemed to remember something suddenly. "That reminds me", Ahsoka reached into a pouch on her belt, "I have something for you."

Luke looked at her. "What do you mean?", he asked quizzically.

Ahsoka produced a small silver object, no bigger than her palm. Luke didn't recognise it as quickly when it was loose, but he soon realised where he'd seen it before.

"The brooch?", he tilted his head, "From your cape?"

"Take it", she dropped it into his hands carefully.
Luke took a second to look at it. It was a simple thing of silver, flat and with small circles engraved in it. Flipping it over, however, Luke saw something new about it. The back side of it had a blue stone set into it. His eyes might have been playing tricks on him, but he almost swore he saw the blue stone glow a little brighter for a second before fading back.

Ahsoka seemed amused. "It's just a little token. Think of it as a good luck charm."

Luke closed his hands around it and recalled some old words, "In my experience, there's no such thing as luck."

She turned away with a smile. "Well, maybe experience doesn't outrank everything after all."

He kept the trinket in his hand and admired it. "Thank you, Ahsoka", he said honestly.

His friend nodded graciously. "Now", she started making for the door, "Get some rest. It'll be a couple days before we get there, we should use that to prepare as best we can."

Rest sounded like a good idea, and Luke had been looking forward to it. "Sure thing. I'll see you in a few hours."

She shot him a warm smile as she went through the door and shut it behind her. Luke looked down at the small gift again. He didn't know what to do with it, but Luke had a feeling that didn't matter. It was a thoughtful gift from a dear friend, and he'd value it all the same.

Looking back out at the stars, the different feelings came back to him. The approaching stench of war and violence was unmistakable. For all his optimism, his acceptance of the Imperials, his friendship with Ahsoka - it was all in preparation for a battle that was yet to come. Whatever it was they were facing could threaten everyone back home - Leia, Ben, Han, Chewie, Artoo, Threepio, Ezra, and countless others. Now, it was down to these four ships to put a stop to it.

The feeling of movement, its nature unclear, hung in the background too. It might have even been slightly stronger now. Luke shook it off, putting it down to tiredness. Looking at the brooch one more time, Luke turned from the window and set it down beside the bed.

As Ahsoka said, all the paths were coming together. Now they were only a few short paces from the end.

"Work faster!", the Fourth Sister shouted as the teams fumbled around the final door.

The Inquisitor kept pacing back and forth beside the podium at the entrance to her Master's prison. As soon as the second door had fallen, they'd found another sealed door in their way. This one, however, was far easier to remove and thin enough for their scanners to get through. After this final door was removed, they were there. Her Master would be free, and everything she deserved would finally be hers.

General Veers and Commandant Hux didn't seem to appreciate the magnitude of the situation. Both of the Imperials were only thinking about supplies and what to do if Thrawn decided to come back. That didn't matter now. Unless the Chiss could appear in the next few minutes, nothing would stop them.

She looked back at the door. The lighter, thinner material of the final door had come apart easier that the previous two. They'd only reached it last night, and half the reason they were still at it this morning was because they were too cautious to try it in the dark. The Chief Excavator had made the 'informed choice' not to tell her about it last night and waited until this morning. Needless to
say, she'd been livid. She'd ordered the crews to return immediately, and ensured the Chief Excavator wouldn't cause her any problems again.

There were mere inches left of the door jammed into the joint at the top of the frame. The troopers brought up their laser-cutters and dragged the heat agonisingly slowly over the metal. Every instinct told her to finish the job herself, but she'd already found out that this door too didn't yield to lightsabers.

At last, the metal door fell out of its place. The troopers caught it and laid it down flat in front of the entryway. She was already approaching eagerly.

"Ma'am, maybe we should-", the trooper gave up as she barged past.

The place felt so cold. The air seeping out of the ruin was heavy and stale and made the hairs on her neck stand-up. *Not fear*, she told herself, *adrenaline.*

The Inquisitor reached for her lightsaber and lit up the entrance with the light from its blade. A long stone corridor sloped downwards into the darkness further than her light would carry. *This was it.*

"Let's go", she called over her shoulder and placed a foot on the first step down.

"I'll, uh, I'll wait. Make sure it's... safe, up here." She easily recognised Hux's snivelling cowardly voice.

The Inquisitor heard a sigh and the pat of boots on the dusty stone ground. "After you, Inquisitor", Veers muttered unenthusiastically

*Fools. They have no idea.* The General called over two stormtroopers from his escort to follow. The Fourth Sister could feel their fear. Her Master would punish them for such weakness soon enough.

Taking another step down, she was surprised to find that inside the ruin looked different to the dull doors outside. The walls were an elegant carved stone design with red lines, circles, and symbols in patterns along the walls and ceilings. The steps under her feet weren't old or worn, but perfectly preserved after all these years. It was as if this place had been sealed away from time, opened anew as if a day hadn't passed. Unlit braziers were set into both sides of the sloping stairs every few metres that would once have led the way inside.

"Damn creepy if you ask me", one of the troopers said under her breath.

"Silence!", the Fourth Sister shot her a glare. There would be no disrespect here.

The stairs didn't go on for too long before she caught sight of a new chamber ahead of them. The Fourth Sister silently went ahead, not caring to keep the light back for the people behind her. At the foot of the stairs, there was another podium identical to the one outside - a plain pillar with a metal triangle set on top. The triangle was broken at its peak, just like the one outside, and directly below it a line stuck up from the bottom of the symbol. *What are you for?* Once more, she couldn't see a clue. Perhaps her Master could enlighten her soon enough.

The chamber was dark and she could barely see anything. The light from her saber barely showed a few metres in front of her. Reluctantly, she waited for Veers and the troopers to follow her in. Veers was first, trying to squint through the darkness to get a view. When the two troopers followed, she simply glared at them.
"Lights!"

Her command made them jump and fumble their weapons. The asinine fools would be worthy example for her Master to force the others into shape. Finally, their weapon-mounted flashlights came to life and shone around the room.

The chamber was even larger than she'd expected. The perfectly-preserved stone chamber was large, maybe fifty metres across and ten metres tall. It had seven walls, one of which was the entrance they used. All of the other walls exited into some other part of this structure. It must have been huge.

In the middle of the room, yet again, was one of those damn podiums, identical to the last two. There were other statues around of hooded figures, some of them with stone spheres in their hands. The Fourth Sister didn't know what they were and she didn't care.

His voice tapped into her mind instantly. "Come to me."

She felt her Mater draw her attention to the exit a the far side of the room, right of where they'd entered. She didn't feel surprised at his guidance, knowing that he must have already been in her mind as soon as the door had opened.

"This way", she ordered the others, pointing towards the exit with her weapon.

"You sure?", Veers questioned.

She scowled at him in the low crimson light. It was enough for Veers to get in line and follow her orders. The exit He called her too had yet another one of those identical podiums in front of it, just like the stairs they'd taken. She walked around it and saw a few steps led up into a corridor. The light from her saber danced off the walls, and on them the Fourth Sister thought she saw more patterns. Looking closer, she found they were no mere patterns. In the wall were a number of panels depicting some sort of story. She waved her lightsaber ahead of her and saw that the mural extended for the length of the corridor. The same thing was repeated on the opposite wall, an identical replication for whatever purpose it was made for.

"Thrawn would have been helpful here", Veers observed as he came up behind her.

"Well he's not here, is he?", she growled, every memory of the Chiss grating at her spirit.

The Inquisitor looked down to her feet. On the ground beneath the panels was a small recess, filled with a strange ashy substance. She knelt down to it and prodded it with her finger, but it did nothing.

"Power lights the way", He whispered through their connection.

What does that mean? She gritted her teeth and tried to figure it out. The light from her saber wasn't giving her much to work with and she could barely see what she was meant to be looking at.

Her hand tightened around her hilt - she hated riddles. A thought came to her after a while. Power. She looked at her saber. Strength is power.

She touched the tip of her saber against the substance and it fizzled loudly. Then, it erupted in an orange light that spread rapidly down the length of the corridor. The corridor went on for twenty metres at least, now lit by the orange light beneath the panels. She went over and did the same for the other side of the corridor, leaving two streams of fiery light lead the way to a door at the far-end.
As she walked slowly forward, she sheathed her blade and looked at the panels she passed.

The first panel showed figures fighting with weapons, probably lightsabers. Behind them, there was a big pyramid structure under a starry night sky and from the top of the pyramid some sort of light or energy poured out. In the middle of that light was a tall figure.

In the next panel, that tall figure was overlooking more scenes of war. The third panel panel showed the tall figures with a weapon fighting the crowds beneath him. In the fourth panel, a crowd of people seemed to be joining him.

*Master*. It had to be. No other answer made sense.

The fifth panel had her Master standing with two hooded figures before a crowd of kneeling people. Each of the figures held something round in their hands, like some sort of sphere. In the penultimate panel, her Master held one of those spheres in both hands. An aura seemed to cover Him as he did, but she didn't know what that meant.

Finally, they came to the last panel. In the simple illustration, her Master sat on a throne flanked by one of the cloaked figures on either side and a number of others bearing weapons. Beneath the throne, lines of smaller figures bowed before him, and beneath them were the broken bodies of countless more. It's message was clear enough: victory, control, power, and conquest.

"You will understand soon enough, apprentice." His voice was louder and had an energy to it. She was so close now.

Finally, she reached the door at the end of the corridor. Briefly, she thought it'd need the same effort to get through as the others, but that wouldn't be the case.

"The final step. Bring down those before you." Her Master's riddle was easy enough to crack.

Stretching out a hand, she grabbed the door with the force. It was old and heavy, carved out of ancient stone unlike the metallic material of the others. Summoning every ounce of strength, every drop of anger, every second of waiting from years on this blasted mission, she prepared herself.

With one powerful motion, she pulled her hand down. The door came with it.

"At last, my apprentice."

Chapter End Notes

A hefty chapter this time.

You get two Lothal sections here because I'm generous. We open with Ezra waking up from his vision in the last chapter. It was never a debate in my head about whether Sabine would come with Ezra when this point of the story came, even though she's pregnant. Ultimately, it comes down to Ezra having complete faith in Sabine to keep herself and the baby safe, trust in himself to keep her and the baby safe, and acceptance that Sabine is far too stubborn not to get her way. I also only now noticed the similarity with Hera at Scarif with both her and Sabine setting off on dangerous adventures with a little one in the oven. Both women are tenacious, dedicated, and
formidable warriors, and even pregnancy won't stop them doing that until the last possible moment. Besides, Sabine is still early on and she isn't really impaired much by it. The departure was difficult because there's so many people they needed to see before they left. I think some of that feels a bit rushed, but this chapter is already quite big without extra fluff thrown in. Jacen being more supportive and understanding is a mark of his maturity and growth over the last year, showing him growing into the Jedi he was always meant to be. Lastly, Ezra is obviously troubled by the vision he had and the future is unclear to him. It's hard for him to communicate this to Sabine even with their connection. It should be emphasised that Ezra doesn't fully understand the vision, and we all know that visions can be tricky.

The planning section for the battle is here rather than the next chapter so as not to interrupt the action for next time. Of course, no plan survives contact with the enemy, so this is just their general target for what'll happen. Perhaps the biggest thing here is Thrawn taking command of the Chiss cruiser Omnipotence, and Faro taking the Chimaera. Thrawn needed to go back to the Chiss and it felt right for him to see this through with a Chiss ship of his own. However, I felt it was even more important to let Faro come into her own. She has grown and struggled for the whole story, and this recognition of her talent at the end is an important step for her character. In truth, she was never in the original plan for this story. I decided to use her after reading Thrawn: Alliances and now, 34 chapters in, she's one of my favourite characters in this story. I also wanted to give Pellaeon a promotion since he's more than earned it. The idea that he rejected a Commodore rank was first mentioned back in Chapter 27, and the reason was to stay with the Myrmidon. There's a practical reason for the promotion, as Thrawn says, but I also felt like it'd be wrong not to have both Faro and Pellaeon get some official reward. However, I won't confuse you all by changing how I refer to Pellaeon. He says that he prefers the ring of Captain than Commodore, so I'll keep calling him that for convenience's sake more than anything else.

The Ahsoka and Luke section is short and simple and touches on two things. Firstly, I wanted to go into a bit more detail about how Luke and Ahsoka feel about the other Imperials. They've only been together a short time, but they're warming up to them a bit. There's obviously a limit, but they're definitely grateful to them for the help. Secondly, there's the gift of the brooch from Ahsoka's cape. Full disclosure: I forgot to mention the brooch in the first few chapters of the second half, but it is meant to be there too. Also, there's obviously some link with that piece of jewellery and Rex's beacon ring. It's easy enough for people to put two and two together, but I'll talk more about it later. I'll remind you that I try not to do anything in this story without a canon or Legends precedent to justify the choice.

Finally, there's the Fourth Sister's section. After 34 chapters, they're finally into the place containing the big bad of this story. The 'hall of stories' the Fourth Sister walks through explains a barebones display of the story behind the Being. The Inquisitor is no artist, so she doesn't see as much in the panels as Thrawn or Sabine would. However, more detail wasn't necessary for the plot. The section was meant to continue on after this and not end on a cliffhanger, but I decided that this was the better choice going forward. It might put off answers a little longer, but I hope it's worth it. Sorry I'm leaving you hanging for a few weeks, but I look forward to wrapping this all up soon enough.

Next time: "There are things in the universe that are simply and purely evil. A warrior does not seek to understand them, or to compromise with them. He seeks only to
obliterate them."
Chapter 36 - The Warrior's Path

Chapter Notes

Hello there, here we are after a short hiatus. From now on, chapters will be released every 4 days since events are moving quickly and all closely linked. I might make it 5 days if I feel like it's going too fast though.

For the next few chapters, the little previews are much more ambiguous like this chapter's is. There'll be a little explanation of what each one means in the author's notes, and why I picked it for each chapter. The main reason for this is that these chapters don't have such easily distinguishable 'sections' as previous ones and are all deeply linked. Rather than doing a boring ambiguous summary, I decided to just do something fancier with them.

This time: "There are things in the universe that are simply and purely evil. A warrior does not seek to understand them, or to compromise with them. He seeks only to obliterate them."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"They'll be smart enough to be expecting an attack. Even if they aren't already in their positions, they'll have plenty of warning once we enter the system."

Pellaeon folded his arms and cast a discerning eye over the projection of the dig site and the expected fleet position above it. He'd run it by the Myrmidon's bridge crew once already, but it never hurt to do it again. They were minutes away from the system now, and it was a good way to ease everyone's pre-battle nerves.

They'd all seen their fair share of battles over the years. However, aside from the unexpected tussle above Site Two and a few stray pirates lurking in the Unknown Regions, none of them had seen real combat since Lothal. Pellaeon trusted his crew's skills and instincts all the same, but even the finest soldiers would feel uncertain about battle after so long.

His First Officer, Lieutenant Handel, pointed down to the ships in the projection. "How are we sure they won't go into orbit?", he asked.

"They know we won't risk damaging the dig site unless we know exactly what we're dealing with. The closer they are, the more we have to check our shots. One stray laser might cause us all sorts of problems", Pellaeon explained, pointing the map.

It wasn't ideal. The thought process was one Pellaeon was familiar with from the Clone Wars, having seen or heard of the Separatists using such tactics over occupied Republic worlds.

"So", Pellaeon looked to the senior officers of his ships gathered around the strategy table, "All clear on the plan?"

"Aye, Captain", First Officer Handel answered.
Lieutenant Yara nodded too, her mind already moving on to her tasks as Sensor Officer. Lieutenant Henri had internalised the plan the first time, and Pellaeon expected nothing less from his Weapons Officer; their lives depended on him doing his job, which Pellaeon knew he would.

"All clear over here too, sir", came a call from the helm station. Commander Kenic was, quite wisely, still at his station guiding the ship as they prepared their emergence from hyperspace.

"Alright", Pellaeon lowered his arms to his sides, "I don't need to stress how important this is. We stop this, we save countless people back home. More importantly, we'll actually get to go back to that home after seven bloody years of this mess."

"Don't tempt fate, sir", Yara's lightheartedness didn't mask the undercurrent of fear.

Pellaeon smiled. It would be his luck to die here, but worrying wouldn't change that. All they could do was their best, and he knew they all would.

"Let's not let that happen then, Lieutenant. Everyone to your stations."

None of his crew wasted time on salutes and instead sprung to action. Each one peeled away to their stations, sliding into their seats and joining up with the junior officers already working on the bridge. Pellaeon turned on his heel and walked up to the end of the bridge to get the best position to command from. *And the best view.*

It wasn't long before Commander Kenic delivered the news they'd been waiting for.

"Co-ordinates approaching. Disengaging hyperdrive."

*This is it.*

Pellaeon shifted his weight on his feet as the hyperspace vortex began to slow through the viewport. Slowly, the swirling blue corridor melted into a dark space with lines of white that fell to pinpricks of stars.

Before them was the planet they'd come here for. Rocky, dark orange, uninviting. Tartarus as Thrawn had since named. Pellaeon didn't know where that name came from, but Thrawn was convinced that it was appropriate.

Thrawn's *Omnipotence* had emerged just before them, its unusual form off the *Myrmidon's* port side. Soon after, Vanto's *Unyielding* came up on starboard, then finally Faro and the *Chimaera.*

There was a crackling of the comm over the bridge's sound system as the command channels flared to life.

"All ships accounted for", Thrawn announced coolly.

"Scanners shows the ships low above the dig site", Faro and the *Chimaera* were already on the ball, "Don't think they've noticed us yet."

Pellaeon held his comm up to his mouth, "Let's make sure they don't do that until as late as possible."

"Agreed", Vanto concurred, "We're ready when you are, Grand Admiral."

Thrawn had kept the Imperial rank even on his Chiss ship, at least for this mission. Most here knew him as such anyway, and trying to work in a new title this late was needlessly complicated
for everyone. It was the same thing Pellaeon had done, keeping his Captain title despite now being a Commodore.

"Very well. Make for the coordinates of the dig site, be on alert."

"May the force be with us", Skywalker added, also apparently patched into the channel.

The four ships held in tight formation as they approached the planet. Pellaeon periodically glanced from the view back to Lieutenant Yara at the sensor station, waiting for any signs of movement from Canady and Hux below. The approach to the planet would only take minutes, but each second dragged. Every second they gained here would be precious, getting them as close as possible to landing Skywalker and Tano on the ground. However, every second they lost was one more the Fourth Sister had to do something stupid, dangerous, or more likely both.

"Movement!"

Pellaeon snapped his head back at Yara's voice. "Lieutenant Henri, weapons ready."

"Awaiting command, sir!", the man answered immediately.

"Enemy ships moving out of position", Thrawn confirmed over the comm channel. "Confirming...", there was a few seconds delay as they made sure their predictions had been correct. "Confirmed, Solicitude moving to engage with the Invictus and Aeternus in support. All ships, prepare to engage."

Their own ships edged ever nearer, waiting to get as close as possible before engaging.

"Skywalker, are you ready to launch?", Faro asked over the comm channel.

There was a few seconds of delay. "Affirmative, just say the word", the Jedi answered.

A few more seconds passed. The Myrmidon started to enter the atmosphere, the completely clear skies of this world giving a wide view of the terrain far below. Finally, Pellaeon caught sight of the Solicitude's silhouette against the bland planet surface as it ascended to its defensive position. Now.

"All ships: open fire."

Thrawn's calm command was all that was needed.

Simultaneously, all four of their ships erupted with intense but controlled bursts of fire from their cannons. The green blasts of the Star Destroyers soared down beside the icy blue fire of the Chiss ships towards their target.

The enemy was outgunned, but their defensive advantage worked many ways. They couldn't just outright destroy the Solicitude or its wreckage could crash down where they needed to go. They needed to suppress it, get it out of position, or damage it just enough in just the right ways to avoid showering their teams on the ground with a few thousand tons of molten metal.

Faro's voice once more sounded over the comm. "Skywalker your time is now. Invictus marked for you. Get it out of position and let's get the boots on the ground."

"Got it", Skywalker sighed audibly, "Here goes nothing."

Pellaeon reached for his comm again, "Acknowledged, Skywalker. TIE escorts launching now."
Behind him, Pellaeon heard the confirmation call from his hangar officer as the TIE fighters started to launch.

It was a sight to see off their starboard bow as Skywalker's Jedi shuttle headed towards the surface, flanked by a dozen TIEs from the *Myrmidon*'s cohort. The periodic blasts of Imperial and Chiss starship fire around them embodied the unexpected, unorthodox, and hopefully unbeatable alliance they'd thrown together.

Pellaeon smiled to himself. *Hell, we might actually pull this off.*

"Enemy ships!", Canady screamed over the comm.

The Fourth Sister slammed her hand on the filed HQ's map table. "Defensive formations, now!"

The various frigate Captains nodded and broke the hologram connection, leaving just her and the three lead Imperials.

"Solicitude is moving to orbital position, *Aeternus* and *Invictus* in support." Canady's holographic figure paused and looked at her, "Are you sure this is... this is what it wants?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Of course I know what He wants." Her Master had made it abundantly clear.

Canady turned to Veers, "General?"

Veer's eyes over the map table and then up to Canady. Ever since the old Imperial had seen Him and spoken to Him, Veers had been silent and removed.

"Yeah...", he nodded uncertainly. "Half up there, half down here... just like He said."

The Fourth Sister smirked at his meekness. Veers had been the only real thorn in her side since Thrawn left and to see him so utterly in awe of her Master was glorious. Now, the General would never think to question her actions. Better yet, Hux and Canady had seen the change in him too and were both far too cowardly to question what had made him that way. *You shall see soon enough.*

"They outnumber us!", Hux blathered out the obvious, "How are we-

"We have a defensive advantage, Commandant", the Fourth Sister didn't even care enough to be annoyed by him. "Besides, we have a few tricks up our sleeve that Thrawn won't be able to handle."

Veer's lifted his head, a flash of his usual determination returning briefly. "You think Sloane will get here in time?"

"Possibly." She thought back to what her Master had told her mere days ago. "Not that we need her to."

Of course, her Master hadn't told Veers *everything* about His plan. Instead, he'd saved some of the crucial details for her ear's only. Veers, Hux, Canady, and the others did have their places, but so did she.

"And where will you be, Inquisitor?", Canady asked on cue.

"Down below. With Him."
The Captain's hologram squirmed uncomfortably and gave a gruff nod. "Right, right...", he looked around and saw that Veers was in no place to be decisive. "Well then, we'll get into position. We'll try to stop Thrawn, the Jedi, and the others too."

"Dismissed, Captain", she nodded to both Canady and Hux.

They shared an uncomfortable look before their blue projections disappeared from the table.

"I'll be with the walkers", Veers mumbled and made to leave.

She didn't bother to reply, and only watched the shaken man ruh out of the small building and off to his position. Now, everyone but her was in place. It would take Thrawn long enough to whittle down their defences even with his numbers - the Chiss was far too careful to risk damaging what was down here. No, Thrawn would send the Jedi down here, to her Master. He'd send them right where He needed them.

Her Master had given them everything they needed. A plan, a mission, a purpose. As of their meeting hours earlier, even his name. Their future was about to be realised.

Not waiting any more time, the Fourth Sister turned on her heel and marched out the door. Once more, she felt her hands shaking. Not fear, she tried telling herself, it's just adrenaline...

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Luke's eyes kept glancing at the sensor screens out of instinct more than anything else. Not at the Star Destroyer in lower orbit he was fast approaching, but at the TIEs on his wings. Never had he flown with TIEs before, aside from that one time from Endor as a prisoner. It felt strange to have them watching his back and fighting to keep him safe. Weirdest part was that he'd do the same for them. They were in this together now.

Another burst of fire erupted from their ships down towards the planet. Their opponents weren't firing back yet, probably still trying to pull themselves together from the surprise. It wouldn't be long before that happened though, and getting to the surface under such fire was going to be tough.

Trying to calm his mind as he closed the distance, Luke hit the comm.

"Ahsoka, everything ready on your end?"

The Togruta's voice came instantly, "All set, just waiting on you."

"Well, I'll try not to let you down."

Ahsoka chuckled, "I'm sure you won't."

Ahsoka was waiting on board the *Chimaera* in an Imperial shuttle with some of the ground teams. The *Chimaera* and the *Unyielding* had about a dozen teams each ready to land, split evenly between Imperial stormtroopers and Chiss marines. Luke didn't know what to expect from the latter, but anything was good as long as it got them to that ruin.

"I'll see you down there, may the force be with you." Luke cut the comm and focused ahead.

The skies here were completely clear and let Luke see a wide view of the ground below. The grey of the *Solicitude* stood out above the rocky surface below. The two smaller Arquitens-class cruisers were also clear too, flying on either side of the Star Destroyer.

*That's the one.* Luke looked at the cruiser on the right-hand side. *The Invictus.*
Luke checked the scanners behind him. He was widening the gap between himself and their fleet, but they'd be upon their enemy soon enough.

Then, a sensation in the force caught his attention.

"All wings, bank right!"

The *Solicitude*'s turrets erupted with streams of green laser fire as soon as the command was out. Luke pulled the stick right and saw the TIEs with him follow suit. It only took a few seconds for the laser fire to stream through his previous position. The stream kept coming, the guns giving a constant barrage of fire. Their enemy didn't have to worry about stray shots hitting anything, so there'd be no gaps for Luke to catch his breath.

"Break formation and avoid that fire. Don't give them a swarm to shoot at", Luke told the TIEs.

"Copy that, blue leader."

*Blue leader.* It was appropriate. Picking targets would get messy with TIEs and stormtroopers on both sides of this fight. To combat that, all of the stormtroopers and TIEs on the *Chimaera* and the *Myrmidon* had spent the journey doing some customisation. In honour of their Chiss allies and Grand Admiral, many had settled on painting things blue. The TIE fighter wings were all painted with streaks of blue in various patterns and the same thing had been done to many of the stormtrooper's uniforms.

The escorting TIEs split apart in various directions. As that happened, alarms started to blare in the cockpit. Luke glanced at the screen. *Enemy TIEs.*

"We have incoming!", called one of the pilots.

Thrawn's voice interrupted over the comm channel, "All TIEs engage enemy fighters, get Skywalker to the *Invictus* at all costs."

Luke didn't answer and just took the moment to breathe. As his shuttle made a beeline towards the *Invictus*, he could see the swarm of enemy TIEs fast approaching. The rangefinder ticked closer and closer, counting down the moments until all hell broke lose. Finally, it came.

Luke squeezed the trigger and a torrent of blue lasers spat out of his ship. The approaching wall of TIEs split apart as fast as they could, only one getting caught in his opening attack.

Then, the entire sky erupted in green. Both TIE groups opened fire almost simultaneously and everything around them descended into chaos. Luke banked hard to the right, avoiding the two TIEs that had gone straight for him. As he did, a handful of allied TIEs flew past his view, weapons hot as the two swarms clashed violently.

Luke looked around, checking for any way he could help those with him. Dozens of ships buzzed around him, zipping in every direction and spewing laser fire as they did. Through the chaos, he picked out one of the friendly TIEs with an Imperial on his tail. Luke hit the engines and swung left to help. The more of the TIEs that survived, the better the chance they'd have of pulling this off.

"Gah, I'm hit!", one of the pilots screamed over the comm before it abruptly cut out.

He kept his focus on the TIE in his sights. Another Imperial TIE zoomed past right in front of him, one of his allies hot on its tail. A second later, Luke had his clear shot. He squeezed the trigger and sent off two quick bursts. They hit their target perfectly, and the enemy fighter exploded on...
impact.

"Woah!", came the relieved sigh of a pilot over the comm, "Owe you one, Blue leader."

Luke brushed it off, "Let's get this thing over with before we start keeping score."

A sudden impact jolted him back into the action. A few glancing blows hit the rear shield. No damage, but Luke didn't want to give them a chance to do some. The shuttle pulled down and Luke checked his sensors to see where the shot came from. It was no use, the whole space around him was a chaotic mess. TIEs criss-crossed, turned, and spun around so much that he was losing track of which way was up.

Another pilot came over the comm, "Got one! Gonna see if I- Agh!"

_Dammit._ Luke saw the fireball up to his right, another one of their pilots taken out of the fight.

"Skywalker!", Commodore Faro's voice interrupted, "How's that frigate looking?"

"Oh, right", Luke snapped his head to look over at the _Invictus_. He was close, but not as close as he'd like. The swarms had collided just a bit too far from the enemy ships and he'd be exposed for too long on his approach.

"Don't delay, Skywalker. We need that opening."

He clenched his teeth. "Got it, Commodore." Luke looked over at the frigate again and sighed, "Making my approach now."

Focusing on the bigger picture, Luke left the TIEs behind and turned towards the enemy ships. The Star Destroyer and both frigates were all focused on firing at the capital ships. They were giving it their all, trying their best to stop them getting to ground.

The swarm thinned out as Luke cleared it, leaving a short but dangerous area of open space between him and the _Invictus_. Luke pushed the accelerator forward as far as it'd go and watched the turrets on the enemy ship as close as he could. The moment they noticed him, he'd be in trouble.

"Come on, come on", Luke repeated to himself.

Miraculously, he'd made it half way before he saw the first of the _Invictus'_ autoturrets start to swivel.

"Ah, better than nothing", he grumbled and banked hard to the right.

Luke unlocked the wings and set them to spin like he'd done above the Temple planet to make himself a more difficult target. Within seconds, more of the Invictus' turrets had noticed him and were filling the space around him with fire. He swerved right, arcing the shuttle downwards, then hit the engines and pulled up. The turrets were too slow to get a bead on him but he was closing fast. The closer he got, the more dangerous this would get.

He checked his scopes. Their own fleet of ships were closing on the TIE swarm behind him. They needed that opening now or this whole plan was going to fail.

"Ah, sithspit", Luke muttered and pushed the shuttle to go faster.

Luke pulled back on the stick and arced the ship up in clear view of the frigate's bridge, then pulled
down again. The shuttle swooped down and soared low over the frigate. His shuttle zoomed past the autoturrets and swung by the bridge, doing everything he could to get their attention. Every turret was doing its best to follow him, but little else.

"Dammit, dammit", Luke grumbled as he went around for another pass.

The shuttle swung back around to come from behind, making sure to give the Solicitude a wide berth as it turned around. Luke needed to get their attention this time. Thinking of a bad idea, Luke aimed the shuttle to fly over the bridge on the second pass. He picked up speed, pushing the shuttle as fast as he could to close the gap. Draw them out, Luke. Taunt them.

His shuttle was almost coming up on the Invictus when he made his move. Luke cut the engines to a crawl and hit the decelerator, letting the momentum alone guide the shuttle over the low bridge of the frigate. The stream of turret fire following him started to draw closer as his shuttle slowed down.

"Come on, take the bait..."

The shuttle lurched over the bridge and Luke gently pushed the stick down. He'd be in full view of the entire bridge, taunting them and hopefully getting them to do something stupid.

Every second, the turrets got closer to hitting their mark. It was starting to give him another bad idea. The next bursts hit closer to his shuttle as it slowed to a crawl, the gravity of the planet below still having an effect at this altitude.

He braced himself, "Any sec-"

The entire shuttle rocked as the first barrage hit him. As soon as they did, he powered up the engines and pulled forward at full throttle. The shields had tanked the blow, but the Invictus had tasted blood now. Hopefully they'd be eager to finish the job.

Finally, there was a spark of energy from their engines. Gotcha!

Luke dropped his speed slightly and kept listing to the left. Slowly but surely, the Invictus also turned to follow him, making sure its turrets could get the clearest shot. Every few seconds, Luke slowed a little bit more, letting a few shots get too close or just skim the shields to keep them encouraged.

"We see you, Skywalker", Pellaeon's voice came over the comm, "They're moving out of position. Just a little more and we'll hit their broadside with everything we've got."

"Copy that...", Luke trailed off as he focused everything on keeping their attention.

Just a little more... More turret shots bounced off the shield. A little more...

Another volley hit him. The shield was starting to strain now.

A little farther...

The Invictus' kept turning, caught up in trying to take him down. The frigate kept coming until its broadside was completely exposed to Thrawn's ships. There.

Thrawn was ready and waiting with the order. "All ships, redirect fire. Take out the Invictus."

Luke saw countless blasts of light as all four of their ships fired simultaneously at the exposed
frigate. The *Solicitude* might have been able to take the shorter bursts with its powerful shields, but the sustained fire all at once was too much for the small Arquitens-class frigate.

Its shields didn't hold for more than a few seconds. It tried in vain to correct course but it was too late. Luke could see the shield straining under the firepower before the first shots broke through into the hull. It was over in seconds. The side of the frigate melted away under the laser fire, and then the whole magazine went up in flames.

"Now's our window!", Faro announced over the comm, "Vanto, we'll follow you!"

Luke's sensors picked up the burst of energy as both Vanto and Faro's ships floored their sub-light engines and made a break for it. Vanto took the lead, the swarming TIEs scattering as the Chiss warship surged through the gap left by the *Invictus*. Charred shards of the frigate bounced harmlessly off the *Unyielding*'s shields as it opened up the next phase of the battle.

The scattered Imperial TIEs regrouped and started to head back to the *Solicitude*. Meanwhile, his own allied TIEs started to head over towards Luke. They still had a job to do, and the *Invictus* was only the first step to stopping this threat once and for all.

Luke focused on the mission and turned planetward. "Alright blue group", he announced over the comm, "Let's clear out their surface defences."

The *Chimaera*'s bridge watched the *Invictus* break apart without uttering a word. Skywalker's shuttle and his TIE escort were already heading down to the surface and Vanto's ship. That left the *Chimaera* stuck behind, watching everything unfold before them.

Thrawn and Pellaeon seemed to have the attention of the *Solicitude* and the *Aeternus*. It was a good thing that they did, those guns would tear their ground forces apart if they got the chance. Hopefully, they'd be able to slip past the blockade without Canady coming to his senses.

Saying it out loud... all of a sudden, that didn't seem like such a solid idea.

"We're behind them, heading to engage the *Cunctator* now!", came Vanto's voice over the comm.

"Great, *Unyielding*", Faro replied, "Keep Hux distracted as long as you can, we're coming now."

They were on to stage two. Now, Vanto needed to distract Hux's ships long enough for the Chimaera to get Ahsoka and her ground teams on to the surface. Then, they'd help Vanto get Hux out of the picture too.

"Agral", Faro looked over to her Helm Officer, "Full speed ahead. Get us through."

"Aye, Commodore."

Faro turned back and looked out at the scene in front of her. They were a few tens of thousands of feet above ground but the unusually clear sky let her see everything below them. The *Solicitude* loomed large just off to the port side, the *Aeternus* a bit further, streams of heavy fire spewing out towards Pellaeon and Thrawn's ships. Directly in front of her was open space, save for the *Invictus*' smouldering remains falling down into the planet's gravity.

She felt a hint of inertia as the engines fired up again and the *Chimaera* moved forward. As they moved, Faro got on with the next stage of the plan.

"Ground teams. Get ready to launch", she barked into her comm, "TIE escorts, get launching."
"Red group launching now, Commodore."

Satisfied, she lowered her comm. She looked over at the Solicitude again, a few ineffectual bursts of turret fire from the Myrmidon dissipating against its shields. A moment later she noticed something: *hang on, the Solicitude’ stopped firing.*

She'd barely turned her head when Commander Hammerly started shouting.

"Commodore! Burst of energy from the Solicitude's engines, multiple TIEs launching too!"

*He's coming for us. Dammit, Canady.*

Sure enough, the Solicitude started to turn in their direction. Ignoring the other two ships already firing at it, Canady's Star Destroyer was coming right for them instead. The aforementioned flight of TIEs was also starting to come into view. Then, all of the enemy turrets opened fire at once.

"Incoming!", Hammerly braced herself on the map table.

Faro did the same. "Shields will hold! Stay focused!"

The first few impacts started hitting their shields. They'd hold, Faro hoped at least. It didn't matter so long as they got their people on the ground. The barrage didn't let up as every single gun on the Solicitude unleashed on them. The squadron of enemy TIEs had closed fast do, moving quickly in to range. They needed to launch now or they were never going to.

Once again, she went for her comm. "Red leader, you have incoming."

"We see 'em", Red Leader answered, "We're just leaving the hangar. Should be- Ahhh!"

The call cut abruptly with a loud crash.

"Red leader? Red leader?!"

Another desperate voice came over the channel, "We lost Red Leader! Too much fire! Too muc - Noo!"

Another audible crash came as the call fizzled out.

"Commodore, Red Three. Those guns are slaughtering us the moment we get out the hangar and those enemy TIEs won't help anything!"

Faro cursed under her breath. They could wait until they were past the Solicitude, but that wouldn't solve the TIEs swarming their underside. If they waited to launch their own fighters, the enemy TIEs could clear out the underside cannons and just blast anything that came out of the hangar. No, they needed to get their own fighters to launch, take out those TIEs, and launch the ground teams, all while making sure the Solicitude's guns didn't rip them apart as they did.

"He's right, Commodore!", Ahsoka added urgently, "Our ground teams will be picked off easily by those fighters and turrets."

Faro looked up and saw Hammerly's worried face. "What do we do, Commodore?"

She gritted her teeth. *Cover from those guns, that's what they need. If only we could put something in the way of their guns and our hangar... An epiphany hit her like a hovertrain. Yes! That's it!*

"Tano, Red Three", she breathed into the comm, "If we can cover you from those turrets, you think..."
you can handle the TIEs before they get too comfortable?"

There was a moment's silence. "Uhh..., Red Three didn't sound too hopeful, "If you can be quick
about it, maybe. Another minute and those TIEs will be right on top of us and there'll be no hope."

She looked to her First Officer. "Hammerly, how long can our dorsal shields hold?", Faro asked
suddenly.

Hammerly looked confused, "Depends what you're asking them to do..."

"Just to get us past the Solictude." Faro raised her head and shouted across the bridge, "Divert all
power to the dorsal shields!"

"But they'll rip our flanks apart!", Hammerly said quietly but urgently, not wanting to make too
much of a show of questioning her.

"We won't give them a chance, Commander", Faro answered. "Agral, put us on a full seventy-
degree tilt, maintain maximum speed."

The young man did a double-take as he put it together, "Aye aye, Commodore."

It was Ahsoka's idea that had given her the answer. Marg Sabl. Thrawn had explained the tactic to
her only a few days ago. Republic Venators had dorsal hangars, so Ahsoka had tilted her Venator at
the Battle of Ryloth with the underside facing the enemy to give her own fighters enough cover to
launch. Imperial Star Destroyers were the other way around, with their hangars on the ship's
underside. All Faro had to do was reverse the trick: turn the Chimaera on its side with the topside
pointing towards the enemy, and the hangar beneath protected from the Solictude's turrets.

The Chimaera started to tilt and all the power went to the dorsal shields. The artificial gravity kept
the crew on the right alignment as everything outside moved around them.

Faro went for her comm again, "Red group, launch! Establish a perimeter and stop those enemy
TIEs."

"Aye, Commodore. We're clear to launch", Red Three replied.

Faro let out a sigh of relief. She took a moment to watch the sight outside of the bridge. The dorsal
shields were rippling around them as an entire's Star Destroyer's payload slammed into them. Faro
didn't know if they were designed to take that, but damn if it wasn't working right now.

She turned her head to the scanners. The Chimaera's scanners were starting to pick up the enemy
TIEs swarming beneath them, but they were picking up even more of their own. One by one, the
red blips on the radar blinked out as they got close. Perfect.

"Shields are taking a beating, Commodore!", Pyrondi shouted, pulling her attention back to the
bridge's situation.

"Just a little longer, we just need to pass the Solictude's field of fire."

Faro tried to look out the bridge viewport, but it was no use. The Solictude was hitting them with
everything they had and all she could see were the ripples of hundreds of turbolasers hitting the
shield. The faint muffled sounds of it starting to strain just made it through the thin atmosphere in
high orbit.

Come on, come on, you can hold.
"Enemy TIEs breaking off!"

There was a small cheer at Red Three's words. *It worked.*

Faro wasted no time, "You heard him, ground teams. It's clear, go!"

"On it, Commodore", Ahsoka replied instantly. "Though, I have to say, good plan."

Faro smiled a bit, "Can't take the credit, Tano. I owe you one."

"Shield's straining!", Pyrondi updated from his station.

Faro put her comm away and looked back on her crew. "How much farther until we're out of shot for them?", she asked Hammerly.

The Commander looked frantically at her reports. "Uhhh... not long. *Solicitude* has stopped turning but they're still firing. Forty seconds maybe."

*Better than fifty.* The shield was still under intense fire outside. The muffled noises were starting to sound more and more strained.

"Keep our hangar out of sight of those turrets. Agral, adjust course as we pass, turn us a bit as we go", Faro ordered.

"Aye, Commodore", the helmsman answered.

"Shields really struggling now!"

Faro shut her eyes. There was nothing else they could right now. Just wait and listen as every laser pushed the shields to breaking point. Faro couldn't even hear the individual impacts as each one was drowned out by two more.

"Thirty seconds!", Hammerly shouted.

*Come on, girl. Hold together.*

The noises kept getting louder and louder. Faro opened her eyes and could see the flashes of green more brightly than before as the shield struggled to hold.

"We're overheating!"

"Keep it together! We're almost through!", she shouted.

Hammerly gripped the map table just a little tighter. "Twenty seconds!"

Faro shut her eyes again. *Almost there. Almost there.*

"Ten", Hammerly counted, "Nin-"

"Shield breach!"

Faro screamed at the top of her lungs, *Brace!*

There was a deafening screech as part of the shield sputtered and gave out. Then the entire ship shook.

"Gah!", the impact threw Faro forward over the table.
"We're hit!"

Multiple impacts rocked the *Chimaera* as the rear shields failed. The bridge shook as shots started to find their mark. Alarms started blaring, sirens starting going, and everything seemed to slow down.

Faro took in a few deep breaths. Every shudder forced her to hold on to keep her balance. A Star Destroyer could take some hits without its shield, but you were playing with fire. Too many shots in one place, or just one shot in the wrong place, would end it.

*We can do this... we can do this.*

More shots hit the *Chimaera*. Faro didn't know where they were hitting, but the alarms were bad enough. At least the bridge was still here.

Then, the jolts seemed to slow. They became softer and less intense. In a matter of seconds, the jolting impacts ebbed away.

"We're through!", Hammerly was almost jumping for joy, "Moving out of effective range. *Solicitude* moving back to engage the *Omnipotence* and the *Myrmidon*!"

Faro let out a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding. For a second there she thought they were in trouble. She heard a few relieved cheers from the bridge crew, but most people managed to keep their cool.

She didn't let herself get too calm though, they still had a job to do.

"Status report!", she shouted to her crew, waiting for someone to answer.

Hammerly was quick to answer. "Still waiting for data...", she looked at her screen in anticipation. "Looks like mostly superficial damage. Lost a few armour plates on the ship's rear, one of the sensor orbs was damaged, lost a few surface turrets and...", the colour drained from her face as more data came through, "And the hyperdrive."

*Karabast...*

"Well", Faro sighed, "We don't need it right now. We're here to deal with the Fourth Sister and the ruin, we'll figure out how to get home later."

"Aye, Commodore", Hammerly nodded and shut the screen off. *Out of sight, out of mind.*

Faro clasped her hands behind her back and started to walk up the bridge. "Let's rejoin Vanto and get Hux out of the way", she brought her crew's minds back to the task at hand.

There were some murmurs of agreement as everyone refocused. Faro looked down at the surface and could see that their ground team were safely away. Vanto's ship had already engaged Hux and everything seemed to be going to plan.

Still, part of her was a little more worried than she wanted to admit. Without a hyperdrive, they weren't getting off this planet. Slowly and without drawing the crew's attention, she reached for her comm and keyed in an address.

"Lieutenant Xoxtin", she whispered, "Just to get a sense of things, how many shuttles do we have left?"
There was a short pause. "Not many, Commodore", Xoxtin replied. "We used most of them for the ground crews, why?"

Faro cursed silently. Better than zero.

She didn't let on any concern in front the Lieutenant. "Just... make sure they're prepped."

"Aye aye, ma'am." If Xoxtin had caught the worry in her voice, the other woman had hidden it well.

Setting it aside for now, Faro focused her mind on the battle. She could see Vanto's ship exchanging fire with Hux's Star Destroyer and the small specks of the shuttles as the ground teams reached their destination. Great, she thought, now for the hard part.

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*Marg Sabl, huh?* Ahsoka didn't try to hide her smile as their shuttle barrelled towards the surface. She'd never imagined that the tactic could work for a Star Destroyer too. Desperate times, she supposed.

Faro's quick thinking had gotten them through. The ground team's shuttles were making straight for the dig site below. This world reminded her too much of the Temple world with its barren landscapes and hidden structures. However, this world was different in the force. While the Temple world reeked of death and pain after whatever happened there, this planet felt different. There was an evil here, focused and precise, but there was something different about it to anything she'd seen before.

Either way, this was the right place. One way or another, this ended here.

The Togruta ducked out of the cockpit of the Imperial shuttle and back into the hold.

"Get ready! We're almost on the ground", she announced to the teams.

The hold was filled with a dozen stormtroopers from the *Chimaera*. Ahsoka had never imagined fighting alongside them, especially not after she'd killed some of them, but then again she couldn't have imagined most of what had happened in her life. To avoid confusion, their stormtroopers had spent the journey from Csilla customising their armour to set them apart. Every helmet, breastplate, or pouldron had been splashed with paint. Some of them had only bothered to put a few marks to set themselves apart, others had gone all in with logos, full face paintings, or other things that meant something to them. *Sabine would be proud.*

However, the similarity to Mandalore hadn't escaped her. The last time she'd fought alongside a real army, they too had injected a bit of creativity to honour their mission. Ahsoka wished she still had one of those orange 501st helmets, even in spite of what had happened after. Even more than that, she wanted to have the men in those helmets back. What she wouldn't have given to have any of the Clones back at her side for this - Cody, Fives, Wolffe, and of course, Rex.

Her hand instinctively went to the brooch around her neck. It took her a second to remember that she'd already given it to Luke. Mandalore had ended badly for all of them, but this fight wouldn't be the same. She'd made sure of that.

Ahsoka watched them check their weapons one last time before one-by-one they signalled that they were ready.

"What are your orders, ma'am?", the Sergeant beside her asked.
For a moment, she didn't know what to say. It'd been so long since she'd done this.

She snapped back to it soon enough. Ahsoka knew the plan off by heart. "We're landing just south of the dig site. There'll be some resistance but nothing we can't handle. We advance to a nearby building and work on taking out those walkers. Then, myself and Skywalker head down to this ruin while you secure the surface. Simple, right?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Ahsoka smiled and passed through them to wait at the ramp. As soon as that door opened, she'd lead the way. After all, the best commanders lead by example, and she'd learnt from the best.

The shuttle flew smoothly as it neared the landing zone. The combined effort of Vanto, Faro, and Luke was keeping the remaining enemy fighters and capital ships occupied, letting them get to ground without being attacked. Ahsoka was grateful for that, she had far too many unpleasant memories of being stuck in a shuttle under fire with nothing she could do about it.

"Get ready!", the pilots shouted from behind.

Ahsoka brought her hands down to her waist and used the force to pull her sabers into her hand.

The shuttle lurched to a hover and then down, hitting the ground with a thud as the landing gear hit hard rock. The ramp hissed and lowered, letting the light outside pour into the shuttle.

"Go! Go! Go!"

Ahsoka ignited her sabers. The ramp was barely open before blaster shots started flying in. She caught every one, reflecting them back out and shielding her squad from harm.

Outside, enemy stormtroopers were already waiting for them. An open area of ground lay between them and their target building up on a small hill - a hut apparently used as living quarters by that Inquisitor - with some large rocks spread out on the approach to give some cover. About eight enemy troopers were ducked behind the rocks, firing over at them with everything they had.

"Jedi! Jedi!", she heard one of them shout.

Ahsoka turned her head back to her squad, "Follow me."

Her sabers still swirling about her catching every shot, Ahsoka charged down the ramp with her cloak billowing behind her. She heard a yell from her squad as they joined her, a cascade of red laser fire coming out from behind her.

Ahsoka made for the first piece of cover about ten metres away, covering her squad as best she could as they ran for it. She stood on top of it, drawing what fire she could. She managed to get one of the enemy shots at the right angle and deflected it back through the air, catching the enemy in the chest as he peaked out. Three of her troopers slid behind the rock she was on, catching their breath.

"Nice shot, ma'am", one shouted from below.

The Togruta jumped down from the rock and kept pushing up the hill. The rest of her squad had fanned out across the slope, using what cover they could to push up. Another one of the enemies fell to a blaster shot up ahead.

Ahsoka leapt over another rock, to the shock of the enemy trooper already behind it. The trooper
tried to scramble away but she soared over him and cut his weapon in half as she hit the ground. Before he could react, Ahsoka sent the trooper flying back into the stone with a strong push. It was enough to knock him out cold for a bit, and if he was smart he'd pretend to stay that way.

She heard another enemy trooper go down to her left, then another off to her right. The final three enemy troopers had broken from cover and were trying to run up the hill. Her squad caught one in the leg just as he got over the crest of the hill, the trooper falling to the ground clutching his injury.

Ahsoka led the charge up the final few metres. They reached the peak of the hill and it levelled out, the Fourth Sister's hut standing alone and apart from the rest of the Imperial structures down here.

The two enemy stormtroopers stared at her for a moment, then looked at each other, before throwing their weapons to the ground.

"We give up, we give up", they muttered and raised their hands.

"Smart move", Ahsoka kept her sabers pointed at them just in case. "Sergeant?", she looked behind her as the rest of the squad joined her.

Two of her own troopers walked up to take their weapons and march them away somewhere safer. Ahsoka was glad they didn't have to keep killing everyone. Many of these men had served side-by-side only weeks before, so any chance to spare their lives was welcome.

They double-checked their squad quickly before moving on. Luckily, they hadn't lost anyone on the charge up the hill.

Ahsoka stepped around the small grey prefab building. It was a dismal little thing far from anyone else, just the place a dark-sider would find homely. It was right by the dig site though, making it a perfect place to launch their final run into the ruins below.

From the small hill, she could see down over the place they'd come here for. A large square area had been dug out fifty metres down and at least the same size around all its edges. A metal stairs led the way down on the side closest to her and Ahsoka could see the gaping door at the bottom of the pit. A lone podium stood in front of it, catching her attention for a reason she couldn't quite place.

Again, she felt the presence strongly. She could feel the subtle difference it had to anything she'd seen before. It did remind her of Malachor, but something was just a bit off. The force was strong here but also strangely weak. It was as if it lacked something or had something taken from it. It was broken, damaged, even wounded. Maybe they'd had it all wrong. Maybe they weren't here to destroy something, they were here to fix it.

Her thoughts were cut off by a warning in the force. Her eyes shot out to her left, at the area overlooking the pit. *Walkers.* She'd almost forgotten that five walkers were stationed side-by-side along the pit's edge, ready to attack anyone that tried to get close - ready to attack her.

*Move!*

She didn't second guess her instincts as she jumped back from the small rise. One of the AT-ATs fired its main cannons and the building exploded in shards of red-hot plasteel. Her squad was already diving back down the hill they'd climbed up, trying to get out of view of the AT-ATs. Ahsoka joined them, sliding down onto the ground as another shot destroyed what was left of the Inquisitor's hut.
The plan had been for her to deal with them, but that wasn't happening. Panting for breath, she pulled her comm to her mouth instead. "Luke?", she asked into it, "We're pinned. We need those walkers gone, now!"

"Alright, alright", Luke banked hard as he avoided another eager enemy TIE. "Working my way down!"

Luke looked out of the window at the ground below. He could see the various landing sites around the area as their ground teams poured out. The Imperial shuttles and Chiss clawcraft dotted around the area stood out against the rocky surface, as did the thousands of blue and red blaster blots flying across it.

He looked for Ahsoka's landing site near the edge of the dig site. To his left, the smouldering remains of a small building drew his attention and he could see small figures pinned down in cover nearly. There you are.

Next, he looked over to the line of AT-ATs nearby. The one at the end of the line closest to Ahsoka was firing in her general direction, while the others were focusing fire elsewhere in the area. Awfully close together, Luke thought, barely a few metres between most of them.

"Here goes nothing", he muttered as he banked right to come around and make a better pass.

The rest of blue group was handling the enemy TIEs and red group had just joined them from the Chimaera. Hux in his Star Destroyer wasn't quite the opponent Canady was, and the combined effort of Faro and Vanto was keeping him occupied.

Luke lined up his shuttle diagonally with the line of AT-ATs. He didn't think any of them had noticed him yet as he started to come down guns blazing. His blue bolts collided with the AT-AT at the centre of the line, and dissipated harmlessly on its armour.

"What?! Dammit!"

The walker barely flinched as it took the shots. Its head started to move and search for him, spotting him easily as he made straight for them.

Karabast! Luke broke off his attack and shot off to the left, running parallel to the line of walkers and passing right over Ahsoka's position. His target started trying to hit him but couldn't get a lead. It did, however, get the attention of the rest of the walkers all packed close together, who all started to aim in his direction.

"Oh, great", Luke sighed unhappily, "I get your attention easily..."

He kept his speed up, just to make sure the slow moving AT-ATs couldn't catch him with their guns. He started to bring the shuttle around again, coming in from the left side of line.

Think, Luke, think! His guns did nothing, this thing didn't have any tow cables, and he sure wasn't going to chance a seismic charge that close to the target. He needed something powerful, precise, and strong enough to knock them down like Corellian dominoes.

His hands tightened on the controls. I'm having a lot of bad ideas today...

Biting his lip, he hailed Ahsoka again. "Uh, Ahsoka...", he swallowed awkwardly, "How much do you like this shuttle?"
"A lot...", his friend replied, "Don't tell me you're going to-

"I'm going to", Luke winced, waiting for an angry Ahsoka to object.

The Togruta sighed on the other end of the comm. "Alright, fine. Just get down here quickly."

Luke breathed a sigh of relief as the shuttle lined up with the side of the first AT-AT. Confident in the trajectory, Luke took a final solemn moment before hitting the emergency door release.

Then, he stood up, quickly grabbed his small bag from the seat beside him, and ran for the door.

"Where's the Jedi?!", the co-pilot shouted.

Veer darted his head around, trying to find that Republic Shuttle. *Damn field of view in this thing... useless.* Pulling down the scopes, Veers swivelled them around to try and find the Jedi. He looked off to the right, following where it had gone after that first pass.

It took him a few seconds to spot it among the chaos around them.

"Right side", he called to his crew. "Coming in quickly...", Veers checked the rangefinder. *Too quickly.*

"Moving now", the pilot said. "Get us a shot, Jarkins."

It didn't take the co-pilot long to realise what Veers already had. "I... he's coming in too fast. We won't be able to move in time."

Veers kept watching through the rangefinder as the walker slowly stomped its feet, trying to turn. The shuttle was still approaching but its guns were silent. It wasn't trying to shoot at them yet. As it kept coming for them, its course unchanging, he realised what it was doing.

*It's coming right for us.*

"Sir?", the co-pilot looked back to him, "What do we do?"

The General didn't answer him. Instead, he let go of the scope and looked ahead at the pit before them. They could try in vain to shoot that shuttle down, or they could let it find its mark.

Veers wasn't superstitious. His whole life he'd found rational explanations to everything. But, what he saw down there, that wasn't rational. That didn't have an explanation he could understand. That *thing* down there wasn't anything he's seen. Ever since he saw it, he knew exactly why Thrawn had made every choice he'd made, he knew exactly why the Chiss had called the Jedi here, and he knew exactly why those Jedi had to succeed.

He gave no orders. In the final seconds, the two pilots screamed and leapt out of their seats, barging past him to try and get to the escape speeders.

Veers never knew if they made it.

Ahsoka loved that shuttle. It had been a gift from Riyo Chuchi a few years ago, a relic from the Clone Wars. She'd taken it gladly, but it had needed a few things. Thankfully, a certain Weequay pirate owed her a few favours, and that had turned it from a simple shuttle to a formidable and practical vessel. It had been the ship that had helped her guard the World Between Worlds, it had carried her and Sabine off to rescue Ezra from the depths of the Unknown Regions, it had served
her and Rex as they scoured the galaxy for clues about this mystery, and it had brought her and Luke out here to solve that mystery. All that, just to end up as a glorified bowling ball.

Her beloved ship exploded on impact with the first AT-AT, engulfing the entire walker in flames. The explosion sent one of the shuttle's wings loose too, detaching it and launching it into the next AT-AT in the line. The force of that sent the second one falling over, which knocked the third and then the fourth. The fourth one came down and smashed the final walker's leg, sending it keeling over onto the ground. All five down. Thanks, old friend.

Luke jumped from the shuttle as it passed overhead. He used the force to soften the impact as he hit the ground somewhere off to her side. As she watched the burning remnants of her ship and the enemy walkers, Luke headed over to her, a nervous expression on his face.

Ahsoka sighed, staring at the destruction. "I really liked that ship."

"Yeah, sorry about that", Luke winced. "I'll buy you a new one?"

She shook her head, "Don't worry about it." Ahsoka finally looked at him, "You're like your father, you know that?"

"I'll take that as a compliment", Luke replied jokingly.

Ahsoka rolled her eyes and motioned to her squad. "Come on", she set aside her sentiments for now, "Let's get this over with."

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Chapter End Notes

Alright, so this is a very busy chapter with a lot of small things to talk about. Quickly, the preview quote is from the first canon Thrawn novel and felt like a perfect fit for this chapter. Not much more to say on it really.

The space battle isn't really a space battle but an upper-atmosphere battle. The basic idea is that the Solicitude, Aeternus, and Invictus are in orbit to slow Thrawn's attacking forces down while Hux's remaining ships cover the stuff on the ground. Obviously, the Imperials are outgunned, so it's a losing fight, but they do exploit the fact that the allied fleet won't risk missing shots and hitting the ruins below. Basically, it's a plot reason for why the allied ships don't just tear through Canady immediately. They have to fire in short, controlled bursts to avoid any stray shots, while Canady and his ships can attack to their heart's content. The TIE squadrons that the allied fleet uses are Blue group for Luke's escort and Red group for Ahsoka's escort. They're named purely for convenience.

Faro uses a version of the Marg Sabl, the same fleet tactic Ahsoka uses at Ryloth and the one Thrawn mentions back in Chapter 31. I took a lot of liberties with how shields work and stuff like that, hopefully it wasn't too far-fetched. The Chimaera has taken a bit of damage and lost its hyperdrive, but the ship is still perfectly capable of participating in the battle. The problem now is just getting its crew off-world when the battle is done.
There hasn't been much death in the story so far, but in this chapter we lose people and ships that have been around for a while. General Veers is the most obvious death. He's the first non-original character I've killed and I wanted his death to be somewhat redeeming. I intentionally left what happened at the end of the last chapter ambiguous for a few reasons, but suffice it to say that it deeply disturbed Veers. I don't think Veers is evil, I think he's more like Pellaeon or Faro in that he's willing to see a bigger picture. Unfortunately, he saw it too late, and could only accept his death in his final moments. We also lost the Invictus and its remaining crew, the ship that saw our first Ahsoka and Sabine action section in Chapter 7. Speaking of ships, Ahsoka's little red shuttle is also gone. That shuttle was a surprisingly important part of this story and turns up in almost every chapter, so I felt like it deserved a nice send-off. There's still the Imperial shuttles around the place that Ahsoka and Luke can use to escape, so don't worry about things on that end.

Next time: "In those seconds I saw a vista which will ever afterward torment me in dreams. I never sought to return to those tenebrous labyrinths, nor would I direct any sane man thither if I could."
Chapter 36 - He

Chapter Notes

Sorry for being a day late, but I needed some extra time to work some of this out. A big chapter with some important events and reveals that are long, long overdue.

This time: "In those seconds I saw a vista which will ever afterward torment me in dreams. I never sought to return to those tenebrous labyrinths, nor would I direct any sane man thither if I could."

"Bring us in closer!", Pellaeon yelled to his helmsman.

The Myrmidon was manoeuvring around, trying to get a good angle on the Solicitude. Canady's Star Destroyer had made a vain attempt to stop Faro and the Chimaera getting through, and had lost its position because of it. Pellaeon and Thrawn were now bearing down on the out-of-place Star Destroyer with only the small Aeternus doing its best to keep them at bay.

"Pellaeon?", came Thrawn's voice over the comm.

He was quick to answer. "I'm here, how're we looking?"

"Tano and Skywalker are both on the ground, Veers' walkers are destroyed, and our other ships have engaged the Cunctator and its escort", Thrawn explained. "In other words, we are looking well."

Pellaeon smiled with relief, "Some good news at least."

He kept watching Canady's Star Destroyer as it banked towards them. Its guns were trailed on the Omnipotence while only the Aeternus' turbolasers were troubling the Myrmidon. Earlier, they risked overshooting and hitting the ground below. Now, at this angle, the Myrmidon and Omnipotence didn't have to worry about that.

"Think we can get through them now, Grand Admiral?"

"I believe we can get solve our problems with one move", Thrawn continued over the comm. "Focus fire on the Aeternus, on my command."

Pellaeon looked at the small frigate, the last remnant of their original fleet that hadn't either been destroyed or allied with Thrawn.

"Henri", Pellaeon shouted over to his Weapons Officer, making sure he'd heard the order. The other man nodded. Pellaeon raised the comm again, "On your command."

"Not yet", Thrawn replied. "I need you to advance and fire on the Aeternus."

He gave a sceptical look at the frigate directly ahead of them. They weren't exactly on top of each
other, but it wouldn't take long for them to crash right into them. *Maybe that's the point.*

"You want us to ram it?", he asked.

"In part. Advance and fire, force them to divert all power to one area of the shields, and then we shall hit them where they're exposed. We'll take out their stabilisers and engines...."

"And we knock it into the *Solicitude*," Pellaeon finished for him. *Not bad.*

"Absolutely. We will hold the Solicitude's attention until the time is right."

The Captain huffed and looked back to his crew. First Officer Handel nodded approvingly, and Commander Kenic's smile showed that the plan had the helmsman's blessing too. In his younger days, Pellaeon would have scoffed at such a reckless plan. However, this might actually have been one of the most sensible parts of this whole ridiculous mission. Besides, one way or another, this was going to be his last mission, he knew that. Might as well try something new while he had the chance.

Pellaeon remained at the front of the bridge, eyeing up their target. He felt the subtle readjustments as Kenic took them around, wanting to come at the frigate slightly from the side to knock it in the right direction.

For a moment, Pellaeon thought again about all the people on those ships. He didn't harbour any grudges against the majority of their troopers and officers. Most of them had just been dragged along for the ride, not knowing or caring about what went on higher up the chain. There was never any getting away from that in war, but it never hurt to take a second to think of those souls that would have to die to make sure so many more wouldn't.

Kenic offered the final affirmation, "Ready, Captain!"

"We're ready", Pellaeon said into the comm, "Waiting on you."

Pellaeon watched the *Solicitude*'s guns try their best to get through the shields of Thrawn's Chiss warship. Those same guns had battered the *Chimaera* only minutes earlier, yet these Arsiss-class warships almost shrugged it off. *Good thing they're on our side.*

Thrawn gave the order calmly. "Now."

"Now!", Pellaeon repeated it again, bracing himself on the viewport windows.

The *Myrmidon* lurched forward, coming in from the side of the *Aeternus*. Its guns blazed a wall of green fire that collided with the small frigate. An extended barrage would probably rip that ship apart in minutes, but they didn't need to destroy it completely. The air around the *Aeternus* rippled as the shots collided with its shields.

"They're shifting power", Yara called from the sensor station.

*Got them.* Pellaeon went for his comm again. "*Omnipotence*, open fire!"

There wasn't even a second's delay before the blue laser fire of Thrawn's ship came in from their starboard side. The Chiss gunners' aim was true and every shot went precisely to the stack of engines at the rear of the Arquitens-frigate. Of course, diverting shields still left a slither of protection elsewhere, but nowhere near enough to deal with that amount of fire.

As the *Myrmidon* kept coming in closer, they saw the rear of the *Aeternus* rocked by an explosion
as the engines and fuel cells ruptured. The explosion caught the stabiliser on the side where it'd been hit, and the frigate started to dip under the gravity in the direction of the Solicitude. Pellaeon's ship was only seconds from impact.

"Brace yourselves!", he shouted.

The bow of the ship collided with the Aeternus in a rather muffled, anti-climactic thud. There was a small jolt on the bridge, but the Star Destroyer brushed off the impact without much ceremony at all.

The Aeternus, on the other hand, didn't fare so well. The impact crushed the frigate's starboard side and sent it plummeting, right into the Solicitude's path.

There were only a few seconds before the frigate slammed hard into the Solicitude. The impact itself didn't look all that damaging. The explosion that came next definitely did. The impact turned the Aeternus into a massive fireball that melted into the Solicitude's hull. Secondary explosions started to tear through the Solicitude, ripping apart the bow of the ship.

That left a mark, Pellaeon thought drily.

His bridge erupted with a series of cheers.

Canady's ship didn't fall apart instantly, but it was definitely lost. Pellaeon didn't know how many systems they must have just lost - life support, sensors, and communications at the very least.

"It's coming down", Pellaeon said to his bridge crew. "How's its trajectory look?"

Yara took a few seconds on her screens. "She's listing, it'll come down a few kilometres from the dig site."

That was a relief. Pellaeon didn't want to find out that their last great manoeuvre had just killed everyone on the ground.

"Excellent work, Myrmidon", Thrawn sounded more than happy with the outcome. "Once Commodore Faro and Commander Vanto are done, we'll be clear for now."

Pellaeon didn't miss that last part. "For now? You think Sloane will show up?"

"Let us hope not", he replied. "Even with our numbers, we would not-" Thrawn cut off abruptly.

"Thrawn?", Pellaeon asked curiously, "Thrawn?"

What in-

"Captain!" It was Lieutenant Yara calling from the sensor station. "We have an incoming ship!"

Oh, you've got to be kidding. Pellaeon rushed over to her, cursing under his breath. He just had to go and run his mouth. There was no way they could handle the resources Sloane would have.

"Please tell me it's not what I think it is", Pellaeon half-pleaded as he came up and looked at her screens.

Yara looked up, uncertainty on her face. "Uh, no, sir. It's no Star Destroyer."

Pellaeon squinted at the display, reading the information on the incoming ship. Yara was right, it
certainly wasn't a Star Destroyer. The model of the ship also left no room to doubt who was on
board. *Now that is unexpected...*

"This is it", Rex confirmed, holding the ring in the palm of his hands.

Sabine leaned over from the co-pilot's chair. "You sure? How do you know with that thing?"

Rex chuckled and slipped the glowing piece of jewellery back on his finger for safekeeping. "I just
do."

"It's alright", Ezra said, "I trust you."

Ezra hit the button to power down the *Starbrid*'s hyperdrive. He didn't need Rex's assurance to
know that they'd arrived, he could feel it. That presence in the force that had drawn him off
the *Chimaera* all those years ago, the one he'd felt from the stars every night of his exile, the one
that had driven him in the lead up to his rescue - it all led here.

The hyperspace corridor melted back into the familiar dark expanse of space. Looming large in
front of them was yet another one of the barren, rocky worlds Ezra had seen so many of over the
years. *This is it.*

"Huh", Rex mumbled from over his shoulder, "Nothing in sight."

It took another moment for the sensors to pick up the specks of activity on the planet below.

Sabine leaned forward and watched the screens closely. "Hang on, we're picking something up."

"Friendly?", Rex asked.

"I'll take us in closer." Ezra hit the engines and guided them towards the planet, watching the space
outside carefully.

Suddenly, Sabine gasped. "Wait, they're Star Destroyers! Two of them!"

*Karabast.* Ezra instantly began checking their weapons and glanced at the shield indicator too.
Then, he paused. Something wasn't quite right.

"There's other ships too", Sabine continued. Ezra looked over to his wife squinting at the screen.
"Nothing I've ever seen but they're big, some sort of cruiser."

"Doesn't matter what it is." Rex got to his feet and narrowed his eyes at the planet. "Ahsoka and
Luke are here somewhere and we're going to-"

*Beep beep. Beep beep.*

The alarm made them all jump. Ezra's first instinct was a proximity alarm, but it wasn't that. He
was still getting used to the ship's noises. In fact, it was the incoming communication alert.

Ezra looked at Sabine, then at Rex. "Who's hailing us? Ahsoka?"

"No", Sabine shook her head. "Look like it's one of those unknown ships. I don't recognise the
signature."

"Better than a Star Destroyer", Ezra muttered and hit the accept call button.
He almost choked on air when he saw the holographic figure of Thrawn project itself on the console-mounted display.

"Thrawn!", Rex growled.

The Chiss looked so similar, he didn't seem to have aged a day since they first ran into him on Lothal. The only difference was his uniform. Gone was that white Grand Admiral's attire, and instead Thrawn had a new black uniform on that Ezra didn't recognise. The symbol of the shoulder was unfamiliar too, but it certainly wasn't any Imperial one that he knew of.

Thrawn's cold red eyes scanned all three of them. "Ezra Bridger, Sabine Wren, Captain Rex. An unexpected-"

"Can it, Thrawn!", Rex interrupted, "Where are they?! What have you done with them?!

"Tano and Skywalker are on the surface below", Thrawn said calmly, knowing exactly who they were talking about.

That meant one of two things. The first guess was that Thrawn had found them and tracked them here, hoping to catch them for some reason or another. However, it didn't explain the new ship, new uniform, or the fact that Thrawn didn't just blast them out the sky to begin with.

No, something else is going on. Ezra cast his mind back to when he escaped his jungle world over a year ago. After Argos bought him the time to escape, Ezra had tried to slip away before Thrawn closed in. However, before he could, Thrawn had contacted him. The Chiss had offered him a choice: try to flee, or join him. Ezra had always wondered why Thrawn did that.

Perhaps, the most likely option wasn't the correct one. Thrawn knew they were there, but for some reason he wasn't trying to kill them.

"Well...", Rex slammed his fist on the console,"You're not going to lay a finger on them."

Thrawn furrowed his brow. "I don't thi-"

"Don't worry, Rex." Sabine smirked at Thrawn, "He couldn't stop just Ahsoka and I last time, I'm sure the three of us plus the two of them will be fine."

"He's not trying to kill them."

Ezra looked at his two companions, both staring at him in confusion. They couldn't sense what he could. Ezra didn't blame them for jumping to the conclusion that they did - he had no love for Thrawn either - but they had to keep their minds on the facts, not on their preconceptions.

"I am not", Thrawn confirmed.

Sabine scrunched her face at the Chiss. "What are you talking about?"

"We are working together."

"Bah!", Rex threw up his arms,"Why would Luke and Ahsoka ever work with someone like you."

"For the same reason the three of you came out here. The same reason Skywalker and Tano came out here in the first place", Thrawn countered.

*Thrawn knew*. Maybe Ezra should have given him that much credit. That world that Ahsoka and Sabine had found him on was littered with old ruins, bodies, and evidence that left him with so
many questions. Thrawn was many things, but definitely not stupid. With his eye for art and detail, how could the Chiss not have caught on to something out here? Especially with the Inquisitor around, the Chiss too must have noticed that something in the Unknown Regions wasn't right.

Thrawn gave them a moment to take in the news before continuing. "We have little time to explain. We all know that something dangerous is out here. I have you to thank, Bridger, for putting us on its trail. I do not claim to understand it, but I know enough to believe that it must never be unleashed on the galaxy. While some of the other members of my fleet, the Inquisitor included, did not agree, others did."

"You're trying to stop this... thing, too?", Sabine looked utterly befuddled.

Thrawn nodded. "We are. After setting up an alliance with your two friends, we also managed to get support from my own people. Together, we launched this attack. Skywalker and Tano are on the ground now, entering the ruin in which we believe this great threat is contained." He moved his eyes back to Ezra. "If you are here now, I can only assume that there is a reason for it. You Jedi have a habit of fortuitous appearances."

"Guilty as charged", Ezra replied with a bit of humour. It quickly ebbed away. "It's complicated. We just knew to come."

"A great many things are complicated", Thrawn agreed.

"So... what?", Sabine folded her arms unhappily, "We're meant to trust you just like that?"

Thrawn shook his head slightly, "No one could reasonably expect such a change of heart. However, I ask that you trust your friends. They saw fit to join us in this endeavour, so take that for what it's worth."

Ezra shared a look with Sabine. She didn't like this one bit, but he could feel the acceptance from her. Ahsoka and Luke's safety was worth whatever risk trusting Thrawn's word brought.

"Fine", Rex answered sternly for them, "As long as your people don't try killing us, we won't kill them."

"That is all we need." Thrawn started to do something on his end. "I can arrange a TIE escort. Enemy capital ships have been destroyed but fighters remain in the air."

"We can deal with a few fighters", Sabine replied bluntly. The hostility might have been gone, but she definitely didn't like having to trust Thrawn. Honestly, neither did Ezra.

"All we need is their location", Ezra added.

"Of course." Thrawn did something else on his end. "I'm sending you the coordinates now. It'll be a ruin, buried into the ground. Tano and Skywalker will be inside somewhere. Beware of allied Chiss and Stormtroopers. I'll send word ahead but I'd rather you not inflict any unnecessary casualties."

The coordinates came through for a site on the surface. All of the ships and activity they'd been picking up on the planet below were clustered around it. Getting there was going to be tricky.

"What about that Inquisitor?", Ezra asked.

"Also below, possibly in the ruin. However, I'm sure she wouldn't be much trouble to you, assuming Skywalker and Tano haven't dealt with her already."
His thoughts dwelt on the Inquisitor for a moment. Ezra was confident he could beat her in a straight fight, Luke could too. Not to mention Ahsoka, who'd already proved to be on a whole other level to all of them. The Inquisitor wouldn't be the biggest obstacle they'd face, but Ezra knew better than to ignore the potential threat all together.

"Alright, we're heading down. Make sure you tell your people not to shoot us", Ezra warned.

"I will make sure", the Chiss assured them. "I wish you every success, Bridger."

The call disconnected, leaving the Starbird's cockpit in uncomfortable silence.

Ezra had hoped he'd never run into Thrawn again out here. In retrospect, he should have known better than that. It was Thrawn that was ultimately responsible for his own exile, for the years of separation, for Kanan's death, for Lothal's misery, and so many of the things that had caused him and his friends so much pain.

Still, Ezra knew to trust him right now. Ezra felt the sincerity of his words, the honesty with which he spoke. After seeing the destruction wrought on those other planets, how could any sane person not want to stand against it? That didn't mean Thrawn was his friend, but right now the Chiss wasn't his enemy.

Sabine let out a sigh and rubbed her forehead. "I don't even know what just happened."

"Me neither", Rex agreed, "All I know if that I want to be out of this place ASAP."

Ezra nodded wordlessly and guided the ship down to the surface. His stomach turned with each passing second as they drew closer.

Luke jumped down the last few metal steps into the bottom of the pit. The ruin Thrawn had talked about stood waiting for them at the bottom. Set into one of the pit walls was a large rectangular doorway several metres across. In front of it lay a podium with an unfamiliar symbol atop it.

For all the effort it took to get her, the ruin didn't look all that impressive. However, looks could be deceiving. Luke hadn't felt such a concentrated evil since he met the Emperor. This was definitely the place.

The squad of painted stormtroopers formed up behind them, and the Sergeant walked up to Ahsoka. "Ma'am, we're ready when you are."

Luke wasn't sure if they'd be coming in with them. It never hurt to have an extra set of eyes. He nodded, "Good. Let's not was-"

"No", Ahsoka interrupted, "Keep your squad here and secure the entrance. Luke and I can handle things inside."

Luke wasn't sure whether that was the best choice, but he trusted her judgement. Then again, if this thing was as powerful as he feared then stormtroopers wouldn't be much help to them.

Suddenly, Luke felt something. He felt a little brighter, more optimistic, and more safe. It certainly wasn't this place doing it - this ruin was one of the most evil things he'd ever encountered - but there was definitely something else. He thought back to that feeling of movement he'd sensed over the last few weeks. Perhaps this was the same thing.

"Hey", Ahsoka clearly noticed his flustered reaction, "You ready to get going?"
He shook it away. "Yeah, let's do this."

Ahsoka gave him a half-smile and pulled her staff out of its sling. That odd artefact never ceased to amaze him. She pressed some unseen button and it extended back out to its usual length. Ahsoka turned and led the way towards the ruin, tapping the staff down with every step. It was a change of pace from the fast battle they'd just run out of, but caution and patience would absolutely serve them better here.

Luke stopped and looked at the pillar set just outside the ruin. He couldn't make sense of the symbol on top of it, not what it meant or what it was made of. He stopped to brush his left hand over it, feeling the strange metal. Like so much else about this place, it felt wrong. Leaving the strange object behind, Luke followed Ahsoka in to the ruin.

It was especially dark inside. They should have been able to see down so much further than they could. Ahsoka led the way carefully down the ancient steps, leaving the muffled noises of battle behind them.

On his hip, Luke swore he felt some sort of vibrating feeling. Luke was almost getting fed up of this. First one 'feeling', then another, then another - each one more vague and frustrating than the last. The feeling kept up and Luke glanced down to the bag slung around his body. Something inside was calling for attention. Luke stopped and opened it, digging through for the culprit. That brooch Ahsoka gave him drew his mind first, but the curiosity quickly switched to another object: the compass. The blue stone in its centre was glowing brightly, illuminating the whole bag.

Ahsoka had stopped further down the stairs. "What's wrong?", she saw the compass in his hands, "What's happening?"

He faced it to her, letting her see the glow. "No idea, it's never done this before."

The compass had come into his hands on Pillio at one of the Emperor's secret observatories. Luke never knew what compelled him to take it, or what told him to bring it with him out here. Clearly, it had some purpose. Maybe he was about to find out what that was.

He pressed the catch to open it. All the dials pointed down the corridor in front of them. It was a compass, after all, but where was it guiding them?

"I'll take the lead", he announced to Ahsoka, taking the next few steps down.

She stepped aside and let him pass, following close behind with the light.

The stairs didn't go on for much further and at the bottom they found another one of those pillars. Luke looked back up the long stairs and was barely able to see the glimmers of light at the top. That other pillar was just in view, the symbol on top of it barely distinguishable from all the way down here.

Ahsoka took a step forward and waved her staff around the chamber they were in, its pure white light banishing the darkness around them. The room was large with several obscured corridors leading off from it. Another one of the podiums stood in the centre of the room and a number of tall statues were dotted around the walls, watching silently over the forgotten ruin.

"It's too quiet. There's a battle going on outside but down here there's nothing." Ahsoka was barely more than whispering, as if to drive the point home. "No one else is here, no troopers, nothing. This place is just removed, locked away from the galaxy."

Luke glanced down at the compass again. "Maybe that's the point."
The dials on the compass were just visible from the sapphire light of the lodestone. They all pointed towards one particular exit across the chamber. The compass vibrated physically as Luke held it up towards the passage. It was a clear sign of where they needed to go. He led the way, past yet another one of those identical pillars set just inside the passageway.

They climbed a handful of small stone steps and came into a short corridor. At the far end was a sealed black door. Setting his eyes on it sent a chill up his spine. *That's it.* After all this time, all these months, this was it.

"I think we're...", Luke trailed off as he saw Ahsoka carefully inspecting the wall to their left. "What's wrong?", Luke asked as he stepped forward.

Etched into the wall were a series of intricately carved panels. There were figures, weapons, stars, buildings - a chronicle no doubt related to what they'd come here for. Ahsoka was fixated on the very first panel. It showed people fighting beneath a great pyramid, with one figure rising from the top of it. It meant nothing to Luke.

"The pyramid...", Ahsoka's awed tone surprised him, "It's Malachor."

*Of course it is.* Malachor had kept turning up in their time out here. He didn't have the time to figure out what the panel was telling them, but it at least confirmed what that vision had long suggested - Malachor was key to all of this.


She sighed and pulled her eyes away. "You're right. Let's finish this."

Together, they approached the last door. Strangely, Luke couldn't feel anything specific on the other side. There was no handle, no hinge, and no indication whatsoever of how to open it.

"Allow me." Ahsoka raised her free hand and shut her eyes, reaching out with the force. With a smooth, gentle motion, she pulled down and the door followed.

On the other side, bathed in a deep red light, was a chamber similar in size to the one they'd passed earlier. A handful of steps led up to a raised area in the middle of the room, a few paces in from the door. Around that raised area stood twelve pedestals, and on all but one of them sat an orb just like the one Luke had seen in his vision. The spheres glimmered with the same red energy that lit up the rest of the room. They were all arranged around a central obelisk, about ten metres high, mounted on two pillars.

Most important of all, Luke saw two figures.

On her knees with her back to them was a young woman with short-cut hair, an unusual lightsaber on her back. He hadn't seen her before, but he knew that it had to be the Inquisitor he'd heard so much about.

"I have done as you asked, my Lord", the Fourth Sister's voice broke the silence.

In front of the Inquisitor, trapped between the two pedestals that held up the obelisk, Luke saw the second figure look at him with a grin. It was slumped on its knees with its waist held in place by one of the unusual restraints with two more of the blue tendrils holding its arms out to the side.

Luke didn't know what he'd expected to find out here, but it wasn't this. No horrid monster, no twisted creature, no decrepit old relic - just a man. Bound in place by the ethereal blue ropes was a tall near-human man. Even slumped over on its knees, the man was almost Luke's height. His skin
was a healthy tanned brown, unblemished by age or wrinkles. He had thick brown hair that fell down to his ears, and piercing blue eyes untouched by the yellow of most dark-siders Luke had known. The man was garbed in a clean black robe and tunic that clung tight to his form, showing a broad chest and thick muscled arms. Anywhere else in the galaxy, he'd have been considered handsome.

However, Luke knew looks were deceiving. For all its fair appearance, this thing's presence in the force felt foul. There was no warmth, no life, no happiness. The man was like a gaping void of darkness, utterly repugnant, and completely and totally consumed with evil.

It laughed as its blue eyes met the new arrivals. "At long last."

The man's large hand clenched into a fist. In Luke's own hands, the compass jolted and the centre stone pulsed intensely. Then, the blue glow that had started when they entered cut out.

Seconds later, the glowing blue tendrils holding this strange being in place fizzled and pulsed before dissipating into nothingness.

It slumped forward, free from its ancient restraints, as its cackling laugh echoed around the chamber.

The Chimaera's guns kept up the barrage as the final frigate escorting the Cunctator broke apart. The Arquitens-class ship dived nose-first into the bare rocky expanse far behind the dig site, billowing black smoke high in the air. It's nose crashed into the rock with a mighty explosion that soon engulfed the rest of the ship. It was just Hux now

Commandant Hux was anything but a competent military mind. A Star Destroyer and two supporting frigates should have been able to keep her and Vanto's ships occupied for a while. Under Hux's command, it was barely more than a nerf-shoot. The first frigate had gone down in seconds, fully exposed to both the Chimaera and the Unyielding's attacks. This second one had tried to move to a better position closer to the Cunctator, but it never got the chance to.

As Faro and Vanto bore down on him, Hux's resolve had faltered. From his position above the ruin, Hux had pulled back and turned the lumbering ship around, trying to gain some altitude and escape the slaughter. Faro came in from the starboard side as Vanto came up on his rear, guns tearing apart the shields protecting the engines.

"How're their shields looking, Commander?", Faro called back to Hammerly.

Hovering over the new Sensor Officer that had taken her place, Hammerly gave a reassuring smile. " Barely holding, he won't last much longer."

The Commodore turned her head back to the bridge's viewport. Off to her right, the Unyielding was slowing to a halt to take position about a thousand feet above the ruin, also knowing that Hux wouldn't be running much further.

The Cunctator's shields were straining under the fire, just like the Chimaera's own had as they broke through Canady's blockade. Finally, they gave way.

"They're down!", Hammerly confirmed.

Faro nodded over to her Weapons Officer. "Pyrondi?"

The man kept his focus on his screen, directing every turbolaser at the now exposed engines. Faro
watched through the window as the left-most engine at the rear of the Cunctator was torn apart by green turbolaser fire. Pale blue fire from the Unyielding quickly destroyed the centre engine too. Its engines gone, the Cunctator was finished. It listed to the left and arced downward towards the ground.

The massive ship's bow slammed into the hard rocky service about two clicks off their port side, ploughing through layers of rocks and stone as it crashed to ground. Several small explosions were set off by the impact, the final engine overheated and exploded, the sensor array near the bow sparked and set off a large electrical explosion a hundred metres tall, and countless other areas of the ship burst into flames. The bridge survived and there was a good chance Hux survived with it, but the ship was done for.

"We got them!", Vanto boasted over the comm. Faro rolled her eyes amusedly. "You got them? I think you're seeing things, Vanto", she joked. "Hmph, we'll pick apart the data later", the other man promised.

The Commodore set the commlink back on her belt and gave a relieved sigh. For the most part, they'd won the air battle. Every enemy cruiser and frigate was destroyed, all of their own were intact, and they had almost complete air dominance over the site. Vanto's Unyielding had taken position high over the dig site, shrouding the area under the Arsiss-class cruiser's shadow.

Below them, Faro could still see the TIE squadrons locked in dogfights a hair's breadth from the ground. The flashes of explosions and concentrated areas of laser fire showed that the ground battle was still raging too.

"Commodore, I see everything is going well down there", Thrawn's voice came over the comm channel without warning.

"All clear", she confirmed. Faro looked out to the starboard side at the smouldering remains of the Solicitude that had crashed into the ground only minutes earlier. "I see you two up there have done your jobs."

The Chiss showed little sign of celebrating. "Enemy ships are gone for now but I have some other news for you."

She wrinkled her nose, "Is something wrong?"

"No, but there's a ship incoming to the surface. Watch your fire and make sure they get to ground safely."

A ship? She didn't have any idea why there'd be any more ships out here.

She pressed him for more details. "What ship? Who?"

"Bridger."

Faro's breath caught for a moment. The name caught her off-guard, as it had the rest of her bridge crew given how silent they became.

"What's Bridger doing out here? Why now?", she asked, doing her best to hide the surprise in her voice.

"I do not know", Thrawn admitted, "But if he is here, we must again assume there is a reason for
She shut her eyes and took in a deep breath. "Got it, Grand Admiral. I'll make sure everyone knows to expect another Jedi."

"Miss Wren too, and the Clone Captain Rex", he added.

Wonderful. "As you say, they'll be safe", she assured him.

Faro pinched the bridge of her nose and dropped her head. Why are they here? Why now? It didn't sit right with her. She understood Thrawn's implication when he said they must be here for a reason. The 'will of the force' as the Jedi called it had led Bridger to find all the signs that had made sure he'd come back out here, drawing him onto unknown planets and leaving Thrawn and the rest of their fleet to pick through the pieces. If Bridger was coming out here now, and bringing both the Mandalorian and the Clone with him, then something important was going down.

Perhaps this mission wasn't going to be as simple as she'd started to hope.

Luke let the defunct compass drop out of his shaking hands.

"So long", it laughed, "After all this time..."

The Fourth Sister shuffled backwards on her knees, taking in the sight of the thing she'd apparently been serving for so long. Luke looked to Ahsoka next to him. The Togruta stood defiant, not a hint of fear on her face. Luke hoped he looked that brave right now.

It got up to one knee, resting its large hands on its thigh as it took in deep, rasping breaths. "They thought... they thought that by taking the keys to the binds that they'd ensnare me here forever." It laughed again. "Ignorant fools. The keys called to their rightful place. The Jedi and the Sith knew that, and hoped it would lead them back here when they could destroy me. Instead, it led blind fools like you right where I needed you."

Luke hurriedly grabbed the compass from the ground. Still intact, the dull stone in its centre and the intricate carvings on its casing had given nothing away.

"Yes...", It could see him staring at the tiny trinket. "My apprentice found one and brought it here with the Chiss. You brought the other, young Skywalker. The final key to my freedom."

No. All this time, and it was all for this. Not a compass but a key. The force-imbued stone in its centre providing the final piece to unlock whatever had kept this thing locked away here.

As Luke looked back, he saw the Fourth Sister prostrate herself before the being. "I am ready to serve, just as you asked, Lord Snoke."

So, it had a name. Luke hadn't head of any 'Snoke' before.

The name caught its attention. Snoke's mouth twitched into a wretched smile. "So you are."

"What are you?", Ahsoka's voice cut across the chamber, reverberating around the stony walls.

Snoke's shining blue eyes focused on Ahsoka and a devious smile crawled onto its lips. "Something more."

Ahsoka took a cautionary step forward, bringing the staff forward with her. "I've seen more than you know", she replied.
Their enemy huffed a laugh at her boldness. "Perhaps you have, Togruta."

The towering man shut his eyes and pushed himself onto his feet. Snoke took a second to check his balance before opening his eyes and refocusing on the two of them. Snoke was well over seven feet tall, looking down on the other three people in the room with him.

"Once, I walked the path of the Sith", he began.

"Until Malachor", Ahsoka interrupted.

Ahsoka stood firm and held Snoke's glare. The word struck a chord in the dark-sider and Luke saw his lip twitch in anger. Luke remembered what he'd heard in the vision - "He should have died at Malachor." Looking at the man in front of them now, Luke never would have guessed that. The individual before them looked strong, healthy, and powerful.

*Your eyes can deceive you, don't trust them.* Ben's words, among the first Luke had learned of the force, came back to him. As the anger seethed on the being's face, Luke looked past it and reached in to feel what Snoke really was. *Pain, death, sorrow, hatred, and nothingness.* Even the Emperor had not felt so utterly devoid of warmth and life.

"The cowards tried to use the weapon", Snoke growled, "But it did not work. It misfired and wiped out all of them. The foolish Sith at that temple as well as the Jedi sent there to destroy them. Or at least, it wiped out almost all of them." Snoke stepped forward, looming over the kneeling Inquisitor but keeping his eyes on Ahsoka. "I was at the periphery of the blast. It could not kill me, but it transformed me. The death, the pain, the *power*, he took in a satisfied breath, "It gave it to me."

"You're a wound in the force...", Ahsoka breathed.

Luke looked over to her. He had no idea where she'd learned of something like that, but Luke couldn't think of a better label. This being felt as if any goodness or warmth had been torn from it and replaced with unimaginable darkness.

"A wound", Snoke laughed dismissively. "I am no wound, no weakness. I am a vessel for absolute power in the force."

"You shouldn't exist", the Togruta said breathlessly. "The force can't sustain something like that. You'd destroy yourself."

Snoke sucked in a long drawn-out breath. "Ah, and yet here I stand." He turned to the side and took a step toward one of the pedestals with the orb set upon it. "It is true that, in weaker hands, such power would break most. However, for those strong enough to... conquer those limitations, the opportunities are endless." Snoke set his hand on the orb and smile amusedly. "Unfortunately, I do need the living force to sustain myself."

Luke's eye widened. *The orb.* Again, he remembered his vision. He remembered the hooded figure and the poor monk it murdered. The figure had drained the life out of the temple's defender and absorbed that essence into the orb. An orb just like the one set on all of these pedestals.

"These orbs...", Luke breathed, "The living force. I saw what that... thing did."

Snoke looked over at him with a sadistic grin. "I admire you both, I have to say. So much wiser and more perceptive than those that came before", he bellowed. The amusement faded and his harsh glare refocused on the orb. "They kept me sustained all this time, but they trapped me here", he spat.
"I don't understand, what is this place?", Luke asked. He looked around at the chamber, "And how did you get the orbs here if they trapped you here?"

"Oh, you misunderstand", Snoke raised his hands and motioned around, "This is my home. The Jedi and the Sith did not build this place. It was built for me. They merely used it - an attempt to insult me by trapping me here. The Jedi were too weak to kill me, and the Sith too arrogant to pass up the opportunity to humiliate me."

"Why not just kill you?", Luke asked, "Why here?"

"They couldn't kill him." Ahsoka stepped forward again but was looking at Luke. "A wound will reconstitute itself. Try to destroy it and it won't stay destroyed for long."

Snoke smiled at her sinisterly. "My, my, Togruta. Even I am impressed. Your wisdom is wasted on the Jedi."

Luke shook his head, "That makes no sense. Why would they leave you here where they knew you'd be kept alive? Why not destroy these orbs?"

"Think about it", Ahsoka answered, "If this... device is what kept him trapped here, destroying the orbs would mean that nothing would keep him here. He'd just walk right out. They couldn't kill him either, so trapping him here like this would be the only choice."

"So... what? You built a prison in your own home?", Luke squinted at Snoke.

Snoke huffed, "Prison? That is what it became but is not its original purpose." He turned his back to them and admired the obelisk towering behind him. "The living force has so much potential. However, it needs a living conduit to be unleashed. I, unfortunately, was not so."

"That doesn't explain what this damn thing is!", Luke snapped, frustrated at all the dancing around the issue.

"It's a weapon...", Ahsoka breathed, "The temple world, the destroyed planets - it has to be."

"Not the exact one I used elsewhere, the others could be moved", Snoke laughed. "But again, you learn quickly. My home needed defence and I knew exactly how to provide it. The force is many things, a weapon being but one of its uses."

Luke looked skeptically at the two pillars between which Snoke had been held. What sort of weapon had a place to stick a prisoner? "You got stuck in a weapon?", Luke questioned.

"Like he said, it needs a living conduit", Ahsoka pointed out. She turned back to Snoke, "You aren't a conduit. They trapped you in that weapon but it could never fire, not with you."

Snoke growled lowly to himself and turned back. "They did, and took the keys to my shackles that you so foolishly returned."


A bemused smile appeared on Snoke's face. "Oh, is that why you think I let you come here? No, any living conduit can power the weapon. It might be the reason I was trapped here but the weapon itself means little to me. It is just a means to an end."
"What end?", Ahsoka demanded.

"I thought you of all people would know, Togruta. I can feel its mark on you. I can sense your knowledge, your understanding of it. I was denied it once. With the two of you, the power to pierce the veil would be within my grasp."

_Pierce the veil? What was Snoke talking about? Why would Ahsoka know anything? What in the - wait._ Luke recalled that strange vision one last time. He remembered what those servants of Snoke had come there for. _The World Between Worlds._


The realisation crept over her face. "Impossible...", she turned back to Snoke, "Impossible. No dark sider can set foot there."

"The force makes everything, and it can destroy everything. The living force can break that barrier, but it must be strong. Like, say, when it is concentrated within two powerful and experienced warriors... such as yourselves."

"You're insane. You think hooking us up to that weapon of yours will give you access to the gateway?", Ahsoka scoffed.

"If I believed that, I wouldn't have wasted time talking to you", Snoke retorted. "No, as I said, the weapon is just a means to that end. It will not get me through the veil, but it will clear out my enemies to make way."

Snoke turned around and looked at the Fourth Sister. She'd been watching the whole exchange silently from her knees. A bad feeling crawled up from Luke's gut.

"You Jedi have your use to me, but now...", Snoke loomed large over the Inquisitor, "So will you."

Snoke's movement was too fast. His fingers erupted in a blast of force lightning that hit the stone at his feet and danced instantly across the room at them. Luke felt the familiar searing pain as the electricity coursed through his body and sent him flying back. Beside him, Ahsoka flew back, even she'd been too slow to react. They both landed roughly on the ground by the podium at the doorway.

Luke didn't remain stunned for long and was scrambling to his knees as soon as he landed, even as his right hand still twitched from the currents, using the stone podium to hold himself up. Snoke was simply staring at them from the obelisk, with the Fourth Sister watching them with a smug grin.

Luke held Snoke's gaze for a second, unsure of his next move. Then, his enemy's blue eyes flicked away and focused on the Inquisitor. Snoke reached out his hand to his apprentice. With a gasp, the Fourth Sister flew into Snoke's grasp. Snoke caught her by the neck, holding the woman up to eye-level with his large hands. The Fourth Sister grabbed at the hand, her legs flailing in the air. The hand around her throat flashed blue as Snoke sent a short jolt of lightning through his apprentice.

"Ah, my naive apprentice", he admonished her as she gasped for breath. "So utterly blind, so consistently embarrassing. Pathetic. Gullible. Weak."

The Inquisitor tried to struggle with the last ounces of her strength. "I wanted to help you...", she choked, "To serve..."

"You?", Snoke laughed again. "Only you could be so stupid. You were useless as an agent." Snoke
turned his head to the obelisk, "At least you can be of some use elsewhere."

Snoke stepped over to the obelisk, the Inquisitor struggling fruitlessly in his grasp, and threw her down between the pillars. His fist tightened and the shimmering blue ropes that had kept him in place coiled around the Fourth Sister.

Then, Luke felt a horrible surge in the force. The orbs around the obelisk started to vibrate and glow, the red hue growing more intense. Luke felt the same horrible, unnatural feeling he'd felt in the vision as the orb stole away the monk's life force. No... no, no, no, no!

The overwhelming sensation assaulted every sense he had. He looked over to Ahsoka. She was on her knees too, pushing herself up using her staff.

"Ugh... gah...", he heard the Fourth Sister struggling against the restraints, "What's... what's happening?"

"You're doing what you always wanted to do, my apprentice." Snoke stepped aside as he spoke, stepping away from the obelisk and the orbs.

The orbs were glowing even brighter now, bathing the entire room in a blood-red glow. He and Ahsoka both looked at the podium between them. The triangular symbol atop it started to vibrate.

Snoke cackled from the far side of the room, now well clear of his abhorrent devices. "You wanted to help me destroy the Imperials, did you not? Here then."

Extending his oversized hand towards the Inquisitor, Snoke focused in and shut his eyes. His fist clenched. Everything happened at once.

The orbs erupted with a stream of intense red energy. Every stream crashed into the Inquisitor, lighting the obelisk above her with the same red glow. Luke could barely hear her screams over the deafening roar of the orbs' beams.

"Luke!" He turned quickly to Ahsoka and could easily see why. On the podium between them, the triangle was lit up too, just like the obelisk. "Move!"

He didn't think twice. Luke threw himself to the side away from the podium, as did Ahsoka. Seconds later, the obelisk shot out a massive stream of energy right at the podium. The beam went through the triangle and shot straight down the corridor to the other podium at the far end.

All Luke could hear was the roar of the weapon and the Fourth Sister's helpless screams.

"Commodore!"

The voice of her Sensor Officer surprised Faro. She lifted her head and walked over to him from the map table.

"Something wrong?", she asked him.

"Yeah...", he pointed to his screen, "Energy spike a few seconds ago from the surface. No idea what it is."

Faro peered over the man's shoulder and looked at the screen. An energy spike had come out of nowhere on the surface and was growing more intense by the second. It wasn't electronic, it wasn't radioactive, and it wasn't thermal.
"Commodore", came Thrawn's voice across the channel, "There appears to be a situation..."

"Yeah, I'm seeing it." Faro kept watching the readings go higher and higher. Unsure what to make of it, she made her way over to the top of the bridge. "Vanto?", she asked through the comm as she reached the window, "You seeing this?"

Faro waited and watched the *Unyielding* as it hovered high above the dig site below. She felt her heart-rate ramping up with every second. She had a really, really, bad feeling about this.

"Energy spike, we've got it too...", Vanto replied at last. "I th-", he cut off abruptly.

"Vanto?", Thrawn asked quickly, "Vanto?"

"I... it's... it's coming from the ruin!"

As Vanto said it, Faro saw a flash of red light down in the dig site. *What in the-?*

The flash of light erupted into a giant beam of pure energy. It fired straight up at the sky, and right at the *Unyielding* suspended directly above it.

"No! Move! Mov-"

The beam of energy shot up and ripped through the *Unyielding*'s hull like a thermoblade through butter. The Arsiss-class cruiser was split in two within seconds, the blast just barely missing the bridge towards the rear of the ship.

"Eli?!", Thrawn yelled over the comm, "Eli?!"

There was only static as the beam cut out as quickly as it appeared. The Arsiss-class cruiser was burning. The attack had split the thing right down the middle. The bow of the ship started to fall to the ground. The rear - with the bridge clinging on - fell backwards and plummeted to the ground.

Both missed the dig site itself and crashed into the surrounding area. The bow of the ship came down a few hundred metres from the ruin, just clear of the battle. The rear of the *Unyielding* crashed down over the old Imperial camp. The field HQ disappeared under the wreckage and a wall of dust, ash, and debris went out in all directions.

"Vanto?!", Faro urged, "You still there?"

Faro could still see the bridge structure intact. The beam had cut clean through the ship and she prayed it had missed him.

"Thrawn...", Bridger's voice made her jump. She had no idea he was even patched into this channel. "That wasn't an ordinary weapon." The Jedi sounded breathless and even fearful.

"Bridger, what was that?", Pellaeon asked desperately.

Bridger sighed over the comm channel. "I don't know", he admitted, "But you need to get your people out of here now. There's nothing else you can do here."

"Not so fast, Bridger", Thrawn countered, "We stay here until we know this threat is gone, or until we breathe our last."

"Oh, so now you decide to be noble?", Bridge muttered.

Faro paid no mind to Bridger's mistrust, that was entirely understandable, but she did trust him - or
at least she trusted his warning. Whatever just took out Vanto was something far beyond their ability to counter. This weapon, if that's what it even was, had torn through the Chiss ship easily. She doubted a Star Destroyer, or its crew, would fare much better.

They were cut off by a sudden cough over the comm.

"I-", a familiar voice coughed again, "Anyone there?"

Vanto?!

"Eli!", Thrawn sound relieved.

"Yeah...", another cough, "I'm... I'm here."

Faro breathed a sigh of relief, "Thought we lost you there."

There were a few panting breaths. "No, I'm alright... can't say the same for the ship though. What... what was that?"

"We don't know, though it seems obvious that it's something to do with whatever lies below", Thrawn reasoned.

"At least we didn't lose you, Vanto. We can send teams over to fetch you", Pellaeon suggested.

"Forget it, focus on the mission. We'll find our own way out", Vanto assured them.

Faro would have preferred sending someone down, but she trusted him to take care of himself and his crew. Vanto had his own responsibility, and she had hers.

Leaving Thrawn and the others to sort things out for now, she quickly switched over to another channel. "Xoxtin? How are those shuttles I asked for?"

"All ready, Commodore", the old hangar overseer replied, "Can I ask what they're for?"

Faro took a deep breath and turned back to her bridge crew.

"Attention, everyone." A hush fell over the bridge and every eye turned to her. "You all saw what just happened, and as you know, the Chimaera's hyperdrive is fried. We're not getting off this planet in this ship and there's no doubting which ship is the next closest target for... whatever that weapon was. Besides, every enemy ship is done for, which means our job is done. I'm ordering a full evacuation. Some shuttles have been prepared in the hangar and I'm preparing all escape pods for non-emergency launch."

She saw every face sink. Some went wide-eyed, some mouths fell open.

"W-what? We're abandoning ship?", Hammerly asked disbelievingly.

"Unless you've been hiding the ability to fix a hyperdrive with no materials, Commander, then yes", Faro smiled a bit, trying to inject a bit of humour. "But like I said, there's no question which ship will be in the firing line if - when - that weapon fires again. There's nothing more the Chimaera can do here."

Her bridge crew didn't answer. It had all been going so well, none of them must have been expecting it to end so abruptly. With discontented murmurs, they started to following her orders. A few officers tentatively rose from their seats and began making for the door.
Keeping her eyes on the officers yet to budge, Faro raised her comm to speak to the whole ship. "Chimaera, this is Commodore Faro. Abandon ship. All non-essential personnel make your way to the hangars or the escape pods immediately."

That managed to prompt a few more. The stormtrooper guards at the far end of the bridge exchanged a look behind their helmets before joining the stream of people taking their leave. Only the most stubborn of her officers were holding back.

"Even me?", Lieutenant Pyrondi stood up from the weapons station.

"You see any ships to shoot, Lieutenant?" He had no answer. "Then get yourself down to the hangar."

He nodded reluctantly and joined the end of the crowd fleeing the bridge. Still hunched over the map table, Commander Hammerly looked lost for words.

"Commander", Faro caught her attention, "Go oversee the evacuation. I need you to make sure everyone gets onboard.

Hammerly stammered. "W-what about you?", she asked.

Faro sighed, "I'll be there later. I need to be here to respond if anything happens."

The Commander bit back a reply. "Aye aye, ma'am", she said with resignation.

Faro flashed her an approving smile before Hammerly turned and followed on the tail of the rest of the crew. Faro looked around at the empty bridge. Almost empty. Her eyes focused on the man still at his station.

"Agral?", she called over to the helmsman, "I meant everyone."

"You're not moving this ship without me, Commodore", he replied, "I'm staying however long you do."

Agral had a point. She didn't know how to pilot the Chimaera. If they needed to manoeuvre in any way, she'd need him here. It wasn't ideal, but it was necessary.

"As you will, Lieutenant", she conceded.

Clasping her hands behind her back, she walked slowly up the bridge, pondering on their next move. Their victory had become a lot less secure very quickly. Whatever was going on down there, it was out of their hands now. They had to trust Skywalker, Tano, and now Bridger and his friends to sort this out.

Chapter End Notes

I can gloss over most things and focus on Snoke. I'm still not entirely happy with how that big reveal section played out. A lot of answers had to be given in a very short space of time and I had to balance it between giving away too much and not giving enough. The cliche of the villain explaining his secret plan to the heroes ended up
being unavoidable, but that doesn't mean I'm entirely satisfied with it.

Surprise, surprise - it's Snoke. Many people figured that out a long time ago. Snoke was always a pretty safe guess for a big, dangerous, unknown force-wielder lurking the the Unknown Regions after the OT. I have not been subtle with dialogue and stuff either and there's been plenty of little things throughout that hint at Snoke. In Chapter 11 as Ezra leaves the WBW, the last voice he hears is Snoke's "there has been an awakening" line. In Chapter 20, Snoke promises the Inquisitor a place in his new "Order" and has a particular interest in Vader. Chapter 23 has phrases like "sharp tool" and "heir to Lord Vader" that are both from Snoke in TLJ. Chapter 28 sees Snoke end his conversation with an ominous "We shall see" just as he does to Kylo in TFA, and in Chapter 31 we get "Bring. Them. To. Me" in the same vein as Snoke's instructions about Rey. I don't think it was a huge surprise to most of you, so I didn't overplay the name reveal, not that the name would mean anything to Luke or Ahsoka at this point anyway. Also, that bizarre hooded figure with a mask and "chitinous fingers" from Luke's vision in Chapter 28? One of Snoke's attendants. I did say it wasn't my creation.

As for what Snoke is, he's a wound in the force created at Malachor when that weapon fired. He's pretty much a rip-off of Darth Nihilus, but he gets to keep his physical form like Meetra Surik does. However, unlike his lovely masked forebear, Snoke has found a means to 'store' force energy inside special kyber orbs. These orbs have shown up once or twice before. At Site Three, Ezra and the Fourth Sister note a smashed orb upon an altar. That is one of those orbs, the one from the empty pedestal that Luke sees here, destroyed in a battle between Snoke's followers and his enemies. Its destruction unleashed the energy within and wiped out all of the combatants, similar to Malachor's temple. The purple mist that shrouded Site Three was the residue left behind from that force energy. Luke's vision strongly alludes to the orb stuff when Snoke's attendant 'force drains' one of the monks into the orbs. For this story, Snoke's attendants are purely for the purpose of draining life. It's an almost ritualistic power he's granted them, but they're not powerful in themselves. Think of it as those royal guards that Ezra runs into in the finale. They have some crazy powers, but they're ultimately nothing special.

As for the weapon that fires, some sort of weapon has been linked to this threat since Site Two. I admit, this part did feel a bit... contrived I guess, but it's always been the plan and it fits with everything established so far. The weapon works by channelling the force energy of the orbs into a living conduit and then unleashing it as a powerful weapon. However, Snoke is no normal living conduit, so the power flows right through him in a sort of loop. Basically, the weapon can't fire properly and Snoke was just trapped in the device. As for Snoke getting trapped, it was by a combination of Jedi and Sith as he says. This author's note is getting too long, and everything that needs to be known to understand events will be in the story. However, I will have a full breakdown of the story behind Snoke, what he is, what he did, and how he was trapped in the post-story author's note. A lot of it just isn't necessary for the story and would just be piles of needless exposition. Also, the 'blue binds' that hold Snoke in place are inspired by the ones Yoda sees holding Sifo Dyas in TCW, if anyone wondered where those came from.

The chapter title and description are both unusual. They're nods to HP Lovecraft, someone I've dropped a few references to throughout this story. He is the name of a short-story inspired by Lovecraft's time in New York in which he describes meeting a bizarre man with the ability to show him the past, and ends with the man becoming shrivelled and wasting into a black mass. The whole door into another time thing was
actually weirdly appropriate for Snoke in this story due to the WBW thing, as is the link with shrivelled black bodies, so it felt like a good fit. The chapter description is also from that story, spliced together from two separate lines. I'm a big Lovecraft fan, as I'm sure many others are too, and that's most of the reason behind the choice. There's nothing really Lovecraftian about this story and I'm not sure I could pull that style off even if I wanted to, but I love his stuff too much to pass on the odd reference or two.

Next time: "I lived not in vain."
Chapter 37 - Sacrifice

Chapter Notes

Sorry, late again due to busy life stuff and a bit of difficulty with this chapter. I'll do my best to get the next chapter out on time, but apologies in advance it there's another delay.

This time: "I lived not in vain."

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No... it can't be.

Ezra had felt many terrible things in his life, but he'd never felt anything like that weapon.

Pain, anger, hatred, death - all of it concentrated into something raw and absolutely destructive. Wherever Luke and Ahsoka were, they were in terrible danger. They needed to get them out of there no matter what.

"I'm taking us in", Ezra said bluntly, eyeing the line of destroyed AT-ATs not far from the pit edge.

Sabine and Rex didn't say a word. They'd both seen what just happened and they both knew where that blast came from.

The Starbird came in low over the walkers, the clouds of dust kicked up by the destroyed cruiser still obscuring most of their view. Ezra saw flashes of blue and red as the forces below exchanged fire. A few of the flashes were coming from among the walkers; they'd have to fight their way from the landing site to that ruin below.

Relying on the scanners, Ezra slowed their ship and touched down not far behind the site. Rex was already pulling his helmet on and going for the door before the engines were powered down. Sabine stayed in the co-pilot's seat, watching Ezra closely as he turned everything off.

They didn't need to say a word. Ezra stood up and checked the saber at his hip. Sabine followed, but placed her helmet down on the chair. While she still had the chance, Sabine wrapped her arms around him silently. Ezra returned the hug, letting the unique aroma of paint, hair dye, and carbon scoring fill his senses. Sabine knew something was wrong, she knew that he wasn't sure how this was going to turn out, but here she was anyway. Whatever was about to happen, they were going to face it together no matter what.

With an affirmative squeeze of his hand, Sabine let go and pulled her helmet on. Rex was primed and ready, his old DC-17s in each hand, as Ezra and Sabine joined him at the exit ramp.

"We ready?", the Clone shouted to them.

Sabine drew her pistols and Ezra lit up the hold with the emerald green glow of his saber. We're ready.
Rex slammed his hand down on the button and dropped the exit ramp. Warm air rushed in with a cloud of dust. Ezra instinctively reached out with the force and kept it out of his eyes and mouth, trusting that Sabine and Rex had helmets to do that job for them.

They charged out of the ship and into the fray. As they'd seen coming in, red and blue laser fire filled the air. No one seemed to have picked them out yet at least. Ezra looked for the nearest source of blue laser fire - knowing that it wouldn't be any sort to stormtrooper - and rushed towards it. Visibility was low, but Ezra could start to make out three humanoid figures crouched behind a large rock.

A few stray shots whizzed past him as he ran. Rex fired a few shots off in that direction, but the clouds of dust cut off any chance of seeing where they landed.

The three humanoid figures were just what Ezra had expected: Chiss. The three Chiss soldiers crouched behind the rock spotted approaching. One went to raise his weapon, but the soldier next to them held them back. *Looks like Thrawn did tell them we were coming.*

The Chiss trio's leader shouted something in their language at her troops. As Ezra, Sabine, and Rex reached them, the Chiss leader raised a hand.

"Ezra Bridger?", the team's Sergeant asked with a heavy accent.

"Yeah", Ezra answered, crouching down in front of them. Rex slammed his back into the rock, taking cover from any other rogue lasers. Sabine went in next to him, looking over at Ezra as if to check that he was still okay.

"They told us you were coming", the Chiss woman said. Ezra was relieved that she spoke basic, that really was a lucky break for them. "You want the ruin, no?"

"Sure do", Rex answered loudly, "Which way?"

The Sergeant stood up and poked her head over the rock. "Over there!", she pointed directly in front of them, "But you have some problems." She ducked back down instantly as a shot ricocheted inches in front of her face.

"What kind of problems?", Sabine asked exasperatedly.

"Enemy soldiers. A small team of them are straight ahead!", she said between rushed breaths.

"They have superior position and visibility."

"Stormtroopers aren't a problem", Ezra assured her. He turned to Rex, "What do you see?"

The Clone poked his around the rock quickly, trying to spot where they were. "Ugh... all that damn dust's messing with my scopes. I-", he ducked back quickly as a shot flew past where he'd just been, "Never mind, I see them. I count five, fifty metres ahead, slightly raised ground. Just under a little rock overhang, it's keeping all this dust off 'em."

"Explains why they're getting such good shots off", Sabine muttered.

Rex looked at Ezra, "Ideas?"

*Overhang, huh? Enclosed...* Ezra looked up at Sabine, "Want to try something stupid?"

He could feel her rolling her eyes under her helmet. "I married you didn't I? What you got?"
Ezra shut his eyes and reached out, blending what Rex saw with his eyes with what Ezra felt through the force. *Fifty metres, rock overhang, five targets, no spacing - perfect.*

"We'll hit them from above", Ezra told her, "Still got that rocket in your jetpack? We'll bring the overhang down on top of them."

Sabine scoffed, "You know I can't fly in this storm right? Dust will ruin my jetpack, and not just the paint-job."

"I know. I'll throw you."

The Chiss squad had no idea what they were talking about. The Sergeant looked at them like they were crazy, and she was probably right.

Sabine, however, trusted him completely. With a shrug she holstered her pistols and cracked her knuckles. "Alright, let's do it."

The Mandalorian took a few steps back from the rock, crouching down a bit to prepare herself. Ezra turned off his saber and stepped back. He reached out with the force again, focusing on the stormtroopers firing at their position. Then he reached out to his wife, feeling her resolve and determination, and mentally grabbed a firm but gentle hold of her.

"Ready?", he asked.

Sabine didn't hesitate. "Now!"

Perfectly in sync, Ezra lifted her up with the force and threw her high in the air as Sabine pushed off with her feet. He felt her soar through the air for several long seconds. Then he heard the blast of the rocket launching from her back. It exploded loudly on its target, bringing with it the noise of crumbling rocks clattering on armour. The enemy weapons fell silent and he felt Sabine's boots land gently on the ground. *Cyar'ika, you continue to impress.*

"I think she got them", Rex chuckled and stepped out of cover.

Ezra shook his head humorously and nodded to the Chiss squad. "Which way to the ruin?"

The shocked Chiss Sergeant blinked away her stunned expression. "Uh, yes, yes. Come on, we'll escort you." She scrambled to her feet and barked some orders in their language at her troops.

Ezra followed the Chiss teams as they moved out of cover and advanced forward. They quickly joined Rex and Sabine, standing over the mess she'd made with pride. The sounds of battle still echoed distantly around them, but they seemed to be far enough away for now.

The dust cleared a bit as they reached the edge of a large pit. It was a good fifty metres straight down. The feeling from the ruin Ezra had already sense was even more potent here - it's presence in the force was a gaping void that stood out even as a battle raged around them. Ezra also saw a stone podium just outside the dark entrance. It oozed with the foul stench of the weapon that had just taken down the cruiser.

A few figures were spread out by the door, giving the odd podium a wide berth. They looked like stormtroopers, but Ezra could see some dashes of colour than set them apart. *Must be Thrawn's.*

"How do we get down there?", Rex shouted over to the Chiss.

"Over there", the Sergeant pointed to some metal stairs just barely visible on the far side of the pit.
Ezra shook his head, "Too slow." He stepped forward and looked down to the bottom of the pit.

"I know what you're thinking", Sabine told him, "Do it."

Ezra turned to the Chiss. "Take your men and go secure that stairway, we'll need a good escape route."

"I'll gather what troops I can, Jedi", the Chiss said warily, noticing that he never mentioned anything about getting down there.

"Good...", Ezra took in a deep breath and took a step closer to the edge.

Without another word, he leapt off the edge to the shock of the three Chiss soldiers. Ezra fell for a few seconds then used the force to cushion his impact. As soon as he landed, he looked back up and gave Sabine and Rex a nod.

The two of them took a few seconds before throwing themselves off the edge too. Ezra reached out as they fell, catching them with the force, and letting them down gently on the ground.

"Ugh", Rex grumbled as he got up and out his pistols, "I promised myself I'd never do something like that again..."

Ezra led the way across the pit floor towards the ruin. The stormtroopers spotted them approaching and two came over to meet them.

"Where are Ahsoka and Luke?", Rex asked quickly.

"They're inside", one of the troopers said, " Been in there a while. No idea what's going on down there."

Ezra looked past the troopers as they filled Rex and Sabine in. That lone podium standing by the door, reeking of pain and death, dominated his every thought. That blast came from it, he was sure of that. It didn't take a genius to know what had to be done to it.

He reached for his belt again and grabbed his saber. Igniting the blade, he raised it and swung it with all his might at the podium, hoping to stop it taking more lives. The blade collided with the stone and skimmed right off with a high-pitched screech.

"Dammit", Ezra cursed, the jolting impact sending a sharp pain up his wrist. He brought the blade over again and held it to the stone slowly. The same high-pitch screech came as the saber made contact, but it didn't leave a mark. Should have known it wouldn't be that easy.

"We already tried blasting the thing", one of the troopers called out, everyone nearby having already heard and seen Ezra try to destroy it.

"It was worth a shot", he lowered the saber but kept the blade out.

Rex sighed. "Guess we're going inside", he motioned to the gaping black door before them.

Luke and Ahsoka were inside somewhere and they had to get them out. He steeled himself and turned to the ruin, not knowing what they'd find within. We're coming, you two. Just hold on.

Death. It was all Luke could feel as he recovered from his daze.

He'd thrown himself hard to the ground just before the blast came. The deafening noise had been
nothing compared to the overwhelming sense of darkness that had come with it. It wasn't a blast of heat, or a laser, or anything like that - it was pure force energy, corrupted and twisted to be a tool of absolute unspeakable evil.

"Now, you see the potential", Snoke bellowed from the far side of the room.

Luke groaned and looked for Ahsoka. She was climbing to her feet on the other side of the podium, giving him a determined but clearly shaken expression.

"The Fourth Sister is weak, unbalanced, sloppy, and yet through her I can destroy fleets", Snoke said with smug satisfaction. His malicious gaze focused on the two of them, "But with you, Skywalker? Or you, Tano? Such potential."

The Fourth Sister's limp form remained shackled in place and the obelisk above her buzzed with energy. Luke didn't know if that thing would fire again, or how long that would take, but it didn't matter. If there was even the slightest chance, then they had to stop it. Nodding to Ahsoka, they knew what they had to do.

Snoke took a few slow, small steps towards them as they rose to their feet. He stopped right in front of the obelisk, hands raised as if inviting them to go for him. *Your overconfidence is your weakness.*

Luke stood up straight and he pulled his saber into his hands. He lit the blade, holding it ready in front of him. Beside him, Ahsoka's beautiful white sabers ignited simultaneously.

Their opponent stared at them for a few seconds. Then Snoke shut his blue eyes and tugged slightly at his tunic. Beneath the folds was a saber of his own, unlike any Luke had seen before. Snoke ignited it, revealing not one red blade but three. A large blood-red main blade and two smaller ones sticking out just below the emitter, like a crossguard on old metal swords.

They charged in together. Luke went high, Ahsoka went low. Snoke barely moved to meet them. His blade swung up, catching both of Ahsoka's with the crossguards and knocking Luke's aside with the main blade. As Luke swung again, Snoke had already pushed Ahsoka back and had spun round to meet him.

Snoke was fast. Faster than Vader had been by far. As Snoke's lightsaber collided with Ahsoka's again, Luke saw that Snoke was still able to channel the power that Vader had.

Luke struck again, using all his physical strength to push against Snoke's blade. He met his opponent's gaze across the saber lock.

"You're arrogance will be your undoing", he spat as sparks flew between them, "I know it."

Snoke pushed back, using his strength and size to his advantage. "Do you?", he grunted a laugh, "Well I know a great many things, Skywalker. I've seen you, watched you. I see the seeds of your failure growing even now."

"Don't listen to him, Luke", Ahsoka yelled as she came in from the side. Snoke expertly blocked her attack and slid back a few steps.

"But I do see, Jedi. I see you, and I see your friends. I see their futures. The soldier, who'll know only war and loss for all their dwindling days. The warrior, whose heart will doom them to fall in battle. The knight, fated to end alone and so far from home."

*What is he talking about?* Luke shot Ahsoka an uncertain look. The Togruta remained fixated on
Snoke, staring him down defiantly as she planned her next attack.

"Then there's the rogue, to be cast down by the one they loved most", Snoke's head turned to Luke. "The leader, who will see a life's work crumble into nothing. The child, destined to finish what their grandfather started. And you, Skywalker, the failure who will cause it all."

*Enough!* "No!" Luke pulled his blade back and slammed it down again, catching Snoke off-guard with the force of his attack. He swung wide again, sending Snoke stumbling to the side.

"Good...", Snoke laughed, "Anger. Your failure will be complete."

Luke raised the saber again for another blow, but a spark of light and energy from the obelisk took his attention. It was charging, and it was going to fire again soon. They couldn't let that-

A sudden flash of red came from beside the Fourth Sister. Luke was frozen in place as two spinning red blades flew right at him and...

"Luke!", he heard Ahsoka's shout just as he felt the force of her throw hit him. Without a second to spare, Ahsoka threw him to the side a few metres, and the Inquisitor's spinning lightsaber missed him by millimetres. Snoke's hand lowered as he released the weapon and let it clatter off into the darkness.

As he hit the ground, he heard the noise of Ahsoka's lightsabers colliding with Snoke's as she continued the fight.

"That was a cheap move", Ahsoka admonished him as she glided around her opponent.

Snoke swung aggressively after her, each swipe being caught by her white blades. "I wasn't going to kill him", Snoke growled between swings, "Only take him out of the fight."

Ahsoka flipped over Snoke and forced him to duck and dive to avoid her. As he came back up, Ahsoka came down with both of her sabers and held him in a lock.

"Luke!", she shouted as she struggled against her enemy, "The weapon!"

_The weapon._ Luke looked back at the obelisk, glowing brighter and brighter with each passing second. It was charging up again but for longer now, almost certainly more powerful too.

Trusting Ahsoka as she continued her duel with Snoke, Luke got to his feet and readied his blade. He approached the obelisk and the Fourth Sister's limp body still tied beneath it. He knew he had to destroy it, but how? Luke looked around frantically, desperate for an answer.

_The orbs? No, they could be unstable. They couldn't take the risk that it would only kill them and leave Snoke unharmed._

_The obelisk?_ Luke looked up as the red glow became almost blinding. _Damnit, Luke! Do something!_ With no other ideas, he swung his blade at one of the stone pillars. It bounced straight off.

_No!_

Luke raised the blade again, pleading that another strike would break the weapon. It was too late.

"Luke! Get out of the way!", Ahsoka screamed from behind him.

There was nothing else he could do. Helpless, Luke dived to the side as the overwhelming torrent
of power erupted above him. He covered his eyes and his ears to try and block out the screeching, the screaming, the pain.

"All escape pods away", Faro said aloud to Agral, the last person left on the bridge with her.

Agral was standing at the map table with her, not needing to be at the helm station right now. The man breathed a nervous sigh, "That's some good news. It's probably best if-"


The alarm was a familiar one. Faro ran over to the Sensor Station and her gut twisted at what she saw. The energy reading was back. It was starting to grow again, just like it had before taking Vanto's ship out.

She swallowed hard. Vanto had been right above the ruin when it fired. *Now...* She glanced at the fleet arrangements. The *Chimaera* was closest to the ruin, but it wasn't directly above it. But the *Myrmidon* and the *Omnipotence* were. They were several thousand feet above, but they were still in clear view if that weapon fired.

*Not if. When.*

"Commodore?", Agral was standing beside her, "What do we do?"

She watched the screen. If that thing fired, it would take one of their ships out. Right now, it was either going to be Pellaeon and the *Myrmidon* with its full compliment of crew plus the others she was sending their way. Or, it would be the *Omnipotence* and its thousands of crew, Thrawn included.

*Or, it could be us.*

Commodore Faro looked at the helmsman. His eyes locked on hers and she knew he caught her meaning. Without a word, he nodded, and made his way back over to the helm station.

Faro reached for her comm and held it to her mouth. "Hammerly? How's the evacuation?"

There was a crackle as her First Officer answered. "Shuttles are packed and I think everyone that didn't get on the pods is accounted for", Hammerly said, "Except you two, of course."

*Except us. Only us.*

"Good work, Commander. Now get on one of those shuttles and get to the *Myrmidon*.

Commander Hammerly almost choked on the other end, "W-what? No! Not without you two!"

"Commander...", Faro shut her eyes, "Thank you."

Hammerly knew not to answer back. "I... I understand. Thank you, Commodore. Words can't express..."

"Hammerly", Faro smiled a bit, "Get going."

She heard the other woman swallow back a sigh. "Aye aye, Ma'am."

Faro checked the screens as she walked back over to Agral's station. Just as she'd ordered, the shuttles started launching from the hangars, taking with them almost every other member of
the Chimaera's crew. There would be no more wasted lives if they could avoid it. Faro couldn't abide it on the Invictus, it had unsettled her with the Imperator, but she would never let it happen to this ship - her ship.

"Lieutenant?", she placed a hand on the back of his chair.

Agral had known what she wanted to do without her asking. He was a good man, a loyal man, and a friend. Faro wished he hadn't needed to be here too, but she knew he'd made the choice knowing full well how it'd end.

"Very well", Faro took his silence as her answer, "Take us in."

The Chimaera's engines fired and she felt the slight hint of inertia. From their position just south of the dig site, the ship slowly began to turn and move forward.

It was only a few seconds before the expected call came. "Commodore..."

Between the escape pods, the shuttles, the movement, and the energy spike, Thrawn obviously knew what she was about to do.

"Grand Admiral, that weapon's firing whether we like it or not", she said firmly, "How many thousands are on your ship? How many on Pellaeon's?"

The Myrmidon's came in on cue, "Faro? You can't-"

Through the viewport, Faro could no longer see the dig site as their bow passed over it.

"Pellaeon, it's just Agral and I now. It's the logical choice."

The energy readings kept climbing higher and higher, higher than they had before Vanto's ship went down.

"Karyn, you don't-"

"Yes, sir, we do. Destroy this thing and get yourselves home." Faro's voice came across every bit as certain and strong as she'd wanted it to.

They were right over it now and the energy readings were reaching breaking point.

Faro felt a smile come on as purpose and intent filled her. "It's been an honour, the both of you. I couldn't be more proud of serving with you."

The Chimaera kicked up a little bit of speed, making sure they had enough to carry them far over the battlefield below.

Thrawn and Pellaeon were calling at her over the comm, but Faro couldn't hear them. Vanto's voice, wherever he was down there, sounded out too. It didn't matter now. There was no going back.

Faro moved her hand from the chair to Agral's shoulder, a last bit of human contact before the end.

She barely heard all the warnings and alarms as the weapon below them fire. She didn't fear the weapon as it melted through the metal of the ship's underside. She didn't fear the secondary explosions that tore through the hull. She didn't fear the noise and the heat and the light as they overwhelmed the bridge.
She didn’t fear anything as she was left with silence.

Thrawn could only watch in sullen silence as the weapon tore through the Chimaera. Its momentum kept the ship going as the bizarre blast tore apart everything on board. The hangar, his officer and all its art, the bridge, and the last two souls on it. It had been quick at least. As soon as the bridge had been hit it went up in flames. It would have been quick, painless, but absolutely certain.

*She is gone.*

The momentum that Lieutenant Agral had given the ship in his own final moments carried it over the dig site. It came down well clear of any of their troopers, making sure no extra lives were lost or threatened as the Star Destroyer came apart.

Against the backdrop of the destruction below, Thrawn started to see the shuttles flying up to orbit towards the Myrmidon, carrying hundreds of survivors from the *Chimaera*. Escape pods in their non-critical escape setting were coming up to join Pellaeon’s ship too, carrying countless other crew members.

Faro never wanted to waste lives. She’d done everything in her power to get as many people as possible off that ship before sacrificing her own life to protect the even greater number of people in the rest of the fleet. Most of all, she had chosen to do so. She could have had no more fitting end in the line of duty.

Even more than that, more than the lives she just saved or the bravery of her sacrifice, Thawn had admired her in life. She’d served at his side in countless missions. She’d helped him crush the rebels on Atollon, handled Vader skilfully on the mission against the Grysk, was at his side above Lothal, stepped up to the mark after the purrgil attack, maintain both secrecy and professionalism in the search for what lay out here, and stood with him as they made the hard choices necessary to being them here today. Above all, she’d been one of the few true friends he knew he had. The galaxy was lesser for her loss, and so was he.

Thrawn would not let his sentiments get in the way though. The time to grieve was later. They still had work to do here.

He slowly raised his comm again, "Captain Pellaeon, are you ready to receive the survivors?"

The Captain delayed for a few seconds. "Y-yes, we're ready", his voice was heavy and strained, "We'll have room to spare for the people still on the ground too."

"Speaking of...", Thrawn keyed another address into the channel, "Vanto, what's your status?"

"Still here, Thrawn", he muttered miserably. "Getting out of what's left of this ship is harder than we thought."

Thrawn peered out the window. He could not see them in detail, but he'd memorised the landing sites well enough to have an idea.

"Hmm, the landing site used by Tano and her team will be the closest to you. If you can-"

"*Grand Admiral!*", one of his crew members interrupted loudly in their native language, "*Proximity alarms from orbit. Multiple signals inbound!*"

Thrawn paused. He knew what that meant. He'd hoped they'd be out of here before she arrived, but
clearly they failed. He paced over to the sensor station to get a better view of the situation.

Close to the planet, the unmistakable speck of a Star Destroyer dropped out of hyperspace. Another followed soon after, and then a massive signature came with it. The *Eclipse* - a Super Star Destroyer, former flagship of the Emperor himself, and now the flagship of Grand Admiral Sloane. The *Eclipse* came with ten other Star Destroyers in all; more than enough to tear apart the two ships they had left.

*We're out of time.*

"Grand Admiral?", Pellaeon asked urgently, "Plan?"

Thrawn was silent as every option went through his head at once. They could fight fruitlessly and waste the chance Faro had given her life to buy them, or they could try to escape. There was only one logical choice. Death served nothing if it could be avoided.

He checked the scopes again, absorbing every piece of data before formulating their plan.

"*Myrmidon*, full right turn and ascend. Prepare to jump to hyperspace", Thrawn quickly gave the same order to his own crew.

"Aye, sir", Pellaeon agreed, wisely knowing there'd be no winning against Sloane's fleet, "What about the Jedi?"

The Chiss went for his comm again. "Bridger?" No response came. "Skywalker? Tano?" He received only static.

Thrawn weighed his options again. *Waiting for them could delay us too long and leave none of us with an escape route. If they've failed, remaining here achieves nothing. If they succeed, they still have ships below.*

Sloane's ships were moving right for them. This time, they were the ones with the defensive advantage and Sloane would never risk destroying whatever was here. Besides, it'd be a few minutes before she got in range. They had a window but it was only a tiny one.

"All ground teams, this is the *Omnipotence*. All teams are to disengage and head to your ships", Thrawn ordered to their forces below. His thoughts turned back to his friend still on the surface, "Vanto, can you make it to the landing site?"

"I... I don't know. Still trying to find a way out of this wreck." He grunted as if moving something on his end. "We'll move as fast as we can but...", he didn't need to finish his sentence.

Thrawn sighed silently, "I understand. Good luck, Eli."

His heart heavy, Thrawn set aside his commlink and marched around his bridge, issuing orders and directions as he went. Whatever was happening in the ruin was in the Jedi's hands now, not his, and he could nothing more if they failed. His only concern now was for his own forces and the thousands of lives Faro had died to buy a chance for. He owed it to her to make sure that sacrifice wasn't wasted.

Luke panted for breath against the cold ground. The weapon blast ebbed away, but this time it didn't come with quite the same sense of utter devastation as before. Maybe the weapon had missed. Or maybe the pain beyond was too much to process.
It didn't matter. Luke had to stop that weapon from firing again, everything depended on it.

He raised his head and saw Ahsoka leap at Snoke again. Both moved like a blur, more acrobatic and fast-paced than anything he'd seen before. Luke was slow and heavy, Vader had been too, but Snoke and Ahsoka were fluid, agile, and masters of their craft. Ahsoka's reverse grip gave her speed and unpredictability, while Snoke's odd crossguard design posed new problems especially when coupled with his physical strength.

The weapon, Luke! Scrambling to his feet, he looked back to the obelisk and the binds between the pillars holding it up. Destroying the orbs wasn't an option, destroying the pillar didn't work, destroying the main obelisk itself looked impossible from down here. His eyes went to the Fourth Sister's limp body still trapped in the ethereal restraints. That only left...

The faintest twitch of movement caught him by surprise.

The Fourth Sister's head lifted up slightly and painfully. She's still alive... how? She struggled weakly against the restraints, using what little remained of her strength to look up at him. When her eyes met his, Luke's heart stopped. Two pained and regretful green eyes stared back at him. The yellow stain of the dark side was gone. Even in the force, Luke realised why he'd been so quick to dismiss her as dead. The anger, the hatred, the arrogance - all of it had faded away. In these final moments, as this weapon's power was forced through her, she'd had a moment of clarity. She might not be unable to undo her mistakes, but she could do her part to stop it going any further.

Her lips twitched and the faintest strain of a word came out. "Skywalker..." Her voice was too weak to say it, but her eyes weren't. "Please."

Luke watched as her strength broke and her head fell down again. Above her, he felt the obelisk starting to charge up again. It was now or never.

Raising his saber again, he ignited his blade as the sound of the duel behind him continued. The Fourth Sister didn't flinch at the noise or as he raised the saber up above his head.

"I'm sorry", Luke couldn't offer her much, but he did what he could.

With one swing, he brought his saber down. The effect was instant.

The obelisk screeched and whirred horridly as its conduit was permanently freed. A burst of unfocused energy sent Luke stumbling back onto the ground, staring up at it.

"No!", he heard Snoke shout from across the room. Luke saw the towering warrior use his might to push Ahsoka back and run over to the weapon.

Luke scrambled out of the way as quickly as he could, but Snoke was far more interested in the obelisk. They both watched as he turned off his saber and reached out his hand to the Inquisitor's body. As he did, the binds released and let the Fourth Sister fall to the floor.

"She's gone, Snoke", Ahsoka shouted at him.

"It doesn't matter now", Snoke stepped towards the nearest podium. His large hand rested on an orb and he took in a deep breath. The orb glowed bright red for a second and Luke swore the same aura surrounded Snoke as it did. "She was weak. The thousands up there that will be bent to my service are strong." Snoke looked over at them with a faint red glow behind his eyes. "The two of you are stronger, and you will give me what others could not."

Snoke's arm shot out with an immense blast of lightning yet again. Luke stared in wide-eyed horror
as it made right for him.

At the last second, a blur of white stepped between him and the attack. The light was blinding and an impact sent him soaring back towards the doorway.

They were just at the bottom of the stairs into the ruin when that weapon fired again. Ezra felt it just before it fired and warned Sabine and Rex fast enough to get them to duck down out of the way. They all huddled into the corner of the stairway as the entire corridor was filled with a blast of raw force energy.

Ezra could hear the echos as it hit its mark. Whatever it did hit though, it didn't come with the same sense of loss as before. It was smaller and more muted than when that Chiss ship had come down. Ezra hoped that meant something good.

As soon as it was clear, Ezra scrambled to his feet and pulled Sabine up with him. Rex was already up and running down the stairs into the next chamber. The Clone stopped for a second as they entered an open but mostly empty chamber with several corridors leading off it.

"I think...", Rex squinted down at the beacon ring, "I think-

"That way", Ezra pointed to one of the corridors on the far end of the room, "I know it. I can sense it."

What he was sensing, Ezra didn't know. It was evil, just like he'd felt before. However, hidden amongst it, were two familiar flames of light. It was them. They were almost there..

"We have to be close now!", Sabine shouted as she broke into a run behind him, "How much fu-

A deafening screech cut her off, loud enough to make Ezra rush to cover his ears. He feared the worst at first, but when the weapon didn't fire again Ezra knew something else had changed. On the contrary, Ezra could feel something almost good. Luke and Ahsoka must have done something right. The evil presence was still there all the same, but something was going right.

Regaining his focus, Ezra followed his senses and leapt up the steps into another corridor. There, they saw them. At the far end of the corridor was an open door into a large chamber. Inside, they could see three silhouettes. Ahsoka and Luke were the closest ones, standing with their backs to Ezra and the others. Beyond them, a third much taller person was staring them down.

Before Ezra could call out, a blinding light erupted from the towering stranger. Ezra rushed to cover his eyes, the light far too intense even all the way down the corridor. By the time he could see again, he was already running towards the door with the other two behind him.

Luke had been knocked to the ground just inside the room. Further in, Ahsoka stood tall and defiant as their enemy launched an overwhelming barrage of force lightning at her. Ezra watched in awe as Ahsoka's hands glowed with the force as she absorbed every bolt of the attack. Their opponent kept up the stream, moving to the right as Ahsoka moved opposite it, locked in a ferocious battle of wills.

"Ahsoka!", Rex barged past him with his weapons raised.

"Rex!" Ezra tried in vain to grab him but the Clone was out of reach.

Rex sprinted through the corridor ahead of them and charged into the room, his weapons raised at the powerful force user Ahsoka was locked in battle with. The Clone let out a cry and unleashed a
volley of shots from his pistols at Ahsoka's attacker. The dark sider snapped his head to the side just as Rex fired and threw one of his hands out in the Clone's direction, still using the other to attack Ahsoka. Every shot that Rex had fired froze in mid-air. Rex couldn't react before they all unfroze at once and flew right back into his chest.

"Gargh!", Rex yelped as a half dozen shots collided with his armour. He fell to the ground and his helmet clattered to the floor.

"I've got him!", Sabine shouted, rushing over to help him. Thankfully, Ezra saw the Clone moving on the ground. That old armour still held up, but the wind had been knocked out of him.

Ezra's attention instantly turned back to Luke. The other Jedi was on his hands and knees in a daze and barely seemed to have registered that they were here.


Luke blinked a few times before he noticed what was happening. "E-Ezra?", he mumbled confusedly.

"Yeah it's me", Ezra assured him, "You alright? Can you get up?"


Before Ezra could stop him, Luke jumped to his feet and looked over to Ahsoka. She was still holding her own against the dark sider, using all her power to contain the torrents of lightning.

Without thinking, Luke started to run for her. Luke only got a few metres before he stopped jarringly mid-stride. Ezra looked to Ahsoka and saw one hand extended back to hold Luke in place. As she did, her eyes locked on to Ezra's own.

Memories flooded back at the sight of her like that. He remembered Malachor, as she'd thrown him back into the Phantom as she faced Vader. He remembered Kanan in his last moments as he used the force to save them all, one hand holding Hera and the other the inferno that would otherwise have destroyed them all.

No, that's not happening again! Ezra followed in Luke's example and ran forward. He reached for his lightsaber ready to help Ahsoka and-

"Ezra!"

Ezra ground to a halt. Ahsoka's gaze was still fixed on him. It was taking everything she had to handle her attacker and holding back Luke. Ezra knew what came next.

"Ezra! Take him!"

Ahsoka saw Ezra's reaction. He knew. She wasn't sure what he'd known beforehand, but he knew now. He understood why he'd been compelled to come out here.

The young Jedi shut his eyes, placed his saber back on his belt, and nodded at her. Then he turned and grabbed Luke by the arm.


Ahsoka let go of Luke, knowing Ezra had him now.
Behind her, Luke struggled with his feet and reached his hand to her. "No! Ahsoka!"

Even as Snoke's relentless attack sapped all her strength, Ahsoka still found it in her to smile at them both. She hoped it would tell them what she wanted it to. She'd made this choice herself, she'd made it so they could live, and she made it so that this danger would never be unleashed on the galaxy.

As Ezra kept dragging Luke back to the entrance, Ahsoka turned her head to the other two people who'd come. Rex was struggling to his feet with an arm slung around Sabine for support. Her old friend was hurt, but he'd be fine. The Mandalorian looked over at her. Even under the faceplate, Ahsoka could feel the pain on her face. Whether through some bond of their own or the bond the Mandalorian had with Ezra, Ahsoka knew Sabine understood too. Sabine's lowered her head and started to step back towards the door. She motioned for Rex to come too, but he was already standing up and focusing elsewhere.

Rex's helmet had gone, fallen to the floor in the chaos. That meant she could see his face one last time. That face - the same one she'd seen thousands of times before on different people - was full of heartbreak. Rex knew what this meant too. His old brown eyes locked on her own. She didn't need to tell him anything that he didn't already know. Rex had been with her longer than anyone else and had saved her life more times than she could count. Now, she was going to return the favour one last time. She didn't need to hold him with the force like she did with Luke, or shout for his help like she had Ezra. Instead, she just smiled at him, filling the promise she'd made to see him again before the end.

With that, he knew he had to go. Shutting his eyes to hold back any tears, Rex tore himself away and grabbed his helmet from the ground. With one final look back, her closest friend turned and ran to Ezra, helping him pull Luke as fast as they could to the exit.

Gathered at the door, Ahsoka looked at all four of her friends. Ezra Bridger, who'd saved her life after pulling her from Malachor and brought them out here if the first place. Sabine Wren, the fearless Mandalorian who'd been at her side on their first crucial run out here. Luke Skywalker, her companion for their second journey and the son of the man who'd taught her everything he'd known, and a woman who'd been her closest friend and ally when things were at their darkest. Rex, who'd fought by her side from Christophsis to Mandalore, had saved her as his own brothers turned on her, and had remained the truest friend she'd known all her life.

For them alone, she'd happily go like this. To know that there were so many others beyond that who'd get to live if she defeated this monster was just a bonus.

As soon as they were clear of the door and into the corridor, Ahsoka flashed them one last smile. Then, she reached out for the door and brought it down between them, sealing their respective fates.

Snoke seemed surprised at her move. The storm of lightning from his hands abated and he regarded her with a curious smile.

"How noble, Tano. However, such an honourable deed will be for nothing. I cannot be killed, I cannot be beaten. You will die here anyway and so will they."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I don't need to kill you."

Snoke hesitated as her hand went to her back. She went under her cloak and pulled the marvellous white staff from its sling. Bringing it out, she extended it to its full length and admired it in the dim red light.
"A trinket?", Snoke said mockingly. "It means nothing."

"You're right", she smirked, "It's nothing."

The staff, despite how intrigued by it the others had always been, had no special power. It was barely more than wood and a bit of metal. The staff was only a conduit, a conductor, an amplifier. A single focal point to concentrate and release the force within her and around her. The orbs of light, the force blasts, the effects on the gateways - it had always just been her. Every little trick that had impressed Sabine, Ezra, and Luke had been one of her own making. And I have just one more.

"You're right. I couldn't kill you, not right now", Ahsoka started to Snoke, "But there's more than one way to win. You're a wound in the force, nothing more."

She slammed the hilt of the staff on the ground and focused.

"What can you do, Jedi, that so many others more powerful haven't tried before?"

The Togruta chuckled under her breath, "Power is nothing next to experience."

Ahsoka reached out to everything in the room. She felt the twelve orbs set on their pedestals, still teeming with raw power in the force. One by one, she pictured each in her mind. Slowly but surely, each one started to glow and vibrate.

Snoke's arrogant smile melted away. "W-what... what are you doing?"

"You're right, the force can do all sorts of things. But everything comes in balance." She recalled Master Yoda's words to her in the temple only weeks ago. "As there's life, there's death. But as there's death, there's life."

"Tano?", Snoke growled.

Around them, the ruby orbs started to glow brighter. Not, this time, for Snoke's weapon, but for her.

Snoke shook away his confusion and drew his saber. Before he could swing at her, Ahsoka flicked a finger and tore the saber from his grasp, sending it far off into the dark corner of the room. The sudden act caught Snoke off-guard, and she used the moment to grab him with the force and hold him restrained, using all her remaining strength to hold him in place.

Snoke struggled against her grip but she held firm. "Let go!", he spat, "You're a fool if you think you can kill me here!"

"I'm not going to", Ahsoka said calmly.

With the energy of every orb firmly in her grasp, she raised her staff and focused on it before she slammed it down on the ground. At once, the waves of red energy that had once fed the weapon flowed through the staff and coursed into her. The darkness, pain, and death were more intense than anything she'd felt before, but Ahsoka didn't break. She took it all in, taking the darkness and repurposing it into something else.

Ahsoka felt Snoke's fear start to seep off him. "You said it yourself, the force made you what you are", she told him, "A wound in the force. And all wounds are meant to be healed."

She opened her eyes again and locked them on him. Snoke's confidence had given way to fear. He
knew what she was about to do, but could only watch as every slither of energy he'd stolen into those orbs entered her.

Wounds like Snoke could never be truly killed. First, a wound would have to be healed. She could do that. But taking in the force in such a pure and intense form as she was doing... this process was still going to kill one of them. She already knew that.

At last, every slither of energy drained from the orbs and filled her. She felt it all at once. For the briefest moment she felt in tune with the force beyond anything in the World Between Worlds or even Mortis. She felt the past, with all the war, death, and regret along the way, but also the memories, the happiness, and the friends that had filled it. She saw the present too. Here, she felt war and death, but among it all were the flames of hope that would keep burning long after this battle. Elsewhere, a scarred and battered galaxy was rebuilding for a new hopeful future. She also felt the future with unprecedented clarity. The wars yet to come, the pain yet to be felt, the friends yet to be lost. She saw Luke's future, Rex's, Ezra and Sabine's, Leia's, Ben Solo's, Jacen's, and everyone else he'd ever known. Above it all, she knew that, although dark times might lie ahead somewhere, the light at the end was still there. Snoke would survive this day, but because of what she was doing the shadow he'd cast would be so much smaller.

With everything surging through her mind - past, present, future, possibilities, impossibilities, and so much more - she focused on the gaping void before her, still struggling in her grasp.

I'm ready.

One final time, she raised her staff. If she was going to go out, she was going to make a show of it.

Ahsoka focused her mind on the staff, as she had so many times before, and finally released everything that had welled up inside her. A pure beam of white energy enveloped Snoke instantly. The blood-red hue of the energy he'd ripped from so many would not be used for more pain. There was no screaming, no pain, no sorrow. All Ahsoka felt was a wound in healing as the force undid the damage it had wrought so long ago. The gaping pit in the force that had once been there was being filled, replaced and purified by something natural, real, and vulnerable. This wound that had for so long terrorised the galaxy was mended in seconds.

As the force flowed out of her, Ahsoka felt herself letting go. No one could survive such an experience, she'd known that already. She'd died once, long ago, and it didn't scare her, especially now that she knew it wasn't truly the end. She might not be the one to put a final end to Snoke, but she would certainly be around in a way to guide whoever was.

At last, it was done. The staff fell silent and she let Snoke drop to the ground. Physically he was fine, but in the force he was transformed. The man that fell on to the stone ground before her was powerful, no doubt about that, but nothing more than what Luke, Ezra, or the galaxy had faced before. A broken, beaten, spiteful creature, his best days long since past.

I can do just a little bit better...

With her final pieces of strength, Ahsoka tightened her grip on the staff. She shut her eyes and smiled to herself as she brought it down hard, and sent a blast of all the force she could muster out around her. The pedestals fell, the ruin's walls crumbled, the obelisk shattered - and she finally felt at peace.
Ahsoka. Yeah, I have a lot to talk about on that front and I won't put all of it here. There's going to be an end of story author's note where I go into depth on Ahsoka's death, Snoke, and all that stuff, so I'll only do some smaller things here. It might seem like I'm passing over it, but I promise there'll be much more in that final note about it. Ahsoka just couldn't die to kill something, so instead she dies 'fixing' Snoke. A wound in the force is uniquely dangerous, but once mended that wound becomes just another force-user. She goes out making sure that sort of power doesn't get to continue existing, using all of that force energy Snoke drained to instead mend the wound. There was just something perfect about Ahsoka using Snoke's own evil machinations to do something restorative rather than destructive. Ahsoka had to see Rex before the end, and their connection runs deep enough for Rex to know that there's nothing he can do once he's there. The four people that she saves - Rex, Luke, Ezra, and Sabine - are probably her closest remaining friends. Ahsoka would probably give her life for any one of them, so all four is just a no-brainer, not to mention the millions of others she saves by rectifying the issue with Snoke. As for the staff, I think it's right that it's only really aesthetic. It helps Ahsoka, but it doesn't have any powers of her own. It's a show of the true power lying in the force and in individuals, not tools and gadgets, which contrasts with Snoke's obsession with his orbs, weapons, and obelisks.

We also lose Commodore Faro. Faro became a part of this story simply to solve the issue of having a spectator for Thrawn without using Pellaeon all of the time. Over the course of the story, she became one of its most important characters. She became something like the voice of empathy for the Imperials with her concerns for wasted lives, she was an essential part of Thrawn's inner circle, she took command of the Chimaera for the big final battle, and ultimately laid down her life to save others. War is messy, there's good and evil on both sides, and that's true of the Empire too. On paper, Faro begins as a villain, but people can do questionable things for good reasons. At her core, Faro was a good person and I think her death proves that. She never wanted to waste lives and with the Chimaera damaged she knew it wasn't getting off this planet. Her making the choice to give her life to shield and save thousands more is, I think, the most appropriate way for her to go. I settled on Faro dying quite late in the game, only about halfway through, but I always knew one of the big three Imperials was going to die. It was initially Thrawn but I felt that killing both him and Ahsoka was too much. As for Pellaeon, the moment I mentioned his retirement I knew I couldn't fall for that trope of him dying just before it. However, I do think that Faro was the best choice in the end and I'm quite satisfied with her role. Despite not even appearing in the original draft of this story, she did become one of my favourite parts of it.

The Fourth Sister's death also came, something that was perhaps inevitable in the end. Her death was always going to come at the hands of Snoke but my plans for it did change over time. Initially, it was going to be quick, brutal, and completely un-redemptive. However, one extremely persistent reviewer is ultimately the reason I changed my mind. To the guest reviewer who, every chapter without fail, asked me to let the Fourth Sister survive and become good, I'm sorry I could never give you what you wanted. However, it's thanks to you that I realised that killing the Fourth Sister off so callously did nothing. The Inquisitor did deserve some sort of redemption, some moment of clarity, before she died. Having her realise her mistakes in her final
moments and accept that her death had to come was only a short moment of goodness, but it was infinitely more rewarding than just snapping her neck and throwing her aside which was literally my original plan. So here's to you, guest reviewer, and your unending dedication to seeing the good in people that so many others wouldn't.

There's one or two minor things also worth mentioning. Ezra and Sabine's combat stuff was the first I've written of them fighting together in this story and was just a nice little showcase of their teamwork. As for Ezra catching Sabine and especially Rex after jumping from a height, it's a nod to Anakin and Ahsoka doing that to a terrified Rex in TCW's Landing at Point Rain episode. Lastly, as if it needs to be pointed out, Ezra's vision from a few chapters ago was indeed Ahsoka, asking him to take Luke away and allow her to deal with Snoke.

Next time: "When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies but the pack survives."
Chapter 38 - Aftermath

Chapter Notes

A day late for our last main chapter, sorry about that.

This time: "When the snows fall and the white wind blows, the lone wolf dies but the pack survives."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What happened next was a blur.

Luke barely remembered running from the ruin with Ezra, Rex, and Sabine. They were just crawling out of the door when it hit him. At first Luke feared that the weapon was firing again, but that feeling quickly faded. Somehow, for reasons he couldn't explain, the darkness and unnatural power he'd sensed here just started to disappear and was replaced with its antithesis. Luke felt life, warmth, healing, and a crescendo of other things as the darkness here was finally vanquished.

Then, Ahsoka was gone. Luke felt her leave, as he had with Master Yoda. There wasn't fear nor pain, only purpose, contentment, and peace. Rex had felt it too, his bond with his old friend strong enough for him to know. Luke could feel it from Ezra and Sabine too. They all knew.

None of them had time to process it as they escaped. As soon as they got to the surface, they were barraged with urgent warnings of Imperial reinforcements. The run for Ezra's ship was barely a passing memory. Luke only remembered leaping up the ramp and falling to the floor of the Starbird's hold as Ezra and Sabine got them in the air.

There might have been some fighting as they left, Luke couldn't remember. Sabine was a capable enough pilot for it not to have caused much trouble if there was, and a minute later they came in for a rough landing in the Myrmidon's hangar seconds before it jumped to hyperspace.

For a few seconds after they landed, there was silence. Then it all came crashing down on them.

"Agh, dammit!"

Rex's helmet hit the far end of the hold with a crash.

"I should have come with her!", Rex was shouting to himself more than Luke, "I could have... ugh!"

The Clone sank down on the bench beside him, hanging his head in his hands. From the cockpit, Luke heard shouting and noise as Ezra and Sabine started to process what just happened. Luke swallowed back a wave of emotions and just breathed.

Rex's eyes fluttered and his mouth twitched. "I-I-should, I could-

"There was nothing you could have done, Rex", Luke said as calmly as he could manage.
The Clone ran his hands across his bald head. "I just... I...," Luke could see the heartbreak in him. His teeth clenched in anger and pain, his fingers were strained and... wait...

"Rex...", Luke leaned forward a bit, "Your finger."

The older man gave him a puzzled look for a second before it dawned on him. "Oh...", Rex took the glove off of his right hand to reveal a ring. Just like Luke expected, it had a glowing turquoise stone on it.

Reaching for his bag, Luke fumbled for the gift Ahsoka had given him. He pushed aside the compass and grabbed the silver brooch with its own illuminated blue glow. Luke pulled it out carefully and opened his palm to Rex.

"Ahsoka gave it to me before the battle", Luke explained, "Said it would bring me good luck. I guess I never realised what she meant."

With shaking hands, Rex gently took the piece of jewellery from him. The Clone silently inspected the familiar item, mouthing inaudible words from his lips. He flipped the brooch over to look at the glowing blue underside. Rex hovered his right hand over it and then the sapphire light from both items faded. A homing beacon.

"She knew", Rex looked up at him, all the anger and frustration that had just been there was now gone. "When she gave it to me, when she went on this mission, when she gave this to you... she always knew."

Of course she did. Ahsoka had always been enigmatic, never willing or perhaps never able to explain what she knew and how she knew it. Luke was used to it from her, as he had been from Ben and Master Yoda.

"It sounds like her", Luke mused, "She would never hesitate to lay down her life to save others. After what she just stopped, she saved more than she could ever have known."

She'd died a hero. Perhaps most of the galaxy wouldn't know it, but Ahsoka wouldn't need them to. She never clamoured for recognition or approval, only ever focused on doing the right thing.

Luke watched Rex for a moment. The Clone was still silently lost in thought as he stared down at the jewellery. Part of Rex was hurting, you didn't need to be a Jedi to figure that out, but Luke could feel hints of other emotions: pride, respect, acceptance. Knowing that Ahsoka walked this path consciously was enough for Rex to be proud of her for it. He'd miss her, they all would, but Ahsoka wouldn't want them to wallow in pain for her. She'd want them to honour her sacrifice and make the most of what she'd done for them. Luke at least knew that much for sure.

"It's strange", Luke mumbled quietly, "I thought I was beginning to understand her sometimes. I thought that our bond in the force was starting to let me know what she was thinking and planning but...", he sighed mournfully, "I guess I didn't know everything."

"The Force is great in all", Rex smiled and shook his head, "But when it came to understanding Ahsoka, experience outranked everything."

With an accepting smile, Rex sank back in the chair a bit, still focusing on the brooch in his hands. The grief would take a while to work out, but it would pass with time. Their victory, however, would endure. After all, they'd completed their mission. Whatever Ahsoka had done had vanquished this threat. The weapon was destroyed, all that stored up energy with which Snoke had
caused so much destruction had all been removed, and Luke could feel nothing of the void that had once been there. More importantly, the threat Snoke had posed to the galaxy, to the World Between Worlds, and everything else, was done.

But yet... Luke scowled to himself. There was still something. Something small, almost imperceptible. Whatever it was, if it was even related to Snoke, was barely a fraction of what had once been there.

Dismissing the errant thought, Luke sunk his head back against the headrest and let out a weary breath.

It’s over.

The Starbird scraped into the Star Destroyer's hangar, sliding along the deck as they just managed to make it. Sabine didn't care about making it smooth, only making it. The paint job would be ruined, but honestly she didn't care right now.

As their ship ground to a halt, all she could do was catch her breath. She pulled her helmet off and looked over to Ezra in the co-pilot's seat. His gaze was fixed on nothing in particular as they both sat in agonising silence.

The sound of a crash and Rex's yell from the hold snapped them out of it.

A familiar feeling of rage, grief, and anger started to well up inside her. She clenched her teeth, tightened her knuckles, and felt the angry scream crawling up her throat. She threw her helmet down, letting it clatter to the ground.

Before she could scream and shout, Ezra's arms were around her. She hugged back on instinct, wrapping her arms around her husband and trying to shut everything else out.

"I can't believe she's gone...", Sabine mumbled into his shoulder.

She felt Ezra breath in shakily and pull her tighter. Sabine pulled back, and saw the dampness of his cheeks. She removed her glove and let it fall, then brought her hand to his face.

Sabine already knew that she was an angry griever. Ezra, on the other hand, was quieter. She hoped they'd temper each other's worst impulses. He'd stop her from lashing out at anything and everything, she'd stop him suffering in silence and bottling all of that pain up. They'd made that mistake with each other once. They weren't going to repeat it.

The memory of the grief over Kanan flooded back. With it she remembered her own worries going into this mission.

"I...Part of me thought I was going to lose you", she admitted quietly, "The way you were acting was just..."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know", Ezra looked away, his voice breaking. "If I had I could... I could have known what would happen, I could have stopped it!"

She pulled him back to look at her. "Don't say that, there's nothing you could have done." Sabine didn't need the force to know that was true. "Ahsoka wouldn't let you blame yourself."

Ezra always hated feeling helpless. In those situations he had a tendency to blame himself. He'd done it when Kanan got captured all those years ago, he'd blamed himself for everything on
Malachor, he even beat himself up over not being there to help for most of the war. Sabine wouldn't let him do that, and neither would Ahsoka. Sabine knew the Togruta better than most. A part of her knew that Ahsoka must have seen what would happen, just like Kanan seemed to know before his passing.

Sabine didn't know what exactly happened down there. There was no doubt that Ahsoka was gone though. She didn't know how to describe it, but she felt her go. Perhaps it was something from Ezra, but Sabine couldn't help but feel that, even though they'd lost Ahsoka, they'd done what they came here to do anyway.

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Sabine felt the familiar sensation of his mind brushing on hers. She hadn't quite got around to working out the meditation thing yet, as much as both Ezra and Ahsoka had tried in the past. Still, her bond with Ezra let her tap into him sometimes and vice versa, and right now they both needed the comfort.

The sound of an incoming call shattered the silence. Sabine opened her eyes and hit the audio receiver, not wanting a hologram of anything right now.

"Bridger? Skywalker? You there?", a voice asked. It was that of an older man, the same voice that had called them towards this Star Destroyer in the frantic escape from the surface.

"This is Sabine", she said lowly, "We hear you."

"Wren? It's Captain Pellaeon. Good to know at least some of you made it."

There was a heaviness to the Captain's voice that Sabine knew hid his own grief. Two of the large ships in Thrawn's fleet had come down in the battle and no doubt he'd lost some friends on them.

"We'll be at the rendezvous point in a few minutes", the Captain explained. "You're welcome up on the bridge. I think we need to figure out what just happened down there."

"We won." Ezra's focus had come back and his voice was steady. "We won, that's what happened."

"We won. Bridger's words were the final confirmation Pellaeon needed. After all this time, it was over. They'd done it. Five years of time out here hadn't been for nothing.

The mood of the Myrmidon's bridge was sombre despite their victory. They should have been cheering, laughing, smiling, and making merry at the thought of it. Instead, it was quiet and uneasy.

Faro was gone. One of the few friends Pellaeon had in this galaxy was dead. She'd lasted all this time out here only to give her life in the final hours. Her sacrifice, and that of Lieutenant Agral too, had bought survival for the Myrmidon, the Omnipotence, their Jedi and rebel allies, and almost the entirety of the Chimaera's crew. Pellaeon knew she made that choice herself and was proud to do so, but it didn't make it sting any less.

Other things were unclear too. There'd been no word from Vanto since Sloane's arrival. It was unlikely he'd made it to the shuttles in time. Something was wrong with their Jedi and Rebel friends too. Bridger and Wren were alive but clearly shaken. They'd lost someone else down there, there was no doubt about that.

"We'll be at the coordinates Thrawn gave us in a minute, Captain", Handel told him dourly.

Pellaeon grunted an acknowledgement and leaned onto the map table with both hands. He took in a
deep breath and tried to shake out the last of the adrenaline from his system.

The door to the bridge hissed open and a weary figure limped in. Commander Hammerly's head hung low and her mood lower as she approached him.

"Captain", she greeted weakly.

Pellaeon stood up, "Commander..." He looked at her closely. Her short blonde hair was roughed up and her fair skin stained with a few bruises and scrapes. "Are you alright?"

She nodded and came to a stop at the map table. "I'll live", she sighed. "It could have been worse."

Pellaeon caught her gaze and saw the pain. They'd both lost a friend.

"Captain, dropping out of hyperspace", the helmsman called across the bridge.

Through the bridge windows, Pellaeon saw the hyperspace corridor melt away. The silhouette of the Omnipotence loomed large in front of them, already waiting for them at the rendezvous. From the Arsis-class ship's hangar, he saw a handful of imperial shuttles launch towards him, carrying the survivors from the battle that had landed on the Omnipotence during the escape. Pellaeon nodded to Lieutenant Handel, approving the launch of the handful of Chiss shuttles that had piled onto the Myrmidon amidst the chaos.

The expected noise of an incoming call came shortly after. Pellaeon answered as soon as he heard it, making a hologram of Thrawn's upper body appear above their table. That previously unreadable face was more stoic than most, but the Chiss' eyes seemed heavier, his expression darker, and his shoulders looser.

"Sir...", he started.

Thrawn cut him off with a raised hand. "No need for formalities, Pellaeon. We are past that now", the Chiss moved his eyes over to Hammerly, "How did we fare?"

Hammerly sighed again and wiped the sweat from her brow. "Pretty much everyone made it out. Myself, Xoxtin, Pyrondi, Torbal, and every other officer are safe...", she paused uncomfortably, "Aside from Faro and Agral. We may have lost a few others elsewhere in the ship from the damage or people just not making it out in time, but the vast majority are accounted for already."

"It's a damn sight less death than there'd have been if the Myrmidon or the Omnipotence got hit", Pellaeon muttered grimly.

"Without a doubt", Thrawn concurred. "If either of our ships had been hit, thousands more would have died. Not to mention the hundreds more that would have been unable to escape the surface without us." The Chiss looked away mournfully for a moment. "Commodore Faro made the choice she did knowing what she'd save. She was allowed the chance to choose her own fate and she'd have had it no other way."

Pellaeon nodded weakly. "I know."

"As for the ground teams, most are accounted for", Hammerly continued, "There were some casualties on the ground, as expected, and we think we lost two shuttles to fighters or Sloane's ships in the escape, but we got most of them."

Thrawn's eyes flickered with something and Pellaeon knew where his thoughts lay. "Any word from Vanto?", the Chiss asked them both.
Pellaeon shook his head and looked at Hammerly. She winced uncomfortably.

"We haven't heard from any of the Unyielding's crew", Hammerly admitted. "They were left on the surface."

Pellaeon shut his eyes and cursed silently. Not only had they lost Faro, they'd left Vanto in Sloane's hands too.

Any response was cut off as the doors to the bridge opened again. Skywalker walked in first, his eyes heavy and sombre. Behind him, Pellaeon saw a face that was new yet entirely familiar. The old Clone, Captain Rex, looked exhausted and removed too. That left two more figures, both of which Pellaeon had never expected to see on the Myrmidon. Sabine Wren clearly hadn't lost her love of art or colour, but the brightness of her armour was a sharp contrast to the dark expression she wore on her face. Then, there was Bridger. He was older, obviously, than the man they'd spent five years keeping an eye out for, but he was still recognisable. Just like the others, Pellaeon could tell something was wrong.

The four of them walked up to the table. No one else followed, and Pellaeon now knew why they'd looked so broken.

Thrawn's lips parted, even he was shocked. "Ahsoka Tano?"

Skywalker reached the table and shook his head. "She didn't make it."

No... Pellaeon looked away, praying that this was the last of the bad news they'd have to deal with today. He didn't know Tano very well or for very long, but the Togruta had earned his respect and admiration in the short time she'd been here. Pellaeon knew that the quiet and reserved Jedi was exceptionally talented and powerful in the ways of the force, but to hear that even she didn't make it out of this... Pellaeon felt his heart sink just a little lower.

Hammerly moved a bit closer to him, letting the Jedi and their friends join around the table.

Thrawn's surprise didn't erode his focus on the mission though. "Did you succeed?", he asked urgently.

The two Jedi shared an unreadable look. "We think so", Bridger's voice was uncomfortably uncertain.

"You think so?", Hammerly repeated.

"It's complicated", Skywalker admitted. "It's gone. Ahsoka saw to that."

Thrawn scowled sceptically, "Are you certain?"

"Luke's right", Ezra confirmed. "Whatever Ahsoka did down there worked. It's gone."

"What was it? It's dead, right?", Hammerly asked sharply.

Bridger looked away, deep in thought. "It was a being. A dark sider. It was what we've been sensing out here. Ahsoka destroyed it, that's all that matters right now.".

Even now, Pellaeon still hated this force stuff. The Jedi had always been cryptic, even back in the Clone Wars, so maybe he shouldn't have been surprised that they still were. Despite their ambiguity, both Skywalker and Bridger seemed convinced that they'd won though and that this fight had ultimately paid off. The victory felt a bit empty, Pellaeon had to admit that, but a hollow
victory is better than any defeat.

"It'll have to be enough." Thrawn appeared to share Pellaeon's acceptance. "If you truly believe this threat has been vanquished, then I will trust your judgement."

Hammerly bristled uncomfortably. "Forgive me, Jedi, but what if you're wrong? How can you be sure this won't come back to bite us?"

"Snokes defeated, Commander. We're sure of it", Luke assured her.

"No peace is ever permanent, but that does not make the victory any less worth fighting for", Thrawn concurred. "As for achieving that victory. Ahsoka Tano's sacrifice will be remembered, as will Commodore Faro's." Thrawn focused on the Jedi and their companions, "Nor will we forget the role the four of you played in this endeavour."

"Same to you", Luke replied. "We may not have started out as allies but we couldn't have done it without your help."

"Luke's right." Bridger raised his head and looked at Thrawn, "It's not easy for me to say that, but it's the truth."

Pellaeon watched Thrawn's tempered reaction. Bridger, perhaps more than anyone in the galaxy, had reason not to like Thrawn, or Pellaeon himself for that matter. His gratitude, or at least acceptance, was no small thing.

"I understand, Bridger, and I appreciate your honesty", Thrawn replied earnestly. "We have had our differences in the past but I see no reason for them to determine our future. That war is over, and we must adapt to changing circumstances to make the best of it."

Wren leaned forward, placing her hands on the table. "Look, Thrawn, it doesn't undo what you did during the war, alright?" The Mandalorian ran her tongue around her mouth as she tried to find the words. "But, in retrospect we at least can't hold a grudge for what happened out here. Trying to kill us, trying to catch Ezra, and all that."

"Yeah, I suppose", Bridger grunted a laugh. "Can't say I appreciated you all trying to kill me, but it did lead us to where we are now."

Pellaeon cleared his throat awkwardly. They don't know. Of course they don't know. In all this chaos, Skywalker wouldn't ever have had time to explain to them what Thrawn was really trying to do when it came to 'catching' Bridger. Thrawn glanced over at Pellaeon with a knowing smirk.

"Yeah, I didn't tell them", Luke chimed in with the hint of an amused smile.

The Mandalorian scowled at them all, "Tell us what?"

"Oh, I'm sure Skywalker will enlighten you on that account", Thrawn's carried a hint of amusement. "Suffice it to say that we were not the enemies you might have assumed us to be, Miss Wren." The Chiss paused and looked at the Mandalorian for a moment, then to Bridger. "Or, perhaps I should say Mrs Bridger?"

The two of them exchanged a surprised glance. "Uh, Wren-Bridger, actually", the Jedi corrected.

Pellaeon huffed a laugh. Thrawn had said several times that he believed there was something between Bridger and Wren. Perhaps Thrawn's ability to read human behaviour was even better than Pellaeon had thought.
"Quite the interesting union, certainly. My congratulations, if you'll accept them", the Chiss offered courteously.

The two Wren-Bridgers didn't seem to know how to handle the gesture. Thrawn wasn't much for congratulations, formalities, or shows of warmth of any kind. At least he was making the effort to be polite, Pellaeon supposed.

"Oh, uh, thank you", Ezra mumbled, his Jedi facade slipping slightly to reveal a more human level of awkwardness.

"Speaking of such formalities, give my regards to your friends - General Syndulla, Garazeb Orrellios, and former Agent Kallus. I suspect they all had some role in facilitating these events, however minor. I do not expect our paths are likely to cross again for me to deliver them personally."

"You're going elsewhere?", Bridger asked.

Pellaeon already knew Thrawn's answer.

"This threat has passed, yet others remain. My people are at war and my place is there", Thrawn affirmed. "Besides, I will need to render a report to the Ruling Families. They will want to know what has transpired and the fate of the personnel and resources they committed to us. I will also make sure that they know of those who gave everything for this victory."

"What about Vanto?", Pellaeon's mind was still on another lost friend.

Thrawn looked away in thought for a moment. "I will see what can be done. Sloane will not harm him, he is too useful for her and she's no sadist, but she will try to use him for information."

"Well, if Vanto's half as stubborn as the rest of us then I'm sure Sloane is going to have a miserable time of it", Pellaeon chuckled

Thrawn laughed. Pellaeon had to second-guess himself for a moment there. *Thrawn laughed*. In all his years, Pellaeon had never heard the Chiss give anything more than an amused grunt at anything.

"What about yourself, Gillad?", Thrawn inquired, using the Captain's first name for the first time in a long while.

"Retirement", that had never been in question, "I think I've earned it."

Thrawn smiled thinly, "I completely agree."

Pellaeon had thought about what to do in that retirement many times. He'd changed his mind a few times over the years, but in recent months he'd settled on his choice. Eventually, he'd decided to buy some land somewhere quiet and live out his days in peace.

"I'm bound to have some back-pay coming and there's some nice land on Sulon near Barons Hed. It's quiet, calm, and away from all the war and politics."

"I hope it's as peaceful as you deserve", the Chiss said with sincerity. "I will do my best to keep in contact, if I can", Thrawn added.

Pellaeon nodded, "I appreciate that, Thrawn."
"Safe travels, my friend. I hope our paths will cross again under better circumstances. To you too, Commander Hammerly", Thrawn turned to his former crew member, "Send my deepest appreciation to the remainder of the Chimaera's crew. I am eternally grateful for their loyalty and service for this past decade."

"I'll tell them", Hammerly nodded, "Thank you, sir - uh, Thrawn. It's been a privilege."

"Thrawn", Pellaeon caught the man's attention one last time, "Good luck. For the wars to come."

Thrawn shared one final smile with Pellaeon before looking off-screen with a nod. The hologram disappeared, driving home that this mission was well and truly over.

Pellaeon didn't know if he'd ever see Thrawn in person again. He was sure that the Chiss would make good on his promise to stay in contact, but Pellaeon wasn't sure under what circumstances, if any, they'd cross paths again. Maybe that was a good thing. After all, Thrawn was the type who'd be fighting for something until the end of his days. Pellaeon never planned on setting foot in that arena again in his lifetime. Then again, the galaxy had a frustrating way of making even the best laid plans go awry.

Ezra wasn't sure exactly how to feel as Thrawn's projection dissipated.

Thrawn had been the architect of so much pain, destruction, and death over his life. Thrawn had wiped out Chopper Base and so many of the people in it, he'd kept Lothal under an iron grip for his Defender project, he'd brought Ezra's homeworld almost to its knees to meet his ends, and he'd forced Ezra to make the choices that led him out here for five years of exile.

Still, Ezra found himself unsure how to feel. After all, everything that had transpired had brought them here now. Without Thrawn's aid, or the actions that led them out into the Unknown Regions in the first place, they'd have never found this threat - Snoke, as Luke called it. There was no doubt that Thrawn and his fleet had been essential to this whole operation, and to their survival.

Hammerly, the Commander next to Luke, made to leave. "I'm going to head back down and get everything squared away. We need to get a full accounting of our losses."

Captain Pellaeon nodded, "Good call. I'll catch up with you later."

"Sure thing", Hammelry replied. Ezra noted the absence of formality among them; it was odd to see after so many years of seeing nothing but protocol and rigidity among the Imperials. The Commander turned briefly to them, "Thank you, all of you. We appreciate the help."

"Same to you, Commander", Luke replied, "I'm sorry about Commodore Faro."

The Commander forced a smile. "Thank you. My condolences for Miss Tano too."

The woman nodded courteously then made her way swiftly to the door. Ezra must have seen the Commander years ago when he escaped the Chimaera, Commodore Faro too, but he couldn't recall them. All he ever used to imagine when he thought of the Imperials were faceless men in uniform, each barely distinguishable from the last. Time and experience had proved that the universe was never that simple.

Rex cleared his throat. "I'm gonna head back to the shuttle. I just...", he trailed off uncomfortably.

"It's alright", Sabine answered him, knowing full well why Rex needed some time right now, "You go."
The Clone smiled appreciatively and went to leave but turned back after a few steps, "Oh, I'll send up the Starbird's nav data. It'll give us a quicker route home."

"That'd be appreciated, thank you", Pellaeon replied politely.

Rex turned away and disappeared through the bridge's main door. Across the map table, Captain Pellaeon stood up straight and faced Luke. Ezra wasn't familiar with the man before this mission, so he didn't find it as difficult to warm to him. Sure, at the back of his mind Ezra probably had a general distrust of anyone from the Seventh Fleet, but Pellaeon's attitude and actions had earned him some favour. The Captain seemed nice enough anyway.

"I know it's already been said, Skywalker, but thank you." Pellaeon extended a hand to Luke, which he shook promptly, "And I'm sorry about Tano. She was... quite something."

Luke gave a bittersweet smile. "She really was", he mused. Luke grew more serious again, "And we're sorry about Faro too. She was a good person, not many could do what she did."

Pellaeon began walking slowly up the bridge, motioning the three of them to follow. Ezra let Luke walk beside Pellaeon, choosing to stay at Sabine's side instead. She seemed to feel just as out of place here as he did. After all these years, here they were walking around on a Star Destroyer's bridge as friends and allies.

"Thrawn didn't ask...", Pellaeon started as they walked, "I think I already know the answer but I'll bite anyway: The Fourth Sister?"


"Hmph. Figured", Pellaeon said drily. They reached the top of the bridge and came to a stop. Ezra and Sabine stood to the right of Luke, Pellaeon on Luke's left. "How'd she go, if you don't mind me asking?"

Ezra saw conflict on Luke's face. There was a mix of emotions, something Ezra hadn't expected for the Inquisitor. The Inquisitor. Ezra's three encounters with the Inquisitor had stuck with him. Of course, he'd lost Argos to her in their first encounter. At the second, he'd only barely escaped into the World Between Worlds. At the third and final meeting, Ezra almost bested her but his lightsaber cut out. If it hadn't been for Ahsoka, who knows what the Fourth Sister would have done to him.

"I killed her, but it was her choice", Luke's voice was low and ponderous.

Pellaeon wrinkled his nose, "How do you mean?"

The other Jedi shrugged. "Snoke manipulated her. Before the end, I think she had a moment of clarity. She knew she had to die to stop Snoke and she accepted it."

Final hour conversion didn't redeem the Fourth Sister for everything she'd done in the past. However, Ezra did feel some pity for her. He knew himself how easy the dark path was to follow and once you started down it then it almost never let you go. Like Vader, the Fourth Sister had just barely managed to break from that path. Better late than never.

The Captain was silent and kept watching out of the main window. Like Ezra, he didn't seem to have anything to say on the Inquisitor. The four of them spent a short while in silence before the engines of Thrawn's Chiss warship flared up. It was an unusual ship, quite different to anything Ezra had seen before. They watched as it turned slowly to a new vector before the engines fired up.
even brighter. A second later, it blinked out of view and into hyperspace.

Pellaeon let out a breath as if he’d been holding it for years. "So... it's really over."

"For now, yes", Ezra replied.

"I hope that's good enough." The old man glanced at Luke with a half-amused smirk, "I was hoping you Jedi would get less cryptic about things once it was over."

Sabine laughed, "Believe me, they don't stop."

Pellaeon chuckled and turned back to the viewport. "So, what now?", he asked, "What do the Jedi do in the galaxy now that this threat and the Empire are both gone?"

Briefly, Ezra wasn't sure what to tell him. Pellaeon, despite his help here, was still a servant of the Empire, or what remained of it. However, it only took a second for Ezra to realise how misplaced those reservations were. The Empire was gone and Pellaeon had made it clear he was done serving. Besides, word of the Jedi would spread quickly, especially once Luke got back. As Rex had said back on Pantora, it was a new era, and there'd be no hiding the Jedi's role in it.

"We rebuild", Ezra said assuredly.

"Really?", Pellaeon asked disbelievingly.

Ezra smiled proudly. "Really", he confirmed, "The process has already begun. We won't be moving back to the old Temple for a long time, probably not in my lifetime, but in time we'll rebuild stronger than ever."

Ezra was sure of that. It remained to be seen how Luke was going to approach things - Ezra knew that Luke had some intention of training his own students - but that the Jedi would grow back over time was certain, one way or another. The two of them needed to sort that out soon though. As much as Luke and Ezra had in common, Ezra wasn't sure how much Luke's own views would mesh with his own. Furthermore, Ezra didn't see Luke moving to Lothal, nor did he see himself going elsewhere.

It didn't matter right now. That was a question for another time.

"Well, good luck to you both", Pellaeon said sincerely.

Beside him, Sabine spoke up softly. "I'm sure we'll have a little something for Ahsoka when we get home", she turned her head to Pellaeon, "Just something small. Lots of people in the galaxy will want to say their farewells." The Mandalorian paused for a moment. "You'd be welcome to come, if you want to."

"Sabine's right, we'd be more than happy", Luke concurred.

"I appreciate it, many people from the fleet will want to pay their respects." Pellaeon sighed heavily, "I've got a few families to track down when I get back too, Commodore Faro's and the like. They'll want to know what happened."

"Well, when you do, let us know", Luke told him, "We owe them our lives as well."

"Captain Pellaeon?", a voice interrupted from across the bridge, "The Starbird just sent up the navigational data. We're ready to jump."
The Captain huffed a sigh and stared out of the window for a moment longer. It was easy to forget that Pellaeon and his crew had been out here ever since the purrgil. At long last, they too were finally done out here.

"Commander Kenic", Pellaeon said at last, turning to the officer at the helm, "Let's go home."

What a goddamn mess.

Grand Admiral Sloane kicked aside a shard of metal on the ground. It might once have been part of a Star Destroyer, or one of their walkers, or a trooper's armour, or who knows what else.

Standing near the edge of the large excavation pit, Sloane could see the complete chaos that had been left here. All the ships she'd sent to Thrawn's effort were lost. The Cunctator and the Solicitude had been destroyed, as had all four of the frigates, as well as almost every fighter they'd come with. All five AT-ATs were gone, as were almost the entirety of the ship's crews and stormtroopers.

General Veers was dead. One of her most competent and experienced officers had gone down with the walkers. Captain Canady had been pulled from an escape pod and rushed to the Eclipse's medical facility. The doctors were confident he'd live, but he'd be in recovery for months. Worst of all, Brendol Hux of all people was completely fine, having miraculously survived his ship's crash landing with little more than a few scratches.

Sloane cast her eyes to one of the downed Star Destroyers in the distance. It was the Chimaera, Thrawn's own ship. However, any hope that they'd taken that traitorous Chiss down with it were shattered by intercepted communications. Thrawn had been on the escaped Chiss ship, and his former First Officer, Commodore Faro, had taken command. She was dead, but almost no one else of Thrawn's band of insurrectionists had been eliminated. The Jedi were gone too. Sloane's ships had picked up a Mandalorian Gauntlet of all things leaving the battle, and Sloane made the obvious leap that it belonged to the rebel Sabine Wren, a close confidant of the Jedi Bridger that Thrawn and the Fourth Sister had been so obsessed with.

Speaking of the Inquisitor, she was nowhere to be found. Sloane knew what that meant. Not that she'd miss the insufferable and incompetent mystic, but a force user would have been a valuable tool for their new Empire.

Ultimately, there was no getting around it. This whole operation had been almost a total disaster. Almost. Sloane was convinced there'd be something from all this that she could salvage. Starting with this.

From her right, Sloane saw a crowd of people approaching under stormtrooper escort. A dozen Chiss were bound in cuffs and being marched towards her. They were all survivors from the fallen alien ship, found alive by her teams as they scoured the wreckage. Sloane could learn much from the Chiss themselves, she was sure, but she had other concerns first.

Instead, Sloane waited as her troopers brought the prisoners in front of her. At the front of the group of prisoners was the odd-one-out. A human male, garbed in the same uniform as his Chiss crewmates, stuck out like a sore thumb. Sloane approached him, holding her hands behind her back as she inspected him.

"Commander Eli Vanto", she said as the man looked at her. "Imperial attache to the Chiss Ascendancy and former personal aide to Grand Admiral Thrawn, correct?"
The question was rhetorical. Sloane already knew who he was. She'd poured over every file she could find on Thrawn and everyone he'd been involved with as they made their way here. Vanto's name had stuck out immediately, and it was no surprise that Thrawn had turned to him and the Chiss people for help. The man looked a bit younger than she'd pictured, but Sloane wouldn't let looks device her. Thrawn trusted Commander Vanto implicitly, and she knew far better than to dismiss Thrawn's obvious faith in him.

"Grand Admiral Sloane, your reputation precedes you", he said with exaggerated humility

"Don't waste my time, Commander. I want answers", she told him pointedly. Sloane turned to look over the large pit below. "What were you doing out here? Thrawn was always tight-lipped about it, and that Inquisitor was frustratingly secretive. Perhaps you'll be more cooperative."

Vanto forced a laugh. "Sorry to disappoint you", he scoffed.

Sloane shut her eyes with a sigh, "I see you're going to make this difficult." She turned back to the escorting troopers and nodded. "Take them back to the Eclipse", she ordered, "I'll speak with them later."

Vanto glared at her as the troopers marched them away. Sloane watched the cohort go as questions swirled in her mind. What was going on here? What was the power the Inquisitor spoke of? Why did the Jedi want it? She expected to be mulling over those questions for a long time.

Once again, she looked back down at the pit. Her troopers were already picking over the ruin that was at the bottom of it. A smashed stone pillar lay on the ground in front of a gaping door, leading into an old and seemingly empty ruin. Sloane hadn't gone inside yet, but she was glad of it. Something in her gut told her than she didn't want anything to do with that place.

Sloane stood watching the handful of soldiers she'd sent down to secure the site. They were clearing debris, moving a handful of bodies, and occasionally glancing in towards the ruin for the teams that had already gone inside. Only a few minutes later, a single figure ran out of the ruin and shouted to the rest of the troopers outside. Something was going on down there. Wonderful, Sloane muttered in her mind. What now?

Sloane grumbled as she made her way over to the steps down into the pit. If something was happening down there, she wanted to know about it. By the time she got down there and crossed over towards the ruin, a few more stormtroopers emerged from the structure in a flurry.

"Troopers!", she shouted over to them, "What's going on over there?"

The Sergeant in charge saluted as she approached him. "Grand Admiral, we found something. You'll want to see this."

From the ruin, four of her troopers emerged carrying something together. It was a medical stretcher by the looks of it. A crowd of officers and soldiers blocked her view at first, but as the troopers pushed through the spectators many gasped or recoiled in horror. An officer gagged and keeled over, and others covered their mouths to stifle any sort of reaction.

As soon as the troopers came to her she understood their reactions.

On the stretcher was a mess of a thing. It must have been a tall humanoid once - at least before this happened to it. The thing's skin had been burned away across its body, leaving only pale sore flesh. Its clothes were tattered and torn, some of them melted into the flesh itself. The thing's body was contorted into a horrible position, its spine surely broken. Its face was a horrid mess too.
A deep gash across its skull exposed brain and bone, and there was a gaping hole in the right side of its face where the cheek had once been. Blood dripped from countless wounds across its body and a pungent odour of burnt flesh and bodily fluids seeped off it. The only parts that weren't mangled beyond all recognition were its strangely bright blue eyes.

Then, it blinked.

"My god...", even she couldn't hide the shock, "This thing's alive?"

It blinked its eyes open and looked around, but it didn't seem able to move any other part of its body. Sloane had never seen anything like it. This thing should be dead.

"We found it deep in the ruin, Grand Admiral", one of the troopers informed her shakily.

*This was it.* There was no way this... thing wasn't connected to whatever happened here. She was sure of it.

Sloane tore her eyes away. "Did you find anything else?", she asked the Sergeant.

He looked back over his shoulder at one of the other troopers. "We found this", he said as he nodded for the other to approach.

Another trooper walked over carrying a long white piece of fabric in his hands. Sloane took it from him and inspected it. It was a cloak of some kind, she could tell from the fastener at the neck. Somehow, it still looked good as new, without a tear, crease, or blemish of dust on it.

"No idea where it came from. ma'am", the Sergeant explained, "Only other thing we found down there were some piles of rubble, a couple of smashed ornaments, and the Inquisitor's body."

*So, she was dead.* Sloane wouldn't miss her, that was for sure. Keeping the cloak in her hands, the Grand Admiral looked back at the mangled monstrosity they'd hauled from the ruin.

"Get that mess back to the *Eclipse*", she commanded.

"At once, Grand Admiral", the Sergeant acknowledged promptly. "Any further orders?"

Sloane stared into the battered being's pale blue eyes. They appeared to acknowledge her and even in this sorry physical state its gaze still seemed strangely overpowering.

"No", she turned away from it, "Pack it up. We're done here."

Chapter End Notes

As I've mentioned, we still have a small epilogue to go, but this was indeed the last major chapter. There's a big end of story author's note to come that'll explain the larger thematic stuff, so I'll stick to the smaller things here.

Rex and Luke don't need many words to mourn Ahsoka, and I think it was better to have Rex accept Ahsoka's death rather than be distraught about it. There was also no way in hell Rex was not going to say experience outranks everything here either. I've
said before that I grew up with Ahsoka and Rex, so it was odd to put my own version of the end of their relationship to (digital) paper. As for Ezra and Sabine, they didn't need as much focus on the grief as Rex and Luke. I did somewhat bait Ezra's death a bit much, so that had to be addressed. I also think it was important to show both of them leaning on each other in their grief. My only real complaint about how they handled Kanan's death in the show was that all of the crew dealt with it separately and didn't lean on each other for support. This time, I wanted to stick with this story's focus on Ezra and Sabine's relationship and family in general, having these two rely on each other to cope with the loss of one of their closest friends.

Pellaeon's meeting with Thrawn marks their final conversation, signalling the end of a duo that has run through this whole story. There needed to be something to humanise their friendship, and it is indeed a friendship, in their final conversation. Thrawn's informal tone and laughter are a departure from the stoic and serious Chiss we usually know, and is a testament to the fact that, underneath everything, Thrawn does have a heart of some kind. In light of Faro's death and Vanto's capture, Thrawn isn't going to say farewell to his last true friend without some little bit of sentiment. There wasn't much of a chance to do a final farewell between Ezra and Thrawn, but I think there's enough of one for me to be satisfied. Ezra doesn't forgive him for what he did, nor does Thrawn show any regret, but the two of them have a sort of mutual respect for each other, at least as far as this threat goes. As for some of the small details, there's two worth mentioning. Pellaeon is going to retire to Sulon near Baron's Hed. This location first appeared in Dark Forces II: Jedi Knight. Kyle Katarn's family has an estate near the town and it's where he first gets his lightsaber, as well as where he has his first duel with the Dark Jedi Yun. I adore that game series and it's hardly the first reference to it. There's also a very intentional word choice at one point that might - and I mean might - end up being relevant in the future...

As for the chapter preview line, it's one I'm sure many are familiar with. It's a common Stark saying from Game of Thrones/A Song of Ice and Fire. Its original context is a bit different to how I used it, but it echoed the idea that Ahsoka, the lone wolf, gave her life so the rest, the pack, can survive. Ahsoka as that metaphorical wolf seemed sufficiently "Filoni-y" too, and it's not the last Ahsoka literary comparison thing that I hope would have Filoni's approval in this story...

We end with a Sloane picking up the pieces of the battle. Sloane doesn't turn up much in the story, but she is definitely important throughout its second half and in this period of the canon as a whole. As for Vanto, his fate was hard to decide on. At first, I planned to kill him off but I decided against it as enough people had died. Him surviving leaves some questions open for the future, and we all know that good endings are also beginnings too. As for Sloane's recovery of Snoke, it's something that was bound to happen. We all know Snoke doesn't die yet, so he needed to be recovered somehow. I go into depth about Snoke in the end of story note, so stay tuned for more on that.

Next time, for the last time: The Epilogue.
It had been Rex's choice to have something on Lothal for Ahsoka. She never had a permanent home to speak of and Lothal was one of the places she'd known best.

Rex had taken most of the preparation into his own hands, as Ezra knew he would. The Clone missed her, there was no denying that, but at the same time Rex valued the life Ahsoka had bought them even more than before. He was going to spend his last years well before accelerated ageing caught up with him. He'd picked out a nice hill not far from the Spectre Compound to set a small stone for Ahsoka. It was a gorgeous site, overlooking the sea to the west and the plains to the east. Rex had also sent out word to most of the people he'd thought would want to know.

Luke and Leia had informed the Republic leadership of her passing and had obviously had a hand in organising the memorial. They'd arrived on Lothal a few days early, bringing the astromech and protocol droid they were both so fond of to help prepare for the small service.

Along with Luke and Leia had come a cohort of their own friends. General Solo, the man Ezra had heard so much about, wasn't exactly the type of person Ezra expected Leia to be interested in. Suave, cocky, and an all-round scoundrel, it was the clearest example he could think of for opposites attracting. A towering Wookiee called Chewbacca came too, making Zeb only the second tallest and hairiest rebel on Lothal. With them came another person Ezra had long wanted to meet. Ben Solo was barely a year old, but Ezra could feel the force from him even stronger than he'd felt it from Jacen. Luke would have his work cut out for him teaching Ben how to control that power.

Most surprising of their friends was someone Ezra already met years ago. Lando Calrissian had lost none of his irritatingly smooth charm or quick tongue. He'd gained something in politeness and manners though. Ezra had spoken to him a few times, mostly to save Hera from being trapped in conversation with him too long, and Lando didn't seem as bad as Ezra remembered. The smuggler went on about how he was responsible these days, the price he had to pay to be successful. Ezra thought that the war had something to do with that change too.

On the day, a select number of faces from the Republic and Rebellion turned out. After so many years, Ezra finally got to see Wedge again. He'd be on Lothal for a few days still and they'd promised each other they'd catch up properly before he left. A Rebel medic, Sergeant Larte, came too, apparently having been close with Ahsoka in the early years of the Empire. Senator Mothma and a number of Republic officials had attended, trying to do so as low-key as possible. Chandrila's Senator was the galaxy's central political figure these days and the fact that she made time for this spoke volumes about what Ahsoka had meant to the Rebellion, the Republic, and her personally. They'd all come to pay respects to the founder of the Fulcrum programme, which had ended up being critical to the success of the Rebellion. On top of that, as the New Republic sought to set the past straight; they were erasing the anti-Jedi propaganda that the Empire had put out. The Clone Wars heroes were being given the justice they deserved at last. Ahsoka, despite being so young at
the time, had been one of those heroes.

Admiral Gial Ackbar, commander of the Rebel fleet at Endor, was one of the more distinguished attendees. The Mon Calamari reminded Ezra of Rex, full of the stories and wisdom you'd only ever get from a soldier. Ezra was surprised to hear that Ackbar had fought with Ahsoka during the Clone Wars, and after all these years Ackbar still remembered what she'd done for them.

Senator Riyo Chuchi was another high-profile visitor. She'd come with a small Pantoran delegation. Chuchi had always said that Pantora owed Ahsoka a great debt, and they came to prove that. Ezra had brought her to see the academy and the students too. The humble Senator accepted no credit for helping them get there though, instead insisting that it was Ahsoka who'd saved them and ensured that the seeds of the Jeid Order would be nurtured.

There were some more unexpected appearances too. Hondo had crawled out from wherever he'd been hiding and come to pay his respects. The old pirate regaled him with stories of Ahsoka during the war and after - how he'd helped her take down lethal bounty hunters, how they'd fought together against Grievous' droid armies, how she'd come to him in her hour of need to get that shuttle of her's tricked out. Most of it was probably embellishment, but there was a sentiment in Hondo that Ezra couldn't miss. Even the swindler had a heart, and just a piece of it had broken with Ahsoka's loss.

A Mandalorian ship had caught most of them by surprise. When Bo Katan walked off alone, every one but Rex and Sabine were shocked. Mand'alor the Restorer as her people had started calling her had come to pay her respects to Ahsoka, having fought alongside her in the Siege of Mandalore. She didn't come with guards - not that she'd need any - nor any escort, and Ezra had the sneaking suspicion that she'd honestly just hopped into a ship and left without telling anyone. It seemed like a very Mandalorian thing to do after all and Ezra didn't think anyone would be stupid enough to try and stop her doing it.

True to his word, Captain Pellaeon came with an entourage of survivors from their mission in the Unknown Regions. A general pardon had already been issued for ex-Imperials, and the combination of Luke and Ezra's word had made sure Pellaeon got one too in spite of his high rank. The survivors were even being given the pay they were owed and were all going their separate ways. Ezra even spoke with Commander Hammerly about the Chimaera's crew. The former First Officer had done her service and was settling down on Coruscant, with many others scattering to all corners of the galaxy. As for Pellaeon himself, his dreams of some land on Sulon were bearing fruit. He'd found a nice plot of land and an old friend of his was still living nearby. He also promised to be in touch soon about things for the late Commodore Faro and the other fallen members of their fleet. Just as they promised, Ezra, Luke, Sabine, and Rex would all make sure they paid their respects when that time came.

There were many more guests that Ezra didn't know. A group of Togruta from Kiros, some villagers from a planet called Carlac, some other Wookiees from Kashyyyk, and two sisters from Coruscant that no one else seemed to know but clearly knew Ahsoka. A man called Bonteri spent some time talking with Rex, but Ezra knew nothing more about him.

That so many people from all corners of the galaxy had come on short notice was astounding. Ahsoka had touched all of their lives in some way, shape, or form. From the Clone Wars to Snoke, she'd saved countless lives, and the entire galaxy owed her a debt even if they didn't know it. Ahsoka wouldn't need them to know that though. All she'd ever want would be for them to enjoy the peace, freedom, and opportunity that her sacrifice had given them. As long as they did, Ahsoka's memory would live on every bit as strong as it had when she lived.
Even then, Ezra knew Ahsoka would always be with them. In her lessons yes, but also in the force. As Luke put it so well in his eulogy: *no one was ever really gone.*

By the time their small ceremony was over, the sun was hanging low over the horizon. Most of their guests had either gone home or gone back to wherever on Lothal they were staying.

Ezra stood watching from a hill not far from Spectre Compound. He could see Solo's ship, the infamous *Millennium Falcon,* waiting to take off home. He could see several figures standing around it as they made sure they were ready to go. Lando shouted something over to Leia before disappearing inside the ship. Han stood arms folded, saying something to Chewbacca as they slouched on the entry ramp. Leia stood beside them, but her focus remained on her son sat on the grass at her feet. Luke was standing a bit further back, a contented smile on his face as he watched his nephew.

The other Jedi probably sensed Ezra long before he excused himself and started making his way over. They hadn't had a chance to talk much since the ceremony. The other Jedi walked up the hill, coming to a stop just beside him.

"It was a really nice service", Ezra said after a while. "You did well. She'd have been honoured."

"I just threw words together", Luke brushed off, "But thank you for Lothal. You and Rex picked a really nice site. I see why you all love this place so much."

Ezra smiled and looked back towards the Compound and Capital City beyond it. "Yeah, it means a lot to us", he mused.

Lothal was crucial to all of the events that led them here. It was for Lothal that Ezra had forced Thrawn into the Unknown Regions in the first place. Without those events, Ezra'd never have picked up the trail that led them to Snoke. Perhaps Ahsoka or Luke would have found that trail themselves anyway, the force would find a way after all, but there was no denying that the way events played out had been shaped by Ezra's home. There was no better place for Ahsoka to be remembered.


Luke spoke for both of them. In the weeks since they'd come home, both of them still had the subtle feeling that something still wasn't right. It was nothing like before - the call that had beckoned to him for those 5 years in exile was gone - but still a faint whisper of something remained. It might not have been Snoke at all, just something else that had been hidden in the background all along. Luke suggested that it might be Grysk, those aliens Thrawn had gone home to fight, or maybe even the lingering residue of the Emperor's power. They didn't know either way, but Ezra was sure an answer would reveal itself in time.

"Perhaps Ahsoka will know", the other Jedi supposed.

Ezra turned his head to Luke. "You think so? I don't know how... *that* works."

The vision of Master Yoda Ezra had at the gateway to the World Between Worlds was Ezra's first and so far only encounter with what Luke called force spirits. Powerful wielders of the force were able to preserve their consciousness and manifest after death. Yoda, Master Kenobi, and Luke's father Anakin were the only three people with that ability Luke knew of, but he seemed convinced that Ahsoka had that power too. With all the secrets and surprises the Togruta had, Ezra thought it was a safe bet too.
"Well, how do we contact her?", Ezra asked.

Luke shrugged. "I'm not sure it works that way. Master Yoda came back days later, Ben took years to appear fully. I think that when the time's right, we'll see her again."

"You're right", Ezra nodded. "Either way, we have to be ready just in case."

"I know." Luke paused for a moment and looked behind him at Spectre Compound. "You've done a good job already. I hope I can have the same success."

Ezra knew the implication there. They'd already spoken about the Jedi and Ezra's opinion of them. Neither Luke nor Ezra were Jedi in the same vein as those of the old Republic. Both had their attachments that set them apart from the Jedi of old, but they both had their own visions that set them apart from each other. However, while Luke rejected some of the traditional Jedi ways, Ezra was willing to cast off far more that Luke could abide.

Luke wanted to keep the rulebook with a few changes, Ezra wanted to throw it out and start back from those basics. Stricter rules might mean less freedom, but Luke saw that as an acceptable sacrifice to resist the allures of the dark side. Given how much Luke's father impacted Luke's view of the Jedi and the galaxy, Ezra couldn't blame him for being so cautious. On the other hand, Ezra was more open. The dark side mattered less to him than the balance in between. Ezra had brushes with both extremes over the years, be that Kanan's lessons or Maul's ramblings. However, he'd had plenty of time to understand the middle ground too. From the teachings of the Bendu to his experiences in exile, the need for a careful balance in all things had become clear.

They weren't worlds apart, but the Jedi Order that Ezra was already building wasn't the same one Luke hoped to build. For that reason, their paths weren't the same.

"I appreciate that you're so understanding, Luke."

"We're different people, different perspectives, different lives." Luke pursed his lips, "I'm sorry that we won't be alongside each other."

Ezra shook his head, "We'll always have each other's back. We may be in different places, teach different students, have some different opinions, but we're still Jedi. We stick together, we work together, even if we spend most of our time apart."

Luke smiled. "Glad to hear it. I could certainly use some good advice when I start taking on my own students."

"That reminds me", Ezra reached into his pocket and took out a holodisc, "This belongs with you."

Luke recognised the holodisc immediately. It was the same one Ahsoka had given Ezra before the two of them had left for this mission months ago. Full of Jedi texts, teachings, ideas, and examples. Ezra had gotten a lot from it, but Luke would get more.

"Take it. It belongs with you", Ezra said as he placed it in Luke's hand.

Luke inspected it curiously and then looked back at him. "You're sure about this?", he asked.

"I have copies of the things I want", Ezra assured him.

His friend was still cautious. "There's a lot of stuff in here. You don't know what else in there might be useful."
Ezra smiled slightly to himself, and clasped his hands at ease behind his back. "I know what's in there: the past."

Luke took a moment longer to think. Then, he slipped the disc into a pouch on his belt. For a while, they stood silently, gazing at the hill in distance upon which Ahsoka's memorial rested.

The other Jedi took a long breath before turning to him. "I'd better get to it then", Luke said, extending his right hand to Ezra.

"Thanks for everything, Luke!", Ezra shook the robotic hand.

"You too, Ezra. And good luck. For the Jedi, for the child, for everything", Luke said sincerely.

"Same to you. May the force be with you", Ezra smiled, bringing out the Jedi's favourite old saying.

Luke bowed his head, "And with you, my friend."

With that, Luke turned away and made his way back down the hill. As Luke joined the others outside the *Falcon*, Ezra felt a different familiar presence walking up the hill behind him.

"How is everyone?", he didn't need to look to see who it was.

"They're alright." Sabine came up and stood beside him. "It was a nice day. Difficult, in some ways, but nice. Ahsoka wouldn't have wanted it to be miserable."

Ezra caught his wife's hand in his own, a small sign of comfort after a long day and an even longer road to get here.

The two of them stood and watched as the crowd of people outside the *Falcon* finished up. They could hear the echoes of conversation and laughter from them all. Lando and Han were the first to slip back inside, raring to get going. Ben must have seen them go and seemed to perk up. Ezra smiled as Chewbacca stopped in his tracks and roared happily at the young boy. He scooped up Ben Solo in his hairy arms, carrying the giggling child over his shoulder with a hearty Wookiee laugh that echoed loudly even as they disappeared into the ship. That left only Leia and Luke, and both turned back one last time to wave goodbye before they too made their way inside.

"I can't believe this whole thing's over", Sabine sighed wearily as the *Falcon's* ramp closed up below.

Ezra smiled and gently tightened his hold on her hand. "One story's ending is another's beginning."

Nothing worth having was ever easy. It may have been a difficult road to get here, but the peace of mind they could enjoy now was worth all of the sacrifices. With no threat lingering on the fringes of space, no Empire breathing down their necks, no war to ravage the galaxy, they were about to experience a real peace. It was just in time for the slow rebuilding of the Jedi Order and the Republic. *And just in time for little Mira too.*

Ezra smiled at the thought. One chapter might be closing, but there were still plenty more to follow.

With the roar of its engines, the *Falcon* lifted off the ground. It soared up into the clear sunset sky, passing low over the hills and out over the ocean before disappearing far over the horizon. Sabine and Ezra took one last look over towards the hill with Ahsoka's small memorial nestled on the far side before they too made for home.
No one was there to see the four illuminated figures on the far side of the hill. A white-robed figure knelt down, taking in a deep breath she didn't need. Behind her, Master Yoda rested quietly on his cane, and beside him Master Kenobi stood stoic and silent. Her Master was closer, the pride emanating from him without any words spoken.

The slithers of sunlight were still enough to see what had been laid here. She felt her companion's eyes on her as she inspected the small ornate stone set into the ground. After a long moment of hesitation, her ethereal hands brushed over the simple carvings. The Fulcrum symbol was engraved upon it by one whose art she knew so well. Below the symbol, her fingers ghosted the short inscription in her honour:

_In Memory of Ahsoka Tano_

"The wind ever under her wings, bearing her where the sun sails and the moon walks."

Chapter End Notes

And that's our epilogue. Stick with me for the last of my stupidly long end of chapter notes.

For the funeral, I felt like it was better to do it this way instead of doing the actual ceremony/service. By spending a bit of time talking about each guest and why they came, it let me show just how much Ahsoka did and how many people she touched throughout her life. It also functions as a mini-epilogue for some people like Pellaeon and Hammerly, allowing me to show little snippets of what the future has in store for them. There's loads of guests that turn up. Most of them are fairly self-explanatory, like Hondo or Mon Mothma. Some Togruta colonists from Kiros come to honour the woman who freed them from slavery, Wookiees from Kashyyyk in thanks to the padawan who helped end the Trandoshan raids, and the Carlac villagers pay their respects to the woman who fought against Deathwatch to protect them. Lux Bonteri, who is actually alive in canon, just believed to be dead by the Empire, also gets a mention. The two sisters from Corsucant are the two people that will appear in the TCW revival, and we've seen clips of them in the Celebration panel and the trailer. I felt like they should come too, especially since they're bound to be important to Ahsoka's story in the end. A Sergeant Larte also gets mentioned, which is Kaeden Larte from the Ahsoka novel that goes on to become an Alliance medic.

For Ezra and Luke, they're both going separate paths for training their Jedi. I felt like Luke and Ezra, while they'd remain good friends, just belonged elsewhere. Luke has Ben to train and is likely to have his Academy elsewhere, while Ezra just belonged on Lothal. Furthermore, Ezra's experiences with Ahsoka, the Bendu, and in his multi-year exile have taught him the importance of balance rather than rigid adherence to one strict code that Luke hasn't had by this point, at least not to the same extent. They've both had different journeys and it's made them different people, but they're still good friends and I'd imagine they'd still cooperate closely. It also ensures that Ezra, Jacen, and the rest are well clear of what happens to Ben Solo in the future. Ezra's line about knowing that it's only "the past" in those books in taken right from Kanan in 'Path of the Jedi' way back in Season 1 of Rebels. There was just no way I wasn't rounding out
Ezra's final scene without a callback to the man who set him on this path in the first place. Then, of course, there's a little bit of Sabine and Ezra. Mira is easily the most popular choice for an Ezrabine kid name, thanks in no small part to the amazing Meldy Arts, and for good reason.

Finally, "where the sun sails and the moon walks." That, as I'm sure you all know, is part of the correct reply for the eagles in Lord of the Rings. Filoni has made no secret of his love of Tolkien and its had a clear impact on Ahsoka. In Rebels' epilogue, we get Ahsoka the White with the staff, robe and all. As for the quote itself, it's been linked with Ahsoka before. For Season 2's finale, one of the unused tracks for that ending montage was called "Where the Sun Sails and the Moon Walks", and it's an excellent piece if you haven't heard it yet. Basically, there was no way there wasn't going to be something like this to wrap up Ahsoka. Now, I have a huge confession to make in that I've never read LotR. A crime I know, but I like to think I've absorbed enough of it by cultural osmosis and the film adaptations to justify using some stuff from it. Besides, WestwardGlance has enough love of that author to spare, so I'll borrow some from him...

Speaking of which, since this story's over, go and give his After Moses a read. It's what I'm going to do now that this is all wrapped up. Y'all know how good he is already, and he's only gotten better with AM. I'll also point you towards The Luckless Mage of Greind when Acacemy, another excellent story from one of our Rebels writers that's absolutely worth your time and then some. Last but certainly not least, I'll point you all to Normal, a Rebels fanfic you may have seen around recently from CdnChgr, a great story with that most precious of things: Ezrabine.

There's a big ole' author's note after this which breaks down a ton of stuff like Snoke, Ahsoka's sacrifice, where this fits in the ST, and plenty of other stuff that I thought was worth mentioning. For those of you who'll read it, there's loads there. Otherwise, this is where I sign off. It's been a massive journey of one whole year, over 300k words, and hundreds of hours of work. I'm proud to have seen it through, and even more grateful to everyone who has read, reviewed, and responded to this story. I can't put into words how much I appreciate all of the kind words and feedback you guys have given me, and I know I'd have never seen this story through without you.

Sincerely, humbly, and gratefully - Lothcat1138

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