Star Wars: A Path Reconsidered
by Akivan

Summary

What if Thrawn personally investigated The Death Star right after his mission with Vader? What are the consequences and how does it affect the timeline?

Thrawn finds himself out of time. His true loyalties and resolve openly face the malice of Lord Vader in this story of hidden motivations and hope brought to light. The Rebellion will find they have an unlikely ally... if they can rescue him first...

“It is never wrong to be curious. But it can sometimes be dangerous.” —Thrawn

Begins directly after Thrawn: Alliances and before Thrawn's re-appearance on Season 4 of Star Wars: Rebels. This is a canon-compliant story that will explore and follow events of Rebels season 4, with an alternate universe spark following Thrawn's curiosity and fear about The Death Star. Expect spoilers for "Thrawn," "Thrawn: Alliances," "Star Wars: Rebels," and general spoilers for books and comics centered around this prequel timeline.
A Spark From Curiosity

Chapter Summary

Following the events of Thrawn: Alliances, time grows short for Thrawn's people. Thrawn must see the Empire's new project for himself... and face the consequences.

“You can’t stop the change, any more than you can stop the suns from setting.” — Shmi Skywalker

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“How long will you accept tyranny as a necessary part of Imperial rule?” Nightswan said. He stood in the dark across from Thrawn in a field of tall grass. A gentle breeze rustled the blue-green blades. The scene was a tense serenity.

Thrawn watched the brilliant lights of the Creekpath Mining Complex in the distance. Faint sounds of industry echoed from the facility. He relaxed slightly, as if relishing the last moments of calm and willing the moment to linger for just a bit longer.

However, he knew the thousands of people there were no doubt afraid of the Imperial presence in the skies above. Such an unusual calm amid uncertainty and fear.

Thrawn blinked slowly. After a moment he turned his gaze to Nightswan. “I do indeed serve the Empire... but-“ His eyes lost focus for a second, almost as if Thrawn lost balance briefly. This made Nightswan nervous, but also worried.

“I also serve the causes of the Chiss Ascendancy,” Thrawn said slowly.

Nightswan’s eyes widened slightly and temptation rippled across his brow.

Thrawn took a slow breath. “If I deem this project to be a threat against them, I may find it necessary to reconsider my path.”

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Batonn was a slaughter.

No survivors were reported inside the perimeter of the shield. Insurgents and civilians perished together in a horrendous death trap beyond anything seen since the Clone War. The shield itself acted like a thermal barrier for explosives, ricocheting the explosive energy back down toward the Creekpath residents and trapping them amidst the horrors of brimstone and molten fire.

So much senseless loss of life. Why?

Why did he not anticipate Governor Arihnda Pryce? Not see her actions in time?
And he was forced to take credit for her slaughter...

Grand Admiral Thrawn stood on the bridge of the *Chimaera* with his hands clasped behind his back, watching intently out the main viewport. He stood alone. His white uniform brilliantly withheld the pearly mixture of light from the grandeur of space and the artificial illumination from his Star Destroyer. The gold bars upon his shoulders reflected the strength of his station.

Commodore Faro watched him closely from the tactical holo display. There was nothing on the targeting screen despite Thrawn’s insistence to continue scanning. He was intent that something would be found here.

Outwardly Thrawn stood resolute, but inwardly… he experienced a turmoil of calculation and… emotion. Faro, after so much time under his command, could sense his disquiet. The subtle things gave him away. Every so often his thumb would rub across his wrist, and he had that same look of exhaustion he had as when observing Lord Vader during the space battle against the Grysk.

Thrawn had undoubtedly come to some sort of realization that he was unwilling to accept; however, she never knew what his conclusion came to be. Something about Grysk tactics she assumed and their consequences. Yes, she saw that same look upon him now, again.

Faro suddenly worried a threat unknown to the rest of the ship lingered out in the starry blackness. But surely, the Grand Admiral would alert her should there be a danger. No, something else lingered in Thrawn’s eyes.

Bitterness.

All people have regrets. Warriors are no exception.

Thrawn’s crimson eyes pierced into the starry grandeur of the nebula outside the viewport, considering the colors and auras only he could behold in the expanded spectrum of light. A portion of the cloud expanded in purplish, red brilliance.

He blinked slowly. It was sad the others couldn’t perceive what he was able to see. His mind drifted to distant thoughts that plagued his mind as the colors faded back to a softer aura.

All forms of regret sear equally deeply into the mind and soul. Always beneath the scar lurks the thought and fear that there was something else that could have been done.

Thrawn remembered Emperor Palpatine’s words.

“Ah,” the Emperor said knowingly. “Your thoughts are laid bare, Mitth’raw’nuruodo. You fear that, once I have dealt with the rebels within my borders, I will turn my unstoppable weapon against your Chiss. Is that your concern?”

“Commodore Faro,” Thrawn said smoothly. He motioned to the empty space next to him, a silent request to join him. Faro carefully walked around the tactical display and joined him alone at the end of the command walkway, showing deference to his position in front of the viewport.
She eyed him with a hint of worry once reaching his side. Yes, bitterness hung in the depths of his eyes, but there was a sadness there that she had never witnessed in the Chiss Grand Admiral. Concern latched to her brow.

“Yes, Grand Admiral?” Faro said quietly. They were out of earshot of the rest of the crew. “Is everything… is everything alright?”

Thrawn pursed his lips and raised his chin, not looking at her. Was he afraid to look her in the eye? Faro followed his gaze, and a short moment passed between them. Thrawn sensed her anxiety and her questions rising within her mind.

“There is a reason I brought the Chimaera here, to this place, Commodore Faro,” Thrawn said slowly. “Please. Observe a moment.”

He seemed fixated upon a single spot in the starry nebula, though Faro could not discern what held his attention. But it was not starry nothingness to Thrawn. There was a faint heat signature, but also something else. Something indistinct he was able to sense because of a secret he held; a secret he held for the sake of his people.

He felt it, though faintly; it was surely there. So many emotions emanated from beings held within the otherwise silent nebula. At a younger age, the source of his disquiet would be sharper within his Sight.

“Grand Admiral! Commodore!” The Tactical Officer rose from his station and rushed to the tactical display. Thrawn slightly turned, watching the officer quickly manipulate the holo display. A focused spot of space was brought up on the circular console. “Large target has just been scanned forward of our bow. It appears to be non-functional; perhaps under construction.”

The object was blurry and shapeless, out of focus on the display. “Scans are incomplete though; there appears to be some sort of interference. We’re trying to focus the scan, sir,” the tactical officer said as he adjusted instruments on the tactical console.

“Orders, sir?” Faro asked Thrawn.

“Maintain current distance from the target.” Thrawn said. “And continue a full sensor sweep of the area. Report any new… abnormalities.”

“As ordered, aye sir.” Faro said. “Helm be prepared to maneuver should the object move.”

“Helm, aye,” said the helm officer.

Faro turned to the tactical officer. “Continue scans as ordered.”

“Watch for smaller ships orbiting the initial target,” Thrawn said. “Though the interference we are experiencing may prevent such detail.”

“If we decrease the Chimaera’s distance to the object, Grand Admiral, we could achieve more detailed readings,” the tactical officer said.

“Negative Lieutenant Commander,” Thrawn said. “We mustn’t make our presence known so clearly quite yet. Gather what you can from this distance.”

“Aye sir, expanding scanner coverage.”

Faro overlooked the bridge with pride. Every crew member vigorously carried out their orders.
They were honored to be stationed aboard the *Chimaera*, but perhaps also gratefully lucky considering the stories of what could happen aboard other Star Destroyers in the Imperial Fleet.

Each one of them was loyal to Thrawn, not only because of his great tactical skill and leadership style, but because Thrawn gave them his loyalty first. Their lives seemed to be important to him, which was sadly rare in the Empire.

*Leadership is a role and a task that should never be aspired to lightly. Neither should loyalty be given without reason. A true leader will work to prove worthy of a deeper trust.*

When Lord Vader served aboard the *Chimaera* during their mission in the Unknown Region, there were many times when Faro observed Thrawn subtly redirecting the Dark Lord’s ire from perceived failures among the crew. Thrawn would often insert himself as the clear target for Vader and his anger. Faro sometimes wondered if that was part of Thrawn’s consideration while going on the mission with Vader alone to the surface of Batuu. The result was getting the Dark Lord off his ship and away from those aboard the *Chimaera*.

“What do you observe Commodore Faro?” Thrawn said quietly. He was focused once again on a single spot outside the main viewport.

Faro turned her attention back to the Grand Admiral. She was comforted a bit by his question, which offered a familiar test and a teaching moment of sorts that was common among their careers together. She always enjoyed learning from Thrawn. She considered the readings from the tactical display across the bridge and looked out the viewport as she attempted to put the pieces together in her mind.

“Well Grand Admiral, the interference is unusual for this area of space,” Faro said. She pulled a tablet from a console in front of them and cued up the reading of the unknown target from the tactical display. “And considering the size of the target the *Chimaera* found, that tells me the obscurity could be deliberate.”

Thrawn nodded and hummed an affirmative.

Faro ran the numbers in her head as she glanced over the readings. The scan suddenly updated, and a sense of dread nearly overcame her. Perhaps she had just realized the source of Thrawn’s disquiet, but how would he be aware of this already?

She angled the tablet for Thrawn to see. “Grand Admiral, if the numbers are correct for this structure, it’s basically the size of a small moon,” Faro said. “It is considered incomplete still? And look at the power readings that have just updated, sir. The potential destructive power of what is being built here is… astronomical.”

Thrawn looked down at the tablet and immediately understood the calculated dread he felt from her. He had felt that same dread for a long time once putting the pieces of this clandestine project together.

Thrawn thought of his people. He *feared* for his people.

He thought of his conversation with Emperor Palpatine once again.
“I would certainly not wish to see my aid to you and your Empire subverted to conquest or destruction,” Thrawn said. “But I would also warn against diverting too many of the Empire’s resources from a flexible navy of capital ships and starfighters to massive projects that can bring the Imperial presence to only one system at a time.”

“Allow me to allay your fears,” the Emperor said. “I have no designs against your people. Indeed, I have noted that despite your assistance in mapping the Unknown Region hyperspace routes, you have kept the location of Chiss worlds and bases secret. That is acceptable. I don’t begrudge you the defense of your people.”

Thrawn had felt the Emperor’s malice and heard it in his words back then. He felt that same malice echoed now, as he looked at the tablet in Faro’s delicate hands. He already knew what it was, though he needed to see it for himself. That is why he brought the Chimaera here; it is where his research led him.

This target undoubtedly was the Death Star.

Thrawn reached for the tablet to look closer at the detailed readings, but Faro didn’t let the tablet go. In a bold move, she held onto the tablet, stopping Thrawn in his movement. She wanted him to look at her. It was such a small movement, but this amounted to the abruptness of a ship losing power and unexpectedly dropping out of hyperspace.

Thrawn paused but kept the tension on his pull of the tablet. He set his jaw, slowly rose his eyes up and met Faro’s determined gaze with his crimson orbs. He saw her determination but also her worry. His eyes flinched narrow for a quick moment, as Thrawn considered her boldness.

Faro felt a quick shiver of ice run through her veins, but she held his gaze and turned her hesitation into assertiveness. Even she was surprised a little at her own brashness. She was worried about him, but also now concerned for the wellbeing of the Chimaera and the crew.

“Sir,” Faro whispered. “Should the Chimaera go into tactical alert? What is this? I know something troubles you, and I have the feeling you already know what…” She nods her head toward the viewport, “…this is.” The target had become faintly visible despite their massive distance as it seemingly drifted along its path.

Thrawn held her gaze another moment, unmoving. It was almost as if information Faro couldn’t quite decipher was echoing from his crimson eyes toward her own. He angled his chin up and returned his hand into position behind his back.

Faro saw a sadness again that unnerved her so much. Perhaps sensing this, Thrawn turned back to look out at what only he knew as the Death Star. He took a deep breath, as if steeling himself.

“What have I told you about this place Commodore Faro?” Thrawn said quietly. “My… mission here?”

Faro glanced at the tablet. She held it as if it were a delicate flower in both hands and then looked out the viewport, following Thrawn’s gaze. She suddenly felt small. “Nothing, sir. Only the coordinates and that we may find something here,” Faro said quietly.

“Indeed, we have accomplished that, have we not,” Thrawn replied slowly with almost a bitter humor. He glanced at Faro and nodded toward the obscured Death Star. “Under other circumstances, I would not hesitate to tell you my suspicions, but I fear the danger now is too great.
I took a risk bringing the *Chimaera* here, though I needed to see what was here with my own eyes.”

Faro was silent as she considered the faint object outside the viewport. There was *something* out there, but she couldn’t quite make out the shape or the scale of it. She realized this must be a classified project, and that the *Chimaera* shouldn’t necessarily be here. Thrawn was protecting her and the rest of the crew by withholding specifically what the *Chimaera* found.

“Considering the power-readings you have just seen,” Thrawn said, almost whispering. “Time... grows short. I fear I am nearly too late.”

Thrawn watched with his enhanced eyes what only he knew as the incomplete Death Star float deceptively inert through the space in front of them for a moment. Faro was aware of the danger now and was afraid of possible consequences to the ship and perhaps even to Thrawn himself.

Thrawn found Faro’s troubled gaze, and he regarded her with a prideful sadness. A choice lay before him now, though perhaps one he was unable to fully control. “You are a fine officer of the Imperial Navy Commodore Faro. A ship and her crew should be considered fortunate to have you as it’s leader.”

Faro’s eyes widened with a hint of emotion and confusion. While she felt extremely honored, she did not like the implication of his words. “Sir, I...,” Faro whispered. She didn’t understand. Did Thrawn suspect he would be severely punished for this detour from Lothal? Something was wrong. Her mind started spinning. Was he in good health? What was going on? “I don’t understand.”

“Perhaps in time, part will become clear,” Thrawn said, turning his attention toward space once again. They both stood there for a quiet moment, watching out the main viewport.

Alarms suddenly blared.

“Sir! Ship exiting out of hyperspace!” The tactical officer refocused the tactical display. Thrawn quickly shut his eyes and furrowed his brow, a physical repulsion to the intense malice he suddenly felt. Faro missed his reaction, however. She whipped around to face the holo, quickly patting at an eye with one hand.

“Status!” Faro said.

“It’s come out of hyperspace between us and the object on scanners. Approaching quickly,” the tactical officer said. He hesitated, his eyes widening. “Sir, it appears to be an Imperial Star Destroyer.”

“How...,” Faro considered. She took in an anxious breath. “Do we have identification on the vessel?”

Communications Officer Lomar suddenly interrupted. “Sir! They’re hailing us. They’ve identified as the *Devastator.*”

Faro mentally froze. Lord Vader.

“Open a channel Lieutenant Lomar,” Thrawn said, lulling Faro out of her surprise. “And Commodore Faro, the tablet please.”

Thrawn held out his hand. A faint smile was on his lips, though his eyes were still a sad focus. Faro had forgotten she was holding the tablet, and she almost timidly handed it to him.

He paused though before taking it fully from her grasp. This made her look up at him, and he found
her gaze once more and nodded.

“Thank you,” Thrawn said. They were simple words, but so much meaning was passed behind them. More meaning than perhaps Faro was willing to accept. Thrawn slowly transformed into the collected and poised Grand Admiral with which she was familiar. “At your station please, Commodore Faro.”

“Yes, Grand Admiral,” Faro said. She wanted to ask him so many questions but there simply was not enough time. She nodded in return and walked toward the tactical display.

“Connection established, sir,” Lieutenant Lomar said.

“Very good Lieutenant, enable transmission,” Thrawn said.

An overwhelming and familiar voice suddenly filled the bridge. It seethed of the anger of a predator that had just caught its unruly prey.

“Grand Admiral, Thrawn.”

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Chapter End Notes

"I walk alone, beside myself
Nowhere to go
My flesh and bone
This part of me
The seeds I've sewn"
- *Flesh and Bone* by **Black Math**

[Spotify Song Link](https://open.spotify.com/track/0Tg1jvVQDQ9bZzZQ8M8m3V)
A Secret Revealed

Chapter Summary

Thrawn has no choice but to confront Lord Vader, and Lord Vader can finally act on his suspicions of treason from *Thrawn: Alliances*

“It is never wrong to be curious. But it can sometimes be dangerous.” —Thrawn

"Grand Admiral. Thrawn." Vader said.

Faro put a hand on the tactical console to steady herself, and the officers nearby stopped breathing. Darth Vader’s holographic image faded into existence on the tactical display, replacing the blurry and obscured image of what only Thrawn knew to be the Death Star. Thrawn had one hand still in position behind his back while the other still held the tablet. He regarded the information one last time and then folded it with his arm behind his back, his other hand secured around his wrist as he made his way to the tactical display.

“Lord Vader,” Thrawn said. “To whom do I owe the pleasure of this meeting?”

“I think you know Grand Admiral,” Vader said. “No more games. Why are you here? This is Director Krennic’s jurisdiction. Should you not be at your required station at Lothal?”

“A temporary diversion my lord,” Thrawn said. “One that was necessary. The remainder of the seventh fleet is on their way to Lothal as we speak.”

“The Emperor deems what is necessary,” Vader said. He pointed at Thrawn. “Not you. And the *Chimaera* is needed at Lothal to eliminate rising rebellion there. Not to mention securing your own Tie Defender project.”

Vader paused, crossing his arms. Thrawn’s crimson gaze intensified, and Faro could see a tension rise.

“We will continue this discussion on your ship,” Vader said. He waved his hand, clearly enraged, and his holographic image fizzled away.

“Very well,” Thrawn said to the empty void. Thrawn looked at Faro. “Have the hangar bay prepare for Lord Vader’s arrival. And make available the number one spot for his shuttle.”

“Aye, sir,” Faro said.

Thrawn turned to the chief tactical officer. “Clear all of the data acquired of the large target from your consoles. Leave all that is available only to this tablet. It is not to be spoken of any further, is that clear?”

“Yes, Grand Admiral,” the tactical officer said. He pushed a button sequence on the main tactical console and walked down the command walkway, turning to the crew pit. “Purge the system.”

A crescendo of yes sirs came from the pit below, even though many seemed surprised at the order.
“Commodore Faro,” Thrawn said. “Deliver this tablet to my office please. Place it on my desk as I await Lord Vader’s arrival here on the bridge.”

She felt her anxiety grow as she took the tablet once more. “Yes, Grand Admiral,” Faro said. Thrawn nodded and looked at the others nearby.

“Carry on,” Thrawn said. He walked back to the viewport with practiced endurance and regarded the imposing presence of the new Star Destroyer. The ISD Devastator now filled most of his view, as if Lord Vader deliberately placed it there to block his observation of the Death Star. His crimson eyes watched as a shuttle left its launch bay and vectored toward his own.

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Lord Vader was furious.

Vader held onto the overhead railing as his shuttlecraft landed in the Chimaera’s hangar bay. His other hand rested on his belt near his lightsaber.

A part of Lord Vader was also thrilled with malice. Nothing could protect Thrawn from his wrath after coming to this sector of Imperial Space, meddling with the Emperor’s Death Star. Thrawn had overstepped his sanction, and this time, not even the Emperor’s favor could be a shield. Vader was justified to act. Members of his First Legion were wise in remaining silent during the short journey between Star Destroyers.

“The shuttle is landed and secured Lord Vader,” Commander Kimmund said. The ramp began to slowly descend, revealing the Chimaera’s hangar bay. Crewmembers nearby were at attention as they saw Lord Vader’s imposing figure and his First Legion stormtroopers in formation behind him.

Vader watched them react to his presence. He could feel their fear.

“Grand Admiral Thrawn’s location?” Vader asked.

Commander Kimmund made his way from the cockpit. “He’s reported to be awaiting your arrival on the bridge, Lord Vader.”

Not his office? Interesting. So Grand Admiral Thrawn wished an audience for their confrontation. Very well; Vader would make this a lesson for the crew then. So be it.

“You are with me Commander Kimmund,” Vader said. “The rest of the First Legion will stay with the shuttle and keep it secured for departure.” Vader remembered Rukh and his cloaked fascination with the First Legion’s shuttle previously while in The Unknown Region.

Vader’s cloak rippled violently through the air as he paced down the ramp and through the hangar bay. Commander Kimmund, dressed in full stormtrooper gear, matched Vader’s stride with his blaster carbine resting firmly in his hands.

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Thrawn felt a familiar cold.
The presence of Lord Vader approached. Thrawn knew he had mere minutes until Vader arrived on the Chimaera’s bridge, but he stood resolute at the main viewport, facing outward toward the ISD Devastator. His hands rested behind his back, his shoulders squared, and his feet balanced underneath him. To those on the bridge, he looked like the stoic Grand Admiral that his loyal crew had come to admire.

However, nothing external was quite in focus for Thrawn, as he was entrenched in his thoughts.

*Each person has goals. Some are dark secrets that one hopes will never see the light of day.*

Thrawn remembered his conversation with The Bendu on Atollon.

“What manner of creature are you?” Thrawn said.

“One beyond your power to destroy,” The Bendu said.

Thrawn unhooked his blaster and pointed it at the magnificent creature, wounded and helpless on the ground. Regret briefly furrowed Thrawn’s brow. “It would not seem so.”

The Bendu’s eyes widened with surprise. “You cannot see.”

Thrawn inhaled and lowered his chin. His crimson eyes narrowed at The Bendu’s words, as if immediately deciphering the meaning behind them. Could The Bendu feel that Thrawn’s Sight was failing him? Thrawn felt unbalanced, as the wise creature was able to touch through his opaque mind.

“But I can!” The Bendu said.

Thrawn saw a familiar look within the eyes of The Bendu. It reminded him of when the Chiss children delved deep within their Third Sight. He was struck at the memory of his people.

“What… what do you see?” Thrawn said, nearly timid in the pearly sight of The Bendu.

“I see your defeat, like many arms surrounding you in a cold embrace.”

Was that cold embrace about to be delivered here at the hands of Lord Vader?

Thrawn might pay a high price for leading the Chimaera to this location of space, but it was a risk the Grand Admiral needed to take. His recent research combined with the trade logs recorded previously by Eli Vanto indicated there was little time until the Death Star was operational. Thrawn had a bad feeling about this weapon, and after what he had seen here now, he knew this project to be too high of a threat to his plans and to his people.

Thrawn needed to learn all he could about Krennic’s project. Unfortunately, this diversion was a catalyst that seemed to spark the Dark Lord’s suspicion and wrath. All that he was working toward was threatened.

As he had told Nightswan on that fateful night on Batonn, Thrawn did not wish to see hope extinguished. A choice lay before him now, a new path, but one toward which he would have to strategically maneuver.
The doors to the bridge hissed open. Thrawn mentally steeled himself to the present moment, knowing full well who just entered the bridge behind him.

“Grand Admiral Thrawn,” Vader said.

Thrawn slowly turned to face Lord Vader. Unmoving and silent, he held his ground, watching Vader walk with measured steps. Vader stopped in the middle of the command walkway overlooking the pits. His hands rested on his belt as he surveyed the bridge.

The air was icy. A tense moment passed as Thrawn watched Vader. The Dark Lord held the stance of confidence and finality. Malice and a surety of conviction echoed from him.

“Young crew,” Vader said slowly. Thrawn’s eyes narrowed as he considered the Dark Lord. “They appear to be an efficient group. Tell me, Grand Admiral, what have they found here?”

What have they found here; not what have you found here.

Thrawn’s face hardened, and his crimson eyes shone with intensity as he recognized a threat to his crew. Vader recognized that look; The Jedi had seen it on him once. It was an expression that spoke imminent death.

The doors suddenly hissed open once again, breaking through the ice in the air, and Faro walked onto the bridge. She appeared out of breath as she had been trying to quickly return from Thrawn’s office. The truth was, Thrawn did not want her here for this conversation, and had hoped his errand he gave her would additionally spare her this moment.

Thrawn’s eyes briefly flicked to her as she made her entrance.

“Grand Admiral, my Lord Vader,” Faro said as she made her way to her station at the holographic display. Vader turned his attention to her.

“Commodore Faro,” Vader said. “Report on the Chimaera’s findings in this sector.”

“Lord Vader,” Thrawn interjected. “I welcome you aboard the Chimaera once again. I am honored, as always, by your presence on my ship.”

Vader pointed at Thrawn. “I asked Commodore Faro a question.”

Thrawn held his silence but allowed his crimson eyes to emit his displeasure.

Every crew member on the bridge held their breath. They recognized the tension between the two leaders and were anxious at the uncertainty of what would happen.

Faro felt an anxiety unlike anything she had previously felt; however, she externally stood firm. She looked to Thrawn, who returned her gaze with an intense but subtle calm.

“Commodore Faro,” Vader said. He was an imposing presence.

Faro was nervous to be directly addressed by Lord Vader, but a bold strength overcame her. “My Lord Vader, the Chimaera does not retain any scans related to this sector. The readings were too muddled with interference to be considered viable.”

“Perhaps I could shed light on the matter, my lord,” Thrawn interjected. “Details await us in my office.”

Vader was furious. His hand edged closer to his lightsaber, and he took a step toward Thrawn, fully
facing him now. His voice was filled with malice. “You mean to tell me Grand Admiral that the
*Chimaera* has no record of this sector despite my Star Destroyer clearly detecting your scans. What
are you scheming?”

Faro grimaced. Had she said something wrong?

“As I stated Lord Va-,” Thrawn stopped and subtly flinched. A sudden opposing magnetic energy
filled the air, and Faro noticed that Thrawn’s breathing changed, becoming deeper and more
concentrated. She also saw that Vader's right hand was slightly curled at his side.

Thrawn lowered his chin and glared at Lord Vader with his intense crimson eyes. They were like
orbs filled with the fury of red fire. Thrawn’s jaw set and his brow subtly furrowed as if in deep
concentration during this silent stalemate.

Thrawn’s resistance was quite unexpected. Vader stood unmoving and held their standoff for a
moment, searching through the Force. Thrawn’s mind was still opaque to him. *Just like the Force
sensitive Chiss children Vader suddenly realized*...

Vader released the Force from his grasp and put his right hand back on his belt. Faro felt the
strange magnetic energy dissipate in waves, diminishing as if it were never there. She didn’t
understand.

Thrawn rose his chin. His crimson eyes held defiance, his secret exposed.

“As you stated,” Vader said, his voice booming. “Your office.”

Thrawn took a stoic breath and surveyed the bridge. He scanned each area of operations, reviewing
the faces of every crew member as if searing their memory into his mind. Faro realized with a chill
he was examining the bridge as if seeing it for the last time. His gaze finally stopped on Faro. His
eyes flashed briefly from their stoic defiance.

“The ship is yours, Commodore Faro,” Thrawn said. Thrawn let his gaze linger a moment longer
than necessary, making sure she understood the finality behind his words.

Faro regarded him with a silent worry of understanding. “Aye, sir,” Faro said, nodding. “I have the
ship.”

Thrawn nodded in return. He faced forward and walked stoically down the command walkway
past Lord Vader and Commander Kimmund as if in silent challenge.

Lord Vader turned and followed Thrawn, Commander Kimmund not far behind. Vader’s cloak
bowed through the air of the quiet bridge.

*But eventually, inevitably, those deepest goals must be made manifest if they are to be reached.*

*And he must be ready to bear the consequence.*

*All of them.*

The door to the bridge hissed shut behind them.
A Cold Embrace

Chapter Summary

What has Anakin Skywalker fallen to become?

“Now be brave and don't look back. Don't look back.” —Shmi Skywalker

**This chapter contains descriptions of violent confrontation**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once certain levels have been reached, there is no need to prove leadership or competence. A person with such power is accustomed to having every word carefully considered, and every whim treated as an order.

And all who recognize that power know to bow to it.

A few have the courage or foolishness to resist.

Some succeed in standing firm against the storm. More often, they find their paths yet again turned from their hoped-for goal.

But such a turn does not always mean that the victim has lost.

Or that the victor has won.

Thrawn entered his office, followed closely by Lord Vader and Commander Kimmund. He saw the tablet Faro delivered placed on his desk and continued his pace toward it. It was quiet.

The office door hissed shut behind them.

Lord Vader immediately unleashed a Force-push with his left hand and threw a cloaked Rukh against the wall. The cloak fizzled away, the creature fell limp to the ground, and his electro staff clanged onto the metallic floor.

Vader in the same motion turned to Thrawn. Thrawn faced him. His eyes wide but projecting strength and defiance. Vader curled his fingers and focused on Thrawn’s neck. Thrawn recoiled as he had on the bridge, though less guarded this time as the Force behind the move was not subtle. He stepped back, grabbed the back of a chair for support and braced against a violent, invisible storm.

The walls of the office reverberated and clicked as the Force powered through the air. Thrawn took in a fierce breath, relying on instinct. He still resisted the Dark Lord.

Lord Vader furiously moved forward with rage and grabbed Thrawn’s neck with his gloved hand. Thrawn clutched the Dark Lord’s hand, as Vader shoved the Grand Admiral with his momentum
against a large wall of art that had Phoenix Squadron’s emblem and a lothcat emblazoned on its surface.

Thrawn immediately struggled to get free, but Vader pushed him back, relentless, unmoving. Vader’s mask was hauntingly expressionless against the deep malice that Thrawn could feel.

Thrawn kept one hand clasped to Vader’s wrist while his other braced against the wall behind him. Thrawn struggled to breathe, only able to take shallow gasps. He shut his eyes, trying to calm himself.

“You may resist the Force, Mitth’raw’nuruodo,” Vader growled, pronouncing Thrawn’s full name improperly just as The Jedi had done many years before. Thrawn opened his crimson eyes at this, a mix of defiance and pain. “But you cannot resist me.”

Thrawn’s eyes flicked to the limp form of Rukh for a moment and back to the dark mask of Lord Vader.

“Young pet cannot save you,” Vader said.

Thrawn found it harder and harder to breathe as Vader’s grip slowly tightened around his neck. His eyes widened. He felt a tearing sensation suddenly, and a spike of pain shot from his throat. Thrawn brought his other hand up in panic, trying to loosen Vader’s grip. Such malice. And to think that he was once Anakin Skywalker, Jedi Knight, a man whose legacy Thrawn still admired. And Padmé Amidala, his wife… Thrawn felt a pang of guilt and anger. What did Anakin fall to become?

Thrawn’s foggy mind thought of his blaster at his hip, but Vader suddenly unhooked and ignited his lightsaber with his right hand to the side. The swift movement was jarring to Thrawn, but Vader’s grip loosened a bit. A red glow now shimmered throughout the office.

Thrawn took in shaky breaths. He tried to move again but Vader countered and pressed back against the wall of art, dazing him this time. Thrawn opened his mouth to speak but he couldn’t get enough air. A pained whimper sounded instead as he struggled. No this can’t be where it all ends. So much sacrificed... He tried to adjust his grip on Vader’s wrist, but he felt himself growing weak.

Vader watched Thrawn’s eyes losing their red vibrancy.

“Commander Kimmund,” Vader said. “Remove and secure his blaster.”

Commander Kimmund was in awe at the unexpected display in front of him. Thrawn was somehow able to resist the same power he witnessed his Dark Lord use so many times to crush into submission, and sometimes extinguish, unruly and incompetent Imperial leaders. He was grateful that his helmet hid his face, as it would betray his conflict and fear at this being done to Grand Admiral Thrawn.

Kimmund knew Thrawn to be a strong leader with wisdom surpassing perhaps all Imperial leaders, save for the Emperor and Vader. Not only was Thrawn wise, though. Kimmund had experienced the result of his leadership during their mission to the Unknown Region and found Thrawn to be a fair leader worthy of his ship’s loyalty and respect. Kimmund had held the hope that the Grand Admiral’s leadership style would eventually expand to the other ranks and commands of the Empire.

However, Kimmund was witnessing that hope being squashed before his eyes.

Kimmund had no choice but to follow orders. He stepped forward and took Thrawn’s blaster from
the holster at his side. Thrawn kept what was left of his defiant focus on Vader though, never straying from his helmet. Kimmund flinched at being so close to Vader while he was in his dark ire. He secured the blaster and stepped back to his place near the door, weary at watching Thrawn struggle alone.

Thrawn’s hearing started to ring and fade. His eyes fluttered as he began to lose the fight against falling unconscious… or worse. He shifted his feet underneath him and patted feebly with his left hand at Vader’s grip. Thrawn was growing weak. He let his left hand fall limp against the wall of art behind him, losing his strength.

There was nothing Thrawn could do; Vader was too powerful. Thrawn’s sight began to darken; he lost his ability to focus. His shaky gasps for air became more sluggish than those of Vader’s respirator. His body began to betray him.

Thrawn’s right hand squeezed feebly at Vader’s wrist one last time, trying not to let it fall too.

He thought of his people. He began to let go.

*Double vision: bolts coming at chest, at helmet, at chest –*

Vader quickly looked to his left as a door opened and three Imperial Sentry Droids emerged from a training room in Thrawn’s suite.

Vader released Thrawn, outstretched his left hand and Force-pushed one droid back through the opening. Thrawn dropped limply to the metal ground on his left side with a loud thud, and Vader deflected blaster bolts with his lightsaber.

Thrawn tried to focus as he gasped for precious air. He sluggishly moved his right hand to his throat. It felt wrong; he still couldn’t take full breaths. He coughed violently and rolled over more almost into a fetal position, but he was too weak to fully do so. His legs and left arm would hardly respond. His whole chest heaved with each breath, desperate for oxygen. He struggled for air and coughed up saliva mixed with blood.

Kimmund immediately took cover behind a corner and returned fire at the battle droids. He was amazed as their armor plating seemed to dissipate and absorb his blasts. He keyed his comm.

“Tephan! Thrawn’s office, now! Under attack by sentry droids!”

Out of the corner of Kimmund’s eye, he saw the Noghri bodyguard stirring across the room, but Kimmund was pinned down by blaster fire to do anything.

Rukh, on his side, reached for his electro staff. The Noghri was positive a few bones were broken, but that didn’t matter. He came back to consciousness as his master’s lifeforce was being squandered by Lord Vader. No, broken bones didn’t matter. He had pressed the activation codes on his transmitter to unleash the sentry droids. A satisfied and pained smile now graced his face.

Then Rukh saw Thrawn trembling and struggling across the room from him on the floor. He lost his delight immediately. He winced as he moved to get up and rolled his staff closer. He balanced on his knees and watched as Vader’s lightsaber suddenly shut off as the Dark Lord attempted to slice one of the sentry droids in half.

Vader was appalled. No, it could not be. Cortosis? How could Thrawn have droids that were made of cortosis? The mine and the factory were destroyed on Mokivj during the Clone War. The Jedi was sure of their destruction. Vader quickly reacted with the Force to divert the three sentry droids’
attacks. Vader had to remember how The Jedi fought them.

Vader had a conversation flash to his memory.

“Do you expect me to believe that a tactician of your skill has not yet thought of a way to kill me?” Vader said.

Thrawn smiled faintly. “I have, in fact, thought of three ways.”

Rukh saw his opportunity for a flank attack. He moved to get up.

“Nah,” Thrawn wheezed. He whimpered as he grabbed more at his throat, stopping Rukh’s advance. Thrawn still lay on the ground, taking unstable breaths but alive. Blaster fire and Vader’s rage filled the office. Thrawn tilted his head despite the pain and fought to keep Rukh’s gaze.

Rukh realized that Thrawn’s eyes were too dim for a Chiss.

“K’user cat csei s tuv… Vah rsah… veo ch’at k’ir,” Thrawn said through hoarse and wheezing breaths. It hurt for him to speak.

Thrawn pressed his eyes shut, clutched at his throat, and coughs suddenly shook his body with pain. His lips were coated with more blood. The strained wheezing was painful for Rukh to hear. Thrawn was on the brink of consciousness.

Rukh was frozen. He understood what Thrawn wanted him to do, to enact their contingency, but Rukh didn’t want to leave him. Thrawn must have read Rukh’s hesitation.

“Rukh…,” Thrawn flinched as he took a quavering breath. His eyes glistened but were commandingly focused on Rukh. His left hand started shaking with fatigue, but Thrawn balled it into a fist in defiance to his body. “Ch’tra!”

The word echoed through Rukh’s mind like it was a Force wave. Rukh’s eyes tightened sorrowfully at his master, and he shook his head slightly. He looked to Vader and Commander Kimmund fighting and preoccupied, then beheld Thrawn once more, fading where he lay. Thrawn’s focus was quickly fleeting. Rukh nodded, his mind decided in respect for his commander, and activated his cloak.

Thrawn watched, through blurry and fading vision, Rukh shimmer away into the air as his cloak activated. Thrawn was relieved in his pain. He realized how cold he felt suddenly and remembered The Bendu for a fleeting moment.

Thrawn began to relax.

His right hand fell sluggish from his neck to the floor. Sound began to fade, and he slowly closed his eyes. He gave in to his body.

He let go.
"Nowhere to go, this bleeding heart
Is in my hands
I fell apart, my flesh and bone
My flesh and bone

This part of me
The seeds I've sewn."
- *Flesh and Bone* by Black Math

[Spotify Song Link](Spotify Song Link)

Translations:
‘“Nah” «No»
"K’user cat csei s tuv! Vah rsah veo ch’at k’ir." «Go away from this place! You know what to do.»
"Ch’tra!" «Go!»
A Lesson

Chapter Summary

“To live in fear is no life at all.” —Padmé Amidala

**This chapter contains graphic depictions of injury and medical care.**

Faro paced slowly back and forth in front of the main viewport. So much nervous energy was built up; she wanted to storm off the bridge and join Thrawn in his office. But what would she do?

What could she do? Faro wanted to do something, but she felt trapped and sidelined.

She was so worried, but also so angry. She hoped Thrawn would be able to maneuver out of whatever trap this situation became, but the malice of Lord Vader was immense. Faro had heard stories. She had never seen Vader like that before herself though, and Thrawn had stood up to him. No, she had a bad feeling about what was happening.

An unusual ping suddenly sounded from the tactical display.

“Um... Commodore Faro,” the tactical officer said. He hesitated. “I’ve- I’ve never seen this before. We’re getting an unusual internal alert.”

“Report!” Faro said, more forceful than she intended.

The tactical officer quickly pushed a button sequence and studied the report. The seconds felt like eternity, and the bridge was hushed with a silent tension. The tactical officer had a sudden look of horror glance across his face as he interpreted the alert.

Faro’s heart dropped.

“Three Sentinel Droids… appear to have been activated in Grand Admiral Thrawn’s office. They are attacking.” The tactical officer looked up at Faro with confusion and disbelief. “It’s a distress call sir.”

Everything slowed down for Faro. “Are they the aggressors? Or are they defending?”

The tactical officer turned to his console and shook his head. “I’m- not sure. It’s not specific sir. It must be an automated alert we’re receiving.”

Faro strode down the command walkway to the tactical display. She was focused with sure authority. She looked over the alert, and the bridge paused for her for leadership.

She decided. “Stormtrooper Commander Ayer send a security team immediately. Alert all commands. Secure the ship and protect the admiral.” Her voice lowered. “And send Chief Medical Officer Cody with a trauma team for any casualties.”
Rukh hobbled through the hallways of the *Chimaera* toward the hangar bay. He tried to suppress any noise, but it was getting tough with each pained step. He tried to forget the broken bones as he maneuvered around personnel otherwise unaware of his cloaked presence.

He slipped through the doors to the hangar bay and leaned against a crate. He surveyed the area, while crew members bustled hurriedly to their stations. Rukh decided that the distress signal from his droid activation must have gone out. He didn’t have much time then.

Rukh saw that Vader’s shuttle was abandoned, the entire First Legion responding to his master’s office. He suddenly felt an onslaught of guilt and wanted to run back to Thrawn’s aid. He quickly repressed those feelings. He was Thrawn’s only hope right now to enact his contingency.

Rukh took a deep breath and pushed himself forward toward the shuttle. He found the pilots seat and began the startup sequence. The shuttle radio came to life, but he quickly shut it off. Rukh didn’t have the patience to listen to confused traffic control. It would slow him down.

He took off and flew underneath the star destroyer before Empire forces could react. He pushed the engines as hard as they could go. The shuttle shuttered as Rukh piloted almost too close to the hull of the *Chimaera*. He heard the faint beep of a target-lock, but it faded as he punched the shuttle into hyperspace.

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Commander Kimmund watched in awe as Lord Vader stabbed the tip of his lightsaber into the right photoreceptor eye of one of two remaining sentinel droids. The droid fell, deactivated, as Vader fluidly turned and deflected bolts from the last droid. He bellowed with fury.

Vader stretched out with the Force. He pulled his forearm up and clasped his hand into a fist. The air fizzled and groaned with energy. Lights flickered, and the sentinel droid’s armor plating suddenly crumpled. It fell to the ground with a loud thud and burst into a shower of sparks.

Lord Vader deactivated his lightsaber. It was silent.

Only Lord Vader’s steady respirator replaced the sounds of battle. He walked forward and stood over the crumpled droid. Small fires clung to life upon wires and burnt plastoid. Sparks flashed from the crumpled debris as if the droid’s synthetic soul fought to maintain its light.

The Jedi’s memories unwillingly came forward.

*The acrid smell of burnt plastoid curled in The Jedi’s nostrils as he stared at the droids on the floor. It was a horrid smell. He looked up.*

*Padmé stood at the edge of an elevated platform, her S-5 held shakily in a two-handed sharpshooter stance, her mouth hanging open in astonishment. Thrawn stepped forward into view beside her, holding a long, shoulder-slung ion rifle in the crook of his arm. His Chiss armor was still mottled and damaged.*

*Thrawn stiffly slung the rifle behind his back, casually plucked the S-5 from Padmé’s hands and hooked the grapple around a nearby strut. He smoothly dropped down to the ground and sent the*
blaster back up to her in ascension mode. He walked toward The Jedi.

“Well done,” Thrawn said. His glowing red eyes scanned their surroundings as he approached.

The Jedi nodded, smiling thinly. “Thanks for the assist. Next time, feel free to join the fight sooner.”

“If I had, you wouldn’t have learned how to defeat them.”

Commander Kimmund flinched, as Lord Vader suddenly growled in fury and launched the crumpled droid at his feet into the far wall with the Force. It exploded in a puff of fiery smoke and left a deep dent in the metallic wall.

_Padmé._

Vader ignited his lightsaber again and sliced furiously at a nearby chair. Sparks and metallic pieces flew across the suite. He diminished the chair to many damaged and burned pieces.

Vader stopped. He focused on the burning pieces. Focused on the _fury._

Forget the memory. Forget the pain.

Forget _her._

A meek voice brought Vader back to the present.

“My Lord Vader?” Commander Kimmund knelt on the floor in front of Thrawn’s still form. _Shielding him?_ He held a hand to the Grand Admiral’s shoulder, and his helmet was off, revealing the commander’s conflicted emotions. Heavy sweat covered his face.

Vader’s hearing came back to the present in a delayed transition; he became aware of Thrawn’s strained gasps for air. His body unconsciously continued to fight for life.

“He- he’s still alive Lord Vader,” Commander Kimmund said. He looked down at Thrawn his brow furrowing. Vader noticed Kimmund’s grip on his shoulder tighten briefly, as he sensed a hint of regret through the Force emanate from the Commander.

“What of the Noghri bodyguard?”

Kimmund shook his head. “I believe he’s gone my lord. He activated his cloak during the fight.”

Vader remained silent a moment, considering. Pounds suddenly sounded on the main entrance door to the office and a muffled, commanding voice echoed through the metal.

“This is Stormtrooper Commander Ayer! I demand entrance to Grand Admiral Thrawn’s Office immediately and demand status on the Grand Admiral!”

Commander Kimmund’s comm sounded. Tephan’s voice was strained with stress. “Commander Kimmund, the First Legion is holding back the _Chimaera_’s security and medical team as ordered, but I fear not for much longer. It’s going to get more heated than just words very soon.”

Lord Vader faced the door. Still holding his lightsaber hilt in his hand, he took formidable steps toward the disturbance.
“What do you mean the First Legion is denying us access?!” Commodore Faro was appalled.

“Major Ayer reports they are being held back from entering the Grand Admiral’s office at Lord Vader’s orders,” Lieutenant Lomar said, clearly stressed. “He sounds ready to break through the door sir.”

Commodore Faro started pacing, her hands behind her back. This situation escalated beyond anything she anticipated. They were about to have Imperials fighting each other on a Star Destroyer that was now fully under her command. “Any status on Grand Admiral Thrawn?”

“No Commodore.” Lomar hesitated. “But- Major Ayer reported loud bangs and blasts coming from the office on his approach. It is silent now however.”

Commodore Faro stopped and stared at the Lieutenant. She feared what the silence could mean. And Lord Vader wasn’t letting the Chimaera’s crew inside? Faro came to a cold realization. Lord Vader had punished her Grand Admiral, and he must have fought back... unsuccessfully.

Faro decided for the sake of the Chimaera and the crew.

“Tell the Major to stand down. I’m on my way personally,” Faro said. She turned and walked toward the two Death Troopers flanking the door to the bridge. “You two are with me.”

The Death Troopers moved from their position and flanked Commodore Faro as she walked with purpose off the bridge to Grand Admiral Thrawn’s office.

Without Thrawn, she was the only person that stood between Vader’s wrath and the rest of the Chimaera. Faro would be the bulwark for her crew, and act as Thrawn had done for them during their mission to the Unknown Region. She would attempt to walk the narrow sand bridge of peace that was being slowly eroded by the fierce wind of Vader’s wrath.

She would try.

The doors to the bridge hissed shut behind her.

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Stormtrooper Commander Ayer held his blaster rifle in front of him at a tense parade rest. His fingers twitched with the need to act. He needed to do something.

Ayer stood in his stormtrooper armor, unmoving and glaring at Tephan and the rest of the First Legion. Despite the expressionless armor, the First Legion saw his anger in his stance. He was irate. They denied him access to his commanding officer. The rest of his security and trauma team stood behind him with anticipation and concern.

Ayer’s patience thinned. He took a step forward but stopped immediately, as the First Legion raised their blasters at him. Ayer responded in kind but kept his blaster pointed to the side, not fully pointing it at them. But the threat was the same.

“Hold! Stand down,” Ayer said. He held up his left hand. “It is time that I speak with Grand
Admiral Thrawn. That is all I want.”

“We are still under orders Major Ayer,” Tephan said. “We are not to allow anyone entry beyond this point. That includes you and any crew from the Chimaera.”

“That is unacceptable. I am under orders from the Chimaera’s captain herself. I must verify and ensure Grand Admiral Thrawn’s wellbeing, and you are preventing me from fulfilling my orders.”

“As I’ve repeatedly stated Major Ayer, that is impossible- “

“Unacceptable!” Stormtrooper Commander Ayer lowered his left hand back to his blaster rifle. “You are denying me access to my grand admiral. I heard explosions on my approach to this location. I have reasonable command here. Either you let me pass or I will make it so.”

Loud bangs, sounds of a lightsaber igniting and screeching metal suddenly sounded beyond the office entrance. The First Legion stormtroopers flinched, and this gave Ayer enough leeway to push forward. He shoved through them toward the door and started pounding on it. Ayer’s team tried to follow.

“Hold it!” Tephan recovered quickly, pointing her blaster to the Chimaera’s security team. The medical staff behind them gasped and held their hands up, their eyes wide. The Chimaera’s stormtroopers paused but kept their blasters pointed at the First Legion.

Ayer pounded on the door. He heard the effects of metal and plastoid being sliced and melting on the other side. What was happening to Grand Admiral Thrawn?

It was suddenly quiet.

Ayer glanced behind him. One First Legion Stormtrooper had their blaster pointed at him, while the others were in a tense standoff with his own stormtroopers. The situation was about to erupt.

Ayer pounded on the door again. “This is Stormtrooper Commander Ayer! I demand entrance to Grand Admiral Thrawn’s Office immediately and demand status on the Grand Admiral!”

Tephan rose her left wrist to her helmet and keyed her comm. Deep, garbled sounds emitted from her helmet though as what she said was encrypted.

Ayer slowly turned and faced the standoff. His blaster rifle still held to the side and downward but in a ready position. The First Legion Stormtrooper pointing his blaster at him gripped his blaster tighter and emphasized the targeting of Ayer’s chest. Ayer expected the worst to suddenly ignite.

Everyone held their position.

The door behind Ayer opened, and the blasters of the Chimaera’s crew were wrenched from their hands. Ayer quickly turned around, shocked. Vader stood before him, lightsaber hilt in his right hand at his side and his left forearm raised as blaster rifles flew behind him to the ground in Thrawn’s office.

Ayer tried to survey Thrawn’s office, but he only saw the remains of burning plastoid on the ground and charred blaster bolt stains on the walls as Vader pushed at Ayer with the Force.

Ayer flew back. He grunted in surprise, and the Chimaera’s stormtroopers caught him, preventing him from falling. He stood back up strong and took a step forward. He looked poised to fight despite not having a weapon.
“Stormtrooper Commander Ayer,” Vader said, pointing. “You will stand down.”

“Grand Admiral Thrawn,” Ayer said. “Commodore Faro orders that I ensure his safety. I demand to speak with him.”

“You make no such demands of me.” Vader turned his attention to the trauma team. “I will allow one of you entry.”

A female medical officer with curly brown hair and green eyes rose her hand. She had a large ECM-598 Medical Backpack over her shoulder. Her uniform indicated her as Chief Medical Officer of the Chimaera and the trauma team’s director. “I am Chief Medical Officer Zahara Cody. I will go Lord Vader.”

“Very well; come.” Vader turned to go back inside the office, Zahara following.

Ayer immediately objected, stepping forward. “Lord Vader, if Grand Admiral Thrawn requires medical attention, I must demand entry and assess the situation. You must understand my position—”

Vader swiftly turned and held out his left hand reaching with the Force. Ayer suddenly couldn’t breathe and instinctively reached for his neck. He rose slightly in the air, his feet unable to touch the ground.

“The only thing you must understand Major Ayer is that I have power,” Vader growled.

Faro took each step down the Chimaera’s corridors with dread. The two Death Troopers followed with loyalty and attention, and they flanked her on either side closely. Faro wondered if they had a similar dread for Grand Admiral Thrawn and didn’t want to lose another commanding officer.

Vader’s wrath in this manner was not unheard of; there were rumors constantly circulating the fleet. The Dark Lord had been known to discipline and remove officers of the Imperial Navy from their commands. Some never heard from again…

To do the same to Grand Admiral Thrawn? Perhaps more conflict occurred between Lord Vader and Thrawn than she realized during their mission to the Unknown Region, and this detour was the tipping point. Perhaps Thrawn became too curious about the unusual target scanned in this area of space.

The reasoning didn’t matter to Faro though. The well-being of her superior officer, someone who earned her respect and loyalty through their careers together, was at the forefront of her priorities. She was determined to reciprocate that loyalty back to Grand Admiral Thrawn.

Faro and the Death Troopers rounded a corner. A chilled tension was immediately felt. She saw the backs of the medical and security response teams as they approached Thrawn’s office.

The air became energized and, Faro saw from behind, Stormtrooper Commander Ayer suddenly rise above the group and grasp at his throat. The Chimaera’s response teams backed away and revealed Lord Vader with his left hand outstretched. His other hand held his lightsaber hilt.

“The only thing you must understand Major Ayer is that I have power,” Vader growled.
The two death troopers immediately raised their E-11D Blaster Rifles and protectively put themselves in front of Commodore Faro as they advanced on the scene. Encrypted garble quickly transmitted between them and filled the corridor. This gained the attention of some from the group ahead.

Faro was appalled. “My Lord Vader, what is the meaning of this!”

The death troopers stopped at the perimeter of the group, but Faro pushed in front of them to face Lord Vader. She had had enough. Despite the sure power of Lord Vader, Faro was tired of his machinations here on the Chimaera. She would reinstate authority on her ship.

“Release Major Ayer immediately!”

Lord Vader turned his head toward her and searched through the Force. He felt a mixture of fear and determination emanating from her but loyalty echoed like a mighty beacon. He felt a similar confidence in her that Thrawn had during the conflict against the Grysk.

Vader released Ayer, and the Stormtrooper Commander fell hard to the floor, coughing for precious air. He immediately moved to get up; he growled in anger.

“Major Ayer stand down,” Faro said forcefully. Her hands clasped behind her. Ayer deflated as if just realizing she was there.

“Yes- yes Commodore Faro.”

“All of you, stand down,” Faro said, eyeing both the First Legion and her own stormtroopers.

She rose her chin toward Lord Vader, waiting. Vader clipped his lightsaber back to his belt and then rested his hands on either side of the belt.

“We must speak Commodore Faro.”

“Yes… I think we must Lord Vader.”

Vader held Faro’s commanding gaze for a moment and then turned to go back inside, his cape billowing at the quick turn.

Faro quickly addressed the group around her. “You will all keep your weapons lowered and hold your positions here until further orders are given. Is that clear?”

“Aye sirs” echoed from the group. Thephan nodded her head as well.

Faro looked at her two death troopers. “Wait for me.”

“Aye Commodore,” one of the Death Troopers said as Faro moved to follow Vader inside Thrawn’s office.

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The door closed behind Faro, and Vader stood in the hallway corridor leading further in to Thrawn’s office. His back faced her.

“Let what you see here be a lesson Commodore Faro,” Vader said slowly. He then continued his pace into the room.
Faro didn’t move for a moment, as she took in her surroundings. Melted plastoid and shards of metal were strewn about, dents and blaster burns littered the metallic walls and remains of Thrawn’s Imperial Sentinel Droids lay before her on the ground. Most of all, she became aware of someone struggling to breathe.

Faro broke out of her frozen state and trudged forward. Horror gripped her as the rest of the office was revealed, and her heart broke.

“What in the universe…,” Faro said. She rose a hand to her mouth in shock.

Thrawn lay on his left side, slightly leaning forward toward the ground, unconscious with Commander Kimmund and the Chimaera’s Chief Medical Officer Zahara Cody kneeling above him.

Zahara was positioned directly above his head. She had her left hand on Thrawn’s forehead and her right delicately on his throat. She grimaced and shook her head. She moved her right hand from his neck and gripped his right wrist that was curled on the ground in front of him, as if he was gripping at his throat just before going unconscious.

Faro saw that Thrawn’s neck was bruised heavily with a greenish tint, but the rest of his skin was a much paler blue, almost gray, in comparison to the vibrant blue that was normal. His lips were covered with blood and his gasps were becoming thready. Zahara was intense with concern and looked to Kimmund.

“Help me turn him over on his back,” Zahara said. She motioned with her head. “Come on this side.”

Kimmund stepped over Thrawn and knelt between him and the wall of art. Zahara leaned down further and carefully placed her left-hand underneath Thrawn’s head, moving it down toward his neck. Thrawn’s left cheek now rested on her forearm while his neck was then gently secured against her hand. At the same time, she secured his right jaw with her other hand and nodded to Commander Kimmund.

Together they gently rotated Thrawn on his back. Zahara matched Kimmund’s movement, keeping Thrawn’s head straight relative to his body.

Thrawn was so limp in their grasp. His left arm and hand remained in place, slightly stretched out from his elbow on the ground, while his right was pulled across, resting on his chest.

“Secure his head here and keep it straight,” Zahara said to Kimmund. Kimmund put his hands on either side of Thrawn’s face, and Zahara rummaged through the medical backpack.

Zahara pulled out a moist cloth and wiped Thrawn’s face clean of the blood around his mouth. She returned it to a sanitary pouch inside the pack and then pulled out a clear oxygen mask. It had tubing connected to the ECM-598 medical backpack.

She pressed a button on the inside of the pack and oxygen began flowing from the mask. She placed it over Thrawn’s face, covering his nose and mouth.

“Hold this here,” Zahara said to Kimmund. “Make sure it stays sealed against his skin.”

Kimmund gripped the mask, his hand shaking slightly, as Zahara turned back to her backpack. She began placing instruments on the ground. A long plastic tube, a metallic and curved blade with a handle…
This was too much for Commodore Faro to just stand by and watch. Faro let out an involuntary
gasp as she rushed forward. She fell on her knees at Thrawn’s side. She didn’t care what Vader
would think about her loyalties.

She reached for Thrawn’s left hand on the ground and held it up to her as she watched on
helplessly. But he didn’t respond to her grip. His hand remained limp, while his chest continued to
heave with each unconscious and wheezing gasp. Despite the breathing mask, his breaths were
becoming more irregular and jagged.

Faro rose her other hand to her mouth again, her eyes filling up with emotion. His body was failing
him. Kimmund glanced at Faro grimly, almost sorrowfully.

Zahara took a deep breath. “Okay, I need to intubate him to give him an airway. He might react, so
I need you both to hold him steady if he does.”

Kimmund nodded and Faro’s eyes widened.

“Okay…,” Faro whispered, hesitant.

“You can set the mask aside Commander Kimmund,” Zahara said. “Place your left forearm
underneath his shoulders and lift slightly.”

Kimmund followed her order and placed his other hand on top of Thrawn’s right wrist resting
limply on his chest. Zahara at the same time grabbed Thrawn’s head with both hands. Her fingers
grasped the back of his neck while her palms and thumbs cupped his jawline and chin.

Kimmund lifted and Zahara angled the top of Thrawn’s head backward slightly toward the ground.
This ensured a straighter path to his troubled lungs. Zahara moved quickly. She took the
laryngoscope blade with her left hand and inserted the curved blade deep into Thrawn’s mouth and
passed his tongue. Once far enough down inside, she tugged forward carefully at an angle and
revealed the opening to his trachea.

There was so much blood. Zahara quickly pressed a button on the medical pack with her right hand
and grabbed a connected suction tube. She guided it down the laryngoscope’s pathway deep into
Thrawn’s throat and started suctioning out all that she could. This made Thrawn react.

Thrawn unconsciously flinched. His shoulders slightly bucked, and he began to gag.


Kimmund braced him with his right arm against Thrawn’s chest and Faro held down Thrawn’s left
shoulder with one hand. Her other didn’t move from his hand.

“Hold on Grand Admiral,” Faro said. “Try to relax if you can hear us…”

Thrawn was so weak. His body could hardly do anything but gasp for air anymore, which was
being impeded now by a large laryngoscope down his throat.

“I can’t wait any longer,” Zahara said.

Zahara stopped suctioning and grabbed the long plastic endotracheal tube. She glided it down the
laryngoscope’s blade down into Thrawn’s mouth and throat and passed the opening to his trachea.

Faro watched as the plastic tube disappeared farther and farther down into Thrawn’s mouth. She
was horrified once again. Never would she have imagined having to see Grand Admiral Thrawn in
such a state. *So weak and helpless after everything they’ve gone through…*

Faro became aware suddenly of Lord Vader watching everything from across the room. His hands were resting on his belt as he passively observed. Did he even care how this all turned out? Faro realized that Vader probably cared more about her reaction as the ranking officer of the *Chimaera* and seeing this as a warning. Unfortunately, it probably didn’t matter if Thrawn lived through this. The gruesome lesson would be learned all the same…

Thrawn’s gasps began to slow even more and his shoulder muscles began to relax from their brief tension.

“No, come *on*,” Zahara muttered. There was damage in Thrawn’s trachea from being crushed that she had to maneuver around. She was able to finesse around it though with slight corrections with her wrist and was eventually satisfied that she got the tube far enough down passed the damage.

Zahara placed her right hand down firmly against Thrawn’s mouth and nose and held the tube in place, while she smoothly lifted the laryngoscope up between her fingers and out of Thrawn’s mouth. Now only the plastic tube protruded from his mouth. Faro found it odd seeing Thrawn’s expressionless, almost peaceful, face with the tube sticking out.

Zahara grabbed a syringe full of air and inflated a balloon that was at the end of the tube, now inside of Thrawn’s chest. This sealed and secured the tube inside against his trachea and would allow ventilation.

Thrawn was so still now, when Zahara knew he shouldn’t be. His body should be fighting the temporary seal blocking its ability to suction air. Zahara’s pulse quickened, and she quickly attached a puffy bag ventilator to the endotracheal tube and pumped air slowly.

She waited a few seconds, watching for the rise and fall of his chest, but it felt like eternity to Faro.

“Commander Kimmund you can lower him to the ground now, gently,” Zahara said. “Hold this bag and pump slowly like this okay? Only at about ten per minute.”

Kimmund leaned up and did as Zahara ordered, slowly pumping the ventilation bag. He watched in dreaded awe as Thrawn’s chest rose and fell with each of his compressions on the bag. Zahara then unfastened Thrawn’s white uniform tunic and opened it, revealing the front of his sleeveless black undershirt he would wear during sparring sessions.

Faro helped hold his white tunic open while Zahara used a stethoscope on his chest. She hovered over the top and lower portion of Thrawn’s chest and analyzed each breath. Zahara visibly relaxed and took what seemed to be the first deep breath of her own.

“His breath sounds are good,” Zahara said as she leaned back and placed the stethoscope around her neck. “You’re doing well Commander Kimmund.”

Zahara then reached into her backpack and took out a prepared stick of medical tape. She unraveled the tape into a straight line, revealing a sticky middle with more of the tape on either side, each folded around a stick. She slid the middle part underneath Thrawn and stuck it to the upper part of his neck.

“Commodore Faro, I’ll need your help,” Zahara said. “Please hold the tube in place while I secure it.”

Faro held onto the tube with one hand, still determined to hold onto Thrawn’s hand with her other. Zahara further unfolded the left side of the tape and tossed the stick to the side.
“You’re doing well Commander Kimmund. Keep ventilating him like that,” Zahara said, as she tore the double-sided tape in two all the way down its length like a lizard’s tongue.

Zahara guided the top torn portion up along his jaw and cheek, placing it along his skin between his nose and upper lip, and secured it down his other cheek. With the other torn portion, she followed the same line up his cheek but then, once reaching his lips, twisted it around the tube protruding out of his mouth. She mirrored her actions on the other side, tearing the tape and following the established route along his cheek, between his nose and upper lip and down the other side.

After twisting the last portion of tape around the tube, she gently gripped the endotracheal tube and found it secure and delivering precious oxygen to Thrawn’s labored lungs.

“Is he… going to be alright?” Faro said.

Zahara pulled out a small, square mechanical ventilator attached to the ECM-598 medical backpack, and she briefly met Commodore Faro’s troubled gaze as she pressed a button sequence on the machine.

“She’s stabilizing,” Zahara said. “You can stop Commander Kimmund.”

Kimmund stopped ventilating and watched as Zahara quickly removed the bag from Thrawn’s endotracheal tube and connected a tube from the mechanical ventilator. The machine began breathing for Thrawn, and the sounds, while quieter and rhythmically slightly different, were eerily like Lord Vader’s respirator. Faro was too focused on Zahara’s non-answer to her question though to notice the similarities. Worry gripped her heart still.

Zahara once again listened to Thrawn’s chest with her stethoscope to verify good breath sounds. She then held Thrawn’s right wrist and waited there for a moment. Faro stared with anticipation.

“He continues to stabilize, Commodore,” Zahara said, nodding her head. She lifted Thrawn’s wrist and folded his white uniform tunic back over. She gently lowered his wrist back down to rest there on his chest.

Zahara had a small and relieved smile on her lips. Her green eyes were kind when they met Faro’s gaze again. “You may notice his color slowly returning to normal now, yes?”

Faro looked down. She saw how the skin on Thrawn’s face and hands began to return to a lighter blue hue. Though, the color was still far from normal.
A Test of Loyalty

Chapter Summary

“To die for one’s people is a great sacrifice. To live for one’s people, an even greater sacrifice. I choose to live for my people.” — Riyo Chuchi

Lord Vader watched.

Whether Thrawn survived was inconsequential to Vader’s ultimate objective here on the Chimaera. He suspected and accused Thrawn of espionage and treason against the Empire, and Vader was sure he had prevented Thrawn from transmitting what he learned here of the Death Star plans back to the Chiss Ascendancy. After all, that was their pattern of operation during the Clone War.

*Observe, gather intel, learn from the shadows and adapt.*

Vader couldn’t allow the Death Star plans to be compromised. Not when they were so close to completion.

The Dark Lord moved behind Thrawn’s desk. The Jedi Guardian mask stood untouched on its stand despite the carnage and aftermath of battle around the room. It’s hollow eye openings peered judgingly at Vader’s own mask.

Vader felt through the Force and looked over the desk.

*Something familiar is here…*

He opened a drawer on the left side and found Thrawn’s collapsible melee baton and an old but sleek and well-maintained blaster pistol tucked inside. Vader recognized the blaster. Thrawn had used it alongside The Jedi during their mission together so many years ago. It was surprising that Thrawn still had it.

Vader reached down and touched it.

Unwilling memories rushed forward.

*A line of mugs on a bartender’s counter exploded into a gas of thick white smoke.*

*Thrawn grabbed The Jedi’s shoulder and shoved hard against it. Through the smoke, The Jedi caught an unclear image of the Chiss leaping on top of the bar and turning to face the doorway with drawn blaster.*

*The Jedi found himself swaying farther to the side with momentum from the shove. His balance was gone, and his knees buckled beneath him. Enough gas had affected him, and he toppled to the floor, hitting the rough wood. The room erupted with blasterfire.*

*Four blurry shapes charged toward them, blasters blazing. Thrawn returned fire through the*
smoke, his weapon flashing brighter than the others and making a higher-pitched sound.

The vision morphed.

The Jedi awoke to a deserted bar and groaned as he pushed himself to a seated position through lingering dizziness.

“Welcome back,” Thrawn said. The Chiss sat in a chair, his back to The Jedi and facing the bar entrance. His gun hand rested on the chair’s armrest, the blaster pistol pointed toward the door. “You will note where the first two shots were aimed.”

The Jedi looked at the bar. Right where The Jedi had been standing were two fresh blaster burns. “I guess I should thank you for pushing me out of the way.”

Thrawn half turned, a pained frown on his face. “That was not my intent,” he said.

Lord Vader yanked his hand away from the Chiss blaster and returned to the present. Sounds of tape being torn filled the room. For a long moment, Vader thought about the vision.

But was it Thrawn’s intent to shove The Jedi out of the way? … Evidence of precognition… or Third Sight as the Chiss call it… The Jedi didn’t recognize the use of the Force back then… But Vader now saw Thrawn’s slip of evidence, the lapse most likely a result of him being injured from blasterfire at the time…

Vader thought back to their recent fight in the same bar while on their mission to Batuu where they went to investigate the disturbance felt by the Emperor. A group of Darshi had attacked them this time. Vader thought back to how Thrawn fought. The Chiss’s movements and tactics could be evaluated to be too quick to be of natural reactions.

But there was one moment that stood out.

Vader remembered suddenly feeling the disturbance during the fight, which was later revealed in their mission to be the young Chiss children terrified, confused, and seemingly calling for help.

Swirlings in the Force—surprise—confusion—darkness—anxiety—

The swirlings of anxiety turning to fear—twisting in alien forms and patterns—breaking all ability to concentrate—flashing into unfocused turmoil—

Vader remembered the sensations of the young children’s cries being so unexpected and flooding his mind that it made his pace falter when he felt it. He realized now that Thrawn, once Vader alerted that the disturbance was near and could be located, reacted in the same manner.

Vader had never seen Thrawn at a moment of complete surprise. Neither had The Jedi. Without warning, the Chiss’s face went suddenly rigid, his stride jerking just as Vader’s had a moment earlier.

The moment had passed quickly, but it had now been enough for Vader to realize that Thrawn had sensed the children as well. How had Thrawn hidden his Force sensitivities from everyone. Did the
Emperor know? Surely, he would have told Vader...

Vader remembered how Thrawn’s mind was always opaque and impenetrable when he would search through the Force. Perhaps the alien forms and patterns swirling around his mind shielded such ability from being discovered. Perhaps it was an attribute of all Chiss with Third Sight as the children’s mind felt the same as Thrawn. Or perhaps it was even a quality of their species as a whole.

Vader now wanted answers.

“How long until he is able to be moved,” Vader said, as he slammed the drawer closed with the blaster and baton inside.

Faro started at the sudden noise. Zahara looked up from putting her instruments away into the medical backpack and addressed Lord Vader.

“I would like to monitor him here for a few more minutes before transport my lord,” Zahara said. “But he will need surgery soon to repair the damage to his throat. I can alert my team outside to prepare an op-room for our arrival.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Vader said. “Grand Admiral Thrawn will be transported to my Star Destroyer.”

Faro saw the confusion flash across Zahara’s face and knew she was about to protest. Faro interjected before the Chief Medical Officer was able to speak.

“Surely, my Lord Vader, the facilities are adequate here aboard the Chimaera to treat his injuries?” Faro said.

“No,” Vader said. “He will be transferred aboard the Devastator and placed under care there until we reach Coruscant. I have further questions for him and need to be present.

“Besides, the Chimaera cannot afford yet another diversion as far out as Coruscant. You are needed at Lothal Commodore Faro.”

Vader pointed at her. “And I expect no delays this time.”

Commodore Faro recognized the threat. The same or worse that happened to Thrawn would be done to her if she didn’t comply. She wanted to protest.

The Chimaera… the Seventh Fleet… she couldn’t lose Thrawn. She had a feeling that once Thrawn left the Chimaera, she and the rest of the Empire would never hear of him again.

Faro was about to delicately argue to Lord Vader for Thrawn to be treated on the Chimaera, but she felt a small squeeze on her hand. She startled and looked down.

Faro met the slightly opened and pale red eyes of Grand Admiral Thrawn.

“Grand Admiral…,” Faro said as she brought her other hand to cup around the back of his own. Thrawn’s eyes were a dull red, so much less vibrant than normal, and they spoke of a pained caution. His hand lightly squeezed her own a little more for emphasis once their gaze met, and he moved his head slightly from side to side, as if cautioning her against protesting to Lord Vader. He knew she was about to protest and was trying to stop her from doing so.

But the slight movement made his eyes flutter closed and his brow furrowed. What little control he
had vanished as his body reacted. He began to gag against the endotracheal tube stretching down his throat and into his lungs. He moved his right hand up intending to grab the tube, but Kimmund reacted quickly and pushed his arm down firmly.

At the same time, Zahara was over him and pressed down with one hand on the top of his chest and her other firmly on his forehead. Thrawn’s body responded weakly and jerked against the pressure. His legs and feet shifted weakly as he fought his body’s urge to resist.

“Grand Admiral Thrawn, Chief Medical Officer Zahara Cody here,” Zahara said. “What you’re experiencing is natural, but you’re going to have relax against your body’s instinct.”

Thrawn gripped Faro’s hand tighter as his body tensed. Faro watched as he stilled. His brow betrayed his turmoil however. She knew he was in the midst of a desperate fight for control by how his eyes tightened shut.

Vader suddenly felt a magnetic pulse in the Force. He stretched out, trying to understand it. It was familiar…

Swirlings in the Force—anxiety—darkness—confusion—pain—

A sudden jerk. Thrawn’s shoulders jerked again and his head slightly flinched back and to the side. It was as if his body was trying to throw away and flee from the tube down his throat and the resulting pain. The motion made a single tear escape his left eye at the same time.

“It’s okay…,” Faro said, emotion in her voice nearly betraying her.

Swirlings in the Force—misery—

“Let the machine breathe for you, sir,” Zahara said in a soothing voice. She slid her hand from his forehead and in a smooth motion wiped his tear away. She held her hand there on the side of his face firmly, preventing any future motion. “Don’t fight it. Let your body’s natural instinct fade away.”

Swirlings in the Force—

A sudden twist—CRACK—alien patterns and forms emitting control—unfocused turmoil binding into the ability to concentrate—

Focus—opaqueness—

And it was gone.

Vader watched as Thrawn visibly relaxed under Kimmund, Zahara and Faro’s grasp. The Chiss’s brow was still furrowed and his eyes clinched shut however. Vader could no longer read him through the Force, but he could feel his exhaustion and weakness. Vader would remember this.

“There you go, sir,” Zahara soothed. “You’re doing well, just like that. I know it feels uncomfortable, but the tube needs to stay inside.”

Faro rubbed the back Thrawn’s hand, trying to comfort him. She hoped this would make him focus on a different sensation than what he undoubtedly felt painfully at his neck. She wanted to keep him relaxed.

Kimmund released his own hold and leaned back. He took a deep breath. The commander seemed exhausted, his face covered with sweat.
Zahara shifted to her right side slightly to examine Thrawn’s neck. She looked up at Lord Vader, who stood behind Thrawn’s desk.

“I recommend that numbing spray be applied down his mouth and throat once aboard your Star Destroyer Lord Vader,” Zahara said. “I don’t wish to put him through that here. It would make his body react again, and he needs rest right now.”

“Noted,” Vader said.

Lord Vader picked up the tablet from Thrawn’s desk and regarded it for a moment. Faro’s heart dropped, and her anxiety shifted to an intense dread. She would have to answer to Lord Vader now.

Faro felt another small squeeze and saw Thrawn’s pale red eyes open again looking at her. He looked tired as he peered into her gaze.

“He is awake?” Vader growled.

Zahara hesitated. “Yes, my lord. He is aware of us.”

Faro’s eyes, holding the gaze of Thrawn’s own, watered. Thrawn’s eyes narrowed briefly and knowingly, as if trying to project strength to her. His small squeeze stayed firm against her hand. *It will be okay… trust your training... I trust you can get through this…*

Vader, after another moment of considering the tablet, brought it with him as he walked around Thrawn’s desk to fully face them on the ground. His cloak billowed behind him, displaying his tempered fury. It was time for Faro to answer to the Dark Lord, and it was time for the Dark Lord to confirm her loyalty to the Empire.

Faro shifted slightly on her knees and turned to face the imposing presence of Lord Vader. At the same time, Thrawn moved his red gaze to Vader.

Zahara leaned down close to Thrawn and whispered, “Be careful sir, not to move your head too much.”

Thrawn blinked slowly, but his gaze was transfixed on the approaching Dark Lord. Despite his growing exhaustion and the red vibrancy gone from his Chiss eyes, his gaze still held power. Vader stopped in front of the group, holding the tablet in his right hand. He beheld Thrawn’s gaze for a moment, and the Chiss’s eyes held the Dark Lord’s attention, unwavering, as if they were trying to speak.

Vader searched through the Force once more. Thrawn’s mind was opaque, but he felt the emotions of anger… *and fear?* Vader pressed further. *Ah... fear not for himself but for another...* Good.

“Commodore Faro,” Vader said. Vader lingered on Thrawn’s gaze and saw his eyes flinch. Vader then turned his head to Faro.

“Yes- yes, my lord?” Faro said.

“This tablet, you were the one who delivered it here, correct?” Vader held the tablet up for emphasis.

“Yes...” Faro said. She knew where this was going, as she remembered what she said to the Dark Lord on the bridge.

“And what information does it contain?” Vader said.
“My lord, I can expl—”


Faro took in an anxious breath, and she held onto Thrawn’s hand like it was a lifeline, his grasp remaining steady. Here it was…

“My Lord,” Faro said slowly. “It contains the scans the Chimaera took of an object in this sector of space.”

Vader’s left hand balled into a fist and a small gust of Force echoed from it. It brushed against Faro’s face, fluttered her hair and made Vader’s cloak billow. The debris on the floor also reacted at the same time, shaking and slightly moving outward from the burst.

“You lied, Commodore Faro,” Vader growled. “You told me there was no record maintained of this sector.”

Thrawn squeezed Faro’s hand harder and glared with fire at Lord Vader, recognizing an imminent threat to her. He tried to speak instinctively, but his shoulders flinched, his body wanting to gag again. Zahara placed a hand on Thrawn’s right shoulder to steady him but wisely remained quiet during the Dark Lord’s ire. Thrawn clinched his eyes shut as he regained control. Kimmund saw his reaction and felt pity for the grand admiral; his respect for him also rose.

Thrawn wanted to speak in Faro’s defense but was unable to do so with the endotracheal tube stretching down into his throat and chest. He could only helplessly watch as his Commodore was challenged.

Faro glanced down at Thrawn struggling to regain control, his eyes clinched closed. The tape around his face held the endotracheal tube securely, and the mechanical ventilator maintained a steady rhythm despite Thrawn’s body trying to reject its help. She gently squeezed and laid his hand on the floor, pulling her own hand out of his grasp.

“Lord Vader,” Faro said, gaining a confident edge to her voice. She moved to stand up, and Thrawn’s eyes fluttered open watching her rise. His eyelids were heavy and his gaze sluggish.

“If I may respectfully interject,” Faro said. She stood tall, her hands clasped behind back, facing Lord Vader. “I said that the Chimaera’s systems retained no record of this area of space. The readings indeed were too muddled to be considered viable.”

Thrawn relaxed and blinked slowly. He was proud of her as he recognized her path of thought.

“The Chimaera’s system was purged, and what remained of the scans was placed on that tablet.”

“And you were ordered to deliver it here?” Vader said slowly.

“Yes.” Faro waited as Vader considered her.

“I see,” Vader said eventually. “You must now recognize that the installation here is under the highest levels of classification in the Empire.” Vader stepped forward, emphasizing his words with the tablet.

“Grand Admiral Thrawn knew this yet brought you and the Chimaera here without the Emperor’s, Director Krennic’s or my own knowledge.” Vader’s head turned and held Thrawn’s gaze, yet his words still addressed Faro. Vader’s malice grew. Zahara’s eyes widened and Kimmund took in a deep breath.
“He attempted to scan this installation and to do so secretly,” Vader said. “He is accused of mixed loyalties and treason against the Empire.”

Faro gasped. “My Lord, surely—”

“No.” Vader was furious. The air echoed with the Force. Thrawn resolutely held Vader’s gaze, his eyes now piercing and speaking defiance. “He is accused of espionage against the Empire in favor of his own people. He is accused of using Imperial resources to advance the causes of his Chiss Ascendancy at the expense of the Empire.”

Vader clutched the tablet with both hands and suddenly snapped it into two pieces. It shattered in his gloved hands with a shower of sparks and fizzled as he slammed the remains to the ground.

“Were I not here to prevent him from doing so,” Vader said as he pointed. “Grand Admiral Thrawn would have taken what he learned and compromised the security of the Empire by transmitting what he found here. Were it not received by his people, there is a risk that the rising insurgency in this galaxy could have intercepted those scans.”

Faro was aghast. Surely this was untrue. She couldn’t imagine Thrawn doing such a thing; not after all they had been through as a crew. Surely…

Vader placed his hands on his belt and turned to Commodore Faro. “Surely you recognize this threat Commodore Faro.”

Faro hesitated, doubt clearly showing on her face. She had a deep loyalty to Thrawn. She looked down and found Thrawn’s gaze. He tightened his eyes briefly and blinked slowly, as if he was trying to convey that it was alright to speak against him. Do it… it’s okay…

Faro’s expression tightened briefly in sorrow and regret at his gaze. She was in an impossible position. She hesitated.

“Commodore Faro?” Vader said.

Faro blinked rapidly, fighting back her emotions, and rose her head to look at Vader. She took a deep breath.

“I—” Faro glanced to Thrawn and then back. She spoke slowly, trying not to let her voice betray her. “I see… the soundness of your accusations, my Lord Vader.”

Faro lowered her head. “The security of the Empire must be preserved,” she said.

Vader crossed his arms, regarding Faro. “Very good. That is correct Commodore Faro.”

Faro timidly rose her eyes to Vader and then glanced to Thrawn, her head remaining lowered in deference to the Dark Lord. Thrawn’s eyes were closed, and his face was relaxed. The mechanical ventilator made its hauntingly artificial breath sounds, keeping him alive. He seemed to be unconscious once again.

Faro’s mouth and brow furrowed in emotion looking at her grand admiral, her eyes threatening to spill over, but she took a deep breath and quickly regained control of her emotions. She finally recognized the similarity to Vader’s own respirator and briefly wondered of Vader’s own origins of needing the device.

“As Commodore Faro stated,” Vader said, turning to address the group. “The security of the Empire must be maintained. Therefore, what truly happened here must not be spoken of outside
Kimmund knew what was coming after experiencing many similar situations with other superior officers of the Empire being removed from power by Lord Vader. A cover story would be established and those knowing the truth of what really happened would be sworn to secrecy. With this happening to Grand Admiral Thrawn, it was doubly important to establish a cover due to the nature of the accusations against him and considering his stature in the Empire.

“What happened here was an attack against Grand Admiral Thrawn, Commander Kimmund, and I during our meeting. Thrawn’s Sentinel Droids attacked us and in so doing, severely injured the Grand Admiral. They were used in an assassination attempt against him before when a rebel spy reprogrammed them, and as such these droids were left over from that attempt and activated today.”

Vader turned to Faro. “You must address the Chimaera as it’s captain-in-charge and explain this to the crew. You must also explain the Chimaera’s need at Lothal to eliminate this growing rebellion while Thrawn will be transferred aboard my Star Destroyer for transfer to Coruscant facilities for proper care.”

Faro was in disbelief, her eyes widening, but she wisely remained quiet. Vader eyed each of them.

“Is this clear?” Vader said.

Kimmund answered first, knowing his place. “Yes, my lord,” he said, as he reached for his helmet and put it on. “Awaiting your order.”

“Understood, Lord Vader,” Faro nodded glancing to Thrawn’s still form and then to Vader.

Zahara nodded as well but didn’t speak, her right hand was still on Thrawn’s shoulder. Vader stared at her, sensing her doubt.

“Prepare him for transport,” Vader growled.

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Chapter Summary

"In a dark place we find ourselves, and a little more knowledge lights our way...
Difficult to see. Always in motion is the future." —Yoda

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One whose path has taken a new turn is often initially disoriented. But as time passes, and the path continues steadily in its new direction, there is a tendency to believe that it will remain so forever, with no further turns.

Nothing is further from the truth.

Commodore Faro stared at Thrawn’s desk. Her left hand held her right wrist behind her back. Her right hand was clinched tightly, knuckles lightening with tension.

Faro was alone in the turmoil of her own thoughts, standing amid the duplicity of battle’s carnage and pristinely untouched art.

A place of Thrawn’s measured order now reflected chaos in the wake of Vader’s malice. Faro never fully realized before this moment how deeply she treasured that order. Thrawn himself represented order… safety… that the Empire didn’t provide before being assigned to his command.

A tear escaped her eye. She let it rest there on her cheek as she considered the communication console on Thrawn’s desk. Her eyes narrowed and became unfocused as she remembered Vader’s words.

“Let what you see here be a lesson.”

Fear gripped her, and a shiver ran down her spine. Images of Thrawn helpless on the ground and the sound of him struggling for air flashed unwillingly into her mind. She closed her eyes and repressed the flashback.

Faro felt helpless… stuck. She breathed slowly… deeply… She needed to bring her anxiety under control.

She swiped and patted at her face with both hands. She held them there against her face a moment and then rubbed her eyes. The tears were wiped away. She took a deep breath and mentally steeled herself. Vader still had a role for her to play. For the sake of the crew, …and loyalty to the Empire…, she would carry out the order… and obey.

Faro raised her chin, leaned over and pressed a button on the desk. She returned her hands behind her back and stood straight.

“Begin ship-wide transmission,” Faro said. A beeping trill sounded, indicating the channel was
Zahara tried to keep pace with the First Legion. She carried the mechanical ventilator and leaned over Grand Admiral Thrawn. He was being rushed by Commander Kimmund on a hovering gurney toward an awaiting shuttle in the hangar bay. The endotracheal tube was still secure in his mouth and down his throat with the tape extending around him, giving him life. She saw small flashes of Thrawn’s red eyes as he attempted to open them.

The First Legion escorted them down metallic corridors of the Chimaera. Lord Vader led the way. Thrawn was covered with a blanket that stretched up to the top of his chest. Kimmund wondered if Vader wanted the blanket there as a show to cover wounds implied by Faro’s address to the ship. Crew members gasped and muttered their surprise upon their passing.

Faro’s speech continued to address the ship. It was evident in her tone that she struggled with her emotion, as should be expected upon a superior officer being injured. However Kimmund knew a layer of her emotion contained apprehension about fulfilling the cover story ordered by Vader. Kimmund couldn’t blame her…

“Grand Admiral Thrawn has been severely injured in an assassination attempt— as a result of his Sentinel Droids being reprogrammed by rebels— as such, all Sentinel Droids will be pulled from
service and evaluated.”

Vader turned a corner and Kimmund maneuvered around more crew members. They too gasped in surprise. “Oh no…” “The Grand Admiral…” “He looks bad…”

“The Grand Admiral is being transferred aboard the ISD Devastator for rapid transport to Coruscant medical facilities as I speak,” Faro said as she continued her address to the Chimaera. “Meanwhile the Chimaera must make haste to Lothal— to eliminate this rebellion against the Empire. Expect a jump to hyperspace within the hour.”

Faro took a breath. “Further updates will be forthcoming. Commodore Faro, out.”

Faro pressed the comm button and ended the ship-wide transmission.

It was silent. She stood there in the company of her thoughts once again.

Her lip quivered as she began to realize the gravity of what she had just done. She had just facilitated the smooth exit of Grand Admiral Thrawn off the Chimaera, took command of his ship and lied to her crew with a cover-story. She knew she would never see Thrawn again.

Faro couldn’t dwell on that now and allow her emotions to fully betray her quite yet. She turned to make her way out of Thrawn’s office and exit the suite. She moved carefully as debris littered the floor. The air still smelt of the acrid stench of burnt plastoid mixed with the remains of chemically dipped and sterile medical supplies. She stepped over the carnage as she made her way out.

Faro walked through the door but stopped in mild surprise. She found the two Death Troopers were waiting for her on either side of the entrance. They both picked up their E11-D Blaster Rifles from parade-rest and turned toward her. They waited.

Faro looked at them, surprised they were still there. But then she remembered she was the commanding officer of the Chimaera now. She considered them for a moment and mentally recoiled at the thought of her face most likely showing evidence of her emotion and anxiety. For all they understood though, she was merely troubled after witnessing Thrawn injured by his own Sentinel Droids.

Faro nodded at them, mustering together what she could of an outward presence of Imperial leadership.

“With me,” Faro said, and she began walking. The Death Troopers followed, flanking her stride loyally down the corridors of the Chimaera, heading back to the bridge.

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Stormtrooper Commander Ayer waited for them outside their shuttle in the Chimaera’s hangar bay. He stood with four additional stormtroopers under his command. The hangar bay doors hissed open. Vader, followed by his First Legion, walked through the entrance.

Ayer saw Grand Admiral Thrawn unconscious on a repulser gurney, covered up to his shoulders with a blanket. Commander Kimmund was pushing the gurney, and Zahara stayed right next to Thrawn holding a machine connected to a breathing tube. The Grand Admiral looked helpless.

This was the first time Ayer saw the Grand Admiral since receiving orders to ensure his safety… Guilt and regret gripped him. He had failed— or was never given a chance to succeed. Either way,
he failed Grand Admiral Thrawn.

Ayer stepped forward. He met the group a few steps away from the shuttle. Vader saw him walk forward and stopped, putting his hands on his belt. Kimmund, Zahara and the First Legion paused their advance.

Vader and Ayer stood a few paces from each other, considering one another. Crew members in the hangar bay nearby watched. Ayer’s expressionless helmet moved from the Dark Lord to the group behind him. Tension held the air.

In one smooth movement, Ayer secured his blaster to his armor and removed his helmet, his gaze transfixed on the unconscious form of Grand Admiral Thrawn as it appeared from underneath the helmet. His eyes spoke conflict. He was nearly shaking, aghast, while also maintaining proper Imperial ceremony required of his station as Stormtrooper Commander of the *Chimaera*.

He cradled his helmet under his left arm after a moment, and his gaze flicked to Zahara. He quickly noted her worried and widened eyes. He then beheld Lord Vader.

“Lord Vader,” Ayer said, nodding his head. “A new shuttle has been prepared for you for departure. I merely wish to see the Grand Admiral off.”

Vader searched through the Force. He felt a strong sense of loyalty, sense of duty… regret and… a dread of failure emitting from the Commander.

Vader slowly moved aside with measured steps.

“Very well,” Vader said. “Quickly.”

“Thank you my lord,” Ayer said. He stepped forward and held Zahara’s gaze as he approached over the short distance. His eyes silently asked her of Thrawn’s status. Zahara’s held apprehension and caution; she didn’t speak, as if she were afraid.

Ayer stopped in front of her beside the gurney, considering the fear in her eyes. *Why are you afraid?* His eyes narrowed, and he looked down at Thrawn. He placed his right hand on the Grand Admiral’s shoulder and grimaced. His eyes followed the path of the breathing tube from the ventilator Zahara held, to the tube protruding from Thrawn’s mouth. He saw how it was taped securely around his jawline and behind his upper neck.

The stoic Stormtrooper Commander shivered as he watched Thrawn’s chest rise and fall to the rhythm of the mechanical ventilator. He glanced over Thrawn’s unconscious form hidden underneath the blanket. Ayer remembered Faro’s address to the ship and realized horrible wounds must be covered up.

But then Ayer rose his scan and saw the wounds on Thrawn’s neck. *Could Sentinel Droids cause such an injury?* Ayer remembered Vader using his power on him previously… *How it felt to gasp for air but be unable satisfy his lungs because of an invisible Force pressed upon his neck…*

Ayer took a deep and unsure breath. Had something similar happened to his Grand Admiral? *While he stood outside his door... and let it happen...*

His thoughts raced in conflict, as his jaw flexed. He blinked slowly and rose his steely gaze to Commander Kimmund. Kimmund said nothing and made no indication to address Ayer. He merely held the railing to the repulser gurney, hidden behind his stormtrooper armor.

Ayer’s gaze held judgment and anger. Kimmund’s helmet stared back, expressionless.
Ayer stood up straight and placed his right hand behind his back. He glanced down at his Grand Admiral once more. His face flashed between anger, regret and guilt. He steeled himself and turned away to face Lord Vader.

“Thank you— for taking care of him, Lord Vader,” Ayer said, a glint in his eye.

Vader felt the undertone of accusation. He should have eliminated Ayer when he had the chance in the corridor, but strategically could not now as the cover-story and Imperial spectacle had to be maintained. They stood there glaring at each other, and Vader’s malice grew from behind his helmet. He knew the Stormtrooper Commander could be trouble.

“Commander Kimmund, prepare for our departure,” Vader said.

“Yes, my lord,” Kimmund said. He pushed the repulser gurney carrying Thrawn passed an unmoving Ayer. Zahara glanced at Ayer with her apprehensive eyes as she walked forward carrying the ventilator. Ayer's eyes narrowed in return as he stood alone unable to do anything as they left him where he stood.

The First Legion followed Kimmund, but Zahara stopped at the ramp. She reluctantly gave Tephon the mechanical ventilator.

Ayer watched from his place on the hangar deck, the First Legion and Thrawn disappear into the shuttle. He moved his gaze back to an unmoved Lord Vader still staring at him.

“Chief Medical Officer Zahara Cody isn’t going with you?” Ayer said.

“My Star Destroyer has its own Chief Medical Officer,” Vader said. “Grand Admiral Thrawn will be taken care of.”

Ayer felt apprehensive at the edge to Vader’s words. But he knew he couldn’t act or protest on his worry for the sake of the ship, and most likely for the sake of his own life. He merely nodded at the Dark Lord with his eyes piercing through the thick tension in the air. Zahara, with the four stormtroopers from the Chimaera, walked back to stand in a line beside him. She kept her eyes downward. The shuttle’s engines began to roar as their startup sequence began.

Vader watched Stormtrooper Commander Ayer another moment, as if hoping he would protest a challenge. *Give the Dark Lord a reason to deal with the Commander…* But the Dark Lord turned and walked up the ramp. Vader disappeared inside as the ramp closed behind him.

Ayer glanced at Zahara, now standing beside him. Her eyes still focused on the floor, and she took in a shaky breath. Ayer saw and felt her desire to be on that shuttle with Thrawn. Her breathing increased as the shuttle lifted from the tarmac. Zahara broke away from her fright and gazed up to watch the shuttle. Her brow furrowed, but dared not look at Ayer for fear of her emotions betraying her.

It was then that Ayer knew something deeper and terrible had happened. He turned his head and watched the shuttle pass through the hangar bay shield with dread and anger.

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Commodore Faro stood alone in front of the main viewport on the *Chimaera’s* bridge. Her shoulders were squared, feet firmly planted and hands clasped behind her back. She watched the *ISD Devastator* slowly move forward and bank slightly to its left.
“Commodore Faro,” a navigation officer said. “The jump to Lothal is almost locked. Just a moment and the Chimaera will be able to jump.”

Faro kept her gaze on Vader’s Star Destroyer. “Very well Lieutenant. Inform me once the calculations are complete.”

“Aye Commodore.”

The bridge quietly carried out their tasks. However a dread lingered in the air. Faro felt it, dwelled in it and was trying to overcome it. Every crew member on the bridge felt the absence of Grand Admiral Thrawn.

Vader’s Star Destroyer continued to gain distance at impulse speed, it’s brilliant blue engines carrying the vessel away. After a moment, the Devastator reached an acceptable distance from the Chimaera and vectored toward a new heading. Under other circumstances it would be considered a beautiful sight, watching a Star Destroyer maneuver in such a way so closely.

Faro watched as the engines flashed. The light suddenly shifted around the Devastator and the Star Destroyer flashed into hyperspace, leaving the Chimaera behind.

Faro took a deep breath. Her gaze lingered on the spot where the Devastator disappeared. Where Thrawn disappeared…

She then scanned the horizon hoping to find the mysterious object that caused such pain and turmoil in the distance once more. It was gone as well, leaving only darkness and tendrils of gaseous nebula beyond the viewport.

“Commodore Faro,” the navigation officer said. “Course laid in to Lothal. Awaiting your command sir.”

Awaiting your command.

Faro steeled herself and turned around, facing the bridge. She rubbed her wrist that was clasped behind her back as she considered the crew, but mentally recoiled, realizing she had just mimicked one of Thrawn’s habits.

“If I may have your attention for a moment,” Faro said.

Every crew member on the bridge paused and turned to her. Faro beheld their faces. They spoke of apprehension, worry and loyalty. She hoped her own beheld assurance and leadership. The loyalty that Thrawn had earned of them now stretched toward her. Faro felt guilty and undeserving.

“I’m sure each of you heard my address to the ship earlier,” Faro said, containing her emotion. Some of the crew narrowed their eyes in sadness.

“An— incident did occur,” Faro continued. “And Grand Admiral Thrawn— gravely injured…”

Her voice trailed off, eyes turning glassy, but she continued to return the crew’s gaze. A few gasps emitted from the crew in the pits below, and some officers returned Faro’s gaze with a glossiness of their own, realizing the gravity of what happened.

“I have assumed command of the ISD Chimaera. We will— hope— for Grand Admiral Thrawn’s quick return.”

Lier—
Faro quickly looked down and took a deep breath. She contained her emotions, willing them away, remaining in control only barely.

The Chief Tactical Officer put his hands on his hips and shook his head. The bridge held dread at Faro’s words. They knew Faro was holding back the true extent of Thrawn’s condition. By her reaction it must be grim...

Faro looked up. “We must continue the mission set before us at Lothal.”

“The Rebels will pay for what they have done,” the Chief Tactical Officer said.

Faro beheld him a moment.

“Indeed— they will,” Faro said. They will pay for something they are not guilty of...

Faro turned to the Navigation Officer. “Helm, to Lothal as soon as possible.”

“Helm, Aye. Vectoring to jump to hyperspace.”

The Chimaera’s engines groaned to life and a quiet hum filled the bridge. It spoke of power. The Star Destroyer began to turn toward the jump vector.

“Estimated time of arrival is about 12 hours, sir,” the Navigation Officer said.

“Very good. Lieutenant Lomar,” Faro said. “I will be in Grand Admiral Thrawn’s office should I be needed. Alert me once we are above Lothal.”

“Aye, Commodore,” Lieutenant Lomar said.

Faro scanned the bridge.

“Return to your duties,” Faro said. She walked down the command walkway toward the exit.

Crew members on the bridge returned to their duties, sounds of buttons and consoles being manipulated filling the air. Faro walked through the doors of the bridge, and they hissed shut behind her. She felt the ship lurch slightly as the hyperdrive powered up.

Clouds of purplish-blue gaseous nebula expanded and flowed in the Chimaera's wake as the Star Destroyer jumped into hyperspace.

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Chapter End Notes

“Don’t know me anymore
A bell that tolled to comfort me
An empty street
A rising steam

I walk alone
Beside myself
Nowhere to go."

- *Flesh and Bone* by Black Math

[Spotify Song Link](#)
A Spectre

Chapter Summary

At wintry dawn, where o'er the sheep-track's maze
The viewless snow-mist weaves a glist'ning haze,
Sees full before him, gliding without tread,
An image with a glory round its head;
The enamoured rustic worships its fair hues,
Nor knows he makes the shadow he pursues!

—"Constancy to an Ideal Object" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Chapter Notes

"If all you do is fight for your own life, then your life is worth nothing," —Hera Syndulla

See the end of the chapter for more notes

No one can say where his path will take him, even for the duration of a single day. More difficult still to see is where one’s path will intersect that of another warrior.

A warrior must always be alert for such meetings.

“What did they do now?” Hera said as she slowed the Ghost to a stop.

A Star Destroyer was enveloped in a chain of explosions with a massive green glow emanating from underneath. Clouds of debris and smoke pockets expanded from the crumbling vessel. It was a display of pure destruction set behind a disabled Imperial shuttle. Sabine and Ezra were safe inside the shuttle, waving timidly from the cockpit in the direction of the Ghost.

“Those two can’t go anywhere without blowing something up,” Zeb said.

Kanan sat silent beside Hera in the copilot seat, grateful that Sabine and Ezra were found and okay after their mission with Saw Gerrera. He was disturbed though by what he felt in the Force. He felt a bleeding cry of immense power that was quickly diminishing to nothing.

Engineers rescued from the Star Destroyer stood safely in the cargo bay of the Ghost, grateful for the liberation from the Empire. They would have been sent to Jedha to use their skills for the Empire’s new projects. Hera stood before them now, making sure they were comfortable and otherwise okay.

Ezra watched the entrails of hyperspace speed past the observation window of the gun turret from
the balcony above. His hand harshly gripped the turret gunner’s seat as he looked on. He was grateful to be reunited with his family.

“As soon as we are able, we will plot a course for each of your home worlds,” Hera said.

“Actually,” an engineer said. “We have all decided to enlist in your cause.”

Hera’s eyes widened.

“We figured if the Empire valued our skills, they’d be better put to work serving you and the rebellion,” the engineer continued.

“I’m sure command will be grateful for your commitment. Thank you,” Hera said.

Kanan listened from the balcony above and shook his head. “I don’t like the sound of this Kyber Crystal. It’s the second one we prevented the Empire from getting their hands on.”

“Saw seemed convinced they’re trying to weaponize it somehow,” Sabine said, standing next to Kanan. “Is that even possible?”

“At that scale? I don’t know…” Kanan said, a hand on his chin in thought. He was worried and still shaken from feeling the Kyber Crystal cry out earlier.

“What if Saw’s right?” Ezra said turning and walking toward them. “And the Empire is already on the verge of winning a war most of the Rebel Alliance doesn’t believe has already begun?”

Hera pulled her arms around her a little tighter at Ezra’s words.

A sudden lurch and the Ghost dropped out of hyperspace. Lights flickered as everyone lost balance. Zeb and the engineers caught Hera, and they braced against the hangar walls at the sudden change of velocity. Ezra fell forward into the railing above the cargo bay. Kanan and Sabine grabbed his arms at the same time and stopped him from falling over into the bay down below.

“Whoa, hold on kid!” Kanan shouted as Ezra grasped the railing with a groan.

Sabine saw the trails of hyperspace beyond the turret viewport fade into static balls of light. “What’s happening?”

“Chop!?” Hera yelled.

Everything was still, and the Ghost was quiet. Hera’s heart dropped as she realized the engines were shut down. She pushed off a wall and ran to a ladder. “What’s going on!”

After a moment of no answer, berating warbles sounded from the cockpit. Zeb helped some engineers back to their feet, his eyes wide.

Hera grunted with worry and rushed up the ladder to the main deck. She was followed closely by Kanan, Ezra, Sabine and Zeb. She scrambled to her feet on the main deck and ran down the central corridor of the Ghost, sprinting by the lounge and staterooms, and burst into the cockpit. Starry but empty space moved slowly outside the viewport as the Ghost drifted slightly off its axis.

Chopper was plugged into the main console, turning the control. He was rerouting system power to enhance communications range. Hera knelt and placed her hand on the droid’s head. Chopper turned his head to her and emitted frustrated warbles.
“An automated distress signal?” Hera said.

Chopper warbles doubtfully.

“What?” Hera looked down in confusion a moment. She shook her head. “That doesn’t make sense.”

She rose and made her way to the pilot’s console. She pressed a button sequence and pulled up a visual representation of the signal.

“What’s going on Hera?” Kanan said. Hera looked back and saw him standing in the doorway, with Sabine, Ezra and Zeb looking on from behind him.

“Why the sudden stop?” Ezra said.

“I—,” Hera hesitated, eyeing each of their faces. She sat down in the pilot’s seat. “I don’t know. Chopper picked up a distress signal and dropped us out of hyperspace to keep us in range.”

“Could’ve warned us first,” Zeb said.

Chopper warbles defensively and extends his mechanical arms in emphasis. Zeb frowns and crosses his arms.

“It’s unusual though. The signal was coded specifically for Chop to decrypt here on the Ghost, and it’s—” Hera mentally recoiled and shook her head.

Kanan walked forward and placed a hand on her shoulder. He felt disbelief and confusion from her. Hera began flipping controls and moved the throttle levers to minimal power, priming the engines for a restart.

“Hera? Are we safe here?” Sabine said.

“Yeah no no we’re okay here,” Hera said. The Ghost began to groan to life as its engines came back to power. She manipulated more controls and focused the holographic map with the distress signal for everyone to see. It was within reasonable distance.

“It just doesn’t make any sense to me,” Hera said. She shifted around in her chair to face everyone, glancing up at Kanan and then looked at Sabine, Ezra and Zeb standing next to Chopper near the cockpit door. “The signal has unique encryption ciphers that I loaded into Chop years ago and haven’t used since… well a long time ago. No one should know about them.”

Hera paused, looking up at Kanan.

“The transponder codes… they identify with Grand Admiral Thrawn’s Imperial authorization.”

“Oh no no no,” Zeb said raising his hands. “That is definitely a trap for us.”

Everyone was quiet, eyes wide. The only sound was Chopper turning his mechanical socket connected into the Ghost. Chopper updated the map with distance and fuel usage counts from their location to the distress signal.

Sabine walked forward to examine the signal’s read out more closely and sat in the copilot’s seat. “What if it’s real?”

Ezra frowned. “But why encode it only for us to decipher if he’s truly in trouble? I’m sure the Empire could find him faster than we could with their resources.”
“And why not mask the authorization…,” Kanan considered. “This is almost too direct.”

Ezra crossed his arms. “Did Kallus ever mention working with someone else as Fulcrum on the Chimaera?”

Kanan hummed in thought while Hera started punching controls to vector the Ghost toward the coordinates.

“I don’t think we can ignore this,” Hera said. “At the very least, we should investigate.”

Zeb was worried and crossed his arms. “We’re actually doing this?”

Hera punched in a location of space near the signal. “Kanan, you, Ezra and Sabine take the Phantom and scout the area around the distress signal. Chop mark up a jump to these coordinates.”

Hera turned and looked at Zeb. “Zeb and I will watch for an ambush and pick you up at the first sign of trouble.”

“Alright… I’ll go man the turret,” Zeb said with apprehension. “I still don’t like this for the record.”

“What if it’s Thrawn?” Ezra said.

Everyone hushed, apprehensive. But Kanan felt an unusual reassurance from the Force.

“No matter who it is,” Kanan said, nodding. “We’ll help them if they’re in trouble.”

“And apprehend them if they are trouble,” Sabine said. “We could acquire valuable intel at the very least.”

“Yeah…,” Ezra said, doubtful. He watched Hera fly the Ghost to a new vector. He usually loved this part, jumping into hyperspace, but the thrill was mixed with fear of the unknown of what they would find.

Hera pushed forward on the throttle controls, and the Ghost leapt into hyperspace in a brilliant swirl of blue.

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Rukh didn’t want to move. He inserted his data chip and keyed the pre-coded signal on his console, but then his body started to betray his pain and exhaustion. He sat slumped in the Imperial shuttle’s pilot seat unable to raise his arms anymore to maneuver. Too many broken bones, and just… tired.

The shuttle drifted aimlessly at the coordinates Thrawn made him memorize so long ago. Rukh could only watch the stars drift through his drooping eyes. It would have been beautiful were turmoiled thoughts not swirling in his mind. Is he still alive… Can they survive without him… How long will I have to wait here… How long will I last…

He had to able to tell—

Time became muddled. Rukh wasn’t sure if he fell asleep or kept staring at the same set of stars for eternity.
A beeping sound emitted from the console. Rukh looked through blurry vision at a blinking light.

*They heard it.*

----

Sabine brought the *Phantom* to a stop beside an inactive Imperial shuttle.

“Hera, it was a little tough to find with its systems powered down,” Sabine said into the comm. “But we found an Imperial transport at the coordinates from the beacon. No response to our hails, but no signs of any other ships.”

“Yet,” Zeb said over comm from the *Ghost*.

Ezra smiled and rolled his eyes.

“Okay I’ll keep watch from here too, but nothing else we see from here either,” Hera said over the comm. Her voice held apprehension. “Still, be careful… this is an odd situation.”

“We need to get on board,” Kanan said feeling through the Force. “Start the docking sequence Sabine, and Ezra and I can go check it out.”

Sabine maneuvered them to dock with the Imperial transport.

“Can you tell if… they’re human?” Ezra said.

Kanan rose to his feet and looked at Ezra. Even behind the mask, Ezra could feel his master’s stare. Kanan understood the question below the surface. *Is Grand Admiral Thrawn on that shuttle?*

The *Phantom’s* airlock hissed as Sabine connected with the Imperial transport.

“The seal is good and secured,” Sabine said.

Kanan shook his head and put his hand on Ezra’s shoulder. “Not human. Though… I don’t think it’s Thrawn.”

Kanan squeezed Ezra’s shoulder and smirked as he walked to the airlock. Sabine gave Ezra a questioning look. “You really think it’s Thrawn?” she said.

“Maybe. It could be.”

Sabine took an unsure breath. “I’ll be on comm the whole time; talk to me if you can over there. Be careful.”

Ezra smiled. “Aren’t I always?”

Sabine raised an eyebrow, her expression making Ezra laugh. “Don’t worry Sabine, we’ll be careful.”

Ezra turned and made his way to Kanan. As they went through the airlock, Ezra noticed Kanan was holding his lightsaber ready in his hand.

Kanan ignited it as they entered the Imperial transport. He was ready to defend Ezra and himself, but also used it to light the way for Ezra as the transport was powered down except for essential
power. Ezra saw a slumped figure in the pilot's seat and put his hand on Kanan to stop his advance.

"There's someone there at the controls," Ezra whispered.

"Hello?" Kanan announced. "Can you hear me?"

No response, the figure didn't move.

"We're not here to fight," Ezra said. He laughed nervously, and his gaze drifted to Kanan's lightsaber... "Despite the lightsaber..."

Kanan slowly stepped forward, feeling through the Force. It was so quiet except for a beeping trill. Ezra saw a light blinking on the console.

"I should deactivate the signal," Ezra said.

"Good thinking," Kanan said. Kanan stopped behind the pilot's chair, and Ezra reached over to the console, punching a button sequence. The beeping stopped.

Ezra looked down at Ruhk with wary concern. Definitely not Thrawn... Rukh was unconscious and breathing softly. Ezra gently touched his shoulder.

"Hey, can you hear me?" he said.

"Is there a pack somewhere Ezra?" Kanan suddenly asked.

Ezra looked up to his master, confused, then scanned the shuttle around them. A pack rested on the floor to the side of the copilot's seat.

"Uh, yeah...," Ezra said. Kanan held onto the back of the pilot's chair with one hand and lifted his other carrying the lightsaber to further direct the light for Ezra. Ezra cautiously knelt down and opened the pack. He gasped and delicately reached inside.

Kanan rose his eyebrows, waiting for confirmation about feeling something familiar.

"It's... it's Hera's Kalikori!" Ezra said, delicately raising the totem, inspecting it. It seemed undamaged. Kanan sighed in relief.

Ezra glanced in the pack again and reached inside. "There's also some sort of data drive in here."

"Hmm, we'll need to bring that back to command."

Rukh stirred and grunted.

"Whoa, hey hey," Kanan said softly, moving his hand to Rukh's shoulder. "Are you injured?"

Ezra quickly put the Kalikori and data drive back into the pack and stepped over to kneel next to Rukh.

"My name's Ezra, and this is my master Kanan. What's your name?"

Rukh's eyes were tense, and he was apprehensive, as he gathered his senses. He blinked and focused on Ezra's face. A spark of recognition-

"Rukh," he whispered through quaking breath. Rukh shakily tried to raise his right arm toward the shuttle's console, but he grunted in pain. Ezra reached for Rukh's arm and held it gently.
"Must have a few broken bones," Kanan said.

Rukh stuttered a breath and nodded toward the console where the blinking light was flashing earlier. "The data chip, take it..."

Ezra gently lowered Rukh's arm to his lap and found the slot where a data chip was inserted. He ejected the data chip and beheld the clear, rectangular piece of technology.

"Give it to your droid... it will... explain...," Rukh trailed off as his eyes became heavy.

"Hey, Rukh, stay awake now," Kanan said.

"Kanan, Ezra!" Sabine exclaimed over their comm. Her voice was stressed. "Get moving, a contact just appeared nearby; it's scanning us!"

Ezra inhaled and looked up to Kanan. Kanan deactivated his lightsaber and hooked it to his belt. He started unfastening Rukh from the pilot's seat. "Grab the pack, Ezra; I'll carry him out!"

"Alright!"

Ezra slipped the data chip into a back pocket and hurried over to the pack. He glanced inside once more to make sure the Kalikori and data drive was inside and pulled it closed. He slung it over his shoulder and stood up, as Kanan heaved Rukh into his arms.

"Let's go!" Ezra said.

Sabine roared the *Phantom*'s engines to life and quickly disconnected from the Imperial shuttle once Kanan, Ezra and Rukh were on board.

"Who's our guest?!" Sabine said, glancing back.

"His name's Rukh," Kanan exclaimed, setting him down on the floor. "We'll find out more later!"

"What found us?" Ezra said, jumping into the copilot's seat.

"An Imperial light cruiser," Sabine said, maneuvering away from the shuttle. More targets showed up on the console originating from the light cruiser. "And some Ties..."

Suddenly another target flashed from hyperspace close overhead, shifting the *Phantom* in it's wake. The *Ghost* veered in front of them and lowered below the *Phantom*'s vector. It's turret began to erupt in muffled rebukes, firing at the approaching Tie Fighters.

Hera's commanding voice filled the *Phantom*'s cockpit. "Attach quickly Sabine! We need to get out of here!"

Tie Fighters began to explode as Zeb yelled in triumph. Sabine maneuvered forward, careful to avoid Zeb's firing solution, and set the *Phantom* down on the *Ghost*'s docking apron.

"We're secure, Hera!" Sabine said as she power-locked the *Phantom* down.

They lurched forward as Hera propelled the *Ghost* toward a jump vector. Ezra and Sabine braced on the *Phantom*'s console and passively watched out of the cockpit window. Laser-fire and Tie Fighters buzzed across their view. More explosions rocked them, and burning pieces of a Tie Fighter peppered their hull. They swerved and pivoted as Hera guided them through the skirmish.

They straightened on a vector, and suddenly the light around the *Ghost* brilliantly flashed in
pseudomotion as the *Ghost's* hyperdrive powered up. It groaned in strength as the stars battled a pseudo-shift.

The stars eventually relented, and the *Ghost*, with the *Phantom* safe upon its back as its quarry, flashed into hyperspace.

----

The *Chimaera* broke through the swirls of hyperspace with a mastered elegance that spoke of measured countenance. Though, it was bereft of serenity. Its leader was lost… taken, its future unsure. She knew amongst a few… why.

Commodore Faro let go.

She sat alone at Thrawn’s desk in a muddled mess of emotions. She held her head in her hands and let her tears flow freely. She sobbed in mental anguish, finally releasing the stress of her precarious position. She didn’t want this.

The spherical statue of a world flanked by two reptilian creatures stood behind her in the dim lighting of the suite. The Jedi Guardian mask that stood to her right on its stand upon the surface of the desk, observed her trembling form.

The carnage from the struggle between Vader and Thrawn remained strewn throughout the room. Smoke still rose even now from the shattered torso of a Sentinel Droid. Faro left it all there. She didn’t want to face the reality yet of what happened. She wasn’t ready to face her shame resulting from her inability to prevent what happened.

Faro trembled in fear not only for herself but for the crew of the *Chimaera* as well. Surely, they would all be watched from now on by Lord Vader. The burden of the responsibility of command coupled with that scrutiny was too much for her to handle right now.

*Faro must be careful to obey and fulfill her duty as the leader of the Chimaera.*

*But what of the Seventh Fleet? Who would take over…*

A low hum began to reverberate from the ceiling, followed by a soft, blue glow emanating throughout the suite. However, Faro didn’t notice as her hands covered her face in sorrow. She continued her internal battle to constrain her burdens within but was clearly failing to do so.

“Commodore Faro,” Thrawn said. His voice was melancholic and smooth.

Faro immediately stopped breathing and whipped her head up. Her bloodshot and overflowing eyes found the life-size form of Grand Admiral Thrawn shrouded in blue light looking back at her in the middle of the suite. He was standing straight and unyielding in his pristinely white uniform, his hands behind his back.

It was like seeing a ghost.

Her heart raced as she quickly stood up, panicked, and took a deep breath. In the same motion, her feet instinctively stepped backward, and Faro tripped on her chair. Her left hand caught herself on the back of the chair while her right quickly tried to erase the tears and emotion from her face.
“Grand Admiral Thrawn! What…,” Faro said. But Thrawn continued in his smooth voice.

“I apologize if this comes as a surprise to you, for the circumstances that would allow this recording to be delivered and released mean that— “

Thrawn paused, and his eyes narrowed. He pursed his lips as if he were reluctant to continue. Faro’s heart dropped and broke again as a small hope was shattered within. She realized this was a recording and not a live transmission. Her breath stuttered with emotion and she stopped wiping away the tears from her face.

Thrawn’s crimson eyes seemed to glisten in the holo-recording as he continued. His voice was more hushed than before.

“This message means that I… have failed my mission… and regardless of the finality of whatever fate has befallen me, I am otherwise unable to perform my duties as Grand Admiral aboard the Chimaera.”

Faro’s eyes widened as they slowly overflowed. Tears sluggishly trailed down her cheeks. Thrawn looked down.

“I hold hope that I needlessly prepare this message, but I would be foolish not to do so. I am not able to see like I once was capable.”

Thrawn’s eyes rose back up and glinted with a melancholy wisdom.

“I have had other messages prepared for you in the past, but I find myself preparing yet another should something unseen befall my fate after what we have discovered during our mission to Batuu and Mokivj. I record this message as we travel from the Unknown Region.”

Thrawn took a deep breath, as if considering his next words.

“Vader has grown suspicious of my loyalties; he has, in fact, directly challenged me of it.”

Faro’s memories flashed back to their mission in the Unknown Region. The faces of the Chiss children are distinctly etched into her mind as they held terror when they emerged, rescued, from the shuttle in the Chimaera’s hangar bay. And their relief when they saw Grand Admiral Thrawn walk to greet them…

She also remembered Thrawn and Vader standing alone at the command viewport many times, out of earshot of the rest of the crew, as Thrawn was always negotiating with Lord Vader. Vader and Thrawn had many meetings alone in Thrawn’s office. Did Vader threaten him then? Perhaps she never realized the danger through which Thrawn had to navigate for himself…

“My people are dying, Karyn.”

Faro recoiled. Thrawn’s eyes narrowed with sadness; the same sadness she recently saw upon him in-person. His voice swam with contained emotion.

“And I fear the fault lies with me that their time grows short. I have received reports even now that the Grysk have begun operations against them.”

Faro remembered the battle against the Grysk.
The battle against the Grysks raged outside the Chimaera’s command viewport. Explosions and laser fire beamed nearby as fighters danced among the battle.

Faro watched Thrawn for guidance and orders, but she suddenly became worried. He was unfocused and his face became suddenly rigid. Was he going to faint?

“Sir?” Faro asked tentatively.

“Yes, Commodore?”

“Sorry, sir,” Faro apologized. “The way you were looking out at Bogey One… are you all right sir?”

“I am,” Thrawn said. “I was pondering the problem of mixed loyalties, and the decisions one must sometimes make. Lieutenant Lomar hail the Grysks.”

The comm channel opened and Thrawn spoke in a language she couldn’t understand. Though Thrawn spoke it beautifully.

“End transmission,” he said in Basic.

“Sir?” Faro asked. “May I ask…”

“I gave my name and warned them to cease operations against us. The survivors of this battle may take the warning to heart. Their masters, unfortunately, will not.”

Faro now realized that Thrawn’s eyes were haunted in the memory. She wondered more about what exactly Thrawn said to the Grysks during that battle. Had he said something that endangered his people? And saved their own lives instead?

“All life in this galaxy is precious to me… but there are evil things in this galaxy Commodore. Things far more evil than what the Empire labels upon the insurgents and pockets of rebellion in this galaxy. I have experienced some, while others are only rumor.”

Faro was shocked on instinct at his words. Was he implying the Empire was wrong? But then she thought of Lord Vader and what the Dark Lord did… perhaps she should examine the galaxy a little more closely.

A weary anger shimmered in Thrawn’s eyes, masking the sadness. His voice held a clipped edge.

“The Grysks are one of those threats… but they are merely a branch toward another. At the expense of my own people, I have given the Empire and the rest of the galaxy time to prepare for their invasion… Though I fear my warning to Lord Vader will not be headed, or even passed on to the Emperor at all.

"I held the hope once that this galaxy could be united and confront those threats together in strength.”

Thrawn shook his head and paused. He smirked after a moment and looked up again. What is he thinking? I wish I could speak to him now…

“As time grows short, I wonder that it might be Lord Vader or even the Emperor himself that may cause this message to be released to you Commodore Faro. Perhaps not; perhaps an accident or…”
battle has caused this, but... I may be required to choose once more between my people and the Empire, and I’m not so sure I will be able to make a strategic move that serves both in the future.

“There is only so much I can say here.” Thrawn huffed out a bitter breath. “Time is short. In fact, there is something I think I must see before our return to Lothal. If it is safe, I will tell you of it.”

Faro’s face scrunched with sadness. She walked forward around the front of the desk to stand closer to his holographic image. As she rounded the front of the desk, she noticed his left thumb rubbing his right wrist. Faro recognized his habit, and her heart dropped further in sorrow.

She sat on the surface of the desk, supporting herself in front of the unmoving image of her Grand Admiral. Were it not for the blue hue, she could trick herself into believing that he was alright, healthy and standing before her now. She wiped at her face and left a fist covering her mouth as she suppressed the full measure of her grief.

Thrawn’s eyes glimmered with a familiar sadness.

“I’m proud of you Karyn,” Thrawn said. He paused and lowered his chin. “I hope that whatever has befallen us, and ended our time together, will not linger upon your conscience… that it will pass on… and not leave its burden upon you. The Chimaera and her crew will follow you. I entrust them to you and am comforted that it is you that lead them now.

“You will be alright. Do what you must to survive.”

Thrawn took in a deep breath and paused. But he let out the breath and lowered his gaze to the side as if he had just decided against saying something. He blinked slowly and looked up once again.

“It’s been many years since I’ve seen another member of my people… to see those children, frightened and afraid… nearly taken from me— my people— “ Thrawn clinched his eyes shut and lowered his head. He furrowed his brow, huffing a breath, and visibly swallowed. Willing a memory away from his past? Faro had seen that same reaction on battle-ridden soldiers before…

“Do what you must to survive, Karyn,” Thrawn said quietly. He slowly raised his head and opened his eyes.

He nodded and smiled slightly even though his eyes spoke sorrow.

“You’ll be alright.”

Thrawn stared for a moment longer, and then his holo-image fizzled away.

“No...” Faro cried, reaching forward into the air. Her balance was unprepared though, and she fell to her knees. Her right hand was cut upon razor sharp shards of plastoid and metallic debris as she tried to stop her fall. Faro hissed with a sob, as she yanked it to her chest. She cradled it with her left hand, covering the blood flowing from her palm. Blood oozed down her arm and dropped over her uniform and onto the floor.

“Ow,” she murmured in pain, her tears beginning to flow like an unbroken stream. Perhaps the pain helped release her sorrow. She curled inward upon herself, gripping her injured hand tightly, and sobs wracked her body.

Faro knelt alone in her anguish upon the metallic floor, surrounded by the destruction of Vader’s wrath.

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The *Chimaera*'s medical bay was pearly white and bright. It was in stark contrast to the dark and haunted thoughts swirling within the mind of its Chief Medical Officer. Zahara stood over a bed in the triage entrance lobby, as if in a frenzied trance, her ECM-598 Medical Backpack laid open upon it. The pack's medical contents were strewn in a messy pile across the bed's surface. She buried herself into the task of organizing everything again, making it *new*, and replacing items... *replacing items used on her Grand Admiral*.

*No, don't think about it- Focus on the task-*

*Laser scalpel... here- Blood pressure regulator... here- Anti-venom... here- Bandages... here-*

Her hands reached with practiced purpose, efficiently shoving items into place where they were *meant* to be. The medical staff gave her space, recognizing her stress. They had never seen her like this before. No one spoke to her since she returned from the hangar bay. *Since she abandoned her Grand Admiral*...

*Oxygen mask... FLASH-*

*Labored breathing- Gagging- Thrawn's face in her grasp- Pulse weak-*

"*Let the machine breathe for you, sir*"-

*Shoulders heaving- "It's alright..."-*

*Tape ripping- Crimson eyes filled with pain-*

*VADER'S MASK-*

Zahara fell away from the flashback with a muffled gasp and staggered to her right into a metal table. The table fell over with a loud crash, and medical instruments clanged across the floor. The medical bay stopped and fell into a crisp silence, everyone's attention redirected toward the noise.

Zahara was frozen. She couldn't look away from the oxygen mask in her hands. She was locked in a stalemate with her own mind, her breathing heavy and rapid. The mask's shape became distorted in her increasingly strained grasp.

White, armored hands slowly appeared and moved to cover her own. They hesitated expecting a reaction but tenderly enveloped her hands. Zahara flinched but otherwise didn't move, her anxiety and internal focus unchanged. They were gentle hands despite being armored and lightly increased their pressure.

"*Hey...*" The voice was soft and timid, trying not to scare her. The fingers of the white, armored hands slowly curled a little more around her own hands and squeezed twice.

Zahara's eyebrows raised, and her pupils focused, coming back to the present. She took in a stuttered breath and held it. Her hands started to shake and released their tension on the oxygen mask.

"*Zahara... hey...*" The voice was quieter than before, though filled with the same concern.
Zahara exhaled slightly and flicked her eyes up. She met the worried and tender eyes of Stormtrooper Commander Ayer.

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Chapter End Notes

"Dense fog was flying along everywhere. I had my hands cupped around a tiny light which threatened to go out at any moment... I looked back... my own shadow on the swirling mists, brought into being by the little light I was carrying."

—Memories, Dreams, Reflections by Carl Jung

A Brocken Spectre
A Governor

Chapter Summary

“Easy is the path to wisdom for those not blinded by ego.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Arihnda needed a drink. Her feet carried her lithe form briskly along a main commerce street of Lothal’s Capital City. Speeders passed by as merchants called out to the crowds advertising their stock for the day. She was a bit on edge walking among the people, but no one recognized her. She made sure if it.

Her Imperial uniform was set aside today for the dress of a commoner. Well, a wealthy commoner, but one that wouldn’t attract unusual attention these days. With the Empire taking interest in Lothal’s mining operations in the recent past, the locals had gotten used to seeing a handful of wealthy business magnates every now and then, visiting from worlds like Coruscant wanting a piece of assumed cashflow.

But the Empire took everything. Rightfully so, Arihnda thought. She believed with great conviction that the Empire’s rule was necessary, especially among the lawlessness and squalor in the Outer Rim. She would help ensure that order and usher in the enlightenment of her place of origin.

Even so, Imperial presence didn’t stop the business magnates from trying to make a profit. Though much of that had slowed down in the last month as the Empire sequestered control over rising insurgency. In fact, all traffic would soon stop once Grand Admiral Thrawn and his Seventh Fleet returned in orbit above the planet.

Arihnda let out an angry huff. She stopped at a busy intersection and shoved her hands in her coat pockets, pulling the lavender colored coat more around herself. She could clasp it closed, but Arihnda felt particularly stubborn today. She wore long black leggings and a black turtleneck with a blue stripe running up the center toward her neck, but it wasn’t quite enough for the breeze that flowed between the buildings. She shivered and lowered her chin toward her chest, instinctively trying to shield her face behind her coat’s collar but was failing.

Her eyes began to water. She blinked faster and let out another frustrated breath. She wasn’t happy.

Speeders zoomed by in front of her and voices intermingled with the noise as people joined at the intersection, waiting to cross the street as well. But it was just noise to Arihnda. Her mind was spinning, constantly re-thinking the politics of the last few days. No one was giving her any answers.

Thrawn.

Grand Admiral Thrawn fought the insurgents at the Battle of Atollon some time ago and then swiftly left on another mission after his debriefing on Coruscant. The entirety of the Lothal Sector was just abandoned, and Arihnda was left to hold the pieces together with Imperial officers that oozed the incompetence of a lost gundark.
Grand Moff Tarkin was expertly avoiding answering her questions as well. *Grand Admiral Thrawn is unavailable in this present time. He is on an urgent mission ordered by the Emperor himself. You need to be patient Miss Pryce.*

Miss Pryce…

How long would he be gone? What about the security of the Lothal Sector? How many insurgents are present and active after Atollon? Arihnda had specifically requested to Grand Moff Tarkin that Thrawn and his Seventh Fleet be assigned here in the first place. Now she felt disrespected and was being treated and ordered around like a petty subordinate.

This whole situation reeked of squandered politics and she was sure Thrawn was in the middle of it. He always was naïve when it came to politics. If only she knew what his mission was, maybe she could plan ahead.

They couldn’t just leave. Politics. Arihnda needed a new strategy, but she couldn’t see an alternative at the moment. That’s why she stepped away today, to think. *She really needed a drink.*

A small, wet sneeze erupted low to Arihnda’s left. She startled, looked down and found a tiny female Twi’lek child rapidly rubbing her nose. Her skin was a deep orange covered by a simple knitted dress. A young Twi'lek boy she assumed to be her brother had his arm around her shoulders and was leaning forward around his sister, staring up with wide, green eyes at Arihnda. His clothes were similarly made to his sister’s and filthy with dirt and grime. He smiled as his gaze was filled with childlike awe.

Arihnda scowled. That’s all she needed was to get sick in the midst of everything she was having to deal with. A lithe voice with a heavy Rylothian accent sounded behind them.

“Please don’t mind my children miss,” a female Twi'lek said. “My son’s favorite color is purple.”

Miss…

Arihnda looked at her, her scowl mixed with confusion. The mother must have recognized Arihnda’s confusion and stepped forward, herding around her two children. Her skin was a similar mahogany-orange tint with blue stripes weaving down her lekku. She smiled at Arihnda and chuckled.

“Your coat,” the Twi’lek mother said motioning with her head. “It’s very beautiful.”

Her daughter sniffled loudly.

Arihnda just stared, calculating. Part of her was disgusted and wanted to get away from the germs, but she was surprised to be directly addressed by anyone on the street. She hoped the mother wouldn’t recognize her. By her dress though, Arihnda was revealed to be just another wealthy off-worlder, not their Imperial Governor. No one expected to see their governor alone on the street. *She was the perfect disguise.*

A speaker for the intersection chimed, and it was clear to cross the street. People started walking, and the mother’s smile faded as Arihnda didn’t move. Arihnda’s mouth downturned as she glanced over the Twi’leks one last time. She groaned and briskly walked forward, returning to her journey.

Arihnda turned and walked down a side street that cut through a busy market. On the other side was a cantina. She could see the entrance.

It was so loud. So many people were bartering prices. One vendor in particular was in a heated
argument, debating the value of his handcrafted leather pouch.

Arihnda weaved around the makeshift market stands and bushels of excess supply stock. Some of the lids were skewed on their side, revealing rare and coveted meiloorun fruit within. Part of her wanted to stop and pick up a handful to take back with her to her office, but then she didn’t feel like watching over them in the cantina. Or carrying them along her journey back… She made a mental note and would order her assistant to make a “supply run” to the market later today.

The cantina was like an oasis apart from the chaos of the market outside. It wasn’t horribly busy but it had just enough people that Arihnda felt confident enough to be able to blend in and not be noticed. HoloNet projectors throughout the room and vidscreens in the center above the main bar displayed a rotating emblem of the Empire, but typical cantina music played over the speakers. It was an odd combination.

Arihnda slowly made her way through the front dining area, and her eyes discreetly scanned the patrons as she passed tables. Some of them hushed as she walked by and continued as she gained distance from them again. She chose to sit at a tall stool at the bar that gave her privacy but still offered a clear view of the cantina entrance.

Arihnda took a deep breath and surveyed the room again. The music was so jovial. She could feel her muscles relaxing.

“So what can I do fer ya t’day miss,” a burly voice sounded.

Miss.

Arihnda bristled, and her muscles immediately tensed, as she whipped her head toward the voice. She found the face of the scruffy human male bartender. He was stereotypically cleaning a glass as he looked at her. Arihnda didn’t know if she wanted to vehemently scream at him for being the next person to call her “miss” instead of governor, or chuckle at the irony. Then a large part her wanted to start crying, but she was too dignified for that to start. She was so stressed…

“Oh ho ho,” the bartender laughed. He gently placed the glass down, flung his towel over his shoulder, and leaned on the bar with both hands. He was eye level with Arihnda, considering her gaze for a slightly uncomfortable beat, unfazed by her guile. If he knew who she really was maybe he wouldn’t be so courageous, Arihnda thought.

He recognized all of those emotions displayed on Arihnda’s face in a flash and knew the sum of their parts. His experience as a bartender knew just what she needed. “Someone needs something with a little extra in it I see. Let me see what I can cook up.”

Arihnda was a bit stunned as he nonchalantly pushed himself up, winked, pointed, and began gathering bottles behind him. Three bottles of various sizes were placed with a soft clink on the bar surface. Arihnda followed his every movement like she was assessing a newly assigned officer to her command.

He started humming along to the tune of the music as he bent down to gather more supplies. Arihnda rolled her eyes. She crossed her legs, planted an elbow on the bar surface and rested her chin in the palm of her hand. She watched him with a pouty, yet somewhat grateful, annoyance. She huffed a deep breath.

Even though he couldn’t see her, the bartender knew the noise came from Arihnda.

“There ya go, let it out,” the bartender said with hearty gusto.
A mixer and a small box of starfruit appeared on the bar surface in front of Arihnda. She eyed the fruit and furrowed her brow.

“Blueberries,” Arihnda said. The bartender rose and Arihnda flicked her gaze toward him, refusing to move her chin from her palm, and watched him rise.

“Huh?”

“Blueberries. I would prefer blueberries.”

He eyed her as if he was about to argue with her about messing up his *perfectly designed* cocktail. But then Arihnda released her chin, lowered her arm to the bar surface, and gave him an exasperated look.

He chuckled.

“Yes ma’am,” the bartender lilted as he disappeared beneath the bar once again. Clangs and shuffling sounded below as he searched through his wares for blueberries.

Arihnda took in a deep breath and mentally counted to five. With the bartender below the counter however, she noticed something. Or *someone*.

A clean shaved man that just spoke the essence of military was sitting in a booth by himself across the room from her. She released her breath and briefly caught his eyes before he quickly redirected his gaze back down to his drink. Two fingers swirled around the lip of the glass while his other hand moved casually to wipe at his face and mouth.

But Arihnda recognized what he was doing. He not doubt held a communicator. Sloppy…

Before she could assess him more, the bartender rose and blocked her view. Arihnda blinked rapidly and redirected her attention. She shifted in her seat, trying to play off her surprise by scooting closer to the bar counter.

The bartender grabbed the box of starfruit and replaced it with a box of blueberries. He seemed to notice the subtle change in her demeanor but didn’t say anything as he turned to the three bottles.

He began pouring the tonics into the mixer and glanced in the direction Arihnda was looking. He hummed.

“He give you any trouble?” he said as he tossed some blueberries into the drink mixture.

“What?”

The bartender cued the mixer, and a raging torrent emitted from the little machine. He released his hand after a few seconds and leaned over the opening of the mixer. His examination of the liquid’s consistency must have proved inadequate, for, when Arihnda opened her mouth to ask him again what he meant, she was interrupted by another roar. She deflated and rested her chin in her hand again.

The raging torrent eventually ceased, and he poured the mixture smoothly into a glass. He displayed a winning smile at her while he poured.

“That man behind me, in the booth,” the bartender said. He placed the glass down in front of Arihnda. “He give you any trouble?”
Arihnda made a point not to look in that direction. “No,” she said as she grabbed for the glass.

The bartender chuckled again and leaned down to her eye level. “You don’t sound so sure.”

Arihnda paused, glass hovering in the air as it was interrupted on its path. She eyed the bartender. Her gaze narrowed and she took in a deep breath as if she were going to say something.

Arihnda rolled her eyes and took a swig from her drink.

“Alright alright,” the bartender said. He turned to the three bottles and placed them back in their proper place on the shelves behind him. “So what brought you in here today? Especially in such a state.”

Arihnda quite liked the cocktail. It was refreshing and she found herself releasing stress with each sip. She placed the glass down and grabbed a handful of blueberries. She rolled them around in her grasp like they were dice as she considered how to respond.

“Respect,” Arihnda responded. Her hand stopped and she ate a few of the berries. “Or… a lack of it. At work.”

She didn’t see the harm in speaking in generalities. The bartender grabbed his towel from his shoulder and started cleaning the bar surface.

“Ah I see,” the bartender said. “Needed some time away. How’s the drink?”

Arihnda took another sip. “It’s quite good actually.”

“You say that as if you were expecting some sort of diluted emerald wine.”

“If you experienced what I have over the last few days, you would’ve too.”

The bartender chuckled once again. His laugh was beginning to grow on Arihnda. “Well, I put the rest in the chiller. Let me know if you want a refill.”

The cantina music abruptly cut off while he was speaking to be replaced by an Imperial HoloNewsNet jingle. The lights around them slightly dimmed. Arihnda looked up mid sip to the holoprojectors and saw the emblem of the Empire pulse red as it rotated. Everyone in the cantina paused and stopped talking.

“Well that hasn’t happened in a while,” the bartender muttered.

Arihnda couldn’t escape even for a moment. She swigged the remainder of her glass and clanked it down. “Refill please.”

The bartender emitted concern as he reached for the cocktail mixture in the chiller. He quickly swept troubled eyes over the entire cantina as he held the mixer cup, seeming to assess the demeanor of the patrons. Arihnda wondered if he expected trouble. He turned toward Arihnda and glanced at her, seemingly leaving her assessment for last, as he reached for her glass.

Arihnda crossed her arms on the bar surface and held her elbows, slightly hugging herself. She looked up to the vidscreens and resigned herself to viewing what should be an urgent or emergency-level Imperial broadcast. She recognized the protocol that took over the civilian systems.

“Citizens of the glorious Empire, I bring to you today news of a particularly dire nature,”
holojournalist Alton Kastle stated, with just the right amount of horror in his smooth voice. “Word has just been received that renowned military leader Grand Admiral Thrawn of the Imperial Navy’s Seventh Fleet has been gravely injured in an apparent assassination attempt aboard his own Imperial Star Destroyer.”

Arihnda stopped breathing. Images of a stoic Grand Admiral Thrawn and the ISD Chimaera flashed on the vidscreens. Hushed whispers and muted gasps echoed through the cantina, and Arihnda’s heart skipped a beat, blood pressure rising. Her hand unconsciously rose to her mouth in astonishment while her blue eyes grew wide.

This can’t be happening…

“What in blazes did they do,” the bartender whispered as he poured Arihnda’s drink.

“It is reported that sentinel droids stationed aboard the vessel ambushed Grand Admiral Thrawn and other officials during a high-level meeting, caught completely unawares,” holojournalist Alton Kastle continued with practiced emotion. “Witnesses state that the Grand Admiral selflessly fought the droids, preventing further injury to other leaders in the meeting. This is certainly keeping with the behavior of the highly decorated Grand Admiral.

“No word yet on the means to which the sentinel droids were reprogrammed or how widespread this hostile act is through out the Imperial Navy. As a precaution, all sentinel droids have been pulled from duty for evaluation. Signatures from droids already evaluated point clearly to extremists found along the Outer Rim. As such, the remainder of Grand Admiral Thrawn’s Seventh Fleet is being dispatched to begin operations to quell this small group and restore order. Expect delays as Imperial blockades are placed throughout the region. The Empire apologizes for this inconvenience in travel but rest assured that this is for your safety.”

A group of three stormtroopers entered the cantina, but no one gave notice as everyone was transfixed to the HoloNet report. Arihnda noticed however. One of the stormtroopers pointed at her and they slowly began their advance through the front dining area.

“Reports do not state the nature of his injuries..., though one can assume after having read the specs for Imperial Sentinel Droids… But Grand Admiral Thrawn is being transported aboard the ISD Devastator with haste to medical facilities on Coruscant. We wish for his recovery. Rest assured that the glorious Empire will not allow this terror to spread. The HoloNet will continue to follow this shocking and developing story.”

The lights returned to their preset haze and the cantina music abruptly began again as if nothing had interrupted it. Arihnda felt numb, though part of that could already be the cocktail. It was such a surreal moment. It was the bartender’s turn to let out a deep breath, and everyone noticed the stormtroopers now.

Arihnda grabbed the cocktail glass and took a big gulp as they approached. She scowled at the man in the booth across the room from her as she swallowed and clinked the glass swiftly back on the bar. Her blue eyes were full of flames. Tarkin had her followed.

The stormtroopers stopped beside her at the bar, making the bartender pale.

“Governor Pryce you need to come with us,” a stormtrooper said. “A speeder awaits us outside. It’s urgent.”

“No doubt,” Arihnda said as she looked at her glass. Her eyes then flicked up to the bartender. His eyes were surprised, but she was impressed by his demeanor.
She moved to get up.

“Governor,” the bartender said in goodbye.

Arihnda looked at him as she swiped her hands over her coat. She paused, straightened her shoulders and clasped her coat closed while watching him. Her expression softened but gave no other indication of communication.

She faced the stormtroopers and transformed into an Imperial Governor. “Lead the way.”

“Aye ma’am,” the stormtroopers replied.

One lead the way out while the other two stormtroopers covered her from behind. Patrons in the cantina now knew who she was. Arihnda found suspicious and wary eyes as she followed the stormtroopers out.

The jovial cantina music was snuffed out as the speeder’s doors closed around her.

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“There is satisfaction in defeating an enemy. But one must never allow oneself to become complacent... A warrior may forget that even the task of identifying the enemy can be difficult. And the cost of that failure can lead to catastrophe.”

Chapter End Notes

*Hello, author here! *waves awkwardly* If you want to see a canon picture of Arihnda's outfit, [Click Here](#) to see a few pictures from her appearance in the Thrawn comic. If you don’t want to that's okay too! That's part of the joy of writing, paving a path that enables you to envision your own environment and theories!*
Chapter Summary

"If you strike my voice down, know that a chorus of thousands shall rise up in its place." —Senator Padmé Amidala

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hera pulled back on the throttle and eased the Ghost out of hyperspace and into a comfortable drift among a cluster of asteroids. The asteroids were each uniquely shaped and softly tumbling in their orbit around a distant blue star. They would provide cover should the Imperial Cruiser and its squadron of Tie Fighters choose to pursue.

Though Hera doubted their ability to do so, it felt especially important to make sure they weren’t followed, considering the distress call prompted a diversion from Yavin IV.

The Ghost’s engines powered down with a soft hum. On scanners they would look just like another space rock drifting along its path around the star.

Hera leaned back in her pilot’s seat and soaked in the silence that followed the jump. Moments of stillness like this were rare, and she had a feeling things were about to change for everyone aboard the Ghost.

And she needed a breath of calm after that space battle. Though some fights lasted only briefly, they would replay over and over in her mind, sometimes days or even longer afterward depending on the event. Even if some didn’t come to remembrance willingly, Hera wanted to learn from them all the same. To become a better pilot, a better protector. She couldn’t lose her family.

Childhood memories of Ryloth came forward.

The Clone War. Explosions. Smoke.

Father’s stoic voice, rallying civilians to battle.

Radio chatter. Cries for help—

Mother clutching her close in the night as weighted boots march by outside.

Be quiet... Don’t make a sound...

Blaster-fire. War. War. War.

Brother—

WAR—

“It’s all you’ve ever known isn’t it? ... You were forged by it...”
Hera noticed her hands were trembling. She stretched her fingers, testing the adrenaline inside them. The tremors slowly subsided with each pulse and stretch.

Hera’s eyes followed what she knew to be the voice of her friend and looked down to her right. Chopper had made his way to her and was observing her, angled slightly so that his photoreceptors were focused on her face. Chopper probably knew more than anyone else aboard the Ghost about what troubled her thoughts.

“Bwaah bwirr wah?” Chopper beeped quietly.

Hera tried to give him a reassuring look and tentatively placed her right hand on his head. “Yeah Chop, I’m okay now.”

Hera looked back outside, beyond the cockpit viewport, and Chopper seemingly followed her gaze.

“Thanks,” Hera whispered.

“Bwhirrrr…” Chopper hummed melodically.

The colors of space were beautiful here. Vibrant blue light from the distant star reflected from the asteroids, radiating its splendor toward the rebel ship as if in an excited greeting. The colorful light danced across the Ghost’s viewport and painted Chopper’s metallic torso and Hera’s face with speckled rainbows.

The sight made Hera smile.

“Hera!?” Sabine’s voice echoed from the lounge, followed by load shuffling and grunts.

Hera flinched toward the noise. As if trying to grasp the last moments of serenity before they flew away, her hand instinctively clinched shut on top of Chopper’s head.

Chopper looked at Hera and warbled gently at her. “Whhaa wha-aaaa whhha ah.”

“I know.”

Hera smiled thinly, her eyes tired but hopeful. She regarded Chopper for another quick second and then turned her attention to the controls in front of her. A chime sounded as she flipped switches on the pilot’s console.

“I’ll be right there Sabine,” she yelled toward the lounge. “I need to let Command know we won’t make our schedule.”

The holo-projector whirred to life, a shimmering blue light emitting from the device as it waited for input. Practiced hands punched in a code sequence as Hera focused.

“Okay…,” Sabine muffled in return.

Metallic footfalls sounded as someone barreled into the cockpit. Chopper rotated his head and found Zeb in the doorway out of breath.

“We need you Hera,” Zeb said.
“I know I’ll be just a second—”

“You’re the one with the most medical experience and—”

Hera’s eyes went wide, and she whipped her attention toward him. “Whoa what? Someone’s hurt?”

Zeb scratched the back of his head and acquiesced, “Well yeah… our new—”

“Whaaa whirrahh,” Chopper warbled in warning.

“Zeb…,” Hera said worried. “I didn’t know anyone was—”

“What’s happened Captain Syndulla?”

Hera and Zeb turned toward the holo-projector and found a concerned Senator Mon Mothma wrapped in blue light. Her stance was tense, and her eyes moved between Zeb, Chopper and finally rested upon Hera. Leadership emitted from her even through the small holo-projector, but also trepidation of what news she might receive.

“Senator Mon Mothma,” Hera hesitated turning her attention to the Rebel leader.

“We didn’t expect you for at least another hour Captain,” Mon Mothma said. Worry furrowed across her brow. “Has… something happened?”

Hera unconsciously squeezed her right hand. Zeb suddenly felt out of place, but he saw Hera’s sudden hesitation.

“Just a little detour ma’am,” Zeb said with a timid smile. “Picked up someone who needs a bit of help.”

“Ah, yes…,” Hera said, taking a deep breath. She now realized it was whoever they picked up on the Imperial Shuttle that was injured and not a family member on the Ghost. She regained her measured voice. “We won’t be making our scheduled arrival back to base Senator. We may have discovered something vital.”

Mon Mothma’s eyes glinted. “What can you tell me?”

“We picked up a distress call on the way back to base; investigated the area, and picked someone up. We think this might be related to Grand Admiral Thrawn.”

Mon Mothma was surprised and skeptical. “Grand Admiral Thrawn? How so?”

“The distress call identified with his Imperial authorization.”

“Quite bold,” Mon Mothma whispered.

“It also contained encryption ciphers used specifically by my father on Ryloth during the Clone War, implying it was directed to us specifically…”

Zeb’s eyes widened as he regarded Hera while Mon Mothma furrowed her brow, her eyes intense. She stilled briefly as if trying to quickly put a puzzle together in her mind.

“The Empire knows of Ryloth’s communication techniques?” Mon Mothma cautiously asked.

“No I don’t think it would be possible Senator,” Hera said. “The ciphers used are old and haven’t
been used for a long time. Besides, the Empire wasn’t prepared for our escape from the palace for example.

“I think...,” Hera paused, amazed at the theory echoing within her mind. Her eyes were intense though as she regarded Senator Mon Mothma’s own wise reflection. “I think this was a way of getting a message to us. But we require more time to investigate.”

“A message?”

“Yes Senator,” Hera said, placing a hand on Chopper again.

Mon Mothma took a moment to consider the information thrown at her. This certainly was unexpected. Her eyes spoke of a burdened caution. “Find out what you can Captain. But be careful.”

“We’ll report back once able Senator,” Hera said, pressing a button sequence. Mon Mothma shimmered away as Hera ended the holo-call.

Sabine patted a damp washcloth to Rukh’s forehead. Rukh was unconscious and was laid down on the coach in the Ghost’s lounge. Ezra walked in from his bunk.

“Found these,” Ezra said, carrying a pillow and blanket. They suspected Rukh had broken bones by the way he was breathing and wanted to make him as comfortable as possible. A pressure bandage was already wrapped around his torso and a cloth sling was secured to his right arm.

Ezra placed the blanket over Rukh and then gently moved to lift Rukh’s head and shoulders. Sabine reached for the pillow as Ezra held him and placed the pillow underneath.

Ezra huffed a playful but concerned breath. “Heavier then he looks.”

Sabine raised an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t tell him that.”

“Definitely don’t tell him that,” Zeb said as he entered the lounge, crossing his arms and stopping near the door as if he didn’t want to get too close. Hera rounded the corner behind him, concern laced upon her face.

“How’s he doing?” Hera said.

She scanned Rukh’s form as she walked forward, and knelt between Sabine and Ezra. She placed a hand gently on Rukh’s face as she examined him. He felt cold to the touch.

“Not sure really,” Sabine said, adjusting the blanket to cover his feet and tucking them in as if placing Rukh within a protective cocoon. Chopper rolled into the lounge, stopping next to Zeb, observing in silence.

“He seemed in pain on the shuttle,” Ezra said as he sat down on the couch, leaning forward on his thighs. He was wringing his hands together as he looked at Rukh. Sabine saw that his blue eyes were unfocused, perhaps remembering his and Kanan’s time on the shuttle.

“Did he say anything about what happened to him?” Hera asked.

Ezra sat up straight and took a deep breath. “No, just that his name’s Rukh and— oh!” Ezra reached into a back pocket and grabbed the datachip. He held it up before him, displaying it to
everyone in the room. “Rukh said to give this to Chopper… he said it would explain everything.”

If she ignored the subtle insignia of the Empire in the corner, it looked like an otherwise ordinary datachip to Hera. It’s clear transparency revealed wires and blocks of technology inside of its rectangular form that no doubt held vital information within. She was nervous about it though.

She pursed her lips and scrunched her forehead in doubt as she considered the small datachip.

“I’m worried about giving that to Chopper, Ezra,” she said. “I know there may be important information on it, but it could also be dangerous for him. We had a close call once before with Chop, and I don’t want to go through that again…”

“He seemed pretty insistent on it,” Ezra said, turning his attention to Rukh. He lowered his voice. “He went through a lot to get here.”

“Hera.”

Everyone turned to see Kanan standing on the opposite side of the lounge, having climbed back down from the Phantom to retrieve a pack. Ezra smiled as a spark of joy ran through him, remembering what they found. Kanan reached gently into the pack he held, the sound of wooden blocks clinking together as he grabbed the priceless totem within.

Hera’s eyes immediately went wide and glistened with emotion as Kanan revealed and held the history of her family’s ancestry in his hand. Everything seemed to quiet around her. She let out a shaky breath and slowly stood, unsure of the sturdiness of her feet.

“My Kalikori,” Hera whispered in amazement.

The lounge was a hushed silence as Hera took slow, measured steps toward Kanan. Her footsteps echoed softly off the metallic floor. She had risked so much to retrieve the Kalikori once before, and she thought she had lost it forever.

“Perhaps… a gesture of good faith,” Kanan said quietly and carefully. Hera stopped in front of him, amazed at the heirloom in his hand. Her breathing was heavy now, holding back emotion. She rose her head tentatively and met Kanan’s mask with afraid and glistening childlike eyes of her own.

Kanan responded as if he saw her looking at him. Sensing her trepidation, he smiled and held the Kalikori out more toward her. Hera looked down at it once again and examined every part of it before slowly reaching her own shaking hands out toward it.

It was like being reunited with an echo of her past that spoke comfort and strength to her. The stories and memories of which the totem spoke were precious. Hera’s hands hesitantly wrapped around her family heirloom as if afraid it would suddenly vanish should she dare to retrieve it once again.

Hera firmly grasped it finally, taking it fully from Kanan, and finally held it within her hands. She gently stroked a hand over the wooden surfaces, feeling the textured carvings marked into the connected blocks by the hands of her ancestors that came before her.

She couldn’t help but notice it had been well cared for and shined as if it had been polished. Tears escaped from her eyes.

“My Kalikori...,” Hera said again with heavy emotion.
She took in a shaky involuntary breath, making her slightly whimper. She quickly brought up a hand to her mouth in response, her eyebrows scrunching together and raising, eyes continually watering. Kanan quickly hugged her into a warm embrace.

Hera leaned into him, burying her face in his shoulder as memories of her childhood flooded through her mind once again. This time, even though war on Ryloth was a constant, her memories were now mixed with the warmth of her family, happy together despite what the Clone War threw at them.

Sabine and Ezra both smiled with emotion, and Zeb felt his own eyes water at the sight, holding himself tighter in his crossed arms.

A shaky voice croaked with a weak tenor from the couch, “He wanted it returned to you should this happen…”

Ezra startled and turned in his spot on the couch. “Rukh you’re awake!”

Kanan loosened his embrace, and Hera turned, wiping the emotion from her face as she breathed shakily. She found Rukh looking at her through glassy eyes as he lay on the couch.

“Should what happen?” Sabine asked.

“Please…,” Rukh said. Determined, he used his left arm to raise himself up from the pillow, grunting in pain. The blanket fell as he struggled to rise.

“Whoa whoa, be careful,” Ezra said, reaching out to help him. Sabine moved quickly to assist as well.

Despite the pain, Rukh swung his legs over, careful not to use his right arm, and sat up with the help of Ezra holding onto his left shoulder.

Sabine sat down where Rukh’s feet once were and readjusted the blanket around him. She then braced his back gently and helped settle his broken arm upon his lap.

Rukh clinched his eyes closed and steadied himself for a moment. “Please… the datachip is important… I will explain what happened after… it will help.”

Hera glanced down at her Kalikori and then looked at Rukh once more, calculating. There was a sad sincerity in Rukh’s eyes. Almost pleading.

“Okay,” Hera said.

She slowly moved toward Ezra and took the datachip from him, regarding it with concerned eyes once more. *That Imperial insignia*… Chopper seemed content though and rolled to the middle of the room. Were the situation not so serious, Zeb would have accused Chopper of putting on a falsely brave demeanor.

Hera knelt down before Chopper, holding her Kalikori in one hand and the datachip in the other, and stared into his photoreceptors. “You feel anything weird, you stop right away okay?”

“Bwah waaa ah bwaaa-a,” Chopper warbled.

“Sweet talker,” Zeb teased, as he followed Kanan around toward the couch to more easily see what Chopper would display.
Kanan touched a switch on the wall, dimming the lights. He stood against the wall, crossing his arms and hunched forward as he reached out with the Force. The Force felt tumultuous yet insistent as if it was crying to be heard, almost childlike and distant.

Zeb sat down on the couch, leaning forward. He and Rukh both regarded each other briefly with the eyes of one warrior to another. Respect was found there.

With a click, Hera inserted the datachip into Chopper’s receiver. She stepped back to stand with Kanan, and he placed a hand around her shoulders. He held her tight for support.

Chopper warbled a few beeps as he began to process the information on the chip.

Whirring and scrunching clicks emitted from Chopper’s little metallic frame. Hera remembered the old encryption ciphers from so long ago and realized he must be processing through them to unlock the data. They must be stored down deep into the little droid’s databanks. The wait felt like eternity.

She held the Kalikori tighter once the clicks stopped, and Chopper’s holographic emitter hummed as it spun itself up to life.

Chopper turned his head slightly right and rolled backward a bit as he positioned himself to focus the holo-images in the middle of the lounge.

Blue light shimmered and lit the room with a soft glow. What appeared to be coded data flashed suddenly, followed by quick images of what seemed to be star charts and blueprints. It was going so fast though. Garbled code seemed to be interspersed among it all.

“What’s happening Chop?” Hera asked.

Chopper emitted strained warbles.

“Corruption? Or too much data perhaps. Can you focus it?”

The data-stream stopped, leaving a blank blue light reflecting in the room.

“Look for a message…,” Rukh said, breathing heavy. “There should be a message…”

Chopper started whirring his processors again and then warbled smugly.

A life-size image of Grand Admiral Thrawn, in his white Imperial uniform with gold bars on his shoulders, bathed in blue light, suddenly flickered into existence in the middle of the room. Everyone flinched; even Chopper warbled with surprise.

“Whoa,” Ezra whispered. Hera leaned into Kanan more and held her Kalikori tight to her chest.

Rukh regarded his master with sorrow and let out a lingering breath of guilt. Sabine felt his ache as she supported his back.

Thrawn didn’t speak.

His crimson eyes were intense and considering, yet apprehensive, and his chest rose and fell with measured breaths. His back and shoulders were rigid, his right wrist clasped firmly in his left hand behind his back. His feet stood resolute underneath him inside their crisp black boots.

Thrawn breathed deeply, steeling himself for what must be said. Thrawn’s form spoke of the Imperial nature and rigidity required of his station, yet Ezra saw hesitation dance upon his brow.
“The winding path to peace,” Thrawn began, slowly and melodically. “Is always a worthy one, regardless of how many turns it takes.”

His voice held a gentle and quiet countenance as if he didn’t wish to frighten a child who was easily spooked. Kanan flinched though, earning a quick glance from Hera.

“A wise ambassador once said, it is our duty, and our responsibility, to preserve the lives of those around us,” Thrawn continued.

There was a flicker in Thrawn’s eyes, chipping at his Imperial rigidity. For a moment his eyes seemed to unfocus, and his gaze turned slightly to the side, as if facing a memory. His voice became almost wistful.

“She also beheld the light of thousands within her eyes, as she defended to me, that what drove her were individuals, people and honor.”

He lingered there in the memory for a moment. His eyes were almost haunted.

Tearing himself away from the memory, he quickly looked straight again. Hera recognized regret. Thrawn’s crimson eyes shined like sparkling glass as his mind returned.

“It is that same purpose under which I operate,” Thrawn said, his voice strong. “She knew that a chorus of thousands would rise up in its place should her voice be extinguished, and it is to a few within what I see as that rising chorus, for which this message is intended.

“Captain Hera Syndulla,” Thrawn said, pronouncing her name in proper Twi’leki as he did on Ryloth before. “I intend that this message be delivered to you and your Phoenix Squadron, and then passed along to what I see as your superiors, Senators Mon Mothma and Bail—”

He cut himself off and his face suddenly became rigid. Thrawn’s eyes flicked left and focused somewhere beyond him, the crimson orbs tracking something moving in the distance.

Everyone in the Ghost’s lounge held their breath as Thrawn furrowed his brow in subtle anger and slightly lowered his chin. Zeb noticed that he steeled himself as a warrior would before conflict.

The sound of a door whooshing open echoed faintly on the holo-recording, and metallic footfalls got louder as someone approached. The anger suddenly dissipated from Thrawn’s brow though and was replaced with concern as he rose his chin.

“Grand Admiral Thrawn,” a woman’s voice said, hesitation and subtle emotion clipping at her words. “I’m sorry to interrupt but I needed…”

The woman’s voice trailed off, unsure perhaps of what to say.

“Commodore Faro, what’s happened?” Thrawn said.

Hera thought he looked worried. The woman’s voice sounded almost scared like a daughter would be toward a father after having a nightmare. It made her reminisce to when she approached her own father as a young child during the night on Ryloth, sometimes hearing explosions in the distance.

“I know you didn’t want to be disturbed,” Faro said. Fear echoed in her voice. “But I need to speak to you about Lord Vader, sir. He…”

Thrawn’s eyes flinched narrow. The nightmare, Hera thought. Ezra’s eyes went wide at hearing Vader’s name, and he flicked his gaze over to Kanan. He saw Kanan’s head lowered as he listened,
his expression grim.

“The crew…,” Faro continued, audibly letting out a nervous breath. “I’m at an impasse, and I need your advice, sir.”

“Please, sit Commodore,” Thrawn said gesturing behind him. “And tell me what troubles you.”

The holo-recording became fuzzy as it tried to track his movement, and sound became distorted.

“Oh! You were recording, I’m so sorry Grand Admiral.”

“It is no matter,” Thrawn said. “I can continue the log…”

The holo fizzled away to plain blue light as Thrawn must have cut the recording.

Then a very different Grand Admiral Thrawn fizzled into existence. His head was turned down and to the side, immersed in his thoughts as his eyes were unfocused. The demeanor he carried spoke sadness and worry.

“I cannot express enough, the magnitude with which I speak,” Thrawn said quietly.

Thrawn slowly rose his head and looked straight, his crimson eyes glistening with emotion that was unusual for the Ghost crew to see. He looked burdened with responsibility. Hera recognized that same look on Mon Mothma a short moment earlier.

“My people are dying… I must act quickly, and that comes with great risk,” Thrawn continued. “You must know, while I wear the uniform of the Empire, I have always served the causes of the Chiss Ascendancy. My people are my mission, and my mission comes first.

“There are evil things in this galaxy, far more evil than the Empire. I once held hope that alliances could be established and held a vision of a galaxy united against that evil… But no longer…”

Thrawn paused and looked down, taking a deep breath. His left thumb rubbed his right wrist as he did so, and he was entrenched in his thoughts for a moment. The muscles weaving upon his forehead tensed, and he pursed his lips.

“The delivery of this message implies I have failed, and am no longer able to act,” Thrawn whispered. “There is so much I would say.”

Rukh held his head low, unable to look at his master any longer. Guilt coursed through his veins. Sabine looked at him, feeling him tense, and saw the emotion on his features. Her eyebrows rose in sympathy and she gently squeezed his leg in support. Rukh just closed his eyes tight in the shame he felt.

“Attached to this message is information I deem useful to your Rebellion,” Thrawn said. He rose is head, facing straight once again, and took a breath. “Please understand that everything I did, I did for the greater good of the galaxy, and with the intent of preserving all lives that were around me…” His head nodded and eyes narrowed. “…including yours.”

Kanan rubbed his chin in thought while he reached out to the Force for guidance. It was still pleading.

Thrawn suddenly straightened, rising his chin with a show of authority and respect, though his crimson eyes betrayed the emotion he was holding back.
“Rukh,” Thrawn said. “If you are present for this message, please listen.”

Thrawn paused, steeling himself, and Rukh looked up at his holo-image, grimacing with apprehensive sorrow.

“Ch'ah tovun'csivci csah vah cat veo raszi,” Thrawn intoned in his language. It sounded like measured music.

“Nah…,” Rukh groaned sorrowfully.

“Vah viz k'ir na,” Thrawn continued melodically. “K'ir nah tir veo g'evipah lishah vah. Tir nen tisci can ch'acevasi.”

Rukh shook his head and took in a sorrowfully hitched breath. Sabine gently rubbed his back and Ezra locked eyes with her in shared sympathy. Rukh rubbed at his eyes with his left hand.

Thrawn steadied himself and visibly swallowed.

“I regret any pain I’ve caused to you all in the name of the Empire,” Thrawn said. “And I am regretful that we could not go beyond the relationship of adversaries and toward that of allies.”

Thrawn smirked slightly. “Perhaps, were fates different…” Thrawn blinked slowly after a moment of consideration and then nodded in finality. “May you gain hope.”

Grand Admiral Thrawn’s form fizzled away, leaving a stunned Phoenix Squadron in hushed silence.

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Chapter End Notes

"I walk alone
Beside myself
Nowhere to go"

- *Flesh and Bone* by Black Math

[Spotify Song Link](https://open.spotify.com/track/6uYF5zP1jOA5JU2gkOqQ9q?si=qyACF23zQKvYOGaHjL6csw)
A New Perspective

Chapter Summary

“As the conflict that decides our galaxy escalates, we cannot lose perspective on the value of life and the price of freedom.” —Bail Organa

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With stunned eyes, Ezra watched Grand Admiral Thrawn’s form fizzle away to be replaced by a void of blue nothingness. The empty light from Chopper’s holo-projector shimmered throughout the lounge. The droid rotated his head toward Hera but found her eyes wide and fixated upon her Kalikori.

The lounge was so quiet except for Rukh’s heavy breathing as he covered and rubbed at his eyes with his left hand. Even though Ezra couldn’t understand the melodic language that Thrawn spoke, he could still feel the echo of weight behind the words.

*Thrawn must have said goodbye,* Ezra thought.

“Rukh?” Ezra quietly prompted. He observed Rukh with sympathetic eyes.

Rukh released a hitched breath and lowered his left hand to his lap. His glossy eyes focused upon the floor as his brow spoke of sorrow and regret. He opened his mouth to speak but closed it again and shook his head.

Sabine lowered her head slightly to catch his eyes with her own. “Can you tell us what happened, Rukh?”

“And… what this all means?” Zeb asked, leaning forward on the couch.

“I… need a moment,” Rukh whispered, not yet ready to trust his voice should it completely betray his emotion.

“Okay,” Sabine whispered, rubbing his back again. She looked up and met the gaze of Ezra, Zeb and then Hera as if asking what to do.

Hera took a step forward. She absent-mindedly rubbed her Kalikori as she considered Rukh with a new gaze of understanding. Her green eyes no longer spoke with the suspicion of an adversary, but now beheld an ensemble of compassion.

She turned to Chopper.

“Chop, what else is on the datachip?” Hera said.

A low hum emitted from Chopper as his processors spun through the datachip. Once again, garbled code appeared on the holo-projection, and star charts filled with pixelated data and distorted images flashed quickly. It didn’t seem to make sense.
“Bwir bwir bhwahh…,” Chopper warbled quickly.

What appeared to be the most recent entry was paused on the projection. It was pixelated and formless, seemingly corrupted like the other entries.

“Corruption,” Hera mumbled.

“Yeah, surely those numbers are wrong,” Zeb said.

“I failed him again…,” Rukh whispered.

Hera found Rukh looking up at the holo-projection. He tentatively met her gaze after a moment.

“Rukh?” Hera said, moving toward the short table in front of the couch. She knelt and leaned forward, propping her forearms on the small table and placing her Kalikori upon its surface.

“What happened?” Hera softly prompted, looking up at him with knowing eyes as she rested on the floor.

Rukh briefly narrowed his eyes.

“I had to cut the data transfer early,” Rukh began slowly, swallowing visibly. His mind traveled back to the past. “Thrawn took the Chimaera to a project site. He was concerned about its threat to his people and his plans, and he needed to investigate.

“But Lord Vader intercepted us before…,” Rukh’s voice trailed off and he took a deep breath. Rukh looked to the side and blinked slowly. Kanan crossed his arms and grimaced as he reached out through the Force.

“Thrawn had the ship’s database purged,” Rukh continued. “I think to protect the crew… And everything scanned was left to a tablet he gave to Commodore Faro to deliver to his office.

“I think he knew—…” Rukh stopped himself before going down that train of thought. He took another deep breath, willing himself to focus on the facts of his memory.

“I was transferring the data from the tablet, but I had to stop and activate my cloak,” Rukh said, eyes unfocusing. “There wasn’t enough time before they arrived. Something… must have happened between Thrawn and Vader on the bridge.”

Rukh balled his hand into a fist upon his lap as he continued, his voice carrying subtle anger.

“Vader attacked without warning. He was able to see me, and I flew back into a wall… The next thing I remember is waking to the sounds of struggle.”

Rukh’s left fist began to shake, and his eyes widened in subtle horror. Everyone in the lounge was paralyzed at Rukh’s words and at his sudden change in demeanor from anger to horror. His voice became small.

“I awoke to… Vader clutching Thrawn by the throat. He couldn’t breath and Vader was too powerful… Thrawn was letting go…”

Labored gasps— Pained crimson eyes, fluttering closed—

Hands letting go—
“Hey…,” Ezra whispered.

Rukh flinched and came back from his memory. Ezra held Rukh’s left shoulder gently, and Sabine gave Rukh a concerned smile. Rukh realized he must have paused for a little while.

“I… activated sentry droids to defend us,” Rukh said quietly, blinking quickly. “Vader dropped Thrawn…” Rukh let out a hushed breath, and his voice became small. “He coughed up so much blood… I was going to attack, but he stopped me—

“Told me to run… to enact his contingency.” Rukh looked away in shame and grimaced in sorrow. “I shouldn’t have left him behind…”

Rukh clinched his eyes shut and shook his head. Hera narrowed her eyes, her gaze glistening tenderly.

“What… did Thrawn say to you,” Hera asked. She gestured her head toward Chopper. “In the recording, if I may ask?”

Rukh met her gaze.

He held her eyes for a moment, and Hera could feel pain held within the essence of his soul. He eventually spoke with intense sorrow and respect.

“He released me from service,” Rukh said with stuttered breath. “And told me not to be burdened and—” Rukh let out a sorrowfully bitter huff, holding back tears. “He wished we would part in friendship.”

Rukh dared not look any of Phoenix Squadron in the eye. He stared down at the ground and breathed heavily while trying to maintain control of his emotion.

Hera bit the side of her bottom lip as she watched, while Sabine patted at her own eyes in empathy. Ezra held Rukh’s left shoulder still, hoping to project strength.

Kanan, his arms still crossed and standing behind Hera, lowered his chin and gestured toward Rukh. He still felt questions and pleading from the Force.

“What was his contingency Rukh?” Kanan asked.

Rukh looked up at the Jedi.

“You.”

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“Zahara… hey…”

Stormtrooper Commander Ayer’s voice was a gentle beacon. It washed away and shielded Zahara from judgmental eyes held within the harsh white light of the Chimaera’s medical bay.

The same voice that commanded stormtroopers into battle with vigorous purpose became a tender
anchor that steadied Zahara amidst the turmoil of her mind.

Ayer saw her relax, her shoulders slightly lower, but he felt her tense under his gentle grip now in another uncertain but present way. She held her breath.

Ayer saw so many thoughts course through her in seconds, her brow wrinkling. Her hands trembled within his own armored gloves, still holding onto the oxygen mask.

Zahara exhaled part of the breath she was holding and looked up.

Ayer found her eyes. They were filled with fear and wide with guilt and sorrow. Ayer took in an unsteady breath at the sight and narrowed his own gentle eyes.

“Hey…,” Ayer said. “It’s okay—”

She cut him off from speaking as she lunged forward into his arms. Her hands released the oxygen mask to the floor as she curled them together to her chest. Her body met the armored torso of Major Ayer, pushing him back a step as he was unprepared for her embrace.

Zahara didn’t care. She buried her head into his shoulder and trembled.

Ayer held her. Despite the rigidity of his stormtrooper armor, Zahara found comfort in his embrace.

“Is there somewhere we could go and talk?” Ayer asked, his chin somewhat buried in her curly hair. She smelled of the purest flowers blooming upon a summer evening.

A nurse knelt in front of them, beginning to pick up the medical instruments from the floor. She gestured behind them and said quietly, “The first ready-room should be clear if you wanted some privacy, sir.”

Ayer nodded at the nurse.

“Thank you,” Ayer said, slightly pulling away from Zahara. “Let’s go, follow—”

Commotion from the medical bay entrance interrupted him, and he flinched toward the noise, alert, though still holding Zahara as she trembled. He saw a crowd of nurses ushering someone inside the bay. His heart dropped as the crowd parted, and he recognized who needed help.

Commodore Faro staggered forward, clutching a bloody right hand. Her entire arm and part of the front of her uniform was covered and stained red. Faro’s face was pale, as if she was ready to pass out.

“Zahara,” Ayer said forcefully, patting her back gently to get her attention.

Zahara felt the strain in his voice and looked up. Her eyes went wide at the sight of Commodore Faro.

Immediately Zahara leapt into action as Chief Medical Officer, compartmentalizing and leaving her shattered state of mind behind. She moved toward Faro with concern and authority, grabbing onto her arms and assessing the damage.

“To trauma room one now!” Zahara ordered.

Faro’s eyes rolled backward, and her knees suddenly buckled. Ayer caught Faro by the waist and underneath a shoulder. He met Zahara’s eyes.
“Follow me,” Zahara said with authority.

Ayer scooped Commodore Faro into his arms and followed Zahara to trauma room one.

Faro sat at the edge of a medical bed and watched Zahara methodically wrap her hand. She breathed slowly and deeply, steadying herself.

Faro’s gaze moved to the IV in her left arm. The sleeve of her uniform was ripped and cut hastily to provide access to her artery. An IV line currently fed her body precious blood and nutrients to replace what was lost.

Faro felt eyes watching her. She moved her gaze and found Stormtrooper Commander Ayer leaning against the far wall, watching her with crossed arms. His expression was guarded yet his eyes spoke of turmoil and judgement.

Faro also saw a spark of loyalty however… loyalty she felt she still didn’t deserve.

And Ayer’s eyes seemed to suspect her guilt. They held each other’s gaze, Faro’s eyes silently warning against questions, Ayer’s glinting back and asking anyway.

“That should do it,” Zahara said with a contented sigh.

Faro averted her gaze and saw her hand and wrist completely bandaged. Zahara smoothed over the bandage’s surface, making sure it was secure.

“A new uniform is being delivered here as well to replace the one you’re wearing,” Zahara added, meeting Faro’s eyes kindly, yet holding a knowingly haunted echo of what they experienced together.

“Thank you,” Faro said. She took a deep breath as Zahara rose to put the bandage supplies away. “How long until the transfusion is complete?”

“Oh, I would say about thirty minutes Commodore,” Zahara said. She pulled a jar of ointment and pain pills from a drawer and showed them to Faro. “I’ll prescribe these pills to help with the pain over the next week or so, and the ointment should be placed over the wound every twelve hours.”

Faro seemed to hesitate.

“If you’d rather me re-wrap the bandage, feel free to visit me here in the medical bay,” Zahara said, as Faro regarded the pills and ointment with scrunched brows.

“The three of us should speak,” Ayer said, cutting through the Imperial mantra of the moment.

His piercing eyes were focused upon Faro, and Faro sat up straight and met his eyes with knowing authority. Ayer didn’t back down though, and Zahara faced them both anxiously, leaning on a counter.

“Permission to speak freely Commodore?” Ayer asked, an edge to his voice. His demeanor was vibrating with barely contained energy.

Faro’s eyes narrowed a moment.

“Granted, Major,” Faro said finally.

Zahara eyed Ayer and then Commodore Faro nervously, remembering Vader’s words of warning. It took most of her mental strength to keep from falling into the grasp of another attack of anxiety. She looked down and focused on the floor. Ayer noticed.

Faro regarded Ayer for another strained moment, both in a silent stalemate.

“For the sake of the crew—”

“Don’t give me that,” Ayer interrupted with a bitter huff, tilting and shaking his head. His eyes were glassy yet held passionate strength.

“I saw…” Ayer pointed to the ground and stepped forward in his passion, “…him before Vader took him…” Ayer gestured to Zahara and glanced at her with pained eyes threatening to spill over. “…saw her eyes—…”

Faro looked down and held up her right hand to stop him.

Zahara flinched at Faro’s movement. “Careful…,” Zahara said emotionally.

Faro tilted her head to the side, glanced at her hand, and then gazed at the ground for a quick moment, remembering the carnage upon which she fell… and the cause of that carnage. She took in a hitched breath and lowered her injured hand to her lap.

Faro raised glossy eyes filled with the haunted burden of leadership toward Ayer’s own burdened orbs.

“For the sake of the crew,” Faro began slowly again in earnest, her eyebrows raised. “What I say cannot go beyond us three, nor can it leave this room.”

Ayer took a deep breath and nodded. He looked down in submission and held the bridge of his nose. He crossed his arms and looked up with pained eyes as Faro began speaking again.

“Grand Admiral Thrawn was indeed… removed from command by Lord Vader,” Faro said.

“Why?” Ayer asked, almost pleading.

“Vader…,” Faro shook her head. “I don’t believe it…, but Lord Vader accused the Grand Admiral of espionage against the Empire. You must understand the scrutiny the rest of us are under, yes?”

Zahara’s and Ayer’s eyes went wide as if just realizing the danger.

“We have a responsibility to the rest of the crew that I’m sure Grand Admiral Thrawn would want us to uphold,” Faro continued through strained emotion.

“And nothing can be done?” Ayer asked after another breath.

Faro shook her head and was about to respond, but she was cut off by Major Ayer’s holo-communicator. It suddenly emitted an emergency level trill startling the three of them.

Ayer scrambled for the device on his belt and held it up for the three of them to see the message. He hesitated a moment and then clicked a button to receive the transmission.

The rotating emblem of the Empire appeared, pulsing red. Then dread filled Faro’s, Ayer’s, and Zahara’s hearts as images of Grand Admiral Thrawn and the Chimaera were displayed.
“Citizens of the glorious Empire, I bring to you today news of a particularly dire nature,” holojournalist Alton Kastle stated, with just the right amount of horror in his smooth voice. “Word has just been received that renowned military leader…”

“Well that was fast…,” Faro whispered in dismay.

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The *Ghost’s* lounge sparkled with the blue light of Chopper’s holoprojector once again. Everyone watched in dread and utter surprise as images of Grand Admiral Thrawn and his Imperial Star Destroyer were displayed in an emergency level Imperial broadcast against the voice of holojournalist Alton Kastle.

“Reports do not state the nature of his injuries..., though one can assume after having read the specs for Imperial Sentinel Droids...,” holojournalist Alton Kastle said in practiced and muted horror. Rukh grimaced in sorrowed anger at the propaganda.

“But Grand Admiral Thrawn is being transported aboard the *ISD Devastator* with haste to medical facilities on Coruscant. We wish for his recovery. Rest assured that the glorious Empire will not allow this terror to spread. The HoloNet will continue to follow this shocking and developing story.”

The broadcast returned to a rotating emblem of the Empire. Sabine and Ezra still surrounded Rukh with support, and he shook his head.

Hera’s heart started racing.

“I must speak with Senator Mon Mothma right away,” Hera said.

She rushed to her feet. Chopper turned his holoprojector off and followed her into the cockpit.

----

Malice.

Hate.

Strength.

Power.

*Victory.*

Doors whooshed open and revealed a darkened specter, shadowed by hatred.

“Is he ready?” The dark specter asked, oozing with malice.

The Chief Medical Officer of the *ISD Devastator* turned robotically to face the voice.
“Yes, my lord,” the medical officer said curtly. “He will wake soon, though… he won’t be able to speak because of the tube.”

The dark specter walked forward into the room, his cape billowing behind him.

Darth Vader observed Thrawn laying unconscious and restrained on a slightly tilted medical table, hooked to machines with various liquids seeping through them.

“He does not require the ability to speak for me,” Vader said.

Vader continued into the room, the doors whooshing closed behind him.

To some extent, the direction of one's chosen path automatically selects for the paths that may cross it... Some are driven by chance, others by design, others by a change in one’s goals.

Some are driven by malice.

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Chapter End Notes

**Translation from previous chapter:**
Ch’ah tovun’csivci csah vah cat veo raszi. «I release you from your service.»
Vah viz k'ir na. «You have done well.»
K'ir nah tir veo g'evipah lishah vah. «Do not let what happened burden you.»
Tir nen tisci can ch'acevasi. «Let us part in friendship.»
Break the Truth Inside of Me

Chapter Summary

“For my ally is the Force, and a powerful ally it is.” – Yoda

“We’re not just flesh and bone. Not just stuff. We’re more. We’re luminous.” – Poe Dameron

Chapter Notes

“A bell that tolled to comfort me
An empty street
A rising steam
Break the truth inside of me
Climbed down to hell on the devil’s tree
I clutched a branch of soot and flame
The thought that rose, to scorch my feet”
-Flesh and Bone by Black Math
Spotify Song Link

Thrawn stood in a field of pure, silvery nothingness. Crimson eyes attempted to discern an edge, but the pearly silk upon which he stood seemed to go on forever. Limitless. There was no boundary in sight.

A spark of confusion boiled to the surface of his mind, but it was quickly gone, as if dispelled away.

The light in this space was soft and inviting. It gently caressed his sapphire skin with a smooth reflection. What is this place?

Compelled to investigate, feet stepped forward a few paces to explore this new setting. But he stopped immediately. Thrawn looked down at himself, startled to find himself clothed in a very familiar black military-style uniform with a burgundy patch and silver bars upon its collar.

He let out a surprised breath; subtle and cold condensation exhaled from his mouth and nose. He held his hands out before him, examining his uniform. Not for many years did he wear this armor. But it felt right.

This whole space felt… right.

A rolling crescendo began to transform the very space before his eyes, bringing with it a soft and pleasant breeze.
Voices quickly flashed in faint echoes within its flow of transformation.

“It surrounds us and penetrates us.” [Obi-Wan Kenobi] –

“The light, it’s always been there. It will guide you.” [Maz Kanata] –

“Luminous beings are we.” – “Be a candle or the night.” [Yoda] –

“You were right. You were right about me.” [Anakin Skywalker] –

A wolf howl –

Thrawn saw the silvery silk upon which he stood transform beneath his combat boots into beautiful tall, green grass.

“One secret is known, it cannot be unknown.” [The Bendu] –

“There is more than one sort of prison.” – “The strongest stars have hearts of Kyber.” [Chirrut Îmwe] –

“It’s life’s music. The song we make.” [Leia Organa] –

The voices were barely discernable as if muffled yet attempting to break through. Thrawn strained to understand them.

But his crimson eyes took in an amazing sight and beheld the silvery surface of this space replaced by a sea of waist-high golden-green grass stretching out to the farthest distances of which he could perceive. The rolling sea of grass danced along to the rhythmic current of a soft breeze. Silence comfortably beheld the space, save for the gentle blades rustling together. Serenity.

A light blue sky faded into existence overhead, stealing his attention. Clouds peppered and refracted golden light toward him.

It was so… beautiful. The tranquil breeze teased a few locks of his loose blue, black hair falling across his forehead.

Thrawn heard a gentle hoot echo and averted his gaze a bit to his left. An owl-like creature drifted overhead and hooed twice more after seemingly catching his scarlet gaze.

An overwhelming peace overcame Thrawn. His shoulders relaxed.

A child’s laughter suddenly permeated throughout the air. It crescendoed from mischievous giggles to playful shrieks of joy. It was a sound that could only be described as one that beheld the heartbeat of the universe; it was a sound that Thrawn hadn’t been able to regard in quite some time.

An ache gripped his heart as his eyes scanned for the source. He cautiously stepped forward and walked wherever his ears led him. Grass parted before him as he walked.
Blue, shimmering butterflies emerged from the grass in his wake. They speckled Thrawn’s armor with soft blue flashes of light as they fluttered and sparkled across the rolling meadow. He turned left and right as the laughter oscillated and reverberated between intensities, the butterflies following.

Suddenly chuckles reverberated more intensively from behind. Thrawn’s heart quickened, and he stopped.

The laughter hushed and stopped with him.

The same gentle wind flowed mildly, carrying with it an empty silence yet continuing to tease at his hair. Thrawn looked down a moment as if unsure, the butterflies flickering across his vision as they glided over the blades of grass.

His brow spoke hesitation and worry. Cold condensation flowed from his mouth and nostrils with each breath despite the deceptively golden light of this space. What is this?

Thrawn took a deep breath and tentatively turned his head to look behind him. His shoulders and the rest of his body slowly followed.

Thrawn found himself rotated to face where the laughter stopped, and his scarlet eyes found a little girl bathed in a soft pearly glow upon the horizon. She stood not on the rolling fields of grass, but beyond it upon silvery silk where the sea of golden, green blades dared not to travel beyond. Behind her flowed a cascade of twinkling stars and purple brilliance.

The eyes of the little girl mirrored his crimson gaze, and her skin was identical to his own caerulean exterior. The top half of her hair was pulled back, while the rest of her blue, black hair hung in long curls over one shoulder. Loose bangs rippled around her face in the wind.

The wind heaved with his emotion as Thrawn’s heart ached even more with recognition. His face scrunched in grief, and his knees staggered, but he caught himself. He swallowed his reaction, intaking a shakily restricted breath.

Another echoey voice, now clear and filled with wisdom.

“Rejoice for those around you who transform into the Force.” [Yoda] –

Thrawn cautiously stepped toward the little girl, beginning to close the long distance between them. Sorrow hung within his crimson orbs, but also something else. There was a cheerfulness there.

A hope.

The blue luminous butterflies flittered about Thrawn once again as the grass parted before his steps. The child giggled with delight, and his steps became confident. Thrawn smiled far beyond the vast distance of sorrow that he felt.

Thunder.
The dark side clouds everything.” [Yoda] –

The wind suddenly howled, and the fields of grass rustled in distress. Thrawn halted his steps; his smile faded to concern as he considered the space once again. Purple lightning burst behind the little girl, and dark clouds rushed in, covering the towering blue sky. A low ominous hum began, as if magnetic.

The little girl startled. Thunder rumbled and echoed throughout the space. Thrawn could see where it was beginning to rain farther out, as dark streaks of blue cascaded toward the ground beyond the fields of grass. Golden light dimmed and was traded for one that held an ominous red and blue splendor.

Thrawn looked at the little girl with questioning eyes. She looked worried.

It began to snow; the butterflies disappeared. Cold vapor that Thrawn exhaled became more apparent, and the sea of golden-green grass suddenly morphed into a silvery and drooping sheet of frosted blades. The space now beheld the pallid bluntness of winter.

A chill filled the air. The little girl’s gaze flitted to something behind him, and horror gripped her features. It pained Thrawn to see her so afraid. It was painfully familiar.

Another familiar cold enveloped Thrawn, startling him a moment. His crimson eyes widened in shock at the feeling. His mind, and the memories contained within, flooded back to him as if he had just broken free of an enchantment. All at once, he understood why he was in this place. And who shouldn’t be here.

Panicked dread gripped Thrawn as he realized what the space in which he stood represented and possibly revealed. Thrawn caught the little girl’s gaze another moment, her eyes pleading, while his own summoned her image and laughter to memory. I’m sorry...

His eyes flitted downward, and Thrawn furrowed his brow in concentration. He flinched his scarlet eyes narrow.

A sudden twist—CRACK—

A swirling burst of energy radiated outward from where Thrawn stood, and the shockwave shattered the frosted meadow into millions of pieces of speckled glass. It was a harsh, tumbling sound as the shockwave traveled.

Alien patterns and forms emitting control—

The features of the space faded into a silvery opaque and quiet nothingness.

Focus—opaqueness—

The only thing that remained from the previous scene was the speckled blanket of crushed glass that stretched forever in every direction. Thrawn looked up and saw silvery nothingness where the little girl once stood.

Opaque.

Thrawn inclined his chin and put his right wrist in his left hand behind him.
Defiance.

The sounds of a mechanical ventilator became apparent.

Thrawn mentally steeled himself to the present moment, knowing full well who stood behind him. A dark shadowy figure loomed in stark contrast to the pearly splendor of speckled glass and silvery horizon.

A familiar voice filled with malice boomed.

“I saw your mind,” Vader said.

“Did you,” Thrawn answered smoothly.

“Yes.”

A wolf howl –

“Your focus determines your reality.” [Qui-Gon Jinn] –

Vader slowly circled around Thrawn like a predator stalking its prey. Each step crunched and gnashed at the meadow of speckled glass. Thrawn stood resolute in his position, remaining focused upon a point in front of him. He knew the Dark Lord was walking around to his front though; he could feel his every step.

Vader stopped in front of Thrawn, the dark figure facing him with his expressionless mask that spoke malevolence. The Dark Lord’s hands rested on his belt as he considered the Chiss.

Thrawn avoided looking at the Dark Lord. The Chiss’ gaze remained steady upon the silvery horizon beyond. Vader reached deeper through their connection though and could feel his focus straining. Perhaps enough time had passed.

“The little girl,” Vader said. “Who is she?”

A sudden twist—CRACK—

Thrawn’s crimson gaze whipped to Vader’s mask. His chiseled brow fluctuated, and his jaw tensed as he eyed Vader with tempered fury. Vader could see the red vibrancy of Thrawn’s eyes had faded.

Thrawn was having trouble focusing; it became increasingly difficult to keep Vader out and away from the depths of his mind. He flinched as his head suddenly began to ache. The blue and red light that held malice returned to the silvery space. A rolling magnetic hum filled the space, and a wolf howl echoed from the distance.

Thrawn let out a pained breath and shakily brought his right hand up to the temple of his head. He staggered, but Vader caught him underneath his right armpit and held his other arm tightly beneath the shoulder.

Thrawn closed his eyes and lowered his head in another pained gasp.

“What…,” Thrawn said through pained breath. “What are you- doing- to me?”
The Chief Medical Officer of the *ISD Devastator* watched with a mixture of muted amazement and concern as Vader loomed over the unconscious form of Grand Admiral Thrawn. The Dark Lord stood to the side of Thrawn’s head with the fingers of one gloved hand placed firmly on Thrawn’s forehead and his other placed upon Thrawn’s chest, fingers splayed over where his heart would be. An IT-O Interrogator Droid hovered passively nearby.

Thrawn lay restrained on a slightly tilted medical interrogation chair with probes and sensors around the back of his head. The same breathing tube was still extended from Thrawn’s mouth, providing precious oxygen to his body and secured with tape. It hadn’t been touched since his arrival on the *ISD Devastator*.

The white sleeve of his uniform on his right arm was hastily torn up to his lean bicep to provide access to his elbow pit for an IV. The fabric was stained with spots of red as the medical crew was harsh in their search for an artery. Clear tape held sensors and tubes that ran down the length of his structured forearm secure to his cerulean skin. Firm restraints around his upper bicep and wrist held the arm secure, ensuring the IV wouldn’t be interrupted in the event of resistance. Restraints also were placed around Thrawn’s left wrist and both legs, secured over his smooth black Imperial boots.

The Chief Medical Officer watched the screens and instruments around him, as neurological data ebbed and flowed along to a strange magnetic energy pulsating in the air. He didn’t understand what was happening, but he had heard rumors about Lord Vader and could only imagine.

Loyalty Officer Major Emarr Ottkreg stood at the foot of the interrogation table observing with malevolent delight.

“Increase dosage of skirtopanol by two percent,” Ottkreg said.

“Aye sir,” the Chief Medical Officer said. Hesitation edged at his voice. “But I must warn that we’re approaching safe limits Major.”

Ottkreg rotated curtly on his heel around to face the Chief Medical Officer. His boot clacked on the metallic floor upon successful rotation. Ottkreg’s form was stiff with Imperial rigidity, and his eyes glinted with authoritative judgement. The Chief Medical Officer flinched.

“Dare you question a loyalty officer during an interrogation?” Ottkreg said curtly.

“No- no, sir.”

“Look behind me,” Ottkreg said, every word pronounced with purpose.

Ottkreg let a moment pass as the Chief Medical Officer turned his gaze upon Thrawn. Thrawn had begun to unconsciously twitch under an invisible pressure. The restraints weren’t quite needed yet but still held him in position.

“That- is no longer a Grand Admiral. What you see before your eyes is a *traitor*,” Ottkreg continued. The Chief Medical Officer looked at Ottkreg with the wide eyes of a subordinate. “An. Alien. Once entrusted by the Empire at the highest levels, now reduced to… this.”

Thrawn’s shoulders heaved unconsciously underneath Vader’s hands in a physical reaction to their mental struggle.

“That. Trust. Was betrayed!” Ottkreg said through vehement passion. He pointed at Thrawn,
emphasizing his words. “And the knowledge of this betrayer must be discovered and obtained. No
matter the cost. He and his people will be punished.

“Do you not agree, Stormtrooper Commander Kimmund,” Ottkreg said, placing his hands behind
him and turning his gaze to Commander Kimmund.

Kimmund stood guard beside an entrance door in his stormtrooper armor with his blaster held in
his hands. Once again, he was thankful his helmet obscured his face, for his expression would have
betrayed his true answer.

“Yes, Major Ottkreg,” Kimmund said, projecting the tenor of a loyal officer. Thrawn suddenly
flinched in the medical interrogation chair, making Kimmund startle. Kimmund’s helmet shifted to
Thrawn’s form a moment as he considered the Grand Admiral and then looked at Loyalty Officer
Major Ottkreg once again. He hoped he projected loyalty.

But Ottkreg saw it. He noticed everything. He would add this to his report.

“I’m glad you agree, Commander Kimmund,” Ottkreg said with a hint of disbelief. Ottkreg turned
to the Chief Medical Officer. “Status of injection.”

“Progressing nominally sir,” the Chief Medical Officer said as he monitored the screens before
him. “The two percent adjustment is nearly complete.”

“Very good,” Ottkreg said as he turned curtly back toward Vader and Thrawn. “Very good…”

A magnetic aura intensified, making the walls respond in subtle reverberation.

“Whoa,” The Chief Medical Officer muttered.

“The little girl,” Vader said aloud with malice. “Who is she?”

There was a sudden regression in the magnetic aura, and Thrawn flinched again against his
restraints. His head heaved left and returned to center again as if his body was trying to throw
Vader’s hand away from his forehead. Vader’s fingers kept their place though.

The magnetic aura strengthened and pulsed in a new rhythm. Thrawn’s hands quickly morphed
into tight fists, and he began to struggle against his breathing tube. His body needed more oxygen
than was being provided.

“Heart rate has dramatically increased Major Ottkreg,” the Chief Medical Officer said in surprise.
Ottkreg pointed at the Chief Medical Officer, while keeping his enthralled gaze on the struggle.

“Do not- adjust- the oxygen,” Ottkreg clippedly said.

“Aye, sir,” the Chief Medical Officer said quietly.

Kimmund watched the scene in muted horror. Thrawn strained and weakly shook against his
bonds. His chest visibly heaved as his body became desperate for more oxygen. But the flow of
oxygen was constrained by the mechanics of the tube. The device that once saved the Grand
Admiral now became something that the Empire could use as a source of torture and distress.

Thrawn was clearly under distress, but Kimmund was hindered from action by his own unique
restraints. Kimmund could do nothing.

Major Ottkreg returned his hand behind him and watched with wide-eyed awe and admiration.
“Fascinating,” Ottkreg muttered.

“What…,” Thrawn said through pained breath. “What are you- doing- to me?”

As he held Thrawn up on his feet with his left hand underneath Thrawn’s right armpit, Vader squeezed Thrawn’s left shoulder tight. This made Thrawn look up at Vader’s mask with pale crimson eyes. Soft cold vapor exhaled with each quickened breath.

“Your homeworld,” Vader declared slowly. “Show me.”

“Nah,” Thrawn exasperated, his brow tensing.

Vader swiftly removed his right hand from Thrawn’s shoulder and encircled his hand around Thrawn’s throat.

Thrawn tried to flinch away but couldn’t; he closed his eyes and grunted a lament in a strained breath. *Not again.* Vader applied just enough pressure to maintain control. Thrawn’s knees buckled underneath him, twinkling the sparkling glass underneath with the shift of his feet, but Vader held him. In the same movement when his knees buckled, Thrawn instinctively grabbed Vader’s left arm for support with his right hand.

They paused there, but the Dark Lord angled his hand after a moment, forcing Thrawn to look up at him.

Pained crimson eyes opened and beheld the malevolent mask of the Dark Lord. His gaze spoke defiance but also strain. His eyes were dimming.

Vader increased his grip for a moment, and Thrawn swiftly brought his left hand up to grip Vader’s wrist. Thrawn clinched his eyes closed as he tried to concentrate through shallow and labored breaths. *Focus. Don’t show him.*

“You. *Will. Show. Me,*” Vader said. Vader then suddenly released the majority of his grip around his throat, but still maintained control around Thrawn’s neck.

Thrawn opened his eyes in surprise and breathed a deep breath. The release was unexpected. It made Thrawn’s control falter.

His crimson eyes widened in horror, and brow raised in panic as he felt the slip.

It began to snow.

“Nah,” Thrawn muttered desperately. He shifted his feet in a weak bid to get away from Vader.

Vader was unyielding. Thrawn’s eyes filled with sorrow as mountains began to take shape among the silvery silk beyond them.

“Ah,” Vader said in victory. “And your thoughts manifest. But I need more to find it. Show. Me.”

Thrawn’s eyes began to flutter. He knew he had to regain control quickly or Vader would soon have enough familiarity of the planet to use the Third Sight ability to navigate to it. So *this* is why he was kept alive. Vader would surely use him to reveal the locations of the most prized secrets and locations of the Chiss Ascendancy. *Thrawn couldn’t allow that.*
The sound of an owl hooting –

“Always remember, your focus determines your reality.” [Qui-Gon Jinn] –

"To defeat your enemy, you have to understand them." [Ahsoka Tano] –

A wolf howl –

Thrawn pressed back instinctively and found an unknown strength. He narrowed his scarlet gaze and thought of her.

A magnetic hum reverberated with loud intensity as Vader found resistance from the Chiss. Thrawn flitted his gaze to a point behind Vader and saw her first. His eyes immediately spoke a scarlet, dim sorrow.

A harmonic, lilting voice suddenly echoed behind Vader.

“Are you an angel?”

Purple lightning erupted around them, erasing the towering mountains in a flash. Vader tensed and froze in his onslaught. He dropped Thrawn, and Thrawn fell on his right side with a twinkling shattered as he fell into the meadow of icy glass. In the same motion, Vader rotated and faced a lone female figure in the distance surrounded by a portal of shining stars and purple brilliance.

Padmé.

She stood there in her brilliant blue funeral gown, a gentle breeze tousling the folds of fabric. Her belly showed signs of having carried a child, large and round. Small white flowers were placed among thick curls of her hair surrounding her beautifully vibrant face. Luminous blue butterflies fluttered around her form. Her expression held worry and confusion.

Thrawn grunted and angled himself up on his right elbow. He caught her warm, brown eyes. Thrawn brought his left hand up to his throat, and he breathed heavily while he caught his breath. He shivered in her angelic gaze.

A memory rushed forward.

A sleek Chiss ship settled to the ground nearby, while The Jedi wrapped together a bundle of explosives.

“I hope we’ll meet again,” Padmé said. “Thank you for your help.”

“And for yours,” Thrawn said, inclining his head to her.

Padmé searched Thrawn’s face in confusion, but then there was a spark of recognition. Her eyes widened; Thrawn’s narrowed and glistened. I’m sorry…

She whipped her gaze to Vader and shook her head. Thrawn anguished at her expression of grief. Tears flowed from her eyes, and she took a step backward.
“No,” Padmé echoed.

“No, Padmé,” Vader said as he stepped toward her, holding out a hand.

Voices echoed.


“Liar!” – “You’ve betrayed me! You brought him here to kill me!” [Anakin Skywalker] –

“Let her go!” [Obi-Wan Kenobi] –

“You turned her against me!” [Anakin Skywalker] –

“You have done that yourself.” [Obi-Wan Kenobi] –

Thrawn took in an emotionally stuttered breath listening to the memory, cold vapor puffing along with his emotion. He shook his head in sorrowful guilt as his suspicion was confirmed.

Padmé screamed, and Vader halted in place. Thrawn felt a chill course through him as he watched Padmé transform before his eyes. Her skin began to melt, revealing bone, and her eyes began to glow yellow. Thunder rolled and purple lightning flashed harshly behind her. Wind quickened and howled throughout the space.

Thrawn lifted himself up and slowly staggered to his feet. He shivered, crossed his arms as cold snow fell and leaned against the breeze. The fringes of his hair flowed wildly in the wind. Vader’s ventilator echoed loud despite the howling cascade.

“No...,” Vader said, reaching out to Padmé again.

“Anakin!” Thrawn yelled.

Vader immediately responded and stretched out with his arm toward Thrawn. The air roared like a lion as the Dark Lord balled his hand into a fist, and Thrawn suddenly couldn’t breathe. Thrawn brought both hands up to his throat trying to grab at an invisible Force wrapping around his neck.


Padmé screamed in grief. It made Vader release Thrawn, and Vader turned to face Padmé once again. Thrawn erupted into strained coughs on the ground as breath returned to him. He looked up through pained scarlet eyes and saw what captivated Vader’s attention. Padmé was fully transformed into a mummified form. Red streaks of lightning erupted out of her darkened eyes. Thrawn closed his eyes.

“I don’t know you,” Padmé hauntingly echoed to Vader.

Padmé suddenly clutched her throat and was hit with a purple shard of lightning. She burst into flame, destroyed.

“No! Not again!” Vader yelled.

A white flash of silvery light erupted in the space.
Kimmund flinched as Vader howled, flinched his hands away from Thrawn and stepped back from the medical interrogation chair. Vader furiously outstretched an arm at the hovering IT-O Interrogator Droid, and the droid crumpled into a mass of showering sparks as Vader crushed it with the Force. It fell to the ground with a loud thud.

Vader found Thrawn’s crimson eyes open with a weak defiant accusation, focusing upon the Dark Lord. Vader stared back with malice. Thrawn’s brow was furrowed in concentration, but there was a vast sea of fog in his mind that he couldn’t quite emerge beyond.

“My Lord?” Loyalty Officer Major Ottkreg prompted.

Vader tore his attention from Thrawn and faced Ottkreg. He pointed in anger.

“You have failed,” Vader said. The walls reverberated with a magnetic pulse. “He is not weak enough. Prepare him for another session.”

Thrawn’s eyes wandered and explored the room. He mentally recoiled at the sight of the oxygen lines connected to his breathing tube and became fiercely aware of the sounds of the mechanical ventilator breathing for him. Thrawn gently closed his eyes in a physical manifestation of him shoving that reality to the back of his mind before he lost control.

Scarlet eyes sluggishly opened and moved down to his body. Thrawn saw himself restrained to the medical interrogation chair. His eyes found the IV in his right arm and then followed the tubing to find Imperial consoles surrounded by medical equipment. The Chief Medical Officer of the Devastator met his crimson gaze, but he quickly startled and averted his gaze, pressing buttons on a piece of equipment.

Then Thrawn met the steely gaze of Loyalty Officer Ottkreg. The major was studying Thrawn, watching his reactions.

“Yes, my lord,” Ottkreg said, smirking. “I will make sure he’s ready.”

Thrawn then impassively found the fourth person in the room. He wore the armor of a Stormtrooper Commander. Recognition. Thrawn’s eyes briefly flinched narrow. He and Commander Kimmund silently regarded each other.

Kimmund felt exposed in Thrawn’s crimson sight. Could he feel Kimmund’s conflict? His doubt?

“You best see to it before we reach Coruscant, Major,” Vader said, pointing at Ottkreg. “The Emperor is not as forgiving as I am.”

“I give you my word, my lord,” Ottkreg said looking at Vader with confidence. “He will be ready.”

Vader moved with heavy and furious footfalls toward the door.

“Commander Kimmund,” Vader said as he walked. “I leave you to oversee the operation. I will be in my quarters, and I am NOT to be disturbed until he is ready.”

Padmé.

Another energy pulse echoed through the air.

“Yes, my lord,” Kimmund said.
The door shut behind Vader, the reverberating aura dissipating as the Dark Lord walked farther away.

Vader left them alone.

Major Ottkreg turned sharply and walked toward the medical monitoring equipment. He stopped and stood beside the Chief Medical Officer, reading the data on the screens.

“Show me the latest data,” Ottkreg said. “And compare it with the readings from when our traitor arrived.”

While Major Ottkreg conspired with the Chief Medical Officer, Commander Kimmund slowly walked to Thrawn’s side. Thrawn sluggishly followed Kimmund with his red gaze as the Stormtrooper Commander approached. Kimmund stopped beside him and considered those faded red eyes through his helmet.

It was as if Thrawn was reading him and speaking to him at the same time. He felt Kimmund’s doubts. But what could Kimmund do?

“Give him a dose of lotiramine,” Ottkreg said, inclining his chin toward Thrawn.

The Chief Medical Officer immediately spoke up. “But sir that will cause the skirtopanol to metabolize and- ”

“I. Know. What it will do,” Ottkreg said in hushed anger.

“With respect Major Ottkreg,” Commander Kimmund said. “Even I know the risks of that mixture.”

“Well then,” Ottkreg said. “It’s a good thing we have the chief medical officer of the ship here to ensure his survival.”

The Chief Medical Officer swallowed, eyes wide.

“Because if he doesn’t,” Ottkreg continued, facing the Chief Medical Officer. “It would be very bad for you wouldn’t it.”

Ottkreg, with inclined chin, smiled at the Chief Medical Officer a moment and then graced Kimmund with the same expression.

“Begin the injection, that’s an order,” Ottkreg said after a moment with serious authority.

“Aye, sir,” the Chief Medical Officer said, pressing a button sequence on his medical console.

Thrawn considered Ottkreg with the fierce crimson eyes of a Grand Admiral in the midst of battle. At the sound of a mellow trill from the medical equipment, Thrawn shifted his gaze to the tubing connecting the medical equipment and the IV inserted into his arm.

Thrawn watched as a foreign liquid traveled through the tubing toward his body. There was nothing he could do.

It felt cold at first as the liquid pushed into his artery. So odd. Eyelids became heavy, and he blinked slower. His head shook as he fought to stay awake.

But suddenly his eyes went wide, his blood turning hot. Thrawn flinched against his restraints, and he curved his head back. His body began to fight against his oxygen tube, but the tape held it
secure.

Muscles became stiff a moment, but then he trembled and jerked with tremors. Thrawn’s eyes rolled up and back into his head. Kimmund placed a hand on his shoulder without thinking.

The tremors abruptly stopped, and unfocused red orbs returned forward. They were lax and pointed at an undetermined spot on the ceiling.

Thrawn relaxed, and his expression became soft, eyes straight and unfocused. It was quiet except for the mechanical ventilator, steady in its hauntingly apt respirations.

Crimson orbs fought to stay open, sluggishly blinking without rhythm. His head weakly shifted, but then Kimmund watched the red orbs flutter closed, as Thrawn finally succumbed and released his hold on consciousness.

Watching that would haunt Kimmund forever. Kimmund looked up and found Ottkreg watching him with a smirk. They stared at each other a moment. Kimmund removed his hand from Thrawn’s shoulder and placed it back on his blaster, straightening his shoulders.

Three quick beeps emitted from a medical console.

“His blood pressure is dropping,” the Chief Medical Officer said.

“Inform me once the application is complete,” Ottkreg said with malice.

“Ah… Aye, sir,” the Chief Medical Officer hesitated.

Ottkreg sharply turned and exited the room. The doors closed with a whoosh.

The Chief Medical Officer let out an exasperated breath and leaned backward on a piece of equipment as he swam in the depths of his stress. He and Kimmund were left to the sound of the mechanical ventilator supplying Thrawn with precious oxygen.

“Keep him alive,” Kimmund said. “By any means possible… You keep him alive.”

The Chief Medical Officer stood straight and blinked rapidly. He nodded at Commander Kimmund and then started studying the medical console and sent commands to the machines. He glanced at Commander Kimmund though as the Stormtrooper Commander took a deep breath and placed his hand back on Thrawn’s shoulder.

A stolen Imperial shuttle vectored away from the _Ghost_.

“Are you sure about this?” Kallus slowly asked from the pilot’s seat. “Last chance.”

“I’m sure,” Ezra said, sitting down in the shuttle’s copilot seat.

Rex stood behind Ezra and grabbed the seat for support while Kanan and Sabine sat in jumpseats behind them. They all wore stormtrooper armor as a prepared disguise. Sabine examined the white helmet as if visualizing a future painting upon a blank canvas.

Ezra keyed the comm.

“Hera, we’re about to make the jump,” Ezra said.
“Okay,” Hera said, worrying filling her voice. “Please be careful, all of you.”

“We’ll be okay Hera,” Kanan said.

“You better,” Hera said with command. “As soon as I drop the engineers off at base and refuel, we’ll meet you at the rendezvous point okay?”

“With one interesting additional passenger,” Rex said nodding his head. “We’ll be there Hera.”

“We need to go now if we’re to meet them at the hyperlane transfer point over Brentaal,” Kallus said.

Hera took a breath. “May the Force be with you,” she said.

“And with you,” Kallus said as he steadied the shuttle on a new vector.

Ezra closed the audio communication, and Kallus pushed forward on the throttle. Light wrapped around the shuttle in flashy pseudomotion, and the stars stretched in blue brilliance as the shuttle jumped into hyperspace.

An enemy will almost never be anything except an enemy.

But an adversary can sometimes become an ally.

There is a cost of course. In all things in life there is a cost.

Sometimes the risk is one’s future, or even one’s life.

But in all such situations, the calculation is straightforward: whether or not the potential gain is worth the potential loss.

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Chapter End Notes

“Don't lose a thousand lives just to save one."
"Maybe. But that doesn't mean I can't try to save his life."
– Aayla Secura & Ahsoka Tano
A Silhouette

Chapter Summary

“When surrounded by war, one must eventually choose a side. The future has many paths — choose wisely.”

The Rebels’ stolen Imperial Shuttle soared through hyperspace like a chrome needle spiraling for a fixed target. Kallus focused on the shuttle’s controls from the pilot console. He tried to look busy, making minor adjustments to the Imperial comm frequency and going through basic checklists in his mind.

A memory came forward.

“This is Fulcrum with an urgent message. Thrawn knows about—”

Kallus stopped talking and flinched as he observed the Fulcrum symbol fluctuate on his communication equipment.

Adjust controls… Focus signal…

Electronic interference still present… Signal won’t go through…

“By the light of Lothal’s moons,” Thrawn said smoothly.

Kallus’ heart dropped as Thrawn’s figure stepped into the doorway. The moonlight silhouetted his white uniform with a soft glow, a harsh contrast to his crimson gaze. His eyes glimmered red upon Kallus with a knowing and crisp conviction.

With his secret now seemingly exposed, a stunned Kallus turned in his seat to fully face Thrawn.

“That is your code-phrase isn’t it, Agent Kallus?” Thrawn said, walking forward and stopping a few more paces into what was once Ezra’s home. Thrawn lowered his left hand from behind his back, holding a device. “Or, would you prefer I address you as Fulcrum?”

Kallus was trapped. And Thrawn knew it.

Kallus silently considered the device in his hand. Thrawn held it up for Kallus to see, rotating it to reveal the screen to him. The Fulcrum symbol was displayed above alternate waveforms, which were jamming the outgoing signal.

“I’m afraid your Rebel friends won’t receive your warning,” Thrawn said.

Kallus suddenly lunged at Thrawn with a kick. Thrawn blocked it with his knee and countered with a right punch and a kick of his own, but Kallus blocked both and dodged around the Grand Admiral. Kallus threw a punch. Thrawn maneuvered left and punched Kallus in the chest, stunning him. This gave Thrawn the opening to grab Kallus and flip him on the ground with a harsh thud.
The memory morphed.

_On the outside walkway, two Death Troopers held up a beaten and bruised Kallus by the arms. Thrawn defeated him in their scuffle, but not before Kallus was able to destroy the jammer, releasing his warning to the Rebels._

Kallus looked up at Thrawn with an injured defiance, and the Grand Admiral slowly walked to him with his hands behind his back. Emerging from the darkened room and into the moonlight, he stopped in front of Kallus and considered the betrayer of the Empire with his intense eyes.

“You have the heart of a Rebel,” Thrawn said.

“I’ll take that as compliment,” Kallus replied.

_Thrawn furrowed his brow at this, his eyes emitting something that wasn’t quite contempt. Irritation, disappointment, obligation. Displeasure? Remorse? With an almost indiscernible narrowing of his eyes, a thousand thoughts appeared to flow through the Grand Admiral’s mind in mere seconds._

_After a pause, Thrawn turned to go back into the room, and the Death Troopers followed, dragging Kallus with them._

“Kallus?” Ezra said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Kallus immediately startled away from the touch and panicked, turning sideways in the chair. Ezra recoiled back into his copilot seat and met Kallus’ confused gaze as the former Imperial emerged a little too slowly from his flashback.

Rex held up both hands and softly took a step forward from behind Ezra.

“Whoa, hey Kallus, it’s just us,” Rex said gently. He indicated to himself and then Ezra. “It’s Rex? And Ezra?”

Kallus quickly shifted his troubled gaze between them. Everything was hazy. Nothing made sense. Rex pointed left.

“Sabine and Kanan… over there?” Rex continued. Kallus breathed quickly, his heart racing. “We’re in hyperspace… on a mission.”

Shoulders eventually relaxed with recognition, and Kallus shook his head in embarrassment. He ran a hand through his blond hair, took a deep breath, and leaned his elbow on the back of the pilot chair. Another shaky breath, and he grabbed his nose, his hand covering his eyes. _Shake the memory._

“Brrwir bwhaa ahh,” Chopper warbled. The droid was in the rear of the shuttle plugged into a data port. Makeshift medical equipment rested on a repulser lift nearby.

“And Chopper,” Sabine quietly said, concern laced upon her brow. But her smile was reassuring. Rex slowly crouched on a knee in front of Kallus and looked up, hoping to meet his eyes.

“Hey, you went away from us for a little bit there,” Rex said with a sympathetic gaze. He was careful not to touch him, recognizing the symptoms of a flashback. It reminded Rex of the
psychological and emotional wounds he and his Clone Troopers had to sometimes deal with as a result of the Clone Wars.

Kanan could sense the turmoil in Kallus’ mind, but it was diminishing quickly.


Kallus took in another deep breath and flicked his timid yet hardened gaze over to meet Rex’s, filled with understanding. His forearm swung over and hung freely off the end of the pilot seat as his muscles continued to relax.

“I’m back,” Kallus timidly said, looking down again. “My… apologies.”

“No need to apologize, Kallus. But I’ve got to ask,” Rex said carefully, slightly grimacing. “You feeling up to this mission? Returning to the Empire-”

“I’m good to go,” Kallus interrupted.

Rex squeezed Kallus’ knee and nodded, knowing not to press the issue further. He moved to get up.

“I’m sorry Rex… it’s just, memories…,” Kallus said, watching the former Clone Captain maneuver stiffly in awkward fitting Stormtrooper armor.

Rex leaned on a wall and crossed his arms. “I understand,” Rex said.

“Are we sure about this mission?” Kallus said suddenly. “Because what it means is…” Kallus laughs and looks at them all, shaking his head. “…is nearly crazy.”

“You and Rex haven’t seen his message yet-” Ezra started but was interrupted by Kallus as he continued.

“One of the greatest military minds of the entire Empire just happens to be working against them this whole time?”

“I know how crazy it sounds,” Kanan said from his seat.

“I worked side by side with Grand Admiral Thrawn,” Kallus countered with a soft intensity. He eyed each of them, letting the silence speak for him a moment. “I witnessed him first-hand hunt the Rebels down with a passion. Like you were antagonists meant to be completely removed from a Dejarik board. It was like a game of strategy to him, and he enjoyed it.”

Rex felt a similar doubt as well. Kanan held up a hand, and Ezra and Sabine traded worried glances.

“It’s a situation I don’t think any of us fully understand,” Kanan said slowly. “And I know you and Rex weren’t given much of a briefing either before you had to leave base and meet us on the Ghost.”

“Mon Mothma didn’t say much, no,” Rex said.

“I get it,” Sabine offered. “Even after seeing his message and speaking with Ruhk, the Empire’s propaganda still seems easier to believe.”

“Look, I don’t doubt the strategy behind this mission, please don’t get me wrong there,” Kallus said. “A Grand Admiral of the Empire? That’s a valuable asset and amazing source of intel if he
cooperates.”

He sighed and softened his eyes. “I saw Hera’s eyes. Even through a holo her conviction was evident. If she and Mon Mothma believe in something, I’m there.”

Kallus looked down briefly at his left hand resting on his leg. He made a fist and pulsed it three times as he thought. Intense eyes once again beheld the group.

“Just…,” Kallus hesitated, he rose his right hand to emphasize his words. “There’s always something more with him. Don’t forget what he’s done, and what he meant to do to the rebellion. To us.”

The quiet in the shuttle was edged. Rex nodded and hummed an affirmative in the hushed silence.

“We need to be careful, I agree,” Rex said slowly. “Like you said, you served next to him. Anything at all give you pause about Thrawn’s allegiance? Perhaps a reason to send the Ghost a message in the first place?”

“I think you know my answer to that,” Kallus said.

“Nothing at all?”

Kallus sighed and deflated. He shook his head.

“I don’t know,” Kallus said. “I’ve not really thought over my career with him lately.”

Chopper warbled a chirp.

“Not much time before we arrive,” Ezra said.

Sabine smiled with a mischievous glee.

“You know what that means Chop!” Sabine said. She held up and excitedly shook three cans of paint. “Time for a new coat of paint!”

She maneuvered around the makeshift medical equipment and approached Chopper, followed quickly by lamenting and frustrated warbles. Kanan was grateful for the change in spirits and chuckled as Sabine gently argued with and convinced the spunky droid about the disguise.

Rex put his stormtrooper helmet on while Kallus and Ezra turned their attention to the shuttle controls. Ezra cued up a map of their known location and Kallus inserted a transponder chip into the communication console. Kallus wasn’t quite finished entering a code sequence into the console though when he hesitated again.

Kallus started breathing quickly and his eyes widened. He froze.

_Thrawn’s form silhouetted by soft moonlight…_

_Red glowing eyes…_

_“By the light of Lothal’s moons…”_
“He knew the code-phrase,” Kallus whispered.

Ezra glanced at him and recognized the look on his face. It was the same expression he held right before Ezra startled him earlier.

“What, Kallus?” Ezra asked carefully.

Kallus held the look of a man standing just beyond the point of a revelation. His hand trembled as it hovered, frozen over the communication console.

“The code-phrase; he knew it,” Kallus repeated. His voice was small as his mind seemed to be partly in the memory still. Adrenaline made his fingers twitch while his thoughts organized.

“Fulcrum?” Ezra asked.

Kallus’ eyes abruptly focused, and he shook his head, lowering his hand to his lap. He glanced back at Ezra with wide eyes, present on the shuttle once again.

“N- no…,” Kallus said, slowly regaining his voice. “The code-phrase used by Fulcrum agents. By the light of Lothal’s moons…”

They emerged from hyperspace, the front viewport revealing a calm view of the space over Brentaal. But Kallus looked down and didn’t react. Ezra pressed a button sequence and began scanning the sector around them.

“It was the first thing he said to me,” Kallus continued wistfully, visibly swallowing and blinking.

“No contacts in range,” Ezra said, a nervous inflection to his voice. “We got here early. Hopefully.”

“Kallus what does that mean?” Kanan prompted.

Kallus looked at Kanan.

“I’m not sure,” Kallus said. He huffed a wary breath. “But…”

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Commander Kimmund wasn’t hungry. He sat in the mess hall alone among the Devastator’s stormtroopers, hovering over his food. The others gave him space, wary about the leader of the First Legion.

Kimmund didn’t blame them. He was a superior officer but also leader of a secretive operational squad that answered directly to Lord Vader.

His helmet rested on the table as he stared blankly at his food. A subtle shift of gravity occurred as the Devastator dropped from hyperspace, but Kimmund didn’t notice. Thoughts were in turmoil, and he felt an unexpected conflict with his station that he couldn’t quite shake.

A tray of food suddenly crashed onto the surface of the table across from him. Kimmund startled and looked up to find Tephan. She dropped her helmet next to his and plopped down in the seat across from him.

“I called your name twice,” Tephan said, her demeanor spicy. She lifted her glass of caf and plate
of food from the tray. Each produced a pronounced clink upon the table’s surface. Kimmund watched passively, and Tephan shoved the tray aside with a flick of her fingers.

“Seeing as you’re sitting alone…” She dramatically whipped her cloth napkin fiercely through the air with a whoosh, releasing it from its fold. “…I thought I’d ask if it’s alright to join you…,” she said, placing the napkin on her lap.

“…sir,” she added. Tephan glanced at him briefly, her eyes betraying a playful companionship despite her otherwise spicy demeanor. She pointedly placed utensils next to her plate.

Kimmund didn’t say anything, letting her express her little grandstand. He watched her take a bite of food amidst the companionable silence, and she began to fail at holding back a smile while she chewed her food. They met each other’s gaze again, and Kimmund’s façade of a stony expression failed as well. He chuckled.

“Permission granted,” he said.

Tephan smiled triumphantly, her nose wrinkling as she relaxed into her seat. “Thank you, sir,” she offered.

Tephan couldn’t help but notice that Kimmund had barely touched his food.

“You know,” Tephan said, swallowing her food and eyeing him with raised eyebrow. “It’s an Imperial offense to let caf go cold. I’m obligated to report you to the Imperial Office of Criminal Investigations.”

Kimmund chuckled again and grabbed the neglected glass of caf. He swirled it around and considered the liquid within.

“I’ve got a question for you, Tephan,” Kimmund said. He sipped at the caf and scrunched his eyebrows a bit at the lukewarm consistency.

“Shoot,” Tephan said.

“Why do you remove everything from your tray every time? Once you’re done, you have to put everything back anyway.”

“I like to enjoy my meal,” she insisted, grabbing her own cup of caf. “The tray is too constraining. Makes me anxious.”

Steam rose from her cup of caf, and her eyes closed as she breathed in the sweat aroma. She took a sip, and her shoulders lowered as she visibly relaxed.

“Ah, …,” Kimmund intoned. His voice was quiet as he slipped back into his thoughts.

Tephan noticed. She rested her elbows on the table surface and lowered her voice. “He’s not doing well is he?”

Kimmund flicked his gaze to her, his expression grim but guarded.

“The Grand Admiral I mean,” Teophan whispered. “It’s bad isn’t it?”

Kimmund pursed his lips and held her gaze. He considered what he could say. The truth about what really happened to Thrawn was very compartmentalized. Even Tephan as part of the First Legion was unaware of the truth and assumed along with the rest of the Empire that Thrawn was
injured in an assassination attempt. Kimmund, Lord Vader, Loyalty Officer Ottkreg, and the Chief Medical Officer were the only people on the ship who knew the full truth beyond the cover story.

Kimmund didn’t like lying to his team, especially Tephan. He shook his head in a silent “no” and looked down at his caf, slowly swirling the liquid again.

“I see,” Tephan said with a hushed breath. She took in a deep breath and eyed him with sympathetic hesitation. “Don’t blame yourself. I’m sure the Grand Admiral wouldn’t want you to either.”

Kimmund felt a pang of guilt, opened his mouth to say something, but was interrupted by an alerting chime on his commlink. He set his caf down on his tray and grabbed his commlink from his belt with a sigh.

“Commander Kimmund here,” Kimmund said with authority. Tephan returned to her food respectfully but still listened.

“Sir, this is Lieutenant Jace,” a nervous voice emitted over the commlink. “I’m the air traffic controller on watch, and there’s a shuttle here requesting permission to land.”

“Why are you contacting me about it, Lieutenant?” Kimmund asked.

“They say they’re carrying a resupply of medical equipment, sir. We don’t have any record of expecting their arrival, and their transponder seems to be acting up. But with the First Legion handling Grand Admiral Thrawn’s recovery… I thought I should check with you before proceeding further with protocol.”

“I see…,” Kimmund said, his mind racing. He couldn’t remember an order to receive a delivery of new medical equipment…

Tephan kept her head lowered to her food but looked up at Kimmund. She saw him narrow his eyes and seemingly come to a decision.

“Have a readout prepared for me, Lieutenant, and I’ll review their information,” Kimmund said, raising from his seat. “Allow them to enter the pattern in the meantime. I’ll be there shortly.”

“Aye, sir,” Lieutenant Jace replied.

Kimmund cut the comm and placed the device back on his belt. He grabbed for his helmet and eyed Tephan apologetically.

“Sorry Tephan, duty calls,” he said, placing his helmet on. “Gotta go whip a pilot into shape for breaking their transponder.”

“No worries, sir,” she said with a smile. She pointed at him with her fork. “Give ‘em an extra shakedown for me.”

“Will do,” Kimmund said, offering a lazy salute while rotating toward the exit.

Tephan chuckled and nonchalantly saluted back, her elbow not moving from the table. She watched her Commander leave the mess hall with worried eyes. She knew he was troubled.

An RA-7 protocol droid appeared and suddenly grabbed Kimmund’s barely touched tray of food.

“Whoa hey hey hey!” Tephan said batting a hand at the startled droid. The droid paused, and
Tephan reached over the table. She carefully grabbed the top of Kimmund’s cup of caf and lifted it from the tray. “I’ll take that.”

She settled in her seat again and swirled the liquid around, mimicking Kimmund’s habit. Her mouth downturned in a grimace at the lukewarm temperature while she took a sip. The droid turned to deliver and dispose of the tray of food but Tephan stopped it.

“Droid wait,” Tephan said, still grimacing. She held out the cup to it. “Go heat this up for me would you?”

After a short pause, the droid took the cup and walked away to fulfill her request. Tephan returned to her food with a sigh, moving it around on her plate. She looked up and scanned the mess hall, watching the other Stormtroopers and Imperial officers. Her gaze met some and felt a pang of frustration each time as they quickly averted their eyes from her own.

Tephan chewed on a big bite of food, chomping on the regulation rations in her mouth like it was the scrumptious result of motherly home-cooking. She was alone just as Kimmund was before her arrival. And she was okay with that. That’s what she told herself anyway. Her gaze flicked back to the door that Kimmund exited through, and she washed down her food with the last gulp of her own cup of caf.

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An Unexpected Ally

Chapter Summary

“Balance is found in the one who faces his guilt.”

“In this war, a danger there is of losing who we are.” — Yoda

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lamenting warbles sounded from the rear of the Rebels’ Imperial Shuttle.

“Happy beeps, Chop,” Ezra said, flipping switches on the copilot console. “Happy beeps.”

“I happen to agree with the droid, Ezra,” Kallus said as he vectored the shuttle closer to the ISD Devastator. “This feels off.”

“They let us into the flight pattern,” Ezra offered.

“But that is precisely what worries me,” Kallus said, grimacing. “They’re not following correct Imperial protocol. I didn’t configure the transponder quickly enough. It wasn’t broadcasting correctly...”

Rex placed a hand on Ezra’s copilot seat and watched the ISD Devastator loom larger through the viewport as they approached. “They’ve just put us within weapons range is all,” he said.

“Right…,” Sabine said nervously.

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The control nest provided an overlook of the Devastator’s large hangar bay. Personnel and various droids could be observed going about their business, refueling ships and inspecting armaments as needed. Sparks flew from the interior hull of a Tie Fighter as a maintenance crew performed repairs, and stormtroopers were in the process of inventoring crates on the starboard side of the bay.

Kimmund held a tablet and reviewed a report about the Imperial Shuttle. An uptight Lieutenant Jace stood next to him wringing his hands together. The Lieutenant’s eyes briefly glanced over to the viewport. It was part of his duty to coordinate everything to peak efficiency down there in the hangar bay. Immediately, he saw everything that could possibly go wrong without proper direction.

Jace re-centered his eyes and watched Kimmund scroll through the hastily prepared information. He lifted himself on his toes in what he hoped was a subtle motion to see what Kimmund was focused on. Ah, the personnel section.

“They reported five souls and a droid on board, sir,” Lieutenant Jace said.
“Mmhmm,” Kimmund intoned.

“A- and their fuel is at one quarter mark,” Lieutenant Jace continued, wringing his hands together more forcefully and willing himself not to glance out the viewport again.

“I see that, Lieutenant,” Kimmund said, scrolling passed the fuel read outs and settling on the cargo manifest. There was only a general entry reporting medical supplies.

“They didn’t go into specifics about the type of medical they’re carrying?” Kimmund asked. He raised his head and looked at the wide-eyed Lieutenant.

“No sir; just that they were ordered to resupply us.”

Could this be Ottkreg? Needing a resupply of his mind-numbing agents to further his campaign of interrogation? Kimmund turned his attention back to the tablet and scrolled up to the communication transcript.

“They mentioned Grand Admiral Thrawn by name?” Kimmund said.

“Yes, yes sir,” Lieutenant Jace said. “The pilot said the supplies were needed for his recovery.”

Kimmund’s brow furrowed underneath his helmet. It wasn’t right to expound upon mission specifics. If proper credentials existed, proper clearance would be granted, and nothing further was to be done.

He scrolled up to the shuttle’s identification. It was a Lambda-class T-4a with the standard armaments and cargo capacity. It’s transponder beacon though transmitted codes that Kimmund knew to be old and outdated.

No, Major Ottkreg wouldn’t have his name associated with such insolence as a Loyalty Officer of the Empire. He had a gut feeling that this was something else entirely. Would a group of rebels really be able to find and intercept the Devastator? And crazy enough to actually do it?

Kimmund’s thumb rubbed the side of the tablet as the last bit of his Imperial programming warred against a curious sense of morality. Thrawn didn’t deserve what was happening to him and this might be a way for Kimmund to do something about it. A very risky way… One in which his career and life among the Empire would be thrown out the viewport.

*But Teph... And the others...*

“Their code sequence came back negative, Commander,” Lieutenant Jace said quietly, nervous to repeat another set of data Kimmund was obviously inspecting. “It doesn’t match current encryption standard.”

Kimmund straightened and regarded Lieutenant Jace. Through his helmet, Kimmund saw a nervous and impressionable young man in awe to be standing next to the leader of the First Legion. Lucky. After an uncomfortable moment, Kimmund’s mouth began to move, his mind settled.

“The transponder reports precisely what it’s meant to, Lieutenant,” Kimmund said commandingly, masking his surprise at hearing his own voice. He shut the tablet off and promptly handed it to the Lieutenant. “Have the shuttle cleared to land on my authority. This is First Legion business.”

“Aye, sir,” Lieutenant Jace said. He sat down at his station and pressed a code sequence to initiate preparations for the new shuttle arrival.
“How long until we return to hyperspace?” Kimmund asked.

Lieutenant Jace put on his headset. He adjusted the microphone to rest properly in front of his mouth and glanced briefly back to Kimmund.

“Reports show the drive overheated during our last jump. Hard to say, sir.”

Convenient.

“Alright,” Kimmund said. He walked to the viewport overlooking the hangar bay and watched as a spot was prepared for the shuttle. “I am to escort them personally. Cancel the normal reception.”

“Aye, sir,” Lieutenant Jace hesitated. Lieutenant Jace then watched in awe as Commander Kimmund, leader of the First Legion, unhooked his blaster and walked out of the air traffic control nest with purposed steps.

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“I can’t believe it,” Kallus said. He flipped switches to trigger landing mode on his heads-up-display. “They just cleared us to land.”

“Oh man,” Ezra whispered nervously.

The shuttle’s comm chimed and an equally nervous sounding voice emitted from the device.

“This is Lieutenant Jace again, shuttle seven-five-six-seven,” Lieutenant Jace said over comm. “You are cleared to land at the vectors sent. First Legion authority.”

“First Legion,” Rex muttered to himself.

Kallus’ heads-up-display updated with new landing vectors. He turned quickly to the group with wide eyes.

“Last chance to get out of here,” Kallus breathed. “Once we land, we’re at the mercy of the Empire and First Legion.”

Kanan felt a pull from the Force. It was the same confusing cry he felt while listening to Thrawn’s holomessage.

“Do you feel it, Ezra?” Kanan asked calmly.

Ezra quirked his head to the side and furrowed his brow at his master. He closed his eyes and reached out to the Force. Ezra flinched and looked puzzled.

“Yeah… I think I do…,” Ezra said wistfully.

“We should finish what we came here to do,” Kanan said. He put his Stormtrooper helmet on. “The Force is with us.”

“Well, it’s not the craziest thing I’ve ever done…,” Rex offered.

Sabine let out a skeptical groan. “ comes pretty close for me,” she said, putting her helmet on as well.
“Please acknowledge, shuttle seven-five-six-seven,” Lieutenant Jace said over comm.

Kallus turned back to his pilot console and maneuvered the shuttle along the new landing vectors. He huffed a breath at the mighty sight of the *ISD Devastator* and keyed the comm again.


Kallus cut the comm and breathed deeply. They were really doing this. Chopper rolled up to join everyone in the cabin near the cockpit. The droid’s new Imperial paint job shined bright against the light from the viewport.

“Looking good, buddy,” Sabine said, her voice modulating through the helmet. She patted Chopper on the head affectionately.

“What’s the First Legion, Kallus?” Ezra asked. Kallus flew them underneath the *Devastator’s* hull and toward the hangar bay.

“Lord Vader’s personal, elite special operations squad,” Kallus answered.

“Oh…”

Chopper chirped lamenting warbles.

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The Rebels’ stolen Imperial Shuttle set down smoothly in the *ISD Devastator’s* hangar bay. Steam spewed out fiercely from vents as the engine transitioned to an idle state. The bay was alive with energy, Imperial personnel performing their tasks. Droids automatically began maintenance protocols on the Rebels’ shuttle, connecting lines and wires to external junctions on the outer hull.

Commander Kimmund halted in attention before the shuttle, with his blaster resting firmly in his arms and ready for anything. He watched the ramp slowly lower with keen eyes, and fingers twitched nervously on his blaster. What did he just do? Who did he just let on board?

His eyes examined a stormtrooper as they walked down the ramp with a similar blaster at rest in their hands. A droid and a repulsorlift filled with boxes of medical equipment soon followed. It was pushed by two more stormtroopers with a fourth stormtrooper hanging back, watching everything from the top of the ramp.

The fourth stormtrooper’s helmet optics were fixated upon Kimmund. They had a blaster at the ready as well, and Kimmund noticed it wasn’t set to stun.

Kallus’ heart thumped in his chest with steely anxiety as he walked down the shuttle ramp. He saw what he knew to be a commander waiting for him by the markings on the armor, and, by the pauldron the trooper wore, Kallus further suspected them to be in charge of the very First Legion that allowed their clearance to land.

*This is a trap,* Kallus feared.

Kallus stopped a few paces in front of the commander and glanced back as Kanan and Ezra stopped pushing the repulsorlift at the foot of the ramp. They turned their attention to Kallus and
waited.

“Reporting as ordered, Commander,” Kallus said, turning forward. Muscle memory kicked in, standing Kallus straight with Imperial rigidity. Kallus wasn’t sure how he felt about still having that instinct. He saluted stiffly.

Kimmund didn’t say anything but returned the salute with a sigh. It was just enough pomp to pass Imperial regulation.

They both carefully considered each other and returned their hands back to their blasters, purposely projecting their movement. Kallus noticed, and it meant Kimmund was also suspicious.

Kimmund remained silent, waited a moment and assessed each of them one more time. His helmet moved robotically during the examination, and his gaze stopped on the fourth stormtrooper at the top of the ramp for a prolonged moment as if in silent challenge.

Eyes and helmet then flicked back to Kallus standing in front of him.

“I am Commander Kimmund, leader of the First Legion,” Kimmund began slowly. “You’re here to resupply us in support of Grand Admiral Thrawn’s recovery, is that correct?”

“Yes, sir,” Kallus replied.

“Mmhmm,” Kimmund hummed. Kallus held his blaster tighter as tension rose. Were they about to fight their way out?

Kimmund suddenly looked to his left. “Ensign,” he said, projecting his voice to an approaching maintenance technician. “Have this shuttle refueled and ready for departure upon our return.”

“Aye, sir,” the technician replied. She walked over to a console and started a new maintenance protocol.

Kimmund turned back to Kallus. “I will escort you to the medical bay.”

Kallus was stunned, his helmet masking his surprise. How was this working? He cleared his throat and turned to Rex standing ready on the top of the ramp.

“You two up there make sure the shuttle is ready for departure,” Kallus said.

“Aye, sir!” Rex replied. But the former Clone Captain didn’t move as he kept his attention on Commander Kimmund. Sabine stayed ready in the pilot’s seat if they needed to get out fast.

“And you two,” Kallus said, turning to Ezra and Kanan with authority. “You two and the droid with me.”

“Yes, sirrr,” Ezra said, emphasizing the words a little too dramatically.

Kimmund rolled his eyes under his helmet and then examined Kallus’ stormtrooper armor a moment. It would barely pass a shakedown inspection.

“With me, Lieutenant,” Kimmund said. He turned and started leading them out of the hangar bay.

“Ezra…,” Kanan hissed quietly while the two of them pushed the heavy repulsorlift forward.

“What?” Ezra innocently replied.
Kallus looked back as they began walking through the busy hangar bay and shook his head at them. Chopper followed Kallus closely.

“Welcome to the ISD Devastator,” Kimmund said over his shoulder.

The unlikely group walked down a long metallic corridor within the cold interior of the Star Destroyer. Kimmund hastily turned a corner on the way to the medical bay. His thoughts were racing. He lowered his right arm and hand that was carrying his blaster to his side and reached for his commlink with his left hand.

Kallus heard Kimmund audibly sigh as he pulled it from his belt and keyed it. A nervous voice answered.

“Yes, Commander?” The Chief Medical Officer said over the comm.

“Open comm channel,” Kimmund warned, as he walked briskly with Kallus on his heels. They were followed closely by Kanan, Ezra and Chopper. “How’s he doing?”

“Right… I would say about the same, sir. Which… perhaps is a positive.”

Kimmund rounded another corner, sidestepping around Imperial personnel. Officers stopped in their wake, saluting the leader of the First Legion in admiration… and perhaps fear Kallus realized. Kimmund ignored them.

“I’m on my way with a medical team to resupply us,” Kimmund said. “They have a doc on their team… Say… Why don’t you take a break?”

Kallus was confused.

“Well… I suppose—,” The Chief Medical Officer started.

“You’ve been working hard,” Kimmund pressed further. “You deserve it.”

The Chief Medical Officer seemed convinced after a pause.

“A break sure sounds good, Commander,” the Chief Medical Officer said breathily.

Kanan and Ezra traded glances as they pushed the repulsorlift through the Devastator’s halls.

“A hot cup of caf and a meal will do you good,” Kimmund continued. “Besides, I did the same to you. That time away to think sure did me good. New perspective and all that.”

The group of disguised Rebels being led by the Commander of the First Legion arrived at a blast-door and stopped. Kimmund shifted his grip on the commlink and entered in a code with free fingers. Kallus glanced back at Kanan and Ezra and shrugged.

“I think I will. Thank you, sir.”

The door opened and the group continued forward.

“Like I said, you deserve it,” Kimmund said. “Go on ahead, I’ll be there with my medical team shortly.”
“Thank you, sir! Ah, the equipment here will show the history of what I’ve done lately. Shouldn’t be too hard to decipher.”

“Acknowledged, enjoy your break,” Kimmund said with a bitter authority. He keyed off the commlink, returning the device to his belt, and led a very confused group of Rebels toward the medical bay.

----

Tephan reclined in the mess hall, her head resting on her seat-back and slumped in her chair. Her legs were inclined, with boots crossed and propped up on top of the table. Eyes closed, she held a steaming cup of caf in her hands, resting it on her lap.

The A-7 protocol droid had fulfilled her request and returned Kimmund’s heated cup of caf to her earlier. Only her helmet remained on the table now, in addition to her feet, the droid having removed her tray and empty plate.

There were benefits to sitting alone Tephan found. Thinking she was asleep, those sitting at tables nearby returned to a normal speaking level, and she was able to eavesdrop on their conversations. Upon returning to her squad mates in the First Legion, they would all be filled in with the latest scuttlebutt on the ship.

She was giddy just thinking about it. The façade on her face emitted someone napping, with her expression remaining neutral, despite her inner thrill.

A whoosh indicated someone had just walked through the entrance. Tephan rose an eyebrow and carefully opened the eye underneath to see whose presence was added to the mess hall. She was surprised to find it was the Chief Medical Officer of the ship.

Tephan opened both eyes, being careful not to move otherwise, and followed him as he made his way to retrieve a meal. Was it a good sign he was here? Did that mean the Grand Admiral improved enough for him to leave? He was nervous. Did that mean the opposite? Stop.

She rose her steaming cup of caf and took a slow sip as she observed him. Goodness he was awkward. Holding a tray of food and a drink, he turned around and scanned the mess hall.

Tephan quickly waved at him and caught his attention. Those sitting in tables nearby groaned as they suddenly realized she was alert while leaning back in her chair. She swung a leg down dramatically and pushed out the chair next to her with her foot. She pointed to it with wide, smiling eyes and nodded her head with reinforcement.

The Chief Medical Officer grimaced an awkward smirk. He quickly lowered his head and glanced around the room once more before making his way to her. Tephan sat up straight and rested her elbows on the table as she watched him approach.

*Oh yes, you’re going to answer all my questions,* she thought as she sipped more caf. There was a mischievous glint in her eyes, sparking the edge of her grin.

The Chief Medical Officer placed his tray on the table and awkwardly scooted the chair forward as he sat down. He nervously opened his mouth to speak, but Tephan interrupted him.

“Oh, skip the formalities, Doc,” Tephan said.
Commander Kimmund stopped in front of a stormtrooper guarding a door in the medical wing. He just stared. When the stormtrooper didn’t say anything, he sighed. Damn Major Ottkreg, scaring the troops into inefficient protocol.

“First Legion business,” Kimmund said forcefully. “Let us through. And no, no one else is cleared to enter.”

“Y- yes, Commander Kimmund,” the stormtrooper said. The guard hit his fist sideways on a control panel and opened the door.

The Rebels found themselves walking down a short hallway, lined with five doors on either side, and terminating at the end with a cold, metallic wall. Air was hushed and heavy in this place, and Ezra became immediately uncomfortable. Kanan sensed it too, additionally feeling his padawan’s discomfort.

Kimmund stopped before one of the doors at the end and entered a code sequence on a keypad. A whoosh echoed throughout the corridor as the door opened. Kimmund lingered where he stood and examined the room from the passageway.

The Rebels couldn’t see inside yet, but the sound of a breathing ventilator could faintly be heard from where they stood in the metallic hallway. It was steady in its consistent, slow rhythm, echoing eerily off the titanium walls. Kanan felt guilt and a sense of dread ooze from Commander Kimmund. There was great regret there, and a sense of a prison lingering around the commander.

Kimmund’s muted change in demeanor upon opening the door was evident to all of them though. He turned to the Rebels and motioned to the room with an open palm. His other hand still secured his blaster.

“It’s protocol for me to seal the door after we enter,” Kimmund said quietly.

“And lock us inside?” Kallus countered.

“Trust me,” Kimmund said, unmoving.

Kallus didn’t like this; he didn’t move. It was the perfect opportunity to trap and contain them. But Kallus saw something in Kimmund that mirrored himself when he was in service to the Empire. There was a familiar desperation there. A tiredness.

But Kallus must not have reacted quickly enough, for Kimmund sighed and walked through the door without them.

“Follow me,” Kimmund sighed.

One last glance back to Ezra and Kanan, and Kallus followed.

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Tephan took a long and lingering sip of caf while watching the Chief Medical Officer eat. He wouldn’t mix his food items, eating each food group by itself and then continuing to the next. And
he hadn’t touched his caf yet. She narrowed her eyes.

“So, doc,” she said, lowering her voice. “With you here, I assume he’s improving?”

He paused and looked at Tephan.

“I’m not really supposed to talk about-,” he started.

“Oh, come on, I’m First Legion,” Tephan interrupted, smiling proudly. “Surely there’s an exception. My squad’s handling his recovery.”

There was a glint in the Chief Medical Officer’s eye that Tephan couldn’t quite decipher. Her face went blank and serious.

“It’s all very compartmentalized,” he said slowly and hushed. “With the Grand Admiral involved and all…”

Tephan glared at him, her thoughts racing. The way he spoke made her apprehensive, but she wasn’t exactly sure of the reason.

“Where’s Commander Kimmund now?” Tephan asked.

“He’s with him now actually with a new team. Gave me a break,” he said munching on food again.

“So, he’s improving,” Tephan stated, quietly hopeful.

He looked at her with sympathetically. “Well…”

He cleared his throat and his jaw clenched. The look in his eyes is all she needed.

“I see…,” Tephan said, looking away. Nostrils flared and her brow knitted as she took another sip of caf.

“Sorry…,” he whispered.

Tephan narrowed her eyes and suddenly set her cup of caf down on the table with a clink.

“You know, I’ve just remembered something I need to finish before next rotation, doc,” she said.

Tephan scooped up her helmet and made her way out of the mess hall. The Chief Medical Officer, left alone to his meal, watched her leave with hastened steps.

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Ezra was cold. He didn’t like this place. Senses were suddenly heightened after entering this metallic passageway, and, that breathing sound… Its rhythm wasn’t natural, and it evoked a feeling of anguish.

_Ezra was cold. He didn’t like this place. Senses were suddenly heightened after entering this metallic passageway, and, that breathing sound… Its rhythm wasn’t natural, and it evoked a feeling of anguish._

*Swirlings in the Force—darkness—anxiety—*

Kanan squeezed Ezra’s shoulder with strength.
“Focus Ezra,” Kanan whispered. “Remember your purpose.”

Ezra didn’t understand what he felt through the Force. It was strange and unknown. He steadied himself and nodded. Master and apprentice then pushed the repulsorlift together into the room and met a sight they were not expecting behold.

Grand Admiral Thrawn lay unconscious on a medical interrogation chair with a mechanical ventilator breathing for him. The chair was marginally tilted up from the ground, acting more like an inclined table, with a semi-circular sensor array around Thrawn’s head. Thrawn’s face was docile, and lips were relaxed and slightly ajar, hovering passively around a plastoid divider that covered his teeth inside his mouth. The divider protected the breathing tube from being crushed.

The repulsorlift was discarded at the edge of the room, and Ezra stepped hesitantly closer to Thrawn’s unconscious form. The padawan was shaken at seeing the restraints around Thrawn’s arms and legs. His eyes caught the sight of dried blood on the Chiss’ right arm and torn uniform. He winced. The IV snaked down the length of his caerulean arm and was secured by hastily applied and deteriorating tape.

Another hesitant step forward, and he removed his stormtrooper helmet. Sweat lingered upon Ezra’s brow as he caught his breath.

“Ezra…,” Kanan hushed in warning. But he didn’t hear his master. Ezra couldn’t deny the turmoil he felt through the Force and sought to understand the strange cadence that traveled along its current. It was different yet familiar; unknown yet known.

The sound of a small, childlike voice began to echo as if it was lingering a little too far away.

*Swirlings in the Force—anxiety—despair—*

“Vav rot'sah.” … “Vav.” … “Tis'mi?” …

“Do you hear that?” Ezra asked.

A sudden hiss reverberated through the room, and the door whooshed closed as Kimmund sealed them inside.

Kallus unfroze from his stupor at the sight of his former superior officer reduced to such a state. He quickly whipped around and pointed his blaster at Kimmund.

“What’s going on here?!” Kallus demanded. “This isn’t a medical bay, it’s an interrogation chamber!”

Kimmund held up his hands. “It is for prisoners…,” he said slowly.

A memory flashed to Kanan’s mind.

“You have wasted enough of my time,” Tarkin said to then Agent Kallus.

*The Inquisitor entered the chamber and stopped next to Tarkin. They stood before a captured Kanan Jarrus, strapped to an interrogation table.*
“You are no doubt unaware the Jedi are trained to resist mind probes,” the Inquisitor said.

“If he is the Jedi he claims to be… I take it you have a solution?”

The Inquisitor smiled and stepped closer to Kanan.

“Pain, a Jedi still feels pain,” the Inquisitor said. “And pain can break anyone.”

The vile Inquisitor held up a hand to Kanan and a magnetic battle within the Force erupted between the Force-bearers.

“What do you see?”

“Why are you helping us?” Kallus asked breathily.

Kimmund turned his gaze upon Thrawn. Ezra had made it to the Chiss’ side, placing a hand on his left shoulder and brow scrunched in thought. The boy’s eyes were fixated upon Thrawn’s neck, no doubt appalled at seeing the damage there now that he was standing close.

“Because he doesn’t deserve this,” Kimmund said quietly. “And I couldn’t do anything about it…” He regarded Kallus once again. “…until now. I just went with a gut feeling.”

Kimmund shook his head and huffed a breath. “Look, I wouldn’t trust me either, and I don’t blame you. But…” Kimmund looked to Ezra and Kanan. “…You’re all Rebels, aren’t you? Jedi even?” He fixed his eyes upon Kallus again, looking down his blaster-barrel. “And you’re former Imperial, yeah? I can tell by how you carry yourself.”

Kallus grimaced underneath his helmet. “Yes.”

An uncomfortable silence passed between them.

Kanan removed his helmet. With his scarred and cloudy eyes, the Jedi master looked to an empty corner across the room and smirked.

“I think it’s okay Kallus,” Kanan said, turning in Kallus’ general direction.

“I understand,” Kallus said to Kimmund. He gingerly lowered his weapon and secured it to his stormtrooper armor. “More than you know.”

“He’ll be treated fairly?” Kimmund asked.

“I was,” Kallus replied slowly, removing his helmet. Understanding but still wary eyes emerged from underneath, blonde hair disheveled. He dropped the helmet to the ground with a thud as if disgusted with the essence of that old life.

After a beat of assessment with piercing blue eyes, Kallus walked over to the medical equipment that monitored Thrawn. “And you will be too…,” he said over his shoulder.

Swirlings of despair turning to pain—twisting in alien forms and patterns—
“His neck, Kanan…,” Ezra said, his left hand carefully lifting the white collar of Thrawn’s uniform. “And… something’s wrong.”

“I feel it too, Ezra,” Kanan said, stepping beside his padawan. “We’re gonna get him out of here though.”

What were these Imperials up to? Kallus’ blue orbs skimmed over the displays. They took care of their prisoner horribly; Thrawn’s vitals were all over the place. Kallus opened a log of medicine and toxins administered.

Kallus’ heart dropped.

“Skirtopanol mixed with lotiramine?!” Kallus exclaimed. His wide eyes beheld Kimmund in stunned accusation. “What’s the goal here?”

“I tried to argue against it…,” Kimmund said, his voice trailing off as he stepped to the foot of Thrawn’s form.

“What does it mean?” Ezra asked.

Kallus’ stunned gaze moved to meet Ezra’s concerned eyes.

“It could destroy his mind… It could prove fatal,” Kallus said. His hands began dancing over the medical equipment, triggering small beeps. A clear liquid began to travel down Thrawn’s IV line. “Maybe they thought his species could take it, but I need to neutralize it all the same.”

“Stay with him,” Kanan said quietly to Ezra. He then turned to Kimmund. “Help me unload the boxes from the lift.”

Ezra, his hand still resting on Thrawn’s left shoulder, turned his head and watched his master and Commander Kimmund begin to unload the repulsorlift.

Chopper was plugged into a data-portal on the wall next to the entrance. The droid turned his photoreceptors to Ezra and warbled.

“Wha bwir bwah,” Chopper emitted nervously.

“Something’s wrong with the hyperdrive?” Ezra asked.

Kimmund grunted as he shoved a heavy box of supplies away from the repulsorlift. “Yes, data shows it overheated during our last jump. I assumed it was part of your plan?”

“N-no…?” Ezra replied.

Kanan glanced his perception to the far corner of the room again as he set a box down. “I guess we’re fortunate for the delay.”

“We have another problem,” Kallus said, walking to Thrawn’s side and facing Ezra. His steely blue eyes glanced over Thrawn’s form as he approached, noticing the hastily torn sleeve and dried blood around the IV. But it was the now visible greenish, purple bruising around Thrawn’s neck that made Kallus pause.

Kallus slowly lifted the loose flap of Thrawn’s white uniform and set his jaw as he got a closer look. Speckled, dark green dots formed a subtle rash above the bruises, indicating burst blood vessels, and it was clear to Kallus where Vader had gripped Thrawn’s neck. The organic structures
were a bit more swollen and more deeply discolored around where a thumb and fierce fingers clearly planted themselves.

Kallus grimaced and glanced with now glistening eyes at Ezra, who was watching with a sickened and sorrowful intensity at the damage. *No wonder Thrawn needed the breathing tube.* Ezra squeezed Thrawn's shoulder tighter at the gruesome sight, while the mechanical ventilator steadily made Thrawn's chest rise and fall, the synthetic breathing noise permeating throughout the room. He briefly met Kallus' narrowed eyes, and Kallus looked back down at Thrawn's form again with a compassionate yet outraged bearing to himself.

“They weren’t kind,” Kallus muttered. “He should have been tended to by medical droids by now.”

Ezra watched as Kallus methodically lowered the uniform flap back in proper place on Thrawn’s chest. His thoughts seemed turmoiled, and the Imperial turned Rebel smoothed the edge of his former superior’s uniform as if in reverence. “The machine breathing for him is too loud. We’ll take it with us for use on the shuttle, but you’ll have to be on the lift with him with a manual bag ventilator… You okay with that Ezra?”

“So, I’ll… be breathing for him?” Ezra said, eyes widened.

“Yes,” Kallus replied.

Ezra looked back to Thrawn’s lax and unconscious face. “Okay,” he said, nodding.

Fingers on Thrawn’s IV arm twitched, while the clear liquid continued to seep through the IV.

*Swirlings in the Force—despair—anxiety—*

*Tis’mi?” … “Vatt’ah ten.” … “Ttis’ah.” …

Ezra flinched.

“There it is again,” Ezra said. “Did you hear it Kanan?”

Three low beeps sounded from the machines monitoring Thrawn, and Kallus walked to the displays with concern to see what was happening.

“What do you hear, Ezra?” Kanan stood still and reached out to the Force, but he only felt his padawan’s anxiety.

“It’s like a voice… a child’s voice. I can’t understand it… And… it’s so…” Ezra closed his eyes.

*Swirlings of pain morphing to grief—breaking all ability to concentrate—flashing into unfocused turmoil—*

Ezra felt a tumult of grief overcome him. It reminded him of losing his parents, extinguished by the Empire. Left alone on Lothal. Abandoned. Lost.
Exiled.

He whimpered. “So… painful and… cold… misery…”

Kanan felt it and rushed to Ezra’s side. Tears seeped from his padawan’s eyes.

Kanan put his arm tightly around him and held Ezra tight. His other hand rested on Ezra’s chest, and he could feel Ezra’s heart rapidly beating. Kanan was worried. “Ezra concentrate; don’t get lost in what you feel.”

_A spark—a sudden twist—CRACK—alien patterns and forms emitting control—_

*Unfocused turmoil binding into the ability to concentrate—*

_An older, feminine voice—*

“Ch’itkashn.” … “Veo.” … “G’evoti.” …

Ezra was lost in what he heard and sensed coursing through the Force. Kanan shook him. “Ezra!?”

*Focus—surprise—confusion—*

It was quiet.

Ezra’s perception slowly returned to the physical space around him. Eyes still clinched shut, his heart rate slowed down while he took deep breaths. The mechanical ventilator breathing for Thrawn actually provided a helpful pace for Ezra to focus on for calm. It was steady.


Ezra’s eyes slowly fluttered open and found glossy crimson orbs staring back.

“Thrawn…,” Ezra whispered.

*Focus—*

Crimson orbs fluttered open to find a boy in sorrow with tears streaming down his face. His eyes were closed tight.

*Swirlings in the Force—surprise—confusion—*
Recognition suddenly dawned in Thrawn’s crimson gaze. Heavy eyes flicked to the one who he recognized now as Kanan Jarrus, holding Ezra with a tense worry. The Jedi held the worry of a father.

Kanan huffed a breath and turned to meet Thrawn’s glossy gaze, and Thrawn held Kanan’s clouded and wise eyes with his own, dimmed scarlet. Could the blind Jedi see him?

Thrawn’s eyelids were quickly becoming too heavy. He slowly shifted his sight back to Ezra and regarded the young man.

Kanan sensed so many questions reflected from Thrawn. He felt Thrawn’s exhaustion and the mental struggle to overcome it.

“Ezra look,” Kanan said, gently shaking his padawan. “Open your eyes.”

Thrawn unfocused and flinched narrow his glistening red orbs at the wording. Her melodic voice echoed like a memory. “Ch’itkashn veo g’evoti…”

Ezra slowly opened his eyes, the last currents of fear drifting away. Thrawn saw they were filled with sorrow when the young man met his gaze. There was surprise and confusion there for both of them.

“Thrawn…,” Ezra whispered.

Thrawn held Ezra’s eyes dimly. His brow furrowed with questions, while Ezra wiped the tears from his face. The Chiss couldn’t speak because of the breathing tube, but his eyes seemed to convey so much. You put yourself in danger here… You aren’t supposed to be here… Why do you risk this… for me…?

“They’re going to get you out of here, Grand Admiral Thrawn,” Kimmund said at the foot of the interrogation chair. Thrawn sluggishly moved his gaze where the voice emitted. There was a hint of emotion to the commander’s strong voice. “I’m seeing to that.”

Recognition in Thrawn’s scarlet eyes. You risk so much…?

Thrawn looked down and saw they unhooked his restraints. He tried to lift his arm but could only twitch his fingers. Thrawn blinked slowly in frustration.

“He’s weak and malnourished, on top of the toxins they gave him,” Kallus said from behind the medical displays.

Thrawn found Kallus watching him from the displays. The former Imperial Agent nodded.

“Why are his eyes so dim?” Ezra asked.

“Low oxygen count in his blood probably,” Kallus said. He manipulated the displays in front of him. “The numbers are low. Well… for a human. I’m not sure what his should be actually…”

Thrawn explored the rest of the room and settled upon what would appear to be an empty corner to any other pair of eyes. His hearing began to fade as he focused on the corner. Crimson orbs went wide and then flinched narrow with a flash of familiarity and regret. Thank you…

Thrawn alerted to movement on his left. Crimson eyes tracked the heat signature of someone
walking down the hallway outside. Weakly, Thrawn pointed to the door with his left hand and tried to raise it shakily. Kimmund saw the subtle movement and was immediately reminded of the Chiss children he helped rescue in the Unknown Region. The children saved his and the lives of his squad multiple times during their escape with precognitive warnings of Grysk attacks.

Thrawn’s crimson eyes shifted to Kimmund’s helmet as if the Chiss knew the object of his memory. Those eyes held the look of one resigned to his fate.

Thrawn dropped his hand limp with over exertion, clinched his eyes shut and jerked his head slightly to the right. His body began to reject the breathing tube, but Thrawn was able to stop it quickly with effort. The pain lingered however.

Ezra placed a hand on Thrawn’s forehead at the sudden movement and the spike of pain felt through the Force. The new plastoid divider in Thrawn's mouth seemed to be troubling.

“Whoa hey it’s alright,” Ezra worriedly said, trying to steady him.

“Someone’s coming,” Kanan said.

The surprise of Kimmund’s memory and possible realization slowed him down though.

A keycode could be heard being punched into the pad outside, and, just as Kimmund turned around, he found himself face to face with Tephan as she walked into the room.

“Commander Kimmund I wanted to check…,” Tephan’s voice trailed off as she took in the room. Her heart turned cold, and she paused.

First, she noticed the empty repulsorlift next to boxes of medical equipment strewn on the floor. No. Some weren’t boxes at all but hollowed out coverings similar to what smugglers would use.

Then she noticed two men and a boy in stormtrooper armor without helmets on. The one behind the medical displays seemed on edge at her arrival, ready for a fight.

Third, Tephan noticed a crumpled IT-O Interrogator Droid on the floor in the back of the room. Then, Thrawn’s pained expression as he tried to calm himself with the boy’s palm on his forehead.

She tilted her head and regarded Commander Kimmund with an almost hurt confusion.

“Sir?” Tephan asked, confused and terrified with disbelief.

“Tephan,” Kimmund responded stiffly. He was frozen a moment. She was the last person he expected to walk through that door. He knew what he needed to do, but he hated it.

“Wh- what’s going on sir?”

“I’m sorry,” Kimmund said, and he pulled his blaster pistol from his hip-holster in a flash, and Tephan plopped to the ground with a thud, stunned unconscious.

Kimmund quickly holstered his weapon and rushed to her side. He shifted her to her back and lifted her head in the crook of his arm. A gloved hand shakily pulled her helmet off, revealing her limp face. Kimmund's heart ached at the sight; she would have been the only one to talk him from doing something crazy like this. She always protected him; she was his center.

“I suppose there’s not room for one more on that lift?” Kimmund said sadly as he brushed the hair out of her eyes.
“I’m sorry Kimmund,” Kallus said quietly. “Thrawn needs Ezra there to-”

"I know..." Kimmund interrupted sorrowfully. He sighed regretfully as he looked at Tephan’s face one last time, taking in all her features and committing them to memory. “I know... Forgive me one day,” he whispered.

Chopper warbled lightly.

“We… should get going soon,” Kallus said slowly. “We may not have much time before the hyperdrive’s back online.”

With one last wring through Tephan’s hair, Kimmund stood up with a sigh. Again, the leader of the First Legion was grateful for his helmet, for it hid the emotion underneath. However, Kanan felt it clearly and empathized with the commander.

Kimmund nodded. “Let’s get him off this ship.”

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Morality separates heroes from villains.

Sometimes, all the universe may hang in the balance.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Vav rot'sah «Wake up»
Vav «Awaken»
Tis’mi? «Daddy?»
Vatt'ah ten. «Help him.»
Ttis'ah. «Please.»
Ch'itkashn «Open»
Veo «Your»
G'evoti «Eyes»
Chapter Summary

"Even a small group of people can change the galaxy. It only takes one man to spit in the eye of a giant and blind him." —Nora Wexley

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

All beings begin their lives with hope and aspirations. Among these aspirations is the desire that there will be a straight path to those goals. It is seldom so. Perhaps never.

The Empire was found to be something vile, a disease manifested out of a corruption long unseen and undisturbed by those blinded within the Republic Senate. It was an illness that arose and entrenched itself into the very fabric of their society. Born from the chaotic ambitions of the Clone War, it grew toward an established link that brought forth a façade of stability to the worlds and populations held within its newfound territory of influence.

Those of sound mind and purer hearts, those guardians of justice, were unable to see its rise in time. They too were blind. Most fell at the unwilling behest of those once trusted. Few survived, and for those who did, to flee and retreat was the only answer. To preserve what was seen as their only hope was the only answer.

Usurped by one who’s treachery and deception amounted to that which existed beyond the darkest bounds of morality and practical existence, the Republic fell and morphed into the vile creature now known to those few who seek out its true nature, held firm upon the pillars of a corrupted order, ruling with an unshakable and unmalleable countenance. One with such unmovable and tyrannical convictions filled with malice, there was no reason, no compromise, no means observed toward a trusted alliance.

A New Order had arisen from the Old, which bespoke of the singular and selfish means toward that which was never meant as an end but as a beginning toward an ongoing rule of terrible power, intended by the Architect to stretch on for all eternity.

An Eternal Empire.

That could not stand. Always two there would be and connected to the other, one always was. It was clear. The Unknown was connected to the Known.

The position operated upon always was taken forth with the upmost clarity and conviction. Loyalties and the weight of one’s word was opaque and carefully set forth in a navigation upon the delicate and eroding sand-bridge of a hoped-for peace. Truth was upheld but indeed protected from that which was recognized once as a light walking amongst twilight in the sky, now cruelly transformed into a darkened shadow haunting the very depths of memory.

The mission always came first; the people, first. From within, the pillars shall crumble, the
architects of their own destruction.

To defeat an enemy, you must know them.

To know your enemy, you must become your enemy.

And so, a Grand Admiral of the Empire he became.

To be lifted with such gentleness was something unaccounted for in the long years of the recent past. It was a foreign experience, a compassion, that was so different from the offerings of the Empire. An unfettered kindness permeated the very aura of the space around Thrawn, perhaps a result of those in the room or perhaps the sum of those kind souls mixed with the mysterious field of energy that had, through those mostly unkind years, come to be known by this part of the galaxy as the Force.

Surely, so very different from what recent years had offered…

Crimson eyes fluttered open and found the Jedi Kanan Jarrus hovering over him, lifting him from the Empire’s metallic contraption that caused so much pain. Indeed, Kanan once knew that pain himself at the hands of Tarkin and the Inquisitor, a shared and common suffering between the Jedi and the Chiss.

While Thrawn tried to focus, his head lay limp in the hollow of Kanan’s arm, swaying with the gentle lift. Kanan cradled him as he would a child that had fallen asleep in the night away from their bed, the Jedi’s other arm hooked underneath Thrawn’s thighs. Someone had placed Thrawn’s left arm lax across his torso, while his bare right arm, adorned with secured tubing and the IV, teetered limply in the stale air of the Star Destroyer. The torn and bloodied fabric of the sleeve from his white Grand Admiral uniform swayed forgotten below it.

Kanan rotated toward the repulsorlift, and the IV suddenly stung, having been tugged a little too harshly in Kanan’s rotation toward the lift. A sharp pain trailed up the appendage, and Thrawn flinched his eyes closed.

What a helpless feeling Thrawn felt, not able to move or even breathe on his own. He tried raising the hand on his torso to alert Kanan of his distress, but his fingers would only twitch. Thrawn furrowed his brow in frustration and weakly shook his head away from the pain, the only movement he was able to produce.

Thrawn would have moaned in pain, but the breathing tube prevented him from doing even that, unable to emit any audible sound since speaking with Rukh and Commodore Faro aboard the ISD Chimaera. He hoped she and the crew were well…

Thrawn was so tired, both of a physical and of a mental nature. The course upon which his mind would normally travel became ever foggier and more uncertain with each heartbeat. It was nearly untraversable now. He should just let go, let go of the struggle and of all the pain with which he was troubled.

It was so cold. His mind suddenly seemed detached from his body, and Thrawn began to relax, his body fading away from him. No…

Ezra ducked underneath Thrawn’s breathing tube and IV lines and lifted Thrawn’s dangling arm. A little blood had trailed down his cerulean forearm from where the IV was inserted.

Kallus stood on the other side of the interrogation chair, fumbling with an IV bag and the mechanical ventilator. “Commander Kimmund, would you grab this IV bag for me please?” Kallus asked, as he lifted the mechanical ventilator from its place.

Kimmund took the IV solution from him and followed Kallus around the interrogation chair, careful to not tug on Thrawn’s IV line any more than already was done. He observed his superior officer with a pang of guilt. One for which loyalty and admiration was great enough to commit treason, so helpless in the arms of both Jedi.

They seemed to care for him though, especially the boy. Thrawn wasn’t responding to the young man’s touch. Thrawn’s face remained relaxed and lips slightly open around the breathing tube. Kimmund saw the boy look to his master with questions as he and Kallus approached.

Two shrill double-beeps began to emit from the mechanical ventilator Kallus held. The machine could also monitor a patient’s vital signs and detected Thrawn’s diminishing heart rate and resulting low oxygen level. Kallus startled and quickly silenced the machine.

“What’s happening?” Ezra asked, watching Thrawn’s face relax more.

“Place him on the lift quickly- Carefully,” Kallus said.

With Ezra stabilizing his arm, Kanan gently lowered Thrawn onto the repulsorlift.

“Thrawn?” Ezra’s voice had a worried edge to it as he touched Thrawn’s shoulder. Thrawn lay unresponsive, the mechanical lift of his chest the only indication of life.

“Go ahead and get on the lift with him Ezra,” Kallus said as he kneeled down beside Thrawn. He set the mechanical ventilator down with a metallic thud, as Ezra climbed over Thrawn and sat on the Chiss’s left side.

Ezra could tell Kallus was worried. The former Imperial glanced at the readout on the mechanical ventilator and quickly grabbed for a tube of stimulant.

“What now?” Ezra asked. Kallus’ eyes hesitated toward Ezra’s gaze a moment as he turned back toward Thrawn. Kallus pressed the tube against Thrawn’s neck and injected the stimulant.

“The toxins are breaking down in his system. It’s starting to be too much for him to handle in his state.” Kallus’ voice became quietly grim.

Kallus tossed the empty tube aside and looked back at Ezra. He knowingly held up a manual bag ventilator, and Ezra’s heart dropped with nervous energy. “Oh…”

“When I separate the tube, we need to do this fast,” Kallus said with reassuring authority. “I’ll show you how to do it first, and then I’ll hand it to you okay?”

Ezra’s eyes went wide but were determined at the expectation of his action. “Okay.”

“Thrawn’s fading…,” Kallus said, looking at the group. Kimmund took in a deep breath upon seeing the gravity within Kallus’ gaze. “We need to get him proper medical care soon at our base…”
Kallus looked aside and decided against finishing the thought. What good would it do right now? He resolved his mind and leaned over Thrawn, looking intensely at his closed eyes, and mentally willed them open.

“Grand Admiral-,” Kallus started. He reached for Thrawn’s hand resting across his torso and squeezed, trying to awaken him. “Thrawn… sir.”

Thrawn wasn’t responding. His body merely shook at Kallus’ attempts at attention.

“The stimulant should have worked,” Kallus muttered. The sound of the mechanical ventilator breathing for Thrawn became a weight upon everyone’s hearts. Kallus squeezed Thrawn’s hand one more time and then moved to rub Thrawn’s chest, just above his heart. His voice became intense. “Thrawn, sir, wake up.”

Commander Kimmund shook his head, afraid suddenly that all he did would soon be for nothing. Kanan lowered his head and gripped the handle of the repulsorlift as he felt turmoil in the Force.

Ezra was unaware of the turmoil though and unknowingly pushed through it. He placed a hand on Thrawn’s forehead, and his voice was soft. “Thrawn? Open your eyes for us.”

Thrawn’s eyelids flinched, and his brow furrowed underneath Ezra’s palm as his consciousness rose back to the surface.

“There you go, sir,” Kallus said, smiling thinly. Heavy cerulean eyelids revealed dim scarlet orbs, and they flinched as they went in and out of focus. Eventually Thrawn recognized Kallus, his face hovering directly above him. “We’re going to switch out your breathing tube, and get you off this ship, okay?”

Sound was strangely echoey and far away, as if Thrawn were underneath a blanket of ocean, and sound was drifting far away and useless. Thrawn understood more of Kallus’ facial expression than his words.*Brow furrowed… face slightly red… blue eyes intense… authoritative surety… hesitant trust… anxiety.*

Kallus saw Thrawn losing focus and pressed his hand slightly harder onto Thrawn’s chest. Thrawn’s eyelids pulsed open as a result, and his pupils attempted to focus again for but a moment. Thrawn shifted his head and began to drift away once again though, his eyes closing with heaviness.

“We just need to do it; Ezra, keep his head secure,” Kallus said breathily.

Ezra kept his hand on Thrawn’s forehead, and Kallus moved quickly. Kallus detached the oxygen connection of the mechanical ventilator from Thrawn’s endotracheal tube and secured the manual bag ventilator in its place. Thrawn didn’t react. Ezra was amazed at how quickly the transition happened.

Kallus squeezed and released the bag at a steady rhythm while watching the medical readouts beside him. There was a slight dip in the oxygen readings but it soon recovered.

“This is the rhythm you want to maintain,” Kallus said. Ezra found Kallus’ gaze and nodded. Kallus rotated the bag on the tube toward him, and Ezra began breathing for Thrawn. “Yes, just like that Ezra. Commander Kimmund, let’s cover them, quickly.”

Ezra felt a surge of anxiety a moment at observing Thrawn’s chest rise and fall to the rhythm of his hands. He felt a squeeze upon his armored shoulder though and found Kanan looking down at him with cloudy and scarred eyes. “You’re doing well Ezra.”
Kallus placed the inert mechanical ventilator at Thrawn’s booted feet for use in the shuttle, and Kimmund began placing the smuggler boxes over their legs. Small air holes were punched into the top of some of the crates, and Kallus hooked the IV bag connected to Thrawn’s arm through them. “Alright lean back Ezra, we’ll be at the shuttle soon. Just remember, you’re breathing for him.”

“We’ll be fine Kallus,” Ezra said scooting backward and down on his right side beside Thrawn. Kallus nodded back and placed the last crate over them. It was a tight fit, but to any Imperial, they would be pushing a repulsorlift full of ordinary medical supplies, just as the official manifest from the leader of the First Legion indicated on his report.

Kallus stood up straight and found Kimmund holding a stormtrooper helmet out to him. “Helmets on,” Kimmund said.

Kallus and Kanan put on their helmets and joined each other at the foot of the repulsorlift. Kimmund punched in his code sequence at the door, Chopper watching the leader of the First Legion with his photoreceptors. The droid warbled nervously.

The door whooshed open and Kimmund eyed the droid through his helmet a moment. He then turned to Kanan and Kimmund, his voice strong. “Follow me, and, as before, let me do the talking.”

Kimmund didn’t give them a chance to respond and turned to exit the medical interrogation room. He stopped short though and faltered at the sight of Tephan laying unconscious on the metallic ground. *This better be worth it.*

Kanan felt the Commander’s regretful ache through the Force and pitied Kimmund. Commander Kimmund continued forward though, despite the pull of his heart, and ushered them out of the hallway. Once again, Kimmund ordered the stormtrooper guarding the entrance that First Legion personnel were only allowed through.

And thus, Commander Kimmund, leader of the First Legion, led a group of Rebels and an Imperial prisoner of the highest classification toward the *ISD Devastator’s* hangar bay.

Toward freedom and escape. Toward hope?

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Major Ottkreg felt it was time to check on the traitor. He slowly walked the corridors of the *Devastator*, leading back to the medical interrogation wing that held Grand Admiral Thrawn. Oddly, the Chiss wasn’t formally stripped of rank, as the Empire needed to maintain the prime cover story of rebel partisans attempting to assassinate him through hacked sentinel droids. It was too risky; too many journalists had deep connections within Imperial ranks and knew how to look for little details like that.

Therefore, much to Major Ottkreg’s chagrin, he still thought of, and had to address to others within the Empire unaware of the truth, their alien prisoner as *Grand Admiral* Thrawn. One whom technically held a higher rank than he still.

No matter. Soon, Major Ottkreg felt the ire of his Imperial fortitude would be extinguished considering the toxins he ordered the Chief Medical Officer to administer. Should the Chiss overcome the concoction, Lord Vader and the Emperor should ensure the parasite’s end soon.
enough. Until the fate became final though, the sheer fear held within the eyes of those he passed in the metallic hallways of the Devastator would suffice his hunger for power and respect.

The stormtrooper guarding the interrogation wing of the medical bay stood promptly at attention upon seeing Ottkreg’s approach.

Major Ottkreg stopped in front of the trooper and stood rigid with Imperial pomp for an awkward beat, judging the trooper’s reaction. He already noted three violations of Imperial protocol on his way here and had a keen eye in search of a fourth. Ottkreg eyed the stormtrooper from boot to helmet as if he owned him.

“Well are you going to let me through or just stand there like a lost gundark?” Major Ottkreg said curtly, raising his chin with a smirk.

The stormtrooper straightened his shoulders returning the major’s gaze with hesitation. “S-sir, I’ve been ordered to only allow First Legion personnel through.”

Major Ottkreg’s smirk faded and his brow reflected a new ire. “Do you not know who I am trooper?”

“Y-yes sir- Major Ottkreg, sir- I’m sorry but-“

“Under who’s authority do you hold this order?”

“Commander Kimmund, sir.”

Major Ottkreg bristled, and his voice hushed to a frightening malice. “I am a Loyalty Officer of the Empire. Do you not understand- the weight with which my authority stands.” Ottkreg stepped closer to the stormtrooper. “Especially considering- who is in that corridor behind you!”

The stormtrooper knew he was given an order and felt he understood the proper chain of command given the circumstances he was aware of. Yes, this was merely a test of loyalty. He wouldn’t let someone who wasn’t authorized beyond him. Too many Rebels had infiltrated Imperial facilities around the galaxy, and he wouldn’t be the next. Should he pass this test perhaps he would be commended and given a promotion, he thought.

“With respect, sir,” the stormtrooper began. “Commander Kimmund is in command of the First Legion which answers directly to Lord Vader, who is the supreme authority on this ship, and-“

“Oh, we have a stormtrooper who thinks on their feet do we? Enough!”

Major Ottkreg pulled out his command code cylinder from his uniform and beckoned the trooper to insert it into the door’s security panel. Through gritted teeth and an ire yet unknown to the stormtrooper in their Imperial career until this moment, Major Ottkreg kept his voice surprisingly literate and understandable. “You. Will. Open. That. Door.”

The stormtrooper, perhaps realizing the chance of having made a mistake, quickly inserted the code cylinder into the panel, and the door immediately hissed open. Major Ottkreg furiously grabbed his code cylinder back and trudged forward into the interrogation wing, suspicious of what Kimmund had done.

Ottkreg punched his key-code into the panel for the door behind which Grand Admiral Thrawn was held and immediately blanched at what he saw… or what his eyes didn’t see.

_Frag…_
Where Thrawn should have been was an empty medical interrogation chair with open restraints and disconnected medical sensors. Ottkreg huffed into the room and saw Tephan of the First Legion incapacitated and unconscious on the floor with her helmet off.

His eyes wide in astonished anger, Ottkreg bellowed in fury to the stormtrooper in the hallway. “You idiot!”

Major Ottkreg pulled out his communicator. “Set a lockdown throughout the ship. Should Commander Kimmund be spotted, his location is to be reported to me immediately, and he is to be taken into custody for questioning. Alert Lord Vader with a Code Silver under my authority. I don’t care if he’s in his bacta tank!”

The stormtrooper walked behind Major Ottkreg. “Orders sir…?”

Major Ottkreg unkeyed his comm and eyed the unconscious form of Tephan with disdain. He turned around to the stormtrooper after a moment with wide eyed fury. “With me trooper.”

And Major Ottkreg trudged into the corridors of the Devastator followed by a nervous stormtrooper.

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They were almost to the hangar bay when the alert went out. Commander Kimmund slowed to a stop in the middle of the hallway upon receiving the security alert.

“What’s going on Kimmund?” Kanan asked. The Jedi felt the sudden dread from him.

Kimmund glanced back to Kanan and Kallus. “Complication. Security bulletin out for my detainment. Either someone found the room empty or…” Kimmund shook his head and continued down the corridor again with Kanan and Kallus pushing Thrawn and Ezra on the lift.

“… or Tephan woke up,” Kimmund grimaced. “We need to hurry.”

Kimmund rounded a corner, and the hangar bay entrance was just ahead. The doors were right there, and the Rebels’ Imperial Shuttle waited beyond.

But two stormtroopers suddenly appeared in front of them from another pathway ahead.

“Halt,” one stormtrooper said, holding his hand out. Kimmund noticed the other trooper raised their blaster a little higher than normal regulation for parade rest. They were ready for trouble.

Kimmund held out his left hand, indicating to Kanan and Kallus that they should stop.

Kimmund feigned ignorance and continued a few paces before stopping himself, adding separation between him and the Rebels and Thrawn. “What’s going on troopers?”

“We’ve been ordered to take you in for questioning, Commander Kimmund,” the stormtrooper holding his hand out continued. “Major Ottkreg’s orders.”

“Ah, I see,” Kimmund said, returning his hand to the barrel of his blaster. His blaster was set to stun… But there were two of them, and Kimmund saw theirs weren’t set to stun… Upon neutralizing one, the other would have enough time to react. A tense silence swam through the atmosphere of the corridor, as Kimmund considered what to do.
Ezra, on his side looking over Thrawn, could feel the tension from where they lay underneath the boxes on the repulsorlift. Even if a fight did break out, he wouldn’t be able to help as he needed to breathe for Thrawn. They seemed stuck yet were so close to their goal.

Kallus naively stepped forward, hoping to help Kimmund. His mind twitched to the blaster at his hip. “Is there some kind of problem here?”

“Kallus no,” Kanan muttered.

Ezra felt an awareness from Thrawn in the Force and witnessed his crimson eyes flutter open. They were mesmerizing as Ezra had never seen eyes such as his. They glowed a pale red in the darkness, perhaps capturing the small amount of light that seeped through the air holes in the boxes around them. Ezra could tell he was weak by how his eyes moved but also noticed Thrawn seemed to be tracking movement.

“You can see them can’t you?” Ezra whispered.

Thrawn gingerly shifted his head and looked Ezra directly in his eyes. He tried to hold the young Jedi’s gaze. Ezra saw and felt wisdom in those crimson orbs but couldn’t quite decipher the meaning conveyed from them, yet they still spoke to Ezra. If only Thrawn could truly speak to him…

Thrawn flicked his gaze to Ezra’s hands pulsing the ventilator and filling his own lungs with oxygen. Perhaps with anxiety at realizing the helplessness of his condition, Thrawn fluttered his eyes closed.

Ezra felt Thrawn’s anxiety. “It’ll be alright,” Ezra whispered. Thrawn merely furrowed his brow in response, trying to will the anxiety away.

Ezra hoped they would be off this ship soon.

Kimmund glanced to Kallus and held up his hand again to stop him, but the movement startled the stormtroopers blocking their advance to the hangar bay. They both raised their blasters toward the Rebel group, and the one seemingly in charge raised his voice commandingly.

“Halt! All of you, lower your weapons to the ground! The droid too, no sudden movements!”

Chopper held up his mechanical hands and warbled nervously.

Kimmund was now caught with a hand off of his blaster, truly unable to react. He mentally groaned at Kallus and turned his attention back to the stormtroopers, his helmet slowly shifting forward with his gaze.

“Alright let’s not do anything hasty, boys,” Kimmund said, raising his left hand higher in perceived submission. This was bad.

But suddenly the stormtrooper on the right let out a surprised yell as his shin was inexplicably struck. Chopper whipped his head back and forth, trying to determine where the source of the attack was coming from.

“Hey! What?!” The stormtrooper looked down and saw nothing, but his feet were suddenly swept from underneath him. The trooper fell to the ground with a harsh thud, his blaster clanking away from him. The stormtrooper’s companion nervously reacted toward the stealthy strike. What was happening?
Kimmund didn’t wait for explanation. He saw an opening, both stormtroopers’ attention off of the group, and slapped his hand back to his blaster. In a flash, he stunned the trooper on the left while a lone discharge of lightning enveloped the other trooper on the ground, stunning him as well.

It was quiet after the second trooper fell unconscious on the ground.

Emerging from his stupor, Kallus whipped his blaster from his hip and pointed it forward, trying to assess with Kimmund for another threat.

“Hold your fire,” Kanan yelled behind them. “He’s friendly.”

And with what appeared to be a shimmering essence to any normal eye, a flash sparkled in the corridor, and a short, armored creature appeared breathing heavily over the two fallen stormtroopers holding an electrostaff.

“Rukh,” Kanan said, smirking.

Rukh’s staff was at the ready, still poised from battle. The Noghri shifted his gaze up from the troopers limp on the ground and smiled at Kanan.

“You,” Kimmund exasperated, lowering his weapon with frustrated but thankful disbelief.

At the same time, Kallus turned to Kanan, keeping his blaster focused on Rukh, “You know him!?”

Rukh shifted his gaze to Kallus and eyed him with a warrior’s challenge directly over the barrel of the former Imperial’s blaster.

“Yes, he’s a friend,” Kanan said with soft assurance. “Lower your weapon.”

“I know him as well,” Kimmund said with a bitter respect. “How are you here Rukh?” Kimmund shook his head and corrected himself. “How long have you been here?”

Rukh straightened and stepped over the unconscious stormtroopers toward the group. His eyes were quick, assessing their surroundings.

“Doesn’t matter, long enough,” Rukh said deeply. “The hyperdrive should be back online soon.”

“So you were behind the hyperdrive overheating?” Kimmund said. So he’d been on the ship a while... “Moved on from sabotaging shuttles have you?”

Rukh couldn’t help but offer a brief smile. “Yes.”

Rukh lost his smile just as quickly and glanced longingly at the boxes on the repulsorlift. He eyed each of them with a stern seriousness. “Quickly. I’ll continue to escort you.”

Rukh activated his cloak and disappeared.

“Sabine, Rex, have the shuttle ready to go,” Kanan said into his comm. “We might need to get out of here fast.”
"To defeat an enemy, you must know them." —Thrawn

"To know your enemy, you must become your enemy." —Sun Tzu, author, "The Art of War"

“I study the art of war, work to perfect it.” —Thrawn
Chapter Summary

"Plans are fragile things, and life often dashes expectations to the ground." —Kriea

"A man must do what he must... Even if his stand is against the fall of eternal night." —Nevil “Nightswan” Cygni

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Rebel group walked through the entrance of the hangar bay to no reaction. The door whooshed closed behind them.

Kimmund hesitated and assessed the area, scanning the actions of Imperial personnel and every droid in sight. But he detected no threat. Through his suspicion and anxiety, he gingerly continued to lead them toward their shuttle.

*Don't react… just be as you normally would…*

*Routine supply escort… yes, nothing unusual here…*

Though outwardly, he maintained the Imperial pomp and rigidity required of his station, inwardly Kimmund was shaking. *Because* of his stature in rank, he was aware of the consequences of his actions today should they fail, not only for himself, but for the others around him… for the others *relying* on him.

Consequences for those who never thought to doubt him. *Tephan.*

Sweat dripped down from his forehead beneath his helmet. His left eye stung as a drop trickled into the delicate orb.

*Eyes back and forth- Blink, blink, blink-*

*Keep moving forward- Step left, right, left, right-*

*Scan the area- Someone approaches-*

*Threat? - Assess…*

Three maintenance technicians followed by an Imperial astromech approached them on their path. Thetechs carried bags of spare parts and recycled bits of crumpled metals. They almost shyly averted their gaze as they approached and walked by Kimmund, and Kanan and Kallus pushing the repulsorlift.

*That* was a different look than the familiar wonderstruck respect he would normally get as the leader of the First Legion. Their eyes held terror... suspicion... No, Kimmund was weary of the looks he got from them... it was surely something born from Major Ottkreg’s ship-wide alert.
Kimmund glanced back at them and saw that their pace had obviously quickened. Kimmund shook his head, took in a deep breath, and accelerated his own pace, returning his gaze forward. There it was, the Rebels' Imperial shuttle seemingly refueled and ready to go. Kimmund was increasingly on edge the closer they got to the craft.

Stormtroopers logged equipment and stored supply crates on the far side of the hangar. They seemed oblivious to their presence though. And in front of them just off their right, another maintenance technician sat on the ground in a pout, her hands inside a partly dismantled droid. Her forehead and uniform was covered in grime and oil from the droid having spectacularly malfunctioned all over the floor.

“Bwrhh whao whaaaa,” Chopper warbled nervously as they passed the sight.

Kimmund glanced over his shoulder at Chopper’s small distress. Before he was able to hush the droid, a shrill and pompously familiar voice sounded over the loudspeaker.

“Commander Kimmund…”

Kimmund halted in place, Kallus and Kanan abruptly pulling and sliding the repulsorlift to a stop behind the Commander. The voice echoed off the titanium hangar walls with a clipped and ear-piercing whine. It made the spine shiver. And yet it was conspicuously commanding and authoritative at the same time.

"You and your… group of Rebels, halt precisely where you are.”

Major Ottkreg…

There was a malicious excitement to the trill of the loyalty officer’s voice.

The hangar bay paused and grew excessively quieter at the word Rebels, save for the constant sound of ship machinery and droids going about their programming. Kimmund knew he shouldn’t have stopped moving, but that was a part of his basic, instinctual Imperial conditioning that was so ingrained within him and yet unbroken still in his rebellion.

Kanan and Kallus were frozen behind the Commander of the First Legion. They glanced at each other and felt immediately exposed, and Chopper shifted nervously beside them. The maintenance technician working on the malfunctioned droid stood up and slowly backed away.

Kimmund took a moment to steel himself, keeping his gaze straight while considering his options. He took a deep breath and just stared at the Rebels' Imperial shuttle. They were so close…

He had walked them directly into a trap.

Commander Kimmund slowly turned around and faced the traffic control nest overlooking the hangar bay. There he was, a figure sure to be Major Ottkreg holding a microphone up to his mouth. A sneering smile curved up the Loyalty Officer’s face and wrinkled his cruel eyes.

But next to Major Ottkreg was another figure, nervously wringing their hands together. Poor boy, Kimmund thought. He recognized the Imperial Officer to be Lieutenant Jace.

Kimmund released a tired sigh and reached for his comm at his belt. He projected his voice as true to himself, a tired veteran ready for rest, ready for peace.

“This is First Legion business Major Ottkreg. You know not about what you speak,” Kimmund said bitterly.
Ottkreg chucked.

“Nonsense. You have committed treason against our Emperor and you will stand down.”

A group of stormtroopers emerged through the hangar bay entrance with their blasters at the ready. The stormtroopers logging supply crates across the way also alerted to the situation.

“You are mistaken,” Kimmund insisted.

“This doesn’t look good, Kimmund,” Kallus hissed.

“I realize that,” Kimmund muttered.

As Kimmund muttered his response, Kallus also saw over Kimmund's shoulder, Rex and Sabine appear on the shuttle’s ramp. Rex pointed his blaster rifle at the ready, and Sabine held her blaster pistol in one hand. Her other hand held a device.

Everything happened in slow motion as Kallus watched Sabine press down on the device.

Kimmund opened his mouth to speak to Major Ottkreg again, oblivious to Sabine and Rex behind him, but found himself interrupted by a flash of blinding white light. Roaring thunder quickly followed and fire erupted in a string of deafening bursts around them. Tie Fighters and Walkers lining the hangar walls turned into balls of flame, and everyone ducked to the ground for cover.

Major Ottkreg’s smirk faded as he watched the explosions erupt in sequence across the hangar bay. He had a spectacularly perfect view of the destruction from the traffic control nest.

Ottkreg’s face reddened as it scrunched into an angry fury. His voice screeched into the microphone, rivaling the decibel level of the chaos down below. “Stop those Rebels!”

“Come on!” Sabine yelled over comm. “Get to the shuttle!”

Blaster fire streamed through the air as Rex and Sabine returned fire with the remaining stormtroopers. Kimmund saw there were too many, and he was too far away now to help Kanan and Kallus push the repulsorlift.

“Go!” Kimmund yelled to them. “I’ll cover you!”

Kimmund rolled to his feet and scrambled to cover. He ducked behind crates of doonium and fired at the stormtroopers, diverting some of their attention toward himself. More were arriving through the hangar doors.

“Stop for the shuttle as soon as you hear the engines!” Kallus yelled back to Kimmund.

Kimmund glanced back between exchanging fire with his former compatriots. "Just go!

“Chop go ahead, prep the shuttle! You can go faster than us!” Kanan yelled to Chopper as he pushed himself up from the ground. Chopper warbled acknowledgement and sped off.

Kanan joined Kallus, and they shoved the repulsorlift toward the shuttle. They were almost to the ramp, but Kanan suddenly felt a surge through the Force.

Swirlings in the Force... Malice. Hatred.

It was a distant aura. He also felt a more immediate threat. Kanan removed his helmet and turned toward the hangar bay entrance.
“Kanan what…,” Kallus started, but he was interrupted by three stormtroopers appearing suddenly in front of the lift with raised weapons.

Kallus didn’t have any time to react, but Rukh was ready, having scouted ahead. Two stormtroopers began flailing as an invisible spectre subdued them. The other flinched and was taken down by Sabine.

Kanan steeled himself and ignited his lightsaber, placing it ceremoniously in front of his face as he stepped forward.

“It’s a Jedi! Focus on the Jedi!” Stormtroopers exclaimed.

Kanan fluidly deflected blaster bolts meant for him and those behind him.

Rukh decloaked. He scanned the battle with fierce eyes and then looked at Kallus, who was frozen. “Get him on board!” Rukh growled, sweeping a hand up toward the ramp.

“Rukh!” Sabine exclaimed, surprised and happy to see him.

“I’ll ask later,” Rex said as he huffed down the ramp to help Kallus push the lift up into the shuttle. He eyed Chopper with a smirk as the droid warbled sarcastically from inside the shuttle. The droid was busy sifting through the shuttle’s systems, trying to get the shield up. “Jump in the pilot’s seat Sabine; you and Chop get us ready to go!”

Commander Kimmund took a moment and knelt behind his cover, looking back at the Rebels. He saw Kanan with his lightsaber ignited and deflecting blaster bolts as he slowly backed toward the shuttle ramp. To see a Jedi in action up close…

Rukh caught Kimmund’s gaze and nodded. A new respect was found between them despite their antagonistic history.

Kimmund grunted and activated his comm again. “Lieutenant Jace, do you copy?!”

Static answered. Laser bolts came close to Kimmund’s cover, and he quickly returned fire. “I know you can hear me Lieutenant!”

“Y-yes sir, I can hear you,” Jace meekly responded.

The poor lad probably didn’t know what to think. Kimmund felt for the guy. “You must listen to me! I am the Commander of the First Legion, and you know I answer directly to Lord Vader. You must-“

Kimmund dropped his comm and yelled in pain as a stray laser bolt hit him in his left bicep. He flinched away from the trajectory and scooted over more into cover. He groaned in painful frustration and gingerly rested his arm across his lap. He stretched for his dropped commlink with his right hand.

Chaos was erupting in the hangar down below Lieutenant Jace and Major Ottkreg. Wild flashes of light from explosions and blasterfire lit the control nest with bright flares. The light revealed the contrast of Jace’s fearful demeanor of surprise and confusion to that of Major Ottkreg’s pure outrage.

Major Ottkreg turned toward Lieutenant Jace and pointed at him with fury. “Don’t you dare listen
to that traitor. You lock that shuttle down immediately! It is not to leave this hangar bay!”

At the same time, Kimmund's strained voice emitted over their commlinks again.

“You must allow that shuttle to takeoff. First. Legion. Authority,” Kimmund continued through pained and insistent inflection.

Lieutenant Jace hesitated. The Commander of the the First Legion a traitor? Commander Kimmund answered directly to Lord Vader, and, well, Vader answered to no one except the Emperor, least of all Major Ottkreg.

“I…,” Lieutenant Jace stuttered.

Major Ottkreg smoothly, with vile anger, unhooked and pointed his blaster pistol at Lieutenant Jace. “I gave you a direct order Lieutenant.”

Sabine flipped controls and pressed a button sequence to begin the shuttle’s engine startup sequence. Chopper finally got the shuttle’s shield working, and it began absorbing the stormtroopers’ blasterfire with hollow thuds. This allowed Kanan to relax, and he shut down his lightsaber.

Kanan reached out to the Force and felt the battle around him, heard the stormtroopers yelling, some panicked. He focused beyond the thuds impacting the shuttle’s shield, felt the heat of fire around them.

There it was. An approaching malice, one filled with a shattered darkness and focused on their obliteration.

But then, there was a closer pang in the Force. Kanan’s sense vibrated as he sensed Kimmund’s state of mind. It was a mind content yet turmoiled. Injured yet free.

Kanan saw that Kimmund had been hit by blasterfire in the arm and needed help. The Stormtrooper Commander turned Rebel hunkered down in his cover and only returned fire with his right hand. Kanan felt for a path to reach him.

Between lulls in blasterfire, Kimmund saw Kanan focused on him and knew what the Jedi was thinking. It was too risky. Kimmund shook his head and motioned to the shuttle as he flinched away from more blasterfire.

“Kanan we need help with the boxes!” Kallus yelled from inside the shuttle. Ezra.

“Up the ramp!” Rex yelled, tugging on Kanan’s shoulder.

Kanan helped Rex and Kallus lift the last of the boxes. A wide eyed and alert Ezra sat up beside Thrawn, whose eyes were closed with furrowed brow.

“You alright?” Kanan asked, leaning down and reaching for Ezra’s shoulder.

“Yeah…” Ezra seemed disoriented.

“Whoa he doesn’t look so good,” Rex said, stunned at seeing Grand Admiral Thrawn at all, much less in this state.
“How’s he doing Ezra?” Kallus asked, kneeling down next to the repulsorlift near Thrawn’s head. Ezra noticed he seemed to assess both him and the Chiss with the eyes of a medic.

Kanan stepped back and gave Kallus room as he began to fumble with the mechanical ventilator. Kallus unhooked the bag Ezra was using and reconnected the mechanical ventilator to Thrawn’s breathing tube, allowing Ezra to rest.

Upon hearing the mechanical ventilator begin to make noise, Sabine glanced back. She narrowed her eyes as she saw Ezra place a hand on Thrawn’s forehead.

Distrust? Disgust? Sabine didn’t know what she felt, or what she should feel, at the sight of an Imperial Grand Admiral in such a state. And at Ezra’s reaction to him.

But she saw Thrawn’s message and Rukh’s reaction to him. Sabine felt some disgust at her own gut reaction, but knew it would take a lot of effort from both Thrawn personally and herself for her to change and ever trust him.

“He woke up once along the way,” Ezra said to Kallus. “And I think he’s sort of alert now with the explosions and all.”

A commotion broke out at the foot of the ramp. Kanan flinched toward the noise, igniting his lightsaber. He felt Rex react as well as he raised his blaster rifle. Before the Jedi and the former Clone Captain could react though, the two stormtroopers were beat down and knocked unconscious. Kanan relaxed. Sounds of heavy breathing and footfalls sounded as someone then unseen walked up the ramp.

Rex startled as Rukh shimmered out of his cloak and walked onto the shuttle between he and Kanan.

“You need to watch your flank,” Rukh groaned as his warrior eyes scanned everyone on the shuttle.

The battle in the hangar bay suddenly muffled and faded away, the ventilator though vibrantly audible in its rhythm. Rukh’s brow creased as his gaze found Thrawn, and he took in the sight of his master, unresponsive on the repulsorlift. A pang of guilt, anger and regret overwhelmed him.

Kanan sensed Rukh’s feelings as they were pronounced and raw. By Ezra’s small intake of breath, his padawan felt it too, but there was no denying the change in the warrior’s demeanor for the rest of them on the shuttle.

Rukh’s shoulders relaxed, and he slowly stepped forward, securing his electrostaff over his back. Kallus saw his destination, the pained look in his eye and stepped away from the repulsorlift, giving Rukh room alone at Thrawn’s side.

Rukh glanced up at Ezra with hesitant and sparkling eyes. He was glad to see Ezra alright and thankful for him taking care of his master, but there was a deep sadness there as well. Ezra removed his hand from Thrawn’s forehead and returned an empathetically mellow smile.

And thus Ezra witnessed their reunion.

Rukh leaned forward, careful not to disturb Thrawn's bare right arm resting on the lift’s cool surface, covered in secured tubing and IV. He hovered over Thrawn’s still face, and Rukh reached for his left hand laying lax across his torso, holding it steady.

“Thrawn,” Rukh began quietly. Thrawn stirred, his brow furrowing. Rukh’s brow raised and
became slightly pleading. “Can you hear me?”

Crimson orbs slowly fluttered open, and Rukh breathed a sigh mixed with a sad relief. Thrawn’s eyes once again pulsed with a struggling focus, but became steady after a moment. The Chiss’s brow narrowed with emotion upon recognizing Rukh, crimson eyes becoming glassy.

Thrawn willed his fingers to move with great effort and returned Rukh’s squeeze with what little strength he had. Ezra thought he saw Thrawn’s lips flinch in a small smile around the breathing tube.

“Mitth’raw’nuruodo,” Rukh said in reverence. “Ch’ah k’ir nah tovun’csivci csah ch’ah ch’ah.” «I do not release myself.»

Rukh’s eyes began to well up as he smiled sadly, and Thrawn’s sparkled with increasing emotion and understanding. Rukh saw the message…

A darkened Specter emerged from billowing smoke and flame at the entrance to the hangar bay. Sabine saw it appear through the cockpit viewport, and her heart dropped with dread.

"Uh, guys?!" Sabine yelled, voice shaking. She fumbled for a device on her belt. A red lightsaber ignited from the dark form. “We have a problem!”

Sabine found the device and pressed down. More explosions erupted in the hangar bay.

“I should go back for Kimmund,” Kanan said quickly.

“No,” Rukh huffed at Kanan, his gaze shifting away from Thrawn for but a moment. “I’ll go…” Rukh found Thrawn’s crimson eyes once again, and knowingly held them with perhaps a double meaning. “…you need to get him out.”

Thrawn scrunched his brow and subtly shook his head at Rukh. No, not for me…

“I have my own shuttle, hidden, Chiss design,” Rukh continued. “Kimmund and I will get out together.”

Explosions continued to erupt in chain reactions through out the hangar. “What did you do?” Kallus wistfully asked, making his way to peek over Sabine's shoulder.

“Rex and I just went on a routine patrol of the hangar bay while you were gone,” Sabine said, grunting as she primed the shuttle’s throttle. The engines began to roar to life.

"Placed explosives where we could," Rex added.

Rukh’s gaze was locked with Thrawn’s, his grip steady in Thrawn’s weak hand. Ezra suddenly realized Rukh wore the face of one who was saying goodbye.

“Nan’eo ch’abeiuh,” Rukh said heavily. He rose his brow in emphasis with his words. “Ch’eo ch’acevi.” «Never goodbye… My friend.»

Thrawn’s eyes flinched with touching sadness. He shook his head in another small protest and seemed to struggle against his breathing tube as if he tried to speak. Not… for… me…

Rukh looked up and caught Ezra’s glassy eyes. “Promise me you’ll take care of him,” Rukh said.

Rukh breathed a sigh of relief and looked back down to Thrawn. Thrawn didn’t seem to want to accept the implication of what Rukh had told him in their beautiful language, crimson eyes pleading. Rukh simply returned a sad smile to his master, eyes threatening to spill over. He squeezed Thrawn’s hand firmly one last time and then tore it from his grasp, stepping back.

Thrawn tried to track Rukh backing away, his fingers twitching where his hand once was.

Pleading and heartbreak between these brothers erupted in the Force. It was loud for Ezra, and he replaced Rukh’s hand with his own in Thrawn’s grasp, trying to offer what comfort he could. Ezra felt Thrawn slightly squeeze back in return, but the Chiss’s eyes began to flutter, nearing the limit of his cling to awareness. His eyes closed with his release on consciousness, and Ezra saw it was slightly wet with emotion, upon the cerulean skin around where his crimson orbs once glowed.

“Go! Get out of here!” Rukh said as he swiped at his face. He activated his cloak when he reached the foot of the ramp.

A voice of malice boomed over the battlefield, and Kimmund immediately recognized the voice of his superior.

“Commander. Kimmund.”

Lord Vader.

Kimmund glanced back at the Rebels’ Imperial Shuttle. Too late now. The distance was too great. He would never make it out with Lord Vader here.

One of his tired sighs expelled from his nose, and he looked to his left bicep. Now that was a lot blood. Well, maybe not a lot, but Kimmund still blanched at the sight. He would never admit it but the little blood around Thrawn’s IV line had made him queasy. This...

Kimmund groaned and tried to ignore it.

More explosions. A scream full of hatred bellowed. The smoldering leg of a Walker was thrown across the hangar as if it were a tree branch.

Kimmund watched the shuttle ramp close and lift off with triumph. Yes! Go! But his triumph quickly turned to dread as the craft shuddered, suspended in the air. It froze in place, the metal groaning. Another bellow of hatred rippled along the current of a strange magnetic energy that flowed through the aura of the hangar’s battlefield. Vader was holding the shuttle back with the Force.

“Hold on!” Kanan yelled.

Everyone shifted and tried to catch their balance. Kallus and Kanan slammed against the pilot-side wall, while Rex clung to the back of the copilot seat. At the same time, Ezra held Thrawn and himself secure on the repulsorlift, the lift having been magnetically anchored to the floor. Thrawn was unresponsive again though, his arm with the IV and tubing shifting sluggishly off the lift with the momentum of the shuttle. Chopper warbled and clucked anxiously, and Ezra shivered.
Kimmund had to do something. They didn’t come this far to fail. *He didn’t sacrifice this much to fail.* The Commander of the First Legion turned Rebel Fighter steeled himself and moved to get up. *This was it.* But once Kimmund got his feet underneath him in a crouch, he was surprised to find Rukh decloak in the midst of a run, sprinting toward him with his electrostaff at the ready.

The sight of Rukh bounding into battle straight at him was both terrifying and mesmerizing.

Rukh jumped, used Kimmund’s right shoulder as a spring and launched himself into the air toward Lord Vader. A grand battle cry reverberated over the battlefield as Rukh brought his staff up to striking position in the air. Stormtroopers seemed taken in awe. His yell mixed beautifully with the magnetic aura of the Force, creating a deep, vibrating hum that resonated within the hearts of all within the hangar. What a glorious sight for Kimmund, watching the fierce Noghri bound spectacularly through smoke and flame.

But Vader saw him as well.

*Double vision: electro-strike to helmet, torso, shin-

Vader turned his grip in the Force toward Rukh and paralyzed him in the air mid-jump. Rukh struggled to break free of the invisible hold, groaning, but he accomplished that which he had intended.

*The shuttle was free.*

“*We’re free!*” Sabine exclaimed, astonished.

“*Punch it!*” Rex yelled.

Sabine whipped the throttle forward.

Kimmund smiled underneath his helmet as he watched the Rebels escape with Thrawn through the forcefield of the *Devastator’s* hangar bay.

Rukh yelled in pain as Vader held him in the air. Kimmund whipped his head back and saw Rukh grabbing at invisible evils.

"*Let him go!*" Kimmund yelled fiercely.

Kimmund stood in full combat readiness despite his arm, and rotated toward Lord Vader, his former leader. He heard a muffled pulse that was sure to be a blaster as he advanced and noticed a flash of light erupt in the traffic control nest. Kimmund depressed the trigger of his blaster rifle, ultimately ensuring his condemnation.

*Double vision: multiple bolts coming at torso, torso, head, torso, torso, torso-

Vader released Rukh to the metallic floor with a harsh thud, and deflected Kimmund’s blasterfire with his crimson lightsaber. Rukh rolled quickly to his feet, ignoring the pain, and charged Vader with another echoed cry.

*Double vision: electro-strike to torso, thigh, torso-*
Vader redirected his lightsaber and parried Rukh’s quick strikes from his electrostaff.

Kimmund didn’t want to hit Rukh and hesitated to find a clear shot on Vader. *Come on, Rukh, give me an opening…*

Rukh sidestepped and rolled away from a strike. *There…*

Kimmund squared the Dark Lord in the sights of his blaster rifle and moved his finger to pull the trigger. Two harsh, high-powered blaster bolts thundered over the sounds of battle. They were quick in their rebuke.

But they weren’t from Kimmund.

The bolts were from a DLT-19D long range heavy blaster rifle... First Legion issue.

Kimmund didn’t feel the pain, not right away. It was merely this blinding numbness that suddenly enveloped his chest. It was confusing at first. He took in a stuttering and labored breath, and found it tougher than it should have been to do so.

The shots were precise, grouped close together. No doubt a product of his First Legion, Kimmund thought.

Was it odd that Kimmund was proud? His squad did well and fulfilled their duty efficiently, as he had personally trained them to do so. To protect their quarry, at all costs.

Kimmund staggered to his left, but caught himself. Breathing was tougher than it should have been, and he coughed. He let out an involuntary cry as the pain began to emerge. The aim of his blaster rifle failed, and he looked down to his chest.

Rukh, on his knees after rolling away from Vader’s saber strike, saw the red on Kimmund’s white armor. More regret haunted Rukh’s eyes, and a realization surfaced that this was a trap from which they would likely not escape. The Commander of the First Legion fought to stay on his feet but faltered.

Vader saw Rukh’s hesitation and thrust his lightsaber forward with the intention of running it through Rukh’s chest. Rukh didn’t react however and smirked when Vader’s lightsaber shut off. Once again, Rukh witnessed the surprise of Lord Vader with his own eyes.

Rukh wore armor made of cortosis. Rukh shoved his electrostaff through the air and struck out at Vader with newfound vigor.

Kimmund’s knees buckled, and he found himself staring at the high ceiling of the hangar bay. Sound began to fade.

A woman’s voice. Terrified. Scared. Pleading. “No! I ordered you to stun!”

A stormtrooper with First Legion markings appeared over Kimmund. They removed their helmet revealing a woman. Her face was scrunched in sorrow. *Tephan.*

He could tell she was calling his name, but sound was muffled. Her eyes were pleading and overflowing.

She removed Kimmund’s helmet, wanting to look him in his eyes again. Tephan found glassy orbs filled with resigned remorse holding her gaze. With the helmet off sound became somewhat discernible, and he cringed at the sound of his own breathing. His breathing was heavy, and blood
seeped freely from his chest, escaping the side of his mouth.

Tephan stuttered in sorrow, tears mixing with the sweat of battle on her face. Her voice was small. “Why did you do that?” Tephan sorrowed.

A question that encompassed so many actions and decisions Kimmund had made that day…

Kimmund just narrowed his eyes and joined her in sorrow. Tephan grabbed his hand and pressed on his chest.

“It was… the right thing to do,” Kimmund struggled.

“I could have made it right,” she pleaded. “I could have helped if you just told me what was going on; we could have worked out whatever… whatever-“

“Shhh,” Kimmund comforted in his sorrowful pain. He sluggishly raised a hand to her face. “I know…” he smiled "That’s why… I did what I did.”

Tephan shook her head, leaning into his touch, and her nose scrunched as her breath hitched. He always protected her as she protected him through their career together.

Kimmund was struggling. He looked into Tephan's eyes and tried to bathe himself in their beautiful light one last time, taking in every memory, every moment they experienced together. He found a peace there. A balance.

“Forgive me- one…" a breath “…day…” And Kimmund’s eyes slowly unfocused with the release of a last breath.

Tephan caught his hand before it fell completely from her face. Her eyes went wide and her mouth opened but no sound erupted. She shook him and realizing he was gone, gave in fully to raw sorrow. “No no no no, please!”

Rukh heard her pleading across the hangar with dropped heart. Vader reignited his lightsaber and tore the electrostaff out of Rukh’s hands with the Force, flinging it away. In the same movement he froze Rukh in place.

“This dance has gone on long enough,” Vader said with malice.

The Dark Lord threw Rukh through a wall of flame.

Rukh landed harshly against a wall, flames almost too hot nearby. His electrostaff was nowhere to be seen. Bones were surly broken again, and he helplessly watched from the floor as Vader walked though the wall of flame. A dark silhouette.

But Rukh noticed he landed next to his cloaked Chiss shuttle. *Fortunate. Lucky. Rukh pulled a device from his armor, making Vader stop his advance. This device ensured Chiss technology wouldn’t be turned over to the hands of any enemy. Perhaps he could take out Vader with it as well…

Rukh smirked and pressed down on the device, content with his fate. Vader reached out, and vision flashed white.

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“In darkness, cold.
In light, cold.

The old sun brings no heat.

But there is heat in breath and life.

In life, there is the Force.

In the Force, there is life.

And the Force is eternal.”

—Sunset Prayer, Guardians of the Whills

Chapter End Notes

"My flesh and bone
This bleeding heart
That’s in my hands I fell apart"
- Flesh and Bone by Black Math
[Spotify Song Link](https://open.spotify.com/track/4Jv5jzjK7ZJv5jzjK7)

Songs that hold the essence of An Eye of a Giant and A Night Falls
"Tessa", "Never Goodbye" and "Sacrifice"
Golden colored whisper birds flittered about in a synchronous melody as they soared over the dense jungle of Yavin IV. They flew against a beautiful backdrop of warmly colored clouds prominent and dignified in their hold of the skies, reflecting the amethyst and coral tones of sunset. It was a majestic sight that captivated the attention of Corporal Osleo Prennert, who stood watch in his cylindrical overlook. He was at his post, stationed high above the purple-barked Massassi trees and bioluminescent orchids that encompassed the rainforests of this vibrant moon. He enraptured himself in his musings, wondering if perhaps the flock of blue headed birds were in search of their evening meal as they ebbed and flowed over the flora down below.

Osleo dared a peek downward at the vast jungle. He was a little more comfortable with his height in the sky as time with his duty went on, but his grip on the railing tightened just as it had on his first tour of duty when he beheld a subtle sway of the narrow tower. A soft breeze rustled the Massassi trees, creating rolling waves of emerald covered branches that revealed sparkles of the bioluminescent orchids underneath while they swayed. Small pyramid structures poked out of the emerald cascade beyond, strong and confident in their time-honored and ancient hidden wisdom. The purple colored bark of the similarly ancient trees warred for recognition against dense climbing ferns that clutched onto them, seeking the aura of the same brilliant sky above them. The beautiful sight stretched on to the horizon as far as Osleo’s eyes could perceive, and the serenity it offered him certainly outweighed his fear of the dangerous height of his station.

Both flora and fauna worked together despite their fight for the sky’s attention, not only in shielding small prey from the whisper birds soaring above them, but also in helping to conceal the growing Rebel base hidden amidst the dense jungle and Great Pyramid that rose above it.

Corporal Osleo Prennert had one of the most important duties of the base. He was a sentry posted high above, a sentinel-on-watch, whose duty was to warn of impending dangers and also to be a guide for those seeking the promise of refuge and protection.

Toward a promise of hope.

Three trill beeps sounded from his commlink at his belt, startling him from his musings. He quickly snapped the commlink from its cradle and cleared his throat before keying the device.

“Corporal Osleo Prennert,” he said.

“Corporal Prennert, General Draven speaking.” The general’s voice was more direct and gruff than usual, and the General was already known for his blunt no-nonsense attitude. “A modified VCX-
100 light freighter is in route to base, coming in on combat vectors, designated *Ghost*. You should be able to pick it up on your scanner already. Verify.”

Osleo blanched at the prospect of having missed an in-bound ship. But nothing was on schedule to be arriving right now…

“Aye sir, verifying.”

Osleo took a deep breath and activated his sensor scope. He brought his scanner forward into a targeting position and began sweeping the skies along the usual combat vectors.

Three mellow tones indicated a target-lock, and there she was in the scope, the beautiful *Ghost* flying toward base. Detailed information from the ship started streaming into the device as the transponder began to communicate with Osleo’s scanner. Readouts of fuel, speed, altitude and heading streamed across his scope’s heads-up-display. Osleo keyed his commlink again.

“Verified, General. Positive identification received and transmitting vectors for landing.”

“Thank you Corporal Prennert. Guide Captain Syndulla into base, she’s without her astromech,” General Davits Draven said with a sigh.

“Aye, sir, acknowledged,” Osleo responded. He switched frequencies on his commlink. “Captain Syndulla? Corporal Osleo Prennert, sentinel-on-watch, do you copy?”

“Good copy, Corporal,” Hera responded over crackly comm. “It’s good to hear your voice.”

General Draven tossed his commlink headpiece onto the console in front of him with another heavy sigh. He pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. The technician sitting stationed before him at the console was tense as he could feel the stressful irritation of the General and leader of Alliance Intelligence.

The control sector of the Rebel base was dimly illuminated with the green glow of galaxy maps and flashing data of critical intel rotating in shifting priority on various terminals throughout the operations center. To an outside eye, the room would appear to be full of chaotic noise and shifting lights, but the scene bespoke of ordered efficiency to those trained to move along to its shifting current.

“Something amiss, General?”

General Draven released his nose and looked over his shoulder to find Senator Mon Mothma, regal in demeanor and expression. Her eyes were kind, and they smiled softly underneath her measured authority. She wore her typical white tunic with embellished silver necklace and matching white leggings for easier movement throughout base. It had become a busy day for those in command.

“No Senator,” Draven said, shaking his head and putting hands on his waist. “Had to wake up our sentinel-on-watch again. I think the air up there is too thin.”

Mon Mothma chuckled softly. “The Corporal is still adjusting, I’m sure he’ll become a fine example of the role of base sentinel.”

“You put a lot of faith in people.”

“Perhaps,” Mon Mothma responded with an inquisitive hum. “Sometimes faith is all we can have, General.”
General Draven huffed and faced her with a respectful challenge. “What if that were an incoming Tie Fighter? Our sentinels-on-watch would be the first line of defense in that situation, and it’s their job to alert us, not the other way ‘round.”

“We must have faith that when that time comes, we’ll be ready,” Mon Mothma said nodding her head with a small smirk.

General Draven eyed her with a pragmatic stare and eventually acquiesced with a somewhat sarcastic hum of affirmation. He stepped over to a terminal, Mon Mothma following closely, and returned his hands to his waist after bringing up a live data-feed of the Ghost coming in to land. “Forgive me if I have a talk with Corporal Prennert after his shift is done.”

Mon Mothma eyed her General and head of Alliance Intelligence with the fond gaze of a proud leader. While Draven didn’t necessarily share in her quickness to hope for the good in others, it’s precisely his pragmatism and attention to facts that made him perhaps the best at his job. The rebellion needed people like him, but that wouldn’t stop her from trying to make him see the sun every now and then.

Mon Mothma turned her attention to the terminal, reflecting in a green aura the data readouts of the Ghost’s approach. “How long until Captain Syndulla lands?”

“Minutes.”

“I suppose I’ll make my way to greet her then. Thank you, General.” Mon Mothma moved to turn and make her way out of the operations center.

“You know I don’t like this, Senator,” Draven said, his voice grim. Mon Mothma paused and faced him. At the glint in his eyes, she rose her chin and softly clasped her hands in front of her. “Had I been consulted, I wouldn’t have approved such a mission.”

Mon Mothma rose her eyebrows slightly but remained silent. Draven quickly glanced around the operations center, making sure they were out of earshot of other personnel and took another deep breath. His eyes were steely as he considered his next words.

“Some of our best people are sent to infiltrate a Star Destroyer,” Draven said quietly. “And not just any Star Destroyer the Empire has to offer, the Devastator. In dashed hopes of exfiltrating a fallen Grand Admiral who’s surely under high guard and who may or may not be alive in the first place if the accusations against him are even true. I understand the strategic benefit but that’s only if a successful recovery occurs, if he chooses to cooperate and if we choose to trust his information in the first place. He’s too much of an unknown. The risks don’t outweigh the benefits.”

Mon Mothma pursed her lips and considered her General a moment. She kept her voice hushed but assuring. “Our rebellion will benefit from this, General. The datachip recovered by Captain Syndulla alone could greatly propel our efforts to free the galaxy of the Empire’s tyranny.”

“I wish I would’ve been given the chance to analyze it before sending some of our best people into that kind of danger.”

“If we waited, we would have missed the only opportunity to recover him.”

It was as if they were afraid to say Thrawn’s name out loud. General Draven knew that arguing with Senator Mon Mothma at this point of the operation was pointless. He looked to the side and resigned with a sigh.

“My best slicer is preparing his equipment as we speak,” Draven said, his voice returning to
normal volume. “If there’s data to recover, he’ll be able to access it.”

Mon Mothma nodded as she somewhat relaxed from her stiffness. A smile returned to her eyes. “I have faith that the Force is with us, General Draven.”

Draven’s eyes narrowed, and Mon Mothma smiled as she turned and made her way out of the operations center. A bright halo of light engulfed her lithe form as doors whooshed open, revealing a bustling hangar bay that stretched out to a bright tarmac illuminated outside by an amethyst sunset.

Senator Mon Mothma was met on the tarmac outside the Great Pyramid with a beautiful coral and amethyst colored sunset and golden whisper birds flying majestically overhead. No wonder Corporal Prennert was distracted, she thought. It was a sight worth beholding on this cool evening on Yavin IV.

The Ghost touched down smoothly on the tarmac with steam rising from various vents around the hull once it settled. Droids and mechanics rushed to the ship and attached hoses to begin the refueling process. The engines whined as they spun down from power, creating a reverberating hum that could be felt deep in the chest for those nearby. It was a strong ship.

The ramp hissed, spurting out more pressurized steam, and it began to lower to the ground as Mon Mothma continued her approach. Zeb walked down the ramp, surrounded by a group of engineers recently rescued as a result of Saw Gerrera’s clandestine and reckless mission. The Lasat assisted some of them as the group appeared disoriented and malnourished. Others were in awe of the majestic Great Pyramid that housed the majority of the Rebel base.

“Garazeb Orrelios,” Mon Mothma said, coming to a stop at the foot of the ramp. “Welcome back to base. How do you fare?”

Zeb looked down to Mon Mothma as he guided a woman down the ramp. He was still a bit intimidated by Mon Mothma’s presence and smiled timidly.

“As soon as these people get a hot meal, I think we’ll all be fine,” Zeb said. Mon Mothma eyed the group with a concerned gaze. “These are the engineers we rescued. They’ve offered their expertise to our cause.”

“Indeed?” Mon Mothma asked.

“That is correct Senator,” one engineer said. “The Empire valued our skills, but we all agree that they’d be better served in assisting your rebellion.”

“We are honored to have you.” Mon Mothma scanned the group again with almost motherly eyes. She saw tired souls in need of rest. “I will have each of you escorted to the medical bay to be looked over, and a hot meal will be prepared in the meantime.”

“Senator!”

Mon Mothma looked up to find Hera bounding down from the top of the ramp. Hera quickly but carefully pushed her way through the group, and the engineers were glad to accommodate her a path. Hera breathed heavily, trying to catch her breath from racing down through the Ghost from the cockpit.

“Captain Syndulla,” Mon Mothma said, as Hera stopped before her.
Hera held up the datachip, her emerald eyes wide. Nerves made her hand tremble in the cool evening air. “Here it is,” she said wistfully.

Mon Mothma flinched at finally seeing the device in-person. She paused there, eyeing the transparent electronic datachip. Just as Hera had hesitated earlier about the dangers of such a device while on the Ghost at the sight of the Imperial icon etched into the corner, Mon Mothma seared her gaze upon that same emblem. This was really happening.

She took a deep breath, glanced to Hera’s determined gaze and pursed her lips, as she gently took the device. Her fingers were careful, afraid to put too much pressure on the fragile looking datachip. She held it before her another moment considering the implications of the information contained within its electronic infrastructure. Could this be the evidence they needed to convince the Senate of the Emperor’s treachery and tyranny and recruit more to their cause?

“Hopefully our people can recover the data despite the corruption,” Hera said, breaking Mon Mothma out of the stream of her thoughts.

“Thank you, Captain, you’ve done well,” Mon Mothma said with a warm smile. She saw the worry in Hera’s otherwise hopeful eyes and put a hand on her shoulder. “The Force is with them.”

“I know,” Hera said with a thin smile. “I need to be back in space as soon as possible.”

“The refueling process has already begun,” Mon Mothma said nodding to the technicians tending to the Ghost. “As soon as you’re able, you’re clear to depart.”

“Thank you, Senator. You ready Zeb?”

“As ready as I can be, I guess,” Zeb replied his voice echoing from the metallic confines of the cargo bay.

“Bring them home Hera,” Mon Mothma replied. Hera turned to face her, her eyes alight with nervous excitement. “All of them. We’ll need him to verify the data, especially if we fail to recover the information.”

Hera knew she was talking about Thrawn. Her heart pattered with anxiety at the prospect of having a Grand Admiral of the Empire on base. But if the claims of his loyalties were true…

Hera nodded with hesitation and glanced down before earnestly catching Mon Mothma’s eye again. “Please, at least watch his message. He’s very earnest, and… different. There’s something more out there that has him worried.”

Something more than the Empire? Mon Mothma’s blood went cold.

“I will make sure command sees it, you have my word,” Mon Mothma said grimly. “And I’ve recalled Senator Bail Organa from Coruscant. He should be here upon your return.” She nodded and squeezed Hera’s shoulder in finality. “We all eagerly await your return. May the Force be with you.”

Hera offered a small smile as she began to back up toward the Ghost’s ramp. “And with you Senator.”

Hera glanced up at the Great Pyramid, sweeping her eyes over it and taking in its ancient grandeur again before walking up the Ghost’s ramp. This was the hardest part of command, watching those to whom you gave orders depart into danger. The worry, the guilt… the fear… Mon Mothma clutched the datachip as she watched Hera disappear along with Zeb into the cargo-hold of the
Corporal Osleo Prennert watched with pride from his narrow sentry tower as the *Ghost* took off and flew toward the boundaries of dusk upon the horizon. Small twinkling stars had begun to emerge, and soon the *Ghost* became an indiscernible sparkle among them. *A spectre disappearing into the falling night.*

Smoke and flame enveloped the *ISD Devastator’s* hangar bay. It was pure chaos, and those tendrils of chaos reached for the Rebels’ Imperial Shuttle as it was suspended and held hostage by Lord Vader.

But the pressure released. Kanan and Kallus fell from the wall to the floor as the shuttle lurched free of the invisible hold.

*They were free.*

“We’re free!” Sabine exclaimed as her hands danced over the controls.

“Punch it!” Rex yelled from the copilot seat.

Sabine whipped the throttle forward and the shuttle lunged through the forcefield and into the starry depths of space. The *Devastator’s* hull was uncomfortably close as Sabine weaved the heavy craft around sensors and turret emplacements, and everyone inside held on.

The sight displayed through the viewport offered a great sense of speed and inertia. Were the situation not so dire, Rex would have considered it a fun and exhilarating experience from the copilot seat. Kallus carefully crawled along the shuttle’s metallic floor toward Thrawn and Ezra as the shuttle shifted and lurched to Sabine’s evasive input. The metallic floor offered a smooth obstacle as Kallus slid with almost every movement of the shuttle.

“Hold on!” Sabine yelled, and she whipped the shuttle to port side as ion pulses pounded nearby. Kallus and Kanan groaned as they tried to clutch onto a railing or jump-seat. The Imperials were waking up to their escape attempt. “Chop!? I need jump vectors! How’s it coming!?”

“Bwrrh arrh bwahh ah,” Chopper warbled quickly from the dataport at the rear of the shuttle.

“Okay!” Sabine pushed down on the controls and flew the creaky shuttle underneath an elongated antenna.

Kallus made it to Thrawn’s side and steadied himself on the floor next to the mechanical ventilator despite the rolling maneuvers of the shuttle. Ezra felt Kallus’ heart drop as he read the data on the machine. Kallus fumbled for an injector and glanced at Ezra with wide blue eyes before settling on Thrawn’s lax face.

“Thrawn, I need you to open your eyes for me,” Kallus said as he filled the injector device with an opaque liquid.

Rex controlled his breathing and punched in jump coordinates on the console before him. “Jump vectors set, Sabine!” Rex confirmed.

The shuttle lurched as a pulse bounced off the shuttle’s shield, throwing Kanan back down to the floor. Kallus dropped the injector and groaned as he tumbled to the side. Ezra desperately clung himself and Thrawn steady on the repulsorlift.
“Get us out of here Sabine!” Ezra yelled.

More ion pulses chased after the shuttle, and they finally broke away from the Star Destroyer’s hull, into empty space. But a trill warning began to sound and red flashing lights erupted on Sabine’s heads-up-display.

The Devastator launched two torpedoes after them. There was no time to evade… They had to jump.

“This is gonna be close!” Sabine said. She yelled as she pushed the hyperdrive throttle forward and flashy pseudomotion erupted around the shuttle as stars began to shift. Approaching torpedoes nearly had their target and were hungry for the object of their destruction. But the stars relented, and the Devastator’s torpedoes found empty space where the shuttle once stood. The shuttle escaped.

“We need to cancel the other jumps,” Kallus said as he swept the metallic floor for the medical injector now that the shuttle was steady in hyperspace. It had rolled away in the chaos.

“What?” Rex asked, swiveling toward Kallus in his copilot chair.

Kanan sat on the floor with his forehead in his hands. He must have fallen pretty hard. Ezra made his way to his master and knelt in front of him, placing a hand on in his shoulder to steady him.

“Kanan? You okay?”

Kanan offered a thin smile. “Yeah kid, I’m okay.”

There it is. Kallus clutched the injector and slid back to Thrawn’s side. He gently shifted Thrawn’s head to the side and pressed the injector to the crook of his neck and jaw. The opaque liquid inserted into Thrawn’s system with a mellow hiss amidst the steady rhythm of his breathing tube.

“We need to go straight to the rendezvous,” Kallus said, his voice insistent. He pressed two fingers against the injection site to stop the little bit of blood that would otherwise trickle down.

“The jumps are meant to prevent the Empire from finding us though,” Sabine said.

“I need more equipment to stabilize him,” Kallus countered looking up at Sabine. “I can’t do that here any more than I already have.”

Rex looked knowingly at Sabine and nodded. “It’ll be safe to contact Hera soon. We can tell her to expect us earlier then.”

Sabine glanced to Thrawn and nodded reluctantly.

Swirlings in the Force— A child’s giggles—

Ezra began to hear a faint song. The melody mirrored that of kyber crystals singing, but the tune was different, almost a humming lullaby accented with twinkling’s of the Force.

“Whoa,” Ezra muttered. The song came from Thrawn’s direction, and Ezra felt oddly drawn to it. Like it was calling to him. “Do you hear that Kanan?”

“I sense… something,” Kanan said. “I don’t know what.”

Swirlings in the Force— A rolling crescendo of peace— Tranquility—
“Ezra?” Kanan asked, shifting to get up. He was concerned with Ezra’s transfixed stare and slow advance toward Thrawn. “What do you hear?”

Sound of the natural space around him didn’t reach Ezra anymore. All he could perceive, the only thing he gave his attention to, was that undeniable song. The Force called to him. And Ezra wanted to answer.

Ezra reached the top of Thrawn’s unconscious form and slowly reached for his forehead. “Thrawn?” Ezra asked wistfully.

Upon touching his forehead, Ezra took in a harsh hiss and flinched as his vision flashed white. His eyes immediately rolled back. Ezra’s knees buckled, but Kallus quickly caught him. Indiscernible whispers enveloped Kanan’s perception as he felt Ezra lose consciousness, and Kanan rushed to them as Kallus lowered Ezra to the ground.

“Ezra?!” Kanan prompted, as his voice hitched.

Sabine’s heart dropped, and she was more determined than ever to go straight to the rendezvous point to meet with the Ghost. “Chop give me the coordinates to meet Hera!”

Nervous warbles.

“Ezra can you hear me?!” Kanan continued, tapping Ezra’s cheek.

But Ezra was unable to hear his master. His eyes fluttered underneath his eyelids as if he were dreaming, but he was otherwise peaceful in apparent sleep.

In the Force though, Ezra was in an entirely different place. He was meant to be a witness and was offered a glimpse of a new journey. A journey upon which he was not alone.

Chapter End Notes

"I walk alone, beside myself
Nowhere to go
My flesh and bone
This part of me
The seeds I've sewn"
- Flesh and Bone by Black Math
Spotify Song Link
A Vision, Familiar Yet...

Chapter Summary

“You cannot lose what is inside you. You can only misplace it. The task, then, is to find it again.” —Chirrut Îmwe

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"A child stolen is a lost hope."

Darkness— Confusion— Anxiety—

Open. Your. Eyes.

Swirlings in the Force— A small shift to awareness—

Ch'itkashn. Veo. G'evoti.

A soft breeze— A simple melody— Peace— Warmth—

Tranquility— Rest—

“Meow…”

Ezra slowly began to emerge from what felt like a deep sleep. He was so comfortable. His back didn’t ache, and he felt as though he was at rest in bed after a long day of work. Ezra was at peace.

“Meerroww?”

Ezra grunted and scrunched his face in protest. “Just… five more minutes, Zeb,” Ezra mumbled.

Childlike giggles— Soft light— A gentle breeze— A melodious hum—

Open. Your. Eyes.

“Miaowwww…”

Ezra groaned with irritation and threw an elbow over his face. He covered his eyes with his arm, protesting for a few more moments of blissful peace. More sleep, not yet Zeb.

Four little weights suddenly vaulted onto Ezra’s chest, and it felt as if a small creature had jumped on top of him.

“Meow!”

Open. Ch'itkashn… Your. Veo… Eyes. G'evoti…
Ezra’s blue eyes snapped open, and he startled to find a white loth-cat standing on top of him and insistently looking down at him. A canopy of tree branches swayed delicately in a gentle breeze above.

“Ah!” Ezra gasped in surprise and shot himself up to a seated position. The white loth-cat bounded off his chest just in time, and Ezra patted himself down, breathing heavily and moaning with disoriented adrenaline. “Wha…?”

Ezra was startled to find the stormtrooper disguise gone to be replaced with his familiar yellow collared shirt and orange jacket. He held his hands out before him, trying to shake his confusion and catch his breath. “I… don’t understand,” he whispered. “How?”

Ezra looked up and was amazed to find himself seated on a forest floor that was peppered with soft leaves and delicate needles shed from the majestic branches above. The fallen flora, along with patches of knee-high golden-green grass, provided the soft bedding upon which Ezra had awoken. He focused on the forest canopy above and felt as if he should recognize these trees. They were familiar and comforting, and the magnetic aura of the space spoke of a warm peace… It beheld a song of restoration…

The soft breeze huffed and rustled the branches. Cone structures on top of the trees produced a unique melody that spread outward along with the current of the wind as far as Ezra could perceive.

“Whoa…,” Ezra muttered, his eyes wide and curious. His breathing had nearly returned to a normal cadence, nerves diminishing.

Ezra wasn’t entirely sure if the sound the trees made was a memory he held or an entirely new experience. But it was familiar. The breeze stirred up another of Ezra’s senses, and a mild aroma enveloped the space around him. His mind teetered upon the edge of memory.

Ezra rose a hand and hovered it over the ground next to him. Why was he hesitant? With inquisitive brow, Ezra reached for a pile of leaves and soft needles beside him and carefully brought a handful of the foliage up to his nose. He breathed in deeply and closed his eyes with the intake of breath. The smell was crisp and carried the notes of the woodland realm around him. Soft fragrances of timber, honeysuckle and tea root invited him to memory.

Ezra opened his eyes and stilled. Old Jho…

Old Jho was an Ithorian barkeeper who owned a cantina on Lothal. The wise and aged Ithorian was a dear friend and a precious treasure to the locals of Capital City. Ezra enjoyed listening to his tales of wisdom and stories of his experiences living on Lothal before Ezra’s time.

Old Jho’s voice echoed in Ezra’s memory.

“I like the one about the spine trees of Pelamir Gorge. I went there often as a juvenile. I remember the sound the wind made in the tree cones and the taste of the root tea. And the crisp smell of the needles in winter.”
This was a forest of spine trees! Ezra looked up in amazement. Was this Lothal? Was he home?

His memory of Old Jho’s voice, distantly echoed, continued…

“The forests are all cut down now. Turned into mines and machines.”

Confusion laced Ezra’s brow. This forest was thriving and indeed not touched by the Empire. Or did it triumph despite it?

Where was he?

The wind brought with it another echoed song, and a woman’s voice began to dance along with the currents of the breeze. It was a motherly song, as if a mother was singing a lullaby to their child prior to sleep. The melody was soft and inviting, but the words were different. The language was alien and unknown, although the love contained within its tone was undeniable.

A child giggled in the distance, and the mother chuckled in the midst of her words, though maintaining the beautiful song. Ezra smiled.

A soft twinkle of the Force also spoke to Ezra’s heart, and his eyes wondered in search of the horizon through the forest of spine trees, scanning for the source of the music. Blue eyes beheld a white glow to his left; however shapes and the object of the glow were hidden and indiscernible through the many trees.

A trilling “meow” sounded next to Ezra, and he averted his eyes from the curious glow and found the white loth-cat staring at him. The creature sat on its haunches, perhaps smiling and its tail flitted about behind it as if the song moved it.

“I… I don’t— Where am I?” Ezra asked wistfully. The last thing Ezra remembered was escaping the Star Destroyer, ISD Devastator. How did he get here? Why? “The shuttle…”

“Mrruhh,” the white loth-cat trilled as it stood up. The pearly creature trotted toward Ezra and trilled even more to the pounds of its paws upon the forest foliage. It was an adorably innocent whine.

Ezra huffed in amusement despite his disoriented mind and offered a hand to the white loth-cat. The white loth-cat sat down and nuzzled its head to Ezra’s hand, and it purred with contentment as Ezra caressed its soft fur.

“You brought me here didn’t you.” Ezra scratched the chin of the white loth-cat to be met with affectionate purrs and then moved to stand up. He put a hand on the trunk of a spine tree to steady himself, still a little disoriented at the movement within this strange place. It was as if he wasn’t quite awake, his mind still foggy and in need of a cup of caf.

The white loth-cat trotted a few paces before Ezra and looked back expectantly. “Rrrroww?”

“You want me to follow?”

The white loth-cat huffed and trotted a few more paces and circled to look back at Ezra. Its gaze was piercing and filled with ancient wisdom.
“Okay…,” Ezra said as he began to step forward.

The white loth-cat led him through the dense spine forest, the little creature bounding over spine tree roots sticking out from the ground and various tufts of grass and spine needles. This forest was well established and strong, and Ezra was amazed and comforted to see Lothal blooming to life.

The beautiful song of the mother’s unknown lullaby continued to permeate the magnetic atmosphere of the spine forest. It remained a distant echo, dependent upon the strength and pathway of the breeze. An enchanting melody, Ezra stayed alert as he followed the white loth-cat, hoping to discover its source.

A clearing up ahead began to take form where the spine tree forest ceased to expand. The white loth-cat continued in its confident pattering pace, but Ezra stopped at the edge, suddenly unsure. His anxiety rose at what he saw.

Ezra leaned upon a sturdy spine tree and watched the white loth-cat advance beyond the forest boundary toward a figure, standing alone on a small hill amidst short golden-green grass. The figure held the stature of a man, clothed in a black military style uniform, and his back was toward Ezra with his right wrist clasped there in his left hand. Feet stood sturdy underneath him in what appeared to be combat boots, but the design was foreign to Ezra. Alien.

Ezra looked closer and realized the figure’s hands were blue, confirming what his heart felt. Ezra’s eyes widened. Thrawn.

The white loth-cat reached Thrawn’s feet. The confident little creature of the Force walked affectionately between the Chiss’s boots and rubbed against them, trilling at him and begging for attention. The white loth-cat looked steeply up at him, and Thrawn shifted his shoulders. He turned his gaze downward, considering the curious little creature, and Ezra saw his uniform was marked with a maroon patch on the right shoulder as he shifted his torso. Ezra didn’t recognize the emblem.

“Myou?” The white loth-cat trilled insistentently at Thrawn and then beckoned toward Ezra.

The side of Thrawn’s face was slightly toward Ezra, but the boy still saw the Chiss’s crimson eyes pulse as he became aware of Ezra’a presence at the edge of the spine tree forest behind him. His chin rose, but he didn’t move otherwise to fully face the new presence. The intruder.

Then Ezra felt it.

Swirlings in the Force— A sudden twist— CRACK—

Break the truth inside of me...

Ezra suddenly sensed an opposing magnetic field emit from Thrawn’s location in the Force. It appeared to make the breeze react as the wind rustled at Ezra’s hair and clothing. The spine tree cones also reacted, reverberating in their soft cadence with more intensity. The magnetic field both reached out and pulled away at the same time, like it was cautiously observing in its defense.

Alien patterns and forms emitting control—

Focus— Opaqueness—

It felt as if Thrawn was trying close himself off from Ezra. He was trying to shield himself, Ezra realized.
Ezra gently pressed back in the Force toward Thrawn despite his fear. He felt uncertainty from Thrawn and a measured pattern of observational study. Thrawn was waiting to react as a warrior would, his focus fixated upon Ezra yet defiant in not facing him fully. The sight of a Chiss passively ready for conflict was intimidating.

The white loth-cat mewed softly up toward Thrawn again, as if in a plea for comfort. The unknown mother’s melodious lullaby increased in volume and seemed a bit more near to them, yet still it flowed as a distant echo.

_Childlike giggles— A twinkling tune—_

Thrawn appeared to flinch and close his eyes, and Ezra felt a longing sorrow of emotion flow from him. A sorrow that was accompanied by immeasurable guilt.

_This bleeding heart that’s in my hands…_

Voices echoed.

“_You will know good from bad when you are at peace and passive.” _[Yoda] —

“_The point is that you are not alone. You’re connected to every living thing in the universe…” _[Kanan] —

_I fell apart…_

Ezra gasped softly as the voice of his master flowed through the atmosphere of the space. It was a memory from a time ago on Lothal, when Kanan was training him in his abilities to connect with other creatures using the Force. This particular lesson was a frustrating one in which a wild orange striped loth-cat angrily resisted Ezra’s own attempts at connection. _Rightfully so as it was just bonked in the head with a rock thrown by Kanan…_ Ezra was turmoiled and distracted by other stresses at the time, unable to master his ability to connect with the Force. He was afraid and overwhelmed by emotions then.

The voice of Kanan continued to echo in the Force memory.

“…_but to discover that, you have to let your guard down. You have to be willing to attach to others._”

_Nowhere to go…_

Across the distance, Thrawn opened his eyes and took in a shaky breath. He glanced down to the white loth-cat, then averted his crimson eyes back to Ezra briefly before facing forward again. There was a shaky exhaustion there. Ezra felt the opposing magnetic field weaken, though it didn’t entirely dissipate.

Ezra clinched his jaw and swallowed as he considered Thrawn from the boundary of the spine tree forest. His fingers curled into the spine tree bark, and he reached outward and within simultaneously. Ezra was glad to be leaning onto a sturdy tree. Thrawn felt unsteady and turmoiled, projecting some of that disorientation onto Ezra’s own senses through Force as a side effect.

_The regret and measured sorrow, the longing for something lost, stolen…_  

_The longing for reunion…A weighted duty to one’s people…_  

_I walk alone…_
Ezra recoiled as he felt a nip in the Force, making his curiosity repel away from his search. He tilted his head and scrunched his face. *Did Thrawn just…?*

“Mmmrrow…” The white loth-cat mewed at Ezra, pulling him from his reverie. It stood there at Thrawn’s feet, waiting with encouragement for Ezra to walk into the meadow.

Ezra gingerly stepped forward, not sure of the sturdiness of his own feet. His eyes shifted between the white loth-cat and Thrawn, and nerves were screaming at him to stop. But he continued despite the fear he felt.

*Beside myself…*

His hand lingered on the spine tree bark as long as it could and then found open air as Ezra’s feet carried him toward Thrawn.

*My flesh and bone…*

With slightly hunched shoulders, Ezra slowly made his way across the beginnings of a vast meadow. His feet shifted in the golden-green grass, and glowing blue butterflies fluttered out from the rustling blades in his wake.

*This part of me…*

Ezra’s gaze followed the sparkling butterflies as they rose in the air along his path and found that the pearly glow to his left had taken shape. It was a mesmerizing sight, for it appeared to be Capital City, some of the landmarks recognizable. But tall white spires rose majestically in the air above it.

*The seeds I’ve sewn…*

Ezra’s feet stopped walking as if by their own volition, eyes fixated upon the glowing city. It was so beautiful.

A memory…

“*It’s beautiful isn’t it, son?*” Ezra’s father said. *They stood on the balcony of Ezra’s towered home, overlooking the white spires and thriving future vision of Lothal’s Capital City.*

“*Yeah,*” Ezra replied in his vision. “*So peaceful.*”

“*That is all going to change when the Empire arrives.*”

“But… I don’t want things to change,” Ezra replied.

Ezra’s mother walked up to stand on Ezra’s other side. “*They already have Ezra,*” she said. “*You have made us so proud.*”

“You are going to need to stay strong,” Ezra’s father said. “*Can you do that, son?*”

“Yes, I can.”

“*Remember, Ezra,*” his mother said. “*Without hope we have nothing.*”
The memory morphed.

“Moons are setting.” Kanan’s voice was soft, and he walked up carefully behind Ezra, who was seated on a boulder overlooking a vast meadow. Ezra had just found out that his parents died at the hands of the Empire. “It’ll be morning soon.”

“I saw them Kanan. My parents, they were right here,” Ezra said, confused. “I can’t explain how.”

Kanan walked up to look over Lothal’s grasslands with Ezra, basking in the moonlight. “The Jedi teach that life doesn’t cease in death. But merely changes form in the Force. Your parents are alive inside you, Ezra.”

Kanan looked at Ezra, eyes glassy, “They will be, always.”

“It is a comfort to know that it will thrive in my absence.”

Ezra was torn from his memory at Thrawn’s soft voice. He found himself standing beside Thrawn, overlooking a vast golden-green meadow atop a small grouping of rolling hills.

Crimson eyes met Ezra’s timid orbs. They glowed with a scarlet gloss, carrying suppressed emotions within their fiery depths. There was a discernment there as well, as if he was studying Ezra with a curious hint of concern. How long had Ezra been silently standing there, lost inside of his memory?

Ezra could see the detail of Thrawn’s uniform now, but still didn’t recognize it. Silver bars on his collar seemed to indicate rank, and the material of the uniform as a whole was unusual. It was odd how the delicate patterns caught and reflected light. Behind the silver bars on his collar, Ezra looked to see no damage there. Thrawn’s eyes narrowed briefly, perhaps at Ezra’s curiosity, and he averted his crimson gaze forward, fixating his eyes upon a treasure in the meadow beyond.

Ezra didn’t know what to say… What should he say? Where should their conversation even begin? He found himself, a Jedi, standing next to someone who held the rank of Grand Admiral in the Empire. Or one who once held that rank…

Who was Thrawn truly?

Ezra felt a particular quiver in Thrawn’s awareness, as if he was struggling for focus.

“Thrawn…?” Ezra wistfully intoned. Thrawn’s jaw flexed, and he took a deep breath.

“Ezra Bridger,” Thrawn said, exhaustion lacing the structure of his voice. His left thumb rubbed against his right wrist as he took another breath, perhaps trying to settle himself.

They both allowed the moment to stretch, standing there in an odd but companionable silence. The breeze flowed gently between them as it rustled the blades of the meadow. The space was serene and offered a peace that both appreciated.

Breaking through the quiet serenity, the white loth-cat rubbed and weaved through both of their feet, trilling happily as it did so. Ezra looked down and offered a smile. Thrawn kept his chin fixed in position but followed the little creature of the Force with his crimson gaze, his own expression neutral but contemplative.
Content that Thrawn and Ezra were finally standing together, the white loth-cat trotted away, beginning a little trek across the meadow in front of them toward a treasure. Part of Thrawn’s instinct startled protectively as he realized the white loth-cat’s destination, but he suppressed it quickly, for he knew the little creature was of the Living Force, similar to his treasure.

Ezra felt Thrawn’s temporary rise in anxiety accompanied with a small spike of fear. He noticed Thrawn rubbed his wrist again as his eyes tracked the white loth-cat, and Ezra followed his gaze to discover the source of his worry. Ezra found a mystery.

In the vast meadow before them sat a little girl, perhaps not seven standard years old. She was surrounded by knee-high golden-green grass, but where she sat the grass was flattened. Blue shimmering butterflies fluttered about her while the breeze gently rippled her black hair. No, not merely black hair, Ezra thought. He saw blue reflected as the light glistened upon her dancing hair. Soft curls of her blue, black hair hung over one shoulder, defiant against the breeze.

Ezra couldn’t see what she was doing, but she was transfixed upon a task, her focus on the ground in front of her. The white loth-cat disappeared, bounding into the high grass, but Ezra could tell where the small creature was as more shimmering butterflies were disturbed and floated up in its wake of pattering paws through the meadow.

The little girl must have heard the adorable pattering, for she looked up suddenly. Ezra saw that her skin matched Thrawn’s cerulean exterior as joy filled the features of her face. Her smile was vibrant, and her red eyes mirrored that of Thrawn’s own.

She shrieked a laugh filled with pure joy and clapped as the white loth-cat jumped from the grass and into the clearing where she sat. A child’s joy... the heartbeat of the universe. The white loth-cat trilled a meow as it trotted over to her, and she held out her hands, reaching for the little creature.

“Ch’eo ch'acevi! Ch'eo ch'acevi!” She giggled. The white loth-cat bumped its head against her arm, and she petted it affectionately. “Veat carco vah vubeo?”

Even though Ezra couldn’t understand what she said, the enchanting delight of a child was contagious.

Thrawn chuckled.

“She called it her friend,” Thrawn offered, his chin inclined. “And asked of its wellbeing.”

Ezra felt a swell of pride from Thrawn while his crimson gaze remained almost mesmerized upon her. Ezra found there was a sadness there that hung in the depths of his eyes though as he searched Thrawn’s face.

The white loth-cat mewed as if speaking to the little girl.

“Ch'an'ucw ch'acevi?” Ezra looked back at the little girl upon hearing her speak, and he found her looking directly at him. Her crimson gaze, even though a child’s, was still intimidating. She smiled though and waved at Ezra.

Ezra awkwardly waved back, feeling out of place. Thrawn hesitated a glance to him, and Ezra met Thrawn’s eyes briefly, expecting another translation. Thrawn clinched his jaw and turned his gaze back, watching the little girl return to an unknown project. The white loth-cat plopped down on the ground, laying next to her, and watched her work.

“Another friend,” Thrawn said eventually. He took a deep breath. “Another friend is what she said.”
An owl-like creature hoo’ed overhead, stealing Ezra’s attention. *That’s familiar*... Thrawn observed the owl-like creature as well soaring in the sky above. They both found a comfort there, the sky reflecting the golden blues of Lothal’s beginnings of dusk.

“Forgive me, Ezra,” Thrawn said slowly, eyes following the bird. “For earlier. You no doubt felt it. I cannot trust what I see here—”

Thrawn hissed and clinched shut his eyes as a flashback unwillingly came forward.

*Dread— Nowhere to go— An approaching shadow— Twinkling crunches—*

Thrawn gasped and flung his right hand to his head. His feet staggered but Ezra reached out to steady him, placing a hand his shoulder.

*Weakness— Hopelessness— Hand around throat—*

Thrawn grunted a painful lament and lowered his head, brows scrunching as he fought to stop the flashback. His knees threatened to falter, and he instinctively latched onto Ezra’s outstretched arm with his other hand.

*I clutched the branch of soot and flame...*

*Not again— Wheezing breaths— “Show me”— “Nah”—*

*Cold crystals of snow— Struggle against the malice— Childlike giggles morphing to screams— Desperation— Frailty—*

Thrawn moved his right hand from his head to the base of his neck. Ezra’s heart chilled. Was he having trouble breathing? Ezra held him tighter, worry and panic lacing his eyes, heartbeat increasing. *The Force showed Ezra too...*

*Malice—VADER’S MASK—*

“Howmi!” «Daddy!» Ezra flinched and saw the little girl looking at them, still smiling in her radiant joy as if unaware of the turmoil Thrawn was currently sifting through. “Tis‘mi! Ch‘ean‘i!” «Daddy! Look!»

Thrawn’s breath hitched, and Ezra felt him regaining control in the Force.

“Howsi!” «Dad!»

Crimson eyes fluttered open and Thrawn carefully rose his head, leery of the dizziness. He slid his hand down to his chest, catching his breath, and Ezra followed his sluggish gaze to the little girl.

She picked up a necklace, clearly made of elaborately braided golden-green grass from the meadow. Beaming with triumph, she held it up on display for them. *She was so proud.* Her crimson eyes were alight with expectant approval.

Thrawn huffed a soft chuckle despite the quaking Ezra felt from him. He lightly squeezed Ezra’s arm as he straightened his stance, still leaning into Ezra as he continued to emerge from beyond his daze. Thrawn rose his chin and offered a smile to his daughter that he hoped hid his pain.

“Hah cart cssah bun!” «It is very good!» Thrawn called from across the meadow. She beamed even brighter if that were possible. “K‘ir ch‘ah in‘a yeah na!” «Make me one as well!»

She chuckled as she leaned over and continued to work on her piece of art in the meadow beyond.
“Csei s cart veo, niezaho!” «This *is* yours, silly!»

Ezra witnessed the exchange with a dumbfounded air about him. Here he was, holding onto someone who recently met him as an adversary, a Grand Admiral of the Empire, but the Force now offered a new perspective.

“What…,” Ezra said wistfully as he supported Thrawn. Ezra’s mouth was wide, displaying his befuddled mind.

“Thank you, Ezra,” Thrawn said. He squeezed Ezra’s arm one last time before lowering his own to join his other behind his back.

Thrawn inhaled slowly and returned to his measured stance, shoulders squared and hands clasped behind him. Ezra gingerly released his hold from Thrawn, making sure he was indeed steady on his feet before giving space again.

Ezra felt he knew the answer to the question already, but he was compelled to ask anyway. “Who…?” Ezra hesitated. “Who is she?”

Thrawn’s eyes pulsed and narrowed briefly as he considered Ezra’s question. He remained silent, and Ezra didn’t think he would get an answer. The white loth-cat continued to lay on its side beside the little girl, its tail contentedly going up and down as it passively observed them all.

“Ch’eo tocas… Ch’eo cart’ar.” «My light… My hope.»

Thrawn’s voice was small and flowed with suppressed emotion that perhaps Ezra did not expect. Ezra couldn’t understand what he said, but the love contained within Thrawn’s tone was undeniable.

“Your… daughter?” Ezra timidly asked.

Thrawn blinked slowly. “Yes.”

A voice echoed.

“Through the Force, things you will see. Other places. The future…the past. Old friends long gone.” [Yoda] —

“She was taken from me…,” Thrawn said, mouth downturned, eyes unfocused and haunted in memory. “Long ago. To say more is too much.”

“I’m sorry,” Ezra whispered. “I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s alright,” Thrawn interrupted, glancing with glassy eyes toward Ezra. To lose a child…

Another voice, familiar…

“Ezra…”

Ezra flinched. Was that his mother?

“Ezra…”

“Over here, son.”

The voices of Ezra’s mother and father echoed and flowed across the meadow from their right.
Ezra stepped forward a few paces and found his towered home on Lothal materialized a moderate distance away. Thrawn seemed to hear the voices as well as his head turned with Ezra’s movement to find the source of the voices.

“Mom? Dad?” Ezra asked as he beheld his old home. His parents, standing atop its balcony, waved.

“We are so proud of you Ezra…”

His mother’s voice flowed soft and soothing. Ezra’s parents then put their arms around each other and turned to walk inside the home, out of sight.

“I don’t understand,” Ezra said, turning sad eyes to Thrawn. “Why am I here?”

“I do not know, Ezra,” Thrawn replied, his own gaze glistening. “The mysteries of the Force are an enigma to me.”

“Yet we stand here.”

Thrawn looked at Ezra’s towered home again. His eyes conveyed memory.

“When you found me, we were connected a moment. I believe I felt echoes from when you discovered their fate.”

Ezra remembered being lost in what he felt in the Force on the Devastator. When they found Thrawn unconscious and restrained to the medical interrogation chair, there were potent swirlings in the Force that called to Ezra.

“I saw only flashes,” Thrawn continued. “Nothing was really clear, but the essence was there.”

Thrawn averted his gaze downward and narrowed his eyes a moment, as if feeling some of the emotions again. “I am sorry,” he said, catching Ezra’s eyes. His crimson eyes conveyed so much more beyond his words. And their scarlet glow, Ezra realized, had started to dim.

Ezra opened his mouth to speak but instead offered a spectre of a sad smile as if to say, it’s alright just as Thrawn had said to him. He didn’t trust his voice.

“I…,” Ezra said after a moment, scrunching his eyebrows. “I also, saw flashes… here…”

Thrawn stilled and his shoulders stiffened. “Here,” he repeated slowly. “What- what did you see?”

Ezra grimaced. He didn’t want to trigger Thrawn into a flashback again, but the Chiss was resolute in his demeanor.

“Snow,” Ezra began. “And a field of broken ice and…,” Ezra had seen him, but he didn’t know how to delicately convey it. “A dark…,” Ezra’s voice trailed off.

“Vader,” Thrawn said breathily. “You saw Lord Vader.”

“Yeah…,” Ezra swallowed. “He attacked you.”

Thrawn unfocused and broke eye contact. He frowned, seeming lost, alone despite the strength in his stature. His posture became nearly identical to the beginning of the second part of his holo-message.

“Then you understand why I am unbalanced; not at peace, even here.”
Swirlings in the Force— Alien patterns and forms emitting turmoil— A call to focus—

A mother’s lullaby—

Thrawn closed his eyes. The lullaby returned along soft currents of wind, and Thrawn’s daughter began to hum along to the song across from them in the meadow. Her focus remained on the ground in front of her, perhaps further embellishing her father’s braided necklace.

“I’ve done what I must for my people,” Thrawn said, his voice mellow but strong. He focused his dimming gaze upon his daughter. “That has come with and is also a result of a great cost. There are things more distant in this galaxy that are purely evil, Ezra.”

Thrawn’s eyes spoke of shadowed memory as he caught Ezra’s attention. “Beyond the Empire. You must become aware of them. The state in which my people found the Empire after the Clone Wars required the path I was given. I was to prevent those evils from spreading and to send aid in return. Build alliances…”

“You still can,” Ezra said, sensing Thrawn’s melancholy.

Doubt held the structure of Thrawn’s face. He glanced away and beheld the approaching dusk upon the golden horizon, the boy’s hope perhaps too painful to observe in his current state. Even here, Thrawn felt his body betraying him, weakening to whatever concoction that dreadful loyalty officer put in his system. And his throat, he couldn’t feel it anymore, but perhaps that was a blessing.

“Without hope we have nothing,” Ezra pressed softly.

“My hope was stolen from me,” Thrawn said.

His daughter. Ezra took a breath and looked at her, as she hummed contentedly in the meadow beside her white loth-cat friend. The pearly spires of a future Lothal Capital City were beautiful and vibrant in the glimmering sunset.

Kanan’s words of comfort rose to Ezra’s mind. Or a version of them at least…

“Kanan told me once, life doesn’t end but only changes form. That it continues on,” Ezra said, turning back to Thrawn. Thrawn registered Ezra’s words but kept his sight transfixed forward upon his daughter. Ezra motioned to the vision of his towered home. “Just like my parents. They’re with the Force now, and… inside, always.”

“Until our reunion?” Thrawn intoned, soft emotion lacing his voice. Ezra stilled. Thrawn huffed a melancholic breath and squinted his eyes. “It feels so easy to join them…”

Them…

Ezra’s eyes widened. This couldn’t be why the Force brought him here, to witness his passing? The Force wouldn’t do that… would it? Thrawn looked so tired. No, Ezra thought.

What sounded like an expression of the mother’s singing voice echoed to Ezra across the meadow. “Vatt’ah ten.” «Help him.»

“We’re on our way to a Rebel base with you. Hold on until we get there—“

“I’ve tried, Ezra,” Thrawn said, tilting his head. He longed for this reunion that seemed to be set as an offering before him.
“The datachip you sent us,” Ezra said. Thrawn shifted dim crimson orbs to Ezra’s at this, expression hesitant. “We saw your message, but its data is jumbled. You have to tell us yourself about these evils, about your true mission. You said I need to know of them. And your people, they still need you right?”

Thrawn looked faint, “Indeed, they do.” The features of Thrawn’s face were sadly apologetic. “Though I do not know that I am able any longer. A twilight is upon me, Ezra.”

Thrawn hunched his shoulders and looked upon his treasure in the meadow again. His eyes glistened, and his voice became a smooth melancholy. “Look forward, even so, to what lies ahead for you, despite the dangers of that future, and what you hold onto of your past.”

Stars began to appear and twinkle beautifully upon the horizon behind Thrawn’s daughter. A woman’s form took shape and seemingly arose from among them. The light of the vision understood after a moment how to properly reflect her form, and she began walking through the golden-green grass toward Thrawn’s daughter. Blue shimmering butterflies fluttered about her and almost soared around her as an escort as she made her way across the meadow. Ezra saw that she was Chiss.

She wore a long flowing dress that danced along with the wind, and as she walked, her cerulean hand cascaded over the top of the tall golden-green grass, exploring its texture. Ezra saw her hair was a vibrant dark blue that curled just like the little girl’s.

“Nah…,” Thrawn whispered with heavy emotion. “Hah cart k'itro.” «It is true.»

The motherly lullaby was found to be hers as the unknown song permeated from her soothing voice. It was comforting, Ezra thought, even though the language was still unknown. But Ezra was concerned by what what he felt from Thrawn. Immeasurable guilt and regret oozed from him beyond the sorrow held within his crimson eyes. And love. There was a love held there that rose above all else and was perhaps what kept him steady in the midst of his turmoil.

“Ch'eo ch'acah.” «My love.» Thrawn’s breath hitched sorrowfully.

The Chiss woman’s voice was smooth and strong as she sang the unknown lullaby. Thrawn’s daughter gasped and whipped her head toward the source of the song.

“Csen'ai?” «Mother?» She shrieked with echoes of joy and sprung to her feet as her scarlet eyes recognized her mother.

“Tin'mi! Tin'mi!” «Mommy! Mommy!» The little girl bolted toward her mother. “Vah cart cseah s! «You’re here!»

Thrawn watched his daughter run toward the one whom they both loved with an anguished yet rejoiceful gleam. The little girl bounded up and down through the meadow; the tall golden-green grassland of Lothal was nearly at her shoulders, almost concealing her within. Even so, one wouldn’t be able to miss her as the shimmering blue butterflies flew up and skittered wildly along her wake.

The meadow became a sight to behold with both eye and heart. The glowing white spires of a future Lothal Capital City, décòred with the sparkles of dusk’s beginnings in the sky, permeated majestically above the rolling golden-green grassland, alight with blue glimmers in the wind. And yet the joyous reunion of mother and daughter, and the resulting echoes of cascading love, was all the more beautiful sight.
The mother scooped her daughter up in her arms and twirled in circles. Both giggled in rapturous joy as they rotated. Their daughter wrapped her arms around her mother’s neck and buried her face in her shoulder. Likewise, the mother held her close, squeezing her as if to never again let go.

Thrawn stepped forward and let out a shaky breath, and tears escaped from his dimming eyes as he beheld their reunion. He wished so much to hold them both again. It had been so long.

He startled though and stopped where he stood. A confusing pang in his heart told him to stop. Ezra felt it as well, as if the Force cried out.

“Mirroww…” The white loth-cat was sitting on its haunches in the clearing and meowed toward Thrawn.

But Thrawn didn’t want to stop. He would be there for them this time.

“That was the most bitter irony of war: The greatest acts of love for your family were the ones that kept you apart from them.” [Raymus Antilles] —

Defiant against an external will, booted feet shifted forward again, intending to carry Thrawn through the meadow toward them. Toward his treasure. Toward that which brought him hope.

A wolf howl—Lightning—

A roaring thunder clap sounded, accompanied by white streaks of lightning that streamed across the sky, and Ezra flinched and protectively covered his face. Thrawn immediately cried out in pain and collapsed to his knees. He clutched his chest with his left hand and held himself up from collapsing further with his right.

“Thrawn?!” Ezra rushed to Thrawn’s side, sliding to his knees. Wind increased. Ezra put his right arm around Thrawn’s back across the shoulders and clutched him. “What happened! Show me!”

More lamenting pains erupted from Thrawn’s throat as he tried to breathe. He curled inward upon himself, trembling with waves of pain. Breath came in labored wheezes, and blood escaped the right side of his mouth with a weak cough. Ezra pulled him backward and placed his left hand on the top of Thrawn’s chest to gingerly move him.

Thrawn shakily lifted his hand from his chest as Ezra pushed him back and found it covered red. Blood streamed from a deep gash in his ribs, piercing his lung and leeching precious liquid down his uniform. Ezra blanched at the sight.

“Oh… Hold on, hold on,” Ezra said, as gripped him tighter.

Thrawn shivered and clutched eyes. With a hitched breath, Thrawn’s mind went blank, and his head rolled backward into Ezra’s arm at his shoulders. His hearing faded, and all he could comprehend was the piercing pain in his chest as he tried to clutch the wound again. Muscles went lax, and he collapsed onto his right hip.

Ezra cradled Thrawn as the Chiss’s muscles failed, and Thrawn allowed Ezra to guide him downward into a baptism of Lothal’s golden-green meadow.

“Thrawn?” Ezra pleaded, as he tried to settle Thrawn on his back. His legs were outstretched but bent and prevented him from fully laying back. “Hey, hey, hey open your eyes.”

Ezra pressed on the wound, making Thrawn hiss a gasp at the pain. Thrawn rolled his head away from the pain, while a foot reflexively scraped across dirt and grass to push away. But the reflex
produced more pain. Thrawn’s eyes shot open, unfocused, and his right hand flinched upward from its outstretched position on the ground as he shook his head. Unfocused crimson eyes beheld a sky at dusk with blue shimmering butterflies floating above.

Thrawn stilled, muscle tension waning. The pain began to float away; eyelids began to flutter closed.

Pain, spiked and harsh—

“Thrawn!” Ezra yelled as he pressed harder on his chest. “Stay awake!”

Thrawn pulsed his eyes wide back to awareness. Fingers on his right hand shakily dug into dirt with the struggle to breathe. Such pain… His breath was becoming thready, and Ezra could feel his quakes and trembles underneath his hands.

“I don’t know what to do,” Ezra said, his voice small. Tears escaped his eyes as he searched Thrawn’s face, hoping to find answers from him. But all he found were grim crimson eyes, resigned to their fate and struggling for focus.

“Why is this happening?” Ezra continued, scared and filled with sorrow. But Thrawn didn’t have an answer. His eyes merely narrowed a moment as he tried to focus on Ezra’s face in the midst of shallow breaths. Each labored inhale and exhale produced shuddering and rattling hitches underneath Ezra’s hands. It hurt…

Thrawn’s mind was foggy and struggling for basic vocabulary.

“Eli…,” Thrawn managed to say.

“What—”

“Eli. Vanto.” Thrawn exhaled through wheezing breath. “Remember that… that name, Ezra.”

“Eli Vanto?”

Thrawn blinked slowly. “Y- yes… Eli Van…”

“Hey!” Ezra lamented, shaking Thrawn as he pressed down.

Thrawn’s eyes pulsed wide again, not really focusing anymore. “He may. Try… to contact,” Thrawn said through painful hitches. He swallowed and tried to breathe deeper. “Friend. He is. A… friend.”

Blood began to pool on the ground, and Ezra knew there was nothing he could do here. He watched helplessly as Thrawn continually faded beneath his hands. Why was the Force doing this?


Thrawn’s daughter suddenly fell to her knees in front of Ezra, and the heartstrings of Ezra’s heart broke.

“Tis’mi,” «Daddy» she said, her expression otherworldly. She smiled calmly, and her glowing red eyes were confident and happy to see her father. Thrawn’s awareness increased, and his eyes shifted to behold his treasure. “Hah ch'aah carcir bun.” «It’s okay.»

Thrawn shakily found strength and rose his right hand to her face.
“Ch’eo tocas…” «My light…» Thrawn said weakly, his eyes overflowing. “Csehisbah vah.” «Look at you.»

Ezra’s fingers curled, and he pressed down harder, mentally willing and pleading for Thrawn to hold on. Thrawn barely flinched at the new pressure, inhaling only a shallow heave. His eyes shifted more to his right as his wife appeared beside their daughter, hand over her mouth, and piercing crimson eyes watering.

Thrawn’s eyebrows rose as he beheld her. His voice was barely a whisper. “Ch'ah bazor… viz cart… cseah.” «I should have been there»

“Nah ch'eo ch'acah,” she said falling to her knees beside their daughter. She smiled through glistening and caring eyes as she leaned over and placed a hand on Thrawn’s face. “Hah ch'aah nah veo vott'i.” «No my love, it’s not your fault.»

Thrawn leaned into her touch, and he fought to keep his eyes open. He moved his mouth as if to speak again, but words couldn’t escape beyond wheezing breath. Dim crimson eyes pulsed as they tried to stay focused on his love, but they increasingly began to focus beyond her, past the shimmering blue butterflies above them.

“Hah ch'aah g'esb.” «It's alright.», she said, emotion lacing her voice.

Thrawn’s hand slipped from his daughter to the ground, but she gripped it. Fingers flinched trying to close around her small hand. Breaths became slower and more sluggish, and Ezra could feel Thrawn relaxing.

“No, please,” Ezra muttered.

Cerulean lids wobbled heavily. Thrawn closed his eyes.

A wolf howled, it's cry echoing across the field, and Ezra looked up through overflowing eyes to find it staring at them with its intense yellow gaze. It began walking toward them, and Ezra saw that its fur was white like the loth-cat’s.

Voices echoed.

“What you need, you already have.” [Obi Wan]—

“We’ll see each other again. I believe that.” [Rey]—

“Ch’un’cr ten.” «Show him.», Thrawn’s daughter said to Ezra. Her eyes were precious and serene, expression ethereal. “Vah tuzir vatt’ah ten.” «You can help him.»

Ezra shook his head. “I’m sorry I—“

She raised a necklace she wore and delicately displayed it in both palms toward Ezra. It was made of flat sheets of wood and various baubles crafted and carved by hand. It was intricate and obviously personal. The little girl earnestly looked up at Ezra.

“Cart reo tocas.” «Be his light.», her mother said softly. Ezra found her crimson eyes to be kind in the midst of their woe.

Tocas… Ezra recalled Thrawn saying that earlier but his mind was spinning and filled with shocked sorrow. “I don’t understand. I’m sorry.”
The white loth-wolf made it to them and stood over Thrawn’s head, looking down at them. Ezra saw ancient yellow eyes filled with wisdom peering into the very essence of his being. It was chilling.

Perhaps satisfied with what it saw, the white loth-wolf lowered its nose and began sniffing Thrawn’s forehead. Ezra’s face scrunched sorrowfully again as he beheld Thrawn’s lax form. He realized he hadn’t stopped pressing down yet. But he didn’t want to move.

In the midst of its snuffles, the white loth-wolf suddenly puffed a breath, and cool steam permeated over and around Thrawn’s head. The white loth-wolf then rose its head, and squinted powerful amber eyes at Ezra. The Jedi flinched as it began doing the same to Ezra, but Ezra felt a reassurance from the Force and stayed still. The white loth-wolf puffed another breath upon Ezra, releasing the same cool steam.

Swirlings in the Force— Patterns and forms emitting control— Focus— Flashes—

Ezra’s vision flashed white as he fell backward to the ground, the golden-green grass of Lothal’s meadow providing a soft cushion for his fall.

"First comes the day
Then comes the night.
After the darkness
Shines through the light.
The difference, they say,
Is only made right
By the resolving of gray
Through refined Jedi sight."

— Journal of the Whills, 7:477

Chapter End Notes

"I walk alone
Beside myself
Nowhere to go
This bleeding heart
That's in my hands I fell apart"
"Flesh and Bone by Black Math"

"Is anybody out there?
Can you lead me to the light?
Is anybody out there?
Tell me it'll all be alright"
You are not alone
I've been here the whole time singing you a song
"Carry You by Ruelle"

Songs that hold the essence of *A Vision, Familiar Yet...*
"They Being Dead Yet Speaketh" & "Your Mother Loves You"
Chapter Summary

“The future is not a river to carry us. It is the ocean in which we drown, if we are not prepared.” —Valkorion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The fulcrum upon which the fate of the galaxy balanced was like an elusive glass. Was it a single point? Or many encompassing the whole of that point, one unaware of the other, fighting for and maintaining that balance? If one failed, would the others also tumble? The galaxy would become an unbalanced void.

What do you do when faced with the unknown?

The mind could be a fragile thing, especially when faced with a truth contradictory to an established belief.

Truth. Should it be sought and understood even if obtaining that truth meant the topple of stability? But was that stability even truly stable? What was stability? Falsehood.

What was known to be correct and true was perhaps a deceptive illusion for those caught within the master’s guise, meant to ensure a false measure of strength and peace for those within the comfortable bubble, when in truth, that bubble was tumbling down a precipice of jagged rock toward horrific destruction.

What was loyalty… truly?

Such was the trouble that faced Commodore Faro.

Aboard the Chimaera, Thrawn’s office was cold. It was left untouched except for the removal of battle’s carnage. Pristine, were one not aware of the events of the past day, Grand Admiral Thrawn would be expected to be seated at his desk upon entering.

It was an eerie sight for Faro, for it offered a warning of how quickly someone could be replaced in the Empire, regardless of stature, and… regardless of the replacement. A warning it was of how quickly fate could change even for those seen as a pinnacle of strength and endurance.

The office felt like a hollow echo.

Faro sat at what was now her office desk with wide, unfocused eyes as she listened to a partially broken audio recording. She was amid mental conflict as the playback was breaking the final strings of that which she once knew as truth. As loyalty.

Since returning from the medical bay, Commodore Faro had been sifting through a trail of Thrawn’s records, contrary to Chief Medical Officer Zahara Cody’s order for rest. But her mind was restless, and it was enthralling to discover once again, first hand, that most of Thrawn’s art collection was integral to his research.
She knew the art assisted him in many ways, but Faro had never been able to analyze the collection by herself and at her own pace. It made for an enthralling exploration of diverse cultures of the galaxy contained within a beautifully vibrant tapestry.

So much history, so much art, was contained within the collection, the histories of which Faro had not been taught or made aware of during her Imperial education. Faro couldn’t comprehend everything however, as much of Thrawn’s notes were in what she assumed to be his Chiss language.

She giggled at times when she imagined Thrawn hastily writing those notes, trying to keep up with his thoughts. He had to manually draw and write the characters on a tablet or his desk, as those of his alphabet were foreign. *Alien.* His handwriting was precise, but it ebbed and flowed beautifully on the page.

It was surprising to Faro that Thrawn never input the characters or a knowledge of his language into the Imperial database. Manually writing everything must have been slow and tedious. But it was the perfect encryption she realized.

With his absence, the knowledge on those pages was lost, and the thought saddened Faro. She felt as if she could hear the echo of his voice if she stared at the writing long enough. In her curiosity, she found a method to everything archived that spoke of his pure admiration for his art collection beyond its material and strategic value. Her search became a process of healing in a way. It was like she still had a piece of him; she didn’t fully lose him.

Even though he was gone, she still felt as if she were invading his privacy and hoped to remain respectful, but she couldn’t deny the ease with which the information unlocked for her. It was almost as if Thrawn wanted Faro to find his research in his absence, as much of the information decrypted once she input her own authorizations.

Faro’s anxiety returned with dread though as she found the recording that currently held her wide-eyed attention. Pained crimson eyes flashed back to the forefront of her memory, and Faro felt once again his weak squeeze echoed in the palm of her hand.

Her anxiety had spiked after she realized the timestamp of the data and had immediately moved to play it. Thrawn received a highly encrypted transmission dated only hours before Vader’s attack. A transmission that was additionally timestamped to occur not even a standard hour before Thrawn’s personal change-of-command holo-message was recorded and prepared for her.

> “Regardless of the finality of whatever fate has befallen me, I am otherwise unable to perform my duties as Grand Admiral aboard the Chimaera.”

Now here she sat, shattered and struggling to maintain an internal balance.

A young man’s voice emitted from the archived transmission. It was measured with an unusually familiar accent, but a slight wobble every other syllable betrayed a deeper river of emotion.

> “We are on route as we speak, sir, but…” His voice trailed off, shaky and hesitant.

> “What communications have you received from the planet?” Thrawn said slowly and heavily.

Faro grimaced at hearing Thrawn’s voice. *Lier.* She shivered, and guilt she suspected to not leave her for the rest of her life coursed through her veins.

> “None, sir,” the young man said breathily. Static began to invade the audio playback. “None, except for the initial distress.”
Faro paused the recording and began pressing deeper into the encryption of the transmission. She wanted the holovid to display as well, but she had to slice the encryption further. Her right hand proved troublesome as the bandage upon it prevented swift movement over the console. She felt a tender stretch on the palm, and frustration boiled upon her brow.

The office holo-projector whirled and hummed, and a blue holographic spectre of Thrawn’s form appeared across her desk, facing away from her and toward the middle of the room. He stood squared and resolute as always in his crisp Grand Admiral’s uniform, his hands clasped behind his back.

Faro steeled herself and continued playback. The transmission remained filled with a slight distortion sometimes but was thankfully clear enough to discern. The link must have been stretched across a great distance Faro thought.

Thrawn held up his right hand, stopping the young man’s report. It shook slightly, and Faro’s heart tightened as she had never seen him physically display his trouble in such a way. Thrawn turned away slowly, moving as if beyond the point of exhaustion, and placed the hand upon the back of a chair, leaning his weight slightly upon it. It was in fact the same chair that Vader would later slice into molten pieces with his lightsaber.

Faro’s eyes became glassy as she was able to watch Thrawn’s expression threaten to go beyond the sadness she had previously discerned when on the bridge with him as second-in-command for the last time. Thrawn was unsteady, as if he required the chair to stand. He lowered his head after a moment and closed his crimson eyes, perhaps trying to maintain control and push the troubles of his thoughts away.

“I’m so sorry, sir,” the young man continued. Thrawn took a deep breath and shook his head. “The admiral estimates about eight hours before—”

Commodore Faro slapped her desk with her left hand and stopped the recording. Her face blanched as she realized the source of the young man’s voice. Thrawn having stepped aside revealed a clear line of sight to the other person in the recording. Her mind couldn’t fully reconcile what she understood as truth with what she saw to be the identity of the young man her glistening eyes found standing there in holographic form in the middle of her office.

Faro saw another ghost. There stood Eli Vanto with pained eyes fixated upon Grand Admiral Thrawn.

“How?” she whispered, standing up upon shaky feet.

Faro’s heart began to race, and her face contorted into a mixture of sorrowfully hurt confusion and disbelief, as her watery eyes shifted between Grand Admiral Thrawn and Eli Vanto. Thrawn had told her Eli was lost and had been reported as such in a debriefing. Eli was logged in Imperial records as missing in action, presumed dead.

Faro thought Eli was dead.

However, here he was, speaking with Thrawn, obviously not missing. Not dead. Faro saw that Eli wore a different uniform, not of Imperial design, and she didn’t recognize the emblem on the shoulder.

Faro felt betrayed. Why the deception? Treason… Why the secrecy? Treason… Why keep the truth from her? Treason…
Why?

Treason.

Thrawn’s voice echoed to her memory…

“Vader has grown suspicious of my loyalties; he has, in fact, directly challenged me of it.” …

Faro saw her former superior standing there in the hologram, frozen in a rare state of vulnerability, his head bowed, and eyes closed.

His voice echoed again…

“There are evil things in this galaxy Commodore.” …

“I held the hope once that this galaxy could be united and confront those threats together in strength.” …

The history of service, of loyalty, that Thrawn gave to her and to the rest of the Chimaera, couldn’t, shouldn’t, be erased so quickly.

Could it? Would Faro allow it?

A true leader will work to prove worthy of a deeper trust.

But leadership and loyalty are both two-bladed weapons. Each can be twisted from its intended purpose.

Faro was wrestling with her mind, her Imperial impulses warring with the instincts of her better nature. Thrawn and Eli had to have had a reason for this deception, right? However, she was afraid to discover the purpose. Faro had been steadfast in her belief that Thrawn was not a traitor as Vader had accused, but… She stood now, shaken, as her eyes rested upon perhaps that which was worthy of the accusation.

Even so, amid her hurt confusion, Faro’s better nature held a small spark of faith born from Thrawn’s legacy.

“My people are dying, Karyn.”

Faro took in a hitched breath, and she reached for the console to continue playback. She was afraid and weary about what she would find, but, even so, her trembling hand pressed the button on her console.

“—our arrival,” Eli continued. The former Lieutenant Commander of the Empire swallowed hard as his gaze hesitated. Faro saw a crushing sadness and empathy in Eli’s stance.

Thrawn rose his gaze forward, looking eerily both at and beyond Commodore Faro at the same time. Unintentionally as a result of the hologram, Faro saw beyond the façade that Thrawn constantly held as a leader and a Grand Admiral of the Empire. There was a vast ocean in the depths of his glowing eyes that contained emotion and echoes of a personal loss. Faro moved to the side, timid in Thrawn’s holographic sight. She rubbed her right forearm and found where his gaze rested.
Thrawn was considering the spherical statue that rested upon the pedestal behind where Faro stood and blinked his glistening eyes to the methodical rhythm of his mind. Faro could see his focus shift internally as his pupils dilated, but it only lasted briefly as he squared his shoulders. His voice was muted.

“Was it Grysk?” Thrawn asked, unmoving.

Eli’s brow arched up as he pinched his lips. “Yes…,” he said, eyes averting in sympathy. “It appears so.”

“The fault lies with me.”

“No, you can’t know that.”

“I can, and it does,” Thrawn said as he halfway turned back to Eli. He kept his hand on the chair while his other still rested on the small of his back.

With her left hand sliding across the desk surface, Faro slowly followed Thrawn’s turn, walking from behind the desk to better observe the holo-recording. Her mind felt numb as she tried to process everything.

Thrawn appeared haunted as he met Eli’s gaze again. “Were it not for my words, the Chiss would not now be in open conflict with them. I have disrupted the balance,” Thrawn continued.

“There are only reports of a single attack,” Eli said.

“No, it is only the beginning.” Thrawn placed both hands behind his back again and fully faced Eli now. “How you describe their attack indicates to me a shift from subterfuge and stealing away our children, toward all-out war. They are testing military response. You must be prepared; you must be careful.”

“We will be,” Eli said offering a sad smile. The smile faded as he softly shook his head at Thrawn. “We could still find her.”

Thrawn’s shoulders slightly hunched. Faro saw doubt there in her grand admiral. He narrowed his eyes after a moment. “If you do—”

“I’ll contact you right away,” Eli said nodding.

Faro recognized that Thrawn didn’t have hope, as if feeling the truth in his heart already.

“Thank you, Eli,” Thrawn said, emotion lacing his voice.

As Faro watched, Thrawn appeared to delve deep inside his mind. The same look would appear upon him during battle at times, usually at the behest of a call to action at the precipice of an impossible decision. Thrawn emerged from it into familiar Imperial rigidity, though his eyes still held the turmoil of his soul.

“Please offer my apologies to Admiral Ar’alani,” Thrawn began smoothly. “I cannot yet abandon my mission set forth by the Aristocra. It is too important to the greater conflict…” Thrawn’s voice trailed off a moment, as his jaw flexed. He shook his head, looking pained. “…even for my own homeworld.”

“I- I understand,” Eli said. “And I think Admiral Ar’alani will too, but…”
“Not the Aristocra,” Thrawn finished. He averted his gaze and offered a bitter sigh. “Even in fulfilling their orders, I defy them still. It seems they cannot be appeased.”

“I would hope they would see—”

“No, Eli, they will not,” Thrawn clipped in a rare interruption. There was a flash to his crimson gaze, beyond which anger hung for those who would not see. “They are in conflict, yes?”

Eli hesitated and shyly nodded after a moment of consideration.

“You’ve been ordered not to tell me,” Thrawn said.

Eli’s eyes were apologetic. “Yes.”

The corners of Thrawn’s mouth rose slightly as if proud. Proud that the Aristocra deemed him too important or proud that Eli would stay loyal to their orders even if that meant keeping something from him personally, Faro didn’t know. Perhaps both, but there was a hint of pride there surely.

“It’s alright, Eli, and it is no matter. I saw the Chiss shuttle myself escape from the Chimaera’s engagement with the Grysk. I do understand tensions have escalated in some way.”

A Chiss shuttle? Thrawn never mentioned this, Faro thought.

“There is conflict brewing among them,” Eli said slowly. “But… Admiral Ar’alani- and others-didn’t want to distract you from your mission.” His eyes became a bit hopeful despite the pain. “Perhaps this Grysk attack will stop it.”

“Stop it?” Thrawn repeated. “It will only make it worse.”

Thrawn sighed and looked to the side, staring where once a Twi’lek Kalikori rested. His eyes were haunted in memory. “Our own Clone War,” he muttered to himself.

“It’s never gotten full scale, but…,” Eli said quietly.

“I will accelerate my plans,” Thrawn said quickly, re-centering his attention upon his former protégé. “Remember our research? I found the source and suspect it to be a threat, even to the Chiss as a whole regardless of ideology or political affiliation. Once able, I intend to put the Chimaera on course to what I believe is the main worksite.”

“You found it?” Eli asked wistfully. “And you think it’s a threat?”

“I believe so yes, and I hope to discover its capabilities. I have yet more suspicions but uttering them even over this frequency is too dangerous. I’ve been preparing a data-drive to be sent to the rendezvous point instead. Rukh should be able to ensure its safe delivery when the time is right.” Thrawn’s eyes became piercing even through the lowered resolutions of the hologram. “The Aristocra must become aware of the danger emerging here. They must know it is familiar.”

“Be careful, sir,” Eli said. “This all sounds too risky, even for you, if I may.”

“Do not worry about me, Eli,” Thrawn said, offering a small smirk, though his eyes didn’t match it. “I’ll be fine.”

By Eli’s demeanor, Faro read that Eli knew Thrawn was only trying to reassure him, making the poor boy perhaps even more apprehensive. Thrawn seemed to recognize Eli’s leery bearing as well, but it was something Thrawn had to say as a leader even so. Thrawn’s head tilted slightly while
eyes narrowed knowingly at his former protégé. Thrawn knew and had become resigned long ago to the danger and to the fate this mission set forth by the Chiss Ascendancy and the Aristocra could bring forth to him.

“Some in power never agreed with my mission nor the actions potentially required of me for its success,” Thrawn said more quietly, perhaps wanting to be careful with Eli’s emotions. “Additionally, you and Admiral Ar’alani must be cautious of your association with me.”

“Nonsense,” Eli responded, almost looking hurt.

“It may be necessary,” Thrawn replied. He considered his thoughts another moment and took a deep breath, as his eyes became glassy again. “If there are any survivors…”

“We’ll take care of them. And I’ll find her, sir, you have my word.”

Thrawn narrowed glistening eyes and nodded. “Thank you for informing me,” Thrawn whispered.

Faro noticed Thrawn rub his right wrist with his left thumb, and she was nearly overwhelmed with her own emotion. She rose her bandaged right hand and wiped at her face in a weak attempt to contain the sorrow escaping her eyes. His homeworld attacked by the Grysk? He never mentioned this either. And Thrawn must have had someone dear to him there, Faro thought. The burden he carried when no one else knew...

That would explain the nature of his expression and demeanor she discerned later on the bridge. Their last conversation now carried so much more meaning. This was too much for Faro to comprehend.

Thrawn turned toward the desk and stood staring at the main console a moment. Holding the expression of someone saying goodbye, he turned back halfway and faced Eli.

“The burden he carried when no one else knew…”

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“Farewell and safe travels, my friend,” Thrawn said heavily.

“To you as well, sir,” Eli said shakily. Eli looked like he wanted to say so much more but withheld himself. He appeared so small and lonely in his unknown dark uniform.

Thrawn seemed to take in the sight of his friend for a moment longer. His crimson eyes pulsed narrow. “Nan’eo ch’abeiuh,” Thrawn said after a moment of quiet. «Never goodbye.»

Eli’s expression became a mixture of surprise and sadness, obviously understanding the language and the meaning held within. “Nan’eo ch’abeiuh,” Eli repeated back breathily with a whispered and heavy accent.

The tones from his friend made Thrawn’s eyes perk briefly with a subtle smile. The phrase from Eli wasn’t quite a mirror of the correct pronunciation that Thrawn had produced. To Faro’s ears, it was almost as if an additional instrument were needed to produce the correct tones that the vocal chords of human anatomy didn’t possess.

But with a final nod, crimson eyes reflected a somber light, Eli’s own a mixture of longing sorrow. Thrawn slowly turned back and reached over his desk. With almost a smooth caress, he pressed a button on his center console and ended the transmission with a mellow trill.

Eli Vanto disappeared behind him. Thrawn rose his chin and took a deep breath. He closed his eyes.

The holo-message’s blue aura then faded a moment later and left Thrawn’s former office dark, and
Commodore Faro standing there alone upon shaky knees.

Faro leaned to sit on the desk, gobsmacked at her new revelations. Tears ran hot as a tumultuous array of emotion flowed from her. She breathed quicker and quicker until she was on the verge of hyperventilating.

_Fear, sorrow, anger—_

_Betrayal, shame, guilt, regret—_

_Loyalty, empathy, confusion—_

CHAOS—

She hissed in subtle pain and clasped her right hand. Blood seeped through the bandage, and Faro realized she had been squeezing her hand into a tight fist. The fragile sutures must have broken away from their bonds.

A ping also sounded at the door.

“Karabast…,” Faro mumbled. She moaned in pain as she began untying the bandage. She swiped at her face with her forearm and leaned over her desk at the same time scanning its surface. She found her target and punched a button with her elbow. “Yes? Who is it?”

“Major Ayer, ma’am,” Ayer said over comm. “You requested to see me?”

“Oh right…,” Faro replied. Her voice was going back to strength and emerging beyond her emotion, but not quickly enough to escape Ayer’s attention.

“Everything alright, Commodore?” Ayer said with concern.

“Ah yes- yes, Major Ayer,” Faro said, grimacing at the blood on the unfurling bandage. “I just- wasn’t expecting you so soon. Please, come in major.”

Chapter End Notes

Author’s note: (Hello there!) I hope you're enjoying this story! I wanted to assure everyone that has blessed me by reading this story and commenting and speaking with me, that this entire work has always been planned to its conclusion and has a set ending in mind. The goal as well is to have this complete before _Thrawn: Treason’s_ release (and Episode 9 *wink wink*). This is a story I feel in my heart (and flesh and bones ;) ) and I can't wait to share it fully with you all!

**Considering that, after reading this chapter, you might find more nuance to the first couple of chapters. Much love!**

This (and most of the next 2 chapters) was written and heavily edited while at Star Wars Celebration Chicago 2019.
Ezra screamed and opened his eyes with a flash of panicked cerulean orbs. He was laid on the ground in the Ghost’s lounge, but Ezra didn’t recognize where he was. His mind was held captive in a realm between dreams and visions, not quite able to shake away from the flowing fields and spine tree forests of a distant Lothal and reconcile it with present reality.

Ezra found himself flat in his back surrounded by chaos and pounds of battle. Harsh turbulence rumbled the frame of a strange metallic floor. Sparks flew across his vision and disorienting surges pushed Ezra from side to side. He whimpered and flailed his arms about trying to steady himself, but someone was over him and holding him down.

Muffled voices and muted warbles echoed from metallic surfaces as engines strained and groaned. The mixture of chaotic noise and pulsing light proved too overwhelming as Ezra wasn’t fully emerged from the Force-vision. Ezra couldn’t focus, everything was foggy and obscured by the lingering haze of dreams.

Kanan, still wearing his stormtrooper disguise, appeared overhead with concern laced across his face. “Ezra?! I’m right here!”

Ezra yelped again as Kanan reached for his shoulders. The young Padawan scooted away in fear and leaned up on his arms, frantically looking around for help and escape. Ezra was afraid, for Ezra didn’t see the face of his master but the dreadful mask of Lord Vader.

Alarms were blaring, and Ezra began to hyperventilate along with the chaotic cadence. Where was he? The whoosh of a mechanical ventilator nearby enhanced the projection of Vader’s mask to his troubled and disoriented mind.

_Vader’s voice filled with malice, “Show me…”_

_Thrawn’s voice constricted to a breath, “Nah…”_

_Dread— Hopelessness— Cold—_

“You’re on the Ghost, Ezra,” Kanan hesitated, slowly reaching his hands toward Ezra, though careful not to touch him. Ezra whipped his gaze to the familiar voice, trying to focus, but now found the white Lothwolf where Kanan knelt.

Kanan’s hands were shaking as he sensed Ezra’s panic and confusion. “It’s me, Kanan.”

Ezra’s breath hitched as he flinched away again amid another booming tumble of turbulence. He squinted though and found Kanan’s face as it began to emerge from beyond the mirage of the Force-vision.
“Find your center Ezra,” Kanan carefully continued.

Wooden baubles clonking together— A child’s giggle— “Ch’un’cr ten.” «Show him.»—

Ezra clinched his eyes shut and sighed a whimper, trying to shake his visions and the echoes of turmoil. He saw the face of Thrawn’s daughter smiling as she held her necklace up to him. Her mother’s voice echoed softly, “Cart reo tocas.” «Be his light.»

Though far from balanced, Ezra’s panicked eyes flashed open and the lounge of the Ghost rose to recognition. Sounds of chaotic battle and urgent voices became clear.

Ezra shot up to a seated position and gasped for air. He frantically brought his hands forward and found them gloved in stormtrooper armor.

“Ezra?” Kanan’s voice was urgent.

“Zeb, I need you on that turret!” Hera’s voice echoed from the cockpit, followed by heavy footfalls upon metallic floor. Zeb bounded into the lounge toward a ladder and caught Ezra’s confused eyes.

“Good to see you awake, kid,” Zeb said as he started climbing.

Frustrated warbles emitted from the cockpit.

“Just get me any jump point out of here, Chop!” Hera urged. “Hurry!”

Sparks flew and lights dimmed briefly as a deep explosion bellowed and rocked the Ghost.

“There went the shuttle!” Sabine yelled from the forward turret.

“Ezra look at me, listen to my voice,” Kanan urged smoothly on the ground in front of Ezra. “Emotion, yet peace.”

Ezra tried to calm his breathing, but his heart wouldn’t slow as his mind saw thick blood flash on his hands. His focus fell back inside his mind as his perception was in Lothal’s field once again with Thrawn fading beneath his hands.

Ezra felt the jagged rise and fall of Thrawn’s chest as the Chiss wheezed. A faint pulse of Thrawn’s heart reverberated up through his hands as Ezra tried to keep the precious life-liquid inside.

With a weak heaving breath, fingers of Thrawn’s left hand brushed against Ezra’s hands in a twitch of pain. Ezra pressed down harder on the gaping wound, and Thrawn huffed a gasp. Thrawn tried to speak but suffered another wet breath and shook his head to the side. Breathe... Dirt audibly crumbled underneath Thrawn’s other hand as he scraped his fingers into the ground, but his right arm quickly became limp and outstretched to the side as he began to let go. Crimson eyes began to fade from their glow and unfocus. The pain...

Thrawn began to relax underneath him, but Ezra willed Thrawn’s wheezing breaths to continue through curling fingers. Please... Faded and dim crimson eyes pulsed as they tried to focus on Ezra’s face through the swelling pain and rattling struggle to breathe.

Ezra felt the crash of fear once again of hindering Thrawn’s breathing but hoping to stop the bleeding at the same time. Garish red blood felt sticky as it congealed and soaked beyond his hands and through Thrawn’s uniform toward a forming puddle of rustic nectar in Lothal’s meadow.

“I don’t know what to do,” Ezra lamented, tears escaping his eyes, transfixed upon his hands.
Ezra flinched as Kanan grabbed onto him with a father’s grasp, a grasp not intended to let go. “Come back to me, Ezra,” Kanan pleaded. “Ignorance, yet knowledge. Passion, yet serenity.” Ezra sobbed, “Why is this happening?”

Kanan felt Ezra’s helplessness, and he briefly heard pained and wheezing breaths echoed from beyond.

“Chaos, yet harmony, Ezra,” Kanan said, placing a hand on Ezra’s face. Ezra’s perception flashed back to the Ghost with a gasp, and he met Kanan’s gaze right in front of his face. The cloudy and fatherly eyes looked into Ezra’s soul, and it was as if they could truly see each other again for a moment.

“Look at me, Ezra,” Kanan said slowly taking a deep breath. “Death, yet the Force.”

Ezra scrunched his brow in sorrow and hitched a lamenting breath as he held his master’s gaze through overflowing orbs. Kanan squeezed Ezra’s shoulder as he felt the Padawan begin to anchor himself to the present moment.

The Ghost lurched into hyperspace, leaving the pounds of battle behind.

Kanan fell backward as Ezra suddenly flung himself forward and held Kanan into a tight hug with sobbing laments.

“He died in my arms, Kanan,” Ezra lamented. Kanan sat there and hugged Ezra just as tight, secured and protected in his fatherly arms.

“Shh shh shh,” Kanan whispered in Ezra’s ear, sighing a scared but relieved breath. “It’s okay…”

“I couldn’t stop it…”

Hera’s voice echoed urgently from the cockpit, “Keep us steady, Chop.”

Chopper’s warbles chased after her as she emerged from the airlock hallway and into the lounge. Her worried eyes found Ezra distraught with sorrow, clinging to Kanan on the floor.

“Ezra? Are you okay?” Hera said with motherly fear. She rushed to them and caressed the back of Ezra’s head as she knelt.

Panicked blue eyes opened, and Hera investigated Ezra’s sorrowed soul.

“Hera?” Ezra asked with glistening eyes. His voice was small.

“You’re safe now,” Hera said, relieved. She shook her head. “You scared us.”

A beeping and steady alarm emitted from the direction of the couch. Ezra finally became aware of others present in the lounge.

“Keep that pace Rex!” Kallus ordered.

Ezra flashed his gaze to the noise and froze at what he saw across the room. The small table and two knee-high stools were pushed away from the couch. Thrawn lay limp on the couch, at the mercy of Rex and Kallus’ efforts, the breathing tube still taped around his jaw consistently delivering oxygen to troubled lungs. Rex was standing over-top Thrawn, compressing Thrawn’s chest as he straddled him on the couch. Kallus knelt on the ground beside them, fumbling with the
mechanical ventilator and an injection tube.

“Thrawn!” Ezra panicked and stumbled to his feet, but Kanan and Hera grabbed him.

“Whoa wait Ezra!” Kanan urged.

“Let them work on him,” Hera said.

“No! No, no…,” Ezra cried.

Sabine appeared at the hallway leading to the cockpit, having shut down the forward turret, and found Ezra being held back, lamenting. Surprise laced her face.

“Here, sit on the chair, Ezra,” Hera said as she guided Ezra to a wooden chair at other end of the curved couch. She searched his eyes, kneeling in front of him. “They’re doing all they can for him.”

Kanan sat down next to Ezra and put an arm around him. Ezra trembled as he caught Hera’s empathetic eyes, and she took Ezra’s hands within her own and squeezed. It was obvious to everyone that Ezra had experienced something beyond expectation and time in the Force. Sabine saw Ezra’s care and worry for Thrawn, a Grand Admiral of the Empire, and felt defensive at the sight. She crossed her arms and hugged herself, warring against her own callousness and apathy.

Zeb emerged from the ladder leading to his turret. With his ears back and eyebrows raised, he caught Sabine’s gaze, and she pursed her lips and shook her head. Zeb sighed, keeping a hand on the ladder, worried at Ezra’s worry.

Kallus ripped more of Thrawn’s right uniform sleeve, exposing more of his bicep, and pressed the injection tube into the lean muscle there above the secured tubing of the IV. A hollow whoosh emitted from the device as medication flowed into Thrawn’s body.

“Come on,” Kallus muttered as Rex continued compressions. A tension permeated the air as Kallus kept a hand on Thrawn’s right arm, as it slightly hung off the couch, and watched the screen on the mechanical ventilator. A mellow beep finally sounded.

“Stop compressions, Rex,” Kallus said breathily, holding up his hand.

Rex paused, breathing heavy as he tried to catch his breath. Kallus reached over and touched Thrawn’s neck. He found Thrawn's pulse to be faint but there.

Kallus sighed measured relief, “He’s back.”

Ezra flinched, remembering the vision. “His chest!”

Rex and Kallus recoiled and found Ezra’s eyes to be urgent. Ezra pattered his left side, “His chest! There was so much…”

Ezra’s voice trailed off, eyes haunted, but Rex understood with a chill. He’d spent too much time on battlefields alongside his brothers to miss the conviction in Ezra’s blue Jedi eyes. A similar look would appear on the face of The Jedi General he once served, and Rex had learned when to recognize it and to never ignore it.

Rex turned back and looked down at Thrawn with a soldier’s assessment. The former Clone Captain scanned the Chiss Grand Admiral and found Thrawn’s face to be upsettingly lax with the oxygen tube protruding passively from his lips. He hastily pulled at Thrawn’s belt and unfastened
the flap of Thrawn’s white Grand Admiral’s uniform.

Kallus pushed Thrawn’s left hand away from his chest, against the seatback cushions, and out of the way. Rex meant to check Thrawn’s chest, but his black sleeveless undershirt was in the way. Kallus rose further on his knees and leaned over Thrawn’s form. He held the uniform open while Rex fumbled over his belt on his stormtrooper disguise.

A pang of dread ran through Ezra’s heart as Rex unsheathed a combat knife. The metallic 
*schwing*
 reverberated through the Ghost’s lounge.

*A wolf howl*— *A roaring thunder clap*— *Thrawn’s cry of pain*—

Ezra moaned a fearful lament as he sprung to his feet. Kanan felt the aftereffects of the vision as well and grabbed Ezra. “It’s only an echo, Ezra,” Kanan said.

Hera and Kanan held Ezra tight as they stood together and watched Rex and Kallus work on Thrawn. Rex cut and tore Thrawn’s black undershirt in half from torso to collarbone with the combat knife.

“I don’t see a wound,” Kallus said, though stunned as his eyes found remnants of ones past on Thrawn’s bare chest.

Rex secured the knife back to his belt, as Kallus hovered his hands over what appeared to be old blaster burns. Considering how the scars faded, part originally appeared to have been carved deeply into the lean muscle there over Thrawn’s heart.

“That must’ve hurt…,” Zeb muttered, able to see the old wounds from where he stood.

Sabine held herself a little tighter at the sight. Though the burns were relatively small, they etched harshly outward, branching from three impact points into Thrawn’s cerulean skin as if the energy blasts had been diffused. Rex bent down and patted gloved hands over Thrawn’s torso in search of a fresh wound for which Ezra feared, and Thrawn’s muscles unconsciously tensed as Rex shifted and rotated him enough to peek at his side and back.

“There’s nothing, Ezra,” Rex said as he gently lowered Thrawn back down to the cushions.

“But I saw…,” Ezra whispered eyes wide. He scrunched his brow and focused hauntingly on his hands.

Kallus busied himself with Thrawn’s vital signs. Thankfully they were improving but inexplicably so; Kallus wondered if the ventilator was malfunctioning.

Rex indicated to Thrawn’s chest. “Just old wounds. Nothing more.”

Rex felt pity for the young man. He grunted as he swung his right leg over and dismounted the couch as if he were getting off a speeder bike. His eyes looked down to Thrawn and Kallus.

“You good?” Rex softly asked Kallus, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Kallus hesitated a glance up to the Clone Captain, distracted as he was preparing a new bag of medicine for Thrawn’s IV to help dilute the toxins in his system. “Yeah… yeah thanks Rex.”

Rex placed his hands on his hips and sighed. He unfocused his eyes as if caught in an old memory, but his lapse lasted only a moment. With one last grim glance over Thrawn’s form, Rex turned.
“I think we all need a little rest, hmm?” Rex said softly. He placed a hand on Ezra’s shoulder as he walked by, catching the young man’s troubled eyes.

“I think that’s a good idea,” Hera said with motherly concern.

Ezra was confused. *What he saw, what he experienced. What did it mean? What purpose did the vision have—*

Ezra gasped as he caught sight of a bracelet on the low circular couch-table beside Hera’s Kalikori. It was made of wooden, decorative baubles and flat pieces with personal embellishment. Ezra rushed to it and picked it up with delicate hands despite his adrenaline, almost bumping into Kallus there on the floor. Ezra’s eyes were alight with a small joy but then shifted to a haunted sheen as echoes of the vision returned.

“Ezra—” Hera began.

“His daughter had a necklace just like it,” Ezra said wistfully as he carefully rolled the wooden pieces with his fingers.

The lounge fell silent and hushed as Ezra considered the bracelet in his hands. The steady rhythm of the mechanical ventilator breathing for Thrawn, mixed with the hums of the Ghost traveling through hyperspace, was the only noise permeating the room. *His daughter.*

Kallus carefully closed Thrawn’s white Grand Admiral’s tunic and laid Thrawn’s left arm to rest comfortably across his chest again. Kallus pressed Thrawn’s uniform down smooth with a certain reverence and kept his hand resting there as he watched Ezra with sympathetic eyes.

“We found it in his pocket,” Hera prompted softly. Kanan seemed to feel her glance to him, and he placed an arm around her shoulders as they all became aware of a depth to Thrawn that perhaps the Chiss wouldn’t wish to share so easily were he even able to do so.

“I… I couldn’t understand her, but she held it up to me, as if she wanted me to…” Ezra shook his head. His voice became muted, and he looked lost. “He lost them…”

Kanan stepped forward and reached for Ezra. “What you saw Ezra—”

“My parents were there too…”

Kanan squeezed Ezra’s shoulders, making the young man look at him. Kanan pursed his lips as he remembered the night Ryder told them of Ezra’s parents’ fate. Ezra had a vision then too…

“Ezra, what you saw…,” Kanan leaned his head forward. “…what you experienced can be meant to convey many things. It may have a different purpose even for Thrawn. He was there too, right?”

Ezra timidly nodded, averting his eyes back to the bracelet. His voice was small. “He was there… we spoke.”

“Let’s get some rest, Ezra. A clear mind can shed light on what you saw,” Kanan continued. “The vision’s purpose may not even be fully for you but for Thrawn.”

“We won’t be able to ask him for a while,” Sabine said.

“How can I sleep after this?” Ezra said.

“He’s stabilizing,” Kallus said from his spot on the floor, hand still on Thrawn’s chest. “Enough to
make me comfortable to get rest of my own.”

Ezra glanced at everyone and carefully placed the bracelet back on the table beside Hera’s Kalikori.

“Though I’d prefer if someone stayed with him,” Kallus said after watching Ezra’s hesitant movement.

“I can stay,” Hera said. “Chop can monitor our course. It’ll be a while before we make it to base.”

Ezra took a deep breath. “Okay…, but…” he looked timidly at Kanan. “…could you- stay with me Kanan? I saw- other things too and…” The Sith Lord…

“I’ll stay with you, Ezra,” Kanan said leading Ezra toward the cabins. “What do you say we get out of this stormtrooper armor first.”

Sabine smiled a worried smile and patted Ezra’s shoulder as he and Kanan walked by. “I need some rest too,” she said.

“Go on,” Hera said with a kind smile, as she walked over to the couch. Kallus groaned as he moved to stand. His joints were stiffening the farther away they got from imminent danger. Hera grimaced and hugged herself as she was able now to get a closer look at the damage at Thrawn’s neck.

“He’s still very sick,” Kallus said through his exhaustion. “Let me show you what I’ve done and what to look for.”

Kallus walked Hera through streams of medical data and showed her what the Empire had done to their prisoner, and Zeb crawled back up to the central turret. The Lassat would find rest and provide watch there should the Ghost need to be defended upon exiting hyperspace. Rex went to find solace at the table in the kitchen.

Hera breathed deeply as she read over a datapad of Thrawn’s medical history that Kallus had put together.

“Come get me if you need me,” Kallus said, walking to the forward cargo hold.

“You sure you don’t want to take Kanan’s cabin?” Hera asked.

Kallus chuckled softly. “I’m sure. I know we told Ezra to sleep despite his protests, but I won’t be able to close my eyes…” He rapped his fingers on the edge of the doorway as he turned back to Hera. “…If I find sleep, I won’t complain but too much thinking to do.”

Hera recognized a sparkle of revelation in his eyes, but she would wait to ask him about it. As if recognizing her discernment, he narrowed his eyes kindly at her and averted his own to Thrawn’s relaxed form before tiredly disappearing beyond the airlock doorway.

Hera pulled a stool next to the couch and sighed as she sat down. She considered her Kalikori and Thrawn’s bracelet resting beside it on the small table.

With both changed back into familiar clothing, Ezra tucked himself into bed while Kanan sat down on the floor next to him. He sat cross legged there in the cabin with his back against the bed and altered his breathing as he began the path toward a meditative state. But his focus was interrupted as he felt a pressure pat on the side of his arm.

Ezra was so exhausted that the young man had quickly fallen to the enticement of sleep but had
unconsciously reached out for Kanan to make sure he was still there. Kanan lowered his head and smirked, content to hold protective watch while he slept.

Kanan would do anything for Ezra. They were attached.

*They all were.*

Kanan felt something changing in the Force. A new dawn approached, carrying with it a radiance that would illuminate a new path upon which they would traverse together.

“For every ebb there’s a flow;

For every flow there’s an ebb.

Happiness turns to sorrow;

Sorrow is reborn as hope.”

-Aya-Glon
"Long is the war. Only by surviving it, will you prevail.” —Yoda

Stormtrooper Commander Ayer’s armored boots produced hollow clacks as he slowly made his way down the metallic hallway leading into Thrawn’s—Commodore Faro’s—office. He had his helmet tucked underneath his arm and glanced at small pieces of art resting on top of pedestals lining the entryway as he walked. An eerie aura of the past day crept up Ayer’s spine. Sentinel droids no longer stood guard, but the décor of the corridor had not changed.

Major Ayer paused at the end of the hallway, and he found Commodore Faro sitting on top of the desk, unfurling a partially bloody bandage off of her right hand in obvious frustration.

Faro froze with a jolt. Her right hand hovered before her face, partially unwrapped, and she held a mangled bunch of unfurled bandage in her other hand. The outstretched bandage hung lackadaisically between, connecting the two. Faro’s eyes twitched over the sight of her hands and then to Ayer’s face. Both were frozen silent, but the contortion of Major Ayer’s eyebrows was enough to convey a question.

“Oh, I’m a blubbering mess,” Faro muttered. She cleared her throat. “Come in, come in, Major.”

“Can I—,” Major Ayer began, but abruptly stopped with a flinch as Faro became animated again.

She fiercely tugged the bandage, and most unraveled with a mighty whip through the air. But part remained anchored around her wrist. Faro stubbornly tugged a few more times against the cloth’s resistance but moaned when she realized it wouldn’t budge. Doctor Zahara Cody had masterfully wrapped the injury.

“Can I be of assistance, Commodore?” Ayer slowly asked as Faro pressed the mangled bunch of released bandage to her right palm.

“Ah… yes,” Faro said. Her palm began to throb as a small amount of blood trickled away from her wound. “The very top left drawer…” She indicated the direction behind her with her left elbow. “…I have bacta ointment stored there.”

Ayer nodded and stiffly made his way around the desk. He opened the drawer and hesitated when he found a collapsible melee baton and an old but sleek blaster pistol tucked inside beside the ointment.

“It should be just on top,” Faro said.

Ayer glanced his intuitive eyes up at Faro, her back to him as she sat on the desk and pressed on her hand. The Jedi Temple Guard mask rested behind her there on its stand, and Ayer’s combat sense oddly felt it observing him as he returned his attention back to the drawer. Glancing over the unusual blaster one more time, he grabbed the small bacta canister and made his way to the front of the desk.

Ayer realized she would have trouble handling the canister, so he set his helmet down on the desk
with a small clonk and twisted the canister open with armored hands. Faro grimaced as the canister popped and ripped, revealing it was the first time being opened and used. He rose an eyebrow and glanced from the canister to meet Faro’s guilty eyes.

“If I may speak freely Commodore Faro,” Ayer said softly.

Faro nodded, her voice equally soft. “You may, Major…”

Ayer shifted away from the desk slowly. His armored feet clacked methodically on the metallic floor as he positioned himself in front of her, and he dared to face her rather closely as he narrowed his eyes with a sigh. Even though accusing, Faro saw his eyes echoed a kind concern.

“Did not Doctor Cody say to apply this every twelve hours?” Ayer insisted. He held the canister closer to her in emphasis.

“She did,” Faro replied.

“And nearly sixteen have passed.”

Faro’s voice held a defiant edge. “That would be correct, Major.”

Ayer’s unfaltering gaze held her own and remained steady in the wake of her exposed stubbornness. She huffed in frustration and began patting the blood away from her right palm with the frizzled bunch of bandage. Ayer hummed a sarcastic affirmation.

“If I’m allowed a defense,” Faro said. “Our standard arrival to Lothal was going to be my indication as time for application.”

Ayer shook the bacta canister as if it were sauce intended for a meal. “That was before our own blockades hindered our progress and altered routes.”

He squeezed the bacta canister gently one last time and offered it to her.


She avoided Ayer’s eyes and applied the cool healing ointment to her pained palm. It was a nice comforting sensation as the medicine began to calm her wound. Should have applied this sooner, Faro thought.

The bandage loosely hung to the ground, still anchored to her wrist. Ayer chuckled softly and reached for the back of his belt.

“Here, let me see your hand,” Ayer said offering a hand to her. With a flip of his other wrist, he expertly unhooked and extended a collapsible knife.

Faro startled at the ease with which he brandished the knife. Ayer saw her hesitation and rose his eyebrows insistently. “It’s just in the way,” he said.

Faro scrunched her face and scrutinized him as if he had lost his mind. Ayer realized her train of thought and nearly rolled his eyes were it not for his hold upon Imperial decorum.

“The bandage?” Ayer emphasized.

“Oh…”

Ayer masked his amusement. “Let me cut it off, it’s in your way. We can get Doctor Cody to apply
Faro saw her palm had stopped bleeding, though still angry and inflamed. She offered her arm to him with a timid stubbornness, and his touch was surprisingly delicate. Ayer placed his armored palm underneath her wrist, careful not to cause her any pain, and gently lifted the bandage with his thumb. An inexplicable urge to giggle rose up Faro’s spine. She had to look away as she pursed her lips, trying not to laugh.

“What did you think I meant?” Ayer asked with a small smile. He began carefully slicing at the bandage.

“I thought you’d gone completely mad quite frankly,” Faro began, as she looked back at him. There he was, the man beyond the soldier. “Like you just transformed into an uncivilized Hutt that had determined my hand to be worthless scrap to be thrown as fodder to a wild tusklan.”

“Quite the description,” Ayer said with a huff. He rose an eyebrow. “How much sleep have you gotten?”

“A little here and there,” Faro said.

“So, none at all,” Ayer said as the bandage fell away into his hand.

Faro sighed. Major Ayer was good at reading people. That’s what made him an excellent Stormtrooper Commander for the ISD Chimaera.

“I caught myself nodding off at one point,” she said as she slid down from the desk, careful with her right hand. She scooped up the now useless cloth from the floor, and Ayer allowed the bandage to slide from his armored hand. It was as if the joviality of the moment slid away with it, a grim but shared tension replacing it.

Ayer re-secured the knife to his belt with instinctive ease and assessed Faro’s demeanor with his soldier’s bearing. He could see there was a burden and an air of anxiety hanging around her as she rounded the desk. She opened a low cabinet with a small kick of her foot.

“Which, you’re correct…” Faro threw the remains of the bandage into a waste basket tucked inside the desk cabinet. She sighed again as she straightened and looked to Major Ayer with the tired eyes of leadership. “…not really any at all. Too much to think about and consider.”

Major Ayer picked up his helmet from the desk and tucked it underneath his arm again. He nodded in deference and offered the bacta canister to her. Ayer witnessed her regress toward her memories as she took it. Her expression held an aura of sour confusion mixed with almost a hint of grief. And betrayal?

Her eyes wandered up and caught Ayer’s. Unspoken understanding rested between them both as leaders on the ISD Chimaera and as shaken souls caught together inside a callously austere system of Imperial authority and dissimulation.

“Thank you, Major,” she said quietly. With almost an air of reverence, she opened the drawer and placed the bacta canister inside.

“It was the Grand Admiral’s?” Ayer asked.

Faro caught her breath and paused with her hand on the drawer.

“The blaster I mean,” Ayer continued, motioning toward the drawer.
“Ah—yes, I believe it was.” Faro grimaced. *It was. Not, it is.* She cleared her throat, looking down. “The baton as well I’m sure, though, I never saw him use either of them.”

Ayer hummed thoughtfully, his gaze lingering on their former leader’s effects.

“How is the crew?” Faro asked, slowly closing the drawer. Ayer moved his gaze up and met her eyes, lingering there a moment with calculations echoing like a distant shadow. It was as if he had just closed himself off from her.

“Quiet,” Ayer said eventually. “Grand Admiral Thrawn’s absence is felt ship-wide, though the crew remains efficient and ready.”

His eyes flashed subtly, and Faro seemed unsure how to proceed.

“Crew morale isn’t why you requested me here though is it,” he continued after her hesitation.

“No, not entirely,” Faro said.

“There’s no indication any suspect the true nature of his absence,” Ayer said. “Only Doctor Zahara Cody knows outside you and I.”

“That’s… not why I—”

“Though if the crew *were* aware, I would advise you to be cautious of discontent. The Grand Admiral inspired a rare loyalty among us.”

The emphasis Major Ayer placed on *us* did not go unnoticed by Commodore Faro. *Was that a threat? Or just blunt advice?*

“I appreciate the assessment,” Faro said. Her voice remained strong and powerful, but a part of her began to worry if Ayer would be a problem. She relented yet another sigh and leaned her forearms on the chair in front of her. The tension she held released as she relaxed her shoulders. She was *tired.*

“I know you’re in a nearly impossible position,” Ayer said quietly. “I acknowledge that…” Faro looked up to find a rigid sympathy, as if the soldier in Ayer was afraid to show anything other than the indifference of Imperial regulation. “…I just can’t accept Lord Va—,” he stopped himself. *Can’t accept Lord Vader’s actions. Can’t accept what Lord Vader did to his Grand Admiral.* It was dangerous to finish the sentence aloud even if Faro and Ayer perhaps shared the same mentality. He averted his eyes in the quiet room with a grimace and shook his head.

“I couldn’t stop it,” Faro eventually whispered, understanding his train of thought. Her eyes began to glisten with a haunted sheen. Ayer’s Imperial dignity began to crack as well, his gaze contorting to mirror hers as he looked at her again.

She shook her head. “I *tried—***”

“I know you did,” Ayer said, taking a breath. “I’ve heard stories of Lord Vader, some from Commander Kimmund himself while he and his First Legion were stationed here while in the Unknown Region. There’s only so much you can do against that kind of fury. I tried myself and were it not for your interference…”

Ayer’s voice trailed off as memory involuntarily flashed before his mind’s eye. *An invisible force around his throat. The need to get to his Grand Admiral. Can’t breathe. Lifted into the air. Can’t breathe. Vader’s malicious voice, “The only thing you must understand Major Ayer is that I have*
“Major?” Faro’s voice was soft. She saw his mind return and perhaps again glimpsed the man beyond the soldier, seeing now a troubled spirit through his glossed eyes instead of that jovial soul from before.

Ayer’s voice was soft and slow, as if he were unsure of its current strength. “Were it not for your interference, I would have fallen victim to it as well.”

His eyes spoke thanks. And loyalty. Was that a loyalty Faro deserved? Her guilt would always tell her, no. Faro rose to a timid straightness. She blamed herself and felt Ayer should direct that same blame toward her also, not toward himself. But it became evident they both carried a personal blame, each toward themselves and found a companionship within that depression.

“It was only something Grand Admiral Thrawn would have done himself for you,” Faro said.

Ayer hummed. “No doubt.”

Faro blinked her emotion away along with a shaky breath, while Ayer appeared to be in a similar struggle in the echoed silence of the office. They found themselves as companions standing upon a narrow sand bridge that held them up toward what was now a crumbling Imperial longevity. A narrow sand bridge that was quickly eroding and under which neither knew rested below.

Faro pressed her hand to the spherical instrument panel before her on the desk, and her voice became hushed as a small trill emitted from the device. “I wanted to show you something,” she said.

The office holoprojector whirled to life, and a cool light illuminated them in an eerie blue glow as projections of Thrawn’s research and art appeared around them in a semi-circle. Ayer slowly turned as he examined the array of images. Ancient depictions of Mandalorians hovered beside pictures of a young Ezra Bridger and Hera Syndulla with her parents. Curious images of what appeared to be a maze inside of a wolf’s head and people riding atop other wolves racing across an unknown plain completed the array.

“These are some of the images that so enraptured Grand Admiral Thrawn amid our campaign to capture the rebels of Phoenix Squadron, or the Spectres as they labeled themselves,” Faro said as she walked to stand with Major Ayer. She placed her right wrist in her left hand behind her back as she stopped, unconsciously mirroring Thrawn’s typical stance. “Have you seen these before, Major?”

“Not long enough to appreciate the detail,” Ayer said. His voice held awe as he stepped closer to the image of the wolf riders. Such a curious image. “One time I believe I interrupted his studies…” Ayer was caught by surprise as he turned, noticing Faro’s familiar stance. “…He didn’t leave them up long enough for a good look, Commodore.”

“I see.” Faro narrowed her eyes briefly before scanning the array of images herself again. “There’s a lot more going on than I think we realize.”

“In what way?” Ayer asked, his face abandoning wide-eyed curiosity for layered concern.

“Grand Admiral Thrawn left me a holo-message upon his inability to lead the Chimaera any longer. It activated just before I injured my hand.” Faro unconsciously pulsed the fingers of her right hand. Her eyes became a masked pain as she continued. “He was highly cognizant of the dangers of battle and even more so apparently of Lord Vader’s bearing toward him. I would show
you part of the message, but it can only be activated when I’m alone.”

“I don’t understand,” Ayer said, shaking his head. “He knew Lord Vader might take him out?”

“Grand Admiral Thrawn was aware of a threat beyond the known galaxy that apparently rivals the Empire’s strength. I don’t believe Lord Vader agreed,” Faro said as she caught his gaze. Ayer flinched at the prospect.

“What could possibly rival our fleet?” Ayer muttered.

“I don’t know; he described the Grysks as a branch toward another, though never named it. He seemed concerned about revealing everything to me. There’s something evil out there in the Unknown Regions, and his Chiss Ascendancy hoped to find allies against it. He said his people are dying…” Faro’s voice trailed off, and she averted her eyes as she remembered the look in Thrawn’s own crimson orbs in the holo. That coupled with the more recent revelation of his homeworld being attacked with someone dear to him missing nearly broke her where she stood. Major Ayer was shocked to silence as he watched his Commodore. Faro had been carrying a burden of knowledge beyond what he expected.

“Grand Admiral Thrawn mentioned mixed loyalties during our battle with the Grysks. It is there where I believe Lord Vader saw the basis… or excuse… for his actions,” Faro said, her voice a bit shaken as she met Ayer’s gaze again. “No matter how vain or contrived.”

“This evil…,” Ayer softly prompted. “Is Imperial leadership aware of it?”

“It doesn’t seem so. Or they’ve ignored him entirely,” Faro said with exhaustion. “Lord Vader wouldn’t heed his warnings, and I don’t believe other officers in a position of influence would have listened with their xenophobic inclinations… It is that resistance to his efforts to warn them that I believe led to the Grand Admiral acting alone and, ultimately sparking Lord Vader into actions of his own.”

Major Ayer considered the mural of Rebel Captain Hera Syndulla and her parents. “That explains Thrawn’s need for the rebellion to end so quickly; they’re just a distraction from the true threat. Also, his disagreement with leadership in spreading the fleet too thin.”

Ayer noticed Faro’s questioning look. He tilted his head, offering, “I was present during a conversation between the Grand Admiral and Grand Moff Tarkin. Apparently Imperial leadership was entertaining the idea of a more powerful singular project at one point instead of the Tie Defender program and overall fleet production.”

Faro nodded her head and looked away, her eyes unfocusing. Her face was grim as she entrenched herself in her thoughts. Is that the object they were scanning that sparked this mess? It would make sense. She shook herself out of her reverie.

“This array of images,” Faro said waving her hand across them. Ayer followed her motion and entertained his curiosity again. “These are the last of Grand Admiral Thrawn’s research. Do you see a common link?”

“I see two of our primary targets, Ezra Bridger and Hera Syndulla…” But Ayer didn’t see a connection. He shook his head as he stepped toward the Mandalorian and waved his hand across the ancient image. “…but this, and the wolves; I am unsure.”

Faro watched him patiently and then scanned the images again in measured silence before making her way to an unusual statue that stood just beyond the image of the wolves at the far side of the
room. It was then that Major Ayer saw an echo of his Grand Admiral and was unexpectedly comforted at the sight. How she slowly carried herself with her hands crisply set behind her back; her methodical patience amid questions of intellect and revelation. It was an echo but it was there. All of that time as his second-in-command shaped the bounds of her nature.

The statue was tall and grotesque. It resembled perhaps a monster of myth that would surely send children into a fright at the sight of it. Faro placed her left hand on its seemingly wooden surface and turned to face Ayer, her jaw stiff.

“The Force is what they have in common, Major Ayer,” Faro said with a grim confidence. She softly patted the statue. “This is a Bardottan statue. It depicts a demon of war worshipped by some of the Bardottan people called Malmourral, and in myth it would drain the Living Force of individuals offered as sacrifice to it.”

She nodded toward the images of wolves and continued, “The wolves are creatures of Lothal and so named Loth-wolves. Research reveals them to have a connection to the Force and are a sort of guardian to the planet. And the maze within one of their minds, that is perhaps the most perplexing, but it seems to depict ancient pathways or coordinates. Whether the path is literal or not remains a mystery.”

Faro’s hand slid from the Bardottan statue and indicated to the other images as she made her way to the semicircle’s center again. Her voice was filled with a smooth reverence as she revealed the nature of her Grand Admiral’s tapestry.

“Ezra Bridger, a Jedi and strong student of the Force. Tarre Vizsla, the first Mandalorian Jedi of ancient times, carrying the unique Darksaber. The Jedi temple mask on the desk, I believe indicative of Jedi Knight Kanan Jarrus,” Faro said. She placed both hands behind her back again with a deep breath and caught Ayer’s curious gaze. “It seems Grand Admiral Thrawn sought to understand different aspects of the Force, and I believe wished to utilize it toward an advantage against whatever evil awaits us beyond the known galaxy.”

Ayer scrunched his eyebrows. “But what of Hera Syndulla?”

“Where she goes, so follows Kanan and Ezra… and with her removal from the Rebellion’s leadership, much of their cause would also crumble.”

“And the quicker Grand Admiral Thrawn would be able to focus on the greater threat out there,” Ayer said, beginning to understand.

“Exactly.” Faro turned her focus to the spherical statue flanked by creatures known by only a few as ysalamiri. A chill seemed to envelop the atmosphere of the room as Ayer saw her gaze shift to a haunted echo. And fear? “The sphere. What do you make of it, Major?”

Major Ayer pursed his lips and followed her gaze. He didn’t recognize anything unusual about the spherical statue, but, glancing back to Commodore Faro’s haunted eyes told him he should reconsider the assessment.

“I… see a statue of a world, Commodore,” Ayer said as he hesitated his eyes toward the sphere again. “I always assumed it to be an artistic rendition of Grand Admiral Thrawn’s homeworld. A sort of keepsake and memory, though… I’m sure you’re going to tell me otherwise now.”

Faro huffed an apprehensive chuckle. “Yes.”

A part of her was enjoying this despite the serious nature of their conversation. Faro felt connected
to Thrawn’s legacy as she perhaps took on the role for Ayer that he so patiently enveloped for her.

*Teacher. Leader. Fath—*

She rubbed her right wrist with her left thumb as she sought the proper words and fought her foreboding dread about her discovery. Her shoulders were unrelenting in her attempts to relieve the tension.

“It is no artistic rendition,” she said quietly. “Perhaps it *did* serve as a reminder for him, but it is so much more. That is a Bardottan or Living Sphere. Similar and perhaps of familiar ilk as the orbs of the arcane Nightsisters, it was used in ancient rituals to drain and store the Living Force from others.”

Ayer felt the breath leave his lungs as he took in the orb with new eyes.

“The ysalamiri creatures flanking the orb indicate to me that Grand Admiral Thrawn was aware of its original purpose,” Faro said. “From the little notes I was able to read, ysalamiri in nature have an innate ability of creating a Force-neutral field around them. I think he therefore understood the dangers of the orb, and whether the statues here are merely an artistic warning or have an active effect on the Living Sphere I cannot say.”

“Well I’m not touching it to find out anytime soon,” Ayer said.

“I would advise against that, yes,” she said with a small smirk. “Though apparently the sphere glows green once activated and is therefore inert as it stands now. The means of activation are also unknown and perhaps require the Force itself.”

“Now I don’t blame you for getting little rest,” Ayer said. Faro found his face to be kind.

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“Indeed. To have something like that hovering behind you… it’s not the best feeling in the worlds...” Faro smiled a sad smile, averting her solemn eyes. The burden of her newfound position, and the knowledge she carried, was beginning to take its full weight upon her. “I don’t know how he did it all,” she muttered.

“Only today,” Ayer said softly. He returned her sad smile when her glistening and unsure gaze reached him again. “He said that to me once, while I was… entrenched… in compiling problems as Stormtrooper Commander. It can be tricky sometimes, juggling the needs of many troopers at once. He was kind to offer me advice...” He chuckled, the corners of his eyes wrinkling to the tone. “…I may have resigned or requested transfer were it not for him. One thing at a time. Focus on what you can accomplish today, but still with the larger point of view in mind, is essentially what he told me.”

“Only today,” Faro muttered. She narrowed her eyes, eventually focusing on the Living Sphere again. “That’s good advice...” She took a slow breath, her shoulders finally relaxing. “…I’m glad you stayed, Major Ayer. Though I’ll understand if you may not share the same sentiment after all of this.”

“I don’t intend on going anywhere,” Ayer said, shaking his head. His eyes were piercing with conviction, his voice strong. “Not after what they did to him...” His voice took on an angered shake. “…Damn... or what they’re currently doing to him.”

Faro had resolved to not think about what her Grand Admiral was currently enduring. Especially considering how injured he was when she last saw him. Though never personally involved with the higher echelons of interrogation—torture, she knew and was horrifyingly aware of what could be happening to Thrawn at the moment. While the rest of the Empire was unaware of the truth, Faro,
Ayer and Zahara were alone, together, in what they knew.

“We must be careful,” Faro said, filled with caution. “I intend to learn more of this greater threat; intend to continue the research that Grand Admiral Thrawn started, but… the entire ship is under scrutiny after Lord Vader’s accusation.”

“Is there nothing we can do for him?” Ayer asked. He knew the question was nearly pointless, but it was a hope that they both felt in their heart. Their loyalty for their former leader was strongly rooted within each of them.

Faro solemnly shook her head. Her eyes spoke of the doubt and chagrin that her voice dared to not utter, for if her fears, grounded in a harsh reality, were said aloud, that last spark of hope may ultimately be extinguished within them both. She didn’t have the heart to do that.

After a moment, Commodore Faro opened her mouth to speak but flinched as she was interrupted suddenly by a mellow tone of her comm. She pressed her hand to the device and Lieutenant Lomar’s unsettled voice emitted over the comm.

“Commodore Faro, Lieutenant Lomar here; I apologize for the interruption. A live priority message has just been received for you.”

“Ah…that’s okay, Lieutenant. Who’s trying to reach me?”

“Grand Moff Tarkin.”
A Foul Stench

Chapter Summary

“What use are ideals if we cannot fit them to the universe as we find it?” —Qui-Gon Jinn

Grand Admiral Thrawn is dead.”

Tarkin’s voice was heartless and crisp. The hologram managed to almost perfectly capture the icy cold of his natural essence. Commodore Faro and Major Ayer were hit with a wave of shock, though they tried to keep their reaction diminished under his gaze. Tarkin carried the weight of the Empire around him, and that Empire they knew saw Thrawn as a traitor and perhaps wanted him dead. Faro’s spirit shook, but she somehow managed to maintain a stoic façade.

Dead.

Tarkin just stood there a moment, assessing their reactions. Testing them? Ayer especially felt Tarkin’s steely gaze, as Ayer couldn’t mask the faint anger hidden inside the depths of his eyes. Ayer wished he had his stormtrooper helmet on so he could hide his expression behind it instead of it resting underneath his arm. Tarkin seemed to process and recognize Ayer’s anger.

“His wounds proved to be too great. He succumbed to them not too long ago,” Tarkin said slowly in his clipped tone. He moved his controlling and judgmental gaze squarely upon Faro. “We thought it prudent to inform you, Commodore Faro, prior to this information releasing to the public.”

We... Faro took in a shaky breath. “I see,” Faro said in a hushed whisper.

“Your Chief Medical Officer, Doctor Zahara Cody...,” Tarkin’s voice carried an edge of warning, and Ayer’s protective instincts surged up his spine. The Major recognized where the conversation was going. “...Please convey my sentiment to her that there was absolutely nothing further she could have done for Grand Admiral Thrawn.”

Faro saw Tarkin’s eyes flash with a pause. Of course. He’s worried about Zahara’s reaction. Ayer had to remain calm, for he shouldn’t officially know the truth beyond the cover story.

“Of course, sir,” Faro said cautiously. “I will personally inform her.”

“Very wise. I am sure she will appreciate it,” Tarkin said slowly. He rose his chin and stiffened his stance even more beyond what seemed to be possible. “This is a transition for the Seventh Fleet. You will maintain your position Commodore, but upon your arrival at Lothal, an advisor with direct knowledge of the situation will join you and Governor Pryce. He will be stationed aboard the Chimaera to assist in dealing with these rebel assassins. Once Lothal is returned to order, it is then that we may assess the future of the Seventh Fleet.”

Faro understood the true meaning behind Tarkin’s words. She was under scrutiny both of loyalty and of tactical aptitude as an Imperial Officer. Her future was in question considering what she knew. And this advisor...
“You will be given the courtesy an hour to inform your crew of the dire news about their former leader. Then it will be in the hands of the wider Holo-Net to disperse.” Tarkin’s voice, while still a pompous trill, took on a solemn stiffness. It was as if he was trying to add empathy to his tone, but it was impossible, coming from his cold heart. “I wish you success at Lothal, Commodore.”

Tarkin’s true face revealed itself just prior to the hologram fading away, his eyes intensifying and his mouth contorting into a smirk. It was as if the oxygen was stolen away from the office as Faro and Ayer were left standing there.

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Governor Arihnda Pryce was irate. She paced in front of the window in her office with the heavy footfalls of a terentatek on the prowl. The structured gloom of her governorship, Lothal’s Capital City, rested below, illuminated in the orange hues of sunset, masked by sordid pollution and smoke. Imperial resource gathering and mining operations made the city and the rest of the planet as a whole look horribly sick lately.

“You had me followed,” she said through clinched teeth. “And you’ve neglected to inform me…” she emphasized her words with pointed fingers. “…until— now— of the biggest threat to the stability of my governorship.”

“Do you not appreciate that the Empire invests in the safety of its most valuable assets?” Tarkin groveled haughtily from the hologram. Arihnda bristled as she paced, fiercely grasping her wrist behind her back as she tried to control her emotions.

Valuable. Asset.

Tarkin was playing her, and she knew it. Where he said valuable asset, she heard uncontrollable rival. Tarkin’s voice held an edge of warning as he continued. “The Seventh Fleet returns to orbit Lothal as we speak, does it not? The Chimaera soon to follow.”

Governor Arihnda Pryce groaned in frustration as she pivoted to pace down the length of the window yet again. “Yes, without the very mind that would have surely guaranteed my success against these rebel insurgents.”

“Thrawn is dead, as I’ve stated,” Tarkin said pointedly.

“As you’ve stated,” Arihnda murmured, stopping in place. She took in a deep breath, composing herself as much as she could, and glanced down upon the city below. Her city. A symbol of her power. Arihnda was smart and knowledgeable to the whims of politics.

Part of her was curious how the Holo-Net would fashion their story of propaganda. How they dressed the story often would reveal a thread of truth for those who knew how to interpret the omissions. She knew in her heart more was going on than was being revealed to her. And she loathed being lied to. Disrespectful…

Arihnda turned to face Tarkin in a rigid whip. Her blue eyes held fire. “Do you expect me to believe this so easily? That Thrawn would allow himself to be taken out by his own sentinel droids? Those that he trained with nearly everyday? Their reprogramming null as their tactics would be the same?”

Tarkin’s expression took on a dangerous sheen. As his façade faded to reveal his malicious authority, Arihnda’s diminished and flinched to a yielding deference, her eyes wide as she realized she overstepped.
Do you intend to make a liar out of me, Governor Pryce? Do you question the word of our Emperor?” Tarkin said.

“N— no… No, Gov— Grand Moff Tarkin,” Arihnda stammered.

“Failure to acknowledge this truth will find you explaining why to a far less patient audience,” Tarkin said. Every word was pointedly enunciated. His eyes narrowed with a slight smirk. “Others have found their power stripped away from them for similar questions of authority. Remember that.”

Arihnda’s mind was spinning. Did Thrawn’s lack of political finesse and naïveté finally catch up to him? Kill him? Were rebels truly successful in taking out the greatest military mind of the Empire as the broadcast would claim? Or was there something else going on? She had enough political sense to stay quiet though and no longer voice her questions.

“I… understand,” Arihnda said with a hush.

“Very good. An advisor aware of the situation is on route to join you on Lothal. His information will soon be transmitted to your station, and Commodore Faro shouldn’t be too far behind with the Chimaera.”

Arihnda cleared her throat and pressed a sequence on her desk console. “I appear to be receiving a data packet as we speak, sir. I will prepare for his arrival.”

“Excellent. I expect your rebels to be eliminated, Governor Pryce… swiftly, before they must become my problem.”

Tarkin took an almost theatrical pause to make sure Arihnda understood the threat. Then the hologram faded away, and Arihnda finally released a breath that she had been holding and punched a fist down to her desk. Thrawn, that idiot! She yelled in frustrated fury as she repeatedly hit her desk with more crashing thuds. Stormtroopers in the hallway flinched at the commotion.

A mellow trill interrupted her fit, and Arihnda exasperated one last groan. The download of this new advisor was complete. With a huff and trying to catch her breath, Arihnda slapped her personal code sequence down amid her pout and inserted her code cylinder into her console.

An unstable and maniacal laugh began to sound from her as she read over the report.

Arihnda needed a drink.
A Heart of Kyber

Chapter Summary

“If our beliefs tell us one thing, and the needs of real people tell us another, can there be any question of which we should listen to?” —Qui-Gon Jinn

“The strongest stars have hearts of kyber.” —Chirrut Îmwe

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Ghost weaved through hyperspace like an arrow soaring through a cool breeze, its target the secret Rebel base of Yavin IV. Celestial lights peppered the ship’s hull with majestic strokes, and Sabine watched the grandeur in comfort from her seat in the forward turret. It was a beautiful sight so often taken for granted among space travelers. Until she finally fell asleep… Even Kallus had succumbed to his exhaustion, snoring softly on the cold floor of the forward cargohold.

The halls of the Ghost were quiet and simulated a dark night. Hera and Chopper were the only ones awake. The lounge reverberated softly to the cadence of the hyperdrive, and gentle tones pulsed along to the rhythm of electronic sensors and data streams akin to synapses and nerves flowing through organic life. It was almost peaceful.

Almost.

Chopper’s holo emitter graced Hera’s face with a soft blue glow, as the last moments of a priority Imperial broadcast displayed. Hera was surprised at the anxiety growing exponentially inside her chest, and Chopper could detect the concern and worry at the scrunch of her brows. Holojournalist Alton Kastle was Imperial propaganda at its finest. He enunciated the last of his broadcast with just the right amount of comfort mixed with emotional horror, every few words hitching as his voice would artificially break.

“As the glorious Empire mourns the death of Grand Admiral Thrawn, one of our finest examples of an officer and a leader…,” Holojournalist Alton Kastle’s voice lifted in breathy bravado towering toward a bellowing strength. “…His legacy. The mighty Seventh Fleet! Continues the fight in his name! Soon, Lothal, the Outer Rim, and then all remaining systems will be rid of these rebel insurgents, and a new, glorious order of the Empire will reign with peace and security throughout the galaxy! Remember this day citizens. Peace— begins— today!” Kastle paused for dramatic effect and brought his voice down. “No word yet on an official memorial for Grand Admiral Thrawn. Myself and the greater Holo-Net will keep you updated should more information on this developing story surface.”

Hera’s growing nag of anxiety wouldn’t go away after the broadcast. Chopper had since gone back to the cockpit to monitor the Ghost’s progress toward Yavin, leaving Hera in the lounge alone with her troubled thoughts.

Well, not entirely alone, but her only companion wasn’t able to offer very good company at the moment. Hera leaned her head back as she walked, rubbed at the stress knots in the muscles at the back of her neck and sighed. She had been trying to walk off her anxiety by pacing around the
room, but her mind was too unsettled for calm.

Hera stopped where she stood and watched him from the middle of the lounge.

The Empire had crafted a clever bout of Imperial propaganda from its twisted sense of truth and fabrications to encourage citizens of the galaxy toward a fear and acceptance of Emperor Palpatine’s harsh rule. The cruel might of the Empire and its military forces would only have more leeway now to punish and subjugate those who would fight and sacrifice for freedom, while others, probably most of the galaxy at this point, would remain unaware, brainwashed to reality.

Hera was afraid about what this would mean for the Rebel Alliance. Senators loyal to the Rebel cause were finding it increasingly more difficult and dangerous to push for legislation that would encourage a peaceful path to more freedoms. Now their efforts would find more resistance. Hera saw the heavy hand of the Emperor bearing down evermore, and the heartstrings of the Rebellion were being stretched thin. But what the Empire lacked, that the *Ghost* crew had in abundance, was hope.

*Hope and truth.*

Thrawn was not dead as the Empire so fervently claimed.

Thrawn lay asleep, unconscious on the lounge’s curved couch. His body silently fought a mighty war against malicious toxins that coursed through his veins. Kanan said he woke up on their disguised Imperial Shuttle… *when Rukh said goodbye to him…*, but Thrawn had been unresponsive since.

Hera hugged herself and gnawed at her lip as she focused her gaze upon him. It was if she were standing at the ledge of a deep chasm, her destination on the other side, but she was having to convince her legs of their strength to jump over toward it. Her muscles would flinch and meet an invisible barrier each time she endeavored to step forward, and her heart would race until she stopped the effort. Her boots were magnetized in place.

But she needed to go to him. *He* needed her to go to him. *Damn anxiety.*

She pinched her eyes closed and slowly opened them again with a deep breath. She stepped one foot forward. And another step. And then another. Until she found herself halfway across the lounge. Hera was timid in her walk to Thrawn’s side, but her shoulders were strong, defiant despite the fear hidden inside her veins. Standing over him, Hera hugged herself a little tighter as she found herself fighting an unexpected bitterness looking down upon him.

Hera’s mind flashed in memory.

*Hera was on Atollon again, standing around the main command console, Kanan and Ezra at her side while General Dodonna, Commander Sato and Ryder Azadi were materialized in hologram. The Fulcrum symbol was displayed before them, and Kallus’ garbled voice emitted over the comm. “This is Fulcrum with an urgent message. Thrawn knows about—”*

*The message was cut short.*

“Thrawn knows? Knows about what?” Kanan asked, clearly on edge.

“Knows about the attack on Lothal?” Ezra offered.
Ryder Azadi averted his eyes. “Something’s happened. Most of the Imperial Fleet left the system. What does it mean?” Ryder probably knew but was perhaps afraid to voice it.

“Thrawn knows we’re here,” Hera said with dread. She turned to personnel behind her. “All ships, battle stations!”

Everything happened so quickly in the memory. The Empire’s Seventh Fleet appeared in orbit overhead, blocking the stars with imposing Star Destroyers and Corvettes. Long range communication was jammed, causing Ryder to disappear from the conference holocall. Sato and Dodonna also disappeared momentarily to tend to their ships, and then the call to evacuate went over the loudspeaker on-base. Alarms clanging throughout the Rebel base made adrenaline spike up the spine in a horrifying rush. A Rebel Frigate attempted to jump away to Rally Point Nova but was instantly pulled out of hyperspace and destroyed.

The Seventh Fleet had gravity wells in place. They were surrounded. They were trapped.

Hera was frantically studying the battlefield for a solution when the flagship of the Seventh Fleet, the ISD Chimaera, majestically joined the standoff. Grand Admiral Thrawn appeared in holo on the main console, and a hush filled the Rebel Base.

“General Dondonna, Commander Sato, Captain Syndulla,” Thrawn said with stoic pragmatism. “At last we meet in this… theatre of war, however briefly. There is no escape, and your forces are badly outnumbered. This… rebellion, ends today.”

“We’ll never surrender to you, Thrawn,” Hera said.

“You misunderstand, Captain. I’m not accepting surrenders at this time. I want you to know failure, utter defeat, and that it is I who delivers it crashing down upon you. Now… let us proceed.”

Thrawn’s image flashed away, and one of the more fearful moments of her life followed. Hera would never forget the turbo-laser bombardment crashing down upon their weakening shield, nor her worry for Kanan as he tried to make it back to cover.

But the turbo-laser fire stopped. They were nearly captured were it not for the frightening intervention of The Bendu.

The Force had a funny way of turning perspectives upside down. Hera’s bitter gaze morphed into one of empathy as his smooth voice echoed again in her mind.

“I want you to know failure… utter defeat…” —

Thrawn was experiencing the spice of his own words. And it was the former recipient of those words, who now stood over him in pity. Thrawn’s body was broken, power stripped away, and plans torn asunder. Certainly, by all definition, the results of utter defeat. Of Vader…

Hera took in a deep breath and sat down on a short stool beside Thrawn. She grimaced at his condition. He looked weak. The grand admiral’s plaque on his chest, silver bars on his collar, and gold shoulder plates had little meaning any longer except as a bitter echo of what once was.

“We both know utter defeat now,” Hera said softly, her tone almost motherly as she scooted closer to him.
Thrawn’s left arm was folded comfortably across his torso while his almost bare right arm rested on the cushions at the edge of the couch. Other than his neck, Thrawn’s right arm was also of concern because of the Empire’s horrid IV insertion. The doctors were harsh in finding the artery. Hera and Kallus were worried about an infection forming around the IV insertion there at his elbow pit, but they needed to wait until they had access to better medical equipment on Yavin before switching it out.

Until then, Kallus had put an IV drip on Thrawn’s hand. Gauze with the help of a little bit of tape secured the tubing in a gentle loop on the top of his hand, just beneath the knuckles of his fingers. Cool vitamin-rich fluids had been flowing into Thrawn’s body since being on the *Ghost*, helping to both strengthen him and to assist in diluting the toxic mixture of skirtopanol and lotiramine. Hera followed the tubing and wires up to the mechanical ventilator resting over the couch on a shelf now. His vitals were relatively steady considering what they were before, though still critical. Hera would prefer Thrawn’s blood pressure to be higher, but what was even considered normal for a Chiss?

Thrawn’s face was lax, the oxygen tube secured there with fresh tape and passively protruding from his lips. His chest steadily rose and fell with the ventilator’s rhythm. Hera closed her eyes and found an odd sort of comfort there listening to the rhythmic clicks and whooshes of the ventilator breathing on Thrawn’s behalf. She focused on the sound, and it helped her squash the spark of anxiety from the Imperial broadcast.

Hera hovered gloved hands over bruises and inflamed cuts on his forearm. Dried blood stuck, dark and crusty, to his blue skin. “Look what they’ve done to you,” she whispered. Imperial medical personnel obviously knew nothing about finding an artery for an arterial catheter insertion on an alien with non-human-standard skin color. But Hera also suspected by their shape that a few of the cuts weren’t the result of attempted medical attention… Hera was disgusted at how they treated him.

No one deserved this. No one deserved torture or pain. Even an adversary still deserved an amount of dignity and respect. “Revenge is not the Jedi way” Hera would hear Kanan tell Ezra sometimes.

She gently pressed on a piece of tape securing part of the arterial IV tubing to his arm, and the skin looked dry. With an angered puff, she slipped off her gloves and put them on the knee-high couch-table slightly behind her, next to three of Thrawn’s code cylinders and belt that Rex had taken off earlier. Hera shook her head at the sight of Thrawn’s ripped uniform sleeve hanging down from his bicep as she faced him fully. The white fabric was stained with spots of red along with part of his uniform tunic at his right side as a result of the horrible treatment.

Hera carefully picked his right arm up and placed it in her lap for a closer examination. She glanced up to his face, but saw Thrawn didn’t react, his face remaining lax and lips unmoving around the oxygen tube.

Thrawn’s cerulean skin was smooth to Hera’s touch as she more closely examined his arm. The texture differed slightly from what she expected. In her experience, even the most hairless mammalian bipedaled aliens in the galaxy had at least a faint sheen of fine hair covering the surface of their skin that could be spotted upon close inspection, but Thrawn had none. Instead, his blue skin had the texture of a smooth but tough leather, though soft and perhaps deceptively delicate. The hair atop his head however seemed to grow at a faster rate than what would be considered galaxy-standard. He already had a small fringe forming at his forehead though perhaps it helped that his hair was a bit disheveled and no longer holding standard Imperial structure.

Hera could tell he was sick by the way his skin was reacting. It felt, as her mother would
sometimes say, *clammy*.

Suspicious, Hera reached over and felt his cheek with the back of her fingers. “Oh…,” she moaned. She did the same to his forehead and then rested her palm there. *Fever.* Hera’s eyebrows arched up in worry. *Infection?* “You’re burning up.”

A small bowl of water was on the couch-table, and Hera twisted around and dipped a cloth into the cool liquid. She folded it in a nearly perfect rectangle and placed it there on his forehead.

Imperial uniform tunics were made of a fabric called gaberwool. It was a sturdy material but probably didn’t breathe very well, and Thrawn’s body needed to dissipate heat. Hera folded back the top left corner and expanded out the area around Thrawn’s neck, careful not to touch the injury.

But Hera hesitated at the sight of his neck and shivered. The greenish, purple bruising seemed more pronounced, especially where it was obvious a thumb and fingers had gripped, and the subtle rash of speckled dark green dots was not so subtle any longer. Hera’s eyes glistened as she turned back to the couch-table and shuffled around for a bacta patch.

As she tore open the bacta patch, she glanced at her Kalikori and focused on the bauble that represented her little brother. The memory of losing him that day and their dashed hopes for his recovery was beginning to swell in the memory’s return. *No, stop.*

Ezra’s panicked words when he fought to separate Force-vision from reality echoed suddenly in her mind.

*“His daughter had a necklace just like it… He lost them…”* —

Thrawn’s presence as a grand admiral of the Empire was fading away. He was simply someone who needed help, and, just like her, was also someone hurt by the collateral of war.

*Thrawn’s holographic form carrying sadness and worry. Crimson eyes glistening. Burdened.*

*“My people are dying…”*  

*Crimson eyes haunted.*  

*“May you gain hope…”*  

Hera breathed a shaky sigh. “Seems like we both lost someone, too,” she said softly, lowering the bacta patch onto Thrawn’s neck. She was gentle as she extended the four blue, glowing electrodes onto the skin and smoothed the patch over the injury. At the very least, the bacta patch would reduce swelling and pain, perhaps even numb the area, depending on Thrawn’s biology.

Hera wiped at an eye and sniffed through moist nostrils, as she reached for a tube of bacta ointment and another wet cloth. But before she could start cleaning his arm resting lax over her knees and applying the bacta to his cuts and bruises, a child’s pleading voice she didn’t recognize nor understand flashed to her perception…

*“Tis’mi?”  … “Vav rot’sah.” «Daddy? …Wake up.»* —

The voice was both echoey and distant yet nearby at the same time. Hera’s heart skittered as she
flinched and danced her eyes over the lounge behind her. But no one was there, and the ambient hums and clicks of the *Ghost* continued on, uninterrupted in the quiet lounge. A small child’s pleading voice surely came from behind her though.

Wide, hesitant eyes scanned the lounge one last time before turning back to Thrawn. “Starting to hear things now,” Hera murmured, trying to deny what she knew she heard. She gingerly dabbed at Thrawn’s arm with the damp cloth. Tubing and wires were taped around his lean limb in such a way that she had to carefully pat at the caked and sticky spots until they lifted away. It concerned Hera to move his arm too much, but she needed to clean underneath where blood had dripped and dried. With a caring touch she gingerly rolled it over, grimacing when she saw the tape tug and stretch at the movement. Were he awake, it might have been painful.

*Swirlings in the Force — despair—anxiety—*

Two calm beeps sounded from the mechanical ventilator. Hera missed the small twitch of Thrawn’s fingers as she glanced up to the machine.

“Oh good, your numbers are improving,” Hera said, relieved. She touched Thrawn’s cheek again with the back of her fingers and patted around his forehead. “Still feverish to me though,” she said. The damp cloth on his forehead should be flipped over so the cooler side would touch his skin.

*A spark— unfocused turmoil —*

Hera saw his reaction this time as she picked up the cloth. Thrawn’s eyebrows scrunched together as if in a frown, and his head pressed toward her with a flinch.

“Thrawn?” Hera whispered. Startled, she placed the cloth back down on his forehead and rested her palm there. No response. She moved her palm to caress slightly over his soft hair. “Can you hear me?”

But Thrawn didn’t react anymore, his face lax and unresponsive again. *Couldn’t react.* Only soft clicks and whooshes from the ventilator permeated the room. Hera leaned back and glanced at the readout on the ventilator once more before returning her attention to his arm on her lap.

Hera began to apply small dabs of bacta ointment to inflamed cuts and bruises. But then she placed her hand underneath his right palm and gingerly lifted it to examine his hand more closely. Careful about the IV drip that Kallus inserted there, she made sure the tubing had enough slack in the line, only lifting slightly and leaning over to look. Unconscious, his hand offered no resistance to her movement and felt deceptively delicate to her touch. Hera recognized Thrawn to be a warrior though by the flexible musculature there and the nearly healed scars around his knuckles that were common results of sparring.

At the sight of his nails though, Hera held her breath. She set the tube of bacta ointment down and extended his fingers with a hush. Underneath his nails, extending into some of the nail beds, was a black substance appearing to be a mixture of fiber and paint. Hera’s heart dropped. Evidence of his fight and struggle to survive. *Part of Vader’s gloves or armor.* Hera reverently wiped at the material caught there under his nails with the damp cloth from her lap.

*Swirlings in the Force— a sudden twist— CRACK—*

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An unusual burst in the Force radiated through the *Ghost* and tore Kanan away from his
meditation. Kanan flinched where he sat on the floor in Ezra’s cabin, and Ezra shuffled in his sleep, moaning as he too felt the ripple in the Force. But it wasn’t enough to wake the exhausted Padawan.

*Despair turning to pain—twisting in alien forms and patterns—*

Kanan reached out in his perception and recognized Hera’s muffled voice from down the metallic corridor. “*No, no, no Thrawn, listen to me, you have to relax.*”

Kanan leaned forward to get up, but Ezra’s hand squeezed his shoulder. He hesitated back and found Ezra still asleep. Ezra’s face scrunched with unconscious turmoil, as he seemed to be reacting to the flow of the Force coming from Thrawn. Then Kanan realized… *The vision.*

Just as Ezra had trouble emerging from the Force-vision, if Thrawn was truly there with Ezra, he might be experiencing a similar chaos. And Kanan recognized that the chaos could be dangerous in Thrawn’s medical condition.

Kanan remembered Ezra’s panic.

*Ezra lamenting in his arms. Kanan hugging him tight.*

“*He died in my arms, Kanan*” … “*I couldn’t stop it.*” …

What was Thrawn waking up from? He didn’t get the story of the Force-vision yet from Ezra. *Would Thrawn remember dying? What did they experience together?*

Whatever they experienced together, Kanan felt the traumatic echoes. He needed to help.

But Kanan realized he might be able help more from where he already was instead of leaving Ezra. His time at the temple wasn’t long enough to be formally trained in the art, but Kanan remembered Jedi Masters talking about a technique that used meditation to influence the flow and outcome of battle. Perhaps he could do something similar on the *Ghost* and influence a call to serenity.

Kanan took a deep breath and focused inward, lowering his heartbeat as his mind prepared to drift and reach out.

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Chapter End Notes

"I walk alone, beside myself
Nowhere to go
My flesh and bone
This part of me
The seeds I’ve sewn"
- *Flesh and Bone by Black Math*

[Spotify Song Link](http://example.com)
"We have hope. Hope that things can get better. And they will." —Hera Syndulla

Swirlings in the Force—a sudden twist—CRACK—

Hera had just gotten the first of the black fibrous material out from underneath a nail when Thrawn lurched awake. She gasped as Thrawn’s muscled frame jerked with tension. Crimson eyes flashed open, dim and unfocused on the ceiling overhead.

Echoes of thunder…

Thrawn’s body immediately fought against his breathing tube. His left hand instinctively flinched to grab it, but Hera reached with her right and squeezed, pressing it down to his chest, while trying not to jostle his other arm on her lap. Thrawn recoiled and flinched at the pressure, eyes squinting with pain.

A flash of phantom pain to the chest—can’t breathe—warm life-liquid seeping out—

Despair turning to pain—twisting in alien forms and patterns—

“No, no, no Thrawn, listen to me, you have to relax,” Hera said, as she leaned over him so he could see her face.

Crimson eyes found her own worried gaze and tried to focus on her. There seemed to be a spark of recognition, but there was so much confusion, so much pain there clouding his vision.

Thrawn saw Ezra’s face … felt the Padawan pressing down on him.

“Thrawn?”

But that voice, he knew that voice…

Just like Ezra, Thrawn was having trouble emerging from beyond what he experienced in the potent Force-vision.

The small commotion rattled Rex awake, and the former Clone Captain found himself hunched over in a very uncomfortable position at the galley table. He had fallen asleep while surveying the Holo-Net and gathering intel on a datapad that now had a nice puddle of drool on its screen.

“Thrawn?”

Rex heard the small panic in Hera’s voice, and he quickly sat up as his mind rose to awareness. But not before he majestically knocked over his mug of caf and sent the liquid kyber all over the place.

“Well that’s just great,” Rex muttered as he grabbed the datapad and lifted it away from the approaching puddle of caf. He clambered to catch the mug but missed, and it clanked to the
metallic floor of the galley. He would later blame the constricting stormtrooper armor for the spill…

Hera startled and glanced over her shoulder at the sound of glass clamoring upon the ground, and saw Rex beyond the galley entryway comically shaking caf off of himself and a datapad. They caught eyes briefly before Thrawn’s boot ed feet shuffled on the couch cushions and averted Hera’s attention back to the former Grand Admiral and leader of the Empire’s Seventh Fleet.

Thrawn moved his jaw as if trying to speak to Hera, but the oxygen tube was in the way and prevented any sound production. He clinched his eyes closed and rocked his head to the side as he tried to handle the pain and discomfort.

“Hey, hey, I’m right here,” Hera said softly pressing on his shoulder with her left hand.

“He’s awake,” Rex said wistfully, walking to stand over Hera’s shoulder. Rex glanced at the mechanical ventilator and grimaced when he saw the numbers all over the place. “His pulse is too high.”

Thrawn’s feet shifted weakly again as he instinctively tried to move away from the sensations of pain, but Thrawn couldn’t tell what was real and what was vision.

“Thrawn, please look at me,” Hera urged, searching his face. Thrawn’s brow scrunched in pain and anguish.

Too much pressure. Can’t breathe. Can’t speak.

“Hey, try to focus on my voice, and let the machine breathe for you.” Hera shook his hand and squeezed more tightly.

In his mind’s eye, Thrawn saw his daughter smiling at him. He felt her take his hand and squeeze as if he were in the Force-vision again. His precious daughter; he didn’t want to lose her again. “Tis’mi” … “Hah ch’aah carcir bun.” «Daddy … It’s okay.»

Hera was surprised to feel Thrawn try to return the squeeze. His fingers were weak, softly flinching in weak hitches as they tried to curl closed around her hand.

“There you go,” Hera encouraged, worriedly searching his face. The mechanical ventilator was beeping a warning; his pulse was elevated and blood pressure rising. “Thrawn open your eyes for me.”

“He needs a sedative,” Rex said as he grabbed an injection tube from the ventilator and began to prep the medicine.

“No, that would be too much for him,” Hera said.

Thrawn felt something reaching out to him in the Force. It was a magnetic wave that pushed beyond the waves of pain from his body.

Swirlings in the Force—peace—calm—serenity—

But it was invading…

Deception? … no… no, not again…

Thrawn’s brow pulsed as he tried to close himself off from what he thought was a threat and met
the magnetic swirlings with an opposing wave of his own. Shoulders heaved as his body tried to shake away the oxygen tube.

*Alien patterns and forms emitting turmoil—a call to focus—opaqueness—*

“If he doesn’t calm down soon, he might break the seal for his lungs,” Rex urged, filling up the injection tube with a sedative.

Hera was curious to see a pulse of sudden, focused fight flash beyond the dread across Thrawn’s brow. She pressed her left palm to Thrawn’s cheek. After everything both the Empire and Kallus injected into him, she knew it would be dangerous to add a sedative to the mixture, but Hera began to worry it was going to be their only option.

“Thrawn please, you must relax against your instinct. You’re okay here,” Hera pleaded, pressing more on his cheek and rubbing her thumb against his skin.

*A mother’s lullaby—the melody soft and familiar, joining the swirlings of peace and calm—*

Hera saw a hesitant shift in Thrawn’s focus from panicked fight to peace. From defiance to trust. His brow furrowed in concentration, and muscle tension began to fade across his body as he gained control.

Three mellow trills on the mechanical ventilator. Thrawn’s pulse and blood pressure began to lower, and to Hera’s and Rex’s relief, Thrawn started to respond.

*Swirlings in the Force—alien patterns and forms emitting control—*

Thrawn leaned into Hera’s touch at his cheek.

*A wave of peace guiding toward an island of tranquility—serenity—*

Heavy cerulean lids fluttered open to reveal dim and unfocused eyes of scarlet. Hera saw them pulse as they tried to focus on her.

But a silver glow of speckled radiance clouded his vision as Thrawn emerged from beyond the Force-vision, and blue sparkling butterflies fluttered throughout the soft mist of light. Amid the heavenly light, a beautiful, familiar face formed into shape.

Thrawn saw his wife hovering over him. *His love.* Her glowing crimson eyes were the definition of love as her palm rested upon his cheek. *She was a sight gravely missed.* Her voice was melodic and composed with tones of love. “*Hah ch’aah nah veo vott’i.*” «It’s not your fault.»

Hera smiled in relief, her eyes kind as she searched Thrawn’s face. She saw an unexpected wonder and a reflected softness in the depths of his eyes as he struggled to focus.

“Can you hear me?” Hera said.

*A spark—*

*Focus—*

Thrawn awoke to awareness. His crimson eyes narrowed with a flinch as the *Ghost’s* lounge sharpened to his perception, and the smiling and radiant face of his love faded and morphed from Force-vision to reality.

Thrawn now recognized the face of Rebel Captain Hera Syndulla. The structure of her eyes spoke
relief and worry while the heat signature of her cheeks rose slightly under his focused scarlet gaze.

“Thank the stars…,” a man’s voice said with relief. Thrawn’s head lay back, too heavy for the damaged musculature of his throat to support, so his eyes tiredly searched around for the source of the voice. He found former Clone Captain Rex standing nearby, deactivating an injection tube.

Thrawn was confused to find Rex dressed in stormtrooper armor, but then everything from the past day flooded his memory in a foggy daze. It was tough to piece it all together and reconcile events with an order of time though. One moment he saw Zahara, Kimmund and Faro as he lay immobilized on the floor of the Chimaera. Then a cloaked Rukh the next moment, watching over him from a corner as the Rebels rescued him from torturous interrogation on the Devastator. And then his daughter the next moment, smiling from across a gently flowing field of golden-green grass on a thriving and healthy Lothal. Her giggling laughter reached across the magnetic void… But what was Force-vision and what was reality… so… tired…

Rex’s heart shook as he saw Thrawn’s gaze begin to fade and drift beyond him.

“Thrawn, stay with us,” Hera said as Thrawn’s eyelids hovered lower and lower. She shook his hand still gripped inside her own atop his chest, and his head flinched as he recoiled back to awareness. “Stay awake, okay?”

“Good call on the sedative,” Rex muttered, as he read the data on the ventilator. Thrawn’s blood pressure was low now as the Chiss returned to a baseline resting state. “He might actually need a stimulant…”

“Hey… hey there,” Hera whispered with a soft smile when Thrawn caught her eyes. The crimson orbs seemed to be filled with an abundance of questions and concerns, and there was a familiar sharpness there despite the obvious pain in those crimson orbs, held back by a strong will.

Hera straightened a bit, moving her hands softly to Thrawn’s right shoulder, and saw Rex grabbing another injection tube. “Let’s not add anything more to his system until we see how his body responds.”

“Alright,” Rex said with a sigh. “I’d like to be ready though…” Rex glanced down to Thrawn and lowered his voice. “Those numbers make me nervous.”

Thrawn saw Hera’s focused determination as she leaned forward and patted around the cloth on his forehead. Her focused determination to aid him… A kind heart… Thrawn saw her brows narrow as if she were piloting the Ghost through a slalom of asteroids and turbo-laser fire. The cloth was gently lifted away, and Hera disappeared from Thrawn’s view.

Thrawn’s eyes began to explore what he could see above him, curious about where he was. The tubing and wires from his oxygen tube and sensors stretched up to a machine resting above a curved couch upon which he lay. The structure of the ceiling… the tones of ambience beyond the clicks and whooshes of the ventilator… the presence of Hera Syndulla… Could it be?

“You’re on the Ghost,” Thrawn heard Hera say as he heard water sloshing and dripping. Thrawn was a little awestruck. He found himself to be a passenger upon the very ship he spent so much time studying and tracking down.

Hera slid into view again, and he felt a cool sensation on his forehead. Thrawn blinked slowly at the feeling, grateful for the comfort.

“You’re running a fever, not as bad now, but I’d like it to be lower still,” Hera said as she smoothed
out the cloth on Thrawn’s forehead. Her touch was motherly.

“He’s running a fever?” Rex asked.

“Yes, developed over the last hour. It’s a good sign though, means his body is fighting…” Or a sign of infection, Hera thought, but she wouldn’t say it. She desired to project hope despite the fear. Thrawn caught her flinch though as she turned back to address him directly. His crimson eyes were tracking her as if trying to decipher a puzzle.

Hera softly touched his right wrist, indicating to his hand. “We have you hooked up to another IV drip to help dilute the toxins the Empire gave you.”

Thrawn carefully looked down, his muscles sore and stiff, and found his right arm nearly bare, covered in tape and tubes, and resting across Hera’s lap. He tested his fingers, but immediately stopped at the sharp tug from the needle and tape. Not doing that again…

Hera saw him wince. “I wouldn’t try to move your right arm much. The Empire… well—”

“Are evil rancors who have no idea what they’re doing except in the knowledge and execution of pain,” Rex said, glancing with grim eyes over Thrawn’s arm.

Thrawn had just realized his neck was slightly numb and that the corner of his uniform jacket was folded back. He also felt that his undershirt was torn in half… Thrawn was so disoriented. How long had he been unconscious? With a shaky effort, Thrawn moved his left arm toward his throat to investigate. Hera was about to stop him, fearing he was going for the oxygen tube again, but realized he was only curious.

“I… I put a bacta patch there,” Hera said as Thrawn found the patch. With the uniform flap folded back and covering part of his rank plaque, part of Thrawn’s blasterburn scar could be seen etched into his cerulean skin, snaking outward from a hidden impact point. Rex wondered again about its origin from where he stood.

Thrawn lowered his hand as if it was too much exertion, resting it there at an angle across his chest. He was tired. Malnourished.

“We’re on our way to an Alliance base where you’ll get proper care,” Hera said. Thrawn intently watched her as she twisted to grab a tube of bacta ointment from behind her on the couch-table. She began to apply the healing ointment to cuts and bruises on his right arm. Her touch was soothing.

Thrawn shifted exhausted eyes and caught Rex’s gaze. Rex met Thrawn’s eyes both as one experienced warrior to another and as a fellow soldier empathetic to the wounds and plights of another, regardless of affiliation. Thrawn lifted his left hand and wove his fingers in the air. Rex hummed a question and scrunched his eyes, making Hera glance up. Thrawn moved his fingers more methodically and narrowed his tired gaze.

“Typing,” Hera said.

“You want to communicate?” Rex said simultaneously, understanding.

Thrawn dropped his hand and carefully nodded his head, slowly blinking an affirmative.

“Lemme go get my datapad,” Rex said as he went back to the galley.

“I’m sorry,” Hera said as Rex walked away. Thrawn looked at her with a question as she cared for
his arm again. “It must be frustrating, not being able to speak.”

Oh. Thrawn rose his eyebrows as she glanced down at him, and he looked up to the ceiling with a slight exasperated roll his to his eyes, his eyelids heavy. *Among other things that currently bare discomfort…*

Hera huffed a mellow chuckle as she pulled a small bacta patch from her kit on the couch-table and ripped it open from its packaging. She carefully maneuvered it underneath IV tubing on his arm and placed it over a group of particularly deep cuts. Thrawn seemed to release unknown tension held in the muscles there as the medicine began to mend the wounds.

“Oh,” Rex said, walking back into the lounge with metallic clacks of his stormtrooper boots and a datapad in hand. Thrawn saw him rubbing at the screen, trying to clean the surface. “Here, all set for word input.”

Hera took the tablet and held it close to Thrawn’s face so that he didn’t have to move his head too much. Thrawn’s brow furrowed in concentration as he shakily lifted his left hand to the device. His hand trembled, and it took great effort to keep the instincts of his body wanting to revolt against the breathing tube under control while exerting this strength.

Rex saw the tremble in Thrawn’s hand as he slowly typed with intense and methodical concentration and realized just how weak the Chiss Grand Admiral had become. The Empire and Vader struck a mighty blow against him.

Thrawn lowered his hand to his chest and watched Rex and Hera expectantly. Hera turned the tablet around.

“My crew?” was typed there.

“My crew,” Hera repeated, glancing back to Thrawn. He returned her gaze with a small nod, and his crimson eyes were expectantly waiting for their answer.

“The *Chimaera*, right?” Rex asked, his eyes studying Thrawn.

Thrawn held Hera’s stare, and Hera saw pragmatic apprehension there. Thrawn feared possible consequences for his crew as a result of his failure. *As a result of Vader.*

“The broadcast…,” Hera began, holding his gaze. “Alton Kastle from the Holo-Net said the *Chimaera* is headed for Lothal with Commodore Faro in charge.”

Rex recognized the relief of a good leader in those crimson eyes. In fact, he witnessed the same look on his Jedi General as he had hovered over him, while waking up wounded at the Battle of Arantara many years ago.

“You…came for me.”

“It should have been me who went in the first place. A true leader always leads from the front.”

Hera’s voice broke Rex from the small reverie.

“They’re expanding efforts against the Rebellion there after what they’re claiming as an assassination attempt against you…,” Hera’s voice trailed off, and she averted her eyes a moment as her anxiety threatened to manifest again. Thrawn saw her fight it away and met her piercing green eyes again. Hera saw an unexpected but guarded compassion there… a solidarity.
Rex found Thrawn’s tired eyes shift to him. An understanding flowed between them, and it was as if the former Clone Captain knew the silent question bathed in scarlet. He had witnessed Thrawn’s and Rukh’s goodbye amid the chaotic escape on the *Devastator*. It was not unlike one witnessed between his Jedi General and then Padawan Ahsoka.

*Rex knew Thrawn had the right to know…*

“We don’t believe Rukh made it out,” Rex said, his eyes soft but blunt with the measure of a warrior. Rex crossed his arms with a sympathetic grimace as Thrawn closed his eyes, dread rippling across his brow. Hera squeezed his shoulder. “We detected an explosion as we escaped. Kimmund too, we don’t believe made it. They were heroes, they saved us all.”

“Thrawn? We’re so sorry,” Hera prompted softly while caressing his shoulder. Glossy crimson eyes fluttered open and glanced between Rex and Hera. Hera pursed her lips, and her voice was hushed. “You should know too that the Empire has publicly declared you to be dead.”

Rex thought Thrawn didn’t seem surprised. “Probably trying to save face,” Rex said. “I’ve not seen your holo message yet, but Hera’s told me what you said. I’m sure the Empire is trying bury that they allowed essentially a spy to become a Grand Admiral.”

Thrawn pulsed his eyes narrow at Rex as he considered his words. Rex wasn’t sure if Thrawn’s expression was the result of wanting to correct him or merely a realization of his vulnerability as a fugitive among Rebels now. Thrawn eventually rose shaky fingers on his left hand and nodded toward the datapad again. The former Grand Admiral appeared to be weakening quickly.

Hera presented him with the datapad, and Rex was surprised at the next entry.

“Ezra?” Rex asked, protective yet confused.

“Ezra?” was typed there on the datapad.

Hera understood. “The vision. I suppose you *were* present?” she slowly asked. Thrawn subtly nodded with a heavy blink. Exhaustion began to lace his face evermore. Rex was in awe; a *shared Force-vision between a Jedi and a Grand Admiral of the Empire.*

“Ezra didn’t say too much…,” Hera continued carefully, remembering a mention of a daughter. She didn’t want to stress him with too much detail in his condition. “But you both must have gone through a lot together. He was pretty shaken; I’ve not seen him quite like that before.”

Thrawn’s eyes conveyed a concern that neither Hera nor Rex were perhaps expecting. Thrawn seemed genuinely worried about Ezra.

“Kanan is with him now and watching over him in his cabin,” Rex said indicating with his thumb. “They’re both resting, probably asleep. Either that or Jedi stuff.”

Thrawn lost focus and slowly averted his eyes straight. *Jedi stuff…*

The shift was sudden.

Rex recognized the shift in Thrawn right away. It was a sudden change that he witnessed too often during the Clone Wars. Thrawn’s body had just gone into shock right before Rex’s eyes, Thrawn’s heart rhythm dangerously slowing. Rex knew what the signs looked like, but Thrawn, being Chiss, had an additional reaction. A shiver coursed up Rex’s spine as he watched the red vibrancy of Thrawn’s unfocused eyes looking beyond him suddenly fade and dim.
“Thrawn?” Rex said urgently, flinching toward him just as the mechanical ventilator began to trill a warning.

But Rex’s voice and the remaining surroundings of the Ghost became foreign to Thrawn as he reached out instinctively for that magnetic aura he felt earlier. Jedi stuff…

*Maintain control… focus… reach out… —

*Swirlings in the Force— echoes of muffled voices and a song of kyber—

*A wolf howl echoing distantly—

*A presence of peace and strength rising to meet alien forms and patterns— familiarity—

*Harmony—

*Jedi…

*Dume… “He’s okay…” —

*Good…” —

*Echoes of strength and serenity— enveloping and cascading to reinforce alien forms and patterns —

*Hope—

The lounge was blurry. Silver tones of heavenly light shined brightly again as Thrawn’s mind sluggishly returned. Small blue flashes of fluttering butterflies skittered about through the air. He could make out the structure of Hera’s face as she pushed her way into his faded and confused field of view. She was frantic and saying his name by the movement of her lips, but he couldn’t hear her voice.

In fact, all sound was gone. Ears ringing, Hera was panicked. *What’s wrong? Heavy… so very… heavy… childlike giggles…*

Rex’s face emerged from beyond the silvery glow as his form took shape, bursting through the silvery haze. He leaned forward and down toward Thrawn. The former Clone Captain looked serious and focused as he reached over with a cylindrical tube in his hand.

A pinch underneath the jaw. Pressure and cold. A rolling roar, rising.

A release as sound faded into clarity.

A song of kyber morphed into an angry beep from the mechanical ventilator, and the Ghost’s lounge became clear to Thrawn. Hera’s face came into a weary focus, her eyes wide. Her voice finally reached Thrawn’s ears and matched the rhythm of her lips.

“…ou hear me? Come back to us,” Hera said, her voice breaking and emerging from an echo.

“Here,” Rex said, handing her a cloth. Hera took it and pressed just below his jaw to stop the little trickle of blood where Rex injected a stimulant. “Come on…”

Hera watched Thrawn’s dim scarlet eyes widen and focus with a surge of energy, and he lurched his head and shoulders as if to cough. But he shook his head back to center and tensed. He clinched his eyes shut as he willed his body to relax. Hera had been squeezing his hand again on his chest
Thrawn sluggishly opened his eyes as he relaxed, unaware of when he had drifted off. Rex and Hera both hovered over him.

“Rest is good, Grand Admiral, but not that much,” Rex said, raising up to look at the ventilator and pressing a button sequence. “The stim worked. His heart and pressure is steady again.”

“You were leaving us for a second there,” Hera said. She lifted the cloth away from Thrawn’s neck and saw the bleeding stopped. Thrawn realized Hera had been holding his hand again when she relinquished it and turned to wash the cloth in the bowl of water behind her on the couch-table. Fingers flinched in cold air where they rested atop his chest. Crimson eyes followed her movement but were interrupted as Rex hovered into view over him. The former Clone Captain studied Thrawn’s face as the Chiss tried to focus on him. Rex grimaced, not liking what he saw.

“I should go get Kallus,” Rex said, placing a hand on the crown of Thrawn’s head. The mechanical ventilator persisted in its clicks and whooshes as Rex studied him another beat. “See if there’s more that can be done.”

“Good idea,” Hera said, joining Rex in his observation. Thrawn’s eyes had dimmed considerably, and he seemed to be having trouble maintaining focus.

“I’ll be right back,” Rex said as he walked out of the lounge for the forward cargohold. His pace was rushed. Thrawn watched him leave, turning his head slightly with a small wince.

“Careful,” Hera said.

Thrawn glanced his eyes back to her and recognized a wealth of concern in her eyes beyond what she previously had displayed. That bad, is it? He averted his tired eyes and explored more of the lounge. He slowly scanned what he could until his eyes became transfixed upon an object on the couch-table.

Hera followed his gaze and found him focusing on her Kalikori. She huffed a breath and smiled a bit beyond her worry as she glanced between Thrawn and her family heirloom again.

“My Kalikori,” she said, her voice soft as she reverently stroked the wooden baubles. She caught Thrawn’s dimmed scarlet eyes studying her and smiled a thankful sadness. “Rukh said you wanted it returned to me. I don’t understand why you took it in the first place, but I’m grateful to have it returned. It means so much to me.”

Thrawn blinked slowly and nodded as if acknowledging his past action. Hera sensed a reason there, but Thrawn was getting noticeably tired again. The stim didn’t seem to last as long this time.

Thrawn sluggishly considered the Kalikori again and noticed Hera’s unconscious caress of the part of the heirloom that represented her brother. In his studies of her and Phoenix Squadron, Thrawn came to learn of a brother of hers that died quite young.

“Ezra did mention one thing,” Hera said, hovering her hand away from the heirloom and over the couch-table’s surface. Hera was no longer afraid of distressing him; she felt he deserved to see this again.

To Thrawn’s surprise, Hera picked up his wooden bracelet and held it close so he could easily see it. Hera saw a spark of longing sadness. She pursed her lips and held his right shoulder with her
other hand.

“We found this in your pocket… Ezra mentioned a daughter,” Hera said quietly, caressing the bracelet as she held it up for him. “Said she had a necklace just like it.”

Thrawn’s eyes found her own and narrowed, guarded yet vulnerable, a hurt exposed. Hera held his gaze and shook her head, sorrowful and without words. The look in his scarlet orbs was all she needed to confirm that he held a deep loss.

Thrawn had expected the Empire to have discovered the bracelet and destroyed it. But there it was, safe in Hera’s hand. His fingers flinched on his left hand as he beheld the precious artifact that held memory, and Hera gently placed it there in his hand atop his chest. Over his heart. Thrawn tried to grip it, fingers weak as they struggled to close around it.

Hera put her own hand over his and assisted his fingers, pushing the closed around the bracelet. Returning his echo of hope to him. Thrawn’s eyes blinked so slowly that Hera wasn’t sure if he’d open them again. So tired. Thrawn tried to hold her eyes, but his eyelids were becoming increasingly heavy.

“We’ll be on base soon,” Hera said, holding her hand over his own, squeezing. “Medical will be waiting for us, and we’ll get you fixed up, okay? Things will get better.…’” Hera pressed the fingers of her other hand to his forehead as she spoke, flipping the cloth over to the cooler side. “… You can be— better— But you have to keep fighting. Hold on until then… onto hope, it’s there I promise.”

Thrawn’s scarlet eyes pulsed at her words. If only Hera knew the significance of the wording of her encouragement.

An echoed memory.

“Ch’eo tocas… Ch’eo cart’ar.” «My light… My hope.»

“Your… daughter?”

...“Yes.”

Thrawn was losing focus.

“Okay?” Hera prompted, adamantly searching Thrawn’s fading eyes. He nodded sluggishly, blinking his eyes. Okay…

Muffled voices echoed as others entered the lounge, but Thrawn couldn’t understand them. It was as if his sense of Basic vocabulary left him right before sound began to fade away. Silver light encroached upon his vision, and Hera’s face blurred. So tired…

A wide-eyed Kallus appeared overhead. His blonde hair was disheveled, and dark circles were under his eyes. His lips were moving as he leaned in close, examining dim and unfocused scarlet eyes. Kallus turned to someone and pointed, but Thrawn couldn’t focus any longer.

Darkness threatened to fold over Thrawn’s crimson orbs. Those above began to fade away into silvery light and then to nothingness. It was inviting… soothing…
A mother’s lullaby… an echo of hope in hand…

Thrawn’s eyes fluttered closed. He relaxed and gave in to rest.

But he held on.

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A Path to Perdition

Chapter Summary

"Sometimes even the smallest doubt can shake the greatest belief."

"The simplest gesture of kindness can fill a galaxy with hope." -Bail Organa

Chapter Notes

"Wish she could tell him, "Hold on"
She's waiting between worlds
Waiting between worlds that divide through a choice undefined
A break in the line where all paths intertwine
And no roads lead or progress behind
And all signs read: "Know The Way". Decide,"
- "Waiting Between Worlds" by Zack Hemsey

Spotify Song Link

Corporal Osleo Prennert was thrilled to have had the honor of guiding such a majestic diplomatic ship in for landing. The ship was beautiful and sleek compared to the rugged veneer of small fighter-craft like X-wings fresh from a scuffle. The sleek ship bespoke of the elegance of those contained within its shining hull, but Osleo’s thrill soon mixed with curious concern. From up in his narrow tower, he witnessed a swarm of activity erupt down below after it landed. Ships were being repositioned, and personnel hurriedly shuffled around the tarmac of Yavin IV’s Great Pyramid. It was as if they were preparing for both massive launches and arrivals at the same time.

It all looked very confusing from his position up so high in the sky, a fellow tenant among golden colored whisper birds. But General Draven had given him a very blunt talking to after nearly missing Captain Syndulla’s approach. It wasn’t so much his words or his voice; it was the general’s eyes that struck deep into his soul. General Draven was a military leader who expected his people to embody their best selves, and he was one to quickly point out, without any fluff or padding, each and every inefficiency he could see. But the general’s words weren’t out of malice, but born from an aura of blunt respect, which simply demanded the same in return from his soldiers. He was a good leader… just pragmatically realistic. One who expected the best and saw the worst, and one who was very cognizant of the consequence of failure resulting from carelessness.

A sentinel-on-watch wasn’t supposed to worry or wonder about the unknown. Certainly, no more daydreaming. But he thought he recognized that figure walking down the ramp of the diplomatic ship. The flowing cloak mixed with attire structured in the formal tones of Alderaan gave him away.

“I apologize for the delay. Imperial blockades impeded our progress much more than usual,”
Senator Bail Organa said as he walked down the ramp of his ship. Mon Mothma stood at the foot of the ramp and saw a rigid stress upon him as he walked to meet her. He still stole a wondered glance up at Yavin IV’s Great Pyramid as he approached though.

“I’m glad you made it safely, my friend,” Mon Mothma said with a soft smile. Her voice flowed with familiar tones of regality and diplomatic poise. But she was in the presence of a friend, and Bail recognized her apprehensive edge.

“The call to return seemed urgent,” Bail said, holding her eyes as he stopped before her. He read the unspoken strain reflected despite her smile. They couldn’t fool each other.

She hummed and slowly nodded as she gathered her thoughts. “There’s been a… development, that requires the delicacies of an in-person briefing.”

Bail glanced around them, making sure their conversation was private despite the busy tarmac. “Does this have anything to do with the broadcast? About the Seventh Fleet?” He hesitated, lowering his voice. “About Grand Admiral Thrawn…?”

Mon Mothma rose a hand and averted her eyes before glancing around herself. She was being cautious, even here on Yavin IV, and that made Bail nervous. “It does,” she said softly.

“I had hoped not,” Bail said with a hush. He had held hope that the Alliance wasn’t responsible for such a high-profile attack. To do so would mean a pain and a punishment from the Empire that Bail wasn’t sure the fledgling rebellion cause could withstand at such an early stage of formation. They simply weren’t ready for full-scale conflict.

A spark of that hope had kindled while in transit to Yavin IV as none of his contacts, Fulcrum and otherwise, came back with a positive confirmation of the act. But now…

“Walk with me,” Mon Mothma said. They walked through throngs of flight crews and mechanics tending to a group of A-wings as they made their way toward the interior of the Great Pyramid.

“Remember our time in the Republic Senate,” Mon Mothma said. “The corruption we faced together as a coalition before the Emperor gained his power? It was a confusing time wasn’t it.”

“It still is,” Bail said as he maneuvered around hurried crew chiefs. His mind fell into sad memories of those now lost who were part of that original coalition. Friends like Padmé Amidala…

He shook himself from those thoughts and saw that Mon Mothma perhaps did the same. Bail fought back a feeling of claustrophobia as they walked deeper into the Rebel base.

“The base seems to be on high alert,” he said clearing his throat.

“We’ve increased patrols as a result of the broadcast.” Mon Mothma took a deep breath as she paused before a sealed door. Bail recognized it as the entrance to a secured Alliance Intelligence hub and became increasingly wary at a looming pressure of change born from shadows. She considered his gaze a moment.

“Those days with the Republic Senate, during the Clone War,” she began slowly. “The lines between sides were blurred at times, and it became apparent more existed than merely Separatists and Loyalists. There were others, existing apart and wishing to remain so, such as Mandalore.” The conflict was painful to remember. She gestured. “That time was a prelude to what we now endure, together. But the system is still the same.”

“What are you trying to say?” he said with a hush. Bail was folding into an unspoken revelation. If
this was about the Imperial broadcast…

“The bureaucracy remains to be fundamentally the same flawed machine. The system will always act to preserve itself. And its most valuable commodity it wishes to maintain? Perception.”

It was a game of perception. A game of lies. The broadcast was pure propaganda just like everything else the Empire did in the public eye. Bail huffed an incredulous breath, but why should he be surprised? He shouldn’t be. But the subject of the propaganda was ludicrous, right? Grand Admiral Thrawn? The very Imperial Officer that was nearly victorious in decimating their entire cause at Atollon?

Nearly victorious…

A Chiss Grand Admiral… A Chiss who claimed to be exiled from his people…

“So, he’s not… Are you saying…” Bail’s voice hushed as it trailed off, but his eyes continued the wild question.

Mon Mothma hesitated, perhaps understanding that which was unspoken, and nodded slowly, keeping her sharp eyes upon his. “It’s become apparent there are more to consider. Another party works from the shadows and seems to have been doing so for quite some time. Much longer than we realize. There’s more that we as the Rebel Alliance must become aware of before moving forward in this clandestine civil war.”

She opened the doors to the Alliance Intelligence area, and Bail saw through wide eyes, a circular holotable with what appeared to be jumbled data and distorted imagery floating above it. Air felt heavy as they entered. The room was dark, the central blue glow not quite permeating toward the far corners but further illuminated by green holographic maps and screens being monitored by a limited number of Rebel Alliance Officers.

“Ah, senators, good of you to finally join us,” General Draven said.

“Generals,” Mon Mothma said in gentle greeting, as she and Bail joined General Draven and General Dodonna around the holotable.

Draven held the look of a man resigned to battle, the experiences and burdens of the past creasing his features. Bail thought the general seemed disagreeable, peevish perhaps even at the principle of this meeting.

General Dodonna meanwhile was focused on the jumbled data hovering before them. He absentmindedly stroked his snowy beard as he tried to decipher the images.

“This data makes no sense. The corruption is severe and probably encrypted underneath all of that,” Dodonna said with a sigh. Bail agreed; the numbers were all over the place, and imagery malformed. Dodonna motioned to Draven. “Have your people tried to extract it yet?”

“So far, unsuccessfully,” Draven said, crossing his arms with furrowed brow.

“Do we have a time of arrival?” Mon Mothma asked Draven.

“They’ve gone silent as of two jumps ago,” Draven answered. “But estimates are anywhere within the next three hours. I must reiterate, Senator, I don’t agree with bringing him here.”

Mon Mothma nodded, her eyes narrowing with her thoughts. “I understand your concerns, but he will be able to explain these readings,” she said, motioning to the data.
“Do you really understand? It’s what he might do afterward that concerns me,” Draven retorted. He shook his head and sighed. “But only if he’s able to do so. Their astromech’s report was less than optimistic.”

“All the more reason for him to be here where he’ll best be treated.”

“Ah, excuse me,” Dodonna interrupted, raising a hand. He rose his eyebrows as he glanced between them. “He?”

Draven took a breath and eyed both Bail and Dodonna with the sharp assessment of a military intelligence general. He took a beat as it was apparent his mind was warring with the realities and specifics of the situation.

It was time to explain.

“Clear the room!” Draven announced suddenly, making Dodonna flinch. The general turned swiftly, his voice gruff and powerful as he addressed his officers in the intelligence bay. “Step away from your stations! You’ll be recalled once authorized, but until then, everyone out! Clear the room!”

Bail watched as everyone shuffled away. No one seemed surprised at the call to exit. This must have been happening fairly often recently, Bail thought.

“What’s going on?” Bail asked once the four of them were alone.

“As you may have discerned by now, the latest Holo-Net broadcast was a fabrication,” Mon Mothma said. “It was meant to stoke the fires of the Imperial war machine against the Rebellion, while simultaneously providing an explanation as to the absence of the Seventh Fleet’s Grand Admiral.”

“Grand Admiral Thrawn?” Dodonna asked. Draven nodded and hummed an affirmative.

“Vader took him out under suspicion of treason apparently, contrary to the Empire’s official report,” Draven sighed, turning back around to address them. “The Ghost encountered a distress call, and this datachip was recovered from the survivor, who’s believed to be Thrawn’s bodyguard or assassin.”

“Grand Admiral Thrawn meant for us to have this information should something happen to him,” Mon Mothma said, motioning to the jumbled holoimages.

General Dodonna’s face blanched, “What?” Dodonna’s eyes danced over the holoimages with a new consideration. He looked like he was going to be sick.

“He meant to send intelligence… to the Rebellion?” Bail challenged.

Mon Mothma nodded. “There’s a message—”

“Forgive me for interrupting Senator,” Dodonna said. “But this datachip, is it even safe to have it present on base? It could be a trap to learn of our location.”

“I’ve shared the same concerns, General Dodonna,” Draven said. Mon Mothma stiffened, yet Draven looked uncomfortable as he glanced to her and nodded. “But my people have looked at the device. As far as we can tell, this was meant solely as a data courier. Though a horribly corrupted one. Besides, if it were a trap, we would have known the consequences long ago…”
Mon Mothma held cautious exhaustion in her stance as she considered her peers. “General Draven and I have seen it once already, but there’s a message we must watch together,” Mon Mothma said.

She pressed a button sequence, and it was as if every molecule of air suddenly retreated from around Bail as Grand Admiral Thrawn’s image flickered into existence on the holotable.

“By Caraya’s soul…,” Dodonna muttered.

Thrawn was bathed in blue light, standing resolute and proud in his white Imperial uniform with his shoulders adorned with shining gold bars. His hands rested confidently behind his back, and the Chiss stood silent as he breathed measured breaths, steeling himself.

Bail slowly circled around to Thrawn’s front and found the crimson eyes of the Chiss Grand Admiral intimidating even through holo. “This is absurd,” Bail muttered, as he slid his hand over the holotable’s surface for guidance. Dodonna held the same measure of awe as he did the same, moving to Mon Mothma’s other side, and Draven slowly followed Dodonna with crossed arms and lowered head. Draven was entrenched in thought, calculations dancing across his brow and unfocused eyes.

Bail saw a flicker of uncharacteristic hesitation in Thrawn’s eyes. Thrawn’s voice was slow and held melodic purpose as he began to speak.

“The winding path to peace is always a worthy one, regardless of how many turns it takes,” Thrawn said. A Jedi saying, Bail knew.

“This is real?” Bail asked.

“Yes,” Draven said curtly, glancing to Bail with intense eyes though head still lowered in his walk.

Thrawn’s strong voice melodically continued, “A wise ambassador once said, it is our duty, and our responsibility, to preserve the lives of those around us.” Padmé. Bail met Mon Mothma’s eyes with a flinch and found her already watching him with glistening eyes, expecting his reaction.

Taking his place next to Mon Mothma, Bail glanced back and saw a glimmer in Thrawn’s own shimmering orbs. What seemed to be an echo of a memory cracked the crisp edge of Thrawn’s Imperial rigidity, and his voice became wistful, eyes unfocused.

“She also beheld the light of thousands within her eyes, as she defended to me, that what drove her were individuals, people and honor.” Bail saw that Thrawn’s eyes were haunted as he lingered there in the memory. It was an odd sense of regret that hung upon the Chiss. To see this upon Thrawn, a grand admiral who had been such a passionate adversary…

“It is that same purpose under which I operate,” Thrawn said, his voice strong. “She knew that a chorus of thousands would rise up in its place should her voice be extinguished, and it is to a few within what I see as that rising chorus, for which this message is intended.”

Lightning struck the fibers of Bail’s soul as he took in a harsh breath of air. That phrase… It resounded like a reverberating gong in his head. She knew that a chorus of thousands would rise up in its place should her voice be extinguished… That was a phrase inspired from Padmé’s speech during the Alderaan Conference on the Clone War Refugee Crisis so long ago. Bail was there; he had heard her words personally.

Bail was transported to the past in his mind’s eye. He heard Padmé’s voice again, clear as day.
“I know that there are those individuals in the galaxy who would seek to promote fear and spread chaos,” Padmé announced, her voice strong.

Bail was among a few who knew the cloaked figure standing next to him was not actually Padmé, but a droid adorned to appear so. Bounty hunter Aurra Sing had made things complicated at this conference, and Padawan Ahsoka Tano had already prevented catastrophe once. The brave padawan was with Padmé now in what Bail hoped was a safe location.

“To those who act as agents of chaos, I say this. I stand resolute and unyielding. And if you strike my voice down, know that a chorus of thousands shall rise up in its place, for you have no dominion over the righteous. We are the defenders of truth.”

It was undeniable. Thrawn’s message was surely intended for Bail and Mon Mothma, as the wording was deliberate and personal. Thrawn knew Padmé, Bail additionally realized. It was he of whom she spoke of so long ago. Thrawn was the Chiss scout who had aided in thwarting a Separatist operation from being unleashed against the Republic during the Clone War. The one who had helped Padmé and Anakin. Bail’s mind reeled with overwhelming realization.

How many more deaths did Thrawn prevent by intervening? What more did he know?

Bail had missed much of the message as he emerged from his ocean of revelation. Mon Mothma glanced to Bail and noticed his face had paled considerably.

“Attached to this message is information I deem useful to your Rebellion,” Thrawn said, taking a breath. “Please understand that everything I did, I did for the greater good of the galaxy, and with the intent of preserving all lives that were around me…” His head nodded and eyes narrowed. “…including yours.”

Bail would have to watch the holo-message again to comprehend everything said. Padmé…

“I regret any pain I’ve caused to you all in the name of the Empire,” Thrawn said. “And I am regretful that we could not go beyond the relationship of adversaries and toward that of allies.” Thrawn smirked slightly. “Perhaps, were fates different…” Thrawn blinked slowly after a moment of consideration and then nodded in finality. “May you gain hope.”

Grand Admiral Thrawn’s image fizzled away, leaving General Draven’s intense stare in its place.

“Captain Syndulla and her crew were able to recover him from Imperial custody,” Draven said. “Our people found him under intense interrogation.”

“They’re enroute to base with him as we speak,” Mon Mothma said.

“They actually had him imprisoned,” Dodonna muttered in disbelief as he leaned on the holotable. “I never thought I’d see the day, Grand Admiral Thrawn defecting.”

“That’s not necessarily true,” Draven said bluntly as he circled around the holotable again. “He never intended to defect. His message was a contingency, intended only to release and be delivered upon his failure.” Draven uncrossed his arms and leaned on the table with deep breath. He grimaced despite his stiff demeanor. “He’s not in good shape; Operative Kallus verified a mixture of lotiramine and skirtopanol. Thrawn may not be able to recall the information we seek should he even be willing to cooperate at all.”

Mon Mothma held up a hand and exuded what could be described as a radiance of thousands. Her
eyes scanned over each of them. “This may be the very evidence we need to legitimize our cause to the Senate and more so to the greater public. We must have faith.”

---

*I walk alone
Beside myself
Nowhere to go
All signs read: "Know The Way". Decide.*

Commodore Faro hated shuttles. Their smaller airframe provided for a more turbulent ride through atmosphere, especially on a humid planet such as Lothal at this time of its seasonal cycle. That’s why she was grateful the *ISD Chimaera* was granted clearance to dock with the Imperial Command Center in Capital City rather than flying in one of those garbage piles.

From her place at the forward command viewport, Faro observed as the massive Star Destroyer sliced through the upper atmosphere like a sharp beam of light piercing through an edge of darkest night. Its hull was strong and heavy, through which no natural turbulence could easily permeate. Advanced stabilizers and thrusters counteracted the intricacies of atmospheric weather streams that Imperial shuttles simply didn’t possess.

The *Chimaera* gracefully soared through Lothal’s sky, its shining hull majestic in its tones of chrome, reflecting Imperial might and security down upon the civilians of Lothal below. Its unique undercarriage design of a chimaera was preserved as an untarnished artifact left to honor the legacy of Grand Admiral Thrawn. In fact, the Empire was utilizing it as a battle cry for the rest of the crew and the Seventh Fleet. Brilliant hums of the *ISD Chimaera’s* powerful engines reverberated outward through the outer edges of the city as it approached. It was a proud ship.

Surely the sight brought a sense of stability and order, yes? Faro would hope to think that. There was a time when she would be confident about that sentiment. She was trained to think that, yet she felt an undeniable looming threat of chaos and war as she stood within the Star Destroyer itself. Too much had happened. Her base instincts instilled upon her as an Imperial Cadet were void and washed away, as her perspective had changed. Her perspective was clean.

Though, loyalty was a complicated thing sometimes, especially when mixed. While she wore a legacy of loyalty to Grand Admiral Thrawn, her responsibility transferred to that of his crew in his absence. Thrawn had entrusted them to her.

Faro’s mind folded into memory. To those around her, Commodore Faro was merely lost in thought, as a leader sometimes may appear.

“The ship is yours, Commodore Faro,” Thrawn’s smooth voice echoed. At the viewport, she calmly turned her head to the side, and her mind’s eye saw Grand Admiral Thrawn, bathed in cascades of silver light, standing next to her on the *Chimaera’s* bridge once again, resolute just as they had stood together at that critical hour before fates changed. *Before the Devastator appeared. Before Vader.* A brilliant scene of stars dancing and morphing into that of Lothal’s atmosphere was taking place before her outside the viewport while the Star Destroyer cut through the sky, but she was more enthralled by a vision of that which was taken.
Faro had understood the finality behind Thrawn’s words back then, as he had allowed his gaze to linger upon her own eyes longer than perhaps necessary. *Echoes of Vader’s breathing.* Thrawn’s form was like a mirage, bright and clear yet somehow still unfocused in Faro’s mind. *Was she forgetting his image already?* His presence was comforting to her though despite her insecurities and the obvious illusion.

She wasn’t alone; he stood with her, even in memory. His eyes glinted, and he smirked slightly. *He looked proud.* She would never forget the look in those scarlet eyes. *Protect them. I can do so no longer.*

“Commodore, we’re entering the approach corridor,” a helmsman announced.

The mirage dissolved, and Faro lost the illusion, blinking rapidly. She cleared her throat and centered herself. “Very well lieutenant,” Faro said, glancing over her shoulder. “Proceed as cleared and continue approach for planetary docking maneuvers with the Command Center.”

Faro took a deep breath where she stood, looking straight again and beholding a mixture of space and planetary sky. She watched the remainder of the *Chimaera’s* trajectory through atmospheric entry from the command viewport. *Alone.*

The sun danced through clouds as the puffs of moisture relented and revealed a dulled scenery of rolling fields of grass crowned by Lothal’s Capital City. Persistent voices of regret and dashed hopes peppered at her mind as she watched Lothal’s mushroom-shaped Imperial Complex come into view on the horizon. It ruined the skyline, and the planet looked sick. *Bitterness.* Fear and doubt were ever present feelings since Tarkin’s report. *Thrawn was dead.* There was no escaping that fact. She knew it. Ayer knew it. Her crew knew it. *Zahara knew it.*

“Are you sure about this, doctor?” Ayer asked, as he stood in a doorway in the *Chimaera’s* medical bay.

“I’m sure,” Zahara said closing her ECM-598 Medical Backpack. It was restocked and prepared for transport. She looked up from her desk and caught Ayer’s eyes as he crossed his arms. He casually leaned his shoulder against the doorway as he considered her. He didn’t look convinced. *Always the Stormtrooper Commander,* she thought. Zahara smiled sadly with her kind green eyes. “It’s what I need.”

“You know it’s not your fault,” he said.

“I know.” The smile left her delicate face, to be replaced by a self-reprimanding grimace. Her eyes sparkled like glistening emeralds. “But everywhere I look, I’m reminded of what happened. Of what I couldn’t prevent. I was powerless and unable. A Chief Medical Officer of a Star Destroyer shouldn’t allow their commander to—” She stopped herself. “I was the Chief Medical Officer on watch… I can’t help but see the blame or the pity in their eyes as I pass by, and I don’t know which is worse.”

“No one blames you.”

“But I do, and I see it reflected in the crew’s eyes whether they intend it or not. And they don’t even know what we know.” She shook her head, her voice becoming small. “The flashbacks won’t stop—”
“Zahara…,” Ayer said, stepping forward into the room. His eyes shone with concern.

“Time away off-ship to think and heal will do me good,” Zahara said, taking in a deep breath and trying to avoid Ayer’s eyes. She stood and swung the backpack over a shoulder, as Ayer stopped in front of her. She tried to prevent the tremble in her voice. “Besides the medical staff on Lothal could use the help from what I understand.”

Ayer held out his armored hands, and Zahara gnawed at her bottom lip, fighting emotion. As Ayer’s hands hovered before her like an offering, she shyly looked up into his eyes. There was a kindness and an understanding there in his gaze. She relented, released the tension in her shoulders, and placed her own delicate hands in his, gloved in armor.

“It’s only a temporary assignment,” Zahara said. Her eyes matched the sadness of her heart.

Ayer’s eyes were tempted to mirror that of her own as they shined narrow. He would like to believe her, he really would… But he had seen the hooded poncho and the extra rations she had placed inside the ECM-598 Medical Backpack. Those weren’t very standard as far as medical supplies went…

“Be careful down there,” he began.

“I will,” she said softly. Zahara motioned to move away, but Ayer held on. His grip pulsed as he gently held her hands, and his gaze knowingly held her own with a sharp spark.

“Reports show increased rebellion activity down there,” he slowly insisted, his own voice hushed. “It’s believed they use the sewer system underneath the city to smuggle themselves and supplies in and out of the area. Multiple access points on the street make for a cumbersome vulnerability for the local troops.”

Zahara’s heart quickened.

“An Imperial could find themselves walking next to an insurgent pretty easily without realizing it. Their presence is quite common on the streets… Please, be careful,” he continued. His eyebrows rose as he searched her eyes. “You understand?”

“I…” Zahara exhaled a shaky breath, unsure and perhaps feeling exposed. Ayer rubbed over her hands with his thumbs, encouraging her voice. “I… haven’t…” Her voice trailed off as she shifted her weight on her feet, but she willed her voice to return. “I haven’t decided what to do yet,” she whispered.

She looked away, ashamed to hold his gaze, but Ayer understood. They both shared a dangerous truth, and Ayer knew they were probably in more danger here among the Empire than on Lothal alongside those designated insurgents. Though that had to remain unspoken. A lot had to remain unspoken between them…

Ayer nodded and released her hands. “I’ll escort you to your shuttle,” he said softly. He put his helmet on per Imperial regulation and motioned toward the door. “Ma’am,” he said.

Zahara stared out the doorway. “Thank you…, major,” she said, glancing to him as she began to walk.

Ayer followed her to the Chimaera’s hangar bay in silence. Zahara boarded a shuttle bound for the planet’s surface under new orders approved by Commodore Faro to aid local Imperial medical staff. Ayer stood on the flight deck, his Stormtrooper Commander armor shining in mellow brilliance. He watched her go.
This bleeding heart
That's in my hands I fell apart

Swirlings in the Force— A call to focus—

Muffled voices...

Worried. Frustrated. Familiar...

“Careful with him.” “His arm, watch his arm.” “Here, hold this.”

Zeb saw Thrawn’s eyes flutter open as he gently twisted his arms underneath the Chiss Grand Admiral, maneuvering Thrawn’s head to cradle in the hollow of his left arm, while hooking his right underneath Thrawn’s thighs. Thrawn’s weak gaze briefly met Zeb’s own apprehensive one, but the crimson orbs heavily fluttered closed again as Zeb gently lifted him.

The Ghost’s ramp lowered to reveal a bustling tarmac, and a shadowed hangar bay stood beyond at the bottom of Yavin’s Great Pyramid. Zeb cradled Thrawn’s unconscious form in his arms at the top of the ramp. Thrawn’s bare right arm rested across his torso, and the IV lines were carefully coiled, while his left arm hung lax toward the ground. The mechanical ventilator steadily oscillated as it breathed for Thrawn, echoing its rhythmic whooshes throughout the cargo hold.

“Where are they?!” Zeb hollered. Medical personnel were supposed to meet them upon landing, but they were so far met with silence.

“They said they’re on their way,” Hera’s voice sounded over the ship’s comm. “I’ll check again!”

“They should be here already,” Kallus said, holding the ventilator and standing next to Zeb.

Kallus stood there exhausted, still in his stormtrooper disguise, and glanced over the tarmac with his piercing coppery eyes. Some Alliance personnel were already sending curious glances their way, spotting the figure clothed in a white Imperial uniform and tall black boots in Zeb’s arms. Kallus adjusted his grip on the mechanical ventilator, and with his other hand, he reached over and touched Thrawn’s fevered forehead. Zeb angled his arm that cradled Thrawn’s head toward Kallus, and he saw Thrawn’s brow furrow and head flinch slightly as he responded to Kallus’ touch.

Zeb was nervous. Zeb was holding Thrawn... Zeb was holding a Grand Admiral of the Empire... Zeb was holding an operative of the Chiss Ascendancy...

Zeb was holding someone who’s fate might affect the course of the galaxy...

“We should just go,” Ezra said with a worried ache, walking up behind them. Zeb glanced back with unsure eyes to find Ezra and Kanan approaching. Thrawn’s form was so lax in the Lasat’s arms, lenient to every move. The fingers on Thrawn’s right hand flinched with the movement, and Kanan reached for Ezra’s shoulder, sensing a ripple in the Force.

Kallus groaned, frustrated. “He’s right, we have to go.” Kallus glanced to the back of the cargo
bay. “Tell them to meet us, Hera! We’re walking him over!”

A hurried sense of movement... Bounding springs through crisp air... A bird’s call...

Crimson eyes fluttered open to see a flock of golden colored whisper birds soaring overhead across a towering sky, painted with clouds that stroked the vast canvas with beautiful tones of amethyst and coral. It was a sight to treasure after serving on ships for so long.

Thrawn’s eyes were heavy as he glanced around. What do you see? As the whisper birds soared above, crimson eyes sluggishly focused on what appeared to be an ancient pyramid looming tall and proud. Curious... Zeb glanced down, and the Lasat’s eyes widened when he caught the faded crimson orbs. Zeb said something but the sound was muffled and indistinct. Everything was becoming too bright, and focus was fleeting.

Thrawn blinked slowly toward a closing darkness and tried to reach out with his other senses. Focus... He felt the distinct rise and fall of Zeb’s bounding gait as the Lasat carried him across the tarmac. Indiscernibly hushed voices echoed as they no doubt passed curious Alliance personnel. Then he felt the drift of natural air flowing across his left hand as it dangled freely toward the ground.

Thrawn tried to regain a sense of control by curling his fingers but was met with exhaustion and frustration as he found he could do no more. It was as if his arm was weighted down with the trials of a thousand suns. Feeling and sensation slowly drained away from his body, and he clinched his eyes before slowly relaxing them. Thrawn was losing his hold on consciousness. His body was betraying him again.

Echoed rumbles of engines... Sizzles of droid repair... Gasps of surprise...

“Mother of moons...” “We caught one...” “Wait... is that...?”


Cold hands touching neck...

A sudden twist—CRACK—

EYES OPEN.

Thrawn’s crimson eyes flashed open as he whipped up his left arm and latched onto Doctor Harter Kalonia’s wrist before she could fully remove the bacta patch from his neck. Fiercely intense crimson orbs, reflecting a focused fight, found unfamiliar faces hovering above. The unexpected touch to his injured neck triggered a burst of strength as the sounds and emotions of Vader’s attack flooded his senses again. Thrawn saw fear in their eyes as they were faced with a Chiss ready to fight.

Doctor Kalonia lifted her fingers away from his neck and froze as if in the gaze of a predator.
Thrawn darted disoriented eyes around and found them to be inside what appeared to be a hangar, humid and dark.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” a nurse exclaimed.

*Alien patterns and forms swirling in confusion—*

Thrawn’s shoulders heaved, and his booted feet shifted with the intent to fight as adrenaline rushed through his body, but foreign hands of the Rebellion medical team pressed down upon him. His crimson eyes narrowed with the brief intensity required of battle, and his hand pulsed around Doctor Kalonia’s arm as he tried to pull it away with fleeting strength.

“Grand Admiral, you must calm yourself!” Doctor Kalonia insisted, nervously eyeing Thrawn’s hand as his grip tensed even more upon her wrist.

*Grand Admiral…*

Thrawn tried to bring his right hand up as well but was met with a sharp pain as his wounds stretched and the IV lines tugged. He clinched his eyes closed, and suddenly became aware of the breathing tube.

“Make room!” Through heavy lids, Thrawn watched as two nurses were pushed aside to be replaced by Kallus. The former Imperial hovered low above the Chiss and met Thrawn’s tiring gaze. “They’re here to help you, Thrawn,” Kallus firmly said. “Let them. You have to relax for them, okay?”

Thrawn’s eyes pulsed as he considered Kallus, his grip hesitating. Thrawn was unsure, confused and broken. He was struggling to find a capacity to trust through his triggered instinct to fight.

A worried and clearly upset Ezra then appeared beside Kallus. It was the first time Thrawn had seen the boy since the Force-vision. Thrawn’s brow pulsed, startled yet instantly relieved.

“Thrawn?” Ezra’s voice sounded anxious, his eyes darting around the group. “What’s going on? How is he?”

Thrawn’s dimmed crimson eyes softened as he considered the boy. Thrawn made a choice. He relented and released his grip on Doctor Kalonia’s wrist and slowly began to relax. Kallus grabbed for Thrawn’s left arm and gently lowered it down to the cushions of the repulsor gurney. “There you go,” Kallus said.

“I need to look at your neck okay?” Doctor Kalonia said with a hush. Thrawn’s focus internalized and his eyes flinched narrow and pulsed to the pull of the patch over delicate cerulean skin. Her hands slightly trembled as she pulled the bacta patch away and revealed intense greenish, purple bruising and a speckled rash of dark green dots.

A hush fell over the medical team.

“Clear signs of… struggle,” Kalonia said softly. She moved her hands to Thrawn’s chest and pulled the fabric away for a closer look. “And old scarring; let’s prepare a scar tissue analysis as well.”

“We’ve been trying to dilute the mixture of skirtopanol and lotiramine,” Kallus said.

Thrawn was losing focus as the adrenaline began to fade away but held on to the last vestiges of concentration as a figure clothed in white appeared overhead next to Doctor Kalonia. The medical team showed deference.
“Grand Admiral Thrawn,” Mon Mothma stated regally. Her voice was smooth, and a spark of surprised recognition resonated in Thrawn’s eyes. “Do you recognize who I am?”

Thrawn blinked slowly as he maintained an ever-faltering focus upon her, and those around them held their breath at the meeting of both leaders. Mon Mothma wore a tranquilly stiff expression, yet her eyes held empathy as they were centered upon those scarlet and broken. It was as if information that they alone could decipher flowed between them, a magnetic aura of equals. Thrawn found the strength to nod an affirmation.

_I walk alone_

_Beside myself_

_Nowhere to—_

“You are welcome here.” Mon Mothma held his faltering gaze a moment longer and nodded. She then looked each medical team member in the eye. “He is to be respected. Treat him as one of our own, you understand?”

Thrawn’s eyes began to close.

“Yes, ma’am. Let’s go,” Doctor Kalonia said. She keyed a commlink at her belt as she pushed on the repulsor gurney. “Lieutenant, prep the room and medical droids for surgery.”

Mon Mothma stood beside Kallus and Ezra as they watched the medical team take Thrawn deeper into the base toward the medcenter. Ezra didn’t like the looks from some of the Alliance personnel as Thrawn passed. Some looked happy at the state of a captured Imperial officer; others looked angered at the sight.

“We need to—” Ezra began, worried. He felt a pressure on his shoulder and found Kanan there.

“I’ll watch over him,” Kanan said, following after Thrawn.

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Commodore Faro walked down the metallic halls of Lothal’s Imperial Command Center. Her booted feet produced hollow clacks that reverberated around her. It was time to meet with Governor Arihnda Pryce.

A Stormtrooper opened a door for her to reveal an office, crisp with Imperial decorum.

“Commodore Faro, welcome to Lothal,” Arihnda said with a flavor of disdain. She looked perturbed and highly inconvenienced. Arihnda stood in front of a window that provided a clear view of Capital City. An Imperial officer in a white tunic of the Imperial Security Bureau stood with his back to Faro, rigid in his stance.

“Thank you, Governor Pryce. A pleasure,” Faro said in formality, stopping in the middle of the office. She flinched when the door closed behind her, but her only physical betrayal of the flinch was her narrowed eyes. The unknown Imperial officer turned.
Arihnda gestured. “Allow me to introduce Loyalty Officer Major Emarr Ottkreg. I don’t believe you’ve met before?”

“I can’t say I’ve had the honor,” Faro said, her heart quickening.

“The honor is mine, Commodore. The honor is mine,” Ottkreg said with a crisp smile of malice.

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“Waiting between worlds that divide through a choice undefined
A break in the line where all paths intertwine
And no roads lead or progress behind

And all signs read: "Know The Way". Decide.”
“He’s doing alright. Just needs a lot of rest now,” Kanan said as he sat down next to Ezra on the ramp of the Ghost. The Ghost was still a sanctuary, even on Yavin IV. “It may be a while until you can speak with him.”

Ezra had his legs hugged to his chest where he sat, resting his chin atop his knees. He stayed silent, and Kanan could feel the disconnect. Ezra had been quiet since their mission to the ISD Devastator.

“You okay?” Kanan asked.

“Just… thinking of Lothal… And what this all means for my home.”

“We’ll help them one day, when we’re able.”

“We were there, on Lothal,” Ezra said quietly. He looked sideways to Kanan and saw confusion ripple across his master’s brow. “In the vision,” he added.

Kanan hummed, nodding his head. Ezra had yet to speak about what he experienced, but Kanan didn’t want to pressure him into discussing it before he was ready. “You and Thrawn?”

“Yeah,” Ezra said with a breath. “It was different though. A future maybe, like my other vision. Remember when Ryder told us about my parents?”

Kanan grimaced, and as his heart flinched, it was his turn to turn away. Ezra’s sorrow was tough to witness that night. “Yeah, I remember.”

“It was the same skyline with the tall spires, and it looked… free, like a good place to live.” Ezra huffed a small laugh. “A white lothcat woke me up in a spine tree forest. I thought it was Zeb at first.”

Kanan smiled. “Zeb mistaken for a lothcat.”

“Don’t tell him I said that,” Ezra said.

“No promises on that one.” Kanan was relieved to see Ezra’s smile while discussing the Force-vision, and he felt comfortable prompting Ezra with more questions. “We’ve seen a white lothcat a few times before, haven’t we?”

“One led us to Ryder, yeah… It led me to Thrawn in the vision. He was standing alone, just outside the forest…” Ezra winced, voice becoming hushed as he saw himself in the vision again. “…watching over his daughter. His uniform was different, not Imperial and like some sort of battle armor. The emblem was specific. Red, I think.”

“Uniforms can be deceiving,” Kanan said. “Maybe the Force showed you his true one.”
“I think…” Ezra hesitated. He was unsure if he should even mention this, but Kanan was his master. His family. Out of everyone, Kanan should at least know what he suspected. “I… think Thrawn might be Force-sensitive.”

Kanan’s brow furrowed. He thought to his time on the Ghost as the traveled back to Yavin IV with Thrawn onboard.

A presence of peace and strength rising to meet alien forms and patterns—familiarity—

Kanan took a deep breath. “I think so too,” he said.

“You do?”

“I reached out to him in meditation while you were asleep, and, well… he answered back. Thrawn was reaching out for you, you know? Wondering how you were doing.” Kanan put his hand on his shoulder. “It’s probably something best kept quiet until we can speak with him about it though… What you both experienced, it must have been powerful.”

A cool breeze began to make its way through base.

“Thrawn collapsed, and I couldn’t save him,” Ezra said with a hush. “Why would the Force do that, Kanan?”

“I don’t know. What you saw could mean many things,” Kanan said, feeling Ezra begin to tremble. He squeezed his shoulder. “But Master Yoda taught that the future is always in motion and that there are many possibilities. Maybe what happened means something more to Thrawn. Did Thrawn say anything in the vision?”

“He warned of a greater threat like he did in the holo-message, but no specifics. I think he was getting tired; his eyes were actually dimming. He got worried when I told him the datachip was corrupted, though.”

“Maybe the Force simply sent you there to encourage him and be there for him.”

“Maybe…,” Ezra said, looking up at the Great Pyramid. It was majestic yet ethereal.

A smooth sound of kyber… The song cascaded through the air… An unknown mother’s melody…

A voice echoed… “Remember that name, Ezra…”

A familiar voice… Thrawn’s voice… “Friend… He is a friend…”

“Ezra?”

Ezra startled, and found Kanan leaning toward him. Ezra’s eyes went wide. “Thrawn told me a name. Oh, what was it?” Ezra said urgently.

The sound of kyber intensified in Ezra’s mind, and he rose his hands to his head. He groaned in frustration.

“Focus Ezra, find your center,” Kanan said, also hearing the song of kyber. It was as if it emanated from the ancient pyramid.
“Remember that... that name, Ezra...”...

A bolt of lightning struck Ezra’s mind.

“Eli!” Ezra exclaimed. “Eli Vanto. That’s the name Thrawn wanted me to remember. Said he may try to contact us! Thrawn said he was a friend!”

“Whoa, slow down, kid,” Kanan said. There’s the Ezra Kanan knew, talking faster than was nearly possible to comprehend. “Eli Vanto?”

“Yes, Eli Vanto. It was one of the last things Thrawn said. He sounds important. A friend.”

“Well, we should tell someone in charge. Maybe we can figure out who that is,” Kanan said, getting up. He offered his hand to Ezra. “What do you say we go find Senator Mon Mothma.”

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A sense of touch returned first.

_Darkness— Warmth— Comfort—_

_Ch’itkashn. Veo. G’evoti._

Thrawn realized he wasn’t cold anymore as he became aware of the soft surface upon which he lay. _He was comfortable._

_Swirlings in the Force— A small shift to awareness— A bell that tolled—_

_Open. Your. Eyes._

Sound came next with clicks and whooshes of a ventilator, followed by reverberations of soft footfalls in the distance. A sense of space blossomed. Where was he? Thrawn needed to _see._

_A simple melody— Tranquility— Rest— A rising steam—_

Strong brows furrowed with a fight to emerge from an ocean of darkness. Thrawn’s eyelids were so heavy.

_“Tis’mi...?” “Daddy...?”_
Crimson orbs fluttered open.

Thrawn lay still, assessing the space around him with a warrior’s instinct. Don’t show awareness until you yourself are aware. He was slightly inclined in a cushioned bed and found himself to be in what appeared to be a private room of a medcenter, though obviously not Imperial. The materials were too natural. Actually, perhaps it wasn’t quite a room, but merely a private space of a larger segment. Two large curtains bordered him on either side and stretched toward a wall of serrated stone that stood directly across from him. Comparable to the pyramid structure he saw...

Flashes of memory.

A Lasat looking down, nervous… Garazeb Orrelios… Darkness…

Light… Unfamiliar faces… Fear… “Do you recognize who I am?” … Moon mother… Mon Mothma… “You’re welcome here” …

It was quiet. Thrawn was alone.

Heavy blankets stretching up to his chest weighted him down, his arms resting atop at his sides. The Rebellion left him unbound. Curious. Gauze and IV lines coiled over his right arm. His nervous system was perhaps sluggish to sync with his mind as he wasn’t sure if he could properly feel the limb. A loose and soft gray tunic adorned his torso, replacing the Imperial uniform of a grand admiral, and wires weaved down underneath the fabric. Sticky sensors secured to his chest there, and they stretched and pulled with each rise and fall of his chest.

Lifting his left hand, he scanned it as he held it before his face, perhaps oddly curious at his ability to do so. He wiggled the cerulean fingers. They were like the sapphire wings of morning cascading through the earliest stretches of a new horizon, graceful and free, shifting with the rising canvas of sky around them, the sun its masterful conductor. The first light illuminating a new path. Thrawn slowly turned his hand over and tested his grip. He held his fist tight as his mind flashed, fingernails digging into the palm.

Memory flashed to a haunted mind.

Thrawn struggled on the ground. Echoes of battle. Rukh held his eyes. Thrawn balled his quivering hand into a fist. “Ch’tra!” …

Thrawn released the grip. He straightened his fingers and froze them there. His hand was steady; it didn’t shake. He averted his awakening gaze, scanning the far corners of the room. Crimson eyes glistened and narrowed to find them empty. Alone.

Thrawn instinctively wanted to take a breath, but found the ventilator to be keeping his breath stable. His awakening mind found his mouth to be free though. He moved his jaw side to side and brought his hand to his mouth. Fingers ran over dry lips to discover the cumbersome breathing tube to be gone.

Exploring more of his face, fingers found a small tube secured with tape to his cheek that curved
directly up into his nose. Oh goodness, he wished he had remained unaware of that... That was strange feeling.

He lowered his hand to his neck, and explored what felt like a new breathing tube, secured to his throat there with a plastic contraption that stretched all the way around. They must have operated on him, Thrawn realized. He lowered his hand to rest on his chest as he blinked slowly, centering himself.

A grimace flashed to his face as he carefully rotated his head to the side with sore muscles. Sluggish eyes followed tubing that led to machines controlled by a medical console. There, just out of arms reach resting on a side table, was his heirloom bracelet. His daughter’s echo. Relief that Thrawn was unaware he could have traveled through him like a wave. Hera had perhaps placed it there. Perhaps a gentle reminder of a promise.

Thrawn carefully rotated his head straight again and leaned back. It was quiet. He scanned his surroundings again and, still, found no one to be nearby. If this was how they treated captured enemy combatants, the Rebellion surely was not ready for open war. They had left him alone, and Thrawn was a warrior. A warrior with a mission. Though maybe that wasn’t how they viewed him. Still, Thrawn needed to know what was going on regardless of his status among them. His people were reliant upon him, and he needed to continue his path.

Thrawn watched his left hand passively rise and fall on top of his chest. He curled his fingers over his grey tunic and felt the sensors monitoring his vital signs underneath. Brows furrowed, and he rolled his crimson eyes as he realized what he was going to do. This was going to hurt.

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Doctor Harter Kalonia held a datapad in front of two nurses and a medical droid. A squadron of A-wings had come into base with casualties, and they were reviewing vitals of the injured when the alert sounded over her commlink. A harsh trill startled the group, and Kalonia fumbled to silence the device as she pulled up the notification on her datapad.

Thrawn was crashing, his vitals flatlining. Her heart dropped. “You three with me!”

They ran to the isolated and secured part of the medcenter. The Alliance trooper guarding the area understood to let them pass, as the alarms could be heard echoing from beyond.

It didn’t make sense to Kalonia. She had just checked Thrawn’s vitals, and he was improving at an incredible rate considering what the Empire put him through.

With a mixture of panic and adrenaline, Kalonia whipped aside the curtain and slid to a stop. Her brain couldn’t reconcile the sudden absurdity. She found Thrawn laying there awake with a handful of wires with his glowing crimson gaze upon her. Panic should have rippled up her spine, but the stern demeanor of an irritated medical doctor surfaced within her.

“All right?” Kalonia said, aggravated.

She shook her head as Thrawn indicated with the sensors in his hand. He almost looked innocent. Almost. Stubbornness must be a common thread among military personnel. Of warriors. None of them were good patients, and she suspected Thrawn wasn’t going to be any different.
“The first thing I’ll point out to you is your right hand,” Kalonia said as she nearly hovered over Thrawn at his bedside. She held a datapad and indicated to his bandaged arm with a stylus. “Attached to the IV lines there is a call button.”

Thrawn winced slightly with the rotation of his right arm, as the limb was tender to move. There, along the side of his hand near the pinky was a call button. He looked up and found her gaze again. “Please use that next time,” she said pointedly. She turned her attention to the datapad.

Another medical technician was verifying the accuracy of the replaced sensors that Thrawn had ripped off his chest while a medical droid stood idle by the far wall.

Thrawn began to study Doctor Kalonia, noticing her wary stance and small bursts of frustration as she tapped the stylus upon the datapad in her hands, but his observations were interrupted by approaching noise of heavy footfalls and breathing. Thrawn averted his gaze and saw the heat signature of someone running toward them from beyond the curtain.

Kallus threw the curtains aside with wild eyes. “I got the alert,” Kallus said, trying to catch his breath. “I was across base.”

“Operative Kallus, welcome. The alert was indeed false, as you can see,” Kalonia said, indicating to an awake Thrawn. “Our Grand Admiral here decided to pull sensors off of himself rather than use the technologically more proficient means of pressing his call button.”

Thrawn rose an eyebrow and blinked slowly as if acknowledging the blunt description of his deed.

“I see,” Kallus said, smirking slightly to Kalonia’s annoyance, as he caught his breath. He placed his hands on his hips and nodded as he held Thrawn’s gaze. “Good to see you awake.”

“You’ve made considerable improvements,” Kalonia said to Thrawn. She scrolled over her datapad, perhaps enthralled with the data. “I’ll admit we’ve never treated a Chiss before, but we encountered little side effects beyond what we could handle. And nothing too far beyond expectation of human physiology. A blood transfusion may even be viable between the two species oddly enough, but I digress.” She squinted as she swiped over the datapad and took a deep breath. “All traces of skirtopanol and lotiramine are nearly absent from your system. You’re at a threshold where I feel comfortable asking…” She looked up to Thrawn. “You ready to speak? Breathe on your own?”

Thrawn’s eyes narrowed. She seemed insistent at his ability to do so, and he needed to talk. Thrawn carefully nodded an affirmative.

“Okay good; I must admit I’m under orders by General Draven to get you speaking as quickly as possible anyway, but I’ll never do something my patients aren’t ready for.” She looked over her shoulder. “Lieutenant increase his oxygen count over the next minute please.” Kalonia plopped her tablet down on the bed next to Thrawn’s thigh. She leaned in closer, holding Thrawn’s gaze, studying his reactions.

“Our medical droids were able to identify the unique musculature of your vocal cords and repair the damage there. Your voice will be hoarse, but structurally it’s alright to speak.” Kalonia indicated to the tube and showed Thrawn a small plastoid cap. “I’ll place this on top, and then you’ll be able to speak. It’ll require considerably more effort and you’ll hear suction when you breathe, but that’s normal. I’ll be here to reconnect it if anything isn’t right.”

Kalonia stopped and considered Thrawn’s gaze, making sure he understood. “Okay?”
Thrawn casually rose a few fingers on his left hand and nodded as he slowly blinked an affirmative.

“Oh-two levels are adequate for the transfer, Doctor,” the technician said.

Kallus crossed his arms. This all sounded too complicated, and it was making him nervous. He watched Thrawn with nervous eyes.

“Alright, here we go,” Kalonia said. With practiced hands, she quickly lifted the oxygen tube from the conduit leading into his throat and placed the cap in its place. “Go ahead, breathe for us.”

With labored lungs, Thrawn of his own volition, took his first breath in days. He closed his eyes as he concentrated. It was tough as he sought a natural rhythm of breathing, but it was a good feeling. Because of the nature of the tube in his throat, a phlegmy and labored hiss emitted with every inhale, but Thrawn was free. A hand pressed upon his shoulder, and Thrawn found Doctor Kalonia when he fluttered open his eyes.

“Keep your eyes open for me,” Kalonia said, as she shined a light to his pupils. She glanced over her shoulder to the medical technician. “Oh-two levels?”

“Steady for the moment.”

“How…” Thrawn immediately clinched his eyes shut. His voice was small and hoarse.

“Remember, the trach-tube requires more effort,” Kalonia said.

Thrawn kept his eyes closed as he settled himself with the odd feeling. His throat felt so dry yet numb at the same time as medicine still flowed through him. He furrowed his brow before opening shining crimson orbs again.

“How long. Has it been?” Thrawn asked through rasping breath.

“About two standard cycles since bringing you to base,” Kallus said, walking closer to Thrawn’s bedside, opposite Kalonia. Thrawn’s gaze was sharp despite the exhaustion. It was like he was giving a report to his Grand Admiral again. He felt the aura of the time he served as Agent Kallus of the Empire. Kallus grimaced at the feeling. “Almost three if you count travel-time,” Kallus said with a hush.

Thrawn’s eyes widened. Nearly three days?

Kalonia grabbed the tablet. “It’s prudent that we establish a baseline, now that you’re able to speak. Please state your name and rank duties for my records.”

Thrawn shifted a questioning gaze to Kalonia and met her piercingly certain observation with a grand admiral’s wit. He knew what answer she expected; this was merely a doctor’s checklist. An evaluation of memory and competence.

Kallus stilled as he saw Thrawn’s eyes lose focus.

“My name…,” Thrawn began, his soft voice trailing off as he turned straight and rasped contemplative breaths. He seemed to entrench himself into the depths of his mind. Kallus couldn’t help but shudder slightly at the sound of his strained breathing.

“Yes, please. Let’s begin with your name,” Kalonia said, her tone perhaps gentle as she watched him closely.
Kallus suddenly feared that the Empire’s mixture of skirtopanol and lotiramine had affected Thrawn entirely too much. Could he not even recall his name?

But though he was beyond naturally tired, Thrawn’s mind was completely present. Thrawn’s mind was burdened, yet he had slowly decided to reveal part of that burden.

Yes, Thrawn knew what answer they all expected… Though Chiss did not do what was expected…

“My name…,” Thrawn began slowly and regally again between scratchy breath. “Is Mitth’raw’nuruodo…”

"O… okay, how do you-" Kalonia began as she started to edit her datapad.

“And I am a Commander… of the Expansionary Defense Fleet…” Thrawn moved his piercing crimson gaze between Kallus and Kalonia, observing their surprise between breaths. “Servant of the Chiss Ascendancy…” Kallus’ eyes had gone wide while Kalonia stood stunned, her frustration replaced. “My mission set forth by the Aristocra remains at hand. As a representative of my people, I request an audience with Senator Mon Mothma.”
A Failure to Listen

Chapter Summary

“Old sins cast long shadows.” —Yoda

“What this war represents is a failure to listen.” —Padmé Amidala

“My flesh and bone
This part of me
The seeds I’ve sewn”

“The burden is ours
To penance, we hew”

“I am a Commander of the Expansionary Defense Fleet… Servant of the Chiss Ascendancy… My mission set forth by the Aristocra remains at hand. As a representative of my people, I request an audience with Senator Mon Mothma.”

Mon Mothma sat quietly at her desk, reviewing reports from distant rebellion cells on a tablet when her temporary solace was interrupted. General Draven rushed through her office door with heavy feet.

“He’s awake and requesting for you,” Draven said, stopping nearly breathless before her desk.

Usually if she were interrupted like this, something terrible had just happened. Draven’s eyes were urgent. Did he tear his way across base to reach her in-person instead of over comm? Why not use a commlink?

“What—?” Mon Mothma began.

“Thrawn. Grand Admiral Thrawn; he’s awake and talking.” Draven pointed. “And asking for you.”

A rush of cold engulfed Mon Mothma’s form. So that’s why he came in-person… Mentioning Thrawn was too sensitive even over Rebellion frequencies. After all, Saw Guerrera had proven himself able to infiltrate and bypass certain transmissions, and the Rebel Alliance didn’t want even the Partisans to know of Thrawn’s presence among them. At least not until they themselves knew what to do with the Chiss Imperial.

Mon Mothma straightened in her seat and briefly allowed panicked thoughts and daunting realizations to race through her mind. But only for a moment. She carried an aura of regality when she met her general’s gaze with her fiery sapphire eyes.

“Take me to him.”
The art of perspective is often not achieved until the revelation of the fragility of one’s place in the galaxy. Vast and filled with promise it can appear, but so easily turned dark and formless, the galaxy truly can become.

Dangerous, it is. One must be careful in all things.

The Chiss Ascendancy knows this well.

That to which one is loyal does not always endorse that to which one finds paramount. One can be separate from the other, though inner turmoil persists upon the eternal scales of balance. The recognition of these truths sets one apart.

The small sectioned room of the medical bay was hushed except for Thrawn’s softly rasped breathing and mellow beeps from the machines monitoring him. His eyes were closed, and an old 2-1B medical droid that had surely seen better days managed a medical console nearby. The droid manipulated the displays and had adjusted Thrawn’s IV mixture a few times already since Kallus had been in the room. Thrawn’s Chiss physiology, while close to that of humans and other select bi-pedaled species, reacted unexpectedly at times.

Doctor Kalonia stood nearby with her arms crossed, watching over everything as the room’s custodian. It was her domain, and she its guardian. Kallus caught the doctor’s gaze from across the room, and the former Imperial had to suppress a shiver as he felt Kalonia also assess him with that same calculation so often reserved for Thrawn lately. He knew that look.

Kalonia had helped Kallus recover in both mind and body since his liberty from the Empire. The physical wounds had healed nicely, but Kalonia knew more than most about the wounds still plaguing Kallus’ mind, some perhaps even the result of Thrawn himself.

Imperial programming represented a steep mountain meant to be overcome; the smallest habits of muscle memory so deeply engrained that perhaps they would always be a part of him. But the good doctor was no doubt worried about how Kallus was handling seeing and interacting with his former commander again. She didn’t need to worry about him though. He was fine.

But the brief sparkle behind Kalonia’s eyes conveyed otherwise, and Kallus had to look away. Kalonia’s gaze was like that of a fierce ebon hawk, ready to strike with her fierce talons.

Kallus instead set his mind upon his former commander. He examined Thrawn’s form with a heavy sigh while fighting memories of regret and old sins committed in the name of the Empire as he did so. But was Thrawn different?

Doubt.

The datachip and Thrawn’s message had thrown doubt upon deeply rooted convictions. Had the Chiss always possessed ulterior motives while in service to the Empire? Hidden loyalties? There were rumors about the Emperor’s abilities though.

Fear.

Could the Emperor even be kept in the dark about such motives? Was this whole situation a well-
orchestrated trap, meant to destroy the Rebellion once and for all by finding their base at Yavin IV?

And had Kallus unknowingly delivered the architect of that destruction?

Thrawn’s crimson eyes were hidden below furrowed brows and a rigid face, perhaps attempting to acclimate to the reality of the new breathing tube at his throat. Though weakened to such a state, Kallus still saw an echo of his grand admiral resting in that soft medical bed. The nearly white medcenter gown Thrawn wore was an eerie reminder of the white uniform reserved for the twelve Grand Admirals of the Empire. The gown merely lacked gold bars on the shoulders and Thrawn’s rank plaque emblazoned on his chest.

Thrawn was seemingly resting, but Kallus still knew his former commander well enough. Kallus gazed over the length of wires and tubing connecting the Chiss to machines and sensors. A small feeding tube snaked its way along the side of Thrawn’s cheek from a nostril, his body finally receiving precious nourishment. But that breathing... Thrawn sounded as if merely breathing was a laborious process. The fingers on his left hand atop his chest flinched at times during small intakes of breath. Ribs were no doubt bruised from Rex tending to him on the Ghost.

Kallus shook his head with another deep breath. Thrawn had been through a lot...

Typically Doctor Kalonia would have allowed more time for natural healing to have taken place around a patient’s throat, but General Draven was insistent on getting Thrawn speaking as soon as possible. After all, Thrawn was technically an Imperial prisoner of war here among the Rebellion.

Despite Thrawn’s apparently unique circumstances, General Draven needed information for Alliance Intelligence, and Thrawn was the only person who could verify and expound upon the corrupted datachip. So, providing that it could be done safely, Mon Mothma had reluctantly approved of the process. Kallus still was apprehensive about it, struggling with the morality of putting anyone through that pain unnecessarily. He assumed Doctor Kalonia didn’t like it either by the look on her face every time she examined Thrawn’s vitals.

More than anyone though, Kallus recognized that Thrawn was uncomfortable and fighting against it due to his history of Imperial service with the Grand Admiral.

It was an odd sight for Kallus, juxtaposing the sharpened and vivid leader commanding from the bridge of a Star Destroyer with what he saw now. Kallus remembered the time he and Lieutenant Lyste were called to Thrawn’s office aboard the ISD Chimaera. Thrawn had been sparring with Sentinel Droids in what appeared to be a regular exercise routine, and, in the quick volleys, Kallus had witnessed Thrawn stop powerful metallic punches with his own hands. The Chiss had flowed along with battle’s current as if he was always meant to be there, displaying the rare strength and resiliency of a seasoned Chiss warrior.

Thrawn looked so small now, almost fragile in the medical bed. An IV coiled around Thrawn’s maimed right arm that once was strong enough to stop the pommeled strike of Sentinel Droids. Yet Kallus still recognized that same strength and resilience. Thrawn merely focused it internally, mentally resisting whatever pain pelted the confines of his body and mind.

The root of strength was never physical.

Kallus startled as he felt a breath flow over his shoulder and found a concerned Zeb taking a place next to him.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you,” Zeb said quietly. “I promised Ezra I’d be here if he woke while they were gone.”
Right... Hera, Ezra, Kanan and Chopper were on a supply mission on the _Ghost_ and not expected to return for a few more hours. Kallus gave a small smile and hummed. Zeb was a good person, and Kallus admired his capacity for empathy.

“How uh… how’s he doing?” Zeb asked. His voice was hesitant.

“How well, all things considered,” Kallus said.

Kallus turned back to find Thrawn watching them through tired eyes. Though not to their former spark, the crimson glow behind him had improved. Kallus would never forget how dim those eyes looked on the _ISD Devastator_. An odd mixture of relief and startled dread flowed through Kallus at his former commander’s attention. Thrawn’s face was soft though and unreadable, but, as measured breaths labored through the small tube protruding like a plastoid collar around his bruised throat, there seemed to be an oddly humble yet strengthened submission reflecting in those crimson depths. Despite his condition among the Rebellion, Kallus discerned a certain level of thankfulness from his former commander.

But Thrawn flinched, as his crimson eyes narrowed.

With a sharp focus perhaps meant for battle's edge, Thrawn’s gaze flicked over Kallus’ shoulder, tracking movement.

_Burning crimson eyes… Painful scorn and abrasive conviction reflects from them…_

_Her voice echoes with contempt…_

“You were sent to the Empire to learn about it…” A concerned angst yet shimmers behind her scarlet light… “…not join it.” …

“I took advantage of the tactical situation presented to me.” …

General Draven emerged through the medcenter curtain to find crimson eyes already target-locked upon him. The general held the curtain open for Mon Mothma and stiffened instantly.

Draven’s face was rigid, and the general’s posture shifted perhaps to an instinctual combat-readiness. Tension surged through the room like a Krayt Dragon’s shrill call.

Despite Thrawn’s delicate reality, he matched the rival military commander’s gaze with sharp crimson orbs. They both became entangled in a silent tribunal of scrutiny, Draven declaring his suspicion and bitter anger for the Chiss Imperial, Thrawn countering the Rebel General’s piercing challenge with an irradiated and unwavering conviction of his own.

“Should we… give you all the room?” Kallus hesitated.

“No Captain, you and Captain Orrelios may stay,” Mon Mothma said, her voice regal beyond the tension. As she entered, she commanded the room with measured steps, her white tunic flowing gracefully around her. “I in fact would prefer it, given each of your unique histories with this entire situation.”
Kallus nodded, yet stepped back to give them space. Zeb followed to the edge of the room, but Doctor Kalonia didn’t care about whatever magnetism oscillated among the group. *This was the ebon hawk’s domain…*

“We need to make something clear straight away,” Kalonia said, holding her position next to the medical consoles and the 2-1B droid. Like a hot coil ready to spring, General Draven averted his attention away from Thrawn and considered the doctor. She addressed everyone, but her attention was primarily set upon Draven. “He’s my patient, and his health, my responsibility. If I give the word, this…” She flung her hand before her. “…*conversation* is over. Are we clear?”

“Understood Doctor Kalonia,” Mon Mothma said, answering on behalf of her general with peace flowing from her voice. This earned a pointed glance from General Draven, but Mon Mothma blinked away his swath of bitterness with a tight smile and turned toward their unlikely guest.

A swath of arguments swam behind his eyes, but Draven eventually nodded, although clearly out of deference the Senator. Doctor Kalonia felt the urge to make a snarky remark… *don’t strain your neck…,* but she kept it to herself.

Mon Mothma stood at Thrawn’s bedside, her demeanor guarded but eyes holding a soft kindness as she assessed him. Thrawn shifted his head with a rougher hiss than usual and met her eyes with a crimson radiance that, despite the layer of exhaustion and masked pain, conveyed a decorum of respect meant for an equal. As melodious beeps and whooshes from medical equipment filled the silence around them, the two leaders considered each other. Unspoken acknowledgments and assessments passed between them.

Thrawn rasped softly through calmly measured breaths while Mon Mothma gathered her thoughts. She clasped her hands in front of her, and her mind ordered itself into a senator’s decorum.

Thrawn waited patiently.

*Her eyes convey a careful thoughtfulness, perhaps concern. A hope, surely. A willingness to listen, perhaps, but there is a hesitation behind her sapphire eyes. Perhaps fear, but determination stretches beyond it.*

“Grand Admiral Thrawn,” Mon Mothma began slowly. *Her voice is slow and methodical, purposeful.* “Leader of the Empire’s Seventh Fleet, commander of the *Imperial Star Destroyer Chimaera…*” A slight shift and narrowing of her eyes. “Yet, I’m told you’ve given another name with a rank of *Commander,* along with allegiances toward another authority, no doubt holding additional accolades. How do you wish to be addressed?”

A small smile stretched on Thrawn’s lips. “You are still addressed as *Senator,* are you not?” Thrawn asked softly. *Her posture stiffens, perhaps apprehensive. A slight increase of heat appears upon her cheeks.*

Thrawn scrunched the fingers of his hand atop his chest with a particularly difficult breath through the apparatus at his throat. Though talking clearly brought him discomfort, his voice still managed to hold a smooth edge. “You remain loyal to Chandrila, as their representative despite your… *exile,* here among the Rebellion.”

“Yes,” she offered. Mon Mothma mirrored Thrawn’s slight smile, but her voice quieted into a canvas of somber tranquility. “Though the greater conflict strains that calling, requiring sacrifice.”

“I understand,” Thrawn said, blinking slowly. His eyes unfocused for the briefest moment, a new sheen in his crimson eyes once meeting Mon Mothma's watchful gaze again. “Mitth’raw’nuruodo is
my full Chiss name, and commander, the last rank held as servant to the Chiss Expansionary Defense Fleet… before leaving for the Empire…” A shaky pause for breath. “I would still answer to admiral of course, as you do to senator, but simply calling me by my core name of Thrawn is adequate and will perhaps alleviate confusion.”

“Confusion…,” Draven huffed with challenge, approaching the foot of Thrawn’s medical bed. Narrowed crimson eyes found General Draven. Draven’s eyes express distrust. Perhaps resentment and hostility. A natural guardian, his tone speaks challenge. “As well as alleviating partiality and prejudice promoted from past action as an associate of the Empire?”

“Actions, all of which held purpose,” Thrawn said through a difficult breath.

Mon Mothma outstretched her hand and caught Draven’s passioned gaze, stopping him from responding further with only a glance. Now wasn’t the time for that sort of debate. It would surely come later in an official capacity, and once Thrawn returned to health. Thrawn steadied himself underneath heavy lids, and his crimson eyes appeared more tired once they opened again. More dim. Thrawn didn’t release his fingers this time after a harsh breath, keeping them scrunched into a soft fist atop his chest.

“Perhaps I yet hold ceremonious rank in Imperial public narrative,” Thrawn said quietly, catching Mon Mothma’s sapphire gaze again. “However, it is entirely more likely, under clandestine arrangements, the Empire has a sort of bounty upon me should it be discovered I yet live. Those in power surely are now aware of my transgression against them.”

“Quite likely,” Mon Mothma said with a breath. She clasped her hands in front of her again, a timid smirk forming at her lips. She too had a bounty upon her after her impassioned speech, calling for rebellion. “We appear to have something in common then, Thrawn.”

Thrawn hummed. “Perhaps more than you realize…” A slow, rasping breath. “...thank you for seeing me.”

“There’s much to discuss, of course, but that will come in time. Your return to health is priority,” Mon Mothma said.

“A noble sentiment and an appreciated one, Senator, but time is a commodity we do not have. I must request an exemption to transmit a message.”

“Do you think us mad?” Draven huffed.

“My people must know I-”

“Absolutely not,” Draven pressed. Kallus and Zeb held their breath against the sudden tension, keeping their silence at the edge of the room. Mon Mothma looked uncomfortably stiff but allowed her general’s line of contention, perhaps sympathetic to Draven’s concern as one of her military leaders.

“You think I would allow an enemy combatant access to our communications equipment? Especially one as highly ranked as yourself?” Draven’s eyes were as potent as the strongest Savareen brandy, and his voice became venomous. “You may claim allegiance to your Chiss fleet when its convenience suits you, Grand Admiral Thrawn, but I still see an Imperial officer in front of me, fallen from grace and into the hands of his enemy.”

Thrawn’s crimson eyes radiated an aura of disciplined ire as his breath increased. “And what should I see before me, General Draven?”
An enemy? …

“An Alliance General willing to do whatever necessary to protect this base and those within.”

A shaky series of breaths came from Thrawn as he considered General Draven. The ire radiating from his crimson eyes diminished toward that of a softer edge. Perhaps Thrawn saw a bit of himself in the general. After all, would not Thrawn do the same were roles reversed? He must listen…

“My encryptions would prevent any trace you fear back to Yavin Four,” Thrawn said with a slow rasp.

Everyone stilled as if an invisible magnetic charge had suddenly pulsed through the room at Thrawn’s words. Kallus flinched with a small gasp, caused Zeb to glance wide-eyed at the former Imperial, turned Fulcrum Agent.

Mon Mothma raised her chin with startled eyes but maintained a measured consideration upon Thrawn. “How do you-”

“Who is Eli Vanto?” Draven interrupted.

Crimson eyes flinched narrow, and Thrawn took his time with a rasped breath. Draven's posture was even more stiff if that were possible, his eyes sharpened like a battle pike, ready to strike a clear and present threat. Thrawn didn't respond.

“Would he be the recipient of your message?” Draven pressed. He was no doubt glad to steer the conversation away from the subject of their location. No one outside the Rebellion should have knowledge of their presence on Yavin IV…

Thrawn’s voice returned calculated and smooth despite his breathing. “He would be among those decrypting it, yes,” Thrawn said.

Draven's brow furrowed with the wit of an Alliance Intelligence General who had seen too much and trusted too little. “For those in the room who do not know, I will inform of Eli Vanto,” Draven said pointedly. Thrawn’s face went rigid.

“His homeworld, Lysatra, a planet in Wild Space,” Draven continued. “He comes from a three-generation family of cargo shippers and joined the Empire on an academy track toward supply officer, no doubt with hopes of continuing the family legacy…” He motioned toward Thrawn, with whom his fiery gaze had not yet faltered. “…until he met you… He was removed from such track and spent most of his career by your side as supposed translator and aid.”

“You appear to know of him well…,” Thrawn said, a warning at the edge of his strained voice.

“As do you… Eli Vanto holds the rank of Commander in the Imperial Navy, now listed as missing in action,” Draven challenged.

“Officially, yes,” Thrawn said quietly.

“Unofficially?” Draven asked.

“I extracted him. He serves the Chiss Ascendancy now.”

Kallus narrowed his eyes. Extracted him?
But Draven was unyielding. “Trust is not a fickle thing, Grand Admiral Thrawn. I know the art of subterfuge. How shallow words can be… how subtle threats can be…”

“As do I, General Draven,” Thrawn answered with suctioned breath. “Yet you must listen and trust all the same. My message must be sent and the status of my homew-”

“Your request is denied,” Draven huffed, pointing with a suddenness that made Kallus flinch, ready to pull the General away from Thrawn.

“General…,” Mon Mothma said, raising her hand to him.

“I will not allow that kind of risk to be introduced to this facility,” Draven said.

Thrawn's voice was weakening. “I need to verify the Chiss Ascendancy also received my data-”

“I don’t give a flying pelikki about your reasons, Grand Admiral,” Draven began. “Especially after your supposed knowledge-”

“Peace. General Draven…,” Mon Mothma insisted.

Silence filled the medical room except for Thrawn’s rasped and suctioned breaths. His homeworld… Thrawn’s crimson eyes scrunched closed with a flutter, and a small beep sounded from where Doctor Kalonia stood.

Mon Mothma looked over her shoulder to Doctor Kalonia at the noise, and Kalonia shook her head. “His oh-two levels are dropping. He needs to rest soon.” Kalonia's gaze shifted over to Thrawn’s form. “Long and deep breaths Thrawn.”

Mon Mothma turned back to Thrawn and sighed heavily at the sight of him. Draven saw an Imperial Officer who was hell-bent on delivering the will of the Emperor, spreading chaos and an iron rule of the Empire throughout the galaxy, where Mon Mothma saw something entirely different. Perhaps on the surface, Draven was correct, as that was the façade Thrawn upheld as a necessary sheen, but, like Thrawn mentioned earlier, his actions from within the Imperial war machine moved toward a greater purpose.

Mon Mothma saw a man stuck between worlds, surrounded by storms of an orderly yet deceptive chaos in which winds of providence and balance flowed toward a singular point. A point upon which Mon Mothma was beginning to realize inside her capacity for faith that Thrawn had once stood as a bulwark against an evil greater than the known universe apparently could imagine. And in addition, she thought sadly, she also saw a man struggling to breathe, injured and damaged so much so that perhaps he no longer knew even the sum of his own character.

A loyalty of mixed nature could become corrosive over time. Mon Mothma wanted to understand.

“How long have you known?” Mon Mothma asked, placing a hand upon Thrawn’s shoulder. Thrawn’s eyes opened at the gentle touch and pulsed as he found focus upon Mon Mothma’s face. He looked puzzled. “About Yavin,” she added.

Draven huffed and paced away from the bed. He had tried to prevent that confirmation from happening. This was a major security breach, and Draven knew it had to be dealt with…

“I’ve known for quite a while,” Thrawn said.

“Before Atollon?” Kallus asked from across the room, earning a glance from Draven as the general turned to pace. Thrawn looked almost proud as he shifted to consider Kallus a moment.
An echo of memory.

“By the light of Lothal’s moons.” … a jammer in Thrawn’s hand... the Fulcrum symbol on its display...

A scuffle... the jammer dropped... shattered... the warning released...

“In doing so, you’ve given me the last piece of the puzzle.” ...

The signal triangulated... Atollon...

“You have the heart of a Rebel.” ...

“He commands only the loyalty of my actions, not the loyalty of my heart and mind.” ...

Kallus was plagued by the memory, though for a different reason ever since he realized Thrawn had known the code-phrase.

“Yes…” Thrawn’s voice was faint. “…before Atollon.”

Machines monitoring Thrawn’s vital signs sounded a small warning again, and Thrawn eyelids started to become visibly heavy over eyes of dimmed scarlet. Doctor Kalonia’s reaction was immediate.

“I must stop this now, Senator Mon Mothma and General Draven,” Doctor Kalonia said as she moved to Thrawn’s bedside. Mon Mothma stepped aside as Kalonia reached over Thrawn and released tubing from a mechanical ventilator. “This has gone on long enough.”

“No… wait,” Thrawn rasped weakly. He still had that same stubbornness Kalonia found common among warriors who didn’t know how to stop fighting.

“I need to stabilize you, Thrawn,” Kalonia said, as she pulled tubing over toward Thrawn’s throat. “That means reconnecting you to the ventilator.”

But Thrawn swiped a shaky left hand up and grabbed Kalonia’s wrist, stopping her motion. “Wait, please,” Thrawn rasped.

“Thrawn, your oh-two levels are dangerously low,” Kalonia insisted. She felt the shakes tremble in waves over his hand as he held on to her, but he was strong enough to stop her, briefly at least until the adrenaline wore off.

Thrawn’s breathing was ragged as his dim eyes caught Mon Mothma’s concerned orbs of sapphire. “My message… I- must…”

“We will discuss it,” General Draven said, moving to stand beside Mon Mothma. Was there a hint of concern beyond the anger? “You need your health to send such a message though, yes?”

“Let’s have you healed first,” Mon Mothma said, glancing to General Draven. “Then we’ll discuss this further, I give you my word.”

Thrawn’s sight began to darken as he struggled to maintain eye contact. Time became sluggish, and
he became vaguely aware of a consistent stream of warning beeps.

*Swirlings of the Force*...

“Thrawn?” Thrawn found the voice came from Doctor Kalonia hovering above, but his mind was fleeting despite his appeal for control.

*An unwilling flash of memory*...

Kalonia recognized the mental shift. His breaths were horribly labored now, sounding thready as Thrawn’s chest heaved with each suction of air.

*There was nothing Thrawn could do... Vader was too powerful*...

He squeezed feebly at Kalonia’s wrist one last time, trying not to let it fall. “Release my wrist,” Kalonia said, a noticeable shift toward gentle concern. She would make a note to revisit this once he was physically healthy enough to discuss it. “Allow me to help you, okay?”

*He thought of his people*...

More defiant breaths and pulses of crimson orbs attempting to focus, Kalonia waited as Thrawn finally lessened his grip and allowed his hand to fall back to his chest.

*He let go*...

Doctor Kalonia quickly attached the mechanical ventilator, stripping him of speech but gracing him with precious oxygen in doing so. Thrawn wasn’t quite ready though, and his eyes widened as the ventilator began to breathe for him. On instinct, he moved to raise his left hand toward the disturbance, but Kalonia pushed his hand back down to his chest.

“Two-one-bee, push a sedative. Standard dosage,” Kalonia said to the medical droid. She tapped controls with her other hand to decline the medical bed to a flat position.

As the medical bed lowered, Thrawn’s fleeting gaze saw a transparent liquid traveling along his IV toward his right arm. A sudden wash of lethargy overcame him, and the last he was able to perceive before the black abyss of unconsciousness was the blurry face of Doctor Kalonia and the faint squeeze of her hand upon his own.

“You’re safe. Rest now,” Kalonia said as she squeezed his now stilled hand. Thrawn’s unseeing eyes fluttered closed, and Thrawn finally fell into a rest, beginning the process anew of healing his weary mind and body.

Kalonia straightened with a sigh and moved to walk around to the other side of the medical bed. “Now if you would allow me to tend to my patient,” Kalonia said crisply as she passed by the onlooking group, effectively telling them all to get the hell out in diplomatic doctor’s terminology.

“We should talk in my office,” Draven said to Mon Mothma, as he turned to exit.

“Of course, General,” Mon Mothma said quietly.

“If you would join us once you’re done here please, Doctor,” Draven continued. Kalonia hummed an annoyed acknowledgment as he whipped the curtain open and walked through.

Kalonia looked up from her datapad at the loud whoosh of fabric, and watched General Draven carry his swath of bitterness and leadership’s weight out of the medical bay. Mon Mothma caught
Kalonia’s gaze and nodded in thanks before following in the general’s wake.

“All that time…,” Kallus whispered as Zeb followed him into the stone hallway of the medical bay. “He could have come here.”

“Hey,” Zeb said, coming to a stop. Kallus seemed as if he were trapped in a web of thoughts from which help was needed crawl free. Zeb grabbed Kallus’ shoulders and leaned the former Imperial against the wall of ancient stone. “What do you mean?” Zeb asked gently, pulling Kallus out of his stupor.

Kallus huffed an incredulous laugh, meeting the Lasat's eyes. “He knew about this place, Zeb. Yavin. Before Atollon,” Kallus said.

“I'm not sure I follow. I'm not sure I want to follow,” Zeb said with a nervous laugh.

Kallus averted his eyes a moment, making sure their conversation was private. He shook his head. “If Thrawn had wanted to, he could have decimated the Rebellion a long time ago. He didn’t need to find out about Atollon. He didn’t need me. Zeb… he knew about Yavin.”

Zeb’s Lasat eyes widened. “You think he’s telling the truth?” Zeb asked.

“I think Thrawn is Fulcrum.”

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“A fallen enemy may rise again, but the reconciled one is truly vanquished.”

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