

**STAR  
WARS**<sup>TM</sup>

THRAWN  
ASCENDANCY  
BOOK II: GREATER GOOD



**TIMOTHY ZAHN**

NO. 1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR





**STAR WARS BOOKS BY TIMOTHY ZAHN**

*STAR WARS: Heir to the Empire*

*STAR WARS: Dark Force Rising*

*STAR WARS: The Last Command*

*STAR WARS: The Hand of Thrawn, Book 1: Specter of the Past*

*STAR WARS: The Hand of Thrawn, Book 2: Vision of the Future*

*STAR WARS: Survivor's Quest*

*STAR WARS: Outbound Flight*

*STAR WARS: Allegiance*

*STAR WARS: Choices of One*

*STAR WARS: Scoundrels*

*STAR WARS: Thrawn*

*STAR WARS: Thrawn: Alliances*

*STAR WARS: Thrawn: Treason*

*STAR WARS: Thrawn Ascendancy: Chaos Rising*

*STAR WARS: Thrawn Ascendancy: Greater Good*

**STAR  
WARS™**

THRAWN  
ASCENDANCY  
GREATER GOOD



Copyrighted Material

**STAR  
WARS™**



**THRAWN  
ASCENDANCY**

BOOK II:  
GREATER GOOD

**TIMOTHY ZAHN**



PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia  
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies  
whose addresses can be found at [global.penguinrandomhouse.com](http://global.penguinrandomhouse.com)



Penguin  
Random House  
UK

First published in the United States of America by Penguin Random House in 2021

First published in Great Britain by Del Rey in 2021

Published in Penguin Books, 2022

001

*Star Wars: Thrawn Ascendancy: Greater Good* is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are productions of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2021 by Lucasfilm Ltd. & ® or ™ where indicated. All rights reserved.

Excerpt from *Star Wars: Thrawn Ascendancy: Lesser Evil* by Claudia Gray copyright © 2021 by Lucasfilm Ltd. & ® or ™ where indicated. All rights reserved.

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,  
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-529-10194-2



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material

For those who recognize that “the greater good”  
is seldom good for all



# THE **STAR WARS** NOVELS TIMELINE

## THE HIGH REPUBLIC

Light of the Jedi  
The Rising Storm  
Tempest Runner  
The Fallen Star

Dooku: Jedi Lost  
Master and Apprentice

## I THE PHANTOM MENACE

## II ATTACK OF THE CLONES

Thrawn Ascendancy: Chaos Rising  
Thrawn Ascendancy: Greater Good  
Thrawn Ascendancy: Lesser Evil  
Dark Disciple: A Clone Wars Novel

## III REVENGE OF THE SITH

Catalyst: A Rogue One Novel  
Lords of the Sith  
Tarkin

## SOLO

Thrawn  
A New Dawn: A Rebels Novel  
Thrawn: Alliances  
Thrawn: Treason

## ROGUE ONE

## IV A NEW HOPE

Battlefront II: Inferno Squad  
Heir to the Jedi  
Doctor Aphra  
Battlefront: Twilight Company

## V THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

## VI RETURN OF THE JEDI

The Alphabet Squadron Trilogy  
The Aftermath Trilogy  
Last Shot

Bloodline  
Phasma  
Canto Bight

## VII THE FORCE AWAKENS

## VIII THE LAST JEDI

Resistance Reborn  
Galaxy's Edge: Black Spire

## IX THE RISE OF SKYWALKER



## DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

**SENIOR CAPTAIN THRAWN** | Mitth'raw'nuruodo—Trial-born

**ADMIRAL AR'ALANI**

**THALIAS** | Mitth'ali'astov—Trial-born

**SYNDIC PRIME THURFIAN** | Mitth'urf'ianico—blood

**MID CAPTAIN SAMAKRO** | Ufsa'mak'ro—cousin

**SENIOR CAPTAIN LAKINDA** | Xodlak'in'daro—merit adoptive

**GENERAL BA'KIF**

**CHE'RI**—sky-walker

**THE MAGYS**

**COUNCILOR LAKUVIV** | Xodlak'uvi'vil—ranking distant

**RANCHER LAKPHRO** | Xodlak'phr'ooa

**YOPONEK** | Coduyo'p'o'nekri

**QILORI OF UANDUALON**—Pathfinder navigator (non-Chiss)

**JIXTUS**

**HAPLIF**—Agbui

## CHISS ASCENDANCY

### Nine Ruling Families

UFGA	PLIKH
IRIZI	BOADIL
DASKLO	MITTH
CLARR	OBBIC
CHAF	

### Chiss Family Ranks

BLOOD	TRIAL-BORN
COUSIN	MERIT ADOPTIVE
RANKING DISTANT	

### Political Hierarchy

- PATRIARCH**—head of the family
- SPEAKER**—head of the family's delegation to the Syndicure
- SYNDIC PRIME**—head syndic
- SYNDIC**—member of the Syndicure, the main governmental body
- PATRIEL**—handles family affairs on a planetary scale
- COUNCILOR**—handles family affairs at the local level
- ARISTOCRA**—mid-level member of one of the Nine Ruling Families

### Military Ranks

SUPREME ADMIRAL	MID CAPTAIN
SUPREME GENERAL	JUNIOR CAPTAIN
FLEET ADMIRAL	SENIOR COMMANDER
SENIOR GENERAL	MID COMMANDER
ADMIRAL	JUNIOR COMMANDER
GENERAL	LIEUTENANT COMMANDER
MID ADMIRAL	LIEUTENANT
MID GENERAL	SENIOR WARRIOR
COMMODORE	MID WARRIOR
SENIOR CAPTAIN	JUNIOR WARRIOR

A long time ago, *beyond* a galaxy far, far away. . . .



**F**or thousands of years it has been an island of calm within the Chaos. It is a center of power, a model of stability, and a beacon of integrity. The Nine Ruling Families guard it from within; the Expansionary Defense Fleet guards it from without. Its neighbors are left in peace, its enemies are left in ruin. It is light and culture and glory.

It is the Chiss Ascendancy.



**STAR  
WARS™**

THRAWN  
ASCENDANCY  
GREATER GOOD



## CHAPTER ONE

---

**T**hroughout her years in the Chiss Expansionary Defense Fleet, Admiral Ar'alani had lived through more than fifty battles and smaller armed clashes. The opponents in those encounters, like the battles themselves, had varied widely. Some of them had been clever, others had been cautious, still others—particularly political appointees who had been promoted far beyond their abilities—had been painfully incompetent. The strategies and tactics employed had also varied, ranging from simple to obscure to screamingly violent. The battle results themselves had sometimes been mixed, sometimes inconclusive, often a defeat for the enemy, and—occasionally—a defeat for the Chiss.

But never in all that time had Ar'alani experienced such a mix of determination, viciousness, and utter pointlessness as in the scene now unfolding in front of her.

“Watch it, *Vigilant*—you’ve got four more coming at you from starboard-nadir.” The voice of Senior Captain Xodlak’in’daro came from the *Vigilant*’s bridge speaker, her resonant alto glacially calm as always.

“Acknowledged, *Grayshrike*,” Ar'alani called back, looking at the tactical. Four more Nikardun gunboats had indeed appeared from around the small moon, driving at full power toward the *Vigilant*. “Looks like you have a few latecomers to your party, as well,” she added.

“We’re on it, ma’am,” Lakinda said.

“Good,” Ar’alani said, studying the six missile boats that had appeared from behind the hulk of the battle cruiser she and the other two Chiss ships had hammered into rubble fifteen minutes ago. Sneaking into cover that way without being spotted had taken some ingenuity, and many commanders with that level of competence would have used their skill to exercise the better part of valor and abandon such a clearly hopeless battle.

But that wasn’t what these last pockets of Nikardun resistance were about. They were about complete self-sacrifice, throwing themselves at the Chiss warships that had rooted them from their burrows, apparently with the sole goal of taking some of the hated enemies with them.

That wasn’t going to happen. Not today. Not to Ar’alani’s force. “Thrawn, the *Graysrike* has picked up a new nest of nighthunters,” she called. “Can you offer them some assistance?”

“Certainly,” Senior Captain Mitth’raw’nuruodo replied. “Captain Lakinda, if you’ll turn thirty degrees to starboard, I believe we can draw your attackers into a crossfire.”

“Thirty degrees, acknowledged,” Lakinda said, and Ar’alani saw the *Graysrike*’s tactical display image angle away from the incoming missile boats and head toward Thrawn’s *Springhawk*. “Though with all due respect to the admiral, I’d say they’re more whisker cubs than nighthunters.”

“Agreed,” Thrawn said. “If these are the same ones we thought were caught in the battle cruiser explosion, they should be down to a single missile each.”

“Actually, our tally makes two of them completely empty,” Lakinda said. “Just along for the glory of martyrdom, I suppose.”

“Such as it is,” Ar’alani said. “I doubt anyone out there is going to be singing the elegiac praises of Yiv the Benevolent anytime soon. Wutroow?”

“Spheres are ready, Admiral,” Senior Captain Kiwu’tro’owmis confirmed from across the *Vigilant*’s bridge. “Ready to rain on their picnic?”

“One moment,” Ar’alani said, watching the tactical and gauging the distances. Plasma spheres’ ability to deliver electronics-freezing blasts of ionic energy made them capable of disabling attackers without having to plow through the tough nyix-alloy hulls that sheathed most warships in this part of the Chaos. Smaller fighter-class ships, like the Nikardun missile boats currently charging the *Vigilant*, were especially vulnerable to such attacks.

But the missile boats’ smaller size also meant they were more nimble than larger warships, and could sometimes dodge out of harm’s way if the relatively slow plasma spheres were launched too soon.

There were tables and balance charts to calculate that sort of thing. Ar’alani preferred to do it by eyesight and experienced judgment.

And that judgment told her they had a sudden opportunity here. Another two seconds . . . “Fire spheres,” she ordered.

There was a small, muffled thud as the plasma spheres shot from their launchers. Ar’alani kept her eyes on the tactical, watching as the missile boats realized they were under attack and scrambled to evade the spheres. The rearmost of them almost made it, the sphere flickering into its aft port side and paralyzing its thrusters, sending it spinning off into space along its final evasion vector. The other three caught the spheres squarely amidships, killing their major systems as they, too, went gliding helplessly away.

“Three down, one still wiggling,” Wutroow reported. “You want us to take them?”

“Hold on that for now,” Ar’alani told her. It would be at least another few minutes before the missile boats recovered. In the meantime . . . “Thrawn?” she called. “Over to you.”

“Acknowledged, Admiral.”

Ar’alani shifted her attention to the *Springhawk*. Normally, she would never do this to the captain of one of her task force ships: giving a vague order on the assumption that the other would pick up on her intent. But she and Thrawn had worked together long enough that she knew he would see what she was seeing and know exactly what she wanted him to do.

And so he did. As the four momentarily stunned missile boats headed off on their individual vectors, a tractor beam shot out from the *Springhawk's* bow, grabbed one of them, and started to pull it in.

Pulling it directly into the path of the cluster of missile boats charging toward the *Grayshrike*.

The Nikardun, their full attention focused on their suicidal attack on the Chiss cruiser, were caught completely off guard by the vessel angling in on them. At the last second they scattered, all six managing to evade the incoming obstacle.

But the disruption had thrown off their rhythm and their aim. Worse than that, from their point of view, Thrawn had timed that distraction for the precise moment when the Nikardun fighters came into full effective range of the *Grayshrike's* and *Springhawk's* spectrum lasers. The missile ships were still trying to reestablish their configuration when the Chiss lasers opened fire.

Twenty seconds later, that section of space was once again clear of enemies.

"Well done, both of you," Ar'alani said, checking the tactical. Aside from the disabled missile boats, only two Nikardun ships out there still showed signs of life. "Wutroow, move us toward target seven. Spectrum lasers should be adequate to finish him off. *Grayshrike*, what's your status?"

"Still working on the thrusters, Admiral," Lakinda said. "But we're sealed again, and the engineers say they should have us back at full power in a quarter hour or less."

"Good," Ar'alani said, doing a quick analysis of the debris and battered ships visible through the *Vigilant's* bridge viewport. There shouldn't be any places out there where more ships could be lurking.

On the other hand, that was what she'd thought before those six missile boats popped into view from the battle cruiser's hulk. There could be a few more small ships gone to ground in the fog of battle in the hope that they'd be missed until the time was right for their own suicide runs.

And at the moment, with its main thrusters down, the *Grayshrike*

was a sitting flashfly. “*Springhawk*, stay with *Grayshrike*,” she ordered. “We’ll clean out these last two.”

“That’s really not necessary, Admiral,” Lakinda said, a hint of carefully controlled protest in her voice. “We can still maneuver enough to fight.”

“You just concentrate on your repairs,” Ar’alani told her. “If you get bored, you can finish off those four missile boats when they wake up.”

“We’re not going to offer them the chance to surrender?” Thrawn asked.

“You can make that offer if you want,” Ar’alani said. “I can’t see them accepting it any more than any of their late comrades did. But I’m willing to be surprised.” She hesitated. “*Grayshrike*, you can also start a full scan of the area. There could be someone else lurking nearby, and I’m tired of people charging out of nowhere and shooting at us.”

“Yes, Admiral,” Lakinda said.

Ar’alani smiled to herself. Lakinda hadn’t actually said *thank you*, but she could hear it in the senior captain’s voice. Of all the officers in Ar’alani’s task force, Lakinda was the most focused and driven, and she absolutely hated to be left out of things.

There was a brush of air as Wutroow stepped up beside Ar’alani’s command chair. “Hopefully, this is the last of them,” the *Vigilant*’s first officer commented. “The Vaks should be able to sleep a bit easier now.” She considered. “So should the Syndicure.”

Ar’alani touched the comm mute key. As far as *she’d* been able to tell, the supreme ruling body of the Chiss Ascendancy had been as unenthusiastic about this cleanup mission as it was possible for politicians to get. “I didn’t know the Syndicure was worried about rogue Nikardun threats to the Vak Combine.”

“I’m sure they aren’t,” Wutroow said. “I’m equally sure they *are* worried about why we’re way out here engaging in warlike actions.”

Ar’alani cocked an eyebrow at her. “You raise that question as if you already knew the answer.”

“Not really,” Wutroow said, giving Ar’alani one of those significant looks she did so well. “I was hoping *you* knew.”

“Sadly, the Aristocra seldom consult with me these days,” Ar’alani said.

“Oddly enough, they don’t consult with me, either,” Wutroow said. “But I’m sure they have their reasons.”

Ar’alani nodded. Normally, the Nine Ruling Families—and the full weight of official Ascendancy policy—were dead-set against any military action unless Chiss worlds or holdings had been directly attacked first. She could only assume that the interrogation of General Yiv the Benevolent and a thorough examination of his captured files and records had proved the Nikardun had been such an imminent threat that the Syndicure had been willing to bend the usual rules.

“At least Thrawn must be pleased,” Wutroow continued. “It’s rare to get vindication *and* retaliation delivered in the same neat package.”

“If you’re trying to get me to tell you what he and I talked about with Supreme General Ba’kif before we left on this little jaunt, you’re in for a disappointment,” Ar’alani said. “But yes, I imagine Senior Captain Thrawn is pleased at how things turned out.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Wutroow said, her voice making a subtle shift from the admiral’s friend to the admiral’s first officer. “Coming into range of target seven.”

“Very good,” Ar’alani said. “You may fire at your convenience.”

“Yes, ma’am.” With a crisp nod, Wutroow headed back across the bridge. “Oeskym, stand by lasers,” she called to the weapons officer.

Two minutes later, it was over. Ar’alani ordered the *Vigilant* back around, to find that the last four missile boats had vanished into expanding clouds of debris. Briefly, she thought about asking Thrawn and Lakinda if they’d offered the Nikardun the chance to surrender and decided it would be a waste of breath. The enemy had been annihilated, and that was what mattered.

“Well done, all of you,” Ar’alani said as Wutroow returned to her side. “Captain Thrawn, I believe the *Grayshrike* and I can handle the rest of the mission. You’re hereby authorized to move on.”

“If you’re certain, Admiral,” Thrawn said.

"I am," Ar'alani said. "May warrior's luck smile on your efforts."

"And yours," Thrawn said. "*Springhawk* out."

Wutroow cleared her throat. "Supreme General Ba'kif's conversation, I presume?"

"You may presume whatever you wish," Ar'alani said.

"Ah," Wutroow said. "Well. If there's nothing else, I'll get started on the post-battle report."

"Thank you," Ar'alani said.

She watched as Wutroow headed across toward the systems monitor console. Her first officer was right about one thing, at least. The Vak Combine *would* be relieved and pleased.

The Nine Ruling Families and the Defense Hierarchy Council would also be relieved. But she doubted very much that anyone in either of those particular groups would be genuinely pleased.

Syndic Prime Mitth'urf'ianico had been waiting in the March of Silence in the Syndicure's prestigious and historical Convocate Hall for nearly half an hour before the man he'd arranged to speak with finally arrived.

But that was all right. The idle time gave Thurfian a chance to observe, and to brood, and to plan.

The observation part was easy. The March of Silence, a favorite spot for Speakers, syndics, and others of the Aristocra to meet on neutral yet private ground, was surprisingly empty today. Most of that, Thurfian suspected, was because the syndics were back in their offices with the Council's latest report on the mop-up efforts against what was left of General Yiv's scattered forces, while the mid-level Ruling Family members that constituted the Aristocra helped them prep for the upcoming Syndicure session or simply worked their usual jobs in the various government agencies. The Speakers, as the top representatives of their families, were probably having long conversations with their homesteads, discussing the situation and getting their Patriarchs' orders on what exactly their families' responses would be once the data sifting was finished.

The brooding part was equally easy. Thurfian had already read the report, or as much of it as he could stomach at one sitting. Woven through all the military data and maps and charts was the understated but clear fact that Senior Captain Thrawn had—*again*—come out looking like a bright star in the Csilla sky. All that despite the fact that he had disobeyed the spirit of standing orders, put an invaluable sky-walker in deadly danger, and risked drawing the Ascendancy into a blatantly illegal and unethical war.

Thurfian was still working on the planning part when Syndic Irizi'stal'mustro finally made his appearance.

As always, Zistalmu waited until he was in earshot of Thurfian—and out of earshot of the other small groups in the hall—before speaking. “Syndic Thurfian,” he said, nodding in greeting. “My apologies for the delay.”

Despite the seriousness of the situation they were meeting to discuss, Thurfian nevertheless had to suppress a smile. *Syndic Thurfian*. Zistalmu had no idea that his colleague had just been elevated to Syndic Prime, the highest Syndicure position below the Speakership itself.

Zistalmu didn't know the new title, and he probably never would. Such rankings were closely guarded family secrets, for internal Syndicure use only, unless the Speaker or Patriarch decided some extra authority was needed somewhere. But those situations were few and far between. Thurfian would most likely carry the rank in secret until the day of his retirement, and only his memorial pillar at the Mitth homestead would reveal it.

But he didn't need anyone else to know. Secrets were such delicious morsels that they could be enjoyed alone.

“I was getting ready to leave,” Zistalmu continued, “when a delegation of Xodlak descended on my office, and I couldn't get rid of them.”

“They came to *you*?” Thurfian asked.

“No, they *came* to Speaker Ziemol,” Zistalmu said sourly. “He generously foisted them off onto me.”

“That sounds like Ziemol.” Thurfian huffed out a commiserating

breath. "Let me guess. They wanted the Irizi to sponsor their return to Ruling Family status?"

"What else?" Zistalmu growled. "I suppose you have delegates from the Forty come to you on occasion, too?"

"More often than I'd like," Thurfian said. Though now that he was Syndic Prime, that would never happen again. As Speaker Ziemol had handed the Xodlak off to Zistalmu, so Thurfian could now hand such annoyances off to a lower-ranking Mitth syndic. "Usually they just want support or a temporary alliance, but a lot of them want to get into the Nine, too. I sometimes daydream about proposing a law that the number of Ruling Families be permanently set at nine."

"I'd be on board with that," Zistalmu said. "Though one should be wary of unintended consequences. If at some future date the Syndicure decided they wanted the Xodlak or perhaps even the Stybla back in, the Mitth might get booted out to make room for them."

"Never happen," Thurfian said firmly. "Speaking of unintended consequences, I assume you read the Council's latest report?"

"On the Nikardun campaigns?" Zistalmu nodded. "Your boy Thrawn just can't seem to lose, can he?"

"If you ask me, he loses all the time," Thurfian growled. "The problem is that every disaster he breaks over his knee is followed so quickly by a glowing success that everyone forgets or ignores what came before."

"The fact that he has people with brooms sweeping up behind him doesn't hurt, either," Zistalmu said. "I don't know, Thurfian. I'm starting to wonder if we'll ever be able to take him down." He raised his eyebrows. "And to be perfectly honest, I'm also starting to wonder if you still want to."

"If you'll cast your mind back, you may remember I first broached this topic when he was also riding high," Thurfian said stiffly. "You think just because he hasn't yet fallen from his implausible mountaintop means I'm happy to see him continue unimpeded?"

"He *is* bringing honor to the Mitth," Zistalmu countered, just as stiffly.

"Honor that could evaporate tomorrow," Thurfian said. "Along

with whatever gains he's brought to the Ascendancy as a whole. No, Zistalmu. Rest assured that I still want him out. The only question is how to do it so that his ultimate self-destruction creates a minimum of collateral damage."

"Agreed," Zistalmu said. To Thurfian's ears, he still didn't sound completely convinced. But at this point, even partial cooperation was enough. "I presume you brought a proposal?"

"The beginnings of one, yes," Thurfian said. "It seems to me that we want him as far away from the Ascendancy as possible when he falls. One possibility would be to persuade the Council to send him against the Paataatus."

"Which they won't do," Zistalmu said. "They're bending the preemptive-strike laws hard enough right now with the Nikardun. They're not going to turn around and send him against someone else. Certainly not without provocation."

"But what if there *was* provocation?" Thurfian asked. "Specifically, what if there were rumors that the Paataatus were allying with a large pirate group to attack us? At the very least, the Syndicure and Council would want someone to go out and investigate such a possibility."

"*Are* there any such rumors?"

"Actually, there are," Thurfian said. "Nothing all that solid at the moment, I admit. But they're there, they're strengthening, and they're definitely provocative. I imagine that with a little effort we could boost their credibility."

"That's fine as far as it goes," Zistalmu said, eyeing him closely. "How do we persuade the Council to send Thrawn?"

"I doubt they'll need much persuasion," Thurfian said, feeling a smug smile crease his lips. "It turns out the alleged pirates are a group he's already faced off against. Specifically, the Vagaari."

Zistalmu opened his mouth. Closed it again without speaking, his presumably reflexive dismissal of the idea morphing into something more contemplative. "I thought he'd already destroyed them."

"He destroyed one group of them," Thurfian corrected. "But who's to say there aren't more lurking in the shadows?"

"That was certainly one of his most mixed-result exploits,"

Zistalmu mused. “He captured that gravity-well generator the researchers are still trying to figure out, but then lost the big alien ship from Lesser Space before anyone could get a look inside.”

“*And* lost a respected Mitth syndic along with it,” Thurfian growled. All Chiss lives were important, but the fact that Syndic Mitth’ras’safis had been a Mitth automatically meant his disappearance wouldn’t mean as much to an Irizi like Zistalmu.

It was supposed to be different when the one who’d been lost was kin, though. It still rankled Thurfian that Thrawn would so casually throw away the life of one of his own family members.

“Yes, of course,” Zistalmu said. “A sad day, indeed. You knew Syndic Thrass, didn’t you?”

“Mostly just in passing,” Thurfian said, feeling slightly mollified. At least Zistalmu had the grace to acknowledge the Mitth loss. “I oversaw the transportation and commerce office back then, while he worked directly under the Speaker.”

“I understand he was close to Thrawn?”

“So I’ve heard,” Thurfian said. “I’m not sure I ever saw them together, though. Syndicure and Expansionary Defense Fleet circles don’t overlap very much.”

“Hardly at all, in fact,” Zistalmu conceded.

“But to return to the point, what the Council and Syndicure will remember most is the gravity generator Thrawn brought back,” Thurfian said. “We can hint that if they send him out there again, the same lightning might strike twice.”

“Hopefully with technology that will be a bit easier to crack,” Zistalmu said. “You have a plan for getting this enhanced rumor started?”

“There are some pathways I can use that won’t lead back to me,” Thurfian said. “That part is key, of course. You’ll want to find some similar pathways of your own.”

“So that if it explodes in *our* faces instead of Thrawn’s, you won’t take all the blame?”

“So that we have two different credible sources to present to the Council and Syndicure,” Thurfian said. “One story is an unfounded

rumor, and we already have a few of those. Two independent stories from Chiss sources are a pattern worth paying attention to.”

“I hope so.” Zistalmu paused. “I trust you see the possible flaw in your plan?”

“That he’ll succeed yet again?” Thurfian scowled. “I know. But once the Nikardun have been destroyed, that will be the end as far as any real danger to the Ascendancy is concerned. A Paataatus-Vagaari alliance may not be much of a threat, but it’s all we have to work with. And surely between the two of them they can handle a single Chiss warship.”

“If the Council sends him alone,” Zistalmu said. “All right, I’ll see what I can do about getting some rumor pathways set up. Let me know when you’re ready so that we can coordinate the revelations. You have any idea when Thrawn is due back from the Vak Combine?”

“Not really,” Thurfian said. “Ar’alani is committed to finishing the job, and there’s no way of knowing how long that will take. Especially since what she finds may require her task force to make a side trip or two to clean out other Nikardun nests. The point is that we have time to get this moving in the proper direction.”

“Let’s just make sure we do it right,” Zistalmu warned. “If we let people get too comfortable, he’ll continue to skate along while they all forget him, after which his next disaster will catch everyone by surprise.”

“Don’t worry,” Thurfian assured him. “We’ll do it right. And this time, we’ll do it permanently.”

Only they probably wouldn’t, Thurfian conceded glumly as he left Zistalmu and headed out of the March of Silence. People saw what they wanted to see, and too many of the people in authority chose to remember Thrawn’s successes and ignore his failures. Thurfian was certainly willing to give this latest attempt a try, but he suspected it would end the same way as all the others.

What they needed was a new approach. He and Zistalmu were try-

ing to hit Thrawn with a hammer, but Thrawn was too big and the hammer was too small. They needed a new angle with which to hit him.

Or they needed a bigger hammer.

Syndic Thurfian had held a certain degree of power. Syndic Prime Thurfian held a little more. But he realized now that neither of those positions gave him enough.

It was time to try something new. It was time for Syndic Thurfian to become Speaker Thurfian.

By the time he reached his office he had the outlines of a plan. Speaker Mitth'ykl'omi, he knew, was considered to be a vital part of the Mitth political structure.

It was time for Thurfian to make himself equally indispensable.



## MEMORIES I

"There," Haplif of the Agbui said, pointing through the scout ship's viewport at the half-lit planet in front of them. "You can't see the damage from here—"

"I see it quite clearly," the veiled being seated beside him said calmly in that exotic voice of his, that strange mixture of rasping and melodic wrapped up inside an obscure accent. "It extends across the entire planet, I presume?"

"It does," Haplif confirmed. He'd never seen Jixtus without his cloak and hood, his gloves concealing his hands, his black veil covering his face. He had no idea what the creature looked like.

But that voice would stay with him forever.

"Then you can add this to your list of successes," Jixtus said. "Well done."

"Thank you, my lord," Haplif said, squinting a little. Now that Jixtus mentioned it, there were indeed subtle signs of the global destruction down there. The clouds on the sun-lit side, which would be glistening white on an untouched world, were here laced with gray and black from the fire and blast debris thrown up from the vicious civil war he and his team had engineered. On the night side, the clusters of city lights that had once shone cheerfully in the darkness had all but vanished.

Haplif smiled to himself. The near-total destruction of an entire world, and it had all been accomplished in barely six months. *Six months.*

Yes. He was *that* good.

"I understand a single refugee ship escaped."

Haplif scowled. Trust Jixtus to take the shine off a crowning moment. "Only temporarily," he said. "The Nikardun are taking care of it."

"Really," Jixtus said. "You were told not to have any direct contact with them."

"I had no choice," Haplif said. "You told me you didn't want anyone knowing what happened here. The planet never had a communications triad, you were out of range of the standard transmitters, and we didn't have any ships of our own. One of Yiv's ships was poking around, so I contacted them."

For a long moment Jixtus was silent. "You *did* say you didn't want anyone knowing about the war, didn't you?" Haplif prompted.

"Yes, of course," Jixtus said, sounding a bit put out. "I trust you at least kept my name out of it?"

"Your name and mine both," Haplif assured him. "I didn't identify or locate the system for them, either. I just gave the ship's vector and told them it was a group trying to recruit forces against General Yiv. Naturally, they headed after them in hot pursuit, with no doubt righteous fervor in their hearts and minds."

"No doubt," Jixtus said. "You understand Yiv and his people very well."

"I understand *everyone* very well," Haplif said. It wasn't bragging, after all, if it was true.

"I presume you gave the Nikardun their destination?"

"I'm not absolutely sure they had one," Haplif said, keying a line across the navigational display. "All we had was their departure vector, and they mostly took that because

it was as far away from the last group of enemy ships as possible. I only know of one advanced civilization along that route, and I'm not sure the refugees were able to get any data on it with the government computers demolished."

"Still, there's a great deal of life in the Chaos," Jixtus said. "Even our records presumably show only a fraction of it."

"That's what they're counting on," Haplif said. "From what the Magys said—that's their title for their leader—from what she said before they took off, I gather the plan was to check each likely system along their path until they found someone they could appeal to for sanctuary. Failing that, they were hoping to find an uninhabited but livable world where they could go to ground. All the Nikardun have to do is follow that same plan, and they'll eventually find whoever takes them in."

"Unless you were lied to," Jixtus said. "Perhaps the refugees know exactly where they're going."

Haplif scowled. Unlikely, but possible. His talent for reading and analyzing cultures was unmatched, but individuals could still surprise him, especially those he hadn't had good opportunities to read. If the Magys had been deliberately vague so as to throw off any possibility of pursuit . . .

He felt his throat briefly palpitate. Jixtus was playing with him, he realized belatedly. Poking at the very set of skills that made him so valuable, teasing the possibility that Haplif wasn't as good as he knew he was. "It doesn't matter," he said. "The Nikardun are following. Whether the refugees reach a sanctuary and are destroyed there or whether they run out of fuel and air and die in space, the end result is the same."

"But you hope the latter?"

Haplif shrugged. "Fewer chances of loose ends," he

said, keeping his voice casual. "But as I said, the end is the same." He smiled. "The end that only I could orchestrate."

Jixtus chuckled, a dry, raspy sort of sound. "Never let it be said that Haplif of the Agbui lacks confidence and pride."

"Even when his employer suggests those qualities are unwarranted?"

"Especially then," Jixtus said. "But beware of overconfidence. Eyes held high in pride are less able to see uneven ground ahead."

"Fortunately for your needs, I can see both," Haplif said. "At any rate, we're finished here. We can go home now?"

"You spoke of a Nikardun ship," Jixtus said. "Are there bases in the area?"

"A couple of small ones, yes," Haplif said. "Listening and relay points, with limited defenses. They're not likely to send any warships roaring out to bother anyone."

"Yet you were able to persuade them to do just that," Jixtus pointed out. "Others might be able to, as well. Not to mention, Yiv himself may find a new task for them."

"Well, even if he does, they're not likely to find this place," Haplif said doggedly. "The people here keep mostly to themselves these days. I'm not sure any of them has even been outside the system in decades."

"Except for the refugee ship."

"Which will be gone soon enough."

"I trust you're right," Jixtus said. "As to your question. Since you mention my needs and your unique ability to fulfill them, there's one more job I want you to do."

Haplif looked sideways at the other, a bitter taste in his mouth. He should have guessed this wouldn't be the end of it, despite Jixtus's promise. As Haplif understood most beings, he also understood his employer.

Or did he? With the obscuring cloak, hood, and veil hiding all the usual cues of face and eyes, Jixtus could be

nearly anyone, from virtually any bipedal species. For that matter, for all the evidence of Haplif's eyes and ears, he might be sitting next to one of the demons from Agbui myth he'd so often been threatened with as a child.

He shook the thought away. Superstitious nonsense. "You promised we would be done."

"I've changed my mind," Jixtus said calmly. "What do you know about the Chiss?"

Haplif felt his eyes narrow. "I thought Yiv was going to take care of them."

"Yiv thinks he's going to take care of them," Jixtus corrected. "Some of my colleagues think that, too. Unfortunately, I know better." Deliberately, the obscured face turned toward Haplif. "Unless you feel the job is beyond you."

Haplif forced himself to hold that unseen gaze. The Chiss were also the stuff of legend, as terrifying in their own way as the mythical demons. But unlike the demons, they were real. "No, of course not. We can handle them."

And he meant it. Whatever else the Chiss might be, they had the same hopes, dreams, fears, and blind spots as everyone else. Anyone with those qualities could be taken down. "But I don't know much about them, so it may take longer than usual."

"Take all the time you need," Jixtus said. "After all, Yiv and the Nikardun still have their part of this drama to work through. Your task won't begin until theirs is ended."

"Yes," Haplif said. "A question. If you're convinced Yiv will fail to destroy the Chiss, why let him continue?"

"Even failures can serve a purpose," Jixtus said. "In this case, Yiv will draw the Ascendancy's attention outward, which will better prepare your path."

"And will presumably also drain Chiss military resources," Haplif said, nodding.

"Yes," Jixtus said thoughtfully. "Though perhaps not as successfully as I'd hoped."

Haplif frowned. "Trouble?"

"I don't know," Jixtus said in that same half-thoughtful, half-uneasy tone. "Twenty years ago, even ten, I would have said the destruction of the Chiss Ascendancy would be a straightforward exercise. No longer. A new generation of military leaders has arisen, warriors who cannot be trusted to walk recklessly down the well-worn paths of manipulation set before them. Supreme General Ba'kif, Admiral Ar'alani, a few others—they think and plan outside the normal patterns. Unpredictable. It may make your task more challenging."

"You give them too much credit," Haplif said contemptuously. "Or perhaps you give *me* too little. Military minds and reactions are of no consequence. I deal in the political realm, and I doubt the Chiss leaders have any less ambition and lust for power than anyone else in the Chaos."

"So I assume," Jixtus agreed. "I'm simply warning you that it won't be as easy as this was." He gestured toward the planet in front of them. "Take whatever resources you need. Others will take over from you here."

"We could do more," Haplif offered. "I still think we should move more of the survivors out of the zone."

"We'll decide whether and how to deal with them," Jixtus said severely. "This task is finished. The next lies ahead."

"Yes, my lord," Haplif growled. He hated leaving any job uncompleted, even when all that remained was mop-up.

"And I'll want the locations of the Nikardun bases you mentioned before we part company," Jixtus added. "We don't want someone stumbling across your success here."

"Definitely not," Haplif agreed. Still, if Jixtus considered the job done, who was he to argue? "So. Once we've destroyed the Chiss for you, *then* we go home?"

"Then you go home, Haplif of the Agbui," Jixtus said. "And with double payment."

"Thank you," Haplif said. "Though after everything you said about the Chiss, I'm wondering if the payment perhaps should be tripled."

"Perhaps it should," Jixtus acknowledged. "We shall see. You said there was one known advanced civilization along the refugees' vector. Which one?"

"It's a minor, off-the-path world, barely worth notice," Haplif said. "A place called Rapacc."

## CHAPTER TWO

---

**W**ith one jump left to the Rapacc system, Mid Captain Ufsa'mak'ro had called for the *Springhawk's* bridge personnel to take a short rest break.

Which was fine with Mitth'ali'astov. As Sky-walker Che'ri's caregiver—her *official* caregiver, now—she'd seen the subtle signs of fatigue in the young girl during the last section of twisting path through the Chaos. If Samakro hadn't called for a break, Thalias would have asked him to do so.

But he had, and all was well. Che'ri sat at her navigation station, sipping fruit juice and looking idly around. That was pretty standard, at least as Thalias remembered her own days as a sky-walker: After spending hours deep in Third Sight, she'd often felt the need to stretch her eyes a little during her breaks.

Unlike Thalias's old routine, though, she saw how Che'ri's eyes kept coming back to the piloting console beside hers. To Thalias, the pilot's realm had always been little more than a slab of mystery with controls attached. To Che'ri, it was almost like a familiar friend.

The girl's juice packet looked to be almost empty. "Would you like some more?" Thalias asked, stepping up beside her. "Or something to eat?"

"No, thank you," Che'ri said. She put the sipper to her lips, her cheeks puckering briefly. "Okay, I'm ready."

Thalias looked around the bridge as she took the empty packet. Samakro, she saw, was over by Senior Commander Chaf'pri'uhme at

the weapons station, talking softly with both Afpriuh and one of the plasma sphere specialists—Lieutenant Commander Laknym, if she was remembering his name right. “Doesn’t look like we’re in a hurry,” she told Che’ri. “Besides, Senior Captain Thrawn isn’t here yet. I imagine he’ll want to be present when we contact the Paccosh.”

“Okay.” Che’ri hesitated. “What are they like?”

“The Paccosh?” Thalias shrugged. “Alien. Voices that are kind of whinnying, though you can understand them okay. Speak Taarja, which I never liked.”

“You mean they whinny like packbulls?”

“A little,” Thalias said, trying to remember when she’d heard a packbull in real life. She was pretty sure she had, but she couldn’t place where or when that might have been. “The Paccosh we saw in the mining station were about my height, maybe a little taller. Big chest and hip bulges, light-pink skin, and they’ve got head crests that look like woven feathers. Their arms and legs are thin but they seem strong enough. Oh, and they’ve got purple splotches around their eyes that sometimes change when they’re talking to people.”

“Sounds interesting,” Che’ri murmured. “I wish I could see them.”

“I’m sure we’ll bring back vids.”

“It’s not the same.”

“No, it’s not,” Thalias conceded. “But really, some downtime would be good for you. You can draw, play with your building snaps—”

“And do lessons,” Che’ri said with a distinct lack of enthusiasm.

“Oh, right,” Thalias said brightly, as if she’d completely forgotten that part of a sky-walker’s routine. “Thanks for reminding me.”

Che’ri peered up over her shoulder, giving Thalias the kind of strained-patience look that ten-year-olds pulled off so well. “You’re welcome.”

“Oh, don’t be like that,” Thalias said, mock-chiding. “There might even be some lessons you’d like.” She pointed at the pilot control board. “If you want, I’ll help you sweet-talk Lieutenant Commander Azmordi into teaching you how to fly the *Springhawk*.”

To Thalias’s surprise, Che’ri seemed to shrink into herself. “I don’t

think so,” she said. “I got in enough trouble just learning how to fly a scout ship.”

“One: *You* didn’t get in trouble,” Thalias said firmly. “Maybe Senior Captain Thrawn did, a little, but it all worked out. Two: Learning things should never get you in trouble. Now, if you actually took the *Springhawk* for a ride around some planet without permission, *that* might be a problem. But just learning how to do it shouldn’t. Three: You’re—”

She broke off with a sudden flicker of embarrassment. “Three: If someone doesn’t like it, we’ll just refer them to Captain Thrawn, and he’ll set them straight.”

“That’s not what you were going to say,” Che’ri said, frowning suspiciously up at her. “What were you going to say?”

Thalias sighed. So embarrassing . . . “I was going to say you’re ten now,” she said. “And that reminded me that I missed your starday. I’m so sorry. With all that was going on last month, I just totally forgot it.”

“It’s okay,” Che’ri said, hunching her shoulders. Her voice was quiet, and Thalias could hear the distant hurt beneath it. “It’s not like I remember being taken to the skylight to see my first star. And, you know. Parties and treasure-puzzle poems are mostly for little kids.”

“I still feel terrible for forgetting it,” Thalias said. “Maybe we could do something now. A belated starday celebration. I could make something special for dinner, and then we could play whatever games you wanted.”

“It’s okay,” Che’ri said again. “Anyway, there’s not much we can do when I’m on duty.”

“All right, then,” Thalias said, determined not to just let it slide. “We’ll wait until we’re back on Csilla or someplace and do you a tenth-and-a-half starday. How about that?”

“Okay,” Che’ri said. She seemed to straighten in her chair. “Senior Captain Thrawn’s here.”

Thalias turned around, mentally counting out the time. She was at a second and a half when the hatch opened and Thrawn stepped onto

the bridge. His eyes flicked around the room, lingered a moment on Thalias—he could tell that she’d already been turned to face him before he entered, she guessed, and had deduced that the reason for that was Che’ri’s Third Sight—then came to rest on Samakro. “Report, Mid Captain Samakro?” he said, stepping toward the first officer.

“Ready for our final jump, sir,” Samakro said, turning away from Laknym and taking a step toward his captain. “Weapons and defenses all show green.” He flicked a glance at Thalias and Che’ri. “Shall I have the sky-walker and caregiver escorted to their suite?”

Thalias braced herself. She’d been with Thrawn when he first met the Paccosh people, with her life on the block right alongside his. She wanted to be here—she *deserved* to be here—to see what had become of them. If Samakro insisted on shunting her and Che’ri out of the action, he and Thrawn were both going to have an argument on their hands.

Thrawn looked at her again, and she had the eerie feeling that he knew exactly what was going on behind her eyes. “I think not,” he told Samakro. “Given the inherent difficulties of travel in and out of the Rapacc system, I’d like our sky-walker to be ready in case we need her for a quick exit.”

Samakro took a breath, and Thalias could see him lining up his own argument—

“But you’re right, they shouldn’t be on the bridge,” Thrawn continued, looking around. His gaze stopped at the weapons station, where Laknym was still consulting with Afpriuh. “Lieutenant Commander Laknym, do you feel qualified to handle secondary command weapons control?”

Laknym spun around to face him, his eyes widening. “*Me*, sir? I—ah—” His eyes flicked nervously to Samakro. “Sir, I’m just a plasma sphere specialist.”

“None of us was born into the command structure, Commander,” Thrawn said, a little drily. “Opinion, Senior Commander Afpriuh?”

“Yes, he’s qualified,” Afpriuh said, looking up at Laknym.

“Good,” Thrawn said. “Don’t be overly concerned, Commander.

I'm not expecting serious trouble, and this would be useful experience for you. Please escort Sky-walker Che'ri and Caregiver Thalias to secondary command and take the weapons control station there."

Laknym swallowed visibly but gave Thrawn a crisp nod. "Yes, sir. Sky-walker; Caregiver . . . ?"

Thalias had been in the *Springhawk's* secondary command room only once, back when she first came aboard and was given a tour of the ship. It was smaller than the bridge and located in the heart of the ship, the last stronghold of control should a battle go horribly wrong.

Between its size and its lack of viewports, it was also seriously claustrophobic, and she felt her skin itching as Laknym pointed her to the navigation station. With Che'ri in tow, she wove her way through the other warriors already on station. By the time she got the girl strapped into her seat, all of the displays had come to life, showing not only the status boards and the view outside the ship but also a view of the bridge itself.

The outside views helped the claustrophobia a little. But not much.

The *Springhawk* was already on its way, with Azmordi guiding them in a short jump-by-jump toward the Rapacc system. There wasn't a spare seat for Thalias, so she stood behind Che'ri, pressed against the girl's chair. Somehow, having her head closer to the ceiling made the claustrophobia worse. She kept her eyes moving to try to distract herself, shifting among the hyperspace swirl outside, the status monitors, Che'ri sitting in front of her, Thrawn standing motionless behind the bridge comm station. Azmordi called a warning—

The swirl vanished into star-flares, and they had arrived.

"Full sensor scan," Thrawn ordered. "Focus especially on ships or battle debris—"

"Contact," Samakro cut in. "Ship directly ahead, Captain. Looks like a Nikardun frigate."

Thalias winced. She'd hoped that the Nikardun who'd been blockading Rapacc had run away and left the Paccosh in peace after Yiv's defeat and capture. Clearly, they hadn't.

On the bridge monitor, Thrawn leaned over the comm officer's shoulder and touched a key. "Unidentified ship, this is Senior Cap-

tain Thrawn of the Chiss Expansionary Defense Fleet warship *Springhawk*,” he announced in the Taarja trade language. “We come in friendship and peace.”

“We have no friends,” a voice came back, the harsh Taarja words sounding even harsher coming from him. “We will have peace when you are gone. Leave immediately or be destroyed.”

“Big talk coming from a half-sized ship,” someone behind Thalias muttered.

“Maybe he’s got friends nearby,” someone else warned.

“I would urge you to reconsider,” Thrawn said calmly. “The offer of friendship is not given lightly.”

“If you come in peace, prove it,” the voice said. On the main display, something broke away from the frigate—

“Missile incoming,” Samakro snapped.

“Not a missile, sir,” Mid Commander Dalvu corrected him from the sensor station. “It’s a single-passenger shuttle, heading . . .” On the display Thalias saw Dalvu lean closer to her board. “Heading thirty degrees off target,” she continued, sounding confused.

“A test,” the voice continued. “If you are truly Chiss, disable without destruction.”

“As you wish,” Thrawn said. “Senior Commander Afpriuh? At your convenience.”

“Yes, sir,” Afpriuh said. “Sphere launcher aligning . . . firing sphere.”

Thalias looked at the tactical display, watching as the mark indicating a plasma sphere raced away from the *Springhawk* toward the shuttle. The two marks intersected—

“Shuttle has been flickered,” Afpriuh reported. “All systems down.”

Thrawn nodded acknowledgment. “Have we proven our identity?” he called.

“What is your purpose here?”

“To assure ourselves that the Paccosh have regained the peace that was stolen from them by the Nikardun,” Thrawn said. “To eliminate the last of that enemy, if that goal has not yet been achieved.” He lifted up something and held it toward the comm station cam. “And to return this to its rightful owner.”

“What’s he holding?” Laknym muttered.

“It’s a ring,” Thalias told him. “One of the Paccosh we met on the mining station gave it to him for safekeeping.”

“And the name of that owner?” the Taarja words came.

“Uingali foar Marocsaa,” Thrawn said. “I trust you are well?”

There was a strange, almost chuckling sound from the speaker. “I am indeed well,” the voice said. The same voice, but with a subtle difference.

And now with the harshness gone, Thalias, too, could hear the voice of the Pacc from the mining station.

“You might have led with the ring,” Uingali continued, sounding much calmer now. “Others have come with false claims and statements, and we have necessarily grown wary. Showing the ring from the beginning would have saved us the task of retrieving the shuttle you disabled. But no matter. Follow us, Chiss Senior Captain Thrawn. My people are eager to meet you.” On the display the frigate’s bow angled up as it began a pitch turn.

Thalias felt her mouth drop open. Emblazoned on the underside of the Nikardun frigate was a familiar image: a nest of small stylized snakes with two larger ones curving up from among them. The same image as the ring Thrawn was still holding to the cam.

She huffed out a breath. “And *you*,” she muttered in the direction of the display, “might have led with *that*.”

The Rapacc capital city was named Boropacc, and from what Samakro had seen as the *Springhawk*’s shuttle flew over it the place had definitely been through the grinder. Apparently, whatever Nikardun forces had been on the ground at the time hadn’t been very tidy when they pulled out.

“Yes, they destroyed what they could as we drove them back to the void,” Uingali conceded, nodding out the window at the damaged city as he gestured his visitors to the meeting room’s comfortable-looking lounge chairs. The four charric-armed warriors who had accompanied Thrawn, Samakro, and Thalias from the *Springhawk*