

Commander Rhy lance's office aboard the *Dark Prophet II* was sparsely decorated. A room full of plain grey furniture reminded Justinios Drake of his office back at the university but despite the familiar environment, the newly minted Knight had a tight ball forming in the pit of his stomach as he sat down in front of Taldryan's de facto leader.

The Commander spoke first, "Knight Drake, thank you for the meeting." Rhy lance's cordial tone set Justinios at ease but the Chiss didn't wait for his visitor to return the pleasantries. "Do you want to stay here, within Clan Taldryan?"

As a fellow scientist Justinios appreciated the directness of his superior officer's question, even if it was one the Aleena hadn't asked himself since he had survived the events of Karufr. "You ask a valid question Commander," Justinios replied. "But where else would I go to continue my research?"

"If you returned to the University now, you know as well as I that your nascent abilities would help propel your research forward by years." Commander Rhy lance red eyes were fixed on those of Justinios. "Also, I am sure the Dark Council would reward you handsomely if you helped them find the scattered remains of our fleet."

Knight Drake found the Commander's statements to be confusing. "If I didn't know better, I would say you were trying to get rid of me."

Rhy lance smirked as he continued. "Knight Drake, you know as well as I that any good scientist has to be aware of all of his variables." With a flick of his blue hand, the Chiss commander pulled up a holomap of Brotherhood space. "Look at this map, even a novice like yourself can tell that a major conflict is brewing. As skilled as you are, I cannot lead this clan into battle without knowing for sure that you can be relied upon. So I will ask you again, do you want to stay here?"

"What if I say no?" The Aleena journeyman asked. "You would let me simply waltz out of here?"

"Yes." Commander Rhy lance was very matter of fact in his reply. "Even if you ran right to the Inquisition, our ships would have left this point in space long before they could muster an attack and I personally do not see any risk to you returning to your old life."

Knight Drake rubbed his blue reptilian chin. "Let us be blunt Commander. You are saying that if I am to continue my research within Taldryan then I must fight when the time comes?"

"You have a responsibility to those under our protection if you are to continue to use our resources." Rhy lance typed in another set of commands onto his keypad and the holographic map disappeared. "I do not need your answer now but I need it soon."

"I just need to make a single holocall."

Commander Rhyllance nodded as he punched at his terminal. Justinios was sure the Chiss was sending the authorization that was needed to make an outgoing transmission. With that, the Aleena Knight jumped off the durasteel chair and made his way to the communication center.

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The technicians had taken great care to route and reroute Justinios' transmission as it made its way to the galactic core so that the Aleena's call didn't give away the fleet's position by accident. The form of the female Aleena that had taken shape in the hologram in front of the blue-skinned Knight indicated that their efforts had paid off.

"Justinios," the female in the hologram stated, "I am surprised you are alive. My algorithm only gave you a .3% chance of survival based on your last known location and the duration of time that you have been missing."

"Well Essi, your math has always been second to none but in this case there are significant variables that your formulas would not be able to account for," Justinios responded. "I regret that I am not able to share more at this time. The accuracy of your morbidity formula will have to wait for another day."

Essi's hologram emitted an audibly sigh. "So what is the purpose of this call if you will not be sharing updates on your situation?"

"My work has reached a crossroads." Justinios carefully chose his words, Essi was one of the only people he considered on his same level of intelligence and she would easily piece together any clues. "I am working with an organization that has access to equipment and techniques that I can't access at the university."

A smile began to cross Essi's face. "I will not be the reason you give up on your life's work Justinios. Do not worry about me, you must follow your dreams."

Justinios continued with his previous thought, ignoring Essi's exclamation entirely. "There is some dangerous work they want me to take on before I can continue my own research"

"Go on," Essi replied tersely.

"You are the only person in the galaxy whose opinion matters to me." Essi's face began to beam again as Justinios continued to speak. "I do not know what to do and you are the only person whose mind I trust as much as my own."

Essi's holographic avatar quickly wiped at her eye's before responding. "As much as I would like to have you back at the university, I never thought I would see the day that Professor Justinios

Drake would meet a challenge that would derail him from proving his theories true. Do these people possess the tools you need to further your research?"

"Yes but Essi you don't..."

She did not let Justinios finish. "Do you have access to these tools with any other organization?"

"No."

"Then if you return to your job here, you will always wonder what could have been." This was exactly why Justinios cared for Essi more than anyone else in the galaxy. Anyone else he called would have shot a barrage of questions his way before even attempting to help with his conundrum. Despite the fact that he hadn't spoke to her in months, she simply took the information available and formulated the most logical response possible. It also helped that she was 100% correct, Justinios would regret leaving Taldryan behind his entire life if he left now.

"I will come and see you as soon as I can." The two Aleena had spent enough time around each other that Justinios knew he didn't have to say explicitly that he would be staying. "Does this mean you aren't mad at me anymore."

The laugh that came out of the hologram was probably loud enough to be heard by the technicians who were likely still waiting outside the comm room. "Oh no, no, no. I may be the best wife in the galaxy for putting up with these shenanigans but that doesn't mean you are off of my list yet."

The two Aleena ended the call by exchanging their regards for one another. Justinios then reached over to the console and ended the transmission. Knight Drake then exited the comm room as the technicians filed in behind him to no doubt ensure he had not covertly sent any information to those hunting the Taldryan fleet. Standing in the middle of the communication center, Justinios took out his holopad and typed a short message to Commander Rhy lance.

*I would like to be included in on-going military operations. I need to begin to test my abilities in real-world scenarios, for science reasons.*