



Reading Room

StarWars FanFiction

POV: Bye, bye, Joan d'Arc

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[New Republic Nebulon B Frigate *Joan d'Arc*]

The main hangar of the Nebulon-B Frigate *Joan d'Arc* was strangely quiet when Captain Ralne Orris got out of the turbo-lift. Only a shuttle and a very battered B-Wing occupied the usually crowded installations. Ever since most of White Squadron's pilots and ships had been transferred to a new unit this was a ghostly place. What the hell, I almost miss them, he thought with a faint smile. His steps echoed as he walked towards the centre of the flight deck. Beyond the magnetic opening a bright dot grew bigger amongst the star field, revealing the shape of a Lambda Class shuttle. He started to tap the floor with his right boot, unable to contain his impatience, but ceased to do so when he became aware of the several looks at his back. There were at least a dozen semi-idle technicians in the hangar, and all of them were probably wondering what had brought the captain to the flight deck, a place he didn't use to visit. He grimaced and forced himself to not look back. *They are going to have something to talk about for weeks...*

The shuttle finally completed the approach manoeuvre and entered the hangar while its lower wings rose and locked up. He had to struggle to not run towards the ship when the ramp started to descend. *Control yourself, Ralne, you are acting like a teenager!*

A man in the New Republic uniform exited and saluted when he saw the captain. He returned the salute and tried to see something inside the ship, while the other man revised something on the shuttle's landing gear. Some moments later a second person appeared, dressed in a grey jump suit without military markings. Ralne's heart seemed to be about to explode with joy when the woman smiled in his direction. Her brown hair was cut over her shoulders, exactly as he remembered it, but her face seemed to be paler.

"You are pale, Dehanna, are you sick? Were there any problems during the trip?" He said walking towards her with a look of apprehension in his eyes, stopping a metre from her. The woman's grin became even broader and she shook her head.

"I've spent the last six months in a lab in Burgala, dear. You wouldn't expect me to have had too much sun lately, would you?"

"No, I suppose I wouldn't." He realised a bit late that Burgala's habitable hemisphere was on the last part of its winter, which was eight months long. But even if the planet had been in its warmest season, considering how seriously Dehanna took her work as a chemical engineer, her white skin was nothing to be surprised about. He took a better look at her as she reduced the distance between them to only a few centimetres. The wide jump suit was not the most elegant dress a woman could wear, but even that couldn't completely hide her slender body which she moved with a grace that made her appear younger. Actually, her age was

close to the Captain's, who was almost forty years old - although many people thought him older -. An appreciative whistle from somewhere behind Ralne told him that someone else had noticed the newcomer's beauty. His first impulse was to turn back and arrest the joker, but Dehanna's laughter made him forget it all.

"It seems that some of your men know better how to react before a woman..." She said putting a hand on his neck and pulling him toward her. For an instant he feared that she would kiss him passionately, and he would be unable to prevent it. Not that he didn't desire it, but the whistle had made him more painfully aware of where they were. But she just kissed him briefly on the cheek before moving back again.

"Don't worry, I won't embarrass you in the presence of your crew." She whispered with a wink. He smiled and restrained a sigh.

"Thanks, dear. I've missed you terribly, but this is not the best place to show you how much..."

"I've missed you, too. Ten months is a long time." He nodded and started to feel better. After the initial shock of seeing her again, he started to recover the initiative. Ralne made a gesture towards one of the droids unloading cargo from the shuttle, which gently took the bag that Dehanna was carrying.

"He knows where he has to take your luggage. Now come with me, and I'll show you the *Joan d'Arc*. If you're you're not too tired, of course." He added considering she had just arrived from a long trip.

"It will be a pleasure, Captain." She answered smiling again and holding the arm he offered her. They started to walk towards the turbo lift. When they passed near the damaged B-Wing, most of the technicians working on it did their best to appear they were completely concentrated on their present activities. The only one who kept looking at the couple quickly imitated his partners when an angry look from the Captain convinced him that, whether it had been him or not who had whistled a minute ago, he shouldn't abuse his luck. Dehanna didn't notice the silent conversation, as she was looking around at the big structure and the numerous empty places where no ships were parked.

"I had imagined this place with some more activity."

"You should have come a week ago, when the squadron was still here. You had to shout if you wanted to be heard." *Although I'm glad you didn't come then.* He already had enough with the technicians without having to worry about the pilots too. They were considerably worse. "If you had seen this hangar the first time I put my feet on it... My shuttle arrived ten minutes after a group of new pilots with their fighters, and there were something like three hundred colonists waiting to board their transports. At least one hundred were children, running all over the place with some crewmen trying desperately to prevent them from hurting themselves." She laughed inclining her head back, showing her neck in all its beauty. *Oh, gods, how I love it when she does that...*

"It's a shame that I won't have a chance to meet those pilots you talk so much about."

"Well, yes, it's a pity." He said trying to appear really sad for that, but she was not deceived by his poor performance. When the turbo lift's door closed behind them she kissed him again, this time on the mouth, and smiled feeling his reaction.

"I would say that you don't miss the squadron that much..." She said interrupting the kiss a bit too soon for Ralne, who was starting to enjoy the moment.

"Oh, damn, they have to ruin my day even when they are thousands of parsecs away..."

"Come on, Ralne, they can't be so bad!" She admonished him, although her rogue-like smile contradicted her tone.

"There are no words to describe them." He said, but he had to smile back under her inquisitive look. The door opened and they entered a corridor that lead directly to the medical facilities, the first spot from a series of interesting places he had planned to show her. He guided her through the different installations, answering some of her questions, and leaving the rest for the officers in command of those places. Of course, he had previously instructed them about the visit they were about to receive, without specifying the nature of the person who was going to inspect the ship. Dehanna was so discreet that none of the crewmen could suspect anything; as far as they were concerned she might have been a civilian official on a routine

visit. Nevertheless Orris didn't have the slightest doubt that when the technicians who were on the flight deck had a chance to talk to their colleagues, rumours would reach every corner of the *Joan d'Arc*. He didn't like it, but knowing he couldn't prevent it, and that he wouldn't be commanding this ship much longer, he didn't care.

The Captain had intentionally reserved the bridge for last. He smiled proudly when he saw her face watching the view screens in astonishment. He had ordered to dim the lights for some moments to increase the effect, and the officer to whom he had commended that particular mission had good reflexes. When the door to the bridge slid open, only the occasional blinking from scanners and other devices tried uselessly to compete with the magnificence of the universe. The region they were navigating through presented areas full of inert gases, remnants of a star had disappeared millions of years ago, which trapped the light from two near suns, a red giant and a medium sized blue star. The result was a mosaic of incredible colours, constantly changing from an intense red to a pale blue, passing by an infinity of oranges and violets. The brightness of the stars and the figure of Elbarado, the almost wild planet in whose orbit they were going to dock with a Calamari Cruiser for refuelling, was more than enough to complete an incredible landscape. He would have liked to arrive at the precise moment the red giant appeared behind Elbarado, but it wouldn't happen again for another thirty to thirty-five hours, and they couldn't wait that long. But Dehanna's wide open mouth showed him that she was not disappointed with what they had got.



"This is... this is..." She stuttered unable to find the words. It wasn't as if she hadn't made any space travels, but passenger ships' observation decks were usually reserved to the first class, and she was not a woman of excessive luxuries. What she had been able to see until now had nothing to do with this impressive view.

"I know." Captain Orris said proudly. This was what he couldn't explain with words, what he would like to answer when someone - including Dehanna - asked him how he could bear to be so much time far from everything, to face so many dangers and even then return for more. The opportunity to feel this was that reason, but you had to be there to understand it. Of course, it was not the same for everybody, and after the first moments, or even years, of amazed wonder, people without his vocation would get bored of space, or even sick if they were given enough time. He saw that in her eyes when she turned her head to look at him. She would never get attached to space navigation like him, and that made him feel surprisingly sad. In his dreams he had seen their future life as a never ending journey, where they would only touch a planet time enough to leave again. But that was his dream, not hers. He wondered what her dream was, not for the first time, but more intensely than ever before.

Because he had to look for a point in the middle. He had understood that slowly, very slowly, during half of his life, but especially the last months. The reality of his feelings couldn't be denied any more. *I do love this woman*, he thought, with such strength that he feared that everybody could have heard it. For a second, he

wondered what his men would think of him, and a couple of those pilots, too, if they could see what he had in his mind at that precise moment, he, Orris *the Stone*, as he knew he was called in the jokes which went around. He had felt good being Orris *the Stone*, having the crew's respect as the best prize or recognition he might desire, but things had happened which had made him reconsider the image he had of himself. This was something he needed to talk with her about, explaining to her what had changed since the last time they had been together. His worst fear was that she didn't share his feelings at all, and although the way she looked at him seemed to indicate a positive answer, he knew that matters tended to get more complicated.

Dehanna took another long look at the view screen and then returned her attention to him. This time he could see better inside her look; *perhaps I'll never be a space woman myself, but now I understand you.* That was all he needed. Orris smiled and pointed to the bridge entrance.

"I suppose that you will be hungry after the visit, are you?" He whispered.

"More thirsty than hungry, but we can cover both necessities at the same time."

"Sure, let's go." He stopped a second and made a sign to one of the bridge officers. "Inform me when you have contacted with the *Rebel Dawn*."

"Yes, sir." The man replied without moving his eyes from his console. When he heard the door closing at his back, he looked at his partners and smiled. The people from the flight deck were right, who would have thought it. "Now, when did *The Stone* find the time to court that lady?" A chorus of laughter greeted the joke, but they added nothing. The officer shook his head. He looked at the closed door a second time and then to the view screens. They had not increased the lights yet, and for some moments he forgot the navigation displays and admired the silent spectacle. He surprised some of his partners doing the same. Nobody talked, everybody concentrated on his or her own thoughts. He discovered that he was happy for the Captain, and with a touch of nostalgia he thought of the last girlfriend he had had. Perhaps she would give him a second chance... He forced himself to return to his work. *Damn, this is terribly contagious!*

Captain Orris and Dehanna walked towards the lift that would take them to her quarters. They had been in silence since they had left the bridge. Orris was looking for a chance to return to the informal conversation; he didn't want to talk about what really mattered until it was the right moment, and the turbo lift was not obviously the right place. Their looks met and they smiled slightly embarrassed, feeling as if they had been surprised thinking too loudly. They both looked at the level indicator until the door opened with a low hiss. Orris had a sudden impulse and pressed a different button. The door closed again and Dehanna looked at him with curiosity.

"Have you forgotten where the quarters they have assigned me are?"

"No, of course not, but you said that you were more thirsty than hungry and I've thought that we could have a drink before dinner."

"Good idea." The door opened to what seemed a store of spare components and machinery. "Is this a shortcut to the bar?" She asked with a frown.

"Actually it is the only path to the bar I'm thinking about."

"Ah, this place is not the same now, too quiet for my taste." The first class technician Kostolitz sighed looking around. The hidden bar known as **Bomb Shelter** by White Squadron's pilots had all its tables empty except the one he and his friends were occupying at that moment, and it had been that way for the last week. The floor had never been so clean.

"Yes, you've repeated that a hundred times in the last hour." The chief engineer Lieutenant Marc Rammes said with a slight trace of annoyance.

"That not mentioning that we'll run out of drinks soon..." Kostolitz continued as if he hadn't heard his partner.

"You've repeated that, too."

"Don't look at me." Lieutenant Barris, the shuttle *Anubis*' pilot, said rising his palms. Without fighter cover, I can't assault an Imperial convoy as we used to do in these cases..." He laughed briefly at the memories of that.

"If Captain Orris had known something of those raids..." Lehla Dengar, the expert on shields and the only woman in the group said, leaving the end of the sentence floating on the air.

"I don't know." Barris said shaking his head. "You should have seen his expression when White Leader had to explain him the damages suffered by the ships."

"Don't tell me." Rammes said. "Hard training, that was the official excuse."

"What else?" Barris shrugged.

"Don't forget that it was me who had to repair everything." Kostolitz pointed out.

"Yes, but you never complained as long as you had your ration of Corellian beer, did you?" Dengar chuckled. Kostolitz took another sip from his bottle and shot at her with a finger.

The group kept in silence for a while. All of them had kept a close relationship with White Squadron's pilots, but that was not the only reason for the low spirits. Although none of them had an official confirmation, the chances were that all of them would be transferred to different destinations at the end of this trip. The *Joan d'Arc* had taken more punishment than most ships could have without disintegrating a couple of times, and it was time for her to receive some badly needed repairs. That would take too much time for its regular crew to remain onboard, especially with a war claiming all the re-born Republic's resources, and especially experienced pilots and technicians. This meant that their paths were about to separate after two years, the most intense any of them had known. To live that time under all that danger and pressure generated a lot of stress, but it also served to build the strongest friendships that anybody could hope to have. It would be different if the war was over, when they could easily keep in touch and with some luck even have the chance to visit each other. But being onboard different warships meant that next time they had a meeting, there might be some empty chairs. That was especially true in the case of Barris, who was always risking his life in search and rescue missions beyond all hope, and some times even beyond sanity. He caught Rammes' quick glance at the coloured patch he was wearing on his flight suit's chest, indicating he had received the *Kalidor Crescent* for one of his last actions, and realised what the engineer was thinking about. He smiled briefly in his direction and shrugged, as if indicating to his friend that he would be fine, but Barris was far from feeling that certainty. He was about to say something to break the uneasy silence when he noticed Kostolitz, the closest one to the narrow entrance, turning to look alarmed in that direction. An instant after hearing the steps the four people were standing in attention, struggling to hide their surprise and panic.

Captain Orris was there.

He enjoyed the sensation as he had never thought he would. All the stunned faces were looking at the front, rigid as sticks, wondering what was going to happen now. He had known of the hidden bar's existence almost since its creation, and his first reaction had been to find it, discover those responsible of the flagrant act of disobedience, and punish them as they deserved. He threatened to do so, and had all the crewmen and pilots - because he did know that the pilots were all involved - know the potential consequences for their careers if he found the place before having a confession. But he thought better and decided to do nothing, although he made new threats from time to time, just to keep everybody alert. It was good for the pilots' spirit to have such a place, and it was even better if they thought that there was some danger to it. They were under such a strong pressure, constantly flying in combat missions, that feeling that different kind of danger was fun and exciting, something to talk and laugh about when there were no more reasons for joy. Somehow it was even good for discipline. They were breaking so many rules with that bar that they would be afraid to break any others. Of course, that was not completely true. He couldn't remember any of them who had never been arrested at least once, and some of them seemed to live happily in the detention area. Definitely, the existence of their hidden bar was not their worst fault. A couple of times he had been about to finish the whole story when he found clear indications that they had used their fighters, and even the search and rescue shuttle - which also needed Barris' collaboration, by the way - to capture supplies for their damned bar. But he had considered that nobody had resulted wounded, that causing the heaviest possible

damage to the Imperials was their mission after all, and last but not least, he had imagined the face of the Imperial commanders who wouldn't receive their shipment of drinks. *Have water!* Orris had thought and laughed at the mere image of it, and finally left the final punishment for next time.

Of course, he had analysed the ship's schematics until his eyes ached, like a personal challenge, looking for a place where something like a bar could be hidden without notice. And he had found it, oh, yes, he did it. To determine the access path to the place was easier once he knew what he had to look for. None of those pilots could know where all *his* ship's cameras were located.

Ah, pilots. They thought they knew everything.

They should have been here now. He had reserved his dramatic appearance for a special occasion, but it had never showed up. At least he had trapped these four here. The sweat covering more than one forehead, and those eyes wide open, which their owners didn't dare move to take a look at him, was the most fun part of his role as *The Stone*. A man had the right to have his little satisfactions. But he couldn't prolong this for too long, or Dehanna, who stood in silence to his right wondering what this was all about, would think that he was a sadist. *Well, just a few moments more.*

"I think some of you will have an explanation for this, have you not?" A quick glance to Dehanna showed him that she had partially understood what was going on. One of the corners of her mouth was trying to move upwards, although she was able to prevent it from becoming a full smile. *Well done.* None of his victims had answered yet. They were probably trying to decide who was supposed to do so. He caught a look between Rammes and Barris, both Lieutenants, and in consequence the higher ranked officers present.

"Lieutenant Barris?" This was a moment as good as any other to make him pay for using the shuttle for something different than for its legitimate purposes.

"Sir?" *Smart guy*, Orris thought delighted, *he is trying to delay the unavoidable.*

"Can you explain me what this place is, and what you are all doing here?" The impatience in his tone made the man blink.

"I think you have discovered the legendary Bomb Shelter, sir." Barris looked at him for a millisecond, trying to guess what the Captain's reaction would be, but he thought better and looked forward again, at the wall. Orris followed the man's look, and found out that all the space was covered with pictures. Some of them were of the pilots, a few of ships, but exactly in front of Barris there was a photograph of Captain Orris with a crosshair painted on it. He didn't need to get closer to see that someone had been playing darts with it. With an effort he distinguished a "100" painted right between his eyes. Dehanna had seen the picture too, and this time she had more trouble to avoid a smile. The other corner of her mouth was fighting hard to help its brother in the attempt. Ralne had seen pictures like that before. He had even played darts on one of them back in the Naval Academy, but that was beside the point. This time it was *his* picture.

"Ah, at last I've found your little secret..." He started to pace with his hands clasped at his back, carefully watching Barris and the rest of his group. All of them were now looking at the photograph, Kostolitz with horror painted in his eyes. *Here was one of the usual players.* "I like it." Ralne said. "Especially the decoration. You've got an interesting collection here." He stopped directly in front of his photograph, which showed an impressive amount of holes. Dehanna could think what she wanted, but he was going to enjoy this moment. They owed him that much.

"I don't know what makes me more angry, to have never been invited to visit your charming little place, or the final proof that *all of you* disobeyed my orders." He pronounced very carefully the "all of you". Rammes swallowed hard. *"Intentionally and repeatedly."* He added barely five centimetres from Barris' nose. When he continued walking, the Captain noticed a picture of the more recent White Leader. He would have loved to see if she would have been able to keep that bright smile at this moment.

"White pilots." He said dragging the two words. "They were responsible for this."

"W-we all helped..., sir" Rammes said. "More or less." He added, probably wondering why he was so stupid to open his mouth without being asked to.

"It's true, sir" Lehla Dengar supported his partner.

Captain Orris smiled sarcastically. "Very noble. You could have said that you had just discovered this place an hour ago, exactly as I've done, but no. You have given me a confession and I have a witness who will testify in the court martial. Won't you, doctor Azprillia?" He had intentionally turned his back on the terrified officers, who seemed to notice Dehanna's presence for the first time. Only she could see Captain Orris' face. He winked at her and formed a word without sound on his lips. *Please*.

"Of course I will, Captain." She said with the firmest tone she was able to muster, considering she was about to die trying to keep in the laughter. Her cheeks were red, but only Ralne noticed the difference.

"All right. You were all aware of what my orders were." It was not a question, but almost all of them nodded. "And you all know what the *consequences* of this will be." He took as long as he could to spell the word "consequences".

"And you all thought me so stupid to not know where *exactly* this place was *since the very first moment*?" He had been increasing his voice's volume and when he ended the sentence he was almost shouting. Rammes had been about to jump, and Dengar had closed her eyes. Kostolitz had started to wink involuntarily, while Barris rose his head even more, his Adam's apple dancing up and down. Orris gave them time to consider his words. It had not been since the very first moment, but they didn't need to know this. They looked so miserable that Dehanna started to get worried. The Captain shook his head and took Dehanna's hand, leading her to the closest table. Once they were comfortably sat Ralne spoke again, this time in a very low tone, so low that they could hardly hear him.

"And finally, is no-one going to offer us something really cold?"

It was almost half a minute until they started to look at each other, while Ralne and Dehanna waited patiently.

"Did I hear what I think I heard?" Kostolitz whispered.

"I think I did, too." Dengar answered.

The four of them jumped and ran behind the bar at the same time, struggling to hold drinks and glasses with shaking hands. They miraculously didn't break anything, although someone accidentally let fall something like two hundred ice cubes, which slid in all directions. Kostolitz's first attempt to bring some drinks, whatever whatever they were, to the Captain and Dehanna's table finished with his bones on the floor, after he slipped on some of the perverse ice cubes. That was too much for Ralne, who lowly at first, and louder later, started to laugh, unable to stop. Dehanna ceased containing herself and laughed with him also, and soon had tears rolling down her face. The four officers couldn't understand what was happening, and even less believe it. Their puzzled faces was all the Captain needed to make his laughter attack stronger.

It was at least three minutes before he or Dehanna showed any symptoms of recovering something close to composure. Timidly, Rammes approached their table, while Barris and Dengar helped Kostolitz to recover a vertical position, not without almost being about to fall themselves, which menaced to prolong the laughs longer.

"Eeeer, Captain, are you ok?" Rammes said. Ralne was about to fall from his chair, his face completely red, his eyes covered with tears, and with noticeable problems to breathe correctly. He lifted a hand indicating he was about to reply and recovered his position on the chair, not without some effort. Dehanna was watching him with amusement. She had never seen him like this, and obviously, these crewmen hadn't either.

"Ah... Yes, I'm fine." He said at last. "It's just that... if you could have seen your faces..."

"Sir?" Orris was about to start again, but this time he was able to keep it under control.

"Don't worry, Rammes. All of you come and take a seat. Nobody is going to get arrested today."

"What about the court martial, sir?" Barris asked with doubt painted on his face.

"No, there won't be a court martial either. I'm not in that mood."

"It shows, if you don't mind me telling you, sir." Dengar said while she approached the table with Barris and Kostolitz.

"Don't be so formal, all of you. No more "sir" today. Just call me *Captain*.... pfssss..." He could hardly contain the giggles. *I feel ingenious today.* "Ah, sorry... Well, I'll make the introductions. This is doctor Dehanna Azprillia and these are Lieutenants Barris and Rammes, and Sergeants Dengar and Kostolitz.

"Nice to meet you all." Dehanna said, and shook her hand with them.

"You wanted to know my pilots," Orris said, "and that won't be possible now, but this is the place where they used to hide - to hide from me, mostly - and these are their closest friends among my crew, or maybe I should say their *accomplices*. Barris blushed slightly, but obviously the Captain was in an incredible good mood today. So good that he didn't seem like himself.

"I see." Dehanna answered, taking a better look around. "Interesting place."

"Yes, they used to call it the Bomb Shelter".

"Curious name."

"If you visit *Joan d'Arc's Reading Room*, you will find a *tale* explaining how it was given that name." Dengar said. She was a usual visitor of the Reading Room herself.

"Really? Interesting." Orris said. "It must be in a section that I've not checked out." Dengar bit her tongue and blushed. If the Captain took a look at some of those tales, he wouldn't be that happy. He didn't use to appear very nicely portrayed in them, to say the least...

"Basically, some pilots found this place and they thought the Captain wouldn't allow them to make a private bar of it..." Barris explained.

"Correct." The captain interrupted.

"... So they kept it a secret, known only by a few people." Barris finished with not a great conviction. "The Captain heard some rumours and threatened with serious punishment if he discovered the place and those responsible..."

"I think I get the picture, thanks." Dehanna said, glancing at the Captain, who was smiling with a self-satisfied look.

"Perhaps you are thinking that something hit me on my head, that stress has made me become crazy, or both things at once," he said, "but don't get confused. I had my own reasons to ignore what was happening here, and the active participation of *some individuals*." This time Barris paled under the Captain's revealing look. "Tomorrow, I'll again be *The Stone*," Kostolitz swallowed, "but today, I'll give you a truce." With that he winked at them. The wink had a second meaning that all of them understood perfectly: *Only for today*.

After a timid start, the conversation ran smoothly, mainly remembering adventures and anecdotes for Dehanna's delight. Orris smiled every time one of the other four made a little indiscretion, assuming that he knew all the details in the same way that he had known about the Bomb Shelter's existence. That was a trick he had been taught in the Academy, when they were told how to conduct an interrogatory, but he had never thought that it would result useful with his own crewmen. Nevertheless, he had no intention to abuse this fact. He was really enjoying the chat, and after some time he let his officers take the lead of the conversation. Of course, he was used to having chats like this with the higher ranked officers, but this was the first time he had allowed himself to be so relaxed in the presence of other members of the crew. He thought that he hadn't really known them until this moment. Once prudence was set aside, they were treating him almost like an old friend, and the sensation was great. It showed him that they not only respected him, but they had an elevated concept of their Captain, accepting him immediately as one of them when he descended from the bridge's height. He was fully aware that he couldn't do this regularly; the discipline would suffer for it, and he knew that he needed a blind obedience under combat situations, an immediate answer to every one of his orders. A Captain couldn't be expected to explain the reason behind his orders or he would lose his ship in the first emergency. That had been this way for thousands of years before even space travel, and had not changed since then. He had to admit that a part of him was actually very close to *The Stone*, but that was an extension of the personality he had developed out of necessity. As long as he didn't allow *The Stone* to eat Ralne Orris, he could be at peace with himself. He was glad to have a chance to show these few selected people there was more to him than what was usually seen onboard the ship. Tomorrow *The Stone* would be back, but today, today he could be himself.

Ralne abandoned his thoughts and tried to catch up with the conversation. Barris and Rammes were trying to decide if first White Leader, Commander Sherry Krenzel, had Jedi powers or not. The Captain gave them all his attention. The debate was interesting.

"Believe me," Rammes was saying, "I was there and I know what I saw."

"I've heard that story a dozen times," Kostolitz answered shaking his head. "But I can accept more easily that she had an incredibly lucky day, one that I've never seen before, I must admit it, than believing that a Jedi Lady dead eight hundred years ago was helping her to pilot her ship." Barris nodded in agreement. He knew what it was like to try something apparently impossible with a ship and live to tell the story. He was of the opinion that what many people called a miracle was a merging of ability and good luck, although it was a merger not always well balanced.

"I was there, too, Kostolitz." Dengar said. "She practically destroyed a Star Destroyer on her own, and she did it not a second too soon." She repressed a sudden shudder. "Without her, this ship and all of us who were onboard would be no more than floating debris. Have you read the report?"

"Do you mean that fairy story that Ibero wrote, "[Joan d'Arc](#)"?" She nodded. "I've always thought that the man has got a powerful imagination... I had a good time reading what you call a report, but you must accept that he was not there, and there was only one person who could have told him all the... fantastic details: Shok'wave herself. And don't forget that she was in a comma when she affirmed to have received the visit from that... ghost."

His argument couldn't be refused except as a question of faith, but Dengar made a last attempt.

"I've heard that Luke Skywalker was helped by a dead Jedi to destroy the first Death Star..."

"Fables, again fables. Something to scare the Imperial children with and make them eat all their dinner. Two full elite squadrons gave their lives to cover his tail, and at the end he had luck with his final shot." He lifted his hands when his friends started to complain, including Barris. Kostolitz was walking on dangerous terrain by disregarding one of the greatest heroes of the Rebellion. "All right, all right, don't misunderstand me, I'm not saying the guy is not a good pilot, and the same applies to Shok'wave; they have proven it a lot of times, but allow me not to believe in witches tales..."

There was a moment of silence after that, because they all had expressed their opinions and there was a technical equality. Dehanna had refused to give an opinion because she had not known White Commander, and on the other hand, her point of view was that of a scientist. She preferred not to be caught in a discussion about the existence or not of the Force. Then they seemed to remember that Captain Orris was there.

"What do you think, Captain?" Barris asked. "If there is someone here who can resolve this it's you. You spent more time with her than any of us did." What the pilot was not saying, but that none of his friends ignored, was that the relationship between the Commander of White Squadron and the Captain of the *Joan d'Arc* had been anything but easy. Ralne supposed that Barris expected him to support the sceptical side. He would have rather preferred to be left out of the debate, but now he had to answer. All of them were looking at him expectantly.

"Well, I think this is indeed a very complicated question. First we should decide if there exists something like the Force or not, and we are not the first ones to discuss about it. People have been arguing about this for generations. I'm inclined to think that the Force exists. We all have heard about the Jedi Order and the things they did throughout thousands of years. Although much of it can be legend, there are a lot of documented actions that we can't easily explain without the intervention of something else. Perhaps one day science will discover what it is, but until then, we can call it the Force." A very polite exit, but nothing that they hadn't heard many times before. He didn't have any other answer to give them.

"About if Commander Krenzel had or not that special power," he continued, "I have to admit that I did observe traces of it." Kostolitz opened his mouth in disbelief, and Barris seemed slightly disappointed. Rammes and Dengar smiled, but they didn't say anything. It was evident that the Captain had not finished. "Some times she was able to guess things that she just couldn't deduce, and even less know, as she affirmed, only with the data we had on the table. On such occasions there was something in her eyes, something that managed to convince even me about her arguments. And believe me, that is not easy at all. About the combat you've been talking about, I've watched the recordings dozens of times and I still can't understand how she did it. She was good, that can't be discussed, but not that good, with or without powers."

It's hard to believe that there might have been someone else piloting the fighter with her, but not much harder than explaining it as just a question of luck." He shrugged. "There were times, though, when she acted as if she had the same certainty, but she resulted to be wrong." All the faces turned serious, detecting a hidden reproach more in the Captain's tone than in his words. Ralne stopped, feeling that he was starting to speak too much, and kept the rest for himself. *She used to act as if she knew exactly what had to be done, and the only way to have it done was her way. I wanted more than her word or her intuition to take my decisions, and she seemed to find that unacceptable. That was what made a permanent discussion of our work. It would have been interesting to hear her point of view, but I guess I'll never have that chance.*

"Nevertheless," he continued without a noticeable pause, "although it is beside the point, there is something I want to make clear. She will always have my highest respect and consideration for all she did for the Alliance and for all of us. I've heard that some people accuse her of being the main cause for the disappearance of White Squadron as an operative unit, but that's not true. She created that squad and believed in it when nobody else did. She couldn't be forced to resign from her position as commander, although her present work didn't allow her to keep managing the squadron. She had won that privilege and she made use it. Her reasons for doing so are none of our business. Nothing has been lost. Pilots and ships were just transferred to be part of a new unit. About this vessel, we all agree that it deserves a rest, with or without White Squadron."

There was nothing more to say about this, and all of them understood it. The conversation returned to less serious subjects, but Ralne felt that it was time for him to leave. He waited politely for ten minutes and then he used a pause to say good bye.

"This has been a pleasure, ladies and gentlemen, but I fear I had promised Doctor Azprillia a good dinner..." He looked at Dehanna and she agreed with a nod. She noticed that the Captain wanted to talk to her in private, and she was eager to give him the chance.

"I'm very glad to have made all your acquaintances, really." She said while getting up. "I hope I'll be seeing you again before this trip ends."

"You always will be welcome at the Bomb Shelter, Doctor." Rammes said. "And you also, Captain, of course if..." The man realised that the Captain had promised a truce only for one day. But Ralne smiled and waved his hand.

"Don't worry, Rammes. But I've NEVER been here. Was that clear enough?"

"As a Calamarian ocean, sir."

"Great. You all can keep your Bomb Shelter." That was not saying much, considering all of them would be probably serving on different ships a week later. "I'm sure that the first thing your pilot friends will be doing on their new ship will be to create a new secret bar. But if I have the slightest suspicion that any of you come here while on duty..." He left the sentence go unfinished. "Or using New Republic property for unauthorised uses..." This time he stared directly at Barris, who saluted in the military fashion.

"You can trust us, sir."

Ralne just groaned and went out with Dehanna.

They were still laughing when they got to her quarters, where she wanted to make a stop to change her clothes before dinner. Ralne waited patiently in the corridor until she was ready. The cabin she had been assigned for her stay onboard was comfortable, but not big enough as to have something like a hall. And it wouldn't have shown much education on Ralne's part to insist on entering to observe how she got ready. He had more than one reason to be glad for having brought Dehanna to the Bomb Shelter. He couldn't remember the last time he had suffered such a laugh attack, and he had to admit that it made him feel really good, somehow more relaxed. Furthermore, he had appreciated that chance to be closer to his crew. They were good fellows, and he had enjoyed feeling like a normal person, forgetting he was the Captain for a while - only for a while -. But what was most important to him at this moment was that he felt he was ready to talk seriously to Dehanna.

He tried to remember when and how his feelings towards her had started, but he couldn't remember it. One day he had woken up and he just knew it. He had promised himself that he would do something about it, but

years had passed without him taking any step in the right direction. The question of what he loved the most of her couldn't be easily answered either. The first word that came to his mind was *everything*, which made even worse the thought about the time he had lost. *I can't help that now, and perhaps it's not too late.*

It was the first time that Dehanna had been alone since she had boarded the ship. Since she had received Ralne's call, she had been wondering what it was all about. Ralne seemed somewhat different, although it was hard to explain what had changed exactly. It was obvious that he was trying to tell her something, but she could only guess about what it was. When he had showed her the *Joan d'Arc's* bridge, her first thought had been *how am I going to compete with this?* It was not only the spacial landscape, but what he did for a living. This man had won battles, as terrible as it sounded! His crew treated him almost as a god, and that was not that strange. He had gone to the hell with them and had managed to bring them back safely. Compared with that, her lab was only a place with a lot of technology and people watching reaction curves on a monitor. She found it amazing, but not if she looked at it through his eyes. Was that what he was trying to explain, the reason because he always ran away after some days on a planet? Well, she could understand that and had always done it. But there was something more to it. What exactly, she didn't dare to expect anything, good or bad. Frankly, she didn't imagine Ralne abandoning this way of life, and she wouldn't leave hers behind to follow him throughout the galaxy. She had wondered many times if there was something they could do about it, but years had passed and Ralne's visits were less common every time. Was this a way for him to definitely say good bye? She had feared this moment, but she would get over it if it came.

Dehanna looked at her image in the mirror and shrugged. She was as ready as she could expect to be, and if she wanted to know what Ralne had on his mind, there was only one way to find out.

When she appeared again, wearing an elegant black dress, which deliciously enhanced her figure, Ralne felt suddenly weak. There was much more to this woman than what could be noticed with the eyes, but even that was incredible, at least for him. Perhaps I just don't deserve her. The thought made a chill run through his spine, but somehow he found the adequate words to praise her beauty and good taste, and offered her his arm to lead her to his quarters.

Dinner passed without incident, remembering anecdotes and interchanging news about common friends from the good old times. The journey had been long, since they had met for the first time in a coffee-shop at Burgala, where he was accomplishing his first tour of duty as third officer on an Imperial Navy Dreadnought, while she was studying her last course at the university. Those were the times when people started to talk more and more about the Rebellion against Emperor Palpatine. Burgala was way too far from the Imperial Center, formerly known as Coruscant, to be too involved in the galactic politics, but every new ship brought a new wave of rumours and unconfirmed news. The ambient in the Imperial Fleet was tense, but nothing compared with the times of the Clone Wars, which had ended almost thirty years before. The young Lieutenant Ralne Orris and his comrades had not even been born then, but many of their higher ranked officers had fought in them. They explained that the present situation had not that much of a war. The Rebels were just a group of terrorists who used the Fleet as target for their actions, not very spectacular by then. Ralne and Dehanna didn't pay too much attention to all that. They were just another young couple, composed of a young naval officer and a native of the planet, something very common in every place where the Navy had a permanent base. But something changed when Ralne's ship was sent to stifle a disorder at Beyenera, where the population had attacked the local Imperial garrison, apparently after some abuses from the troops detached there. That wouldn't have been so important, and it could even have finished with a punishment for the local Commander if the actions his soldiers were accused of were proven to be true. What made it something serious was the news about Rebel units supporting the revolt. Ralne said good bye, and went happily and proud to have a chance to see some action. When he returned, two weeks later, Dehanna was unable to make him speak about what had happened. Evidently, he was very affected but he didn't want to share it with her. It took him years to be able of tell her about how his first mission had finished in a massacre of civilians, following strict orders from the Imperial Palace. After that, things were changing gradually for them. The still insignificant rebellion was not enough to cause any commotion on Burgala, but it grew to be a major concern for the Imperial Navy. Ralne's trips began to be longer and more frequent, and that took its toll on their still young relationship. Ralne was becoming more serious, distant and mysterious, never wanting to talk about himself, but not really hearing when it was she who spoke. One day, she was told by a friend that Ralne's ship had arrived, but he didn't call her. Six months before, she would have tried to find out what was wrong with him, but then Dehanna thought that he just had decided on his own that things were over between them. That saved her a lot of problems, because Ralne had deserted. One of his comrades, whom she had met on a couple of occasions, visited her at her work, and asked her discretely

about Ralne, trying to appear that he was interested for personal reasons. She told him that they had broken up but that she was not looking for a new boyfriend, and less among Ralne's friends. She had to be convincing, because it was the last time she saw him or was bothered by someone asking questions about Ralne. Only a year after that did she learn what was going on, when she found a nervous Ralne waiting for her near her home. During some time, the emotion of their scarce encounters seemed to bring new life to their relationship, but that didn't last for too long. Time passed and Burgala became one of the planets that openly supported the Alliance. The base was taken by Rebel commandos and reused by the Alliance. Her only participation in those events were that she hid two women in her home for a night, when Ralne asked her to do so. She guessed that they were Rebel agents, and that was the closest she ever had come to feel she was a Rebel too. She couldn't imagine herself with a weapon in her hands, and Ralne never tried to convince her to get more actively involved, although she supported his same ideals. Not everybody could be a warrior, and furthermore, someone had to keep working on the non-military jobs, or the Alliance wouldn't last for too long, that was self-evident. Things between them returned to the beginning. He visited her when he had the chance, but they never took a step forward.

Nevertheless, there had been a lot of happy moments throughout the years, and those were the ones they remembered during the dinner, besides the funny stories about themselves and the people they both knew. Ralne didn't want this moment to end, because he feared that after this night nothing would be the same. If that was good or not, he was not in a hurry to find out. He would have liked to prolong the present, cheerful and carefree, before it belonged definitely to the past, although a part of him was consumed by impatience. Finally, when they finished the desserts there was a moment of silence. *It's now or never*, he thought, and looked at Dehanna directly into the eyes. She smiled. Ralne revised in his mind the hundred ways he had imagined to start this, but Dehanna anticipated him.

"It's the first time in twelve years you have invited me to visit one of your ships." She said without losing her smile, but with such intensity in her look that showed how serious she was. "I thank you for the ride and the guided tour, but you have not brought me here only for that, have you?"

"As always, you can read my mind as nobody else." He said perceiving with some annoyance a certain heat on his face, a clear sign that he was involuntarily blushing. *Damn, I shouldn't be this transparent...*

"Not as clearly as I would like," she said, "but today you're not the Ralne Orris I used to know..." He felt a void in his stomach, fearing to have disappointed her on something. "...But someone a bit closer to the Ralne Orris I thought you really were under that wall you've constructed around yourself."

"Yes, I suppose that is what a psychiatrist would say." He answered evasively, not knowing whether to feel relieved or worried by her comment.

"Don't get defensive with me, not tonight." She said shaking her head. "Or you will ruin everything." He seemed very affected by her implicit warning, but Dehanna didn't add anything to make him feel better or to soften her words. This game had lasted just for too long.

"Yes, you're right." He nodded after some moments. "No shields for this mission, I'm sorry. I'm not accustomed to feeling this vulnerable, you know."

"Now you're starting to do better." She encouraged him.

"Thanks." He smiled and decided to forget all his essayed speeches, realising that none of them would work. "It happened very recently, during one of our last missions." She nodded inviting him to continue. "We had to track down one of our best admirals, who had penetrated with several ships deep into Imperial space, and force him to return using all the means in our hands. He had lost many people in a mission and some of them were made prisoners. He just become crazy and tried to finish the Empire on his own...."

"I suppose it was as bad as it sounds. Did you and your men get him?"

"Almost. We rescued most of his people, but the Admiral sacrificed himself to give us the time we needed."

"He recovered sanity at last..."

"I think he did, although we will never be sure. I had a long talk with him before matters became complicated." Dehanna didn't say anything. She could feel that he was getting to the point. Ralne sighed. "I saw myself in that man, Dehanna, as I might be within twenty or thirty years if I don't do something to

prevent it. That was a man who had never had a life out of the duties he had imposed on himself. His crews were all the family he had known, and that surely had a lot to do in the way he acted. I noticed all that when I saw him, and he did too. He was staring at me as if he knew all everything me, my innermost thoughts, my feelings, letting me know that he had once been like me and been where I was. I got frightened. For the first time in my life I felt completely terrified before a battle. Not that I was not used to danger, it was not the fear to die in combat which almost paralysed me. What I feared was that if I had fallen there, I'd never have had the chance to know what I had been missing, to taste that life I had hoped to have some day." He made a pause and swallowed. Slowly, he lifted his eyes to look at her. "A life where I'd be with you."

It's done. I've said it.

Dehanna couldn't reply immediately. There was a time when she had hoped and prayed to hear something like this coming from his lips, but years had passed and she had got accustomed to this relationship, the sort of agreement that didn't commit them to anything. After the first disappointments, when she still waited for something different, she had managed to be reasonably happy with the life she had. She liked her work and enjoyed it, and she had made some good friends on the way. From time to time, she had had some romantic adventures - and she didn't deceive herself thinking that Ralne wouldn't be doing the same -, but somehow, none of her occasional lovers seemed to have what she needed to risk everything and give herself away forever. Only one man caused that effect on her, and that man only appeared in her life once within long periods of absence. Some times it was just for a few hours, and then he left her again with that sad and very well known sensation of melancholy. There had been times when he had called her, but she wasn't available, or she simply didn't want to go through the same again, and then she answered with an apology. But he didn't seem to notice. There was always a next time, and she finally went where he was waiting for her. She went without any hope, but feeling alive as if it was life itself what he gave her with every encounter. She didn't know how important she was for him, but she must mean something, or he wouldn't insist on coming back again and again, even after a couple of failed encounters. Sometimes she believed that his feelings were the same as hers, but finally it was he who always said good bye.

"And what kind of life would that be?" She asked at last, visibly touched. Dehanna realised the courage he had needed to put together to get there and she didn't want him to misinterpret her words. She took his hand over the table to show him that she was not implicitly rejecting him, her eyes brightening with a deep emotion.

"I can't promise that I will always be beside you." He said after some instants, perceiving a trace of disappointment in her. *How can I be so stupid?* He had begun saying what he was not going to do or accept. Ralne took her hand, which she had started to move away. "Listen to me. Right now I have a duty which I can't turn my back on." *It's just perfect, you fool.* Now he had continued with the apologies, and precisely of the kind he had just told her the Admiral had used to not have a life.

"Don't worry, I can understand that." She said, trying to not seem as affected as she was. "I've never demanded anything of you, and I can't imagine you forgetting your obligations. I have not asked for explanations, either, so you don't need to give any." She made a new attempt to set her hand free, but Ralne Ralne didn't allow it.

"Please, let me finish." He said. "I've not made you come here for nothing." He softened his grip, but she left her hand where it was. He thanked her in silence before continuing. "There are a lot of things I just can't abandon, yes, or I wouldn't be who I am, but what I'm trying to make you know is that those things are not my life, not anymore. My life is where you are, this is what I've understood at last, after all these years. You were the only reason for me returning every time, after every travel. It's only that I didn't know it. No, no, that is not true." He said shaking his head. "I did know it, but I didn't want to admit it." Dehanna felt as if time stopped. He had never told her things like this, but she could see in his eyes that he was speaking the truth. Everything seemed to turn around her, making her feel as if all this was no more than a dream. But Ralne's hand over hers was real. She could feel his heat, the humidity of his sweat, the texture of his skin, the strength of his fingers, and she knew that all this was really happening.

"What I want to make you know," he continued, "is that I want to do my best to make you feel happy, and make of that the only mission that matters, the only objective of my whole life. I want to be with you every second that I can steal from the rest of the universe. I want to have a home of our own, in Burgala or wherever you want it. To have children, if it's not too late for us." She laughed when he said that, feeling that she was about to shed a tear. "I love you, Dehanna. I've always loved you, and I always will, whatever you say in the next minute." Then she noticed the tear on his face and blinked to let hers fall. What remained of the bottle of wine dropped when she briskly stood up and he did the same to receive her hug.

"Dehanna, I..."

"Shhh, don't say anything more. Actually, you could be the rest of our lives without saying anything more and and I wouldn't notice."

For a second he thought of a thousand holo-movies he had seen. This was the moment when someone knocked on the door, the door-bell chimed or an alarm sounded somewhere. But none of that happened, neither then nor for the next eight hours.

The day after Captain Orris gave them the fright of their lives, Rammes, Dengar, Barris and Kostolitz were sat again at the same table in the Bomb Shelter. A couple of hours later, the *Joan d'Arc* would be docking with the *Rebel Dawn* and they would receive their new orders. If they were going to be transferred to other destinations, as it seemed most probable, or not, they would know then. The four friends had arranged their duty shifts to have this time together, and they were now doing their best to not show low spirits.

"All right, these are the last ones!" Barris announced uncorking a Blue Stuff bottle. There was another one waiting between ice cubes. "The only ones that remain from the legendary assault on the Imperial convoy that carried them."

"I thought that Vyper and Granite had taken the last boxes with them." Rammes said.

"But not these two, brother. I had them in a safe place waiting for a moment like this. And I want you to know that I was about to have them all for myself when I returned from the mission that won this for me." he said pointing to the *Kalidor Crescent* patch.

"The effort is appreciated, pal." Kostolitz said patting Barris' back.

"Has someone seen the Captain?" Lehla Dengar asked. "I thought that, after what happened yesterday," - some coughs accompanied her remark -, "we might invite him and his visitor to share this with us."

"He has given orders to not being disturbed until ten minutes before contacting the *Rebel Dawn*." Barris explained with a big smile painted on his face.

"Whoaaaa, then it was what it seemed!" Kostolitz exclaimed. "Who would have thought the Captain had a heart after all..."

"Well, the lady is cute enough as to make the *stones* melt." Rammes said with a wink, receiving a nudge from Dengar. "Ouch, that hurts!" He yelled with notable exaggeration.

"Give the boy a break, Lehla." Barris said. "You can also melt some stones yourself." Dengar grimaced.

"Some times I don't know how I bear you all." She said shaking her head theatrically, causing the three men to laugh.

"Enough of this." Kostolitz said. "I'm thirsty, and here is a bottle calling us with its tempting voice."

"All right, show me your glasses." Barris said and started to serve the blue liquid.

"A moment, please!" Dengar said. "We need a toast!"

"Yes, I agree." Rammes nodded. "Do you think we have enough for four rounds, Barris?"

"Sure! We have two bottles, remember."

"Then let's have four toasts, a different one for each one of us. Ladies first."

"Very good." Dengar accepted. "I see that you're recovering part of your good manners." She lifted her glass and waited until her friends did the same. "Forgive me if I'm such a romantic, but this is for the Captain and

that woman of his. Good luck for them both!"

"For the Captain and his girlfriend!" They all said enthusiastically and finished their glasses.

"All right, my turn." Barris said. "We all have shared a lot of things with White pilots, and we must not forget that they discovered this place, so my toast is for them. Good luck for them and their new squad! For Wolfshead Squadron!"

"For Wolfshead Squadron!" A second later the glasses were empty again. Barris had to uncork the second bottle to fill all of them again. "Boy, we're going to get a good one..." He said laughing.

"Yes, we better have a cold shower after this." Rammes commented, causing some more laughs. "Well, it's my toast now." With his free hand he signalled all the space around them. "This is for this ship, which kept all all of us alive these two years, the stars know how bad we saw it more than once. Yes, there have been difficult moments, but we have had some very good ones, too. This is for the *Joan d'Arc*!"

"For the Joan d'Arc!" They proclaimed. The third round was consumed as quickly as the previous ones. Dengar got the giggles, which soon extended to her friends. "Someone is going to have to help me climb those stairs." She said between hiccups. "The three men volunteered for that mission at the same time, and that caused a new chorus of laughter. Finally, Kostolitz lifted his hand demanding silence and prepared himself for the last toast, waiting until Barris had all four glasses filled.

"All right, we've had toasts for the Captain and his girlfriend..." some new giggles from his friends menaced with making it impossible for the technician to continue, "...For our friends the pilots, and for the ship, this wonderful and venerable ship. All of this is great and undoubtedly they well deserved those toasts. But we're forgetting something veeeeery important here."

"And what's that?" Barris asked.

Kostolitz smiled to all of them and lifted his glass ceremoniously. He waited some instants to rise the expectation and then roared "For all of us, who kept the whole thing moving!"

"For all of us!" The friends exclaimed, making their glasses touch before finishing with its content. They laughed for more than a minute, but they all fell silent gradually. It was Lehla Dengar who spoke to express what all of them were thinking of."

"Hey, whatever happens, let's not forget each other, and let's hope that our ways will cross again, OK?"

"OK, Lehla." Rammes said putting his arm over her shoulders and kissing her on the forehead. There was a moment when it seemed she was about to cry, but then Kostolitz put another kiss on her forehead closely followed by Barris. Then Rammes decided to have a second try, and soon she had to use her fists to force them to move away.

"You are all impossible!" She yelled, although what she actually meant was *I love you all*, and that was precisely what her friends understood.

When they abandoned the Bomb Shelter, Barris took a look back and noticed that the last bottle still had a half of its content intact."

"We can't waste that, it would be a sacrilege!" He exclaimed.

"Put the cork in as best as you can, and leave the bottle by the Captain's door." Rammes suggested with a wink. "He may appreciate it."

Barris recovered the bottle and cork and finally the door closed behind them. Automatically the lights died in the Bomb Shelter. The echoes of a thousand conversations, the stories told again and again, never exactly the same, the jokes from a hundred worlds, the shouts and laughs, and also some tears, all that remained guarded by the silent walls that had been the only witness. That was the place where a group of young people had tried to forget the war raging around them, pretending they were safe. There they had mourned the friends that never would return, and celebrated noisily the newcomers. If there was a word to describe the story that had been written inside this place, that was *friendship*, and for all those who had been there

enough time, the place itself had become a synonym of the word. Perhaps they would forget the conversations, the stories, the jokes, the shouts, the laughs and the tears, but one thing was for sure: they would never forget the Bomb Shelter.

As they would never forget the battered ship they had called home, the Nebulon-B Frigate constructed to be part of the Imperial Navy, but captured and recovered for the cause of freedom. On its hull, a blue and white winged horse, symbol of a fighter squadron that flew eight hundred years ago, lead by a Jedi Lady they knew as Joan d'Arc. A Jedi who, believe it or not, returned from death to help this ship and its crew to win a battle that had to be won, and whose name the ship received as a grateful tribute. The ship had known many combats and dramatic situations, and now it would navigate towards a well-deserved rest. The wounds received through its serving time would be repaired, and some day, the *Joan d'Arc* would be ready to write new pages in the galaxy's chronicle, although other people would play the lead roles.

A light illuminated a certain part of its hull. The man who had been the *Joan d'Arc*'s last captain opened the door of his quarters. The 3PO silvery droid handed him part of Dehanna's luggage, as he had requested five minutes ago.

"Perhaps you may want me to remove the bottle from the entrance, sir." The droid said politely.

"What bottle?" He asked following the droid's look to the ground. "Ah, this bottle..." He found a half bottle of Blue Stuff covered with ice cubes and escorted by two glasses, without any note to explain who had sent the unexpected gift. But Ralne didn't have any doubts about their identity.

"No, thank you. I'll take care of it myself." He said.

"As you prefer, sir." The droid bowed and left with a sound of servo-motivators. Ralne took the bottle and the glasses, shook his head and laughed briefly before returning to the room."

"Look what some anonymous friends have left here for us." He said.

"It seems that someone had a party," Dehanna said taking a look at the bottle, "and wanted us to be part of it."

"Well, we have ten minutes before I'm expected on the bridge." He handed her one of the glasses and filled both carefully. Ralne felt that he had never been as happy as he had been during the last hours. It would be hard to wipe the smile from his face before entering the bridge again, but now, there was no reason to hide the sentiment to the woman who was the only cause of it.

"This is for you." He said.

"For dreams that come true." She answered. There were a lot of details to discuss about, and they had only started to do so, but all that could wait. She believed him when he told her that he wanted to recover the lost time, that there was a place between their respective works and responsibilities where they could construct a future for them both, and she was willing to do her part of that compromise. It wouldn't be easy, but it never was for anybody. They finished their glasses looking into the other's eyes.

"Well," she said after the kiss that followed, "I suppose you have a ship to command."

"Yes," he answered taking a short glance at his waist-chronograph, "but this time you're coming with me." Although it would be most convenient if you wear some more clothes..." She laughed and started to follow his recommendation.

"You have work to do this time. Won't be my presence against the regulations?"

"Hmmm, no, unusual in any case, but even if there was a rule against civilians on the bridge during an approach manoeuvre, I'm the Captain of the ship. Nobody is going to discuss about regulations with Orris *the Stone*." He winked at her and opened the door when she was ready. "Come on, let's confirm a couple of rumours."

Their laughter filled the corridor on their way to the nearest turbo-lift.

THE END



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