



Reading Room

StarWars FanFiction

POV: Dreams and Memories

By Michael Stauber

This story is dedicated to the best two friends I've ever had. For both of them I'd storm the gates of hell, armed with only a bucket of water. For one of them I did, getting burned so badly that the scars will remain forever.

This story is entirely fiction and combines the pains and struggles of two separate events of misplaced confidence and hurt feelings into a single line of events. Writing it has hammered the last and final nail into this coffin (in more than one sense) and helped me to leave it all behind. In a distant past, not so long ago and yet so far. Unrepairable and yet teasing and itching, as Dreams and Memories - and scars for that matter - always do.

[Aboard the Alliance Frigate *Joan d'Arc*:]

Cor contritum et humiliatum Deus non despiciet.

The outlet was blowing a stream of cold, almost chilly air down on his sweat covered neck, but after the heat of the last couple of hours it was a more than welcome feeling for Captain Michael "Vyper" Stauber, as he shifted in his chair and lighted another cigarette. Still exhausted and drained from combat he inhaled deeply and gave Commander Shok'wave an amused look. She was sitting behind the desk of her small, but neat and tidy office and radiated anger like a broken heatsink, still watching the onboard camera's replay of his last combat engagement. Her fingers were clenching the remote control and since the beginning of the replay her lips had transformed into thin, bloodless lines. Instead of watching the clip of his last "Reconnaissance" flight, that had lead to the destruction of an Imperial Escort Carrier and its fighter complement, he preferred to watch his commanding officers reactions, but from where he was sitting it was hard to ignore the fast moving action on the screen.

Vyper could tell that she was about to explode and that her anger could flare any second by now. He inhaled deeply and vented the smoke through his nose, waiting for the things to come. He didn't care.

"What the hell did you think when you pulled that stunts?", she said with a very dangerous tone in her voice, as she replayed the combat recordings from his A-Wing, that had been uploaded into the *Joan d'Arc*'s computer as soon as he had touched down.

Vyper didn't say anything and impassively watched as the just ended Battle unfolded again in front of him. His lone A-Wing, out for a routine test flight after an motivator replacement, had run into an Imperial Escort Carrier just two sectors away. Vyper saw how his A-Wing swept through the first wave of TIE Interceptors and blew two of them to bits and pieces even before he could halfway recharge his shields, that he had fully drained in order to get more speed out of the agile A-Wing as soon as he had left the *Joan d'Arc*.

Then he closed onto the third and fourth Interceptor, which frantically tried to evade the seemingly unavoidable collision. Shok'wave squirmed for an instance, as the screen showed the two TIE Interceptor's approaching his A-Wing head on. Vyper had fired in the last possible instance and obliterated the fiercely firing Imperial fighters into expanding clouds of fire and debris, just to plunge through the expanding clouds. He still remembered the thuds and bangs as some bits and pieces had hit his shields and he felt a kind of relief that the video didn't show how close one of the T/I's flailing solar panels had slid past his A-Wing's puny fuselage. The A-Wing spun around in a victory roll, pulled up hard and closed onto the next flight of Imperial fighters that just had launched. The combat recording showed him tangling with the Eyeballs and he shot them down almost as fast as the Carrier could launch one wave after another. After several minutes the furball had drawn him so close to the Imperial warship, that the Carrier's defensive weaponry could leash out onto him. So Vyper had done the only logical thing and brought the fight even closer to the Carrier. The clip showed him racing at top speed towards the Carrier, while blazing green laser fingers sizzled around him and tried to touch his fragile A-Wing. Only a few did actually hit, while he worked the controls and threw the A-Wing from one side to another and spiraled it around in a random fashion. The impressively sized superstructure of the Carrier grew bigger and bigger, until it more than filled out the entire video screen.

Vyper leaned back and pulled on his cigarette again, because he knew what came next. The A-Wing pulled out only two feet above the hull of the Carrier and raced down its short and sturdy hull, which was small compared to a real warship, but still looking impressively big, especially up close and personal on a video-recording.

At that time Shok'wave keyed the remote, killed the screen and whirled around in her chair to face him. Her sparkling eyes were half shut and if looks could have killed, nobody could have saved Vyper, that he was sure of. With an angry "thump" she slammed the remote on her desk, where it hit a cup filled with pencils, tumbling it over and spreading its contents all over the desks surface.

"Do you have a death wish or what? What the fuck did you think by pulling a stunt like this? Not only that you engaged into a fight with a craft that has not been certified combat ready by maintenance, you also don't radio for orders or assistance and plow yourself into almost any hostile craft that comes into your crosshairs! You endangered your live and the security of the *Joan d'Arc* and all hands aboard. Tell me one reason why I shouldn't ground you, once and for all!"

Some time ago Vyper would have cared, but in the last couple of weeks that had changed. Something old, long forgotten, long dead had emerged from the fogs and shadows of the past and that had made a difference. He wanted to explain, wanted her to know, but he knew that this was something he had to deal with all by himself. If he had to break the strong bond of friendship between them, then it had to happen, because there was no choice.

Instead of answering her questions he again pulled on his cigarette. Slowly he let the smoke go and returned her fierce stare without any impression. For an eternity - at least several seconds - they maintained the stare, which turned into a contest of willpower. Finally Vyper gave up and used another pull on his cigarette for an excuse to break the eye contact.

"I nailed them all. I got back in one piece. Nothing else matters, so don't raise a fuzz. Ma'am!"

Shok'wave's hand washed over a pile of papers on the desk and sent them flying into the air, as she rose from her chair: "Don't get cocky with me! You're endangering your fighter, your comrades and yourself! This is not the time to take stupid risks or to pull stunts like that. I really should ground you until you get back to reason or at least until I have found out what's your problem."

He crossed his legs and slowly blew a cloud of smoke up in the air, while his face remained totally impassive.

Shok'wave sighed heavily and let go a deep breath. Softness returned to her voice as she said: "Look, I don't know what your poison is, but in the last four weeks you have changed a lot. Everybody noticed it, not only me alone. Most of the time you lock yourself away in your cabin and at nights you've been seen walking around in the lower decks a lot. Not speaking of your unscheduled "Reconnaissance" flights. Fourteen of them in 28 days and none of them had a regular flight plan. I signed them all off, without asking any questions, but for me it looks like you're either fighting a private war against the Empire, or that you're trying hard to kill yourself along the way. You're avoiding your comrades, you're avoiding me and you look like you're hunted by a whole legion of ghosts. Bluntly put: You look like shit. When did you sleep the last time and what is your problem?"

Vyper studied his fingernails, while Shok's words sunk into him. He couldn't help, but what she just had said came very close to the truth. The chilly air, still blowing onto his neck, made him shiver. Slowly and with aching knees he rose to his feet, dropped his cigarette into the ashtray and looked his commanding officer into the eyes again. Then he straightened his shoulders and said: "If that's all then I guess I'm dismissed. See you later."

He gave her a sloppy two finger salute, turned around and walked to the door. Before he had opened it, the remote control slammed into the wall besides him, missing his ear by just a few inches.

"Damn it! I'm not finished yet!", Shok'wave screamed at his back. "Answer the damn questions or ...". She left the rest of her sentence uncompleted, but for Vyper it was more than clear what she meant by it. Maybe she was as scared of saying it, as he was careless of hearing the words that remained unspoken.

Without turning around he said softly, but with an unshaken voice: "You don't want to know. Trust me. You don't want to know."

Then he opened the door and slowly walked out, as if he had to carry the burden of the whole world on his shoulders. He almost ran into Psycho, who was just approaching Shok'wave's cabin. Without looking up Vyper said after a moment of hesitation: "If I were you, then I'd rather come back later. She's in a shitty mood right now."

Psycho shook his head and with his long arms he made a gesture like he tried to shy a cloud of flies away: "Ah, I just want to go over some working details with her. Should be no big deal."

Vyper just gave him his "I warned you!"-look and like being guided by remote he walked through the corridors of the *Joan d'Arc* until he had reached his cabin. As soon as the door had closed behind him he turned around and with his bare fist he punched the wall so hard that the skin above his knuckled burst open. Soaring pain shot through his hand, but he welcomed it and the warmth that filled his whole lower right arm and creaped up to the tightened muscles of his shoulder. He let go a deep breath and slowly walked over to his desk, where he slumped into the waiting chair. The bottle was still half filled with the remains from last night and so he unscrewed it and poured several fingers of gold shimmering fluid into a dirty glass. While taking a couple of sips he unfolded the four sheets of papers that he withdrew from a pocket of his flightsuit and with shaking, unsteady hands he straightened the letter out on the surface of the wooden desk. With eyes that didn't see he looked at the unmistakably female handwriting. It was a very unusual message in more than one ways. It wasn't an electronically delivered message, but one that came in an sealed envelope and which had been written on real paper. Blue ink on white paper. An anachronism since eons, but very fitting, as he acknowledged with a feint smile, because it resembled a voice from the past. A voice that he could hear loud and clear in his ears and now it called him to abandon, if not betray his duty and his friends. A voice, that he easily could assign to the beautiful face that it belonged to. A person, that he hadn't seen since a long time and that he thought it would be as dead as the feelings the he once had for this very special person. But he knew better - always had. A love like that never dies and it remains forever and all times. Grows even stronger with time and distance that went by, like a wind that enkindles a tiny, little flame and turns it into a demanding and all consuming wildfire.

The warmth or the alcohol unfolded it's heat in his stomach, while he listened to the voice from the past and thought of all the dreams that he once had. Dreams and memories ... that was all that was left. Was it? He didn't know. He shifted uneasily in his seat and the holster of his sidearm slumped into the armrests of his chair. Slowly he withdrew it and the cold, polished steel of the FE-MEK 45 Assault Blaster felt very good and comfortable in his hand. He made his decision, knowing that it wasn't even a choice, but the only thing that he ever had wanted and longed for, no matter what the consequences were. A feeling like Deja Vu overcame him, while he shifted the Blaster uneasily in his hands and he remembered that he had been there before, a long time ago. Almost in another live. A live over and gone, but not forgotten. "En Brera. No Choice.", he mumbled, as the blaster slid from his numb fingers and as he allowed despair to take over, as the memories of his darkest hour came back from their grave to haunt him ...

[Three years earlier, Tarada VI, Imperial Training Facility]

Questo e luogo di lacrime!
This is a place of tears!

- Giacomo Puccini, *Tosca*

The light of the two moons threw long shadows through the broken roof of the old cathedral and through the few pieces of colored windows that had remained intact. The towering, massive structures of the building were like hands that reached up to the night's sky that was clearly visible in all its might and made spectators feel little and insignificant. Like a little wheel in the big gearbox that resembled the universe and everything in it. He couldn't help it, but it was an odd feeling to be in a building and to see the sky from within, but this House of God was just another casualty of war, as was he and so many others that he cared about. And still, the universe's gearbox went on, slowly grinding the remaining wheels into oblivion.

His slow and careful steps could be clearly heard, because every time his boot came down gravel and pieces of broken glass made noise under his feet. The figure in the black leather flightsuit wandered to the middle of the cathedral and sat down on one of the bigger pieces of rock that were laying around everywhere. He sighed heavily and looked up into the beautiful and clear sky, deep in thoughts and low in spirit. He knew that he shouldn't have gotten here. Not tonight, maybe not at all, but he needed to be alone and not in the company of others, especially not while they were celebrating. His mind wasn't on celebrating and all he felt was a very big loss and a grief stronger than he could bear.

His eyes filled with the hint of tears as they scanned the sky for one specific bright star and without much trouble he could make it out. This star had a very special meaning for him. This far away sun was as warm and inviting as it was unreachable, but still it was teasing. Inviting him to come over and at the same time it was reminding him that this wasn't possible.

He could imagine how the bright and warm light of this sun lightened up a sky not much different from this one, creating spectacular sunrises over the grassy hills of a river's valley that had a very special kind of tree on the slopes of a low riverbank. The sweet memory of a dream came to his mind, a dream that had not come true. A dream that he couldn't give up or abandon, because of the power of his love. A love like none before and like none would ever be again. He had to let her go, because it was the only option and it tore him apart. How could he live on without her love? The loneliness, the emptiness and the void that her absence created in his heart was more than he could bear. Every awake hour he thought about her and in his sleep faint images of what was and what could have been haunted him in his dreams. He didn't know how he could live on without her love and for sure he didn't want to live on without her.

His hands clenched to fists as he swallowed another wave of pain and agony that shook his body. He could barely breath and barely think straight. Suddenly he realized that somehow his FE-MEK45 assault blaster had slipped into his hand. It was fully charged, the safety was off and his index finger rested comfortably on the trigger. The cold steel felt reassuring and very comfortable as if it held all the answers he was looking for. He had never thought about *that* before, but this time it was different. It was the solution he was looking for, as it would end his pain. Then he could dream on forever and maybe ... maybe in another live there would be a chance to make this dream real. Slowly he raised the blaster, his eyes still fixed on the gleaming light of the distant star.

"I will always love you.", his voice whispered, as he increased the pressure on the trigger and readied himself to embraced the kiss of death.

"That's one of my favorite places, too, Lieutenant. I usually come here when I've got a lot of things on my mind and need a getaway from Squadron business.", a loud voice said from behind and out of the darkness.

Slowly the Lieutenant lowered the blaster and switched the safety back on. Then he turned around and mustered the approaching person, whose bulky figure turned into the shape of Captain St. John's, the executive officer of the Imperial Pilots Training Facility.

"Well, Lieutenant Stauber, looks like I came right on time", the Captain explained as he sat down besides him on the piece of rock.

The young pilot said nothing and looked at the blaster in his hands and then up to the sky. For a long time they said nothing, until Vyper finally broke the silence: "Maybe you should have come a few minutes later."

The Captain slowly took the blaster out of Vyper's hands and inspected it carefully. "Gods of Absalom, you and I have more similarities than you think. The reason why you got so far in your advanced pilot training, so fast and with that kind of success, is easy to understand. At least for me. I've seen it in your eyes the first day when you arrived and I've seen it every time when we put you in a cockpit. You don't care about tomorrow, as if you know that there would be no tomorrow for you. At least none you would like to come

true."

Vyper turned his head and looked his superior in the eyes. He saw understanding in this fatherly eyes and he also saw pain.

"Yes, it's right. I've been there before and I know how you feel.", St. John added.

Then he pointed up to the sky and said: "Do you see the faint red light at the lower end of the Crimean Cluster? That's Paladia, the star that my eyes automatically search for when I visit this place from time to time, at clear nights like this."

The Captain paused for a moment and then he continued with a low voice: "We were outnumbered, outwitted and outmaneuvered. Half of our fighters went down in an eyeblink and she was the first one who died. Something inside of me died, too. We won the battle, but at a terrible price and never again it has been like before for me. Often I still wonder what I did do wrong, what else I could have done, or what else I could have said to make a difference."

The captain paused for a moment as his eyes searched those of the Lieutenant. "Sometimes you can't."

Vyper looked at "The Old Man" as they had called him more often than not, but always behind his back. His skills as a pilot and as an officer were undoubted. Every time when they had flown against him he had run circles around the trainees and caused much embarrassment and red ears. But he never had let them feel the kind of superiority that many other imperial officers showed. Instead he had always been the one who offered his advice and helped them to overcome any weakness and lack of experience that they had. For the first time Vyper was able to see behind the impenetrable mask of his superior and he didn't know what to say.

The Captain sighed and handed him the blaster back, while he slowly raised himself to his feet. "I don't have any answers for you. You can leave this building together with me and join the others to celebrate the successful completion of your training and your upcoming transfer to Shadow Strikefighter Wing, or you can stay behind and deal with the past. Whatever you do, remember that there is always an end to a night and that there is another sunrise. There will never be a sunrise like the one you grief about, but nobody can take you the memory of it."

With a low voice he then added: "Sometimes it's all that prevails: Dreams and memories."

Then Captain St. John slowly walked through the dark hallway and his bulky figure merged with the darkness that surrounded them both. A chilly, cold darkness under a star-spangled sky.

Vyper glanced up to his star and the blaster felt very heavy in his hands. The pain was still there and he knew that it never would go away. Not for the rest of his live, no matter how long it would last. But he then knew that it would last longer than this night. "*En Brera - No choice? Maybe.*", he thought. "*Maybe ...*"

[Present time and Date, the Bomb Shelter, aboard the Alliance Frigate *Joan d'Arc*]

An Ally has to be watched like an Enemy.
- Joseph Stalin

Granite took another sip from his flame-thrower and leaned back as far as his barstool and his balance allowed. Then he put his head closer to Ibero's ear and said in a low voice: "You've seen Vyper today? He doesn't look that good. You've got any idea what's up with him?"

Dario didn't look up as he shook his head. Then he for himself took a big sip from the blue stuff that he preferred. "I have no idea, but I'm worried, too. Our higher up's seem to be in a shitty mood. Did you hear the screaming coming from Shok's office yesterday?", he said, while shaking his head. Then he nodded at Torpedo, who just joined them at the bar and took possession of a free stool.

Granite nodded slowly and a wry smile appeared on his face, as he said: "Yeah, I was in CIC at that time, just two rooms and a couple of ventilation ducts away. But I'm sure you could also hear it as far as

Engineering."

The pilot from planet Iberya played with his empty glass and then ordered a cup of coffee to get his head clear. He had to fly tomorrow, so he needed to be up to speed.

Torpedo laughed, while he grabbed himself a beer and popped the bottle open. He looked around before he finally said: "As far as I know Psycho stumbled into it by accident, but the way it looks a lot of feathers got ruffled. Shok's is pissed - god knows why, Psycho is upset because she denied him the additional workers for his security detail and the hell knows what's bothering Vyper. He doesn't even attend to the briefings anymore."

Dario finally took a sip from his fresh served coffee and looked at Torpedo with amazement. "Really?"

Granite and Dario exchanged looks.

Torpedo shook his head. "Yeah, and I hope that means they've finally grounded him. Heck, each time he returns from one of his sorties I'm wondering what's falling apart first: His A-Wing, or it's pilot."

The Caldanian pilot shrugged Torpedo's remark off and between sips he said: "Ah, I don't know. You need more than a bunch of Imperial wannabe pilots to scorch our evil one. He's more than able to handle whatever they throw at him, but maybe he needs a brake, like we all do. Heck, this patrol duty is getting on everybody's nerves ..."

"Yeah, it's almost as if he isn't himself anymore.", Dario said. "He's been taking a lot of risks in the last weeks and I wonder if it has anything to do with the re-supply ship that docked with us four weeks earlier. Maybe he knows something that we don't know. Maybe there's some trouble ahead like the last time when High Command pulled us back for some R&R. Sheesh, now that was fun!"

Owen rolled his eyes and then finished his flame-thrower. "Oh yeah. If that's what they call a day on the beach, then I'll pass this time. But then again, if the news are that bad, then the rest of our Command Staff should chicken out as well. Let's keep an eye on the situation, OK?"

"Sounds fine with me.", Torpedo said. "But right now I wouldn't want to fly on Vyper's wing and I don't envy anybody that has to."

With that he glanced at Dario, who was assigned to fly patrol with "Captain Zombie", a term which originated from the lower decks of the *Joan* and had come up two weeks earlier when a strolling tech had run into what looked like a ghost for him when he bumped into Vyper in a dark hallway, late in the night.

Dario shrugged it off and even though that he had some concerns, which he preferred to withhold, he admitted: "Sometimes we all have our problems and then it's good to have someone out to watch our backs. I'm prepared and I can handle it."

Torpedo finished his beer and put the bottle back on the polished surface of the bar.

"I hope so, my friend, but if I were you, then I'd watch my back very carefully out there. Never forget where he comes from."

Dario straightened his back, clenched his fists and gave Torpedo a very hard stare: "What do you mean by that?"

The Security Officer maintained an impassive face and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"You know what I mean."

Then he dropped a couple of coins onto the bar and slowly walked away. Dario couldn't help but to shake his head, while heavy thoughts filled his mind.

Granite rose and patted Dario on the back as he left for his quarters. He wasn't scheduled for flying the next day, but there was something he had to check before he could call it a day.

[Early the next morning:]

Questa Notte nessun dorma!
This night lets nobody sleep!
- Giacomo Puccini, *Turandot*

"Oh gawd, didn't you sleep at all?", Ibero asked when Vyper came into the locker room.

Vyper mumbled a greeting and opened his locker to pull a fresh flightsuit out of it. "No. I had a bad night."

Ibero zipped his flightsuit close and then lifted his right foot on one of the benches to tighten his boots. While doing so he examined his comrade closer. Vyper had dark rings under his eyes and looked like he hadn't slept since a long while. He was unshaven, his hair was a total mess and he looked a even more pale than usual. But there was something else. He moved like an old man, as if he had a heavy burden to carry. What scared Dario the most were Michael's eyes. Apart from being all red from sleep deprivation or sorrow, they weren't focusing on anything and had lost all of their intensity. Dario "Ibero" Pozo had seen this look in the eyes of men and women before. Most of them had went into battle and never came back.

"Did you have a bad dream?", Dario asked and shifted the other boot onto the bench, while Vyper slipped out of his training suit and into his black flightsuit, which was very out of the ordinary. It was no secret that he hated the white colored flightsuits that Shok's had issued to the Squadron, but so far he had always complied to the dressing rules. But apparently not this time, because he had picked his old Imperial one which had been deprived of each and any rank and unit insignia and looked very worn and battered. It was also the flightsuit that he had come aboard with when he first arrived on the Joan d'Arc, fresh out of the Alliance Training Frigate Regis, the home of Red Squadron, which had been Vyper's first assignment after leaving the Empire and joining the Rebel Alliance.

Vyper ignored him until he had strapped the belt with his FE-MEK45 assault blaster around his waist.

"Yeah, sort of.", he sighed, while he put four, then even a fifth spare magazines into his belt pockets. "I don't want to talk about it, OK?" He looked Ibero sharp into his eyes and then started walking towards the hangar. But Ibero stepped into his way and held up his hand. Softly he said: "Look, I don't know what bothers you, but I have eyes and I can see. Talk to me, man. What's the deal?"

His eyes trailed into the distance again and almost as soft as a whisper the former Imperial pilot said: "Sometimes I wish I could turn back the wheel of time, to stop it entirely or to at least blow the candle out and call it a day, but that's not an option."

Then he walked around the pilot from Iberya and left him wondering what this was all about. But then Dario shrugged it off and raced after Vyper, because duty was waiting.

[Five minutes later:]

Two separate destinies are waiting ahead
on my way towards death. If I stay and
fight ... I'll never return home, but my glory
will become immortal.
- Homer, *Illias*

Dario glanced over the instruments of his A-Wing and made sure that all gauges were within safe limits and that all systems were operational. Then he tucked the checklist away and opened a channel to the hangar controls.

"This is White reconnaissance-flight of two. White 9 calling, White 3 has the lead. Ready for takeoff, requesting clearance."

A couple of seconds later he heard Zeppelin's familiar voice over the radio, who was sitting in at the launch desk.

"Recon flight of two, you are cleared for takeoff. Tell Vyper to bring that A-Wing back in one piece. I'm sick and tired of those techies whining about all the work they have with his ride once he returns from his usual trip around the block."

"Will do!", Ibero chuckled and lifted his A-Wing carefully up and brought it's sleek bow into alignment with the hangar door. Ever so gently he pushed the throttle forward and slowly accelerated out of the hangar. Apparently Vyper was in a hurry, because he was already speeding past him and out into the cold void of space.

Ibero took a quick sensor reading, but except the two A-Wings and the Frigate close behind them nothing was nearby, which was no surprise. The Joan d'Arc's sensors would have picked up any threat a lot earlier than the sensors of the puny A-Wing, so it was time to relax a bit and to enjoy flying the hottest fighter in the arsenal of the Alliance.

Soon after launch they engaged their auto pilots and headed down the first leg of their long range patrol, which was leading them through four neighboring sectors. All of them lay close to the course that the Joan d'Arc was taking. It was just one of this boring patrols that they've had a lot of lately, while Alliance High Command had pulled them back from where the real action was. Of course somebody had to play the rear guard and monitor friendly trade and commerce, but Dario couldn't help but to wonder if there weren't any other reasons behind their orders.

Several uneventful hours later they reached their second waypoint and for the first time on their flight Dario heard Vyper's voice over the radio: "I pick up a strange signal at the very edge of my sensor range and I'm going to check it out. I'll be back in a couple of minutes. Continue as planned, I'll catch up with you later."

He didn't wait for a reply and with a quick glance on his sensors Dario could see, that Vyper had transferred not only his laser energy, but also his shield energy into his engines. His sleek A-Wing was accelerating at the top of it's capabilities and already had gone past 120 MGLT. Dario glanced over his sensors and couldn't pick up anything unusual in the direction that his wingman was heading to. But then he remembered the look in Vyper's eyes back in the locker room and his worries came back. He knew that what Vyper just did was against normal procedures. And he also knew what he was expected to do. He should have informed the *Joan d'Arc* of what was going on, but then he said to himself: "What the hell ..."

He pulled the stick all the way to his lap and set his engines on full power, while he went into hot pursuit of the disappearing friendly A-Wing. His Shield and Laser-Recharge gauges were quickly fading back from Green to Red and then to dull Gray and it made Dario feel very vulnerable. But it was the only way to maintain the same speed and distance with Vyper's craft, which was already more than 9 clicks away and at the very outer edge of his sensor range. All the time Dario waited for an angry call from Vyper, ordering him back onto the racetrack pattern of their scheduled patrol. But the call never came. After several more minutes it was clear for Dario, that Vyper had lied to him, because there was nothing on their sensors that he could pick up and they already had passed the area, where any kind of distortion would have been. Not only that, it also looked like Dario's A-Wing had a slightly higher sensor range than Vyper's fighter and that Vyper didn't know that he was being followed. This wasn't unusual, because most of White Squadron's A-Wings had seen a lot of combat and the use of customized or tailored spare parts sometimes took it's toll on the combat readiness of several systems, including sensors.

Vyper was still flying in a straight and level line and Dario fired up his navigational computer to take a look where they were heading to. There was no registered space station or refueling point in the charts and the next habitable planet was more than four days of travel away. Course and heading didn't merge with this planet, so this couldn't be their destination anyway. But there was a rarely used trade route not that far away, mainly used by Ore Freighters coming out of Shobashiri III and heading for the more civilized areas of space.

[Aboard the Frigate Joan d'Arc, CIC:]

Nimis exalatus rex sedet
in vertice - caveat ruinam!

- Carl Orff, *Carmina Burana*

"Who authorized this bullshit?", Commander Krenzel asked furiously, as she glanced over the flight plan. Her angry stare focused on Torpedo, while the communication tech behind his console did his best to mend himself into his surroundings, pretending to be invisible.

This wasn't an option for Torpedo, even though that he had seen it coming and that he right now preferred to be somewhere else. Playing for time he checked the flightplan in question by himself and seeing no useable way out he came out with the truth: "If you didn't, then I don't know. When Captain Vyper and Lieutenant Ibero launched I supposed they did so based upon your instructions. After all, to me it looked like the usual dawn patrol."

Shok's pressed a button on the console and called up a map, that had the Joan d'Arc in the center of it and showed the sector of space they were within right now. A thin green line showed the Frigate's present course, while a dotted blue line represented the flightpath of the sortie in question. This thin, dotted line was leading straight into Imperial held territory and extended by far more than their scheduled patrol area.

"As you can clearly see this flight is operating outside our assigned sector. It also leaves us without the coverage that the dawn patrol is supposed to represent and at least that should have raised your curiosity. Now they are already outside our communication range and we can't order them to return. Why the hell didn't you call me to confirm the authorization prior to launch?"

Slowly but surely Torpedo was getting upset under this onslaught and finally he crossed his arms before his chest.

"Look, if it were for me, he wouldn't have been allowed to fly anyway."

Commander Krenzel stemmed her fist onto her hip and with a firm voice she requested: "What do you mean by that? Explain!"

Torpedo returned her hard stare and said: "Ever heard the expression: Once a turncoat, always a turncoat?"

"Are you nuts?", Shok'wave screamed, not noticing that the tech behind his console had turned white as a piece of paper. But Torpedo didn't react and stayed impassive. After a couple of seconds he started to speak.

"Look, I'm just giving you options, that's what I'm paid for. As well as anybody else you noticed how much he has changed in the last couple of weeks and that is very, very odd. If I were you I'd at least consider this specific option and would make preparations along those lines."

Shok'wave studied Torpedo's facial expression for a while, while a lot of thoughts and mixed feelings tangled with each other inside of her. Finally she came to an verdict and said calmly: "OK, give orders to relocate the *Joan* two sectors core wards and change all patrol patters accordingly. Let's deploy a communication buoy at our present location with orders for Captain Vyper and Lieutenant Ibero to report in on a secure channel once they return to this location. This leaves them without knowledge of the *Joan*'s present whereabouts and and gives us room to react to any surprises."

Torpedo nodded and made two quick notes on his wrist-computer. Shok'wave could see that he was not overly pleased with those orders and that he had hoped for more. While she was not eager to give the orders, especially not when Torpedo (or anybody else for that matter) pressed her like that, but she knew she had to. Sooner or later she might have to, but not yet.

"Furthermore ready two A-Wings and two B-Wings for launch at tomorrow, eight o'clock. We give Vyper 24 hours to report in and if we don't hear from him or Dario by that time, then you get your chase."

She could tell that he was about to explain to her how far an A-Wing could get in 24 hours and that so many hours of lead could make a pursuit impossible, but her stern voice and expression told him to back off, which was more than fine with Commander Krenzel. She turned around and glanced through the viewport at the impressive scene of starts outside.

"Whatever you do, I hope it's worth the fuzz I'm going to raise when you get back!", she thought and smiled reluctantly.

[Present time and date, aboard the Frigate Joan d'Arc]

One for all, all for one!

- Motto of the three Musketeers

Granite finished another cup of coffee while the fingers of his right hand impatiently danced across the keyboard of the onboard computer system. He was sure that by now one of the Wizards like Psycho or Dario would already have found what he was looking for, but then again, Dario wasn't available and he couldn't draw Psycho into this.

Finally the screen beeped and a big Alliance Crest appeared on the screen, followed by the two words "Personal Bureau". He was then prompted to enter his user name and password and by then he prayed that the Bothan he had paid for this information a long time ago was as honest as he had looked. The Caldanian pilot finished his input and with a lot of tension he pressed Enter. The screen beeped again and almost made him jump, but when the screen cleared and a big menu appeared he knew that he had made it. With a huge smile on his face he selected one of the options and requested a complete history of a specific Alliance pilot. The output filled at least twenty pages, but contained almost nothing that he didn't already know about in general, but some details were new to him. Granite read it all and shook his head. Vyper had what they called a moved history, but so had most of White Squadron's pilots. But there was something interesting on the last page, a reference that this individual was subject of monitoring by the Internal Security Division according to Alliance Regulation #24771/C. With a lot of curiosity Granite followed the link to the SD information and sighed heavily as the requested files appeared. It took him some time to read it all and he didn't like most of it. As it looked nobody in High Command fully trusted pilots that had flown for the other side and once somebody turned over, he was thoroughly interrogated and debriefed by the SD. So far that was normal procedure. But what caught his disgust was, that Vyper had been subject of constant monitoring ever since then. They had checked his mail, searched through his personal belongings frequently and also followed him around once he was off duty. This spy activity had ceased once he had been transferred to White Squadron and it looked like Commander Krenzel had seen to that personally, as several filed protests of her proved. But still, the SD had continued to check all incoming and outgoing communications to and from Vyper. Granite requested a list of all activities and soon he had found what he had been looking for. When the replenishment freighter had arrived several weeks earlier, Vyper had received a small envelope with a printed message in it. That was so unusual that Granite followed the link further. Soon a photograph of the individual handwritten pages in question appeared on the screen and Granite cursed once he was halfway through the message, because he remembered that one of the names he had read in this handwriting had also appeared in the debriefing that Vyper had given once he had defected. Granite scrolled back to cross check that. Yes, there it was! Several years ago an Imperial Commando Team had invaded a small scientific outpost that had been maintained by the Alliance and in the process of it several members of the commando team had been killed, while two had been captured alive. One of the captured members had been killed while she tried to flee, the other female had fully cooperated with the Security Division. Granite tried to call up more information about her, but once he tried it, he was informed that this information was Top Secret, classified under Rainbow Eyes, the highest clearance level in existence that he knew about.

He sat back and thought about what he had just read and fell a decision. This was far bigger than he had expected and it was about time to get someone involved that knew more about this stuff than he did. The Caldanian pilot activated the intercom and called a specific cabin.

Psycho's very tired face appeared on the screen and with a yawn he brushed the back of his hand over the shadow on his cheeks. Without introduction Granite came directly to the point and said smilingly: "Are you in the mood to do some surfing? I need information from a specific computer system and I can't get in without your help."

Psycho yawned again and nodded. "Sure, where do you want to go today?"

Granite smiled reluctantly and told him what he had in mind. Psycho was instantly awake when his tired brain registered what his fellow pilot just had said and replied with: "You are a madman, aren't you? We will get in serious trouble, you know that!"

The Caldanian shrugged it off and said: "We already are. Believe me, we definitely are, so get your butt into gear and come over!"

[Three years earlier, aboard the ISD Valiant]

Things are falling apart ...

- William Buttler Yeats,
The Second Coming

The unnerving high pitched noise of the twin Ion engines slowly ceased as they finally spun out as soon as the TIE Interceptor had settled down on it's resting place inside the huge hangar of the Imperial warship. Lieutenant Vyper sighed with relief as he undid his heavy flight helmet and stretched his aching shoulders. Another boring patrol had just ended and all he wanted was a hot shower, a cold drink and the ability to stretch his aching back on his bunk. But there was something he longed for even more and it had kept him going all the time. He was going to see her again - finally! Like on autopilot he jumped out of his craft, went through debriefing and hurried back to his cabin. All smiling he even greeted the patrolling Stormtrooper's and rushed inside. In a hurry he unbuttoned his flightsuit and threw it onto the pile of dirty clothes in one corner. While he rushed to the bathroom he stopped dead in his tracks as he noticed the flashing red light on his personal communication console.

"A waiting message?", he asked himself and smiled. "Now that could be something!", he said and walked over to replay the recording. The screen came alive and the header told him that it had been recorded two hours earlier, at one of the consoles in the hangar's galley. That was odd. He had expected a message from Sandra's cabin, or from Special Operations where she had her desk. But then her lovely face appeared on the screen and his worries ceased as he looked into her sparkling blue eyes. She was smiling as usual and just the way she looked increased his blood pressure and filled his heart with warmth and lightness.

But then he noticed that something was different. Sandra had shouldered a backpack and was wearing her gray and black combat gear instead of her regular uniform. Then she began to speak:

"I'm sorry to leave you such a short message, but do you know where I'll be in twenty-four hours from now? There has been an opening in Field Operations and this assignment is very important. It's a big chance to get to places and I can hardly turn it down as you very well know. It's just a 90 day assignment, but very exciting and thrilling and after all that's what I always wanted. It's just too bad that I won't be around for the celebration of the successful completion of your advanced training."

For a short moment sadness appeared on her face, but then the smile returned and her eyes got this playful look like pure sin. "But I'll make up for it as soon as I get back."

She glanced around and nodded to somebody apparently standing further right to her.

"OK, I have to run, we're leaving in a few minutes. Don't be worried, it's just a hit and run mission and not really dangerous, which is about all I can safely say without compromising security." For a short moment she looked down and her shoulder long hair fell into her face, but despite that Vyper could see her smiling. When she looked up again Sandra's face had this special impression that Vyper would die for. With soft and gentle voice she said touchingly: "I love you."

Without warning the screen went dark and this darkness filled Michael with a whole set of mixed feelings. Never before he had witnessed so strong feelings for anybody and he was the most happiest man around, because this beautiful, intelligent and charming woman returned his feelings. As much as he loved her, as much as he longed for her, he knew that she wouldn't be his and his alone, because she simply couldn't, Michael admitted to himself as he sat down on his bed. Resting his head in the palms of his hands he kept staring at the steel plated walls of his empty cabin, which seemed by far less inviting and comforting as it had appealed to him five minutes ago.

There were other things in her live that mattered more or at least as much and one of those things was her desire to be in the forefront of action, where it really mattered. Just pushing papers at a desk, filling in requests and forms at a computer couldn't please her desire. That was something which he had to acknowledge and to arrange with, like this sudden outburst into the dangers of Field Operations. It had happened before and he remembered the despair and the loneliness that it had thrown him into, when she was so far away. God knew where! She had always come back and she would also this time. He didn't and couldn't question her love, her friendship and her sincere feelings for him, but this time he had a very odd

feeling that he couldn't place. He hoped and prayed that this feeling had nothing to say but then again, her sudden announcement and departure had plunged a searing hot knife into his heart and filled him with more pain than he could bear. Something was different and out of place, but he didn't know what ...

"Ninety days.", he mumbled as he laid back and covered his eyes with the back of one hand.

Those ninety days went by, each single second turning into an eternity and each minute into an eon. All this time he couldn't stop thinking of his beloved one and at night she haunted him in his dreams. Vyper performed his duty almost as if on auto pilot, but surprisingly he performed all his assigned tasks with such a good performance, that it caught his Squadron Commander's attention. Finally the ninety days had passed and Vyper was standing in the hangar, waiting for the Assault Transport *Kimsecik* to land. Contrary to his usual timeliness he had come in early to await the touchdown of the Special Operations Transport and he had a hard time standing still, while he inwardly was dancing with joy that he finally would see her again. There it came! Finally! The bulky hull of the spacecraft broke through the forcefield and slowly moved up until it hang between the roof of the bustling hangar and had very well cleared the Star Destroyers hangar gate. Then it's pilot skillfully rode the big spacecraft on it's suspension fields to the assigned landing area close to a row of parked TIE Bombers. With a loud hiss the landing gear was lowered and snapped into position as soon as the retracting armor plates had fully extended. Gently the transport touched down and it's engines unwound while they were powered down. Vyper hastened over to the landing area and positioned himself close to the main hatch on the starboard side, which was already opening. A slender figure appeared inside the dimly lightened hatch and stepped outside. The reddish hair told him that it was not Sandra and this master sergeant hurried past him without a greeting. The next person came out, this time a bulky Private, who had his arm in a sling and then an entire stream of special operatives poured out of the transport. All of them looked very fatigued and showed signs of tremendous exhaustion. Not too few of them also had cuts, bruises and other injuries. Then the stream ebbed for a moment, as two stretchers were carefully carried outside the *Kimsecik*, where they were handed over to a group of doctors and medical orderlies. Vyper watched it with increasing worry and for a brief moment he had thought the woman on the second stretcher was Sandy, but fortunately she wasn't it. Finally the last group of people emerged from the Shuttle, accompanied by it's two pilots. Vyper knew one of them and so he quickly walked over, recognizing but ignoring that the pilot was in a conversation with one of his passengers, a very stern and grim looking Colonel. Commander Elliot, the pilot of the shuttle noticed him approaching and reluctantly looked him in the eyes. Without saying anything he slowly started shaking his head. The weight of the world collapsed on Vyper's shoulders and the hangar began to spin around before his eyes, as the realization of what that meant hit him like a hammer.

[Aboard the Skipray Blastboat *Millennia*]

Don't assume that I still am whom I used to be!

- William Shakespeare, *Henri IV.*

"He won't come." The stern voice spoke this verdict the way that even the period at the end of the sentence was pronounced and in the dimly light cockpit of the modified Blastboat his faint smile expressed almost as much as sorrow about what he just had said.

"Oh, trust me, he *will* come, Malcolm.", the female answered and brushed her hair back with one hand while she kept staring out of the port window and with one hand on the controls.

The weapons controller gave her a curious look and insisted: "How can you be so sure?"

She bit her lip and remained silent for a while until she turned around to face him. "Because I asked him to come. If there is anything to depend on in this fucked up universe, then it's just that. Believe me, Malcolm. He will show up and that's the smallest of our problems."

Malcolm sighed heavily and flipped a couple of switches on his console. He knew that it would lead nowhere if he started to doubt her reasoning. What ever the source of her knowledge was, it apparently run deeper that he was willing to dig.

"Sensors show a slightly increased energy reading at starboard one-oh-five, but beyond detection range of

the main sensor bank. Shields up to 125%, weapons on the ready. Could be him, Sandra. In a couple of minutes we'll know."

She nodded solemnly and said with a firm tone in her voice: "What ever happens, open fire on my mark only and not earlier."

[A-Wing Recon 3]

We assumed he was a coward,
but truth to tell - he was devil incarnate.

- William Shakespeare,
Two Gentleman from Verona.

An odd sensation overcame Vyper as he noticed the blue blip on his sensors. A neutral craft in neutral space, nothing out of the ordinary, but he knew that this was what he was looking for. Despite his sense of homecoming he reset the recharge for shields and lasers to maximum to feed back power to the drained energy cells. He was almost slammed into his restraining belts when the speeding A-Wing dropped velocity rapidly, while most of it's power plants output was used to regenerate it's defensive and offensive capability. With the throttle still at full power, but now with less than half the previous speed he slowly approached the targeted craft. His sensors identified it as a GAT-12j Skipray Blastboat and that was quite odd. The Blastboat had an impressive armament and was just the kind of assault craft that could bring you into and out of trouble fast - depending on which of the cockpit windscreen you sat.

If it came to a fight, the he could for sure outrun and outmaneuver it, but his A-Wing would be easy prey to it's the three ion cannons, two lasers and the combined might of the separate torpedo and concussion missile launchers if he decided to slug it out with the Blastboat.

Suddenly his sensors issued a warning sound and he noticed four, then six blips, which dropped out of hyperspace from different directions. After a few moments the new arrivals were classified as Assault Gunboats.

Vyper sighed heavily and said to himself: "If that's a trap, then it just sprung. Surf City, here I come!" With that he reset his laser- and shield-recharge to gain best combat speed and locked on to the closest attacker. The distance decreased with a fast pace and a quick glance at the combat camera's video-feed told him that this Gunboat was not after him - yet - and targeting the Blastboat instead. For a moment Vyper wished that he had brought some missiles along, but by now it was too late to worry about that. He made a quick course correction, gaining some lead on the first Gunboat and waited for the distance measurer to click down to 1.36 km, until his index finger pulled the trigger. Fiery blasts of lasers leashed out from his A-Wing and converged right in front of the leading Gunboat and after another small course correction the shots were dead on target. Vyper's right hand moved the stick very gently and kept the fire on target, with more shots hitting than missing, quickly dropping the Gunboats shields. The enemy pilot started to react and rolled hard to the left to provide a smaller silhouette, then he pulled up and around until his fighter faced the approaching A-Wing. His wingman stayed with him through the entire maneuver, keeping almost the same distance between him and his leader, which showed Vyper clearly that this guys knew their job.

"*Now this is going to get interesting!*", he thought and fired another quick volley of shots at the leading Gunboat, before their combined return fire forced him to go defensive. Guided by instinct he pushed his right pedal, pulled up hard and went into a half loop, while he reduced his speed to increase his maneuverability. At the top of his loop he pushed his left pedal and reversed his maneuver to keep an eye on the closing Gunboats. The first two flights were now chasing him, while the remaining two were launching torpedoes at the Blastboat. Fortunately the second flight of Gunboats was still too far away to open fire, but it was clear to him that they'll be in missile range quite soon.

"*Time to finish the first two early!*"

Looking up from his sensors he detected only one of the nearby GUN's, the other one, the one which he already had attacked, was nowhere to be seen. Vyper cursed heavily as his A-Wing was rocking under the impact of dual laser fire from dead astern. Breaking hard while dropping even more speed he pulled up, eased the stick back to neutral, made a 180 degree half roll and rolled again. The chasing Gunboat was

unable to follow him through this maneuver, but it got another chance to make one successful hit against his rear shields. Vyper equalized his shield-strength and transferred some energy from lasers to shields. A quick glance over his shoulder told him that the leading GUN was still trailing him, while it's wingman was now trying to draw his fire. He checked angles and distance to his pursuer and leveled out for three, or four shots against the tempting target in front of him, then he had to break away to avoid being hit by the wingleader. On top of that his threat indicator started flashing in bright yellow, when the second group of Gunboats tried to acquire a missile lock on him.

"Somehow this doesn't seem to be my day ...", he mumbled and decided that it was time for something drastic. He set his laser and shield recharge to maximum and cut back the throttle, forcing his pursuer to overshoot. As soon as the blocky shadow appeared over his canopy he opened fire while resetting his power configuration back to normal. Shot after shot he fired into the already weakened shields of the leading Gunboat, while he used the Gunboat as cover against it's wingman, which was now stuck in a very unfavorable position. The wingman tried to steer clear so that his leader could open fire on Vyper's chasing A-Wing, but they needed several vital seconds to coordinate their movement and that was more than enough for the A-Wing's lasers to slice through the Gunboats shields and to cut off one of the main wings, just before a stray laser shot ignited it's internal ammunition and blew it apart.

Suddenly the missile warning klaxon announced the approach of at least one flight of concussion missiles, but as soon as this warning appeared, as soon did it fade off. Something must have gotten the missiles right after their launch and that did raise Vyper's curiosity.

"Whoever nailed the missiles, thanks!", he said on the open Guard frequency.

"De nada!", replied a familiar voice with the light musical accent for which the people from Iberyia are know. "I thought you need someone to watch your back, you know. Looks like I'm right, eh?"

Vyper sighed as he leveled out behind the remaining Gunboat of the first flight and started pounding it. "I thought I had ordered you to stay behind, my friend."

Dario grunted in affirmation while he broke hard to avoid fire from the 2nd flights last Gunboat, as it tried to avenge the sudden destruction of it's wingman. "Oh, you did. I thought **you** also had orders not to detour from our assigned sector. I guess we're both guilty as charged, now let them hang us together."

The former Imperial pilot chuckled as he finished off his last Gunboat and headed over to assist his friend, even though that the sensors told him that Dario was more than able to handle the single Gunboat which tried to mess with him. He had already reduced it's shields to twenty-five percent and was slowing down for the kill. So instead of helping Dario, Vyper targeted the second next target, a Gunboat from flight three, which was in hot pursuit of the already lightly damaged Blastboat.

"You know, I'm glad to have you on my wing, but you don't know what this is all about."

Dario quickly finished off his target and joined up on Vyper's wing.

"Trouble. What else?", he said and gave him a quick thumbs up.

The two remaining Gunboats, now slightly outnumbered made the wisest choice they could come up with and fired up their hyperdrives. The Blastboat managed to fire one last missile at one of the GUN's, but an eye blink before impact both GUN's picked up speed and elongated and made their jump towards the safety of hyperspace.

A female laughter, tickling like Champaign could be heard over the open frequency and Vyper said to himself: "Trouble ... indeed."

[Aboard the ISD *Guardian*]

History - Distilled Hear-Say.

- Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution*

Bustling activity was always a common sight on the bridge of an Imperial Star Destroyer, even at unusual times of day. Or night, in this case. Lieutenant Commander Dahlgren, serving the Empire more than seven years was more than used to it by now, even though that he didn't like the circumstances that had forced him to report in that late. Maybe it was because he didn't like to be the messenger of bad news, because he knew of a lot of instances where superior officers had forgot about the wisdom that a messenger was just reporting the bad news and not responsible for them. With a solemn expression on his face, straightened back and firm step he approached Vice Admiral Garner, who was standing in a crowd of staff officers while paying close attention to the words of the ISD's Captain. Lieutenant Commander Dahlgren waited until the Admiral had noticed his approach and gave him the sign to speak.

"Two Gunboat's of Theta Squadron returned from their mission, reporting four casualties and that the mission has been a failure." Dahlgren thought about adding some details to the report, but decided against it as the Admiral's expression darkened.

Vice Admiral Garner traded a quick glance with his Flag Lieutenant and then he smiled, much to Dahlgren's surprise. "I see. Anything else?"

The Lieutenant Commander threw his brow in furrow, but then added: "They reported heavy opposition not only from the target itself, but also from half a dozen of A-Wing's."

The Admiral's casual and relaxed expression shifted towards uncertainty, as he turned around to consult the star chart.

"That's quite unexpected, but we can accommodate for this inconvenience." He addressed the ISD's Captain and added: "Send Reconnaissance Drones to Reconnoiter each and any sector between the coordinates 44-7 and 42-1. We have to find the base or ship from where this A-Wings operate. If we manage to take it out in a decisive strike, then we can continue with our mission as planned."

Lieutenant Commander Dahlgren took for granted that he was dismissed and with a relieved expression on his face he turned around and walked away to resume his duties.

[Aboard the Skipray Blastboat *Millennia*]

Two or three times I loved,
Before I knew your name or your face.
I loved you in a voice or in a candle's flame.
This is what Angels do to us and how
they teach us to adore.

- John Donne, *Air and Angels*

The cramped crew compartment just behind and under the cockpit of the Skipray Blastboat seemed to be a lot smaller with four people jammed into it, even though by specifications it was designed for five crew members. Vyper took another sip of his orange juice and reflected the last two hours that had taken place. He went through the short conversation again that he had with Sandra over the commlink and the looks that they had exchanged once his A-Wing had docked to the Blastboat. It had been just small talk, the exchange of pleasantries and curious looks, but nothing more than that. Right now she was plotting the course for their next hyperspace jump and had turned her back to him and Vyper noticed that for all the time that she had been doing so he had kept watching her. He used this moment to reflect his thoughts and to listen inward what his heart told him. At first he was surprised to find a lack of excitement. Yes, of course he was excited, but not as much as he had expected himself to be in face of this unexpected situation.

The last couple of years ever since had been very, very difficult for Vyper and it had taken him a long while to regain inner peace and emotional stability. And just when he had accomplished that and had come to terms with himself and was ready to move on, she had stormed back into his live like a refreshing spring-whirlwind. Ever since he had received her message he had felt that the dike's that he had risen in protection of himself over all this years started to crack open more and more. While plugging his fingers into the opening holes he kept telling himself that it is foolish to go there again, but thoughts set aside and listening to his heart he knew what the answer was and always has been. For him. He didn't know if that was true for

her as well, though.

The Rebel pilot asked himself: "*What will change now that we've met again?*" and "*What does she want me to do?*"

He looked over to Dario, who was uncomfortably checking his surroundings and always kept one hand close to his sidearm, even though that neither Sandra nor the guy that she had introduced as Malcolm posed any threat. Dario hadn't said much since he came aboard and Vyper appreciated it, even though his fellow pilot probably had more questions than even himself. Questions, that he had not yet gotten an answer for and probably wouldn't get for the time being.

"*What does she want me to do?*", he asked himself again and then he remembered that they've been there before. Back then the answer had been: "*Just be yourself*".

And he was going to do just that.

He put his glass down on the small sideboard as the hyperdrive motivators of the Blastboat came to live and made the jump to lightspeed. Sandra returned to the crew compartment and threw her hair back with both hands before she sat down on one of the bunks.

"We've got two hours before we drop to sublight again and I think some explanations are in order."

She glanced over to Dario and then her comforting blue eyes rested on Vyper, who badly wanted a cigarette and gave in to this needs. While lighting it up he broke eye contact and then picked it up again, saying: "Yes, I think some explanations are badly in order. For all those years I thought you were dead, until you've sent me your message." He wanted to say more, but it didn't seem to be the right time or place for that.

She sighed heavily and looked over to Dario again, who made preparations to rise to his feet. But then she shrugged and gestured him to stay. "What I say now should not go any further than this room. Michael, you take for granted that I once belonged to the Imperial Special Op's, but that is not the entire story and what you know about me is also not the complete picture."

She swallowed hard and brushed some hairs out of her face before she looked him firmly into the eyes. "After graduation from the university I joined the Empire and worked my way up to the top, gathering vital information and insights and reporting them to my true superiors. I uncovered a vital operation that was threatening an important Alliance asset and I was able to put a stop on that. Unfortunately doing so blew my cover and I had to give up the legend that I had worked on so hard. My time in the Empire did run out before I had a chance to say good bye to you. It hasn't been until very recently that I learned about your defection and now that I need your help I established contact again."

Dario looked from one to the other and noticed that his wingman looked deeply into the eyes of this beautiful, slender woman. Michael's somewhat tense body language eased and it seemed that by looking into her eyes he had found what he had been looking for. And that troubled Dario more than anything else, because her last words were still ringing in his ears: "*... now that I need your help ...*". For Dario it looked like Vyper had overheard that sentence and given it another meaning, more to his liking. Finally Sandra smiled at Vyper and Dario knew, that if he had been subject of such a smile, then he would be lost as well.

Finally Dario coughed and said: "I don't know what's going on, but I'd like to offer my assistance as well. So what can we do for you, Ma'am?"

Sandra came over to the small table in the middle of the crew compartment and punched a few keys on a pad at the sides. The wooden surface slid open and revealed a small holographic projector, which came to live. Colored lights flared up and projected a three-dimensional star chart into the air above the table. The chart zoomed closer in they noticed several icons within, that had name tags assigned to them.

"We're currently here, approximately four jumps from Imperial controlled territory, while this sector is firmly in the hands of the Rebel Alliance. A lot of jump anomalies, space nebulas and asteroid fields make it a difficult terrain for any prolonged space battle, because giant fleets could pass through this sectors for weeks without finding each other."

Dario and Vyper knew all this, because it had been part of their day to day duty in the last couple of weeks.

They knew that the Empire had staged a lot of limited raids and probes into this territory and hadn't it been for the intervention of White Squadron and others, they might have succeeded.

Then the map zoomed closer to the imperial border and even beyond it, into a region of space called *The Twin Sun*. Sandra pointed at this system and went on with her lecture.

"Alliance assets have revealed that the Empire has constructed a new Space Factory in this area and of course that raised our curiosity. A factory that close to the border is as much of a threat to us as it is a tempting target. The Empire knows this as well and recent Reconnaissance flights show very dense mine fields and strong fleet concentrations."

Dario interrupted her and asked: "How strong?"

"Two Imperial Class Star Destroyers, a dozen Frigates and Corvettes and several Cruisers and Carracks.", she added with a sigh and went on. "It's more than sufficient for defense, so we estimate an upcoming offensive once they have gained more data about where to strike at."

Vyper shook his head and crossed his arms in front of his chest. "I agree that it's a threat and that they will most likely strike out soon, but I disagree about gathering data."

He shrugged and pointed at the holographic image. "They might not know our strength and where we have concentrated our forces, but Imperial doctrine in a case like this is: Threaten something the enemy values and he'll come out and defend it. So I'm more than sure that they are going to strike a civilian target like the colony on Ga'jakobo or the mining complex at Shobashiri III."

Dario nodded slowly. "And if they're using more than a token force for this task, then we both know that they're going to succeed. Heck, even one ISD and a couple of Frigates is more than sufficient to wipe out our defenses over here."

Vyper smiled and looked up from the map projection. "Yes, but it's not sufficient to defend the vast area of this sector once they have taken it. We fought against the odds before and we succeeded. We can pull it off again."

A laughter like crystal bells rang through the confinement of the Blastboat, as Sandra looked from one to the other. "Gimme break, guys. One Blastboat and two A-Wings against the Fleet of Vice Admiral Garner? I think I have a better idea."

Vyper smiled at her and then said: "Actually I was thinking about having the rest of White Squadron joining us in our cause, but OK, let's hear your idea."

She walked slowly around the projection and pushed a button at the console. The map display folded together and the laser projection drew a new picture. It showed a massive, bulky cylinder with four central fins at the end and right beside it was a small window with technical data regarding this object.

"Ah, I doubt that we need further assistance. Take a look at this and tell me what you make out of it."

Vyper examined the cylinder and glanced over at the data readout. "Hmm ... looks like a modified space bomb to me. There is no size reference, so I don't know how big it is. But the data says that it uses NoX-2000 instead of the usual Nomotexatrin explosive. That should increase the explosive power quite some."

Sandra nodded and pointed at the Space Bomb. "The range has degraded due to the added weight of the warhead, but tests have shown that the bomb is three times stronger than usual. The NoX-200 is pretty instable and once armed the explosives might go off too early or not at all, but we have four in stock and I intend to make good use of them."

The pilot from Iberyia looked impressed. "One of this eggs should be enough to waste an ISD, provided that you get through the fighter cover. Not bad."

Sandra nodded with a smile on her face. "That's right. But an ISD shouldn't be our target of choice, right?"

Crossing his arms before his chest Vyper grinned and gave Sandra a thumbs up. "We're going to spare Vice Admiral Garner the embarrassment and the cancel the offensive for him. And don't worry, Dario and I will make sure that you can make your delivery without that much hassle."

"Oh-oh!", Dario said. "I smell trouble ..."

[ISD *Guardian*, inside the *Twin Sun* System]

To the fight and to the weapons I fly!

- Richard Lovelace, *To Lucasta, Going to the Wars*

The darkly metal cylinder had a length of around 2 meters and a diameter of roughly 30 centimeters. It resembled an old shaped torpedo and was cramped into a narrow tube close to the hangar bay exit of the star destroyer. One end harbored a strong propulsion system of the same kind which was put into use by propelling TIE Fighters, while the other end was equipped with a vast amount of sophisticated scanners, sensor and communication arrays. Almost the entire hull was crafted out of solar receptors, which served in providing the cylinder with power to operate it's drive and internal systems. And those internal systems just came to live. Bits and Bytes, consisting of a complete sets of orders and navigational data were downloaded into the small electronic brain inside the cylinder. For the first time since it had left it's production plant the brain went alive and the small electronic brain sorted through this data, recognizing that it now would be known as *Spyglass-653*. As soon as it had learned that, the outer hatch opened and *Spyglass-653* started it's maiden flight, when it's powerful propulsion system propelled it out of it's launch tube.

Immediately a vast sensation in form of sensor input flooded the electronic brain and it began to analyze the data it was receiving. The data turned into blips, which arranged on a three dimensional chart and each blip quickly became a vector attached, as it's current speed and course were recognized and logged. A quick sweep with the active sensors added even more information and soon *Spyglass-653* matched the signatures of each blip with data from it's memory, assigning blocks of additional information like ISD *Guardian* - IFF01 - B426 - C2FF - 23A2 - 05 to each of it, as it continued it's flight towards the set destination.

Soon it reached it's first waypoint and adjusted it's course according to the assigned flight plan. After a last internal self check of all systems and after pre heating the hyperspace motivators *Spyglass-653* entered another dimension and crossed a vast distance in a mere eyeblink.

As soon as it had entered hyperspace it returned from it. A similar sensation like the one it hat witnessed after launch overcame the small electronic brain of *Spyglass-653*, but when it discovered absolutely nothing in the close vicinity, then it couldn't help but to feel disappointed, if not even bored.

Out of boredom *Spyglass-653* activated it's active sensor array, which had a by far greater range than the passive sensors, but also drained more energy and made it more likely that it would be detected by similar systems around, that *Spyglass-653* didn't know of by now. The wave of sensor energy assembled in the small emitter-array and raced outward and into all directions. Expanding with every kilometer that it traveled and losing in signal strength. Suddenly some of the emitted energy bounced off an uneven surface and was strayed back and reflected into all kind of different directions. Some of the signals even found their way back into the receptors of the passive sensor array of *Spyglass-653*. It took only milliseconds and *Spyglass-653* had determined the size and relative position of this object and a quick second active scan completed the information by a whole deal. The databanks listed this craft as Frigate and so *Spyglass-653* started to query the transponder of this ship with the proper code sequence. The information came in as "Alliance Frigate *Joan d'Arc*". At the same moment *Spyglass-653* noticed a strong, bundled sweep of energy coming in from the direction of this target and it's electronic brain registered that it had been detected by the active sensors of the Frigate, which activated a sub routine deep inside it's memory core. All relevant data was transferred to an output device, where FRG *Joan d'Arc* - IFF00 - 773C - 25CB - 6301 - 07 was sent out with a scrambled narrow beam radio signal. *Spyglass-653* very well noticed that the registered target was just barely inside the corner of the transmissions beam and that it would most likely receive the data as well, but no orders regarding this situation were stored within it's brain, so it went ahead.

As soon as the transmission was out, *Spyglass-653* initiated another pre heating of it's hyperspace motivators. Unfortunately a blinding, green bundle of photons lashed out from the Frigate and even before *Spyglass-653* could recognize it as a laser bundle's fiery greeting, it's existence ended once and for all time.

All that remained was a drifting cloud of molten fragments.

[Aboard the FRG *Joan d'Arc*, CIC]

Who challenges ... the
bottomless, endless Abbys?

- John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

"We nailed it!", Lieutenant Fraser reported with enthusiasm and glanced from his weapons control station over to the targeting display.

Suddenly the Communications Officer over to Fraser's left leaned forward and frantically worked the controls of his station. Without looking up he glanced over at the Commander Shok'wave, Lieutenant Commander Foxfire and Flight officer Torpedo, who had been following the entire event.

"Looks like the probe finished it's transmission just in time and I dunno why, but we received it as well, sir. Decoding will take a long while, though."

Shok'wave's face lit with a smile and she came over to the communications console. She looked at the data and then patted radioman Smithers on the back.

"I doubt that we need to decode the transmission. The fact that we received it, where it came from and where it went to says us all we need to know. Plot a course from the source of the transmission, align it with our present position and lengthen the plot outward until it reaches the next solar system."

Smithers did as ordered and transferred the information to the tactical display, which was located in the middle of the Combat Information Center and took up most of the space. Shok's glanced over the map and studied it carefully.

"Now tell me what we know about this *Twin Sun* System and prepare for a relocation of the Joan. The Empire knows that we're here and we're not going to exploit that information on our expenses. Let's make a small jump to get out of here first of all an then we'll plot a course which brings us closer to this *Twin Sun* System, so that we can take a look."

"It rather seems to me that it's the Empire who's buying this time.", Foxfire said with a smile.

Torpedo scratched his chin and shrugged. "I think two can play this game. Let's leave a probe of our own behind and see, how the Empire reacts to the news of us being here."

"Sounds fine with me." Shok's said and eagerly awaited whatever their computer had to tell about this star system.

[Aboard the ISD *Guardian*, inside the *Twin Sun* System]

The Lion doesn't defend itself against traps,
and the Fox doesn't defend itself against wolves.

- Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Duke*

Lieutenant Commander Dahlgren closed the zipper of his flightsuit all the way up before he stepped into the hangar bay. He nodded towards the two technicians who had readied his TIE Advanced and their thumbs up told him all he needed to know. Soon he and his flight of five had launched and left the massive structure of their mothership behind. They had to maneuver carefully, because a lot of traffic was going on around them. Six Frigates, twelve Corvettes and several bulk freighters were the biggest blips on their targeting display,

along with the massive ISD *Guardian* and the Factory Station that the ISD hovered above.

Each capital ship had fighters on patrol and the uncounted shuttles and transport shuffling crew and equipment around didn't make navigation easier, especially because a dense layer of minefields separated the space around the Factory into navigable and hazardous, even deadly sectors.

Finally they reached their patrol sector and relieved another flight of five TIE Advanced, which returned to the ISD *Guardian* to catch some stand down time.

"Avenger Lead to Avenger flight. Assume patrol pattern Omega-5 and watch your sensors closely. I have the lead, Avenger 5 watches our rear.", Dahlgren radioed and heard the acknowledgment from his wingmen. He glanced over his instruments and prepared for another set of long and boring hours on patrol.

Suddenly he received a broadcast over the main command circuit: "ISD *Guardian* to Perimeter Security, Flights Alpha, Avenger, Theta and Gamma. Resume patrol as ordered. Mission Control and Recovery transferred to ISD *Huntsman*. *Guardian* over and out."

Dahlgren stared at his Star Destroyer in disbelief, as it's massive hull swung around and slowly, but steadily picked up speed on an outbound course. Two minutes later it made it's jump to hyperspace and abandoned him and his men, as well as his fellow pilots from the other flights. Their mothership apparently had some urgent business elsewhere. So urgent, that there hadn't been time to recover all deployed fighters, leaving it under-strength for whatever mission was at hand. He couldn't help but to wonder if he'd ever see the *Guardian* and his few belongings again, which had remained aboard.

With a curse on his lips he flipped his radio to the *Huntsman*'s flight control to reported in and to find out if they knew what was going on, but instead they served him off with a noncommittal "*Huntsman* to Avenger Lead. Resume patrol and stand by for further orders."

"Thanks guys! It's glad to know that our work is appreciated!", Dahlgren thought and swallowed his anger.

[Aboard the Skipray Blastboat *Millennia*]

Separation is all, what we know about heaven.
And all we expect from hell.

- Emily Dickinson, My life closed twice before it's close.

"Docking clamp open, A-Wings clear for maneuvering.", Sandra said and released the transmit button of her radio.

Several meters behind her the two runaway A-Wings from White Squadron slowly dropped speed and drifted away from the Skipray Blastboat. Michael glanced over to Dario and gave him a thumbs up, as they both finished their in flight check and picked up speed and rejoined formation with the *Millennia* at her wing tips.

"I hate to be so picky and hard to convince.", Dario said over the open channel, as he studied his navigational data. "But you two are really sure that this will work?"

Michael chuckled and shook his head, before he replied. "Ah, my friend. A lot of things can go wrong and I don't even want to know how old the data is, that we place all of our lives upon. For all what we know the two suns could be nova's by now, a Star Destroyer could be right on top of our entry point or a shower of micro meteoroids could be somewhere in our flight path."

Sandra's refreshing laughter could be heard over the comm, just before she added: "Or our last fight could have thrown our nav-computers out of sync, or a untightened screw could come off and result in a premature exit from hyperspace, or ..."

Dario groaned and threw his A-Wing into a barrel-roll.

"Stop it right there, you two! You have a nice way to reassure me, you know that?"

Sandra sighed for a moment and then she said: "You're right. I've seen better plans like this go wrong, but we all know the risks and the gains. So are you in or out?"

"As if you have to ask!", Dario grumbled and looked over to Vyper's A-Wing, who stayed dangerously close to the Blastboat's wingtip.



Michael didn't reply to Sandra's rhetorical question and indeed he knew that their plan was more than risky. Coming out of hyperspace well inside a star system, of which they had only questionable and outdated data was one thing. But coming out inside and on top of an suspected enemy formation of war ships more than tricky and a gamble which heavily relied upon the fail-save-mechanisms of their hyperdrive's. If all went according to plan, then they should re-emerge from hyperspace just within missile range of the factory station and within two minutes they could jump back to safety. On the other hand Michael knew very well that no battle plan survived first contact with the enemy.

"*Let's pray to god that they don't have an Interdictor!*", he thought and checked his instruments for the last time.

[Aboard the FRG *Joan d'Arc*, Communications Facility]

The slings of death surrounded me,
and the pains of hell held me in their grasp.

- Psalm 116.3

Stephen Psycho Proud set down his glass of cool aid and glanced over to Owen Stone, better known as Granite, as he frantically worked the keyboard. "You have nerves, you know?"

The Caldanian shrugged Psycho's remark off easily and mumbled: "What the hell ... how much longer will it take anyway?"

Wiping sweat from his brow Psycho entered another line of instructions and hit the enter key. Finally the

display on the screen changed and instead of "Connecting!" it showed the Imperial Crest in all it's colorful might.

"Don't rush me. We need to make sure nobody can follow our tracks and hacking into the main Imperial Database isn't exactly a piece of cake. I can't believe you managed to talk me into it! Shok's will eat us alive if she finds out."

The Caldanian pilot chuckled and gnawed on a piece of bread. "If you don't tell her, I won't. And from what I've seen in the Alliance records we're in deep shit anyway, so if Sherry bites our heads off, we're probably in a much more favorite position."

The screen changed once again, this time showing the crest of the Imperial's Intelligence Division, a contradiction in terms which forced a chuckle out of both pilots.

"OK, now let's take a peek at Vyper's Imperial record!", Granite urged.

Psycho looked at a small piece of paper where he had written Michael's old Imperial Identification number down and entered it into one of the query fields. It took a few seconds until the screen changed.

"Strange, his record is noncommittal as a politicians promise. Just the basic stuff. Where he served, how long, combat engagements and stuff like that. It doesn't even say that the contend is classified, but lists that there is a quite a nice reward on his head."

The Caldanian bowed over to Psycho and looked himself. "I see. Well, well, then let us check out the bitch. What was her name again?"

He tried hard to remember, but finally Psycho started hammering in her name all by himself. He almost never forgot any important detail. Now the screen filled itself with long columns of text and several images.

"Now that's a pretty lass, don't you think?", Granite asked as he admired one of Sandra's pictures.

"Yepp, sure is!", Psycho mumbled, as he started reading. "And a deadly one, too!" He pointed at one of the columns. "Just look over here! She screwed around with the Empire and sold them out to the Alliance. She was a long time sleeper Agent!"

Granite nodded warily. "That confirms the information I found in the Alliance Databanks, but it looks once she changed affiliation they never trusted her fully again and that's why she quit and started working as freelancer."

Psycho scratched the shadow on his chin and scrolled down a little bit more. Without looking up he said: "What I don't get is how you can hope to survive in this kind of business without the powerful support of one of the two big players. Looks like neither the Alliance nor the Empire is at speaking terms with her. Oh, forget about that!", he exclaimed and stuck his finger at the screen.

"I guess that's what you've been looking for, uh?", he said and looked over to Granite.

Granite was a slow reader, but it didn't take him long until he nodded in approval.

"Don't you just hate it when I'm right?", he mumbled. "She's a bloody bounty hunter. Heck, she even got an advance for our Evil one, which means she's quite good!"

Psycho started to get nervous and fumbled around with the keyboard.

"What? No, wait, this is interesting!", Granite said, continuing to read even more.

But Stephen's worries increased as he peered over to the secondary monitor, which showed statistics and additional data about their current computer-interlink with half a dozen private, commercial and last but not least Imperial computer networks. The path they had taken to log into the Empire's inner sanctum should confuse any spectators and delay any effort of tracing, but it was just make-shift, which would work once and for a short amount of time. And right now Psycho had the strange sensation that their time had just run

out.

[Aboard the FRG *Joan d'Arc*, CIC]

The curious thing was that the regiment, which formed a compact unit because of an esprit de corps which bordered on fanaticism, was composed of the most diverse elements.

- Charles-Jules Zede, *Souvenirs of My Life*

"Probe has entered hyperspace, ETA to *Twin Sun's* 2 hours 42 minutes.", Torpedo said and glanced over to Shok'wave.

"Good. Bridge, do you copy? Is our course laid in? If so, prepare for the jump at your discretion.", she said and leaned against the holo-projector table, studying the star chart carefully.

Avery glanced up from her wrist computer and smiled at Moose, who just entered CIC, trailed by Solo, White Squadron's newest addition to the training win.

"All fighters are fully armed and ready and I briefed the others on what's going on. So we all agree upon that we're just reckon in force and see what's going on before we make our move?"

Shok'wave made a sour face upon Moose's usage of "*we all agree upon*", but she decided to let it go for the moment and just nodded her approval. Her eyes went wide when the *Joan d'Arc* suddenly started to shudder under her feet, as if something large had hit her into the flanks. The holo-projector emitted several sparks and a cloud of smoke, then all lights went off and total darkness surrounded them. Sherry grabbed hard for the rail of the projector, as the artificial gravity went out as well and she started to float. Screams of surprise and curses surrounded her in the darkness, as the others pilots came under the same effect.

Something blocky slammed into her shoulder and Shok's couldn't tell whether it was someone or something, but fortunately they impact drove them both into opposite directions. She had to move hand over hand to maintain her grip on the rail that she was holding on to. As she was holding on to the rail she noticed that there wasn't the slightest vibration, nor was there any noticeable machinery sound, which was more than odd. Normally the vast amount of equipment needed to operate a star ship like this generated a steady background noise, which you tended to overhear after a while. Which made the sudden silence more than uncomfortable.

"Damage report!", she shouted and tried to remain calm, knowing that whatever had hit the *Joan d'Arc* had left her mortally wounded and dead in space.

[Aboard the ISD *Guardian*, Bridge]

All my net catches is fish.

- Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*

Finally the long smear of stars outside the turned into sharp pinpoints again as the Star Destroyer emerged from hyperspace. Vice Admiral Garner knew it was a risk to leave most of the strike force and even a good chunk of their fighter support behind, but he had not gotten this far in the Imperial Navy without taking a considerable, controlled risk or two in all those years. Then again, he couldn't help but to feel relieved when one of the Bridge officers announced that a Rebel Frigate - and it could be no other than the one that their probe had discovered earlier - was almost dead ahead.

"Distance to target?", Garner asked and his face turned into a sour expression when the figure was presented.

"That far away? It'll take our fighters at least 35 minutes to get into attack position."

The ISD's Captain made half a step towards his superior officer and eagerly said: "I'm sure they'll make it in less time." Then he turned around and yelled: "Red Alert! Launch all fighters and prepare to engage the Rebel Forces."

"Admiral!", one of the Bridge officers at the main sensor screens shouted and Vice Admiral Garner tried to hide his amusement, when he noticed how the two other officers close to the one who had called for him made their best effort to make themselves invisible. Whatever it was, he hoped this Lieutenant had a good excuse for interrupting him in his thoughts!

"What is it, Lieutenant?", Garner growled.

The Officer swallowed hard before he made his report. "It looks like the targeted Frigate has a massive malfunction. Sensors pick up only very low energy readings and no offensive or defensive armament is online. Looks like she's drifting dead in space, Sir!"

The Vice Admiral checked the sensors himself and exclaimed: "What the hell ...?"

But then he felt a cold chill, or odd sensation on his back and turned around, almost bumping into a cloaked figure whose presence he had not noticed before. He could swear that this stealthy guy had not been there a moment before, but then again, you never get used to the presence and odd behavior of the Emperor's closest servants, as he admitted to himself with a trace of envy.

"I think I can explain, Vice Admiral.", the figure said with slowly pronounced syllables and gestured him further away from the preying ears that surrounded them on the bridge.

[Aboard the FRG *Joan d'Arc*, Communications Facility]

What are you complaining about? I'm creating glory for you.

- Colonel Pierre Jeanpierre,
French Foreign Legion, March 1958

Drifting in the darkness Psycho and Granite uttered curses from their respective home planets, even though that Psycho had to admit that the Caladanian ones were a lot more colorful. All the communications equipment as well as lights, life support and artificial gravity – even the coffeemaker right beside the door – had gone out. In total darkness and vertigo of floating around in zero gravity Stephen managed to pull out his ancient gasoline lighter and flicked it until the small flame appeared. He thumbed the dial to turn the flame brighter and looked at Owen, who seemed to have lost a lot of facial color in the last minute, but then again, in the dim light Stephen couldn't be sure of that.

"Cool. Next time you have a great idea like that, **don't** wake me up, ok?", Psycho mumbled.

Somehow Granite had managed to grab the communications console and he pulled himself closer to Psycho, who then grabbed the Caldanian's leg and could thrust himself to one of the handholds close to the main computer core.

"So what the hell was that anyway?", Owen asked, once he had gathered enough of his wits to make a reply.

Psycho ripped one maintenance panel on the main computer open and sent it drifting into the room, while he poked his head inside the opening. His reply was kind of muffled and damped, while he examined the interior of the computer with his lighter and his Mark Two eyeballs.

"Some kind of new Imperial Countermeasure against hacker's like us. I heard rumors that something like that was in development and here we have the proof. Just before the lights went out I noticed that somebody had traced us and I was about to cut the connection down." With a sigh he added: "Apparently it was already too late."

The Caldanian tried to shrug without losing his grip on the console and as a result he almost bumped into

Psycho.

"Uuh ... but even if they toasted our main computer, why didn't the backup systems kick in? Hell, live support and artificial gravity are independent systems with separate power supply and control circuits.", he added knowingly.

Meanwhile Psycho had found what he had been looking for and pulled one of the plug in cards out of it's rack and readjusted several jumpers on it, trying hard not to make rapid movements to prevent to drift off, while he had both hands in use for this task.

"Yeah, that's right. But there is an override mode and this systems can be patched permanently to the main computer. That's what we did when we took over the Joan from the Empire and some of the original crew tried to flood the bridge with sleeping gas. Either we forgot to reverse the changes, or the virus switched it back."

"Can you repair it?", Granite asked, while placed both feet on the console that he was hanging onto and realigned himself towards the half closed door which was leading to the main corridor.

Psycho mumbled something which sounded like he wasn't sure yet, but then again, as far as Granite could tell Stephen was just too focused on his repair attempt to pay attention to his question. So he decided to see how the rest of the crew were doing and launched himself towards the door with a carefully powered thrust of his legs. He couldn't help but he had the odd sensation that the next few minutes would decide the fate of White Squadron.

[Somewhere in Hyperspace, close to the *Twin Sun* System]

There are only two reasons we do not reach our goals;
one is we underestimate ourselves and the other is we
tend to fear failure.

In the close confines of his cockpit Vyper had a lot to worry about, especially now, with his A-Wing under control of the nav-computer and with nothing else to do. As usual he had tried to empty his mind and to meditate, as he usually did before entering a battle zone, when time and circumstances permitted. But this time it was different and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't totally empty his mind. Pictures and images of Sandra appeared before his half closed eyes, along with feint memories and fantasies. His heart seemed to burst and he wondered how he had managed to stay alive for so long without the constant presence of this lovely woman. Not a single day had passed since this memorable week back then, that he hadn't thought of her, even though he had been sure that she'd be gone forever. But now she had returned and that changed everything and for the first time since a very long while the future looked very bright and promising again. And with that came the sense of belonging, the sense of homecoming an something else he couldn't place. A subdue feeling that he had not felt since his early youth and it took him a long while to figure out what it was.

It was fear.

He couldn't dismiss this thought easily and after a while he admitted that for the first time in his service time with the Alliance he went into a battle with fear. Fear of losing Sandra in the dangers that lay ahead of them, fear of endangering his friend Dario and fear of finding death himself, now that he again had found a reason to live, something that made live worthwhile. There were still so many things that he wanted to say, wanted to do and wanted to come true and maybe the battle ahead would put a permanent end to all his high hopes for the bright and promising future that lay ahead.

He thought of his friend Dario and Michael knew first hand how much his friend had to lose. Thinking of his beloved wife Marife, who was leading the local resistance cell back home at Iberya. As far as Michael knew both hadn't seen each other in a year and while White Squadron had flown a lot of dangerous, wasteful and sometimes even impossible missions, his friend Dario had always kept the faith, never shied away from the dangers. Dario had so much to lose and despite that he had followed him onto this chase that would lead them all between the open jaws of the best the Empire had to offer.

Again and again his thoughts circled around this matter, but then he found a string to pull himself out of this

troubled waters. "*Just be yourself!*", she had said. And that was what he was going to do. Michael took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. He felt better. After another breath and slowly letting it go he felt that the worries broke away like an egg shell which had gotten too small for him to fit into. Again he closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing while he thought of Sandra's lovely face and the sensational warmth of relaxation flooded his limbs.

Now he was ready for whatever was laying ahead. And just in time, because the nav-computer beeped three times to indicate that the destination would be reached in 30 seconds. Time for a last check of the instruments. They were still on course and in formation, with the Blastboat in the lead and the two A-Wing's escorting it on it's wingtips. All systems were ready, lasers and shields fully charged.

The nav-computer issued a final acoustic warning, then the elongated stars snapped back into place as all three ships entered normal space. At once the sensors sprung online and within an eyeblink the screens filled with hostile echo's and return signals. But Michael had no time for checking the sensors, because a blocky, massive piece of steel blocked the path of his racing A-Wing. He saw the Blastboat pulling up hard, almost crashing it's starboard wing into Dario's A-Wing as it did so and without hesitating any longer Michael pulled back the stick as well, while he kicked the right pedal with as much strength as he could muster.

He almost plunged into the antenna on top of the Carrack Cruiser as he rushed past it, expecting it to open fire at him and his friends any minute. He looked around, found Dario and joined up on his wing, trailing the Blastboat as it sped towards an even larger target dead ahead. The Factory Station!

Vyper tried to get a picture of their surrounding, worrying where the Eyeballs, Gunboats and Interceptors where. He counted at least a half a dozen Frigates, two Carrack Cruisers, a bunch of Corvettes and Freighters. Two of the Corvettes where hovering above and below the Factory Station, but the number of echo's on his targeting display confused him until he realized what it meant.

"Watch out for mines! Don't stray too far away from our present course and heading!", he shouted into their frequency, as the first gleaming bundles of light touched out from a nearby Frigate and ate away his shield-energy.



Dario noticed four approaching TIE Interceptors dead ahead, which were trailed by two Gunboats and brought his cross-hair in alignment with the lead Interceptor.

Meanwhile Sandra's weapons officer Malcolm reached out and threw a switch on his weapon console, switching from Lasers to Ions. Then he touched the radar screen with the tip of his index finger and marked a target for the dual Missile launcher. It took only four of five seconds until the targeting computer had locked

on and programmed the warheads of two concussion missiles to follow Vyper's A-Wing.

"Now we have them where we want them. Let's pop our disguise and bag the bounty.", Malcolm said with a wry smile, ready to press the launch button upon her order.

[Aboard the Joan d'Arc, Hangar Bay]

Peter managed to close the seat belts around him, which finally pinned him to place in the seat of his B-Wing. It had been a real pain to climb into the fighter in this zero-G environment and in almost complete darkness, which was only lighted by the dim cockpit lights of the few combat ready fighters of White Squadron. Fortunately the crafts in the Hangar were not affected by the sudden loss of energy and their magnetic landing gears or suspension fields held them in place. But actually crossing the vast openness between the ready room exit and the closest fighter had been a tough cookie. So neither Iceman nor Daniel, better known as "Drake" had bothered to make it to their own ships. Apparently this was Avery's B-Wing, Peter realized and Drake, who just closed the canopy behind him had managed to get a hold of Psycho's A-Wing.

Both pilots had no clue what was going on elsewhere, but when the unexpected power loss had happened, both had agreed to scramble and take a look what was going on out there.

Iceman didn't bother to run down the entire checklist and just hit the emergency power-up button as soon as he had opened the protective cover above it. The B-Wing's Engines started whining, while all the screens, displays and control lights came to live. As soon as the gauges indicated green he pulled back on the stick, lifted off and retracted the landing gear. Gently pulling the throttle forward he slowly let the B-Wing pick up speed and approached the hangar exit. Somehow the energy barrier that sealed the hangars atmosphere against the cold void of space was still active and this raised Iceman's curiosity for half a second. Apparently it was one of the few – if not the only working system aboard the *Joan d'Arc*. But then again, if it had failed in first place, then the entire hangar and every ship section with doors that had been open while the power loss took place would have turned into hostile environments not too long ago.

Shutting off his worries Iceman plunged his B-Wing through the field and launched his fighter into the fray, with Drake's A-Wing in hot pursuit.

As soon as they had left the hangar they noticed the distant Star Destroyer and several waves of approaching TIE Fighters and TIE Bombers. Their lead elements were still seven clicks away, but they were approaching fast and in vastly superior number, while White Squadron's only hope for survival lay in the hands of a skilled Lieutenant and an eager Flight Officer.

"Join the Alliance, they said.", Drake mumbled. "Visit exiting places they said. Well, looks like it's going to get very exiting, don't you think?"

Iceman chuckled as he brought locked the wings of his fighter in attack position and readied his Proton Torpedoes. "Yeah, I guess you're right. This doesn't look like a day on the beach, if I'm not mistaken."

Then he got serious and targeted the closest TIE Bomber, still far out of reach. "I'll take care of the bombers, try to keep those Eyeballs as busy as you can, but be prepared to break and engage any bomber that slips by."

Drake didn't need any encouragement, because his sensors told him the entire story. Without her weapons online and with the shields still down the *Joan d'Arc* wouldn't survive that many torpedo hits. Each torpedo which made it through their line of defense would do some serious damage and endanger their friends and comrades aboard.

[Aboard the ISD *Guardian*, Bridge]

Vice Admiral Garner was more than pleased with how the operation unfolded before him. Apparently the Alliance Frigate had been successfully disabled by a computer virus, which was at least what the Secret

Order Initiate claimed. All sensor readings so far supported this information, even though the Frigate had managed to launch two single fighters in response. Admiral Garner was sure that his forces would wipe this minor nuisance away in an eyeblink and the helpless Frigate would then be easy prey for the swarms of bombers, which would reach their attack position any minute by now. He didn't even bother to order the *Guardian* closer, because by the time it would be in shooting distance the action would for sure be over by long.

"Urgent message on the command channel from the *Huntsman!*", one of the communications officers announced.

Garner turned his attention to the surprisingly pale Lieutenant, who struggled ahead with his report: "Uh ... looks like they're under attack by an yet undetermined number of Rebel fighters."

The Admiral raised an eyebrow and queried harshly: "How many warships?"

When he got the reply he relaxed seemingly and turned his attention towards the unfolding battle at hand. "I'm sure they can handle whatever the Rebels throw at them."

[Aboard the Blastboat *Millennia*, Twin Sun System]

This was the moment that Sandra had waited for and that she had hoped that it would never happen. But the Empire had left her no choice and made it clear that they needed to be sure of her devotion and loyalty to the Emperor, before they could trust her again. Working as a freelancer and for the Empire as well as the Alliance had it's back draw and it didn't pay that well. Sooner or later she had to make a choice and the moment was now or never. And she made her choice. She had so much to lose, her logic said her, but her heart left her only one option and she followed it. With a swift movement Sandra drew her sidearm, half turned in her pilot's seat and shot Malcolm squarely in the chest. Her Blaster was only set to stun, but it would buy her the time she needed.

With holstered her blaster again and reached over to the backup weapons console on the left of her hip. It wasn't as comfortable and complex as the one the weapons officer was supposed to control and handling it while flying was quite demanding, but she had no other choice than to divert her attention to both tasks at hand.

But she had to take care of the two Gunboats, which were a crucial part of the trap they - *the Empire*, she corrected herself - had laid out for Michael. She made sure that the Concussion Missiles were still selected and then flipped the targeting over from the two A-Wing's to the Gunboats. So far the Imperial fighters were ignoring her Blastboat, but the approaching TIE Interceptors had already split in elements of two and each group opened fire upon Michael's and Dario's fighter. Finally the targeting computers beeping switched to a constant whistle and Sandra pressed both firing buttons on the weapons console. The Blastboat shivered as it launched the four Advanced Concussion Missiles at once and their homing warheads raced onwards to the unsuspecting Gunboats. Immediately she launched another salvo at the two GUN's, well knowing that even two impacting missiles wouldn't finish them off due to their superior shields and armor. Provided that the first pair of missiles hit them at all.

Vyper rolled hard and realigned his A-Wing, as the pair of TIE Interceptors in front of him opened fire. Their shots went by close to the bell of his fighter and he squeezed off a salvo of single bursts himself, with slightly better accuracy, hitting and damaging both of his enemies lightly. Then some green laser beams hit his own frontal shields and he had to break lock for another evasive break, pulling up and leveling out again on them. With a light smile on his lips he pressed the trigger again, noticing that both TIE's were still too close together, making it very easy for him. His stream of ruby glancing energy needles reached out and gently touched the solar panel of the right TIE, ripping it off clearly and sending the crippled craft slamming into it's unprepared wingman. Both Imperial fighters exploded in a fiery ball of whirling debris.

Michael glanced over his shoulder, looked around and saw that Dario had just apparently finished his first TIE and was in hot pursuit of the second one. An explosion further down their way to the Factory Station caught his attention and by the flailing wings that whirled out of the fireball he noticed that this must have been one of the Gunboats. The second GUN tried hard to evade a single Concussion missile, with it's shields already way down and with trailing smoke, indicating serious internal damage.

For a moment Vyper was very surprised how quick they had finished the first the first wave of Imperial crafts, but now that the advantage of surprise had plaid out it's limited usefulness things would get hot and hotter by by each and any passing second. He already noticed two flights of TIE Advanced closing from the right and the left, while a lot of other hostile dots and clusters on his threat indicator came closer to where they were. Not only the Carrack Cruiser behind them, but also two Frigates, one up and to the left and one on the right, were in or almost in range to open fire with their main batteries. There could be no doubt that they were currently about to or preparing to launching their fighters.

"Our time runs out, guys.", Vyper signaled. "Let's deliver our presents and get the hell out of Dodge."

He then targeted the remaining Gunboat and caught it's attention by opening fire, unfortunately without doing any harm to it. The GUN made another hard turn to evade the trailing missile, which finally run out of fuel and exploded harmlessly. Dario joined Vyper in his attack on the Cygnus Starwing and together they sent it into oblivion, making the path free for the Blastboat to continue it's flight towards the Factory.

[Meanwhile aboard TIE Advanced Avenger One]

Just finishing another quick glance around Lieutenant Dahlgren checked his sensor display and was surprised to find three green blips in midst of all the red dots there. He blinked in surprise and looked again. "What the hell ...", he mumbled and flipped through his targeting computer to select one of the newcomers to obtain further info. Before he could do so the speakers in his helmet started bearing: "*Huntsman* to Avenger and Theta. Hostile forces in sector 2-4 red. Move to sector 3-4 red, but do not – repeat – not engage."

He heard further orders concerning other flightgroups, but blended them out from his consciousness, as he wondered about this strange orders and assembled his wingmen around him. They rejoined formation, sped up and raced towards what seemed to be an Skipray Blastboat and it's two A-Wing escorts. Dahlgren wondered where the rest of the Alliance ships were. Probably they'd come out of hyperspace any minute by now, not even in his wildest dreams thinking that three gold fish would willingly swim in this tank filled with sharks that the *Twin Sun* system represented due to their presence. He noticed a couple of TIE Interceptors and Gunboats which already had engaged the Rebels and were getting the worst of it. The Interceptor pilots screamed for assistance and Dahlgren was more than eager to jump to their assistance, but as soon as his flight came closer than 1.5 clicks to the targets, the *Huntsman* ordered them back angrily.

Finally the screams of the last Interceptor pilot were cut of abruptly, as his fighter was turned into a cloud of expanding debris. One of the Gunboats had also went down by now and finally Dahlgren had enough. "Avenger Lead to *Huntsman*. Are you guys sleeping or what? Our people die out here while you let us stand by twisting our thumbs. Are we allowed to engage?"

The Lieutenant knew he would have to pay for this insubordination, but he just couldn't stand it any longer. There was a moment of deadly silence on the comline, but then he heard a stern voice in his speakers: "Affirmative. Avenger, engage to kill."

With an almost sexual relieve Dahlgren threw his TIE Advanced around and ordered his wingman to attack, with himself going in for the leading A-Wing, which skillfully rolled through the dozens of laser beams that leashed out from the Frigate *Gladiator*, hovering above the scene. Dahlgren prayed that the A-Wing would survive as long as it would take him to get into firing range, which would be real soon by now, due to the superior speed of his craft.

The Imperial Lieutenant used this moment to reconfigure his power settings to one best suited dealing with an A-Wing and checked that his lasers were fully charged. He wanted his first volley to come true, so he linked all lasers and waited until the leading A-Wing had finished it's roll. Holding his breath he waited for the right moment and with the precision that would have made a Zen-master proud he pressed the trigger, knowing the result even before the four solid beams had finished their short voyage.

[Aboard the Joan d'Arc, CIC]

Uttering a silent curse Shok'wave thumbed her lighter and held it up, while she used her left hand to prevent herself from drifting away freely. The little flame threw long shadows in the Combat Information Center and

lighted the long and white faces of her fellow officers. "So, where is the damage report?", she asked and looked at Moose, who happened to be closest.

The Alderaanian pilot threw a sour face and looked up from his personal communicator, which dangled uselessly and with dead controls from his wrist. "I'll head for the bridge and see what ideas they have. Someone should check with Engineering, too."

Avery nodded and used her legs to thrust herself towards the door. "That's exactly what I'm going to do. I guess whatever trouble we've encountered has it's origin in the lower decks."

With a curious look Shok's faced her and carefully shifted the lighter from one hand to the other, as it was getting quite hot. "What do you mean by that?", she inquired.

At that moment a bright light appeared in the corridor outside CIC and headed their way, dangling from one wall to the other as someone was trying to make his difficult approach in zero gravity. Finally Granite burst into the room and drifted over the card table, missing the rail by just an inch and floating on. He almost bumped into Shok's who, let go her lighter and grabbed him towards the next save handhold. The flashlight he carried brightened the room a lot more than the zippo they had to rely on just half a minute ago.

"Uuuh, I think I can explain.", sighed the Caldanian pilot and shrunk a little bit away from his Commanding Officer.

He quickly told them what he and Psycho had done and what they had discovered.

"You broke into the main Imperial Database?", Solo inquired and let go a deep breath.

Shok'wave shook her head and moved her face closer to the sweat covered forehead of the Caldanian pilot: "We will have a long talk when this is over, be assured of that.", she whispered with a dangerous tone in her voice. She then listened to his explanation of what had happened to the ship's computer and waved her hand: "Can Psycho fix it?"

Granite shrugged as best as he could without losing his delicate stand. "I hope so, but who can tell to which degree the virus has infected the systems? It might shut everything down once we have it up again, but I'm no expert in this."

Commander Krenzel looked him deep into the eyes and Owen could very well see her anger and disappointment within there.

Finally it was Solo, who broke the silence and said with great discomfort: "I might be the newest addition to the Squadron and the Training Wing, but I guess we might be able to find out what's wrong if we restore power to the computer and hook up the R2-Unit, that I've seen around lately."

Shok's whirled around and screamed: "Ledner!", before she thrust herself into the general direction of the corridor.

"No.", Solo said, surprised and confused by Shok's reply, following her with his eyes. "My name is Charbel, Ma'am."

Granite chuckled as he drifted by and headed for the exit. "Welcome to White Squadron. And by the way, Ledner is Drake's R2-Unit."

[Inside the *Twin Sun* System]

The impact on his rear shields caught Michael totally unaware and instantly he pulled up hard on the stick while putting all his weight onto the left pedal. Another impact, this time not as forceful as the first one before ate away whatever rear shields he had before and boiled off armor off his left right wing. A yellow warning light indicated a system failure and the smell of ozone told him that something had been damaged or was smoldering. He quickly diverted energy from lasers to shields and equalized his shields again. Their charge gauge showed a dull yellow, telling him that the protection of his craft was severely limited until he could

afford to transfer more energy into the shields. Finally he noticed the approaching TIE Avengers in his peripheral vision. At first the blurring and fast movement got his attention and he had already leveled out onto them before he noticed what design he faced. He fired some stray shots at the leading pair of fighters until his survival instinct cut in and forced him to break his attack and to go defensive again. Not a second too soon, as both approaching Avenger's opened up again, their laser fire passing through where his craft would have been by now, had he not reacted in time.

The Avenger had been his fighter of choice back in his Imperial days, but since then he had come to hate it for the dangers which it posed in the hands of skilled and able pilots. And due to their scarce numbers and their high costs only the very best Imperial pilots were allowed to fly them. Such as the ones he was facing right now.

"I've got trouble over here.", he said over the radio. "How's going, Sandra, Dario?"

The pilot from Iberyia sighed and then said: "Same here. Both Frigates are launching Eyeballs and Interceptors and they'll be all over us in a minute. Our time is running out very fast."

There was no reply from Sandra and with a panic expression Michael looked around until he had located the unmistakably form of her Blastboat. The Factory station had opened up with her impressive amount of defensive lasers and bathed the dancing, drifting and breaking Blastboat in an eerie spectacle of light as it's shields absorbed the brunt of the onslaught.

Finally he could hear her over the static, even though the transmission was garbled. "... almost there, almost there!", her voice overlaid with cracking discharges and full of tension.

Another hit diverted his attention to the tasks at hand and again he had to go evasive. This time he managed to follow one of the Avengers as he pulled out of his dive. Michael cut back the throttle pulled up hard and sped up again, the Avenger dead ahead under his crosshairs. He opened fire even before his targeting computer could finish it's projection and beam after beam sliced into the T/A's shields. The skin on his arms started to trickle in anticipation and he gave in to his instincts, aborting his attack just as he breached the Avenger's shields. Not a moment too soon, as two T/A's had managed to get onto his tail. With a sense of relieve he noticed that Dario was already taking care of one of them. The Imperial pilot had to break off and that left Michael with one worry less for the moment. A sudden cut back of his throttle and an aggressive bank and turn maneuver forced the trailing Avenger to overshoot, with most, but not all of his shot's missing, but allowing Vyper to return the debt and to chase him in return.

[Aboard the Blastboat *Millennia*, *Twin Sun* System]

The Blastboat rocked again under the merciless impact of laser fire coming up from the X7 station and with a worried look Sandra noticed that heir shields would falter in a couple of seconds. Sweat run down her brows and into her eyes as she did her best to maintain an unpredictable course while getting closer and closer to the station. Her only chance was firing the Heavy Space Bombs in the last possible moment, or else the gun towers had a fair chance of setting the bombs off too early. She really wished that she had the kind of bombs that she had said to Michael and his companion while she had briefed them on the mission. But that had only been another bait to lure them into the trap so that she could catch the bounty and regain the Empire's trust and confidence. But then again, somehow she had always known that the Empire would never fully trust her again and that had helped her to decide between duty and honor.

Another bundle of lasers lighted up the front shields and partially blinded her vision as she finished her thought, still frantically working her controls. But the regular Heavy Space Bombs she had would do the job as well, provided that all of them would hit home. And there her circle of thoughts closed, because to make that happen she had to get dangerously close.

She dived the Blastboat between two of the outreaching structures that reminded her so much of space containers and pulled up hard, aiming directly for the center cone of the station. Two, then three more laser blast's hit home and a shower of sparks behind her told Sandra that something important had been hit. *Millennia's* sluggish reactions told her even more.

"*Damn, I've lost my port stabilizer!*", she cursed and finally pressed the trigger on the console besides her legs. The Blastboat staggered as half a ton of steel and explosives were launched from the quad missile

launchers and immediately upon reload she fired again without waiting for a target solution.

Sandra bit her lower lip as she did her best to pull the Blastboat into a steep climb to clear the station, but the failing stabilizer just spun the *Millennia* around until it sluggishly reacted to her input. She barely managed to clear the center cone and raced over one of the steel struts that connected one of the containers with the main hull. With a loud bang one of the monitors burst and showered her with sparks and glass fragments. All around her and warning klaxons went off and her ship started spinning without reacting to her frantic jerking on the controls.

[Outside the *Joan d'Arc*]

Of course he was used to flying an A-Wing, but Daniel Sutherland instantly noticed certain differences between the fighter he was used to fly and Psycho's personal one. This one behaved like a racehorse and the slightest movement on the stick brought an instant, sometimes forceful reaction. To him it looked like Psycho had cut some deals with maintenance and they changed certain settings for him to improve the A-Wing's handling even more. The differences were subtle, but still he needed to get accommodated to them fast, because the hostile TIE Fighters were almost within firing range. Drake glanced around and saw that Iceman's B-Wing – "*Avery's B-Wing*", he reminded himself – was half a click to his right and circling around to engage the approaching TIE Bombers from one flank. It was a fair shot at best, but the Imperial pilots noticed his tactics and simply adjusted to it by diverting half of their TIE Fighters – about seven or eight – to intercept Iceman.

"This is not going to work.", Drake said and switched to his Concussion missiles, targeting the leftmost quad of TIE Bombers.

Iceman pressed his left pedal and joined up with Drake again. "I guess you're right. OK, let's do the best we can. I hope that will be enough." He then checked the status of his Torpedo launcher and picked the closest Bomber.

As soon as both pilots had a solid lock they let loose and quickly switched through their targets, firing one torpedo or missile at each bomber. A deadly rain of homing projectiles raced towards the unshielded enemy TIE Bombers, still closing onto the *Joan d'Arc* and fully ignoring them.

A few TIE Fighters which happened to be in the path of the approaching missiles opened fire and bright explosions told the story of some successful hits.

Upon Iceman's command they split up again, Iceman putting his B-Wing into a steep climb, while Drake inverted his A-Wing and then pulled the stick to his belly, diving under the enemy formation. A quick glance around told Drake that they had wasted a total of eleven Bombers, but before he could cheer up he noticed that seven were still continuing their flight, while half of the Eyeballs were chasing him and the other one was about to follow Iceman through his climb, with both groups splitting up and performing a perfectly timed Thach Weave maneuver.

One of the constant reminders that Moose had hammered into them came to his mind and for the first time since at least twenty minutes Drake smiled, despite the sweat that was covering his forehead and the tension with which his hands worked on the controls. "*Control your breathing and always stay focused on your objective!*".

"*As easy as that, sure!*", he thought and veered around to open up with his lasers on the closest of his attackers, while trying to keep track of the Imperial's deployment around him. The Eyeballs returned fire and their green energy darts filled the void around his Dodonna Blissex fighter, most of them passing harmlessly around, but more than he liked to found their mark and drained his shields. One TIE Fighter exploded under his fire, with a second and a third one taking minor damage as he skid right through their formation. Drake put Psycho's A-Wing into a drastic scissors movement to avoid being hit, while he drained every last ounce of speed out of his ride, speeding closer to the *Joan d'Arc* and the Bombers, which were just about to open fire. Up and ahead he saw Iceman, who apparently had tried to follow the Bombers on his own, but by now he was forced to break, because the Eyeballs were getting nasty. Drake noticed that the B-Wing's shields had already been badly mauled and that only skill, sheer luck and the rock solid design had kept the slow B-Wing alive such long against this impressive numerical advantage of the pressing TIE Fighters.

Drake targeted a pair of Iceman's attackers, and a lucky hit blew the lead element up and forced the Imperial's wingman into a defensive maneuver which forced him to abandon his attack on the B-Wing. For now, but that wouldn't last long, as Drake knew very well.

Again he looked at the Bombers, their trailing element as far away as 1.08 clicks, at extreme distance of his lasers, but within range. He knew he couldn't afford it, but there was no choice. So he leveled out and brought his crosshairs into match with target. As soon as he got the green light he poured shot after shot into the rear of the Bomber. Just as it was about to break it's attack run and to pull up, one of the shots went through it's armor and set of an internal explosion which obliterated the craft. Ignoring an impact onto his rear shields Drake targeted the next Bomber and opened up, but this time he wasn't that lucky and the Imperial pilot skidded up, to the left and than downwards, avoiding the laser fire and continuing it's approach. Several further hits onto his already weakened rear shields told Drake that this was something he couldn't afford. He broke his attack run, transferred energy from lasers to shields and helplessly watched as the remaining six bombers opened up ripple firing their torpedo's into the shieldless and powerlessly drifting *Joan d'Arc*. The sensation of loss, failure and grievance came over him and with high flaring anger he leveled out behind the closest Eyeball. "This ain't over yet!", he uttered and pressed the trigger, well knowing that this could not save the *Joan d'Arc* or any of his friends and comrades aboard. But that didn't matter to him anymore ...

[Aboard the ISD *Guardian*, Bridge]

"Torpedo's launched, Admiral!", the Tactical Officer said and looked up from his console. Vice Admiral Garner gave him a nod of approval and then continued to look at the main screen, whose live video feed, running on a high magnification, had locked onto the helpless Frigate and the deadly blue stream of homing projectiles that raced up and onwards towards a helpless prey.

"Mark this day. It'll be the first victory of this new campaign that once and for all will deal with the Rebel Insurgency." The Admiral was about to say more, but steps behind him and the presence of an uneasy officer behind his back made him stop. Slowly and with a lot of anger in his eyes he turned. "What is it?"

The Communications Officer swallowed hard and then said nervously: "We lost communications with the station. The last report indicates a serious attack, Sir."

Vice Admiral Garner slowly turned and glanced over the tactical display. His eyes radiated fury as he then locked his glance at the bearer of the bad news. "Recall all fighters as soon as the Frigate is finished off and set course to the *Twin Sun* System for immediate jump after recovery of all flyable fighters."

The ISD's captain moved closer to the Admiral and whispered softly, but with worry for his men: "What about those who had to eject? We can't leave them behind, sir."

The Admiral shrugged the comment of and said with a harsh tone in his voice: "We have no use for pilots who have just proven their incapability." His facial expression left no doubt that the matter was closed with that, as he continued to watch the deadly stream of torpedo's, which were about to end another matter real soon now.

[Aboard the FRG *Joan d'Arc*, Communications Facility]

"Come on, you don't want to upset Uncle Psycho, won't you?", Stephen whispered as he caressed the main computer core. He had restored it's power by connecting an auxiliary power supply which usually was used for field repairs on droids. But he wondered if it would be sufficient to sustain the high drain when the computer core initialized it's three dimensional memory gates. Again he flipped the power on switch, but this time he started a different initializing sequence by not energizing all the computer's system at once, but one after another. Finally the screen lit up and the automatic diagnostic started to run through.

"Phew! That was that.", he mumbled and slowly stood up and pulled himself closer to the keyboard, which had started to drift away in the zero-G environment.

Suddenly he heard a weird noise from the corridor and turned his head in curiosity. The unmistakably figure of Ledner, Drake's R2 unit filled the door, but what amused Psycho the most, was that Ledner had Shok'wave in tow. Literally, as the droid was using his magnetic wheels to stay attached to the floor and Shok's had wrapped her arms around the droids head to let him pull her in.

"Uuh, Shok's, I can explain ...", Psycho started and gestured around.

Sherry let Lender pull her closer to the main computer terminal before she launched herself towards Psycho and grabbed one of the handholds to stop her drift. With the free hand she cut him off. "Oh, I'm more than sure that we'll have a long chit chat once this is over. But first of all we need to get moving."

She gestured towards Ledner, who had opened one of the small hatches in his torso and extracted one of his arms to connect himself with the computer core that Psycho had just brought back half way online.

Stephen swallowed hard and turned the screen so that Sherry could see what was going on.

"We were stuck by a virus, a computer virus which shut down virtually everything.", he mumbled.

Commander Krenzel looked around and noticed the jury rigged repairs that Stephen had undertaken, approving them with a quick nod.

"Figured that out from what Granite said. He's currently heading towards the bridge to find out if they know anything we don't. How far are you with the computer?"

Stephen cleared his throat and threw his face into a sour expression. "Just started it up a few seconds ago. Diagnostics is running through, but the virus is still active and as soon as I start one of the sub-programs like Lights or Gravity, the virus switches it off again."

Shok's was about to say something, but then Ledner beeped a series of tones, and turned his "eye" towards Shok's.

She looked at Stephen and asked: "Do you understand him?", but when seeing Stephens face she didn't need to wait for an answer.

"Look, Ledner, I don't understand you. Please do your best to get everything working, OK? I have the feeling that we need to get the hell out of Dodge."

The R2-Unit started whistling another set of tones and the small arm attached to the computer core's main data bus started rotating a half turn left and two turns right. Long tables and statistics flowed over the main screen as Ledner battled his way through all the subsystems and innards of the *Joan d'Arc's* very heart and soul.

Another shadow appeared in the door and leaped into the room. As he slowly spun around and grabbed the corner of the table Shok's and Psycho could see that it was Torpedo.

"We're in deep trouble.", he uttered breathless, weeping sweat from his high forehead. "I just come from the bridge and they have a visual on an ISD and a whole bunch of Bombers and Eyeballs, heading our way. This was ten minutes ago and they should be all over us by now."

Shok'wave's eyes went wide as she heard the bad news. "Has anyone been able to get to the hangar? Damn, with the loss of all power we probably lost the atmosphere there anyway."

Torpedo shook his head and replied: "No, I don't think so. There's still the backup ..."

He was unable to finish his sentence as the artificial gravity kicked in and the lights flared up without warning. The three White Squadron members fell like rocks to the floor, accompanied by everything that had been floating around ever since the loss of gravity. Shok's landed hard on her belly, while Torpedo slammed into the table he had been holding onto. Psycho was a little more fortunate, even though he hurt his elbow while landing on the armrest of his chair. The turmoil of loud bangs, curses and breaking equipment was

accompanied by the warning klaxons of the red alert and the spinning up of other vital systems. The most notably and welcome was the shipwide Intercom, which sprung online and immediately showed Moose's worried face and behind it the main tactical console on the bridge.

"Incoming Torpedo's! Twelve seconds to impact!"

Moose said even more, but Shok's thoughts were already going at ballistic speeds. Provided that all systems would be running within the next couple of seconds, it would take their shields at least two minutes to recharge to full power. Moose's announcement had made clear that they didn't have the time. And the twelve seconds they had was too little to plot even the tiniest hyperjump, least alone to initiate it.

"Ledner! Full speed ahead, evasive actions and execute Gung-Ho-42!"

The Joan d'Arc's powerful Kuat Drive Engines roared to life as Ledner fired them up and immediately kicked them to the maximum sustainable throttle they were designed for. He then switched over to the maneuvering subroutine and started another task that showed him the tactical situation outside, gathered from the active and passive sensor arrays. Lender had thousands of logged flying hours in various X-Wings, but so far he never had flown anything as big as the Joan d'Arc. But it took him less than fifty nano seconds to actually like it. While shifting through the database of pre-recorded commands and maneuvers he searched for the one called "Gung-Ho-42" and executed all the commands and orders that it consisted off, flooding cargo bay 42 with water drained from the *Joan's* reservoir and opening the outer cargo bay door without depressurizing. But all the time he was well aware that it would only buy them five of six seconds, if that much at all. So he started to beep a worried set of tones and pre-heated the hyperdrive coils by himself.

Meanwhile he overrode the bridge's helm, as he noticed that the helmsman had started to make some inputs to change course and for good measure he disabled the auto-pilot, too, because he had noticed that an emergency program had just started to keep the Joan on course despite the twenty thousand cubic meters of water and wreckage that flooded out of the open cargo bay door into the void of space, where the water froze immediately. The sudden rush of water and atmosphere decompressing from portside into space threw the Frigate faster around than even her massive thrusters would have accomplished and with the main engines running on full speed the Joan d'Arc had managed to sidestep out of the first half dozens of Torpedo's attack run. Of course those who had lost lock reacquired and looped around for another turn, while those following after had time for a course correction. But nonetheless it had bought them an eyeblink or two of time.

Lender ignore the hardship that this maneuver had unleashed on the humans around him and while he registered that they slowly rose back onto their bi-pedaled extremities he finished his jump-calculations and initiated a mini-hyperjump that would bring them no further than two light-years, but to temporary safety. But then he noticed that something was wrong. The hyperdrive coils had not recharged as fast as he was used to from the X-Wing's and it would take at least another five seconds until they could jump. The droid checked the tactical feed and helplessly acknowledged the data: "Time to impact, closest warhead: four seconds."

[Inside the *Twin Sun* System]

Vyper noticed a red stripe on the hull of the TIE Advanced as it overshoot and missed his A-Wing by less than five feet, indicating that this was either the Wing Leader or the Element Leader of this flight. His peripheral vision noticed that his shield gauge showed all red and that the Avenger had probably scored two or three hits more on his fighter than he could feel comfortable with. But he wasted no time and pressed his trigger, while his left hand quickly flipped the switch to equalize his shield strength. It was a helpless and automated gesture, because now a kid with a sling-stone could penetrate what was left of his shields.

His burst of concentrated laser fire hit home and the Avenger's shields flared up as they absorbed the rain of energy. The enemy pilot was very good and already had started to pull up hard, which forced Michael to follow him through this maneuver which broke his lock, until he could gain enough lead to continue firing with any chance of hitting home. For doing so he had to cut back his speed, which naturally increased the distance between him and the fast Avenger. He scored another hit or two, until the Imperial pilot broke hard to the left and pulled down and then leveled off. Michael smiled as he noticed what his adversary was doing and refused to play the game by other than his rules.

"So they still teach this at the Academy? Good to know!", he mumbled and kept the T/A between himself and the Correllian Corvette that it was heading to. If he had followed the Imperial pilot through his loop, then he'd allowed the Corvette a good share of shots on him. From where he was now, he couldn't fire at the Avenger, nor could the Corvette open up without hitting one of their own fighters, until the faster T/A had left the slower A-Wing behind it.

Michael used this situation for a quick glance over his tactical display and to transfer some laser energy into shields, but not all of it. Dario apparently had managed to destroy his target and was now taking care of several Interceptors which had been launched from either the Carrack Cruiser behind them, or one of the Frigates above. It didn't matter, because they were quickly running out of options and would be overwhelmed in less than a few minutes. Then Vyper found what he had been looking for, and not a single second too early.

His canopy lit up with an eerie glow of light, as the first Heavy Space Bomb hit the Factory Station and sent a shower of light, fragments and debris out into space. Every explosion shook the massive station as if Thor's Hammer would pound it to pieces. One of the attached containers drifted away, shaken by secondary explosions and then a ball of fire expanded, consuming the entire station and even one of the corvettes hovering above it.

Michael's heart missed a beat as he noticed no signs of the Blastboat, but then he had to close his eyes to shield them from the explosion.

Out of instinct he firewalled the throttle, threw his A-Wing into a loop and then pulled the stick up to change his course and heading, away from the TIE Advanced and the Corvette.

He needed to blink twice until he could see clearly again and a third time to find out where Dario was.

"Dario! Do you see her?"

The pilot from Iberya glanced around himself, throwing his A-Wing from side to side to avoid the stray fire that the TIE Interceptors rained at him from extreme distance.

"Negative!", he replied with clenched teeth and as he pressed his trigger to return the hospitality of his Imperial adversaries he added: "Our time has run out. We either leave now or never, do you hear?"

Michael sighed heavily, while he kept track of the TIE Advanced, which was now looping around to get into attack position on him, while he sneaked his A-Wing through the first volleys of the Corvettes main battery. All that was left of the Factory was drifting debris and it was impossible for him to see anything whose shape resembled as if it had belonged to an Blastboat. He was about to give up his search, when he finally noticed a flickering, third green blip on his tactical display.

"Sandra, do you hear me?", Michael yelled into his mike and headed towards the weak transponder signal, ignoring the closing T/A.

"I have you now!", Lieutenant Dahlgren muttered through clenched teeth and pressed his trigger, as his TIE Advanced leveled out behind the A-Wing.

[Outside the *Joan d'Arc*]

Iceman was too occupied with overriding destroyed and malfunctioning systems and to him it seemed as if Avery's B-Wing would fall apart around him faster than he could say: "Holy shit!"

Nonetheless he kept firing at the Eyeballs around him whenever he could turn enough to keep one in his target sight long enough to press the trigger. So he did miss the better part of the show. Drake, who was heading towards his comrade and pumping shot after shot into the furball around the battered B-Wing, let go a sigh of relieve as the *Joan d'Arc's* external lights flared up in all their brightness. Half a second later her main engines came to life and the powerful ion wash started to slowly propel her along an unknown course. But just as Drake's spirit was about to soar skywards, he realized that it wouldn't matter, because the torpedo's would hit in less than a few seconds, which just added more fuel to his anger.

But the next set of events managed to cheer him up, even though he didn't understand what exactly happened. Some kind of explosion ruptured the *Joan's* hull just below the portside hangar bay and in an explosive decompression thousands of fragments, crates, and pallets rained into space. The force of the thrust was so strong that it rocked the ship around and changed its course by at least 30 or 40 degrees and rotated the ships along its lateral axis and throwing it out of the course of the first four or five torpedo's, which missed the *Joan's* tail section by only twenty or thirty meters and continued to loop around for another approach. The following torpedo's managed to adjust their course and this time only a miracle could save their mothership, as Drake admitted to himself.

All the more the sudden and premature flashes and explosions of the next six torpedo's took him by surprise, until he realized that whatever debris field the *Joan* had launched, happened to be in the path of the approaching Imperial warheads. The warheads traveled at or around 300 kts and their proximity fuses were set off by the mass of the freezing water and drifting objects. Another torpedo exploded, this time closer to the speeding Frigate and scorching one of the gun turrets on the upper foredeck, with still more of them raining in. Finally the *Joan d'Arc* jumped ahead as its hyperdrive kicked in and it seemed as if the Frigate's hull would elongate into the cold void of space, as it made its jump to safety. The remaining torpedo's, now without valid lock continued their flight and either detonated in the debris field or flew guilelessly on.

Drake's heart made a jump in his chest, until he realized that Iceman and him had been left behind, the two of them against some probably very upset Imperials, who had just witnessed a seemingly helpless prey escape their grasp.

"I see it!", Iceman yelled. "Don't wait for me, Drake, jump now!"

Drake almost bit his tongue off, while withholding a reply. Instead he continued to fire on one of the Eyeballs that still chased his wingman around. The TIE Fighter exploded after the second successful hit and one of its solar panels broke off and slammed into a second, unsuspecting TIE Fighter that Iceman had barely missed. Four others were a bit further away and splitting into pairs, while only two were close enough to pose an immediate threat to the damaged B-Wings escape. Drake targeted one of them and radioed his partner: "Take the other one and get the hell out of here as soon as it's finished. I'll be right behind you."

Iceman cursed as his targeting system exploded and threw a shower of sparks over his flightsuit. Through the smoke and ozone smell he saw the streaking bye Eyeball and switched his cannons to single fire and aligned his rather unresponsive B-Wing with only his Mark-I eyeballs as reference. He squeezed his trigger ever so gently and even though that only two of his three laser cannons opened fire, he managed to scorch the paint on the speeding T/F. Apparently the Imperial pilot had more brain than most of his colleagues and decided to take a time out from the battle, because it didn't finish its loop around and headed upwards. That was all the time that Iceman needed and with sweaty fingers he reached over to the hyperdrive lever and pulled it. The B-Wings wings folded together and with relieve Iceman noticed the drive kicking in. The stars in front of his viewscreen elongated and the battered B-Wing jumped to safety, with Drake's A-Wing in hot pursuit.

[Aboard the Skipray Blastboat *Millennia*]

It took her a few moments to realize where she was, as she reopened her eyes and stretched her aching back. But then the annoying blare of the emergency klaxon made her realized. The Blastboat has slammed into the Factory Station upon destruction of its port stabilizer, further damaging vital equipment. Then the explosion of the Factory had rocked her boat and shaken Sandra around as if she was a bug in a coke can that served as a child's makeshift football. At that point she had blacked out as the artificial gravity generators had been unable to neutralize the G-forces that had washed over the Skipray Blastboat in the wake of the exploding station. She didn't know how long she had been out, but in a battle like this a mere second could be just too long. She reached for the stick and the throttle and moved both slowly to see if there was any response. With relieve she noticed that there was, even though that it took her quite some time to stop the wild and sickening rotations along the horizontal axis. She main system monitors was out and two of the secondary MFD's showed just a shower of static, so she switched to yet another screen to take a glance at the damage report. A lot of vital systems showed up yellow, including sublight drive and steering. All weapons systems safe one Ion cannon were destroyed and two thirds of her shield generators, including all aft ones were burned out or inoperable. But the single most important system for her now was shown in bright, promising and relieving green. "Computer, initiate hyperjump sequence. Pre-heat coils and jump when ready."

Only then did she glance around at the raging battle and the leashing out green energy bundles that came from everywhere and converged at two different areas in space told her that the two A-Wings were still around. The question was for how much longer. At that moment her com came to life and she heard Michael's voice.

"Sandra, do you hear me?"

She cleared her throat and then keyed her mike, noticing from the corner of her bright blue eyes that her ship would jump in only a few seconds.

"I'm sorry, Michael. I had no choice than to lure you into this trap.", she whispered and released the button, only to press it again. But before she could speak the hyperdrive kicked in and carried her away. Not that it did matter anyway, because one of the molten shield generators had melted the radio's antenna cable, rendering her communications set unusable and depriving Michael of the only honest and sincere apology she had ever given to him.

[Inside the *Twin Sun System*]

Michael noticed a movement at the outer edge of the debris field that once had been the Factory station and with a big sense of relieve he saw the mangled shape of the Blastboat picking up speed and initiating a jump. He keyed his navigation computer to check the Skipray's course and was even more relieved that it was jumping towards the coordinates they had agreed upon. A stream of green laser bolts soared past his canopy from behind and without thinking Michael rolled to the left and pulled hard on his stick.

"Oh, it's you again!", he mumbled, as he noticed the Wing Leaders TIE Advanced, only half a click behind him. "Dario! Make your jump as you see fit, I'll clean house and follow you ASAP!"

"Muy Bien!", the pilot from Iberya mumbled and tried to bring as much distance between himself and the approaching Interceptors. He was more than glad that he had refused to let them lure him into a close engagement, because it would have been all the more difficult to get far enough away that he could afford to hang helplessly in space while the hyperdrive warmed up.

Meanwhile Lieutenant Dahlgren tried to make another pass on the A-Wing and again the Rebel pilot frustrated him by literally side-stepping any shot that he fired at the Rebel fighter.

"Theta flight, vector in on my target!", he called over the guard frequency and made sure that the closest quad of TIE Interceptors didn't waste their time with firing at the other A-Wing, which was just about to make it's hyperjump and too far away for them to prevent it from escape.

Again he aligned his TIE Advanced and as soon as the targeting computer flashed green, he pressed his trigger, only to see the Rebel fighter perform another set of evasive actions, that looked vaguely familiar.

"Gods of Absalom, I've got enough!", he cursed, only to realize that he had still keyed his mike.

Vyper heard the very familiar curse that the Executive Officer of his Imperial Training Squadron so often had made use of. With a smile on his lips Michael opened a channel to the TIE Advanced, now that he knew that he was also sending on the Guard channel.

"Captain St. John has taught you well. You and me both, pilot."

Dahlgren hesitated and it took him an eyeblink until he had noticed that it was the Rebel pilot who was speaking to him.

Michael noticed that his opportunity had come and as soon as he saw Dario's A-Wing picking up speed and jumping to safety, he flipped a couple of switches on his console.

"Who the hell are you?", Dahlgren asked astonished, not noticing that the A-Wing was picking up speed at an incredible rate and that it's shield and weapon status were faltering, as it's pilot had transferred all energy to his engines.

Michael chuckled as he reached out to pull the hyperdrive lever: "Your worst nightmare. Sleep well, until we meet again!"

Then the stars jumped right into his face and past his canopy, as the A-Wing passed the border between hyperspace and the dimensions beyond. Leaving behind only debris, wreckage and a confused enemy. Safely concluding what had seemed like an impossible mission without the chance of survival.

But still ... Michael realized that this mission had not come without casualties and that something very, very dear to him had died in this very battle, that now lay behind him.

[Epilogue]

The landing pad outside Elysia's little space port was deserted at this nightly time and he was more than glad about that. This little backwater planet offered not much in respect to night life and amusement, but it had the facilities to repair the mangled and damaged fighters, which was why they had chosen it as the third leg of their escape route. The tarmac below his feet had still stored a vast complement of the daily heat and slowly gave it away, warming the chilly night that surrounded him. Vyper stepped around the humming and cracking hull of a freighter and as soon as he had cleared the bulky space ship he looked up to enjoy the beautiful sky above him. It reminded him a lot of Tarada VI, yet it was different and had its own quality and marvel. Maybe it wasn't the sky that was so different, but the times that had changed. Back then on Tarada VI he had almost ended his life out of the desperation that an unfavorable situation had forced him into. By now the situation wasn't much different, but there was this silver streak at the horizon that gave him hope. Even without this streak of silver he knew that there was no easy way out and after all, by now he was a different person than back then. But so was she and it had been her that had lured them into this trap and then helped them out. Michael still didn't have the whole picture, but he suspected that what Sandra had told him after touchdown was only what she wanted to tell him and Dario. But he had seen her eyes, seen something very familiar in it and that made him only stronger in his beliefs in her, more sincere in his feelings and with a lasting, powerful confidence that this could not be the end of all. But it also left him with an awareness of his own shortcomings. Thinking of that he gave in to one of those shortcomings and took the pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and slowly lit one of them, inhaling deeply.

Michael didn't know why he had come outside, but leaving the building had felt naturally for him, like if it was the right thing at the right time. As he had done so many other things at the spur of the moment and without reason, but following the voice of his heart. And by now this voice told him that he was not alone, as he had never been before and recognizing her made his heart jump once again, as it always did in her presence.

Slowly he walked over to the slender figure who stood at the edge of the tarmac. Her hands behind her back and looking up into the sky as if in deep thought. When Michael reached her, she nodded in approval and both just stood there, enjoying each others company without the need to exchange words. Standing apart from her Michael felt a closeness to this wonderful woman, that he could not express in words anyway, because words were too limited and would have taken a lot away from this beautiful moment.

Thoughts about the Cathedral on Tarada VI came to his mind and how his worries and his desperation had consumed him back then and he started to chuckle.

Sandra turned her head and gave him a curious smile. "What are you laughing about?"

"On a lot of nights like this I have been thinking of you.", Michael said softly. "I looked up into a sky like this and reached out for you, wishing you'd be as close to me as you are right now. Maybe even closer."

Now it was Sandra who chuckled, but she didn't say anything in return.

"I thought you were gone forever and so I went on a quest to find you. It took me across the universe and back, but instead of finding you I found myself. When that happened, I found something else, which I had thought it would be unreachable for all time and maybe even beyond eternity. Something which I hold very dear and that I love more than my life. And to my surprise it has always been there, right under my nose."

Michael saw that Sandra had lowered her head while he had been speaking to the stars, but now, as his eyes searched for hers, she looked up and parted her lips with a wry smile.

"So you've got someone waiting for you back home?"

Michael exhaled deeply and let a cloud of blue smoke out, before he turned to face her. He looked her deeply into her sparkling blue eyes and said with a soft tone in his voice: "No. And I stopped looking long time ago, because I have found all that I have ever been looking for."

Sandra remained silent for a long moment as they looked into each others eyes.

"You know this saying", she said and blinked reluctantly before she turned her head to look up to the sky. "When you stop looking someone will find you."

Vyper smiled and looked at the lit tip of his cigarette, before he threw it away. While putting his hands in his pockets he looked at her and replied: "Who knows? Isn't that already the case?"

Sandra didn't say anything for a yet another long moment and just kept staring at a particular bright start up in the sky. Michael looked at her profile and admired her fabulous beauty, not wanting this moment to end, because he knew whatever she was going to say would be another important turning point in both of their life's. And maybe he wouldn't like what she'd say. He felt her reluctance and the struggle within her and he also knew that whatever she was going to say would be the open and honest truth, but also softened up to some degree or another, because she didn't want to hurt him. But then again, how often had she hurt him before and how often would she do it all over again?

Then he also looked up to the sky and tried to find the star that she was looking at. "Someone is waiting for you up there?", Michael asked.

She remained silent, but from the corner of his eyes he could see her nodding slowly. Michael let go a deep breath and withdrew his right hand slowly from his pocket. He walked closer to her and stood behind her back, outstretching his right arm he pointed over her shoulder and up into the star-spangled sky. "Over there, below the Katana-Nebula and to the left of PRS-420. Do you see this star?"

Sandra nodded and turned half around to glanced at him with a recognizing smile. "Yes, I see it. And I remember it very well. I miss the closeness we had back then and I miss our friendship."

Vyper looked her into her wonderful, sparkling eyes and saw a tear rolling down on her face. With his still outstretched hand he gently wiped it away with his thumb, feeling the softness of her skin once again under his touch. He suppressed the urge to take her into his arms and if she had given him any encouragement, then who knows what would have happened? But this chance passed, as others had gone by, long ago.

"I often look up at this star, especially at nights like this. Sometimes I looked up with despair, sometimes with burning desire and sometimes with a deep sense of hopelessness. In all those years only a few factors remained unchanged and those are my deep, sincere feelings towards you. I'm not building up any expectations and the only thing I ask you for, is that you just be yourself. I waited an eternity to see you again and who knows what future has in stock? A month, a year or a decade - to me it doesn't matter."

For a long while Sandra returned his glance in silence, unable or unwilling to say anything in return. Then she took his hand away from her face. At first it looked like she wanted to let his hand go, but then she gave it soft squeeze and kept holding it in her slender, but strong fingers. Her voice was very soft and even a trace of sweetness covered the words that drove a cold steely knife into Vyper's heart.

"My shuttle is waiting and Alliance High Command wants do debrief me as soon as possible. A lot of things have happened and a lot of things have changed.", she said and shifted from one foot to another and breaking eye contact for a moment.

Michael nodded slowly. "Some things change, while some don't, even get better with time and distance."

Sandra let go a deep breath and then said: "But some don't, Michael." She then looked up and into his eyes. For the first time Michael realized an icy cold in those eyes, that usually had shown so much warmth and caring. "Don't wait for me, you'd waste your time."

For Michael it was as if the world had stopped rotating and as if the entire universe collapsed onto him. Through moist eyes he looked at her beautiful face and saw the answer that had been there all the time and

it shattered him even more than her words, which were still ringing in his ears. He swallowed hard and slowly took his hand out of hers. With almost betraying voice he did his best to say: "You know that I'm not good at saying 'good bye', so all I say this time is: Until we meet again, my ... friend."

Sandra hesitated for a moment, but then she gave him a firm hug and slowly walked away into the darkness. Vyper's eyes followed her for a long while. There was still this afterglow of the brief sensation of her slender and soft body pressed against his own and the lingering trace of her perfume in his nose, her slender fingers in his hands ... but there was also the look in her eyes and those softly spoken, but forceful words that – without intention – bore the cruelty and madness of the entire universe in it. Michael drew in a sharp breath and wiped his hands over his eyes. A very big sense of sadness overcame him, filled his eyes with even more tears and filled his throat with pain. But with clenching teeth he refused to give in to it.

With shaking hands he took another cigarette from his breast pocket and slowly lit it. He drew on it, deeply in thoughts and almost jumped when he heard a familiar voice from behind.

"Our A-Wings are rearmed and maintenance has been completed. So what are we going to do next?", Dario said.

Michael turned around to meet him and he could see that Dario glanced to the spot where Sandra had been only a brief moment of time ago. He didn't know how much his friend had picked up and how long he had been around, but Michael also felt glad that Dario was here at this moment to shake him awake from this dream that had turned into a nightmare.

With hurting throat and shaken voice he said to his wingman and friend: "We do what we always do. Face the worst that life can throw at us - and survive. Because we have no choice and there is no other option.", he said and knowingly padded the grip of his FE-MEK45 which rested in it's holder on his right hip. "There is no easy way out and we can't always win without giving up something which means the world to us. Sometimes all we gain in life is a hollow victory and Dreams and Memories of what was and what could have been."

Then Michael chuckled and added: "Speaking of Memories! As far as I remember there's a very impatient person aboard the Joan d'Arc who awaits our return."

Dario's face turned into a sour expression, but then he chuckled. "Yeah, I guess you're right. And I'm not looking forward to what she has to say. That will take even more away from the victory we gained over here, don't you think? That'll leave us with less reasons for dreams and memories, at least the pleasant ones."

Michael's face lit up with the hint trace of a smile and he threw one arm around the shoulder of his friend. Together they started walking towards their waiting A-Wings. "Ah, I don't know, dear Dario. We should always keep in mind that life is a constant, ongoing struggle and that the only lasting victory is the final defeat itself. And until then a lot of things can happen, don't you think?"

THE END



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