



## Reading Room

*StarWars FanFiction*

### POV: The Price

**By Avery "Foxfire" Schroeder,  
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and Dario "Ibero" Pozo**

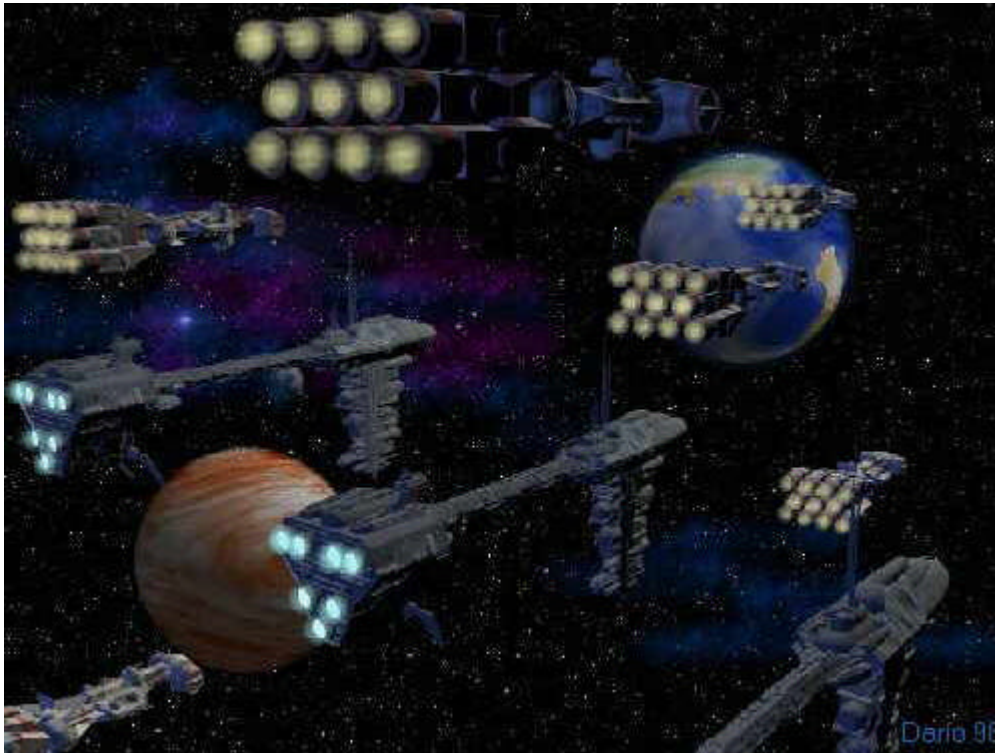
**Pictures by Dario "Ibero" Pozo**

### ***Chapter One: The Mission***

#### **[Present time: Some place in Imperial Space]**

The Core's systems made an incredible spectacle at the main view screen. The frigate *Trailblazer* was following a direct course towards those worlds, but long before reaching them it would intersect the Imperial defence lines around Coruscant and its satellite worlds. That would be a terrible battle, the old man knew that, and he also knew that it would be his last combat. There was no way to survive to that, but he had expected for years to die in battle. On his right he could see Corvette *Tideria*'s bow, occupying the right flank of the arrow formation. The other Corvette, *Hunter*, could barely be seen at port, covering *Trailblazer*'s left flank. *Two Corvettes and a Frigate*, he thought. *Nobody would think we have something to do against the cream of the Imperial Navy.* He allowed himself a grin. At his back, none of the people working on the bridge noticed any change in the Admiral. He had been there for half an hour, standing up before the viewscreen without talking, and all of them had learned to respect those moments, the only ones when the old Admiral seemed to enjoy some relaxation. *Nobody would have thought we were going to be successful in our attack against the shipyards back at Sindar II.* The grin grew even broader, and his grey eyes seemed to brighten like the stars they were watching. *But we gave them a good lesson. Oh, yes, that was one of the best...*

He remembered the last briefing before starting their mission, three weeks ago. Even Admiral Ackbar had doubted they were going to succeed, but had decided to trust him one more time. Garil had chosen not to use a big combat group.. There was not a single Calamari Cruiser among the ships he had taken with him, and his own flagship, the MC-80 cruiser *Liberation*, had been left behind. Garil was sure that a less impressive fleet - three Nebulon B Frigates and six Corellian Corvettes - would have a better chance in the kind of operation he had in mind.



The Imperial shipyards were practically in the frontier between the Imperial domains and the systems controlled by the recently established New Republic. If the last reports from General Madine's people were correct, there were several docks distributed around one of Sindar II's moons, protected by a dense minefield and three Star Destroyers with full fighter complements. Several Star Destroyers and many smaller ships were being repaired or re-fuelled in these facilities, considered safe by the Imperials. Angara's base was only three light years away and could quickly send reinforcements at the report of an enemy fleet. But nobody detected Garil's group before they dropped from hyperspace almost in the middle of the minefield. That was the hardest part of the plan, but Hornet Squadron's B-Wings had jumped besides the combat group instead of being launched after their arrival. The heavy fighters destroyed most of the mines in minutes, while the three Frigate's cannons finished off the rest. None of the six Corvettes, more vulnerable to the mines, were destroyed by them, although two of them suffered serious damage. But the result of the daring manuever was worth the prize. In a question of minutes the small fleet was over the shipyards, opening fire on the docks and the parked Destroyers. The three Star Destroyers that were patrolling the area - Madine's information had been very precise - were flying a wide perimeter around the facilities, and they had been surprised by the New Republic's ships appearing so close to the shipyards. A Calamari Cruiser never would have penetrated in that way through the Imperial defences, but the agile Frigates still have power enough to cause terrible damage, while the faster Corvettes wrought havoc on the enemy installations. The shipyards were so crowded with Imperial crafts that the gunners had difficulty doing their job without hitting their own vessels. Again, Hornet's B- Wings had the task of destroying as many of those laser turrets as possible. When the TIE fighters launched by the three Star Destroyers got in range to attack the intruders they found Amber and Cheetah Squadrons ready to engage them.

It was over almost before it began. The two Corvettes that had suffered the more serious damages during the attack were finally destroyed, and six B-Wings were lost in the fight as well, but Garil had anticipated that possibility. Three shuttles, one from each Frigate, took off immediately after Hornet Leader reported that the shipyards' defences had fallen, recovering most of the survivors in a space full of TIE Fighters. One of the B-Wing's pilots spent only thirty seconds in space after being shot down, establishing a new record for search and rescue operations. The three shuttles managed to return to the Frigates, under the protective umbrella of their cannons and the fighters. The Frigates were turning towards empty space while the rescue ships docked, and they jumped into hyperspace the second when the last of them touched down. The three enemy Star Destroyers had been unable to intercept their escape path in so little time.

Garil remembered his Second Officer's face when he requested the mission reports sent by every ship. The young Captain was full of pride, and only discipline restrained him from laughing, or even hugging his Admiral. Garil had had to struggle to keep from smiling himself.

"I know it's good news, Captain Collins, but tell me our losses first."

"Sir, our main losses were Corvettes *Intruder* and *Brendell*." Collins glanced down at his datapad. "Hornet has lost six B-Wings, we lost a total of five X-Wings from Cheetah and Amber. Five escape pods from the Corvettes and seven fighter pilots have been recovered by our shuttles. The rescue pilots inform that probably there were no more survivors."

"Then none of our people will have to live as a prisoner," he said. "Now tell me about what we have got back there."

"We took out the six Star Destroyers, sir." The young man said barely containing his enthusiasm. "And we have confirmed kills of four modified Nebulon-B Frigates and an undetermined number of smaller ships. All the docks have been completely destroyed."

"Excellent. Now remember my orders to the crew, and to the rest of ships in the same moment we came out from hyperspace. Everybody must stay at his combat positions. If I was the Imperial Commander at command in Angara's base, I would have sent ships to intercept us in our path to home. We are not following a direct route, but it's possible that we'll find some unfriendly faces when we finish this or the next jump."

"Aye, sir." The man saluted and turned on his heels to pass on his instructions. When he did it a good part of the joy had disappeared from his face. As had the rest of the crew, he had learned to read the Admiral's mood through his gestures, and in that moment Garil was sincerely concerned.

*This is not over yet*, he had thought then.

"No, definitely this is not over yet." The Admiral muttered dryly.

#### **[Present time: New Alliance ships orbiting Sullust]**

The Frigate *Joan d'Arc* hung in space, dwarfed by the bulk of the Calamari Cruiser *Guardian* nearby. White Squadron had rendezvoused with the larger ship for routine maintenance, and to send the CO off for an in-depth report to Starfighter Command. It wasn't quite shore leave, but the pilots were getting the most they could from the brief rest; even the trainees were taking a break from their usual intense schedule.

Which created an entirely different set of problems.

Sitting in a small ready room adjacent to the flight deck, Captain Lewis "Moose" Gregory put his head in his hands and sighed. Mostly because it was the only alternative to strangling the young pilot across from him.

"Nik, you know and I know that you're a hotshot in the Maze. But that doesn't mean you get to plaster the walls of the Bomb Shelter with your gun camera shots, And superimposing Captain Orris' face on all the targets probably wasn't your brightest idea ever."

"Hey, it was only half the targets," Hardrive protested, grinning. "I put a shot of Thrawn on all the others - I figure the two of them should get about equal time."

"Meanwhile, Vyper is using them for darts practice, Joker is complaining about the tape on the walls, and Granite says the pictures put Hobbes off his lunch. So unless you'd-" He glanced up as the door hissed open. "Oh. Hi, Foxfire."

"Hi yourself." The XO struck her best holo-caster's pose. "We interrupt this regularly scheduled dressing-down to give you a special report on our next mission. Nik, sorry, I've got to talk to Moose for a second. Go start spreading rumours or something."

"Like the one about how Hobbes figured out how to find the air vent to your quarters...?"

"Out!" Foxfire squeezed her eyes shut in exasperation.

"Yes'm." Hardrive vanished.

Foxfire sat down in the chair Hardrive had vacated, looking a good deal more harried than two days of running a squadron should have left her.

"You all right, Fox?"

"Mostly....but it's gonna be a rough flight. You've heard of Nathan Garil?"

"The Admiral? Yeah, I studied his tactical lectures back when I was in charge of Buccaneer. What's he got to do with this?"

Foxfire paused, as if searching for words. "Well...a few weeks ago, the brass gave Garil a task force of three frigates and the usual support ships, and told him to go break up the Imperial shipyards near the Brightwave sector."

"Brightwave? They have a main base there, ummmmm, could it be Angara?"

"Good memory. The shipyards were in a place called Sindar II, if you want to know it. It was apparently a hell of a fight - the shipyards were completely destroyed, but it seems that Garil lost almost all his force. He got knocked down to one Frigate and a couple of Corvettes, and apparently he just lost it. Ignored all communications from Command and bolted straight into Imperial space."

Moose winced. "I don't like the sound of this."

"It gets worse," Foxfire said. "He's apparently decided to do as much damage as he can before the Imps find him and kill him. The Imperials are obviously pursuing, but so far he's been pretty good at hit-and-runs. All anybody knows is that he's working his way deeper into Imperial space." She shrugged. "Looks like a fancy form of suicide to me."

"Generally, I'm all for doing damage to the Imps. What's the catch?"

"Civilians," Foxfire answered soberly. "Garil's burned two outposts from orbit and ambushed several convoys convoys - I don't think he cares what he takes on, as long as he destroys it."

"You've got to be kidding me." Moose shook his head. "I thought we were supposed to be the good guys here. Flag officers don't do stuff like that."

"Ordinarily, no. But if a mission goes bad enough..." Foxfire trailed off, her eyes distant. "You know, I was stuck in Imperial territory for a good while, back with the Mantis. I can see how he'd do it real easily." She shook her head sharply, focusing on Moose again. "Besides, it doesn't matter. Our job's to get him out of there before he does any more harm. At this point, it's purely damage control - the Imperial reprisals for this are going to be vicious as it is."

"So we're heading into hostile territory, after one of ours who doesn't want to be found, and hoping we'll be able to talk some sense into him when we do find him?"

"And drag him back if he won't listen," Foxfire finished. "It's gonna get pretty ugly - that's why I wanted to talk to you before the rest of the squad. The captain of the *Guardian* is willing for us to leave the Training Wing here for 'extended training', if you okay it...keeping them out of this particular fight may save their lives."

Moose thought about it for a moment, then shook his head. "They're still part of the squad, and most of them are decent pilots already. I'd rather have more time before we got to on-the-job training, but I think they can handle it."

Foxfire grinned. "I told him you'd say that."

"Is Shok'wave going to be in on this one?" The CO had been called to Fleet headquarters several months ago for administrative and coordinating work, and it had been some time since she had been able to even contact the *Joan d'Arc*.

Foxfire shook her head. "This isn't a full-blown emergency, but it's close, and Command wants us out there

yesterday." She scribbled something on her datapad and stood back up. "You coming?"

"Preliminary briefing?"

"Yeah, I want to get to the pilots before Orris does and puts them into a bad mood for the entire mission."

## ***Chapter Two: Behind the Imperial Lines***

### **[Forty hours later. Imperial frontier]**

Advance patrol missions were usually boring. Most of the time you had to pass several hours looking at the emptiness of space, wondering every minute why you were wasting your time like that. But Lieutenant Dario "Ibero" Pozo, White Nine, was far from feeling bored, not today. Twenty minutes ago they had officially entered Imperial space, after passing through an expanse of what could be called "no man's land". He was feeling even more nervous here than he had in the disputed space they'd just left.

He didn't say anything to his partners though. They had been ordered to keep absolute communications silence during the flight, and that measure, if nothing else, was enough to show how dangerous the situation was. If the *Joan d'Arc* was detected by Imperial units they would be in serious trouble. It was like the old days of the Rebellion, when everything was Imperial space. Ibero had not fought in those times, he had joined the Alliance shortly before the battle of Endor, and since then, at least part of the galaxy could be considered as free and safe. But the Empire was far from being defeated, nobody had any doubt about that, and they were now invading its domains. Ibero knew that with the route they were following, directly to Coruscant and the Core's worlds, the odds were good they would run into an Imperial patrol - or worse, a capital ship or battle fleet.

The pilot from Iberya glanced repeatedly at his main screen, but the only visible signals were those from the other two A-Wings, piloted by Flight Officers Daniel "Drake" Sutherland and DSC "Arachnoid", Whites Five and Sixteen. Usually this kind of mission was accomplished by only two fighters, but Arachnoid was eager to fly and Foxfire had allowed him to go out with his two squad-mates, accepting the pilot's argument that three pairs of eyes would be better than two. Ibero understood DSC very well. He had obtained his Flight Officer's wings just a few weeks ago, and after so many sessions in the simulation pods, the man was mad to pilot a real ship. It has been a while since the last time the Training Wing saw some real combat, when they had to track down a group of three Imperial Frigates throughout a half of the galaxy. This mission was not that different, when you thought about it. They were still out looking for a little fleet that didn't want to be found. But this time the chase was taking place in Imperial space, and they were completely alone, without any chance of support from the New Republic Fleet.

Ibero looked to starboard and saw the nose of Drake's A-Wing, exactly where it was supposed to be. He liked to fly with the pilot from Arrebnac. As young as he was, he always seemed to know what had to be done in the middle of a combat. When Drake covered his tail, Ibero knew that he could forget the backwards display. In the same way, when the young pilot took the lead, he did it fast and accurately. It was the first time he'd flown with Arachnoid in a combat mission, but there was no doubt White Sixteen was perfectly prepared for this. *What the hell, last week he shot me down in a simulation*, Ibero thought with a smile on his lips.

One of his partners double-clicked his microphone. He looked over his right shoulder and saw how Drake pointed to his starboard wing. He had detected something. Ibero took a quick glance at his screen but his own sensors had not caught any new signal. He gestured back indicating Drake to take the lead. The A-Wing rolled softly to the right and accelerated. Ibero imitated him and looked to his left to check if Arachnoid had understood. He had followed their manuever immediately. Arachnoid gave him a thumbs-up, confirming he knew what was going on, so Ibero returned his attention to the front. A pale red dot appeared on his forward display. That was what Drake had detected some seconds ago. *Let's see what we've got here*. Before his computer could offer him any data about the Imperial ship, two more signals showed up, and then a fourth. The outline of a fighter appeared on the screen, while the computer indicated "positive identification" with a beep. TIE Advanced. *This is exactly the kind of company I like the least!* There was a slight possibility that they had not been detected yet, but the Imperials' route was unmistakable: they were

heading directly to intercept them.

Ibero tried to think as fast as he could. Their mission was to explore the space the *Joan d'Arc* would have to fly through, and prevent any Imperial ship from detecting their frigate. Their instructions were to avoid any confrontation whenever it was possible, but after being discovered it was too late to withdraw. If they jumped out of there, the Imperial patrol would be free to keep their present route and find the *Joan d'Arc*. On the other hand, if their mothership was out of their communication range - it had to be a ship, because there were no Imperial bases in the proximities - then if they were able to shoot down all the Imperial fighters, the *Joan d'Arc* would be far enough away when someone started to look for the missing patrol.

"This is Nine." There was no reason to maintain communications silence any more. "Drake, take the one leading the right flight, I'll take care of the other one. Arachnoid, if they fly by the book, the wingmen will follow their leaders, at least initially. You're free to attack any of them."

Two "Aye, aye" were the only answer. There wasn't either a comment or a joke - what was surprising in Drake's case. All three of the pilots knew how critical this combat might be. It was not only their own lives. If they were killed and the *Joan d'Arc* was discovered, the Imperials would be able to ambush White Squadron's mother ship and many people would die or be captured. There was no option, they had to win.

Drake selected dual missile launchers and centred his target on his front sight. A single missile wouldn't be enough to collapse a TIE Advanced's shields. The pilot knew this was not going to be easy. Only veteran pilots were allowed to fly a TIE Avenger, as the Imperials called this model of fighter. The sight turned yellow in the same moment that his own threat indicator started to blink. Two Imperial fighters were trying to obtain a lock on him. Great.

"This is Five, I've got two on me." There was no trace of nervousness in Drake's voice.

"I have one." Ibero replied.

"The other is on me." Arachnoid reported.

"Drake, forget your missiles and break now! Arachnoid, take cover behind me and have yours ready!" He changed to lasers and set all the shield energy to forward.

"Good luck," Drake said and broke to port, diverting all his energy to the engines. His threat display turned off for some seconds and then started to blink again. A new turn and the Imperials lost their locks again. It wasn't going to be any easy game to fight against two TIEs Advanced at once. They could attack him by turns and play with him until they had hit him enough to drain his shields. It was a common tactic amongst the Imperials, who used to have the advantage in numbers. When they piloted TIE Fighters or Interceptors, you could hope to hit one of them and cause him enough damage to shoot him down or at least force him to withdraw. A good enough pilot could hope to survive in a disadvantage of three to one or even more, if the enemy pilots were not that good. But that defence wouldn't work against TIEs Advanced or Gunboats, because they could always recharge their shields and return to the combat. No, this game couldn't last for too long. Nevertheless, Drake was sure that when they were in range of his lasers, he would be able then to give them something to worry about.

Arachnoid stayed as closely as he could on Ibero's tail. They had tried this maneuver on the simulators before, and it worked. Sometimes. He understood why Ibero had decided to risk this dangerous tactic. They had to shoot down one of the Imperials soon, or the pilot forced to engage two at the same time would be probably killed, and then the other two would be even worse. *I hope this works...* His threat indicator had ceased to blink since Ibero's fighter was between him and the Imperial's tracking devices. Now the second Advanced would be targeting his comrade too. He caressed the trigger and waited for the appropriate moment. *Go, go...* He saw one, no, two explosions in front of them. Ibero had destroyed the two first missiles launched at him. Green lasers passed above and beneath the two New Republic fighters, but some of them must be impacting against his squad-mate's forward shields. The time seemed to slow down until Ibero's shout sounded in his headphones.

"NOW!!!" The other A-Wing jumped briskly upwards, and Arachnoid saw briefly the TIE Advanced approaching in the middle of his sight. He didn't wait for a lock and shot his two missiles. Arachnoid pushed the flightstick forward and launched his fighter in a deep dive. Arachnoid looked over his shoulder. The enemy ship was hit frontally but it didn't explode. *Damn it, good shields!* he thought. Nonetheless, his sensors indicated him that the Advanced had lost its shields and its hull had also been affected. He pulled



the stick on his stomach and cut the throttle enough to follow the damaged fighter.



"This is mine, Nine!"

"Enjoy it!" Ibero checked Drake's position. He had to give him some help before concentrating on his present enemy. The wingman of the pilot who had taken Arachnoid's missiles had two options, to engage Ibero or to help his wingleader, threatened now by Arachnoid. He chose the second. The TIE Advanced broke to port out of Arachnoid's line of fire and maneuvered again to pursue the A-Wing. Ibero estimated that the Imperial would need several seconds before gaining a position on Arachnoid's tail, so he looked for Drake's closer hunter and switched the weapons selector to the missile position again. Two clicks. If the pilot was good enough, he would be able to evade one of the two concussion missiles, but that would give Drake time enough to engage the other ship. He directed more energy to the engines, although his shields had been drained down to forty five percent. It was not easy to keep the target centred on his sight, constantly moving as he was in his dog-fight with Drake. Ibero lost the lock twice, cursing both times and trying again, but he finally obtained a lock tone and squeezed the trigger, sending two concussion missiles after the TIE Advanced. He reduced his speed and turned, hoping to be able now to help Arachnoid.

Drake noticed how one of his enemies abandoned the attack and smiled. *Thanks, Ibero.* He selected the other one and made a tight loop to engage him. The Imperial pilot slowed his fighter down to keep his position behind the A-Wing, but Drake made a half roll in the opposite direction and pushed his throttle forward, managing to outrun his adversary and move out of his sight.

"Now it's one on one." Drake grinned fiercely and looked for the Advanced's tail.

Arachnoid shot blast after blast at the TIE Advanced, following the Imperial fighter in every one of its attempts to break his prosecution. Suddenly he felt a violent impact on his rear quarters and the A-Wing started to spin. He had been hit by a dumb missile, launched without a lock, so his computer hadn't warned him. "Shit, that was close!" If he hadn't had his primary and secondary shields fully charged, that missile could have put an end to his short career as a White pilot. He sent all the remaining energy to the aft shields and struggled to take the A-Wing out of the spin. The TIE Advanced he was chasing had evaded him momentarily, but Arachnoid persisted, clenching his teeth in concentration. He didn't know if he would be able to survive a second missile hit.

The Imperial pilot chasing White Sixteen's fighter changed to lasers for a systematic pounding on the New Republic ship. His scanners showed that his victim's shields were down to twenty percent. *No matter how much you run, I'm going to catch you.* He shot his four lasers in pairs again and again, and prepared himself to follow the other ship when the pilot tried to break, which he would be forced to do more sooner than later.

*Ten percent.* He smiled, imagining the Rebel scum - as all the Imperials insisted on calling the New Republic's people - sweating and looking nervously at his shield indicators. His own squad-mate was probably doing the same, but he wouldn't have to worry too much longer.

His thoughts were interrupted by his threat indicator blinking in yellow. The computer informed him that he had a Rebel fighter on his tail trying to fix his tracking device on him. He kept his course a second more. If he abandoned his comrade now he would be unavoidably shot down. He shot one more time, but then the alarm sounded indicating warheads launched at him. He couldn't wait any more. The Imperial pilot spat out a curse and climbed sharply, trying to evade the incoming concussion missiles. He pressed a button on his console and launched a chaff charge.

The TIE Advanced pursued by Drake reduced its speed drastically, trying to force the New Republic pilot to outrun him. In a touch of inspiration, Drake selected the missiles launchers instead of cutting his own throttle, which would have made him an easy target for the second fighter. Drake shot two missiles in the last moment and managed to avoid the collision by no more than a meter. The explosion illuminated his cockpit for an instant. *Boooooom!* he thought.

"This is Five." He called. "One less over here, how are you doing, you guys?"

"Not bad, mate!" Ibero replied. "Sixteen, you're free!"

"Really? You've not arrived a single second too soon..."

"Sorry for the delay." The Iberyan pilot saw how his missiles exploded some metres behind his target, although the expanding wave was strong enough to destabilize the Imperial fighter for a moment.

*You're good, my friend, but chaff bursts won't stop a laser...*

Arachnoid was able now to concentrate on his initial target. Blast after blast, he discharged his weapons on the battered TIE Advanced. He was about to destroy it when something exploded on its cockpit ball's upper part. The pilot had understood he was not going to make it and finally gave up, ejecting while he still was able to do so. Arachnoid moved his finger off of the trigger. The TIE Advanced followed its route now unsteered. Without his pilot, the fighter's controls locked on his present position - a characteristic that was not unusual among the combat ships. If a pilot was forced to eject, he could direct his fighter towards his target before pulling the handle. The ship would fly straight forward until crashing against the enemy ship, like a deadly and poisoned last present. In this case, Arachnoid had found a different use for that feature.

Ibero saw the damaged TIE flying away, but from his position he didn't notice the pilot's absence. *Where is Arachnoid?* he wondered. *He had almost got it...*

"Sixteen, what are you supposedly doing?" he asked without easing his fire on at his own adversary. Jinking frantically, the T/A managing to avoid being hit most of the times, although he couldn't shake Ibero off his six.

"The pilot has ejected, my friend!" Arachnoid replied almost singing.

"There's no pilot...? Ah, good thinking!" After a moment, Ibero understood why his comrade had not destroyed the ship itself. When the Imperials sent a new patrol to search for their missing fighters, that Advanced's position beacon would lead them in the wrong direction before they discovered the pilot was not there. That would mean more time for the *Joan d'Arc*.

"Sometimes I surprise myself!" Arachnoid chuckled.

Three clicks away, Drake smiled when he heard Arachnoid's last comment and concentrated on the remaining fighter. Now the odds were three to two, clearly on the White pilots' side.

Arachnoid selected Ibero's target on his computer and selected missiles. The Imperial pilot was clearly an ace, and Ibero was finding it pretty hard to remain after him long enough to hit him more than once. The Imperial broke now to starboard when his computer warned him of Arachnoid's missile lock. He did it in the very last moment, but Arachnoid stayed behind him and the Advanced's pilot was forced to move one more time, this time to port and upwards. Those two turns were all what Ibero needed to reduce the distance that



separated him from the Imperial fighter. He drove his A- Wing close to the TIE Advanced's tail before its pilot could do anything to avoid it. Ibero pursued him patiently, imitating every maneuver and shooting at him every time the Imperial crossed in front of him. At that distance, his shots were very effective and finally he saw the TIE Advanced's right solar panel break apart. The pilot ejected just before the fighter exploded.

"I thought you would never finish him off!" Arachnoid joked.

"Yeah, the guy was very good, I must accept that you have saved me a couple of minutes..."

"A couple of minutes? Hehe, it would have taken you forever to shoot him down without my help!"

"Next time I'll leave the top aces for you, and you will have to beg my help, you joker!" The two pilots laughed for a moment, now that the worst of the danger had passed. But they hadn't finished their work yet. "OK, let's help Drake with the other guy and we'll be able to return home."

"Hey, who said I need help here?" Drake protested through the intercom. His adversary had noticed that he was now alone and decided that he would be more useful to the Empire's cause if he returned alive to inform about the Rebel presence in this area. He pushed the hyperspace lever forward.

"Not if I can help it!" Drake muttered. He shot two concussion missiles at the fleeing fighter without waiting for a lock. The TIE Advanced accelerated straight towards its jump point, closely pursued by the two warheads. The three White pilots saw the explosion, and then nothing.

Did you hit him?" Ibero asked anxiously.

"I don't know." Drake answered dubiously. "Wait a minute, and I'll check if there is any debris in the area."

"All of us will do it, let's go!" The three pilots launched a full sensor sweep on the zone of the explosion, looking for some debris or other remains that could confirm that the TIE Advanced had been destroyed.

"Nothing. Not a single piece of metal." Drake concluded five minutes later. None of his comrades had obtained better results.

"That doesn't mean you didn't kill him." Arachnoid pointed out. "If the missiles impacted when he was starting to jump, the ship could have disintegrated in the middle of nowhere."

"True, but I wouldn't bet our lives on that possibility." Ibero said. "Let's get back to the *Joan* before any other ship shows up and we'll report about this. I fear that Captain Orris will have to order a slight change of route..."

"Just a few clicks inside Imperial space and we run face to face into the first patrol." Drake said thoughtfully. "I'd say that it could be worse, except that it might come true."

None of his friends replied. It was starting to be painfully obvious that this mission was going to be very, very dangerous.

### **[Two and a half hours later, onboard Victory Class Star Destroyer *Canngas' Pride*]**

Lieutenant Fellssenn looked nervously at his commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander Seinn. He had been the only survivor of his patrol, which meant he was the only one who could be punished for the failure. He had been ordered to remain on the bridge until the search and rescue team reported the results of their mission. He had not been allowed to take a seat, or even relax from the attention position he had adopted to present his report.

Minutes passed slowly in the silence of the bridge, and Fellssenn felt Lieutenant Commander Seinn's look spear him. *Canngas' Pride's* Captain was anything but satisfied, and that meant trouble for Seinn, which was the same as problems for him. The flightsuit was too hot for the bridge's environment, but the pilot knew that this was not the main reason for him sweating like that. This was cold sweat.

A voice broke the silence behind him, reporting that Search and Rescue had recovered two of his partners. He struggled to hold in the sigh of relief, not as much for the news of his comrades being alive, as to know that there would be three of them to share the punishment.

"Lieutenant Fellssenn?" It was the Captain's voice. The nervous pilot tried to adopt an even more rigid posture.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm glad to inform you that two of your comrades have survived." There was no trace of that joy in his voice, but that was not surprising.

"That is good news, sir."

"Although one of them won't make it to the *Pride*." The pilot shivered. "It seem that our ships have lost an entire hour following a fighter that was flying on automatic, without the pilot. A pilot who ejects from a ship that still can fight doesn't deserve to be in the Imperial Navy. Search and Rescue *seems to have lost his signal*."

"I understand, sir," he said.

"Now, explain to me exactly what happened, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir. We detected three Rebel fighters, A-Wings, and we engaged them. They were better than us and managed to shoot my partners down. When I realized that I was alone I decided to abandon the combat to inform about the Rebel presence in the area. That's all, sir."

"Effectively, Lieutenant, that's all." The Captain stared at him for some instants before continuing. "There were less of them, but they were better than you. You could be accused of cowardice for abandoning a combat, but with your action you have served the Empire better than by dying. Or ejecting, as your ex-partner. After all, you have accepted that you are not a good enough pilot to beat those Rebels, is this correct, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir." He swallowed hard.

"Nevertheless, at least we know, thanks to you, that there are Rebels in the area. They were A-Wings, and if our information is correct, that bastard Rebel Admiral we are tracking down has not that kind of ship available, so they must be from a different unit. If they are trying to support the Admiral or not, that will have to find out." The Captain remained in silence a few seconds. "There is something good about you, Lieutenant Fellssenn. You have not been so stupid as to try to offend my intelligence lying about the number of Rebels, the circumstances of the engagement or your participation in it. Some pilots do that, as if we were idiots that wouldn't check out their ships' recordings, or search the area for debris of the enemies they have supposedly killed before running away." The pilot didn't know if he was expected to say something or not, so he decided to keep silent. "I've recommended that Lieutenant Commander Seinn not arrest you, and allow you to keep flying."

"Thank you, sir," he said, trying not to seem as relieved as he actually was.

"That's all, Lieutenant." He hadn't said "dismissed", so the pilot didn't move from where he was standing. The Captain left, not before telling Lieutenant Commander Seinn to join him in his office ten minutes later. Fellssenn felt his commander's presence very close behind him. His mouth must be no more than some inches from his right ear when he spoke.

"That's not all, *Flight Officer* Fellssenn." He practically spat into his ear. "I want you in the flight deck in twenty minutes, ready to start a new patrol mission. In your new ship."

"New ship, sir?"

"Yes, *Flight Officer*. You are back in the TIE Fighter, but never expect to pilot a TIE Avenger again, not even an Interceptor. And you must thank the Captain that I don't kill you right now, because that is what I would like to do."

"Y-yes, sir."

"You're dismissed. And remember, twenty minutes."

"All right, sir." The pilot didn't look back as he hurried out of *Canngas' Pride's* bridge.

## Chapter Three: The Search

[Thirty hours later: Deep in Imperial territory]

Two White Squadron A-wings dropped out of hyperspace, coasting past a fringe of barren planets and toward the nav buoy they'd come to find. This star system was too isolated even to have a name, but a fair amount of traffic passed through en route to other destinations. And if any of that traffic caught traces of the *Joan d'Arc's* passage, their mission would suddenly get a lot more complicated. If all went according to plan, destroying the buoy would keep ships out of the area long enough for the *Joan's* trail to fade.

Of course, Iceman thought, he couldn't remember the last time anything had gone according to plan.

"Two, Eight. Looks clear to me," Ladyfox said over the comm-link, the static background intensifying the faint hiss of her Selonian accent. "All right to proceed?"

"Yeah, just keep an eye out," Iceman agreed, surveying the scene before him - planets to one side, a cloud of asteroids to the other, and a space just clear enough for navigation in between. Since Ibero's flight had run into an Imperial patrol less than two days ago, their course had been complete chaos, and the *Joan d'Arc's* navigation officer was threatening to resign over the constant changes of course. Foxfire had had the squadron flying forward patrols every second they were in realspace, and the pace was beginning to tell on all the pilots. They had flown through every meteorite cluster from the Imperial Frontier to this place, trying to find any trace of Admiral Garil's ships without being discovered themselves. Considering they were heading more or less directly toward the heart of the Empire, their objective of finding Garil without being found by the Imperials was so close to the definition of "impossible" that Iceman thought it should be included in the Basic dictionary as an example.

"Let's spread out and get this done with," Iceman said. "I want to get home before Granite gets off shift and into the Bomb Shelter."

"Do you think that Foxfire forgot to lock up the Caldanian whiskey again?" Ladyfox teased. Her A-wing trailed away in a wide arc that would let her sweep the area for Imperial ships while Iceman concentrated on their objective. It should be a simple mission, but there were dozens of things that could go wrong, this deep in Imperial territory. The mission's not over until your feet hit the deck, he reminded himself.

A far-off flicker of pseudomotion caught his attention, and his eyes widened. For anything to be visible at that distance, it had to be big and moving \*fast\*.

Iceman flipped his comm-link on. "Ladyfox, get to cover, shut down everything you can, and DON'T MOVE." He heard a terse double-click of the mike in acknowledgment, and saw the Selonian's A-wing accelerate away. Iceman dove for the dubious safety of the asteroids, keeping a wary eye on the growing shapes behind him. If they got within sensor range before they got to cover... He cut speed sharply as he reached the fringes of the asteroid field, sliding around a large, slow rock that loomed in her path. Just a trickle of engine power to keep him in the asteroid's sensor shadow, no communications, no weapons, minimal life support...Iceman's hand flicked over the console, shutting down everything he dared.

As the last light on his console winked out, the Imperial convoy thundered into range of his passive sensors. Several Corvettes and Escort Carriers, a scattering of Gunboats and T/As, a flight of Interceptors falling into escort formation as he watched...and two Frigates, no less, the *Avenger* and the *Ultimatum*. At this rate, he was half expecting the FRG *Overkill*, Iceman thought with a grin. Then he took another look at the composition of the convoy, and the grin changed to something slightly more feral. Big, fast, and armed for bantha, but that loose formation and haphazard entry suggested something thrown together at a moment's notice. About the reaction you'd get with an enemy Frigate marauding through your back yard, in fact.

"Bet they're after the same guy we are," he said softly to himself. If that convoy was a response to another of Garil's attacks, they knew where he'd been much more recently than White. But a little ingenuity could fix that.

Shivering a little in the cooling air, he settled in to wait on the convoy, hoping Ladyfox was well out of harm's way. Being separated from a wing-mate grated on his nerves, but for now both their safety depended on radio silence. He watched as the squadron of Interceptors spread out, inspected the area, and hurried back into sloppy formation, glad that the better-trained units were kept out near the Rim. The Knights or even Omega would've found us by now, he thought, and then I'd have one seriously charred A-wing...

After too many long minutes, the convoy began to accelerate for hyperspace. I thought they would never leave... Iceman carefully eased his fighter away from the shelter of the asteroid. The first thing he activated again was the heating system. Half an hour more and I would be more Iceman than ever before. I promise never to laugh again when Moose starts talking about orbiting Yavin in a disabled B-Wing for five hours. "Eight, Four. Vanessa, you still out there?"

"I'm here and I'm cold and I'm bored," the Selonian growled back. "What was that all about?"

"Imps after somebody's blood, probably the same guy we're trying to pull out of the fire."

"So we have to fight them off before we can get to the Admiral?" Ladyfox was unimpressed.

"No, hopefully we'll beat them to the Admiral." Iceman smiled. He wondered what was needed to scare the Selonian.

"What about the nav buoy?" Ladyfox asked. "We should destroy it as we've been ordered before to return."

"The nav buoy? Ah, yes..." Something had crossed through his mind when Ladyfox mentioned the nav buoy. Of course. "Wait a minute, Vanessa. I think we're gonna have to stay here a while longer - there's been a slight change of plans."

"Wonderful. Now I see there is no difference between flying with you or with Foxfire. There is aaaaaalways a slight change of plans..."

Iceman sat up straighter and pulled out of his holding pattern, reflexively arming his lasers at about the same time he noticed the colour of the new dot on his screens. He'd noticed Ladyfox doing the same thing - it might be quiet out here, but at this point that only served to make both pilots more nervous.

"White Four, this is Anubis, now what did you go dragging us out of bed for?"

Iceman grinned, recognizing the teasing note in the shuttle pilot's voice. "A nav buoy, Barris, we're stealing it."

The silence over the comm-link was educational in its own way, and Iceman choked back a laugh. It wasn't his fault that he had to keep long-distance transmissions (and explanations) down to a minimum, really it wasn't. "You want us to pick up a nav buoy," Barris said finally.

"Right."

"In a shuttle."

"Right."

"A nav buoy?"

"Right."

"Whatever you say," Barris said, on the end of a long-suffering sigh. "But this isn't in my job description - I want at least a keg of Blue Stuff for this."

"Wait till we get home, it's cheaper out on the Rim."



No stranger to dangerous situations, Barris had been heading steadily for the nav buoy ever since learning what his objective was; Ladyfox had been flying close escort while Iceman kept an eye out for trouble. Not that there was much they could do if it came - the Anubis was far too bulky for the duck- and-cover trick that the two pilots had used earlier.

*Foxfire is going to love this.* He thought with a smile.

**[Thirty-five minutes later, on board the New Republic Frigate *Joan d'Arc*]**

"Good thinking, Iceman" Foxfire said. "I do love this."

"Thanks, Avery." Iceman replied. "I imagined that you would say that."

"Really?" Foxfire winked at him. " Good imagine - now try to imagine what our Captain is going to say."

"I love it," was what Captain Orris had said for Foxfire's surprise and amazement. *I never thought he might say something like that, it's completely out of his style!* Foxfire walked cautiously through the main Engineering doors, wincing at the loud crash and louder curse from inside. "You know what it is," someone was proclaiming, "they're just trying to drive us crazy so we won't notice when the coffee runs out."

She suppressed a snicker and stepped carefully inside, picking her way through the maze of tools and spare parts that littered the floor. "Kostolitz, I swear you'd go looking for a coffeemaker in the Imperial Palace itself."

The chief tech on duty, a tall, lanky man with a slightly unfocused look, shrugged and smiled at her over his shoulder. "The way we're going, we may get a chance. I can't imagine you're after that buoy's logs just to find out where the best shopping is."

"Not till my next leave," Foxfire shot back, maneuvering Kostolitz a little away from the rest of the engineering crewmen. The senior tech would know what and how much to tell the rest, but Foxfire didn't really want to discuss the mission plan with a roomful of techs. "I'm not even sure this will work, but out on recon two of my pilots ran into - well, more like got run over by - an Imperial convoy that was after the same

guy we are. If we can pull the logs out of that buoy intact, we should be able to find out what their destination was - and wherever that is, it's a lot closer to Garil than we are."

"Well, you don't have to worry too much about your logs," Kostolitz said, gesturing over to the hulk of the Imperial nav buoy, where a handful of droids were clustered around the sparking remains of the computer core. "I should have them out shortly - we had to let a couple of R5s at it after we knocked out the first set of defenses. They're not too fast, but they do good work."

"I'm sure they do." Foxfire stared enviously at the droids, wishing she could steal a few of them and put them to work looking for Garil's renegade Frigate. An A-wing's sensors were the best that could be mounted on that small a craft, but even their range was limited, and the number of pilots was even more so. Add to that the fatigue of recon pilots flying heel-to-toe shifts, and things got even worse. But there might be ways to get around that...

She glanced at the astromechs again, and reached for her comm-link as a thought struck her. "Flight Officer Sutherland, this is Foxfire. I need to meet with you in fifteen minutes in the usual briefing room - and bring Ledner with you."

The corridor was dark, as it always was. Foxfire glanced over her shoulders and squeezed quickly through a crack between two cargo crates - which happened to be empty and riveted to the floor. Not much good for storage, but just the thing if you wanted to hide something. Like a bar.

Drake was already waiting for her in the Bomb Shelter, and had been there for some time, judging from the low level of liquid in his glass. His R2 droid Ledner was trundling around behind him, poking into corners with a near-continuous stream of inquisitive noises.

"Sorry I'm late, Daniel," she apologized, sitting down across from the other pilot. "I'd get you a drink, but it looks like you've already helped yourself."

Drake grinned unrepentantly. "After getting Ledner in here, I deserve it. That entrance in the crates is barely wide enough for an astromech, and the other one's even worse."

"Blame Captain Orris...if he didn't ban it, we wouldn't have to hide it. That man has no sense of humor."

"Yeah, now we have to get somebody to tell Hardrive that." Drake nodded toward the gun-camera shots that were still adorning the walls, then winced as Ledner bumped into Joker's mop and brought it down with a crash. "I should never have left that Security programming in there...he thinks it's his job to investigate everything aboard ship."

"Actually, that's what I needed to talk to you about...would you mind letting the bridge crew borrow your droid for a bit?"

"Let them what?" he asked, just before an indignant chirp from Ledner.

Foxfire shook her head. "Well - you've mentioned that he had some programs left over from your Security days, and I got the impression that some of that involved tracking routines. If we can rig an A-wing up for constant transmission to the bridge and run the information through Ledner's security programming, we might be able to get a bit closer to our runaway admiral."

"All we've got to go on right now is a radiation trail, and that's cold as carbonite right now."

"We should have more soon - we've gotten a decent lead on his position, now we just have to dodge the Imps who are also looking for him." She looked thoughtfully at the droid, who'd backed nervously away from the table and was currently wheeling toward the battered jukebox in the back corner of the bar. Then her eyes widened. "Drake, don't let him near that, I think Granite's been playing-"

There was a loud pop and a shower of sparks as Ledner whistled shrilly and wheeled backward at top speed, hastily retracting a manipulator arm. The jukebox cabinet dangled open behind him.

"-Braveheart," Foxfire finished with a sigh. "Anyway, I'd say this is the best shot we've got at staying on



Garil's trail - recon flights alone can't get the job done. Think it'll work?"

"It's worth a try." Drake glanced at the droid, who was advancing on the jukebox again with a determined stance. "What do you say, Ledner?"

There was a slightly abstracted reply of beeps, hoots and whistles, and Drake checked the translator installed in his datapad. "I think that was a yes. But he wants to be allowed to play with the jukebox some more."

#### **[On board the renegade New Republic Frigate *Trailblazer*]**

Flight Officer Daken Teel was lying comfortably on his bunk reading as the chime sounded and unseen fists hammered on the door from the other side. The young man muttered under his breath as he went and opened the door, to be confronted by the hard, unsmiling face of Commander Ilyich Louyan.

"Move it, kid," the latter said in his usual dry bark. "Our turn for recon patrol." Teel nodded once and began to struggle into his flight suit.

As they headed towards the hangar, Daken Teel couldn't help but notice the four pips on Louyan's flight suit. He remembered, once, when he'd seen Commander Louyan in full dress uniform, how impressed he'd been. Never before had he seen so many medals and awards. The other rarely wore his full uniform, though - the last time he'd worn it was when Admiral Garil had been promoted. Apparently, the Commander and the Admiral had served together from a time when the Admiral was a naval Commander and the Commander was just a Lieutenant. Now, the former was the captain of this ship, and his long time friend was the commanding officer of Amber Squadron, the X-Wing squadron on board. Louyan was fiercely loyal to the Admiral, Teel reflected, and an old officer from the "School of Hard Knocks", but he was fair, and on occasion even likable. He smiled slightly at Teel.

"Don't worry, kid, no matter how many pips you earn, you'll always get to fly recon patrols," he said with a dry, throaty chuckle. Daken Teel smiled.

"I'm sure, sir. The difference is, when I've got four pips, I'll get paid that little bit extra to do it." At this Louyan let out a loud guffaw.

"Not that much more," he laughed. "Trust me, kid."

A few minutes later two X-wings of Amber Squadron exited the hangar of the *Trailblazer* and gracefully curved around as they streaked into the distance.

#### **[On board the New Republic Frigate *Joan d'Arc*]**

The usual, ordered quiet of the bridge on board the Alliance frigate *Joan d'Arc* was shattered by a piercing electronic squeal. Lieutenant Stephen "Psycho" Proud, yelped and jumped back as the squat R2 unit in front of him fired a small charge into a rather sensitive area. Psycho scowled and Ibero bit his lip in an unsuccessful attempt to keep from laughing. At this, another man, younger than the other two, rushed up and gently cuffed the R2 unit's domed head as he might do to a disobedient child.

"Ledner, what do you think you're doing? You can trust Psycho - he knows what he's doing," the young man said reproachfully. The droid whistled doubtfully, and Psycho glared at it and rubbed his thigh gently. The young man shot Psycho an apologetic look.

"Look, you complained about not getting to fly - this is the next best thing," he said to the R2 unit, Ledner, in a low voice. "You're still part of the action." Ledner beeped an unenthusiastic response.

"Oh, stop being so obstinate and self-important," Drake growled. "You're not indispensable, so don't pretend you are. The onboard computer on my A-wing does just as good a job as you, anyway." At this the droid hooted and whistled shrilly and Drake shot Psycho and Ibero a triumphant, devious look.

"You don't want to do it, fine. At least move out of the way so that Ibero and Psycho can get at the *Joan's* computer so that *it* can do the job," Drake said scornfully. That did it. Ledner emitted what sounded like a reluctant low whistle, and Drake winked at his squad mates.

"Go for it," he said. "But be careful." The two pilots moved forward and Psycho turned to the younger man.

"I'll be careful all right," he growled. "And if that droid of yours ever does that again, it'll take a team of techs a week to restore him to working order again." Drake sighed and rolled his eyes.

"He won't," he assured Psycho. "Okay, I'm off to the hangar to set up my A-wing for the linkup." With that, he turned and left the bridge, leaving Ibero and Psycho to work on the interface between Ledner and the main computer of the *Joan d'Arc*.

"If you don't stop laughing you're going to finish the job alone!" Drake heard Psycho shouting before the door closed.

### **Chapter Four: First Contact**

#### **[Near the hangar deck on board the *Joan d'Arc*]**

Flight Officer Jeffrey "Hammer" Hayes uttered a silent curse as the reversion lights on the walls flashed for the sixth time that day. A few seconds later the sleek form of the Nebulon-B Frigate *Joan d'Arc* crashed back into real space. Hammer scowled as he walked down the passageway towards the hangar. He was nearly bowled over by Captain Michael "Vyper" Stauber, White Squadron's Intelligence Officer, who apparently also had the idea of going to the hangar to supervise the maintenance of his ship.

"Sorry, Hammer," Vyper apologised as he disentangled himself. "You heading for the hangar deck?"

"That's right. I just wanted to see how the techs were doing on my B-Wing."

Vyper nodded. "I haven't got much to do, either, not with all these tiny hyperspace jumps we're performing, so I figured I'd make myself useful and check on my ship, too. After all, you just can't trust those techs too much, can you?" The two pilots chuckled as they made their way to the hangar.

On the bridge, Captain Ralne Orris frowned. Beside him, Lieutenant Commander Avery "Foxfire" Schroeder and Captain Lewis "Moose" Gregory both gazed intently through the main window at the stars, as if by staring hard enough they might be able to spot Admiral Garil's renegade Frigate. Orris walked over to communications and bent over the panel.

"Flight Officer! How long before you're able to begin sending us data?" he asked sharply.

"Relax, Captain," came the cool, deliberately casual reply. "It's going to take a little time - these are really faint readings, and I need to calibrate the sensors correctly to get the best results. Is Ledner ready?" In answer came an affirmative beep and whistle from the Captain's side. Moose and Foxfire traded looks as they glanced over at Ralne Orris. Psycho and Ibero moved aside after completing the last checks, not desiring to be any more as close to Captain Orris if there was any possibility of him becoming mad. The Captain wouldn't take kindly to Drake's casual tone, but then the young man was probably enjoying the fact that the senior officer needed him and he was out in the cockpit of an A-Wing anyway, in his own domain.

"Captain... the sensors are ready, sir. I'm transmitting the data now." From beyond the visual range of the Frigate, Drake's A-Wing began to transmit the data its sensors found. Drake's R2 unit, Ledner, was finally plugged into the *Joan d'Arc's* communications and sensor equipment so that he could amplify and analyse the data coming in. Setting up the whole super-sensor system had taken hours (and some cajoling on Drake's part), but, Foxfire reflected to herself, they'd had little choice if they wanted to have any hope at all of finding Garil. She glanced over at Captain Orris, who stood stiffly at ease a little way from the comm. panel. His cool eyes swept the bridge and came to meet Avery's own. He acknowledged her with a slight

nod, then returned his gaze to the squat droid near him.

"Wow, eye contact! I think he likes you," Moose whispered.

"Quit it," Foxfire whispered back, elbowing him lightly in the ribs. "He tolerates me because I don't yell as loudly."

"I would never have noticed." Moose smiled but he didn't add anything more. It was obvious for him that Captain Orris tolerated Foxfire better than Shok'wave, although that wasn't saying much. He had never fully understood why the Captain and White Squadron's Commander had that mutual dislike, but ever since Shok'wave had been swamped with bureaucratic stuff far from the *Joan d'Arc*, that bridge hadn't heard the same amount of daily shouts as it used to.

In that moment, Ledner let out a shrill whistle. Orris beat Moose and Foxfire to the panel by a whisker.

"What is it?" he snapped. The communications officer's fingers were busy as they danced over her board and she tried to interpret Ledner's excited beeps and whistles.

"Sir, I think he's found trace drive gases from a Nebulon-B Frigate and a few starfighters. Rebel starfighters." Orris nodded once, decisively.

"I'm getting to know how Admiral Garil thinks," he said briskly. "Helm, lay in a course along the projected trajectory of the ship that emitted those gases. Recall Flight Officer Sutherland. We're going to make a very short hyperspace jump, and then I want a new recon flight ready to go. You've got five minutes, Lieutenant Commander," he finished with a quick glance at Foxfire. She glared back at him. *A recon flight, ready to go in five minutes...just like that. Right.*

"Aye, sir." She answered. Turning on her heel, she left the bridge with a final scowl at the air in general.

### **[Joan d'Arc's flight deck]**

Captain Michael Stauber had just completed his checks and was about to get out of his cockpit when Lieutenant Commander Schroeder's head appeared at the top of the ladder.

"Don't bother getting out," she said without preliminaries. "You and Hammer, thanks to your strange wishes to be on the hangar deck, have just earned a recon detail. Sorry about the notice," and her expression softened a little, "but Orris, as usual, wants everything done yesterday. Drake managed to pick up some traces, so we're off after them like Jawas after a one-legged droid." Vyper raised an eyebrow at the analogy, but he said nothing and nodded.

"Okay. We'll be back shortly then."

Foxfire finally smiled and nodded in return. "I hope so. Good luck - and take care of yourselves, OK?"

Vyper pulled his helmet and gloves on as the cockpit canopy hissed shut. Great - another recon flight. That's the last time I amble on the hangar deck without a good reason. Having already thoroughly checked his fighter, he didn't need pre-flight checks, and he immediately wound the engines up in preparation for takeoff.

Hammer's B-Wing shot out of the *Joan d'Arc's* hangar a few seconds after Vyper's A-Wing had. Normally a two man recon patrol flight would consist of the same type of ship, but one as hastily thrown together as this couldn't afford to be so precise. Vyper keyed his intercom.

"Twelve, this is Three," he began. "Lay in the course that we're receiving via download from the *Joan*, then prepare for a quick hyperspace jump on my mark."

"Acknowledged, Three. Course laid in."

"Three, two, one...mark!" The two ships of White Squadron leapt forward and then burst into hyperspace.

**[Open space not far from the renegade Frigate *Trailblazer*]**

Flight Officer Daken Teel was just about to comment on these recon flights being a waste of time when two fighters suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Teel totally forgot proper protocols and procedures momentarily as he keyed his mike.

"Where in Sith did they come from-"

"Cut the chatter, Amber Nine," Louyan's voice broke in. "Break and attack," he finished coolly. Inside his cockpit, Daken Teel squirmed uncomfortably.

"Ahhh, Lead...my scope shows all green," he said nervously. The reply came back sharply.

"I'm sure it does. They're Alliance ships, an A-Wing and a B-Wing, Nine. Now, do as you're ordered. Break and attack - they're after the *Trailblazer*!" Already Teel could see Louyan's X-Wing streaking ahead as its S-foils blossomed into the cross shape that gave the craft its name.

"They're after us - but aren't we-" Again, Louyan's angry bark cut Teel off.

"Nine, think of it this way," he grated. "Either you get court martialled for coming with the Admiral and disobeying orders, or you get court martialled *and* killed for not obeying my orders. Now," he finished with a roar, "break and attack, Flight Officer!" Teel was stunned into action at the Commander's outburst and his own S-foils unfolded as he surged forward to meet the oncoming ships.

"Umm, Three, they're Rebel, but I really don't think they're friendly," Hammer observed as casually as possible.

"You don't say, Twelve. The wingman seems a bit slow - let's stay on the leader."

"Affirmative, Three." The two White fighters swung around to attack the enemy wingleader from either side, but Commander Louyan had already guessed their intent. His X-Wing curved sharply upward and shot out of the trap, then looped and came back at Hammer, hitting the White pilot several times before breaking off again and going after Vyper.

Daken Teel burst into the fray and he immediately squeezed off a burst at Hammer's desperately weaving B-B-Wing. The White pilot was glued to Louyan's tail, but at Teel's volley he sheered off and slowly began to come around. Meanwhile, Louyan and the White A-Wing were fighting a twisting, spiralling melee, but Louyan actually seemed to be gaining the advantage. Teel couldn't believe he was seeing it - an Alliance X-Wing dogfighting with an Alliance A-Wing, to the death.

*This isn't right - I'm going to have to put a stop to this*, he thought, but before he could do anything his rear shields seemed to crunch under a sudden hail of laser shots. Cursing, Teel threw his X-Wing over onto its side and spun out of the B-Wing's range of fire.

Commander Ilyich Louyan fought with his stick. *Damn, this guy is no rookie at this*, he thought to himself. Still, even veterans make mistakes sometimes. They'd been turning like this for what seemed like an eternity - the starfield outside the canopy seemed to spin endlessly. Louyan decided to try and force the enemy pilot into making a mistake. Setting his lasers on quad fire, he suddenly cut his throttle to a third power. The A-Wing shot ahead suddenly, its velocity still constant. In a flash, Louyan had flung his X-Wing around and snapped off a shot, catching the smaller craft on the beam. *Go for it*, Louyan willed the other pilot silently. *Make a veteran's mistake*. As if to satisfy him, the A-Wing pilot jerked his craft away, straightening it for the barest second so as to make a clean breakaway. Quicker than thought, Louyan's thumb flicked the weapon selector and his finger found the trigger. A concussion missile streaked ahead on an orange tongue of flame and slammed into the aft section of the A-wing as it tried to dive out of the way. It exploded on impact,

scattering shrapnel and A-Wing debris as it did so.

"Vyper!" Hammer's B-wing spat an ineffectual torpedo at Teel's craft. He knew the shot would miss, but it would hopefully distract the X-wing pilot enough so that Hammer could get across and help his damaged wingleader.

"I'm here," came Vyper's reply a second later, and Hammer sighed in relief. "It's a little tight here, though." Vyper's A-Wing juked and corkscrewed, the other X-Wing staying perfectly on its tail, but just unable to squeeze a shot off. Hammer glanced down at his targeting display as he bracketed Vyper's fighter and squeezed the button. The A-Wing's shields were down, and its hull had also begun to take damage. One shot from that X-Wing would spell Captain Stauber's death. Hammer's eyes widened in horror, anger and helplessness. *And that shot is about to come*, he thought.



Commander Ilyich Louyan was thinking those exact same thoughts as he edged his throttle back and allowed the A-Wing to slip ahead a little. The A-Wing pilot noticed the change in speed and attempted to weave wildly and slow at the same time, but it was too late. Louyan's gloved finger closed around the trigger.

Flight Officer Daken Teel shoved his throttle hard against the stops, outdistancing the B-Wing as he redirected his shield energy over to the engines. *Hopefully he won't catch me and I'll come out of this alive*, the young man thought grimly. Louyan's fighter seemed about to line up for a shot on the Alliance A-wing. Teel stabbed the trigger.

Commander Louyan's finger tightened even as his R2 unit screamed and his rear shields and half his hull crunched away into nothing. *WHAT?!* His head snapped around even as he instinctively jerked his X-Wing up and away. Behind him, unbelievably, Teel's X-Wing still spat bursts of quad fire at him as it attempted to follow. Furious at the disloyalty, Louyan was about to go after the young traitor when a shrill warning from his R2 unit reminded him of the A- and B-Wings, both of which were lining up to attack him too. Louyan redirected all his energy to his engines and shot back in the direction of the *Trailblazer* as he keyed his comm.

"You'll die for this, traitor. I'll see that the Admiral hears of it." The reply came, somewhat scratchy over Louyan's damaged comm.

"I'm no traitor, Commander. I'm doing what is right - I won't follow the Admiral down on some death wish, and I won't let you just shoot down people that are on our side!" Louyan cut his comm. off and closed his S-foils. The A-Wing was pursuing and would catch him at sublight speeds, but the renegade Commander pulled a lever and his battered X-Wing leapt into hyperspace.

"Unidentified X-Wing, this is Captain Michael Stauber of White Squadron," Vyper intoned. "Please fall in with us so we can escort you back to the Frigate *Joan d'Arc*." *Please*, Vyper added as an afterthought. *I don't want to have to fight you, too.*

"Gladly, sir," came the reply at length. "I'm Flight Officer Daken Teel, formerly known as Amber Nine." The three ships streaked back towards the *Joan d'Arc*.

## **Chapter Five: Revelations**

### **[Aboard the renegade frigate *Trailblazer*]**

The Admiral was staring grimly out of the bridge window, his knuckles white on the rail, when Commander Louyan stepped onto the bridge of the *Trailblazer*. Still in his somewhat rumpled orange flight suit, the commander stepped forward and waited, his body braced to attention, as he eyed his old friend speculatively.

He'd known Nathan Garil since he was a junior officer. Nathan was older than he was - in fact when they'd first met he'd been something of a mentor to the young Lieutenant Louyan, as he had indeed been to all the men and women that served under his command. In Louyan's case, though, it had been a little different, and the two men had formed a friendship that transcended rank and branch service. The often seen rivalry between pilots and naval personnel didn't exist between Nathan Garil and Ilyich Louyan. The two respected the other, both knew their own stations and limitations, and both were happy with those. And now, Louyan thought to himself as his face hardened, I'm following Nathan Garil, even if it means death. Both men had lived long enough lives, and were happy enough - as happy as could be expected under the Empire. Louyan didn't fear death, then. He feared death only for the young, those who hadn't yet had the chance to see all that life had to offer and be satisfied. Still, in order to see justice served, Commander Ilyich Louyan was prepared to die, and to order others to die with him. *We took an oath when we joined the Alliance*, Louyan reminded himself silently. *These kids all knew what they were getting into, they knew they might have to sacrifice themselves for the cause. Now, they're being called upon to do that. And already, one has betrayed us.* Louyan shook his head with a mix of anger and sadness, then straightened reflexively as the silent Admiral finally turned to face him. Louyan saluted crisply, and Garil returned the gesture without hesitation or expression. At other times he might have smiled faintly, but not today.

"Your report, Commander," Nathan Garil prompted. Louyan nodded.

"Yes, sir. Admiral, Flight Officer Daken Teel and I engaged two Alliance starfighters, apparently from White Squadron. We drove them off, and Teel went with them."

Garil's eyes narrowed and he folded his arms. "What?"

"I'm afraid so, sir. Teel betrayed us and has defected to White Squadron."

Admiral Garil nodded and sighed, rubbing the stubble on his cheek thoughtfully. For an instant he seemed hesitant, perhaps about what he was doing, but it quickly passed and his face hardened with resolve.

"Well, there's nothing we can do about it now. We certainly can't spare the resources to hunt this kid down, and even if we could, any information he knows would already be in the hands of this squadron. White Squadron, eh? I'm just trying to remember who's in charge of that outfit...ah, it's a certain Commander Krenzel, I believe. I don't know anything about her beyond the name, but I do know they're on Ralne Orris' ship. I'll have to watch Orris, he's a damn good captain, and if his mission is to stop us, then we won't get away easily. What's your assessment of this White Squadron, then?"

Louyan frowned for a moment while considering. "I think they're pretty good, from what I've seen. The wingleader we met nearly matched me, and I've got quite a few years of flying behind me. I don't think it was



the CO, either... looked like a male, from what I could see. If that's their regular standard of pilot, then I'd be interested to see what their hotshots can do." That brought the faintest ghost of a smile to Garil's lips, but the smile quickly faded.

"Very well. I want Amber and the other squadrons on full alert. We're going to have to respond quickly if they move against us. Meanwhile, Ilyich, go freshen up and get something to eat. Dismissed."

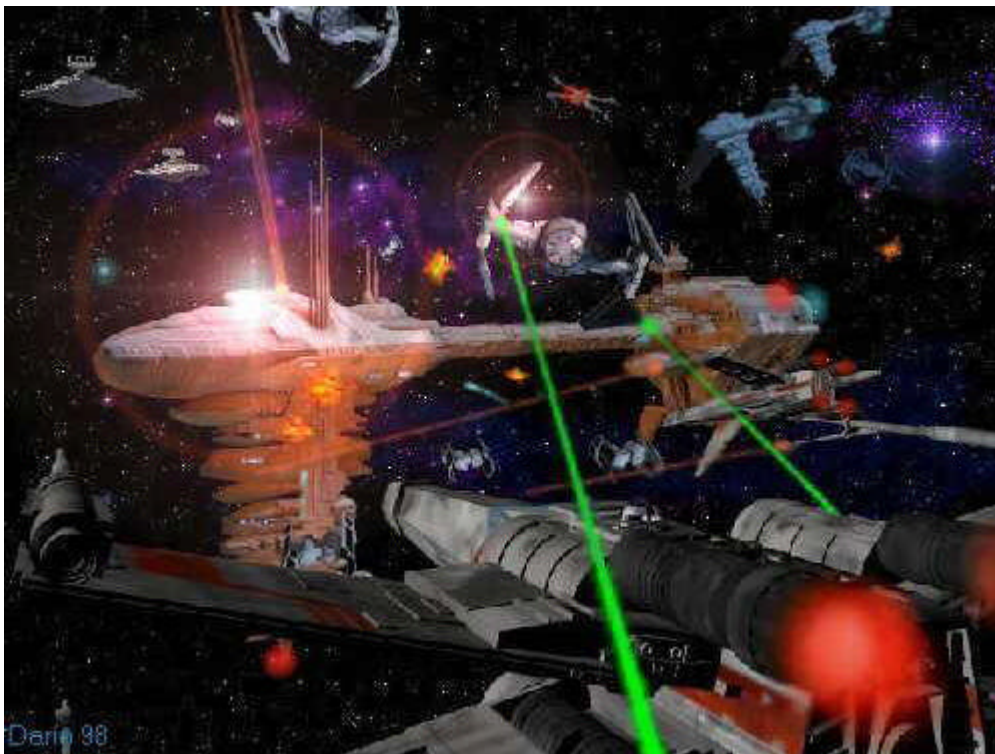
"Aye, aye, sir." Louyan couldn't help a smile as he saluted. In private he would've addressed the Admiral by his first name, but the bridge wasn't an appropriate place for that. The Admiral saluted, nodded curtly, and turned back to stare intently out the window. Commander Ilyich Louyan marched out, leaving the Admiral to his thoughts and the quiet but tense state of calm on the bridge.

*We are being hunted by our own people. Orris has been sent to force us to return. They don't understand. They can't.*

His mind returned to that fatal moment in the withdrawal from Sindar II, almost three weeks ago. The alarms sounded again in his memory with the same tone of urgency, the sound he had learned to associate with immediate danger and death. The Imperials had reacted even faster than he'd feared. At the second jump point they found enemy ships not too far from them. This time two Star Destroyers were blocking their route, and six Frigates were racing towards them at their top speed. A group of Corvettes seemed to be their reserves, and kept positions between the Frigates and the Destroyers. When the first warning of TIE Bombers was heard on the bridge, Admiral Garil knew that their worst suspicions were true. They would have to fight their way home.

"Have Hornet Squadron attack the Star Destroyers with all their fighters," he ordered while the communications officer transmitted his instructions to the fighter commanders. "Tell them to use everything, even the reserves, I need all the B-Wings launching their torpedoes against the Star Destroyer at left." If we can take one of them out of combat we'll have a chance of escaping. Without waiting for acknowledgement he continued giving orders, his mind designing the plan as he spoke. "Amber will cover Hornet's ships while Banshee attacks the Frigates. Corvettes *Mireia* and *Nur'tal* will help too. *Hunter* and *Tideria* will protect our back. Our three Frigates will engage theirs."

It had been a bad fight. Admiral Garil remembered too well the screams coming over the communications.



That was the hardest part of being in command, to hear and see how others died following your orders. The veteran soldier knew that there was nothing more he could have done then, that all those deaths were

necessary to give the rest of his fleet a chance to survive and escape, but still he clenched his hands at his at the sound of those cries. *You will be avenged. All of you will be avenged, I swear it.*

He remembered looking at the main display with concern half an hour later. They had survived the first attack, but now the things were becoming even harder. The frigate *Gaudeamus* was mortally wounded and wouldn't survive when the next wave of Bombers launched their torpedoes against the battered ship. The worst of all was that her engines had suffered serious damage, losing almost all her maneuvering capabilities. There was no chance of jumping to hyperspace for the crippled frigate. Their second frigate, *Gladiant*, was not that much better, but at least its hyperdrive was still intact. They had lost two corvettes too, the ones that had been ordered to attack the enemy frigates, and half of the fighters from the three squadrons, especially Hornet's B-Wings. On the other side, the New Republic's forces had destroyed two of the Imperial frigates and a Star Destroyer, the *Pressis*, had been forced to withdraw after losing its shields and suffering some structural damage under the Hornet fighters' fierce attack. The Imperials had lost a great amount of fighters, too, especially TIE Bombers. The space was full of the debris from dozens of them. Comparing the respective losses, it could be considered that the Rebels were winning the battle. The remaining Imperial Frigates had retired some clicks away when the Imperial commanding the fleet had understood that the New Republic's ships were going to fight to the death. Now they seemed to be waiting for something, only their fighters were keeping an intense fight against Amber and Cheetah's X-Wings. Garil knew that reinforcements were expected. The situation was desperate and the Imperials knew it. They could have used those moments to escape, but not leaving a crippled Frigate and her crew behind.

"This is Admiral Garil." He said to the intercom. "Evacuate the *Gaudeamus* immediately, Captain Sera." A little hologram showed the Captain's exhausted face, and Garil wondered how he looked himself. "Activate the auto-destruction device, but transfer the control to this ship. Perhaps *Gaudeamus* can win a fight even in her last moments."

Captain Sera smiled slightly and nodded.

"All right, Admiral, let's hope so." He turned to a young female officer at his back. "Lieutenant Shillis, order immediate evacuation and run to a shuttle."

"Aye, sir."

"*Gaudeamus* out." Captain Sera said and the hologram disappeared.

Before he closed the contact, Garil caught a glimpse of the Lieutenant's face. She was scared, and she couldn't be blamed for that, not with an order to evacuate coming over the comms. At sixty-two years old, Garil didn't fear death for himself. He had seen a lot of combats, from the Clone Wars to the struggle against the Empire, he had been in many battles and stared death in the face more than once. But he could remember how it was when he was younger, when he had a life to live and hopes for the future. Navy had been his life and he had never had a family out of it. As he was growing older all those plans and hopes had been forgotten one after another, and now he had nothing to lose if death finally came. But there was a time when he had felt as frightened as that woman undoubtedly was, no matter how hard she tried to hide it. That was what courage was, to feel the fear but to fight against it, not to allow it to become panic and to do what you must do. He admired the young woman and the rest of the sentients under his command. Many of them had died during all these years, but he swore to himself that this Lieutenant wouldn't be joining them.

*Don't worry, I'll bring you home safely.*

"Two new contacts, sir!" His head snapped up at the warning he had been waiting for. "Star Destroyers, sir, launching Bombers and TIE Fighters!"

He only delayed his answer for a second. "Amber Squadron, intercept any Bomber that those Star Destroyers launch. Cheetah and Hornet, take positions close to *Gaudeamus* and cover the transports evacuating the crew.:

"Sir, Frigates identified as *Tennef* and *Saitell*, and four supporting Corvettes have started a new approach toward the transports... They are trying to intercept their escape route!" the Rodian officer behind the nearest console exclaimed.

"I see them, Lieutenant Deeggo. Captain Dimb'ura, try to stop those ships for a few more minutes," he ordered *Gladiant's* Captain. "We'll try to cover all you from the Star Destroyers and the remaining Frigates."

"At once, Admiral." The Twi'lek's voice didn't betray his own fear and only a pale color in his brain tentacles showed what he felt. Garil saw him nodding in the hologram and immediately the *Gladiant* started to maneuver to intercept the incoming ships.

*That Twi'lek was brave, too. The Imperials despise those who are aliens to them, but I would prefer a Corvette and a crew only composed by aliens like Captain Dimb'ura than an entire fleet full of cowards like those Imperials. Dimb'ura knew that I might be sending him to death, but he didn't hesitate. No, I was actually sending him to death, now I see it, but, what else could I do? I just couldn't abandon the other Frigate's crew... But I sacrificed two Frigates instead. I should have thought of something better. I was responsible for the two crews. Dimb'ura and his men did it well though. They destroyed one of the enemy Frigates and two Corvettes before to fall. And why I didn't order Trailblazer to attack them too? Perhaps Dimb'ura would be alive now... But no, I had to keep this ship out of that engagement and offer the evacuation vessels a place to land. But they were too far, that was my failure, they just couldn't do it, and I had to watch those damned Corvettes capture the transports one after another...*

"I'm sorry, Admiral..." His first officer's voice startled him and interrupted his thoughts. "Are you all right, sir?" He realized that his hands were so tightly clenched they trembled. He breathed deeply once before turning to face the young captain.

"Yes, Captain Collins, continue with your duties."

"Yes, sir." He noticed the concern in the man's eyes, but didn't comment on it. Garil observed him for some seconds, while the young captain appeared to be very busy watching a console, but he caught him taking a short glance back and turning his attention to the monitor quickly when he noticed that the Admiral was looking. There were any number of reasons for that concern, anything from the strain he was clearly under to the things he'd done since *Gaudeamus'* destruction.

*It's not my fault, he thought, turning back to the main view screen. The Empire bears the guilt for this. I hope that the Emperor is writhing in pain wherever he is now. I always knew Palpatine was a bad beast, but nobody wanted to hear me until it was too late. Bastard. He and all those who follow him, even now after his death. None of them is innocent, not even those who are supposedly civilians, they are accomplices with their silence, pretending there is no war, that they have nothing to do with all the suffering... They call us Rebel scum. Rebel scum... Well, this Rebel scum is going to take them from their comfortable beds and will make them pay. The Galaxy will be a better place when we finish our job. It's not my fault, no, not at all, but the Empire will pay...*

### **[Onboard Frigate *Joan d'Arc*]**

Foxfire hesitated just outside the door of the small ready room, taking a moment to compose her thoughts. From what Vyper had told her about their new arrival, she was going to have to tread carefully. She took a quick breath and walked into the room, past the Security people who were doing their best to look non-threatening.

She could see why, when she looked at the young pilot sitting nervously at the table. Dressed in a rumpled flightsuit, it was hard to tell much about him past the edgy, exhausted look in his eyes - then again, Foxfire thought, she'd be pretty edgy as well if she'd been forced to turn on her own wingleader.

"Lieutenant Commander Avery Schroeder," she said, holding out a hand in greeting. "I hear we owe you one."

"I couldn't just let him - aah, Flight Officer Daken Teel, ma'am," the other pilot said, changing subjects midstream.

"Glad to meet you, although the circumstances could be better." Foxfire took a seat across from Teel. "For what it's worth, Captain Stauber's sensors show that your wingleader made it back into hyperspace."

"That's no help," Teel said bitterly. "He's as far gone as the Admiral by now."

"What do you mean?" Foxfire held herself in her seat by sheer force of will, when what she really wanted was to pounce on any chance of a lead.

"The Admiral, he's, ah, something's wrong with him. When we were ambushed after Sindar II he just went crazy to kill Imperials, any Imperials he could find. All the pilots were in space when it happened, but..." He fell silent for a moment. "One of our frigates was destroyed, and the Imps took most of the crew prisoner as they evacuated. As I've said, none of us could see what happened them, but some of the bridge's officers have been telling some things..."

"What kind of things?"

"Well I don't know how much of it is true, but I've been told that they started to...they...might have tortured someone. The Admiral told us to keep up the fight..." Teel trailed off, shaking his head. "We might have had a chance to escape by turning back and entering again into Imperial space. But it turned out that we weren't escaping at all. Admiral Garil ordered us all back aboard to track down the prison ship. But we could only guess where it might be heading to. Then..." The young pilot hesitated. He looked at his hands as he twisted them nervously on the table.

"I know it's not easy, Lieutenant, but I have to know the whole story."

He glanced at her, but it was only for an instant before he lowered his head in silence. By the time the XO was wondering if the haunted pilot had understood what she had said, he nodded once and started to talk in a low voice. "The Admiral selected the spots where that ship could be re-fuelled, or receive any kind of assistance. And we were ordered to attack all those places. Many of them were not military installations..."

*Then it's true*, Foxfire thought.

"There was no trace of our people in any of those places, but we destroyed them anyway. We have intercepted several convoys, too... The Admiral interrogated the Captains and then the Trailblazer blew their ships apart. We shot down disabled ships!" His voice was about to break. "Most of the times, the crews had no chance to evacuate their vessels. I thought that all that made a little sense if we were able to find that Corvette and rescue our people. But now...nobody knows where they are and he still won't stop."

"I understand."

"Then, when I was ordered to open fire against New Republic ships... I just couldn't handle it any more."

"You did the right thing, Flight Officer." The young pilot was struggling to keep his composure, but he was visibly relieved after having explained his story. "Do you have any idea where Admiral Garil's heading now?" Foxfire hated to press the man, exhausted as he was, but she had an ugly feeling that time was running out.

"Sort of. Look, you're not going to shoot him down or anything, are you?"

"No. Not if there's any way to avoid it - we're trying to get the Admiral and his crew safely back into Alliance space."

Something about Teel's expression suggested that he didn't have much faith in that possibility, but he didn't say so out loud. "I don't know much about where he's going, although it's evident we are closer to Coruscant every day..." Foxfire repressed a shudder. She'd spent more time than she liked in Imperial space just before the formation of White Squadron, and the idea of voluntarily heading toward Coruscant was not a pleasant one. "I heard something about a place named Meldron, or something like that. Does that make any sense?"

She consulted her datapad and found a positive answer. "Yes, there's an Imperial base named Meldron's World not far from here. Apparently they use it to transfer prisoners to other destinations if they're not sent straight to Coruscant."

"From what the wing commander said, I think it's pretty heavily fortified... I don't think the Admiral's expecting us to make it out of there."

"A suicide run..." Foxfire said softly to herself. "Look, Teel, we're going to do our best to get your crew-mates

out of trouble. Meanwhile, we've got to get you into sickbay for a while." She kept her voice as calm as she could, letting the two Security men usher Teel out of the room and toward Sickbay. She'd have to figure out what to do with him later - predictably, Orris was all for tossing him in the brig - but meanwhile she had to talk to the rest of the command wing. If losing the prisoners had driven Garil crazy, maybe a chance to get them back would drive him sane...

"Michael, we can pull it off."...I think, Foxfire added mentally. She, Moose, Vyper and Torpedo were squeezed into the XO's cramped office, along with too much caff to really be safe. "I've been talking to Daken Teel, the pilot who defected to us, and from what he says we have maybe one chance to intercept Garil before he suicides and takes his crew along with him."

"After that little encounter with his recon flight, I don't think he's likely to look at us as friends," Vyper warned.

"Neither do I, but I think we'll at least be able to get his attention." As quickly as possible, Foxfire outlined what Teel had told her about the Rebel prisoners. "He says the prison ship is a corvette named *Harrier*, and it was making tracks for the Core Worlds the last time it was seen. What we get to do is divert the *Harrier* from its destination and head it to Meldron's World instead - Garil is apparently planning to make his stand there."

Moose frowned. "Ambush I can understand, but how exactly are we planning to divert a corvette?"

"There are comm stations within striking distance of our position." Torpedo was grinning, having figured out where Foxfire was going a few minutes ago. "If we captured one, we might be able to get into the systems and start talking with the *Harrier*. Between Vyper, Joker and Psycho, we'd be able to sound convincing, at least."

"Don't forget Ibero." Vyper suggested. "He worked for a telecommunications company before joining us. If there is an easy way to hack one of those things, chances are he knows it."

"Of course! How could I forget that?" Foxfire thought for a moment. "Have Ibero in the group instead of Psycho. I don't want to have so many pilots inside those transports. "Furthermore, after seeing what happened when they tried to link Ledner to the *Joan*'s tracking systems, I don't know if I want they both together again..." She suppressed a smile. "All right. Keep the Joan out of the picture, raid with some B-Wings and a couple of A's for cover, and throw a couple of transports full of boarding troops at them..."

"Plus Joker," Moose supplied. "She used to be in Imperial Intel, and she may be able to get some places we can't. Perhaps Ibero could manipulate the comms, but first we have to get in."

Torpedo shot him a disbelieving look. "You realize how much we'll have to hear about it afterwards?"

"And how loudly?"

"And how-"

"All right, all right." Moose held up his hands to forestall any more comments. "But as long as she gets the job done while she's out there, I'm happy."

"You and me both." Foxfire frowned in thought for a moment. "OK, we can go with me, Drake and Ladyfox flying cover and Moose, Iceman and Hammer taking B-Wings. Torpedo, I'll need you to pick out our likeliest target, and Vyper to scout it out. Moose, you've done infantry, can I get you to sort things out with the guys on the transports?"

"Sure. Put Blitz in my place and I'll go with the commandoes instead. What are you gonna be doing?"

"Just as rough of a job." She made a face and downed the last of her caff. "I've got to go convince Captain Orris that this is a good idea. Anybody want to trade?"

## Chapter Six: The assault

### [Imperial Comm. Station]

Foxfire glanced at her mission timer as the four A-wings shot through hyperspace...seconds left to reversion and yet another skirmish with the Imperials. She waited impatiently for the computer to count down, wanting to have the intercom link available again for a last-minute briefing - not that anyone really needed it, but the mission plan was a bit unusual and she wanted to make sure it was down firmly.

The jump indicator flickered green and her A-Wing dropped into real space. The rest of her group, other three fighters, had dropped in beside her, and immediately broke left and right in groups of two, making room for the B-wings that came in just behind them.

"All right, folks, the defenses here are nothing but gunboats and turbolasers, so we're switching roles for today. The B-wings will cover us while we go for the big target - we have to take out all the turrets on the sunward side of the station, and we don't have long to do it before the transports show up. Got it?"

"Right," Iceman said promptly. Vyper, never particularly talkative in flight, just double-clicked his mike. Torpedo, commanding the B- Wings flight, acknowledged with an "Aye, aye", followed by the rest of his group, Granite, Blitz and Sparks. She was still missing one, though... Foxfire frowned and looked over her right shoulder to catch a glimpse of the missing A-wing. *Somehow I'm not surprised...*

"Got it, Nik?"

"Yes ma'am, got it, can I turn my stereo back up now?"

"Do it and I'll stick you in the brig for a month." She smiled, knowing that Hardrive was just joking. Or at least that was what she hoped. Suddenly her computer emitted a warning tone and her forward scanner started to show red shots.

"This is gonna be fun," Foxfire muttered to herself, looking as a flight of six Gunboats rose from the comm station and spread out to engage them. With Hardrive still in formation on her wing, she ducked under the wave of oncoming Gunboats, leaving them for the B- wings with no particular remorse. Four of the Alliance heavy bombers could handle the opposition without much trouble - besides, she was going to have her hands full with the turbolaser barrage from the station.

"OK, Nik, split up and watch your back!"

"Don't worry, they haven't made the Gunboat yet that could catch up with me." Hardrive's A-wing broke away from hers with a cheerful wing-waggle.

Foxfire threw her fighter into an irregular corkscrew course, scanning the perimeter of the comm station for turbolaser turrets. This was worse than minercing... A quick glance behind her showed all the Gunboats safely engaged with Torpedo's B-wings, and she targeted the nearest turret and dove for it.

*I hate turbolasers!* she thought.

Biting her lip in concentration, Foxfire wove around a near-continuous stream of green fire, then ducked away with a quick flurry of lasers. A satisfying shower of sparks behind her let her know that her attack run had succeeded. *Just fifteen or so left now...*

She glanced at her sensors and found about what she'd expected - Vyper and Iceman had staked out one quarter of the comm station as their own and were methodically strafing their way across it, and Hardrive was careening through wild course changes that had to be leaving the Imperial gunners motion-sick. As long as everything blew up on schedule, she wouldn't complain - they had only a few seconds left before the transports dropped in, and she had several squadmates on the first transport. Moose, Ibero and Joker were all hitching rides on one of the commando ships, and she wanted to leave them a clear path in.

The station spun dizzily over her as she slammed the A-wing sideways to avoid a turbolaser bolt. She hated



charging an installation like this - you could out-think another pilot, but with a wall of gunners it came down to brute force. And that was something an A-wing was notoriously short on.

"Foxy, we've got forty-five seconds till the transports revert," Torpedo said over the comm-link. "You got it cleared out for them?"

"Almost-" Foxfire dumb-fired two missiles into her current target and yanked her stick back for a wrenching turn that sent her skimming over the comm-station walls. "Vyper, you two done over there?"

"Working on it..." The Intelligence Officer sounded about as distracted as Foxfire was herself.

"Personally, I'm right about 'well-done'." Iceman's A-wing angled away from the comm station, trailing sparks from one winglet. Out of the corner of her eye, Foxfire saw Hardrive give up on the subtle approach and charge the last gun turret in a storm of lasers. "OK, we're done," he reported smugly.

Foxfire relaxed slightly. "All right, good work, fall back and-"

"Fox, we're in trouble." Vyper shut her off abruptly. "Four more Gunboats and six squints - they had them hiding in the station's sensor shadow, Probably trying to catch us in an ambush."

Foxfire diverted all the shield power she could spare to her engines. "OK, back in formation and accelerate to attack speed. Torpedo?"

"Yes, boss, we're on our way. Granite, follow me. Sparks, Blitz, hang back and cover the transports. They may have another surprise or two waiting."

"Let them try," Granite said angrily. The Caldanian pilot would have preferred to be with the commando team, but Moose had explicitly forbidden him to board any of the transports. "Sometimes I just can't understand him..." he muttered through his clenched teeth.

Hardrive dropped into position on Foxfire's wing as she arced over the disarmed wall of the station and back into the zone of fire of the active turbolasers. Complicating matters further were the Imperial fighters racing toward them - thankfully, most of them were unshielded Interceptors. But that turn of speed plus quad-lasers would still shred the approaching transports...

"Flight leader, this is Sparks. Transports have arrived."

Foxfire winced. "Tell them to make their docking as fast as they can - we've got problems."

"And this is supposed to be news, right?"

Ibero looked through the nearest viewscreen. They had arrived in the estimated time, but judging from their comrades' activity out there, things were not as quiet as all of them would like. A unnerving rhythmical "tap-tap" had not ceased sounding inside the armoured transport for the last ten minutes. Neither Moose nor any of the commandoes seemed to be as annoyed as he was by the noise, so he decided it was time to do something about it.

"Joker, please, would you be so kind as to stop hitting the floor with your boot?"

"No," she replied without stopping. "I'm nervous, and when I nervous I do this to relax myself."

"And it works?"

"Try it."

"All right, here I go." Ibero started to tap the floor too. Briefly. At the fifth hit he felt a powerful grip on his knee and couldn't continue.

"Ibero, please," Moose said politely. "I've got enough to handle with just her." The look he launched at Joker was enough to make her consider stopping her own tapping, too. After barely a second of immobility, Joker started to drum her fingers nervously on her knee, eyeing Moose occasionally to see if the Training Officer was going to object to that. A few years' experience in Imperial Intelligence didn't exactly mean she was comfortable in a back-door infantry assault like this...on the other hand, it probably beat the second shift in the Bomb Shelter, and was less dangerous to boot.

The corners of her mouth twitched upward as she remembered Granite's reaction to hearing her part of the mission... "Aye lass, give me a moment and I'll have yae a Combat Mop ready to go." *I'll give HIM mops*, she thought, more than a little vindictively. She wondered if Granite had found anything...unusual in his quarters yet, but if not, he'd find it when he got back from this mission. Namely, lots and lots of hastily-scrounged mopheads, neatly bonded to the teeth of his chainsaw...all things considered, it was probably just as well that she was out here and not back on the Joan when the Caldanian had a chance to see her handiwork.

Ibero turned towards her with a questioning look in his eyes.

"What are you laughing at now?"

"Forget it. It's just... watch out!!!!"

The transport lurched heavily as the pilot saw the two TIE Interceptors approaching them up ahead and instinctively ducked into an evasive pattern. "Moose, can I drive?" Joker asked looking apprehensively at the space spinning around them. "You said yourself I needed the practice."

"Joker, be quiet or I'll sit on you," he growled back.

She hushed...mostly because the transport's evasive maneuvers were coming close to catapulting her into the opposite wall. An A-wing changed directions a lot faster and harder, but there wasn't nearly as much room to bounce around in. A moment later, however, the transport's flight leveled back out as the White pilots reported they were free from their pursuers. Joker noticed the boarding troops, who'd been perfectly relaxed during their pilot's wild maneuvering, tense imperceptibly. At an order of their sergeant they all adjusted their facial plates, so their expressions couldn't be seen any more. Their dark blue armors made them look more like some kind of killer droid than like living creatures, especially the two-and-a-half-meter Wookiee holding the E-Web.

"I had always thought they needed at least two strong guys to carry one of them." Joker whispered.

"Or half a Wookiee." Ibero answered.

The transport set down with a loud grating noise, and Joker and Ibero both flattened themselves against the wall as the troopers rushed past them. Moose brought up the rear, festooned with so much weaponry that he resembled a ship in for repairs and covered with dry-dock scaffolding. Ibero looked at him curiously. "Hey, Diana, do you think he's enjoying this too much?"

"Not this, no. Now watching me clean the Bomb Shelter, that he enjoys too much."



Moose ducked, rolled, and flattened himself against the side of the troop transport as a stormtrooper's blaster shot came perilously close. He hoped the smell of scorched fabric was only his imagination...

"You two, keep your heads as low as possible, ok?" he said towards the two pilots still on board the transport. They limited their answer to a quick nod, Joker staring intensely at Moose's smoking left shoulder. *It IS scorched fabric...*

He had a good angle of fire here - it would just be helpful to have a few less targets to shoot at. Instead of the stealth attack he'd been expecting, the commander of the infantry unit had simply opted to trigger the intruder alarm in the landing bay. Moose had been more than a bit surprised at that, until he'd seen the first wave of stormtroopers rushing into the bay. The big open bay, with little or nothing in the way of cover, and which the stormtroopers very obligingly spread themselves across. After Hoth and Tenn'see IV, he had no trouble at all shooting any stormtrooper he saw. He lifted the blaster rifle to his shoulder, aimed-

-and spun as a hand slapped his shoulder from behind. Ander Malak, the infantry team's Exec, leaned in so Moose could hear him over the roar of blaster fire. "Captain, we've got a problem! Bring those two pilots of yours and follow me."

Foxfire glared at her targeting computer, which was telling her more than she wanted to know about how much trouble she was in, and rolled right to line up on the T/I that Hardrive had caught in a loop engagement. "Hold him for me just a second, Nik..." she said under her breath.

The Interceptor broke up under Foxfire's lasers just as far too many green bolts shot over her canopy. She dove instinctively, letting the defensive fire from the station drive the pursuing fighter off her six. That was a trick that wouldn't last for long, though, not once the Imps got their bearings back and started coordinating.

"One down," Vyper said calmly over the comm-link; Foxfire glanced backward and saw him luring an Gunboat into range of their squad-mates' torpedoes. With any luck, the assault troops had finished docking by now...

Moose, Joker, Ibero and two infantry troopers huddled behind their transport, in the closest thing there currently was to a safe place. The other trooper, who Joker identified as the lean, dark woman who had made the trip in front of her, was watching all their backs while Malak explained the situation. "The Imps

have figured out what we're here after - one of my people just saw four stormtroopers go tearing off for the command station. We shouldn't have any trouble securing the landing bay and proceeding with a conventional operation, but we've got to catch up with the stormtroopers, or they'll slag the comm equipment and all this will be useless."

"If they're headed for the center of the station, we can catch up with them - we can intercept them if we're lucky," Joker said with a smug look. "One of my first assignments with Imperial Intelligence was planting listening devices through a station like that one, and I still have the stupid floor plan memorized."

Malak looked at her, seemingly thoughtful for a moment, then nodded back at Joker. "Lead on, Flight Officer."

Foxfire pulled hard right onto the trail of a Gunboat that was racing straight away from the comm station. If the pilot made it into hyperspace with word of their presence, they were finished.

"T-Six, Two. Little help here?"

"Right." Two of Blitz's remaining torpedoes slammed into the GUN's starboard wing as Foxfire's lasers stripped the armor off the back. The Imperial bomber spun out of control and back toward Foxfire, who said something completely unsuitable for an officer or a lady. A rain of sparks fountained from her console at the glancing impact of one wing, and she pulled back hard on the stick. The A-wing started to climb, but only sluggishly.

"Avery, watch your tail!"

She glanced back to see a T/I descending on her. "I give up, they can smell blood," she muttered to herself. But the Interceptor veered away from her six before she even had time to pull up. If Vyper hadn't been around, that ship could have finished her off, but the Imperial fighter was now spinning beyond the station with a solar panel or two the less.

"Are you all right?" Blitz asked, placing his B-Wing beside Foxfire's fighter. He shook his head watching the damage on the small ship's hull. "For a moment I thought he had you..."

"I can fly, but the techs on the Joan are going to kill me."

"Well, that was the last one." Vyper said. "Let's hope the reinforcements take their time getting here."

"No arguments here."

Malak and the pilots squeezed single-file through the narrow access tunnel that ran up the center of the station, trusting Joker to keep them on track among the multiple crawlways that branched off to every part of the station. The sounds of the battle taking place behind them filled the place with deathly echoes. "Damn it" Moose muttered. He had gotten a backache after about five steps - not surprisingly, the Empire hadn't been terribly concerned about the comfort of its techs when it built this place. Ibero looked back and noticed the Training Officer's problems with walking through the tunnel and smiled.

"At times like this, I'm happy to not be that tall." He got an angry groan and a little push as answer.

After much more climbing than Moose had really enjoyed, Joker paused, tilted her head to listen, and then ushered Malak toward a narrow hatchway with a mock-ceremonious gesture and a smug grin. "It's all yours," she said to Malak, then glanced over her shoulder at Moose. "And you can probably shoot something too if you want, boss."

"You're too kind," he muttered back.

The hatchway opened out between two consoles, a narrow space that could fit only one person at a time. Malak solved his problem by rolling forward and out of the way, bringing his rifle to bear on the cluster of

stormtroopers in the middle of the room. Moose followed hard on his heels, taking in the situation just as he would have done in the cockpit. Civilian personnel frozen at their stations, an electronic alarm shrieking somewhere, and a knot of stormtroopers, just startled out of their "guard" stance, just ahead.

He grabbed for some of the heavier weaponry he'd brought along - they had to get this over with quickly, before the civilians scattered around the room panicked altogether and complicated things. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Ibero slipping around the room's perimeter, but he ignored the other pilot to concentrate on the stormtroopers, who had barricaded themselves behind overturned chairs and consoles.

But in the end, that was the least of their problems. Moose's (non- standard) mortar gun left the barricade - to say nothing of whatever was behind it - irrelevant, and Malak's marksmanship took care of the rest. A few of the more dedicated - or frightened - station personnel had made as if to join the fight, but Joker and Ibero had rounded them up and were quietly shepherding them toward the waiting New Republic boarders.

Ibero holstered his sidearm, took a look at the general chaos, and just shook his head before unceremoniously opening up the access panel on the main communications console. Joker followed him a moment later, picking her way through debris, overturned furniture, and spent casings from some of Moose's more unusual weapons. "So, you think we should tell 'em we're here?"

"Sssshhhh, be quiet for a second, Diana." Ibero said without quitting his eyes from the console.

"Everybody is telling me to be quiet today!" she exclaimed. "Just because you're a Lieutenant and I'm not, that doesn't mean that..." She interrupted herself realizing that her partner was not hearing. He was completely concentrated on what he was doing, his fingers flying over the personal keyboard he had brought with him and connected directly to the computer's hardware - the access device was the first thing the stormtroopers had destroyed before to being caught in the battle in - Joker observed that he had exited the main interface and was searching into the computer databanks directly from the operating system, but she couldn't completely understand what Ibero was doing.

"Have you found out anything?" she asked, her previous exasperation completely forgotten.

"Not yet, but I may be close."

"Why aren't you using the computer's interface software to do whatever you're doing?"

"They must have locked the main functions with passcodes and we don't exactly have the time to interrogate all those people." He glanced at Moose, who was looming menacingly at the nearest technician.

"Captain Gregory." Malak said. "I'm being reported that my men have taken control of the main hangar, but the fight is far from being ended. We're losing people." His last sentence hung on the air.

"You've got five minutes, Ibero." Moose said. "And not a single second more."

"Ahah..." Ibero acknowledged semi-absorted.

"And then, what are you trying to do instead?" Joker asked, returning to her previous point.

"I'm looking for a back door, a way to force the communications platform programs change to trace level, something the programmers might have left to allow them to obtain a quick diagnostic when something goes wrong."

"I see. And what if there is nothing like that?"

"There is something, I promise," he said, his fingers never leaving as he tried one command after another. without ceasing trying a command after another, most of the times obtaining messages like "Code not found", "Unrecognizable word" or "Not enough privileges". "We all the people who make... or made this kind of software always want to keep a way to access our own code and knowing what's happening, just preventing a moment when we may be called because something doesn't work..."

"What?" Joker asked, noticing that Ibero had stopped typing.

"Hey Dario, what?" she repeated. There were two words blinking on the screen.

*Hola, viejo!*

"I just can't believe this." Ibero said leaning back on the seat, his face a mask of astonishment.

### **[Space around Imperial Comm. Station]**

Foxtire circled nervously above the Imperial comm station, keeping a wary eye on her sensors. She didn't think the Imps had time to call for help, but if they had, the White pilots would have to cover the transports and pull out fast. *Maybe Admiral Garil's right after all*, she thought sardonically. *At this point, a suicide run to Coruscant looks pretty straightforward...*

She cycled through her targets again, wishing that she knew something about what was happening on board that station. She hated covering boarding operations in any case, and it was worse when her squad-mates were involved in the fighting.... She heard a crackling on her headphones before a familiar voice filled her with relief. "Foxtire, this is Moose. We're in."

"Glad to hear you! Is everybody OK?"

"No, not everybody. We've suffered some losses among the commandos, but the rest of us are in one piece." Foxtire sighed. She couldn't help it, but she felt relieved when she learned that her friends had not suffered any harm during the assault, although other people had lost their life in the attempt.

But she realized that Moose still was talking. "...ou should hear what Ibero has found out."

"Of course. What's going on, Dario?"

The intercom cracked again and then she heard Ibero's unmistakable Iberian accent.

"Hi there... What I've got is this: the core of this software was made by my old company, more precisely by my friend Edu and me!"

"Wow..." She couldn't help but smile when she remembered the first time she saw Ibero and his friend, in their tourist clothes, descending from a crippled Y-Wing that had survived the battle of Yavin. "Does this mean what I think it does?"

"I may need some help from Joker to interpretate a couple of things the Imperials have added, but basically, tell me where you want that Corvette to hear and we'll send them the co-ordinates as if they came from Coruscant itself!"

"Good news!" *And about time, too.*

## ***Chapter Seven: A reason to kill***

### **[Some place in route to Coruscant]**

The small renegade fleet exited from hyperspace in perfect formation. The density of the stars field around them was visibly higher now, and the galaxy's core could be seen like a brilliant ellipse occupying the centre of *Trailblazer's* viewscreen. The three ships were surrounded by irregular clouds of blue and violet spatial gases, a reminder of stars disappeared millions of years ago. But nobody was admiring the spectacular view on the Frigate's bridge. The crew knew their work perfectly well, and Admiral Garil didn't need to order a full scan of the area they had emerged in. With his hands at his back, the man who had been able to bring fear

to the heart of the Empire was looking to the front waiting for the first reports. The lights of all those stars reflected on his eyes, but he was not seeing them. His mind was somewhere else, flying constantly from the past to the future, and then back to the past, in a constant whirl of thoughts, revising, analyzing everything, imagining what would have been if he had acted in a different way in this or that other moment and discarding the idea a second later. Only the future showed some clarity. Revenge and death, a final explosion and then nothing, but before that he would hear those who had caused so much grief scream in their own terror. There was a little voice inside of him - *Maybe my conscience*, he thought ironically - which tried to make him change his mind, to order a 180-degree turn and try to take what remained of his people to safety. There was a second voice which tried to calm the first one, arguing that all this was for the prisoners. But there was a third voice which overwhelmed the other two, the one which realized that there was nothing they could do for the prisoners, and that there couldn't be a life for him after what he had seen and done. The only thing left was revenge, and revenge was what he would have before he died.

Captain Collin's voice behind him brought him back to the present. "Sir, we have detected three transports of medium size in our path. They send neutral IFF codes."

"Escorts?"

"Half a dozen TIE Fighters, sir."

"If they have an Imperial escort they are Imperials too, no matter what their IFF says."

"Yes, sir." Admiral Garil believed he detected a trace of resignation in his first officer's answer, but not even a single sign of rebellion. He didn't turn to look at his eyes, because he knew perfectly what he would find. *Some of the younger ones are starting to wonder about the sense of all this, but they won't question my orders.* He thought for an instant of the missing pilot from Amber Squadron, *Teel, Flight Officer Teel*. His desertion had made him think a lot. He didn't know him personally, although Commander Louyan had said that his progress had been brilliant until now. *Louyan was very disappointed. I understand that, I would feel the same if one of the men sharing this bridge with me did something similar.* But they didn't have an X-Wing to escape with. The thought was disturbing, and the little voice in his mind, the one which argued for retreat, kept saying that he had no right to drag these young people into his revenge. *No. Collins would never let me down, never. I knew what I was doing when I offered him to be Trailblazer's first officer. He was the number one of his promotion, "a future promise", his previous Commander said, "although too young for that position". But I realized since the very first moment he had what a captain must have, yes. But that's not the point here. He saw what I saw. What Teel didn't see.* The voice challenged him to turn and look directly into the young Captain's eyes, and keep looking until he was sure about what Collins would do if he had Teel's chance. He kept looking at the front.

"Tell Commander Louyan he has clearance to shoot down the escorts. Order *Tideria's* and *Hunter's* Captains to attack and disable all the transports. I want to talk to their Captains first."

"At once, sir."

Garil heard how his orders were transmitted and waited. Six X-Wings passed in front of him, accelerating towards the enemy convoy. Commander Louyan's fighter was leading the formation. The Admiral smiled. Louyan's flight had left the hangar even before receiving his clearance or they wouldn't have made it so fast.

Five minutes later everything was over. The freighters' Captains affirmed not knowing anything about Corvette *Harrier* and its escorts. They were carrying a grain cargo towards one of the Border's Imperial colonies, Polneye, a place he had never heard about. That might be true, but they knew more that they admitted. He had noticed how some of them paled when he identified himself as Admiral Garil. After three weeks stories of his predation were arriving to the farthest spots of the Empire. They were probably calling him Garil the Monster, or something like that. *Perfect.*

"Sir, the gunners are waiting for your instructions." Collins said.





*As if he didn't know what my instructions are. There's only one thing we can do with the Imperials. The little voice interrupted him again. Those are not Imperials, they are just traders trying to do their work, and you're going to murder them. Why are you doing this? Why have you been acting like a bloodthirsty animal? Revenge? Revenge won't bring the deads back. Revenge won't heal the wounds.*

*Of course not. The wounds are too deep.*

The scene had come to his mind again and again, like a nightmare when he tried uselessly to sleep, like the most painful memory when he was awake. He looked at his hands. They were trembling again. He bit his right hand hard enough to draw blood, but his hands stopped shaking after that. The terrible images crossed again before his eyes, but he forced himself to look at them. That would give him the strength to finish what he had to do...

"Sir, *Gladiant's* shields are down!" he remembered one of the bridge officers exclaiming. "They're taking heavy damage!"

"*Gaudeamus'* shuttles are been intercepted, sir!"

"This is Cheetah Leader!" The pilot's words were coming mixed with static, but it was still understandable. "We can't do anything, they've all been captured, there's TIEs all around...!"

There was nothing more. Just another ball of fire where Cheetah Leader's X-Wing had been a second before. Garil understood that there was nothing to do, and that he could have made one of the worst mistakes in his career. Many lives could be lost trying an impossible rescue.

"Tell Dimb'ura to get out of there, all the ships, evasive manuevers!" he shouted. His eyes were fixed on the display indicating *Gladiant's* status. All the readings were in red.

*Go Dimb'ura, go...*

The New Republic's vessel was under fire from other three Imperial Frigates, trying to return part of the punishment it was suffering while turning to try to escape at the same time, but neither one was possible now. One after one, her weapons were dying away, destroyed or damaged by the enemy ships. Several bombers were making passes on the doomed vessel, while the few gunners still alive were unable to avoid it. All the remaining laser cannons were shooting against one of the enemy Frigates that had received heavy damages and was aborting her own attack. Finally, the Imperial ship's hull collapsed and a violent explosion

tore it apart as if it was made of paper. But nobody cheered on *Trailblazer's* bridge. Captain Dimb'ura's voice was hard to hear in the static, but the message was clear.

"It's.....ate for us,...iral. We.....ing to make it..."

Garil lowered his head to his chest when *Gladiant* disappeared in the middle of a cloud of flaming gases and debris. *I should have understood that Gaudeamus was condemned. Now I've lost the two ships. Oh, damn, how I've allowed this to happen... But I can't give up yet, there are still people who depends on me, I can't just collapse.*

"Call all fighters back!" he ordered. "Program coordinates for a new jump and send them to all the ships, now!"

"But, sir, we can't jump towards New Republic space, the path is blocked by..."

"I know that!" He interrupted Lieutenant Deeggo, the nervous Rodian who was operating the navigation system. "We are going to return to Imperial space, it's the only option we have!"

"A-Aye, sir!"

He looked at the group of four Corvettes surrounding the *Gaudeamus*. His people were there but he couldn't do anything to help them. His eyes followed the Imperial ships while they were disappearing at the right of the view screen while the *Trailblazer* turned to port. He had knew all the time that this mission could finish in that way, and even then the High Command would consider it a success, as long as the shipyards were destroyed. But he felt a sensation of defeat and impotence filling him like poison. Around the ship, the remaining fighter pilots were struggling to keep the TIE Bombers away from *Trailblazer* and the two surviving Corvettes, but at least they were out of range for the Imperial capital ships' weapons. Not everything was lost yet.

"We are receiving a communication request, sir. From the Imperials."

*The prisoners. They are going to use the prisoners to force us to give up. Standard Imperial procedure.*

"Finish those calculations as soon as you can, officer. Let's hear what the Imperials have got to say. Perhaps Perhaps we'll get some more time."

"At once, sir." The holoprojector came to life and an Imperial Commander appeared before him, his hands at his back, and a complacent smile showing how he was enjoying this moment.

"Nice to meet you. Admiral Garil, I suppose."

"I can't say the same, *Commander...*" Garil pronounced the Imperial's rank carefully, letting him know that this was not a conversation between equals. Garil didn't mind that, but he knew that the Imperial did. The disappearance of the Imperial's smile confirmed his guess.

"Commander Horax, Imperial Navy. Don't think I'm that impressed by talking to a Rebel *Admiral*". Garil forced himself to smile, although the death of his men was constantly present in his mind. For the sake of his remaining crew, he had to keep his pride before the Imperials. He didn't reply and just kept staring until Horax dropped his eyes.

"Perhaps you may want to know how our guests are doing?" *Short and to the point*, Garil thought. "Captain Veedar..."

"Yes, sir." A new hologram appeared revealing a different room. An Imperial Captain watched how two stormtroopers dragged a man in the New Republic uniform. There was a viewscreen behind them where Garil could distinguish *Gaudeamus'* shape. An assault transport was docking with the abandoned Frigate. This man was one of those who had been captured just some minutes ago. His cheek showed a very recent wound, perhaps received during the fighth or the further evacuation, but Garil thought it was more probably caused by one of the stormtroopers.

"We are not going to give up, Horax, so you can avoid the spectacle." The Admiral said. With a glance at the Rodian Lieutenant, he questioned how much time was needed to complete the prejump operations. Lieutenant Deeggo lifted three fingers. *Three minutes.*

"That's your decision, Garil." Now Commander Horax omitted the rank too, trying to offend him, but the veteran soldier ignored that detail. "But surely you know that every decision has a consequence. Captain Veedar?"

The Captain nodded and gestured to one of the stormtroopers. The soldier put his blaster against the man's head and shot. Admiral Garil clenched his teeth and watched how the man collapsed on the floor. Part of his head had disappeared. His blood covered both stormtroopers' armour, but neither of them moved a muscle.

"Murderers," Garil said with scorn saturating the single word. It was not the first time he had seen a sentient executed before his eyes to force him to do what the enemy wanted, but it was something impossible to get accustomed to.

"Shut down your engines and prepare to be boarded, Garil, or more of your people will die."

"So my crew can get the same treatment? I'm not going to do it, Commander, and you know it."

Garil looked at the Rodian. He moved a finger in a circle around his head. The coordinates were about to be transmitted to the fighters and the Corvettes.

"I think that the Admiral is not too impressed, Captain Veedar." Horax said. "Can you offer him something better?"

"Yes, Commander, I think so." Veedar replied. He made a sign with his right hand and a third stormtrooper entered in the scene, shoving a woman. His two partners caught her before she fell on the floor and forced her to turn and look at the front. Garil recognized her immediately. It was the young Lieutenant, Captain Sera's assistant. Her face was filled with horror, and Garil realized that the murdered man was still at her feet. She couldn't be more than twenty two or twenty three, her short hair was red and her skin freckled and very pale. A tear fell from her green eyes when she looked up. *Trailblazer* was not sending a holographic communication, so she couldn't be seeing him, but Garil felt as if she was looking directly into the eyes. *Damned bastards.* She could have been his daughter, or even his granddaughter. She shouldn't be passing through all this, she was just too young. He regretted accepting the transmission, but now he just couldn't order it interrupted, not while that girl was there, looking at him as if he could do something to help her. But he couldn't do what the Imperial wanted.

Time was running very slowly. Lieutenant Deeggo was showing him two fingers now. Only two minutes and they would jump far from there.

"Don't you say anything, Garil?" Horax asked with sarcasm. "Well, we'll press you a little bit more..." Captain Veedar nodded and the last stormtrooper hit the woman's face with his fist. She didn't make a sound, although new tears rolled across her face. Blood started to flow from her nose and her mouth.

"Coward!" Garil exclaimed. "I'm not going to surrender this ship, no matter what you do."

"Ah, I think the Admiral appreciated this a bit more." Horax said. "Captain Veedar, do you think that your men could have some more...elaborate treatment for the lady?"

"Of course, sir." This time the stormtrooper gripped the young Lieutenant's uniform with both hands and pulled back. Garil felt a horror such as he had never experienced. *They can't be doing this, they just can't be doing this...* The old Admiral wanted to close his eyes, to turn back, to hide his face in his hands, but he was completely paralyzed, his body refused to do what his mind ordered. The young woman's screams were like an unbearable song of pain and suffering, filling his ears with her terror and anguish, every nerve and every muscle impossibly tense, as if he would explode in the next moment. *No, oh, no, why are they doing this, how can they do this, she is only a child, no, no, don't do that, don't do that to her, stop now, you devils, stop...!* Before his eyes, the young Lieutenant was struggling to set her arms free, to escape or at least take shelter, but all her efforts were futile. There was nothing she could do against the three stormtroopers. Their grip was unbreakable but she still tried again and again, causing the Imperial officers to laugh. The images blurred together in Garil's mind, everything became indistinguishable but the young woman's eyes. Those times when she was able to open them, there held a plea that Garil felt was directed to him. *Please, finish*

*with this.*

"Shut the engines down, Garil, if you don't want something worse done to the girl."

*Worse?* he thought, unable to break the paralysis he was on. *Nothing can be worse than what they are doing to her, oh, please...*

He was wrong. Everybody on the bridge was holding a tense silence, broken only by the screams that came from the holoprojectors. Some of those officers who could see the images from their seats turned their heads away. Captain Collins, who had stood at his right until that moment, was now covering his ears with his hands, his previous composure definitely broken. Lieutenant Deeggo was looking at the Admiral waiting for instructions, but he didn't give any. The countdown was progressing and the Rodian raised a finger, indicating only a minute for the jump. Garil seemed not to see it. There were tears trying to escape from his eyes, but they appeared to be frozen as the rest of the old man's body. *Is this never going to end?* Garil had never seen such an indignity, such a cruelty. In some way, this was even more horrible for him that when he learned that the Empire had destroyed Alderaan. This act of depravity committed on a single person seemed even more evil, more unbearable. He had never felt so powerless in all his life. Desperation become wrath that ran throughout his body like burning lava from a volcano, fed on all the hate that a human body could contain. Suddenly all that fury reached a limit and the invisible ties that seemed to be restrain him broke all at once.

"FREE HER, YOU BASTARDS!" he roared. Only his eyes had changed, but they looked like the center of a storm. "FREE HER, SON OF A BITCH!" None of the men at his command had never heard him use this kind kind of language, and if his terrible expression was not enough, this told them how out of himself the Admiral was. If he had ordered to stop the ship in that moment, they would have obeyed. But he didn't. His face had turned red, with the veins clearly visible on his neck.

"I'm being informed that your ship is powering for a jump, Garil! Stop now, or it will be worse...!"

The third stormtrooper was sustaining a laser knife before the almost unconscious woman's eyes. When she noticed the deadly blade centimeters from her eyes she made a last struggle to pull away from it, but the other two stormtroopers didn't give her a chance.

*No, no, no, no....* The Admiral had his eyes fixed on the woman's face. "No, no, no...." Garil didn't notice that he had begun to say it loudly.

"Stop now, Garil! I won't say it again!"

"NO, NO, NO...."

"Fifteen seconds, sir!" Lieutenant Deeggo shouted, because he was sure that the Admiral was not going to see his gestures. The Imperial Commander heard it too and hit his hand with his fist. Captain Veedar interpreted that as an order and nodded to the stormtrooper, who was waiting for instructions. The knife descended. The woman's scream overloaded the comm-link's capacity.

"NOOOOOO...!" Garil had been holding a remote control all the time in his hand. He pressed the button that would activate *Gaudeamus'* self-destruct. Two new assault transports had docked with the ship in the last few minutes, when the Imperials had judged it was safe. Three of the Corvettes were very close too. Garil knew that one of them had part of the prisoners on board. All those ships were reached by the huge explosion in the same moment that Trailblazer started to accelerate before its jump. In the last second before the transmission cut off he saw Horax' and Veedar's expressions of incredulity. The stormtroopers released their grip on the young Lieutenant's arms and her tortured body fell to the floor like a broken puppet.

Garil kept staring at the point where the hologram had been. The remote control fell from his hand, and the sound that it made when it crashed on the floor could be heard throughout the bridge. All the crewmen were looking in silence at the Admiral, his faces showing the horror caused by what all of them had seen, but in most of them there was also fury. Captain Collins was crying like a child, but these were tears of rage. Several minutes passed before Garil made a single movement, his grey eyes burning in an expressionless face.

"Has that Corvette been identified?" he asked at last in a very low tone. Only his lips moved slightly, the rest

of his body kept tense while his eyes were lost in a point in front of him. His assistant took some seconds before replying.

"Y-Yes, sir. Its name was *Harrier*."

"Did it survive the explosion?" he asked in the same monotone.

"Affirmative, sir."

Again at least two minutes passed before he said anything more. "I want to know all the places where that Corvette can go for refuelling from here to Coruscant. If there is a possibility of intercepting them, no matter how small it is, we will take it." The words came out slowly, coldly, as if the man who was pronouncing them was already dead. He felt that his soul had died already. A desire for vengeance burned him like a giant bonfire, filling every word he said with hate such as he had never known. Something had broken forever inside of him. The Empire would regret what they had done.

"We will destroy every Imperial platform, every base, every convoy, every inhabited place we find with the Imperial flag on it. They won't have a place to rest, not a hole to hide in all the Galaxy. I don't mind if this leads to my own death. If somebody doesn't want to come with me, I'll leave him in the next place we see, or in what remains of it when we finish with it." He moved at last and looked at the crewmen present on the bridge. None of them said anything, like an oath without words. They would follow him. Even to hell.

"Very well," he said.

"Very well." he repeated now, looking at the motionless transports. Nobody would keep him from doing what he had come to do. Neither the Empire, nor the New Republic. Nobody.

"Sir?" Captain Collins asked. Admiral Garil wondered how much time he had been absorbed by his memories, but it couldn't have been more than some seconds, and it had happened before. His assistant was waiting for his instructions about the transports.

"Destroy them," he said laconically.

## ***Chapter Eight: The Admiral***

### **[Advanced patrol near Joan d'Arc's location]**

"Have you found anything, Tzad?" Flight Officer Charbel "Solo" Tengroth asked using the intercom. He had checked the navigational data at least a dozen of times. Their position was correct, but his A-Wing's sensors had still caught no trace of what they were looking for.

"Nothing yet," Flight Officer Daniel "Tzadkiel" Steinberg answered. Their on-board computers had been fed with the data about the traces Ledner, Drake's R2 unit, had identified as a Nebulon B hyperengine's radiation pattern, but after two hours of unproductive searching the two pilots were starting to think they were going to return empty-handed.

"I hope that little droid hasn't been playing with us. I'd hate to be here looking for nothing when our comrades comrades are fighting elsewhere..."

"Yes, I know how you feel, it's the same over here." Tzadkiel didn't mention that his own brother, Torpedo, was one of the pilots participating in the attack against the Imperial station - just cursed under his breath and took another look at his screens. The search routine was working, but it hadn't produced any results so far.

He switched to the wide area scan one more time, as he had been doing every minute since they left the *Joan d'Arc*. Even so, it took a few seconds before he realized that there was a weak signal timidly blinking near the upper right corner. "Hey, Solo, look and see if you've got something in the wide scan..."

"Have you found them?" Solo exclaimed more than asked.

"No, it's something else. It may be just debris, but..."

"...It has a trace of heat on it, yes, now I can see it."

Without bothering with further discussion, both pilots pushed their throttle forward and launched their fighters towards the dying signal. When they were close enough their computers started to emit more accurate reports, but soon after that their eyes were enough to confirm them.

"Oh, boy... Can you see any escape pod, Solo?"

"Negative." The pilot's voice showed he was not happy with what he was seeing. "But my computer says it has found that hyperdrive pattern..."

"Let me see... Yes, I've got it, too. It matches up to 98 percent." Tzadkiel sighed and activated the long range comms. "*Joan d'Arc*, this is T-Five. We have a positive identification, I repeat, positive identification."

### **[Space around Imperial Comm. Station]**

Foxfire jumped as her comm-link chimed shrilly, a note signalling a transmission from the *Joan d'Arc*. "Lt. Commander, we've got them," the comm officer said in great satisfaction. "I'm downloading coordinates now - a patrol sweep found traces, we fed them to that R2, and we've got the area narrowed down to a clear location."

"Is that a fact," Foxfire said softly. The timing wasn't the best, with a significant number of the squadron's pilots involved in this attack, but at least they had a fix on the renegade admiral. And maybe they wouldn't need the whole wing... She could hope, anyway.

She transferred some coordinates of her own back to the *d'Arc*. "Lieutenant, would you have Flight Officer Teel's X-Wing readied for launch? Tell him to meet me at these coordinates. And let me talk to Captain Orris."

"Yes, ma'am. Actually, he's asking the same thing - here you go." Foxfire didn't wait for Orris to start talking.

"Captain, your communications officer has told me that you have found the trace of Admiral Garil's ships," she said quickly. "I think we could convince the Admiral to cooperate with us."

"We have found something more, Lieutenant Commander... What remains from at least three cargo ships. No survivors."

"Do you think that-"

"Yes. The junk is still hot. This is very recent, and it's a clear indication that Admiral Garil won't allow us to stop him. At least not peacefully."

"Sir, if we explain to him we have chance to rescue the prisoners..." Foxfire was still stunned by the news about the transports, but she refused to admit there was nothing they could do.

"I think Flight Officer Teel was of the same opinion," Captain Orris replied. "Our security team caught him trying to take off with his X-Wing."

*The kid has guts*, she thought. *I'm not too sure about brains, but he's got guts.* "All right, then let him take off, and have him escorted to meet me at these coordinates."

"I'm not sure that's advisable. We'll need all pilots available if we have to launch an attack."

"Captain, it has to be one or the other of us. And I'm a bit more expendable than you are just at the moment." Foxfire glared at the comm-link, glad that an A-Wing couldn't support visual communications. The look on her face alone would probably get her bumped down a rank or two.

"Lt. Commander, the Admiral's already proven himself to be a loose cannon. And I can't spare an A-Wing pilot."

"Thanks loads," Foxfire muttered to herself, then raised her voice a little. "Sir, if worst comes to worst, I can outrun anything they've got." She omitted the fact that her A-Wing was not precisely in perfect condition at the moment. "And if they let me land and talk to the Admiral, then he's ours."

Orris was unimpressed - she could tell that much even without benefit of visual comms. "Sorry, Commander, but I'll need a more specific plan than 'land and talk' before I'll consider authorizing this...venture...of yours."

Foxfire bit back an irritated response about how the Captain planned to stop her, and took a deep breath instead. "All right, my specific plan is to tell the Admiral we've got a chance to rescue his people, and tell him we need his help to do it. From what Teel's told me, I think he'll take the bait."

"I thought you would never reach that point, Lieutenant Commander." Foxfire didn't know what to say. The Captain had known all the time what she had in mind, and apparently had about the same plan himself. *Perhaps that is what annoys Shok'wave so much*, she thought with the beginning of a smile on her lips.

"All right, Lieutenant Commander," Orris said. "Teel will join you at the coordinates you have just sent us, but there is something more."

"Yes, sir?"

"If you don't have a positive answer in one hour, I'll order plan B. I'm sure you can figure out what that will be."

"Yes, sir."

### **[Twenty five minutes later, onboard renegade Frigate *Trailblazer*]**

"Admiral."

Nathan Garil was gazing at space beyond the viewscreen, focusing on nothing in particular and wondering how long he had before the Empire dragged him down. At least he could avenge the Lieutenant and the other prisoners before he...

"Admiral." Captain Collins moved a hand to catch his attention, standing uneasily in front of him. "Admiral, there's two fighters on approach. Flight Officer Teel's X-Wing and one unknown A-Wing."

Garil ran mentally over the composition of the squadron the Alliance had sent after him - B-Wings and A-Wings with a specialty in heavy assault. As battered as his ships were, they couldn't last too long against Imperial or Alliance forces. "They've found us. Have our batteries ready to shoot at them, but don't open fire until I order it. I want to know what is important enough to make Teel dare to return."

Foxfire tensed in her cockpit, one hand hovering over the keys that would shunt power to her engines. She and Teel were approaching at half-throttle with weapons powered down, and it was making her more than a bit nervous. She knew when she was approaching a hostile ship, even when it wasn't shooting at her. In that same moment, her threat indicator started to blink...

*Oh, shit, that's definitely a hostile ship...*

"Teel, listen in on my channel, please. I may need you to help talk us into landing." She keyed her comm to



the Trailblazer's frequency, biting her lip uneasily.

"This is Lieutenant Commander Schroeder of White Squadron, requesting permission to land."

There was a slightly startled pause on the other side of the transmission. "Lieutenant Commander, we're not - I haven't been-" The transmission went scratchy and muffled as the landing officer called for a Commander Louyan. A moment later the transmission cleared, with a different voice speaking.

"You ran out once already, Teel," the man growled. "Should've stayed gone-"

"Commander, I have to talk to you." Foxfire cut across Louyan's beginning tirade and the start of Teel's defense. "In person, if you please. This is important."

"I'm sure." Louyan's voice was tinged with sarcasm - and just a little curiosity.

"What is it you want?"

"Well, mostly I want to land, Commander."

There was a pause. "Permission denied. At least until I hear your story. I'll think about it after that."

Foxfire released her ELS controls and crossed her fingers instead. "It's not a story, it's a suggestion. We can give you a chance to get your prisoners back..."

"I won't let them stop us," Garil said flatly. He had been listening to the conversation between Louyan and that Schroeder since the first moment, and his impression was that this woman was trying to buy some time to allow the rest of her unit to get here. "Not after all this time - all these deaths. Captain, what is the status of the starboard gunnery turrets?"

"Active, sir," his first officer answered hesitantly.

Garil's fist clenched slowly. To attack Alliance ships was not the end he would have chosen for himself, but... *A chance to get your prisoners back*, the woman had said.

"Wait a minute, Collins. Comms. Officer, raise the volume!"

"Yes, sir." The man did as he had been ordered.

"...you've got to decide fast." Lieutenant Commander Schroeder's voice was heard high and clear on the bridge. "The Corvette can be diverted, but it'll make it back to safety soon. We've got a little window we can sneak through, but you're going to have to fight with us instead of against us."

The words seemed to trigger something in Garil, though Captain Collins couldn't tell whether it was rage or hope. Abruptly, he left his seat and headed for the nearest lift.

"Collins, the ship is yours." The young captain started to answer, but the Admiral was not there any more.

**[Five minutes later, Frigate *Trailblazer's* flight deck]**



Foxfire turned abruptly as the lift doors leading to the flight deck hissed open, a wiry, gray-haired man striding through. He had enough energy to power a Cruiser on his own, but Foxfire hadn't seen eyes that wounded since the destruction of Alderaan. *So that's who we've been looking for...*

"Now say again that about the prisoners," the Admiral ordered. Foxfire couldn't help but feel the several blasters pointing at her back, and had to struggle to appear unaffected. Teel couldn't do it. The young pilot looked nervously around, but looked quickly down when his eyes met Commander Louyan's.

"We have taken an Imperial comm station. half an hour ago" Foxfire explained very slowly. "One of my pilots has managed to hack the communication software, and we are able to send Corvette's Harrier group a set of of jump coordinates as if they were being sent from Coruscant or wherever we want." She saw her words impact on the Admiral - just a split-second blink, but she knew she had his attention. "We can divert those ships to a different destination and try a rescue operation. Then we'll return to New Republic space together."

Admiral Garil stared at her. It was impossible to guess what was happening inside his head, but Foxfire returned his look, resisting the urge to look away. She could have cut the tension with a vibroblade.

"Follow me to the bridge," the admiral said at last. "Commander Louyan, come with us - but first put Flight Officer Teel under arrest."

"At once, sir." Foxfire couldn't say if there was a slight trace of pleasure in Louyan's voice. The young Lieutenant looked at her for an instant, as if he were expecting Foxfire to say something to defend him, but she shook her head slightly. If the Admiral decided to cooperate, neither of them had anything to worry about - if not, both of them were dead.

The Admiral didn't look backward as they started toward the bridge. Foxfire did, just to find an armed soldier half a meter behind her with his sidearm ready. She didn't doubt he would open fire if he received the order.

*And I thought that Orris was rude...*

There were other people on the bridge, but they appeared to be concentrated on their work. Nobody had said a word since they left from the hangar, and the silence was starting to be annoying. Or even scary. Foxfire was tempted to take the offensive, but reminded herself that Garil wasn't - *quite* - the enemy.

"You'll need to report to your ship." It was not a question, but she answered anyway.

"Yes, sir."

"Give Lieutenant Deeggo the frequency." A Rodian officer nodded in her direction when the Admiral pronounced his name. "He will open a secured link for you. I think Captain Orris should hear what we all have to say."

"Thanks, sir." *I don't remember mentioning Orris' name. The Admiral is well informed, that's for sure.*

The *Joan d'Arc* was expecting this message. A minute later the hologram projector attached to the communications console came to life and Captain Orris's image appeared in front of the small assembly. The slightly transparent hologram was smaller than the real image, presenting objects approximately at seventy percent of its original size. Foxfire thought that in different circumstances, she couldn't help but laugh seeing the Captain with the height of a kid, but she couldn't find anything funny as serious as the actual situation was.

"It's a honor to meet you, Admiral Garil." Orris said with a respectful nod.

"Thanks, Captain. I've heard a lot of you in the last ten years, so I guess the honor is mine."

"You're most kind, Admiral." Orris replied, somehow impressed.

"Enough of formalities. Lieutenant Commander Schroeder affirms that you could be in the situation of helping us to rescue our prisoners."

"That's right. We're now in direct communication with our men on board that Imperial station. I'm told that they have solved all the technical problems. But the Imperial crew called for help when they realized they were about to be boarded, so we have no time to lose. We have estimated that we have maybe fifty minutes from now to make the operation. If you agree, of course."

"What would be your suggestion?"

"Basically, to divert the Imperial convoy to a place near to our present location and ambush them there. We would be two fully armed Frigates, two Corvettes and several fighter squadrons. Do you have any information about the composition of the convoy?"

"We have been hounding them for the last weeks, and I sincerely doubt they have been able to receive any reinforcements." There was a prolonged silence. Foxfire realised that Garil was provoking Orris, challenging him to condemn what he had been doing, but Joan d'Arc's Captain ignored what was hidden behind that sentence and he simply waited for the Admiral to continue. Garil was staring at the other man eye to eye, as if with his look alone he could penetrate through the hologram and reach the Captain's mind, to guess if he was really offering help, or if all this was just a masquerade to capture him and his men. Orris didn't even blink, accepting the silent scrutiny he was being subjected to. Finally, there was an almost imperceptible change. The Admiral's expression was the same, still looking at Captain Orris, but the coldness in his eyes seemed to disappear slowly. When he spoke again, his voice showed no trace of his previous defiance, it was the voice of someone who is talking to an ally, if not a friend. Foxfire barely kept herself from sighing in relief.

"Two Nebulon A Frigates and the Corvette. That's all," he said. "Their fighter complement suffered serious losses during our last encounter. I calculate two full squadrons, TIE Fighters and Interceptors. No more than thirty fighters at any case. Of course, we can't be absolutely sure that they had not received any reinforcements. This is a supposition based on the fact we hadn't found any trace of a bigger fleet during our raids, although this doesn't mean that fleet doesn't exist." There wasn't any remark on the word *raids*, although Foxfire couldn't repress a shiver. *He had noticed it*, she thought, *I'm not as good as Orris at hiding my thought*. The *Joan d'Arc's* Captain just nodded, considering only the practical side of the information.

"Well, if you're right we can overpower them," Orris said, with a very slight trace of enthusiasm in his voice. The Captain was starting to believe there could be a happy end to what had seemed nothing but disaster only an hour ago.

"It would be wonderful if they took the bait, Captain. but you know and I know that the Imperials are not so stupid as to not check the coordinates they receive. Any spot out of, let's say, an sphere of fifty or sixty clicks around Muldron's base would be considered as suspicious, and they would call for confirmation. That would be the end of our plan."

"You're right, Admiral, but If we make this so close to their base, they can call for reinforcements, and they will have them before we can rescue your people." The words seemed to keep floating on the air, killing the small hope they had started to consider. Admiral Garil's eyes narrowed for an instant, as if he was considering new possibilities in his mind, something that could make an exit for this dead street.

"Not if those reinforcements have something more urgent to attend to."

Foxfire shivered. Suddenly, the coldness was still there, as if the Admiral's eyes were made of pure ice. Actually, she had never seen a look as cold as Garil's. Captain Orris understood what Garil had in mind and horror flickered in his eyes for an instant. Foxfire understood too. The Admiral didn't wait for any answer. His voice was full of determination when he spoke, his tone showing he wouldn't accept any argument.

"How much time would you need to take the *Joan d'Arc* here? I think you could host part of my crew in your ship, if you don't mind..."

#### **[Inside the Imperial communication station]**

"Captain Gregory," Captain Orris' voice came through the headphones installed in his helmet. "we are sending the set of coordinates your people must transmit to Harrier's group. Do it and get out of there. Joan d'Arc out." Moose heard a click, indicating Orris had broken the communication without waiting for his acknowledgement. *Things are going to happen very fast now*, he thought.

"Joker, Ibero, you should be receiving the coordinates right now."

"Yes, here I've got them." The Iberyian pilot replied. "I'll mark them on the holographic chart"

"But that's-"Joker started to say. There was no need to end the sentence. A blue spot started to blink in the middle of the chart displayed in front of them. It almost overlapped a bigger red dot, the one indicating Muldron's base location.

"Transmit them and blow away the console when you've finished." Moose ordered. "Transport, this is Captain Gregory, be ready for take-off in a minute."

## ***Chapter Nine: Confrontation***

#### **[Two hours later, somewhere near the Imperial base]**

The scanner showed high to thirty green signals as Foxfire looked around. There was the whole squadron, the Training Wing - Moose had reminded them by now at least a dozen of times that "they weren't in the simulator any more" - and what remained of Hornet, Cheetah and Amber Squadrons, all of them commanded now by Commander Louyan. Behind them, the *Joan d'Arc* was prepared for the short jump, all its weapons ready to open fire. Closing the formation there were the two armoured transports, initially from the *Trailblazer*, which would try the rescue operation.

*If we can't do it, I don't think it can be done*, Foxfire thought.

She glanced around one last time, marking the positions of the various fighter groups in her mind. The pilots were all holding a clean formation - even Commander Louyan's people, who were worn to shadows. She

only hoped they could maintain that precision - this close to the Core, there was nowhere to fall back to if things went wrong. She hated playing double or nothing...

Shaking her head, she forced away the nagging memory of the cold look on Nathan Garil's face. The Admiral knew what he was getting into. And that was what scared her.

"White Two to all units, prepare for hyperspace jump. You know what to do. And may the Force be with us all."

The two A-wing flights shot ahead into hyperspace, with Moose's wing of bombers following closely behind. That was all Foxfire had time to see before the starlines stretched out in front of her, but they'd been over this strategy so many times that she could see it all in her mind's eye. Louyan's X-wings were scattered throughout the engagement area to provide fighter suppression and support White B-Wings in their attack on the capital ships. Every one had received a full load of six proton torpedoes from the *Joan d'Arc's* armoury. Admiral Garil had preferred to conserve the *Trailblazer's* scarce reserves to use them in his own attack.

The reversion light on her console flickered, and Foxfire braced herself as the fighter dropped out of hyperspace with a faint shudder. Her wing and Vyper's peeled away in opposite directions, making room for the B-wings that dropped in a moment behind them. The heavy bombers were actually outdistancing the A-wings at the moment - Moose's group had a definite goal in place, while the A-wings'g first task was to escort them in an attack on the Harrier and the Frigates. With any luck, that assault would go quickly enough that she could fire a couple of shots into the Corvette itself. After what the Admiral had told her, she wasn't feeling particularly well disposed to anybody aboard that ship. She glanced at her rear sensors, but there was nothing there but the rest of her flight. Garil's ships and the Imperial base were out of her sensor range, but probably not as far as she would like right now. Synchronization was vital if they were to have any chance to complete their mission. If Harrier's group delayed and Admiral Garil's small force was destroyed, they would never have enough time to rescue the prisoners before the reinforcements arrived, and even that was riding on whether or not the Admiral's guess about *Harrier's* escort was correct and the Corvette arrived only with the two expected Frigates...

### [Onboard Imperial Corvette *Harrier*]

There was nothing but silence in the detention block. None of the prisoners had any desire to talk any more. After three weeks the conversations had been dying one after another, and now everybody was absorbed in his own thoughts, or just trying to sleep. The first days they had talked about the chances of escape, but this remote hope didn't last too long. The reality was that they were deep in Imperial space, very deep, judging by the time they had been there, and there was nothing the New Republic could do to rescue them in the short term. Even in the unlikely event they were able to exit from the detention block and eliminate a whole platoon of stormtroopers, unarmed as they were, and take control of the ship, *Harrier's* escorts would vaporize the Corvette before letting them escape.

Captain Sera was leaning back against one of the unpolluted white walls, with his eyes closed but unable to actually rest. He couldn't help but feel he still had a responsibility on his crew, although the *Gaudeamus* was now a cloud of spatial debris somewhere behind them.

That had been the worst day in his life. To abandon your ship was hard, but nothing compared with what he had to suffer after that. Captain Sera had been forced to watch while the stormtroopers tortured his adjutant, Lieutenant Shillis, to convince Admiral Garil of giving up. He would have jumped on them, even with his hands firmly bound at his back by the magnetic handcuffs, if he hadn't known so painfully well that this was exactly what the Imperials wanted him to do. He had closed his eyes as long as he could, before one of the stormtroopers noticed it and hit him on his face with his carbine. Though it had been good to see the Imperial Captain's face when the Admiral made *Gaudeamus* explode practically under his nose. Veedar had turned as white as the stormtroopers' armour. *I wonder what he did to his pants*, he thought with an ironic smile. That had been the only moment when Sera was able to do anything for his people, although he was not sure how good that would be in the long run.

"It's mad, that old fool is absolutely mad!" Veedar was exclaiming, completely out of himself. "He killed his own people, destroying the ship like that! Damn, we were still picking them up!" But Captain Sera understood perfectly what had made the Admiral do it. Better to know his people were dead than leave them to be tortured one after another, as poor Lieutenant Shillis had been.

He'd been prepared to be the next one, but Veedar seemed not to see him. The communication with the rest of the ships had been momentarily interrupted, the Corvette's antennas had been damaged by the expanding shock wave and the reparation team would need at least half an hour to make some of them operational again. The stormtroopers were just standing there, waiting for instructions, including the two who were behind him, with their blasters touching his back. Finally, one of the bridge's officers gathered enough courage to interrupt his Captain's monologue.

"Captain, do you want to order the troops to, ah, finish the prisoner?" The man's face was pale, almost sick, knowing he was stepping on the blood that covered the floor around the murdered woman. Veedar seemed to notice it too and he made a step back, looking stupidly from the floor to the official.

"The prisoner, ah, yes... Take it out of here."

"At once, sir." When one of the stormtroopers stooped to take the body from the floor, he observed the standard procedure and put his hand on her neck first, checking if there was some trace of life.

"She is still alive, sir. Not for long." His tone was neutral, as if he were reporting the temperature on the bridge. But Captain Sera spoke before Veedar was able to reply.

"Don't kill her, Captain. She is the explanation for the Admiral's behaviour..." That interruption got him another blow from one of the stormtroopers, but his words had caught Veedar's attention.

"Stop, soldier! I want to hear what this trash has got to say. Well?"

Captain Sera met Veedar's eyes and gave him the first lie he could invent, ignoring the blood flowing from his upper lip. "His lover, she is his lover. You can believe me, she is my assistant, so I was aware of it. The Admiral would do almost anything for her except surrender." He left the obvious conclusion - that the Lieutenant would be more useful to the Imperials alive than dead - to Veedar.

Veedar stared at him for a moment and then made a decision. "Take her to the medical facilities and put her in a bacta tank. I'll ask Commander Horax what to do with her when the communications have been restored. And put that other Rebel with the rest."

That had been all. He had been dragged to the detention block and he hadn't know anything more about the woman's destiny, whether she had survived or not, or if they had kept her alive after talking to the fleet's Commander. *What I don't understand is why they are taking this long to bring us wherever, he thought not for the first time. We could be in the deepest planet of the Core by now.*

He felt for an instant as his stomach had made a jump inside of him. Every experienced spacer would recognize that sensation - they had dropped out of hyperspace. He had lost count of their jumps some time ago. *Well, maybe we have arrived at last, wherever they are sending us.*

He opened his eyes and looked around. None of the other prisoners seemed to have noticed it, although some of them were surely awake. He hated to see them like that, so terribly depressed - even Sergeant Orindar, who had bothered them with joke after joke the first days, before giving up and staying as silent as the rest. The name of *Lusyanka* had been mentioned more than once. *Lusyanka* was a mythical Imperial prison, one it was impossible to escape from, a place where the prisoners were used for the Imperial scientifics' experiments. Its real location still was a mystery for the New Republic, and every effort to discover it had ended in failure. Since the time of the Emperor Rebel spies had collected reports about prisoners being sent there, but nobody had returned to talk about it. Rumours were that *Lusyanka* was literally the Hell, created by the Emperor to bury his enemies in life. Sera had heard those stories too, and although he knew none of them could have been proven true, he couldn't help but feeling scared, with the irrational fear most sentients feel towards the unknown.

He tried to sleep to avoid thinking, but it was not easy.

#### **[Imperial Nebulon A Frigate *Thenef's* bridge]**

The navigation officer checked their present position one more time, well aware that Commander Horax was

behind him and watching everything he was doing. They were supposed to enter in realspace inside Muldron's base perimeter, but they were at least sixty klicks from it. If it was proved that the error was his, he would have a really bad time. He mentally crossed his fingers and pressed a button on his console. Two pairs of coordinates appeared on the screen. Identical. He was about to tell Commander Horax that they were exactly where they had been ordered to be, but he never had the chance. One of his partners exclaimed something and then the navigation officer was immediately forgotten by the Captain.

"Sir, there are Rebel ships in front of us!"

"I see them, at last I see them..." Commander Horax said with a grin, when the bigger vessel was identified as a Nebulon-B Frigate. He had seen the two sets of coordinates matching and he had been puzzled for a second, but now everything made sense. He had been delaying the return trip as much as he could, ever since he learned that the Rebel Admiral was trying to intercept them. Everybody seemed to be mad about him there in Coruscant, because the Rebel was attacking everything in his way and nobody appeared to know how to find him, much less stop him. Horax had known all the time what the Rebel was looking for, and he had requested permission to allow him to find it several times, but the answer had been always a negative. "Follow your flight plan to Muldron". That was all he had heard every time, for all his trying. What the Imperial Captain desired the most was an opportunity to deal again with Garil on his own, and with that thought in his mind he had used the Admiral's attacks as an excuse not to choose a direct route to their destination, and to not rendezvous with any reinforcement force. Besides, if he had rendezvoused with another force, he would have lost the command of the mission to somebody with a higher rank. Just when he thought that he would never have the chance to meet Garil again face to face, he was being given an opportunity to finish his job. Someone in the Imperial Intelligence must have finally understood what Horax had been repeating all the time about Garil's motivations, and they were trying to trap the Rebel Admiral offering him a last chance to rescue his people. And he had taken the bait...

*Now you'll see what this Commander can do with a Rebel Scum, Admiral or not.*

Whoever had designed this plan would expect him to ask for reinforcements, but he didn't need them. His superiority, numerically and otherwise, over the Rebel forces was more than enough, and that would be what he would write in his report when everything finished. Horax smiled in anticipation, but when he took a look at the first readings appearing on the tactical screen the smile faded.

"Where in the hell has Garil gotten all those fighters from? There are just too many B-Wings, and A-Wings!!??"

"Captain, that is not Garil, at least the readings we are taking don't match with the ones we had from his Frigate..."

"Launch all our squadrons right now! And I want a positive identification of the Frigate ASAP!"

"Yes, sir." The man obeyed, retransmitting his orders to the TIE squadron's leaders. "Should I call Muldron for reinforcements?"

"Only when and if I order you to do so, Lieutenant." Horax replied coldly. He didn't know what was happening, but he didn't want some arrogant guy in a Star Destroyer coming here to do his job. Not if he wanted to have his own Destroyer soon.

"Are you sure this is a good idea, sir?" Captain Kaban, his Second in Command on board the Thennef approached him. He was a grey officer, one of those who expected to keep climbing the ranks, just avoiding the risks and fighting as little as he could. Horax didn't look at him to reply.

"Of course I am."

**[Frigate *Trailblazer's* bridge]**

"Thirty seconds to reversion to realspace." Lieutenant Deeggo informed.

"Very well, Lieutenant." Admiral Garil replied. "Shields and weapons status?"



"Shields at full charge. *Cyclops* is ready to open fire at your request."

"Excellent. Admiral Ackbar always wanted an opportunity to test that program in real conditions. Too bad he is not here to see it."

"I don't think he would like to be given that chance, sir."

Admiral Garil smiled at the sarcasm. "No, I suppose he wouldn't... One more thing before the combat, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir?"

"It has been a privilege to have you in my crew. Thank you very much."

The Rodians' facial expression was almost indistinguishable for humans, but Garil thought he had detected a slight trace of Lieutenant Deeggo's emotions when he replied.

"You're welcome, sir. The privilege has been mine."

The Rodian was one of the few people who had remained with him. Garil had needed to order the rest of his bridge officers to leave - twice in some cases - and in the case of his Second Officer, Captain Collins, he had to threaten him with being court-martialled. *You will understand when you get older, Collins, I just couldn't do this to someone so young.* Only Commander Louyan didn't ask for explanations, although the Admiral didn't have the slightest doubt about his real feelings. He would have liked to have a private talk with him, probably his oldest *living* friend, but there was no time for that. *At least you will have a chance to see the end of this, Ilych. And you, Deeggo, if you weren't the best navigation officer I've ever had, you wouldn't be here right now. Many Rodians have a natural instinct for hunt. Others have used it to become bounty hunters but you decided to join the Alliance instead...* The Admiral shook his head. He would have preferred to do this on his own, but it was physically impossible. From the several hundred people which usually composed a Nebulon B Frigate's crew, if you take out the fighter pilots, the squadrons' technicians, the troops, the medical team, all the auxiliary personnel, whose mission was to keep the whole crew alive and reasonably comfortable, and even the gunners, whose work would be realized by *Cyclops*, an artificial intelligence program, still under development, you could manage a ship of these dimensions with a very reduced crew. But some people were indispensable. A couple of engineers taking care of the engines and the shields, someone to supervise *Cyclops*' performance and the rest of the computer systems, and someone to help the Captain pilot the vessel. There were a dozen of people onboard the *Trailblazer*, and three persons on board every Corvette. Garil knew that all of them were going to die, nobody could avoid that, and he hated to drag these loyal and courageous beings with him. That was the only thought that made him doubt when this plan had shown up in his mind, while he talked with the pilot from White Squadron.

During all the discussions and plans she had kept staring at him, with a silent question in her eyes. *Why? Why had he attacked all those convoys and supply stations, killing everyone aboard?* His only answer had been to activate the holoprojector and showing her what had been the beginning of everything. He had kept an eye on her the whole time while she watched the recording in silence. He didn't need to look at the projector, every detail of the terrible scene was impressed in his mind with more clarity than any machine could produce. That woman had watched everything without blinking and without saying a single word, but he had saw her paling with her hands firmly clenched on her chair's arms. When the image turned out, there was a tear trying to escape from her eyes, but she didn't allow it. She'd seen much suffering in her life, Garil had realized that while he looked at her, waiting for some comment, although her expression showed that this was beyond her own experience. When she finally looked at him, there was understanding in her eyes, but the question was still there.

*Why?*

He had wondered the same thing many times during the last three weeks, but in that moment he had tried desperately to obtain an answer. Part of him tried to argue that everything had been for the prisoners, but the Admiral knew this was not entirely true. He had lost the hope of rescuing them after the first week, and he had only recovered it when Lieutenant Commander Schroeder told him they had a chance to intercept *Harrier*'s group. Why the Imperials had not reached their destination yet, that was a mystery. Even with his struggling to prevent them from docking anywhere or receive any supplies, he had never know where exactly they were, and the Imperial convoy could have rendezvoused with a bigger fleet at any moment. They hadn't found any trace of that fleet, although it was obvious the Imperials were sweeping the galaxy

looking for him. In the worst of cases the *Harrier* should have been in Muldron a week ago.

But the reason for this strange delay didn't matter now. The only important thing was that now they had a chance to rescue his people, at least those who survived the battle and *Gaudeamus'* explosion. But two hours ago, he didn't know anything about that, and nevertheless he had ordered to shoot against a disarmed civilian convoy.

It was vengeance, nothing but vengeance, and years of hate and frustration, seeing how the Empire committed one crime after another, without him being able to do anything to prevent it. He had been out of his mind since the moment when he had to look at that woman being tortured and murdered. Lieutenant Shillis was her name, he would never be able to forget it, although he had forgotten most of the names of the people he had seen die during his life. Lieutenant Shillis. He had checked the database and had obtained all the information the New Republic had about her. Her first name was Cleo. That name had haunted him all this time, wondering what her life could have been if the Empire had never existed. Rage grew inside of him every time these thoughts invaded him, feeding the fire of his own madness. Madness, at last he accepted it. He had been more than a little mad, allowing hate to turn him into what he detested the most, in a monster as evil as the Imperials he had been fighting a half of his life. When he thought of Cleo, as he sometimes allowed himself to call her, he couldn't help but imagining her relatives and friends mourning her, and the mere idea was enough to make him feel sick, feel an even bigger desire to kill. But he had caused the same kind of pain to more families than he could even think of. Realizing that had been terrible, a hammer hitting what remained of his conscience, and he would have killed himself in that same moment if he hadn't had a mission to accomplish, the only one that had any sense: to help to rescue his men.

Still, he regretted being unable to do it on his own, completely alone. The officers who were about to share this last combat with him were all volunteers, including the Corvettes' Captains, who were piloting their ships themselves. A crude and ironic thought crossed through his mind, when the stars appeared again in front of him as the *Trailblazer* exited from hyperspace, with the Imperial base exactly in the middle of the view screen. He was going to risk the lives of many people, and at least the ones on board the *Trailblazer* and the Corvettes would certainly die, to rescue no more than twenty or thirty people. But there was nothing else he could do now. He wouldn't return and be court-martialled for war crimes. His life couldn't finish like that. His whole mind rejected violently the mere thought, threatening to bring the insanity back again. There was no way back for him, only forward, and at least he and his last loyal officers would find their destiny fighting against the real enemy. The hate was still there, but this time he would use it for something good.

"Lieutenant Deeggo, inform me about the Imperial activity."

"They are starting to launch fighters, sir, and the base's batteries are locking on us, but they are being hindered by the ships on the docks. There are two capital ships, a Victory Class and an Imperial Class Star Destroyers. The readings indicate that they are initiating the maneuvers to abandon the docks."

"Yes, I see them. What about the screen ships?"

"I've got two Imperial Class Star Destroyers and a total amount of... twelve Corvettes patrolling the sector. There are three Carrack Cruisers, too. We have surprised them, exactly as you predicted." There was a note of admiration in the Rodian's voice. "They are turning in this direction, probably called back by the base's Commander."

"Excellent." His expert eyes watched the general map of the situation, placing all the ships and installations, while his mind considered several alternatives of action in seconds. Their goal was to delay the Imperials as long as possible, keeping them busy enough as to not attend the calls for help they undoubtedly would receive from Harrier's group. He smiled slightly when he found what he was looking for.

"*Hunter* and *Tideria*, provide us cover from the first wave of fighters and attack the nearest section of the docks. Lieutenant Deeggo, let's see if we can give that Victory Class' Captain the worst departure maneuver of his entire life."

"A pleasure, sir."

**[Space around the Imperial task force]**

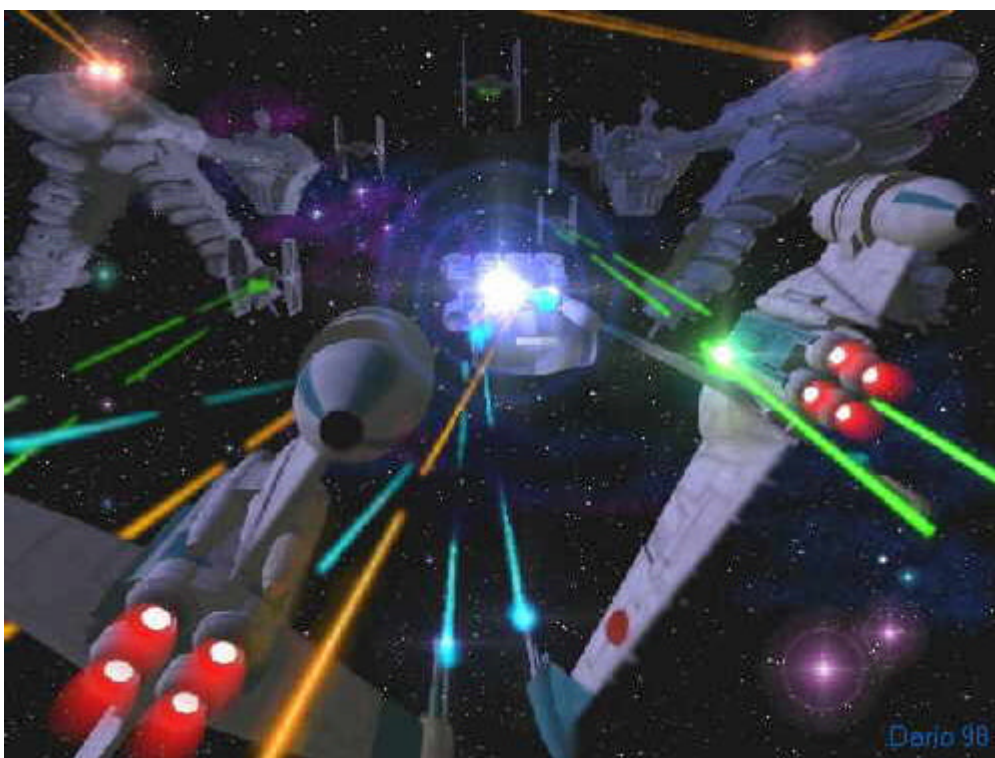
"Foxy. Incoming!" Tzadkiel's voice crackled sharply over her comm just as she saw distant forms decelerating from hyperspace. Right on schedule... She double-clicked her mike in acknowledgement and switched to a secure transmission to the *Joan*. "Captain, they're here. Ready when you are." Without waiting for a response, she switched frequencies. "All right, guys, this is it, let's go!"

"Bomber Flight, follow me." Moose ordered. "It's your turn, Torpedo."

Moose's voice sounded in Torpedo's headphones. He and Sparks had the critical mission to launch a first salvo of torpedoes against the Corvette carrying the prisoners, while the rest of the Squadron attacked the Frigates to divert their attention. When the Imperial ship's shields fell they should disable it before the Nebulon A Frigates or their fighter complement had time to protect it. To do so they would have to fly between the two capital ships and under the fire from the Corvette. A very dangerous pass if he had ever made one, but he had designed this tactic and he wanted to be the first one taking the risks. Moose had understood that and had allowed him to do it. Torpedo hoped he'd still feel grateful a minute later. The two B-Wings abandoned the formation, escorted by a flight of four A-Wings from Vyper's group, led by Ibero.

"Roger that, Captain." Torpedo acknowledged. "Sparks, launch yours on my mark."

"I'm ready, mate. Let's do it." Sparks had lock tone since ten seconds before, but he knew that Torpedo wanted to do it closer, to reduce the Corvette's chances to evade the warheads or to shoot down any of them. They were now at only three clicks from their target, and the Imperial fighters were almost over them. *Come on, Torpedo, we don't need to shove them out the launch tube with our hands...* He had a finger on the trigger waiting for his flight leader's signal. When he heard it a squeeze was enough to send the two torpedoes towards his target.



"There they go!" His two warheads followed Torpedo's closely. Sparks moved his finger out of the trigger as if it burned. If by accident someone launched another pair of torpedoes at the Corvette, the ship's hull would collapse and kill everybody inside of it. He had seen it before. The pilot selected the ion cannons and prepared himself for a very thrilling pass, to say the least.

**[Onboard Corvette *Harrier*]**

Captain Sera was about to ask Sergeant Orindar for another joke - it had to be better than this silence - but he was interrupted by two almost simultaneous impacts on the ship. He felt launched on the floor by an invisible hand. His experience on the Rebel Alliance had been long enough as to recognize immediately the only thing that could cause that kind of impact.

"Proton torpedoes!" He exclaimed. Before he was able to stand up two new hits left the entire ship trembling like a willow. The lights flickered for an instant.

"Somebody's attacking the ship!" He didn't see who said it, but it was a fairly obvious conclusion. The ship maneuvered so hard that they could feel the turn even with the artificial gravity. There were no windows in the detention block, so they couldn't see what was going on. But something was happening out there, that was for sure.

"Everybody on your feet!" he ordered. "If we're going to have a chance to do something for ourselves, it'll be in the next few minutes..." The looks of his men were on him. Looks of anxiety and expectation, but looks of hope, too, for the first time since they were captured.

### [In the battle]

Ibero targeted the closest TIE Fighter attacking the two B-Wings. The Imperial pilot was concentrating so completely on his target that he never had a chance to escape. Torpedo and Sparks were firing on the Corvette and receiving a lot of hits in return. Only the heavy B-Wing shields were keeping them from being destroyed, although even those shields couldn't take too much more. Shortly before, the two Frigates had been shooting at them as well, but Moose's group had given them something more immediate to worry about. Ibero took a short glance to port, beyond Arachnoid's fighter, and he saw a dark shadow falling on the nearest Imperial Frigate.

The *Joan d'Arc* had joined the fight.

"All the energy to the forward shields!" Captain Orris ordered. They were starting to receive fire from the Nebulon A covering *Harrier's* right flank, but the other one was hindered by the Corvette and this first Frigate. If he and Admiral Garil were right, the second ship would maneuver over the other two vessels to take a position where they could shoot at the *Joan d'Arc*. That would leave the Corvette's bottom and part of the left flank uncovered, allowing the two armoured transports to approach it. Up till now the tactic was perfect. What none of them had mentioned was that an Imperial Nebulon A, with its twin forward sections, practically doubled the *Joan d'Arc's* fire power, and if there were two of them the odds were clearly against them. Only Captain Gregory's B-Wings could make a difference, but in the best of cases the New Alliance Frigate couldn't stand more than five minutes where it was.

"Captain, the other Frigate is climbing to take fire position!"

Good girl, Orris thought. "Forget it. Concentrate the fire on the closest one. Rammes, I told you all the energy to the forward shields!"

"I did it, sir." The chief technician's voice came through the intercom. The man was terribly good in his work, and he knew the *Joan d'Arc* better than anybody else. He had been onboard this ship since its capture from the Imperials, and he had even acted as emergency Captain during the Frigate's first mission, but right now Orris needed the best from him.

"It's not enough, Lieutenant! You can do better."

"Yes, sir..."

Orris moved his eyes out of the shield indicators. He knew that if there was somebody able to extract a bit more of energy from the ship's engines that was Lieutenant Rammes. He turned to the officer attending the scanners.

"What about the transports?"

"I've got them, sir. They are approaching Harrier as expected."

"Very well." He didn't say anything more. Everybody knew what they had to do. Five minutes, in that time they would have succeeded or failed, there was no middle ground.

### **[Onboard Corvette *Harrier*]**

Suddenly all the lights died, this time for good. The ship had been disabled. A couple of faint emergency lights turned on, but the illumination they provided was very scarce.

"All right, let's open this damned door." Captain Sera whispered. With the ship's main engines out of order the magnetic locks wouldn't be working, and if they pushed the door towards its niche hard enough, they might be able to open it. Nevertheless, nobody could know what they would find at the other side. Probably there would be at least a pair of stormtroopers guarding the detention block's entrance. Sera was ready to take the first shot, if it only gave his people a chance to overpower the guards and strike back. But they couldn't just wait. If there was somebody out there trying to rescue them, the Captain of this ship would order the troops to kill the prisoners before anybody could reach them.

He clenched his teeth and pushed with all his strength. Three of his men were helping him, including a strong Trandoshan sergeant who had been one of *Gaudeamus'* gunners. The door creaked open.

*At last good luck!* he thought when he saw the two stormtroopers in front of him. One of them had removed his helmet for a moment just before the ship was attacked. Whether he wanted to breathe some fresh air or just scratch his nose, Sera was grateful for it. The fact was that he must have hit his head on a wall when the torpedoes hit the ship, falling unconscious to the floor. His partner was attending him when the door opened. He turned his head in that direction when he heard the noise, raising his assault rifle towards the prisoners coming out, but Captain Sera kicked his head in his best Academy ball-player style before he had a chance to shoot. The weapon fell to the floor, followed by the stormtrooper. Sera couldn't know if this soldier was the same who had hit him twice back on the bridge, but he felt really good thinking so.

"Good kick, Captain," the Trandoshan said behind him.

"Thank you, Trosk. Let's take their weapons. We are going to have company coming from this corridor very soon!"

"Two of us could take their armour and try to deceive their partners." A second officer proposed.

"Good thinking, Ren, but I don't think we'll have time for that. They will be more useful where they are."

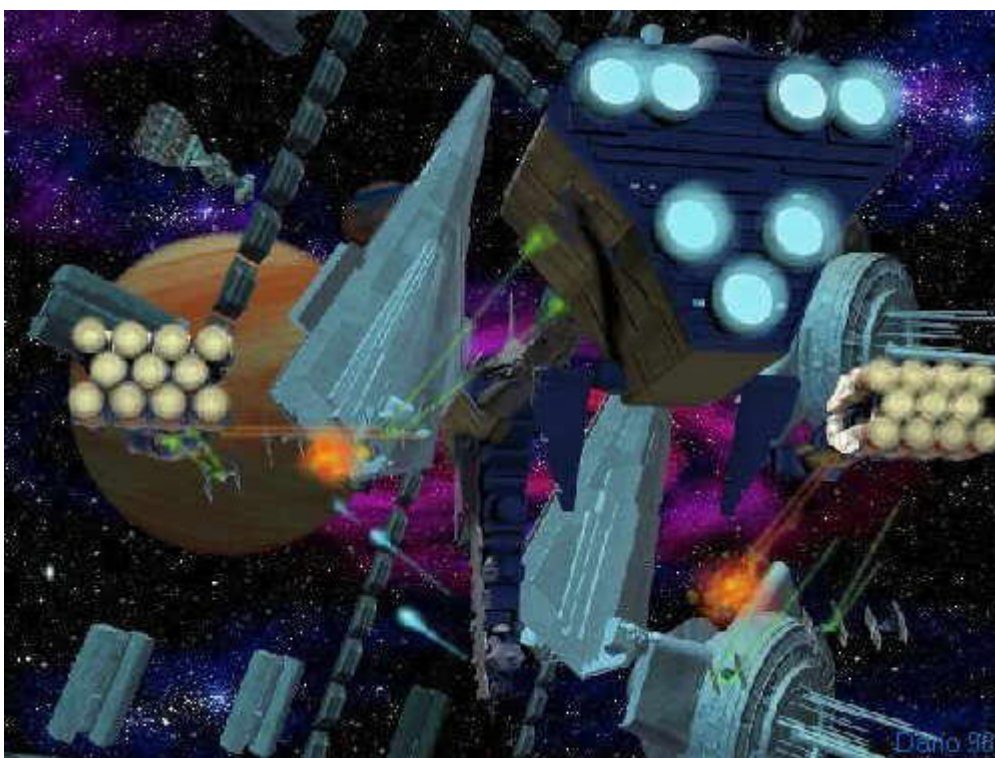
He took a rifle and flattened himself on the floor behind one of the fallen stormtroopers. Other man imitated him, while the rest of the prisoners remained behind the walls. There was nothing else they could use as a barricade, because the only furniture in the detention block were the beds, and they couldn't be removed from the walls. Sera aimed his weapon to the farthest end of the corridor. Five seconds later the first stormtrooper appeared there. Sera killed him with a direct shot to the chest. The officer at his right did the same with the second one, but the next soldiers would be more careful. They had to hide as best as they could behind the two fallen guards when a laser burst passed at mere inches over their heads. They returned fire, but this time they couldn't hit anybody. With only two rifles the prisoners couldn't hold out there for long.

*Now is when the cavalry needs to show up...*

## ***Chapter Ten: Different ways to win a medal and a coffin***

**[Trailblazer's bridge]**

Nathan Garil pressed the button that launched the proton torpedoes, wincing as electrical discharges from the weapons console snapped at his hands. The Trailblazer was taking heavy damage from Imperial fire, but there was more than enough fight left in her to finish the job. The warheads flew towards the Victory Class Star Destroyer's engines. The Imperial ship was starting to abandon the dock when the torpedoes impacted against its left rear quarter. Although its shields managed to absorb the most of the energy of the explosion, it was enough to seriously damage the left engine and an entire section of thrusters. The ship's nose moved briskly to the right and collided with the docks, while the rear side hit the structures on its left. Pieces of debris fell over both Star Destroyers, although the bigger Imperial Class received no lasting damage. But Admiral Garil's intention wasn't to destroy any of them, just to make them hard to leave the dock, and he had definitely gotten that. The Victory Class was materially boxed between the destroyed sections of the docks, blocking the Imperial Class' exit path.



"Lieutenant Deeggo, dive and turn to port. *Hunter*, *Tideria*, listen to me! Our best chance is to cover ourselves from the Destroyers with the docks. We'll last longer against those batteries than against the Destroyers' cannons. Keep shooting at the docks and at all those containers. The more junk we can put in their path, the longer they'll take to get out of there."

Both Captains acknowledged his orders. They were now under attack from the base's fighters, and the Star Destroyers were launching TIE Bombers as well. But the TIEs couldn't approach them too closely, without crossing the line of fire from the station's gunnery turrets. The three ships were covering each others and shooting against the docks' installations at the same time. They had managed to surprise the Imperials, but now that they had reacted it was only a matter of time.

"Admiral, I'm receiving new contacts," the Rodian officer informed him. "The screen ships have been called back to defend the base. I've got another Star Destroyer and three Carrack Cruisers."

"Excellent. We have attracted all their attention. Prepare for our next movement."

**[Space around Corvette *Harrier*]**



Drake pulled the joystick hard to the left following Arachnoid's fighter as they passed near the disabled Corvette. His scans gave him a complete reading of the Imperial vessel status, confirming what the inactive cannons and engines suggested.

"Torpedo, this is Five. You two did it, the fish is frozen."

"Nice to hear that. Could you cover us while we recharge our shields a few minutes?"

"Consider it done," the young pilot replied. "Vanessa, are you still with me?"

"Right on your tail, fortunately for you." Ladyfox's voice sounded in his headphones. "Didn't you see that TIE a second ago?"

"Oops, no- Thanks! I had only eyes for the one who almost fried Sparks."

"Yeah, I know, I owe you one." As it happened, Sparks had seen perfectly well the danger he was in, but he had kept on the Corvette, hoping one of his escorts would do something with the fighters on his six. A less experienced pilot would have broken in that same moment. Sparks hadn't.

"Open your eyes, all of you." Ibero interrupted them. "The transports are here. Three, this is Nine, are you copying this?"

"Affirmative, Nine." Vyper answered. "Keep covering Torpedo and Sparks until they join Moose's group. We'll take care of the transports."

"Roger that, leader." The two B-Wings and the four A-Wings started to move away from the disabled Corvette, momentary free of the Imperial fighters, which were now being engaged by the rest of Vyper's group and some of Amber's X-Wings. The two transports were approaching Harrier covered from the Imperial frigates, but they wouldn't be unaware for too long.

#### **[Imperial Nebulon A Frigate *Thenef's* bridge]**

"Captain, we have detected two armored transports approaching *Harrier*. We can't communicate with Captain Veedar, his ship has been disabled."

"Well, while those transports are docked their friends won't run away. Order our fighters to keep away from the transports until I tell them otherwise."

"Aye, sir."

"Horax, they've got more fighters than us," Captain Kaban said in a low voice beside him. "We are taking torpedo hits-"

"Shut up, Kaban!" Horax replied harshly, although he kept his voice down to avoid being heard by the rest of the people on the bridge. "I'm not going to discuss this with you, so try to keep your panic controlled or leave the bridge." Kaban flushed, but he held back his first impulse to reply to Horax in the same tone. Captain Horax was his superior officer, and you didn't make a career in the Imperial Navy insulting higher officers, no matter what they said.

"All right, Horax, I wasn't suggesting retreat-" he started to say, trying to settle things down.

"Enough of this, Kaban." Horax interrupted his Second Officer. "And if you don't want to get arrested, call me sir or Captain when you're talking to me. Can you understand this, Kaban?"

"Of course, sir," he replied, even more embarrassed. "It will never happen again."

Horax didn't answer, turning his attention to the combat instead. He was a bit concerned about the Rebel fighters, though he would admit that to no one but himself.



**[Transport Nosey One]**

"Hang on, we're about to start the docking maneuver," the transport pilot warned.

Nobody said anything. From the co-pilot's seat, Captain Collins saw the Corvette *Harrier* for the second time in his life, and a chill ran down his back. The other transport, Nosey Two, was now at starboard, both ships almost touching each other. They were supposed to dock together, but there was not too much space to do that on a Corvette's hull. Collins almost jumped when he felt a little blow right beside his seat, but the pilot didn't even blink. *Those guys are used to flying this close...* His respect for the transport pilots increased considerably. He had been so eager to be in this flight that he has offered himself as co-pilot for one of the transports. If he was able to pilot a shuttle, an armoured transport couldn't be that different, but he was beginning to see that the hard part was not the flight itself.

He couldn't see the Corvette for a second, and then he felt a new blow, this time exactly beneath him. At his back, the commandoes' sergeant started to shout orders.

"No time to lose, boys, so I want this done fast!" he roared. Collins realized there was no need for the shouts. Every one of the boarding troops knew perfectly well what he or she had to do. The pilot closed the door at their back, and the Sergeant's voice couldn't be heard any more.

"There is always the risk of losing internal pressure while they force their entrance to the boarded ship," the pilot explained. "They have their sealed armour, but we don't, sir."

Collins nodded. A shrill noise at his back and beneath him startled him.

"That's the soldering unit," the pilot said, anticipating his question. "You wouldn't expect the Imperials were going to open the door, would you?" Before he could reply, the man continued with his lecture. "No, of course not. They have to make their own doors cutting the hull, attach the safety ring to the transport lower hatch, and push the broken piece of hull inside. Sometimes they trap a rookie stormtrooper under it, can you believe it? And then, of course, they have to enter there shooting like devils. The first losses always take place right at that moment..."

A TIE Fighter crossed in front of them, no more than five meters from their viewscreen, closely followed by an Amber X-Wing. Collins noticed then that the pilot's fingers were firmly clenched on the flightstick, and that the engines were on.

"So how do you manage to appear so calm, while it's obvious you're not?"

"What, you mean while we're here without moving, attached to a ship where people are fighting, looking at all those fighters flying around us, one of which might shoot at us at any moment, and praying that none of the capital ships decide to blow us apart?" Collins nodded "Talking, sir, how else. To myself if I'm alone, or whoever is sharing this cockpit with me if there is someone." The pilot looked at Collins and smiled nervously for the first time. "Talking and talking. Have you noticed it?"

**[Corvette *Harrier's* bridge]**

"They're boarding us, oh, shit, they're boarding us right now and that piece of a Gamorrean pig of Horax is doing nothing to help us..." Captain Veedar muttered. The Imperial officer was leaning against the main viewscreen, with his knees over the control panel and his face literally smashed against the transparsteel window, struggling to see the transports over them, but he couldn't do it from there. "He is doing nothing, damn it, we're just the bait, that's what we are, and who would care for the worm, when the fish has caught it?"

That might not be Admiral Garil's ship, but the readings they had obtained before being disabled had confirmed that at least the X-Wings were his. If the commandoes on those transports were aware of what had happened in this ship, and he didn't doubt they were, the first blood they would be looking for would be his. When he realized he wouldn't be able to see anything from there, he turned to descend from the control

panel. Then he surprised the rest of the officers on the bridge looking at him in that ridiculous position, and that turned the fear into rage.

"What are you looking at, eh?" Of course, no one replied. Veedar jumped to the deck, almost falling when he collided with one of the seats. He looked around, looking for the two stormtroopers who used to be permanently on the bridge, but he couldn't see any of them. "Where are the troops?"

"It seems that the prisoners are trying to escape." One of the lowest-ranking officers started to explain, seeing that no one else was going to answer. "The troops' command officer has called all of them to the detention area, but now I suppose they'll have to face the Rebels up there."

"Communications are still out? Send a runner to the detention area and tell the troops to kill all the prisoners before the boarders can reach them." He spat. "All right, there is nothing else we can do. Take your weapons and keep them trained on the main entrance. We'll have to defend ourselves until help arrives!"

*If it ever does...* he added mentally.

### **[Corvette *Harrier's* detention block]**

Captain Sera risked raising his head over the fallen stormtrooper. His kick couldn't have killed the soldier, but the shots from his partners at the other end of the corridor had finished the job for sure. The blaster fire had ceased suddenly a minute ago, just after all of them could hear the unmistakable clang of a ship docking on the upper side of the hull. Now the sound of laser bursts had started again, but beyond the corridor where they were trapped. There was no place to go except forward, but that direction had been full of stormtroopers until some moments ago. Now the only ones they could see were those scattered on the floor at the end of the corridor. There was no mean to know if there was someone more, just hidden at the other side of the turn, but they couldn't stay there forever. His weapon's energy was practically drained, and the one now held by the sturdy Trandoshan, since the officer who had been using it was hit, couldn't be much better. They wouldn't resist a second assault.

"It's time to move." He whispered. He was about to check if the motionless man besides him was alive, but Sergeant Trosk shook his head in an unmistakable sign. Sera nodded and picked his way over the stormtroopers' bodies, gesturing to Sergeant Trosk to follow him. They reached the other end of the corridor, where three more stormtroopers laid, and took their weapons from the floor. His first intention had been to jump to the opposite wall shooting, expecting to surprise any stormtrooper who could be hidden behind the corner, but the Trandoshan put a hand on his chest to keep him from moving. The tall being carefully removed one of the stormtroopers' helmets and gestured Sera to return to the other side of the corridor, where the rest of his people were waiting. The Trandoshan moved back with him and when he considered they were far enough he launched the helmet against the farthest wall. Before it reached the floor a violent explosion disintegrated everything around the corridor's corner, including the stormtroopers' corpses. The shockwave knocked Sera off his balance, but the Trandoshan sergeant pulled him up before he hit the floor.

"A mine with a photo-cell," he explained. "The oldest booby trap after the cord at ten centimeters from the floor. But it works ninety percent of the time."

"Uff, thanks, Trosk..." he said, brushing himself off. "How did you know that?"

"Not a big deal. We put one at every corner back in Hoth."

"I see- It seems you haven't spent your entire career on shipboard duty, have you?"

"No, you can bet I haven't." The Trandoshan grinned, showing his sharp teeth. "We can continue now. There won't be anybody on the other side."

The survivors of the *Gaudeamus* abandoned the narrow room where they had been held for three weeks. They could hear blaster fire, louder and closer than before, and Sera wondered uneasily which side would actually make it to them.

**[Frigate *Trailblazer's* bridge]**

*More time, we need more time!* Garil thought, glancing at the onboard chronometer. Only three minutes had passed since the beginning of their attack. Both Corvettes, *Hunter* and *Tideria*, had been destroyed by now, leaving a cloud of flamed gases and debris as the only remnant of their crews. *Trailblazer* itself couldn't take much more punishment. The shields had collapsed under the fire of the dock's defences and the Imperial fighters. Now the bigger enemy Star Destroyer was managing to move out of them, literally pushing the Victory Class out of his way. He couldn't know how Orris and Louyan's people were doing. They had agreed not to have any communication between both groups; the longest the Imperials took to connect the two attacks, the better. But they should have guessed already that this one was only a diversion.

*But what if they hadn't?* The Imperials rarely grasped the concept that someone could risk his life to help others. The kind of thing Garil's remaining crew were doing now would be just unthinkable for most of them. *No, the only thing you understand is how to torture innocent people, and those who can't defend themselves-* Behind him, Lieutenant Deeggo was constantly checking if any ship was sent to hyperspace, but all the enemy vessels seemed to be focused on *Trailblazer*. Perfect, that was what this was all about. But they had to hold out at least another three minutes, or there wouldn't be enough time for the rescue operation.

"Admiral, the Carrack Cruisers are here, and the other Star Destroyer will have us in range at any moment. We're starting to show hull damage." There was no trace of nervousness in the officer's voice, he was only informing about the facts. Garil thought that the Rodian must have ice in their veins.

"Not to mention the Star Destroyer that is coming now from the base..." Deeggo didn't answer. He just kept staring at Garil with his dark eyes, knowing the Admiral hadn't said his last word.

"Do you think we could make them run a bit more before catching us?" Garil asked in an almost casual tone.

"Not to the fighters nor the Carrack Cruisers, but the Destroyers will have to force their engines. Nevertheless, we won't last too much in a race towards space."

"Not towards outer space, but towards the other side of the planet. As close to the atmosphere as we can."

"That would delay them a bit, sir," Deeggo answered. As he talked the Rodian moved the thrusters levers forward to the maximum power, while changing the *Trailblazer's* course. The wounded Frigate launched itself toward Muldron's orange sphere, pursued by two dozens of TIE Fighters, a bunch of Bombers and the three Carrack Cruisers. And two Star Destroyers behind them.

"Two minutes. Two or three minutes is all we need," Garil muttered as if it was a prayer.

**[Space around Corvette *Harrier*]**

"Great," Granite muttered to himself. "Just great. Look at all those laser turrets. Hmm...they'd shoot down torpedoes, and Foxfire will kill me if I ram it..." He dodged a burst of turbolaser fire reflexively, most of his mind occupied with the question of how to produce a really big explosion if he couldn't launch torpedoes.

He was flying in Moose's group, which had the unenviable job of harassing the enemy capital ships in an attempt to balance the unequal fight between the two Nebulon A Frigates and the Joan d'Arc. His last readings showed his mothership had its shields down to twenty percent, while the Imperial ships had them around seventy percent. The only good news were that Foxfire's and Louyan's groups were managing to keep the enemy fighters under control. However, they had lost some people too. Amber Squadron was taking the worst part, they were taking just too many risks. Granite was sure that at least one or two White pilots had been forced to eject, too. He had seen Grizzly's B-Wing become a ball of fire just in front of him, although his squad-mate had abandoned it in the last moment. He wondered how Barris was going to pick them up, as close as they were to the enemy ships. It would be kind of ironic, to get captured during a rescue mission. He put it out of his mind. To destroy those laser turrets without getting killed himself was going to be quite enough to keep him busy.

With Hammer pacing him, he swung aside and dove abruptly, trying to make things harder to the Imperial gunners. "Hey, that hurts!" He exclaimed when he couldn't avoid a near-direct hit, which took away another

twenty percent from his shields. "Wait until I can put a pair of torpedoes under your seat!" the Caldanian pilot threatened the anonymous gunner who had shot that last burst.

"Torpedoes away." The report rippled down the line of B-wings, and Moose watched intently as the salvo of blue proton torpedoes arced swiftly into the nearest Nebulon A Frigate's hull. Some of them were destroyed before reaching their target, but the rest impacted on a wide area around the hangar's section. He broke away from the Frigate and took a look at his sensor readings. The Imperial ships' shields were falling, but not far enough, not yet. They had to press the attack and buy more time for the commandoes. He had a very good idea of what the prisoners on board that Corvette had been going through, and most of his thoughts were on them.

"All right, people, get some distance and make one more pass..." A shout interrupted him.

"TIEs Advanced!" Iceman warned. "Coming from one-oh-five!"

"Oh, no..."

"All fighters, engage the Advanced!" Foxfire's order sounded in every pilot's headphones. "Vyper, be ready for some company!" She heard the acknowledgements while she swung her A-wing around to attack the newcomers. *This is starting to be too hot for my taste-* she thought.

### **[Imperial Frigate *Thennef's* bridge]**

Commander Horax did his best to hide his relief. That last salvo of torpedoes had made their shield strength descend dangerously. Thennef had lost most of its fighters and the Rebel B-Wings were starting to be a bigger problem than their Frigate, which should withdraw soon or be destroyed. And now a squadron of TIEs Advanced appeared from somewhere to save the day. But he hadn't called them.

He turned to his Second with a fierce look in his eyes.

"Did you call for reinforcements, Kaban?"

"No, sir, I've been here all the time, beside you."

Horax noticed the communications officer was turning to him.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Captain Jader is demanding to talk to you, sir." This was Frigate Saitell's Captain. He must have made that call.

"All right, Lieutenant, let's hear him." Horax waited until the officer confirmed the line was open. "This is Commander Horax, I hear you, Captain."

"What were you thinking about?" the angry voice demanded. "I thought you would call for reinforcements!"

"So I am to understand that it's you who has called for help?"

"Of course I did! We did need that fighter coverage! Were you going to risk our ships just to get all the credit? The Empire has lost what it has lost because Commanders like you!"

"How you dare, Jader? I'm commanding this convoy...!"

"I'm sorry, sir." The communications officer apologized. "He's cut his end of the link."

Kaban's face didn't show the smile he had in his mind, watching how his higher officer discharged his fury

hitting his armchair. It had worked again. If you were patient enough, someone else would do the dirty work for you. Horax couldn't accuse him of disobeying any order, but it was for sure that when Jader presented his report, Horax was going to be in deep trouble. And *he* might be the next captain of the Thennef.

### [Inside *Corvette's* Harrier]

The two stormtroopers almost ran into them. Captain Sera and Sergeant Trosk shot at once and the two soldiers fell to the floor without a sound. The Trandoshan caught a movement at the next corridor out of the corner of his eye and immediately launched himself to the floor, pushing Sera with him on the way. Sera raised his eyes, trying to find out where the enemy was. All he could see was a blaster cautiously showing behind the next open door. The armoured arm that held it was not white, but dark blue.

"This is Captain Sera, from New Republic Fleet!" he shouted.

"Nice to hear you, sir!" a voice replied. "Have you seen two stormtroopers coming in your direction?"

"Yes, but they didn't see us."

A relieved laugh sounded and then he saw two New Republic commandos coming out from their hiding places.

"Those were the last ones in this section, sir. You and your men please follow me. We're going to take you out of here."

"Thanks, soldier. I've never been so happy to see anybody in my whole life."

"I know, sir. I hear that a lot."

Sera laughed and patted the soldier's back. They had to cross through another corridor full of corpses, most of them stormtroopers, but there were a pair of commandos, too. He thanked them silently. When they reached the spot where the commandos had entered into the ship, he could see that they were evacuating some of their wounded comrades through the entrances open on the ceiling. An armoured figure with Sergeant pips approached him.

"Glad to see you, sir. I'm Sergeant Agueda. We'll help you on board the transports. We must hurry - I don't know how much time we have, but it can't be much."

"Thanks, Sergeant. All right, we're going home!" he announced to the rest of his crew. The tired prisoners started to pass through the openings, assisted by the commandos. When all of them had disappeared beyond the ceiling, the Trandoshan sergeant going last, Captain Sera approached the commandos' leader.

"Have you checked the infirmary?"

"No, sir. There is where the last stormtroopers must be now. Is any of your people there?"

"Maybe. I have to go."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I was serious about having little time. I've just received a report saying that the Imperials are receiving reinforcement fighters. And we have two transports up here just waiting for some TIE pilot to take a potshot." While he spoke, he kept his hand on Sera's back, urging him to take the hands of the soldier at the other side of the opening, who was ready to help him to climb.

"I can't leave her behind." He said shaking his head. "I couldn't tell you while my men were nearby, or they would have insisted on coming, but I won't leave without one of my people."

"Sergeant," the soldier in the hatch said. "The pilot said that we must take off right now. There are enemy fighters in this area..."

"Oh, damn it..." Sera couldn't see Sergeant Agueda's face, hidden behind his facial plate and the mask, but he had no doubt that he was cursing in silence. "OK, tell the other transport to take off, and if you're attacked leave too!"

"But, sir..."

"That was an order, soldier! And don't forget to seal both security rings, or you'll kill us when you leave!"

"Aye, sir." The soldier didn't say what was evident to all three of them. Sealing the rings was well and good, but it would be useless if there was nobody to pick them up later.

"All right, Captain, you win. To the infirmary we go."

"You're going to get a medal for this, Sergeant," Captain Sera said.

"Oh, yes, my mother will love it when they send her the damned thing."

### **[Joan d'Arc's bridge]**

"Our shields are falling, sir!"

"So tell me the good news, Lieutenant," Captain Orris said.

"One of the transports is taking off..."

"One? What about the other? No, don't tell me. Rammes, put everything you have straight to the engines, we have to move fast or those two Frigates are going to make a sandwich from us!"

"Are we retreating, sir?" The chief technician's voice came through the damaged communications system with a tinny sound.

"Did I say to retreat, Rammes? I said to accelerate, that's all. We have to force them to move further from the Corvette." The enemy ships rolled on the viewscreen while the *Joan d'Arc* maneuvered. Green bolts were constantly shot from their laser turrets, and now every one was causing damage on the unprotected hull. *Admiral*, Orris thought, *I hope this is worth the price we may pay for it.*

## **Chapter Eleven: The truth is somewhere in the middle ...**

### **[Space around Corvette *Harrier*]**

Vyper pushed the throttle forward and launched his A-Wing after a flight of two TIEs Advanced. He had been forced to divide his flight in two, to protect the transport that had just taken off and the one still docked with the Corvette at the same time. *What are they waiting for?* he thought as he switched the weapon selector to the missile launchers. *We can't cover them forever...* He squeezed the trigger as the lock tone sounded in his helmet, and his two last warheads raced toward for the lead TIE. The Imperial pilot had to break, launching a whole chaff load to avoid being destroyed, but his wingman kept flying straight forward towards the docked transport. And there wasn't anybody close enough to help it.

The TIE Advanced launched two concussion missiles at the motionless ship. Vyper started to shoot his lasers at the Imperial fighter, and he managed to force the other pilot to abandon the attack, a second too late. Both missiles impacted on the transport's hull, but when the gases liberated by the explosion disappeared, the sturdy ship still was there. Its shields and its thick armour could resist two concussion

missiles, but two more warheads would finish it off. Six TIE Advanced were in that area. Vyper's group wouldn't be able to shoot down all of them before any of them shot those missiles.

"Nosey One, this is White Three, you've got to move out of there!"

"Believe me, Three, I know. Two more like those and we'll be history! The commandoes are going to seal the entrance right now...we still have people inside."

*They're dead*, Vyper thought.

"I'm sorry for them, but you can't be up there another second!"

"Cover us, here we go."

### **[Transport Nosey One]**

"What are you doing?" the pilot exclaimed. "Stay belted in, we're leaving!"

"I stay." That was all Captain Collins said before entering the cargo compartment. He took a blaster and dove through the hatch before none of the commandoes could do anything to avoid it - though some of them had seen this before and didn't try particularly hard to stop him.

"Close that ring, soldier!" the pilot shouted.

"No, our Captain is in there!" Sergeant Trosk tried to rise from his seat, but one of the commandoes put his weapon on his face.

"My Sergeant too. I'm really sorry, Sergeant, but we're taking off." The man was sweating intensely under his mask, looking at the Trandoshan's claws and teeth, but the movement of the ship was enough to convince the alien there was nothing else to do. He collapsed on his seat and leaned back against the wall, his look lost on the ceiling. The soldier moved his blaster out of him.

"Perhaps we'll be able to return later-" he said, trying to soften the news. A fierce glance from the Trandoshan made him change his mind.

Nosey One's pilot looked at the Imperial Corvette as they moved away from it, slowly first, and increasing the speed after turning towards the pre-arranged jump point's coordinates. It was hard to leave people behind, but it was not the first time he had seen that happening. In this kind of situations, there was always a Captain Collins sacrificing his life for nothing.

*There goes another hero*, he thought, shaking his head.

### **[Frigate's Joan d'Arc's bridge]**

"Joan d'Arc, this is Nosey One, we're leaving."

"Roger, Nosey One. Our fighters will cover you. Did you recover all the prisoners?"

"Negative. At least one of them remained in the Corvette, with the commandos' sergeant and Captain Collins"

Captain Orris looked at the damage report on the screen in front of him. They had to leave now or they would never do it. Besides Joan d'Arc's usual crew, they had on board the people from Admiral Garil's ships. There was only one decision he could make.

"This is Captain Orris to all ships, withdraw, I repeat, withdraw from the combat area." He kept in silence until the acknowledgements from the flight leaders came through. "Captain Gregory, you and your people cover us while we jump and then come through yourselves. White and Amber Leaders, protect the transports and *Anubis* with all your ships until they reach the jump point, and then retreat."

"All right, boys, forget that Frigate and protect the *Joan*!" Moose ordered. Almost all his group obeyed immediately. "Granite, I've said *forget that Frigate!*" He ignored the angry collection of grunts that came through the intercom.

"Vyper, take the rest of the squadron and cover the transports." Foxfire said. "Hardrive and I will stay with *Anubis*."

"Roger that, Avery, but tell Barris to hurry up..."

"I'll do." She and Hardrive flew around the shuttle, as Lieutenant Barris recovered the last ejected pilot. There wouldn't be any more trips. If some pilot was shot down after this, there wouldn't be anybody to save him or her. "All right, Barris, let's get out of here."

"Sorry, White Leader, but I can't leave while there is people to rescue."

"Have you lost your MIND, Barris?"

### [Frigate *Trailblazer's* bridge]

The *Trailblazer* was fighting its last battle, and the ship appeared to know it. Some captains firmly believed their vessels had something like a soul, and often it seemed to be true. That was the origin of the old tradition of the Captain who dies with his vessel. You could hear hundreds of stories where a ship seemed to have saved its crew's lives, as if it had its own will. If Garil had asked Lieutenant Commander Schroeder, she would have sworn that her old Frigate, the *Mantiss*, had waited to shut down until it had brought what remained of its crew and Praying Mantis Squadron to safety. Admiral Garil had heard many of those tales, and he had survived a couple of his own during his long career. Now he had no problem understanding what his last vessel was telling him, with its flickering lights, its metallic creaks and its sluggish reactions to the controls.

The *Trailblazer* was dying.

Half of its engines had ceased working, and while the remaining power was still enough to maneuver, there was no way that the ship could outrun its pursuers, to say nothing of jumping to hyperspace. The warheads launcher had been destroyed - just as well, considering there were no more missiles to launch - and a great part of the laser turrets were no more than junk, still more or less attached to the tortured hull. The highest atmosphere layers of the dead planet of Muldron were diffusing the Imperial weapons just slightly, but Garil knew he could measure his time in seconds. Several breaches on the hull had killed already most of the scarce crew, and now the only two survivors were the ones occupying the bridge.

"Admiral, they've got us," Lieutenant Deeggo said. "I'd expect the usual call ordering us to give up, but I guess this time there won't be any."

"Not after what happened with the last one," Garil answered from the console where he was seated. From there, he was shooting with the last operative cannons on *Trailblazer's* bow. The main computer had stopped working thirty seconds ago, and with it the artificial intelligence called *Cyclops*. "Today they are looking for our blood."

"Let's make it expensive, sir."

"Well spoken, Lieutenant!" the Admiral replied proudly. "Turn towards that Cruiser, we'll see if we can't take them with us."

"At once, sir!" The Rodian officer wrestled the ship slowly in that direction, the shattered frame of the frigate shuddering under the stress. The Carrack Cruiser they had selected as their last target had lost what



remained of its shields between the entering into Muldron's atmosphere, and the "friendly" fire from the Star Destroyer *Abyss*, now very close to them. Garil didn't have the slightest hope of destroying it ship-to-ship, but Deeggo was right. If they had to die, they had to do it fighting.

The moment has come. I only wish I knew what is happening back there. There was no need for communications silence any more, but they had lost their capability to transmit anything, and probably to receive; Garil could hear nothing but static over the comm systems. He looked sadly to the unoperative console. *I hate to die without knowing if we pulled the rescue off...*

### [Inside Corvette *Harrier*]

"Here they come, sir." the stormtrooper whispered. "Just two."

"All right. Don't shoot until they enter. No prisoners this time, I want them dead."

"Yes, sir."

It was not easy to understand what they were saying, because the stormtroopers' speakers were on their lowest volume, but in the silence of the infirmary their whispers came to the woman's ears, confirming she was not alone. Cautiously, Lieutenant Shillis opened her eyes and saw them, hidden near the only door.

When she regained consciousness, some minutes ago, she'd discovered she was not inside the bacta tank any more. She had no way of knowing how much time she had been there, much less why they had kept her alive, but those questions could wait. After days without moving she felt clumsy, and it was hard to keep awake, her mind still affected by the analgesic drugs, but she knew she had to stay alert to help whoever was on the other side of that door. *The enemy of my enemy...* The room was scarcely illuminated, something unusual, and that should indicate the ship had some serious technical problem. Disabled, maybe... She forced her arms and legs to move, turning until she was lying on her stomach. She heard steps at the other side of the open door. *I have to hurry.* The young woman struggled to descend from the floating stretcher she was on, her eyes fixed on the Imperial soldiers, but they were concentrating on the sounds from outside and none of them noticed she was moving. *A bit more, a bit more-* Her foot touched the cold floor, giving her the reference she needed. With a last effort she managed to abandon the stretcher. Her knees gave way underneath her, but she caught the edge of the stretcher before she could hit the floor and alert the stormtroopers. On the other hand, a noise might not be so bad, if it managed to distract the stormtroopers' attention at the right moment.

Then she noticed the panel behind her hand - the motivator controls for the float stretcher. She struggled to read the labels over every button, until she found what she was looking for. She pressed the "unlock" button. Now she was able to move the stretcher, and she turned it until it pointed towards two of the stormtroopers hidden at the right side of the door. Then she pushed the "march" button and the stretcher started to float smoothly forward. She flattened herself on the floor and waited until the stretcher was about to reach the soldiers, and then she shouted as hard as she could.

"WATCH OUT!" The words were almost intelligible, after weeks of forced silence, but the effect was what she'd wanted. The three soldiers looked in her direction at the same time the stretcher impacted slowly against two of them. The stormtroopers opened fire and dozens of laser bolts passed inches over her head, rebounding in all directions. And suddenly they ceased. She felt arms holding her and a known voice beside her.

"Shillis, you're alive!"

"Captain-"

"Sssshhh, don't speak, we're going to take you out of here."

"I don't want to discourage you, sir," Sergeant Agueda said, "but the transport's already gone."

"Don't give up while there is hope. Five minutes ago all my crew were condemned and now they are flying

home."

"All right, all right, you win again. Let's get the stretcher, it will be easier to transport her."

They moved as fast as they could across the same path they had followed in the opposite direction from the commandos' entrance point. When they got there they only found the same corpses and the two closed security rings on the ceiling.

"Don't say I didn't warn you-" Sergeant Agueda started to say, when a laser burst forced them to launch themselves to the floor. Sera dragged Lieutenant Shillis with him. Only when they reached the floor did he notice he had been hit on his right arm. Sergeant Agueda shot back in the direction the shots had come from, but Sera couldn't help him. He had lost his weapon.

### **[Frigate *Saitell's* bridge]**

"This is useless, Horax," Captain Jader said angrily. "They are going to escape. If you had called for reinforcements when you started, we would have caught them between two fires!"

Through the main viewscreen, the figure of the Rebel Frigate could be seen for an instant, illuminated by its own engines in the moment of jumping to hyperspace and momentary safety. Captain Horax didn't reply.

"There must be always some stupid glory hunter, this has been the Empire's cancer since the beginning." Jader cursed. "Let's see what Grand Admiral Thrawn thinks of all this-"

"Sir, a Rebel shuttle is docking with *Harrier!*"

"Move in that direction at top speed and sweep them out of there! At least those ones won't go anywhere."

### **[Space around Corvette *Harrier*]**

"Do you know what you're doing, Barris?" Grizzly asked occupying the co-pilot's seat. He had been the last rescued one. A total of seven pilots amongst White and Amber Squadrons had been recovered by *Joan d'Arc's* search and rescue ship.

"My job, Flight Officer, just my job." Shuttle *Anubis'* pilot answered. Around them, units from both squadrons were trying to keep the enemy fighters away. "Although I prefer it when the only job is recovering nav buoys."

"What?"

"It doesn't matter. Make yourself useful and take the laser cannons' controls. We're going to be very vulnerable now-"

"Foxy, have you seen that Frigate turning in this direction?" Hardrive asked in a casual tone. The more distant Imperial ship was starting to turn too.

"Yeah, Nik, I kinda noticed. I was just *waiting* for more good news." The rest of White Squadron had jumped with the transports some moments ago. Only she and Hardrive had stayed behind with what remained of Amber Squadron, fiercely engaging the last handful of TIE Advanced. The fighters were close to evenly matched, but they never would be able to stop those Frigates.

"White Leader, this is Amber Leader." Commander Louyan's voice came through. "Run away with your shuttle. We'll deal with the Frigates."

"But your fighters can't make it against those ships!"

"You've done enough here, White Leader. Those are our people, and if someone must die for them it'll be us."

"Great sentiment, Commander, but while *Anubis* is docked here, we've got to stay."

"All right, but not a second later. Amber Eight and Twelve, stay here under White Leader's command. The rest of you follow me-"

Foxfire saw how seven X-Wings turned towards the incoming Frigates, followed by part of the remaining TIE Advanced. There were still some TIE Fighters and Interceptors covering the Imperial capital ships, all of them moving forward now to engage Louyan's group, but they wouldn't be the worst threat. The Nebulon-A's cannons would be.

### **[Inside Corvette *Harrier*]**

Sera had put himself over Lieutenant Shillis' unconscious body, trying to protect her from the laser bolts coming from the bridge. They had nothing to cover with, and the Captain was sure that his luck had run dry. *Just when we had found Shillis-* Another laser bolt rebounded over his head.

"Keep your head low, Captain," Sergeant Agueda said, "or you won't have to worry about your haircut any more!" The commando rose his blaster and shot a random burst towards the gloom, but it sounded multiplied by three. He was about to make a comment about the echo, when he noticed that suddenly the shots had completely ceased.

A voice was heard from the other side.

"Don't shoot! I'm Captain Collins, from *Trailblazer*, everything is clear here!"

"Collins!" Captain Sera exclaimed in astonishment. "Where is the Admiral?"

"Attacking Muldron's base on his own. He is trying to give us enough time to rescue you."

Collins reached them while Captain Sera rose holding Lieutenant Shillis. "Let me help you- but... It's her!" He recognized the woman's face easily - he had seen it in his nightmares every night over the last weeks. The young Lieutenant was unconscious again, but her breath and pulse were firm when Collins checked it out. "I just can't believe it, sir." he said. "After what they did to her, she's still alive?"

"It seems that she got some medical attention - apparently Veedar believed me when I started lying to him. Talking about that bastard-"

"I'm sorry, sir, those were just a pair of Navy officers." Collins said, anticipating Sera's question. "If he's still on board, he must be hidden on the bridge."

"The damned coward! We won't lose anything if we go there and-"

"Shut up a moment, you two!" Sergeant Agueda exclaimed, forgetting he was talking with two higher officers. "There's a ship docking with us!"

"Imperial or ours?" Sera asked.

"I've got no idea - you think I'm a Jedi or something? It will be better to move a bit further from the ring, in case they're the bad guys-"

The two Captains held the woman's body while the commando sergeant aimed his blaster towards the ring.

"Anybody down there?" A man's head poked through the entrance, wearing a pilot's helmet with an Alliance

crest.

"I thought this only happened in holo-movies...!" Agueda finished. He shrugged and went to help Sera and Collins to pass Lieutenant Shillis' body through the security ring.

### **[Space around Corvette *Harrier*]**

"All right, Nik, we're out of here!" Foxfire said. It was not a moment too soon, because Frigate *Saitell* was starting to shoot at the shuttle *Anubis*. But Barris was probably the best shuttle's pilot Foxfire had ever known. After taking off from *Harrier*, he was using the Imperial ship as shelter from the powerful laser bolts, and the Corvette was taking most of the damage.

"Yeah, Foxy, we better move away from this junk-" Hardrive replied. The two A-Wings abandoned the Imperial fighters they were engaging and raced after the escaping shuttle at full speed. The Frigate had ceased to shoot, her Captain must have realized they were going to destroy the Corvette without hitting the Rebel shuttle, but it was too late. The last burst had reached a very damaged spot on the engines section, exactly where two of the proton torpedoes had impacted, and a violent explosion shattered the hull. A terrified Captain Veedar was sucked out of what remained of the hammer-shaped bridge. He was dead before his body was disintegrated by the secondary explosions.

Commander Louyan saw the detonations and checked his scanners looking for the New Republic ships. Five green dots signalled the position of *Anubis* and the four fighters escorting them. Only two red dots delated the presence of two TIE Advanced, but Louyan was sure that they couldn't prevent the shuttle from escaping.

"Amber pilots, break off and jump towards the meeting point as soon as you can!" The five surviving X-Wings maneuvered away from Frigate *Saitell* looking for clear space. They had to be out of the Imperial capital ships' range before trying the jump safely.

Louyan took a look at the screen, where increasing digits indicated the distance from the closest Imperial Frigate. The readings showed how low *Saitell's* shields were, after the combat against *Joan d'Arc* and White's B-Wings. *Two minutes more, and a few proton torpedoes and we would turn you into spatial debris*, he thought with a smile. He kept jinking his X-wing in random directions to avoid being hit by his pursuers. Then he noticed one of his men was about to be shot down by a TIE Interceptor. It was Amber Nine.

"Teel, what *is* it about you!" he exclaimed as he targeted the Interceptor. He was fully aware that this would put him in the sights of the TIE Advanced on his tail, but he couldn't watch one of his pilots die, not even Teel, without doing anything to prevent it. He still was angry with him, but although he didn't care to admit it, he understood the young pilot's reasons for doing what he had done. *He is just a kid*, Louyan thought as he opened fire on the Imperial fighter. *There are things he only will learn with time.*

"Commander-?" Flight Officer's voice was heard for a second, and then the comm. unit exploded. Louyan's X-Wing trembled when it was mortally hit. The TIE Interceptor pursuing Teel abandoned his victim, seriously damaged, but Louyan's own ship was about to disintegrate. Louyan reached the ejection lever. For a second he was tempted not to use it, but then he thought better.

*Somewhere out there is an Imperial prison commander who doesn't know the problems he's about to have...* he thought as the seat launched him out of his exploding fighter.

### **[Frigate *Trailblazer's* bridge]**

Admiral Garil clutched the console in front of him to avoid falling when something exploded on the bridge. He reached again the weapons controls to keep shooting until the very last moment. Deego was trying to keep the ship advancing towards the enemy Cruiser, but the shoots from the Star Destroyer were about to break the *Trailblazer's* engine section from the rest of the hull. Suddenly the intercom crackled with something that seemed different from the static.

"Admir--.. -- got it!" Garil recognized his Second Officer's voice. He had missed most of his words in the interference, but the tone was unmistakable. *We've got it*, that had to be what Collins had said.

"Well done!" he shouted, although he knew Collins couldn't hear him. He waited expecting to hear something more, and he did.

"--..nant Shillis is alive, I repeat, --.." The communication broke again, but this time he had heard the essential part.

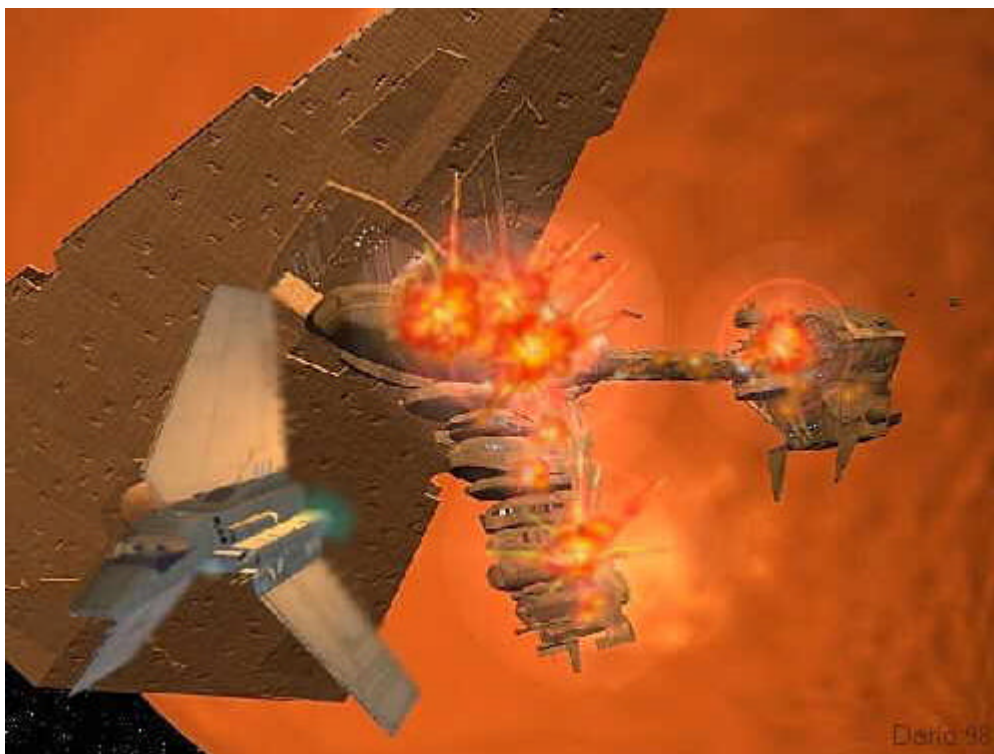
"Did you hear that, Deeggo, did you hear that?" He asked, feeling that his eyes were filling with tears.

"Yes, sir, I did." Amazement and joy merged in the Rodian's voice. As the Admiral, he felt that everything had a sense, after all. A new explosion shook the entire structure of the ship. The space started to spin at the other side of the view screen. Garil realized that the middle section of the hull had broken. The rest of the ship would probably disintegrate in a pair of seconds. He turned to look at Deeggo, but the navigation officer was dead. His console had exploded, killing him instantly. *Thank you, Deeggo*, he thought. *I'll catch up with you in a moment*. Sparks fountained everywhere, all the equipment exploding around him. In the middle of his sight, the Admiral saw an Imperial shuttle. He calculated that the cannons probably would have enough residual energy for a last shot, one more Imperial who would visit the hells. But then he wondered what a shuttle could be doing in a combat area like this.

*Rescuing a pilot*. The obvious answer appeared in his mind. Garil moved his finger from the trigger in astonishment. It was almost incredible, but he was completely sure that he had done the right thing. He saw how the small ship disappeared from the viewscreen as the *Trailblazer* kept spinning. *Run, pilot, fly far away, before this ship explodes and trap you with it*. The time seemed to elongate as the whole vessel started to disintegrate around him. But he didn't see his life running in front of his eyes, it was something different. His mind was jumping from Lieutenant Shillis and the rest of the prisoners to that shuttle he had seen an instant ago. The truth he had been looking for since this started was in some point in the middle of them.

*I can't believe it. She is alive, she is alive, I don't know how it can be possible, but she is alive. Orris, Louyan, Louyan, Collins, all of them made it, they rescued my people. That shuttle was rescuing someone, too. They have risked their lives to save a comrade, just as I've seen my men doing again and again. I've seen Imperials doing that but I had forgotten. Some of them are able to do things like that. Someone had to take care of Shillis to cure her after what they did to her. And now my crew is safe. All our efforts have been for something, and now, this joy, this relief I feel, this is the redemption. I was wrong, I've been blind all this time. I didn't want to finish with the Empire, what I wanted was to kill all the Imperials, every single people living under its flag, but that was bad, very bad. The pilot of that shuttle, he doesn't deserve to die, and he won't be the only one, there will be others like him. I was like that Captain Horax, yes-Who knows if he ever had a reason to become what he is now, but no, there is no justification for that, as there is no justification for what I've done. I can't act as if my own point of view was all there is, I've heard that many times during my life, but only now I understand it. My crew is alive, young Shillis is alive and that pilot is alive, and maybe some day they will be able to live in peace-*

The bridge was full of flames, entire panels of instruments falling from the walls, the screens exploding one after another, launching fragments of glass everywhere. Before the main viewscreen collapsed under the pressure of the twisted hull, the Admiral had a final view of the stars, those stars that had been his whole life since the first time he put his feet on a space ship's deck. The last remnants of sadness or regret disappeared from him, as if they were nothing compared with the wide universe, all his struggles just a scrap of a story. His soul was finally calm, ready to see whatever it was on the other side.



The Trailblazer *exploded*, pieces of its hull flying in all directions until nothing remained. But Admiral Garil didn't notice when it happened.

### **[Imperial base orbiting Muldron]**

The damage caused by the Rebel attack was clearly visible throughout the docks. Captain Horax looked in silence at a Victory Class Star Destroyer, tangled with the structures and the containers it had crashed with. All this had been done by just a Frigate and two Corvettes. But the mood on the Imperial installations was euphoric. They had killed the monster who had brought the terror almost to the Empire's heart, the man who had become the objective for the whole Imperial Navy. The previous failures would be forgotten, and there would be rewards and promotions. The Empire knew how to be generous with the people under its command.

But there wouldn't be any reward for him. The prisoners had escaped because of him, the reports that Captain Jader and his own subordinates would write wouldn't leave any doubt about his responsibility. Horax didn't fear for his life. Not today, when what everybody would remember would be a great victory. But that didn't mean there wouldn't be consequences for him. Grand Admiral Thrawn - or whoever was ruling now the Empire, if the rumours about Thrawn's departure towards the Unknown Territories were true - wouldn't forgive his failure. His career was over. He would have to accept some remote destination, far from everything, and he would never get a promotion again. He might leave the Imperial Navy and look for a civilian job, perhaps commanding a transport or something like that, but this would be even more humiliating. Kaban was directing the docking operation. He could hear the pleasure in his Second Officer's voice. This was a great chance for him. There were witnesses who would testify that he gave his Captain the correct advice. Wrath consumed him, but he had to swallow it and keep from breaking Kaban's stupid face as he wanted to do. That would make the things worse.

"Damn you Garil, I hope you suffered when you died," he muttered.

## ***Epilogue***

**[Fourteen hours later, Frigate *Joan d'Arc*, Captain Orris' quarters]**

Captain Orris was terribly tired. He had spent several hours with Captain Collis and Joan d'Arc's navigation officer, considering all the options for their return path. Collins had informed them about the routes Admiral Garil's had been following during his operations, and some of them could be used for the return path. Trailblazer's navigation officer had been very imaginative, to say the least. But when they finished a terrible headache made him remember how many hours he had gone without having any sleep. Now his crew could do just fine without him for a while. He sat on the narrow bed and started to remove his boots when the door chimed. *Oh, no, can't they do anything on their own if I'm not on the bridge?*

"I hope you've got a good reason," he said while he put the boots on again.

"I wanted to drop off my report - I'm sorry, I can wait until a better time-" Lieutenant Commander Schroeder said hesitantly.

"Of course you could, I can think of quite a few better times, but since you're here already, enter."

"Thanks, sir." Foxfire took a seat and put it in front of the Captain, who'd sat down again on the bed. "I didn't have a chance to talk to you after all this, you know-"

"Please, Lieutenant Commander, save the introductions and go directly to the point."

After the time she'd had, Foxfire was ready to stalk out of the room before she started yelling, but something in Captain Orris told her that he wasn't really angry, nor being rude- from his particular point of view, at any rate. Well, if she had to work with the man, she had to try and understand him.

"All right- First, our mission was to stop Admiral Garil at any price whatever, as long as we could keep him from attacking any more civilians. Then, all of us wanted to rescue those prisoners, specially after learning what had happened when they were captured, but-you had something more in mind, didn't you?"

Captain Orris observed her in silence for a long moment, so long than Foxfire thought that the Captain would never reply. "Yes, there was something. You were there, on that bridge, beside the Admiral. You could see him better than I. He was a good soldier, but there was nothing left of him when we caught up - consumed by hate and desperation, something all of us have experienced some time. You, I, everyone could become as mad as the Admiral if pushed hard enough. I wanted to run away from there when their crew had been transferred to the *Joan d'Arc*. We were risking the loss of more lives than the ones we were trying to save, it would have been the most logical thing to do but-"

"You had given him your word, is that it?"

"No, and you know it. Keeping promises is one thing, but I can break them if I think that I'm getting something more important, like saving others' lives. It's not that different from disobeying an order, you know, if you are *completely sure* that's the right thing." Foxfire blushed when the Captain said that, but he continued talking, discipline was not his point this time. "No, Lieutenant Commander. In this case there was something else." He paused, as if thinking how to express what he had in mind, then just shrugged and said it as best he could. "We had to save the soul of a good man. By doing so, we could save the part of him that is inside all of us."

Foxfire didn't know what to say. She wasn't sure if that was the answer she had come looking for, but she had to think about it. During the last weeks, the memories of her last mission with Praying Mantis Squadron, when they had to fight to return home, losing friends at every step of the way, had been ever-present in her mind. In some way, she had thought that she could understand the Admiral; she had felt that same desire for death more than once on that mission. In the moments before the battle, with the fresh vision of what the Imperials had done to that woman, she had even thought about shooting a couple of missiles against *Harrier* when everything ended, and kill whoever was on board. But when she had the chance, just when Barris took off from the *Corvette*, that thought had been left behind. Finally, the damned ship was destroyed, like some kind of poetic justice, but that didn't matter. She wondered if Captain Orris was right, if all they had something like Admiral Garil inside, one that needed to be saved from what blind hate could do with it.

"Are you going to stay up there much longer, Lieutenant Commander?" the Captain asked with a look that was equal parts tiredness and impatience.

"No - sorry, sir." She started to leave, but stopped when she was at the door.

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

"Do you think we did it?"

"Did what, Lieutenant Commander?"

"Saved him."

Orris thought about the people they had rescued, the woman who had been tortured, and Captains Sera's and Collin's expressions when they took the floating stretcher themselves to the medical facilities. He wondered if the Admiral had been able to hear Collins' last message, but he decided that one way or another, he'd received it. Orris nodded slowly.

"Yes, Lieutenant Commander. We did it."

## THE END



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