



## Reading Room

*StarWars FanFiction*

**POV: Joan d'Arc**

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[Author's note: I want to thank my friend *DSC Arachnoid* for his help revising and correcting the present story.]

### ***Part One***

### ***Shadows of War***

[Deep space, two B-Wings in formation]

"Hey, Shok'wave, you haven't said a word in two hours, is something wrong?" Flight Officer Saakje "Cybercat" Bastmeijer asked. She was flying close to the right flank of Shok'wave's B-Wing, but it was impossible to guess her boss's expression under the helmet and the glasses.

Commander Sherry "Shok'wave" Krenzel delayed her reply almost half a minute. "It's just that I can't stay calm when we are about to leave 300 people to die without doing anything to avoid it."

That was exactly what Cybercat had expected. Psycho, the veteran Rebel pilot who had obtained information from mysterious Imperial contacts had managed to send a last report. Lord Vader did his best to prevent the Rebels from obtaining any valuable data about the latest Imperial technologies. He had ordered the destruction of the entire planetoid where the new TIEs were being developed and manufactured. The facilities had been almost completely destroyed during the combined attack launched by Blue and Praying Mantis Squadrons, but that was not enough for Vader. He wanted the entire planetoid converted into tiny bits and pieces. But there was a small colony there, no more than 300 people who had been forced to work in the Imperial facilities, and Lord Vader had no intentions of evacuating them. That was the way the Empire did everything, and Vader's evilness was only surpassed by the Emperor's... As White Squadron's Commander, Shok'wave had tried to obtain the High Command's permission for a rescue attempt, but it had been denied. The planetoid would be surrounded by Imperial Capital ships, and it would be a suicidal operation to undertake any effort to get through. It was true, but even so Shok'wave had not had much sleep in the last two nights. She had been ordered to bring the recently captured Frigate and the new White Squadron to Alliance territory, but she was delaying their retreat to find a solution.

"I know how you must feel." Cybercat said.

"No, you don't." Shok'wave answered a bit too harshly. "You will be following my orders and those deaths won't be your responsibility. And you don't have to live with that responsibility for the rest of your life."

"I'm sorry, Sherry, but you will be following orders too." Cybercat tried to ignore her friend's tone. "There is nothing you can do."

"Yes, I can send all my orders directly to hell and try to do what I can to save those people." Shok'wave remained silent for some seconds. "But then it would be the deaths of some of us that I would be responsible for. And probably for nothing, because High Command is right. To go there again would be suicide."

Cybercat didn't reply. She didn't know what to say. The young pilot didn't want to return to that planetoid for all the gold in universe, but she would do so if Shok'wave ordered it. But to die - even in such a glorious way - was not a nice perspective. She was supposed to be a member of the new White Squadron's Training Wing, but they were so short on pilots that the trainees were drafted to fly combat missions if the need arose. Actually that flight was part of her training, but it was a real reconnaissance mission too. A signal from her computer interrupted her thoughts.

"Uh, oh... Sherry, I have Imperial contacts at long range."

"Yes, I've got them too. Three, six..., nine Gunboats and one Corvette."

"What do you think? We have no torpedoes..." The last battle had depleted all their reserves. Granite and Moose were working back in the Frigate, trying to modify the Imperial torpedoes in order to use them with the B-Wings, but that job would still take some time. Their fighters had only the energy weapons available and that meant fighting "looking the enemy directly into the eyes"

"If they follow their current route, they will come across the Frigate in a matter of minutes. Lock S-Foils and put all you can into the engines."

"At once." Cybercat swallowed. *End of the training...*



Shok'wave used a different channel and made a short call.

"Foxfire, this is Shok'wave. Cybercat and I are going to meet some friends, a lot of them. It would be nice if you could join the party!" She had no time to wait for acknowledgement. Shok'wave sent the co-ordinates and returned to the combat channel.

"This will be a tough one." Shok'wave said.

*You don't need to tell me*, Cybercat thought, but she didn't say it. "When the Guns attack us shoot against the ones approaching to starboard, and I'll take ones to port. Try not to get hit that often in the first pass and continue towards the Corvette as if you had the devil on your tail. The Corvette will be our main objective." The Corellian ship had powerful long range scanners and there was a high probability that it would detect the Frigate's presence sooner or later. More than likely sooner.

"Copy that, Shok'wave." *The evil on my tail. Very expressive...*

"Eight clicks. They have detected us. Good luck, my friend!"

"Same to you!"

Shok'wave felt the adrenaline invading her body. She tightened her fingers around the stick and concentrated on the six incoming Gunboats. The remaining three stayed with the Corvette. Five clicks to the closest target.

Cybercat took a look at her shields display. Primary and secondary shields were at a hundred percent. She was going to need them. Two clicks.

At the same time the two women noticed that their threat displays started to blink yellow. The Imperial pilots were trying to obtain a lock on them.

"Don't try to evade, there are too many." Shok'wave ordered. "When the missiles are close enough, fire your lasers and pray!"

"Roger..." Cybercat saw how the display turned red and immediately her computer whined, announcing multiple missile launches. She targeted her closest attacker and watched the targeting display to pay close attention to the quickly decreasing distance. With a fast move she flipped a switch on her console and reset her shields to full forward deflection.

The Rebel pilots shot when the missiles were in their final approach and had almost reached them. The explosions illuminated the space for a second, but they were still hit by two missiles each. The shields

absorbed the impacts, only to be further weakened by the first impacting laser bolts from the Gunboats. Shok'wave clenched her teeth with force without ceasing to fire at one of the enemy fighters. She maintained her trajectory while the Imperial pilot broke to avoid the collision. Shok'wave grinned maliciously. *Coward.*

Cybercat passed between two gunboats and resisted the temptation to close her eyes. She had managed to cause serious damage to one of them, but the Rebel pilot didn't take the time to admire her handiwork. She compensated the shields as good as she could and raced on towards the Corvette. Five clicks separated her from the Imperial ship. She followed Shok'wave's fighter, which had gained some lead.

The Gunboats were now hunting the two B-Wings. Those fighters that had remained with the Corvette were now heading out to intercept the Rebel ships and the Imperial hammer was rapidly coming down onto the anvil.

### **[Onboard the captured Frigate]**

Lieutenant Commander Avery "Foxfire" Schroeder and Captain Jane "Shadow" Nagatomi ran towards their A-Wings. They had been closest to the Frigate's bay when Shok'wave's message had been received on the bridge.

"Hurry, Shadow!" Foxfire screamed. "If Shok'wave said a lot of them, then you can bet there are just too many of them!"

Shadow closed her canopy and powered up all the systems without a previous check up. There was simply no time to play this by the book.

The two small fighters took off and raced into space, accelerating with all the power that their engines were able to produce. The rest of the pilots arrived in the bay just in time to see how a damaged Imperial shuttle was being towed towards the other side of the bay. The technician who was driving the tow vehicle had to jump from his vehicle to avoid being burned by the thrusters of the departing fighters. A look of surprise etched on his face as he watched the two A-Wings departing from the floor.

"Why nobody has warned me that there was a take-off scheduled?" He shouted indignantly. Then he noticed that all the pilots were looking at something past him. "What are you...? Oh, no..." He turned his head just in time to see how his now unsteered tow vehicle was plowed into a parked B-Wing which was undergoing repairs. The resulting crash was not very severe, but by now the crippled shuttle was exactly in the worst possible place, just in the middle of the bay and effectively blocking each and any incoming or departing traffic. No other ship could take-off or land while the shuttle was in this unfortunate position.

"We have to get that shuttle out of there!!" Captain Michael "Vyper" Stauber shouted.

### **[In the middle of the battle]**

The three Gunboats in front of them started to shoot. The two Rebel pilots were now surrounded by two hostile formations of fighters, but that could turn into an advantage...

"Don't break yet, Cybercat!" Shok'wave ordered.

"Yes, I see what you're up to!" If the Gunboats in front shot, their pursuers would have to break to avoid being hit by their own comrades. Cybercat glanced at her shield display again and decided that she didn't like that red colour. She waited for a couple of seconds until she pushed her stick forward to dive down and pass underneath the approaching Gunboats. In front of her Shok'wave again used her head-on approach and effectively forced the Imperials to break their close formation.

But this time the Imperial pilot she was taking on was not such a coward, or maybe he didn't have such good reflexes. The B-Wing's lower ion cannon disappeared and with it a part of the Gunboat's left wing. The Imperial fighters behind the leading pilot manoeuvred hard to avoid a possible collision, but one of them

couldn't do anything to evade the damaged Gunboat of his wing leader, which spun just into his path. The two ships disintegrated in a ball of fire. The shields of two more Gunboats almost collapsed under the force of the nearby explosion, but they didn't fail entirely.

"Are you well?" Cybercat asked without looking back. The Imperial Corvette was now in range and she opened fire.

"Yes, I'm doing fine!" Shok'wave lied and cursed in silence. She had lost her advantage and was now far behind Cybercat, fighting to recover control of her fighter. Usually a B-Wing was not easy to pilot, even when it wasn't missing important structural elements, but in conditions like this only an exceedingly good pilot could keep it afloat. But Shok'wave was that kind of pilot. She targeted the Corvette's upper laser turret and opened fire.

When Cybercat finished her attack run against the Corvette and just started to pull out in the wake of its engines she felt a massive impact on her rear shields.

"Bad news, Shok'wave, it's a modified Corvette!" She warned. The modified Corvette had a stronger hull, better shields, better weapons and no blind spot in the rear quarters ...

"Fantastic..." Shok'wave said. Their uncoordinated first pass had lowered the Corvette's shields by only fifteen percent. And there were still seven Gunboats chasing them around. "It seems that we have to do something with those Guns before we can take care of this Corvette!" She said. Maybe it had been a mistake to attack the Corvette after all, but now it was too late to worry about that.

"Roger, here I go!" Cybercat replied. She targeted the closest fighter and shot, while she did her best to evade the response fire. When Cybercat broke away Shok'wave launched an attack against the same fighter. By doing so she had to fly straight and level for a few seconds. She knew that it was a risk, even before several impacts penetrated her rear shields, but she saw the Gunboat explode and that made it one hostile target less.

Cybercat noticed an enemy fighter with very low shields. It was one of the ships that had suffered from the wake of the explosion of the first formation. She switched to ion cannon and did her best to make her shots count. It was very difficult to hit moving targets with the B-Wing's ion cannon because those guns were mounted far off-centre, but the Rebel pilot managed to land some direct hits that disabled the Gunboat. The Imperial pilot was trapped in the dead ship, while Cybercat switched back to lasers and continued her fight.

### **[Approaching A-Wings]**

Foxfire and Shadow had redirected all their energy to the engines. The two fighters were racing in a desperate attempt to reach the battle zone in time.

"I have something on my scanner, Foxfire." Shadow said. "Two Rebels and seven Imperial contacts..."

"We'll be there in three minutes. At a distance of 2 klicks start to recharge your lasers." Foxfire ordered. "How many concussion missiles do you have?"

"Only two"

"I've got three. Attack the closest Gunboat when you get a solid lock."

"Roger that."

### **[Onboard the captured Frigate]**

Vyper impatiently patted the controls of his A-Wing, while his friends fought to move the stricken shuttle out of his departure path. His engines were already up and running and nervously he checked his chronometer.

Foxfire and Shadow had left four minutes ago. The shuttle was moving slowly. Way too slowly for his taste.

"OK, I've had enough! Move away from there!" Vyper screamed and closed his canopy. "I'm going to take off NOW!"

Everybody close to the shuttle ran for cover as Vyper elevated his fighter using the gentle push of the repulsors, pointing the A-Wing's nose directly at the shuttle's upper wing. Then he opened fire and the searing hot shots of his cannons streaked through the hangar. The bothersome wing disintegrated and Vyper's fighter roared towards open space before the first bits and pieces impacted on the floor.

"I could have done that, too." Flight Officer Owen "Granite" Stone said.

### **[Back at the battle]**

Shok'wave tried her luck with another pass on the Corvette. This time she had a slightly better control over her stricken fighter and as a result her aim improved a lot. The Imperial ship was manoeuvring hard, constantly turning and spinning to avoid the attacks and to provide its gunners with the best possible position to fire most of the defensive armament at the Rebel fighters. In no way was this Corvette behaving like the sitting ducks they used to be in the simulations. But when Shok'wave pulled out from her attack run the upper turret was effectively taken out and locked into its current position, while the Corvette's shields were down to seventy percent and less. Her B-Wing was shaking under the impacts of a constant stream of fire from two Gunboats. A direct hit from the Corvette washed away whatever shield strength had remained and her torpedo counter exploded, filling the cockpit with smoke. She didn't need that display because she had no torpedoes to launch, but it was a clear sign that her ship had received more than it could take.

Cybercat inflicted heavy damage on one of the Gunboats and the Imperial pilot abandoned the fight to recharge his shields. That gave her the chance for another attack on the Corvette. She noticed the upper turret's damage and approached the ship from above. She saw her threat display blinking, but ignored it and pursued her attack while sweat burned in her eyes and clouded her vision. Cybercat banked hard to the right when she was about to collide with the Corvette and with satisfaction noticed that the Imperial ship's shields were now down to under forty percent. The woman looked at her threat display again, just in time to notice that it turned into a solid red.

### **[Approaching A-Wings]**

Her computer acquired a lock on a Gunboat and Shadow fired her two missiles. On her left wing Foxfire did the same with another target. They recharged their lasers as good as they could and still had barely any shields at all. But there was no time to waste, nor time to worry about that.

### **[In the battle]**

Shok'wave broke hard in a desperate attempt to shoot down the Gunboat that was chasing Cybercat, before it could exploit its chances and launch its missiles against her wing mate. She shot blast after blast and did her best to ignore the Gunboat that was on her own tail. Her target abandoned Cybercat's trail just as her computer informed Shok'wave of an approaching missile. Shok'wave stretched out to reach the ejection lever and prepared herself for the worst.

The Gunboat attacked by Shadow managed to avoid one of the missiles. The other one launched two of its own missiles against one of the B-Wings, before Foxfire's warheads blew it up.

"Sherry, noooooooooo....!" Foxfire screamed, identifying her friend's ship barely an instant before it exploded as well.

"Did you see her ejecting????!!!" Shadow asked anxiously.

"No, I didn't..." She launched a series of curses that only the nomads she had been living with could understand. Anger flared through her body as she targeted one of the remaining Gunboat's and pushed the fire button.

Cybercat saw her threat indicator go off and couldn't understand why the pilot had not opened fire. Suddenly she heard Foxfire's scream on the intercom and her computer spat out a new report: "White Leader has been destroyed." Her limbs turned numb and her head began to spin as the young pilot demanded a damage report from her computer. She decided that her B-Wing could probably make another pass on the Corvette. Someone was going to pay.

A Gunboat exploded under the merciless fire of Shadow's cannons. Only three remained - no, just two. Foxfire had managed to shoot down another one. She kept firing at the fragments until she felt an impact in the rear and had to evade her victim's wingman. But things were starting to look ugly for the Imperials. Cybercat attacked the Corvette like a crazy demon and was forced to break off with her fighter about to disintegrate, while the Imperial ship's shields had fallen under her ferocious attack. Shadow received that information from her computer and launched her A-Wing against the Corvette firing unceasingly. The Imperial Captain probably decided that it was time to retreat and the ship manoeuvred to initiate its jump to safety.

"Foxfire, help us with the Corvette before she manages to escape!" Shadow demanded.

Foxfire didn't reply with words. Instead she launched her remaining missile into the Corvette's engines and used her lasers to pound the already weakened area. Cybercat and Shadow followed her example and the shots of the three Rebel fighters merged in the same spot. The ship's rear side erupted in explosions and instantly several engines died. This Corvette was not going anywhere anytime soon!

One of the Gunboat's pilots noticed the bad condition of Cybercat's fighter and was going to exploit it. He finished his turn and pulled out hard on her six opening fire. But after only two successful hits he noticed a lot of impacts on his own ship and was forced to break his attack manoeuvring to avoid the incoming threat. It was Vyper's A-Wing, coming in with gun's blazing. The Imperial pilot ejected just before his ship disappeared in a ball of expanding gases. His only surviving partner pushed his hyperspace motivators and his Gunboat started to accelerate, while Shadow and Foxfire kept firing at him from behind, shot after shot. The Imperial fighter never reached its jump point.

The only Imperial ships left in the area were the mortally damaged Corvette and the disabled Gunboat. Cybercat disabled the Corvette too with a few shots from her ion cannon, while Shadow and Foxfire used their scanners to detect any signal from Shok'wave's ejection-seat. If she had managed to eject, then they could locate her using the return signal of that beacon.

"I got her!" Shadow said with relief in her voice. She was the first one to get to the wounded pilot, followed closely by Foxfire and Vyper.

"She isn't moving..." Cybercat said to herself as she approached the badly damaged cockpit, which was all that had remained of the B-Wing. In it was the unmoving body of her friend.

"This is White Two." Foxfire called. "We need a shuttle here immediately, Shok'wave is seriously injured!"

### **[On the other side]**

Shok'wave couldn't see anything at all. Everything was black around her. Not a light, not a sound, nothing that she could sense. She tried to extend her arms in front of her, trying to touch anything, but she couldn't even feel her own arms. That scared her beyond belief, worse than anything she had ever experienced in her entire life. She made an effort to control herself and tried with all her strength to remember what had happened to her. The memories were there, but she found that she was almost unable to bring up a single image. There was something about a battle, she was piloting her B-Wing and Avery was shouting something...

Something about a missile, yes. A missile. She tried to remember it with more clarity, but she couldn't. A *missile* she thought again. *Maybe I'm dead after all.* The idea was frightening, but somehow she was starting to feel an increasingly calm, as if everything was well. *How can I be so calm when and if I'm dead?* She

wondered. *Maybe that's the reason...* She answered herself. Shok'wave tried again to move her arms, her legs, her head, something at all ... But it seemed that she had not body to move around. *I have no body, so it's true, I must be dead, and this is how you feel when you are dead.* She thought that she should be terrified, but there was no fear. Only peace. And a new sensation, as if...

*As if I'm not alone!* She tried to say that with her voice, too, but she had no voice. Yet the thought was powerful and she didn't hear an answer. She felt it.

*No, you are not alone.* There was no sound she could hear, but she was sure that the new thought came from the outside, whatever "outside" meant in her situation.

*Don't worry, Sherry* the thought said. *You are not dead.*

*But where I am? Who are you?*

*Look.*

Shok'wave couldn't reply. Everything was happening so fast she had no time to think. Suddenly, she was able to see again, and she felt a body around her, but she was not the one who moved it. That other thought started to merge with her own thoughts, and Shok'wave was not herself for any longer ...

"Joan, time to go home!" It was her father's voice.



"I'm on my way!" She replied. Joan was sitting in her most favourite place, under the wonderful tree at the top of the hill. She could see her home town from here, while Gerillia's sun painted the sky orange before to disappear behind the horizon. She used to come to this place since her childhood days. When she was sure that nobody was watching, she had fun moving small stones and little branches with her mind, constructing paths and bridges for the insects, sometimes helping them and sometimes putting obstacles in their way, although she never disturbed them for too long. There were days when she closed her eyes and concentrated on a particular bird. After some time, she was able to see what the bird was looking at, feeling the wind on her face, the sun on her back. On other days she didn't have that privacy up here. Some of the village's children sat in front of her and listened with mouths wide open while she told her Jedi Knight stories. All of them adored her, and she loved each one in return. It was so lovely to see their faces when they demanded a new story and when they stayed with her to listen how those stories turned out ... But this particular evening she had come up here alone. She needed to clear up her thoughts after what she had seen this morning.

"Joan, didn't you hear me?" Her father asked again.

"Yes, I'm coming!"



She joined her father while thinking about the holo-reports they both had seen. Usually she didn't pay much attention to them, but today it had been different. There was a war. The Republic had been in peace for at least the last 2000 years, but now it seemed that times were about to change. She had seen the destroyed ships and the rescue transports recovering nothing but dead bodies. Then she had started to hear what the reporter was saying. Everything had begun a couple of months ago, with some disputes over commercial routes and the ownership of a certain space station, which was strategically located close to one of the main transit routes. But the Bretalians had decided to use brute force to obtain what they thought belonged to them, and others had made it too easy for them to get away with it. They were amongst the latest systems to join the Republic - only fifty years ago - and while there had been some problems in the past, nothing as serious as this had ever taken place before. Most of the Republic's worlds had forgotten what war was and now they found themselves more than vulnerable against the Bretalians' form of "dialogue". The aggressors were expanding their area of dominance almost without fighting, but even the few battles that had taken place had forced the death of many. And the Bretalians' ships were now approaching Alderaan, just two light years away from Gerillia ...

"A penny for your thoughts!" Dalian Vincenne said smilingly and looked at his daughter. He was the most gentle man in Universe, at least in the eyes of his only daughter. He tried to sound casual, but he had seen the horror in Joan's eyes earlier in the morning and he knew all too well what caused such pain in her face.

"Dad, what are we going to do when the Bretalians come?"

Dalian took some moments before answering. He had been wondering the same, but he didn't want to increase his daughter's worry. He looked at her and bit his lip when he saw a tear rolling down her lovely face. *She's only seventeen years old! What is going to happen with her?* He laid a hand on her blonde hair and she looked up with her incredibly blue eyes to look at him directly. He couldn't withhold the truth when looking into those eyes and so he spoke.

"I don't know, Joan." He sighed. "I really don't know."

Joan had never heard that tone in his father's voice, which was usually full of confidence. When he was so close by there was nothing to worry about. Her father was able to solve any problem without abandoning his smile. But now she detected the doubt and for the first time in her life she was really scared.

"But where are the Jedi Knights, dad?" she asked. "Why don't they come to stop the Bretalians?"

Dalian knew how much her daughter admired the Jedi and he had enjoyed listening when she told her stories. Some of them were the same stories he had told her when she had been a little child. Others she had come across by reading books and the rest she invented as she went along and when she spoke to the enthralled children. These last ones were the best ones of all, at least in his opinion. But now he had no answers for her. *Yes, where are the Jedi Knights now?*

"I don't know that either. Maybe they don't want to take sides and start a war. Maybe they are just waiting, like us."

"Waiting for what?" There was anger in Joan's voice, and that frightened Dalian more than the holo-reports, and more than the rumours he had been hearing the last months. He looked in worried silence as his daughter showed all her desperation: "They can't start a war because the war has already been started!", she almost shouted.

Dalian couldn't answer. He just took his daughter by the shoulders and silently they walked back to their home. Joan didn't say anything as they walked, but her trembling told him that she was silently crying.

"Joan, are you going to bed without having anything for dinner?" Her mother asked. Marillia looked at her husband and knew that it was not a normal evening like all the evenings before. She sat with Dalian and they both watched the news together. He put the volume as low as he could, so that Joan couldn't hear them from her room, but she was not sleeping and she had always had good hearing.

That night she had strange dreams. From as far back as she could remember it had been possible for her to move small objects just by the power of her will. Many times she knew what people were thinking or feeling, but she had kept that a secret. From time to time she believed that she heard voices that nobody else could. She had thought a lot about becoming a Jedi Lady herself some day, but that was her most secret desire and she had not talked about it with anybody - not even with her parents. This time she had a light sabre in

her hands, a light sabre! But it was not a happy dream. There were burning ships exploding into millions of pieces, laser bolts filling the space with deadly lights, screams, people crying, cities in flames, explosions and destruction everywhere, while she was in the middle of it all. Joan woke up in tears, but she knew what she was going to do.

"Senator Carless has issued a call to arms to defend the Republic against the Bretalians." The news reader was saying. "Each and any Republic's citizen that doesn't want to allow the Bretalians to impose their will on the rest of the Galaxy is welcome to join the Republic's military forces. As we speak the Bretalian fleet is orbiting Alderaan and the population can't hold out much longer without your support!"

"I'm going to Alderaan" Joan said seriously, staring at the holo-player.

"What are you talking about?" Her mother asked with clear panic reflected on her face. Dalian said nothing. He looked at his daughter and understood that this young woman was not his child any more. Her sweet features were full of determination, her eyes as cold as ice. He decided immediately that they couldn't fight against her daughter's desires. All they could do was help.

"You can use our ship." Dalian tried to keep a firm tone of voice, but he felt how his heart was breaking forever. "It's not a great thing, but it can fly, and you know how to pilot it."

Marillia looked at her husband in horror. She hadn't even known that Dalian had taught Joan how to pilot the small ship. It had been their little secret - something completely innocent - but now it seemed almost like treason in the woman's eyes.

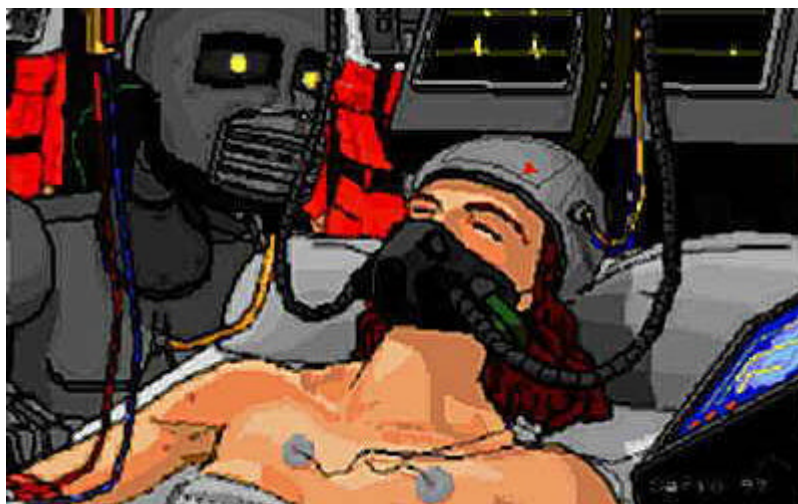
"What? She knows how to pilot the ship? How can you just stand there and...?" But she couldn't finish her sentence - her tears didn't allow her. Dalian embraced his wife and fought hard not to cry, too. This was the only moment of doubt that Joan ever had, but something inside her was pushing her forward and forced her not to look back.

"I love you both" She said, and left the house. When the desperate Marillia tried to follow her daughter, she couldn't find her. She wanted to shout, to unleash all her pain at her husband for not forcing, for not demanding, for not ordering Joan to stay, but she had seen the same as he had in Joan's eyes. She let Dalian embrace her again and continued crying.

Onboard the small shuttle Joan could hear her mother's laments in her mind. The young girl was also crying when she turned the engines on and took off.

### **[Onboard White Squadron's Frigate]**

Shok'wave's body lay on a bed in the medical facilities of the Frigate. After fifteen hours in the bacta tank her most severe injuries were being cured. But the monitor that usually indicated the patient's brain's activity was quiet. The 2-1B Imperial droid was checking the device once again, upon Foxfire's request. Fortunately, this specific droid had received precisely the medical programming which was needed for his work and could be used without any modifications or improvisations. The rest of non-medical droids of onboard the Frigate had been temporarily deactivated.



"The brain scanner is operating within normal parameters." The droid informed with his monotone voice. "There is no detectable brain activity at all."

"Don't say stupidities, you pile of junk!" Foxfire exclaimed. Joker, Shadow, Angelrose, Cybercat and herself were close to Shok'wave's bed. The new male squadron members were looking at them from further away.

"Ok, Sherry, you have played this game long enough!" Foxfire said moving her friend's arm slightly. She took care to avoid touching the tubes that were connected to her. Shok'wave was breathing smoothly through the mask that the 2-1B droid had placed over her face. It was the only noticeable sign of life.

"You just can't do this to me." Foxfire continued. "I don't want to be in Command and of course you don't want me in Command either! So wake up and take the reigns, damn it!" The beautiful pilot's face was completely pale. She couldn't believe that one of the best friends she had ever had in her entire life could end like this. Shadow was holding Joker's hand in her own. Joker had not said a word at all, while Cybercat was staring through one of the bull-eyes into the open space. She knew that when she again had to look at Shok'wave's dead-like face she would start to cry.

"Avery." Vyper said almost whispering. "High Command just sent another request that we leave this position immediately. We must decide what we are going to do ..."

"We are not pulling out till Shok'wave orders it!" Foxfire exploded.

"Take it easy, Avery" Shadow said. "Michael is as worried as we are." Vyper thanked Shadow with his glance.

"I know, I know, I'm sorry." Foxfire said, closing her eyes in pain. "It's just that I can't stand being here without being able to do anything..."

"None of us can. But we must let her rest and maybe we can be more useful if we continue transforming this ship into an Alliance vessel."

"You are right, Shadow. Let's go. Iceman and Zeppelin will escort the Frigate, flying A-Wings. Moose and Granite, let's keep working with those torpedoes. Joker, stay with her and call me if you notice any change, no matter how small!"

"Don't worry, Avery." Joker replied, trying to smile. "I'll let you know."

"The rest of you should try to get some rest. You're dismissed."

**[On the other side]**

Joan's shuttle didn't have hyperspace capabilities, so her only chance was to board one of the Cruisers orbiting Gerillia before all of them left to join with Senator Carless's Fleet. She decided to try her luck with the biggest one.

"Civilian shuttle to Republic's Cruiser asking for permission to land." Joan called.

"This is Republic Cruiser *Dragon*." The answer came back. "Identify yourself, please."

Joan thought for a couple of seconds. She didn't want to use her real name. If something went wrong, then it would be best to avoid any consequence for her parents. She remembered the Jedi Knight she had invented, the hero in most of her stories: Etienne d'Arc.

"My name is Joan d'Arc and I want to join the Republic's Fleet."

"Very well, Joan d'Arc. We'll need all the help we can get. Follow the light indications toward hangar 6D."

"Thank you, *Dragon*." Joan sighed. *That was the most difficult part.*

She noticed that there was a lot of activity in the hangar, as she opened the shuttle's door, watching people running from one place to another, everybody evidently very busy. Five minutes had passed before a technician noticed her presence and came over to her.

"What are you doing here?" The young man asked a bit annoyed. Joan was the only person who wasn't doing anything.

"Well, I've just landed and I have been waiting for someone who could tell me where I'm supposed to go", Joan replied, feeling somewhat silly as the man stared at her without expression. "I'm joining the Republic's Fleet!" She added with more energy than was necessary, but at least that changed the technician's attitude. He smiled and signalled to an elevator in the wall farthest away in the hangar.

"Take that elevator, two levels up, and repeat the part about joining the Fleet to the first officer you see."

"Thank you very much, Mr..."

"Sergeant Santer" The technician said without losing his smile. "But for now you can just call me Sir."

"Oh, of course, yes, sir!" Joan answered, but Santer had already moved on. She saw him some feet away, inspecting the landing gear of one of the multitude of ships that crowded the hangar. She grabbed her bag and walked towards the indicated elevator.

When she got out, the sight was not all that different from the one that she had seen in the hangar. People raced to wherever they had to go, everybody talking at once and working on dozens of different monitors. A box-shaped droid collided with her, but when she was about to apologize the droid was already moving away from her. She went towards a tall man who was inspecting something on a data screen and touched him gently on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry, could you help me, please?" The man turned and looked at her for a second, without really seeing her. He then decided that she could wait and returned to the monitor. Joan interrupted him again.

"Please, could you help me? My name is Joan d'Arc and I'm joining the Republic's Fleet."

"That's fine to me, but the recruiting centre is on the next floor." Once again the man turned to look at the monitor, pushing some keys on the way, when Joan grabbed him by the shoulder and forced him to look at her.

"I need to talk to Senator Carless", she said. Joan didn't know why she had said that first of all. It seemed to her as if the words had escaped her mouth and as if the voices in her mind were doing the talking for her. "He is going to need me because the Force is with me."

That caught the man's attention. He completely forgot the monitor and looked at her from head to feet. "Can

you repeat your name?"

"Joan d'Arc, sir" She said.

"Well, I'm Commander Bandric, and I'm the Captain of this ship." The man said. It was obvious that he was stunned. "Of all the things I've been told for an introduction, yours has been the most original."

"I know how difficult it must be to believe me." Joan searched for confidence inside of her - and found it. Her next words were pronounced without any hint of her previous nervousness. "But you must trust me. I can feel the Force and I'm here to defend the Republic."

"So you want to fight against the Bretalians?"

"Yes, sir, I do. And I must speak with Senator Carless. He will give me what I need to accomplish my mission."

There was something strange about hearing a seventeen years old girl talking like that. Commander Bandric didn't know whether to order someone to take her back to her parents or to give her a fighter and see what the Force would enable her to do. But it was very hard to think while looking into those blue eyes.

"All right, you win. We are about to jump to the meeting point, and Senator Carless will be there. But I don't believe that he is going to receive you. He is very busy trying to avoid the Bretalians from conquering the Galaxy."

"I insist, sir."

Commander Bandric felt that this was not entirely his own will, but he was unable to find any objection. He couldn't see anything else in the room but the girl's eyes.

"I'll do what I can. I promise."

Five hours later, the *Dragon* was stationed in front of an even larger Cruiser, the Republic Fleet's Flagship *Harmony*. A military shuttle left the *Dragon* and headed for the huge vessel, carrying Joan and Commander Bandric, who piloted the shuttle himself. Aboard the *Dragon* she had enlisted as Joan d'Arc, and nobody never doubted that it was her real name.

The meeting room was full of the Republic Fleet's highest Commanders, surrounding Senator Carless and his military advisor, Admiral Rickermoon. Senator Carless was very young for the standards set among the Senators - no more than thirty years old. He seemed overwhelmed by responsibility's weight and it was clearly visible, even for Joan.

"Then there is nothing we can do to save Alderaan?" He asked, addressing nobody in particular.

"There are just too many Bretalian ships orbiting the planet." General Talon replied. "We would be outnumbered one to four and we are the only force that stands between the Bretalians and the defeat for the Republic."

"The Bretalians' ultimatum will expire in 20 hours." Admiral Rickermoon reminded them. "After that time and if Alderaan has not deactivated its surface weapons, the Bretalians will begin the orbital bombardment. Of course the Alderaanians will give up before that happens and there won't be another chance for us to return them their freedom." He saw the effect that his words were causing and tried his best to raise spirits after what he had just said: "We have been promised some reinforcements from the Corellian worlds. If they arrive in time..."

"Then the only thing we can do is to wait for those reinforcements." Senator Carless said sadly.

"We must attack immediately!"

Everybody turned to see who the owner of that voice was. Senator Carless and the militaries were clearly annoyed. They saw a blonde girl with the sweetest face they had ever seen, escorted by a very

embarrassed looking man in a Commander's uniform.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen." Commander Bandric said. "I didn't mean to interrupt, but I didn't know how to deal with this ..." He was starting to wonder what had convinced him to bring this girl to this meeting, but he just couldn't find a logical answer.

"My name is Joan d'Arc, Senator Carless." Joan said, raising her chin and saying what the voice in her head told her to. "I've come to fight on your side and against the Bretalians."

"She says that the Force is with her." Commander Bandric explained in a very low voice, regretting it immediately. Everybody was looking at the young woman not knowing quite what to say.

"Are you a Jedi?" Senator Carless said at last.

"No, I am not. But I can feel the Force and I know that I can help in this crisis." Her voice was surprisingly full of confidence.

*She must be crazy.* Senator Carless thought. But he was tempted to believe her against each and any reasoning his mind was trying to come up with.

"I'll be honest with you." He said. "The Jedi's have denied their help. They say that this is an internal conflict and that they can't participate. It would be wonderful if what you say is true, but I can't risk the lives of the Fleet's crews when all I have are the words of a teenager. Please, don't take any offence in this."

"I don't." Joan said calmly. The voices in her mind were stronger than ever before. And now she was able to understand what they were saying. "I can prove that I speak the truth. Not far from here, on the planet Eyna. I can show you where Master Jonderiis's light-sabre is."

This caused more than one tongue to slip and the the room was filled with sudden outbursts of surprised and stunned shouts. Master Jonderiis had been one of the most admired Jedi Masters and he was considered as one of the founders of the Republic. During his last years he had retired from public life and nobody knew where or when he had died. His light-sabre had become a mythical object, and it had been sought out for thousands of years by archaeologists, historians - and the Order of Jedi of course - but it seemed to have disappeared forever. And now this girl was saying that she knew where to find it.

"If this is true I'll give you the command of an elite fighter squadron."

Some of those present laughed, taking Senator's words as a joke.

"Thank you, Senator Carless." Joan replied without hesitation. "If you could provide me with a shuttle and an excavation team, I'll lead them to the exact point."

"Admiral Rickermoon, could you give the orders for that, please?"

Generals and Admirals looked at each other. Senator Carless could not be serious on this.

"At once, Senator Carless." Admiral Rickermoon replied staring at the young girl. This caused even more surprise. The veteran military was probably the most respected among the Republic Armed Forces, a man whose opinions were always highly valued. Nobody could guess what he was thinking of in that moment, although many of the presents wondered. He never gave an explanation.

Three hours later Joan was watching the place where her instincts had taken them to. The site had been some kind of a temple in the past, but now all that remained were ruins. It must have been a place for meditation. The peace could be felt between the tall trees that surrounded them. Vegetation had invaded walls and columns and it seemed that the ruins of this old buildings were alive in some way.

"There is nothing here, milady." The excavation team's chief said. The scanners had not shown anything at all, but they had been ordered to do what the girl said and they dug where she had indicated. Forty feet and

still nothing.

"You must dig deeper. Another ten feet." There was no hint of a doubt in her voice. The man shrugged it off and ordered the team to continue.

"Sir, we have got something here!" One of the workers said after five long minutes. He carefully extracted a small box from the ground. His chief cleaned it's surface to discover a rich decoration on it.

"Open it, please." Joan said.

The man obeyed. There was no lock. When he opened the box they could see a red cloth covering something. He removed it with two fingers and everybody saw a metallic cylinder with a hole at one of the ends and a single control button on its surface. There was a complicated symbol engraved on it. Nobody said anything until Joan finally took the cylinder and looked at it for a moment, before she pointed the open end to the sky and pressed the button. The workers let an exclamation leave from their lips when the blue light ray appeared.

"It was true!" One of the men said at last. That broke the silence and his stunned comrades grinned at each others.

*Thank you Master Jonderiis.* Joan thought. *Thank you very much!*

Upon their return to the *Harmony*, the light sabre was immediately sent to the ship's labs. Joan had to wait for the expert's verdict with Senator Carless and his staff, whose conversation suddenly was cut off when the chief science officer entered in the briefing room.

"It's authentic." The man said. "The analysis of the sabre and the comparisons with the old registers have proved that it is Master Jonderiis's light-sabre. It still works after more than 4000 years."

All those present were unable to say a word. Senator Carless took the sabre and gave it to Joan.

"It's yours." He said. "And you will have that fighter squadron, too."

"But she doesn't know how to pilot a fighter!" One of the Generals protested. "Do you?" He asked staring at the young girl.

"Do you have flight simulators onboard?" She asked.

"Yes, of course."

"Allow me to try, please." Joan said.

Admiral Rickermoon gave some orders using a transmitter and all the group headed for the *Harmony's* training facilities. Joan noticed a known face amongst the small group of technicians surrounding the simulator's cabin.

"Nice to meet you again." Sergeant Santer said.

"Nice to meet you, sir!" Joan replied surprised as she climbed into the simulator's cockpit.

"I was transferred to the *Harmony* just today." He explained in a low voice while helping her to adjust the seat belts. "I've been heard a lot of things about you and one is that if you are able to pilot a fighter, then you are going to command an entire squadron ..."

"Yes, it's true." She said smiling.

"If you get it, I'll be the chief technician in that squadron." He grinned cheerfully. He had taken a liking for the

girl since the first instant he had laid his eyes on her. "And now it would be better if I gave you a few short instructions ..."

When the canopy closed Sergeant Santer climbed down the ladder and went to the control console. At least a dozen Generals and Admirals were behind him with Senator Carless.

"All right, Joan, let's go."

She started the initial procedures trying not to forget anything of what she had been told. A part of the old Joan felt panic, but the new woman she had become took command. She closed her eyes for a second and breathed deeply, allowing the Force to flow through her. Joan opened her eyes again and targeted the first enemy fighter.

An hour later Sergeant Santer opened a channel to speak with Joan and told her that the simulation was over. Everybody stood in silence behind him, until somebody broke the uneasy peace that had conquered the room.

"Incredible." Admiral Rickermoon said. "She made some rookie mistakes along the way and once or twice she didn't know which button to push, but I have never seen a pilot fighting like that."

Joan descended from the simulator's cockpit and walked towards the crowd.

"So when are we going to attack?"

After many discussions it was decided that the initial attack would be light and would not consist of many forces. The Bretalians' superiority was too obvious and most of the Generals agreed that it was better to wait for the reinforcements. Joan insisted on attacking and she got the responsibility of being in Command of a small force if she was able to find enough volunteers. The news about what Joan had done had sped through the Fleet like the wind. When her request for volunteers was made public, she found that almost every starfighter pilot was eager to follow her. Joan was allowed to take only twenty three and so she got the squadron that she had been promised. They would attempt a surprise attack against one of the smallest formations of the enemy Fleet and if Joan's squadron managed to break the blockade at that point, a bigger force could exploit that weakness immediately thereafter.

Only twenty hours remained until the end of the Bretalians' ultimatum when she entered the main bay dressed in a flight suit. She was the only woman in the entire area. The pilots noticed the light sabre attached to her belt and that confirmed all the rumours they had heard: They were going to be commanded by a Jedi Lady. Everybody accepted her without the slightest doubt. A young pilot approached Joan and saluted militarily. She saluted back in return, feeling a bit strange by doing so.

"I'm Lieutenant Trillian, ma'am. I'm going to be your wingman"

"Nice to meet you, Lieutenant. It will be a honour." Joan looked at the closest fighter and noticed the winged horse painted on its hull, just under the cockpit. "What is this?" She asked.

"Well, when we were told that we were going to join a new squadron commanded by you, and what precisely precisely our first mission was about, somebody proposed to call it Miracle Squadron. Oh, the horse has been the chief technician's idea. He programmed four droids to paint his original picture on every ship of the Squadron."

"It's wonderful!" She said surprised. "Miracle Squadron. I love it. And where is that chief technician you just told me about?"

"He's over there, waiting for you beside your fighter." Trillian said, pointing at one of the ships. "He is Sergeant Santer."

Joan walked towards the fighter feeling the pilots' glances on her. Santer made a small sign with his head and she understood what they were waiting for.

"To your fighters, gentlemen!" She shouted. A chorus of "at once, ma'am" replied her while all the pilots boarded their ships.



Joan raced up the ladder toward her own ship and Sander was there to help her to strap in.

"Be careful, girl." He said. "Maybe you are a Jedi, but you will need more than that to survive."

"Thank you, sir." She replied with a smile.

"No, no more sir. Call me Tobb. I'll be calling you Commander when you return."

"Call me Joan. And thank you very much for the horses!" She said with a smile.

"May the Force be with you!" He said saluting before descending the stairs.

Joan held back a tear. It was the first time that somebody had said that to her. She closed the canopy and turned on the engines.

## **Part Two**

### **Miracle Squadron**

#### **[Onboard White Squadron's Frigate]**

Foxfire left the medical facilities and headed to the bridge. She noticed that somebody was following her and turned her head to see who it was.

"Wait a minute, Foxfire." Vyper said. "The High Command is not the only reason to abandon this area. Remember that we have a Corvette and a Gunboat disabled not far from here, and sooner or later they will be found by another Imperial patrol. If we are still here when that happens we'll be in serious trouble again..."

"I was thinking about it too." Foxfire replied, stopping in her strides. "I'm really tempted to go there in a B-Wing and finish them off."

"That's what Imperials would do. Those ships are defenceless, but they are an inconvenience because they can reveal our presence, so we just kill them. That has a name, and it's murder. I left the Imperial Navy because of things like that." Vyper couldn't hide how uncomfortable he felt, and this surprised Foxfire. The ex-Imperial pilot didn't use to show his feelings so clearly. *The guy is sincerely concerned*, Foxfire thought. *Vyper never talks too much about his past, but he must have seen a couple of really bad things when he was with the Imperials. He is right. I suppose there is a line we should never cross, or we wouldn't be that different from the square-heads...*

"Don't worry, I was not serious. You know me, don't you? I would be unable to do something like that." She adopted her best smile and gave Vyper a little slap on the back and started walking again. Vyper nodded visibly relaxed and followed her.

"We have no troops to make prisoners of them." She continued. "And I don't want to call High Command because they would force us to return. I know that Sherry was trying to find a way to save the colonists, but I can't imagine how we can do that. We are terribly short of time. Not to mention that everything we do is disobeying direct orders."

"A problem every time." Vyper said. "Let's make a short hyperspace jump to a safer location for a while so we can do some brainstorming."

"All right, I'll give the orders for it. I'll warn Iceman and Zeppelin they must link their computers to the Frigate's for the jump. And about the brainstorming, the only thing that came to my mind when I thought of this was that the ship we are flying is still technically an Imperial Frigate..."

"It sounds like a plan." Vyper grinned. "I'll go to see how Granite and Moose are getting along with those torpedoes."

What remained of the destroyed shuttle had been removed at last from the Frigate's main bay entrance. Now the pile of junk had been placed beside a wall, and a technician was inspecting it, looking for usable components. Not far from there two pilots were almost totally covered by the dismantled parts of torpedo launchers from a B-Wing and two TIE-Bombers, at least three Imperial torpedoes and a lot of unidentified pieces. They were deciding noisily who was guilty for the last failed experiment. That had almost caused one of the torpedoes to explode inside the bay. But they were still working while shouting at each other, and nobody tried to interrupt them. Cybercat was observing how two technicians and a droid were trying to make the more necessary repairs to her B-Wing. They didn't even know where to begin. The Rebel pilot felt a hand on her shoulder, and looked back to find Shadow.

"Are you ok?" Shadow asked.

"Yes, I suppose so. I've analysed the computer's records. Sherry was shot down while she was trying to save me from an Imperial fighter."

"That doesn't matter. Don't feel as if it was your fault."

"I can't avoid thinking that it could be me connected to all those tubes and that Sherry is just taking my place."

Shadow knew that the conversation couldn't lead anywhere positive, so she tried to change the subject.

"How are Granite and Moose getting along with the torpedoes?"

"The torpedoes? Ah, yes, it seems they are going to kill each other, but I think it's only a way of keeping the concentration and avoid being disturbed."

"I hope they know what they are doing..." Shadow said. They saw how Vyper approached the two pilots and asked something. They replied to him rudely and continued working, ignoring his presence. He shrugged and went out again.

"Do you think Michael will be angry with us? Captain Lewis "Moose" Gregory asked.

"Nah! He is always a bit serious, that's all. Give me that welder, now this is going to work."

"That's exactly the same that you said last time..." Moose pointed out.

"Do you want to start again?" Granite said with a fierce glance and a metallic device ready to be launched at his comrade. The device was a calibration sensor for the torpedoes that Moose had managed to construct after many hours of hard work.

"If you break that you are going to eat this one!" The bar shaped piece that Moose was holding up was even bigger.

"Hey, isn't that an Imperial support for standard concussion missiles?"

Moose looked at the component and smiled.

"It uses the same subjection mechanism as the torpedo launchers, but it's smaller." He said. "If we could use it in combination with parts of the B- Wing launcher hardware..."

"... We could obtain a hybrid launcher that would work with the Imperial proton torpedoes..." Granite continued.

"... And we could forget the Imperial torpedo launchers that are giving us so many problems to adapt..."

"You got it! I knew there was something inside that head of yours!" Granite said.

"Do you see them?" Cybercat asked. "Now they are laughing like lunatics."

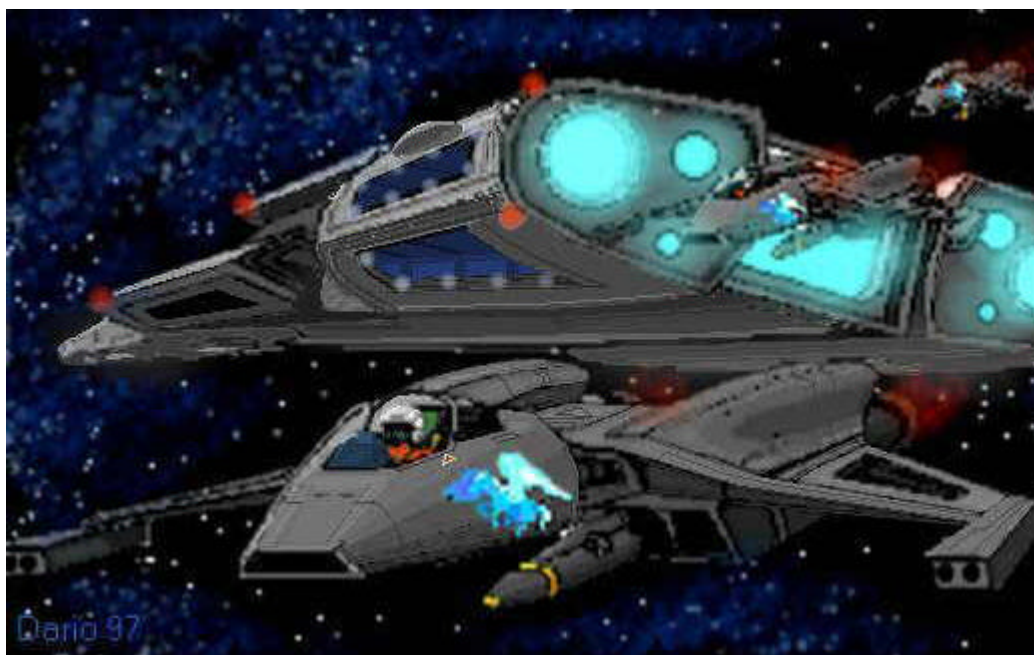
"Let's get out of here before they can do a new test." Shadow replied.

Flight Officer Diana "Joker" Agar had spent some time watching the different monitors connected to Shok'wave's body, but after some time she decided that the medical droid was also doing that task. She decided to ignore the droid's indications about how Shok'wave was unable to hear anything and she started to talk to her. Maybe the droid was wrong, and she desperately needed to feel that she was doing something to help her friend.

"I will start when I was two years old." She commenced. "I could begin sooner but there is nothing interesting. Well, the day of my second birthday I noticed that nobody was watching me, so I decided to investigate what the food processor buttons were for..."

### [On the other side]

When all the fighters had left the hangar, the Cruiser that had brought them there departed. The small ships didn't have hyperspace capabilities. That was reserved for the big vessels, because the hyperspace motivators were too big to be mounted on a fighter. The same occurred with the shield generators, so they were unprotected against lasers and missiles. But even with such limitations the Xatafi MF21 "Singer" was one of the best fighters ever constructed, solid, agile and well armed.



The squadron had been launched far from the objective, trying to avoid the Cruiser's jump from being detected by the Bretalians. There was no concrete plan, just to attack some of the ships that were orbiting Alderaan and cause as much damage as possible. Every ship carried a space bomb, a not very precise weapon, but which launched close to the objective could cause a lot of damage on a capital ship. Joan's instruments couldn't detect the enemy ships yet, so she tried to use the Force to feel them, just as she used to do with the little insects back in Gerillia.

The river of thoughts flooded her, almost making her lose control of her fighter. At first she felt her squadron's pilots. They were trying to control their nerves and their fear, but they seriously believed they could win this battle. They trusted Joan blindly. She felt comforted by this and projected her senses outward, until her mind touched the Bretalians' minds. She tried to separate the origin of the different flows of thoughts that she felt invading her conscience, and after some time she thought that she would be able to distinguish a ship's crew from another. She worked on that, trying to catch the general mood onboard every ship. Most of the Bretalians were overcome by boredom and expectation, some of them seemed to be eager for the beginning of the possible battle, but the more extended feeling was that of overconfidence. They

didn't expect to be attacked...

But Joan received infinitely more than she wanted. She perceived good feelings in the Bretalians too. There were people onboard those ships who loved other people, people who were married, who had children. There were illusions, projects for the future, great desires of living. Joan felt that she was going to be unable of shooting against those ships, against those people. A tear rolled down her cheek under the black glasses when she imagined them dying at her hands.

Suddenly, like a background noise she felt something bigger behind. It was Alderaan's inhabitants. She felt the anguish, the fear, the desolation. Now she knew why the Jedi were so reticent to fight. Finally it was a decision between two life forms, and most of the time good people had to die. Joan removed her glasses and wiped away the tears. She closed her eyes. The people from Alderaan were not guilty, they were about to be invaded, to become slaves of the Bretalians, and she couldn't sit still while that happened. She made her decision. When she left her parents and her home she felt her heart had broken. Now she felt how the fragments were breaking again as she pushed the intercom button.

"This is Miracle Leader. Be ready for combat."

While the answers from the pilots came in, Joan could perceive how their feelings were now even stronger. Her panel beeped and she saw that they were detecting the first of the Bretalian Battle Cruisers. She had been told that eight of the space bombs they carried would be enough to destroy one of those Cruisers. That meant a maximum of three. She selected the closest ones and input them into the computer's memory.

"The plan is simple: We are going to attack those three ships." She said. "Miracle Nine to Sixteen will launch their bombs against the one to port. Miracle Seventeen to Twenty Four will take the one to starboard, and the rest of us will shoot against the one to bow."

"This is Miracle Nine, boss. What about the enemy fighters?"

"They aren't expecting us, so we'll be close to the capital ships before they can react. Engage the fighters only when you have launched those bombs."

"Roger, Miracle Leader."

No more questions, no more doubts. She was only seventeen years old and there were twenty three adult men ready to die following her orders. Joan threw her fear far away. She felt the Force with her and thought that age didn't matter at all. She concentrated her mind on the three Bretalian Cruisers.

She knew that it would be very hard to force somebody to act or think against their will. To force hundreds of people would be impossible. But she could reinforce something that was already there. The Bretalians overconfidence.

*Confidence. That's nice. Be confident, there is nothing to fear, there is no reason to look at the monitors, you are powerful, nobody would attack somebody as powerful as you are...*

The distance was decreasing rapidly. They had undoubtedly been detected by the Battle Cruiser's sensors. But their operators were not watching them.

*Don't worry, there is no danger. The screens are as empty as the last time you took a look...*

A Bretalian looking through any of the multiple external windows would see twenty-four bright points growing in front of them. But nobody noticed.

*There is nothing out there. Nothing to fear...*

The alarms sounded aboard the Battle Cruisers, but their crews were too slow in reacting. They couldn't believe they were being attacked. Joan made a last effort.

*Nothing to fear, nothing to fear...*

Miracle Squadron was almost in range to launch the bombs when the defences came to life. Joan had to concentrate on piloting her fighter and had to interrupt her overpowering of the Bretalians' minds. Sweat covered her face under the mask and glasses but she had managed to get the Squadron to where they were without being shot at once.

Joan selected the bomb launcher and directed the *Singer* against the Cruiser, spinning to avoid the laser blasts. When the sight turned red and the computer beeped indicating the optimal distance she pushed the trigger and pulled the stick back furiously. The fighter trembled with the force of the nearby explosions. One by one, each bomb reached its target. Two fighters were destroyed just after launching their bombs, but when the rest of the Squadron moved away from their objectives the three big ships were covered with dozens of chained explosions. These pilots were undoubtedly the best ones in the Fleet. None of them had missed their target.

"I just can't believe it!" Miracle Four said. "They didn't shoot until we were almost breathing down their necks!"

"Don't get relaxed, here come the reinforcements!" Miracle Two warned. Lieutenant Trillian put his fighter closer to Joan's.

"We'll have to fight to return home!" Joan said. "Engage those fighters now!"

The Bretalians were now reacting to the attack. Some capital ships were moving to cover the position of the three destroyed Cruisers, while dozens of fighters were racing to attack the intruders. The first wave was already there.

Joan jinked to evade the frontal fire and targeted one of the nearest ships. She didn't stay to watch how it exploded and manoeuvred to put her fighter on the tail of a fresh enemy. A new explosion and she forced her *Singer* into a narrow loop, avoiding the laser shots from a third Bretalian. The pilot couldn't understand how he had missed. One instant he had the Republic's fighter centred in his sights, and suddenly it wasn't there any more. He looked astonished at how his own threat display was blinking, but then he couldn't see anything.

"You must show me that trick, Boss!" Trillian exclaimed impressed.

Joan was too concentrated to reply. She and her *Singer* were like an only entity. She was using the Force to feel the ship's reactions before the sensors could detect them. The Force was the only instrument she needed. The young woman perceived the enemy fighters around her and knew where they were without using her displays. The confusion was growing among the Bretalian pilots trying to shoot her down.

But there were more and more enemy fighters arriving, and the remainder of Miracle's pilots didn't have the help of the Force. Miracle Seven had only enough time for a short cry before disappearing in a cloud of fragments. Miracle Fifteen collided with a Bretalian fighter and exploded. Miracle Five was asking for help with three Bretalians on its tail. Joan launched her *Singer* in an interception course.

"Five, break left now!" Joan ordered. The frightened pilot obeyed and his three pursuers mirrored his manoeuvre, offering a clean target to Joan. She managed to shoot down two of them, but the remaining one was about to do the same with Miracle Five. Joan reduced her speed and forced her ship into a tight turn to follow the Bretalian. She pushed the throttle up again and took aim. She felt other Bretalian fighters coming almost in front of her, but if she evaded them Miracle Five would be condemned. Joan kept her trajectory and shot without pause against the Bretalian until the fighter began to disintegrate. She manoeuvred briskly to avoid the incoming threat, but it was late. Her fighter received four impacts before she was able to get out of the line of fire. Her main display exploded and she felt the fragments hitting her in the chest. She couldn't avoid shouting.

"Hang on, Joan, I'm coming!" Lieutenant Trillian's voice sounded in her ears. She used the Force to control the pain and searched for the enemy fighter with her senses.

"Don't worry, Two, I'm fine!" She said. The blood was soaking her flight suit but she didn't notice it. She pushed the trigger one more time and the Bretalian fighter was hit right on the engines. Joan saw how the enemy ship spun out of control and ceased firing. She didn't want to kill anybody more unless it was completely necessary.

"I'm receiving new contacts!" Miracle Twenty said. "They are coming from the planet!"

The Alderaanians had observed the attack and had decided to act. The void created by the three destroyed Cruisers was used by them to leave the planet and join the attack with all the combat ships they still had available. The first Bretalian Cruiser arriving to the area received direct fire from two patrol ships and at least five fighters. Some of the Miracle's pilots cheered over the intercom. But that wouldn't be the last surprise...

Admiral Rickermoon had felt something unexplainable when Joan had spoken onboard the *Harmony*. He didn't know it, but he also had a small affinity to the Force. He would have been unable to explain why, but he firmly believed in Joan. The veteran Admiral had ordered the main force's attack on the Bretalian Fleet ten minutes after Miracle Squadron's. If they had managed to break the blockade and to disperse the Bretalian ships, the Republic Fleet would have a good chance of winning, even without the Corellian reinforcements. He didn't want to hear any advice from the rest of the staff and gave the orders to launch up to the last ship in the Fleet against the Bretalians surrounding Alderaan. He had promised to order a retreat if they found that Joan's Squadron had failed, but if that was the case everybody was aware that there would be many casualties before they could make the jump into hyperspace again. When the *Harmony* entered normal space he carefully studied the first data provided by the sensors. Admiral Rickermoon grinned.

"Sir, we have multiple contacts!" His adjutant informed. "There are Alderaanian ships fighting side by side with Miracle Squadron... One of the Bretalian Cruisers is heavily damaged and is attempting to retreat. There are only two capital ships left in the sector, but we have new indications of at least twenty more arriving!"

"Joan has done it." Admiral Rickermoon said excited. "To all ships, attack the Bretalian capital ships entering the sector. Don't try to save ammunition and shoot every torpedo or missile you have in your bays!"

Joan felt Admiral Rickermoon's presence and she knew that help had arrived. They were going to win the battle.

"Keep the Bretalian fighters busy away from our Cruisers!" She ordered.

"Yyyyyaaaaaaaauuuuuuuuh...!" She didn't bother to find out who the owner of that voice was. Joan grinned and launched her crippled *Singer* after two Bretalian fighters.

The first wave of torpedoes from the Republic's ships fell like a fiery storm on the unaware Bretalians. They outnumbered the Republic two to one, but this was the first time since the beginning of hostilities that they had fought against a capable enemy. They were overwhelmed by the surprise in seeing how several of their powerful Cruisers were bursting into flames. One of the Captains gave in to panic and gave the order to flee. When his Cruiser made the jump into hyperspace it was a sign to take a rest. The Admiral commanding the Bretalian Fleet had died onboard one of the first ships attacked by Miracle Squadron, and after some minutes all the ships that were still able to do so jumped into hyperspace, abandoning the fight. The remaining ships' crews were made prisoners, including most of the fighter pilots.

"This is Miracle Leader. Let's return to the *Harmony*." Joan ordered. She felt how her strength was abandoning her with the blood she was losing, but she needed to say something more. "I'm very proud of all of you."

There were many replies saying that it had been a honour to fly at her side. Everybody cheered, and some of the pilots even made a barrel roll to celebrate the victory.

Fifteen fighters from Miracle Squadron returned to *Harmony's* hangar. At least two more pilots had been able to eject from their ships before being destroyed. Sergeant Santer ran toward Joan's ship and had the ladder ready when the fighter touched the floor. He climbed to the cockpit and opened the canopy using the external mechanism.

"Hello, Tobb..." Was all she was able to say before losing consciousness. Horrified, Santer noticed the blood covering Joan's flight suit.

"I need a doctor here right now, Joan is wounded!" He shouted.

When she opened her eyes again in *Harmony's* medical facilities, the first face she could distinguish was Santer's. Beside him were Admiral Rickermoon and Senator Carless. Lieutenant Trillian, Miracle Two, was there too.

"Hello, Tobb." She said again. But this time she could smile too.

"Hello, Joan." He took her hand. "Don't worry, your wound was not too severe, but you have lost a lot of blood."

"And this young man has your same blood type." Admiral Rickermoon added. "He wouldn't allow the doctors to give you synthetic blood."

"Thank you, Tobb." She smiled again. "Now I owe you my life."

"You are welcome, Joan!" Santer became embarrassed when he noticed he was still calling her Joan in the presence of Admiral Rickermoon and Senator Carless.

"Eeeer, I mean Commander..."

Joan laughed and tightened her grip on Santer's hand.

"I said that you could call me Joan." She noticed the quick glance from Santer to Admiral Rickermoon.

"Am I wrong, Admiral? Can he call me Joan?"

"Of course he can. When you are both alone." He smiled. The old soldier had noticed the way they looked at each other. "He is right about the rank. As of today you are Commander d'Arc."

"And there is more. You are going to receive the Republic's Medal of Honour for your actions today, Commander d'Arc." Senator Carless announced.

Joan didn't know what to say. She was still too tired to think about the consequences of her victory. Senator Carless noticed her fatigue.

"Well, gentlemen. It's time we leave Commander d'Arc to get some more rest."

"All the guys are waiting for you, Boss." Trillian added as he headed to the door. "And don't forget that you must teach me that trick!"

"I'll try to remember what I did." She said smiling.

Tobb Santer was the last one to leave.

"I'll be back." He said kissing her on the cheek.

For a few minutes Joan stopped being the incredible warrior who had just commanded a fighter squadron with the help of the Force to become only a seventeen years old girl who was feeling love for the very first time. She fell back to sleep with a smile on her lips.

The ceremony took place in Alderaan's Senate Palace. The place was full of people, not only Senators, but people who had arrived from the whole planet to see *Alderaan's Jedi*, as Joan was starting to be known. The young woman was awed as she looked at the immense sea of people. She entered with Admiral Rickermoon through a secondary entrance, unnoticed by the public. Senator Carless was there to receive them. A beautiful black haired woman was with him. She glanced at Joan intensely.

"Nice to meet you, Joan!" Senator Carless said cheerfully.

"Nice to meet you too, Senator." The unknown woman didn't take her eyes off Joan. She was holding the Senator's arm.

"I would like you to meet my fiancée, Sorelnei." Senator Carless said with a proud grin.

"It's a honour to meet Alderaan's Jedi." Sorelnei said offering her hand to Joan.

"The honour is mine, Sorelnei." Joan said holding the woman's hand. "But I'm not really a Jedi." Joan added with humility.

"Well, that is what everybody calls you. Even Septim."

Joan understood that Septim was Senator Carless' name. Before she could reply, the orator's voice announced that Joan d'Arc was about to appear on the lecturing platform, and the people which filled the Senator's Palace began to shout her name.

"Don't make them wait, Joan." Admiral Rickermoon said.

Senator Carless put the medal on Joan's chest to the sound of deafening applause.

"Let's go, Joan." Senator Carless shouted so he could be heard by Joan. "You must say something to them!"

She took a step forward and looked at the multitude. When they noticed Joan was about to speak everybody became silent. She breathed in deeply before starting.

"People of Alderaan..." Her first words incited a new ovation. Joan waited until it faded away and continued. "I can't express how honoured I am for all you are giving me. I must say that Alderaan is free today thanks to the efforts of many people who gave their lives to defend the things they believed in, the equality of all the worlds in Universe and their right to live in peace and freedom. I am accepting this medal because they can not be here to take it themselves." The sweetness in Joan's voice had captivated the audience. Some people were crying, and everybody was completely enthralled by her words. "But although we have won in Alderaan, there are other worlds who have fallen under Bretalians' tyranny. We can't rest until all of them recover the freedom they have been stolen. I will fight until that day comes!"

The applause was incredible. Everybody was again shouting Joan's name. She rose her hands asking for silence. She had thought a lot about what she was about to say.

"But we'll need somebody to lead us through this enterprise, somebody who has gained all our respect and confidence." Joan glanced at Senator Carless and reached her hand out towards him. "Senator Carless, will you be that man?"

Senator Carless was stunned. He had been in Command of the Fleet only because of the circumstances, he didn't want either the power or the responsibility. But again he couldn't deny looking into those eyes. Joan knew that she was forcing him to do something he was not prepared for, but there was no other opportunity. He had been the only Senator that had reacted to the Bretalian aggression, maybe because of his youth, and Joan couldn't allow him to retreat now. Senator Carless' name was now the one coming out of those thousands of mouths. He took Joan's hand and directed his attention to the multitude.

"Yes, I'll be that man if the Republic commends me to that mission." The ovation was now thundering, as Senator Carless embraced Joan. There was only one person who was not applauding as she looked at the embrace. Sorelnei, Senator Carless' fiancée.

**[Onboard White Squadron's Frigate]**



Vyper had discovered that it would be impossible to talk with Granite and Moose while they were working. Vyper had met Granite in Red Squadron and knew that the eccentric pilot had an impressive knowledge of weapons. If somebody was able to adapt the Imperial torpedoes to the B-Wing's launchers that person was Granite. And it seemed that Moose was an expert in starfighter's electronic devices, so Vyper thought that there was as good a chance as any that the two pilots working together could reach their goal. A lot of shouts from behind him made him stop and look what was happening. A glance was enough to see that Granite and Moose had discovered something. Vyper grinned and continued his way towards the secondary hangar.

He was thinking about what he had been told by Foxfire. This *ship is still an Imperial Frigate* she had said. *Maybe we could use one or two more Imperial things*. He arrived at the hangar door and entered. He turned the lights on. There was not enough personnel to manage all the Frigate's facilities, and although this hangar had probably been examined when they captured the ship, nobody was working here now.

"Ahaha..." Vyper said.

Four TIE Interceptors were parked there. This hangar didn't have a catapult like the main one, so the fighters had to make free take-offs if needed. Vyper went to the rear side of the nearest fighter and opened the access hatch. He entered into the cockpit and sat before the controls. He turned the computer on and launched the auto-check procedures. He looked at the hangar through the panelled canopy as a rush of memories came to his mind. He had spent many hours in similar cockpits when he flew for the Imperial Navy. The TIE Interceptor was not as good as the TIE Advanced, specially because of the lack of shields and hyperspace capability, but it was still a fantastic ship, and he had had a lot of fun flying in them. He remembered the old times, the old friends, his expectation when he boarded an Imperial Frigate for the first time, honestly convinced that the Empire had brought peace to the Galaxy. But with time he had discovered the price of such a peace: slavery. He had witnessed slaughters in the Emperor's name. He had killed in his name too. Every night, when he went to bed, he wondered if some of those deaths could have been avoided, if he could had acted in a different manner. The loss of the woman he loved had made the situation unbearable for him, desiring his own death and even looking for it in suicidal engagements. In his heart he blamed the Empire for all that pain, and his feelings of guilt became even worse every time he realized that he was discharging his hate and his frustration against the wrong enemy. He finally defected from the Imperial Navy when those thoughts made it impossible for him to live in peace with his conscience. This was a story he had not shared with none of his new comrades, one that he struggled to forget. Now the Empire was about to cause a new slaughter of innocents, and Vyper had decided to do his best to avoid it. If they managed to find a way, of course.

He abandoned his memories when the computer beeped announcing the check was complete. The TIE Interceptor was armed and ready to fly.

Vyper inspected the remaining ships one by one obtaining the same results. He thought about the situation. One Imperial Frigate and four Imperial fighters. Maybe the equation had a solution after all. He used the closest communications console to call the bridge.

"Foxfire, this is Vyper. I've got something for you."

She heard Vyper's information with great interest. Shadow had been on the bridge just a minute ago, and she had said that Granite and Moose seemed to be about to solve the torpedoes' problem. Foxfire ordered a jump to a new position further away from the disabled Imperial ships. While she observed the manoeuvre she thought about their new options. Some hours ago the rescue of those colonists was impossible. Now it was almost impossible. But she had managed to do many "almost impossible" things in the past. That "almost" could be all they needed. If only Shok'wave would come out of her comma...

#### **[On the other side]**

Shok'wave witnessed an entire year in Joan's life through a tornado of images, sensations and feelings. Combat after fierce combat the Republic's Fleet had managed to push the Bretalians a good portion of the way back towards their home planets, recovering the freedom for almost all the systems that had been invaded by them. Senator Carless had commanded the Republic's politics and Admiral Rickermoon the

military mechanism. On the battlefield, Miracle Squadron was always the first to fight, and every pilot in the Fleet dreamed of joining Joan's Squadron and flying beside her. After the battle at Alderaan her *Singer* had never been hit again. The stories about Alderaan's Jedi sped through the Galaxy, bringing hope to all the planets still under Bretalian domination. She insisted every time she was questioned that she was not a Jedi, but that was always taken as a sign of humility, increasing the admiration amongst the people who had the chance to talk with her. The Jedi Knights were still out of the war, rejecting the requests for help from both sides.

The only moments when Joan could be her true self were the ones spent with Tobb Santer, those rare intervals between one battle and the next, when they could be in private, pretending there was no war and that they were only a young couple enjoying life, not wondering about the next day or the next hour. During those instants they forgot their pains and fears, the long hours when Tobb had to wait for the return of Miracle Squadron, praying for Joan to return untouched one more time, those minutes after the combat, when Joan used the Force to feel the *Harmony* before her instruments could, fearing that the ship could have been attacked when she was not there to defend it...

When they were together Commander d'Arc and Sergeant Santer were like a mirage, they were just Tobb and Joan, a man and a woman who loved each other, the oldest tale in the Universe, but the newest one for them.

It was night in *Harmony's* time. They were in Tobb's room, laid down on his bed, with the lights on the dimmest position, illuminating them enough to see each other's faces but hiding the room's details, allowing them to keep the illusion of being in some different place, far from the ship, far from the war. Joan liked to see how Tobb looked at her from head to foot, making her feel desired, like the beautiful woman in her eighteens that she was when she showed him what uniforms, flight suits, helmets and masks hid to the rest of crew. Joan could see the love in Tobb's eyes and that filled her heart with joy and peace. But that night she was scared. She had a frightening sensation that made her feel cold. Tobb embraced her and noticed she was trembling.

"What's up, Joan?" He asked worried. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know." Joan felt a desire to cry. She was unable to explain what was happening inside her. "I feel as if this is the last time we are going to be together."

"Don't be silly." He said, but a cold fear touched his heart too. He had learnt to trust Joan's intuitions. He was unable to understand how the Force worked, but he had no doubts about Joan's powers.

"It's probably nothing at all." She said trying to smile. "This is the part of the Force that I understand the least. Sometimes I perceive images or sensations about things that have not happened yet, but I can't distinguish between visions of the future and my own fears and desires."

"But what are you feeling this time?"

"Something dark." She replied after a while. "Or somebody. I don't know. I feel like..., like if somebody very evil was pronouncing my name, I can't express it better with words."

Tobb said nothing. He started to caress her hair, trying to give her some comfort. That gesture made Joan remember her father, and she finally let a tear escape. Tobb didn't know what to do. He would have given everything he had to help her. It was a torture to see his Joan crying and him feeling so impotent. He gently took Joan's tear with a finger and kissed her where the tear had been. Joan smiled and thanked Tobb with her glance.

"I try to use the Force to see clearer into the future, but I can't." She continued. "I think of you and me and try to see what our destiny is, but I can't..."

"People usually have to live with that uncertainty, and they can still be happy."

"I know. But people usually are not constantly being consulted over what to do to save the Galaxy. Sometimes I see the things perfectly. We must attack here or there and then the Bretalians won't be able to

defend their positions. But other times I am like the rest of people, I have no answers, but there is always somebody who thinks I do. I didn't ask for this responsibility, Tobb. Sometimes I need my own answers too, like now, but nobody can give me any, and all my power becomes useless."

"You are doing pretty well, Joan. We are winning now, and you are the reason for our victories. You have always known what to do, I don't care if it's the Force or your female intuition." Joan had to smile when he said that. "When you are there showing the path everybody follows you without hesitation, with absolute faith. Me too."

Joan smiled again. "Things are going to be more difficult now. The Bretalians are proposing a truce and Senator Carless is tempted to accept. I can't convince him that it's a trick, a trap to catch us unawares. They think they can still beat us, and they are using everything they can to do so, even lying and the offers of peace. Senator Carless has been abandoning his duties more and more lately. Sometimes I think that it's Sorelnei who puts the words in his mouth. Most of the times I try to talk with him I only get to talk with that woman, and I'm not sure if she is giving him my messages. I don't trust her too much."

"Maybe she is just jealous of you." Tobb said. "Sometimes I'm jealous of everybody who is less than a kilometre from you."

Now Joan laughed freely.

"I love you so much that I always fear losing you." Joan said grinning. She pinched Tobb's arm and he cried out as if he was being killed, making her laugh even more.

"Thanks, Tobb. I'm fine now."

Tobb didn't reply. He noticed that Joan was making an effort to ignore her bad predictions, and he decided to do the same. He kissed her tenderly and soon they abandoned themselves to passion. That night they made desperate love.

Joan entered the hangar and walked towards her fighter. It was going to be a "hit and run" mission for six fighters. A Bretalian convoy had been detected near the Remisse system, and Miracle Squadron had received orders to identify the ships, cause as much damage as possible and get out of there before Bretalian reinforcements could arrive. She expected to find her wingman, Lieutenant Trillian, waiting for her last instructions beside her ship, as he always did, but she found an unknown pilot instead.

"Hello. Where is Lieutenant Trillian, please?"

"He has fallen sick today, ma'am. I've been ordered to take his place." The pilot said.

"I hope it's nothing serious..."

"Not at all, ma'am, surely something he had for dinner, but Captain Lamorny saw him vomiting and said that it's better to be safe than sorry."

"He is right." Joan said. Captain Lamorny was Wildcat Squadron's Executive Officer. Wildcat shared the *Harmony's* hangars with Miracle and Kallen Squadrons.

"Are you from Wildcat, Lieutenant...?"

"Smeigger, ma'am. Yes, I'm usually Wildcat Five, but it will be an honour to be in Miracle today and be your wingman." The pilot replied with enthusiasm. Joan saw Captain Lamorny not far from there. He waved his hand, signalled to Smeigger and indicated her with a gesture that the young Lieutenant was a good pilot.

"Very well, Lieutenant Smeigger." Joan said while she replied to Lamorny raising her hand and smiling. "You will be Miracle Two while Lieutenant Trillian is off duty."

"Thank you, ma'am!"

Joan smiled as Smeigger turned round and ran towards his fighter, but she became serious again as she seated herself in her *Singer's* cockpit. She didn't like this change too much, but the Squadron was going to be launched in five minutes, too little time to look for a wingman she knew.

"Is everything ok, Commander?" Tobb Santer climbed to the cockpit to help her as always.

"Hi, Tobb. Well, Trillian is sick and I have to fly with a pilot from Wildcat as wingman, but he will do perfectly, I'm sure."

"Yes, I saw Trillian as pale as a ghost running toward the bathroom barely ten minutes ago."

"Poor guy. I'll go and see him when we return. And now say good luck."

"Good luck, darling!"

"Please, Sergeant Santer, be serious or I'll have to arrest you." Joan said laughing as she adjusted her helmet.

"I can think of one or two places where I wouldn't mind being arrested. Your room, for example..." He replied as he helped Joan to put on the mask.



"It's an order then. I'll see you in my room, and don't try to run away or the punishment will be greater!" Joan's voice sounded through the mask.

Tobb descended laughing and retrieved the ladder. Joan closed the canopy and showed him her right thumb. She was the warrior again.

"May the Force be with you." Tobb said as the fighter took off and left the hangar. He couldn't get last night's conversation out of his mind.

*Please, be careful...* he thought.

The sensors detected the first Bretalian ships. Joan counted sixteen transports and two light patrol ships as escort. *Not a great deal.*

"This is Miracle Leader. Miracle Two and I will take care of the escorts. The rest of you identify and attack the transports. Shoot only against the engines, we don't need a massacre."

"Roger, Leader." The five answers came back one by one. Joan targeted one of the patrol ships and ordered Miracle Two to attack the other one. This was going to be an easy mission.

But something was wrong. She used the Force to feel the Bretalian crews' feelings and noticed a lot of tension. This was not strange, because they should have detected the six Republic fighters by now, but there was something unusual. There was more anxiety than fear, as if they were expecting this attack and were ready to defend themselves...

"Keep your eyes open." She said. "I think this is not exactly what it seems to be."

As if waiting for that sentence, every transport opened their bays and started to spit out fighters.

"It's a trap!" Joan cried out. "We are too close. If we turn back we'll be an easy target. Engage the fighters and may the Force be with you!"

"Two, try not to lose my tail!" She didn't wait for the answer. She immediately directed her *Singer* against the closest Bretalian and opened fire. Her new wingman saw stunned how she evaded the laser bolts in an incredible dance of skill and destroyed two enemy fighters before reaching the first wave. Lieutenant Smeigger couldn't repeat those manoeuvres and he soon lost contact with Joan. He cursed in silence and concentrated in not getting himself killed.

Joan had no time to look back. She stretched her senses feeling every shot directed against her. The *Singer* spun every time a laser bolt was about to hit her. When an enemy fighter crossed her sight she shot without looking. Four of them were coming at her from the front shooting with all their fire power.

Joan pulled the stick back and pushed on the right pedal briskly. Her fighter barrelled through the enemy lasers without being hit. When she was barely a few feet from them she shot twice. One of the fighters lost control heavily damaged. His partners were forced to turn to avoid the collision. That gave Joan some seconds to manoeuvre and put her fighter after the Bretalian ships. She targeted one of them and shot before her computer was able to obtain a lock. The fighter exploded while his closest partner was already being attacked by the young woman. She broke away when her victim lost his engines and remained unable to fight.

But there were too many of them. She couldn't keep up that level of concentration forever. Sooner or later she would relax and then she would be dead. Even if she was able to evade the enemy fire eternally, her comrades couldn't hope to. A terrible cry on the intercom and a little void in the Force told her that Miracle Five had been shot down. Another friend lost, another wound in her heart. In a question of minutes the rest of the pilots would be killed too. She needed to cause a distraction, something that would give them a breather and a chance to escape. Joan saw how the transports were manoeuvring to move away from the battle. For some seconds their respective trajectories were going to cross.

"Two, where are you?" She asked. There was no answer. She had not perceived him being killed, but it was almost impossible to detect everything that was happening around her. She would have to do it on her own.

Joan launched her *Singer* spinning against the transport that was turning to her left at that moment. The ship should use its left thrusters to stop the turn and recover her movement forward. Joan centred the thrusters on the left side in her sight and shot without pause. Some of the shots directed against her by the Bretalian fighters trying to hunt her down hit the transport too. The explosion of the left engine made the Bretalian ship turn even faster in that direction, but without the thrusters that it had lost with the engine the ship would be unable to stop its rotation. The closest transport tried to avoid the collision but there was no time. The two ships collided the same moment Joan passed over them. There was a big explosion and most of the fighters pursuing Joan were caught in the expansive wave. Four of them exploded too, and three more resulted seriously damaged. None of them could follow Joan's *Singer*.



Now the young woman was free of her hunters. The cries from the Bretalian pilots who had been caught in the transports' explosion had caused some distraction among their partners, just as Joan had intended.

"This is Miracle Leader. Time to go!" She ordered. Three acknowledgements were received. She was the closest pilot to the transports, and that caused the Bretalian fighters who were trying to shoot down the three escaping *Singers* to be in front of her. She shot against several of them with deadly accuracy, not enough to destroy any, but enough to make many of them abandon the pursuit momentarily. Joan forced her ship's engines to the maximum and raced after her comrades. The Bretalians wouldn't be able to reach them before they reached *Harmony's* position, and then they would be safe. Joan sighed heavily. They were going to escape.

"Please, ma'am, don't leave me behind!" The cry was full of panic.

*It's Lieutenant Smeigger!* Joan thought. The young pilot had managed to survive, but he had been isolated from the rest of the group and now he would be trapped between a great number of Bretalian fighters. Joan couldn't leave him to die without trying to save him. She pulled back on the stick and made a 180° turn.

"Hold on, Two, I'm coming!"

She again crossed at high speed with the Bretalians trying to reach the escaping fighters. They probably thought that the Republic pilot was heading crazily towards their partners, so they ignored her and continued the pursuit of the other three ships. Joan searched for Smeigger's fighter. She saw him. Five Bretalians were after him. She was not going to arrive in time.

"I can't shake them!" Smeigger cried. "They are going to kill me, please, help me!"

"Don't let the panic blind you! Fly toward the transports!" Joan ordered. "Try to cover yourself among them!"

That was Smeigger's only chance. If he was skilled enough to manoeuvre through the transport formation without colliding, maybe he could avoid being hit. The young Lieutenant obeyed and turned in that direction. Two Bretalians followed him, but the other three broke to engage Joan. By then the Bretalian pilots trying to reach the three escaping Republic fighters had realized they were not going to succeed, so they had turned back and were approaching quickly. Joan was sweating intensely and she was having difficulty breathing. The young woman was making an immense effort to keep in contact with the Force. She wished she had been trained by true Jedi, but she couldn't give up now. Lieutenant Smeigger's life depended on her.

Once again she had to use the Force to evade the intense fire. The three Bretalian pilots seemed to have learned that they couldn't shoot Joan down with a frontal attack. They manoeuvred to their sides trying to surround the Republic fighter. Joan noticed that they were trying to buy some time allowing more of their partners to arrive. She saw how Smeigger was reaching the transports' position. If she continued in that

direction the three Bretalians would be on her tail. She hoped that the frightened pilot was able to stay alive some more minutes. Joan chose one of the enemy fighters and ignored the other two. The Bretalian pilot noticed that he had been targeted and started to jink trying to avoid being killed. The two remaining pilots launched their fighters after Joan. Suddenly she pulled the stick back and the throttled down at the same time. The *Singer* brusquely reduced her speed rising over the two Bretalians. When Joan throttled up again and recovered her previous trajectory she had the Bretalian fighters pretty much centred in her sight. The stunned pilots were shot down before they could wonder what had happened. When the remaining pilot was aware that he was alone he tried to flee and join the incoming forces. Joan allowed him to escape and raced after Miracle Two.

She saw him on the other side of the transport group. He was alone. It seemed he had been able to eliminate the two Bretalians and Joan thought that maybe there was a place for Lieutenant Smeigger in Miracle Squadron after all.

"Let's go, Two!" She said. "We can't return directly to the *Harmony*, that path is now full of Bretalians, but probably we'll have fuel enough for a roundabout course!"

"All right, Miracle Leader. I'll follow you. Thank you very much."

"You're welcome, Smeigger. Now put all the energy into the engines. We'll have to test how fast the *Singers* can fly."

There was no time to lose. Her sensors were detecting a lot of Bretalian fighters coming after them. And one Republic ship too.

"Who is that guy?" Joan wondered. The computer identified the ship as a *Singer*. One of her pilots seemed to have decided to turn back and help her. She smiled before noticing that the signal was not from Miracle's Squadron. That pilot was from Wildcat. She felt a strong sense of danger. Something was wrong.

"Wildcat pilot, this is Miracle Leader." She said using the standard Republic frequency. "Identify yourself."

"I'm Captain Lamorny, Wildcat Seven." The answer came.

Wildcat's Executive Officer. The same that had ordered Smeigger to substitute Lieutenant Trillian.

"What are you doing here?" She asked. The young woman tried to obtain some feelings through the Force, but she was terribly tired. She was fighting to not loose consciousness.

The *Singer* was approaching from aft-starboard. Joan felt the bad sensation increasing. Lamorny would have passed through a lot of Bretalian fighters to come from there. Her instincts were telling her that she should shoot against the newcomer, but her mind was trying to find a logical reason for his presence. The second of hesitation was fatal.

She received two direct impacts from Lamorny before being able to react and evade the fire. Then she felt two more hits on the rear side. Those had come from Smeigger. The engines died out and Joan knew then that she had been betrayed.

Her tiredness was stronger than wrath or sorrow. She closed her eyes and tried to rest some minutes while her defenceless *Singer* was being surrounded by Bretalian fighters. Smeigger and Lamorny were cheering and joking about her through the intercom, but she ignored them. Smeigger was also talking in Bretalian with some of the enemy pilots. Joan smiled sadly. She had managed to initially escape the trap, but Smeigger had improvised a magnificent performance of a terrified boy in danger. He had been very smart. If Joan had not been so exhausted she could have perceived the deceit. There was no point in thinking about it. One of the transports was moving toward her and opening its bay's doors. Joan took her light-sabre. She had never used it before. She looked at Master Jonderiis' sign and breathed deeply. *There is a first time for everything.* She thought.

### **Part Three**

## ***The Prisoner***

### **[Onboard an Imperial transport flying through the Kessel system]**

Lieutenant Stephen "Psycho" Proud looked at the forward visor. The space was covered with Imperial ships. Two Imperial Class Star Destroyers were already orbiting the small grey and green planetoid. There were also several Nebulon B Frigates, Corvettes and Escort Carriers. The last transports and shuttles had taken off from the planetoid carrying troops and personnel from the destroyed facilities. Psycho had been able to introduce himself into the Imperial network and had altered slightly the scheduled flights between the planetoid and the Fleet surrounding it. There was one additional transport allowed to travel through that space, and he was piloting it. He didn't know what would be discovered first: his illegal access to the Imperial Imperial computers, the disappearance of one of the transports assigned to the facilities or the dead pilot, but Psycho hoped to be far from there when any of those three things happened. He was impatient to be very far from the Kessel system for personal reasons too. That was the place where he had been a prisoner of the Imperials. Some nights his nightmares insisted on bringing him back to those days, the interrogations, the tortures ...

The further away from Kessel the better.

"Transport Ballard Two, this is Delta One." The sudden call interrupted Psycho's thoughts. He saw a TIE Interceptor some feet up to bow, flying in the same direction as he was. The scanner showed three more on his tail.

"I copy you, Delta One." Psycho replied trying to seem bored. If any of the TIE's pilots suspected of him he would be killed in a matter of seconds.

"Cargo and destiny, please."

"I'm carrying solar panels for the new TIE model." That was true. He had checked the transport's cargo before hacking the Imperial data base. He had no doubt that the TIE's pilots were using their sensors to confirm his words. "My destiny is the Space Platform Siemar-201, in Thoriam system. I suppose that they are trying to continue with the work there."

There were some seconds of silence. Psycho crossed his fingers.

"All right, Ballard Two." Psycho sighed when the answer came through. "That is what my computer says. Don't lose those pieces, I'm eager to change this Interceptor for one of the new TIEs."

"I would change this transport for your Interceptor, Delta One." Psycho joked. The Imperial pilot laughed.

"Of course you would do." Psycho knew that the Imperial fighter pilots considered themselves like the Imperial Navy elite, very high over the rest of pilots. "Good journey, Ballard Two."

"Thank you, Delta One. Good flight to you too." The four fighters had broken their formation around the transport before Psycho finished his sentence. He consulted the computer and saw that he was only thirty seconds from his jump point. The planetoid was now behind him and he couldn't see it any more. He thought of the colonists. It would be impossible to rescue them with so many Imperial ships in the area. He almost lamented to have informed Shok'wave about their situation. He hoped that she had obeyed the orders and returned to Alliance space. If White Squadron tried to do something for the small colony they would be killed.

Psycho made the last checks before the jump into hyperspace. He had a rendezvous with two officials of Alliance Special Ops. They were very interested about what Psycho and his friends of White had discovered in the Imperial facilities before destroying them. He suspected that the real reason was to commend him a new mission behind Imperial lines. Psycho was always living dangerously.

*But Sherry is so obstinate...* He thought again. Psycho knew White Squadron's Commander since some years ago. When she decided to act nothing could stop her.

"Oh, damn it..." In a sudden impulse he changed the jump co-ordinates for the last known position of White



Squadron's Frigate. The transport accelerated and disappeared in the hyperspace.

### [On the other side]

The Singer was introduced into the transport's bay. The external doors closed and the fighter was softly landed on the small hangar. Joan removed her mask and rose the glasses. She wouldn't need them inside the ship and furthermore she was going to need as much visibility as possible. She let her head fall to the left, like if she was unconscious. She heard the metallic sound of someone placing a ladder over the Singer's right flank, and somebody climbing to the cockpit. The external opening mechanism was activated and the canopy rose with a hissing noise. She felt a blaster pushing her right shoulder. The man said something in Bretalian and a second guy also climbed to help his partner to get Joan out of the fighter. She waited until the Bretalians released her seat belts, and then pushed the light sabre's contact button.

The blue ray grew before the stunned men's faces. One of them tried to shoot but he lost his blaster and one of his hands in the attempt. The man cried out with all his strength and fell from the ladder, ramming his partner with his body. Joan jumped directly from the cockpit to the floor, flexing her legs to soften the fall. Two more soldiers tried to catch her. With a quick movement of her light sabre from right to left she wounded them both seriously. A laser shot passed near her head. She launched herself under the Singer and rolled to the left side of the fighter, just in time to avoid new shots that hit the ship's hull. She looked around looking for an exit. There was an entrance very near of her. If she was able to reach it she could get to the bridge and force the crew to fly towards Republic space... It was a very small chance, but she had to try.

The young woman ran desperately evading the laser bolts by mere inches. The screams from the injured soldiers sounded in her ears, but she forced herself to ignore them. She was about to touch the door when the hangar started to fill with some kind of gas. She looked back and saw how some of the soldiers fell unconscious. Joan pushed the door controls again and again, but the door remained closed. A blind shot hit the wall above her. Joan tried not to breathe the gas, with her lungs about to explode and her head aching. Without knowing what else to do, she destroyed the door controls with the light sabre. Cables and mechanisms were now accessible. She tried to guess how they worked, but the device was too complicated and she just couldn't think clearly, her whole body pleading for air. Finally her instinct was more powerful than her will and she couldn't avoid to open her mouth and breathing. She coughed, feeling a sudden weakness. Joan fell on her knees. The light sabre slipped from her hands and turned off when touched the floor. She stretched to reach it and then everything turned dark.

When Joan finally awoke discovered that she was chained. She could hardly make a single movement. Her body was rigid and she was suffering from a strong headache caused undoubtedly by the gas effects, but at least she had slept something and had recovered some strength. She was laying on a narrow bed, inside a dark room. A background noise of engines told her that she was still onboard a ship. Joan wondered for a second how much time she had been unconscious. Then she felt that she was not alone.

"Nice to meet you at last, Joan d'Arc." Joan raised her eyes to look at the man who had spoken. She found a strong man in his forties, dressed in a Bretalian General's uniform. She recognized that face from the holos.

"I would shake your hand, General Bedenford, but somebody has chained me. They must think that I'm really dangerous."

General Bedenford laughed. He was in Command of the Bretalian Fleet since the first days of the war. He had put a price on Joan's head, and now someone was going to receive the reward.

"You are as brave as I had been told. Too bad that we are enemies."

"If your people had not invaded..."

"No time for that, milady." Bedenford interrupted her. "Now I must introduce you to some gentlemen."

Joan forced her neck to see who stood behind General Bedenford. There were four men. She knew one of them pretty well.

"Ah, Captain Lamorny. It seems that you are going to be a rich man. A coward traitor without honour, of course, but a rich man after all." Joan's words were full of scorn. Bedenford smiled and glanced at Lamorny watching his reaction.

"You can insult me all you want." He said trying to seem indifferent, but his eyes showed the opposite. "I'm convinced that the Bretalians are the future. I've chosen to join the winning side."

"Do you really think that they are going to trust a traitor like you?" She said with sarcasm. "Those who betray once, can betray again. If they are smart, they will eliminate you and your dear friend Smeigger when they can't use you anymore. Maybe that will be soon..."

"Shut up! You are talking nonsense." Joan saw the doubt in his eyes and smiled.

"You should know that Smeigger is not a traitor." Bedenford said. "He is a Bretalian and has acted following my orders." Joan stared at Lamorny and grinned. General Bedenford had not said anything about Lamorny, making clear that Joan was not so wrong about him. He was about to protest, but Bedenford didn't let him talk.

"I think you've got something to do in the hangar, don't you, Captain Lamorny?"

"Of course, sir. It's time to prepare the attack against the *Harmony*." He said looking at Joan with hate. She had to struggle to remain smiling when she heard that. Lamorny left and Joan observed the other three men better. Two of them turned out to not be entirely unknown to her, but she couldn't remember where she had seen them before. The third man was different. He was completely dressed in black, and his face was almost hidden under a hood. She felt cold when she looked at him, the same coldness that she had perceived the night before...

"These gentlemen are Senators Tremoulin and Borgonne." Bedenford said waving a hand towards the first two men. They inclined slightly their heads and smiled. Senators, of course. Joan had seen them in the Senate Palace, talking to Senator Carless. Everything was starting to get clearer now. There were people in the Republic who had seen in the Bretalians a good chance to reach a higher position, one that they wouldn't have obtained with legal methods. Militaries, like Lamorny, and politicians, like these two. And probably there were not the only ones. Joan ignored them and watched the third man.

Bedenford noticed Joan's glance and smiled.

"Well, Joan d'Arc, the famous Alderaan's Jedi." He said. "I thought that you might be interested in meeting a real Jedi Knight. This is Master Calhuch."

He advanced a step and Joan could see him better. She then discovered why he used a cloak. His face was full of scars and strange deformations. The young woman understood at once that those were the effects of using the Dark Side of Force. He was carrying Joan's light sabre in his hands.

"Master Jonderiis' light sabre." Calhuch said. His voice sounded unnatural, like if he was talking inside a cave. When he stared at her, Joan felt as if a frozen hand touched her soul. She couldn't avoid a sudden shiver.

"The stories about you were true." He continued. "You are powerful, but you are nothing but a girl, not a Jedi at all."

Joan didn't want to reply. She didn't even want to be in the same room as this monster.

"But you have come to be a symbol for the Republic. Everybody follows you wherever you go, and with your insistence in combating us, you have become an obstacle we just have to eliminate."

"You are not a Jedi." Joan said at last. "Jedi Knights don't help tyrants and murderers. Jedi Knights don't use the Dark Side."

Calhuch's laughter was nasty.

"Those who you call Jedi Knights are nothing but cowards who are too frightened to use the power they have being given. They are limited to observe the Universe, to let the things happen, when they could be constructing their own destiny. They don't deserve this power."

"But you are different, aren't you?"

"Of course. And I'm not alone. We will construct a new order in our conquered worlds, and if your pitiful Republic oppose us we'll finish with it forever. And you are going to help us.

"NEVER!!!" Joan shouted.

"Ah, but you are helping us even now, as we speak." Calhuch was hideously grinning. "We have agents infiltrated through all your dear Republic. They are telling everybody who has ears that all your triumphs have been obtained using the Dark Side of the Force, that you are just a traitor who was only trying to get the power for yourself. You will be blamed of every disaster, for every catastrophe. People have bad memory. After not much time most of them will believe the accusations. The Republic will be divided because of you, and we'll succeed thanks to you."

"You are not going to succeed!" Joan said with tears streaming down her face. "None of your lies will convince anybody that I'm like that!"

"That is what you think? You will soon discover how wrong you are."

"Bye, Alderaan's Jedi." Bedenford said. "We'll see you later."

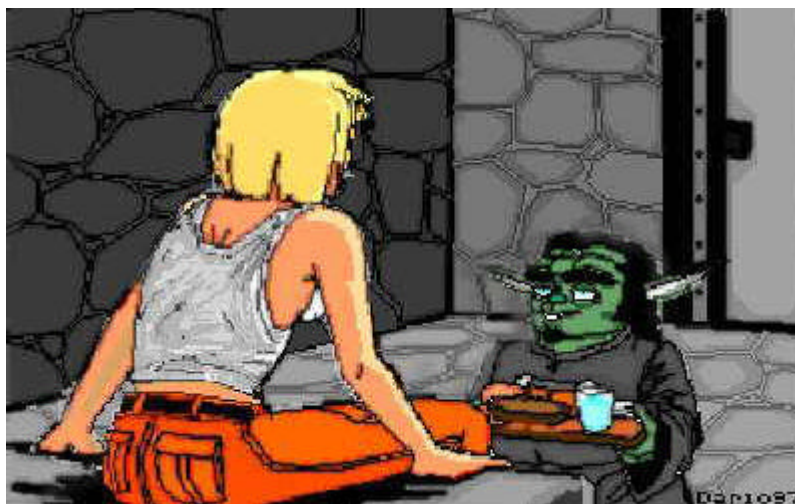
When they finally left her alone in her prison, Joan remembered Lamorny's words about the attack on the *Harmony* and her heart filled with fear for her friends. For Tobb. If Calhuch was telling the truth the entire Galaxy was going to suffer because of her. Her premonitions had been telling her what was about to happen, but she had ignored them. Now it was too late. Joan cried in silence till she fell asleep.

Joan opened her eyes again. She noticed that she was in a different room and that the chains had disappeared. It was evident that they had used some kind of drug on her or the gas again before moving her to this new place. She put a hand on the wall. It was made of stone. There were no vibrations, not even the slightest sound. She was not in a ship anymore.

She got up and stretched her limbs. It was nice to move again. Her wrist and her ankles still had marks from the chains. And she was terribly hungry. Joan didn't need too much time to inspect the room. There were no windows, only a metallic door. She checked it, but it was closed. *Of course*. There was scarce furniture in the room. The bed, a little sanitary device and nothing more. Not even a table or a chair.

After some hours Joan heard a metallic sound. A few seconds later the door opened. A little creature appeared in the entrance holding a tray with some food. Joan looked behind him, but there was another metallic door firmly closed.

"Another door there is, I fear." The unknown being said.



Joan observed him better. He was very small, not much higher than half a metre. His skin had a pale green colour. He had big ears and big blue eyes, and his head was covered of dark hair. He also had an small beard on his chin. Joan thought that nobody with this aspect could be bad.

"Who are you?" She asked.

"Well, I'm the one that food brings to you, hehe, but if my name is what you are asking Yoda is."

"You speak in a very strange way." Joan said smiling. She had immediately taken a liking to the little creature.

"Do you think so? Hehe, a relative thing that is. I think it is you who speaks in a strange way!" Joan laughed for the first time since her capture. "But now time to eat it is, yes, time to eat."

Joan took the tray that Yoda offered her and sat on the bed with the tray on her knees. The food was not any wonder, but Joan was really hungry.

"Where are we?" She asked with her mouth full of cooked vegetables.

"This is the fortress of Compadigne, on the planet Loire. You are deep in Bretalian territory, my girl. If thinking of escaping you are, your mind you should change, I fear."

Joan looked up sadly.

"They told me they were going to attack the *Harmony*, my ship. Do you know something about what has happened?"

"Sorry I am. They don't inform poor Yoda about war matters, my girl. Help you I can't with that."

Joan was suffering intensely thinking of Tobb and the rest of her friends. Yoda was looking at her with sympathy and tenderness. She decided to talk about something else.

"It's the first time I've seen somebody from your race, Yoda. Where are you from?"

"Oh, very far from here my home is, yes, very far. Never there have you been, I bet!"

"No, I suppose I haven't." Joan thought that Yoda didn't want to talk about his origins, but she was still curious. "Could I ask how old you are?"

"Of course you can. You have done it, hehe! Well, I am almost a hundred standard years old. Hehe, I see in those eyes that you thought me younger, but you must know that I'm very young for my race. Most of us live beyond eight hundred years."

Yoda noticed that Joan was very impressed.

"Yes, eight hundred years or more we can live. But other intelligent species in the Galaxy there are who live even longer."

Yoda was amused with Joan's surprise.

"You have lived among humans all your life, haven't you?" He asked pointing at her with his little finger.

"Well, during the year I've been in the Republic Fleet I've met people from other races, but basically I think you are right."

"That is not so strange, my girl. The human race is with difference the more extended throughout the Galaxy. Have you ever wondered why this is so?"

"No, I haven't ." Joan replied feeling embarrassed.

"The main reason is that you have one of the shortest life spans among all the other intelligent forms of life. Your only hope to survive as a species is to multiply yourselves as much as you can, even if that means invading the natural space of other people, hehe. No matter if they are humans too. The majority of the wars that this Galaxy has seen have been started by humans. Bretalians are humans, as most of the Republic soldiers are. Aggressiveness is the main characteristic of your race." Yoda's expression had become very serious.

He saw that Joan wanted to argue and grinned, showing an array of white teeth.

"A lot of good things you have too, of course." He said rising his hands. "Yes, the ability to adapt yourselves to many different environments you have. To many of those places you have taken civilization and culture. Although sometimes the native forms of life have not survived too long after your arrival."

Joan didn't know what to say. She analysed what Yoda had said and thought that everything was probably true.

"Do you think there is some hope for us?" She asked.

"Oh, of course there is! When you meet humans alone you can find them interesting and even adorable people at times. When there are many humans together is when the problems start, hehe. But you have an immense capability for love, too. You love intensely. That is what makes you worth knowing."

Joan smiled and looked at Yoda with increasing respect. His big eyes seemed illuminated with knowledge and wisdom. Joan wondered how a being like Yoda would be with those eight hundred years of experiences. Then a question appeared in her mind.

"Why are you with the Bretalians? That is something I can't understand after all you have told me."

Yoda sighed as if he was suddenly tired.

"A good question that is, my girl. A good question, yes. Sometimes our lives take strange ways." He paused a while before continuing. "I've always felt intensely the presence of the Force around me, and my desire has been to know its mysteries, to follow its path. I came to Loire looking for a Bretalian whom I had been told about. Someone who could help me to understand all those things that I ignored. That man was Master Calhuch."

"But he is a Dark Jedi!"

"Yes, he is now." Yoda's smile had disappeared again, and his face showed a sad expression instead. "When first I met him a respected Jedi Knight he was, and many things from him I learned. But too eager was he to discover all the secrets of the Force and so he began to experiment with the Dark Side. Try to prevent him I did, but listen to me he would not. Now trapped I am among him and his followers. Looked down I am because declined to be instructed in the Dark Side I have. I've lost all hope of returning them

back to the Light Side, and not strong enough am I to fight against them. All I can do is try to soften the lives of their victims, like you. I'm allowed to stay here, cooking and bringing the food to the prisoners. I've cooked too the vegetables you are eating, so I hope you are enjoying them!" He said laughing again.

Joan looked at the food that she had not considered too well. She laughed also and continued eating, deciding not to leave anything on the plate. When she finished, Yoda took the tray and walked towards the door.

"They won't open the second door until this one is closed, and they will check first that I'm alone in the space between, so..."

"Don't worry, Yoda. I understand. Thank you very much."

"You are welcome, my girl! I'll see you for dinner, hehe!"

The days passed slowly. Yoda was the only people whom Joan saw and her only company. A big friendship had started to grow between them. He spent some time teaching her things about the Force, answering her questions, showing her tricks and sharing with her pieces of Jedi wisdom. Joan visibly enjoyed these lessons, but from time to time her gaze seemed lost, and more than once Yoda had seen her wipe away a tear. Yoda knew all too well what the concern that caused that her smile was every day harder to see was. He had tried to obtain some information about *Harmony's* fate but had failed every time. Before his eyes, sadness was consuming the poor woman. And he couldn't do anything to avoid it.

Joan had been prisoner for three weeks the day the door opened and general Bedenford entered accompanied by Senator Tremoulin. This last one was carrying a small case.

"Well, how is Alderaan's Jedi this morning?" Bedenford asked grinning.

"I just couldn't be better." Joan replied getting up. "My rooms are wonderful and the food is excellent. I'll have to congratulate the hotel manager when I leave."

Bedenford and Tremoulin laughed.

"Ah, you are so lovely! Well, I've got good news for you."

"Something about the *Harmony*?" She asked anxiously.

"I told you that Yoda was not making those questions of his own curiosity." Tremoulin said.

"Yes, it was obvious." Bedenford agreed. "You'll have to continue wondering." Joan repressed her anger, but Bedenford noticed her gesture and smiled. "Well, do you want to hear my news or don't you?"

"Go ahead." Joan said laconically.

"All right, milady. You are going to be allowed to send a message to Senator Carless." General Bedenford informed. "A message asking for your freedom. If the Republic accepts to pay, let's say a reasonable ransom, and they set their Bretalian prisoners free, we'll let you go."

Joan thought that the war must not going very well for the Bretalians if they were approaching her with such an offer. They must really be desperate to obtain new resources to continue with their military operations.

"And what does your friend Calhuch think about this?"

"He doesn't agree, but he doesn't care either." Senator Tremoulin was who answered. "He says that Carless won't move a finger for you, and sincerely, I'm of the same opinion."

"We'll see." Bedenford said. Joan noticed that he didn't like the idea of giving her that opportunity, but he

was following someone else's orders. "Are you going to send that message?"

Joan stood in silence thinking about it. Surely the Bretalians' demands would be very high, and she didn't want to put the Republic in such a difficult situation, but the time spent in prison had weakened her will. She wanted to be free again, to see Tobb, her friends, whom she deny to think they could be dead, and her parents. She had thought a lot about them those last days.

"Yes, I'll do it." She said at last.

"All right." Bedenford nodded.

Tremoulin opened the case and extracted a little recording device. He held it before Joan.

"You can begin. Be careful with your words or we'll have to repeat the entire recording."

Joan breathed deeply and started to talk.

"Senator Carless, I request you help me. I was caught in a trap and was made a prisoner of the Bretalians. Now they have decided to offer you my freedom if the Republic accepts to pay a ransom and set their Bretalian prisoners free. I know that these are tough demands, but I beg you accept them. You must know that I've always served the Republic well. Please, don't believe the lies that you might have heard about me. May the Force be with you, Senator Carless."

"Perfect." Tremoulin said stopping the recording. "We'll send him your message with our detailed demands. You will know the answer as soon as it arrives."

They exited leaving Joan alone again. A small hope lived now in her heart.

### **[Surface of planetoid labelled KS-31, in the Kessel system]**

Alvar Parix observed the Imperial personnel of the facilities boarding a shuttle. He was partially hidden behind the demolished peripheral wall. It seemed that all the Imperials were leaving. All the wretched colonists had got very nervous when the arrowhead shapes of the Star Destroyers were seen over their heads, very high up in the sky, like the omen of even worse calamities for them. But if they had come to take their troops from there it might be an occasion for joy.

"Hey, you! What are you doing there?"

The reflexes produced from several years of slavery under the Empire made Alvar raise his hands up. The stormtrooper was at his back. *They are always at our back.* He thought angrily.

"Eeer..., I was just wondering when we are expected to return to work."

"Stupid colonists!" The stormtrooper said. "Can't you see that the facilities had been destroyed?"

Alvar didn't answer. He turned very slowly, lowered his head and looked at the stormtrooper's boots. That used to work with them. Alvar imagined himself for a second attacking and disarming the soldier, but he knew he would be shot before he could get closer to him. His friend Petier had tried it the first month. When the Imperials finished with him there was not too much left of his friend to be buried.

Another stormtrooper was approaching.

"Do you want to stay here with them?" He asked his partner. "That 's the last shuttle!"

"No, of course not. I prefer to see the fires from the ship. Bye, you dumb."

The two stormtroopers left towards the shuttle. Alvar saw how the ship took off and disappeared in the sky. He wondered what were the soldiers talking about. *To see the fires... What fires?* He thought worried. The

young man ran towards the small colony.

### [Onboard White Squadron's Frigate]

Foxfire pushed the button that communicated the bridge with the medical facilities.

"This is Flight Officer Agar." Joker's voice could be heard clearly.

"Hi, Joker, this is Foxfire. Is there any change?"

"Nothing at all, I'm sorry." Foxfire hit the console with her fist. She had hoped to hear some good news, even the smallest.

"Tell Angelrose to relieve you." She ordered. "You need to get some sleep."

"And what about you, Avery? You are the only person onboard who has not rested since yesterday."

Joker was right. Foxfire felt that her eyelids were closing without her being able to do anything to prevent it. She should ask Shadow to come to the bridge for some hours. But not too many.

"I know. I think I'll follow my own advice too. Do you know where Shadow is?"

"The last time she called to know how Sherry was, she was with Vyper in the secondary hangar."

*Ah, yes, the Interceptors.*

"Thank you, Joker, I'll pick her up there."

Foxfire took the elevator which lead to the secondary hangar landing. During the short journey she was thinking about the possibilities they had to rescue the colonists. Maybe it was the weariness, but the pessimism was beginning to dominate her. There would be too many enemy ships there, and there were no chances of getting any reinforcements. High Command had already decided. She had had to give them a lot of apologies the last time they had received a communication from them, one hour ago. She didn't want to leave the colonists to die, but probably that would happen anyway, even if they sacrificed their own lives trying to save them. Foxfire sighed noisily. *To be in Command means a heavy weight on ones shoulders.* She thought. *Now I understand Sherry's early morning moods a lot better...*

When she got to the hangar she couldn't see Vyper nor Shadow, but she heard their voices. Guided by them she found them in one of the Interceptors. Shadow was occupying the pilot's seat, and Vyper was behind her with half of his body inside the cockpit and his legs dragging out. There was not enough space in the cockpit for them both, so Vyper had adopted that precarious posture in order to teach Shadow about the TIE Interceptor's controls.

"Are you going to abandon the A-Wings for those cans?" Foxfire asked.

"Ouch!" Vyper hit his head on the fighter's door when he tried to face the woman. "Hello, Avery..." He said rubbing his head with a hand.

"Are you well?"

"Yes. This bump won't kill me... Well, answering your previous question, I thought that if we are going to use these Interceptors I'll better give you both some theory lessons."

"Eh, who said that I'm going to pilot one of these things?" Foxfire protested.

"Shadow and you are the best A-Wing pilots around, and that is the Alliance fighter with the most similar flight performance to the TIE Interceptor."



"It's the same that he told me." Shadow said from the cockpit.

"I'll instruct some of the others too, maybe Iceman."

"Michael, I'll be honest with you." Foxfire said seriously. "I don't know if this is such a good idea."

Vyper stood in silence for some seconds before answering.

"It's not. I'm trying not to think about it, but even with the Frigate and the Interceptors we won't be able to keep up the deceit long enough to evacuate the colonists. We have very few fighters and pilots. When the Imperials discover us, and they will, we'll all be dead in a matter of minutes."

"Then it's over." Shadow said. "There's no sense to die for nothing. But then... Why do I feel so bad?"

The looks of her friends showed that they felt the same.

"How much time have we left?" Vyper asked.

"Close to five hours."

"Then let's wait those five hours. And let's pray for a miracle."

#### **[On the other side]**

That turned out to be a very long day. Joan asked Yoda for news when he came to bring her lunch and dinner, but he couldn't give her any answers. Joan was unable to sleep that night. The next morning the door opened and Yoda entered sooner than on any other day. His hands were empty. His face was a mask of resignation.

"Good morning, Joan." He began. "The answer to your message has been received at last."

Joan knew by her friend's expression that the news couldn't be too good.

"Let's see it." She said sighing.

"It's not a recording, Joan. It's a written message." He said handing Joan a paper copy.

That was very strange. Why wasn't there either image or sound? Joan frowned and took the paper. The message was very short. She read it with just a glance.

*"To Joan d'Arc:"*

*"Senator Carless has received your message. I've been commended to inform you that the Bretalians' demands have been rejected. We are now aware of your treachery. You are a server of Bretalians and the Dark Side of Force. The Republic won't be manipulated by you again."*

*"Signed: Admiral Rickermoon."*

"It's not him." Joan said crumpling the message into a ball and throwing it against the wall. "Admiral Rickermoon can't have written this."

"Is the message signed by someone called Rickermoon?" Yoda asked.

"Yes, but I'm sure it's a falsification. I know Admiral Rickermoon pretty well, and I'm sure he wouldn't believe Calhuch's lies." The young woman was furious.

"Do you mind if I read the message?"

"Read it if you want." Joan said sitting on the bed and hiding her face in her hands."

Yoda picked up the ball of paper and opened it carefully. He read the message in silence.

"Your instinct serves you well." Yoda said when he finished. "I was there when the original message was received. They didn't notice my presence. They never care too much about me, hehe."

"Continue, please." Joan demanded watching him with interest.

"Well, I could hear Senator Tremoulin saying that he had traced the message's source and that it had been sent from Senator Carless's private residence."

"That is absurd. If Senator Carless had written that, why would he sign it as Admiral Rickermoon? And why reply to a recorded message with only a written text?"

"That's what Senator Tremoulin said too, yes. He was sure that Senator Carless received your message, but he believed that somebody else wrote the answer. Both Tremoulin and Borgonne spies they have, he said, and they were sure that Admiral Rickermoon had not been in Senator Carless's residence for at least two months."

"Sorelnai." Joan said. "She wrote the reply."

"Yes, my girl. Senator Tremoulin said that too. But they decided still to show you the message." Yoda watched Joan's expression. "And who is that Sorelnai?"

"She's Senator Carless' fiancée. She controls him completely, it's clear now." Joan said thoughtfully. "I pushed him to accept the leadership of the Republic in those hard times, but he never wanted that position. Sorelnai has been using him to obtain the power for herself. I had suspected it but now I have proof. She saw me like a possible enemy and has managed to put me aside." Joan adopted a sad expression, her eyes brightening with tears hardly retained. "Tobb tried to warn me of that." She said with a smile full of pain.

"Is someone whom you love very much that Tobb, isn't he? Yoda said looking at her tenderly.

"Yes, he is. And now I'm not going to see him any more."

Joan had resisted just for too long. She started to cry like the first night after her capture. Yoda doubted for an instant, unable to watch her suffering like this, but finally he approached her and hold her in his short arms.

"Cry, my girl. Cry all you want."

Some time later the door opened and Tremoulin entered. Calhuch was with him. Joan got up and looked fiercely at the Dark Jedi. She had ceased crying, but her eyes still were wet.

"You were right, Calhuch. Nobody will pay a single coin for me."

The Dark Jedi didn't reply. He just stood looking at her with the shadow of a smile on his face. It was Tremoulin who finally answered.

"That's not entirely true, lady d'Arc. Maybe you are wondering why General Bedenford is not with us."

"I'm not." She said.

"Well, I'll tell you anyway. I know you were eager to know what had been the fate of your dear Cruiser *Harmony*. Well, they managed to run away." Joan didn't say anything. She knew that Tremoulin had not ended and waited for the rest. "That time." He added. "Only two hours ago, when we had just received the reply to your message, something unexpected happened. Some of your friends decided to ignore the orders and the danger. They have tried to rescue you..."

Joan was stunned. She moved her eyes from Calhuch to Tremoulin, and then back again to Calhuch. He was still staring at her. Darkness seemed to be a living being around the black figure. Joan felt a great fear growing in her heart.

"What has happened??!!" She demanded furiously, almost shouting. Tremoulin made an involuntary step backwards.

"They have been rejected, of course." He said with a grin, but it disappeared immediately. Tremoulin had seen something in Joan's look. He moved back another step. He felt ashamed to feel frightened of a girl and forced himself to smile again.

"It was a very well planned attack." He resumed. "But suicidal. Nevertheless, your famous Miracle Squadron was able to cause a lot of damage to our Fleet before being destroyed. *Pilot by pilot*." He pronounced the last words very slowly.

There was no visible change in Joan's expression. But there was a volcano inside of her. Yoda was watching her with increasing concern. As Joan remained in silence, Tremoulin decided to continue.

"While all our forces were busy fighting them, a commando team almost succeeded in passing through our defences aboard an armoured transport. But they were discovered and destroyed too. *None of them survived*"

Tremoulin studied Joan's reactions before continuing. Calhuch didn't take his eyes off her. The traitorous Senator decided to do what Calhuch had suggested.

"Do you remember Captain Lamorny? Yes, of course you do. He has used his contacts in the Republic's Fleet to obtain something you might want to see. The casualty list of the attacking group..."

He handed a paper to Joan. She took it with the scorn reflected in her glance. What Tremoulin and Calhuch were doing was incredibly evil. But she forced herself to read the list. She owed that to her friends.

There were almost sixty names written there, separated in two groups, Miracle Squadron's pilots and the commando team. Thirty-four pilots had died or disappeared. Even more than a full squadron. Joan read name by name with increasing pain. One of the first names was Lieutenant Trillian's. Poor lad. He probably blamed himself for Joan's capture. She understood why there were more pilots than expected. Some of those names belonged to Wildcat's pilots. They had tried to clean their squadron's name after Lamorny and Smeigger's treachery. Most of her friends' names were there, but Joan had no more tears. She continued with the commando team. They were surely volunteers, she recognized some of those names. All of them were *Harmony's* officials. When she reached the last name she lost control of her legs for a second and almost fell to the floor. Yoda tried to support her, but she didn't notice it.

Sergeant Tobb Santer.

Lamorny knew that too. He had told them about their relationship and they had placed his name the last one intentionally. Joan folded the piece of paper carefully and put it in one of her pockets. She looked up. Calhuch was still looking at her. *Damned bastard* she thought. *All this is your doing*. Hate grew more and more inside of her like a wave. She felt an immense power filling her body, just waiting to be used.

"Joan, no..." Yoda started.

All that hate came through like an invisible fist, launching Tremoulin and Calhuch violently against the walls. The Senator's body fell noisily to the floor and she could see the blood on his head. She understood everything in an instant. This was the Dark Side of the Force. Yoda had told her about that. *Fear, Hate,*

*Aggression, the Dark Side they are.* Calhuch had wanted her to use the Dark Side. He expected to control her after that, to use her like he was using Tremoulin or Bedenford. She could now feel his own fear. Joan was more powerful than he had believed. She could kill him right now...

"Joan, please..." Yoda pleaded.

No. She wouldn't do it.

The external door had remained open for the first time. Joan jumped over her enemies' bodies and exited, ramming the two soldiers who were guarding the entrance. To escape. That was her only thought. Her instincts told her that she should avoid the elevators so she ran towards the stairs. There were soldiers coming up from the lower floors, attending the calls from Tremoulin and Calhuch, who had recovered from the initial surprise and were now pursuing her too. Yoda was trying to catch up with them, fearing that they would harm Joan when she was captured. She decided to try upstairs.

There were alarms sounding over the soldier's shouts. Joan was running as if she were blind, just escaping as fast as she could. Finally she exited to the higher level, with her pursuers almost on her heels. Joan blinked when Loire's sun's light hit her eyes, which were more accustomed to the shadows. There was no possible escape. She was on the fortress' roof, an open place that was used by shuttles and other vehicles carrying prisoners or supplies for landing, but now it was empty. The soldiers behind her and a jump of almost a hundred meters in front. She wouldn't become a prisoner again. Before the astonished soldiers the young woman jumped to the void.

And then something very strange happened. Her survival instinct was what made the call, with the Force as its messenger, and the trees growing around the fortress answered the plea. It seemed like if they stretched their branches to receive her body, holding her and softening her fall. Calhuch, Tremoulin and dozens of soldiers saw stunned from the fortress' roof how she disappeared amongst the dense foliage.



Calhuch used a transmitter to order the guards on the ground level to capture her. They found her under the trees. Alive. She was in shock, but a small wound on her chin was the only visible injury. Nobody could believe what they had seen. Yoda was not tall enough to see what was happening, but he heard the soldiers saying that the trees had moved to save Joan. He had felt Joan's call for help and knew that Calhuch had also done so. Yoda shivered when he heard what the Dark Jedi said to Tremoulin.

"I've never known anybody with such a connection to the Force. We can't leave her to live."

#### **[Imperial transport exiting hyperspace]**

Psycho glanced at the monitors. Nothing. The Frigate was not there. It seemed that he had arrived too late. Maybe Shok'wave had reached his same conclusion and had returned as she had been ordered.

Suddenly a weak signal appeared on his screen. An Imperial mark. He flew in that direction cautiously, waiting for a positive identification from the computer. Here it was. A Corvette. There was a second signal now. This took more time to be recognized, but now the computer was showing the figure of an Assault Gunboat. They were still in space. In the case of the Corvette this was not so unusual, but it was very strange for the Gunboat. Even more suspicious was to have only one Gunboat. The Imperial escorts were always composed of several fighters. Psycho decided to risk it and approached them a bit more.

From a distance of six clicks there were almost no energy readings. Disabled. He thought that there would be no danger using the active sensors to scan the complete area. There were no signs of more ships, but he discovered remains of several Gunboats. And some fragments of a B-Wing...

Evidently there had been a battle. The Imperial side had lost, or those disabled ships would not have been abandoned there. The other side could have been pirates, but they wouldn't have left the Imperials ships intact. They would have destroyed them after stealing their cargo. The Imperials had not received any reinforcements that would have made the attacking group escape. No, they had to be Rebels. But that theory had a weak point too. There were no Rebel forces in the area. They would have captured the Imperial ships, at least the Corvette...

But not if they were a small group with such limited resources that they couldn't capture them. He had come here looking for such people: White Squadron. They could have demanded support from High Command to board the Imperial ships. But not if they were disobeying direct orders and didn't want any contact with them. He had been right about Shok'wave. That woman must be mad.

*They are going to need all the help they can get*, Psycho thought. But where to find them? There was an obvious place: the Kessel system. If he tried to return there and wait for the Frigate's arrival, he would be immediately discovered. It was going to be hard to explain the Imperials why he had returned. That supposing they had not already discovered his last handiwork.

"Think, Stephen, think..." He said to himself. Shok'wave might be mad, but she was no dumb in any way. She wouldn't try to attack the Imperials and expect to live to rescue the colonists. She would have to make a more subtle approach. A "sneaky operation", as Foxfire would say. Psycho smiled thinking of the gorgeous Executive Officer, the sneakiest person in the Galaxy. Then he understood. They would approach the Imperial Fleet pretending to be one of their Frigates. Without any modifications and still sending an Imperial coded identification signal, it was identical to any other Imperial Nebulon B Frigate, of course.

"Which was the damned Frigate's name?" He said looking at the ceiling. "*Watcher*, yes!" He knew that nobody could change the name without destroying the identification coder device. It was inserted in an internal chip which couldn't be recorded over. They were provided directly by the Imperial Fleet High Command on Coruscant.

Psycho opened the rear hatch and launched the TIE's pieces out to the space. He ordered the computer to take his origin co-ordinates as his next destination and pushed the hyperspace motivators.

"I must be crazier than Shok'wave." He said as the stars elongated into bars and the transport entered hyperspace.

### **[Onboard White Squadron's Frigate]**

Two A-Wings landed softly on the main hangar. Lieutenant Peter "Iceman" Kovessy and Captain Thorsten "Zeppelin" Wind's faces showed their weariness after a very long patrol shift. Cybercat and Vyper would do the next one and were already flying.

The two pilots noticed a lot of activity around them. All the technicians seemed to be there, working on a group of four B-Wings. Granite and Moose were among them. An utility vehicle was parked beside one of the fighters, full of Imperial proton torpedoes.

"Hey, you got it, you guys!" Iceman cheered.

"Of course." Granite replied. "Did you doubt us?"

"But we have found pieces enough for only four fighters." Moose explained while trying to remove the grease from his hands using an only slightly cleaner rag.

"This is better than nothing." Zeppelin said.

"Yeah, we can cause a lot of damage even with these babies." Granite was caressing one of the warheads with his hand.

"Am I the only one who is dying for a shower and a bed?" Iceman asked.

The four men abandoned the hangar together. Granite took a last look at the torpedoes that were being loaded on the B-Wing's modified launchers.

*I'm also dying , but to shoot some of those...* He thought with an evil grin painted on his face.

Flight Officer Lisa "Angelrose" Hull watched the 2-1B droid operating the instruments connected to Shok'wave's body.

"What's going on, 1B?" She asked.

"I don't know exactly, ma'am." The droid replied without stopping from checking the monitors. "Commander Krenzel is recovering surprisingly well from her wounds. I don't have an explanation."

"Then... She is going to be well?"

"I couldn't say, ma'am. Her body is almost re-established, but there are not signs of brain activity yet. I think there must be some irreversible damage to her brain, but I can't find it out with the scanners." The medical droid didn't have a facial expression, but Angelrose could have sworn that he was stunned.

She approached to Shok'wave's body and watched her Commander's face. She seemed the same as two hours ago, when she took over from Joker.

"Come on, Shok'wave." Angelrose said in a very low voice. "I don't know where are you, but we need you here. Come back, please..."

## **Part Four**

### **Sacrifice**

#### **[On the other side]**

Joan was laying on her bed, with her hands crossed under her head, looking at the ceiling. Tobb was dead. Trillian and most of her friends from Miracle Squadron were dead too. They had tried to save her and now they were gone. Her grief was immense, unbearable. There was no possible relief for such sadness.

She remembered that first day when she entered *Harmony's* hangar, pilots and technicians applauding her, Trillian saluting so seriously, and Tobb waiting for her beside the Singer, with his winged horses freshly painted... Tobb. She was just unable to resist the thought of Tobb being dead.

Some hours ago she had being unable to resist the desperation and had started to hit the walls with her fists. She had stopped only when she remembered what had happened the last time she had abandoned herself to the wrath. She was beginning to feel that strange power inside her again. No, she couldn't allow it, she wouldn't fall into the Dark Side. Her hurt knuckles ached every time they rubbed against the rough blankets, but she didn't remove her hands from under her head. That was a kind of pain she could suffer better than this other one, her heart's pain. *That night was actually the last one.* A new wave of sorrow came with this thought. *There won't be a life for us now. No future, no family..., Why? Why?*

It was useless, but she even tried to analyse what she could have done differently, where she had made the mistake. Maybe she could have used the message that Tremoulin and Bedenford had allowed her to send to prevent her friends from trying something like that. But who could have guessed...

What if she had not forced Senator Carless to lead the Republic against the Bretalian invaders? Probably there would be peace now, even under a Bretalian government...

What if she had not abandoned Gerillia, ignoring her dreams and her instincts? Maybe Tobb, Trillian and all the others would still be alive...

Or maybe not. The Bretalians would have extended their domination over the Republic's worlds, forcing them to accept their supremacy. Is it worth changing freedom for life? Is it better to stay alive even as a slave than to die a free being?

No, it's not. Joan was unable to think in differently. She couldn't have remained still while the injustice and the war's laws governed the Universe. Tobb, Trillian and the rest of her friends wouldn't have remained still either. They would have preferred to fight, no matter which the price.

That last thought gave her some comfort. There were no tears on Joan's face when Yoda entered, a concerned look in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Joan." He said sadly. "Oh, how I'm sorry, my girl."

Joan didn't reply. She patted on the bed beside her and Yoda sat there.

"Sorry for your friends I am." He explained. "And for you too."

As Joan stood in silence, Yoda continued.

"They have decided that for them very dangerous you are. That attack of your friends has proved them that their strategy of lies has partially failed. Some politicians and many common people can be in doubt, but among the Republic's Armies immensely appreciated you are still, yes. And now you are becoming a threat even inside their own domain. Many people saw you when you jump you did from the fortress. Hardly believe it I can yet. That you must be really a Jedi, people say, and they are frightened of your power. General Bedenford is even having problems with his own troops. They are questioning his alliance with someone like Calhuch, who is called more and more "the false Jedi"."

"I'm not really a Jedi." Joan said as her only answer.

"Wrong you are, my girl." Yoda said. "I had never met anybody with more right to be called a Jedi."

Joan rose her eyes to meet Yoda's.

"Don't say that, Yoda. You have taught me a lot of things. You know the Force better than I do."

"But my master indeed you have become, my dear girl. Completely sincere I'm being with you."

She smiled slightly. Yoda would never know how important this was for her.

"Now tell me the bad news." She said.

Yoda swallowed before starting.

"Calhuch has convinced the others that you must die." Joan's expression was not altered. "You are going to be judged and condemned in public."

"To judge me?" Joan laughed. "Accused of what?"

"Treachery and witchcraft. They will accuse you of using the Dark Side of Force."

"Treachery? Witchcraft? Tremoulin, Borgonne, Lamorny, they are the traitors! And it's Calhuch who uses the Dark Side!"

"I know, my girl, but superstitious the people are. Most of them don't know anything about the Force, but they have heard about the Dark Side, and fear it they do. If Calhuch convinces them that you are a server of the Dark Side the adoration that many people began to feel for you will turn into fear and hate. He seems to have failed in obtaining that among the Republic's worlds, but he still expects to be successful at least inside the Bretalian territory."

"Then it's over. Don't worry, my friend. I'm proud of what I've done and I don't fear death."

Yoda couldn't reply. He didn't know what to say. He just could look up and admire the eighteen years old woman who suddenly seemed to be very much older.

The next morning no less than ten soldiers entered her cell to chain Joan again. Calhuch was present, fearing that the young woman could still try something to escape. She gave no resistance though.

Joan was driven on a open vehicle to the centre of the town. There were many people on both sides of the way. Calhuch's men had taken care that everybody in the planet knew that a server of the Dark Side was going to be judged, and which route they would follow to the court. The cries of "witch" accompanied her all the way. She tried not to hear them. Some people threw rotten vegetables and fruits at her. One or two stones reached her, but Joan seemed to not notice them. She saw many faces crying out horrible things, their fists risen, spitting out their hate and their fear with every insult. But there were people in silence too, persons who didn't believe the lies spread out by Calhuch's agents and who could only see a young girl chained like a beast. Many of them had heard the first rumours about Joan, that she was a Jedi Lady serving the Republic, and watched her even with reverence. Joan noticed those friendly minds, not without some surprise, and felt comforted. She thanked them and concentrated as best as she could on those people, forgetting the rest. The young woman constructed a wall of peace around her and left the shouts and the insults outside. She was unable to move. There were too many chains covering her, almost strangling her, forcing her to fight for every breath, the links digging into her flesh in a permanent torture, their weight practically crushing her. It was supposed to humiliate her, but she showed so much dignity under the rain of curses and dirt, her blue eyes always looking to the front, her mouth closed, never returning a single insult, her face not showing any trace of hate towards those who were offending her, that many people saw a sign of her force in those chains. That woman should be very powerful if such an amount of chains were needed to hold her down.

It was a long journey, because the fortress was far away from the town, but finally Joan's vehicle and her escorts reached a platform installed in a big square surrounded by high buildings. When Joan saw what was there awaiting her she felt her strength failing. Calhuch had prepared a great spectacle. The scene seemed to have been extracted from a very remote age, a nightmare that only could be conceived by an insane mind. Joan was dragged towards a big pole raising exactly in the centre of the platform where the soldiers attached her chains to. When they moved back she could turn her head enough to look around. Three big chairs had been placed at each side, ready to be occupied by the judges. She was not surprised when she saw who was going to preside the court. Calhuch climbed the stairs slowly, calculating every movement carefully, flanked by two men dressed in black like him. He advanced without looking at her towards the left row of chairs, sitting on the central and more predominant position. The two remaining chairs were occupied by his acolytes. Joan didn't even doubt they were Dark Jedi too, followers of Calhuch. The flow of evilness coming from them was enough to make her feel sick. She tried to see their faces, but their hoods shrouded them in shadows. She felt their glaze fixed on her, studying her, their malicious minds trying to penetrate her soul, to steal her will and her courage, to rape her innermost thoughts and feelings. Joan felt nausea and repulsion, and she struggled with all her strength to expel them. She believed she heard something like laughter in her mind as she pushed them back with a last ditch effort of her will. A tear of rage escaped her eyes. She forced herself to look at the opposite side, where General Bedenford and two other men in civilian clothes sat. She had never seen these other men before, but she supposed they were Bretalian governors. She noticed that General Bedenford's past courtesy had disappeared. His eyes were full of hate, and she guessed the reason. It was not only the problems that the rumours about Joan could have caused him. The Bretalian Fleet had undoubtedly suffered important losses during Miracle Squadron's last attack. She understood she was looking at a man eager for revenge. She spared a thought for her lost friends. *Well done, gentlemen!* She almost smiled before moving her eyes away from the furious General and looking around, beyond the platform.

All the square was full of people struggling and fighting to get the best places, those closest to the platform. Even the narrow corridor that the soldiers had kept open to allow the vehicles to get to there had been



immediately filled up. There was not a building on all the planet with capacity enough for so many people, and that was the main reason for choosing an open area. Calhuch wanted a great amount of witnesses for what he had in mind. He had even ordered to record the whole trial.

When the sinister figure stood up all the voices became quiet. An impressive silence was reached when the last whispers finally died away. Everybody had their eyes on the overwhelming dark figure. When Calhuch spoke, his voice could be heard like thunder even from the farthest positions. There was no visible amplifier device. Joan knew that he was using the Dark Side's power to obtain that effect.

"Citizens of Loire." He began. "Citizens of the Bretalian worlds, people of the Republic." His voice was attractive, convincing, full of charm. It was powerful, but tender and gentle. Everybody fell immediately hypnotized under that graceful sound that transmitted such great charisma. Suddenly the owner of that voice didn't seem frightening anymore. He was a big man full of wisdom, someone who cared, someone who must be trusted. Joan closed her eyes and struggled to be free of his influence, concentrating on her own thoughts and isolating herself from the outside, until she managed to hear Calhuch's voice only as a far away echo, unable to reach her. But then she felt those evil presences trying to enter her mind again, to break her resistance, convincing her that all opposition was futile.

*Don't fight. The intruders said. We are not your enemies. Join us, you will be welcome...*

"Noooooo...." She muttered.

"We are living in hard times." Calhuch was saying. "These are times of war and grief, tears and pain. This is a battle that should have never begun..."

*Hear his voice. They insisted. Listen to what he says. You can help to finish with all the disasters, you can end your own pain. You just have to say what we want you to, and you will be free...*

"None of us wanted this. None of us desired this absurd battle among sister worlds, that had lived in peace for so many years."

Joan was resisting with all her will, but she just couldn't push the intruders out of her mind. She was so tired, so in need of rest, and it would be so easy to do what they said... She lost the sense of time, Calhuch spoke and spoke while everything spun around her.

*Don't fear anything. You don't need to die, we don't want your death. You didn't know what you were doing, nobody ever taught you how to use your powers correctly, you were unable to recognize who your friends were...*

"Nooo, you are lying, you're not my friends..." She whispered. The woman was making such an effort to oppose them that her bruised body was starting to suffer the consequences. A thin thread of blood started to flow from her nose without her even noticing it.

*We are not angry with you. But you must repair the damage you've done, to accept your guilt before these people. Then you will be forgiven and you will have the rest that you need so desperately...*

She didn't know how much time had passed, seconds, minutes or hours. But she felt something new. The voices in her mind were starting to get impatient, tired. Her own blood reached her mouth and the salty taste on her tongue broke the trance she was in. She heard Calhuch's voice and changed her tactic. She concentrated on that voice and ignored the ones in her mind.

"But there are people who don't love peace." Calhuch was saying. "People who don't respect life, who can only conceive the Universe as a place to be conquered and ruled..."

*He seems to be talking about himself. She thought. The irony almost made her laugh. The exhausted woman found new strengths to resist.*

"Don't be deceived by her innocent look." Calhuch said. "Don't fall into the temptation of feeling pity for her. She is young, adorable, apparently harmless, but she is one of the most dangerous creatures the Galaxy has never known. Those chains are totally necessary. Only two days ago, she used her powers to make some of her old comrades becoming mad, inciting them to make a suicidal attack against unaware Bretalian

ships, almost in the orbit of this same planet. She didn't care that all her friends died there, that hundreds of Bretalians lost their lives too in that fratricidal combat. She only wanted to escape and continue with her life of crimes."

She could hear exclamations of surprise and indignation and had to bite her lower lip so as to not scream. The lie was so terrible, so offensive, that she felt the wrath growing inside her again. That was exactly what they wanted, but she was not going to take the bait. She forced herself to calmness and waited for her moment.

"Many of you had sons, daughters, husbands, wives, parents, brothers, sisters, friends onboard those ships. All of them have died because of this woman, so don't feel any pity at all!" That fell like a bomb among the people which crowded the square. Images of the recent battle had been extensively distributed by the media, but the most repeated scenes had been those of the transports delivering dozens of coffins in Compadigne's spaceport, and the families of the deceased receiving the corpses. The images of the children crying had been shown again and again. Many of those persons were there now, crying, but finding at last someone against whom to discharge all their rage and desperation. People started to shout and curse at the chained woman one more time, but now with an incredible violence. The wave of hate reached her like a huge hammer. It was such an injustice. She felt the tears filling her eyes. Even those few persons who had initially sympathized with her were now beginning to see her as a monster. But she didn't fall under the discouragement, not this time. She had been pushed, chained, insulted and dragged, her own mind invaded, and now she was forced to hear these horrible lies about her. But she was not going to give up without a fight. She had nothing else to lose.

Calhuch was turning toward her. He had demanded silence before announcing the terms of the accusation, and everybody was now paying close attention to his words.

"You, Joan d'Arc, are accused of treachery to the Republic. You are accused of witchcraft, of having used the Dark Side of the Force trying to obtain absolute power over all the beings in the Galaxy..."

"Treachery to the Republic?" Joan interrupted. She had needed to make a terrible effort, but now the voices in her mind were temporarily silent. Only the closest people could have heard her, but Calhuch stopped his speech in surprise. "Now the Bretalians are the Republic?" She continued.

"Bretalian worlds have never abandoned the Republic! We have tried to return to the Republic the peace and order which had been lost under the corrupted government! We..."

"Witchcraft?" She cut him again. "You, the master of darkness, are calling me witch?"

"I'm a Jedi Knight!" Calhuch shouted. The young girl's insolence was incredible and unbearable. She had managed to incite him to fury. Joan discovered that it was easy to provoke somebody under the influence of the Dark Side. She still felt the loathsome sensation of Calhuch and his men's minds inside of her, and all her scorn was now soaking her words.

"Show your face to the public, remove that black hood and we'll see who is the true servant of the Dark Side!"

"Shut up, woman! How dare you? Are you aware that you could be condemned to die?"

"Condemned! And when is the defence's turn?" Most of the people who could hear her started to shout furiously again. They didn't want either to listen her or to think there was a possibility of her being innocent. They were fully convinced that she deserved to die and that was what they were waiting for. But there were others, a minority, who were trying to keep calm. That woman might be a hideous criminal, but she was right about this last issue. Even if only as respect to formality, there should be a defence. The Bretalians were a civilized people after all. Others were sceptic about all this Force stuff, and were finding it hard to believe that this girl could have provoked a space battle from her cell. Discussions began here and there, and while the most of the voices were claiming for her immediate execution, Joan noticed that she had broken the Dark Jedi's control over the people. But Calhuch was not aware yet, as furious as he was.

"There is no possible defence for someone like you!" His voice was full of hate and threats. There was nothing left of his previous charisma. Some people couldn't avoid a sudden shiver when they heard Calhuch's voice as it really was. Some of them, very few, started to wonder if the rumours about Master Calhuch being a false Jedi and Joan d'Arc being a real Jedi Lady were actually true.

"Are those your Republic's laws? Where people can be judged without a defence?"

Calhuch had great difficulties re-establishing the silence. He was tearing into the young woman with his eyes. Bedenford looked at him from his chair and made a gesture of disgust. He had maintained that it was an error to carry out this farce of a trial. He was as eager as Calhuch to kill the woman and to watch her writhe in agony, but it would have been better to make her disappear without in silence, subtly, allowing the people to forget the stories about her with time. But that stupid Jedi had insisted. He was so sure about his own power that he had believed he would be able to convince the entire Galaxy of Joan's evilness. She had just provoked him and he had fallen completely into her trap. Calhuch had shown an absolute lack of self-control. These shouting people were not important. If the rest of the Galaxy had a chance to see this three ring circus the effect would be exactly the opposite to what was expected. Bedenford made a sign to one of his escort's officials. The man approached and Bedenford gave him instructions to disable all the recording devices. Maybe they could still avoid suffering worse damage.

The dark Jedi was still trying to regain control of the situation. He had managed to provoke people's hate against Joan, and he knew how that would be affecting the woman. She would have to give up sooner or later.

"Say what you have to say, Joan d'Arc!" He shouted. "You can be your own defence. If you accept your crimes freely this tribunal might show some mercy towards you..."

"There are no crimes, Calhuch." She shouted back. "I'm innocent of those stupid accusations. I've served the Republic honestly and I have never used the Dark Side of the Force. Nobody can even say that I've ever claimed to be a Jedi." She couldn't say anything more. She could barely withstand that terrible pressure, with with the Dark Jedis still trying to force her to say what they wanted, and the hate from so many people, increased by her sensibility to the Force, caused her suffering beyond description. But she knew she had won. This trial could only be the fruit of Calhuch's sick mind. Everything was an aberration. Maybe the people who filled the square, those who had been under the Dark Jedi's influence, could give some credibility to this court, but nobody out there could seriously believe anything she could have confessed chained to a pole under the permanent threat of death. There were even some people beginning to doubt Calhuch's version of events. She could feel it .

Calhuch also perceived it with disbelief. Immediately he and his two acolytes were driven out from the woman's mind one more time. He understood that Joan's will was just too strong. He looked around and saw the masses shouting, but he also saw people in silence and looks of fear. Fear of him. Calhuch realized at last what Joan and even General Bedenford had done before, that this trial would finally turn against him. Loire might celebrate this day, yes, but throughout the rest of the Galaxy Joan d'Arc would be mourned, even among some Bretalians. The Dark Jedi had believed it possible to use her tiredness and desperation to overpower her will with the Dark Side, forcing her to admit the accusations. After that nobody would follow her again. The Alderaan's Jedi, as many people insisted on calling her, would be finished forever. The Republic's forces, who had chosen her as their symbol, would have their spirit at an all time low. It would be easy then to drive them to surrender. Calhuch had planned to show himself merciful then allowing her to live, increasing his own prestige, but he had failed one more time. His first plan had been to push her to enter the Dark Side. He shouldn't have had any problems overpowering a girl without a real Jedi training, and after becoming his servant she could have been a valuable instrument. But she had turned out to be stronger than he had imagined. Now his ultimate attempt to use her for his own interests could turn into a new disaster.

The Dark Jedi stared at the chained woman and a new wave of wrath and rage invaded him. She was all he had not been. She had been pushed beyond any possible resistance but had rejected to choose the easy path, the only one that could have saved her, to enter the Dark Side. She had had the courage that he had not, and he hated her even more for that.

She had to die.

"You refuse to accept your faults and insist on trying to confound us with your twisted words." Calhuch roared. "But your evil skills won't be enough to defeat three real Jedi Knights." The other two dark figures stood up and advanced until they were both at Calhuch's flanks. "You are an offence to the Jedi Order, and you will be destroyed by the power of Light!"

Joan felt a moment of weakness. She realized she was going to die. She had believed she was ready for it, but she felt death's fear like never before. She could feel Calhuch's hate like a solid claw trying to strangle her. Her difficulties in breathing had now nothing to do with the chains. She thought of Tobb. Did he also

know with such a certainty that he was going to die? Did he think of her in that fatal moment as she was doing now? The year they had been together crossed her mind in a flash. She remembered everything in a second. It had been worth living to know that love. But now she had to face the last sacrifice. The young woman looked for comfort in the Force, trying to find the strength inside herself. She analysed her feelings and discovered that every word she had said to Yoda was still true. She was proud of her acts and would remain true to her friends, to Tobb. Yoda was right. She was a Jedi.

The fear disappeared as suddenly as it had come. When she rose her eyes to Calhuch she did so with a challenging smile on her lips.

The Dark Jedis rose their hands threateningly towards her. For a second she was able to see their terribly disfigured faces, showing what the Dark Side had done with the men they had once been. They had been destroyed although they refused to admit it. She sent them a thought of mercy and let them see how she was seeing them now. The surprise and the confusion reached Calhuch's acolytes' expressions, but it was only for a second. Calhuch's hate was their hate too, and Joan knew they were beyond any hope of redemption. Suddenly, with a cruel smile of evilness and madness, the Dark Jedi started to shoot blue lightning streaks of energy at the defenceless woman, all the power of the Dark Side flowing from his fingers twitched like hooks. His two followers mimicked him.

Joan screamed under the absolutely unbearable pain...



Shok'wave felt as if she was pushed out from Joan's body. She understood that she was now watching the terrible scene through someone's else eyes. The power of the evil bolts grew in intensity causing the woman's body to writhe wildly. Shok'wave wanted to shout but she was unable to. It seemed impossible that anybody could resist such suffering. Only the chains were keeping Joan from slumping to the ground. Her body was completely covered by blue discharges, her flesh and clothes were burning, letting thin threads of white smoke escape, impregnating the air with a powerful ozone smell. Her screams filled the crowded square. That was what they had demanded, but now many people preferred not to see this inhuman punishment, this merciless torture. Most of them looked somewhere else or simply closed their eyes, covering their ears with their hands. Only the most morbid onlookers and some of those who had lost someone in the war and had fully believed Calhuch's words stood watching the macabre spectacle.

Suddenly, between her cries of pain, Joan's broken voice could be heard clearly by her murderers.

"You can kill me now, but you have been defeated...!"

The chains and what remained of her flight suit fell on the floor, devoid of the body that they had contained. The three Dark Jedis continued launching the storm of energy for a while longer before to noticing it. Calhuch was the first to cease the attack.

"Stop!" He ordered. The man was completely astonished. "What is this? What has happened?"

He walked cautiously to the spot where Joan's clothes laid. Nothing remained of her body, not even the slightest shred. The evil man couldn't understand it. This was impossible. Bedford and the other two Bretalians stood up too. People were trying to see what was occurring on the platform, amongst exclamations of incredulity. In the centre of the immense crowd a little green skinned being had been watching everything from one of the surface vehicle's roofs.

"The way a Jedi dies that is." He said. People around him noticed his presence for the first time. Many of them remembered those words later and wondered who the small creature had been.

"But a Jedi never really dies." He added before carefully descending from the vehicle and disappearing between the masses.

Shok'wave had a last vision of the Bretalian soldiers trying to force people to move back, while Calhuch remained on the platform holding Joan's clothes. Then she was surrounded by the blackness again.

"Joan?" She called with her mind.

"I'm with you." The answer came after a while. "I couldn't let you feel what I felt those last moments."

"I had been told of a Jedi Lady called Joan d'Arc in my school days, but I had always thought that you were more a legend than a real person."

"I know. Eight hundred years is a lot of time in humans lives. But everything I've shown you was true. I had to share it with you, but now you must return. Your body is cured, I've taken care of that."

"But why have you chosen me?"

"There is no time for that. Now you must make your own decisions."

Shok'wave wanted to ask more questions, but she couldn't. The shadows disappeared under a powerful light. She briefly saw her own body on a bed, attached to several devices. A woman dressed in an orange flight suit was there watching her. Shok'wave recognized Angelrose.

### **[Onboard the White's Squadron Frigate]**

Joker was entering the medical facilities when she saw her squad-mate get up briskly.

"What...?" She started to ask.

"Joker, quickly, she's waking up!!!" Angelrose was barely able to say.

The 2-1B droid was already with her, controlling the monitors.

"Commander Krenzel has recovered..." It said. The droid was moving his head from left to right in its version of astonishment. The cerebral activity had appeared suddenly. His programming didn't include miracles, but he was still trying to find an algorithm to explain what he was seeing. Joker took her transmitter from her waist.

"Avery, come to the medical facilities right now and call everybody on the way! Sherry has pulled through!"

### **[Imperial transport near planetoid KS-31]**

Psycho pulled back the hyperspace motivators and the stars recovered their normal shape around him. The first he saw was the impressive Imperial Fleet surrounding the planetoid.

"I'm going to regret this..." He said.

In a matter of seconds he would be targeted by several fighters and he would be interrogated by not very friendly pilots. He knew how easily they would press the trigger...

*It will be better to be one step ahead of things.* The Rebel pilot selected one of the standard Imperial frequencies and used the intercom.

"Imperial Control, this is transport Ballard Two reporting in."

The answer came back immediately.

"Ballard Two, this is Star Destroyer *Senderis*. We have received no communication about your arrival. What are you doing here?" The voice was full of suspicion, but that didn't mean anything yet. Imperial controllers were always very suspicious.

"I left here three hours ago with a cargo of TIE solar panels. My destination was spatial platform Siemar-201, but I've been intercepted on my second scheduled jump point by Star Destroyer *Raveger*." That was the first Imperial ship whose name Psycho remembered. He hoped that it would be very far from there at that moment. "They have taken account of my cargo. I've been ordered to return here immediately and wait for the Frigate *Watcher*."

There were some seconds of silence. Psycho knew that they would be trying to check out his story.

"I don't know anything about *Raveger's* situation, but the computer says that Frigate *Watcher* has been lost in combat."

*Oh, shit!* Psycho thought. *Well, at least he hasn't said "captured"*.

"That must be an error, sir." Psycho was thinking desperately. His scanners were showing four Interceptors approaching rapidly. "While I was docked with the *Raveger* downloading my cargo, I was told that the *Watcher* was one of the Frigates that participated successfully in the attack against the Rebel Star Destroyer *Happy Jack!* That was only a week ago!" The Rebel pilot prayed the Imperial controller didn't know too much about what had really happened in that battle.

Again the answer was delayed too much time. With some luck, the man would be confused.

"Maybe you are right." He answered at last. "The *Happy Jack* appears in the database as destroyed. There is nothing about that operation, but I suppose the report is still being written."

Psycho was starting to sweat. The threat display indicated that he was being targeted. Probably by the four Interceptors at the same time. He decided to try the joke's trick one more time.

"Well, if I can tell you one thing, sir, that is I've never met a bureaucrat who hurried writing a report..."

The laughter could be clearly heard through the intercom. *It has worked again...* He thought with relief.

"Ok, Ballard Two. Maintain your present position until *Watcher* arrives."

"Roger that, sir." Psycho was smiling.

"Hi, Ballard Two. This is Delta One." It was the same TIE Interceptor pilot again.

"Nice to see you again, Delta One. I can't believe you are still on duty."

"Yes, I am, but not for too long. I'll finish my shift in twenty minutes. I see that you are still in that can too."

"Well, at least I can do something with this can that you can't with your nice TIE Interceptor."

"And what is that, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Well, now I'm standing up with a Corellian coffee mug in one hand and a piece of cake on the other!"

The Imperial pilots laughed at the old joke. It seemed that they didn't know it after all.

"You are a funny guy, Ballard Two." Delta One said. "When we finish here try to visit *Senderis's* cantina and ask for Lieutenant Hagger there. We'll have some drinks on me."

"Thank you very much, Lieutenant!" Psycho said cheerfully. "I'll do that."

"See you then, you guy. Delta One out."

The TIE Interceptors left at high speed. Psycho was alone again.

*I should have been actor!* He thought as he felt how part of his tension disappeared.

### **[Surface of planetoid KS-31]**

The colonists were listening to Alvar's narration with grave faces. They were crowded around him in the middle of the small village. It was evident that the Imperials were abandoning their facilities, but that stormtrooper's comments about "fires" couldn't herald anything good. There were different opinions though about what the meaning of that comment was.

"They could be about to participate in a battle, pretty far from here." An old man said. "Those fires or whatever they were talking about can't have anything to do with us."

"No, they are going to blow away what remains of the facilities, I'm sure." Another man said.

"But they wouldn't need those two monsters for that." A woman said signalling the Star Destroyer's sinister shapes, clearly visible over their heads.

"I think the same myself." Alvar said. "We are too close to the facilities in any case. We should group everybody up and put as much distance as possible between us and the facilities."

"But what about our homes?" The older man asked. "Everything we have is here, we can't just leave it behind!"

"If nothing happens after all, we will return when those ships leave, but now our own lives must be our main concern!"

Most of the colonist agreed. Even those less convinced than the old man accepted that they wouldn't lose anything by leaving the village temporarily. They decided to take some food and water and depart the sooner the better.

### **[Onboard White Squadron's Frigate]**

"Are you really well?" Foxfire asked. An immense relief was painted on her face.

"Yes, I'm fine..." Shok'wave replied. She was still laying on the bed, but she had removed the mask and the tubes that connected her to the medical devices. The 2-1B droid helped her, still shaking his head. "Just a bit confused, but..." A sudden thought came to her. "The colonists, what about the colonists?" She urged.

"They should still be alive. But if Psycho's information is correct, they have only two hours left."

Shok'wave nodded. It was this. This had to be the reason for Joan d'Arc saving her and showing her her life, her sacrifice. Maybe the colonists are only a few hundreds, while Joan had fought to set free entire worlds, but the injustice was the same. She had known all the time what she should do, but now she couldn't keep ignoring it.

"We have been preparing ourselves for a possible rescue operation." Foxfire was saying. "All the plan is based on the possibility of convincing the Imperials that this is an Imperial ship and that we have a reason to be there. The Frigate's identification hardware has been installed again, and we have two shuttles available. Vyper discovered four TIE Interceptors in a secondary hangar. He thinks that we could use them to arrange a standard Imperial escort patrol, but..."

"...It's almost impossible to deceive the Imperials like that for too long." The Squadron's Commander ended Foxfire's sentence. "We would be discovered sooner or later, I know." What she didn't need to say was that when the Imperials realized they were Rebels, they would be trapped under the fire from many ships. Too many. "But it's the best imaginable plan and we are going to accomplish it."

Nobody replied. All the pilots were staring at her.

"I can't force any of you, though. I would understand anybody who decided not to participate in this mission." She remained some seconds in silence. Nobody said a word. Vyper and Cybercat were listening from their A-Wings but none of them broke the silence either.

"Transmit this to the Frigate's crew." Shok'wave added. "We are too short of transports, but I'll sacrifice one of the shuttles to evacuate everybody who wants to. That include all of you."

Foxfire looked at her comrades. One by one all of them nodded. Only Joker smiled slightly. Foxfire smiled back in return. Joker always had a smile on her face, even in the worst moments, and Foxfire thanked her in silence for that. She turned to look at Shok'wave again."

"All White Squadron's pilots will follow you... Commander."

Shok'wave took a moment before to replying.

"You will never know how much this means to me."

Foxfire's transmitter beeped. She had kept the device connected all the time, and the conversation had been retransmitted from the bridge to every place where the reduced crew of technicians were working.

"This is Lieutenant Commander Schroeder." She replied.

"This is Sergeant Rammes, from the bridge." All the pilots could hear his voice slightly altered by the transmitter. "Tell Commander Krenzle that she can save that shuttle. All of us will stay."

"She has heard you, Sergeant. And you can believe me, she is impressed." Her friend's look left no place for doubts. "Prepare the ship for the jump to the Kessel system, as close as you can to planetoid KS-31."

"At once, ma'am. Bridge out."

"Vyper, Cybercat, I suppose you've heard that."

"Loud and clear, Foxfire." Vyper's voice sounded on the transmitter, a bit more joyful than he had pretended. "We are already heading to the bay's entrance. We'll land in a minute."

"Very well, Vyper. I'll see you in the TIE's hangar." She turned to find Shok'wave's look fixed on her, full of pride and respect.

"Well, I see that you have managed everything wonderfully while I was... out there." Shok'wave said grinning widely. "Awesome work. Now let's talk about your plan."



**[Imperial Class Star Destroyer *Senderis*' bridge]**

Two controllers were watching the different monitors, bored out of their minds. All the signals were red, every one showing the position of an Imperial ship. The last transport carrying personnel or hardware from the facilities had landed some time before. *Senderis* and *Skies Cleaner* could begin opening fire against the planetoid immediately. One of the men glanced at his chronometer one more time.

"What we are waiting for?" He asked.

"We are supposed to finish the job at 20:00 hours and our Captain is very respectful of the scheduling." His partner answered. "If he has been ordered to start at 20:00 hours there won't be a single shot fired before that time."

"Well, less than two hours..." The first controller said sighing.

"Yes. We've got nothing to do until..." The man stopped short when he noticed a new red signal appearing on one of the screens. "It seems that there are more people joining the party."

"There is another Frigate expected to arrive still. Let me see... *Watcher*."

"Ah, yes, the one that the transport's pilot said he was waiting for. All right, let's contact them."

**[Imperial Frigate *Watcher*]**

"Well, Sergeant Rammes, it's your turn." Shok'wave said. The young technician was going to make the Captain's performance. They had consulted the ship's register and found out that her last Captain had been a Lieutenant Commander Keller. If somebody demanded them to establish an holographic communication they would have to improvise some believable apology to deny it. There were no pilots among the technicians, so two of the trainees, Cybercat and Angelrose, would be piloting the shuttles. The only other people on the bridge would be one of Rammes' partners, Sergeant Dengar. She would be doing all she could to control the dozen of monitors that covered walls and desks.

"I'm ready, ma'am." Rammes said.

"Very well. Foxfire, are you prepared for launch?"

"Yes, boss. Have I mentioned how I hate this mask?"

"At least four times in the last ten minutes." Shok'wave smiled.

"Don't worry, Foxfire." Iceman's voice came through. "You look great even with the mask!"

"Stop the chat, ladies and gentlemen. We are going to start the show. Sergeant?"

Rammes stretched a hand towards his console, but before he could even start to operate the communication system controls the light indicating an incoming transmission began to blink with an insistent beep. The young technician looked at Shok'wave and she gestured to proceed. He pushed the button to accept. A male voice could be heard clearly on the bridge.

"Frigate *Watcher*, this is Star Destroyer *Senderis*. We were waiting for you. Transport Ballard Two, you are cleared to dock with *Watcher* at your convenience."

"This is Ballard Two, *Senderis*. I'm on my way, thank you."

Shok'wave recognized Psycho's voice. She could barely believe it, but whatever her old friend had been doing there it was evident that he had managed to prepare the things for them.

"That Ballard Two is one of us, Sergeant!"

"This is Lieutenant Commander Keller, *Watcher's* Captain, *Senderis*." Rammes said. "We are ready to receive Ballard Two. We are going to launch our escort fighters immediately."

"At your discretion, sir. *Senderis* out."

"Well, this is being easier than we were expecting..." Shok'wave said. "Foxfire, you can take off. Try to leave the conversation for Vyper and Iceman. There are not too many female Imperial pilots, so it will be better if you and Shadow keep in silence."

"I hate those misogynists...!" Foxfire rumbled.



Psycho saw the four Interceptors heading to his position. His guess had been right and Shok'wave had brought the Frigate there, although he was also sure that Foxfire had had something to do with it. *They have even got Interceptors*. He thought impressed. *Well, if they are going to evacuate those colonists this transport will be a good help*.

"Ballard Two, this is Banshee One. You can land in the main bay."

"All right, Banshee One, I'm on my way." Psycho was almost sure that the pilot was Vyper.

"Ma'am, Flight Officers Bastmeijer and Hull are ready in their shuttles..." Sergeant Dengar said.

Shok'wave was thinking as fast as she could. The usual capacity of a Lambda Class Shuttle was three crewmen and twenty passengers. If they used all the space available and compressed themselves all they could, taking into account that some of the colonist would be children, they might be able to carry up round about fifty people in every journey. If they used Psycho's transport, whose capacity was very similar, they could evacuate all the colony in only two trips...

"Wait a minute." Shok'wave used the transmitter. "Cybercat, Angelrose, don't take off yet. We are getting some help. Joker, can you hear me?"

"Yes, Commander." She was waiting onboard an A-Wing, ready for an immediate launch if needed. Moose, Granite and Zeppelin were onboard three of the B- Wings equipped with Imperial torpedoes. The fourth was reserved for Shok'wave.

"Do you think you can pilot a standard Imperial Stormtrooper Transport?"

"Yes, I think so..."

"Well, Psycho is coming in with one of those. When he arrives take the transport and be ready to take off with Cybercat and Angelrose."

"You're the boss...!"

"Sergeants, I'll be in the main bay. We'll be in permanent contact."

"All right, ma'am." Rammes said. He looked at the door closing with a hiss behind White Squadron's Commander and then turned his eyes to his ship-mate.

"Well, Lelha, we are now alone commanding this ship..."

"They didn't prepare us for this!" She said with a sigh.

Shok'wave ran towards the lift and headed to the bay. She consulted her chronometer. An hour and a half. She need to know what Psycho had said to the Imperials before launching the shuttles. The slightest error could be fatal, but she couldn't risk asking him through the intercom."

When she got to the bay Psycho's transport was just landing. The hatch opened and the tall blonde pilot appeared, just to be almost rammed by Joker, who entered the ship and occupied the pilot's seat.

Shok'wave ran towards Psycho.

"Psycho, we are going to launch your transport and two shuttles to recover those colonists! Is there anything I need to know?" While she spoke she waved her hand signalling to the external opening. Joker, Cybercat and Angelrose initiated the take-off manoeuvre at the same time.

Psycho looked at the transport elevating behind him.

"Yes, tell the Imperials that you have been ordered to take the colonists to space platform Siemar-201, and that they are expected to be working in the new facilities. Tell them that it was Vader who gave the order."

"Sergeant Rammes, have you heard that?"

"Yes, ma'am. Here I go!" Rammes' voice didn't show any trace of the nervousness he felt.

"Cross your fingers, Psycho..."

### **[Imperial Class Star Destroyer *Senderis*' bridge]**

"Watch out, buddy, the boss is here." One of the controllers whispered. Commander Perdiggo, the ship's Captain, was behind them, watching the monitors.

"What is that new Frigate doing here?" He asked.

"They came to rendezvous with a transport, sir." The controller consulted the computer. "Ballard Two, one of the transports that has participated in the facilities evacuation."

At that same moment the intercom came to life.

"*Senderis*, this is Frigate *Watcher*. Ballard Two and two of our shuttles are taking off. We have been ordered to evacuate the colonists from planetoid KS-31 and to take them to space platform Siemar-201. Lord Vader thinks that they can continue their work there."

The controller was still watching the screen showing the data about Ballard Two. Space Platform Siemar-201 appeared as its destination. He signalled the data to the Captain. Perdiggo went to the console and took the microphone.

"This is Commander Perdiggo, *Senderis*' Captain. I haven't been informed of that."

**[Frigate *Watcher's* main bay]**

"Insist, Rammes!" Shok'wave ordered.

"Sherry, are you well?" Psycho asked worried.

The woman had closed her eyes and put her hands over her head. She seemed not to be hearing him.

She tried to find that Captain among the sea of minds that surrounded her. *There are too many of them...*

*You can do it, Sherry.*

Shok'wave noticed Joan's presence and felt comforted. She stretched her senses towards the Imperial Star Destroyer.

**[Transport *Ballard Two*]**

Joker looked to both sides and saw Cybercat's and Angelrose's shuttles. She was hearing the conversation between *Senderis* and their Frigate, every second further behind them. The pilot noticed she was biting her nails and picked up her globes annoyed.

*A lady never does this...* She remembered herself.

**[Imperial Class Star Destroyer *Senderis'* bridge]**

"This is Lieutenant Commander Keller. My orders came directly from Lord Vader. If you want to discuss it with him..."

Commander Perdiggo couldn't avoid a shiver at the thought of Vader. But it was him who had ordered to blow up the planetoid. Perdiggo had sent a message demanding confirmation about what should be done with the colonists, and the answer had been very clear. They should die on the planetoid.

**[Frigate *Watcher's* bay]**

Vader. Shok'wave detected a mind reacting with fear when Vader's name was mentioned by Rammes. That should be the mind she was looking for. That fear was strong. Maybe she could push a bit more on that spot.

*If you want to discuss it with him...* She thought intensely.

**[Imperial Class Star Destroyer *Senderis'* bridge]**

*Lord Vader doesn't give explanations when he changes his mind about something.* Commander Perdiggo thought. Only two months ago he had participated in a mission commanded by Lord Vader personally. He had ordered *Senderis* and another ship to attack a Rebel space platform. When they were about to finish it off, he had ordered them suddenly to cease fire. The other Captain questioned why, and the next instant he was holding his neck unable to breathe. Perdiggo had seen him dying slowly until the hologram turned off. Vader had ordered a retreat and he had obeyed without hesitation. An hour later they were ordered to turn back and attack again. This time a medical Frigate had docked with the platform and was also destroyed.

Perhaps this time Vader had his own reasons too.

*If you want to discuss it with him...*

No, he didn't want to.

"All right, Captain, you can proceed. But you'd better warn your men that they must hurry. We'll be bombarding the planetoid in seventy minutes."

"It's time enough for us. Thank you, sir."

*Well done!* Shok'wave heard Joan's voice in her mind.

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

Psycho held Shok'wave before she could fall to the floor.

"I'm fine, Psycho, thank you..."

The veteran pilot stared at her friend and wondered what she had done, but whatever it was it had worked.

"I thought that I knew you perfectly..." He said.

"That's what everybody thinks." Shok'wave wiped off the sweat that covered her forehead and pointed to an A-Wing.

"Welcome to Bait Group." She said. "If the Imperials start to suspect, we'll give them something more urgent to worry about. You might have been with Vyper out there with an Interceptor, but..."

As Vyper, Psycho had started his pilot's days in the Imperial Navy too. But he was not too eager of being in the cockpit of a TIE any more.

"No, thank you. That A-Wing will be fine."

"All right. I'll be in my B-Wing." She started to walk towards the fighter when she stopped to say something more.

"Ah, Psycho, nice to see you!"

The pilot laughed and headed to Joker's A-Wing.

### **[TIE Interceptors' group]**

"Banshee Three, you and Four escort the transports to the planetoid's atmosphere." Vyper ordered.

"Roger, Banshee One." Iceman replied. He and Shadow followed the two shuttles and the transport. Vyper and Foxfire remained near *Watcher*.

Joker saw the two Interceptors join their formation. The planetoid was in front of them, too small to be considered a planet, its shape not completely spherical. It could have been a bigger planet's moon in remote times. Joker consulted the colony's location on the computer and obtained the optimal path for the approach. approach.

*Here we go...*

**[Planetoid KS-31's surface]**

The colonists were just leaving the village when they heard the shuttle's engines.

"Let's hide in the bushes, fast!" Alvar Parix shouted. Everybody obeyed and ran for cover behind the vegetation. The young man looked at the three ships landing near the houses. He approached as much as he dared without risking being discovered by the pilots. He was close enough to see the Imperial marks over the ships' hulls.

Joker looked at the nearest houses through the forward visor. They seemed to be empty, without the faintest sign of life.

"Keep the engines on." She said. "I'm going to take a look out there".

"All right, Joker." Cybercat replied. She and Angelrose were looking nervously at the land around them. "Be careful, please."

Alvar saw the transport's hatch opening and somebody descending. It was difficult to appreciate the details but the orange flight suit was not very common among the Imperial pilots. That was strange, their clothes used to be always black or grey. He observed the pilot looking around for some moments, and then he removed his helmet. The pilot moved his head to both sides and long brown hair fell free over his shoulders. *Her shoulders*. Alvar corrected himself. That was a woman, the first one he had seen in an Imperial uniform. If that flight suit was Imperial after all.

Joker checked her instruments. There were living beings around, but it was hard to tell if they were human or some other intelligent species or just animals. She thought that in any case they couldn't be Imperials because all of them would have been evacuated by then. Or that was what she hoped when she decided to call out.

"I'm a member of the Rebel Alliance!" She shouted using her hands as an improvised megaphone. "The Empire is about to destroy this planetoid, and we are here to rescue you. Please, show yourself!"

*Rebels?* The young colonist found it hard to believe it, yet there was no means to be certain. *But what if she is talking the truth?* He doubted for some seconds and finally got up slowly. The woman saw him and smiled. Alvar stared at her. Nobody who smiled like that could be an Imperial.

"We are all here." He shouted. "Tell me what we should do."

"How many of you are there?" Joker asked approaching him.

"Exactly two hundred and ninety four."

"Very well. Tell them to board our ships immediately. They can't bring anything with them. We will still have to make two more trips and we are very short of time!"

Joker's expression was one of a great concern. Alvar looked at her for a short while and decided to believe her despite the consequences.

"All right, let's go!" He said. Alvar ran towards the bushes followed by Joker. Some heads could be seen popping up over them.

"Listen to me, all of you!" He shouted. "They are Rebels and they are here to help us. Run to the ships and don't carry anything with you, there is not enough space. Two trips will be needed, so the children must be the first ones!"

More and more people came out from behind the vegetation. Their distrust was clearly painted on their faces. None of them moved toward the ships.

"You must believe me!" Joker said. "Please, come with us if you want to save your lives. The Imperials will destroy the entire planetoid very soon, we have very little time!" Everybody stood where they were, looking at each others. Joker heard some whispers.

"Please, you must convince them or all of you will be doomed!" She said.

Alvar searched among the crowd until he found his little sister, only eight years old. She was holding their parents' hands.

"There is only one way to show them that I trust you..." Alvar said. Joker followed his sight and saw the child. The young man walked towards her.

"Come with me, Sal." He said taking her from their parents, who tried to avoid it.

"What are you doing?" His mother asked.

"Mum, Dad, trust me, please!"

Alvar started to run towards the transport holding the child in his arms.

"Alvar, no! The woman cried.

"If there is someone worth being trusted that is our son!" The father exclaimed recovering from the initial shock. "If he believes this woman I will!" Her wife only doubted for an instant and then nodded. They left what they were carrying on the ground and followed their son and daughter.

"You must understand that this is your only chance to survive!" Joker said looking at the colonists for the last time and then running after Alvar's parents.

Everybody watched them moving away, doubting what to do. It was a difficult decision. They had started to think that things would be better now with the Imperials leaving. Maybe they could recover the spirit of the first days, ten years ago, when they had got there from several locations, full of hope and dreams of finding a better place to live. That had ended briskly when the first Imperial ship had landed, but now it seemed that they had abandoned the planetoid forever. But if that woman was right, that place would never be their home again. Alvar Parix's family was already boarding the transport.

"I believe them, let's go!" Another woman shouted. She took her little son by his hand and started to run too. One after another most of the colonists did the same. Joker saw them approaching and sighed with relief.

"You did it!" She said to Alvar.

"But not everybody is coming." He answered looking at the static crowd that had remained far from the ships. "I'll stay here this time. I'll try to convince them too. You are coming back, aren't you?"

"Yes, I promise."

"Then I'll be waiting for you." Alvar calmed his family down as best as he could and descended from the transport. He aided the incoming people to enter. When nobody more could fit, he went to the ship's bow and gestured to Joker to leave. She nodded from the cockpit and the transport started to elevate on its repulsors. Cybercat and Angelrose were taking-off too.

Alvar stood watching the three ships disappear into the sky.

#### **[TIE Interceptors orbiting the planetoid]**

"Here they come, Banshee Four." Iceman said. Shadow remembered Shok'wave's instructions and didn't answer. She followed Iceman's fighter to intercept the incoming transport and shuttles. She used the sensors to check the closest shuttle, the one piloted by Angelrose. The ship was full of people.

Vyper saw the ships approaching and took a look at the nearest Star Destroyer. He was wondering how much time they still had before someone made some detailed checks in the computers or contacted the Imperial Fleet High Command. If that happened, the shuttles, the transport and the Frigate would have some chance of jumping to hyperspace and escaping, but they would be trapped in these Interceptors. Well, to be exact the shuttles and the transport would have to be further from the planetoid to try that. He didn't want even think in the possibility of being captured. If the Imperials put their hands on him he would be slowly tortured to death in exchange for his desertion. He had disconnected the ejection hardware to be sure that that wouldn't happen. It was better to die quickly. He looked at his right wing and saw Foxfire's fighter at his side. She had been captured once after being shot down by him, when he was still in Black Knights Squadron. The charming pilot had made it impossible for him to forget it since then. She had been rescued that time, but it was better not to think about what would happen to her or Shadow if they were caught by the Imperials. Shok'wave had been right, there were too few women in the Imperial ships. He shivered.

#### **[Imperial Class Star Destroyer *Senderis*' bridge]**

"Sir, we are receiving a transmission from *Skies Cleaner*." The man said. "Her Captain wants to talk to you."

"Very well. Open a channel to him." Commander Perdiggo ordered.

"This is Commander Legann." The voice sounded clearly. "What are those transports doing? We will be opening fire in forty five minutes!"

"They have received orders from Lord Vader to evacuate the colonists. I've warned them that they must hurry."

"Orders from Lord Vader? I thought that it was precisely him who wanted them dead! How come I wasn't notified of this change?"

"Well, the orders were brought by the Frigate *Watcher*..." There was hesitation in Perdiggo's voice.

"That's another thing I would like explained. I'm being told that *Watcher* appears in our database as lost in combat."

#### **[Frigate *Watcher*'s main bay]**

Shok'wave couldn't know exactly what was happening, but she had kept the contact with the Imperial Captain's mind and she felt that he was doubting again.

*Oh, damn it. She thought. I don't have your power, Joan, I just can't do it!*

*Don't give up, Sherry. Let the Force do the work for you. Don't try so hard and just do it...*

*Can't you give me some help?*

*I am, you must trust me, but I don't have any direct influence over minds not sensitive to the Force from where I am. You must understand that I'm not alive in the same way than you. I need you, Sherry, all those colonists need you.*

*I know...*

She closed her eyes one more time and pressed the Imperial Captain's mind again. She tried to be relaxed, to let the Force flow freely between her and the Imperial. She again felt his fear of Vader, that was where she could do something.

*Vader wants his orders accomplished without hesitation.*



**[Imperial Class Star Destroyer *Senderis*' bridge]**

"Vader wants his orders accomplished without hesitation." Perdigo said as if in a trance.

"Yes, I agree, and his orders were to destroy the planetoid *with the colonists*." There was a clear tone of impatience in Commander Legann's voice. "And what about *Watcher*? Should I suppose that there is an error in the data base?"

Commander Perdigo heard what one of his controllers was telling him.

"I'm being informed that that is what has probably happened, yes. Talk to her Captain though."

*Vader doesn't like the Captains who question his orders.*

Commander Perdigo shivered.

"And you can contact Coruscant and ask Lord Vader if he is sure or not about his instructions..."

There was a long silence on the channel.

"I'll talk first with *Watcher's* Captain." The answer came finally through.

**[Frigate *Watcher's* main bay]**

"Lord Vader had decided that the colonists can be used in the new facilities." Shok'wave heard Sergeant Rammes explaining. She tried to find that other Captain's mind without losing the first one.

"But why has he not informed us directly?"

Shok'wave thought that she had managed to contact him. He was not so frightened of Vader as like the other Captain, but he was not eager to talk to him either.

"I can't answer that, sir. I've received my orders and I'm obeying them, that's all."

So it was. Sergeant Rammes was right. Imperials officers always followed orders from someone higher. If things went wrong it was that higher ranked officer who paid the price. Shok'wave guessed that this fleet was under command of the first Captain, Commander Perdigo.

*It's Commander Perdigo's problem, not yours.* "Well, I suppose that if Commander Perdigo has no objections you can proceed..." The Imperial Captain said after a while. He seemed not to be entirely convinced, but this might be all they needed.

"I've got something more to ask you." Commander Legann insisted. "Your ship appears in our database as lost in combat..."

Shok'wave doubted. *How had Psycho explained this?*

"Oh, damn it!" Sergeant Rammes said. "I just can't believe they have not corrected that yet! When I finish here somebody is going to lose his rank and his job over there in Coruscant, if nothing else..."

*Well done, Rammes!* Shok'wave thought.

"All right, Captain, when you send your complaints include a paragraph saying that I support you. I hate this kind of mistakes and people being lazy in their work."

"Thank you, sir. I'll do that."

"*Skies Cleaner* out."

"Hey, Sergeant." Shok'wave said through the intercom. "If we see the end of this I'll personally commend your promotion to Lieutenant, it's a promise!"

"Thank you, ma'am. You wouldn't believe the way I'm sweating now!"

Shok'wave laughed briefly. She definitely liked the young sergeant.

Like the rest of pilots, Psycho had been paying close attention to all the conversation from his cockpit.

*It seems that Rebel Alliance is full of good actors!*

## **Part Five**

### **The Hour of Truth**

#### **[Frigate *Watcher's* main bay]**

Joker felt comforted when they reached the Frigate's hangar. She had kept a hand permanently over the hyperspace motivator's controls for the last five minutes, while hearing the conversation between the two ships. Only now she realized that she had not programmed any jump co-ordinates. Nobody could even imagine what would have happened if she had activated those controls.

"Please, Cybercat, could you transmit your jump co-ordinates to my computer?"

"Of course, Joker." Her squad-mate answered. "Good that you didn't need them before!"

"Don't make me more nervous than what I already am!"

She landed softly and opened the rear hatch.

"All of you descend now, please! We are going to return for the rest of the group!"

She observed how the scared colonists, a good part of them children, abandoned the transport. The young man's father stopped for a moment and grabbed Joker's shoulder.

"You are going to save my son and the others, aren't you?" The man asked with concern.

She remembered his mother had called him Alvar.

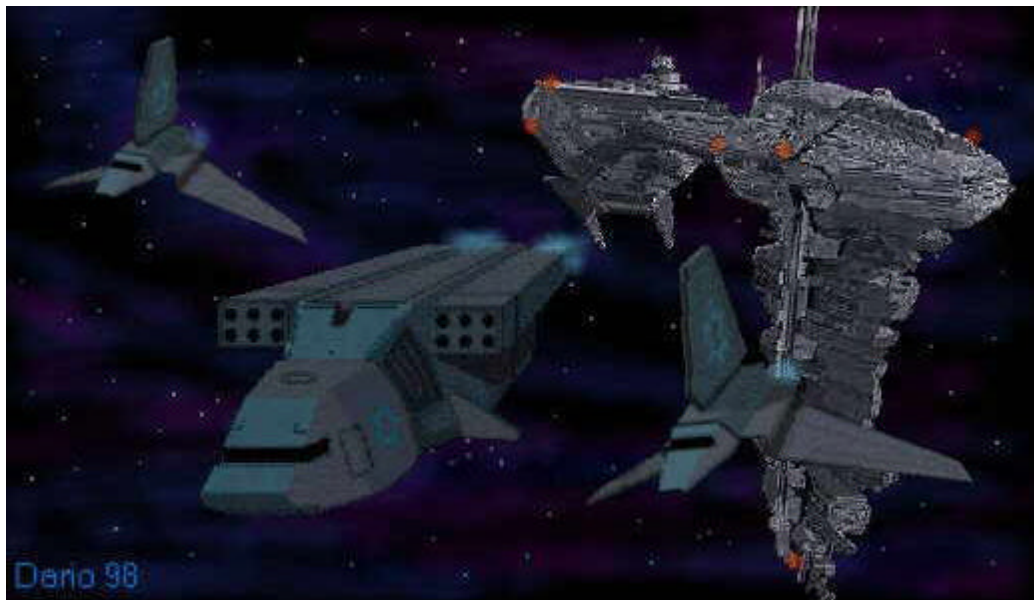
"Don't worry, sir. We'll be back with Alvar and the rest of people as soon as we can."

The man nodded and turned away without reply. Joker couldn't do anything else for him but take-off and do what she had promised. She thought of the young colonist who had remained on the planetoid with the other half of the colony. She hoped that he would be able to convince those more obstinate among them.

#### **[TIE Interceptors' group]**

Foxfire saw the three ships taking off again from the Frigate. Iceman and Shadow had joined them and they

were about to repeat the operation. She was wondering how it was possible that the Imperials were believing so easily what Sergeant Rammes had told them. He was carrying out an awesome performance, but even so it was almost incredible. She had been expecting to be fighting a long time ago. Sherry had been very strange after her awakening. She had not made any comments about it, but Foxfire had detected something new in her friend, she almost seemed to believe that this crazy plan was going to work. The amazing thing was that it was doing so. Until now...



"Banshee Three and Four, provide escort for Ballard Two and the shuttles." Vyper ordered.

"Aye, sir." Iceman and Shadow were already heading towards them. Foxfire looked around one more time to see the impressive amount of ships surrounding them. She couldn't avoid the old reflex to check the shields indicators, just to find she had no shields at all.

*How I miss my A-Wing!*

### **[Imperial Class Star Destroyer *Senderis*. Delta Squadron ready room]**

Lieutenant Hagger, Delta One, had discovered that he was not tired enough to sleep, so he had returned to the ready room to have some chat with his partners, but he had found it empty. It seemed that the pilots who weren't flying were resting in their rooms. He served himself a new mug of coffee.

"This stuff will kill me sooner or later." He said to himself staring at the steaming black substance. "Not to mention it's probably the reason for me being awake when everybody else is sleeping..."

He approached a computer terminal. Maybe he could waste some time with some of the new games. He took a small sip of the coffee and made a gesture of displeasure.

"Oh, boy, today's even worse than other days! I wonder if that transport's pilot was serious about the Corellian coffee..."

That pilot seemed to be a nice guy. He noticed that he had forgotten to ask him his name, but that was nothing that couldn't be solved with the computer's help. He logged in on the general information services and introduced a query searching for a transport called *Ballard Two*. Immediately the data filled the screen. Delta Class Dx9 Stormtrooper Transport, weight, size, average speed, maximum speed, cargo capability, warheads capability... Hagger didn't want the technical information. He selected the duty assignments data. Transport Wing Ballard, main base in Space Platform ISP-51H. Units from One to Six currently temporarily assigned to Sienar facilities on planetoid KS-31. Three of them had been destroyed recently during a Rebel attack. Hagger remembered that all too well. He required specific information about Ballard Two, last flights

and pilots. Here it was. The last stored mission was a flight from planetoid KS-31 to Space Platform Siemar-201. The pilot for that mission was Sergeant Iskaias Sehard. That was what he was looking for. *Iskaias*, *curious name*. He closed the file and took the link to the pilots data base. The information included the standard hologram of the pilot's head. Sergeant Sehard was a male thirty years old, black haired, with moustache and nothing remarkable. Hagger had not imagined the guy like that, but that always happened when you knew somebody only by his voice. He had become more curious and started to read the file. The brief biographical data contained nothing interesting, place of birth, parents, and things like that. He was about to close this file too, a bit disappointed, when he discovered a further note. This was very recent, only one hour and a half ago. Sergeant Sehard was expected onboard the Medical Frigate *Mountrill* for a routine check, but he had not reported in. That was strange. If he was going to *Mountrill* why had he been ordered on a mission? Maybe they were short of pilots after the Rebel attack, and Sergeant Sehard or his higher ranked official had forgotten to cancel the medical checks. Hagger didn't have anything better to do, so he decided to take a look at the casualties list in Ballard Wing.

He thought that this might be restricted information but it was not. Only one pilot had died during the attack. Only one. But there were three ships destroyed. He requested more information and discovered that two transports had been destroyed parked in the facilities. That meant that they should have more pilots than they needed. Hagger's instinct was telling him that there was something strange here.

He took another sip of the coffee, but this time he didn't notice the taste. He tried a different approach and tried to find something about the Space Platform Siemar-201. Reserved Information. He didn't have the clearance codes, so he should start again using a slower path. He made a general query on the Imperial Database searching for Ballard Two, this time looking not only at the subjects but at the contents. The computer informed that this might take some minutes. Hagger had hours if needed.

### [Planetoid KS-31's surface]

"I'm not sure this is a good idea." The old man was saying. He was the one who had questioned the first decision of abandoning the village. "To leave our houses for a few hours was one thing, to leave the planet is a very different matter altogether. Where are we going to go?"

He was not the only one with that kind of doubts. Alvar Parix was trying to convince them that there was a real danger, that the Rebel pilot was talking the truth and that they would be killed if they insisted on remaining on the planetoid. The sound from the engines of the three ships interrupted him when he was about to start again with his plea.

"What are they waiting for?" Angelrose asked. The colonists were not heading toward the ships.

"I'll go see." Joker said. She checked her chronometer. Only twenty one minutes. They would need five to abandon the atmosphere and ten more to be far enough at top speed to avoid the explosion and the expansive wave that would follow. It would be twenty to reach the Frigate or a position from where to jump to hyperspace, but that would be only if they were not caught in the planetoid's destruction. If they did not leave in six minutes they would never make it.

### [Imperial Class Star Destroyer *Senderis*. Delta Squadron Ready Room]

The results of the search started to fill the screen. Hagger scrolled page after page looking for something relevant. He ordered the data in chronological order, from the most recent backwards. There was one very recent. Corvette *Denner* had been expecting transport Ballard Two for docking for five hours, with a cargo of recovered pieces from the facilities. It seemed that the transport's destination had been changed at the last moment, but *Denner* had not been informed. He checked the last accesses to Ballard Wing duty assignments. They were all signed by Lieutenant Fender, the chief of the Ballard group assigned to the Siemar facilities. Hagger selected all the fields available for every record, and he found that even the username who had introduced every piece of information appeared. All these records had been stored by I352fender, who was certainly Lieutenant Fender. All but one, stored by au212admin. Hagger was not an expert, but that sounded like a system management user, not related with the Wing or with a particular person. That was not an entirely convincing proof, but Hagger was sure by now that the data had been manipulated. That made sense. If Sehard had docked with *Denner* five hours ago, he could have made it on time to his medical check up on *Mountrill* one and a half hours ago. If Sehard was really who was piloting

Ballard Two he was not acting under his higher official's orders. And he or someone else had done the job of manipulating the computer records to cover his tracks.

He opened a communication link with the bridge.

"This is Lieutenant Hagger. I need to talk with the Captain."

### **[Frigate *Watcher's* main bay]**

Something was happening on that ship. Shok'wave couldn't know what it was exactly, but she could detect how the tension was growing over there. The Imperials might have discovered something and all the plan could be about to blow up in their faces. The transports were expected to be leaving the planetoid's atmosphere in a few minutes. They needed only a bit more time.

*The colonists on the planetoid, the thought came. It was Joan. Your pilots are having problems with them.*

They couldn't communicate with Joker's group without alerting the Imperials. She needed to know what was happening there. She stretched her senses towards the planetoid looking for a familiar mind. The distance was greater, but the task was easier. When she found Joker's mind she felt her tension. The minds around her were nervous too, as she could feel them now. Some of them didn't want to do something... It must be to go with Joker and her partners. She tried to press them to relax and accept whatever it was, but she found a great resistance. This was turning out to be very hard. Shok'wave had never tried to use her abilities in this manner. Actually she wouldn't have believed it possible if she had not seen Joan d'Arc doing it. Shok'wave had been there somehow, she had indeed felt how Joan had done it. She tried to use her powers in the same way. But it seemed easier when the Jedi Lady did it.

*You can't force all of them to act against their will. You can only reinforce something that is already there.*

Shok'wave tried to do what Joan was suggesting, but she was unable to find anything she could use. She needed to concentrate on more urgent things. The transports had to leave immediately. She returned her attention to Joker's mind and felt her tension. That was not strange. Her pilots should take off in two minutes to have any possibility of escaping.

*Get out of there, Joker, now!* Shok'wave thought intensely.

The sudden thought startled the pilot. She consulted her chronometer again to find what little time they had left. They had lost more than four minutes discussing without any results. Alvar was with her, trying to convince the rest of the colonists to board the transports.

"Enough of this, Alvar." Joker said. "We have no time. We must go right now."

She took the transmitter.

"Cybercat, Angelrose, we're leaving, with colonists or without them!"

She had said that loud enough to be heard by everybody. She ran towards the transport without looking back. Alvar and some of the colonists, especially those whose sons or wives had left on the first trip, followed her.

Shok'wave felt the confusion. The fear. That was what she was looking for. She struggled to push all those minds to feel that fear even more intensely. Fear was the only thing that could force them to move.

*If you don't go you will die!*

The old man and twenty more people had stood seeing how the rest of people ran to board the ships. Suddenly all of them felt the cry of incoming threat in their minds. They could die if they insisted in remaining there. They would die.

"Joker, wait!" It was Cybercat's voice. She looked at the forward visor and saw the remaining colonists running towards her. Less than a minute. They had decided just in time.

"They are all in!" Alvar informed half a minute later.

"Ok, let's go!!!"

The transport and the two shuttles headed to the skies, their engines forced at maximum power. All the colonists had boarded the ships. Angelrose looked at bow to see the two giant Star Destroyers manoeuvring to target the planetoid with all their weapons. The three escaping ships were exactly in the middle and there was no time for a roundabout. In less than fifteen minutes that zone would be a hell.

### **[TIE Interceptor's group]**

Iceman was the first to detect them. He had been constantly watching the chronometer, and couldn't avoid a sigh when he noticed the three red dots appearing on his forward display.

"Interception course, Banshee Four." He ordered. Shadow's Interceptor mirrored his own manoeuvre and they both flew towards the approaching ships. Iceman checked the Star Destroyers position and he saw that they were ready to shoot. Iceman would be happy when they were able to get out of there.

He heard a softened cough through his headphones. That should be Shadow. He checked his rear display again and noticed four ships approaching. TIE Interceptors.

*Four.* He thought. *They can't be Vyper and Foxfire...*

Shadow identified the incoming ships. They were from Delta Squadron. She looked at her threat indicator but it was not blinking. Her fingers flew over the computer controls trying to find which was their target. She knew the answer before the screen showed it. Two of them were pointing their weapons against the transport, the one with the more powerful shields, while the other two were each going to attack the shuttles.

### **[Frigate *Watcher's* main bay]**

Shok'wave returned her attention to the Star Destroyers' bridges, looking for their Captains' minds one more time. She knew immediately that things were getting worse. The intercom crackled and her fears were confirmed.

"Commander, this is Rammes, they are sending fighters against our ships. Our communication console is blinking like crazy, and I imagine they are going to be less friendly with us now..."

*It's time, Sherry.*

"I know." She said.

"Ma'am?"

"You know the plan. All fighters, launch now!"

**[Imperial Class Star Destroyer *Senderis's* bridge]**

Lieutenant Hagger had informed of his discoveries directly to Commander Perdiggo. He had consulted the situation with *Skies Cleaner's* Captain and he had decided that they should intercept the transport Ballard Two and the two shuttles. The suspicions over them were too serious to ignore. If they resisted to be boarded and inspected they would be destroyed immediately. If Ballard Two's pilot had been lying then *Watcher* could be hiding something too, as Perdiggo had suspected since the first moment. He couldn't understand how his fear of Vader had pushed him to accept so easily her Captain's words, but now he seemed to be thinking more clearly. He had ordered to contact *Watcher*.

"They are not answering, sir." The officer said.

"Then we are going to..." Commander Perdiggo was interrupted when *Watcher's* Captain's shout was heard on the bridge.

"To all ships, this is *Watcher*, we are detecting Rebel fighters! There are several B-Wings!"

Captain Perdiggo swallowed hard. Everybody knew by then what the B-Wings were able to do if they were not intercepted in time.

"All fighters, engage the incoming Rebels!" He ordered. "Shoot down the B-Wings first!"

**[Space around Frigate *Watcher*]**

Vyper and Foxfire had received the coded signal. Their squad-mates were being launched. That meant that they were about to be discovered and they were going to try to move the Imperials' attention away from the transports and the Frigate.

"Banshee Squadron, attack the Rebels right now!" Vyper ordered. He knew that Iceman and Shadow would have to abandon the transport and the shuttles and obey the order to avoid being discovered too soon. Foxfire and he were the closest fighters to the Rebels, so they would be the first ones to intercept them. The plan for this contingency was to buy some time simulating they were trying to destroy the Rebel fighters, but actually covering their tails a few seconds, before the incoming Imperial fighters decided to act themselves.

Shok'wave felt somewhat strange piloting the B-Wing, but she soon discovered the reason. She had got used to the MF-21 Singer. The B-Wing was slower and not so manoeuvrable, but it was heavily armed and had the strongest shields any other starfighter had ever had. That was an advantage that Joan had not had. The Jedi Lady was there, somewhere. Shok'wave could sense her presence very, very close.

*May the Force be with you.*

*Thanks, Joan. Here we go...*

She had been watching the Imperial Fleet for more than an hour deciding which ships they would eventually attack. They should choose those far enough from the Frigate to avoid putting it in danger, but close enough to be in range the sooner the better. She had ignored two Escort Carriers that were very near and had preselected two separate Nebulon B Frigates in the computer's memory. She had transmitted the data to the rest of the B-Wings.

"Granite and Moose, take out target One, Zeppelin and I will engage target Two! Psycho, you know what to do"

Acknowledgements were received from the four pilots.

**[Imperial Class Star Destroyer *Senderis*' hangars]**

"Delta One requesting immediate launch." Lieutenant Hagger said.

He had run towards the hangar right after talking to Commander Perdiggo. He had contacted his patrol partners too and the four Interceptors were now ready to be launched.

"Roger, Delta One." The answer came. "Launch in fifteen seconds. You are going to intercept transport Ballard Two. The fighters that had been sent to do it have been ordered to return and engage the Rebels."

"Copy that."

He had heard the warning messages of Rebel fighters approaching. He had expected to be ordered to attack them, but things were moving in a different way. He had been the one who had intercepted Ballard Two twice. This time was going to be somewhat different. If they refused to stop their engines he would be more than pleased to press the trigger. There was nothing Hagger hated more than to be deceived. His thoughts were interrupted when the catapult launched his fighter screaming into space. He felt smashed against his seat for a second and then the uncomfortable sensation ceased. He moved the stick to turn towards the planetoid.

**[Space surrounding planetoid KS-31]**

"They are leaving. All of them!" Joker said. She had seen the signals of Iceman and Shadow's fighters approaching and then four Interceptors more. She had bitten her lower lip knowing what that meant, but now the six ships were moving away from them. That could only mean one thing. Her comrades were attacking the Imperials to distract them.

"Hey, girls, it seems that we are not going to be able to reach the Frigate. Be prepared to jump to hyperspace when we are far enough from the planetoid." Alvar Parix stared at her with concern from the co-pilot's seat but said nothing.

"We'll have to find a path through all those ships first..." Cybercat said. She was right. There were dozens of ships in front of them covering all the possible jump points. The woman had shivered when she had noticed the Interceptors racing towards them. The memories from her last battle were still very fresh. She had been about to be shot down and Shok'wave could have died. But this was what she had promised to do when she had joined the Rebel cause, there was no place for fear. *Danger has always been a part of it.* She concentrated on flying.

"I think we could escape if we head to three zero two point seven." Angelrose said. "But we'll have to pass very close to one of those Star Destroyers..."

Joker checked the computer and saw that the path proposed by Angelrose effectively had some chances of success. Behind the Star Destroyer on the left, the one called *Skies Cleaner*, there was a narrow corridor free of ships, but her appreciation of the situation was true too. They would have to pass very, very close to it.

"All right." She said at last. "But if this fails I'll remember that it was your idea, Angelrose."

"Thank you, Joker, you're very kind..."

Granite saw a bright red dot on his rear display. He checked the computer quickly and was relieved when he discovered it was Foxfire's Interceptor. Suddenly four laser shots missed him just by inches.

"Wow, I hope that Foxfire doesn't take her role too seriously..."

He started to jink enough to avoid the fire but also keeping his trajectory. If there was any Imperial watching he wouldn't doubt that Foxfire was trying to shoot him down.



*You got the point, Granite.* Foxfire thought as she squeezed the trigger again. One of the bolts almost hit Granite's port S-foil. *Pheeeeew, I have to be more careful...*

Moose selected dual missiles and observed the counter indicating the distance to their target decreasing quickly. They would be in range soon, but the Frigate's Captain had noticed that his ship was being targeted and had ordered to move it. It was now offering her bow, where most of her weapons were concentrated. Its weakest point, the long structure that connected the bow section with the engines was now hidden. Moose noticed that his own threat indicator was blinking. The Frigate's gunners were obtaining a lock on him and they would be launching missile after missile in a matter of seconds. A glance at the rear display showed that no less than ten Imperial fighters were following Foxfire's. They were reaching them.

"What do you think, Granite?"

"We are going to love this." Was the answer.

"I must have imagined you were going to say that, you crazy Caldanian..."

Vyper was racing after Shok'wave's and Zeppelin's B-Wings. Their situation was even worse than their squad-mates attacking the other Frigate. Not only was there the Frigate and the incoming fighters. Three Corvettes were trying to cut their path to the Frigate, and they were starting to shoot at them.

*If by any chance I'm hit by one of those Corvettes, I'm going to make a nice ball of fire...*

He shot against the two B-Wings taking care of missing every time. He was dangerously close to them. *Zeppelin must be smelling my after shave.* That must be restraining the incoming Interceptors from shooting themselves, because they were now just behind him.

"Hey, Banshee One, you wouldn't hit a Star Destroyer if you were parked inside of her!"

*The Imperial pilots are getting impatient.*

"Move aside and let us real pilots do the job!"

*Very impatient.*

Psycho was flying freely trying to be everywhere at once, shooting against every fighter that crossed his sight. He had managed to destroy an Interceptor and a TIE Fighter in the first moments. But there were more of them every time. He had selected his old transport and the two shuttles on his computer, observing them from time to time. The trick seemed to be working, because nobody was attacking them. Until now. Four Interceptors had been launched from *Senderis* and were heading to them. When he targeted the leader ship he couldn't avoid an exclamation of surprise.

"It's my friend Delta One again!"

He redirected all the energy to the engines and raced after them. His shields were losing power quickly. It was not only that all the energy was now feeding the engines, besides he had several fighters on his tail trying to reach him. The A-Wing was managing to outrun them, but he was still receiving some shots from them. He changed the shield selector to concentrate all the remaining power on the rear part.

"Resist, please, resist..."

Joker was the first one who noticed them this time.

"Here they come again!"

"I see them!" Cybercat replied. "An A-Wing is chasing them!"

"Yes, it's *my* A-Wing!" Joker said consulting the screen. "It must be Psycho."

"A friend of yours?" Alvar asked.

"Yes, a good one. Tell everybody that we're going to move a bit..."

#### **[Imperial Class Star Destroyer *Senderis's* bridge]**

"Sir, they are only five fighters, four B-Wings and a lonely A-Wing"

"I can't understand Rebels. This is a suicide attack." Commander Perdiggo said. "Very well, our fighters will finish them off. Communicate with *Skies Cleaner*. We are going to continue with the operation. Will be opening fire in seven minutes."

"Aye, sir."

Commander Perdiggo turned to a second officer.

"What about that transport and the shuttles?"

"They are going to be intercepted as you ordered. Lieutenant Hagger is commanding a group of fighters from Delta. We have sent three Stormtrooper Transports to board them. They are ready to disable them if needed."

"Perfect. I wonder if the Rebel attack is related with that transport. Inform me when they are captured."

"All right, sir."

"We can't forget the Frigate either, *Watcher*."

"Their fighters are helping in the fight against the Rebels, sir. They insist they have received orders from Lord Vader. The Captain says that they were informed about Ballard Two's help at the last moment."

Commander Perdiggo frowned.

"Maybe they have nothing to do with whatever that transport is doing here, but we can't be too sure. Keep an eye on *Watcher*. When we finish our present mission I'm going to have a long talk with her Captain. Now tell him that we are going to board their shuttles besides Ballard Two. He must order them to co-operate."

"Aye, sir."

Foxfire had to break to avoid being shot by the incoming Interceptors. It seemed that they didn't want to wait any more for her destroying the two B-Wings. She manoeuvred to let the Imperial fighters pass. She counted ten.

*Let's see how many I can shoot down before they catch me...*

Moose felt several impacts on his rear shields. He compensated them with the forward ones and tried to keep his route.



"It seems Foxfire is taking better aim!" He said.

"That was not Foxfire!" Granite answered. His computer beeped several times. "More bad news, the Frigate has launched missiles!"

Foxfire targeted the closest Interceptor and fired. When the ship exploded the Rebel pilot was already shooting against a new enemy. Shouts and curses filled her ears when the Imperial pilots noticed what was happening. Three of them abandoned the chase and turned to engage her. She managed to finish off the second fighter but she had lost her initial advantage. Suddenly two more Interceptors appeared on her tail. They fired at her with their four laser cannons linked.

And two of the Interceptors that had turned to attack her became balls of fire.

Foxfire looked at her screen. Those were Iceman and Shadow. She changed to White Squadron's pre-arranged frequency. Immediately she could hear Shadow's voice.

"Together again, eh?"

"We must help Granite and Moose!" Foxfire said. She had lost contact with them, but they were not too far, only one klick away. Five TIE Interceptors were hunting them. "Catch those bogies the sooner you can!"

"Ok, see you later!" Iceman said. He and Shadow raced after their comrades while Foxfire got into a dogfight with the remaining TIE Interceptor. She didn't return to the Imperial frequency so she had not to hear the pilot's threats.

"Moose, Granite, we are coming!" Shadow called. She and Iceman were managing to reduce the distance between them and the slower B-Wings.

"Make yourself at home!" Granite said. The fighters on their tail were a serious problem, but he was concentrated on a bigger one. The incoming missiles. If they tried to evade too soon the warheads would cut the angle and the Rebel pilots would be dead. That was if the Imperial Interceptors didn't finish the work first. *Oh, yes, the Interceptors...* Granite thought.

"Don't you think these Interceptors are too close?" Moose said.

"You've just read my mind, man!"

"Here they come. On my mark. Three, two, one, NOW!"

The two B-Wings rose briskly when the wave of missiles was about to hit them. Granite was reached only by one and Moose by two, their shields managing to resist. But some of the warheads impacted on the Imperial fighters that were following them. The explosion was spectacular, trapping the five TIE Interceptors and the rest of the missiles. Granite felt his fighter trembling from the expansive wave.

"Are you both ok?" Iceman asked. He couldn't tell what exactly had happened, as his sensors had been temporarily blinded by the explosion.

"Yes!" Moose answered. "Those were the Imperials, the Frigate's gunners have not been very careful..."

"That gives me an idea." Iceman said. "You just worry about hitting that Frigate."

Iceman identified the Nebulon B Frigate on his computer and used the Imperial frequency again.

"Banshee Three to *Portcantell*, what are you supposed to be doing? You have destroyed five of our fighters! fighters!" There was a second of silence. Iceman didn't wait for the answer. "Someone is going to pay for this, I promise! Now leave the Rebels to us!"

"Roger, Banshee Three. We are ceasing the fire, but don't allow them to get closer." The reply came finally. It had worked. Iceman returned to the previous frequency.

"Now launch those torpedoes and let's get out of here!"

Moose had not heard the conversation, but he supposed that Iceman had had something to do with the fact that their threat indicators were turning off for the first time. He looked at the Frigate one more time. Two clicks. With the shields so low they wouldn't resist too much time in front of her.

"Hey, mate, we'd better shoot from here..." He said.

"I've reached the same conclusion." They couldn't hit the weakest point, but the bridge section was not a bad target either. Iceman and Shadow's Interceptors were very near now. They had started to shoot at them, them, but a group of TIE fighters was approaching from starboard, and they wouldn't wait for too long before to open fire themselves.

"Ok, then!" Moose pressed the trigger. Nothing. He tried one more time. The torpedoes remained in the launchers. "What in the hell...?" He was starting to say while squeezing the trigger again and again. Suddenly, all the twelve torpedoes were launched in pairs without his intervention. Fortunately he had kept the target lock on the Frigate the whole time.

"I suppose that we mounted those launchers too fast!" Granite said. He had also managed to launch his torpedoes after several attempts.

"That doesn't matter now. Let's go!"

The two B-Wings turned to move away from the Frigate, followed by their friends' Interceptors. Twenty four torpedoes were heading towards the Frigate *Portcantell*. All of them were locked on the same spot. The forward laser towers were starting to shoot again trying to hit the missiles. It was too late.

Shadow looked back and saw in astonishment how the Frigate's bridge section completely disintegrated in a huge explosion. The ship started to spin out of control.

"Superb work, you guys!" She cheered, although a look at her display made her to become serious immediately. "Uh, oh, it seems that you have attracted a lot of attention..."

Dozens of Imperial fighters were racing towards them.

"Don't worry about us." Moose said. "But you both should be thinking of returning closer to our Frigate. I guess we're not going to be that much longer over here..."

"Very well." Shadow said. "But first we'll try a pass on those TIE fighters..."

"I'm with you." Iceman replied.

Vyper had been forced to move out of the Imperials' path as Foxfire had done just some seconds ago. He had received an impact on his right solar panel before finishing the manoeuvre. Eight TIE Interceptors and four TIE fighters were now shooting against Shok'wave and Zeppelin. The three Corvettes were exactly in front of them, making impossible the attack on the Frigate.

The Rebel pilot carefully observed the Imperial formation before shooting. The leader ship was closely followed by two wingmen. The rest of the Interceptors were a bit more separated, while the four TIE fighters were flying exactly above them. One of the Imperial pilots was joking about Vyper. He smiled and targeted the first Interceptor. He linked his four cannons and fired.

Zeppelin looked back briefly and saw the closest TIE Interceptor exploding spectacularly, trapping one of its partners too. This second TIE's top hatch was launched upwards violently and an explosion inside its cockpit indicated that the pilot had managed to eject. His fighter blew apart in pieces an instant later. A third Imperial pilot desperately tried to avoid the debris, lost the control and collided laterally with another fighter. The two Interceptors must have come out seriously damaged because neither of them returned to the formation.

"Phweee, four at once!" Exclaimed Zeppelin. "It seems that Vyper knows what he is doing!"

"I saw it! He did it just in time..."

Their shields had received a severe punishment. She had been about to order Zeppelin to break, but now she thought that they could resist a bit more. She cursed when her computer informed her of new ships in the area. Four clicks beyond the Corvettes, the Nebulon B Frigate that was supposedly their target was launching her fighter squadrons.

*Well, the objective is to hit something.* She thought. *Whatever as long as we keep the Imperials far from our ship.*

"Zeppelin, forget the Frigate and attack the nearest Corvette. You know the drill, six torpedoes!"

"Aye, Boss!"

She was targeting the second one when she heard Zeppelin cursing furiously. All his torpedoes were being launched at once.

"I'll kill Moose and Granite, I swear it!"

They heard through the intercom how the aforementioned pilots were also having the same kind of problems. Shok'wave thought for a second about the Corvette receiving those twelve torpedoes. That would be a nice bonfire...

She move her finger off of the trigger.

"Zeppelin, try to pass as close as you can to that Corvette when it explodes!"

"Are you crazy?"

"For some seconds the sensors of all those ships are going to be sluggish!"

"All right, I see it. They can't shoot at us if they don't know where we are..."

The threatened Corvette was trying desperately to evade the torpedo wave, but Zeppelin had had a firm lock on the Imperial ship when he shot. One of the gunners managed to destroy one of the torpedoes but it wasn't enough. The Corvette exploded furiously creating a dense cloud of flamed gases and pieces of flying junk. The two B-Wings crossed through the hell of fire losing part of their shields, but they reappeared on the

other side intact. The two pilots forced the engines to maximum speed and flew over the two remaining Corvettes before their gunners could recover their instruments' use. Vyper couldn't follow them. If he had tried to, his unshielded TIE Interceptor would have been destroyed. He lost them on his screen too, his sensors saturated with the energy from the recent explosion. When his displays started to work again he discovered he was surrounded by Imperial fighters trying to shoot him down. His ship was suffering some kind of power problem, because the impact he had received on the right solar panel had burnt many solar cells, but all the fighter's systems were still operative.

"Well, time to teach these boys some tricks..." He said. He was far from feeling confident though. Three Interceptors and the four TIE Fighters were firing at him.

"How much have the Rebels paid you, you traitor?"

Vyper switched off the Imperial frequency and started to fight for his life.

Hagger had the transport pretty much centred on his sight. He caressed the trigger.

"Ballard Two, this is Delta One. Stop your engines immediately or you will be destroyed. There won't be a second warning!"

Joker heard the threat and shivered. That pilot was not joking. But she couldn't obey that order.

"I'm sorry, Delta One." She said into her microphone. "I would do what you ask, but my throttle has just broken and I can't reduce my speed. Can you believe that?" Alvar look at her with admiration. This woman had courage.

Hagger was stunned when he heard Joker's voice.

"Did you have a change of gender in that Frigate?" He asked.

"I suppose you wanted to talk with my friend, but he couldn't come on this trip. But I'll send him your greetings."

Two clicks away Psycho was struggling to reach Hagger's group.

*That's it, Joker, try to delay them a few more seconds...*

"Stop your engines or you aren't going to send anything at all!"

"Hey, that was the second warning! Are you a liar, a gentleman or didn't they teach you how to count at the school?"

"Delta Three, shuttle One. Delta Four, shuttle Two. Delta Two, just cover me."

"Aye, sir."

He shot against the transport with his linked cannons.

Everybody started to cry onboard the shaking vessel. Joker manoeuvred as best as she could to avoid the incoming fire. Cybercat and Angelrose were having similar problems.

"You're in a really bad mood today, Delta One! Something you had for dinner?" Joker tried not to seem as scared as she really was.

"Today must be the joker's day!" Hagger said. He was turning for a second pass.

"How have you guessed it? Joker, everybody call me Joker!"

He was about to reply when he saw something approaching just in front of him. "Watch out!" He cried pushing the stick violently forward. His fighter only received one hit, but the terrible cry that came through his headphones told him that his wingman had not been so lucky.



"Hi, Delta One. I finally changed that can for this A-Wing! What do you think?"

"Damned Rebel, I'm going to kill you right now!"

"Oh, you don't know how sorry I am to hear that. Should I also consider you aren't going to buy me those drinks?"

The three Imperial pilots were now dogfighting with Psycho. Joker recovered her previous route and checked the computer for a damage report. The shields had absorbed all the laser bolts but they had lost a lot of energy. The ship itself was intact.

"How are you, girls?" She asked. Her display showed one of the shuttles very close to her and the other a bit further behind.

"I can't believe how you had the nerve to be joking with a guy who is shooting at you with four laser cannons!" Angelrose said. "Well, I've received a little damage, but I can fly. People back here have become somewhat nervous though."

"The same over here!" Cybercat said.

A great explosion suddenly illuminated the space several clicks away at their ten o'clock.

"It seems that our people are giving a great spectacle!" Angelrose exclaimed.

"Let's pray all the gunners on that monster are looking at it. We are in range..." Cybercat said nervously.

The giant shape of *Skies Cleaner* almost filled their forward visors. Joker noticed several TIE Fighters racing to the explosion's area. At least they were temporarily free of them.

"Try to pass unawares..." Joker said. Alvar was looking at the Star Destroyer with a concerned expression.

"If somebody can get us out of here that is you, Joker." He said.

"Call me Diana if you want." She replied without moving her eyes from the Imperial ship. "Oh, damn it...!"

A TIE Interceptor appeared just in front of her. Joker was about to evade when the fighter made a roll and passed over them without shooting.

"Why didn't he shot?" Alvar asked.

Joker consulted the computer. The fighter had passed so close that the transport's sensors had identified it without problems. Banshee Two.

"Because that was Foxfire!" Joker exclaimed.

"I love it that you have so many friends..." Alvar said.

Hagger took a look at his display and selected Ballard Two's signal. It was more than two clicks away.

"Leave me alone with the Rebel!" He ordered. "Destroy the transport and the shuttles!"

"All right, sir!" The first answer came. The second one was cut off when the TIE Interceptor was hit headfirst and his pilot killed. The fighter continued into outer space spinning out of control.

"That has been one of ours, sir!" The other pilot shouted.

"It must be another Rebel!" Hagger said. "Engage him!"

"Now it's you and me, my dear friend!" Psycho said. He missed Hagger's reply. He selected White Squadron's frequency and prayed that Foxfire was using it too. "Foxfire, can you hear me?"

"Yes, my friend!" She answered immediately. "The Imperial frequency is too filled of insults and curses, too much for my delicate ears!"

"Glad to hear you." Psycho had to laugh even in the middle of that situation. "Now forget the Imperials and race towards the Frigate while you still can. If we are going to escape it'll be soon, and you..."

"... and I have no hyperspace capabilities, I know." She turned back with a TIE Interceptor looking for her tail.

"Surely you can explain this gentleman that he can't follow me to the women's toilets..."

"Of course I can!" Psycho transferred all the shields energy to the rear part and targeted Foxfire's pursuer. Hagger's Interceptor was exactly on his tail, but he kept flying straight time enough to shoot down the other Imperial fighter.

"You are free now. RUN!" Hagger's shots were about to collapse his shields. Psycho pulled back on the stick and faced his opponent.

Foxfire pushed the throttle forward and searched for *Watcher's* signal on her computer. She redirected all the energy to the engines but she still wasn't satisfied.

"How can I make this damned thing fly faster?"

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

Sergeant Rammes had been observing the battle on the different monitors with concern. Until now he had managed to keep his current position without being threatened by anybody. But that could change at any moment. The colonists had been placed all together in the lunch room, where some of the Rebel crewmen were giving them some food. They had starved these last days from the destruction of the Imperial facilities as they had depended entirely on Imperial supplies and those had been denied since then. But not all of



them were eating. Many people were very nervous, constantly asking about the rest of the colony. All they could see around them was Imperial, and that didn't contribute to their tranquillity. Some of them were still doubting if their hosts were Rebels or not. Lelha Dengar checked the monitors one more time for him. The transport and the shuttles were moving away from the Frigate. Their pilots must have decided to attempt the hyperspace jump by themselves. That would make Rammes' work easier. If they managed to make it all he would have to do was turn the Frigate and jump to the pre-selected co-ordinates. He was not far from the jump point. But he couldn't leave while the pilots flying in TIE Interceptors were out there. He demanded his partner search for them too. All four seemed to still be flying. Dengar anticipated his next demand and continued with the Rebel fighters. She found the five signals. It was incredible, all of them were still alive. But the transport and the shuttles were going to pass terribly close to *Skies Cleaner*... He made a decision. The young man pushed a button on the nearest console. The scarce crew that remained could all hear his words.

"This is Sergeant Rammes from the bridge." He said. "All of you who can leave what you are doing now, run to the laser turrets. We are going to move closer to that Star Destroyer..."

"I hope you know what you are doing..." Dengar said.

"I hope so too."

#### **[Imperial Class Star Destroyer *Senderis*'s bridge]**

"Sir, we are receiving new information from our fighters. It seems that some of *Watcher*'s fighters are fighting against them..."

"What?" Commander Perdiggo stood up alarmed. "Damn it, I should have ordered to fire against that Frigate the same instant it appeared. They are undoubtedly protecting the transport and their shuttles. Have our troops boarded them?"

"No, sir. They have not even been disabled yet. Lieutenant Hagger's group is under attack..."

"Quickly, show me their positions on the tactical screen, and obtain a projection from their present routes."

"At once, sir." The controller hastily did what he had been ordered and three red dots started to blink on the main screen. Yellow lines showed the more probable trajectories that the computer had calculated for them. Even without those lines their only escape route was pretty clear.

"Warn Commander Legann." Perdiggo ordered the first officer. "Those ships are going to pass very close to *Skies Cleaner*. They must use their tractor beams to trap them. The transport Ballard Two must be the first one."

"At once, sir."

"Call the fighter squadron's leaders. All fighters from *Banshee* must be shot down."

"Aye, sir."

"Sir, I've got something that could interest you." A young officer said.

Perdiggo approached the man's console and observed the data he was scrolling across the screen.

"I've been tracing the Rebel fighters from the point where they appeared, but their exit from hyperspace were not registered by our sensors..."

"Let me guess. They appeared very close to Frigate *Watcher*, didn't they?"

"Yes, sir."

"We need no more proof. Order Frigates *Portcantell* and *Grannia* to attack *Watcher*. I want it disabled and boarded.

"Sir, we have lost contact with *Portcantell*. They seem to have suffered serious damage..."

*Vader will kill me for this...* He thought shivering.

"Then order Escort Carriers *Altaner* and *Richelord* to help."

"At once, sir. Are we not going to attack them?"

"No. We must carry out Lord Vader's orders. Inform *Skies Cleaner* we are going to open fire against the planetoid in a minute."

"Aye, sir."

"But let's launch our TIE Bombers first..."

"At once, sir!"

## ***Part Six***

### ***There is always the hope...***

#### **[Space around planetoid KS-31]**

The two B-Wings were now heading to the Nebulon B Frigate that was their initial target. Shok'wave understood that she couldn't seriously damage the ship with only her own torpedoes. Zeppelin didn't have a single warhead remaining, so the most he could do would be to cover her. The explosion of the Imperial Corvette had managed to slow down the Imperials for the moment, but new fighters, most of them launched by that Frigate, were approaching to engage them. She couldn't see Vyper's Interceptor anywhere.

*They have discovered you now.* Joan said in her mind. *All your ships are in threat.*

A glance at the Imperial Frigate confirmed Joan's words. The Imperial ship was burning its engines at maximum power and its route was clear. It was heading directly to White Squadron's Frigate. An overwhelming sensation of impotence filled the Rebel Commander. She couldn't avoid the attack, the most Zeppelin and she could do was try to delay it. They had been about to succeed, only a few minutes more and they could have escaped, but now...

*Don't give up, Sherry!* She felt the sudden thought like a shout. *There is always something you can do!*

A few minutes, only a few... If the Imperials had discovered the plot there would be more ships attacking *Watcher*, closer to its position than this other Frigate. Her computer confirmed her suspicions. Shok'wave decided not to launch her torpedoes yet.

"Zeppelin, we are returning to our Frigate as fast as we can."

"All right, Boss. Do you have something in mind?" Zeppelin was already following his flight leader in a course that would take them to *Watcher's* proximity avoiding the two remaining Corvettes.

Shok'wave was about to reply when something made her to look up. A TIE Fighter was coming directly at her opening fire. She made her fighter spin around the engines section with a brisk movement of the stick. The laser shots passed scarcely some inches from her B-Wing. She pushed the right pedal keeping the stick tightened back. The Rebel fighter jumped out of the TIE's route untouched. She had avoided the laser shots and the possible collision in the same manoeuvre. When she finished the turn the enemy fighter was in the

middle of her sights. She realized that the Imperial pilot had not cared if he had crashed against the B-Wing or not.

*Now the Imperials recruit their pilots in the madhouses!* She pressed the trigger only once and the TIE Fighter's left solar panel broke cleanly apart. The ship flew away spinning out of control. That was the only thing Zeppelin saw.

"Where did that guy come from?"

"I'll think of something on the way..." Shok'wave replied Zeppelin's previous question as if nothing had happened. "Rammes, can you hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am. I was about to request instructions from you. Some ships are approaching, and it's obvious we have been discovered!"

"Be prepared to jump. If you are attacked retreat before being seriously damaged. At least we would save half the colonists."

"All right, ma'am..." Rammes observed the transports' position one more time. They were almost reaching *Skies Cleaner*. *Watcher* was now only two clicks and a half away from them, and three from *Severis* on the opposite side. He hated to be so close to the two Star Destroyers, but he would stand his ground in that position as long as he could without risking the ship.

Sergeant Dengar was calling him from a near console.

"Yes, Lelha?"

"Look at those Escort Carriers, Marc!" The woman said nervously.

"Oh, no..."

Granite and Moose were trying to stay alive under the attack of a wave of TIE fighters. The slow B-Wings were not designed for dogfighting, but the two pilots were doing the best they knew. Four Imperial pilots had already learnt what happened when the B-Wing's cannon fire hit an unshielded craft. Moose tried to see Shadow and Iceman's Interceptors, but they were now out of sight. They should be half way to *Watcher*'s position.

"Whatever's going to happen will do so around our Frigate..." Moose said.

"I can try to jink in that direction!" Granite replied. His threat indicator had not ceased blinking in the last minutes.

"Are you still having fun?"

"Well, I would be grateful for some boredom right now..."

Iceman was forcing his fighter as much as he dared. Shadow was on his right. It was a race towards the Frigate, with TIE Fighters and Interceptors trying to catch them before they could reach their goal. Both fighters had received important damage and were not in their best condition. Iceman's Interceptor had been the most punished in their short attack against the TIE Fighters squadron. His computer had died off with the last impact, and the screen was black in front of him. Iceman looked around, expecting to see a breach opening suddenly somewhere. He didn't need the computer to know his TIE Interceptor had serious hull damage. In front of them, the Star Destroyer *Skies Cleaner* was between them and *Watcher*, almost filling his view. Iceman looked to starboard and struggled to identify the ship approaching, scarcely visible yet. A Stormtrooper Transport. It had to be Joker. Further away, towards bow, was *Senderis*. Suddenly he

observed tiny grey figures being launched from this last ship's bay. Without the computer it was impossible to know which type of ships they were, but he had a bad feeling.

"Shadow, what are...?"

"Bombers!" She shouted. Her computer was still operative and she identified the ships immediately. They had abandoned the Imperial frequency some minutes ago, but Shadow knew that if the Imperials could hear her voice it wouldn't make any difference. Every Imperial pilot would know by then that Banshee's fighters were on the other side. "They are going to attack the Frigate!"

"It has been nice to meet you..." Iceman said.

"The same to you!" She replied. There was no need of saying anything more. They had to try to intercept the Bombers at any prize. The shortest way was to pass exactly under *Skies Cleaner*. Shadow didn't believe they could make it, but she still kept the throttle in the maximum position. Part of her just wanted to turn and run away, but that was just unthinkable. *All right, I'm terrified*, she thought. *But this is something we must do, damn it!* The distance between them and the Bombers was decreasing quickly. The two Interceptors were reaching the Star Destroyer, her immense keel full of laser towers and cannons. Then she noticed that all of them were pointing in the same direction.

Foxtire was no more than four clicks from the Frigate when she saw them. She had managed to get there untouched but now she understood that she had not finished her work. She turned and headed for the TIE Bomber formation.

"I'm starting to think this is never going to end!"

Suddenly the space was illuminated with dozens of lasers bolts.

The Imperial scientific team onboard *Senderis* had launched several probes, obtained all the relevant geological data about the planetoid and had finally determined the optimal point on its surface. The two Star Destroyers would repeatedly shoot all their laser weapons concentrated on that spot. The immense amount of energy generated by so many laser cannons would penetrate into the planetoid making a hole toward its core. When it was deep enough the Imperial ships would launch several space bombs and would guide them directly through that hole. Finally the core would explode making a cloud of fragments out of the doomed planetoid. The combined firepower of the two giant ships was absolutely impressive. Most of those who had the chance of watching the hellish spectacle, that nightmare of destruction, no matter if they were Imperials or Rebels, felt as if their blood had frozen in their veins.

Alvar Parix saw astonished the rain of fire. He looked at Joker and she returned a sad glance.

"You were right." He said. "They are doing it."

Joker didn't reply. There was nothing she could say.

"That was our home..." Alvar said bitterly. "But it was not any more since the Imperials came."

The Rebel pilot could imagine how the young man felt, but there was something more immediate to worry about. She looked apprehensively at the every second closer Star Destroyer. If only one of those laser towers turned towards them they would be killed without her being able to do anything to avoid it.

"I hope they are too busy now to notice us..." She whispered.

The transport started trembling violently.

"A tractor beam! They have caught us with a tractor beam!" She cried out desperately, fighting with the

controls, but her ship's engines didn't have a single chance against a tractor beam designed to hold vessels the size of a Corvette.

Angelrose saw how Joker's transport lost its trajectory briskly. She immediately understood what was happening and manoeuvred to avoid being trapped too. The shuttle jinked for an instant that seemed to be an eternity but finally got free. She had moved out of a second tractor just in time. If it hadn't been for Joker's shout she wouldn't have had the opportunity. The woman looked horrified at her friend's transport.

"Escape!" She heard Joker shouting. "You should have a clearer path now...!"

Angelrose realized that her friend was right. There were no more ships in front of them. The idea of leaving without Joker made her feel sick, but there was nothing she or Cybercat could do. The Imperial operators would be trying to redirect new beams towards them. Her computer beeped. The shuttle was now in position. Angelrose pushed the hyperspace motivators and she felt briefly crushed against her seat. They had escaped. But Joker never would have that possibility. She closed her eyes feeling the tiredness and the sensation of void left by the terrible tension when the danger disappeared. It was always the same when you survived a situation where some others didn't make it. She tried not to think of Joker, not yet.

Cybercat saw how the other shuttle accelerated and jumped. She took a last look at Joker's ship and followed Angelrose. She felt as if she was ten years older. During the last month she had been about to die too many times. It was not easy to get accustomed to this. The list of lost comrades had been growing longer every day, and she had had no time to lament every one. But that moment undoubtedly would come.

*I'm going to miss you, Diana...*

Shok'wave had heard Joker's shout. Every pilot had heard it and knew what it meant. There was no hope for the Rebel pilot and the colonists she was carrying.

*Nothing is lost yet...* Joan whispered in her mind.

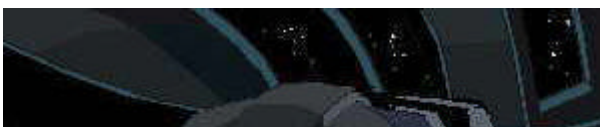
She couldn't reply. White Squadron's Commander struggled to not think of Joker. She tried to concentrate on the things she still could do. She was watching all the ships around her, actually feeling them. Joan seemed to be inside of her, and somehow that made her sensibility to the Force increase as she had never felt before. Every ship was as a bubble of energy she could easily feel and identify. The two Star Destroyers, their Frigate, the Bombers, the other Frigate at her back, the fighters from both sides, the two Escort Carriers closing in on *Watcher's* escape route...

They had to do something very soon or the Rebel Frigate would be trapped there. Shok'wave was sure that that had not been the ship's previous position, but that didn't matter now, if Rammes had ordered to move the Frigate there would be a reason. But if those Escort Carriers managed to blockade the vessel it would never have a chance to jump to hyperspace. She tried to find a solution urgently. Joan's memories were now now her memories too. She remembered that last battle, the transport with the left engine damaged colliding with another ship, the confusion giving a breath to her pilots, who then managed to escape... She headed to the Escort Carriers. Those ships were basically flying hangars provided with powerful engines. And heavily armed.

"Zeppelin, cover me for fifteen seconds and then follow me. I want you using your ion cannons against the first Escort Carrier."

"Be careful, Boss!" He turned to face some of the hunting fighters trying to prevent them from following his flight leader. Zeppelin opened fire and a TIE Interceptor received two direct blasts exploding instantly.

"There goes that one!"



Vyper levelled out behind the last remaining fighter and opened fire. He saw the explosion and the flailing solar panels and checked his sensors for the next hostile target. But he was alone and the only close nearby

signals were those of the SOS buoys from two or three Imperial pilots which had managed to eject from their destroyed ships. After the first twelve Vyper had lost count of how many ships he had destroyed and for him it didn't matter anyway. He had managed to prevent most of the fighters chasing Shok'wave and Zeppelin to continue their pursuit, but then more and more enemy fighters had arrived and he had been unable to keep track of the B-Wings for much longer. At first he had felt a slight trace of panic, but then a very old and comfortable feeling had arisen in him. He couldn't help it, but it felt good to be back at the controls of the beloved TIE Interceptor, still his most favourite craft. And something else had returned: The feeling that he wasn't fighting for a cause and not for just bare survival, but for the kick of the gamble that eventually would lead to a fiery, but welcome death. At the end he was almost regretting, but more so surprised that he had survived again and against all odds. His fighter was seriously damaged but it was still moving. He sighed heavily and tried to shake off the old feelings and sensations that he thought he had managed to overcome since the death of his first love so long ago. It was scaring to realize that they were still there and had flared up again.

He opened the face plate of his helmet and wiped off the sweat with his gloved hand. The moment had passed. He had to concentrate on the present. The Rebel pilot consulted the computer trying to find out where the Frigate *Watcher* had ended up. It was far away.

Even from that distance Vyper could appreciate an intense laser fire in the area. The destruction of the planetoid had started, and that meant that his time was running out. If he was not able to reach the Frigate before it tried to jump to the hyperspace he would be doomed. No matter what he had felt some minutes ago, he didn't want to die now, not here. He pushed the throttle forward and started the long race to his mother ship.

*Now I've got a good reason for being scared...*

Iceman and Shadow were flying exactly under *Skies Cleaner* when the two Star Destroyers started their hellish storm over the planetoid. Their cockpits were being completely illuminated by all that fire. Fortunately all the Star Destroyer's weapons were shooting against the planetoid, but the Rebel pilots were still needed all their skills to avoid being reached. One of their pursuers had not been so careful. The TIE Fighter was destroyed by one of the powerful cannons, and what was left smashed again and again until nothing remained. Shadow didn't even notice it. She was completely concentrated on the flying. There was no time to lose. Finally she saw no more laser bolts in front of her and she understood that they had managed to get across. There was nothing between the Rebel pilots and the TIE Bomber squadron. They had to be now in range and could be launching their torpedoes at any moment. The only advantage for the Rebel pilots would be that the Bomber's computers wouldn't identify the TIE Interceptors as a potential threat. Joker and Iceman headed directly against the enemy formation unawares. The woman targeted the flight leader. Her sight became green.

She squeezed the trigger. The TIE Bomber broke away from the formation with hull damage while she selected a new target. She wanted not so much to shoot down them than to avoid any of the enemy crafts could get closer to the Frigate. She manoeuvred at the last moment to avoid colliding against the Bombers and made the tightest loop her TIE Interceptor was able to resist to gain a better position behind them. Iceman had done the same and the two pilots reduced their speed to stay on their tails. They were very close.

One of the Imperial ships exploded exactly in the centre of the formation.

"I didn't hit that one!" Iceman said.

"Of course not!" They heard Foxfire saying.

The first space bomb smashed against the planetoid. Psycho understood what was going to happen. Hagger was becoming a tough enemy. He had managed to hit the TIE Interceptor at least two times, but the Imperial pilot was far from giving up. He was struggling to evade Psycho's attempts to shoot him down and constantly looking for the Rebel fighter's tail. It was a question of time though, because Psycho had the advantage with his faster and shielded A-Wing. But the Rebel pilot realized that he wouldn't have that time.

"Hagger, we are too close to the planetoid." He called. "If we don't get out of here right now none of us will win this combat!"

The Imperial pilot checked his position and saw how more and more space bombs headed to the condemned planetoid. The Rebel was right.

"OK, you damned Rebel. We'll finish this some other day. But then I'll be piloting a TIE Advanced!"

The two pilots directed all the energy to their engines as they moved away from the planetoid, the A-Wing increasing his speed more than the TIE Interceptor. Psycho had an eye on the Interceptor's signal, every second further behind.

The planetoid exploded.

The expansive wave swept through the space with incredible force, the fragments launched like projectiles in all directions. The Star Destroyers ceased the attack. Psycho kept a straight trajectory and prayed they had left in time. One of Hagger's partners had ejected, Psycho had seen him. He couldn't avoid a shiver.

*To survive after being shot down just to die like this...*

Everything not far enough from the planetoid would be consumed. He had not looked back to avoid being blinded. The Rebel pilot noticed then that his fighter was not trembling any more. He had escaped. A red light died off in his panel and his rear sensors started to recover their capability. He watched the right display and after some seconds a red dot appeared in the middle of it. Hagger had made it too. Psycho smiled and raced towards the space.

The two Escort Carriers filled the space in front of her. Shok'wave knew that the moment had come to do whatever she was able to. She felt Joan and demanded her without words all the help she could give her. Without words too, Joan explained her what she had to do. Shok'wave felt scared, but she had to trust Joan as much as herself.

*Now, Sherry.*

*I'm ready. I suppose...*

Shok'wave and Joan's minds merged into a single consciousness. The Rebel pilot felt the same sensation as she had when she watched Joan's life through her eyes, but now it was the inverse. It was Joan who was seeing with Sherry's eyes. She relaxed and let the Force flow around her. Around them. Joan and Sherry were now the same woman, the most deadly pilot never to be seen. Shok'wave felt she was still herself, but she was Joan too. She stretched her mind and perceived the B-Wing as an extension of her own body. She could feel everything around her with an incredible clarity. The enemy ships were shooting with all their weapons, but she was ready for that.

She got through the two Escort Carriers' barrage of fire, avoiding every laser shot and every concussion missile launched against her B-Wing only by inches most of the time. Every shot caused an effect in the Force flow that she felt and interpreted without thinking. She headed directly for the first ship.

Zeppelin turned to see how Shok'wave was doing. He had expected her to launch her torpedoes against the Escort Carrier but she hadn't. When he realized what his Commander was going to do his mouth opened widely. He was completely astonished.

Shok'wave fired furiously against the forward opening to weaken the shields' strength in that area. The B-Wing trembled violently though when crossed the entrance through the still active shields penetrating into the Escort Carrier's hangar. Her own shields suffered a great loss of energy. She struggled to keep the control.

*We're inside.*

Shok'wave cut the throttle and used the repulsors to reduce her speed. She opened fire against the parked fighters and vehicles, fuel containers, everything. The stunned Imperial crew launched themselves to the ground looking for an inexistent shelter. The hangar was a hell of fire and explosions where there was no place to hide. When the B-Wing turned and exited with her engines roaring it left the most terrible chaos behind.

Zeppelin was sure that Shok'wave had died. He obeyed her last order though and directed his fighter towards the Escort Carrier. His instruments showed that the Imperial ship's shields were flickering. He selected ion cannons and started to fire. His shields were receiving hits from the second Escort Carrier, but whatever Shok'wave had done inside the first one had made the ship cease shooting. He imagined that she had crashed against a vital spot. But when he was over the ship he saw something appearing from the forward opening. It was a B-Wing, followed by the inflamed gases from the Escort Carrier's internal explosions.

He tried to say something but he had no words. His computer informed that the Escort Carrier identified as *Altaner* was disabled. The ship was completely out of control turning in space. The other ship, *Richelord*, tried to evade it. It almost made it, but the mortally damaged *Altaner* crashed against *Richelord's* left side penetrating partially in its structure. Oxygen was escaping from the first vessel through a breach in her hull, extinguishing the fires inside, but killing all the crewmen who were in open areas. The force of the impact had made the two ships break from their previous route. *Richelord's* engines still worked, it had actually not suffered such serious damage, but it couldn't manoeuvre with *Altaner* literally encrusted in its hull.

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

"Did you see that?" Dengar asked. "Now we are free to escape!"

"Not yet." Rammes answered. He was watching Joker's transport on a screen, almost inside *Skies Cleaner's* main bay, and the TIE Bomber squadron approaching, being furiously attacked by three TIE Interceptors. It was not hard to guess that those were White Squadron's pilots.

"Sergeant Rammes to Interceptor group." He called. "Forget those Bombers, our shields will resist some torpedoes, but you must land immediately!"

#### **[In the Battle]**

"Is there something we can do?" Alvar asked without moving his eyes from the Star Destroyer's bay, opening in front of them like a monster's mouth about to swallow them.

"No, I'm sorry. We are doomed." Joker said calmly. She thought that she should be hysteric, but you never know how you are going to react in the face of disaster until it comes. "To escape from this tractor beam we would need engines much more powerful than the ones this transport has..."

They were heading towards the huge opening, the transport's bow pointing directly to the tractor beam's projector's protuberance. They could have been caught in any other position, but coincidentally they were being towed precisely in that one.

"This is a Stormtrooper Transport..." Joker didn't notice that she was talking while thinking. "And all Stormtrooper Transports are armed with twelve proton torpedoes on external launchers..." Alvar noticed a small trace of hope in Joker's voice and watched her searching across the instrument panel as if hypnotized. The Rebel pilot had already seen the indicator she was looking for.

"They are loaded!" Joker cried. She only needed a second to find the launchers' controls and arm the torpedoes. She pressed the trigger and didn't raise her finger until the last torpedo had been launched.



One after another all the torpedoes hit the tractor beam's source position. The first two had done the work, and the rest caused a big explosion that destroyed the nearest launching catapult. Joker felt that she had recovered control over her ship and pushed the throttle to maximum. The transport accelerated away from the Star Destroyer's bay.

Just to find three more Stormtrooper Transports in front of them, the same ships that had been sent to board her. Joker cursed.

"I think I should have saved some of those torpedoes..."

The first ion blast impacted against the main view screen, making Joker and Alvar almost jump from their seats. Joker checked the shields indicators. Not too many shots like that would be needed to disable them.

"You heard Rammes, let's go!" Foxfire shouted. She raced towards the Frigate followed closely by Iceman and Shadow. They passed over the remaining TIE Bombers. Some of them started to shoot against them. Iceman was covering his squad-mates' tails, but he was sure he wouldn't be there too much time. Barely one one shot would destroy his heavily damaged Interceptor. Only one of the TIE Bombers had to hit him. He looked back expecting to see death coming. But he saw instead the nearest TIE Bomber exploding.

"Just run, you guys!" Granite shouted.

"Did you miss us?" Moose added.

"I love you two, I really love you!" Iceman cried out. *Watcher's* main bay seemed to be closer now.

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

"I can't believe it, the transport has managed to escape!" Rammes exclaimed.

"Look at this..."

Sergeant Dengar signalled a certain spot over the tactical display. Three more Delta Class Stormtrooper Transports were approaching Joker's ship. Rammes knew that none of White's Squadron fighters was near, but the Frigate was in range. He had taken care of that.

"All cannons, shoot against those transports!" He ordered. He hoped that enough of his comrades were now in the gunner's positions.

Several laser towers came to life in the Frigate's bow.

#### **[In the battle]**

Joker saw how the three enemy transports were hit almost at once. She manoeuvred to avoid one of them that was moving towards her with her engines completely destroyed. Another one had exploded and the remaining ship was very busy trying not to encounter the same destiny. Joker found her path free and pushed the hyperspace motivators with a wild shout of joy. She was rewarded with the vision of the stars becoming bars of light. She embraced Alvar almost strangling him, but the young man didn't complain. He was too happy.

"This is what you do for a living, Diana?" He asked.

"Ooooooh, no. This is only the good days." She replied shrugging her shoulders.

Alvar laughed the first time in a long, long time. A last look to the screen showing the transport's rear sight in

the moment of jumping had allowed him to see that the planetoid didn't exist any more. But that was not so important now.

Foxtire's Interceptor entered into the Frigate's hangar screaming. She needed all her skill not to crash. Iceman and Shadow passed through the external opening immediately behind. The Frigate was starting to turn towards the space. The ship was suffering the impacts from several proton torpedoes. Some of the TIE Bombers had reached their objective, but the shields seemed to be resisting. She removed her mask with a sigh of relief when the entire hangar trembled violently. The mask fell between her feet. A torpedo must have smashed very close to the bay and the shields had barely managed to absorb the impact.

*I hope we don't stay too long around here...*

They wouldn't have made it without Granite and Moose's help. At the last moment she had believed she had seen Psycho's A-Wing joining them, but she was not entirely sure. She looked to both sides and saw the other two TIE Interceptors. They had landed safely. Suddenly Foxtire realized something. She opened the rear hatch and jumped out. Shadow was coming out of her fighter.

"Vyper, has somebody seen Vyper?" Foxtire shouted.

#### **[Imperial Class Star Destroyer Skies Cleaner's bridge]**

"Sir, the transport has managed to escape!"

Commander Legann had been watching the same monitor. He made a gesture of anger.

*That imbecile Perdiggo...* But he had also been convinced by the supposed Captain Keller, a Rebel probably. He couldn't understand how that could have happened.

"Open fire with all our weapons against *Watcher*, and launch our own TIE Bombers!" He had decided not to risk launching them before, when the transport was being towed to the bay, but now there was no reason to keep them in the hangars.

"Sir, they are turning. The energy readings show that they are about to jump to hyperspace!"

"Then hurry!" Legann hit his seat with his fist.

#### **[In the battle]**

The Rebel fighters were now under the fire of *Senderis's* cannons and surrounded by enemy fighters. Even now a group of refreshment TIE Bombers were joining the battle coming from *Skies Cleaner*. All the Rebel ships had suffered serious damage, and most of them had practically lost their shields. Frigate *Grannia*, which was approaching at maximum speed, was starting to shoot against *Watcher's* engines section with her forward weapons. But the worst of the punishment was coming from *Skies Cleaner*. Her cannons were literally smashing the Rebel Frigate. *Watcher's* shields wouldn't resist to the jump point. The Rebel pilots couldn't do anything to avoid it. If they remained under that intense fire they would be killed very soon.

"All of you, jump right now! It's an order" It was Shok'wave's voice.

"But what about...?" Started Zeppelin.

"MAKE THE JUMP NOW!"

Shok'wave's shout didn't admit any arguing. With a worried look at the readings from *Watcher's* shields Zeppelin pushed the hyperspace motivator controls and his fighter abandoned the battle zone. Granite,

Moose and Psycho jumped after him.

White Squadron's Commander headed to *Skies Cleaner's* bridge superstructure.

*If there is going to be a sacrifice today, it will be now...* The part of her that was now Joan didn't reply.

#### **[Imperial Class Star Destroyer *Skies Cleaner's* bridge]**

"What are the gunners waiting for?" Legann asked angrily. "Shoot down that B-Wing!"

Some of the laser turrets ceased firing against the escaping Frigate and searched for the Rebel fighter.

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

Sergeant Rammes had his eyes fixed on the shields' indicators. They showed six percent on the engines section, ten percent on the rest of the ship. If the engines were damaged before they reached the jump point they would never escape. Five percent. Four.

"There is a TIE Interceptor coming from starboard!" Sergeant Dengar exclaimed. "It's coming in really fast!"

"It must be Captain Stauber." Rammes said. He prayed that the pilot reached the Frigate in time. And that the Frigate didn't explode immediately after that. He didn't know what more he could do. He crossed his fingers. Lelha Dengar had already had them crossed for several minutes.

#### **[In the battle]**

Shok'wave's B-Wing's seemed to be magically evading the laser bolts. She had never experienced such a connection with the Force. She had a finger over the trigger, the torpedo launchers selected. The wall of fire in front of her was dreadful, but the Rebel fighter continued approaching her objective untouched, dancing between the deadly energy bolts, inventing an impossible path through the web of fire. She had redirected all the ship's power to the engines. The shields had disappeared and her cannons were unable to shoot.

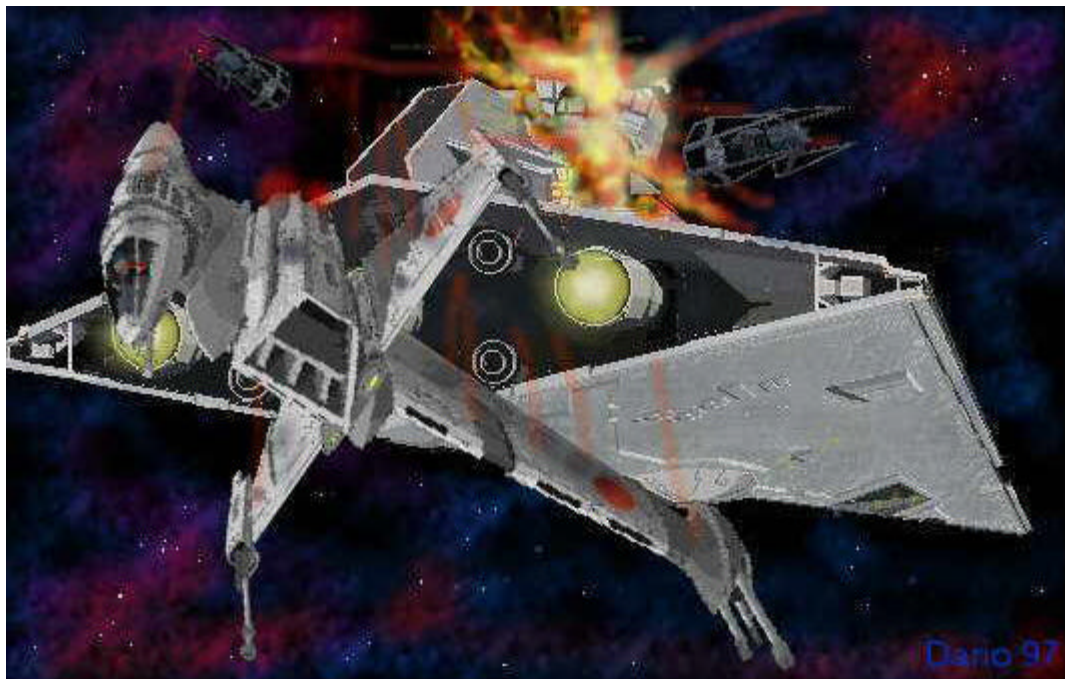
*A bit closer...* Shok'wave and Joan thought at once.

The woman finally pushed the trigger. The launchers didn't work the first time, but she knew what she had to do. She insisted on squeezing the trigger until the launchers set free their deadly cargo. The twelve torpedoes raced in pairs towards the terribly close Star Destroyer's bridge. Behind the view screens, the Imperial crewmen who saw the warheads' blue traces felt what terror meant. Commander Legann opened his mouth and shouted.

The combined power of the four or six first torpedoes made a localized hole in that area of the shields. The rest of the torpedoes impacted too soon after that for the shields generators to compensate the loss. The entire bridge section disappeared in a huge explosion making the ship lose control temporarily. *Skies Cleaner* started to turn slowly to port, the laser turrets still firing, but the shots being lost in space. A steaming hole on the superstructure, still being shattered by secondary explosions, was the only remnant of the main bridge. The Imperial crew would eventually recover part of the ship's command from the secondary bridge, but not in time to stop the Rebel Frigate.

Commander Perdiggio had understood too late that his Bombers wouldn't prevent the Frigate from escaping, and had ordered to attack it too when the Rebel fighters had jumped to hyperspace, but *Senderis* was still too far and their shots weren't really effective. Perdiggio looked horrified at the heavily damaged *Skies Cleaner*, his eyes staring at what had been its main bridge. Somebody informed him that the captured Frigate was running away, but he barely heard the voice. He would have instantly changed his position for

Legann's one, wherever he was now.



Shok'wave's fighter came out from the ball of fire with all her sensors definitely burned out, the hull's painting almost inexistent, but the tough B-Wing was still flying. Completely covered in sweat, she looked at the Frigate accelerating towards outer space and laughed. Laughed as a mad woman would. She had never felt so well.

"Go, go... a bit more, please..."

Vyper stared at the ever approaching secondary hangar bay entrance. The Frigate was initiating the jump. He would only have a chance. If he failed the TIE Interceptor would smash against the hull. He held the stick tightly and saw how the illuminated entrance grew wider and wider before his eyes. The Rebel pilot let a shout escape when the fighter entered cleanly into the secondary bay. He immediately cut the throttle and shot the repulsors, but even then the landing was terribly violent. He had not bothered to open the landing gear, it would have broken with the impact anyway and would have disestablished even more the ship's trajectory. Vyper covered his head with his arms and waited for the fighter to stop. Fortunately for him the other three Interceptors had landed in the main hangar and this one was empty. The TIE Interceptor, still moving at a considerable speed, crashed against the hangar's wall. Vyper felt the panelled canopy falling over him and his body crushed from everywhere. The last thing he perceived before falling unconscious was the Frigate jumping to hyperspace. His last thought was of happiness and relief.

Lieutenant Hagger carefully targeted the lonely B-Wing, but it jumped to hyperspace before he could shoot. He cursed, like many other Imperial pilots around. It was always the same frustrating thing. The readings from the enemy fighters had shown how weakened their shields were, how close to collapse, but when things were so bad the Rebel pilots only had to push forward their hyperspace controls and to have a good chance of escaping. That B-Wing had been the last one, the battle was over. The Imperial pilot demanded a damage report from the computer and saw that he had been lucky after all, another impact and he would have been fried. His partners couldn't say the same. They were not the first ones he had seen die. The Empire had more pilots than it needed, and it was cheaper to produce unshielded fighters like the TIE Fighter or the Interceptor. Furthermore, if they didn't have hyperspace engines the pilots would never have the possibility of running away in the middle of a combat, like the Rebels did. Victory was the only chance to survive. Only the best of the best lived enough to be considered valuable pilots and given the opportunity to fly in an Assault Gunboat or a TIE Advanced.

He decided that he had no reasons to feel so bad. He had accomplished his work as best as he had could. The cameras installed on his fighter would show how he had fought against a Rebel ace piloting an A-Wing and had managed to put him in trouble. They would have to give him that much. Maybe next time he would

really have that TIE Advanced. Hagger smiled.

*I forgot to ask him if that about the Corellian coffee was true...*

The battered TIE Interceptor headed to *Senderis*.

### **[Frigate *Watcher's* secondary hangar]**

Foxfire was opening Vyper's Interceptor's rear hatch a minute after his terrible landing. She struggled to drag the pilot's body out of the cockpit, but he seemed to be trapped. His head was slumped down and leaning on his chest.

"Michael, say something, please!"

She introduced herself through the narrow place that remained between the seat and the left lateral panel and carefully removed the pilot's mask and raised his dark glasses. She was surprised to find that her friend had a smile painted on his face. His eyes were closed. She stretched through the cockpit and put her ear on Vyper's chest. She clearly noticed his breathing and his strong heartbeats.

"You are going to be fine, my friend!" She said. She realized then that all her friends were alive, she herself was alive, something that she would have questioned just some minutes ago. She felt immensely relieved, completely happy indeed.

"I'm even tempted to forgive you for shooting me down that time!"

The woman considered that for a moment. Every time she had needed something from Vyper she had reminded him of that incident. It had always worked.

"Naaaaahh..."

She heard footsteps near the entrance and turned her head to see who was coming.

"Where is Vyper? Where??!!" A powerful voice roared. Granite and Moose had just landed, and when they were told by Shadow that Vyper could be wounded, nobody could prevent the Caldanian pilot from running to the secondary hangar. He almost ran over Foxfire trying to get beside his old comrade from Red Squadron.

"Hey, you, squarehead, wake up right now or I'm going to hurt you!" He shouted shaking Vyper's head. It was evident how concerned he was, but Foxfire feared that those were not exactly the attentions the injured pilot needed.

"Maybe you should wait for medical assistance..." She suggested. Granite didn't show any sign of having heard her. He started to struggle trying to pull Vyper's seat out from the cockpit with his bare hands.

"Be careful, Granite!" Moose cried. He was arriving with Iceman, Shadow and two 2-1B droids carrying a floating stretcher. "You're going to kill him!"

"Give me a fighter, please..." They heard Vyper mumbling. "Give me a fighter and I will return there. I will be safer..."

"It's fine, Vyper it's fine!" Granite exclaimed. Fortunately for his friend, he stopped moving the seat.

"Now let the droids do their work, big man." Moose said smiling. Iceman and Shadow were already dismounting the Interceptor's rear hatch. The droids were waiting for Granite to move aside to do the same with the seat. Only then could they remove the pilot from the smashed cockpit. Granite took the tool box that one of the droids was carrying.

"I can do it better than these cans with legs." He said. Foxfire decided it was a good moment to move away

from the crowded fighter. She joined Moose, who was using his transmitter to inform the bridge about what was happening.

"Nice to see you in one piece!" He said turning off the transmitter.

"Thank you, Lewis." She replied with a brightening smile. "I'm glad to see you too."

"When I looked back and saw that you were not there, and an entire squadron of Interceptors had occupied your place, I really feared for you..."

"Well, I can take care of myself." She replied, the smile becoming a grin. "But a girl always likes to know that somebody else cares for her too. Specially if he is a tall and sturdy pilot like you."

She had not intended to say that, but the words seemed to come out. The effect on the man was immediate. Moose was visibly embarrassed, his face quickly becoming red. Foxfire was about to add something more, but the shouts from the crippled Interceptor interrupted her. *Maybe on some other moment...* She thought still smiling, turning to see what was going on. Their comrades had managed to extract Vyper from the Interceptor, and Iceman and Granite were placing him on the stretcher. The two droids would take him to the medical facilities.

"Let's return to the main bay." Iceman said approaching. "There is nothing more we can do here."

"I'll see you there." Granite answered watching the droids. "I'll first check that these two really know what they're doing."

"Try not to break anything..." Shadow said.

#### **[Imperial Class Star Destroyer *Senderis*' bridge]**

Commander Perdiggo was listening to the first report of the battle. Frigate *Portcantell* heavily damaged. Escort Carrier *Altaner* destroyed. Escort Carrier *Richelord* considerably damaged. Imperial Class Star Destroyer *Skies Cleaner* seriously damaged. Corvette *Ursula* destroyed. He thought that if Commander Legann hadn't been dead he would be hearing his accusations right now. The fighter losses were still being calculated, but they were considerable. Not a single Rebel ship had been destroyed, not a single capture, not a single prisoner. How in the hell things could have gone so bad?

"Sir, we are receiving a call from *Executor*. Lord Vader wants to know if the mission has been accomplished as planned..."

Perdiggo swallowed.

"Answer that the planetoid KS-31 has been destroyed as ordered. I'll be sending a complete report as soon as I can."

"Eeeer, at once, sir..."

His ears seemed to be already hearing Vader's breath. He had never been so scared.

#### **[Frigate *Watcher*'s main bay]**

Everybody was cheering. Joker's transport had been the last one to land. Colonists, crewmen and pilots were embracing each other. When Shok'wave landed at last, escorted by Psycho, she was informed that there had not been a single casualty. Vyper had been transported to the medical facilities, but his injuries were not that severe, just a commotion and a broken leg. Those were the worst wounds that the 2-1B droids had to care about. Such a battle and only that. It was incredible. Not far from her, a group of pilots were commenting the battle noisily.

"Did you see that Frigate after all our torpedoes hit her?" Moose asked.

"Oh, yes!" Granite replied joining them. "It had engines but not much more!" A core of laughs celebrated the sentence.

"You shouldn't be so proud of those launchers of yours." Zeppelin said. He had to run to avoid being reached by two helmets launched furiously at once.

White Squadron's Commander laughed and looked for a quieter place. After a short walk she sat on the floor behind a supply container at the farthest part of the hangar. She leaned back and closed her eyes.

*You did it, my friend!* Joan said.

"I wouldn't have been able to without you." She said. "I wouldn't have done it without my pilots and those wonderful technicians." She opened her eyes and saw her. Joan was visible in front of her, dressed in an old flight suit, slightly transparent, like a ghost, surrounded of light, like an angel. She was smiling.

"They are all terrific." Shok'wave could hear Joan's voice this time. "I would have accepted all of them in Miracle Squadron with my eyes closed."

Shok'wave smiled too.

"That means a lot coming from you." She remained silent for a second and then asked the question she had tried to what seemed an eternity before.

"Why did you choose me, Joan?"

The Jedi Lady stared at her in silence for a second. Then she started to speak.

"The injustice brought me back. When they destroyed Alderaan..." Her voice was full of sadness. Shok'wave didn't need Joan to say anymore. Alderaan, the planet she had helped save so many years ago, the place where hope had been born again, had been finally blown away by the forces of Evil. Joan continued. "The commotion in the Force was so strong that all of us felt it. I had to return, to do whatever I could to help. I've been here and there, trying to motivate your Rebellion wherever I found a being sensitive to the Force. I'm not alone, that I can tell you."

"The colonists' death would have been the ultimate injustice. There was not the slightest of reasons for the Empire to leave them to die. It was just evilness. That Lord Vader and the Emperor... they are monsters, even worse than Calhuch was. I perceived you. You are not only considerably sensitive to the Force. You hate injustice as much as I do, and I knew that inside your heart, you were also prepared to even give your life if necessary." Joan smiled. "Furthermore, you was a pilot, a squadron Commander, like I had been, and I felt immediately identified with you. When I felt you I desired to share my past life with you, just as friends would do, to tell you my story and let you decide if there was something in it that could help you. And I was not wrong about you."

"Thank you, Joan. Thank you very much."

"Thanks to you, my friend. I wouldn't have done it without you either."

Shok'wave smiled and closed her eyes again. Shadow found her deeply asleep five hours later.

### **[Super Class Star Destroyer *Executor*. Lord Vader's private chambers]**

"Apology accepted, Commander Perdiggo." The Lord of Sith said.

Two guards approached to retrieve the body, but Vader prevented it with an imperative gesture of his hand.

"Leave him there. You will take him away later. Now I want to be alone."

The two cloaked figures nodded respectfully and left. Vader pressed a button on his chair's arm and the holo-projector came to life again. He had watched the recordings many times, but he still found them interesting. He should have guessed that Rebels would try something like this. They always did these kind of heroic stupidities. He smiled inside his mask. *What courage.* He thought. *What temerity to go there and face such strong forces just to rescue a group of damned colonists.* He admired them for a second. He had been like them a long time ago, just a pilot trying to save the Galaxy... He interrupted himself with wrath. Lately he had been thinking too much about the old times. The Emperor was right. His son was dangerous, very dangerous. After having seen him defenceless on that platform, with such a look of challenge even in his fear, something long forgotten had reappeared again inside of him. The feeling was timid, almost ridiculous and insignificant, but it was there. He should be very careful and not allow the Emperor to notice this change. But there was no change after all. His son would understand it very soon.

One more time he watched the B-Wing penetrating the Escort Carrier and exiting a few moments later undamaged. The same B-Wing was responsible for the last attack on *Skies Cleaner*. He had observed the recording at low speed several times, the way the Rebel fighter evaded the fire, the deadly accuracy of her last shot. It was clear for him that the pilot was using the Force. His Intelligence Staff had identified her as Commander Sherry Krenzel, the ancient Praying Mantis leader and one of the few survivors from that squadron. She also must have had something to do with the way Perdiggo and Legann had been deceived. Even they were not that stupid. A considerable amount of control was needed over the Force to do something like that, and to pilot a fighter like that woman had done. Maybe his son was not the only potential Jedi in the Galaxy. He would have an eye on that pilot. He and his son could have something for her soon. He rewound the recording and played it again.

"Impressive, young Krenzel, fairly impressive..."

#### **[White Squadron's Frigate. One week later]**

The main bay was a madness. New refreshment pilots had arrived. The older Squadron members would learn their nicknames very soon. Blitz, Tzadkiel, Torpedo, Grizzly and Hardrive. All of them young pilots deciding to give their best for the Squadron. They would begin being part of the new Training Wing, but some of them were veteran pilots who would be flying immediately in the main Wing. That night the official ceremony for the Training Wing's creation would take place. Captain Lewis "Moose" Gregory would be the Training Officer. Shok'wave smiled when she thought of it. Fortunately Granite had shown great skill during the recent battle and wouldn't be a trainee too much longer, or poor Moose would have gone crazy. He had promise to uncork a very special bottle during the party. Joker would take some lessons too, but she would remain in the Combat Wing. There she was, surrounded by colonists. They were going to leave now, that was one of the main reasons for the chaos governing the hangar. Some of them had decided to join the Alliance Military Forces. Alvar Parix was one of them.

High Command had decided not to see the clear fact that Shok'wave had disobeyed direct orders one more time. They hoped that the new Frigate's commanding officer, Captain Rahne Orris, would be able to refrain her from making new "imprudences". He had arrived a few minutes ago increasing the hangar's problems even more. One of the reasons for looking the other way when the reports mentioned Shok'wave's particular rebellion was that the operation had been a complete success, and many of the Admirals and Generals who composed the Alliance High Staff were secretly satisfied and relieved that someone had saved those colonists after all, not to mention the impressive victory over the Imperial Fleet. Actually, the colonists' rescue would be used by Mon Mothma as proof of the Alliance's spirit to convince new systems to join them. She had sent her personal congratulations and had accepted all of Shok'Wave's petitions, including Sergeant Rammes' promotion to Lieutenant and the new name for the Frigate: *Joan d'Arc*. It seemed that Mon Mothma had paid more attention in school than Shok'wave herself.

She approached her pilots and the colonists' group.

"I'm going to miss you, Diana." Alvar said.

"The same here." She replied smiling.

*Ah, that smile... Alvar thought.*

"You are going to do fine in the Infantry." Joker said. "And if you want some day to try the piloting thing, just



call me..."

"I'll do that in any case." He answered. Alvar embraced her and kissed her before she had a chance to run away. Not that she would had wanted to. The ex-colonist didn't say good bye. He climbed to the shuttle and waved his hand before to disappearing inside. Joker stood there looking at the hatch closing.

"Did I see what I think I've seen?" Cybercat asked from behind her.

"I'll tell you when I've had a drink from Moose's famous bottle."

"And you've cut your hair. Now you have a look more... sophisticated."

"Maybe I'm not going to tell you anything. Even after that bottle."

"Oh, Diana, please, please..."

Shok'wave smiled and passed unaware behind the two friends. She laughed when saw Vyper, not far from there, trying to recover his crutches from Foxfire and Shadow, who were playing something like hockey with them and a small cartoon box.

*All of them are alive.* She thought abandoning the hangar. That new Captain could wait a bit more. *We rescued all the colonists and nobody died. It was truly a miracle.*

"That has seemed to be my speciality all my life..." A known voice said behind her.

"You must stop appearing like that, or you are going to give me a heart attack one of these days!"

The shining figure laughed.

"You won't have to worry about that. I've come to say good bye."

Shok'wave sighed.

"I feared this would happen sooner or later." She said. "But I had hoped that you would stay around longer. There is so much you could teach me still..."

"You know all you need, my dear friend. Just keep working."

*It's so strange to see her so young and to know that she is so old though...* Shok'wave thought. Joan grinned. She had heard it, of course.

"I'm going to miss you a lot, Joan."

"Don't think I'm gone forever. Nobody is gone forever."

"That reminds me something I wanted to ask you. Did you find Tobb again in your... new life?"

Joan stared at her in silence for some moments before replying.

"I can't tell you that, Sherry. People usually have to live with that uncertainty. But I think you know the answer." Her grin was an answer itself.

"Yes, I think so..." She grinned too. "I have another question. What happened after you... after you died, you know, the war and all that?"

"Everything is in the books, my friend. Read it yourself. Now I have to see another old friend. May the Force be with you. Forever."

"And with you...."

The image disappeared as if Joan had never been there.

"OK, let's see those books, the computer or whatever. I hope I can find some pictures to show the guys too. The winged horse of Miracle Squadron would look wonderful on the Frigate's hull, but one thing's for sure, I'm not going to paint it myself..."

### **[Planet Dagobah. The swamps]**

Yoda reached into the wooden box and opened it. It was like a ceremony that the old Jedi Master made from time to time. He took the object that was inside. Master Jonderiis' light sabre. Joan d'Arc's light sabre.

Ah, Joan, sweet Joan. How Yoda had loved his young girl, as he used to call her. How he loved her still. The memories came to him again, as always happened every time he took that light sabre. He had stolen it from Calhuch's rooms before leaving. He had never thought that it would be so easy. He had always feared to be stopped, being caught by Calhuch or his men, being locked up by them and to suffer all kinds of humiliations. But he had learnt the lesson. His dear Joan had taught him the main one of them. "That size didn't matter at all." How easy and simple it was. The Force was the same no matter if you were small or giant. The will was the important thing. To defend the right cause. Joan had faced alone the worst punishment a being could suffer. She had been scared, of course, Yoda could feel it. But she had never doubted what the correct thing was.

And she wouldn't die in vain. Yoda would care.

He started to use his skills as he had never dared, to know the people he had to meet, who could be trusted and who could not, to obtain what he needed without fighting. He got a transport and travelled to Gerillia, Joan's world. He found her parents and told them everything, omitting only the worst of her death. He gave them the few things Joan had left, and requested their permission to keep the sabre. They acceded. They were suffering immensely, but Yoda told them that Joan would be always close to them, he convinced them with his words, and they knew that the small being was speaking the truth. They had learnt to live without Joan, always missing her. Now they would be missing her forever. But she was not further away now than the last time she stepped out the door.

When Yoda departed from Gerillia he started the mission he had commended himself. The recordings of Joan's execution could be obtained on the black market if you knew where to ask. And if you had enough money. Yoda used his skills to get both things. He travelled across the Republic worlds telling Joan's story, offering the truth to everyone who wanted it. He managed to reach Senator Carless and forced him to see the recordings. "No traitor paid like this is by the ones who have supposedly bought her." He had said. The web of lies that the Bretalians had constructed around Joan d'Arc was entirely destroyed. Senator Carless decided to resign from the Senate. Sorelnai tried to convince him not to do it, but this time Carless didn't listen to her. She lost the power she had desired so much, and it was Joan d'Arc who had taken it from her.

Yoda didn't stop there. He travelled to the worlds where the Jedi Knights lived far from "the political matters", as some of them used to say. Everyone felt ashamed when Yoda showed them the recordings and told them the facts. They couldn't even doubt. They could feel the truth in Yoda's words, thoughts and feelings. They understood that they had been hiding themselves from the things that really mattered, from the billions of sensitive beings in the Galaxy who needed them and were the real reason behind their own existences.

The Jedi Knight Order joined the Republic one more time, as they had always done in the past, and they lead their forces against the invaders, against those who had brought fear and injustice back. The Bretalians were defeated in less than two months, their own citizens and soldiers rebelling against their governors' abuses. Calhuch and his followers were destroyed. All of them. Peace was restored to the Galaxy. For a little time more.

Joan d'Arc was recognized as a Jedi Lady by the Jedi Knight Order. She was not the first one and she wouldn't be the last either, but she would be the more remembered, the more loved.

Yoda was offered some time later the Jedi's leadership, but he refused it. He had helped every time he was requested for the last eight centuries, but he had preferred to teach, to work in the shadows to keep new young Jedis coming. That was what he had been doing until now.

Luke reminded him of Joan very much. The youth, the courage, the way he looked, directly into the eyes...

*If only Luke were a bit more patient!*

Yoda laughed and closed the box. Luke would be there very soon, and he would be ready for him. The moment of truth was coming. He went to the place where the food was cooking and used a wooden spoon to taste it.

"Almost ready it is, yes..."

Suddenly he felt a known presence, a very dear one.

"Joan!" He said looking around. He grinned showing his few remaining teeth. "Just thinking of you I was, my girl!"



"Hi, Yoda." She said. Her figure appeared shining in the middle of Yoda's house. "I see that you have been playing with that again."

"The sabre do you say? He, he. Cleaning! Yes, cleaning I was! Imagine you couldn't how much dust can accumulate over things if one or two centuries forget them you do!"

Joan laughed. Yoda had always been able to made her laugh. Even during the worst of times.

"The worst of times, yes." Yoda said. "These are terrible times too, you know."

"Yes, Yoda, but there is always the hope of things getting better. This is something you taught me."

"That did I say? He, he. Well, then I imagine it must be true!" He became serious. "Yes, true it is. Even now, I hope that these evil times are going to see an end, yes, an end. This new student of mine, Luke his name is, has brought me back the old hope."

"You could say I've had a student, too."

"Yes, felt her I did, and supposed something to do with it you had. If feel the Force you do, the news can reach even here, to these swamps. This "slimy mudhole" as Luke says from time to time." Yoda tried to laugh again, but he finished coughing instead.

"How are you, my old friend?" Joan asked gently.

"Need you to ask to know that? What a Jedi Lady you are then! He, he. Old. Old I feel and tired too. Yes, very tired. Eight hundred years tell you I did those from my species live, and something like nine hundred is what I've lived. Too much time, yes, too much, but I have to finish my work here before resting. But I'll be with you soon, my girl!"

Joan looked at her old friend tenderly before speaking again.

"Yoda, there is something I've never told you. Please, let me finish before making another joke!" Yoda smiled and kept silent. "I know that you have always thought that you could have saved me if you had acted before." The old Master lowered his head when he found the old sense of guilt inside of him. It had always been there. "But I've never believed that it was your fault. It was my destiny to die like that, as yours was to teach generation after generation of Jedis until now. I loved you then, my friend, and I still love you."

Yoda sighed and rose his face toward her. He nodded.

"Thank you, my girl. More than eight hundred years I have waited to hear that."

"I should have told you this before, I think. Well. Just another thing before I leave."

"And that is?"

"As you would say, more than eight hundred years have passed, but your cooked vegetables still look as bad!"

She disappeared as suddenly as she had come. The echoes of her laughter filled the air for some moments. Yoda smiled and looked at the place where she had been standing.

"Ah, my Joan, my dear Joan d'Arc..."

## THE END



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