



Reading Room

StarWars FanFiction **POV: Call to Silence**

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[On board the Alliance Nebulon-B Frigate *Joan d'Arc*, stationed on the Outer Rim]

The sound of laughter mixed with the smell of beer in the small darkened forward compartment on board the Frigate *Joan d'Arc*. "The Bomb Shelter", as the compartment was affectionately named, served as bar and hangout to the pilots of the Alliance's White Squadron, a group of freedom fighters specializing in assault and deep space reconnaissance.

In the middle of the bar a large poker game appeared to be going on, the four players surrounded by the usual crowd of cheerers and hecklers. Off to one side, three figures sat together at their own table in the corner and spoke quietly. One of them, the youngest, took a generous swig of the liquid known as "Blue Stuff", the official brew of the Bomb Shelter, and sighed contentedly.

"Ahh," he said after swallowing. "Now I know why I wanted to join White Squadron - this is the best beer I've ever had. Mind you, compared to the swill they serve back on Arrebna, condensed Hutt drool would taste nice." Another man, about ten years the senior of the first one, grimaced at his companion's remark.

"If you say *Hutt* and *nice* in the same sentence, Drake, you need to get help, not join a squadron," he rejoined in his thick accent.

"Thank you, Ibero, for your kind comments and comradely support," Drake said, bowing melodramatically from the shoulders before taking another belt of Blue Stuff.

"Cut it out, you two," the third person, a female Selonian, added. "Is it possible to have anything resembling a serious conversation with you guys?" She grinned.

"Not after your comments about Arrebna," Drake sniffed and turned his head as if he was offended.

"My what?" the woman exclaimed. "I made some comment about the strangest creatures on the Rim coming from there - which, judging by our present company, Ibero," she finished with a sly grin, "appears to be totally true." The man called Ibero laughed.

"Ladyfox-1, Drake-0," he chuckled. "You'd better give up now, my friend, before she beats you again."

Drake held up his hands in defeat. "Okay, okay," he sighed. "Although I must remind you that it was your

own decision to deprive yourselves of my witty repartee - it wasn't my fault. " He grinned again. Ibero and Ladyfox laughed, the latter shaking her head.

"Look at this young man," she smiled, "very sure of himself, isn't he?"

"I can't argue with that." Drake chuckled and leaned back in his chair.

"Well, I 'm glad to be here," Ladyfox said, looking around the dimness of the bar. "I think it's great. I can't wait to start flying some missions, and battle some of the Imperials." She smiled again, baring sharp teeth.

"Me either," Drake agreed. "I had to leave my X-Wing in the care of the tech 'droids. They better take care of her! - but I've already got my A-Wing painted up and ready to go. Very sleek she is, too - I have to admit that the A-Wings are definitely growing on me. Shok'wave can have her B-Wing - it'll be us in the A-Wings that keep TIEs off her back!"

"Yes...speaking of which, where is Shok'wave? " Ibero asked.

"Let's find out..." suggested Ladyfox. "Hi! Foxfire! Over here!" She waved at the squadron's Executive Officer, Foxfire the bartender, who started to clean up the bar before she headed over. Drake watched her with obvious interest.

"So *that's* Foxfire," he murmured. After seeing her blonde hair and flashing blue eyes, his eyes seemed to glaze over a little as he glanced back at the table in front of him. Ibero chuckled beside him.

"What is this?" he asked. "You've got your eye on Foxfire?" Ladyfox laughed as well, quietly. Drake, much to his embarrassment, felt himself blush.

"What's the matter, Ibero?" he hissed under his breath. "Haven't you ever seen an attractive woman before?" He looked up as he asked, and for a fraction of a second, thought he saw something that looked like pain flash through Ibero's dark eyes. Then the latter smiled.

"Of course...but I'm usually more subtle," he answered. "And I don't usually single out superior officers for interest, either. Especially not ones armed with crowbars." he added pointedly.

Drake deliberately refrained from looking to try and see Foxfire's concealed crowbar, and decided not to press the issue too much. "Well, if you'd ever lived on Arrebnac... as far as women and excitement in general go, it's about on a par with Tatooine," he said. "At least the weather's different, though... cold usually, but pleasant enough in the summer or spring. Lot more greenery than Tatooine, too, although we do have a central desert continent." he finished as Foxfire sauntered over and sat down with a smile.

"Well, how are you new pilots doing?" she asked.

"Great, Foxfire." Ladyfox smiled. "Good thanks, Foxfire." Ibero replied. "I'm good, thank you ma'am." Drake answered. Foxfire glanced at him. "At ease before you sprain something." she told him with a grin. "In the Bomb Shelter you can relax, so leave the ma'am out, okay? Here we're just all pilots and friends." Drake nodded his acknowledgement and smiled, relieved that the squadron's Executive Officer was not an all-business type like so many command-rank officers were.

"We were just wondering where Shok'wave is, anyway." Ladyfox said. "We noticed she's not around, although everyone else seems to be here."

"Hmm...I think she's off talking to the Captain." Foxfire mused. "I wouldn't be at all surprised if she's being briefed on a mission."

"We'll see if you're right, ma..er, Foxfire. " Drake said, as a figure appeared in the doorway. Instantly all noise in the bar stopped and the poker crowd turned to watch the figure of their Commanding Officer as she strode in and stood in front of the wall.

"I've just been talking to the Captain..." she began without ceremony. "I need three volunteers..." Three hands shot up before she could finish her sentence. Ibero, Ladyfox and Drake had all raised their hands.

Shok'wave smiled. "You haven't even heard the mission yet." she reminded them, and paused briefly. *Rookies... they're always full of enthusiasm. The real measure of them is whether or not their skill matches it*, she thought grimly. There was no response, so she continued. " Okay, you three, you've volunteered. Now I need four more volunteers..." and she picked out four more pilots from amongst the poker players. "Okay, that'll do. You seven, come with me, everyone else, keep a glass of Blue Stuff on hold for me!!"

Drake, Ibero and Ladyfox walked onto the bridge of the *Joan d'Arc* with a slight sense of awe. This was their first time on the bridge, and in Drake's case, the first time on the bridge of any star ship. The low hum of the ship combined with the different beeps, whistles and whines of various communication and navigation equipment to create a wall of background noise as the three pilots trailed Shok'wave and their four comrades.

"Captain, I'd like to introduce you to our two newest pilots - I believe you already know Flight Officer Pozo," Shok'wave said as the three caught up to her talking to the Captain of the *Joan d'Arc*. "The others are Flight Officers Sutherland and Esposito." The three pilots, now dressed in uniform to meet the Captain, all snapped salutes at him. The senior officer returned the salutes with just the faintest hint of a smile.

"Welcome aboard, Flight Officers," he said. "I'm sure you'll do well here. Now, to business." He picked up a small pointer and used it as he conducted the briefing on one of the lighted data screens.

"We'll be dispatching two starfighter patrols - each consisting of two A-Wings and two B-Wings, to patrol a neighbouring system. However, this will be no ordinary patrol. I'm not exactly sure what we're after yet," here the Captain frowned, "because obviously the High Command has decided that that information is on a need-to-know basis, and I don't need to know. However, I *do* know that what you might be looking for is a shuttle, or other small transport ship. To be honest with you, I don't even know *why* you're looking for such a vessel. If you do spot any, though, you're to disable it and wait until we can capture it. " Drake, Shok'wave and Vyper all frowned.

"With all due respect, Captain," Shok'wave began, "that's a pretty sketchy mission statement. Perhaps...." The captain cut her off gruffly.

"Sorry, Commander, I wish I could give you and your people more, but that's all they've told *me*." he growled. "Admiral Ackbar himself is personally taking charge of this one. It appears to be quite important, so I expect you won't let us down."

"No, sir," Shok'wave said, and saluted the Captain, who nodded curtly to dismiss the pilots before returning to his command chair.

As they walked off the bridge, Ladyfox muttered indignantly, "Well, that was great! We go and fly a mission where we *might* run into *something* that could *possibly* be useful and...."

"Oh, come now," Drake interrupted reproachfully. "Didn't you just say you couldn't wait to fly missions?" He ducked to avoid Ladyfox's playful punch.

"Just keep his A-Wing outta my way," she said to Ibero with mock severity.

[Just outside the Alliance Frigate *Joan d'Arc*]

"Lead, this is Three," Vyper's voice came through clearly on the comm. "We're making the jump to hyperspace now."

"I copy, Three...good luck, Vyper." Shok'wave acknowledged the report over the radio and Vyper's patrol quickly vanished into hyperspace.

"Now, pilots," Shok'wave said over the radio. "Stick close to me... we have to be prepared to meet anything here. Drake, if we run into any trouble, you and Ibero can take any TIEs that bother us - Ladyfox, you and I will take any larger ships or slower fighters, such as Gunboats. Understood?" The three pilots all voiced their acknowledgement.

"*Joan d'Arc*, this is White Leader...we're going to lightspeed now. Whites, prepare to enter hyperspace on my mark... three...two...one...mark!" The stars elongated into streaks as the ships hurtled forward into hyperspace.

Drake quickly glanced around his cockpit once again. It was nice to have the full circular vision an A-Wing provided, he mused, but even with that he still didn't like quiet patrols. The only ships to be seen were the two B-Wings on his right, and then, further out and to the right of them, Ibero's A-Wing. Drake glanced down at his radar, at the three green dots that represented his comrades' ships and at the single white blip that showed where the nav buoy was. The patrol was flying a lazy circle around the buoy, hoping that some Imperial ships would show soon before they returned to the *Joan d'Arc*. Finally, the comm crackled to life and Shok'wave's voice filtered through:

"Pilots, it's about time that we..."

"Lead, this is Eight! I've got multiple Imperials exiting hyperspace, bearing one four zero mark one two! " Ladyfox's voice had risen an octave, the excitement showing in her voice.

"Lead, this is Five...confirming five shuttles and four TIE escorts. Permission to engage the escorts?"

"Affirmative, Five. You and Nine go get 'em. Eight, you're with me. Let's ID those shuttles!"

"I copy, Lead," Ladyfox acknowledged.

"As ordered, Lead." Drake's A-Wing dove sharply and swung back on itself to streak back in the opposite direction. Ibero was close behind as the larger, slower B-Wings began to turn.

"Lock S-foils in attack positions," Shok'wave ordered.

Drake, sitting in his cockpit, grinned to himself. His right hand hovered over the non-existent S-foil lever. "I'm flying an *A-Wing* now," he reminded himself. "Oh well, one less lever to worry about." He redirected energy from his engines to his lasers and felt the A-Wing decrease in speed. It would still be more than a match for any TIE fighters, however. Finally, Drake switched his lasers over to dual fire mode.

Meanwhile, the two B-Wings' S-foils swung outward into the normal upside down sword shape and Shok'wave's voice again came on the comm:

"Eight, this is Lead. I'll try and ID Lambdas One and Two on the first pass...you go for Four and Five...then we'll come back around for number Three."

"Roger, Lead."

"Nine, this is Five. I have Alpha One tagged and ready to go... you right for a target?"

"Roger, Five," Ibero replied. "Nine has taken Alpha Three."

"Okay, Ibero, let's go!"

The two A-Wings swerved further apart from each other, Drake's to the right and Ibero's to the left. Drake watched the tiny shape of the TIE Fighter grow larger as the targeting reticle went green. He fired twice as the TIE Fighter began to fire, and then dived. A few green laser bolts splashed against his forward shields, but did him no serious damage. The computer beeped as it informed him of the TIE's destruction. Drake glanced left just in time to see Ibero whip around behind a TIE and empty fire into it at close range. The Imperial craft blew apart in a spectacular explosion which Ibero flew straight through before whooping a victory cry over the comm.

"Yeah, good shot, Nine!" Drake cried enthusiastically as his gloved fingers found the button and selected the next TIE.

"Thank you, Five," Ibero replied. "And to you also."

"Too easy..." Ladyfox commented as the B-Wings slowed to two-thirds speed behind the shuttle group. "Four TIE escorts? You've gotta be kidding! Whatever these shuttles are carrying, it can't be that important."

"Or maybe that's what we're meant to think," Shok'wave suggested as they swooped underneath the shuttles and she hurriedly targeted the next shuttle while it was still within target range. The information flashed across her screen...the two shuttles she had identified were carrying technical supplies...

"Lead, this is Eight! Lambda Four is carrying some sort of coded documents!!!"

Before Shok'wave could reply, there was a crunch as half her aft shields disappeared. She slammed the stick forward and the B-Wing dove steeply, with Ladyfox close behind. Behind her, she saw the dots on her radar scatter as the shuttle group broke formation.

"Armed shuttles!" Ladyfox breathed.

"Yes...they gave me a nasty shock," Shok'wave agreed. "Eight, don't, I repeat, do not destroy them - disable them instead. Use a single torpedo on each if you want to speed the process up, but I have a feeling we'll need them all intact. Oh, and leave Lambda Four to me."

"I copy, Lead." Ladyfox's B-Wing looped up and out of sight, on the tail of a shuttle.

Shok'wave had tagged Lambda Four, but now she selected another shuttle - if she did disable the fourth shuttle, the Imperials might decide that whatever it was carrying was too important and destroy it. Also, she didn't want Alliance capture transports running around in the middle of a dogfight. She flicked the fire selector over to triple fire, and started firing bursts at the aft of the shuttle in front of her. The next moment she was forced to bank as another shuttle fired on her from behind.

The computer beeped its repetitious tone and the reticle flashed yellow as Drake twisted and turned to stay with his TIE, trying to get a missile lock. Ibero flashed by on the other side of the TIE, and it straightened out to fire a burst at him. That was all Drake needed. The tone became a solid whine and the reticle went red. Drake thumbed the firing button and a concussion missile burst out on a tongue of orange flame. The TIE started to pull up, but too slowly, and the missile crashed into it from the back, its warhead splitting the smaller craft apart and leaving one of the solar panel wings to drift slowly in space.

Ladyfox gritted her teeth as the computer whined the fact that it had acquired a torpedo lock. She pushed the firing button and a blue proton torpedo streaked away, straight into the shuttle in front of her. The computer immediately reported that its shields had gone down, so Ladyfox switched the selector over to ion cannons and began to fire at the shuttle. The blue bolts thudded into the enemy ship and raced along its hull, causing fiery sparks and mini-explosions. The shuttle sat dead in space.

"Lead, this is Eight. Lambda Two disabled. "

"Good work, Eight. Go for Lambda Five next."

"Acknowledged, Lead. I'm on him."

Shok'wave's B-Wing flashed across Ladyfox's cockpit window as she yanked the stick around to get onto the shuttle's tail.

"Alpha Four destroyed!"

"Good work, Ibero!" Drake grinned and waved at Ibero as he fell into formation beside him.

"Lead, this is Five. All eyeballs have been destroyed. You need a hand with those shuttles?"

"Negative, Five, but thanks for the offer." Drake's grin grew wider. He and Ibero had done their part by themselves, now Shok'wave and Ladyfox were going to do theirs - without assistance.

"You can move in if you like, though - if Alliance transports show up, which I think they will, we'll need close cover."

"You stay out of my way, Drake!" Ladyfox added and Ibero laughed.

"Affirmative Lead, Eight....moving in and staying out of the way," Drake answered with a chuckle. The A-Wings came around slightly and flew towards the dueling B-Wings and shuttles.

Shortly after, Ladyfox and Shok'wave had disabled all five of the shuttles, and Shok'wave's voice cut in clearly on the comm:

"*Joan d'Arc*, this is White Leader. We have encountered a small convoy...five lambs and four eyeballs...eyeballs destroyed, lambs disabled. Awaiting further orders."

There was a pause, then:

"Copy, White Leader. Remain on station. We have three transports en route. They should be with you any moment. Provide close cover for their docking operation."

"Acknowledged."

No sooner had the order been acknowledged than three transports appeared two kilometers away.

"White Leader, this is Alliance Transport *Ferrett One*," said a voice. "Thanks for the cover."

"No problem, *Ferrett One*," Shok'wave replied. "Just make it quick, okay?"

"Planning on it, White Leader."

The transports slowly approached the disabled shuttles, which were now strewn around a wide area. Inside his cockpit, Drake clenched his hands into fists and silently willed them to hurry. This was the worst part, he reflected. Waiting for the enemy to appear, thinking, worrying... at least after they showed up you didn't have to think what to do, or what might happen... you just engaged the enemy. Also, escort duty was the hardest... and most draining if you failed... type of mission. Failure meant that it had cost lives, and the responsibility for that lay on you. Drake's reverie was interrupted suddenly by a beep from his computer.

"Lead, I..." he began.

"Lead, incoming Imperials!" Ibero warned.

Shok'wave cut them off. "Okay, I see them. Eight, you and I will take out those Gunboats... also see if you can knock out one of the Corellian Corvettes. I'll take the other. Five, Nine... just wait for a..."

"Squints! Two flight groups, three ships each, bearing three one five mark zero and zero four five mark one three," Drake reported. "Nine, you take the guys on the right, I'll take the ones on the left, okay?"

"Affirmative, Five, engaging..." Ibero's A-Wing peeled off and raced toward the starboard Imperial Corvette, and Drake's headed off to the left.

Unfortunately, Shok'wave was not having an easy time.

"Lead, I can't get a clear run at the Corvette to get a lock," Ladyfox reported over the comm, sounding frustrated. "I've got three Gunboats on me, all of them trying to fire missiles at me...as it is, I've got to take missile hits in order to fly straight long enough to get kills."

"Copy, Eight... I know what you mean... just do your best. At least while they're concentrating on us, the Imps are leaving those transports alone." The White CO pulled her B-Wing up in a climb to avoid the green laser bolts which groped like fingers for her ship. An Assault Gunboat sailed across beneath her and she snapped the B-Wing down onto its tail, firing triple laser bursts into its exposed aft section.

Reminding himself that he was *not* in an X-, B- or even Y-wing, Drake quickly decided to avoid a head-on shootout with the three TIE Interceptors that roared towards him. Instead, he held his course straight at them until just out of laser range, then temporarily redirected energy from the shields to the engines, giving the A-

Wing a burst of speed as he stomped on the left rudder pedal. The A-Wing smoothly accelerated and slewed to the left as the three TIEs began firing and green laser bolts sizzled past the A-Wing's cockpit. Drake whizzed past the Imperials so close that he could hear the roar of the Twin Ion Engines that gave the craft their name. Instantly, they broke formation and he redirected energy back into his shield system. Designating the nearest enemy target, Drake sat forward in his seat and gripped the stick.

The fight was not going well for the White Squadron pilots. The TIE Interceptors and Assault Gunboats had managed to herd the Whites (whom they far outnumbered) towards the stationary shuttles and docked transports. Even now, they were getting dangerously close to laser range for the transports...

"Whites, they're almost in range! The transports still haven't finished docking..."

Even as Shok'wave said it, the transport *Ferrett Three* streaked away into lightspeed, closely followed by the newly captured and repaired Lambda Five.

"That's it, the other two still have to get away though," Ladyfox remarked.

"Lead, this is Five," Drake's voice was calm, but he sounded out of breath or distracted. "We're flying almost totally defensive here... my missile lock warning light is so bright I could just about read a holonovel here in the cockpit."

"Well, do the best you can, Five, because... "

"Lead! New ships arriving!" Ibero reported.

"What now?!" Ladyfox asked, exasperated.

"It's Vyper! I don't believe it! Bring on the cavalry!" Drake laughed.

"Lead, this is Three...thought you guys could use a hand," Vyper's voice on the comm sounded just a tiny bit smug.

"Cut the chatter, Three, and let's see some action," Shok'wave retorted, but the ambient laughter in her voice could not be mistaken. "I'm going after that port Corvette... Eight, I believe the other one's yours."

The battle after that was short. Both of the Imperial Corellian Corvettes were destroyed, all TIE Interceptors and Gunboats were destroyed, and all the shuttles and transports made it away safely. It was undoubtedly the arrival of Vyper's patrol arrival that had saved the day.

"Thanks, Three," Drake said just before they went to hyperspace home. "Things were getting a little hot back there."

"Anytime, Five," Vyper replied coolly. "Anything we can do for you... and the next round of Blue Stuff is your shout... although I prefer a nice schnapps myself."

"Typical, I always get helped out by the person with the most expensive tastes," Drake grumbled with good humor as the eight ships rocketed forward into hyperspace.

[On board the Imperial Star Destroyer *Inexorable*]

The darkened dimness of the room, combined with the soft, constant hum, was enough to put anyone who was tired enough and waited long enough to sleep, the man thought. In fact, the man wearing the uniform of an Imperial Navy Captain was tired enough and had been waiting long enough, but he was no where near sleeping. On the contrary, he was only barely suppressing the urge to fidget nervously - and he *never* fidgeted. It was due entirely, he knew, to the man he was about to see. Meetings with this man always instilled a kind of expectant fear and awe in him, and an uncertainty of what was about to happen. Again he went over the details of his last mission in his mind, trying to analyse objectively what he might have done inefficiently or wrong, but he came up blank. Of course, there was usually some fault to be found...

The man's reverie was interrupted as the door hissed open. The sound of uniform boots clicking on the floor seemed to echo in his mind, and he shot to his feet as the visitor walked in. The visitor wore knee-high polished black boots, and his white uniform bore many decorations as well as gold braid on the shoulders. His face was a cold, calculating blue color, and his eyes were a malevolent red by contrast. They narrowed as they looked at the standing man, who saluted.

"At ease, Captain," the deep voice rumbled. The Captain relaxed. "Sit down." The order was spoken simply, without mention of manners or any other unnecessary niceties, and the Captain sat. The visitor looked down at him.

"Your performance on your last assignment was impressive," he noted.

The man blinked rapidly to cover his surprise. He had never been complimented on his work... it was always "adequate", or "satisfactory". But now, "impressive"!

"Thank you, Grand Admiral Thrawn," he said. "I am honored to serve, sir."

The Grand Admiral nodded curtly. "I'm sure you are, Captain," he agreed. "Now, you have shown yourself to be reasonably competent at the simple tasks I have so far assigned you... "

The Captain frowned, somewhat perturbed at this remark. The last few assignments had been anything but simple. The first had been a crackdown on a major smuggling ring, in which he had almost lost his ship and his life. He stared as the Grand Admiral continued.

"Now, however, I have a real mission to test your mettle." The senior officer threw a datapad down onto the table. "That," he informed the Captain, "is it... the destruction of a thorn in the Empire's side." He began to pace around the small room, walking around it slowly. "Hampering our continued success are the Rebel starfighter squadrons, which, although clearly not as large or as skilled as many of our own pilots, are admittedly largely equipped with better technology. Our TIE starfighters, with the exception of the TIE Advanced and perhaps the Assault Gunboat, are no match for their snubfighters." The Grand Admiral's eyes narrowed and he frowned. "We are losing capital ships to starfighter attacks at a disturbing rate. Even with the redesign and upgrade of our Imperial Class Star Destroyers to eradicate their previous weakness, the Rebels still manage to destroy many of our vessels. Their B-Wing fighters, especially, are dangerous. Your job, Captain, is to eliminate one of these squadrons, a particularly troublesome one. Have you heard of White Squadron?"

The captain considered briefly, then shook his head. "No, sir."

The Grand Admiral's frown deepened. "No, I should not have expected so," he mused.

The captain looked up sharply, but the admiral seemed to be thinking, and spoke without rancor.

"It is of little concern," Thrawn continued. "They were once called Praying Mantis Squadron... they have recently been re-organized into White Squadron."

"Ahh, yes sir... I have heard of the Mantis Squadron," the Captain nodded.

"Good. In any case, they contain many dangerous elements." the Grand Admiral continued, increasing his pacing as he spoke. "Their commander is said to be some sort of Force-sensitive. They also have an outlawed security officer, an escaped Imperial prisoner who was the slave of one of our officers, the daughter of an Imperial general (according to rumor,) and one of our own traitors, a renegade Imperial pilot! These are just a few of the insurgents in this group. All members of the squadron are highly skilled pilots, in addition to whatever other skills they might have. You can see, Captain, why they present such a threat to us."

"Yes, sir."

"Your mission, as I have said, is to eliminate them. They are based on board the Alliance Nebulon B Frigate *Joan d'Arc*. Her captain is a worthy and dangerous adversary, and a Nebulon-B Frigate under his command is just as dangerous as the pilots themselves. To accomplish your mission, you will be given command of the Imperial Star Destroyer *Providence* and its task group. Beyond that, the details of your assignment are

up to you, Captain Piett. You may use whatever means necessary to ensure the Rebels' destruction."

"Understood, sir." Captain Piett replied, and nodded. Grand Admiral Thrawn's eyes narrowed and he leaned forward, placing blue knuckles on the table.

"Good, Captain. Perhaps if you acquit yourself well, you will one day be given the ultimate honor... the command of a Super Star Destroyer. After all, it seems to run in your family, doesn't it?" Thrawn smiled, but Captain Piett did not think it was a nice smile. It was a predatorial smile, he thought - all teeth - and Thrawn's eyes seemed narrowed with hidden malice, their red glow deepening just a little. "It is a shame about what happened to your father... he was a good officer and a hero of the Empire," the Grand Admiral continued, almost as if he were reciting a history holo. His voice seemed to contain nothing but the greatest respect for the Admiral Piett he spoke of, but the Captain thought he caught a slight mocking inflection in his superior officer's tone. "A favorite of Lord Vader, too! Such a tragedy for the Empire... as was the loss of the *Executor*."

"Indeed, sir." Captain Piett, son of the famous Admiral Piett that died during the Battle of Endor, replied coldly.

"Very well, then Captain," Grand Admiral Thrawn said, taking his knuckles off the table and drawing himself up to his full imposing height, "You are dismissed. A shuttle is waiting to take you to your new command." Captain Piett stood and saluted crisply. The Grand Admiral returned the salute and Piett marched out.

When he was gone, Thrawn glanced out the window at the stars and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. What Piett didn't know was that he - Grand Admiral Thrawn - actually liked him. His father, Admiral Piett, really had been a good officer, in Thrawn's opinion. What happened to him was the result of pure Rebel luck... and perhaps also the ever mysterious Force, which Thrawn, unlike that traitor Zaarin, had a healthy respect for. Still, Thrawn liked to prod the younger Piett, to test the son's endurance. So far, the young man had done well, both in his dealings with senior officers like Thrawn and in his missions and commands, which left not his tactical skills to test, but his personal qualities. The young Piett had risen up the chain of command even faster than his father, who was catapulted to an Admiral's rank and position by Vader himself. Grand Admiral Thrawn smiled to himself. Yes, assigning Piett this mission was exactly the thing to do. White Squadron was going to be in for a very tough time, and while they were thus occupied, Thrawn had other matters to attend to.

[In the briefing room on board the Alliance Frigate *Joan d'Arc*]

"Okay, pilots, settle down," Foxfire's voice sounded through the ready room. The individual conversations gradually died down as everyone turned towards White Squadron's Executive Officer. "Commander Krenzel's asked me to conduct this briefing," Foxfire continued. "We aren't actually flying a mission now, but things are going to move quickly pretty soon and you need to know the facts while we still have time to tell them."

Drake studied his Executive Officer closely as she looked around at each of them in turn, briefly establishing eye contact, grabbing their attention and holding it, reassuring them at the same time. He had seen Shok'wave do the same, and he mentally filed it away as good briefing technique, in case he ever needed to conduct a briefing. Right now, the bartender Foxfire seemed light-years away, replaced by the grim, but determined woman who stood at the front of the room and continued.

"I've asked the members of the Training Wing to be present as well, not only because they should know too, but because we may need you all to fly some operational missions alongside us for this one. Now, as I'm sure you're all aware, earlier today we captured five Imperial shuttles, one of which carried top secret documents." There were several nods.

"Those documents have since been decoded using cracks obtained recently at great cost to the Bothans. What they are, as far as we can tell, is one of only two sets of data concerning a project that the Empire calls "The Emperor's Voice". This name is a little obscure, so I'll elaborate on its meaning.

Put simply, the "Emperor's Voice" is a Force amplifier. "We believe that this device greatly amplifies and enhances Force abilities in even the most mediocre of Force-gifted people. Were it introduced, armies of Jedi Knights (of a kind, anyway,) would spring up - all Dark Jedi, devoted to the Empire. Our people wouldn't

stand a chance. Our Jedi and Jedi-initiates could not hope to combat such a massive army. Pilots, if this device is completed and introduced into active service, it will mean the end of the Rebellion, and the Empire will reign supreme in the galaxy."

A few heads shook in disbelief, and all the pilots' faces were ashen. Foxfire managed a smile.

"Fortunately, it's not all bad news. We've already intercepted the plans, and, thanks to Shok'wave's intuition, we have all five of the shuttles intact. We hope to fool the Empire so that it doesn't know we "borrowed" its little convoy. Even as we speak, the shuttles are being doctored to appear as if they narrowly escaped a battle with pirates in which their escorts were destroyed. The shuttle pilots have been replaced with specially selected Alliance Intelligence operatives - we don't want the Empire realising that their operation has been compromised. Secrecy is their main priority here - that's why there's only two sets of plans for the Emperor's Voice. With only two sets of plans, less people know about them, and less people can have access to them - and now the Empire is moving both sets of plans to its secret development site. Unfortunately for them, that is also their weakness - all scientists, plans and materiel for the project are in one place: hence, you hit that place, and the project is totally destroyed, hopefully never to return." Foxfire paused dramatically.

"White Squadron has been called upon to destroy the Emperor's Voice." A good deal of noise met this statement as everyone began to talk amongst themselves. Foxfire raised a hand to stop the conversation and continued.

"What our mission will be is to remove any defences - space borne or otherwise - from the development site. We'll then be escorting teams of Rebel Commandos in - they'll be the ones that actually destroy all Emperor's Voice facilities. Now, in order to get to the site, we'll have to move through an Imperial controlled system - this means we have to quickly eliminate all Imperial presence there and move on, before the Empire realizes what's happening. The mission details aren't finalised yet, but they will be soon, so rest and prepare yourselves. Later today, the *Joan d'Arc* will be hyperspacing to the Bonaad system - that's the intermediate one before we get to the EV site. Any questions?"

No hands were raised, and each pilot seemed to be lost in their own thoughts as they realized the seriousness of what they were about to do. Foxfire sighed heavily. "No?"

Ibero raised his hand, a frown on his face.

"Yes, Ibero?" Foxfire asked.

"Ma'am...could we not capture these devices? " Ibero asked. "Surely we could put them to good use." Foxfire shook her head.

"Unfortunately we can't. The suggestion has already been put to the Jedi Luke Skywalker, who rejected it. According to Skywalker, such a device can really only lead to, and manipulate, the Dark Side of the Force. It disrupts the natural order, the equilibrium, of the Force, by trying to unnaturally modify the energy field created by all living things. Perverting nature for our own purposes leads only to evil, according to the experts." Ibero nodded solemnly, and no one else had any questions. "Therefore, we'll have to destroy this thing. Dismissed. " The pilots stood and filed out solemnly.

"The Bomb Shelter's closed," Ibero observed.

Drake was lying on his bunk, staring at the ceiling. "Yep," he said flatly.

"I don't like it," Ibero continued. "We need it to get our minds off this - to loosen up a little, stop worrying so much."

"No," Drake, answered distractedly, still in the same monotone. Staring at the ceiling, a chaotic jumble of thoughts jostled inside his head, with the only noticeable sound the beating of his own heart. *Ah, the Empire's big plans have been beaten before, he reminded himself, and now, they're going to be beaten again...I hope.* Finally he sat up and turned to face Ibero, and his voice regained some of its normal emotion and inflection. "We can't have it open. We'll hardly be in prime condition to fly dangerous missions if we're all half tanked full of Blue Stuff and tequilas, will we?"

Ibero reluctantly shook his head. "No, my friend, I guess not. You are right. Still, I do not think that this

brooding is good for everyone."

"Who's brooding?" Drake asked and shot him a grin. A strange feeling filled him - a kind of excitement mixed with dread, and Drake realized that his adrenaline was already pumping, even though he wasn't yet in a cockpit. Ibero smiled back.

"Well, you seem not to be anymore," he answered.

"Neither am I - that's two down." Drake laughed. "C'mon, let's go and get something to eat," he suggested. "I'm not flying and claiming victory for the Alliance on an empty stomach."

Drake smiled as he walked into the mess. The entire squadron and training wing was there.

"Hi Drake, hi Ibero!" Ladyfox called, and waved at them. The two pilots began to walk over.

"What do we call this, the Bomb Shelter Mark II?" Drake asked.

The two pilots joined Ladyfox, who was sitting with Shok'wave, Vyper and the other pilots from the morning's mission. Shok'wave smiled at them as they sat down.

"Yes, it seems to be, Drake," she answered his question. "Except this Bomb Shelter doesn't serve drinks, unless they're water," she continued. Drake nodded. "How are you three doing?" the CO asked.

"Fine," they all answered. Shok'wave nodded and began to speak as Drake looked at her. The face, although still youthful and full of grace, seemed harder somehow, or perhaps stronger, than it naturally might have been. Shok'wave, he realized, had seen a lot of combat, and despite her sensitive nature - after all, she had some ability with the Force - she was a squadron commander, a strong warrior. The different aspects of her character seemed to show through at different times, and usually when they were most needed. The strong commander would be there when leadership and authority was required, but the listener and counselor was also ready if that was what one needed.

Drake immediately thought how Foxfire seemed to be similar, and how the two complimented each other and worked as a team. Foxfire was always ready for a joke, a drink, or anything exciting, but when the time came, he could already see that she could be serious, too.

Then there was Vyper, the Intelligence Officer that Drake had taken an instant liking to since joining the squadron. Vyper had seen service in several places and for different sides in this Civil War, but despite all that he'd seen, done and experienced, he retained his sense of humor, and was a strong comrade, always ready to defend a friend. As well as that, Drake thought wryly, the man was something of a technical wizard. The Rebellion - or New Republic, as it was now, Drake reminded himself, employed Vyper as a pilot, but he could just as easily have been one of their top slicers, or software people.

Moose - Drake glanced across at White Squadron's tall Training Officer, who was seated at the next table - Moose was nice, too. He spent a lot of time signing up new recruits for the Training Wing, training with them, and liaising with other Alliance squadrons. He always had time for a kind word and a sound piece of advice, though, as Drake was starting to discover.

His gaze continued to drift around the mess, until it settled on the squadron's Tactical Officer, Torpedo. Drake hadn't seen much of Torpedo, as the latter spent a lot of time on the bridge of the *Joan d'Arc*. In fact, Torpedo was the man who was the *Joan d'Arc*'s Flight Controller during those missions where he didn't fly. He seemed more at home, Drake thought reflectively, on a starship bridge than in a starfighter.

He leaned back slightly and smiled as he realized that his subconscious evaluation of White Squadron's Command Wing had come up excellent. He had had little time to think about himself and his situation since joining White Squadron just a couple of weeks ago. *Has it really only been two weeks? Seems like I've been here for months*, he thought. Much of those two weeks had largely been spent flying, (getting used to an A-Wing was something that required a bit of practice,) and learning the disciplines and protocols used within the Rebellion. *The New Republic*, he corrected himself silently. *Ahh, it's always been the Rebellion to me. It stands for the rebellion against tyranny and evil, and even though it's "officially" become the New Republic, what it stands for hasn't changed. I'll stick with calling it the Rebellion.*

Drake smiled and he sighed contentedly despite the tension in the room. Here, he had a real sense of belonging that he hadn't had back on Arrebnac, which was, he thought, probably because most of the people on that world were Imperial beaurecrats. Drake looked around the mess again, at the other White pilots conversing amongst themselves - his eyes flicked over Granite, the loud and boisterous Caldanian that would cheerfully fight about, or drink to, almost anything, then he caught sight of Joker, who was always friendly and ready to laugh. Finally his gaze settled on the table in front of him again. Ladyfox and Ibero sat there, the two people in the squadron that he identified with most because they had flown the most together, being the squadron's three newest pilots - but Ibero had joined a while earlier, Drake reminded himself. Drake smiled at his wingmates, and at Shok'wave, who was talking to them.

"Yes, everyone seems to be doing well. We're all dealing with this in our own way, and, thankfully, no one seems to need to be alone to handle this. We're doing it together."

"Yeah, imagine what they felt like at the Battle of Yavin, or the Battle of Endor," someone suggested. Drake grunted.

"No doubt Commander Antilles could tell you, " he said, and sighed wistfully. "That is, if he was here." He looked around and his face brightened. "Of course, we don't need him...we're Whites, after all. What good is an Imp blaster against a crowbar, I ask you?"

"Not much," Shok'wave answered him with a grin.

"Not much good against a sledgehammer, either, " Ibero added, and Drake shot him a sharp look.

"Oh, come on, Ibero!" he chided him. "Who wants a slegehammer?? I mean, just look at the crowbar - not as clumsy or random as a sledgehammer, it's an elegant weapon, of a more civilized age."

Shok'wave raised a quizzical eyebrow at him. She had the feeling that he had not made that up on the spur of the moment, but was at a loss to place where it had come from.

"Okay, I take it that you are *against* sledgehammers?" she asked. Drake's face brightened.

"My congratulations, ma'am, for your perceptiveness," he said with a smile. "Now..."

"Oh, don't you ever *shut up*?" Ladyfox asked with a grin. "You're worse than a protocol 'droid. I'd say you were born talking..."

"Well, I was," Drake interrupted, still grinning. "I do stop to eat, though." With that, he promptly began to eat his meal.

"Ahh, peace and quiet at last," Shok'wave sighed. "Life on Arrebnac must've been very boring for you to make you talk this much about..."

"Haven't I told you about Arrebnac?" Ladyfox asked with a wicked smile. "You know, the strangest life forms come from..."

"Well, I see our new pilots are settling in well," Vyper observed with a smile, in an obvious attempt to change the subject. Drake swallowed and smiled.

"Yep, nice quarters we have here," he commented, and resumed eating. "It is nice to be here, although at first it was a little difficult to find my way to the Bomb Shelter," Ibero added. "I did get lost a few times."

Ladyfox grinned at this admission. "I've enjoyed my time here so far," she said. "Just keep offering me Imps to shoot at and I won't complain."

Vyper nodded. "You'll get plenty of those before long," he said, and shot a glance at Shok'wave. The White CO ignored him and concentrated on her food. "Hey, I can say no more," Vyper said and held up his hands as Iceman and Zeppelin looked sideways at him.

"Well, isn't that just like an Intelligence Officer," Iceman grumbled.

"Pretty much," Zeppelin agreed. Vyper smiled. "You'll find out soon enough," he said.

[Inside the hangar of the Frigate *Joan d'Arc*]

"*Soon enough*" proved to be right, Drake mused as three hours later he sat in the open cockpit of his A-Wing on the flight deck of the *Joan d'Arc*. He glanced down at the dome-topped 'droid that hooted indignantly at him. "Relax, Ledner," he said, in a reassuring tone. "Look, there's nothing I can do about it. For starters, the squadron flies A-Wings and I'm part of the squadron. Secondly, I'm actually starting to quite like this little baby." He patted the cockpit affectionately. "I can really outrun and out maneuver TIEs in this thing, as *well* as outclass them."

Ledner, the R2 unit, beeped a smug rejoinder, then spat a series of hoots and whistles at him. Drake glanced at his cockpit screen to read what the 'droid was saying. He actually understood some of the 'droid's "speech", if it could be called that, because he had bought the little R2 from a smuggler during his early days with the Arrebnac Security Organization and had served with him throughout his time there. Still, when there was a proper interpreter like a protocol 'droid or computer around, Drake was grateful for the help, since he could really only guess at the main gist of what Ledner was saying, rather than the specifics.

"Well, I'm sorry about that. Aren't you going to be on the bridge, though?" Drake asked. Ledner whistled a reluctant reply. "Exactly. So what's your problem? You'll be winning the fight for us just as much as I am. Add to that the bonus that you won't be as likely to have that noble head of yours cracked open." Ledner blatted a retort. "I've gotta go, Ledner," Drake interrupted him. "Take care of yourself, hey?" The 'droid answered with a mournful tone. "Don't worry about me," Drake reassured him. "I'll take care of myself - and if I don't, my squad mates will do it for me." Drake waved goodbye and donned his flight helmet and gloves as Ledner moved off and the sound of A- and B-Wing engines could be heard throughout the hangar as they began to wind up.

Drake looked down proudly at the bright orange flight suit he wore as a tech unclipped the fuel hose to his A-Wing. The cockpit slowly slid forward and closed, suddenly muffling the noise from the hangar. Drake settled into his suit comfortably as he buckled in. This is where he felt most relaxed and at ease...with the noise pleasantly muted and him warm and relaxed in the cockpit. He flicked on the main power and glanced around his cockpit with satisfaction as the various boards and lights illuminated.

He turned on the comm. "Control, Five is powered up. Beginning engine start..."

"Copy, Five," the flight controller responded. It wasn't Torpedo, Drake knew - the Tactical Officer was flying with them for this mission.

Drake started his engines and let them wind up to 50% of full power - running engines up to full power in an enclosed space such as a hangar was usually hazardous to one's health. Satisfied at his engines' condition, Drake brought them down to idle. The on-board computer reported all navigation and flight systems were working.

Drake glanced at his controls. "Control, this is Five. All systems green and go."

"Affirmative, Five. Stand by."

"As ordered, Control." Drake sat back in his seat and glanced around the hangar. Numerous other A-Wings and B-Wings were also running through their pre-flight checks. While he waited, Drake punched up the in-flight briefing on his computer. White Squadron itself would operate in three flight groups of four ships each, lead by Shok'wave, Foxfire and Vyper respectively.

Drake grinned at the thought, remembering Foxfire's indignant outburst when assigned to a B-Wing. "A **what?!**" she had exclaimed. "Shok'wave, you *know* I have more class and sense than to fly in one of those pigs. They're better than a Y-Wing, but not by much." She had grinned mischevously as she protested, and winked at Moose, who had folded his arms and done his best to look offended, which was hard to do with a huge grin stretching across his face.

Drake shook his head with a smile, glad that it wasn't *him* having to fly in the B-Wing. *Dogfighting and recon*

are what I do best, and I don't fancy doing either in a B-Wing, he thought to himself. He returned his attention to the computer briefing.

White Training Wing would fly in two flight groups, led by Moose and Torpedo. The sequence of events itself was more complicated than most missions. The Whites were going to assault an Imperial space station, but rather than hyperspace in all at once, they were going to come into the system at timed intervals. This was done for a couple of reasons. Firstly, the entire squadron and training wing turning up at once would doubtless cause alarm on the station, prompting it to call for reinforcements - reinforcements that the squadron did not have time to tangle with. Added to that was the fact that a multi-sided attack would further serve to confuse the Imperials and also exploit any weak spots they left open.

Drake's flight group, led by Vyper, would be flying A-Wings in the attack. Shok'wave and Foxfire would both be leading B-Wing groups, and the WTW flight groups were both a mix of A-Wing and B-Wing craft.

Drake checked his readouts - yes, his ship was loaded with the standard twelve concussion missiles. The B-Wings, he knew, would be carrying twelve torpedoes each. Some of the pilots would have preferred heavy rockets, but the new rocket warheads were in short supply and the *Joan d'Arc*, which had been operating independent of any base for a while, had none.

Of course, Drake reminded himself, you could only take a smaller amount of rockets anyway, so the difference in destructive capability wouldn't be too bad, with the B-Wings making up for their lack of warhead strength with sheer quantity of torpedoes. His own A-Wing's missiles would be effectively only useful against enemy starfighters, being far too weak to properly damage the station's shields.

He looked up at the sound of fighters launching. Shok'wave's B-Wing rose from the deck, followed by her flight group, and the four fighters sailed serenely into space. Drake looked as the formation slowly swung out from the *Joan d'Arc*. "Nice takeoff," he murmured to himself. The B-Wings outside suddenly vanished as they entered hyperspace.

Drake waited a couple of minutes, drumming his gloved fingers on his thighs with impatience.

Vyper's voice suddenly cut in over the comm. "Three Group, this is Fi...er, I mean, Three. We're leaving now."

The flight acknowledged the order and Drake powered up his repulsorlift generators. The A-Wing rose smoothly into the air. Ahead and to his right, he saw Vyper's ship slide forward, and Drake nudged the throttle forward as his A-Wing began to cruise out of the hangar. Three Group broke through the magnetic atmospheric containment bubble and then, they were out in the vacuum of space.

"Three Group, report in," Vyper ordered.

"White Five, standing by," Drake reported.

"White Nine, standing by," Ibero said. "White Fourteen, standing by," Zeppelin finished.

"Good. Prepare to enter hyperspace on my mark," Vyper informed them.

Instead of a verbal countdown, Drake watched the hyperspace "mark" light on his console as it went from yellow to green. He pulled the lever and the stars streaked away into nothingness as the A-Wing burst into hyperspace.

[Near Imperial Deep Space Station ZX-5, in the Bonaad system]

"Nice of you to drop by, Three," Shok'wave said as they slid back into realspace.

"Our pleasure, Lead," Vyper answered her. "What's the situation? Do the Imps suspect a large scale attack yet?"

"I don't think so," Shok'wave replied. "We've launched a few torpedoes each at the station, damaged it's shields a bit, but nothing serious yet. I think they think we're just a deep space patrol. You keep these TIEs off us and we'll start dishing out some real trouble, though, and make them think otherwise."

"Copy, Lead. Fourteen, you and I will take TIE group Alpha. Five, Nine, you two have Beta."

"Copy, Three."

"As ordered, Three."

Drake and Ibero's A-Wings shifted vectors to the left slightly as the formation raced toward the cluster of laserfire in the distance.

"Beta Two down." Drake reported tightly as he barrel rolled his A-Wing to avoid a burst of laserfire from behind.

Apparently the station considered the additional four A-Wings a significant threat, because it had now launched a TIE Interceptor squadron as well as another TIE Fighter squadron. With the high ratio of enemy-to-friendly fighters, Drake was spending a lot of his time trying to avoid hitting other ships. It was worse, he knew, for the Imperial pilots. Not only were there more of them, making it more likely that they would hit each other, but their unshielded ships could not expect to survive a hit, whereas the Alliance ships could.

Drake winced and yanked the stick over as his front shields blossomed with light as an Interceptor raced past, its quad lasers blazing. Drake quickly evened the shields out, and shunted laser power to them as he thumbed the selector over to concussion missiles. Selecting the Interceptor that had just fired at him as his target, he whipped the A-Wing around in a lightning turn and dove to try and gain a missile lock.

Foxfire's B-Wing group as well as the Training Wing flight groups came out of hyperspace just four kilometers from the station. Instantly the well ordered formations broke apart, with the B-Wings steadily heading towards the station and the A-Wings flying circles around them and dogfighting TIEs.

"B-Wings...launch a spread - now," Shok'wave ordered.

There was a series of acknowledgements which all overlapped one another and blended into a string of sound as dozens of proton torpedoes suddenly appeared around the Imperial station.

"Sithspawn!" Drake swore as he threw his A-Wing over to avoid a torpedo. "It's raining torpedoes," he muttered darkly to himself. It was almost true. The area of space around the station was filled with blue streaks, each of which was a proton torpedo. Drake's observation of the torpedoes was cut short as an Interceptor sailed across his nose. He looked at it just in time and pulled the A-Wing to the left as he pulled the trigger on his stick twice before the Interceptor flew past him. Caught side on by three fully charged laser bolts, the Imperial fighter's port wing panel blew apart into chunks of molten metal, some of which perforated the ball cockpit. The squint, beyond Drake's vision, began to veer left, before it collided with a TIE Fighter and the two ships exploded.

"Nice work, Five," came Vyper's comment over the comm.

"Thanks, Three," Drake answered. "Watch it, you've got a couple on your tail!"

"Yeah, I see them," Vyper acknowledged. "Not easy to shake two of them, though."

"That's okay," Drake told him. "I'm settling in for a shot at them, break right on my mark."

"Affirmative, Five," Vyper replied.

"Mark!" Vyper's A-Wing suddenly snapped around to the right, the green lasers of the TIEs pursuing him splashing against his shields. The two TIEs swung around, almost in formation, to follow him as Drake's A-Wing soared in from their starboard quarter. There was the orange explosion of a concussion missile launch followed by a couple of laser bursts, and soon only a few lumps of instantly frozen molten metal drifted in space where the two TIEs had been.

"Thanks, Five," Vyper said as he engaged another target.

"My pleasure, Three," Drake answered him with a grin. "I'll trade two TIE kills for a glass of schnapps, what do you say?"

"I appear to have no choice," Vyper chuckled.

"Cut the chatter, you two," Shok'wave cut in. "I'll remind you that this is a tactical frequency, not a smuggler's channel!" Her voice was cut off by the dull whoosh of explosions as the torpedoes began to slam against the station's shields. Inside her cockpit, Shok'wave looked at her screen as the station's shield strength scrolled down quickly to zero. The hull also began to take damage as the last torpedoes struck their target. "Whites, disable that station with your ions," she ordered.

"As ordered, Lead," Foxfire acknowledged. The two B-Wing flight groups angled toward the station, opening up with their triple ion cannons. Blue bolts of energy sped towards the station and spread throughout its infrastructure, racing along with fiery explosions and sparks, as the answering green turbolaser fire slackened and died.

Drake glanced out of the starboard side of his cockpit as the station was covered by the torpedoes exploding against its shields and hull. *Why not destroy the station?* he asked himself. The computer reported that the station had been disabled.

"Good work, Whites," Shok'wave's calm voice told them over the radio. "They won't be sending any requests for assistance now."

It was then that Drake understood. The initial torpedo attack had not destroyed the station, but it had begun to damage the hull. The Imperials would no doubt by that stage be getting worried, and might wish to request reinforcements. In the glory days of the Empire reinforcements had been easy to come by, but since Endor and the fragmentation of the Empire proper, Drake had no doubt that Imperial commanders were under pressure not to request reinforcements unless absolutely necessary. Besides, here in Bonaad, there was little help to call to. Just in case the Imps did try, Drake reflected, rather than taking the time to destroy the station first, Shok'wave and Foxfire with their flight groups had quickly disabled it, thereby preventing any communications being made. An added bonus was that White Squadron could now destroy it at their leisure without any turbolaser interference.

"Lead, I'm showing a lamb leaving the station," Joker reported over the radio.

"Copy, Thirteen," Shok'wave replied. "I've got him too. Looks like rats leaving a sinking ship. Two, you're closer. Think you can take them?"

"Affirmative, Lead," Foxfire answered. "You want us to put them to sleep or take them out?" By this Foxfire meant to ask whether they were to disable or destroy the shuttle.

"We haven't got the time or resources to retrieve prisoners, Two," Shok'wave's voice came over the comm heavily. "And we can't risk them getting away or communicating to anyone. Take them out," she finished with a sigh.

"As ordered, Lead," Foxfire acknowledged and her flight group swung around to rapidly overhaul the retreating Lambda class shuttle.

"How many fighters have we still got here?" Shok'wave asked.

"Lead, this is Six," Moose said. "I put the count at about a squadron's worth, a mix of eyeballs and squints. They seem to be anxious to get out of here."

"Copy, Six," Shok'wave acknowledged him. "One Group, begin strafing runs on the station," she ordered. "Three, Four and Five groups, get after those fighters. We can't afford to leave a single one alive. B-Wings from Four and Five, you can come and strafe the station too."

Vyper, Moose and Torpedo all acknowledged the order and the ships of White Squadron all broke into their respective parts to complete their mission in the Bonaad system.

[On the bridge of the Imperial Star Destroyer *Providence* , patrolling the Outer Rim]

"Captain Piett!" Piett turned from the window and strode over to the man who had called his name.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Sir, we've just received a partial distress call from the Station ZX-5, in the Bonaad system. They've been attacked."

"Attacked? By who?"

"The message doesn't say, sir, it was cut off before they could get out any details."

"Very well," Piett replied in his clipped, concise tone. "Let's hear the message."

The lieutenant nodded and pressed a button, and the distress call filtered through the speakers. "To any and all Imperial craft..." it began, and was interrupted by a burst of static. Captain Piett frowned as the message continued. "...ion cannons to disable.....under attack from.....need immediate assistance, we're...." With that, the speakers fell silent.

Piett stood with his brow furrowed. *I don't have time for this! I need to find White Squadron!* "Are there any other ships in this sector?"

"No, sir. Our task group is the only one in this part of the Rim. It seems that most others seem to be moving either to more densely populated areas of the Rim, or they're moving Coreward."

Piett rubbed a hand over his chin. "Hmm." *Thrawn may be ruthless, and he may have given me a specific mission to destroy White Squadron, but I can't just ignore that station. Besides, if I did he'd probably kill me anyway. He's brilliant, but also completely unpredictable.*

"Very well, Lieutenant. Contact the captains of the *Dagger of Truth* and the *Angel of Fury* and inform them we'll be assisting the station." *I'm no closer to finding White Squadron anyway. The reports that they were operating somewhere in this part of the Rim were sketchy at best - the danger I haven't found yet can wait till I've dealt with the one I have on hand.*

"Yes, sir." The Lieutenant bent to his console and set to work. The *Dagger of Truth* and the *Angel of Fury* were the two Nebulon-B Frigates that constituted the other part of the *Providence's* task group.

Captain Piett whirled around. "Helm, lay in a course for Station ZX-5 and engage hyperspace on my mark." Thirty seconds later the hulking Imperial starships blasted into hyperspace.

[Near the Imperial Deep Space Station ZX-5, in the Bonaad system]

"*Joan d'Arc*, this is White Leader," Shok'wave acknowledged the order. "We're moving away from the station." As she spoke the starfighters that had been strafing the battered remains of the Imperial station ZX-5 broke off and circled at a safe distance as the newly arrived Alliance Frigate *Joan d'Arc* moved in like a bird of prey and settled above the station. A few seconds later, red turbolasers poured from the Frigate into the station, and a minute later it broke apart into flaming chunks of infrastructure which intermittently exploded on their own. The Whites watched in silence as the *Joan d'Arc* swung slowly around and headed for the edge of the system.

"*Joan d'Arc*," Shok'wave asked tentatively, "was there any sign of them getting any communications off?"

"Negative, White Leader. It appears you disabled them in time."

"Affirmative, *Joan d'Arc*," Shok'wave replied. "We're coming in for reloading and re-arming."

"Copy, White Leader. You're cleared."

"I trust that Lieutenant Commander Schroeder briefed you well," Shok'wave began. "Right now as our fighters are readied I'm going to fill you in on specifics for this mission." She pressed a control and a three-dimensional representation of a jungle planet, not unlike Endor but with more water, appeared from the holoprojector.

"Our mission is simple," Shok'wave continued. "The B-Wing flight groups will form an outer perimeter around the planet - as far as we know, there'll be no space borne defences. It's hard to keep an installation secret with a Space Platform hovering over it, after all."

Some of the pilots chuckled, mainly to relieve the tension, and Shok'wave smiled tightly. "In the event that the Imps do have any capital ships down there...nothing bigger than Corvettes is expected, this project relies more on secrecy than strength - then it will be groups One and Two that take them out. Three, Four and Five groups will fly cover for the Commando transports against any starfighters - and believe me, we *do* expect those. What types exactly we aren't sure, although the Empire would be wise to defend this place with its best, so expect some good pilots flying the TIE Advanced, or perhaps Gunboats. Questions?"

Trojan raised a hand. "Mister Watson."

"Yes, ma'am....the Commando transports....will they be coming from the *Joan d'Arc* when she hypers in?"

Shok'wave shook her head. "No. For added security, they're actually coming from another system entirely by a different and long route. Any other questions?"

Now Drake raised a hand, a frown on his face. "Commander, this is just a feeling, but...this whole thing seems too easy. Sure, the Imps have to keep their project a secret, but... I can't believe they'd leave such an important secret undefended. We'll probably find a couple of wings of brights down there. And the station attack....what if they did get off a communication? How far away is the nearest Imperial support?"

Shok'wave smiled. "You certainly are suspicious, aren't you, Drake?"

Drake smiled and relaxed a little. "I guess so, ma'am. Too much time as a Security Officer and you always look for the negative side of things."

Shok'wave nodded. "Understandable. Just so you know....whatever starfighter resistance there is, we should be able to take it. With all of us involved, and fighting for something so important, I'm sure that each and every one of us will fly better than ever before so that we prevail. We've got only the best pilots in this squadron, and I'm proud to command it. The threat we face may not seem as close or dangerous as the Death Stars, nor the mission we undertake so momentous, but the threat is just as real and the mission vital to our continued survival. I hope and believe that it is our destiny to succeed, as the legends of the Rebellion have before us."

Shok'wave stopped and took a breath. *Whew! So much for avoiding giving them a traditional pep talk. Oh, well - hopefully it was useful and encouraging.*

"Getting back to your question, Drake, at last report there were no Imperial starships operating in this sector." The young man nodded, apparently satisfied. "However, I won't lie to you. Chances are that some of us may not make it back from this mission. For that reason, you have fifteen minutes to record any messages you want for family and friends, and to get your personal gear in order for transport if needed. These will be shipped to your family in the event of your death."

Everyone nodded solemnly, and Shok'wave nodded. "Let's go - and may the Force be with us."

[Just outside the system with the planet where the Emperor's Voice is located]

Drake watched the chronometer on his computer slowly marching down towards zero as he pulled his

gloves tighter and flexed his fingers in anticipation. *Boy, they really get you right into it here in White*, he thought wryly to himself. *Two weeks ago I'm flying in on a bounty hunter's captured X-Wing... today, I'm off to save the Rebellion and civilization as we know it.* He checked over the systems once more, and looked at his in-flight briefing again. The flight group leaders had been shuffled a bit for this mission, he knew, to put flight leaders into their preferred starfighters, the ones they performed better in. Foxfire now flew an A-Wing and led Flight Group Four, the Training Wing, whereas Moose, in her former B-Wing, now led Group Two. Torpedo had been offered that lead, Drake knew, but declined as he wished to fly an A-Wing.

Drake glanced quickly overhead at the mottled tunnel of light that was hyperspace, half expecting it to break up under the influence of an Imperial Interdictor Cruiser at any minute. He silently berated himself for being paranoid, and leaned slightly forward in his seat, left hand poised over his controls as the tunnel broke into streaks which shrunk back to points as his flight group came back into realspace. Drake's right hand tensed on the stick, ready to maneuver - - and slackened as he saw his radar, which was filled with green dots. Groups One and Two were already present, and Four burst into existence behind them a second later. Five seconds after that, Five Group joined them and White Squadron had arrived at their destination.

"All groups, report in," Shok'wave's voice cut clearly across the channel. The flight leaders acknowledged and Shok'wave ordered the B-Wings to lock their S-foils into attack positions. The B-Wings slowly rotated and extended into their inverted sword shape and the formation headed for the planet ahead of them by the shortest possible route.

"Look at the spatial interference the planet's atmosphere is causing!" Moose exclaimed.

"They probably picked this planet so that the installation can't be detected, Six," Shok'wave reminded him.

Inside his cockpit, Drake looked thoughtful. *Nor can ships facing the opposite side of the planet to us.* Drake ground his teeth as he sideslipped his A-Wing to avoid a chunk of rock ahead of him. "Lead, this is Five," he said as he keyed the comm. "I don't suppose that Intell had anything to say about a meteor shower, did they?"

"Negative, Five," came Shok'wave's cool reply. "But it's nothing you can't handle."

"Affirmative, Lead, but..."

"Five, we're supposed to be maintaining radio silence," Shok'wave reminded him, just a little frostily.

Drake double clicked his mike in acknowledgement and frowned with annoyance. *Sure, Commander, but what if they're out there already?* Irritably, Drake keyed the comm again. He couldn't help it...something here didn't feel right...

"Lead, what if those asteroids or meteors are harbouring TIEs?"

"Five, check your sensors," Shok'wave answered. "If you see anything, let me know." Her voice retained none of its previous annoyance - Shok'wave, with her Force sensitivity, recognized that hunches and intuition were quite often valid - but still left Drake with the clear notion that unless he had something other than suspicions to report, he'd better keep quiet. The formation passed through the cluster of rocks without incident and the planet loomed closer.

Inside her cockpit, Shok'wave frowned and nibbled her lip. *Waiting is worse than fighting*, she thought to herself. *The sooner they show, the sooner we'll get rid of them. And that had better all happen before those commandos arrive.* The planet seemed to grow larger and larger, and then, in a split second, the comm exploded into twenty different exclamations at once.

"Lead, I have- "

"This is Ten, reporting-"

"Incoming Imperial-"

"From where?" Instinctively the White CO dived as she checked her radar. And groaned aloud.

Drake's left hand blurred into action, redirecting engine energy to the lasers as he pulled his A-Wing randomly off its straight course and checked his radar. *TIEs - from both directions at once! I was right - they WERE in that meteor shower!* His train of thought was interrupted as two green lasers streaked past his ship, the other two slamming into his aft shield. "Great. Brights." he remarked to himself calmly, cutting his throttle to one third and pivoting his A-Wing on its thrusters to face the incoming TIE Advanced. As he throttled up and turned to chase the enemy fighter, which had veered away as he turned, Drake's hand hovered over the concussion missile select switch. He frowned and drew the hand away. His concussion missiles would really be too slow to track a fast, nimble ship like the TIE Advanced... especially with a pilot who knew what he was doing. And these pilots all looked like they knew what they were doing. Instead he hit the fire mode select switch, setting his lasers to dual fire, as he swung around onto the bright's tail. The other ship immediately began to juke, then corkscrewed, and Drake swore under his breath as he fought to stay with it.

Shok'wave checked her chronometer hurriedly as she triggered another burst of triple laser fire. She observed with grim satisfaction that two of her shots had hit the TIE Advanced before it pulled away.

"Lead, this is Eleven, I have your bright."

"Copy, Eleven." Shok'wave grinned at the sound of Granite's Caldanian brogue on the comm.

"Since we're both in B-Wings, I'll keep after him, too... it'll take too long to take out the TIE Advanced with a single B-Wing."

Granite's reply was preceded by a grunt. "Mmph... I wish I had my Blastboat," he growled. "Then I could show those Imperials a thing or two about firepower...and Drake, too."

Shok'wave smiled again at this remark. Earlier, Drake had made an offhand comment that criticized the Skipray Blastboat, the *Bannockburn*, that was Granite's pride and joy. Bigger than an average fighter, Granite's Blastboat had also been souped up considerably with a dual SLAMS system, quadrupling its thrust, which, added to its enormous firepower, made a formidable craft indeed. Granite had shortly after taken Drake on a ride in it, a ride which Drake would not soon forget, and the latter had apologized not long after his recovery from the experience.

"I got the message the first time, Eleven," Drake's voice cut in. "Much as I wouldn't mind a second demonstration now, though." Granite chuckled over the comm, but didn't comment, as he flipped his B-Wing around again to stay with his TIE.

"Lead, this is Thirteen! I can't shake this bright!"

"Copy, Thirteen," Drake replied smoothly before anyone else could. "I'm on him. Break hard right, now." Obediently Joker pulled to the right, the TIE Advanced following her. Drake's A-Wing snapped on to its tail and seemed to stay glued there as he poured several shots into the Imperial craft's aft shields. For all their speed, maneuverability, and destructive power, the TIE Advanced had very little in the way of shields. The bright, which had been firing at Joker, abruptly stopped and streaked away, hotly pursued by Drake.

"Thanks, Five." Joker's voice was calm as she went after a new target.

"Anytime, Thirteen," Drake replied, his voice a little strained as he corkscrewed and rolled his fighter to stick with his prey. He thumbed the trigger intermittently - the TIE, no longer hunting a target of its own, was now far harder to hit. Drake's earlier volley, however, had done its shields significant damage.

"This is Three," Vyper's voice came over the comm. "One bright down."

At the first kill in the engagement, Drake felt his spirits lift considerably, and he curled his lip in a determined snarl, thumbing the concussion missile selector.

"Lead, this is Eleven - one more Imp down," Granite reported.

Drake pulled his flight stick into his stomach as the TIE Advanced shot into a climb, and he glanced down at his targeting display. The Imperial's shields were rapidly gaining strength as they recharged, and he had to stop that... he selected double fire for his concussion missiles, and then redirected energy from the lasers to

the engines. The A-Wing shot forward suddenly, and before the TIE pilot could compensate, Drake hit the trigger at twenty meters from his tail, sending the A-Wing into a dive at the same time. The dumb-fired missiles streaked straight into the aft section of the hapless Imperial fighter just as it began to turn. The TIE Advanced exploded spectacularly, scattering debris.

"Lead, this is Five," Drake said dutifully with a triumphant smile. "That's one more bright down." He glanced at his radar... the Whites were still outnumbered, but they hadn't lost anyone yet. *It's not over yet*, he told himself with a mirthless smile.

[On the bridge of the Imperial Star Destroyer *Providence*]

Captain Norvad Piett frowned as he sat in his command chair aboard the *Providence*. His second-in-command, Commander Jarrett, appeared at his side, a datapad in his hand. Piett didn't look up. "Your report, Commander?" he asked.

The Commander handed the datapad to him and straightened instinctively to give his report. "Sir, our tractor crews haven't found anything. It appears that the station was totally destroyed, and that no one escaped."

"Destroyed by what?"

"It appears that a barrage of proton torpedoes did most of the damage," Jarrett answered him. "However, we detected blast marks consistent with both starfighter cannons and turbolasers."

Piett nodded. *Probably a small Rebel taskforce, perhaps a squadron. Could it have been White Squadron?* His eyes narrowed. "Did you detect anything else?"

"Yes, sir. We've found some sublight drive emissions that appear to be only hours old."

Now Piett turned abruptly to face him. "Do we have any idea where they could have escaped to?" he snapped.

"Yes, sir - there's three systems near here," the Commander replied. "It's possible they went there."

It's possible - it's not much, but it's a start, the Captain thought. "Very well, Commander. Alert the High Command of the station's demise, then order the *Dagger of Truth* and *Angel of Fury* to investigate the first and third systems. We'll go to the second. If neither of them finds anything, they can regroup with us."

"Very good, sir," Jarrett nodded. He began to issue orders as Piett gripped his command chair's arms and scowled. *An entire platform...but why would the Rebels bother to commit an entire squadron to such a task as destroying a research station? There's bigger fish for them to fry. Unless...* Piett pursed his lips as his scowl deepened. *Unless they know something that I don't.* He resisted the urge to contact Grand Admiral Thrawn and request information. Such an action would likely achieve nothing except getting the Grand Admiral annoyed, and Piett understandably wished to avoid that.

"Helm," he said, turning slightly to the Lieutenant at the helm, "prepare to give me flank speed."

[Near the planet Tarsis II, location of the Emperor's Voice]

Drake allowed himself a smile. It looked like things were getting easier. White Squadron had so far managed to destroy a dozen or so of the TIE Advanced without the loss of a single ship, although several, including his own, were damaged. He checked his damage control report. The laser cannon system would be back on line in fifteen seconds. *Good*, he thought, *I hate long waits.*

"Whites, this is White Leader," Shok'wave announced over the comm suddenly. "Our companions are due right about...now." Even as she spoke, several transports appeared towards the edge of the system, several dozen clicks away and to their right, at about a forty five degree angle.

Drake smiled in relief. The transports didn't look like they were going to come anywhere near the fight, a fact that he was glad for. *Won't have to worry about them getting in the way, or getting blown up.* Some of the TIE Advanced immediately headed towards the new arrivals, but several B-Wings herded them back.

"Lead, this is Four," Iceman reported. "I've got what appear to be several Gunboats emerging from the planet's atmosphere."

"Acknowledged, Four," Shok'wave answered him. "Let's worry about these brights right now. Worry about the Gunboats only when you have to, or if they get dangerous."

"Affirmative, Lead."

Drake, his cannon system newly repaired, repeatedly stabbed the trigger and his twin laser cannons spat fire at an incoming TIE Advanced. The bright, its shields minimal before the attack, quickly began to break apart and then exploded. He risked a glance at his radar and saw the transports steadily heading for the planet. *Come on, you lumbering pigs!* he willed them. *Even a Y-Wing's faster than you guys are - move it!*

"At least there doesn't appear to be any Corvettes here," Zeppelin remarked cheerfully over the comm. "If there were, they surely would've been launched by now. Apparently, this place is so secret and far out of the way that the Empire doesn't have any capital ships around."

"That isn't entirely true," Foxfire's voice came tightly over the radio. "Look at the transports!"

Drake's computer shrilled a warning at him as his head snapped around to look at the faint, distant shapes of the transports. In a split second, an Imperial Star Destroyer appeared almost directly above them. His hands had already unconsciously swung his A-Wing on an intercept course as he swore under his breath and redirected all his energy to his engines. A moment later, the Star Destroyer opened up with every weapon it had, and within half a minute, all traces of the transports were gone. On the comm there was nothing but stunned silence.

"Force the TIEs closer to the atmosphere!" Shok'wave ordered. As she spoke, all of White Squadron's fighters turned toward the planet and headed for it at full throttle. The TIE Advanced and Gunboat wings roared behind them.

"This....better...." Shok'wave said over the crackling comm as they got closer to the atmosphere, her voice laced with static. "Commun....disrupted....can't warn....Destroyer."

Drake frowned. *Warn the Star Destroyer about what?*

As if in answer to his question, the Frigate *Joan d'Arc*, its hull gleaming proudly, suddenly sailed in from hyperspace and took position close to the planet...on the opposite side to the Star Destroyer, Drake noticed. *So that's what Shok'wave meant.* A second later a second ship appeared, a Rebel Alliance Corvette. Drake centered the ship in his reticle and hit the button to target it. The computer identified it as the *Faithful*. Drake smiled. "Hopefully this will even things up a little bit," he murmured.

Shok'wave dodged a stray burst of laser fire as she spoke with the Captain aboard the *Joan d'Arc*. "Captain, there's an Impstar Deuce here," she informed him without preamble.

"I know," the Captain's voice came back, unmuffled now that Shok'wave had edged out of the atmosphere and the twisting melee between the Whites and the Imperials. She glanced obliquely behind her at the Imperial Star Destroyer in the distance, which was slowly turning to face the planet.

"How do *you* know that, sir?" she asked him bluntly, sounding a little distracted.

"I've got Sutherland's R2 unit plugged into my tactical and communication systems," the Captain replied. "It not only increased our sensor capability, but, when we came out of hyperspace just outside this system before our final quick jump in, it pulled a data feed from his A-Wing. That happened just a little while before the Imperials showed up. We saw the transports go down, and we managed to contact High Command. I've got new orders for you."

"Yes, sir?"

"Eight of your people will go down onto the planet and attempt to destroy that facility by whatever means they can find."

"**What?!**" Shok'wave asked incredulously.

"You heard me," the Captain continued firmly, overlooking the breach of respect. "You did have all your fighters stocked with some small explosive charges, didn't you?"

"Well, yes..." Shok'wave admitted, a little sheepishly. "But I really included those in case anyone got captured....hopefully they could do a little damage if they did."

"Well, the Imperials are bound to have an armory down there," the Captain said reasonably. "I'd imagine the place will be full of stormtroopers, and they like to have a lot of weapons on hand. All you have to do is find them."

As *easy as that*. "Yes, sir," Shok'wave replied, almost successful in her attempts to keep the sarcasm out of her voice.

"Commander, this is important. We're here, and if we go, or don't destroy this complex entirely, the Empire will move it or rebuild it, and we'll have gone through this for nothing. Your squadron might be our only hope. Trained for this sort of combat or not, I know they're all good shots and we've been ordered to go. Now, the remaining ships up here had better put as many proton torpedoes into that Star Destroyer as possible before it gets within range. Otherwise, the *Joan d'Arc* is a sitting duck. Even with the *Faithful*, I can't hope to destroy it otherwise. Understood?"

"Affirmative, sir. I'll transmit the planetary brief to eight of the pilots now."

"Good. They'd better make it quick. That Star Destroyer might take its time, but it *will* reach us."

[On the bridge of the Star Destroyer *Providence*]

Captain Piett had not allowed himself a smile. Despite the quick destruction of the Rebel transports by the *Providence*, he sensed that there was something drastically wrong here. He frowned slightly.

"What was in those transports?"

"We don't know, sir," Commander Jarrett said as he materialised at Piett's elbow. "We haven't found any cargo debris, though. It's possible they were converted gunships."

It's possible, Piett repeated irritably to himself. "I need facts, Commander," he told his second-in-command curtly. "Not possibilites."

The other's expression remained neutral, but his eyes seemed to darken momentarily. "Yes, sir," he said stonily. Captain Piett nodded.

"Tell me, Commander, why do you think that the Rebels would convert transports to gunships, and then deploy them out *here*, near the edge of the system? And, more importantly," he continued as his frown deepened, "what are the Rebels doing here at all? What is there of value in this system? It only has one planet, relatively low in natural resources, I believe."

"That's correct, sir."

"Then why are they here?" Piett repeated, more to himself than anyone else. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and looked up at Jarrett. "Any idea who those Rebels are?"

"Yes, sir," Commander Jarrett answered, his voice a little higher than usual with excitement. "We've positively identified them as White Squadron." Piett raised an eyebrow, but did not smile as Jarrett did.

"Very good. We'll move to intercept once we've completed our turn. Now, another question, Commander. Where did those TIE Advanced fighters come from?" At this, the Commander shook his head slightly.

"That's unknown, sir. We can't ask them because of the spatial interference caused by the planet's atmosphere. It renders communications and sensors useless." Piett glanced out the window sharply.

"So, it would be easy to hide something on that planet," he stated. Jarrett hesitated a second, then nodded.

"Yes, sir."

"Or behind it," the Captain added. Again an affirmative response.

"Recall the *Angel of Fury* and the *Dagger of Truth* to our position at maximum speed," he ordered.

"Yes, sir, but the *Angel of Fury* is still in hyperspace....the system she is travelling to is further out than ours and the one the *Dagger of Truth* is investigating," Jarrett informed him.

"Very well, the *Dagger of Truth* will have to do then," Piett conceded. He turned once more as Jarrett moved to comply. "Helm, once you've brought us around, accelerate to maximum sublight speed," he said, then took a deep breath. "Communications, contact Grand Admiral Thrawn."

[In the upper atmosphere of the planet Tarsis II]

Drake concentrated on the board in front of him as his A-Wing descended through the planet's atmosphere, its hull glowing slightly with the heat. Outside the cockpit, the sky was black apart from the distant stars.

"Okay, Commando Two, level out now," Vyper ordered, his voice clear now that the area of atmospheric disturbance had been cleared. "I'm scanning for the installation...there it is! Plot course for three one zero, zero mark."

"Commando One, follow Three's order," Foxfire added. The mixed group of A- and B-Wings swung around in the darkness.

[In space, near the planet Tarsis II]

"Captain, we can't disengage now or those TIEs will warn the ISD about you and the *Faithful*," Shok'wave said, exasperated. The voice that answered her on the comm was firm.

"Commander, if that Imperial captain is any good at all - and I'm assuming he is, since he's managed to get command of an *Imperial*-class ship at a time when they're in short supply - if he's any good at all, he'll have realized, or at least suspected, we're here anyway. Now, disengage and begin your torpedo runs. Otherwise, we won't be here much longer. That's an order, Commander."

"Yes, sir." Shok'wave switched frequencies and addressed White Squadron. "Whites, we're making our runs on the ISD now. B-Wings, head straight for the destroyer... A-Wings, keep giving us cover. I expect that once we relax our guard on them, those brights are going to get very nasty."

Various pilots acknowledged the order and the B-Wings suddenly broke from the fight, heading towards the incoming Star Destroyer at top speed. The TIE Advanced attempted to follow, but the A-Wings kept them in a tight, twisting circle.

"Keep them occupied," Moose advised. "Let the Gunboats get away. They won't catch our B-Wings at full speed anyway."

[On final approach to the Emperor's Voice complex]

"I'm going for the power station," Ibero informed them on the comm. For this mission he was flying in a B-Wing, given his experience in a Y-Wing in the past. The B-Wing's proton torpedoes would probably be needed to effectively punch through the armored power station's outer walls to its core.

Drake saw the four thrusters glowing off his starboard side rapidly move forward and diminish in size. It had been arranged, after some argument, to destroy the installation's power station, and then land to try and infiltrate the Empire's facility. Some had argued in favor of simply destroying it in an air strike, but others - most notably Psycho, Foxfire, Vyper and Drake himself - had dismissed such an idea.

"What we're really looking for is most likely underground," Vyper had reminded them, "and also, with an air strike, we don't know if we hit *all* of the target." In the end, Foxfire and Vyper had ended the argument, as, when the decision needed to be made, they were in charge.

There was a brilliant flash and explosion ahead as a pillar of fire leapt into the night sky.

"Well, now they know we're here," Drake muttered to himself. Vyper heard the comment over the comm.

"Hopefully, they'll assume it's an air strike, so they'll be busy getting to anti-ship defences," he said. "Ibero will keep hassling them for a little while. We're landing now - there's a series of clearings in the rainforest just below us."

Less than a minute later the seven craft had all touched down, scattered in their own small clearings. Drake powered down his engines, but left his systems on low power. He'd probably need to get out of here quickly, and if he did, he wasn't going to go from a totally cold start. He checked his blaster in its thigh holster, then took off his flight gloves and helmet and left them on his cockpit board, before opening the hatch behind him and grabbing the small thermal detonators stowed in there. Not enough to blow the entire facility, he knew, but they could help. Popping the cockpit hatch, he let the warm, humid night air wash over him for only a few seconds before he jumped nimbly to the ground and ran towards the next clearing to his left.

There were only two stormtroopers stationed outside the small base entrance, Vyper noticed with a grim smile. "Good, looks like Ibero has them fooled so far," he whispered.

"It won't last, though," Foxfire reminded him.

"Even the Imps aren't stupid enough not to realize that it's only *one* fighter doing all this damage," Drake added. "We'd better drop them both, first shot and simultaneously, or there could be trouble."

Vyper nodded almost imperceptibly, absently patting the FE-MEK45 Imperial Special Forces assault blaster he had already drawn. "Yes, Foxfire and I will be the shooters for this one," he said quietly, as he lifted the blaster in front of him. To his right, Drake looked away quickly as he saw Foxfire's blond hair swishing in the darkness as she did the same.

A second later, Vyper whispered, "Now," and two red laser bolts streaked angrily through the darkness. The two stormtroopers, caught in the neck and head by the blasts, both went down. Vyper waved to the others behind him. "Let's move."

[Making a strike run against the Star Destroyer *Providence*]

Moose juked his B-Wing slightly and watched the green laser bolt sizzle by as its three companions impacted on his reinforced rear shields. The steady beep of his torpedo acquiring lock continued to sound through his cockpit as he held his ship steady towards the massive form of the Star Destroyer ahead of him. He glanced down at the computer as it finally identified the enemy vessel. "*Providence*," he murmured to himself. "I'll remember your name."

The computer whined its acquisition of a target lock and Moose pulled the trigger.

"Strike Two, launch now," Moose ordered, and watched as over a dozen torpedoes appeared around him.

"Peel off before we get too close and prepare for the next run."

[On board the *Providence*]

Captain Piett gripped his chair as the ship shuddered under the impact of the torpedoes. "Status," he snapped.

"Shields still over fifty percent, sir," his weapons officer reported. "They're going to need a lot more torpedoes than that to hurt us."

Although a Nebulon-B Frigate would also do, Piett thought grimly. "ETA for the *Dagger of Truth*?"

"Ten minutes, sir," Commander Jarrett replied.

Piett glanced at the planet. *I need to know what's down there...and that Frigate's captain around the other side is no fool...he's going to wait for me to come to him, while I get damaged by his starfighters along the way.* Captain Piett nodded.

"Very well. I'm not waiting any longer to preserve their safety...begin launching the TIE squadrons. Bombers have orders to destroy that Frigate. How many TIE Advanced are left out there?"

"Not many, sir...about four."

"Order them to assist as well, and reinforce our shields with power from the lower decks, including life support. Evacuate those decks."

"Yes, sir," replied Jarrett, and he began barking orders.

[On the bridge of the Nebulon-B Frigate *Joan d'Arc*]

"Sir!" At the urgent call the Captain turned.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Sir, we've just received a transmission from one of our fighters... the *Providence* is launching TIEs, and the Bombers appear to heading in our direction." The Captain nodded briefly, then rapped out orders rapidly.

"Very well. Inform any A-Wings out there to attempt to destroy the Bombers before they can get past. The B-Wings had better keep concentrating on the *Providence*. According to these data feeds, her Captain has managed to maintain his speed *and* reinforce his shields. He's probably shut off power to some of his ship... Position us so that we'll block the Bombers' line of attack towards the *Faithful*." *

"Sir?" the Lieutenant swiveled slightly in his chair and the Captain continued, a little irritably.

"Yes, Lieutenant, that's what I said. The *Faithful* can take six torpedoes before it goes down - we can take quite a few more than that. Now, helm, get us in front of that Corvette. If the TIEs get in close, the *Faithful* can help us out."

"Sir." The bridge crew complied. The Captain glanced down at the squat R2 unit next to him.

"Keep those data feeds from the oblique angle fighters coming in," he said. The 'droid whistled something back that sounded indignant to the captain. The latter did his best to smile down graciously at the little R2's outburst. "You're doing well," he said encouragingly. "It's great to have you aboard." Feeling awkward at working with a 'droid, he quickly turned and strode over to the tactical officer's post.

"Lieutenant, what's the status of the NX-12 intell data?" he asked in a low voice, bending over to glance at the young woman's screen. She didn't look away from the screen as she answered, but inclined her head slightly towards the captain.

"It's still secure, sir. I've had it moved to a better protected cargo bay."

"Good. I don't want to lose that information to a cargo bay breach," the Captain nodded grimly. The NX-12 was a complete set of intelligence data that the *Joan d'Arc* and White Squadron had been gathering during their time on the Outer Rim. It was thought that the data would be used for an Alliance offensive to disrupt Imperial presence severely on the Rim. The data represented a lot of time, effort and resources expended by White Squadron and the *Joan d'Arc*, and the Captain fully intended to protect it to take it back in one piece.

[Inside the Emperor's Voice facility]

The inside of the complex was a drab grey, similar to holos that Drake had seen of the interior of Star Destroyers. It was dark, too, the only illumination coming from thin emergency strip lights mounted in the walls.

"Apparently the Empire's got another power source stashed away somewhere," Drake observed in a hoarse whisper.

Vyper's voice came softly beside him. "Of course - you didn't think they'd just have one above ground power station to handle this place, did you? They've probably got a secondary power generator further underground...no doubt they'll have main power back in a few minutes. We'd better go and try to find the armory while we're still hard to spot."

Drake winced as he looked down at his bright orange flight suit. *Not exactly what I'd call "hard to spot", in any light*, he thought to himself wryly.

"Psycho, you've probably got as good an idea as I have about where their armory is," Vyper continued quietly. "Got any ideas?" The two men conversed with their backs turned and Drake and the others waited nervously until they turned around. Silently Vyper motioned the group forward and they set off down the corridor.

[The twisting melee in space near Tarsis II]

"T-one, watch it! You've got a squint on your tail!" Joker warned. Inside his cockpit, Trojan craned his neck and looked behind him as the TIE Interceptor swung behind him and started firing.

"I see him, Thirteen," Trojan answered her tightly as he violently jerked his A-Wing from side to side. "I see him, but I can't shake him."

"Hold on, I'm coming," Joker assured him. Ahead of him, Trojan could make out the tiny form of an A-Wing which swung around and headed directly for him. It rapidly grew larger, then swerved past him to his left at the last moment. Trojan dived as he heard laser blasts behind him and the TIE Interceptor disappeared from his radar.

"Thanks for the assist, Thirteen," Trojan thanked her.

"Not a problem, T-one," Joker replied. She redirected more energy to her engines and armed her concussion missiles as she streaked toward a pair of TIE Bombers nearly within torpedo range of the *Joan d'Arc*. The A-Wing roared to within 20 meters and its concussion missile launch tubes glowed briefly as two missiles launched in rapid succession. The slow Bombers, having no time to swerve, took direct hits from the dumb fired blasts. One exploded; the other's twin hull snapped in half before spinning into space.

Trojan punched the button to select the nearest enemy starfighter, and an image of a TIE Advanced

appeared on his screen. *I'm not stopping until I've got you*, he said to himself, setting his lips in a hard line.

[On the bridge of the *Joan d'Arc*]

"How long until the *Providence* is in position?" the Captain impatiently directed the question at Ledner.

The 'droid tooted a reply, and the communications officer turned. "Twenty minutes, sir," he answered.

The Captain nodded. "Very well. Have any of those Bombers got through our defensive screen?"

"Not yet, sir...wait, it looks like two have gotten through...confirmed. They're launching torpedoes." The Captain sighed briefly.

"Dispatch White Fourteen to destroy them," he ordered. A few seconds later the *Joan d'Arc* trembled slightly under their feet as four proton torpedoes slammed into her hull. "What's the status of the Strike groups?" the Captain asked.

"They're making their second run now, sir," the comm. officer reported.

[Making a strike run on the *Providence*]

Shok'wave shunted energy from lasers to shields as she held her course directly at the Star Destroyer ahead of her. "Strike One, launch now," she ordered as she triggered her own torpedoes. She watched with satisfaction as the multiple points of blue light appeared in space around her. Her smile changed quickly to a frown of surprise as her on-board computer shrieked a warning at her.

"Lead, we've got an Imperial Frigate coming out of hyperspace!" Without bothering to acknowledge the comment, Shok'wave quickly asked, "*Joan d'Arc*, we've got an Imperial Frigate coming in here. You seen it yet?"

"Affirmative, White Leader," came the reply. "It's closer than the *Providence*, so you and Strike Two are going to intercept it first."

"As ordered, *Joan d'Arc*," Shok'wave acknowledged. "Strikes, engage that Frigate - use all the torpedoes you've got, we'll make two attack runs."

The Frigate wasn't as strong as the Star Destroyer, but it still had guns. Shok'wave hoped to cripple or destroy it, not wanting to leave the *Joan d'Arc* to face it undamaged. *Besides, if that ISD does get too close, the **Joan** should be able to outrun it*, she mused. *I hope.*

[Inside the Emperor's Voice complex]

Drake nervously drew his blaster, hefting it in his hand once. He'd used this thing a lot before, he reflected, but not against Imperials.

More's the pity - it was stormtroopers that killed Mum and Dad, not TIE pilots, he thought grimly to himself. *But I'm a pilot, not a soldier. I'll do my best to avenge their deaths and prevent new ones - in my own way.* He flicked the safety off his blaster and eased into the half-stoop he used when fighting. The group of White Squadron pilots had spread itself out into a long zigzagged single file. Psycho and Vyper were at the front, and orders were passed down the line by hand signal. Ahead of him, Foxfire waved a hand forward, and Drake set off, waving his own hand as he did so.

The group took a series of alternating turns and headed down several corridors, then stopped. Drake craned his head around, trying to look down the corridor to see the reason for the delay. Soon Foxfire edged back to

where he was. "We're splitting into two groups," she whispered. "You, Vyper and myself will be one, and Psycho will lead everyone else in the other." Drake nodded and moved to pass the message down the line.

"We've found what looks like a deserted TIE pilot ready room," Vyper informed Foxfire and Drake a minute later. "Psycho and the others have gone to look for the armory proper...for now, we'll see if we can blend in with the locals." The others nodded their agreement. They slipped quietly to the end of the long corridor where they'd waited, and Vyper listened at the door. "Let's go," he hissed. "But stay sharp." With that, they burst through the door, blasters raised - to find an empty room, with four black Imperial flight suits hanging on the wall.

"I'm not surprised there's no one here," Drake said dryly.

"They're all up there fighting our people." Vyper nodded, and without any further comment the three climbed into the best fitting suit they could find.

"At least this isn't stormtrooper armor," Drake commented, and grinned tightly. "I don't have the bulk for stormie outfits." Foxfire managed a smile and was about to retort, but Vyper shook his head.

"Don't be too glad," he cautioned. "The Imps will no doubt be cautious of TIE pilots waltzing around the base, believe me. Hopefully Psycho's crowd can bag themselves some stormtrooper suits, though. Let's go, we'll have to leave our flight suits here - it'll feel funny flying in one of these suits again," he finished.

[On board the Star Destroyer *Providence*]

Captain Piett's face muscles remained tight, but the rest of his body appeared unnaturally calm.

"Their status?" he asked. The communications officer turned.

"The *Dagger of Truth* reports that their shields are decreasing... some of our TIE Bombers are getting through their Frigate's defensive screen.... which is actually smaller than it should be, sir." Piett turned to face the young man.

"Explain, Lieutenant," he ordered. The man shifted nervously.

"Sir...it appears that the screen is composed of A-Wings," he said slowly at first, but then picking up speed. "Only there's less A-Wings there than there should be. Some seem to have just vanished. The B-Wings, too."

"They weren't destroyed?"

"No, sir." Piett glowered and resisted the urge to pound his command chair. *So, they must be on the planet*, he thought angrily. *What in the Empire is down there?* He nodded.

"Order the *Dagger of Truth* to approach the Alliance Frigate behind the planet," he said. "Their speed will be such that we arrive in range at the same time." We have them trapped, Captain Piett thought with a small smile of satisfaction. *They either run, leaving their people, and whatever it is they're after, down on the planet, or they come out and try to attack us...that would be suicidal. No, they'll wait for us. They might put up a fight, but, even damaged, the Providence and the Dagger of Truth combined will be more than enough for them.* Piett's reflection was interrupted by the voice of his comm. officer.

"Sir, I've still had no luck contacting Grand Admiral Thrawn," he reported. "The spatial interference, combined with the damage to our communications relays and the distances involved..." Piett cut him off with a curt hand.

"Inform Colonel Yuta that I want three stormtrooper squads prepped for an investigation of the planet," he ordered. "We'll launch the transports when we're closer to the planet." *And then, I'm going to find out what's down there*, he finished to himself.

[On board the Alliance Frigate *Joan d'Arc*]

"Captain, the Imperial Frigate is beginning to move," the Executive Officer of the *Joan d'Arc* reported as Ledner began beeping excitedly. "She's not going very fast, though." The Captain nodded.

"Naturally. They hope to flank us...by attacking us simultaneously with the Star Destroyer *and* the Frigate, they'll destroy us that much quicker, minimizing the threat to their own ships," he remarked.

"Inform Strike groups of a change in orders. Concentrate all fire on the starboard side of that Star Destroyer," the Captain ordered.

"Aye, sir," the communications officer acknowledged.

[On strike approach to the Imperial Frigate *Dagger of Truth*]

"Strikes, abort the second Frigate run!" Shok'wave ordered. "New orders - we're concentrating everything on the starboard side of the *Providence*."

Inside his cockpit, Moose shrugged slightly and brought his B-Wing around in a wide, slow arc. The battle was taking its physical toll on him, he knew - and who knew what it must be doing to the others. *Well*, he thought grimly, *one way or another it'll be over soon, anyway. It seems the Captain has something in mind, though*. The thought gave him hope as he fired at a Gunboat zipping in front of him. It was only then that he realized why he was so tired...evading Gunboats *and* trying to attack capital ships was not at all easy. Fighting the weariness and sitting up straight, Moose shunted energy to his shields and pointed his nose directly at the massive Star Destroyer's starboard side.

[Deep inside the Emperor's Voice facility]

The turbolift doors eased open, and Foxfire, Vyper and Drake started down the corridor. At the end, four stormtroopers ran past, carrying their rifles at high port.

"Uh-oh," Vyper murmured. "It appears they've discovered our deception. I think we'll find main power restored shortly."

"Let's follow those stormies," Foxfire suggested. "See if they lead us to anything important." Vyper nodded.

"We'll try to circle them from three directions...the corridors around here appear to be in a lattice of connecting sections," he whispered. "Let's go...quickly."

Drake blinked sweat out of his eyes as he crept stealthily forward. Having circled around and come towards the position where the stormtroopers were standing, he was now coming in from the north. He caught a flash of white as he got closer...*Steady*, he told himself. Almost immediately the stormtrooper glanced sharply in his direction.

Drake stepped sideways and fired.

The shot took the trooper squarely in the chest, burning through the armor and dropping him in a heap on the floor. At that instant there were several laser blasts, and Drake felt something sting his cheek as the other two visible stormtroopers went down - one had been in the process of reaching for an alarm button. Drake glanced with interest at the wall beside him where a gouge had been ripped by a laser bolt. He felt his cheek, and his glove came away wet with blood. *Wait a minute....where's that other stormtroo...* A flash of white obscured Drake's vision as an arm grabbed his neck in a vice-like grip, and began to squeeze. Choking and gasping, Drake fumbled with his blaster...

And stopped as, after a sickening thud, the stormtrooper hit the ground behind him. Foxfire stepped up from behind him, brandishing her pink crowbar. She smiled and Drake wheezed and nodded his silent thanks.

Vyper slid the card from the stormtrooper's uniform into the slot and the door snapped open silently. The three pilots grinned.

"Looks like we found the armory," Foxfire noted with satisfaction. Vyper nodded and set to work, grabbing various explosive charges, and motioned for the others to do the same. After they'd finished, Drake holstered his blaster and took a blaster carbine off the rack.

"Ahh, better," he said, still a little breathless from his ordeal with the stormtrooper. Foxfire took one as well, but Vyper shook his head and patted his assault blaster.

"Sentimental value," he said with a sheepish grin.

"Let's go and plant these charges," Foxfire said.

Drake reloaded a fresh energy clip into his carbine and leaped into the corridor, crouching and strobing it with blaster fire, as Vyper and Foxfire opened up beside him. Smoke filled the corridor from holes gouged in the walls just as the main lights came back on, almost blinding the White Squadron pilots.

"Go!" yelled Vyper, and they set off at a run, almost colliding with a quartet of stormtroopers around the corner. Drake ducked instinctively, dropping the empty carbine and reaching for his blaster-

"Wait, it's *us*," Granite's unmistakable Caldanian brogue rumbled from one of the helmets. Vyper grinned.

"Great, we've got charges-"

"We've got a map-" Psycho interrupted him, and despite the seriousness of the situation, everyone laughed a little.

"Sounds like a good combination," Vyper said. "Let's work out where to put these charges so we can get out of here."

[On the bridge of the *Joan d'Arc*]

"Sir, White Leader reports they've used all their torpedoes," the communications officer informed the Captain, who acknowledged him with a brief nod. "When will they be in range?"

"Not long...perhaps five or ten minutes, sir," the man replied.

"Very well. Recall the B-Wing strike groups to our position - hopefully the Gunboats will follow them and get closer so we can take care of them before their bigger counterparts arrive."

Suddenly, every White Squadron fighter in the system broke off whatever it was doing and streaked towards the *Joan d'Arc*.

All except one.

On the other side of the planet, shielded from communications by spatial interference, Trojan's A-Wing continued to trail the elusive TIE Advanced that continued to roll, juke and turn just out of reach.

[A corridor below ground level in the Emperor's Voice complex]

Drake snapped off several shots, and heard the clatter of an armored body hitting the floor. *Amazing*, he

thought with a grim smile, *that I haven't used all my luck yet. I must be getting dangerously close.*

At that moment, the lights flashed blood red and an alarm began to wail.

Drake stepped resolutely into the corridor, ran forward, grabbed the dead trooper's ID card, and swiped it through the slot.

Nothing happened.

Frowning, Drake caught sight of the glowing panel set into an alcove beside the slot. Clumsily, he hauled the trooper into a sitting position, pulled off his glove, and pressed the hand to the slot. The door slid open, and for the first time Drake noticed how oppressively heavy the air in the complex was. He took a breath, and stepped into the room.

Inside, at the center of the room, stood a cylindrical pillar, about a meter long and a foot in diameter. Its surface gleamed, except in the middle where a small transparisteel window was set. From inside came a harsh blue glow. Drake gulped and glanced around.

"The Emperor's Voice," he breathed, his gaze returning to the mesmerizing object of power that lay before him. Shaking himself, Drake's brow furrowed in concentration. Shaking his head to clear it of a sudden drowsiness, he pulled the small shaped charges from his "borrowed" utility belt and began to set them around the small room, adding his own supply of thermal detonators.

Drake hurried out into the corridor, hoping that the others had all set their charges too...and froze. *Something's not right here*, he said to himself, the back of his neck prickling with an unpleasant sensation. Then, from behind him, came a sound he'd heard in only a dozen or so holos and had never thought to hear in real life.

The unmistakable *snap-hiss* of a lightsaber.

Drake whirled, his blaster flashing into his hand as he did so - but the weapon flew uselessly from his grip and clattered to the floor beside the dark figure facing him, standing outside the door to the Emperor's Voice chamber. Drake let his hands drop to his sides.

"Who are you?" he demanded of the cloaked figure. The other took a step forward, the violet blade of his lightsaber humming as he moved.

"I am the Emperor's Mouth," he grated. "I guard the Emperor's Voice." Drake, consciously aware of his predicament, decided to try and buy time. *Time for what? No matter - just try to live as long as you can*, he thought quickly. He sneered.

"On the contrary," he began, his voice arrogant. "*You* are nothing. It is the Emperor's Voice that guards *you*."

"What?!" the dark figure hissed.

"Without it, your power is limited," Drake said simply, as if explaining something to a child. "You are certainly no man of power by yourself."

"I am a Jedi-" the other began. Drake snorted.

"You are nothing of the sort!" he snapped. "The only Jedi living is Luke Skywalker. The others have all been destroyed. A Jedi must be proclaimed by his peers, or by a Jedi Master. If that had happened to you, the galaxy would know. Also, if you *were* a Jedi, then you would already have taken actions that would make you well known - that is the nature of the Jedi's role. You are unknown, and, therefore, you are no Jedi." The other growled, and Drake felt the icy hands of fear clawing at his stomach. "You-" he started again, but now the Emperor's Mouth cut him off.

"I am a Jedi," he snarled menacingly. "With my help, the Emperor's Voice has now, finally, started to be heard again. Your pathetic reasoning is irrelevant when set against true power." The cloaked figure stepped forward, stepping towards Drake, and the humming lightsaber came up slightly.

"Soon, your Rebellion will be no more," the Emperor's Mouth said smugly. "After I kill you, I'll disable those charges that you set-"

Drake drew himself up to his full height.

"Then, display your courage and strike down an unarmed man," he growled sardonically. The other inclined his head a fraction.

"Very well." He stepped forward, raising the lightsaber, and Drake prepared for the death blow.

Then, in an instant, everything happened at once. The Emperor's Mouth raised his arms with blinding speed, the violet blade came humming down through the air-

And swung wildly away as a blaster shot caught him in the arm. The Dark Jedi snarled in pain, and as he turned to face the new threat, Drake was pushed by an invisible hand onto the floor.

Vyper stepped out from around the corner, snapping off several shots. This time, however, the Emperor's Mouth was ready, and he deflected the bolts into the walls, gouging out chunks there. However, Drake noticed with surprise, this time, he wasn't pulling the blaster away. *Isn't or can't?* Drake frowned. The rate of fire possessed by Vyper's assault blaster was far superior to most...perhaps the Dark Jedi couldn't concentrate long enough to actually take the blaster. Drake quickly searched and looked around him for a way to help Vyper. His eyes travelled along the plain, smooth, walls-

And came to rest on the blaster that lay on the floor.

Drake twitched, but he couldn't go after the blaster - it was past the Dark Jedi, on the other side of the T-junction where Vyper stood. Drake glared at the corner, then blinked in surprise as he saw the tip of a crowbar sticking out from behind it.

Foxfire! Kick that blaster over here! Drake urged her silently.

For a second, nothing happened, as the resonating hum of the lightsaber continued to be punctuated by the sharp, short laser blasts. Suddenly, Foxfire's head appeared around the corner, and she frowned slightly as she took in the situation at a glance. As the lightsaber again deflected a bolt, her foot flicked out from behind the corner, giving a mighty kick that sent the blaster sliding along the floor. Drake dived for it, and got up into a crouch just as the Emperor's Mouth turned his head slightly towards him.

Drake fired three times before the blaster was again thrown from his hand by an invisible force.

The Emperor's Mouth stepped backwards, away from Vyper and Drake, and turned, the violet lightsaber humming and whining as it deftly parried and deflected all three shots, sending them to gouge holes in the walls, and Vyper's shots as well. The latter had hesitated slightly, distracted by Foxfire's intervention, and this, Drake realized, with a sinking feeling in his stomach, was just what the Emperor's Mouth needed. Even as he deflected the shots, though, the Dark Jedi dimly realized that he was no longer paying attention to the other corner of the corridor's T-junction, and that he had probably just made the last mistake of his life.

Even as Vyper's blaster flew from his hand, there were two quick steps followed by a loud thud, and the black form crumpled to the ground. Foxfire straightened up and put away her crowbar.

"I think we'd better go, you two," she said to Drake and Vyper. "Those charges will be going off at any minute." They nodded, grabbed their blasters, and set off at a run.

[Outside the Emperor's Voice complex]

Vyper, Foxfire and Drake ran towards the clearings where they'd landed in their fighters. "Thirty seconds to detonation!" Vyper yelled. "Let's get out of here!" There was no need...the Whites were already running for their ships.

The mixed group of eight Rebel starfighters raced just above the treetops that could now dimly be perceived in the new planetary dawn. Foxfire glanced behind her, just in time to see an enormous column of fire shoot skyward where the Emperor's Voice complex had been.

"Looks like the Emperor's Voice has been silenced," she said grimly.

[On the bridge of the Nebulon-B Frigate *Joan d'Arc*]

"Captain, the *Providence* and the Frigate *Dagger of Truth* are nearly in range." The captain of the *Joan d'Arc* nodded.

"Very well," he said. "Power up sublight engines...ready for flank speed." The navigator nodded and moved to comply. The Captain shot the tactical officer a quick look, then turned as a beep sounded.

"Sir, the White Commando groups are returning from the planet!" the communications officer reported excitedly. The Captain turned and was about to reply when Ledner suddenly squealed.

"What?" the Captain snapped. The communications officer turned, his face now white and his voice subdued.

"The Imperials are in range, sir."

"Acknowledged. Navigation, set bearing zero three zero, mark four five," the Captain ordered. "Go!"

[Just outside the atmosphere of Tarsis II]

Drake's flight group suddenly boiled into the raging dogfight near the *Joan d'Arc*, and for a moment he fired at a Gunboat before watching proudly as the battered Frigate suddenly surged forward and upward toward the arc of the planet. Guiding his A-Wing to follow, Drake came over the rim of the planet quickly and snarled. Sitting in front of him was the massive Star Destroyer, which was starting to roll onto its side, and the Imperial Frigate.

"Apparently we have more company," he noted with a scowl.

"Commando groups, this is Two," Foxfire's voice came quickly. "All B-Wings torpedo that Frigate." There were several acknowledgements as several B-Wings headed towards the Frigate. A few seconds later, a volley of torpedoes streaked towards the Imperial ship.

[On board the Imperial Star Destroyer *Providence*]

Captain Norvad Piett looked irritably at the glowing blue pinpoints off his starboard bow.

"New ships!" his tactical officer informed him. "Eight ships - A-Wings and B-Wings."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Piett said dryly. "I-" his voice trailed off as a Frigate came racing over the rim of the planet, with a Corvette close behind.

"Here he is, and he has unexpected company," Piett observed thoughtfully. "Increase roll rate," he snapped. "I don't want them taking our starboard side." And he glanced down at the darkened section on the right of his Star Destroyer in the tactical display.

[Just above the planetary crest of Tarsis II]

Drake fired his last two concussion missiles at the Gunboat in front of him and peeled off as the slower craft exploded. Pausing for a moment, he glanced at the *Joan d'Arc* as it leaped forward, ignoring the fire from the Imperial Frigate that mostly shot too far to the aft. Drake smiled thinly. *That's it, Joan, go for it! Apparently, the Empire's gunners aren't what they used to be...* He chuckled quietly in his cockpit.

White Squadron's mother ship slowed as it came up beside the *Providence*, with the Corellian Corvette *Faithful* on the other side. The Imperial Frigate *Dagger of Truth* could no longer fire at the Rebel ships, as they were blocked by the massive Star Destroyer. The Frigate rocked slightly as the last of White Squadron's torpedoes slammed into its hull, then, slowly, it began to move away, heading for the other side of the planet.

Meanwhile, red and green turbolaser bolts flashed incessantly between the huge Star Destroyer and the much smaller Alliance Frigate. Drake smiled in satisfaction as he saw several explosions on the Star Destroyer's still slightly exposed starboard side. *Looks like their shields there are down*, he thought. However, the satisfaction was short lived as the *Joan d'Arc's* battered shields began to collapse, and the number of red turbolaser bolts was far lower than the number of green ones. Drake started as an Assault Gunboat streaked in front of him, and he smiled as he pulled his A-Wing over to follow. *I've been watching the big ships long enough...I'm starting to let *Gunboats* surprise me!*, he thought to himself.

At that moment, Shok'wave's anxious voice came over the comm.

"I've just detected a shuttle leaving the planet, over on the far side! Whites, we have to destroy that shuttle! It must have the other set of EV data aboard!"

Drake glanced around helplessly as several A-Wings broke off and began to race back toward the planet, heading for the right hand side where the shuttle was just visible. *Lucky it didn't come out around the back, or we wouldn't have detected it all*, Drake mused. He punched up a threat display on his computer as he targeted the shuttle, and shook his head. *It's just too far. They won't make it before the shuttle makes the jump into hyperspace. The mission was all for nothing!* He glowered and pounded his hand with a fist.

[Around the far side of the planet Tarsis II]

Trojan's A-Wing shot outward from the planet's outer atmosphere as the TIE Advanced appeared from nowhere, bearing down at him. He was just in time to hear Shok'wave's message, and he glanced off to his left, jumping involuntarily. The shuttle was only a few hundred meters away.

"Acknowledged, Lead," he said tightly, ducking to avoid the TIE Advanced, which soared above him. "T-one has the lamb." Shok'wave couldn't hide her surprise.

"T-one, why aren't you over here with us?" she demanded.

"Uhh, I haven't received any orders to that effect, Lead," Trojan replied truthfully. Shok'wave's voice came back, calm.

"Go get him, T-one," she said quietly. "May the Force be with you."

Trojan nodded and banked toward the shuttle, activating his threat display. *The shuttle is going to hyperspace in thirty seconds, and, judging by these energy readings from the sensors, it has something very powerful on board*, he thought, dropping behind the shuttle neatly and cutting his throttle to match its speed. He'd already put four shots into its aft shields when a horrible electronic squeal interrupted him. He yanked the stick into his stomach, doing a complete roll as the TIE Advanced shot past, flying too fast and beginning a slow curve back around to finish him off. Trojan glanced down at his now blackened control board, noticing that his laser and concussion missile launcher systems were both out. *Great. The shuttle's leaving in less than twenty seconds and I'm...* he curled his lip into a mirthless grin as a thought crossed his mind, and he redirected all energy into his shields and streaked back towards the rear of the shuttle, ignoring the TIE Advanced that had now increased the rate of his turn.

[The main battle near the *Joan d'Arc* and the *Providence*]

"What's he doing?" Shok'wave snapped. "Why doesn't he use his missiles?"

"He's pretty heavily damaged, Lead," Vyper's voice answered her. "He's either run out or had his tubes damaged."

"Thanks, Three," Shok'wave replied distractedly. *When I wished the Force to be with him, I meant the good side.*

[The far side of the planet, behind the Imperial shuttle]

Trojan shuddered and braced himself as he sensed the TIE Advanced completing its loop behind him, and settling in for the kill. In that instant, he firewalled the throttle, and the A-Wing leaped forward, straight at the Imperial shuttle.

Trojan waited until the shuttle filled his vision, then pulled the ejection handle for all he was worth. There was the sound of the cockpit popping and his EV suit sealing as he was catapulted into space.

The A-Wing flew straight into the back of the shuttle, its concussion missiles detonating on impact.

The shuttle and A-Wing exploded in a fiery cloud of debris, and Trojan laughed a sigh of relief as the TIE Advanced soared past, heading back towards the main battle. "We got it! We've won!" he shouted into his helmet, then glanced over at the battle near the planet. *No, you haven't*, he heard himself say in his mind.

Shok'wave shouted down the cheering on the comm. "There's another shuttle - and it's capturing Trojan!" The Whites could only watch in horror as an Imperial shuttle launched from the *Dagger of Truth* and headed purposefully for the tiny dot that was White Squadron's newest Training Wing pilot.

[On the bridge of the Frigate *Joan d'Arc*]

The captain of the *Joan d'Arc* grabbed a handrail to support himself as the ship under him reeled.

"Report," he barked.

"Sir, shields are still down, and port side turbolasers have fallen to fifty percent efficiency," the weapons officer reported. The tactical officer caught the Captain's gaze and shook her head almost imperceptibly.

"An Imperial shuttle has captured White T-one," Communications informed him solemnly. The Captain bowed his head briefly, then brought it up, inhaling noisily.

"That's it, then...we're getting out of here. Navigation, begin calculations for hyperspace. See if you can roll us to expose our dorsal or starboard side to that Star Destroyer."

"Yes, sir," the navigator replied, frowning.

Slowly, the *Joan d'Arc* began to roll, even as the Corvette *Faithful* suddenly looped over the top of it and came to rest in front of the Frigate, placing itself between the *Joan d'Arc* and the *Providence*. A second later, the *Faithful's* guns opened up, and were immediately answered by those on the port side of the now inverted Star Destroyer.

[On the bridge of the Star Destroyer *Providence*]

Captain Piett smiled tightly. "Status of their Frigate?"

"Shields down and hull damaged," Commander Jarrett reported. "Their Corvette is almost destroyed. It's merely bought them some time. Foolish sacrifice." Piett nodded. "What of the B-Wings attacking our starboard side?" he asked.

"The remaining TIEs and Gunboats we have have all been pulled back into a defensive screen," Jarrett reported. "We're still taking damage, but it's minimal."

Piett nodded. "Very good," he said, his voice tense with excitement.

"The *Dagger of Truth* has gone into hyperspace, as ordered, sir," the tactical officer reported.

"Good. Standby to destroy that Frigate," Captain Piett ordered.

[On board the *Joan d'Arc*]

"Hyperspace calculations completed, Captain," the navigator reported softly. "We should move out a bit from the Star Destroyer to jump, though."

"Sir, the *Faithful's* hull is beginning to break up," someone else said. The Captain nodded gravely, a lump forming in his throat.

"Get us out of here, Lieutenant," he said harshly.

"Yes, sir..." the navigator acknowledged. He began to comply and the *Joan d'Arc* began to crawl forward even as the communications officer whirled around in his chair.

"Captain, I have a Mon Calamari Star Cruiser arriving out of hyperspace!" he half shouted, and clapped his hands. "They're attacking the Star Destroyer!"

The massive, bulky form of the Calamari Star Crusier *Starider* blinked into existence just above the slightly larger Star Destroyer *Providence*. Immediately the new ship began pouring fire into the ship beneath it, as the Imperial ship directed all its available guns to the new threat.

[On board the *Providence*]

Captain Piett stood and supported himself against his command chair as the deck underneath him shook.

"Status," he roared over the chaos on the bridge.

"Shields down, hull sustaining damage...." the reply came, before it was drowned out by the sound of an explosion from one of the bulkheads.

"We've no choice! Direct all life support energy to all functional shields! Navigation, get us out of here!" Piett shouted. The huge ship began to roll and the lights dimmed as all available power went into reinforcing the shields long enough to allow them to compute the jump to hyperspace. *We can redirect energy back to the life support systems later*, Piett thought to himself. *If there is a later*, he finished grimly.

[Off the bow of the Star Destroyer *Providence*]

Drake noted the increase of the Star Destroyer's shields on its tactical display, but couldn't do anything as he he whipped over and finally finished his Gunboat. He quickly glanced behind him to see the *Joan d'Arc* come limping back around as the Imperial Star Destroyer *Providence's* main hull suffered a fiery explosion. Suddenly, with red turbolasers still pouring into it, the Star Destroyer rapidly moved forward and vanished into hyperspace.

"I doubt that's the last we'll see of the *Providence*," Foxfire mused.

"So do I," Shok'wave agreed. "I doubt it very much, indeed."

[On board the Alliance Mon Calamari Cruiser *Starider*]

The mood was very subdued on board the *Starider's* mess deck. Tired, dirty and dishevelled, the pilots of White Squadron should have been celebrating, but they were instead drinking a kind of wake.

"We're not even in the Bomb Shelter for this," Drake grumbled. Due to the extensive damage to the hangar deck of the *Joan d'Arc*, there wasn't enough clear deck space for the Whites' ships to land.

"Cheer up," Foxfire urged him. "We just saved the galaxy, remember?" She winked and smiled and Drake could hardly help but do the same.

"Yeah, but we lost Trojan," Angelrose commented. Shok'wave nodded.

"That's true, and we must never stop trying to get him back from the Empire," she said solemnly. "But right now, I think, he would have wanted us to celebrate this occasion." Everyone stared back at her; a few smiles creased weary faces, but no one spoke. Suddenly Drake grinned.

"Did you see the way those TIE Advanced tried to outfly *us*?" he asked incredulously. The mess exploded into dozens of comments, observations and swapped stories of the battle, as squadron pride flared in the heart of every pilot, and everyone went on to release the tension left over from the mission. Shok'wave quietly drew Drake aside.

"Well done, Drake," she told him in a low voice, and grinned. "You've helped establish the right mood here. I felt something in the Force, I think, not long before your groups came back up." Drake nodded as he fingered the dried blood on his cheek.

"Yes," he sighed wearily. "Between us - Foxfire, Vyper and myself that is - we managed to take down a sort of Dark Jedi. Actually, I think he was just a nasty character with some Force ability being beefed up by the Emperor's Voice." Drake shook his head. "Not that that made it any easier, though. Without Vyper and Foxfire there, I'd be dead now."

"So that's it," Shok'wave nodded kindly.

"I guess so," Drake shrugged in agreement. "I'll tell you more about it later, if you like, but first, I want to know - how come you didn't know he was there? I mean, aren't Jedi supposed to be able to feel the presence of other Force-sensitive people?" To his surprise, Shok'wave laughed a little.

"Oh," she said, "That's easy. Because the Force was so disrupted by the Force amplifier, it made it impossible to detect smaller disturbances in it. Think of it like spotting a little ripple in a stormy sea." Drake nodded silently. Shok'wave seemed to know an awful lot about what went on. A thought occurred to him and he asked,

"How did the *Starider* know to come here?" Shok'wave smiled.

"Well, when we captured those plans in the first place, High Command was informed where we were, and they obviously sent out the *Starider* at once, to reach us as soon as possible. Anyway, no doubt some of the crew members here will want some free Blue Stuff later for saving us." Shok'wave made a wry face. "For now, it's enough for me that we've won - we'll worry about going over the battle (and giving them their free Blue Stuff!) later." Shok'wave grinned again and looked up as Foxfire headed over.

"How's the neck?" she asked with a smile. Drake smiled back.

"Better," he agreed. "I suppose for that little favor I'll have to buy you a drink." White Squadron's Executive Officer batted her eyelashes innocently.

"Who, me?" she asked, feigning surprise. Then she winked. "Of course you'll have to buy me one," she said, and laughed. Drake and Shok'wave laughed with her, and the young man stood.

"Ladies, what'll you have?"

Shok'wave was about to answer him when a young Lieutenant dressed in the uniform of Alliance security entered the room and headed over. He saluted, and Shok'wave stood to return the salute.

"Yes, Lieutenant?" she asked.

"Ma'am, I'm sorry, but you'll have to come with me," he said. Shok'wave's lips froze into a hard line.

"May I ask why?" she asked.

"Your presence is required at Alliance Headquarters," he answered her apologetically, "for the official investigation into Rebel losses in this system. The captain of the *Joan d'Arc* will be along, too." Shok'wave frowned.

"On whose authority?" she challenged. Again, the young man looked nervously apologetic.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but the order comes from the Council itself," he said, glancing at the floor. Shok'wave nodded.

"Avery, you're now in command of White Squadron," she said at last. "I temporarily relieve myself of command. Vyper will be your new XO." She looked at the security officer. "Is anyone else coming along for this little party?"

"Well... we'd like a military escort for the shuttle transporting you," he said. Shok'wave opened her mouth to protest having to ride in a shuttle instead of flying her fighter, but thought better of it and shut it. Drake turned to stare at the security officer icily. *Of all the cheek! First they tell us they're taking our CO away for questioning, then they beg us for an escort!*

"I'd like to volunteer, ma'am," he said firmly.

"Drake, your A-Wing is in no condition to-" Shok'wave began.

"If it's all the same to you, Commander, I'd much rather take my X-Wing," he said coolly. Shok'wave nodded.

"Very well. Let's tell the rest of the squadron. Looks like this isn't such a great victory, after all. The Emperor's Voice has been silenced, but now, we might have problems a little closer to home." With that, she turned to address her pilots for what might be the last time.

[TO BE CONTINUED ...]



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