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Red Sky, Blue Flame

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Jag Fel shouldered open his dented cockpit and struggled out. A blast of cold air hit him. He shielded his eyes against the stinging wind and searched the horizon for the Chiss military academy. A vast, curved sphere rose from the bleak landscape, barely visible against the blowing snow. If not for the reflected light of the three converging moons, he might not have seen it at all.

With a sigh, Jag began the trudge back. In this weather, he'd be as blue as a Chiss by the time he got back.

A sharp, nasal blast of from hover sled mingled with the rising wind. The bright red vehicle skimmed through the swirling snow, driven by a burly Chiss man with white, ice-encrusted hair.

"Obersken!" Jag shouted, waving both arms to get the attention of his rescuer. They were well acquainted-most of Jag's flights with the Blue Flame ended with an interesting landing and a scolding from the chief mechanic.

The elderly Chiss pulled up and sent Jag a baleful glare. Moving with practiced ease, he hitched lead ropes to the ship and winched it onto the sled. He grimaced at the sight of the huge mynock plastered over Jag's viewing portal. "Couldn't help this, I suppose. At least this time you've a good excuse."

Jag suppressed a wince. "You'll hear otherwise. The thing settled on Shawntyr's craft and began to eat through one of the cables on her port, forward arm. I, ah ... distracted it."

Obersken sent him a look of unmitigated disgust. "Rash, undisciplined. There's no room for heroes in this corp. How many times have I told you that?"

Jag inclined his head, a gesture that both acknowledged this wisdom and made apology for not following it. As a child, he had dreamed of being a hero. At fourteen, he already viewed these early ambitions with the nostalgia reserved for childhood foolishness.

Gimald Nuruodo, the flight instructor, met them at the door. "More heroics, Lieutenant Fel?"

The Commandant's tone, cool and polite, conveyed his opinion with painful clarity. Jag snapped to attention. "Sir, we won the exercise, sir. "

"Win or lose is hardly the issue. The disregard of rules, the presumption of an individual who placed his impulses above the collective wisdom of tradition and clan, this we cannot allow." He paused for a disgusted sniff.

"You are your brother all over again."

Jag's first impulse was to thank the Chiss--which would be a sincere response, but one that would certainly seem insubordinate. His brother Davin had been a hero in every sense of the word, and the Chiss found a thousand ways to remind him of it.

Thrawn was a hero, Jag thought, but he knew better than to speak the words aloud.

Later, in the comforting warmth of the academy, Jag's thoughts lingered on Grand Admiral Thrawn. He was wise enough to keep those thoughts to himself, even as he joined the other cadets for the evening meal.

Long, straight rows of blue-skinned future warriors filled the mess hall. No one slouched;

no one spoke. They sat with perfect posture on the backless plasteel benches, quietly spooning up the evening meal. You would never know by looking at them that the central purpose of their lives had suddenly ceased to exist.

For months, "Thrawn has returned!" had resounded throughout the Rata nebula like morning birdsong spreading through the academy's dome-sheltered forest. Rumors of the great leader's survival had galvanized the Chiss outposts. The cadets' training had been accelerated in hopes that the Grand Admiral would soon call them into active service. Even Jag had been given a ship of sorts. He considered himself as ready as any Chiss cadet, and as grimly determined to serve well.

But Thrawn's return had been a lie, a hoax perpetuated by a clone and his con man. Jag felt as if someone had pulled his clawcraft out from under him in mid-flight. What were he and the other cadets supposed to do now?

As if in response, a tall Chiss male in the burgundy uniform of a House Phalanx commander strode into the room. The cadets rose crisply and turned with military precision toward the dais to await the commander's words.

Jag stood with them, regarding the Chiss commander with a mixture of interest and apprehension. The commander known only as "Stent" had served with Admiral Voss Parck and with Jag's father, General Baron Soontir Fel. Stent was also the reason why Jag had come to this particular academy.

"Stand at ease," the Chiss said in a low, perfectly modulated voice that carried to the far corners of the mess hall. The cadets shifted into a slightly more relaxed posture, their eyes intent upon the leader.

"The liaison post commanded by Admiral Voss Parck has fallen to the Rebel Alliance," he said bluntly.

With difficulty Jag bit back a curse.

His father's post, destroyed! Once again, the rebels had reduced a corner of his ordered world to chaos.

Commandant Gimald stepped forward and executed a crisp bow, a courtesy normally given only to those of far higher rank than Stent. This was a sure sign of disagreement to come. It was the sort of small, pointed irony that Jag had learned to expect from the Chiss.

"With respect, Commander Stent, the former Alliance has not been known by that name for over a decade. The cadets are expected to keep abreast of political developments."

"The name might have changed since the so-called Battle of Endor, but after fifteen years, the so-called 'New Republic' is still a rag-tag collection of thugs, peasants, and deserters," Stent said bluntly. "But I wasn't sent to discuss semantic niceties. With your permission, Commander?"

Gimald yielded the floor with a tight-tipped face and a deep, formal bow more appropriate to an audience with the Chiss Senate.

"There were two waves of attack," continued Stent. "The first came from Jedi spies. The facility was destroyed. We salvaged what we could before other ships arrived, forcing a tactical retreat. It is possible that some records remained behind. If the security locks were breached, it is possible that the location of this academy has been compromised."

Jag kept his eyes straight ahead, but he felt the other cadets' red-eyed glare and the sudden, answering heat in his face. The academy's location was not entered into the data banks. No human but Baron Fel knew of its location, and this information had been given him grudgingly and with a cost-- the safety of his only living son. Baron Fel understood that betraying the location of this academy would also mean endangering his son. Jag knew his father would not betray him.

Still, here was Stent, preparing the academy for an attack. Stent reported to General Baron Fel. Why would he come, unless the New Republic had learned the location of the academy?

A thin whine cut through the condemning silence, rapidly growing to a maelstrom that spanned the spectrums of sound, encompassing both a thunderous, ground-shaking roar and a

raptor's shriek. Alarms blared and warning lights pulsed. The Chiss scrambled toward the ship hangers.

Jag followed as he had during scores of drills, racing down the spoke-like corridors that radiated from the vast and verdant forest in the dome's center. The passage was filled with a complex green scent, a strange contrast to the metal-and-ceramic fleet visible through the transparisteel wall of the hangers.

Too late it occurred to Jag that his ship, the infamous Blue Flame, was not in the hanger but in the mechanics bay. Again.

His heart sank. He slowed his pace and moved toward the corridor wall to let the others pass. His gaze settled longingly on one of the sleek, silver clawcraft assigned to his fellow cadets. With their rounded cockpits and four neatly furled metal arms, they looked like a small pack of feral creatures, tamped down and ready to spring into the sky.

Suddenly, a terrible crash shook the structure and threw down fragments of the transparisteel wall. Jag raised his arms before his face, but not before he saw his fellow cadets fall beneath a sparkling shower of knife-sharp shards. Many of the Chiss students did not rise again. The bloody survivors pushed through the wreckage to get to their ships. Then they stopped, staring with tight-lipped dismay at their ruined fleet.

Small fires burned throughout the hangar. The sprinklers came on, dousing the flames but doing nothing for burning pain that flared in a dozen wounds on Jag's body. He pulled a particularly nasty shard from his forearm before striding forward to take stock of the damage.

The cause of the disaster had been a mid-sized freighter. Its scattered remains littered the hangar floor, which had buckled and cracked under the impact of the crash. Its cargo, most of which was decidedly not military issue, spilled from a twisted hull and lay strewn across the floor. Between the impact and the shrapnel, most of the clawcraft had been damaged beyond repair. Only one seemed to be still intact.

Jag glanced up. A huge hole marred the ceiling, revealing another gap in the outer wall of the dome. The jagged edges of both holes refracted the light of the converging moons. It was fortunate, Jag noted, that the planet was in one of the temperate seasons of its complex, years-long cycle. Had they been in deep winter, the breached dome would have meant certain death.

"Not a deliberate attack," Jag said, his eyes seeking Stent's grim face.

"This was not the Rebel--not the New Republic."

The Chiss eyed him coolly. "Explain."

Jag kicked at a shattered crate, and the pile of bright fabrics it had once held. "This looks more like loot than anything a military ship would carry. You said the first wave of attack was by Jedi spies, the second came later. Perhaps the second wave was pirates, not New Republic."

Stent considered the suggestion. "It is possible. I was not there to confirm the identity of the attackers. But pirates traveling with Jedi? It seems illogical."

"But not unknown," Jag countered.

"Princess Leia Organa of Alderaan married a common smuggler. That sets a certain standard for strange bedfellows. On the other hand, pirate organizations can be resourceful. They might have got wind of the attack and followed like scavenger birds to a battlefield, with no connection to the Jedi."

A tall, muscular Chiss female approached them and snapped a quick bow to the commander. "Permission to speak," she asked, glancing pointedly at Jag, who had not followed such protocol. Her red eyes lingered for a moment on the blue piping on the arms and legs of Jag's black flight suit. Her own suit was marked in red, as were those of all the other Chiss. When he'd first been issued this uniform, Jag had assumed it to be symbolic, a way of integrating the human cadet with his cerulean-skinned fellows. He soon learned otherwise.

Stent acknowledged her with a curt nod.

She bowed again. "First Lieutenant

Shawnkyr Nuruodo, cadet commander. In my opinion, sir, the human could be correct. It seems likely that this freighter was damaged in the attack on the outpost. The pilot attempted to land on what appeared to be a lake and was confounded by the dome. By the time he realized his error, it was too late to alter course."

"Exactly," Jag agreed. "They never knew we were here."

"They do now." Shawnkyr pointed to the shattered ceiling.

Tiny silhouettes of intruding ships crawled across the pale face of Asdroni, the largest of the planet's three moons. They seemed to circle the glowing orb, growing larger with each spiral.

"They're landing," Stent concluded.

"If they are pirates, they will land and loot the academy. Where are your commanders, your instructors?"

Shawnkyr's gaze shifted to several motionless forms lying under a small hillock of shattered crystal. "They led the way to the hangar. You are now the ranking officer, Commander Stent."

The Chiss nodded once in agreement and pulled a small blaster from his belt. This he handed to Shawnkyr.

"Take ten warriors to the nearest weapons lockers and gather all the charrics and extra energy packs you can carry. Bring them here. The pirates will soon come through the breach. We must be ready for them."

Shawnkyr tucked the blaster into her belt. Her eyes swept the shell-shocked survivors. "Fenlish, Khana, each of you choose four and follow," she barked out, then jerked her head toward Jag to indicate that he was also to come with them.

The cadets sprinted through the corridors to the nearest weapons cache, then looked expectantly at Shawnkyr. Cadet commanders were issued key cards with lock combinations for just such contingencies.

She reached for a uniform pocket; but the ripped fabric hung in an empty flap, its contents lost. A lavender flush suffused her face.

On impulse, Jag spun and kicked the locker just to one side of the locking mechanism. The thin metal buckled. A second kick folded the door in, pulling it away from the lock, but not quite disengaging it. With an exasperated hiss, Jag snatched the Shawnkyr's borrowed blaster and sent a single shot at the lock. The door swung open with a creak of protest.

"Quicker this way," Jag explained to the surprised Chiss. He began pulling charric blasters from the locker. He dumped the first load into Shawnkyr's arms. Their eyes met over the piled weapons.

"Your orders, Lieutenant?" he asked.

She composed herself. "Tlarik, help Jag Fel gather the weapons. All others, queue up. Take as much as you can carry at a run, then return to Commander Stent for instructions."

Shawnkyr spun on her heel to do as she had instructed the others. Jag snatched up weapons and tossed them to the waiting Chiss. He piled all the remaining power packs into Tlarik's arms and waved the last cadet on his way. There were more remaining weapons than he could reasonably carry, but the cadets would need them all. Jag looped the straps to the rifles over his shoulders until he could barely stand under the weight of weapons. He gathered up more to carry in his arms and hurried to the rendezvous point. Stent and one of the surviving cadets were checking out the sole intact clawcraft.

He was about a hundred meters away when a streak of laser fire slashed down through the hangar. A red flare lit the devastation. When it faded, the clawcraft was gone, as were the two Chiss who'd been examining it.

"Stent," gasped Shawnkyr.

"You're in command," Tlarik reminded her.

Shawnkyr composed herself almost instantly. "Everyone take a weapon and two extra packs. Once all are armed, anyone my size or larger takes a second weapon, as long as the supply holds out."

Her red eyes quickly swept the hangar. Jag followed the line of her gaze and tried to guess the path of her thoughts. On the far side of the hangar was one of several corridors that formed concentric circles around the interior forest. The hangars were near the center of the dome, a position intended to protect the ships from attack. Since the dome was virtually invisible from above, it was believed that a ground assault was the only real threat. Only the catastrophically bad luck of the freighter's crashing through the dome had changed that.

"We seal off every circle beyond this one," Shawnkyr decreed. Her gaze shifted from one cadet to another.

"Gintish, seal down this passage. Pump the oxygen from all the outer corridors to contain the invaders in the center. Can you accomplish this?"

The young Chiss snapped a bow and set off.

"That will forestall looting. With limited territory to explore, the invaders will find their way into forest center. We will await them there,"

Shawnkyr concluded, glancing up through the ruined dome. Above them, the enemy ships circled in lower and lower.

The young Chiss took their places. As Jag snatched up a charric, he wondered whether he was the only one feeling apprehensive about this plan. What Shawnkyr suggested were traditional tactics born of the drills the Chiss had designed to protect the academy's students in case of a ground invasion. All of them had been trained in hand-to-hand combat, using the artificial forest terrain as if it were a second weapon. Jag's father had taught his son that the Chiss had an unparalleled aptitude for tactical thinking. Why, then, was Jag so uneasy?

The bombardment was as brutal as it was sudden. Laser fire streamed down into the breached chamber, followed by the blue flare of proton torpedoes.

"To the forests!" shouted Shawnkyr.

The Chiss scattered, fleeing the leading edge of the first explosion, stumbling down rubble-strewn corridors to the central haven. Here the dome was the highest and also the most impermeable, for it was meters thick and protected by powerful shielding. Jag ran close behind Shawnkyr.

The corridor ahead exploded into shrieking metal shards. Jag threw himself at Shawnkyr. They fell hard and rolled together into a side corridor. They found themselves in the mechanics bay, and one of the safest places outside of the forest itself.

The Chiss pulled herself free and came up in a crouch, running lightly under heavy durasteel grids that lifted ships to an easily accessible height.

They dove under one of the platforms and huddled there.

Shawnkyr's black hair, always neatly fastened at the nape of her neck, now hung in loose and unruly strands. She raked one hand through it in an attempt to restore order. Her hand came away wet and red, but she merely wiped the blood on her uniform.

"Probably two-thirds of the cadets have made it to the forests," she murmured. "That leaves our forces at between fifteen and twenty. That should be enough. Once these pirates land, we'll pick them off easily"

The truth came to Jag suddenly.

"They won't land," he said. "Not for a while, at least. There were a few clawcraft still recognizable after the first crash, and the ships came close enough to get a clear view of

them. No one but Chiss flies this kind of ship. It's unlikely that pirates would intentionally attack a Chiss military outpost--"

"Unless it was first softened up by a primary assault," Shawnkyr finished grimly. "In time, they could bring down the shields. The central dome is strong, but not impervious."

They were silent for a moment, listening to the continuing bombardment and the crunch and shriek of the mistreated structure.

"Stent did not say whether your father survived the attack on his outpost," said Shawnkyr.

"He didn't need to. Why else would Stent have come, unless my father survived? My presence here shows how little trust Stent has in my father's honor."

"That is harsh, but logical," she agreed. A particularly powerful blast hit the dome, and the room shook. The Chiss glanced up toward the ceiling and grimaced. "We may be pinned down here for some time. Indulge my curiosity: Exactly how did you come to be here, at the academy?"

It was a question Jag had heard for most of his life. He'd spent much of his childhood at the Hand of Thrawn, the Chiss admiral's hidden base. He had been raised among Chiss, all of whom had shown the same curiosity about the Fels' presence and purpose.

For several years, this had been easily explained. "My father serves Grand Admiral Thrawn," was something all could understand. So Jag was accepted, after a fashion; and he'd played with solemn, blue-skinned children, and he'd watched them mature before his eyes like swift-blossoming cannu flowers. One day they were children; the next, young adults. Ten-year-old Chiss put on the uniform of cadets and left for one of the military academies, whose locations were guarded as jealously as that of the Hand of Thrawn. Year after year, Jag had watched them go with longing eyes.

During the last monsoon season, Jag had grown with almost Chiss-like speed. Relentless training had packed muscle onto his lengthened frame, so he was not quite as gawky as other teenaged humans. His voice changed nearly as precipitously, plunging downward in direct opposition to his soaring height.

Jag remembered his father's face when he'd approached him about a commission to the academy. Baron Fel had been unusually distracted in recent months, and he did a shocked double-take as he focused on the young man standing at attention before his desk.

"Wedge," he'd muttered in disbelieving tones.

Wedge Antilles was his mother's brother, one of the Rebels' heroes and a pilot in their famous Rogue Squadron. Jag supposed he did resemble him somewhat--his hair was the same shade of near-black, and his face defined by black brows, strong features, and a square chin. Once, Jag might have thought to emulate the famous pilot. At the moment, he felt only blank astonishment that his own father did not recognize him, if even for just one moment.

He pulled his thoughts firmly back to the present moment, and the watchful Chiss. "It was a political matter," he explained. "My presence here gives the Chiss leadership a sense of security. Humans are known to be emotional, so the logical assumption is that Baron Fel, though he is currently a liaison between the Chiss and the Imperial Remnant, would protect the hidden Chiss bases from Imperial exploitation for fear of retaliation against his son. With that assumption in place, he is free to maneuver as needed. Without rancor, I can assure you that my safety would be only one of many factors entering into his decision."

Shawnkyr nodded thoughtfully. "I had not thought humans capable of such tactical decisions. "

"And that's exactly why we're stuck here like spine rats in a burrow," he retorted.

"Explain."

"Tactics..." Jag said curtly, holding up his left hand, fingers splayed. "A knowledge of past military tactics," he said, curling his thumb and third finger into his palm.

"Knowledge of the enemy..." this point he underscored by furling his index finger.

"... an understanding of their expectations," he added, ticking off this point by curling his middle finger. He shook his hand, the pinkie still extended. "And what is left?"

"A hidden plan that contradicts and confounds these expectations," Shawnkyr recited.

Jag nodded grimly, shaking the fist his hand had become. "A rational process, a well-reasoned solution. An obvious solution."

He thrust out his right hand, stiffened fingers diving for Shawnkyr's throat. The Chiss batted the attack aside just short of impact. Chagrin mingled with anger on her azure face.

"You have a dangerous way of making point," she said, "but it is effective for all that."

"The Chiss exiled Thrawn for his repeated offenses. Have you never wondered how this brilliant tactician failed to measure the tolerance of the Chiss ruling houses?"

She hesitated, then inclined her head. "I have pondered this, yes."

"The answer is simple: He didn't miscalculate. He used seeming defeat to further his objectives. Did you know that the Empire made recruitment overtures before Thrawn's exile? He could not honorably accept, not as long as he was attached to the Chiss Expansionary Defense. What could he do but engineer his own disgrace?"

Shawnkyr stared at him.

"My father told me of Thrawn's subterfuge. He considered this information part of my training. Surely he was in a position to know. Stent confirmed it when he told me of my commission and explained the purpose of this particular academy. We were to be a hidden phalanx, a weapon for Thrawn to unleash at a moment of his choice."

As Shawnkyr assimilated the information silently. Jag suspected that Stent's name gave his words a weight that they otherwise would not have had.

He glanced at the red piping on the Chiss female's uniform. This presented the Iced Flame--the essence of courage, cunning, and discipline, an the ideal state of perfection that could be aspired to if never quite achieved. Quite a contrast from the blue piping on his own uniform. In the eyes of Jag's fellow cadets, his impossible aspiration was something rather different. His uniform was a constant reminder that he could never be a Chiss.

"Tell me more," Shawnkyr prompted.

Jag sternly banished the bitterness that followed these thoughts like fumes from a bad exhaust. "My father left the Imperial service for a time to pursue a personal matter. Admiral Isard later captured him, and he disappeared from public view. Most people inside the Empire and beyond assumed that he had been executed for treason. This was also Thrawn's plan, carried out by Admiral Voss Parck."

Shawnkyr's eyelids flickered, the Chiss equivalent of a gaping jaw and an astonished gasp.

"Yes, the same Imperial officer who 'found' the exiled Thrawn and brought him to Coruscant," Jag said impatiently, "and the captain of the Star Destroyer who accompanied Grand Admiral Thrawn to the so-called Unknown Regions after his supposed fall from Imperial grace. Thrawn planned each step, drawing Imperial forces into Chiss territory for the protection of his people. The Imperial Remnant gained outposts and alliances, and Thrawn gained a conduit for ships and weaponry."

Shawnkyr nodded slowly. "I have never considered the matter in this light, but your interpretation is logical. Continue. Speak now of the enemy-- not Thrawn's, but the one we face."

"Opportunists," Jag said. "Carrion birds who follow warriors and pick the battlefields clean. They want a quick fight, if they must fight at all. How old are you, Shawnkyr?"

She negotiated the rapid change of topic without hesitation. "I have twelve standard years."

"In human years, you're a child. To human eyes you're a grown woman, a seasoned warrior. That's what the enemy expects to find down here. That's why they're attacking from a

distance. If the ships hadn't been destroyed and the Chiss met this attack in an air battle, our enemy would have scattered and run. Every cadet they encountered would affirm their perceptions. Every cadet but one."

"Ah!" Understanding set her crimson eyes aflame. "And what could lower their expectations more swiftly than a Human boy?"

Jag wasn't sure whether to wince or grin. Since both responses would be equally incomprehensible to the Chiss, he did neither. "I'm taking up Blue Flame. That should lower their expectations to a manageable level."

Her eyes flicked to the aging, battered ship. "An excellent choice," Shawnkyr said without a trace of humor. "And I will prepare the others for a ground assault." She rose in a single smooth movement.

Jag nodded and headed for the old ship.

"Lieutenant Fel," she said sternly.]

He glanced back. One corner of her lips quirked up, an almost imperceptible gesture of approval. "We want the enemy to land and seek easy plunder. Do not dissuade them by flying too well."

This time he did smile, but as Thrawn might have done: coolly confident, utterly superior. "Defeat can be the shortest path to deception."

Jag hauled himself onto the repair dock and regarded his clawcraft. The mechanics had added a coat of metallic silver-blue paint after one of his mishaps. This covered some of the scars but cast every dent into bright relief. He disengaged the locks on the cockpit. He had to shoulder-slam the rounded dome a couple of times before the mechanism fully turned over.

He climbed in and began to power up the repulsor lifts. The ship wheezed as its engines fired, and it rose from the dock with all the grace of a drunken Gamorrean, but at least it rose, and the controls showed that the weapons had been fully charged.

Jag eased through a broad passage and carefully maneuvered the ship into the hangar.

There was little left but rubble, but at least the invaders had moved on. The sky over the shattered dome still shone red with the laser barrage, but the enemy was now targeting other sectors of the dome.

Jag urged his clawcraft swiftly up toward the breeched dome. The hole was much larger than it had appeared from the ground. Huge panels of the thin, mirrored transparisteel hung from the edges. As Jag passed, one of them tore loose. It drifted down, looking nearly as weightless as a leaf in a soft breeze. Any sound of its impact was muted by the noise of Jag's engine, and the continuing assault from above.

He rose up into the open sky, engaging the controls that spread four sweeping weapon arms into firing position. These framed the pod, splaying out in a formation similar to that of an X-wing's S-foils. He wheeled the Blue Flame in a tight circle, surprised and pleased that so unreliable a ship could remain so maneuverable.

The three moons were in rare summer convergence. The forest moon was edging across the face of the large, primary moon. A small, more distant moon, glowing a faint blue against the distant nebular haze, closed in.

As a result, the sky was nearly as bright as in twilight. Even with his lights dimmed, he would soon be noticed.

A passing X-wing changed course and veered sharply toward him. The pirate ship was painted in a garish red-and-black design. Jag punched the atmospheric engines to full power. His clawcraft darted away, barely evading a stream of crimson laser fire.

The enemy ship followed, dipping and swaying and it pursued the Blue Flame. Jag avoided it, but only barely.

He headed toward the main force: five old X-wing fighters surrounding a battered corvette. The pirates had seen the ruin of the Chiss fleet, Jag concluded, and they'd probably

concluded, quite rightly, that since the Chiss hadn't used any land-to-air missiles yet, they didn't have any.

Even so, this battle meant one not-particularly-fast Chiss ship against several professional space pirates. They had every reason to expect his defeat.

Jag threw the Blue Flame into an erratic, zig-zagging pattern, firing seemingly at random. Nearly all his laser fire went ridiculously wild. He hoped that would convince the pirates to overlook his two proton torpedoes.

Both missiles struck their targets, and two fighters dissolved in brief, bright explosions. Jag headed directly into the flying rubble, jinking past the worst of it and accepting a few solid hits. The pursuing X-wing peeled away, circling back at a safe distance.

The alarms on Jag's console began to flash. The hyperdrive had taken a hit. There was some fuel leakage, and danger of volatility. He'd worry about that later, when lightspeed was a necessity--or for that matter, an option. The battered ship had no hope of achieving hyperspace.

It occurred to him that this situation had potential as a deceptive defeat. His fingers danced over the controls, pouring power into the damaged hyperdrive, demanding lightspeed acceleration. At the same time, he armed the eject-hyperdrive mechanism that all Chiss vessels employed-- although few ships could match a clawcraft for sheer maneuverability, their hyperdrives were known to malfunction.

The Blue Flame began to shake as it picked up speed. Jag watched the gauge climb steadily as the overtaxed hyperdrive unit approached critical level.

"It'll be close," he muttered, dodging a laser stream as he careened drunkenly toward an oncoming Z-95.

At the last possible moment, he veered away, rejecting the red-hot hyperdrive into the path of the fighter.

The edge of the explosion slapped the clawcraft hard, throwing it into a spin. Jag let the Flame go, knowing better than to pit the old frame against that sort of force. He eased the clawcraft away from the battle, slowly widened its spiral until he could pull it without harm into controlled flight.

Three fighters down, he noted grimly. Only the corvette and two X-wings remained.

The red-and-black ship circled the wreckage the way an ocean predator might examine a storm-wrecked vessel. It appeared that this pilot, at least, was not convinced by Jag's feigned ineptitude.

Jag adjusted his mask and squared his shoulder. He had to convince these men that he was the best the Chiss had remaining, and that their best was none too good.

Again his warning lights flared. This time the maneuvering jets were dangerously close to overheating. He was running out of time.

"Defeat is the shortest path to deception," Jag muttered as he threw the clawcraft into a screaming dive.

He hurtled toward the dome, streaking past the pirate vessels and throwing all his repulsors on full force.

The Blue Flame slowed. How much and how fast would be hard for the higher-altitude ships to gauge. It was none too easy for him to calculate, either.

The blue clawcraft plunged through the shattered dome, knocking huge sheets of mirrored transparisteel loose.

Jag fell in a drift of giant silvery leaves.

He landed hard enough to bounce.

The impact took out his repulsors, so he landed harder the second time. Pain sang through

his every nerve, and the sky above was still red with enemy fire. Even in the darkness of the hangar, all seemed as bright as blood.

Jag shook aside these dazed perceptions and forced the cockpit open. He tugged off his flight helmet, ignoring the throbbing pain, and squinted up at the sky.

Above him, silhouetted against the pale green moon, was the red-and-black X-wing. It had shut down its engines and was preparing to follow the Flame into the dome.

Jag tried leaping from the clawcraft and settled for falling. He stumbled to his feet and brushed shards of transparisteel from his uniform. His head hurt even more now, and a cut on his forehead was bleeding profusely.

The ship was in worse shape than he. Two of the arms had broken off, and much of the blue paint had been scraped off by the impact with the transparisteel. It looked like a fatal wreck. Jag felt an unexpected twinge of regret as he glanced around for the last thing he'd need to complete the grim picture.

One of his fellow cadets lay nearby, no longer recognizable as male or female, human or Chiss. Jag dragged the body toward the ruined Flame and draped it over the side of the open cockpit. His lips thinned to a grim line as he observed the convincing scene.

He nodded once, then turned and stumbled toward the forest.

He disappeared into the thick foliage, finding a path that no one unfamiliar with the terrain could discern. Even so, he didn't see Shawnskyr until she stepped from the shadow of a vine-shrouded bindoin tree directly into his path.

"They're coming?"

"On their way," he said, and then he fell flat onto his face.

Dimly he was aware of Shawnskyr dragging him into the vine thicket.

Every part of him felt numb, so he didn't mind when she flopped him over onto his back, none too gently. For a moment she regarded him with grave, measuring eyes. Her fingers skimmed his forehead and then dove into his short black hair, probing for wounds.

As she did, sensation began to return.

Jag gritted his teeth and forbade himself to scream.

"You will fight no more today," she announced. "A head injury, and serious. It's a wonder you made it this far. "

Jag lifted weirdly tingling fingers to his forehead. He felt the wet edge of a deep gash that ran from his right eyebrow and well into his hair.

Shawnskyr pulled a knife from her boot and deftly scraped off a strip of hair on either side of the gash. She reached into a utility pocket and pulled out a small ring of tape, such as a mechanic might use for a short-term splicing repair. Ripping off a length with her teeth, she pinched together the edges of the wound and pressed the tape into place.

"It will serve for now," she said in response to his incredulous stare. "I need you awake. Someone must plan tactics."

The soft ping of charric fire sang through the forest. Shawnskyr lifted her weapon and hunkered down.

"How many?" she asked, her voice just above a whisper.

"Two one-pilot fighters. Those are both down by now. There's another ship, a corvette, that could be holding anything from two to fifty."

"Too many," she said.

A soft birdcall drew her attention.

"Both the humans are down. We must prepare the cadets for the larger invasion."

"How many?" he asked in return.

Her face went grim. "Only seven cadets remain able-bodied, myself included. Even in the forest, it will not be easy"

Jag forced his dazed thoughts, to focus. The image of drifting transparisteel plates came back to him and with it, a Thrawn-like deception.

His lips curved in a feral smile; and Shawnkyr saw the cunning there.

"Tell me," she demanded.

Later, the surviving cadets made their way toward the docked corvette, planning to use the comm system to apprise the nearest Chiss outpost of their situation. As they moved through the corridors, they made their way past the bodies of their fellow cadets--dragged there so that they might serve one final time. The slain Chiss rested on lightweight plates of mirrored transparisteel, the substance that had reflected back the sky and cast the illusion that the dome was a large lake.

The surface was subtly rippled, giving anything it reflected an illusion of depth and substance.

Jag glanced at the ceiling. Several ropes hung there, some still swaying.

Moments before, every able-bodied Chiss had hung from two ropes hastily tied to the corridor's metal framework--one tied about their chests to keep their hands free for weapons, the other to their ankles.

Their reflections in the transparisteel panels mingled with the slain Chiss on the floor. To the pirates entering the corridor, the floor appeared to be littered with bodies.

Once the students began to fire, confusion overtook the invaders. They fired low, whirling toward each door leading from the corridor, but never realizing that the danger came from over their heads. The battle was messy and brief.

"An unusual tactic," one of the survived Chiss allowed, his red eyes shining with approval as he glanced up at the ceiling.

Shawnkyr lifted one black brow. "Not so unusual," she countered. "Defeat is often the shortest path to deception, and deception can lead to victory. All great tacticians know this to be true. Is that not so, Lieutenant?"

Several moments passed before Jag realized that he was the lieutenant Shawnkyr had addressed, or that the Chiss were watching him, waiting respectfully for his response. None of the other cadets had ever called him by his rank. When the Chiss were in good spirits, they addressed him by name; when not, they settled for "human."

He considered his words carefully, understanding the importance of this moment. "We are all students of Grand Admiral Thrawn," he said slowly. "They tell that his return was a deception, that he is dead. I say that's a lie."

For once, the Chiss composure failed his fellow cadets. Shock claimed every face. This subject was simply not discussed! But they watched him still, waiting for his next words.

"He will always be with us, as long as we can learn from his example."

They considered this. "I had always dreamed of serving Thrawn."

Shawnkyr said slowly. "That is not to be. But I, too, can learn from example. It took the Chiss too long to recognize the leader he was, and learn to follow. This mistake is not one I will repeat."

She turned to Jag and handed him her cadet commander insignia, then snapped into a crisp salute. After a moment's hesitation, the other followed suit.

With a full heart, Jag drew himself and returned the salute. The effort was too much, and once again the world spun and swam. He looked down, trying to get his bearings. .

Shawnkyr put a hand on his arm and began to propel them both toward the corvette. "I have high hopes for you, Lieutenant," she said quietly. "Do not disappoint me by acting the hero's part."

"A member of the Chiss military, aspiring to be a hero?" he said in feigned disbelief. "What would Thrawn say of this?".