**\*\*NOTE: Some of the timelines have had to be fudged and/or approximated as the EH and the DJB use different timelines that correspond differently to RL. - Z**

**17 ABY**

**Imperial-class Star Destroyer *Vanguard*, Emperor’s Hammer Aggressor Strike Force**

**Commander’s Quarters – Mantis Squadron**

The door’s security system buzzed.

“Enter.” Zoron didn’t bother looking up from his workpad as his XO, Drake Jensen, approached his desk. Drake stopped and was waved to a chair by Zoron. Drake waited there silently as Zoron put the finishing touches on his hand-over report. With it completed, he hit send and waited for the confirmation to show on his screen that it was en route to his superiors. Zoron leaned back and looked at the man seated in front of him.

“Well, Drake, that’s the last of them. I’m officially handing the reins over to you at the end of today’s duty cycle.”

“Thanks Z. I’m a little surprised at the suddenness of this all. When do you fly over to the *Aggressor* to meet your new squadron?”

Zoron glanced at his workpad’s calendar. “About a week. I’ve only heard good things about the commander there, so I’m excited to get boots on the deck to start working.”

Drake stood up and held out his hand. “Well, it’s been a pleasure and an honour, sir. Enjoy your tour with Avenger and keep us regular pilots in mind.”

Zoron smiled, shook the other man’s hand, and returned the pleasantries before Drake left. He turned to the virtual window on the bulkhead and stared into the dark of space. *One week. Then finally I’m off to Avenger - the most feared squadron in this fleet.*

**17 ABY (One Week Later)**

**Victory-class Star Destroyer *Aggressor,* Emperor’s Hammer Aggressor Strike Force**

**Landing Bay**

The ramp lowered on the shuttle and Zoron had to shield his eyes while they adjusted to the harsh glare of the bay’s lighting. After a moment he lowered his hand and could see a number of experienced pilots at the foot of the ramp in uniform. He did a quick count and saw a pair of Lieutenant Colonels, a pair of Majors, three Captains, and a handful of Commanders and Lieutenant Commanders. As Avenger Squadron was the only one posted to this ship, these were obviously his new squadron-mates. There certainly was a lot of combat experience standing in front of him.

A Lieutenant-Colonel with a red star on his epaulets was at the front of the group. Zoron strode down the ramp and set his duffel down before snapping a crisp salute. The other man, just barely shorter than Zoron, returned the salute.

“At ease, Major Zoron. I am Lieutenant Colonel Khaemeir Sarin. Welcome to Avenger Elite Squadron. My senior officers and I have been paying attention to you for the past little while and were quite impressed with your performance in the last skirmish in the Voobly system. Your combat skills are making quite a name for you in this fleet and especially amongst the special operations squadrons. I’m glad we were the ones able to get you.”

Zoron smiled and answered loudly enough for the assembled pilots to hear him. “I’m happy to be here, sir. It was never really a question in my mind if I’d accept the invitation. The old folks in Omega, Praetorian, and Tau never interested me. I wanted to get into the thick of combat and learn from the best pilots in the fleet. That’s why I’m here.”

Sarin grinned in response. “Oh, a politician as well as an ace pilot? I like you. You’ll fit in nicely.” Sarin turned to the pilots behind him and motioned Zoron alongside him. “Let me introduce you to the squadron.”

**17.5 ABY**

**Victory-class Star Destroyer *Aggressor,* Emperor’s Hammer Aggressor Strike Force**

**Sith Meditation Chamber**

Zoron focused his mind on the lock in front of the meditation chamber and felt it respond to the tendrils of Force he directed at it. It popped open and he stepped inside.

The squadron had three Sith Equites and Zoron, who had not yet built his own saber, on its roster. As the Fleet desperately needed their flight skills on the front lines, they could not afford to pull them away from the *Aggressor* for dedicated Sith training, so the chamber had been specially installed for their use when deployed.

In reality, it was significantly more than a meditation chamber. It was a full-fledged training facility for Force users. During their downtime, the Force-sensitive pilots came to the chamber for practice and study in the ancient arts.

While there were three Equites on hand, Sarin was the most powerful and senior of the three, so he acted as Zoron’s master during the training sessions.

For the past few months, Sarin had been working on improving Zoron’s saber defence. Sarin had been teaching him the Soresu form so that he could better handle non-Force users, most of whom relied on blasters to attack.

In the middle of the training mat, Zoron was pouring sweat from the steadily rising from the training remotes that Sarin was operating. Nevertheless, he remained calm and focused.

He recalled his first day with Sarin, when he barely stopped a single shot, leaving him covered with stinging welts from the low-powered training shots. As each shot got through, he got sloppier and more frantic in his blocks, eventually swinging so wildly that he damaged a nearby training dummy.

Today was different: even as Sarin increased the rate of fire and number of remotes, he flowed smoothly from one position to the next, batting shot after shot out of the air. He didn’t know how long they’d been training for, nor did he care. He simply remained centered and kept moving. The aching sensations in his legs and arms had long since been ignored as he strove for his first ever perfect run.

Finally, the tugging in his mind that led him to the proper positions and blocks stopped. He opened his eyes and looked around. All the remotes had been deactivated and Sarin stood in front of him, a wide grin on his face.

“You’ve gotten it. Z, you’ve finally figured it out! Do you know how many remotes I had going? Nine! Every remote we had was up and firing! Well done, my friend!” Sarin clapped him on the shoulder, causing a twinge of pain to shoot down his arm as the exhausted muscles complained. “Just remember that – you stood there for five minutes, with nine blasters eventually going, without a single shot hitting you. That’s how powerful, and simple, this can be.”

Zoron felt the adrenaline dump out of his system, and he turned a weary smile to Sarin. “Thanks bossman. I think I would have laughed at you a few months ago if you’d told me I could do this. I’m glad you didn’t or I would have thought you were crazy and gone to train with Dax or Brian instead!”

Sarin laughed, and slung his arm over Zoron’s shoulders. “You know what, I wouldn’t have blamed you – I’m still waiting for the replacement for that training dummy you decapitated. You were just plain bad back then!”

The two men laughed again and walked out of the chamber, taking the most direct path to the cantina to grab some celebratory drinks.

**18 ABY**

**Ihopek System**

**TIE Shadow *Archangel*, Avenger Elite Squadron**

*Z, roll right. Now!* Sarin’s voice came clearly into his mind and Zoron reacted instantly. He spun his fighter down and to the right just as a stream of laser fire blazed past to hit his pursuer. The explosion rocked him in his chair as he rode out the blast wave. His comm system had been damaged in the previous battle and thus the only way he could receive messages was from his fellow Force-users in the squadron.

He saw Sarin’s TIE Shadow rocket by, already hunting for the next target. He slipped in beside Sarin and scanned for any targets looking to disrupt his commander’s attacks. As Sarin locked onto a solo X-Wing, Zoron saw a pair of A-Wings angling toward them. He immediately cut the throttle and swung the nose of his fighter around to lead the enemy.

He carefully tracked the lead A-Wing with his targeting reticule and heard the tone a moment later as his sensors got a successful lock. He loosed a pair of missiles and immediately transferred his focus to the second A-Wing.

With years of battle-honed instinct guiding him, he began squeezing the trigger to send a hail of lasers at the second A-Wing. The lead A-Wing was hammered by his missiles just as his lasers reached its wingman. The explosion of the first A-Wing battered the second’s shield enough that they collapsed a split second before his lasers reached it. The shots struck home and pierced the cockpit canopy. A small puff of flame leapt out of the cockpit as the air inside ignited from the superheated lasers. The A-Wing tumbled for a second as his shots continued to stitch the hull until they found the fuel compartment. Another explosion flared. Both attacking A-Wings had been destroyed within seconds.

Zoron looked back to Sarin’s fighter and saw a similar explosion as the X-Wing detonated under a hail of fire.

*Nice shooting, Sar. Where to next?*

**19 ABY**

**Victory-class Star Destroyer *Aggressor,* Emperor’s Hammer Aggressor Strike Force**

**Flight Leader’s Quarters**

*ZORON!*

The Force message reverberated in his head, snapping him awake with a start. He sat up on the edge of his bed and rubbed his temples. He recognized the voice that was ringing in his brain. Sarin. He reached for his comm panel, but another message burst through before he could press any button.

*No comms. Meet me at your house in a week. Do not try to contact me before then. Do not discuss this with anyone. I’ll explain everything in a week. Be there.*

He knew the message had come from his old friend. Sarin had been promoted up and out of Avenger, taking on a high-level Admiralty position, as well as holding the highest position of all the Sith in the Fleet. He was confused, but his trust for Sarin far exceeded any doubts he had.

He reached for his workpad and brought up the leave request screen. He hadn’t been home in months and the squadron wasn’t scheduled for any major combat offensives soon, so he shouldn’t have any issues getting the leave approved. He just needed a decent excuse. Luckily, he had already been openly discussing proposing to his girlfriend back home, so he figured now was as good a time as any.

He sent the request through and lay back in bed, staring at the ceiling and wondering what was so important and so damned secret that Sarin couldn’t contact him through the regular channels.

**19 ABY (1 Week Later)**

**Aurora, Emperor’s Hammer Capital World**

**Coyian City – Zoron Family Estate**

The party was in full swing, with the band playing loudly and the gathered guests enthusiastically celebrating the engagement of Zoron to his new fiancée, Hana. Zoron’s father, Lord Tyr Zoron, hadn’t spared any expense, even on the short notice. Zoron had flown in to the city without announcing it to anyone, having left the Aggressor two days prior and stopping off at a trade world suggested by his flightmates to purchase the ring.

He had surprised his father and sister, Jusay, that morning and had broken his plan to them. His father had been ecstatic and his sister was absolutely giddy with the prospect of a wedding to help plan.

He had proposed that afternoon successfully and was now joining in the merriment at his father’s estate. For such little advance warning, Lord Tyr had managed to throw quite the gala, with most of Zoron’s childhood friends flown in and Hana’s family brought in like visiting dignitaries. The Imperial dress uniform Zoron wore stood out in the crowd, though his fiancée’s smile outdid that by orders of magnitude.

Mid-way through the party, Zoron felt a subtle tug in his thoughts and he looked to the far corner of the courtyard. A man in a simple suit stood there, looking directly at him. As their eyes locked, he felt an electric buzz run through him. Sarin was there, in disguise for whatever reason. Sarin nodded and inclined his head toward the house before moving in that direction.

Zoron made a quick excuse about the quantity of beverage he’d consumed and headed toward the house as well. As he entered, he scanned around, spotting Sarin moving into a side room that his father used for greeting guests. He checked and saw that none of the household servants were around and followed.

He entered the room and saw Sarin standing in the corner, away from the windows.

“No lights.”

Though still confused about the secrecy, Zoron closed the door behind him and stood in the darkness.

“Z. I’m about to tell you about a plan that can get us all killed, including every guest here and everyone you love if it gets out. I know I can trust you, but I need you to understand the seriousness of this. If you have any doubts right now, tell me, and I will leave without another word.”

Zoron barely paused before replying. “Sar, I’m in. You know that I’d fly into a black hole if you asked.”

Sarin’s shoulder slumped noticeably and he exhaled a deep breath. “Thanks. I knew I could count on you for this. Sit. This might take a few minutes.”

They both sat and Zoron waited patiently for Sarin to speak.

“Alright. You’re a smart man. You’ve probably noticed a change in the Fleet these last few months. Tons of transfers and re-assignments.”

Zoron nodded. “There’s been a few that have had me scratching my head. A bunch of under-qualified officers got transferred back to Aurora.”

“Exactly. You’ve even picked up on that, but you haven’t yet made all the connections. Ronin and Astatine are making a push. Those officers all have something in common.”

“Huh? A push for what? They’re already in charge of the whole Fleet. What else is there?”

Sarin leaned in. “The Brotherhood.”

Zoron sat there in stunned silence for a moment until Sarin continued.

“They’ve transferred a host of lackeys who are Force-sensitive close to Aurora. Guess what is in Aurora’s orbit?” Sarin nodded as understanding flashed across Zoron’s face. “Exactly. Eos. The seat of the Brotherhood. They’ve been dipping their fingers into Brotherhood politics by positioning their chosen elite close to the Dark Council. The two of them maneuvered promotions and assignments so that Astatine himself has been placed as the Deputy Grand Master. He’s now had the power to start assigning more and more sycophants to high positions in the Brotherhood, all drawn from Fleet officers who are loyal or, at the least, beholden to Ronin and Astatine.”

Zoron’s mouth was hanging open as he tried to process the significance of this. “But, the Fleet, the Brotherhood … they’re supposed to be independent! We’ve had cross-over, certainly, look at you and me for example, but the Fleet can’t rule the Brotherhood!”

“You’re seeing the beginning of the issue. Those of us still with authority in the Fleet who still believe in the original treaty between the Brotherhood and Ronin have been working to safeguard against this for some time now. I can’t explain everything to you, but just know that there will be a number of unpleasant surprises in the coming weeks.”

Zoron stood abruptly. “Let me help, I’m willing to go wherever you need me.”

“I need you to stay right here and play along as a good little soldier. Withdraw yourself from Brotherhood activity and protect yourself. Do whatever it takes to convince the Fleet that you have no interest in the Brotherhood. I need you to stay in the good graces of Fleet command. Denounce me when the time comes.”

“How will I know when the time comes?”

Sarin’s voice came through clearly in his mind, even though his mouth didn’t move. *You will know.*

Zoron nodded and stood again. Sarin did as well.

“Sar, I’m proud to call you a Brother. I will not betray you. You can count on me to follow your instructions.”

“I know Z, I know.” The two men embraced quickly before Zoron opened the door to check for any observers. Seeing it was clear, he waved Sarin through before leaving himself a moment later. He returned to the party with a heavy weight on his mind.

**21 ABY**

**Victory-class Star Destroyer *Aggressor,* Emperor’s Hammer Aggressor Strike Force**

**Mess Hall**

“Sithspit! Look at the holonews!”

Zoron snapped his head around and read the headline splashed across the screen. It read simply:

*Sarin declared Enemy of the Empire*

The entire mess hall was on its feet. Nearly every one of these men had served with Sarin in some capacity, and even those who hadn’t known him personally at least respected him in his role as Executive Officer of the Fleet.

The news kept scrolling and Zoron scrambled to get close enough to hear the holocaster.

”… Grand Admiral Ronin today released this statement: ‘It is with a heavy heart that I regrettably inform you that former Sector Admiral Khaemeir Sarin has betrayed the Fleet. He has committed high treason against the Fleet and has been at the center of an operation aimed at skimming funds from the Fleet coffers. As such, he has been declared an Enemy of the Empire. Thankfully, with the help of my most trusted advisors and operatives, the Fleet prevented any great loss and he fled out of Emperor’s Hammer territory with little more than the clothes on his back. Even now, our forces are tracking him and will soon bring him to justice.’ With that, we will be now presenting a shocking exposé that will reveal the dark secrets that this former high-ranking officer had been hiding…”

Zoron turned away from the screen, shocked by this revelation. He had *known* Sarin. No way that he’d…

*Z. It is time. I will contact you again when it is safe to join me.*

As Sarin’s voice popped back into his head, he remembered the conversation from his engagement party. Recalling the last of Sarin’s instructions to him, he spoke up. Initially, he was just loud enough for the few crew near him to hear, but as his resolve grew, he raised his voice.

“We have all been betrayed. Betrayed by a man we all trusted! He tried to break this Fleet. He tried to put our families and our homeworlds in danger! We must contact Fleet HQ and request to join the hunt. Of all the ships in this Fleet, we should be trusted with the task of hunting this traitorous dog down. We know him best, we can find him!”

His fervent rant was met by a handful of hard stares, but many of the newer crewmembers took the bait. Even for their respect of the man, they could easily be swayed, especially with Ronin’s words moments earlier still echoing. Jeers and shouts sprung up against Sarin, and Zoron smiled. Not at the hatred of this man that he trusted above all others, but at the fact that he had just fulfilled Sarin’s last directive to him.

Without knowing it, the message from Sarin was the last time that Zoron would ever hear the voice of his friend alive.