

Hanger Bay
Defiant II
Deep Space
Kiast System

The shuttle bearing Maximus Alvinus and Len Iode arrived on time, as expected. The pilots of Tython Squadron stood erect, at attention, in two neat rows. Behind them were the battered and damaged fighter craft left unceremoniously on the deck. Mauro Wynter and Silvia Tanos walked briskly to meet the Director and Executor of Satele Shan.

“Gentlemen, thank you for coming under such...circumstances.” Wynter said slowly. Len Iode and Silvia Tanos locked eyes, uneasily as they were about the preceding events. Maximus waved him off. “Nonsense, why one of our units goes rogue on an unsanctioned mission and greatly veers from the rules of engagement I believe coming to pay a visit is in order.” Maximus and Wynter locked arms, in a friendly embrace that came naturally after years and wars shared together.

Len Iode, matter of fact and disciplined as always was quick to interject, Tanos nodded, agreeing with the Chiss’ assessment. “We have little time it appears, Wynter you informed us that you had some very delicate information for our ears only, shall we dismiss Tython?” he asked politely although all parties knew it was more of a command than a suggestion.

The human nodded to Tanos, who dismissed the pilots back to their stations. The four remained alone on the flight deck. The discussion began in earnest. “Sirs, as you may know Arconan territory has been assaulted by mercenary forces. The smuggling efforts and stolen ships from Kiast appear to be a linked event. We gained credible intelligence that the Maelstrom Corsairs are in league with the mercenaries that hit Arcona.” He paused, collecting his thoughts and trying to be succinct. “Furthermore, these forces are being paid by the Inquisitorius and equipped by elements of the Shipwright’s Guild.”

Maximus and Len looked at each other skeptically. “And what is their ultimate objective of such a move? The Inquisitorius has been trying to find our location for some time now. If they are in league with the Shipwright’s Guild why haven’t we been attacked yet?” asked Iode.

Tanos took her cue to offer her assessment. “Gentlemen, we do not believe the entire Shipwright’s Guild is involved. If it were, such an attack would have been forthcoming while we were engaged over Nancora. Our intelligence suggests that the force we engaged in the Unknown Regions was readying to move on Kiast once the Shipwright’s Guild acted. With this force knocked out, it may send them to ground or speed up their timetable.” She finished, nearly exasperated, highly out of character for the Zabrak.

The Executor and Director nodded, and turned to leave. “Very well. I am prepared to forgive your blatant disregard for the chain of command and official orders. Ironically, we have a meeting with the leader of the Shipwright’s Guild in two hours. Tython has one hour to get back

to Sky Breach and put operatives in the streets to find solid leads. I fear there will be rain today.” Maximus stated. Tanos and Wynter looked at each other, puzzled before Len could finish the exchange. “Rain indeed.”

The Foundry

Shipwright’s Guild Territory

Daleem

Kiast System

The industrial behemoth that is the Shipwright’s Guild owned many shipyards, dry-docks, and assembly plants. None were as massive and modernized as the Foundry. Funded in part by large grants by the Empress herself, it was a mark of pride for the Vitali Empire and a promising step towards increasing the prestige of the imperium. If the Empress had only known how twisted it had become.

A lone, slender, man stalked the dim, murky, fire and smoke choked corridors leading to the largest dock at the Foundry. This area was normally teeming with thousands of workers and draftsmen. Today, only two stood astride this work of engineering. “You are late Valenforge. Is something troubling you?” asked the hooded man.

Glav Valenforge, leader of the Shipwright’s Guild was always troubled these days. He had made a deal with the devil, and he knew it. He despised the man in front of him. He feared him more. “Xaro Nym. Grand Inquisitor. You know exactly what is troubling me. Word from our forces in the Unknown Regions. Our staging area has been attacked by a joint Arconan and Odanite strike force. They know something is up. We must call it off. Some of our best assets were neutralized.”

The Twi’Lek looked at Glav incredulously. “And what do I care about mercenaries and your thoughts? This changes nothing. We move up our timetable. I have instructed our forces to strike today. The Jedi are close to finding out our plans. What do you think will become of you if they do? We win or we die. I lost my apprentice Taril Hron during that attack, so do not speak to me about losses.”

Valenforge was crestfallen. He was clearly in well over his head. He held himself together, and looked defiantly at the Sith. “If I go down for this so do you, Nym. Remember, we are in this together. You need me too. Once the Guild replaces the Vitali Empire as the dominant force in Kiast you will have a technocracy able to be the forge for the Iron Throne.”

The Sith smiled as he turned to leave. “The Iron Throne? No simple one, this is not for the Iron Throne. This is for me. This is for revenge. This is for the Inquisitorius.”

Streets of Daleem

Shipwright’s Guild Territory

Daleem

Kiast System

The crowded streets and thoroughfares that lead to the sprawling Shipwright's Guild industrial complex were the true underbelly of Daleem. Whereas the Vitali Empire praised itself as being a beautiful and graceful harmony of elegant nature and pristine technology the truth was not so simple. The wealth and opulence that the Empress and her court relied on came from the sweat and toil of the poor masses and the mass influx of refugees that came penniless to Daleem.

Tiberio Vez sat atop the roof of a cantina, and looked over his field display. He had assault teams of mercenaries spread far and wide. They were readied at all crossings and strong points. The streets were a veritable killing field ready to be triggered at his order. His order had yet to come. And so he waited, and he listed for the communications traffic to set his plan in motion.

During the past hour several small groups of outsiders had entered his domain. They were good, the Odanites. But their pride gave them away. They walked with purpose and their movements were too measured, too well cared for. The Devorian was ready for blood. He was ready to get paid.

His band of mercenaries were an effective bunch. The Maelstrom Corsairs were the best killers and pirates that money could buy. They took pride in killing and they took pride in taking down ships. What a pity that most of their recent work were insider jobs. He sighed heavily. Being handed Shipwright's Guild vessels under the guise of hijacking was insulting but it was necessary. The Empress had powerful friends in the Jedi and the spacecraft of the OEF. Fighting them would be a challenge of a lifetime.

When the call came he was ready. Tiberio got on his radio and dialed in the position of the Odanite operatives prowling the streets. In a few minutes it would all be over, hopefully, and the next phase of the attack could occur. He had always said that the plan was a mistake in some ways. They should move on the Empress. Removing her would cause a power vacuum they could exploit. But alas.

"Vez here, give our friends a warm welcome. Do not let them escape back to Sky Breach Base. If they can regroup we will have to fall back on the Foundry. All teams go. Lets kill us some Jedi today Corsairs. Bring the rain." And with that, the long awaited death of the Odanite interlopers had begun.

Guildmaster's Quarters
Shipwrights' Guild
Daleem

Kiast System

Glav Valenforge sat uneasily in his luxurious hardwood chair, behind a well appointed matching desk. His view of the skyline of Daleem was unimpeded, myriad airships and space faring vessels leisurely flew by. *They* were late. As the leader of the largest commercial enterprise within the Vitali Empire, Valenforge was not accustomed to waiting. The Imperial family never made *him* wait.

The Sephi's secretary knocked on the door hesitantly. "Guildmaster, your noon appointment has arrived." The woman's voice was high pitched, giving away her unease. "Very well. See *them* in. Please inform *them* that they are late." Director Maximus Alvinus and Executor Len lode strode in purposefully, men not used to being fetched by mere industrialists. As *guests* of the Vitali Empire, however, the forces of Satele Shan were public servants and had to adhere.

"Guildmaster, good afternoon. Our apologies for being detained. We humbly seek your forgiveness. We thank you for sharing your information with us regarding the Maelstrom Corsairs and the lost cargo of the *Kesaret*. We had initially assumed our assault on their stronghold had crippled the pirates, but you have evidence to the contrary?" Director Alvinus stated as contritely as he could under such conditions.

The Sephi glared at his secretary as she slinked out of the office. He reluctantly turned to face the Human and Chiss, trying to avert his look of disdain. "Yes, all that we have been over. You have killed many a corsair. Yet, my cargo ship has never been returned and its valuable cargo is missing. The question lies in this conundrum. Where exactly is my cargo and where is my cargo ship?"

Len lode cut off his Director before tempers could flare. The methodic Chiss was accustomed to using logic to his advantage. "We too have pondered this. It appears that the Maelstrom Corsairs could have sold your cargo and moved it off-system. However we have our best pilots scouring the system in our best fighter-craft. If anything can be..." he was cut off abruptly by an upturned hand of Glav Valenforge.

The Sephi glared defiantly at the Chiss. "lode, do me the favor of honesty. I know that your men detained a vessel earlier this year containing my prized cargo of advanced fighter-craft. You impounded it, and have failed to find any intelligence. What exactly are your forces doing in the Kiast System if you cannot assist the Empress and her subjects? This is unacceptable."

Director Alvinus rose, rage seething. "You forget yourself *Guildmaster*. You indeed helm a conglomerate of three-hundred thousand workers and have the Empress' ear. However...we own the skies. Therefore, how did you hear of a classified detention of a pirate craft that only the most trusted of *my* forces are aware of?"

The Sephi smiled and laughed slightly to himself. Len and Maximus looked at each other incredulously before the Guildmaster answered. "Why, gentlemen, because we both have the same problem. Your trusted JTF Satele Shan is woefully compromised as my Guild. They have

become a den of thieves and traitors. Find my cargo ship and return my cargo, and perhaps we can begin to apprehend our turncoats and fix our leaks.”

Streets of Daleem

Shipwright’s Guild Territory

Daleem

Kiast System

Commander Mauro Wynter and Major Silvia Tanos strode through the narrow corridors of the factory city. It was a hellish maze of cramped alleyways and putrid industrialized streets in an otherwise pristine and majestic landscape. They were one of many small strike teams sent by the Quaestor and Aedile of House Satele Shan to investigate the Shipwright’s Guild holdings. The sheer volume of factories, shipyards, wharfs, warehouses, and industrial complexes were staggering. The task of investigating over a quarter of a million employees was straining the resources of JTF Satele Shan to its core.

Wynter and Tanos had expressed their unease at their current mission. Most of the best pilots and operatives of Tython Squadron were airborne, patrolling the area where the *Kesaret* was last seen and maintaining a presence over where the Corsairs were last encountered. It had occurred to the pair that the Corsairs they had dispatched earlier had been only a small portion of the overall organization. The question of who was pulling their strings and what their true intent was alluded them.

“So, say your theory is right. The guild stole their own cargo and funneled them to the Corsairs. I can follow that logic that Valenforge may be trying to overthrow the Empress by arming elements of the Vitali Empire and bringing in pirates. But, if so, why draw our attention to it?” asked Major Tanos.

Wynter looked at her sympathetically. “Major, the Guildmaster most certainly is not involved, he has too much to lose if a change of regime was to occur. However, with so many members within the guild and the political power it enjoys the Imperial family, the Iron Throne, hell even Black Sun could be behind this. We know for a fact now that us seizing the *Raxanna’s Remorse* and the taking of the *Kesaret* are linked. We simply do not know...” he was cut off by the sound of rapid laser fire.

Tanos knocked him to the ground, shielding him from the blaster fire. “Damn, I knew it was a mistake not to take in an armed escort.” Offered Tanos. The Director himself had ordered no military assets were to molest the guild’s holdings. JTF Satele Shan did not want the suspicions become widely known. The pair looked around, and saw many hostile looking workers scurry to their homes and places of work. Commander Wynter keyed on his comms. “This is Bravo cell. We are under small arms fire. How copy all?”

Savant Aaleeshah answered immediately. “Commander, monitoring your position from deep space. Alpha, Charlie, and Delta cells have made contact with hostiles as well. Their comms are

being jammed. It is a small miracle I was able to amplify our signal to reach you. We have dispatched a call for JTF ground forces to come to your aid but you are alone for the next few hours. We have company ourselves and..."

Garbled static roared through his comms. "This is madness. The Shipwright's Guild is trying to kill us?" asked Major Tanos. Wynter shook his head. "Factory workers aren't killers. A coordinated take-down like this? No, something else. We need to make it back to Sky Breach Base. We need to pull our men out. Hopefully we can make it back while JTF Satele Shan still exists."

Their talk was silenced as a large crowd of gunslingers descended from an alleyway taking aim and firing coordinated but hurried fire. The two locked eyes and nodded. They had prepared for an ambush. "Suppressive burst?" asked Tanos. Wynter nodded as he began to charge directly into the enemy fire, firing blindly. In an instant, Tanos lobbed a satchel of grenades into the alleyway as hard as she could. Wynter veered right and dove hard to the deck, shielding himself behind a low wall as the grenades went off with a massive bang. The alleyway was shredded, the enemy had not seen it coming due to training their fire on the quickly running Human. The blast had scared many curious onlookers and would be partisans away.

"Tanos, run. Lets hope most of the other cells make it back too. With limited comms we cant counterattack. We cant fight our way out. Run."

Central Cloister
Sky Breach Base
Daleem
Kiast System

Raider Chrome sat angrily behind his console within the Cloister. As a matter of protocol several members of Tython Squadron had to remain behind at Sky Breach when operations were being conducted. Chrome had drawn the short straw. Knights Ethan Martes, Zeline Nemesis, and Sia Thianos ran in, spattered in blood and thoroughly out of breathe.

"What the hell is this?" asked Chrome. No words were uttered, the assembled Knights sharing a look of shame. "Chrome, we made it out but..." Zeline looked down, hiding a pained look.

Chrome, a renown and experienced veteran knew *that* look. He was so busy monitoring the fighters in orbit that he failed to follow the ground teams. He saw the rapid movements of the cells in the streets of Daleem and the growing hordes of those chasing them. "Should we call in JTF Shan security teams?" asked Martes. Chrome shook his head. "We can only trust our own on this. Get Alvinus and Iode, *now*."

Deep Space Kiast System

The Maelstrom Corsairs appeared out of nowhere, at least so it appeared. From behind the asteroid fields and voids of the impenetrable nebula that was Kiast, a make-shift armada formed up to the horror of the Odanite pilots. So few against so many.

Aaleeshah was undeterred, indeed she had been expecting something of this sort since Tython Squadron had returned from the Unknown Regions. The fact that she was unable to signal for help was less reassuring. She was not alone, however. Some of the best pilots in Kiast flew with her.

“It is no good Aaleeshah. We are pulling back. Unless you can establish comms with the OEF and get the entire Navy scrambled we are pulling back to Sky Breach. Whatever is jamming us shouldn’t be able to affect the Central Cloister. We need to get back immediately,” stated Mar Sul. The Tactical Officer was right, and Aaleeshah knew it. “Damn,” she muttered to herself.

She formed up with the four other Tie Defenders of the patrol mission. A small part of her wanted them to make a run at largest enemy ship, confident that whatever was jamming them was stationed aboard. Aaleeshah liked the pilots’ odds against the ancient Acclamator-class Assault ship. Through the Force she sensed that Tyraal, Talis, and Jafits Skrumm felt the same way. Only Mar Sul and Kasula Daegella felt a sense of foreboding as they formed up.

Biting her lip she continued to monitor the enemy flotilla. Surely, an Acclamator and a pair of Mauraders were not so ominous, as old and primitive as they were. Surely, they would be piloted by rag tag crews of scum. Before she could finish rationalizing things to herself, her heart sank to the pit of her stomach.

“Full speed to Sky Breach, now! We may need to buy the orbital platform crew time to evacuate!” The rest of the team understood instantly what Aaleeshah meant as their displays illuminated several large signatures. From behind the Acclamator three Carrack-class light cruisers and a pair of Strike-class medium cruisers flickered into being, and began launching dozens of fighter-craft.

Streets of Daleem Shipwright’s Guild Territory Daleem Kiast System

The pair ran for their lives, lurching headlong down the dank and narrow alleyways. Blaster-fire rained down on them from the rooftops and scattered from windows and porches along the thoroughfare. These were shots of opportunity, not coordinated fire like those that had taken them by surprise initially. Wynter crouched against a low wall, pulling Silvia towards him and

bringing her to a stop. Their hearts were pounding and they were out of breathe. "You may have been right Tanos, perhaps the Guildmaster was behind this afterall. The Guild has security forces to patrol the streets. Why are they nowhere to be seen?" asked Wynter. It was a rhetorical question that the Zabrak did not answer. Her porcelain, fair skin gave off a cold and clammy glow.

They had been moving back towards Sky Breach Base for over an hour. Something was indeed wrong. Why had no friendly forces come to their aid unless other threats had forced them back to hold Sky Breach. Could things truly be so dire? He snapped out of his wildly racing thoughts as Tanos grabbed his arm, forcefully.

"We need to move. All we have to do is make it over the next barricade and we will be within the base perimeter. Come on," she demanded. The two made it to their feet and began to run when they saw several flashes of light in the far distance. *Lightsabers*. "We still have men out here, we have to provide cover fire," Wynter declared. The two ran *towards* the sounds of battle and carnage and took up position against adjacent walls, and began to spray fire at all that entered the killzone.

In the distance, the familiar faces of Junazee and Korroth were covering the escape of Tex, Chasse Ordin, and Dael Provect. The three were badly injured, and could barely be considered walking wounded. "Thanks for the cover fire, Commander, I will get these two home. There is a Sith up ahead. If it wasn't for Korroth and Junazee getting to us..," Dael directed the others back towards Sky Breach Base.

Wynter took mental stock of his personnel, all of his pilots were accounted for. Korroth and Junazee needed to pull back, or else be overrun by the swarming numbers of mercenaries. It was majestic to behold the Pau'an and Miraluka striking down foes like a scythe through chaff. Far ahead, a single crimson blade was making its way through the mob towards the two Jedi. Wynter knew the Twi'Lek that owned *that* blade.

Heedless to the danger, Wynter ran forward, "Juna, Korroth, rally to me," he ordered. The two slowly formed a semi circle, providing protection and fighting back to back. The calm disposition and serene facial expressions of the Jedi gave Wynter hope and put steel in his wavering resolve. Before they could make their escape, the Sith was finally upon them.

"Perfect. Just perfect. I can avenge my apprentice in one swoop. Such a pity you won't live to see your friends die and your cities burn," sneered the Twi'Lek. Xaro Nym reached out with the Force, and sent the three of them tumbling backwards. Silvia Tanos stepped forward into the void, and took careful aim at the powerful Grand Inquisitor. She fired off several shots, undaunted, allowing the others to regain their footing.

Wynter watched in slow motion. Time simply stopped. He could faintly make out what was happening in front of his eyes as the Sith strode powerfully forward and slashed at the Zabrak officer, sending her sprawling in torrent of blood and gore. She was gone. His mind went black.

Central Cloister
Sky Breach Base
Daleem
Kiast System

Maximus Alvinus stood hunched over a console. He did not speak. Words were simply not necessary between him and Chrome. The blood was strong in both of them. Both seethed with anger. Both wanted nothing more than to charge from the gates and unleash carnage on the streets of Daleem. *That was a different time, a different place*, thought Alvinus.

His command was in bad shape, and he knew it. The stragglers of Tython Squadron were limping in from the streets, more dead than alive. He had lost contact with both Kiast and the OEF. He had barely made it back from the meeting with Glav Valenforge when the first shots rang out. He very seldom felt so powerless.

“Director, wounded coming in,” declared Sia Thiano, as several security personnel helped push stretchers into the makeshift triage center. Dael Provect hobbled forward, embracing Alvinus before he sat down with exhaustion. Tex and Chasse were badly injured. Chrome stepped forward and asked what they all were thinking, “Where are the others?”

As if on queue, Korroth and Junazee walked in, relying on each other for support. Behind them came a Human carrying the bloodied and battered body of a Zabrak woman. Chrome backed away, knowing what was to come. He had never seen his old friend Wynter with such a blank look on his face. He gently placed the lifeless body of Silvia Tanos on a briefing table before turning to address the Director. “Where was our ground support?”

Alvinus sensed the sheer endless depths of Wynter’s sadness and rage. “Mauro...I am so sorry...”, he was cut off by the repeated demand, “Where was our ground support?”

Before he could offer an answer Wynter was upon him, showering him with brutal fists to the head. Chrome was the only one who dared pull the two apart as Wynter howled with rage before letting out a slow cry. “Alvinus, where was our ground support?”

Security guards rushed into the room before being pushed back by Ethan Martes and Zeline, who gripped their sabers in confusion. “Stand down, all of you,” ordered Alvinus. He grabbed Wynter powerfully by the scruff, “Mauro, I am so sorry...we had other priorities. We simply did not have the manpower to retake the streets, hold Sky Breach, and protect her too.”

Without asking he knew what was left unsaid. The JTF Shan ground forces had left them to die. They had been left to die so the Empress could live. Their soldiers were protecting the Summer Palace. And Silvia Tanos, Major of the OEF, was dead.

Imperial Gardens
Summer Palace
Daleem
Kiast System

The Maelstrom Corsair ground forces had stormed the gates of the Summer Palace easily. The Vitali guards were more ceremonial than function, they hardly put up a fight. Tiberio Vez paused to establish communications with Glav Valenforge and report their progress. "Guildmaster, it is done. Your plan *was* perfect. Nym took the bait and charged against the Jedi. Guess his desire to avenge Taril Hron and kill her murderers overcame his better judgment. That Miraluka is indeed a sight to behold in combat." He paused for a moment, urging a heavy weapons platoon forward.

"We are about to take the Summer Palace. Our intelligence shows she is here. Once she is our hostage the Vitali Empire will bow down to the Shipwrights' Guild. And these pesky Jedi interlopers will be driven out. Today the Empress will be humbled. You may order the invasion when ready." The Devorian was indeed proud of himself. In one fell swoop he had lead the agent of the Inquisitorius to his doom, wounded or killed several Jedi, and was about to take the Vitali Empress into custody.

Moments later the heavy weapons platoon had taken out the Summer Palaces shield and allowed several formations of gunmen to form up prepared to breach the gardens where the Empress was held up. As the Maelstrom Corsairs poured into the garden they realized something was very wrong. Coming across a wounded member of the Vitai Guard, Tiberio stopped to question him. "And where is that bitch Empress of yours, fool?"

The guard, badly bleeding, spit blood as he laughed uncontrollably. "Why, the Empress is on Kiast with her forces."

Before Tiberio could fathom the treachery that had brought him here , hundreds of blasters came to life from every direction. Special Operations Battalion Shan had been unleashed. "Valenforge, we have been caught. We must abort. The..." His communications uplink to the Guildmaster was drowned out by the arrival of a squadron of LAAT/i. He gave the order to pull back to the Shipwrights' Guild territory instantly. "This changes nothing," Tiberio murmured to himself, "time is on *our* side."

Guildmaster's Quarters
Shipwrights' Guild
Daleem
Kiast System

Glav Valenforge sighed heavily. The news of the death of Xaro Nym had been truly spectacular. He could now be done with the fake persona of a cowardly beaurocrat and show his true colors as a methodical and calculated leader. While it was true the Inquisitorius had provided ample funding and the strategy to most rapidly acquire military might, he had been undone by his own limitations. He simply never expected Valenforge to be less scrupulous than a Sith.

For indeed it was the Guildmaster's plan to hold the Empress hostage and take down the Vitali Empire. It was indeed his plan to become the single most powerful person within Kias, not just the most wealthy or politically connected. He had amassed a an army and an armada on his own accord, and had played the Sith like a fiddle.

"This changes nothing," he repeated the words that Xaro Nym had tried to intimidate him with. He acknowledged the coded message from the *Shadow of Kesaret*, the Acclamator above. *His* flagship. The vessel containing sixteen thousand loyal soldiers waiting to make blood run in the streets in order to overthrow the anachronistically backwards Vitali Empire. *Time was on their side*. He simply needed his forces to hold the Foundry complex as a landing pad to offload his army. He simply needed his armada to smash the few craft the Odanites had available. He could better do this from the bridge. He prepared a coded message to Tiberio Vez. "Defend the Foundry until massive reinforcements arrive. Counterattack when possible. Good luck, *Commandant Vez.*"

Sky Breach Platform

Daleem Orbit

Kias System

The remaining crew aboard the platform were hurrying to the few shuttles and space-ready craft that were scattered across the delapidated hanger-bays. Never designed as a battle station, the platform had little in the way of defenses and the small command center barely had enough tactical displays for the Tython Squadron pilots to observe the pending chaos. Still, they remained and hoped to buy enough time to finish the evacuation.

"All maintenance crews are accounted for. It is too dangerous to use the space-elevator under these conditions we will have to provide escort planet-side for the shuttles," commented Talis DeMorte as he finished reviewing the passenger logs.

Mar Sul was frantically scanning the display in front of him, and wondering how long the *Defiant-II* could hold off the coming armada. While not an easy engagement, the enemy was only sending the two Maurader-class corvettes forward. The grisled warrior had a hunch what *this* meant.

"We have a choice. Either we let those shuttles go on their own or we stay and help the *Defiant* against those ships. They have us in a holding pattern. If we move forward they check us with

the corvettes and move around with their fleet escorts. Plus, if we engage then the Acclamator will rush to make landfall. Where is the damn Fleet?" he asked to no one in particular.

Aaleeshah was busy herself, trying frantically to open channels with the OEF and the Central Cloister. "It doesn't look good Mar. The OEF Fleet is still in retrofit from the war against the Collective and I can't hail them. The *Seher* and *Proxea Mustirion* are on their way but they won't be able to handle that flotilla alone."

As if on cue, four reserve pilots rushed into the command center. Talis recognized two of them, Mair Sal and Lyra Narix. They had come highly recommended by Major Tanos and had recently rotated off of Flare Squadron from the *Seher*.

The Umbaran spoke first, defiantly. "We aren't leaving on those damn shuttles. The Hegemon is fueled up and ready to launch. She won't stand a chance against those corvettes but she can escort our crews to the surface. The Ties are old, but they can shoot," offered Mair.

It took a few seconds before anyone acknowledged her impertinence. Mar Sul looked over from his console. "Fine. Launch immediately. We will cover the Defiant-II. Hopefully we can knock out those corvettes and buy some time for the *Seher* and *Proxea* to arrive. That's better odds than we have now. Tython, prepare to launch."

Central Cloister
Sky Breach Base
Daleem
Kiast System

Maximus Alvinus was hopeful for the first time all day. Junazee was deep in conversation, trying to coax Wynter out of his shock at the death of Major Tanos. Korroth, meanwhile was tending to the wounded. He did not show it, but he too was deeply saddened by the loss of Tanos. She had led a hard life and deserved better. He swore he would not let her die in vain.

The news from Daleem had cheered him. The trap he had sprung on the Maelstrom Corsairs had done the trick. The enemy was rapidly falling back to defend the Foundry and were under effective siege. It would amount for nothing if the enemy flagship landed and unleashed its cadre of thousands of trained mercenaries. The streets would run red with blood.

He finally rose from the communications array to deliver orders. "Odanites. We are up against a wall here. The *Defiant-II* has just gone down with all hands. The few Tython pilots that are airborne are directing in the *Seher* and *Proxea*. That beautiful bitch took those corvettes with her but unless help arrives shortly we will begin to be bombarded from orbit by the Acclamator's escorts. We have one chance only. All available pilots get airborne now. The Hegemon has just landed. Chrome, Junazee, and Korroth take your fighters and rendezvous with the rest of the team. Mauro, take the helm of the Hegemon and lead Tython in harassing

the enemy flotilla. Our big guns will be on station within the hour. Hopefully, that is enough time.”

Mauro was shaken from his stupor. “Alvinus, you know as well as I do that is a suicide mission for all of us. What good will the Seher and her escort be against those Carracks and Strikes?” he asked, dumbfounded.

Alvinus looked at him, and sighed heavily. “Launch now, and you will see.”

Remembrance of Seher Daleem Orbit Kiast System

Arcia Cortel stood on the bridge of the MC-40 and studied the enemy forces. Four squadrons of X-wings were inbound from the Strike-class medium cruisers as a line of Carracks formed up to fire on the Seher and the Proxea. Tython Squadron flew close to the CR-90, and prepared to engage the enemy fighter-craft.

The coded message from Maximus Alvinus had arrived moments ago, giving Cortel pause. “Time, we need to buy time.” The bridge crew was frantically locking on targets, and gunnery trajectories were being dialed in at the nearest Carrack.

The enemy ships were pressing in, creating separation from the Acclamator. It was a race against time for the assault ship to make landfall before the Foundry was taken. Both sides knew this would be the final engagement.

Cortel was sombered by the loss of the Nebulon-B that they had so recently captured from the Maelstrom Corsairs. She barely knew the makeshift crew that had rapidly been assembled to operate her, but the loss of so many trained OEF personnel was a crippling loss. “Standby for impact.”

The incoming fire was withering, and strained the MC-40’s shields. At least the *Proxea* is being neglected, she thought. Indeed, it made little difference. The Seher was the only ship that mattered to the enemy, for her loss would essentially end the battle. “We need more time,” she stated again to herself. The enemy fire continued.

The Seher locked on the nearest Carrack with all batteries and tore a massive gash in her port side. Tython Squadron made an attack run, and unleashed a torrent of missiles. Escape pods began to rain down as the Proxea’s laser turrets swept them from the sky. The enemy X-wings broke off their attack run on the Seher to target the CR-90, and Tython’s Tie Defenders and the few auxiliary Tie/Ins from the Hegemon engaged at close quarters.

One of the Strike-class medium cruisers was now inbound to cover the hole that the Carrack had left in the enemy line. The plan was working. Arcia simply hoped Alvinus' message was correct. Soon it would be all over unless help arrived.

Over the comm system a familiar voice hailed the *Seher*. "All forces pull back and form up on the *Seher*."

Len Iode's voice had never sounded sweeter. Arcia looked at the tactical display as a massive vessel emerged from the rear of the enemy formation, and dozens of laser batteries came to life. "Time indeed," stated Arcia to herself, "time indeed."

The bridge crew cheered loudly as a Vindicator-class heavy cruiser was acknowledged on the IFF system. The Strike cruiser escorting the *Acclamator* was reduced to slag within moments. The enemy Carracks and the remaining Strike began firing wildly, unsure of what to do. From the far side of Daleem another friendly craft was signaling the *Seher*.

"This is the *Harakoa*, we have target lock on the enemy fighters. *Seher*, give those Carracks hell." The CR-90 raced to take up formation abreast the *Proxea* and provided cover fire for Tython Squadron as they straffed the remaining Strike cruiser with another barrage of missiles. The tide had turned.

Bridge Shadow of Kesaret Daleem Orbit

Glav Valenforge sat, stunned, as his bridge crew rapidly rushed about combating fires. Shields were holding, but barely. The enemy Vindicator cruiser was bearing down on them with impressively accurate and punishing fire.

"Guildmaster, Commandant Vez is hailing us from the Foundry. The enemy ground forces have broken through. We have no landing pad. Your orders?" came the First Lieutenant's briefing.

The Sephi was silent, as he waved the officer off. "This changes nothing. Launch all troop carriers now. Send them to the alternative drop zones. Daleem will burn."

He frantically keyed coded commands into his datapad. Nothing. A familiar voice began echoing from the bridge's communications array. "Valenforge. If you are hearing this I am dead. Do you think I was not prepared for death? Sadly I couldn't let your plans come to fruition. I am afraid your fall-back plan will not go smoothly. I had your self-destruct sequences scrambled. How does it feel to have your dreams dashed and your forces crippled?"

Nym. He always liked to have the last word, *didn't* he? The thought lingered in Valenforge's mind as the enemy laser fire battered the Acclamator. He didn't have time to ponder, as the bridge was soon engulfed in flames.

The Foundry
Shipwright's Guild Territory
Daleem
Kiast System

The battle torn industrial landscape was marred by craters and the debris of war. OEF soldiers were busy rounding up the surrendering Maelstrom Corsairs and Guild security forces. The mop-up efforts were going as planned.

Alvinus surveyed the landscape as Len Iode and Mauro Wynter approached him. They said nothing for a very long time. They were lucky to be alive. Satele Shan was lucky to have survived.

"You could have said something," said Wynter, more a question than a statement. Alvinus and Iode faced him, and offered nothing in turn.

Soon all of the Jedi and other members of Satele Shan formed up on the Foundry, most were too fatigued and battle worn to speak.

"I know. I should have, perhaps," said Alvinus softly. The gamble had paid off. The Director should have been satisfied. He was not.

"At least it worked. But at what cost?" asked Wynter. His old friend turned to Iode, and held onto him for support. "This was our insurance policy wasn't it? Is this what we have become? The defenders of the downtrodden, and now we are a militarized force. Is this what the Vitali wanted?"

Alvinus finally turned to face his two friends. "No, I doubt it is. But it is what the Empire needed. The Empress has taken direct control over the Shipwrights' Guild. Such a powerful and well funded industrial complex was too great a threat to operate freely. You and your men did their duty, and that is enough. Shan did its duty, and perhaps that is enough. We defended Kiast and saved it from open warfare. That is enough. For now." The three walked silently towards the assembled Odanites as the sun rose over Daleem.