

Command Bridge O.E.F.S. (Odanite Expeditionary Force Ship) *Solari* Kiast Orbit

The bridge hummed with activity and electronics as the turbolift doors opened. The lone occupant stepped out surveying the white and brightly illuminated space before him. Kenneth lode had been off of the Empire's leash for many years now, however the Mon Calamari design still felt odd to him. No sunken pits to demand looking up to superiors. Subdued grey panels and walls. Those were still what he felt a bridge should be like.

The bridge is not normally my place, the pilot thought.

Today it was. The former Imperial had drawn desk duty today acting as the coordinator between the wing of fighters attached to the *Solari*, the ship's Captain and Commodore of the *Solari* Battle Group. Tugging on his uniform tunic, and checking that his rank bar was set properly, lode strode to the *Solari*'s Captain luzan'favi, a Twi'lek, who was seated in her command chair. The officer's heels clicked together as he came to attention, eliciting a twitch of the senior officer's lekku.

"Commander Kenneth lode, reporting in ma'am"

The middle aged twi'lek nodded. "Thank you Commander. The staff briefing will be in ten minutes. Until then, assume your post."

"Yes ma'am." The human stepped back and angled himself smartly towards the console. Next to his station was CommScan and Bridge Flight Control. Ken nodded respectfully to his fellow officers who returned the gesture. Taking his seat, the officer began reviewing the current status of the Four Squadrons that made up the Wing.

For the briefing, the pilot wrote down the location, status, and assignment onto his datapad.

Raava is at point oh-five holding steady. Status: Green. Conducting standard patrol to cover rear starboard flank.

Valkyrie is at point oh-seven. Status: Green. Conducting standard patrol to cover rear port flank.

Celestia is at oh-one. Status: Blue. Conducting coordination practice with Solari gunnery crews. Will return to patrol at 1035h shipboard.

And Avenger is scouting 500 km ahead of us. Status: Yellow. Actively scouting.

"Attention all personnel," the Captain's voice echoed through the ship, "*Battle stations, this is not a drill. All department heads, report to the briefing room immediately.*"

Quickly, all of the officers lining the operations area of the bridge headed to the senior officer's briefing room at the rear of the bridge. The dozen or so assembled officers took their seats and

promptly stood as soon as the call to attention came for Captain Iuzan'favi and the Commodore, Vice Admiral Todcar Asptur. As they both moved to the head of the central table, the holoprojector came to life and the lights dimmed.

The Twi'lek Captain was obviously distressed, but Iode was not sure how. "Everyone please take your seats. This was transmitted through the Vatali holonet a few minutes ago."

The holoprojector now showed Commander of the Royal Guard Slynn Keldra stood before what sounded like the Conclave.

"Our Empress has been poisoned." Keldra's voice was distorted by the transmission. *"She is stable, but unresponsive to any of our treatments. I assure you all that the Royal Guard is investigating the matter and will bring the perpetrators to justice."*¹

There were murmurs throughout the briefing room.

"By the will of our Empress, until she regains consciousness, a regent will lead the Vatali in her name. She has decreed that this regent will be..." the Sephi looked as if he were literally gagging on the words. *"The elected High Councillor of Odan-Urr."*²

Silence.

The Captain did her best to hide her concern over the emerging events. "The Council is meeting now to decide what is our next step. Our orders are to deploy our troops to the surface to assist the Royal Guard with crowd control."

"Crowd control?" An Army officer asked from the back of the room.

The Vice Admiral changed the display to a live feed from outside the Voraskel Palace. "A group of protesters have formed around the Imperial Palace. They are saying that Odan-Urr has no right to control the government."

"Before we can deploy however, we need to discuss a disturbing piece of information." The Commodore flicked a switch on the panel in front of his chair. "This meeting is now classified."

The former Imperial sighed at the notion of a classified meeting, luckily the hissing of the hatches sealing masked it. He had attended many in his long career, few had been exciting or engaging. Some kept him up at night.

¹ Dialog is copied from Tipping Point fiction. Original authors: Alethia Archenksova and Aurora "Aura" Ta'var.

² Dialog and associated descriptive writing is copied from Tipping Point fiction. Original authors: Alethia Archenksova and Aurora "Blade" Ta'var.

“We have initial reports from the Royal Guard that OEF personnel on Kiast, Daleem, and Solyiat are already countering the protests, in force.”

There was a look of confusion which spread around the room. Ken was concerned, but intrigued as well.

“All commands have confirmed that only a few dozen of our troops are assisting already. Mostly just those already on patrol when the protests broke out. This counters the numbers SeNet is hearing from their sources.” Asptur rose from his chair. “The Council and the Joint Chiefs are concerned that someone is pretending to be us. To what end, we do not know.”

There was a chill in the room.

Kenneth shattered the silence. “Whoever it is, needs us out of the way.”

The CommScan officer Lieutenant Hals nodded. “My guess would be a power play. We’ve already had how many happen on two of the three planets mentioned?”

The admiral rubbed his shaved chin. “SeNet agrees with you both. That still does not answer where the boots on the ground came from. I want as much intelligence as we can gather on these unknowns. Size, armaments, hell their underwear size if you can while conducting your primary mission.”

Iuzan’favi picked up where the Commodore left off. “To that end, we are assigning C&C elements to the ground to directly coordinate air support and reconnaissance. If something happens, you will move out with the Army’s response team. Commander Iode and Lieutenant Hals, you are to report to the hanger deck with the equipment necessary. You have an hour. Understood?”

“Understood, ma’am.” Both replied.

“Dismissed, and may the Force be with us.”

Two Hours Later

Outpost Echo, Kiast

Ken landed on the surface with a platoon of OEF soldiers, or more aptly peacekeepers. Once the landing ship doors opened, the troops had filed out and joined the Royal Guards on the perimeter of the Voraskel Palace. The pilot stepped out of the craft wearing his piloting gear, helmet in hand, just in case. Lieutenant Hals had not commented on his superior’s gear. Iode was appreciative of that, but he recognized the look the Lieutenant gave him.

The TIE pilot flight suit and ensemble had saved lode many times. He had grabbed extra flight suits and life support components from the quartermaster before he defected. As those parts wore out, the pilot would scavenge on formerly held worlds or check with scrap merchants. The suit's armor, life support and HUD was more than most other piloting gear offered and Ken did not want to give it up. Though with that protection came the looks.

The two men set up the ground control center quickly. They exchanged few words and began their assignment. An hour or so in, Lieutenant Hals looked up from his workstation.

"How could someone who renounced the Empire still wear that helmet and the suit?"

Ken was caught slightly off guard by the question. Most just assumed him defecting was a cover, but Hals seemed interested. "My entire life I was brought up to believe the Imperial military was all you could trust. Not the politicians, not the local law enforcement. Only the Imperial Military. No one was above them, not even their own."

"With all due respect that is simply untrue. I cannot think of how many Admirals and Generals only tried to benefit themselves. Not as many as the politicians perhaps, but they certainly weren't innocent."

The pilot nodded in agreement. "When I was first out of the Academy, just before Yavin, most weren't that way. The military was there to maintain law and order. Combat pirates. Provide aid to those in need." He paused and chuckled, "I worked on a mission with General Organa back when she was still a Senator."

The other officer chuckled. "Really?"

"I was just a Junior Lieutenant, but I was still wingman in her escort flight. Though, as time went on the curtain fell. The attitude of 'take all for yourself at any cost and no matter who gets in the way' trickled through the officer ranks. Abuses of sentients rights, pillaging, murder, these things spread through the ranks like wildfire. That's when I decided to leave."

The Lieutenant asked his original question once more. "But why still wear the uniform?"

"Habit and function. And I suppose the hope for what the Empire was supposed to be."

"HOPE?" Hals blurted, "You equate the Empire to hope?"

Ken chuckled, "Not exactly. It was supposed to end the corruption and bring relief to the Clone Wars ravaged planets. The problem is that the organization allowed and eventually encouraged the same corruption. My hope is one day there will be no corruption, even if we have to burn it away."

The CommScan officer nodded. "An odd way to show it, but I think I understand."

The two men went back to work but the Lieutenant spoke again. "My parents were bystanders until Alderaan. They were afraid of the Empire. They knew the Empire was evil then. They left to fight for the end of its cruel reign. Why didn't you sir?"

The commander stopped working. "I was enamoured with my job. I was blinded by the flashiness. Deep down, I was scared too. Not of rebels, but of what would happen if I did leave. When I finally did, it was the best choice of my life."

They both resumed their work, with one more friend.

After some time, the protesters moved away from the Palace and began pushing into the capital city, blocking traffic and harassing those who stood in their way. A younger Army officer handed the pilot a datapad. Ken read the highlights and keyed his communications equipment.

"Raava Leader, this is Echo Two. Fifth Battalion, Cresh Company needs a scout ahead. Looks like the protesters are trying to route them away from Besh Company. Recommend sending an element."

"Copy, Echo Two. Raava Two on me, Raava Three and Four loop around the left."

"On you sir."

"Got it boss."

"On you Raava Three."

The radio chatter was suddenly drowned out by screaming and several blaster shots that ripped into the sky.

The Commander turned to his fellow Hals. "I'm going to check it out."

"Hurry back, keep your comms open."

The senior officer nodded and put his helmet on, starting a light jog. As he ran behind the responding squad, the former Imperial remembered the last time he was charging on foot into battle. He had been waiting to flying escort for a departing shuttle. Enemy forces had cut him and his wingman off from the landing pad, forcing them to fight their way to another pad two kilometers away. It had been ugly. If not for a infantry squad, they would have gotten killed 100 meters from the platform. There had been others, but that battle was the worst.

Ken and the squad came upon a large group of protesters halted by a squad of male Sephi wearing uniforms the officer did not recognize. A woman was stun-cuffed behind who he assumed was the squad leader. The Odanite popped the strap over his pistol and took cover with the OEF troops.

“You can't do this! We are loyal members of the Empire.” the leader of this group of protester shouted.

The Sephi soldier before them held up a sealed document before them. “The Regent issued a warrant and you must come with us.”

Alethia issued a warrant? The human questioned.

“Or what?” the lead protester responded.

Swiftly the unknown squad aimed and fired in unison. The protestor crumbled to the ground. It was so fast that Ken barely followed it. Screams erupted from the front row and a back to front stampede started, sending troops and civilians into chaos. The hostile squad opened fire and mowed down targets in the crowd Ken was standing next to. All civilian. The OEF Troops left from cover and began charging the hostiles

The former Imperial spoke clearly, surprise in his voice. “Echo Two, requesting assistance. Lock on to my location. Hostile troops engaging the crowd. I repeat, civilians under fire!”

The pilot drew his pistol and fired twice, striking the Sephi who screamed as he went down, wounded. Quickly, the pilot adjusted and fired at the next closest hostile, killing him with a head shot. The hostile squad aimed at the black armor clad pilot. Blaster bolts whizzed past him as he dove behind a stopped speeder. More hits slammed into the vehicle.

OEF troops engaged the distracted hostiles eliminating them. Suddenly a tank rolled around the corner. It was marked with the OEF insignia, but was not one any of the actual OEF troops recognized.

“*Get to cover.*” lode shouted through his helmet amplified voice.

The old pilot and the troops made a hasty retreat to various cover as the tank opened fire on the remnants of the crowd and soldiers. The craft the pilot had just been behind exploding as he and a fireteam took cover in the alleyway they had arrived through. The troops and Ken tried to pulled in as many straggler civilians as they could to into the alley. Meanwhile the ther team tried to draw the tank's fire.

“*Keep running, make a left and don't look back.*” The TIE pilot said each time he pulled someone in.

After what felt like an eternity, but in truth was moments, reinforcements arrived. The fresh troops began engaging the tank, which was getting its own reinforcements.

“Echo two, this is Raava Lead. We see a tank, confirm it’s status.”

Ken peaked around his cover snapping a few shots off at hostiles. “Shoot it!” A wave of bolts slammed into the corner of the building chipping away at their cover.

“Roger, engaging.”

In one pass, a lone X-Wing cleared out the rest of the death squad, ripping through the tank and the reinforcements. Medics ran to drag the wounded to cover as their air support flew another pass to recon ahead.

“Good kill Raava Two.” Ken broke from cover assist in retrieving a nearby wounded soldier, pushing himself to keep up with the medic. As the two moved the man to safety, their radios crackled to life.

“All ground personnel, this is General Grady. Fall back with the protesters, we must maintain a perimeter between them and the mercenaries. All pilots on planet, report to Outpost Echo. Grady out.”

“We’ve got it from here sir. Head back.” The squad sergeant slapped Ken’s shoulder. “May the Force be with you sir.”

“You as well.”

Ken set off back to Outpost Echo telling R3-Y4, his droid, to bring his X-Wing to the outpost.

As he returned to outpost, the pilot saw about a dozen pilots organized into formation. Ken fell into the open place left for him.

“Iode, good you are here.” The outpost commander made his voice louder. The pilots pulled out datapads to take notes. “Let’s get started. Command has tracked a Wing’s worth of troop transports heading for the surface. They have fighter escorts of various types, mostly T-65s and Headhunters. Intel seems to think they are mercenary forces posing as OEF transports.

You all will be Echo Squadron. Your mission is to intercept and destroy as many of these impostor OEF landing ships as possible. If you can, confirm the impostor status intelligence has and where these ships are coming from. You will be on frequency ‘Orbital Aurek’. Questions?”

One of the Sullustian pilots raised his hand. “Who is leader for the temporary squadron?”

The ground commander turned back to the former Imperial. "Commander Iode, you will be in command. Any other questions?"

There were none.

"To your fighters. Stop those transports!"

The pilots broke formation as elements of Raava squadron screamed over head making another attack run. Presumably on more tanks.

The kitbashed squadron was made up of T-70s, A-Wings, and B-Wings from the other squadrons that were assigned to the personnel attached to the ground. In Ken's case, his personal T-70 had just landed. While Ken climbed up the built in ladder, Lieutenant Hals approached.

"Hey sir, Intel update for you." his hand held out a datapad. "Looks bad."

The pilot took the pad, "Thanks. Stay safe down here."

He read the report as he sat down.

From: Office of the Director, JTF Satele Shan

To: Commander, OEF Army Kias District

Early reports confirmed, enemy transports are signaling as OEF friendlies. Visual confirmation required as enemy ship type is not used by OEF.

Kias Military district confirms attacks against civilians and open firefights with OEF Army and Royal Guard units.

Assessment: Unknown mercenary forces are attempting to seed further ill will towards Odanite elements by masquerading themselves with Odanite regalia, symbols, etc. No motive known.

Suggestion(s): Engage enemy forces.

Ken set the channel and keyed his comms as he strapped himself in. "Echo Squadron, our targets are false signaling as OEF. Confirm all targets visually. If it feels wrong. It probably is."

There was a chorus of "yes sir" in reply.

Iode fired up the repulsorlifts and the modern X-Wing lifted off the ground. Its skids retracting as the craft rose. The pilot precisely angled his ship towards the rally point in orbit they would gather at and pushed the throttle.

Go time.

Three Minutes later
Kiast Orbit

The twelve varying fighters of Echo Squadron rose from the capitol world, the system's star directly ahead. Luckily, the enemy was coming from further out so when the squadron would turn to attack the enemy would be blinded. Or so Ken Iode hoped. The three wedges of the squadron altered course toward the approaching dropships, their canopies planetward as they came around the planet.

Before them, Avenger Squadron was approaching from the other direction while the *Solari* was engaging a small fleet of cruisers and corvettes.

Two squadrons of T-70 fighters were screening between the dropships and the two Odanite squadrons.

"All units, shields to double front. Get as close as you can and engage!"