*Aboard the Dreadnaught-class r40* Resolve(IRL: Sorry if all of these ships have names).

*Briefing Room*

*39 ABY*

Raleien had the look of a warrior about him. He was a tall, older Pantoran man with a corpulent build and a receding hairline of thin, neatly combed silver hair. Upon first glance, a thick chest and powerful cerulean arms marked with a patchwork of scars insinuate that Raleien is a man of physical prowess rather than subtle endurance. But a glimpse of deep green eyes set in a hardened, age-creased face suggest a depth of intellect that belies his burly frame. His faded yellow family markings, located on either cheek and constantly visible on a clean shaved face, are minimalist lines which curl around each other in a circular pattern that never quite touch. He is often dressed in simple clothes and lightly armed, but he had a looming presence of a man accustomed to violence.

Therefore, it was no surprise when Raleien had been recruited as a gun-for-hire while frequenting a seedy tavern on Nam Chorios between work. However, he had not expected to end up serving in a reasonably well-organized pirate resistance against equally well-organized remnants of the Imperial regime. He had instead imagined a cabal of well-trained, if poorly disciplined rabble who worked more like mercenaries. In short, he had expected a lot of backstabbing, suspicious scum and villains willing to bare their share of injury or death in pursuit of the next big score.

Raleien had been *mostly* wrong. Oh, there was no doubt that the people he now worked alongside were a heap of nefarious numbskulls at the best of times. Pirates to a tee, united by some common prison escape, with the exception of recruits like Raleien who bolstered their ranks. But his preconceptions about their capabilities had been completely off. Over the three months he had worked with the Revenants as part of a Raider company – their fancy name for heavy infantry – he had come to respect the people he served with. Like any fighting force, misdirected aggression could often lead to fights within the ranks, which was all the more likely among pirates and privateers. But there was also a sense of comradery, of loyalty, that Raleien had now become invested in.

Based on Raleien’s moderate tactical experience, his fighting capability and his past experience, Raleien had been made a squad leader in the company. He would have preferred working alone, but he accepted this leadership even so. He knew he wasn’t suitable to directing the overall battle, let alone leading the entire company. But he had been pleased to be given responsibility for one of the twenty-four weapon’s teams, each comprised of three people. He had become fond of his small team, and though he was still unsure of some members of the company, he had once again found a place in this group. He was a Raider now, through and through. And he would do anything for his team. Even if he still knew next to nothing about the Revenant’s, let alone this Ravager sub-group he was apparently a part of, he would look out for his team and serve this cause. Certainly, beat murdering villagers, like he had done for the Imperials on occasion.

Raleien tensed as he leaned against the outer wall of the briefing room, dark green eyes staring blankly at the opposite wall. Thoughts of his past deeds had only recently started to affect him. In his younger days, thinking about – about *that* – had never been an issue. He was a man who had dedicated himself to the art of soldering, and good soldiers followed orders. It mattered not a wit to him whether the orders had him on the frontlines of a war or whether he got paid. Whether as a Republic soldier or a gun for hire, his commitment to this regimented way of life had eased and nearly erased his conscious. Pulling a trigger was easier said then done, but it was done quite well if you only cared for the mission.

When word had reached Raleien’s company about the impending attack against the Sevarian Principate, they had been mobilized aboard the starship *Resolve*. And that is how they found themselves packed like squabbling Mon Calamari in one of the *Resolve*’s central briefing rooms. They had been ordered to assemble for a mission briefing, and like any reasonably well-oiled military operation, the officers were late. Soldiers in full kit occupied the entire space. Unsurprisingly, an air of anticipation hung like a shroud over the assembled company. People spoke in hushed tones in their assembled squads and platoons, glancing often at the unused command console which would eventually alight and reveal the details of their mission. Junior officers, distinguished by distinct markings on their armor, spoke around the console waiting for the company commander to appear. Everyone from the youngest sprite to the most grizzled veterans in the room stood fingering their weapons, standing in a way which emanated barely contained violence and aggression. A company they may be, but these were still an assembled group of pirates, criminals and thugs. But Raleien supposed if a tool was sharpened, any tool could complete the task of killing.

“Do you think the boss will show up soon?” Iris asked from Raleien’s right side. She was a stout and reliable human woman responsible for their squad’s rocket launcher. She was disapproving of waiting. For a pirate, she was a relative straight shooter. Raleien suspected some soldiery in her own past.

“They can only make us wait so long,” Wredi responded noncommittally on Raleien’s left. He was a Duros man responsible for their shield systems. More of the conventional criminal, he had a dark outlook on life and equally morbid wit to match. But Raleien had seen him in action, and though he was an unconventional fighter, he knew his way around a battlefield.

“You say that, Red,” Iris began, using Wredi’s nickname. “But we’re a bunch of thieves and scoundrels, not some group of Stormtroopers. I bet the boss just got lost in a bottle of liquor.”

Wredi nodded. “I could use a drink right about now.” He reached down to his left leg, removing a flash from the side of his combat boots. Raleien watched but didn’t say anything. He might have been the squad leader, but this wasn’t a military command, just as Wredi said. If the pirate wanted to drink, he could drink.

Wredi popped a swig from the flask and immediately gasped as he lowered it from his lips. Raleien only got a quick smell of the swill inside, but it reminded him of starship fuel and cleaning products. It seemed Iris agreed as she put a hand to her face, covering her crinkled nose.

“What in the damn hell are you drinking, Red?” She asked, her hand muffling her voice.

“’Tis a secret I’ll take to my grave, Iris,” Wredi responded. He winked at Iris and raised the flask in front of him as a salutation, then took another long swig.

“You sure will, Red. I don’t give a damn.”

The buzz of voices suddenly ceased and Raleien looked to the entrance way. The commander strode through the doorway followed closely by a few logistics staff and other attendants. Without a word the crowd of armored bodies parted so he could reach the command console. When he reached the console, he inserted something into an unseen slot. The console came alive, a bright bluish-white light bathing the austere durasteel briefing room in its flickering light. A holographic image of what looked like a fleet layout appeared before them all.

Kird Narrone stood before his company in silence, golden eyes seeming to sweep and penetrate each and every person in the room. A distinct scar was the only notable feature of the Bothan’s otherwise undistinguishable, but hardened face. His hair and clothes were well kept, and he stood with a straight back and arms folded behind his back. Command and purpose radiated from Narrone, and even Raleien felt a sense of assurance being in his presence. Raleien also noticed that the Bothan slightly favoured one leg over the other. Not only was he to direct the battle, but he had also seen battle. That was well.

“So the higher ups have a job for us,” Kird began abruptly.

Someone in the assembled company shouted, “Thanks, captain obvious!”

Kird allowed a small grin. They may have looked like a battle-hardened military unit, but they were still pirates and criminals. Discipline was different here.

“It’s *commander* obvious, thank you,” Kird replied, looking through the crowd. They chuckled at his quip. “But, yes. To my point.”

He pressed a few buttons and the command hologram closed in on the simulated space battle. Among the two fleets, one ship was clearly the *Resolve*, encircled in red. Another in the opposite fleet, which Raleien was assumed was the expected enemy fleet, was circled in red as well. It was located near the back of the group of ships. It looked like one of those ships the old Rebellion had used. Raleien couldn’t remember the name of the ship off-hand. All of this was centered above a planet that Raleien also couldn’t recognize. Might this be a part of a larger operation?

“This here is the *Liparus*,” Kird began again, pointing at what was now undoubtedly the enemy ship of interest. “It’s a Nebulon-B Frigate used by the Principate to help shuttle forces to and from the planet’s surface. Of course, this bird also has teeth, as it knocked out one of our own ships in the initial assault on Dandoran.”

*Aah, so that’s it. They are hitting the Principate in full force*, Raleien thought. He was still new to the animosity between these two factions.

“So what’s our job, boss?” Another person shouted in a thick accent.

“Are you lot deaf? It’s *commander*. I command things,” Kird replied in a sardonic tone. “But I suppose I’ll accept a reasonable question. Our job is to board the ship and neutralize it.”

“Isn’t that just a fancy term for blow it up?” Wredi shouted. Iris smacked him in the chest and he coughed, but didn’t look at all embarrassed.

The Bothan commander shrugged. “Perhaps. We’ll bring enough explosives to do so. But it might make good salvage, and you lot could loot the place if we don’t blow it up. At the very least, the *Resolve* and a few fighters will disable the ship’s engines. Our job is to board the ship in an attempt to take it out of the fight. Neutralize, for those of you without a vocabulary, could mean blow it up, or loot the hell out of it and take it home. Does that sound good?”

No one interrupted this time. A battle focus was beginning to descend on the company.

“Excellent. Now, I’ll go over what little plan we have. Keep in mind all hell will break loose the moment we blow the airlocks on the *Liparus*, so I’ll focus on key objectives. You figure out how to get there. Okay, let’s start here…”

*Aboard the Dreadnaught-class r40 Resolve (IRL: Sorry if all of these ships have names).*

*Airlock 3*

*39 ABY*

Approximately two hours after the briefing had ended, Raleien stood with his squad and thirty five other members of the Third Raiders in the short corridor of a docking port airlock. They stood, waiting for the tell-tale sound that the *Resolve* had used its tractor beams to dock with the *Liparus* so the Raiders could breach the airlock and board the enemy ship. The ship would rock intermittently as it engaged in space combat with the enemy fleet, but the Raiders were experienced in holding their footing under fire.

Time passed, and the platoon-size force stood silent, fingering their weapons and waiting. And waiting. Minutes passed, when suddenly they all heard the soft boom of two metal hulls meeting. A connection – perhaps it should be called a mooring – had been established between the two ships. It was time.

The *Resolve*’s airlock door opened, revealing a short mooring corridor and a similar door at the other end. It was the *Liparus*. Two of the elite pirate raiders stepped up to this door with the explosives that had been provided to them. They placed charges at various points along the door and then scurried back a few metres behind cover. The soft creak of battle armour and the rattle of blasters and other weapons sounded loud in Raleien’s ears, mixing with the thumping rush of adrenaline-laden blood he could hear pounding through his veins as his anticipation for the impending battle grew.

“Weapons ready!” The junior officer in charge shouted. What was their name. Keiren?

The explosion flashed and boomed in front of Raleien and the squad, but they didn’t wait for the smoke, dust and debris to clear. Blaster bolts fired from MWC-35c Repeating Cannons showered the corridor beyond, and an almost equal number began firing back at the Raiders. Raleien took cover in a small wall alcove just in time to avoid a blaster bolt that took another Raider in the neck behind him. Luckily, it wasn’t Iris or Wredi, who stood a little further ahead relative to Raleien’s position.

“Toss the damn charges through!” The officer whose name was likely Keiren shouted, gesturing with a free hand. He looked about ready to repeat the order before a stray blaster bolt took him straight through the eye. His body crumpled to the floor with a smouldering hole where his left eye had been.

Luckily his last order had been received, and a few of the Raider’s shouted wordlessly as they tossed explosives into the corridor ahead. The smoke was still thick and hadn’t quite cleared, but Raleien when the charges went off Raleien could clearly see the explosions go off and debris and body parts scatter with the impact. The rain of enemy fire reduced considerably, providing an opening for the Raiders to take up.

“Let’s move,” Raleien said to his squad in a deep, serious baritone. He didn’t speak often, and almost exclusively in combat.

He wasn’t in command here, but he had a job to do, and a team to look out for. The other Raiders followed suit, advancing through the smoke and bounding forwards on the deck of the *Liparus* toward the end of the corridor. Eventually the enemy soldiers, some dressed in distinctly Imperial pieces of armor, retreated down both exits of the T-juncture which led deeper into the ship. According to the briefing, Raleien and half the remaining Raiders were to proceed down the left-hand corridor. Their target was the secondary weapon’s control systems they were to destroy by any means necessary. Another team would head for the bridge and disable primary weapon’s control led by Kird Narrone himself. Other teams had other jobs of a similar nature, from engines, shields, and communications. All in a bid to try and take this ship in one piece and reap the prize.

Raleien gestured with his free hand for Iris and Wredi to move forward, his other hand maintain a firm hold on his blaster. Iris and Wredi nodded and began to advance down the left-hand corridor, with Raleien and the other soldiers following. Wredi was front-and-centre, the bubble of his [personal energy shield](https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Personal_energy_shield) taking up most of the corridor. In one hand he also held a basic [riot shield](https://www.darkjedibrotherhood.com/item_prototypes/riot-shield) upon which he mounted his blaster in lieu of a free hand. At various intervals the small column would stop and shoot the ceiling, disabling anything that looked remotely like a ray shield emitter. It was slow work, but better than being caught in a ray shield. Only their astrodroids they had on standby might be able to save them in that sort of pinch.

They continued without meeting any resistance. Raleien’s battle instincts were going wild at this. Why hadn’t they been engaged again? This had to be a trap. It was never this easy boarding a ship. Never.

Yet they continued on, taking a right down the corridor followed by four other Raiders including the now acting junior officer in charge. They encountered a small team of defenders sitting at the next junction but dispatched them with ease. Two against seven were not good odds when a shield and blasters were involved. Wredi’s shield remained functional after taking a hit, and the Duros estimated it could take four more, give or take, before giving way.

“We’re just about at the secondary weapon’s room,” Raleien said to the team. “It’s just ahead.”

“Somethings wrong,” One of the soldiers Raleien didn’t know well muttered, seemingly without realizing it.

Iris, who was parallel to Raleien on the opposite side of the wall, nodded. “You’re right, Tick. Something’s up. Maybe we should contact Narrone and get a change of plans.”

Raleien grunted his agreement. Something *was* wrong. They hadn’t engaged the enemy for a long while. He had been expecting fierce resistance. His battle instincts were still going haywire, and he was trying his best to understand the tactical significance of the light resistance they had experienced.

The woman who had assumed command, Ulis, a Pantoran like himself, raised a fist and called a halt. Her young face was lined with worry. “Raleien, take your team onwards down the starboard-facing corridor to the secondary weapon’s room. We’ll stay at this corridor and cover our retreat. We stick to the plan until told otherwise.”

Raleien nodded and continued moving down the corridor. He took a few steps, but then was nearly knocked off his feet as the *Liparus* rocked to port hard. Had something smacked into the hull? Or was that an explosion?

“Narrone, what was that?” Ulis said into the comm. With no response, she set to positioning her team in a defensive posture at a corridor intersection. It was a T-juncture, with three possible corridors to guard. One looked starboard, while the other was the corridor which ran parallel to the port edge of the ship. Raleien followed, taking up a position looking starboard and further into the belly of the ship.

“That, my dear, was an explosion.” The Bothan’s voice paused as they heard blaster fire emanate from the communications device. “Turns out they have this ship packed full of soldiers who were bound for the surface. They waited for us to split up and now they’re going to mop us up. Turns out we’re –“

The sound of Kird’s voice was overwhelmed by the sudden thunder of blaster fire and footfalls. Perhaps two dozen enemy soldiers were rushing down each of the corridors toward the team’s position. The disparate group of outgunned Raiders reacted as best they could, taking cover in small metal nooks created by jutting bulkheads or hugging the wall as best they could. Wredi’s personal protective shield all but evaporated under the onslaught, and his riot shield was taking a beating. Iris managed to clear her backblast and launch her pre-loaded rocket down one corridor. The blast disintegrated the enemy soldiers coming from deeper within the ship, but the other two were still causing a problem. A hail of concentrated plasma pinned them all to their places, and one of the Raiders fell dead to the ground with bolts through their abdomen and leg.

“We’re going to run and gun to the weapon’s room,” Ulis shouted over the din. She gestured to the remaining soldiers, roaring, “Put your fuel cells to the test and run these bastards into the ground! We have to retreat. Do it now. Raleien, go!”

Raleien took a moment to look to Wredi and Iris. They met his eyes and nodded. They were ready.

Wredi activated his backup protective shield, providing them an opening to move without much risk of getting shot. Raleien and Iris began bolting down the corridor, Wredi close on their heels. He didn’t look back to see his fellow Raider’s overclocking their blasters to provide suppressing fire, but he heard the shots, the screams and the grunts of battle.

“What are we going to do once we blow up these secondary controls?” Iris asked as they neared the door of the secondary weapon’s control area.

“First, we run,” Raleien began in a rare display of words. “They have grenades, so we have to be mobile. Can’t stay still.” He touched the control pad of the control room door’s and they whooshed open. Iris and Raleien mowed down the few technicians and the single guard in the room. Raleien thought it odd that they hadn’t been evacuated, but then remembered the Principate had once been Imperials. Then it all made sense.

“Narrone will give us a new target, if he lives. We move on and take out that target. Likely will help blow up the ship. And then we get out of here.”

“Why don’t we just retreat now? No harm in a tactical withdrawal against superior numbers,” Wredi suggested as he placed a few charges on the control room consoles.

Raleien shook his head. “No. This ship is vital to the Principate war effort. We have to neutralize it. There’s no room for failure.”

“Raleien, I’m all about winning here but maybe we should reconsider –“

The Pantoran man raised a hand and Iris, who had been speaking before, stopped mid-sentence.

“Narrone will have a plan. Give him a minute.” Assuming he isn’t dead.

As they finished placing the charges in the room and Ulis’s team began to appear out the doorway under heavy fire from the Principate marines, Narrone’s voice washed over the commlink once more.

“Here’s what’s happening. The team that tried to take the reactor didn’t quite make it, but we have an opening. The guards are dead. I want all remaining teams to collapse on the ship’s main reactor, plant charges, and get out. I don’t care how – escape pods, shuttle, fighter, out the airlock. Just get it done.”

“See? Narrone had a plan.” Raleien grinned, but Iris and Wredi had grim expressions. They didn’t think they were going to make it out alive. Or they were probably wondering whether Narrone had decided to extract himself from the battle a little early to save his skin. Both possibilities were true. But Raleien couldn’t accept the former.

“We’ll get it done. We *can* get it done,” he said to Iris and Wredi. They met his eyes and, after a moment, they nodded. They weren’t brimming with newfound confidence, but something about what Raleien had said assured them enough to continue forward, even if they knew the risk. That was enough.

Ulis appeared in the doorway and looked at Raleien. She had a burning scrape across her right cheek, right through one of her family markings which looked like a pyramid.

“You heard?”

He nodded.

“Good, then let’s go. Your team takes point. We have to move before we’re trapped.”

Wredi, Iris and Raleien complied without another word. They entered the corridor and, Wredi in the lead, started running deeper into the ship.

*Aboard the EF76 Nebulon-B frigate* Liparus *(IRL: Sorry if all of these ships have names).*

*Outside of the Main Reactor*

*39 ABY*

*20 minutes later…*

The push deeper into the ship toward the reactor had been brutal. Every Raider that had been under Ulis’s command had died, providing cover for Raleien and his team to push forward. Wredi had taken a few scrapes from grazed blaster bolts, but nothing that impacted his performance. Iris was, as of yet, untouched. As was Raleien. They were now with the remaining Raiders of the Third Company who had boarded the ship, which was around thirty or so individuals from various teams, squads and platoons. Almost the entire boarding party wiped out in the assault. By military standards, this was an absolute disaster. Yet from a strategic perspective, perhaps the death of over a hundred decently trained soldiers was worth the destruction of a multi-million credit vessel of immense tactical and strategic value to the enemy. Perhaps. A part of Raleien wasn’t sure.

Kneeling on the ground outside of the starboard entrance of the main reactor chamber, Raleien kept his eye on the nearest corridor, watching for signs of the enemy. While the Raiders had taken catastrophic losses, so too had the Principate defenders. Raleien suspected they were re-grouping for another assault. Would they try and overwhelm them before they could escape? *Can we escape*, he thought?

Ulis had assumed command of the ragtag bunch of Raiders, as Narrone had indeed decided to extricate himself from the fight and return to the *Resolve*. In a way, this was the tactically superior choice, if not an honorable one. Narrone was now coordinating the battle from a distance, since one of the now-dead teams had been successful in disabling the *Liparus*’s communications and jamming capabilities.

“You heard what Narrone said?” Ulis asked Raleien as she observed the final charges being set. Narrone had been on the commlink earlier, providing direction for the remaining Raiders to extract themselves using nearby escape pods.

Raleien nodded, but said, “A sprint to the starboard pods on this deck. Close the port-side doors and seal them shut.” He paused, looking over Ulis’s shoulder and watching two Raiders use special tools to weld the entrance. “Only one problem.”

“Which is?”

“We’ll get shot in the back.”

Ulis frowned, considering.

Raleien hesitated. They had to complete the mission. There was maybe a way they could escape, too.

“I – I have an idea,” he began.

“Okay. Shoot.” Ulis folded her arms and regarded Raleien.

“We have three folks left who have personal shields. We also two folks with riot shields. Give me all the personal shields and one of the riot shields. I’ll keep the personal shields activated long enough for everyone to retreat down the corridor and escape.”

“Done,” Ulis responded without hesitation. “I’ll coordinate it. Wait here.”

Raleien had a feeling this would have worked. If this had been a military unit, perhaps some semblance of unit comradery would have won out. But these were a hardened bunch of pirates and thugs, albeit with some training and discipline. Most of this lot wanted to get out with their skin intact to live another day. Raleien didn’t particularly care either way, though he suspected he could also make it out.

“You sure about this, old man?” Iris asked Raleien, looking skeptical.

“Not trying to be too brave now, are you?” Wredi prodded.

Months of training bonded people through grime and grit. Iris, Wredi and Raleien had formed that bond, shared amongst comrades, even if they were only criminals in the end. Each in their own way cared for one another. And today, they had already saved each others lives more than once.

“I’m sure. I’ve gotten out of worse.”

Iris cocked an eyebrow. “Have you, now? Well I suppose someone of your age has probably lived a lot of life.”

Wredi nodded. “You must be endowed with ancient wisdom or luck of some sort.”

Raleien allowed a rare smile to creep onto his face but said nothing.

It was then that Ulis returned with another Raider carrying the personal protective shields and a riot shield from another specialist. Raleien accepted each of the shields and attached them to his person. He holstered his blaster of his shoulder and took the riot shield in his left arm, keeping his right open to activate shields once one of them short-circuited from strain under fire.

The port-side door, which had since been welded shut, began to be pounded with blaster fire from the other side. Everyone turned to look at Ulis. They had finished placing the charges, and we waiting to activate the detonator.

“Don’t activate those shields until I give the signal,” Ulis commanded Raleien. “We’ll try and get as much of a running start as possible before we use them. The detonators on the charges are set for two minutes.” She turned to regard the remaining Raiders. “Are we ready to move? They’re probably swinging around to cut us off even more, now.” She looked about quickly and then nodded. “Good. Hit the switch and let’s get out of here.”

A soft chorus of *beeps* could be heard as the charge detonators were activated and the timer began to silently count down. A series of eight charges around the main reactor were now primed and ready to explode in less than two minutes.

The Raiders fell into motion, beginning a tactical retreat out the starboard-side entrance towards the outer hull of the ship. There they would find the ten escape pods which would ferry them into the void and, if the fleet had received Narrone’s instructions, would be ready to capture them in a tractor beam and tow them to safety before the ship blew. Raleien took position with the rearguard, holding his riot shield aloft and keeping a hand close to the protective shield devices for quick activation.

Blaster fire erupted behind Raleien and he spun. The vanguard, including Iris and Wredi, had taken contact. A squad of Principate troops blocked the exit, but they were small and being overwhelmed by the full force of thirty nearly overclocked repeating blasters. He saw bolts flash by Iris and Wredi’s heads, too close for comfort. He hoped they would make it, regardless of his efforts at the rear. A Raider beside Wredi toppled as a blaster bolt ripped through a weak point on the edge of his riot shield, blasting a hole where a Twi’leks green face had once been. But that marked the end of the first engagement, with six Principate corpses lying in smoking heaps on the deck of the *Liparus*.

Raleien followed down the corridor and past the first intersection, maintaining his position at the rear of their escape. He saw more Principate troops sprinting toward his position from either side. He suspected more were trying to cut them off ahead. He was confident they could make it through, but he still tried to plan for a less desirable eventuality should they fail.

It seemed the enemy commander hadn’t accounted for the enemy cutting off one of the exits and trying to escape using their own escape pods. That showed some incompetence on their part, considering how conventional boarding tactical doctrine tried to factor in securing escape pods as a mode of escape.

He passed the second intersection of corridors. The group ahead was passing the third. There should only be two more to go before the reach the outer hull. They might be able to make it the entire way without any need of his odd shield wall maneuver. But he knew it was a small hope.

The first of the Principate soldiers rounded the intersections they had already passed and began to rain down a hail of blaster bolts on the group of fleeing Raiders. Raleien activated the first personal protective shield and raised the riot shield. The protective shield shimmered into existence and immediately shattered from the initial blaster impact. Some stray bolts got past the now deactivated personal shield, but they were harmlessly absorbed into the wall or deck paneling near the retreating raiders under Ulis’s command. Raleien grunted as more bolts began to impact the riot shield, and he began shuffling backwards as fast he could toward his compatriots. He knew he looked absolutely ridiculous, but if he had been running the force of the blaster bolt blows would have knocked him to his feet and killed him. Shuffling allowed him to maintain a firm stance to accommodate the blaster impacts.

A few more bolts whizzed past him or hit the riot shield before he activated the second personal shield on his person. Again, the transparent blue bubble shimmered into existence for a few crucial moments before the overwhelming impact of somewhat inaccurate blaster fire shattered the energy field once more. Raleien had just enough time as he shuffled past another intersection to consider that they might be facing former Imperial stormtroopers, some of the worst marksmen in the galaxy. They were lucky.

“Raleien!” Someone shouted at him. It was Iris’s voice. “We made it to the outer hull. Get out of –“

A slew of blaster bolts flew by Raleien’s face, and he knew by the faint sound Iris made instead of finishing her sentence that she had been hit. He turned just in time to see Iris’s corpse fall to the deck, three blaster holes through her chest and abdomen, a look of surprise on her still face.

Raleien cursed and activated the third protective shield, shuffling as fast as he could. He was staying just far enough ahead of the advancing Principate soldiers, and he had just finally passed the last intersection. He was nearly back with the rest of the team who were fighting their way toward the escape pods. Like the others, the shield fizzled into life and almost immediately shattered, with the remaining bolts thumping into the riot shield or grazing his exposed flesh. But as Raleien had planned, paired with his momentum, it had provided just enough time for him to make it down the corridor and for the others to have a fighting chance at the escape pods.

Suddenly, the riot shield shattered in his hands from the onslaught of blaster bolts levelled at it just as Raleien made it to his team. The final impact of the shield’s shattering had him tottering off balance. The fall saved his life, though he took a bolt wound in his exposed leg. He felt two pairs of hands drag him out of the hallway and a few other voices yell wordlessly as they tried to fight the advancing Principate troops.

“Can you stand?” Wredi asked Raleien. He had placed him against the wall on the outer hull corridor.

“With help.”

Raleien shot out his hand and Wredi helped him to his feet.

“The escape pods?”

Wredi pointed. “Right here. We hit pay dirt. Now let’s get you in. We got him!”

“Then get in the damn pod and let’s go!” Raleien heard Ulis shout as Wredi escorted Raleien. They hobbled together, with Wredi supporting the hulking Pantoran, moving as one across the corridor toward an open escape pod door. There was a crossfire of blaster bolts that nearly took of both of their heads, but Raleien was thankful that many of the Principate troops appeared to have been trained like former Stormtroopers. Or, in other words, extremely poor shots except in large bunches.

Wredi lifted Raleien’s arm off of his shoulder and allowed the larger man to limp to an escape pod seat.

“Now you stay right here old man. No wandering off!” Wredi was trying to act normal, but Raleien could see the strain in his eyes and hear it in his voice. Iris’s death had hurt him. “We’re just about safe and sound.”

Wredi turned to peak out the escape pod door, gesturing to the last few Raiders who were providing covering fire for their escape.

“Come on! Get inside!” Wredi lifted his blaster, his own riot shield apparently broken or discarded, and fired a few shots himself. “Come on! Hurry!”

Like the first, it happened without warning. One second Wredi was there, his heard barely visible as he levelled shots down both corridors, trying to provide what cover he could. The next second his corpse was leaning against the door to the escape pod in an awkward, back-breaking position, a blaster bolt having gone right through the back of his head and out through his forehead. Raleien cursed, but he couldn’t move.

Someone else in the escape pod shouted, “We have to go! The timer’s almost up!”

“Don’t leave us behind!” Someone called from corridor. A moment later a hoarse cry indicated that the Raider had been shot.

Ulis, who was in his escape pod, pressed a button on a nearby console. The door to the escape pod shut, and she screamed into her commlink, “Activate the escape pods!”

Their own ejected a moment later, and suddenly the pod was dead silent. No sound of muffled combat beyond the wall. No sound at all, save for those within the antigravity of the escape pod. Just the sound of spent soldiers recovering from a fight.

As the escape pod drifted into space, Raleien reflected on the deaths of his two teammates. Reliable, sensible Iris. Witty, sly Wredi. They were both dead, now. Gone to their graves much too early, with no one to bury them or remember them. Raleien thought that he should feel… something. A twinge of regret, or perhaps of guilt at causing their deaths. Mourning, perhaps, for friends lost in battle.

But as he felt the gentle tug of the *Resolve*’s tractor beam begin pulling the escape pod to safety, away from the impending blast, Raleien accepted he felt nothing for them. Looking out the window at the imploding *Liparus*, he felt small satisfaction at another mission accomplished. But for his squad, he felt empty. They were simply gone.

At least, that’s what he told himself over and over again as a single tear, reflected in the light of the explosion outside, slid down his grimy, cerulean cheek to the deck below.

*Aboard the Dreadnaught-class r40* Resolve(IRL: Sorry if all of these ships have names).

*Medical Bay*

*39 ABY*

*1 day later*

Raleien awoke in the hospital bed he had been deposited in after the *Resolve* had retrieved the surviving Raiders from the escape pods. His leg had been mostly healed, and he had slept well after recovering from serious battle shock like most of the others.

He sat up slowly, realizing the other knicks he had taken from blaster fire were also healed, though some new scars were now apparent on his flesh.

As he sat up, something fell from his blanket-covered legs onto the floor beside his bed. He reached down and picked up a small tablet. It was a datapad, and on the front a strange, circular symbol marked the screen. It looked somewhat reminiscent of the Imperial sigil, yet slightly different.

He tapped the datapad and the symbol disappeared. In its place was a wall of text. It was Basic. And it was a letter. It was an *offer*.

Raleien held the tablet in his large hands gingerly, reading the contents a second time. A representative of some Clan had heard reports of his battle prowess and wanted to recruit his services to their cause. They called themselves Scholae Palatinae. The name was familiar, one of several Clans spoken of in the farthest reaches of known galactic space.

*The Brotherhood*, he thought. Of Sith, and Jedi, and those practicing such arcane arts with the so-called Force.

It might be interesting.