





AN ALL-NEW TALE

LAST CALL AT THE ZERO ANGLE

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Tana Chellaine knew trouble was coming for the TIE fighter pilots of Nashtah Squadron when Huck Trompo started to sing.

The problem wasn't that Trompo was singing a ground-hog anthem in the bar—the Zero Angle was no stranger to pilots bellowing beloved unit anthems over the thump of its jukebox. It was that Trompo was singing that anthem while staring challengingly at a table a meter away, one occupied by a quartet of angry-looking vac-heads.

"Trompo, you better end transmission," Chellaine warned. "Florn's giving you the evil eye."

Sax Hastur, Nashtah's squad leader, turned in his chair to regard Florn, the tough old cyborg bartender who ran the Angle with a literal iron fist. Florn was washing a glass with his usual grim precision, but the red pinpoints of his cybernetic eyes were locked on Trompo.

"Better do something, Sax," muttered Artur Essada. "Before Sully starts singing too."

Essada's prediction was right, as was true annoyingly often. Sully Olvar shoved his chair back and rose unsteadily to his feet to join his wingmate and partner-in-crime in song. Trompo grinned and raised his glass, but found Hastur's hand locked on his forearm.

"Throttle down, Huck," Hastur warned. "It's too early to start a furball between ground-hogs and vac-heads."

"C'mon, boss," Trompo complained. "Been a long day."

"I know it," Hastur said. "But I'm not signing you out of the brig again. Hey, Flornie? Couple more Eblas?"

Chellaine shook her head as Trombo and Olvar reluctantly planted their rears back in their chairs.

The Nashtahs were ground-hogs—TIE fighter pilots who flew in planetary atmospheres on missions for the Imperial Army. Maneuvering a TIE through goo was more difficult than flying through the emptiness of space—that was the domain of the vac-heads who flew for the Imperial Navy. Yet it was the vac-heads who wound up on the recruiting posters, and whose victories over rebels, pirates, and slavers dominated the HoloNet.

No ground-hog thought that was fair. But resenting it was one thing—trying to goad vac-heads into fistfights while off duty was something else.

With the threat of a brawl momentarily averted, Chellaine let her gaze wander around the bar. As usual, the Angle

was packed with Imperial pilots—crashing glasses together, arguing loudly about tactics, or just sitting quietly. Nearly all of the pilots were human, and Chellaine could judge how long they'd been at the bar by the state of their olive-green uniform tunics. Some were perfectly crisp, suggesting their owners were new arrivals.

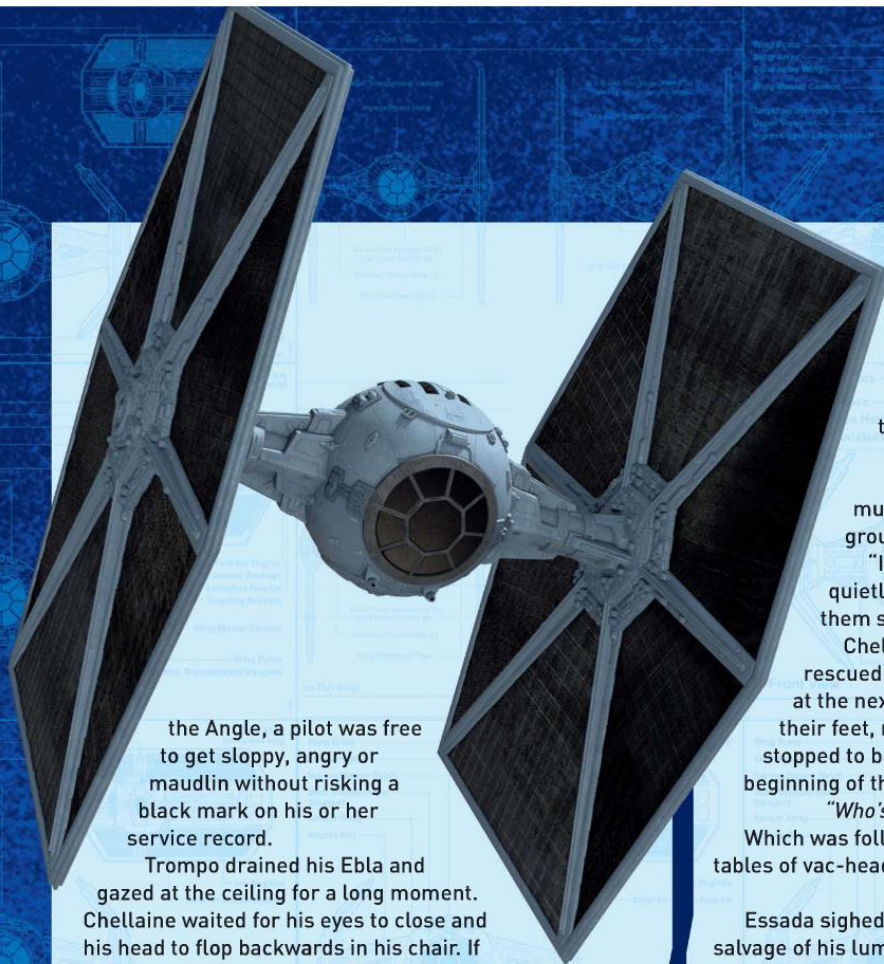
Others were wrinkled and/or stained, adorning pilots who should have left some time ago.

And a few had been removed and discarded on the backs of chairs, a sure sign of a debacle in progress.

Chellaine's own tunic was immaculate, but then she never drank anything stronger than water—and distilled water at that.

The Angle was famous for a number of things: its implacable bartender, its policy of serving ground-hogs and vac-heads alike, and its long-standing tradition that anyone above the rank of squad leader stayed out. That made it a sanctuary for the pilots of Bright Jewel Oversector Flight Base, which dominated the drab surface of the moon Axxila III. Within the confines of

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the Angle, a pilot was free to get sloppy, angry or maudlin without risking a black mark on his or her service record.

Trompo drained his Ebla and gazed at the ceiling for a long moment. Chellaine waited for his eyes to close and his head to flop backwards in his chair. If that happened, should she grab his chair, or let him crash to the floor? She wasn't sure.

But then Trompo leaned forward, eyes bright above his flushed cheeks.

"Those vac-heads were going to *love* my song," he insisted, bringing his fist down on the table hard enough to make the glasses jump.

"They *absolutely* were," Olvar said, backing up his wingmate as always.

Chellaine shook her head, deciding that if it came to it this time she'd let Trombo risk a cracked skull. Perhaps it would knock some sense into him. Trombo was a brilliant pilot with an instinctive grasp of tactics, but he had the impulse control of a sand-panther in heat.

"We should talk about what happened at Portocari," Essada said quietly.

The other Nashtahs' eyes all turned to Essada, who was gazing down at the scarred surface of the wooden table.

"There's nothing to talk about," Hastur said, seeking refuge in his glass of vosh. "We accomplished the mission. That will happen again. We lost people. That will happen again, too."

"But the intel—" began Essada.

"The mission's over," Trompo said angrily, slashing at the air for emphasis. The gesture knocked over Essada's glass of lum, sending the other Nashtahs backpedaling from the table to avoid the rapidly forming lake.

"The mission's over and I feel like a song. A song that all these laser-brained vac-heads better enjoy."

Thrusting his Ebla into the air, Trombo roared out the opening line of the ground-hogs' anthem:

"Oh who flies so high in the skies so blue?"

Which prompted Olvar to shout the traditional response:

"WE DO! WE DO!"

"Brace for impact," Chellaine muttered to Hastur as other tables of ground-hogs joined in the singing.

"It's been a bad day, Tana," Hastur said quietly. "Blowing out a few bad ions keeps them sane."

Chellaine scowled behind the cup she'd rescued from the flooded table. The vac-heads at the next table exchanged glances and got to their feet, nodding at each other. When Trombo stopped to breathe, they were ready with the beginning of their own song:

"Who's on the attack in space so black?"

Which was followed by shouts from at least four tables of vac-heads:

"WE ARE! WE ARE!"

Essada sighed and sipped what he'd been able to salvage of his lum. "I wouldn't mind all the commotion if even one of these idiots could carry a tune."

For a minute or so, disaster remained hypothetical. Trompo and Olvar circulated through the Angle trying to rally their fellow ground-hogs to drown out the vac-heads, the vac-heads redoubled their efforts, and Florn confined himself to a slow, annoyed shake of his head. But then a drink got spilled, or perhaps thrown, and words were exchanged, and soon enough glass was breaking and fists were flying.

"Let me know when Lightning shows up," Hastur said wearily.

Hastur stepped back as Olvar and a wiry vac-head began grappling. A moment later, Essada dodged as Trompo hurled a burly pilot onto their table. The fallen pilot sprang up and bull-rushed the Nashtah, the two coming together with an impact of flesh punctuated by grunts and curses.

A vac-head who'd been on the wrong end of a punch stumbled into Chellaine, sending a ribbon of water out of her cup and up into the air. She moved smoothly to one side to catch the water as it fell and then booted the vac-head in the rear, propelling him back into the melee. Trompo tried to get behind the vac-head he was fighting, but was too slow and took a hard left on the point of his chin. He staggered and crashed down on the corner of the table, which let out a groan of overstressed wood and tipped, depositing Trompo on the floor surrounded by glasses and puddles. Then the table fell on him.

"Incoming," Chellaine warned

GLOSSARY: SELECTED PILOT SLANG

Dupe: a TIE bomber

Fangs out: eager for a dogfight

Furball: a hectic dogfight

Goo: a planet's atmosphere

Hop: a mission

Impstar: an Imperial Star Destroyer

In the black: operating in space

In the blue: operating in a planetary atmosphere

Sitrep: situation report

Skull: a Z-95 Headhunter fighter

Splash: shoot down

Stitched: hit by enemy fire

Suicide sled: a starfighter with weak or no shields

Zero angle: the position behind an enemy's stern



Hastur as a glossy black astromech adorned with jagged yellow stripes rolled out from behind the bar. A sphere on a metal stalk rose from a hatch in its dome. Florn followed a step behind the droid, tucking his rag into his apron.

The Nashtahs clapped their hands over their ears, as did all the pilots who weren't too busy fighting to notice the droid's arrival.

"Five seconds ought to do it, Lightning," Florn said.

A shriek from Lightning's sonic emitter filled the Angle. The brawling pilots crumpled to the floor, hands fumbling to protect their ears.

"That one started it," Florn said, pointing at Trompo, who was trying to crawl away. Lightning tootled cheerfully, and a panel opened on his front.

He extended a prod and jabbed it into Trompo's side, enveloping the pilot in brilliant sparks. Trompo yelped and rolled into the fetal position, kicking feebly at his tormentor.

"Really, Flornie?" he complained. "The shrieker wasn't enough so you had to try and stun me?"

"You were doing a capital job stunning yourself," Florn said. "Now get up, all of you. Get up and shake hands."

The ground-hogs and vac-heads muttered mutinously, but Lightning rolled forward with an electronic chuckle, prod crackling with energy. The pilots shook hands mulishly, then began righting fallen chairs and retrieving tumbled glasses.

"Most flight bases have one bar for ground-hogs and another for vac-heads," Florn said. "You know why the Angle's different? Because all your little feuds are a bunch of poodoo. Doesn't matter if you fly in the blue or the black, in goo or vacuum. We all fly suicide sleds – no shields and no defenses. Except for the skill of the hand on the stick."

Florn signaled for Lightning to go back behind the bar, then swept the room with his cybernetic gaze.

"Rack up half the flight hours I had before the crash and you can talk as much trash as you want," he said with cool disapproval. "Or get turned into a fireball—that means you go on the wall and we'll speak well of you. But until you do one or the other, you mind your manners."

The servos in Florn's artificial legs whined as he stalked off. Chellaine wasn't the only pilot who found herself staring up at the wall above the bar, at the shimmering holos of faces and unit designations. Those faces belonged to ground-hogs and vac-heads alike, all of them men and women who'd

flown out of Axxila on missions from which they'd never returned.

"There are Suthers and Plix," Chellaine said, pointing at two holos.

"And Ashanto," Hastur added grimly.

"You mean Poul Ashanto?" asked one of the vac-heads, sounding surprised.

"I do," Hastur said. "We were friends."

Chellaine wondered if anyone besides her knew what an understatement that was.

"Poul was at Prefsbelt with my brother Alois," the vac-head said.

"Alois Akrone?" Hastur asked. "The three of us were classmates together. He was your brother? Then you must be Heiwei."

"The same," Heiwei Akrone said, nodding at the three vac-heads with him. "We're Banshee Squadron, attached to the Impstar *Solar Storm*. Just in from Phindar."

"Sax Hastur. We're the Nashtahs. Just finished debriefing after Portocari."

Hastur and Akrone shook hands as the other Nashtahs and Banshees eyed each other uncertainly.

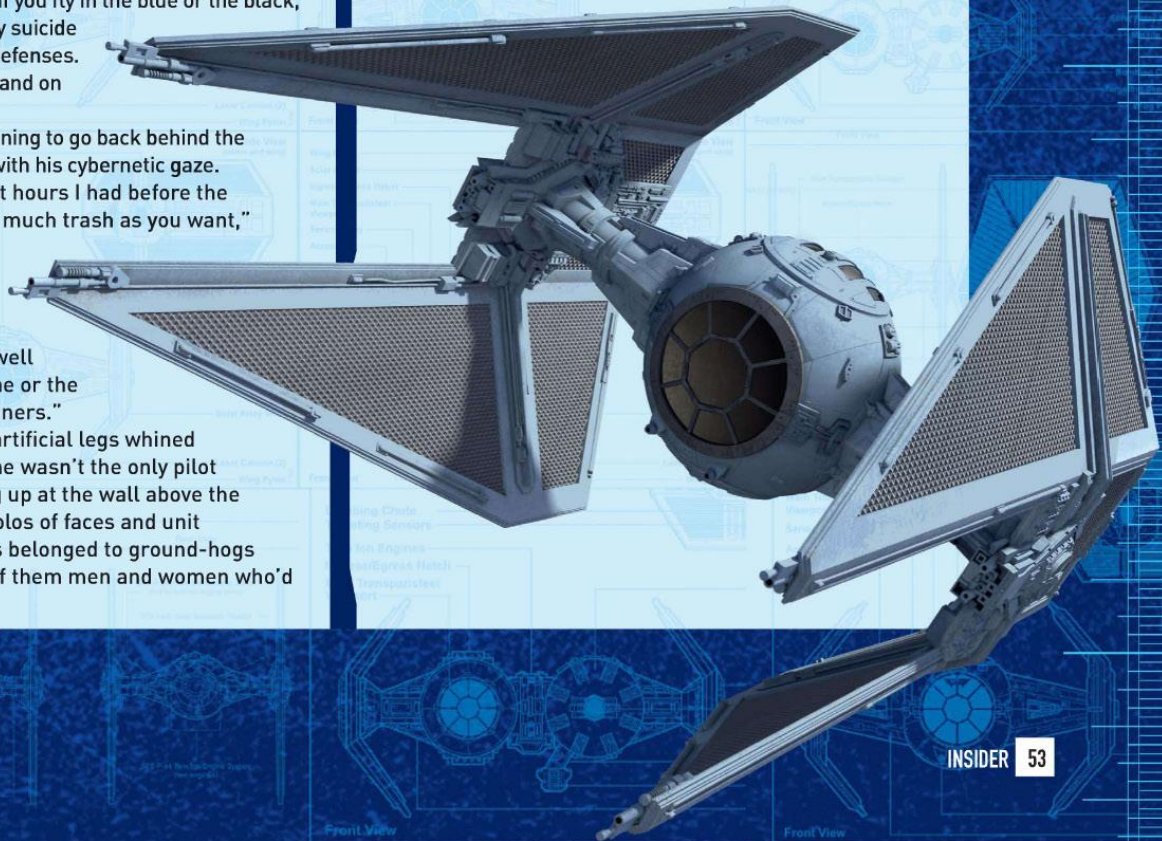
"Since you're all best friends now, you can share a table," Florn called from behind the bar.

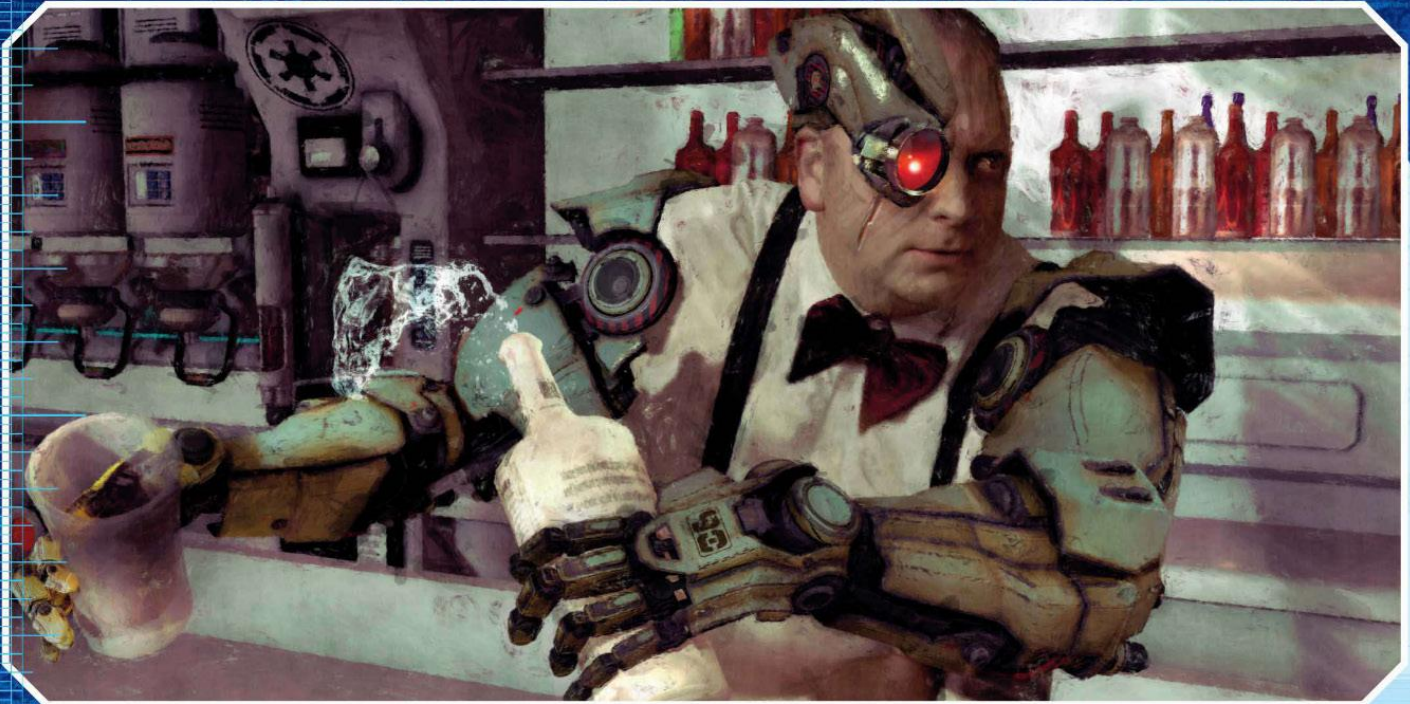
"That's not happening," Trompo said as the hulking Banshee standing beside him said, "No way." Both men's faces were puffy and cut.

Florn shrugged. "You broke the table, so it's share or stand."

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remaining table, gathered the dispersed chairs, and sat down together amid glances of mutual suspicion. Hastur and Akrone ordered a round of drinks.

The muscled Banshee next to Trompo touched his swollen cheek gingerly.

"They call me Bruiser," he said. "You threw a good punch back there."

Trompo looked surprised. "Really? It didn't even make you blink. And if you hadn't slipped back there, you'd have flattened my nose."

Trompo and Bruiser plunged into an animated conversation about the finer points of brawling, while Olvar waited for a chance to join in and the other pilots looked up at the wall, lost in their private thoughts.

"My brother's on the wall, too," Akrone said, pointing.

Hastur located the holo of his old classmate and raised his glass. One by one the others did the same.

"Now we've got three more Nashtahs to add," Essada muttered.

Akrone nodded. "We lost two pilots at Phindar ourselves. I saw Portocari on the sitrep. It was rough, then?"

"It was," Hastur said before Essada could speak. "We were hitting rebel artillery in the hills when we got the call to regroup for a strike on an urban safehouse. The brass said hitting it would prevent house-to-house fighting and civilian casualties."

Akrone nodded, listening.

"The rebs brought down Muller with an anti-air warhead—she's in bacta. Barsay got stitched by a Z-95 inbound to the safehouse—he's dead. We splashed the Skull that killed him, along with its wingmates. Then one of our bombers hit the safehouse. Turned out it was full of munitions—the blast vaporized both our Dupe and her escort."

"Riggs and Chan," Essada said. "They had names too, you know."

"You think I don't remember that?" Hastur snapped, and Essada lowered his eyes.

Hastur shook his head, finger tracing the rings on the

table left by generations of previous drinks. "Riggs and Chan. We would have opted for a high-altitude run with burrowing warheads if we'd known."

"They never knew what hit 'em," Trompo said. "That's something at least."

"What are you talking about?" Essada demanded. "It's *nothing*. Three pilots dead, and Muller may never fly again. And for what?"

"So the intel was bad?" Akrone asked quickly, mindful of the two Nashtahs glaring at each other.

Hastur shook his head, but his hand went for his drink. "That's above my pay grade."

"You want to blame someone, Artur?" Trompo growled at Essada. "Start with the rebels for once. They claim they're fighting for the common people, and now thousands in that city are dead because of what they did."

"That's right—if the brass had learned it was a munitions depot, they'd have canceled the strike," Olvar said.

The Nashtahs and Banshees nodded—except for Essada.

"I'm not sure I believe that any more," he said.

"That's rebel talk, Artur," Trompo said. "How many times have I got to tell you I don't like hearing it?"

"And how long are you going to fly blind?" Essada asked heatedly, then pointed an accusing finger at Hastur. "And how long are you going to pretend this isn't happening?"

Chellaine had had enough.

"If you've got something to say, Essada, say it," she said. "What is it you think is happening?"

"We've been flying fangs out for a week, and on half the hops we've been given intel that's unverified or out of date or both," Essada said. "And it's not just us—I hear it's been like this for squadrons all the way to the galactic rim. Something's happened, and the Empire's responding by pounding every target it can find."

Trompo's face had turned an ominous purple.



He started to object, but stopped when he saw the look on Bruiser's face.

"It's been the same for us," Akrone said. "Listen to this—four days ago, a whole wing from Celanon was diverted to sweep duty, looking for a high-value target in the Gordian Reach. And I hear the Empire's sending a task force to the Jovan system."

"Jovan?" Hastur asked. "There's nothing out there but grain barges."

Akrone shrugged. "I know. The point is, something big's gone down, and it's got the brass scared. I hear Weller himself just came back from Ord Mantell."

"Look, maybe something big *is* going on," Chellaine said. "But what does it matter? We'll never find out what it was."

"It matters because it's our lives," Essada said. "Or at least it does to me."

Chellaine heard the doors to the Angle open behind her, as they did dozens of times an hour. But then the eyes of the pilots looking that way widened, and chairs began to scrape on the floor. She turned and was getting to her feet even before her brain had processed the astonishing fact that Commander Weller himself was standing in the Angle.

"At ease," Weller said. "Haven't been in here since I made wing commander. I've missed it."

He walked over to the bar, where Florn stood waiting.

"Corellian brandy," Weller said. "The good stuff."

Florn placed a glass on the bar, then set another one beside it. He filled them with deep, golden-brown liquor. He and Weller raised their glasses and drank them down, returning them empty to the top of the bar at the same moment. Weller put his hand on Florn's flesh-and-blood shoulder, and the bartender did the same.

Then Weller turned to the assembled pilots. "I apologize for invading sacred territory, but these are not normal times," he said. "There's something you all need to know—because pretty soon the whole galaxy will have heard the news."

Chellaine glanced at her fellow Nashtahs. Hastur was waiting grimly, while Trompo chewed his lip in anxious silence, next to a wide-eyed Olvar. Essada was leaning forward expectantly, eyes locked on Weller.

"The DS-1 platform," Weller said. "It's been destroyed."

Chellaine and Akrone exchanged a stunned glance. The DS-1? The so-called Death Star? Chellaine had assumed that was a codename for some kind of coordinated fire-control technology among fleet units, while Essada had dismissed it as a black-budget item created for propaganda purposes. But here was their

wing commander, telling them it was real. Or *had* been real.

"Destroyed, sir?" someone asked from the back of the bar. "How?"

"By the Rebellion," Weller said. "Along with its entire complement."

There was a moment of shocked silence and then everyone began talking at once. A bark from Weller stilled the tumult.

"Your current Army and Navy affiliations are rescinded effective immediately," he said.

The Nashtahs and Banshees gaped at one another.

"You heard me," Weller said. "All elements of the Imperial starfleet have been placed on full alert. Return to quarters for assignment to new squadrons. Ladies and gentlemen, the Empire's enemies are on the move, and we must meet them on the battlefield—whether that battlefield is in the sky, or in space."

Weller nodded at the pilots, then at Florn, then turned and strode through the doors. As the pilots hurriedly gathered their gear, Chellaine found herself next to the bar, staring up at the wall of holos.

"There'll be a lot more faces up there before this is over," she said to Florn.

"Yes, there will be," the bartender replied, beginning to wash the glasses. "Some of them will be ones you know."

Chellaine nodded.

"Only one thing to do about it," Florn said.

"What's that?"

"The rebs have their own watering holes and their own walls," he said. "All pilots do. Make sure you put two of theirs up for every one of ours. Then you can come back here with your head held high, and raise a glass to the ones who didn't." 🌌

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