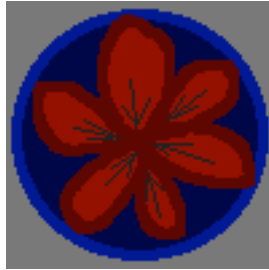


The Abandoned



Part Two of the 349th Story Arc, part of the Empire Wars series by Dar'z Swiftclaw

Imperial Stardate 5221-1227

The planet was small, and had been considered largely insignificant until the war. Now it was on the front lines, and the Dresk had established a base here to defend it against the Empire. The Imperial Star Corps had launched an attack here two months ago, landing troops on the planet in large planetary landing craft. But the Dresk had been waiting for them, and killed twenty thousand of the Imperial soldiers with minimal losses of their own. Some Imperials had fled, but the Dresk had pursued them and killed them all. Or so they thought. One platoon had taken refuge in the woods, and had been hiding there ever since.

They numbered only seven, the only living Imperials on this miserable rock of a planet. Harris was the lieutenant and the only officer of the group. Then there was the sergeant, a huge Torosian by the name of Groden. The corporal was the group's medic and the only female; Franklin was her name. Then there were four privates; three Canids and a Felisian. The three Canids – Welch, Fritz and Sudabaker – were all green recruits, while the Felisian, Durrel, was nearing the end of his five year tour of duty. They were all that remained of the number one platoon of the 349th battalion of the Imperial army. When the attack had failed, they'd managed to escape on a truck into the woods, and found a small cave the Dresk had not discovered. But their good fortune could not last.

Harris had reckoned on being trapped here for only a short time, reasoning that Star Corps would make a second attempt to capture the planet. But no attempt had been made, and now the group was getting desperate. Water they had in abundance, but their food supplies were getting critically low, even with severe rationing and what little they'd been able to forage. After five months, there was no food left, and Harris called a crisis meeting.

The group sat around the campfire, dejected. Harris was forced to reveal his fear that Star Corps were not coming back. Sudabaker said, "I still don't understand why we just don't call Star Corps and tell them to come pick us up. I'm sure they would."

Durrel sneered at him. "And just how do you propose we contact them? That little radio couldn't send a signal out of the star system, let alone reach the Empire." He flicked a thumb back over his shoulder, indicating the small radio set they had set up.

Fritz, who was the group's assigned radio operator, said, "That's just a normal radio. If you want to start sending messages across the galaxy, you're going to need a sub-space transmitter. I don't suppose anyone here's got one hidden about their person?" He laughed bitterly at his joke, knowing that none of them had the vital piece of equipment.

Welch asked a question. "Couldn't we get one off the Dresk? I know they wouldn't give it to us, but couldn't we steal it?"

Fritz shook his head. "I suppose you know what a Dresk sup-space transmitter looks like, do you? And how to get it operational? Even if we could get hold of one, it would probably take us a year or more to work out how to use it."

From the other side of the fire, the group were surprised to hear a deep bass chuckle. Turning, they saw it was Groden laughing, and stared at him in amazement.

"Would you like to tell us what you find so amusing, sergeant?" asked Harris. The sergeant grinned, his eyes glittering in the firelight. "There is an Imperial sub-space transmitter on this planet. I can't believe we didn't think of it sooner." "What?" asked Franklin incredulously, "Where?"

Groden replied, "How did we get here in the first place? The landing ships. They should still be where we left them."

Harris leapt to his feet. "Of course! Groden, you're brilliant!"

Durrel shook his head. "Don't think the Dresk will just let us walk into the ships. I bet they're crawling with soldiers."

Franklin rose from her place by the fire. "It's better than sitting here. I say we move immediately."

Harris nodded. "Agreed. Grab your stuff everyone. We leave in half an hour."

Imperial Stardate 5221-1231

It had taken the platoon several days to reach the landing site, moving carefully by night. In the woods they had had some shelter, but between them and the landing site was open terrain. Even at a distance, it should be obvious to even a casual observer that they were not Saurians, and thus could not be Dresk. If the alarm were raised, Harris and his men would have mere minutes before all hell broke loose.

The platoon had found a small hollow to take shelter in, about half a kilometre from the hulking shapes of the Star Corps landing ships. Even in the dark, the crew could see them, because the Dresk had built a camp at the foot of the ships, filling the place with artificial light. The whole area had been fenced off, and there were guard patrols and sentry towers. Getting in would not be easy.

Harris peered over the top of the small hillock they were camped behind, assessing the situation. Ducking back down, he addressed the group. "Looks like they've got the place pretty well covered. Suggestions?"

Groden replied, "We'll never get through the main bay. Our best point of entry would be the access hatch near the engines. I think I can remember where that is."

Durrel spoke up. "That's all well and good, but how do we get past the guards?" Harris answered, "We'll have to sneak past. Here's the plan; listen carefully, we don't have much time."

It was approaching midnight when the platoon crept forward towards the ships. They'd come around in a wide loop, and were now approaching the landing craft from behind, putting the large vehicles between them and the main Dresk camp. On this side of the ships there was little activity, although a patrol still walked past at regular intervals. Harris led his troops up as close as he dared, and waited for the guard to pass. Once the lieutenant was satisfied the coast was clear, they snuck up to the fence and cut through using their laser cutters. Slipping through, Harris sent his men into position. Durrel went to the left, to take up a position and warn the group of any oncoming danger. Studabaker was to do the same on the right, and Harris would cover their rear. The rest of the platoon was to head for the entrance to the ship, led by Groden.

Before they had left, Harris had given them strict orders to remain silent. The Pantheroid captain crouched down low, keeping a sharp eye for any danger in the dark. He could just make out Durrel doing the same over on the left. Harris looked to the other side, but he could not see Studabaker. The green recruit had crept around between some pallets loaded with barrels. All his senses on high alert, the young Canid nervously fingered the grip of his Maxil rifle. Suddenly he heard what sounded like a footfall, coming from around the barrels. Gripping his rifle, Studabaker peered around the corner. Barely two metres away from him, a Dresk soldier was coming round the corner. He hadn't seen Studabaker yet, but he was turning in that direction. Panicking, Studabaker forgot his orders, and whipping his rifle up he shot the guard dead.

The sound of the gun rang out in the stillness. Harris froze and turned towards it, a look of horror on his face. Then he heard raised voices and running feet, and then several Dresk ran around the corner at once. Harris was caught out in the open, and they saw him at the same time as Studabaker. The private fell easily to the guns of the Dresk, but Harris was quicker. Leaping sideways, he opened fire at his attackers, causing them to run for cover. But before he could do the same, Durrel's warning shout came from behind him. Turning, the lieutenant spotted another group of Dresk firing at him. Then the group behind him opened fire. Caught in the middle, lieutenant Harris went down in a hail of bullets.

Under the shadow of the landing craft, Groden saw his officer fall. Durrel shouted again, and Groden noted the trouble the Felisian private was in. He had found some cover, but the Dresk were closing in on him. Swinging his rifle from his back, Groden leapt forward to help his friend. The vicious roar of his high-powered Miv machine gun filled the night, as Groden ripped into the Dresk surrounding Durrel. Behind him, Fritz and Franklin were dealing with the Dresk on the other side, while Welch was working on the lock of the door with his laser cutter.

Groden's onslaught had driven the Dresk near Durrel back, and left many of them dead. So the Felisian veteran decided to make a run for it. He hurled a grenade

over the barricade to keep the enemy busy, then dashed out as it went off. The Desk behind him might have been dealt with, but the Desk on the other side were ready for him. Several shots were fired at him, and Durrel fired back as he ran. Some of the Desk ducked, but one held his ground. A shot ran out, and Durrel felt a burning sensation in his stomach. He dropped to the ground, screaming in agony.

Fritz saw him fall, and despatched the shooter with a well-aimed bullet. Behind him, Welch yelled, "Got it!" as he finished cutting through the lock and pushed the door open.

"Get in!" he yelled, as he ducked inside.

"Durrel's still alive." Responded Franklin, as she fired another volley in the general direction of the Desk. She turned her head to Fritz and said, "Cover me!" He acknowledged the order with a nod, and let loose a storm of bullets as Franklin dashed out to where Durrel lay, still screaming. The medic knelt down beside him and threw his arm around her shoulders. With her right paw supporting Durrel and her left hand holding her rifle, which she was still using to shoot, the pair hurried back to the shelter of the ship.

Welch was waiting in the doorway. As Franklin made it to the doorway he took hold of Durrel's other arm, and together they hurried their comrade inside. Fritz was the next to go through the doorway, he ran backwards, still firing. Then Groden ducked inside, and swiftly slammed the door shut.

"Keep moving!" he urged them, knowing the Desk would not be far behind. The platoon was in a narrow corridor, a bad place for a fight, so they dashed along, Welch and Franklin carrying Durrel between them. The corridor turned a corner, then another, and they found themselves staring down a long passageway. Fritz noticed a series of doors to the right, and opened the first one.

"In here, quickly." He said, ushering them in. The room turned out to be a control room of some sort, and computer stations lined the walls.

"Now what?" asked Welch, his eyes on the door.

"Engine control room." Said Groden, half to himself. He walked over to the far wall, and began to run his hooves over it. "There should be a service way behind this wall. Ah, got it!" he said, as he pushed on a panel and it swung open. There was a tunnel behind it. They all crawled in, then Groden pulled the door shut. The big Torosian breathed a sigh of relief as he leant back against the wall. "We should be safe for now." He said.

Groden looked over to where Durrel was lying on the floor. Franklin had her medic's bag out, and was working on his wound. Groden asked her, "How is he?" Franklin looked up from her work. "He's passed out at the moment, probably from the loss of blood. The bolt's torn a hole in his stomach; I've done what I can for now, but he really needs surgery."

Groden answered "I have every confidence in you, Franklin. Can we move him? If I'm right, if we head down the end of this shaft we should find ourselves in a safe place."

"Let me finish stitching up this wound, then we should be ready to move."

Imperial Stardate 5221-1232

Franklin stopped for a second to check Durrel's pulse. As she held her watch to check for a minute, she noted the time. Just past midnight. Franklin paused. It was her mother's birthday today. For all Franklin knew, her mother thought her daughter was dead. Longingly, she thought of home, a long way away. Shaking her head to clear the mental image, she focused on her patient. Satisfied that Durrel's pulse, although not great, was at least passable, she signalled to Welch to help pick him up.

Groden led the five remaining members of the platoon down the service way, to where a heavy sealed hatch blocked the way. Taking hold of the wheel that locked it, Groden turned the wheel until the door opened. They crawled into a large tubular room.

"What is this place?" asked Fritz, looking around.

Groden grinned and folded his arms in front of his chest. "We're inside one of the engines. If I'm right, this is the fuel-mixing chamber." He pointed to a large pipe at one end of the tube. "The ignition chamber should be through there."

Welch asked, "How do you know so much about this stuff anyway?"

Groden answered, "My brother's an engineer in Star Corps. Let's just say I've been given the unofficial tour ok?"

He threw his pack onto the ground, and began to unpack his bedroll. "We'll stop here for the night. Dress scanners shouldn't be able to detect us in here. I'll take first watch; Welch, you'll take the second. Then Franklin, and Fritz. Alright everyone, let's get some sleep."

Franklin had a restless night. The faces of Harris and Sudabaker kept passing her in her dreams, and the sound of gunfire seemed to echo round her head. She woke up several times, and each time she checked on Durrel. He was still unconscious, and Franklin was slightly worried. She hoped he would wake up soon. She was only a medic, not a doctor, but she was the best chance Durrel had.

(To be continued)