

Firebird Squadron: Shadowhunters

A Narrative Campaign by Stryker feat. Firebird Squadron

Prologue

The atmosphere in the briefing room of the Strike Cruiser *Hermes* was electric; Firebird's assembled pilots unaware of where they were going or why their entire complement of pilots and equipment had been gathered along with their support craft and maintenance crew. As they waited for the briefing to begin, Pilots mingled with engineers and ship's crew; a motley collection of officers both senior and junior with a smattering of technical experts from the enlisted crew – though the *Hermes* crew was mostly human, Firebird had attracted a lot of nonhumans among their support crew, and a range of species from Twi'lek to Duros and Chiss were in attendance.

A soft chime brought the gathered beings, and Stryker entered followed closely by his black-and-yellow R6 unit and the *Hermes'* Captain. Taking the lectern as the attendees took their seats, he began without preamble and without any hesitation that the presence of so many former Admirals might have elicited.

“One week ago, we received a communique from the *Redemption*; the Modified Strike Cruiser *Deliverance* failed to report following a deep-space aggressor exercise with elements of Battlegroup Thirteen and the Star Destroyer *Kawolski*. Two days ago, we received word that the *Kawolski* had been attacked by stealth fighters and that the Star Destroyer *Retribution* and the Dreadnought *Audacity* had been disabled and abandoned.”

The holoprojector sprang to life with an image of the disabled *Retribution*, the venerable Victory-class cruiser adrift and trailing debris from several large hull breaches.

“Fleet Command is officially blaming the New Republic for the attack, but the Security Office managed to salvage this image from the *Audacity's* sensor logs.”

The screen shifted to a fuzzy depiction of a Y-Wing, its hull and astromech droid painted a mottled black with scattered flecks of grey and white to break up the outline and give the impression of a starfield. For the veteran pilots of the old Infiltrator Wing or the budding historians among the pilots and crew, only one squadron utilised craft equipped as such – the legendary Shadow Squadron, fallen on hard times since the integration of the Infiltrator Wing into the TIE Corps.

“We have been tasked by Fleet Command to investigate this attack, to ascertain whether Shadow Squadron were responsible or simply bystanders; either way, **someone** is responsible for this attack and if Shadow Squadron aren't the culprits, they failed to prevent it and have since disappeared without a trace.”

The holoprojector shut off and Stryker leaned heavily against the lectern, his expression serious.

“Though it hasn't been explicitly stated, our loyalty is being challenged here; if we succeed, we will be rewarded. Fail, we and our comrades in Eagle, aboard the *Redemption*, the *Renegade*, the *Fear*, every one of our Infiltrator Wing brothers and sisters will be put in a very dangerous situation – I do not believe Grand Admiral Rapiet will order summary executions, this isn't the Astatine-era, but there are thousands of lives at stake. Let's not screw it up. We depart in an hour, dismissed.”

As the assembled pilots and crew rose and departed, Stryker absentmindedly patted Sparky on the head – the *Redemption* had once been his home and he'd known most of the crew aboard the *Deliverance*, the entire situation seemed like an elaborate plot from a thriller holonovel, but Shadow Squadron had always been...odd. They'd never really appreciated being relegated to a support squadron, and in a way Stryker was surprised that something like this had not happened sooner.

Still, he had to hope for the best, to hope that Shadow Squadron were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time; the alternative was simply too horrible to contemplate...

Chapter 1

Eight X-Wings and two Y-Wings, each proudly bearing the colours of Firebird Squadron, exited Hyperspace at the coordinates the attack on the *Retribution* and *Audacity* had taken place; the two ships were still adrift, the ships assigned to salvage them and tow them to repair bases still several days away. Even from hundreds of kilometres away, the damage looked extensive; the *Retribution's* Bridge appeared to be open to vacuum, and several large breaches were visible in the superstructure of her dorsal hull – whatever had hit her had hit her **hard**, like a volley of Proton Torpedoes from an assailant she had been unprepared for. The *Audacity* was similarly damaged, her engine bays blasted into wreckage and her weakly-armoured hangar bay blown out from inside by secondary explosions. Stryker was no engineer, but even his limited knowledge told him that the ships would be in drydock for months before they would be spaceworthy again.

[I have sensor contacts ahead, over two dozen.]

The crackling voice of the recently-promoted Commander Travis Cook echoed in his headset, and Stryker shifted uncomfortably in his ejection seat; the presence of interlopers would make their investigation more difficult, especially if they were scavengers out looking for an easy score. The Victory-class design might be fifty years old, but the technology carried within was still military-grade and would make your average pirate or smuggler a hundred times more deadly if it were to fall into the wrong hands.

[Unidentified vessels, you are in restricted space. Power down your vessels and prepare to be boarded.]

The voice was unknown to Stryker but it was clipped, Imperial, and conveyed an implicit threat that not immediately complying was to mean death. In a way, this was both better and worse than pirates – better because the situation might be able to be defused by declaring his identity and orders, worse because if it wasn't, they would be fighting pilots with training and experience on a par with their own and, more than likely, in superior craft- his pilots were some of the finest in the fleet but he didn't rate three-against-one odds in X-Wings and Y-Wings against Defenders...

[I'm reading *Kawolski* IFF signatures on the inbounds; look like Gunboats and Avengers.]

That made it Stelek and Zlatan squadrons, neither of which Stryker had any experience with or personal knowledge of. Still, firing upon fellow Imperial pilots was not how Stryker wanted to start his investigation.

"Incoming fighters, this is Colonel Stryker of the Star Destroyer *Challenge*. Stand down. We are here under orders from the Security Office."

The response was Sparky shrilling warning that multiple ships were painting him with missile locks, and would be in firing range in less than ten seconds. Even with the upgraded engines of the Firebird craft, they wouldn't outrun the incoming Avengers or the missiles they were about to fire. With a sigh, Stryker switched frequency back to the squadron.

"Lock S-Foils in attack position; they aren't our enemies, so fire to disable."

As the formation broke into combat formation, with four X-Wings and a Y-Wing per flight, Stryker diverted power to his front shields and targeted the nearest ship; aiming for a classic disabling shot by severing one of the incoming Avenger's wings from the main body. As the range decreased, his finger hovered over the trigger, waiting to see who would flinch first...

The lead TIEs fired first, a dozen Concussions Missiles lancing out ahead of the agile craft as they closed, screaming in on the less agile X-Wings and Y-Wings. Fortunately this was something the Firebird pilots had become very experienced with in recent months; Stryker, Ricaud and Travis opened fire almost as one, the others a fraction of a second later, laser and Ion Cannon fire scything through the blackness to intercept and destroy the incoming warheads – those that were not destroyed by direct hits were immolated by the explosions of their brethren. Stray blasts grazed the shields of the incoming Avengers, who, disturbed by the unflinching advance of their targets, scattered and left the slower Gunboats in the line of fire. The Gunboats unleashed a powerful but brief barrage of missiles and cannon-fire before their formation also scattered, tagging the craft of the less-experienced pilots SkyHigh and Bowman; leaving their X-Wings adrift and without power. NiksaVel and Travis in the bulky Y-Wings formed a protective shield for the disabled craft, blasting away at whatever came close with their lasers and Ion Cannon turrets.

In the cockpit of his X-Wing, Stryker grunted with effort as he tried to keep pace with the fleeing Avenger, marked by its transponder as belonging to the squadron's commander. The range was good but the Avenger pilot was just slippery enough to evade presenting a good solution, right up until he snap-rolled to avoid colliding with a Gunboat that had just been disabled by one of the Y-Wings. Four scarlet bolts of energy pierced the Avenger's engine assembly one after the other, and the Avenger began to tumble uncontrolled through space. Elsewhere, similar events were occurring and the number of damaged or disabled craft began to climb in Firebird's favour until broadcasts of surrender began to crackle through the speakers in his headset – with both squadron leaders out of the fight, the remaining pilots weren't about to throw their lives away against pilots who had much more recent combat experience.

With hostilities ended, Firebird's support U-Wings arrived; loaded with technicians, they would analyse any surviving sensor data on both derelicts to determine whether Shadow Squadron had been responsible for the attack, and where they had gone afterwards. Even if Shadow Squadron had been innocent, they'd gone dark and were not responding to orders to return, and the TIE Corps could not afford the Shadow-class Y-Wing falling into the wrong hands – Stryker's orders were very clear when it came to preserving the secrecy of the design...

With the data downloaded, the U-Wings took the disabled X-Wings under tow and dropped distress beacons as the squadron hypered out of the system; forces from the *Kawolski* would respond to the call and retrieve their disabled craft, and **hopefully** would be smart enough to stay out of Firebird's way in the future...

Chapter 2 – Eighteen Hours Later

Once again, Firebird Squadron's ships burst from Hyperspace into a system littered with debris; the sensor data from the shattered *Audacity* had led them here, hot on the trail of the renegade Shadow Squadron. The wreckage this time was not Imperial, nor did it belong to the New Republic; instead, it looked as though a cargo convoy had been the target of Shadow Squadron's aggression, the remains of several freighters and their escorts drifted slowly towards the planet's small star.

It was a travesty; Starfighter pilots were often assigned to strike at shipping, but the crews of those ships were usually military or supplying military installations. From what the scanners were showing, these ships had been ferrying nothing of value; they had been attacked simply because they had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Lieutenant Commander Turel in Firebird 5 reported the presence of engine emissions from several small craft and a larger ship of medium cruiser size or larger.

That probably meant they'd landed aboard the *Deliverance*, which made sense; the Strike Cruiser was slower through Hyperspace but the Y-Wings of Shadow Squadron had been on a fairly long-ranged strike mission against two heavily-defended targets and there was only so long their ships and crews could continue alone, they'd need to refuel and rest. Fortunately, the slower speed of the *Deliverance* meant that Firebird might be able to catch up – they'd have to leave the *Hermes* behind, if they were to continue the pursuit, but the chase was now very much on.

With external fuel pods connected to their craft and the pair of support U-Wings loaded up with extra munitions and fuel, Firebird's collection of craft plotted the course most likely taken by the fleeing *Deliverance* and jumped back into Hyperspace - the chase was on...

Emerging from Hyperspace at the end of the trail, the assorted fighters, bombers and support craft spreading out into formation to give their sensor arrays the best opportunity to capture any contacts that might be of use. The empty space between systems was always an odd place to operate, and as the ships continued their journey, their scanners revealed nothing; no exhaust emissions, no sensor contacts, nothing. Either Shadow Squadron had vanished from this plane of existence entirely, or something far more nefarious was going on – it had been a while since Stryker had actively used The Force, but it still worked reliably as a passive early warning sense on more than one occasion. It was going off like a battlestations klaxon now.

"S-Foils to attack positions; break by Flights and..."

He didn't get the rest of the sentence out as a barrage of laser and ion fire sliced through space, slamming into the fighters of Turel and SkyHigh. Both ships fell out of formation, powerless and bleeding smoke as a shape flashed past Stryker's canopy – the mottled black-and-grey made it difficult to spot with his naked eye, but the shape was unmistakably that of a Y-Wing, its cannon turret already swinging to aim at a new target as the attack craft looped around and started a run in on a U-Wing that was trying to tow the disabled Y-Wing of Travis Cook to safety. Cutting his throttle to increase the speed of his turn, Stryker banked in after the nigh-invisible Y-Wing, lasers paired as the speed began to close agonisingly slowly – the *Shadow-class* Y-Wing could reach 100MGLT, which paired with its upgraded cannon armament and expanded torpedo bays, made it a tough nut to crack – the Infiltrator Wing pilots cleared to know of its existence had known that, but nobody had

exercised against them due to their secrecy – that was going to hurt them quite considerably. Swearing, Stryker diverted energy from his shields to his engines and the range began to close, the turret cannons began to swivel round to face the pursuing X-Wing and Stryker triggered a quick snap shot before rolling out of the line of fire – the turret came apart in a flash and the Y-Wing banked heavily away from its intended target. Swinging in behind it and now with a clear shot, Stryker armed his Ion Rockets and sighted them over the enemy craft as the danger sense began to tingle and Sparky hooted a shrill warning; with another curse, Stryker rolled to port and away from his target as bolts of azure ion cannon fire grazed his shields, battering them down but narrowly missing the frame of his craft and making his hair stand on end. The distraction was enough, however, Sparky hooted once more and Stryker was treated to the sight of twelve streaks of light – starfighters accelerating towards light speed.

Furious with the ease at which the squadron had been led into a trap, Stryker rounded up his wayward pilots and arranged for the disabled ships to be taken under tow until the *Hermes* could arrive. The Shadow Squadron pilots had deliberately aimed to disable, as the Firebird pilots had whilst firing upon the *Kawolski's* pilots – did that cast doubt upon their treason, or were they merely not willing to add more crimes to their records? It was a mystery that the pilots of Firebird Squadron were going to have to solve, and quickly...

Chapter 3 – The Next Day

Stryker brooded while he watched the Astromechs and mechanics aboard the *Hermes* perform repairs on the damaged or disabled craft of Firebird Squadron; Shadow Squadron's ambush had set them back by hours, perhaps days, and with every passing minute the renegades were getting further away. Without knowing their objective, they couldn't even plan a daring intercept that would take them to the edge of their endurance – like in the holos. It was probably for the best...

One of the *Hermes*' communications officers approached from just outside Stryker's peripheral vision with a datapad in her hand, she coughed gently to attract his attention and handed it to him before departing. A quick glance at the screen told him that they had intercepted a transmission from the Y-Wings as they departed; recordings of a Star Destroyer opening fire on civilian vessels, of the *Audacity* and *Retribution* snagging the *Deliverance* out of Hyperspace and crippling her with pinpoint salvos of weapons fire designed to disable her. Confused, Stryker checked to see if the files were genuine and the validator confirmed that the data had not been tampered with. Confused now more than ever, Stryker assembled the pilots and revealed what he had discovered – some reacted with shock, some with anger, while others seemed less than surprised that something like this had happened. The Strike Fleet was still full of die-hard Imperials who ascribed to the old ways, and the more moderately-minded members of the Infiltrator Wing were seen at best as weak, at worst as traitors to the Emperor – apparently someone in the *Kawolski* battlegroup, probably the Commodore themselves, had decided to cull the weak themselves...

If the *Deliverance* had been attacked without provocation and the *Kawolski* had ambushed and destroyed civilian freighters without warning, then their mission would need to be modified, but it did not change the fact that Shadow Squadron had gone off-mission, ceased communicating with their superiors, and fired upon TIE Corps vessels. They would need to be brought to heel as much as those they apparently tracked, but for now there were bigger fish to fry.

The squadron's next mission was a dud, as was the mission after that – neither the *Kawolski* or the *Deliverance* were in a position to be tracked, it was as if both ships had simply disappeared from space simultaneously – hiding an *Imperial-II*-class Star Destroyer wasn't something just anyone could do, even within the space controlled by the Emperor's Hammer. Meanwhile the Security Office demanded updates; the *Kawolski* was now under investigation as well, but Shadow Squadron was not off the hook and the Admiralty Board was not impressed with the constant delays – they wanted progress, and they wanted it sooner rather than later. Deep down, Stryker wondered how long it would be before Firebird Squadron was recalled and a less understanding unit was sent in its place – Praetorian Squadron, for example – they'd show up and simply gun down anyone who they considered complicit in the crimes that had been reported, submit a report with minimal detail, and get a chest-full of medals for their time. There had been a time when Praetorian had been honourable, but gone were the days of Ric Hunter and Abel Malik, replaced with pro-Imperial fanatics who would gladly sell their lives and souls in the name of a monster long dead.

Maybe Shadow Squadron's pilots had a point after all; was the corruption limited to the *Kawolski*, or had it spread so far throughout the fleet that it was impossible to tell who was fighting for law and order and who was simply in it for the power?

For the first time since returning, Stryker began to wonder if it might have been better if he'd not rejoined...

Chapter 4

The X-Wings cruised through empty space, another dead-end lead that threatened their pursuit of truth and justice, not that either had been staples of Imperial society. Shadow Squadron had disappeared without a trace, as was their speciality, and the *Kawolski* was now reportedly safely ensconced with the rest of its battlegroup deep within Emperor's Hammer territory and virtually untouchable. That they had failed so comprehensively irked Stryker no end, not only did it reflect badly on him as a Squadron Commander, but it also cast the loyalties of his squadron and the rest of the Infiltrator Wing into doubt – would they stand by their superiors when push came to shove? They would, Stryker knew that better than most, but he was beginning to question whether or not that loyalty was **deserved** – the number of fanatics within the Emperor's Hammer was growing, and Grand Admiral Rapier's secretive mission into the Unknown Regions had already claimed lives that would have been saved had they simply contented themselves with staying within their own borders.

All of this on the whim of a man few of us have ever seen... It's no surprise that someone decided to take advantage of the situation for a power grab...

Truth be told, Stryker didn't hold with the idea of a new Empire being led by a Sith Lord – it had failed **every time** it had been attempted in history, and with the way things were progressing, Stryker had a sneaking suspicion that the *Avenger* and her consorts would return to its territory only to be immediately destroyed by a Superlaser blast from the *Sovereign* under the command of a newly-minded Emperor, Grand Admiral, or other holder of some suitably over-inflated rank.

As the patrol of the system came to an end, Stryker ordered the ships to return to the *Hermes*; there was no point wasting more fuel and putting more hours on the spaceframes than was necessary given the trail had gone cold and they were on nothing more than a fool's errand to try and restore the honour of the Infiltrator Wing. The pilots were tired, he'd seen it on their faces; they'd run themselves ragged trying to prove themselves worthy, of proving themselves better than the insults thrown at them by other squadrons, and they'd burned themselves out doing it. They needed a break, time off the lines before the next big offensive, and Stryker wasn't sure they were going to get it – two pilots were on the verge of washing out, and that number risked rising unless new ways of motivating them could be found.

Maybe we'll hit a casino on the way back to the Challenge, claim we had 'hyperdrive issues' or something...

Either way, it was time to concede defeat and return home; Shadow Squadron had gone to ground somewhere, and they weren't getting anywhere near the *Kawolski* without the entire *Challenge* Battlegroup reinforcing them. For the first time since their formation, Firebird Squadron had failed, and it was time to tuck their tails between their legs and await the judgement of their superiors.

Perhaps Rapier would execute them after all, and just get it over with...

Epilogue – ISD-II Challenge

Stryker sat alone in his office nursing a tumbler of cheap Corellian Whiskey and contemplated the future; technically he'd committed treason by firing upon other TIE Corps vessels, but those charges had been swept under the rug by those wishing to avoid a scandal – Stryker had identified himself and the other ships had fired first, so despite returning fire, the entire incident was being quietly forgotten by those in power. The *Kawolski's* Commodore remained in their position, which was a slap in the face given the evidence that the transmission from Shadow Squadron had provided.

“Couldn't verify its authenticity” my ass, someone up there is covering for the Kawolski crew; murderous bastards they are.

Not for the first time since returning, Stryker considered packing a bag and departing on a “solo recon” from which he had no intention of returning. He'd managed it as a Combat Operations Officer because Admirals had the freedom to go where they pleased when they pleased; as a Squadron Commander, and a junior one when it came to the *Challenge* hierarchy of trust, he had to get authorisation from the Wing Commander and Commodore – authorisation he was unlikely to get. Better to wait until Firebird were again trusted with an independent operation and disappear then, less likelihood of attracting undue attention and putting the pilots under his command, his friends, in the Security Office's line of fire.

Until then, he would play the loyal Imperial and ignore the fact that he was surrounded by a new generation 'true believers' - fanatics and psychopaths who saw genocide and xenophobia as the 'glory days' of the Empire; people who would quite happily reignite hostilities with the New Republic and feed hundreds of thousands if not millions of lives into the blender that was a galactic civil war. If that role gave him the opportunity to ensure a few of those fanatics didn't return to spread their specific brand of vitriol, then that was just a perk of the job...

Word Count: 4,006 Words