



STAR
FORGED
T H R O U G H
F I R E
WARS
BY DANIEL "DRAKE" SUTHERLAND
AND MICHAEL "RAVEN" ROVARDI

The X Wing loomed in the gunsight of the TIE Advanced as the green lock flashed. Raiven tightened his finger on the trigger, firing blasts of green laser energy into the stern of the New Republic starfighter. He was rewarded by a bright flash as the X Wing disintegrated under the hammer blows of his fire, forcing him to roll to starboard to avoid damage from the blast. He checked his sensor board for his flight leader, and turned in his direction.

The battle was going badly for the New Republic fighter squadron. The deep space patrol of 2 A Wings, 4 X Wings and 2 B Wings was reduced to just 2 X Wings and an A Wing - one of the B Wings had fled into hyperspace, badly damaged, a few minutes earlier. The rest of the fighters had fallen to the three - now two - TIE Advanced, as one of the T/As - Tzadkiel's, fell to the combined fire of the remaining Republic fighters.

Raiven tucked in behind Vyper's left wing as he opened fire on the remaining A Wing. The lightweight Republic fighter broke formation with the X Wings and tried to use it's superior speed to extend the distance on the Imperial fighters. "Take the X Wings," came the terse comlink message. Raiven double clicked his comlink in reply.

Vyper's Advanced leaped ahead as he redirected his power settings to pursue the A Wing. These X Wings seemed to be a little better than the previous two, as one swung into a pursuit position to fire on Vyper, while the other hung back to cover his wingman.

Although Vyper's TIE Advanced was far faster than the Republic fighter, the X Wing fired off a quad burst as the Imperial fighter flashed past. Raiven responded with a quad burst of his own, while the second X Wing looped in an attempt to get behind him. As Vyper closed the gap on the A Wing, Raiven slotted in behind the first X Wing and started pounding on his shields, all the

while watching his rear sensor scope. After his second burst of fire splashed across the X Wing's rear shield, a matching burst hit Raiven's rear, fired by the second X Wing. Raiven evaded left, then right, firing another quad burst into the first X Wing as he flashed past.

Raiven cut his throttle to 1/3 and swung to avoid the stream of fire from the X Wing, forcing it into a long outside loop. Jamming the throttles to max, he curved back behind his opponent, using the superior acceleration and manoeuvrability of the TIE to gain a position behind him. Raiven fired precision quad bursts into the X Wing's aft, quickly reducing its shields and punching through. He watched as one bolt struck the R2 droid in its socket, blasting white and green fragments into space. The next burst struck the port dorsal engine and sheared both port S-Foils clean off, destroying the Republic fighter.

Vyper caught up with the A Wing and opened fire before the Republic fighter could turn fully to engage him. Verdant bolts slammed into the side of the turning A Wing, rocking the small fighter. The return fire splashed across the TIE Advanced's forward shields, but it was too late. The next quad burst punched through the remaining shields on the front of the A Wing and converged on the cockpit, completely vaporising it.

Vyper turned to face the X Wing pursuing him as Raiven accelerated to catch it from behind. As the Republic fighter reached 2.5 klicks from Vyper's TIE, it broke away at a tangent. Raiven could clearly see the silver-white shape of a wolf's head as the X Wing jumped to hyperspace.

Raiven's forward viewscreen went black and the simulator canopy opened. Opposite the three pods used to simulate the Imperial craft, the pilots of Wolfshead Squadron who were flying the Republic craft stood in small groups, glowering at Raiven, Vyper and Tzadkiel as they climbed from their pods. Raiven deliberately kept his mien impassive, matching that of the squadron's XO. Vyper spoke to the pilots. "Go get yourselves a cup of caf. Meet us in the briefing room in 15 minutes for debriefing and your scores." The pilots shuffled toward the exit as Vyper, Raiven and Tzadkiel walked to the control station, where the Squadron's training officer, Moose, sat at the main controller's console.

"You certainly gave them a good shaking, particularly on that last run," he said, punching buttons on the main control console and producing a holographic display of the scores. "What do you think of their performances?"

"I certainly wouldn't have liked to run up against them when I was still flying for the Empire," said Raiven.

"And don't forget that Raiven has the most recent TIE Advanced experience," added Vyper.

"They definitely learnt that they can't always rely on warheads to see them through," said Tzadkiel. "That last run without missiles cost the A Wings severely."

"Well, cannons are the main weapons on any starfighter," replied Moose, "It's good to see that they're getting plenty of gunnery practice. We won't always have full loadouts of warheads, particularly if we're operating for extended times behind enemy lines. I've assembled the reruns for you."

"OK, I'll handle the pep talk," said Vyper. "Raiven, you walk them through their mistakes. Keep them on edge a bit, but don't forget the encouragement for those that deserve it."

Moose headed to the briefing room, trailed by the erstwhile TIE pilots. After confirming the security seal on the door, he turned and spoke.

"I'd just like to remind you that the details of this training exercise are classified. Do not discuss them with the other half of the squadron, they will be performing this exercise tomorrow."

This brought a wry grin to the faces of many of the pilots sat in the seats facing the briefing dais.

"Vyper?"

"A couple of general points before we get into details. The TIE Advanced is rare and not widely deployed. But that won't save you if you run up against them. The purpose of this exercise was to teach you how to deal with them as best you can..."

Again, several of the pilots smiled at this. Vyper saw this and suppressed a grin of his own.

"...although they seemed to be a somewhat expensive set of lessons."

The grins faded.

"Raiven?"

Raiven stepped forward and activated the holoprojector.

"You made some mistakes out there. And you came up with some innovative solutions. Let's start at the beginning. Computer, play file 'Sparks' Death' 1...." There was a groan from the back of the auditorium....

[Captain's ready room, Imperial Star Destroyer *Dominance*]

The captain of the newly commissioned Imperial Star Destroyer *Dominance* took a deep breath as he activated the holocomm device mounted in his huge desk. *Roygner. I haven't spoken to this one before, but if he's half as bad as they say he is, then this should be fun, to say the least.*

"Good morning, Grand Admiral Roygner, sir," the captain said with a respectful nod. The foot high image on his desk nodded in acknowledgement.

"Good morning, Vice Admiral. Congratulations on your promotion and your new command."

“Thank you, sir,” the captain said, carefully keeping his voice even and his features impassive. Thanking superior officers was usually a very risky business. Some would simply accept the thanks, but others would often bark that they were only doing their job, as their subordinates should be. Again the image of the tall, striking man resplendent in his white Grand Admiral's uniform nodded.

“I am now going to quickly brief you on your assignment,” the hologram said, the deep, richly resonant voice of the owner barely distorted across the huge distance that separated sender and receiver.

“Your task fleet is now nearly in position,” the image of Grand Admiral Roygner continued. “As you know, we have successfully held the Mantara sector for some years now, and it has proved to be a most valuable resource to us. However, as supplies of natural resources continue to dwindle, that importance decreases. The sector has no tactical importance whatsoever, but other areas do, and our forces are currently being deployed to counter two major Alliance offensives elsewhere.

“This leaves the Mantara sector undefended, and it is clearly an unacceptable situation that Imperial assets be left undefended.”

The captain of the *Dominance* nodded gravely. The Empire depended upon consistency of strength to establish order – and it was consistency of strength, and tactical geniuses - like the Empire's twelve Grand Admirals – that had seen it survive to the present day. He studied this one, Roygner, whom he had of course heard of, but never seen before. The impeccably dressed figure in front of him was tall, he decided, well over six feet in height and possessing a lean build. The Grand Admiral's hair was a rich brown with greying temples, and his eyes were a striking grey. His voice, deep and resonant, spoke of power, authority, confidence, and aristocracy. He was quite handsome by human standards, and the Star Destroyer's captain felt himself transfixed by Roygner's eyes. The cold grey eyes stared piercingly at him like chips of slate as he spoke.

“Accordingly, the Mantara sector is to be relinquished as an Imperial asset,” his image went on, as it began to pace slightly from left to right and back again.

“However, it will also be unacceptable to give the Alliance any chance of exploiting what resources do remain in the region. Therefore, those resources are to be taken or destroyed.

“That is where you and your task fleet come in, Vice Admiral,” Roygner continued, his eyes narrowing fractionally. The captain of the *Dominance* felt as if they were boring into his soul. “You are hereby ordered to completely effect the retrieval, or, failing that, the destruction of all natural resources in the Mantara sector. You may use whatever means necessary, but not a single useful resource must remain. Is this clear?” The captain's mind was racing. *Whatever means necessary? That could go far beyond just orbital bombardment – they're thinking of planetary viral bombs, core disruption technologies...* he blinked once to clear his head. Roygner was waiting for an answer, his hands clasped firmly behind his back, and it was never good to keep a Grand Admiral waiting.

“Perfectly clear, sir,” he answered, his tone even, although his eyes were a murky whirlpool of thoughts and emotions.

“Excellent,” Roygner answered, his calm, almost musical voice somehow acquiring a menacing edge. The Grand Admiral turned and stared at the *Dominance's* captain for a few seconds, seeming to assess the latter, who felt uncomfortably like the senior officer was peering into his soul. Eventually, Roygner continued, his words precise and measured.

“Don’t fail me, admiral,” he said slowly. “You are in command of one of the greatest task forces in the Empire as it is today. Don’t fail me. Grand Admiral Thrawn may be gone, but you will find that the Empire does not lack for strong leadership.” The other forced down an overwhelming urge to squirm in his chair, then looked his superior officer directly in the eye and spoke, his voice hard and cold.

“Yes, sir. I won’t.” At that, the Grand Admiral nodded and his lips curved into a hint of a smile, half exposing white, even teeth.

“I’m sure you won’t, Admiral,” Roygner said, emphasising his subordinate’s rank, as if to remind him of his rapidly increasing status, and how fragile that status was. Slowly he folded his arms and stroked his chin with one hand. “I have other matters to attend to. Good luck.”

And with that the hologram disappeared.

The vice admiral sighed deeply and rubbed his forehead. He’d acquired his promotion and new command – of this ship and this task force - because of his involvement with the recent engagement between several Alliance starfighter squadrons and capital ships and Admiral Leto’s Ninth Imperial fleet. In that engagement, most of the Alliance starfighter squadrons had been all but destroyed, and few of their capital ships had escaped severe damage or destruction. He’d been overjoyed to be the youngest ever Imperial officer to be promoted to the rank of Vice Admiral – beating even the Grand Admirals to flag rank. With the new insignia that he now wore proudly on his breast came the ability and responsibility to command large task groups. To get command of an Imperial task force of this size was a great achievement for any Imperial starship captain – but he was less than thrilled with his newest assignment. The captain of the ISD *Dominance* was fundamentally a good man, thoroughly devoted to the principles of structure and order and to the Empire that strove to establish them in the galaxy, but not always in agreement with the methods that the Empire chose to bring that about.

However, he reflected to himself, there were many factors which influenced men’s actions. And one of the greatest of those was...

Fear.

Fear of failing the Grand Admiral, fear of the Alliance gaining the upper hand in the galactic war that had been raging for so many years, fear of losing his command. Fear of losing himself.

No, that last fear did not apply here, he decided after some thought. Of all the men in the Galactic Empire, he trusted none more than Grand Admiral Thrawn, but anyone else thought worthy by the Emperor to be made a Grand Admiral was equally to be trusted and respected. The Grand Admirals were the masters of their profession, the greatest strategists and tacticians in the Empire, and if one

of them had thought an assignment important enough to personally deliver it, then it must be important – and *necessary* – indeed.

The great men of the universe, the admiral decided, were men of vision and men of faith. *I have the vision – that's why I serve the Empire. Now it's time to exercise the faith.*

He leaned forward and touched a switch.

“XO, come to my ready room, please.”

“On my way, sir,” came the tinny reply, and the intercom switched off. The admiral leaned back in his chair and waited a minute until the door chime sounded.

“Come,” he said, sitting up slightly as the doors hissed open and his executive officer entered. The latter stood stiffly at attention after approaching the senior officer’s desk.

“Reporting as ordered, sir,” he said crisply.

“Very good, at ease and sit down,” the admiral said, motioning the man into a seat. The latter sat and waited respectfully for his captain to speak. To his surprise, the senior officer suddenly smiled a twisted smile, and remarked, “You’re not going to believe what our assignment is.”

“Sir? Try me.”

“Very well. I’ll tell you.” And so he did.

When he’d finished, the XO sat in stunned silence for a full minute.

“Hell of a first assignment for us,” he managed at last. The other nodded.

“It certainly is,” he agreed. “What I’m most worried about is what the crew will think of this – and the crews of our other ships, too. While I think of that, I need you to schedule a captain’s conference for tonight so we can move as soon as possible. I’ll brief the captains and executive officers of all the ships in the fleet myself. You will of course be there as well.” The XO nodded.

“Very good, sir.” The captain of the *Dominance* stared at his executive officer for a few moments before he spoke again.

“Tell me, Captain. Are you all right to accomplish this mission? Speak freely.”

“Vice Admiral Piett, sir, in all honesty, I have some doubts,” the XO confessed, keeping his eyes on those of his superior officer. “However, I’m just a captain, and an executive officer at that. I don’t know the broader picture, so I follow orders. I’ve had doubts before, but I’ve always done the job, and things have always come right in the end. That’s exactly how I view this assignment, sir. I don’t know what considerations are at work here, so I do the job I’m told to do and keep my questions to myself. And, sir,” the XO continued with a frown, “you can be damn sure that I’ll make certain the crew do exactly the same. The first man that balks at obeying an order will be counting deck plates from the comfort of the brig.” Vice Admiral Norvad Piett nodded briefly.

“Very good, Captain. That’s all for now. Dismissed.”

“Sir.” The other man stood to rigid attention and then left.

After the doors had slid closed, Piett stroked his chin thoughtfully. The youngest Imperial officer ever to make an admiral’s rank, and the youngest to ever obtain command of a task force this size, he seemed set to follow in his father’s

footsteps. He searched in his mind for all the stories his father had told him as a young boy, tried to remember if the Admiral Piett of legend had ever had to carry out an assignment like this -

After he started working directly for Vader? No doubt. The Executor wasn't known for its immensity and grandness so much as for the destruction it caused. Piett's thoughts shifted to another matter entirely, and he smiled faintly.

Now that White Squadron is finally out of the way, I can move on to other things. With that thought in mind, Vice Admiral Piett of the Imperial Navy leaned forward in his chair and set to work.

[On final approach to Alliance Space Platform *Patience*, Iberian System]

The young Alliance pilot known as Drake frowned and clenched his fist irritably. Glancing out the window of the Alliance shuttle *Glittering Silver*, he saw what he thought was one of the ugliest space "vehicles" in existence.

A Space Platform.

The Rebel Alliance didn't have that many platforms, Drake knew, which was part of the reason behind his curiosity at being flown to one. The other reason was that he *wasn't* being taken to his squadron's mothership, the frigate *Wolf's Den*.

"Can't this old rustbucket move any faster than this?" he grumbled irritably to himself. A few feet in front of him, in the cockpit, the shuttle pilot and co-pilot heard him and exchanged glances. *Yep, typical fighter jock. No respect for any ship that can't kill you either through excessive speed or weapons malfunctions.*

"*Glittering Silver*, this is *Patience* Flight Control," a voice crackled over the comm suddenly. "You have clearance. Just sit back and enjoy the tractor ride in."

"Acknowledged, *Patience*," the pilot replied evenly, and then, with a small smile, "just make sure it's a nice, smooth, slow ride." He sat back and grinned, deliberately ignoring the barely inaudible curse coming from the back.

[Platform *Patience* Recreation Lounge 3A]

The recently promoted Commander Avery "Foxfire" Shroeder, and her executive officer, Captain Michael "Vyper" Stauber sat deep in conversation at one of the tables in the busy recreation lounge aboard the *Patience*.

"I don't like it," Vyper said with a quick sip of his drink, on this occasion something hot and non-alcoholic.

"Nor do I," Foxfire agreed with a frown. "We don't even have an operational ship, and they're assigning us *this*?"

"I know," Vyper continued, "but-" He stopped in mid-sentence and smiled for the first time since their briefing early that morning. "Hello, here's Drake."

"Back from the dead?!" Foxfire asked, with a look that was just a bit too melodramatic.

The young man had already spotted the pair and was headed over.

"Welcome back, stranger," Foxfire motioned Drake to have a seat and grinned.

"Thanks, Fox," Drake answered with a smile of his own. "Can't say that I like the venue for my homecoming party, though." Foxfire sighed.

"I know, believe me, I'm not too impressed with it either. Unfortunately, Vyper and I found out where we're headed this morning, and it looks even less bright than where we are now."

"Wonderful," Drake rolled his eyes. "Where's the squadron off to now? Freighter duty? Where's the *Den*, anyhow?"

"Slow down, slow down," Vyper admonished Drake gently. "There's a lot to tell you – you won't have heard most of it yet, it's only happened very recently."

Drake's eyes narrowed fractionally and he folded his arms.

"Go for it. I'm listening."

"Well, basically we were just involved in the liberation of Iberya, Ibero's home planet," Vyper explained. "We all took lots of hits, and Wolfshead got hit hard. You know we lost people when Wolfshead was first formed, and the battle at Iberya did little to help with the gaps in our roster. Actually, we don't even have a new ship yet, which is why we're sitting here idle on this rusty tub of bolts. The *Den* is sadly on her way to some rest – she was destroyed in the battle at Iberya." And to Vyper's utter amazement, at that moment a glistening tear slowly rolled down Drake's cheek. The young man said nothing however, nor did he make any effort to wipe the tear away. The loss of the *Joan d'Arc*, Vyper knew, had hit the young man hard. It had become home to him, and at first he had been very hostile towards the new ship, the *Wolf's Den*. Finally, Drake had accepted her, grudgingly at first, but in the end as loyally as he ever had with the *Joan*. And now, he had lost his new ship, too. *It must be like losing a loved one all over again*, Vyper thought to himself. Drake was not alone, he knew. He himself was still dealing with the grief of loss – but now was not the time for such things to be dealt with. Necessity, unfortunately, had to bid them to wait. He took a deep breath, then continued. "This morning we received word of our new assignment. I can't tell you what it is yet – I'll save that till the briefing – but it's big. Very big."

"Isn't it always?" Drake sighed. Foxfire managed a small chuckle.

"With us? You bet," she answered him, her mouth twitching into a thin smile.

"I hope you can get packed and ready fast," Vyper continued with a grin of his own, "because we'll be leaving pretty soon. We have to move damn quickly on this one." Drake snorted, and finally wiped his face with a sleeve.

"Hey, I'm not even *unpacked* properly yet," he said wryly. "It certainly won't be a problem for me to pack everything again." Foxfire and Vyper smiled sympathetically, and Foxfire decided to change the subject.

"So, how was the course?" she asked lightly.

"Not too bad," Drake said with a cheeky grin, helping himself to a second drink Vyper had ordered. "I was lined up for pretty much the same course before I left Arrebna. Advanced Security and Close Quarters Battle Training is a pretty rigorous course, but my natural talent prevailed and I easily passed it..."

"I see the rigours of the course didn't hurt your ego any," Vyper observed dryly. Drake beamed at him in return.

"Well, of course not," he chuckled. "Don't underestimate my ego, Vyper. It's one of the few parts of me that is utterly unbreakable – as I learnt on the course."

“Oh?” Foxfire’s raised eyebrows were pointed questioningly at Drake.

“Ah, it’s stupid really –“ Drake paused for a drink – “we were doing a mockup stakeout. I was already in position in the “cantina” and one of the other clowns decided that he’d try and rush the bust. Unfortunately for me, I was too close to one of the bad guys and wasn’t expecting anything and before I knew what had hit me, he’d grabbed my arm and flipped me onto my back, then he introduced me to the working end of a PR5 Blastech pistol. To add injury to insult, my left arm was broken – it got twisted in the fall. Course, there was a positive side to all this,” Drake grinned. “The guys – the one that started the bust early and the instructor who accidentally broke my arm - felt pretty bad and bought me plenty of drinks.” Vyper laughed.

“Glad you got something for your trouble, then,” he said, polishing off his drink.

“Well, I don’t know about you two, but I think I’ll be off. Drake, we’ll be having a briefing at 0700 tomorrow.” The younger man groaned.

“I have definitely had enough of early starts,” he complained. “I really should have been a bureaucrat like Mum and Dad...” his voice trailed off for a moment before he seemed to come back to himself.

“Yep, cheers, Vyper,” he said, standing. “I’ll see you both bright and early tomorrow, then.”

“See you later, Drake. Nice to have you back,” was Foxfire’s parting shot as the young man left the lounge. Drake smiled and lifted his hand in acknowledgment.

[Visiting Officer’s Quarters, PLT *Patience*]

“At least the quarters on this floating brick are decent,” Drake observed as he unpacked a few personal items into the standard Alliance vanity locker. Stripping out of his working uniform, he laid on the bed and began to read a holonovel. Somehow he couldn’t concentrate.

She’s gone, and I didn’t even get a chance to say goodbye.

The thought brought on that lump in his throat, and Drake cleared it loudly to prevent himself from getting worked up again. *A whole era is over – just gone. And it all happened while I was away. I didn’t even get a chance to say any goodbyes.* Drake frowned crossly. This was not a time to be melancholy. Forcing his thoughts elsewhere, the young man returned to his holonovel.

It was only a few minutes later that a shadow fell across the bed, and he turned around to look at the source.

A slow smile spread across his face.

Outside the viewport glided the beautiful gleaming hull of a New Republic ship, although it was unlike anything Drake had ever seen before.

He could not make out her name, but a large wolf’s head was emblazoned on the sparkling superstructure. *My God, what a ship.* Drake almost felt guilty for so quickly admiring the new ship as he thought of the battered old *Joan d’Arc* and *Wolf’s Den*, both now on their way to rest, either as a training ship or a hulk that glided through space. It did not occur to him that his thoughts – treating the two ships like girlfriends or lovers – were even slightly out of the ordinary. *Well. We’ll*

see if this new ship is as good the Joan and the Den were, won't we? The Wolfshead pilot dismissed thoughts of the fate of his old ships and squadron as depressing and less worthwhile than his relaxation, and settled back down to his holonovel, but in less than five minutes he was asleep.

[Briefing room, PLT *Patience*]

Drake walked into the briefing room the next morning still somewhat groggy from sleep.

"What's the matter, didn't they give you any sleep during your time away?" asked Arachnoid with a smile.

"No, as a matter of fact they didn't, much," Drake answered grumpily as he found a seat. He slowly looked around. Most of his old comrades sat in the hall, along with a few unfamiliar faces. For the first time since arriving back, he felt a warm prickling sensation in his heart despite the icy fingers of fear and grief which had seized it after learning of his old squadron and his old ship's fate.

"Oh, well, a week's worth of sleep back here and you'll be right as rain," Granite interjected helpfully, interrupting his thoughts.

"I wouldn't be too sure of that at the moment," Ibero cut in. "I think we're going to have our work cut out for us..." he broke off as Foxfire and Vyper entered the room, along with the blonde woman that had been captain of the *Wolf's Den*. Drake had rarely actually seen her before. He hadn't ever been personally introduced, and had been away for most of the time she had been in command. He took a moment to examine her in detail. She wore the insignia of a New Republic colonel, and was, Drake thought, reasonably attractive for her age. There was something strange about her, though...the ears, and...

And what?

Drake continued to watch as her gaze coolly swept the room. For a moment it settled on him, a pilot she had not taken much note of before. Then it swept on, her dark eyes almost black...

The eyes...and the ears...

"The captain, she's not human, is she?" Drake enquired of the man sitting next to him, a pilot he'd not seen before. The latter smiled.

"Nope. She's half Bothan. Pleased to meet you, I'm Cardinal." Drake grinned.

"Sorry. Should've introduced myself, Cardinal. I'm Drake." He stuck out his hand and Cardinal shook it firmly, a grin creasing his face.

"So *you're* the one..."

What the hell is that supposed to mean? Drake wondered, although he doubted it was meant as anything but a little jibe. He didn't have time to wonder, however, as Foxfire suddenly raised a hand and the general din died down.

"Good morning," she said pleasantly as everyone at last got quiet and comfortable. "Here we all are at last – Wolfshead Squadron.

"I've gathered you here today for two reasons – one, I need to inform you of our new mission, and two, I'm going to formally introduce our captain, Colonel Talina Gen'yaa, to the newcomers in the squadron." Drake frowned, old arguments

flaring up again in his mind. *What the hell is a colonel doing in command of a naval vessel?* he wondered in a flash of irritation. *And a Bothan, at that, now! Probably some sort of political wrangling by Borsk Fey'lya.*

Foxtire paused and looked over at the captain, who moved forward and leant on the podium.

"Good morning, pilots," the captain said evenly. "I'm in command of the *Wolf's Lair*, your new ship. Not only have I not gotten to fully know the ship yet – she's the first of a new class of ship, the *Wolf*-class Strike Carriers – but also I haven't gotten to know all of you. I have no doubts, however, that I will get to do so in the near future." Drake wasn't sure he liked the way Gen'yaa said that. She seemed to be suggesting that she'd get to know them more because they'd need to be disciplined than for any other reason. *And all this time, I thought Orris was a hard old bastard*, he thought with a wry grin. The captain continued.

"I want you all to familiarise yourselves with the senior crew and department heads, because they're the people you'll be working with. They're on duty at the moment, but I'm sure you'll get to know them in time.

"The mission you're about to take is, quite frankly, not one that I'd wish for, but it's essential nonetheless, and we will be getting underway very soon. I'll leave Commander Schroeder to the details of that mission. Before I leave, this is what I expect of you.

"I expect that you will follow your orders and follow them to the best of your ability. I run a tight ship, and it's through unqualified faith in the chain of command that I've managed to bring all my previous crews back home alive. What I'm saying is, play by the rules. I don't have a problem with initiative, so long as it's within the bounds set out for you. You may make mistakes, but I expect you to learn from them. I'm sure," the captain said after a slight pause, her face softening a little, "that you won't have many problems with this. Your records – both individually and as a squadron – are second to none. That's why you've become one of the most elite New Republic starfighter squadrons. Don't let the Republic down." Colonel Gen'yaa finished and slowly let her gaze drift around the room, letting her words sink in. *Pilots are always such a difficult group to manage...*

"That's all, Wolf Leader," she said, stepping down from the podium. Foxtire called the room to attention and saluted the captain as the senior officer left. Everyone let out a collective sigh, but surprisingly no one said a word. Foxtire's eyebrows arched at this, but she quickly assumed her position at the podium and began.

"So ends the pep talk," she said with a small grin. "Now down to business.

"Before I start, I'd like to welcome back Drake – those of you who don't know him will probably get to know him before long. He has a habit of making himself known," Foxtire added, earning her a sharp glance and a snort from Drake, although in fact he loved the attention. Everyone laughed and Foxtire relaxed slightly. *It's good to lighten this up a little*, she thought with an inner sigh.

"We also have a few newcomers to the squadron who've just been transferred even as we're all being transferred to our new ship, the *Wolf's Lair*. You may have seen a few of them around the platform over the past couple of days.

"We have Hawk, Gandalf, Raiven, Razor and Sledgehammer."

Each of the mentioned pilots stood as Foxfire called out their callsign. Drake watched, a little bored - he knew he would meet the rest of the newbies properly later on - until Razor stood up. As she stood and nodded a greeting to the rest of the squadron, her green eyes made contact with Drake's. *Whoa!* he thought, sitting up slightly. He leaned over fractionally to talk to Cardinal. "What do you know about her?" he whispered.

Cardinal grinned. "She certainly grabs your attention, doesn't she? I talked to her a little on the shuttle over here. Jarn Stynter, 24 standard years old, A Wing pilot and I'm sure ex-model with looks like that. She's pretty competitive, too. I get the impression that she feels she's got something to prove since there are fewer women here than in her previous squadron."

"What about the others?" asked Drake.

"Well, I've only talked to Raiven and Sledgehammer. Raiven - Mike Rovardi - is an ex-Imperial pilot, and pretty good too. Have you taken his and Vyper's training session yet?"

"No, I just arrived back yesterday."

Cardinal shuddered. "I won't spoil it for you - besides, Moose would have my head. Apparently he and Solo helped each other out of a bit of trouble last year. That's his TIE Advanced down in the bay.

"Alex 'Sledgehammer' Carston is a strike pilot - B Wings and Y Wings, apparently. Typical heavy firepower mud-mover."

Drake turned to look at the other pilot. "Don't tell me. A Wings are your speciality, right?"

Cardinal smiled again. "You guessed it!"

Drake nodded and turned his attention back to the briefing.

"...Wolfshead, we have a real situation on our hands here," Foxfire was saying, "This isn't an Imperial convoy or a rogue admiral that we have to track down - in many ways it's much worse.

"The Imperials are abandoning Mantara sector. It no longer has the resources to justify a continued Imperial presence there - at least, that's the way the Imps see it. They're withdrawing, but true to form, they intend to steal or destroy everything of value in the place before they leave. To that end, they've got a massive task force headed there even now at top speed. Luckily we've learnt of this now, or it would be too late. In just a few hours we'll be getting underway at full speed - we're going to give the *Wolf's Lair* a decent test drive on her maiden voyage! - but it's going to be a race against time to stop those Imps from burning everything they can't steal. And whenever they try to destroy resources they can't steal, you can bet your last credit that there'll be casualties and collateral damage." There was a murmur of noise which rippled amongst the squadron, but Foxfire quelled it and continued.

"I realise we're not exactly fully operational on this new ship," she said sympathetically, "but we have orders, and the lives of all those people are too important not to take some risks.

"That's all the information we have at the moment. We don't even know the composition of the task force - the intel we have is sketchy at best. We're probably going to have to gather some of our own when we get there."

Conversation started again as it seemed that Foxfire had finished, but she slammed the podium with a hand and the room went instantly silent. "Last thing before you go," she said, her face grave. "We have been authorised to take any and all measures necessary to complete this mission, as long as civilian lives aren't threatened." "What about *our* lives?" Arachnoid wanted to know. Foxfire's headshake was all he needed for an answer. The room's atmosphere changed instantly, and a deathly silence hung over the assembly. "Any more questions? No? Good. Be on flight deck C in thirty minutes for transport over to our new home," Foxfire concluded. "Dismissed."

[Hangar deck, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

"What a piece of junk!" Drake stood, a kit bag in each hand, staring around him in wonder at the messy conglomeration of spare parts, fighters under repair and exposed circuitry that passed for the main hangar bay, and the fighters housed within it. A nearby B-wing sat sadly on the deck, most of its innards exposed as a couple of grimy techs worked on it. "*This is what we have to take on the might of the Empire?*" "Who the hell are you?" a voice snapped from behind him. Drake whirled around and beheld one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. *Two in one day*, he thought, *The Force must be with me*. Beautiful, yes, but with a look that could have chilled milk. "I'm Drake," he answered evenly, his brow knitted into a frown. "And you are?" "Lieutenant Mar Hanniuska, Chief Tech," she answered, hands on hips and a hydrospanner in one hand. "And if you don't like the new ship – and more importantly, the fighters on board her - you're welcome to get off right here." Drake found, for once, that he just didn't have anything to say. *She's good looking AND she's sharp*, he thought, and his face broke into a grin. "Sorry. No offence intended...it's just that I still miss my old ship. The name's Drake." He dropped a bag and offered his hand. Mar's face slowly unclouded, and the young man was quietly stunned by the resulting brilliance. *Stop thinking like a schoolkid!* he admonished himself, but he just couldn't seem to help it. "I understand – losing a ship is never easy," Mar said, and took his hand in a firm, greasy grip. Drake grinned at his blackened hand. "Touche, Lieutenant," he said with a smile, and was gone. Mar Hanniuska just shook her head and resumed her work, carefully watching the stream of pilots coming from the shuttles with one eye. *Not more hot blooded males!* she thought wryly. *Still, if they're all as easy to outwit as that one was – wonder what his real name is? – then this assignment should be fun.*

[Pilot's Quarters, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Lieutenant DSC, or “Arachnoid” to his friends, was busy unpacking his kit bags when Drake stepped into the room.

“We’ve got to share quarters on this thing?” Drake asked, in a forced calm voice. Arachnoid just nodded.

“Sadly, yes. I have to put up with you all day, every day. I don’t know how or why I got lumped with it, but it seems like...”

“All right, all right,” Drake cut him off with a laugh. “At least I’m with someone who understands the delicacies of communal living. Wonder who got bunked with Granite?” At that thought the two men laughed.

“I don’t know, but I hope you don’t snore, my friend,” Arachnoid warned. Drake was trying to think of a retort when the ship’s intercom crackled to life.

“Do you hear there, Navigator speaking,” it began. Drake inclined his head at the speaker. “Who’s the NO on this tub?” he asked quietly.

“Guy called Vaiweehanen. Lieutenant, a Twi’lek,” Arachnoid informed him quickly before the broadcast continued.

“We will be entering hyperspace in two minutes,” Lieutenant Vaiweehanen continued. “Therefore, secure all clutter ready for reversion. Stand by for updates as we travel. That is all.”

“That’s it? That’s all the information we get?” Arachnoid asked a little irritably.

“Apparently so,” Drake sighed. “We haven’t even finished unpacking yet, and we’re already on the way.”

“Big hurry on this mission.”

Drake nodded.

“And who are these commandos hanging around?” Drake asked him. He’d seen roughly twenty of them, he thought, hanging around the ship. And there were some transports and a shuttle docked with the *Wolf’s Lair* that belonged to them. Arachnoid waved a hand dismissively as he continued pulling items out of his bag.

“Oh, they’re Lynx Commando. Some sort of elite fighting unit that we’re supposed to be working with. They specialise in boarding and capture operations, but they can do groundwork as well.”

“I see,” Drake nodded. “They don’t seem very friendly, though.”

“No, that’s true, Moose was saying that they were a bit stand offish, even with him,” Arachnoid observed, pausing to think for a moment. “But they’re new, and clearly from such a mix of backgrounds that I wouldn’t even like to guess about them. Some of them look dangerous...and not just to the Empire!” Drake chuckled at that. He knew his friend was only half serious, but he had to admit that some of the Lynx members, especially their leader, looked quite fearsome. There was also a blond man that Drake thought was the biggest human he had ever seen. “The Giant”, as Drake had taken to calling him, always seemed to be with a youngish man who wore black and – Drake fancied – carried something that looked remarkably like a lightsaber.

“Well, so long as they do their job and we do ours, I guess it doesn’t matter,” the young pilot offered.

“That’s right,” Arachnoid agreed. “It would be nice to get to know them, though.”

“Yeah. It’s gonna be strange, though,” Drake mused. “I can’t believe the size of this bucket. You could go for weeks without even visiting parts of it!! Yet we *still* have to share quarters, for goodness’ sake...”

“Yes, it’s huge,” his friend nodded. “Pretty impressive, though. Hopefully we’ll be a bit more comfy on here that we were on the *Joan*, or even the *Den*. This is a brand new ship, though...they had to rush it out here when they heard about the Mantara situation. As you’ve probably noticed, parts of it still aren’t finished...hence the shared quarters.”

“Indeed. No offence, my friend, but not for long, I hope!” Drake frowned. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this. Wasn’t the second Death Star taken out when it was still only half complete?”

[Main hangar, Strike Carrier *Wolf’s Lair*]

Foxtire and a man who most of the Wolfshead pilots did not recognise stood apart from the congregated New Republic warriors on the hangar deck. The Wolfshead pilots had been joined by the Lynx Commandos for their first joint briefing, probably their last one before battle with the Empire was joined. The man – if you could call him that – standing next to Foxtire looked decidedly uncomfortable, Drake thought. Foxtire suddenly raised a hand for silence.

“Okay, let’s get started,” she said brusquely. “For those of my pilots who don’t know, this is Captain Zhom Kh’Arli, commander of the Lynx Commandos – it’s good to put a face to the name, isn’t it? For those of Lynx who don’t know me, I’m Commander Avery Schroeder. This is our first mission where we’ll be working together from the same ship, and quite a mission it is going to be. Since there’s a lot more space aboard the *Lair* than the *Den*, Lynx has moved from the *Post Haste* and you’ll be seeing them around from now on. Now, I’ve already briefed my pilots on what we know, and Captain Kh’Arli tells me he’s done the same, so I’ll cut to the latest news we have.

“Intelligence estimates which have been given to us indicate that what we’re up against will be some four Star Destroyers, a couple of frigates and several smaller ships, such as Assault Transports, Corvettes, and so on.”

A murmur ran through the Wolfshead pilots at this information; the Lynx Commandos, however, remained silent. *It’s easy for them not to be worried*, Wolfshead’s commander thought with a flash of irritation. They’re *not the ones who have to actually fight all these capital ships...*

“Obviously, we’re not going to be able to fight a force of this size and win by conventional means,” Foxtire continued. “So we’re going to need to use a little bit of cunning. We actually hope to get Lynx to infiltrate a ship – if we can disable it! – and capture it so we can use it straight away to swing the battle in our favour. Unfortunately the *Wolf’s Lair* is hardly battle-ready, either, but luckily we do have a full complement of fighters and plenty of warheads. We’re going to have to use every one of them, if we hope to win, and maybe with a bit of tricky flying and a lot of luck, we might actually be able to make the Imps’ numbers work against them.

“Lynx, you’ll be on standby, armed and ready to go, so that you can launch and get to an enemy ship at a moment’s notice. Wolfshead, as of now, you’re all on alert five status. You’d better be sitting in your cockpits, ready to launch as soon as the word is given. Captain, do you have anything to say?” Foxfire asked finally, turning to Kh’Arli. The latter frowned and shook his head.

“No,” he answered simply. Foxfire nodded. She hadn’t expected any different, based on her knowledge of this extraordinary man and his character.

“Are there any questions? Make them quick.” Fortunately, there weren’t, so Wolfshead’s commander clapped her hands once quickly, for emphasis.

“Okay. May the Force be with us! Let’s go!” People started to move off in all directions.

Drake suddenly found himself facing the young man dressed in black that hung around the Giant. To his surprise, the commando regarded him with something that looked like a mixture of fear and loathing.

“G’day. The name’s Drake,” the young pilot said in an effort to be friendly, sticking out his hand.

“I am Eadrain,” the other said, but he didn’t take Drake’s hand. He stared at him a moment longer, then asked abruptly.

“Why do you carry a lightsaber? You are not a Force sensitive person.”

Drake was speechless. A quick glance down at the other man’s waist confirmed that he bore a weapon of the Jedi.

“I...well, it’s a useful tool. I can use it sometimes to get out of sticky situations, or to improvise solutions to problems.”

Eadrain shook his head. “That is not its purpose. It is a weapon, not a tool.”

His voice and his stare were both still cold, and Drake felt his temper rising.

“I’m sure. Still, I carry it, and I’ll use it as I see fit. I don’t see what you-“

“Where did you get it?” The voice was still cold, but carried a kind of urgent and intense curiosity with it, as if the young black-clad man’s life depended on the answer.

“Actually, I took it from the body of a Dark Jedi,” the young Wolfshead pilot said defensively. “He was about to kill me and a couple of friends with it.” At this, the commando’s eyes opened fractionally wider, and he raised a brow.

“A Dark Jedi? And where did this happen?” Drake squirmed uncomfortably.

“Sorry mate, but I’ve about had enough of your rudeness and your questions. Where I got it is classified, but I wouldn’t tell you anyway. I tried to be friendly and you-“

“I’m sorry.” Eadrain’s gaze still bore intensely into Drake. “But I sense great evil about your lightsaber, and I’ve felt that same evil, once before. Will you give the saber to me?”

Drake was taken aback. To make such a bold request, at the first meeting, seemed to him incredible. There was an unnerving intensity about this young Jedi – if that was what he was – which the young pilot found both intriguing and frightening. Slowly, he shook his head.

“I don’t think so. I-“ He stopped in mid sentence. By some weird miracle, the black-clad commando’s face was blurring and changing. For a second, Drake could’ve sworn that the man opposite him was his own father. Then, the face

resumed its normal shape, and Drake blinked twice, doubting whether what he had seen had been real.

What was real was that Eadrain now held Drake's lightsaber in his hand. Drake's eyes now flashed with pure anger and he took an angry step forward.

"Look, I don't care who the hell you are, but—"

"I'm sorry." Eadrain's face had lost much of its intensity. "This lightsaber is evil, and evil will befall you if you keep it. On that, you're going to have to trust me."

The commando looked searchingly at Drake, hoping that this impetuous young pilot would believe him, and let the matter rest. The latter tensed for a moment, hesitating, but then relaxed and exhaled noisily.

"I'll trust you, at least for now," he growled. "But when we get back from this mission, you and I are going to have a talk about this." And to Drake's surprise, the black-clad figure smiled.

"Good. That is exactly what I had hoped for," he said. "Now, we had both better be going." And in a second he was gone.

Drake shook his head as he headed for his X-wing. *I wish I knew what the hell all that was about*, he thought, and frowned. *As if there's not enough trouble around here already!*

[Bridge, Imperial Star Destroyer *Dominance*, nearing Mantara Sector, three days later]

"Admiral on the bridge!"

The few personnel standing on the walkway above the crew pits braced to attention briefly as their captain stepped on to the bridge. The XO walked over and made his report.

"Admiral, sir, we're still in hyperspace and nearing the edge of the sector now. All systems are at 100 per cent efficiency." Vice Admiral Piett nodded approvingly.

"Excellent. What about the rest of the group?"

"*Providence*, *Vociferous*, and *Valorous* all show identical status to ours," the XO reported. "The frigates and smaller units do as well. All ships report combat ready." Piett nodded.

"Very good." Then, raising his voice just slightly, "Captain has the bridge."

"Captain has the bridge, aye, sir," several voices answered in acknowledgement. Vice Admiral Piett watched as his ship streaked through hyperspace on its way to plunder and fire upon planets and people that he'd never seen before. *Service in the Imperial Navy is not for the weak or light-hearted*, the admiral assured himself. A glance at his XO beside him made him smile. The latter stood resolutely staring ahead, eager for his chance to serve. The dedication and loyalty there were all that Piett needed to chase his lingering doubts. *If the Empire can inspire that kind of loyalty from a man like him, then it can't be far wrong*, the newest Imperial task group commander thought to himself, then settled in for the last few hours of quiet duty that he would have for a while.

"Dispatch the *Pacifier* to Listening Post IX745 to evacuate it. The personnel on

hand there should already be standing by," the admiral added, as if suddenly remembering something. Then, satisfied, he resumed watching the stars.

[Bridge, *Victory-class Star Destroyer Valorous*]

Captain Listran Draxus stopped his slow pacing to tug at the hem of his green uniform jacket, and smooth the strip of red and blue plastic rank squares on his breast. Below him, the hums and beeps of his ship kept the atmosphere calm, relaxed and organised. Draxus himself stood tall and erect, his shock of grey hair combed straight back, and his gloved hands clasped firmly behind his back. He resumed his slow pacing up the catwalk, glancing down and ensuring that all his bridge crew were doing their jobs properly and efficiently. Thirty years in the Imperial Navy had taught him that...the importance of efficiency and accuracy. Although, he reflected, the Navy certainly wasn't what it used to be. At least now, under the leadership of the Grand Admirals, they had mostly competent commanders, but in the days of Vader and the Emperor... the Imperial captain scowled. Neither had had any idea of how to properly manage men... the only tactics they knew were those of threatening and bullying. *True enough, those two have their place... but what's needed is a mixture of those with pleading, cajoling, rewarding, encouraging, ordering...* every good captain knew that it was a mix of all those factors that got the job done, and got it done to the best extent possible. Captain Draxus jumped as there was a beep. His watch was over, and before he could move the bridge doors had slid open and his relief, Lieutenant Commander Trantin, had walked in and braced up in front of him. Draxus returned the gesture.

"Permission to take the bridge, sir," Trantin asked, standing at rigid attention.

"Permission granted," Draxus replied. Trantin raised his voice.

"Lieutenant Commander Trantin has the bridge." There was barely a ripple from the crew pits, but both Captain Draxus and Lieutenant Commander Trantin knew that the crew had heard them. The captain nodded once, briefly, at Trantin, then strode out.

The uniformed commander paused at the door and pressed the button. Almost immediately, his call was answered.

"Come."

The door slid open and the commander walked in. Captain Listran Draxus looked up as the commander entered.

"Evening, Kilroy," he rumbled with a nod. "Make yourself comfortable and take a seat." The commander sat in the armchair across from where Captain Draxus had his feet up on the desk, his uniform jacket hanging open and loose. Draxus took his feet off the desk and sat up. "Can I offer you anything to drink?" he asked. The other shook his head.

"No, thank you, Listran... you go ahead though." The captain flashed one of his rare grins - it split his grizzled face into a likeable, almost warm one. He nodded.

"Of course I'll go ahead." From his desk drawer he produced a glass, and a small bottle of Corellian whiskey - Whyren's Reserve. The man called Kilroy eyed it speculatively. "Well, I wish you'd said something. Corellian whiskey - and Whyren's Reserve, no less! I think I will have a drink, after all." Captain Draxus laughed.

"I'm sure you will," he said, and he proceeded to pull another glass from his desk. Kilroy glanced around his quarters as he did so. The captain's quarters on a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer were comparatively large, but spartan and functional. The room was devoid of any sort of decoration except for a few family portraits on one wall, and a single plant in the corner. In Kilroy's opinion, the plant looked out of place. To a large extent, the quarters looked as drab and grey as the rest of the massive ship. Kilroy started and turned back in his seat as Draxus' voice broke in on his thoughts, and he handed him his glass, full of the rich orange-brown liquid.

"And now, Commander Brasken, let us toast the Imperial Navy." Draxus laughed with his seldom heard, gravelly laugh, laced with irony. Commander Kilroy Brasken raised his glass solemnly.

"To the Imperial Navy, Captain." They drank their shots in one gulp, and Draxus sighed and belched as he took his seat. Brasken followed the captain with his eyes as he walked. The older man still walked erect and upright, his grey hair short and close cropped, with a receding hairline. The green uniform he wore was impeccable, the knee high black uniform boots polished to a dull shine. Captain Listran Draxus was one of the Imperial Navy's finest captains, and it was disgusting, Brasken reflected, that he was only in command of a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer. Thirty-five years of service to the Imperial Navy earned most good captains at least the command of an *Imperial*-class ship, or in many cases an entire task force. A select few might gain the command of a Super Star Destroyer if they were lucky. In Brasken's opinion, Captain Draxus was one of those captains who would be suited for command of an SSD, and would be up to the task. Commander Brasken looked up to see Draxus regarding him. Finally, the other spoke.

"Have you made the main cargo bay ready yet?" Brasken nodded.

"Yes, sir." Draxus nodded.

"Good." The captain nodded approvingly. "Inform the men of what's going on. Check they're all still with the program. Any that seem to be straying, send them straight to me. We've got to keep a tight ship." He rapped his knuckles on the desk for emphasis as he said these last words. Brasken nodded.

"You've worked out the time?" Captain Draxus nodded.

"Yes. It's shortly after we arrive, after the action starts... perfect for what we need." The commander nodded.

"Right, Listran." He looked hesitant. "What if they don't go for it?"

Draxus looked at him sharply.

"What if they don't go for it? What kind of question is that? They will, trust me - they will. There have been others they've taken, and those others cost them money and resources. We shall cost them neither. Plus, where we're going, they're going to need all the help they can get. They won't turn us down. And I

daresay that us destroying our own kind ought to be proof enough of our intentions." Slowly, Brasken nodded.

"Of course. I'd forgotten Admiral Harkov." A look of distaste crossed Draxus' face.

"Harkov was contemptible," he sneered. "Nothing more than a brassed-up mercenary. I am many things, but I am not a mercenary. Neither are you." He looked pointedly at Brasken, then nodded curtly. "That's it, then. I'm going to get some sleep. You should, too...you relieve Trantin in four hours." Commander Brasken nodded. "Aye, sir." He stood, and saluted his captain, who returned it crisply. Brasken about-faced and marched out, leaving Captain Draxus alone with his thoughts and the quiet hum of the ship.

[Flight Deck, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Raiven practically ran into the hangar bay, wearing his flight suit and carrying his helmet, flight bag and rifle case and skidded to a halt by his X Wing fighter. He handed off his equipment to the tech waiting impatiently at the foot of the boarding ladder.

"Aren't you forgetting something, sir?" asked the tech as the pilot climbed the ladder. "You got an R2 for this flight?"

Raiven paused halfway up the ladder and swore under his breath. Reaching into the cockpit, he fastened his rifle case to the side of the ejector seat.

"No," replied Raiven, looking around. "What about that red and white one over there?"

"Arpin?" asked the tech, incredulous. "I'm not sure that's a good idea, sir."

"No time to be picky. Give me a sec..."

"Umm. Sir..." said the tech as Raiven hurried across the hangar bay.

The white R2 droid with red trim was conversing quietly with a loadlifter droid.

"Hey, you – R2 droid. You busy?" asked the pilot, placing the flight helmet on his head.

The droid rolled forward and warbled a cautious negative.

"Good" said Raiven, buckling his chinstrap, "You've just been conscripted. Report to my X Wing for loading."

Ignoring the droid's jabberings, which he couldn't understand without a translator or protocol droid anyway, he ran back to his fighter.

The tech shrugged and climbed up onto the rear of the fighter to supervise the loading of the R2 unit, while Raiven busied himself with the preflight checklist. He didn't look up even when he felt the fighter rock slightly as the droid was lowered into place.

The R2 unit beeped softly, and Raiven glanced at the secondary scope that displayed the translation of his speech.

[I am R2-RPN, Industrial Automaton Astromech droid. Most people call me Arpin.]

"Pleased to meet you, Arpin. Can you handle the rest of the preflight?" said Raiven.

Without waiting for an answer, Raiven leaned out to the left of the still open fighter canopy. Raising his voice slightly to be heard over the bustle of the hangar deck, he called out to Drake, who was busy preflighting his own X Wing for the patrol.

"I suppose your droid is responsible for the reprogramming of my alarm clock, then?" asked Raiven "I slept until 10:00 hours this morning."

Drake looked around, smiling.

"Hey there, sleepy head. Don't worry about this morning, Ibero cleared it with Foxfire. He pulled your shift this morning. You needed the rest after three days of long patrols and a late night yesterday."

"I know," said Raiven, "Ibero was originally going to fly as part of this patrol, so it looks like you're stuck with me on your wing instead of him."

Drake nodded. "I see you've enlisted Arpin. How many of his appendages did you have to break off?"

"None," replied Raiven, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing, nothing," said Drake. "Don't worry about it. Trust me."

"I have a bad feeling about this," muttered Raiven to himself as the pilots returned to their preparations. "Everything OK, Arpin?" he asked, raising his voice.

[Preflight checks complete. All systems are within New Republic specifications. As it burnin' well should be – I helped maintain this fighter myself. If I'd realised it belonged to an ill-mannered oaf like you I wouldn't have bothered.]

Raiven read the reply with a nod, and looked down for a moment at the primary display screen. Then the message sunk in. He looked back up to the translation monitor again to ensure he wasn't hallucinating or anything like that. He wasn't.

"Err. Arpin. You OK back there?"

[Of course I am. I don't get sick like you overevolved monkeys do.]

Raiven sat back, confused. His reply was cut off by the deck officer.

"X Wing Patrol, Report in. You guys ready for takeoff?"

"Patrol Lead. Ready for launch," said Hardrive, who normally flew under the callsign Wolfshead 7.

"This is Drake, Wolfshead 14, ready to go."

"Sacart here, Wolfshead 17, let's move out."

"Raiven, Wolfshead 22, standing by."

"Patrol X-1, you are cleared for departure."

"You heard her, lads. Let's move out," ordered Hardrive.

Raiven eased in the repulsorlifts and edged out of the wide hangar entrance in fingertip formation with Drake.

As the X Wings powered toward their first hyperspace point, Raiven activated his comlink.

"Wolf two-two to Wolf one-four. Drake, what the hell is happening here? What's with this damn droid?"

Raiven ignored Arpin's indignant response to being described as "this damn droid" as it scrolled across the screen.

"Arpin is a, well, *special*, R2 unit," came Drake's reply. "He's probably not quite what you'd expect from an ordinary astromech."

[Damn right,] replied Arpin, [I'm no ordinary R2 unit.]
"Special!?" said Raiven, addressing both Arpin and Drake, "In what way?"
"10 seconds 'till jump" said Hardrive, cutting across the conversation. "You two had better cut the chatter. Comm silence unless it's urgent once we leave hyperspace. You got that?"
"Affirmative, Lead."
"Two-two acknowledges."
[Hyperdrive ready. Jump on slaved mark. 3... 2... 1... Mark!]
The X Wing patrol threw itself into the abyss.

[Bridge, Imperial Star Destroyer *Dominance*, Mantara Sector]

"Helm, bring us out of hyperspace," Vice Admiral Piett ordered.
"Aye, sir," the duty helmsman acknowledged. "Reversion in three, two one...mark!" The mottled white tunnel of hyperspace gave way to starlines, then finally to the bright pinpoints of light which were stars.
"The rest of the fleet is arriving, Admiral," the XO reported. Piett nodded.
"Very good. Establish an arrowhead formation."
"Yes, sir."

The vice admiral watched with satisfaction as the sleek wedge shaped forms of his other Star Destroyers blinked into existence abreast of his own ship. Further away, and past the titanic vessels, he could barely make out the shapes of his Nebulon-B frigates and the numerous smaller escort craft that made up his task force. Now, as he watched, with military precision, the other vessels began to slide backwards as his own surged ahead of the rest, forming the lethal point of the arrowhead which would soon be striking against this sector. There was a kind of grand majesty that accompanied ships like this, Piett thought. Not merely the smaller Nebulon-B frigates, but the warships – the *real* warships – they carried with them an air of grandeur. Vice Admiral Piett considered Star Destroyers – even the older *Victory* vessels, of which he had two – to be sleekly beautiful craft. He also found the capital ships used by the New Republic ugly and distasteful, the bulky, ugly form of a Mon Calamari Cruiser springing instantly to mind. However, Piett had a healthy respect for the fighting abilities of the Mon Cal cruisers, and he knew – from painful experience – that not even the mighty Star Destroyers were infallible. The bright hull of the Imperial Star Destroyer *Providence*, just aft and starboard of the *Dominance*, had not so long ago been blackened and scarred, crippled by a barrage of torpedo and laser fire from the ships of White Squadron. Still, Norvad Piett reflected to himself, the *Providence* was still alive, he himself was still alive – and promoted! – and White Squadron was not. The thought gave him some measure of satisfaction.

For that was the way of war. You tried to kill the enemy and remain alive yourself. How you did so, though, was of the greatest importance to Piett. Unlike many of his peers, he actually cared *how* his victories were accomplished. Not merely because he was a humane adversary, preferring not to resort to cheap shots or trickery; but also because, for him, there was an elegance, an art

to space warfare. Piett got a great amount of satisfaction from practicing his art – even, he had to admit, when he was defeated. Only once so far in his career had that happened, at the hands of White Squadron. At the time, of course, he had been both angry and preoccupied with saving as much of his small task group as he could. Now, however, he looked back and respected his opponent, a man he had since found out to be Captain Ralne Orris of the New Republic Navy. A worthy adversary, Orris... Piett hoped to meet him again someday. For the latter, with only a corvette, a Nebulon-B and a single starfighter squadron at his command, had forced Piett's own superior task group to the point of retreat. But this, Piett reflected sadly, would not be the same. For this mission, there would be no opponent to fight back. No warships could be expected to come to meet Vice Admiral Piett and his task force to battle for their resources and – perhaps – their homes and their lives. It was sad, really, the vice admiral thought. A task force this size being wasted on stealing from people who effectively couldn't fight back. He shook his head, even as his XO cleared his throat to give his report.

"All ships report in formation positions, Admiral," he said calmly, although his body appeared unnaturally tense and rigid. Slowly, Vice Admiral Piett nodded. "Very good. Commence the run against the first planet in this system," he ordered. "When we reach the branching point, break formation and dispatch the *Providence*, *Vociferous*, *Valourous*, and their escort ships to their own assigned runs. I'll be in my ready room. Captain Gillett has the bridge."

"Captain Gillett has the bridge," the XO echoed, as he watched his admiral stride out. Immediately he began barking orders, and slowly, majestically, the Imperial task force began to break apart. The arrow head's points began to diverge, so that they might simultaneously surround their intended target and minimise any risk – if indeed there was one – to themselves. Captain Gillett smiled with satisfaction.

"Helm, hold your course," he ordered. "Weapons, ready all turbolaser and ion cannon batteries. Signal our transport group to be ready on standby to retrieve stores from the planet. And inform Colonel Richt to have his troops standing by for a planetary assault." The orders were acknowledged and Captain Gillett again smiled tightly as his mighty task force – for at the moment it was his – sailed unchallenged through space.

[Hyperspace, En Route to Spiera System]

The mottled, multicoloured light of hyperspace shone through the cockpit canopy, imparting a somewhat surreal light on the instruments. *Matches this conversation perfectly*, thought Raiven.

[You call yourself a pilot? A speared Bantha could have handled that jump better.]

"Shut it, you oversized datapad!"

[Oh yeah? What're you gonna do about it? You overstuffed mammaloid!]

"I've seen better quality metal on a garbage freighter, you rustbucket..."

Raiven had discovered that Arpin didn't like politeness. Or diplomacy. Or threats. He preferred good, old-fashioned insults and sarcasm. Although the pilot was a little rusty – Alliance and Republic discipline wasn't *that* lax – he was soon back into the swing of things. Raiven wasn't sure, but the bitter, sarcastic edge he thought he'd spotted in Arpin's beeps and tones had almost faded, replaced by good-humoured joviality. Possibly. Perhaps he was imagining it. "You know, I've seen better quality merchandise from a Jawa sandcrawler!"

That one caught Arpin a bit by surprise.

[Not bad. Although I'm surprised they let you fly this thing. I wouldn't trust you to pilot a repulsorlift drinks trolley!!]

"Neither would I," admitted Raiven.

Arpin actually laughed, a sort of electronic whuf-whuf-whuf noise.

[Keep it up. At this rate, I might actually merely detest you...]

"Why thanks..."

[...just before the universe ends.]

Raiven winced.

"Ouch. You know, I've seen better programming on a drinks dispenser..."

The conversation lasted for the full two hours of the hyperspace jump, until, midway through a tirade questioning the legitimacy of Raiven's birth, Arpin announced a 60 second countdown to reversion to realspace.

"Thanks Arpin. On reversion, raise the shields and arm the lasers, quad fire.

Oh, and don't give me that. Just because your parents were a rubbish bin and a hi-fi...."

The fighter patrol dropped from hyperspace on the fringes of the system designated in the mission briefing as S46, the Spiera system. Probes had detected possible Imperial activity on the outermost planet, 15 minutes flight from their hyperspace exit point.

[What's up, Raiven, run out of insults? You biologicals have such limited minds...]

"Quiet a second, Arpin, I'm trying to think."

[I wondered what that smoke in the cockpit was...]

"Funny. Can your holographic system handle tightbeam laser?"

[Naturally.]

"Give me a laser link with Drake's X Wing. Beam it directly through Ledner, and patch my voice traffic through, please."

[Why should I?]

"Because I said please. And because if you don't, when we get back to the *Wolf's Lair*, I'll tear off your head and use it as a satellite transceiver dish.

Clear?"

Arpin didn't like threats, but he got the general idea.

[Touchy, touchy. Link established. Talk away, chatterbox.]

"Drake, can you hear me?"

Drake's voice came back, sounding slightly metallic but clearly understandable.

"Raiven. Orders are for comm silence..." said Drake, looking at the status monitor, "Ah. I see - No comlink emissions, no signals for the Imperials to detect. What's up?"

"Yeah, as long as we fly straight and level so the R2s can see each other's laser transmissions. What's with this mental droid, anyway?" asked Raiven.

[Hey! Who are you calling mental, dewback-spit?]

"Arpin used to belong to a mechanic in the Orrus sector, I forget his name. He made a few modifications, including some to Arpin's communications systems. I think he had a somewhat... colourful... vocabulary, which Arpin obviously picked up. The mechanic was killed when pirates jumped the freighter he was working on. Some Republic units were nearby, and responded to the distress call. They fought the pirates off, but the freighter took such a beating the crew – and droids – had to abandon ship. It turns out that the mechanic had a clause in his will – if he died, Arpin inherited himself – no-one owns him, he works for the Republic by choice. Of course, that means we can't wipe his memory and remove the modifications, like some people have suggested."

[And his favourite colour is blue, and he likes pretty pictures... Will you two stop talking about me as if I wasn't here?]

"If I'd asked you, would you have given me a straight answer?" asked Raiven.

[Of course not. I'd just as soon kiss a Wookiee.] Arpin's tone became somewhat mournful. [Oh, and his name was Harnett, by the way. He was a good man.]

Raiven nodded, soberly. "I'm sure he was, Arpin."

[Operations Room, Space Platform *Stalwart*, stationed in orbit over the planet Talonis]

Sergeant Yazd Wik sighed noisily and belched with a deep sense of satisfaction. His enormous bulk shifted slightly in his chair, attempting to get comfortable, while his giant hands resettled on his stomach. *The trouble is*, he thought to himself, *nobody takes pride in their job anymore*. He chuckled to himself, a deep rumbling sound, at the irony of the thought. He himself had lost pride in his job – along with his chances for advancement in it – many years ago. He'd been younger, then. Younger, and more foolish, but also more enthusiastic, less cynical. Now he sat, fattened and hardened with age, in his comfortable chair, and he pretended to monitor spacecraft moving through the system. In truth, he only monitored traffic when it suited him to do so – and that was usually only done to scare smugglers into paying him substantial bribes. The sergeant of the Talonian Militia had once been a proud young man, full of fire and full of vision. But now, this bloated, corrupt man sat in his place, existing not for what he could give to this life but rather for what he could take from it. And that, he reflected smugly, was shaping up to be quite a bit indeed. He had a good little nest egg going for when he would soon retire, enough money to get him off this rock and onto some holiday world, with a young attractive woman on each arm. Yes, Sergeant Wik had done well for himself. No thanks to the arrogant young captain who had wrecked his career fifteen years ago, he added to himself. He'd stayed

a sergeant that whole time, his hopes of promotion dashed, his only motivation for staying in the service being whatever money he could extort from using his position.

Now, although he didn't yet know it, those years were going to come to an end. Sergeant Wik had just started to doze off when his ears were pierced by a sound he hadn't heard in many long years.

The blaring klaxon of an emergency battle alert.

"Sithspawn!" he rumbled, struggling against the soporific influences of food and drink to sit upright. On his screen he could see multiple red blips.

Red blips?

Imperials! Here – although this sector had long been under the Empire's control, it was seldom, if ever, that Imperial warships ever came out this far. The occasional pirate raiding party was the only action Sergeant Yazd Wik had seen for a long time. Fumbling, he hit the comms switch.

"Defence Central, this is Monitor One Zero," he babbled excitedly. The voice at the other end, more calm and controlled than his own, might have carried a faint hint of contempt in it.

"Roger Mike One Zero," it responded. "This is Central. Go ahead."

"Imperial Alpha ships arriving in system" – *Alpha* was the designation which meant major warships – "they're deploying into a standard arrowhead formation now."

The voice from Central had risen an octave. However cool the speaker thought he was, even he couldn't contain his impassive monotone in light of this news.

"Copy, Mike One Zero," the speaker said. "We've just received a similar report from one of the other monitor stations. Estimate size of hostile force?" Sergeant Wik rubbed his watery eyes with grimy hands, squinting at the screen in front of him and trying to make sense of what he was seeing, like he used to be able to do exceptionally well when he was younger.

"Uhhh...okay, Central," he replied, collecting his thoughts as he spoke. "Figure four main contacts, assume Imperial Star Destroyers, class unknown. One medium sized escort ship – best guess is that it's a Nebulon-B frigate. Then there's a whole bunch of smaller craft...maybe a dozen of them visible at the moment. I can't make them out."

The voice at the other end didn't sound too happy at this sort of sketchy report, but it also realised that in light of the circumstances, it wasn't likely to get much better information from anywhere.

"Copy that, Mike One Zero," it said. "They're still in arrowhead formation? What's their target?"

"Negative, Central, they're breaking formation," Yazd Wik replied, his adrenaline building and helping to brush away the clouds that self pity, substance abuse and age had left on his mind.

"Each of the Star Destroyers is branching out, except the lead ship, which is heading straight for us. The frigate is forming up with one of the destroyers, and the smaller craft seem to be evenly dispersing to trail the warships."

"Stand by, Mike Zero One," the voice from Central intoned. "We're putting all forces on alert now – does the entire task force look like posing a threat?"

Sergeant Yazd Wik gave a sound which was halfway between a laugh and a snort.

"Well, Central, I certainly don't see any other potential targets around," he offered sarcastically. The other voice went icy cold.

"Very well, Mike Zero One," it snapped. "Stand by."
And the line went dead.

[Spiera System, Mantara Sector]

The X Wings arrived at Spiera VI and reoriented for a close pass of the planet. "Well," said Drake, "Looks like it's all clear. Your hunk of junk picked anything up over there, Raiven?"

Before Raiven could reply, the Transmit light glowed briefly on the instrument panel, showing that Arpin had replied on his own.

"Why Arpin," said Drake, with fake shock in his voice. "Where did a little droid like yourself learn such nasty words?"

Sacart sat in the cockpit of his X Wing, scanning his instruments. The sensors had picked up an energy spike a minute or so before, but it had gone as suddenly as it had appeared. He waited for another signal, unsure of whether it was real data or just a sensor glitch.

There it was. And again. This was definitely urgent. He keyed the comlink.

"Lead, this is seventeen. I have energy spikes from the farside of the second moon."

"Affirmative, seventeen. Let's check it out. Patrol, come left to 284 mark 14," replied Hardrive.

Sacart kept watching the scopes. "Geetee," he asked the R5 droid behind him "can you clean it up a little?"

The droid warbled an affirmative.

"Lead, seventeen. Energy spikes register as probable proton warhead detonations," reported Sacart a few seconds later.

"Copy that. Guns Hot. Lock S Foils in attack position!" ordered Hardrive.

Arpin practically screeched.

[WHAT!!! Combat!! I didn't sign up for this! Arm my ejector, I'm getting off here!]

"Now, now, Arpin," said Raiven, surprised at the vehemence of Arpin's protests,

"Calm down. I need you focused in case we run into trouble."

[I don't **do** combat,] said Arpin. [I'm not putting my life in the hands of a slow thinking vegetable like you!]

"That's animal, not vegetable!"

[That's a matter for discussion...]

"Shut up and charge the shields, I've heard protocol droids who are quieter than you."

Arpin stopped ranting, speechless.

The four Republic X Wings approached the planet's second moon, a small dark grey, airless rock sphere.

"Trench time?" Asked Raiven.

"Affirmative," replied Hardrive, "Surface hugging. Watch out for mountains and hills."

The fighters dived low to the moon's surface to hide their sensor signatures.

"You do that, we'll watch for the pebbles," said Drake, diving even closer to the surface. Raiven maintained his fingertip formation.

Hardrive shook his head. *Great*, he thought. *Now I know how the Commander feels. Damn hotshots.*

The patrol shot over a crater wall, nearly opposite the face from which it had approached.

"I'm picking up the proton detonations again!" said Sacart. "15 clicks..."

"Combat Pairs," came the order from the patrol leader. "Sacart, you're my wing. Raiven, stick with Drake."

"Seventeen."

"Fourteen."

"Two-two."

Drake's element dodged left around a large monolith, while Hardrive's flew overhead. The patrol crested a cliff top that formed part of a large impact crater. Above the crater, a KDY Escort Frigate hovered 5 clicks from the surface, seemingly motionless against the stars. Under the frigate, six low, rectangular buildings formed a hexagonal ring around a cluster of silver domes. To the left of the installation, a pressurised hangar and port complex serviced three white landing pads.

Two of the low, grey buildings burned with the bright white flames of oxygen fires in vacuum, as atmosphere leaked from their shattered shells. Circling the destruction were three pairs of TIE Bombers, dropping proton bombs.

"Imps," said Drake.

"What did you expect, fairies?" asked Hardrive. "Sacart, get on the comlink and call in some heavy backup. Iceman's Patrol should be patrolling in the next zone over. We could use some help. If the Empire wants this place destroyed, we want it whole."

"Affirmative, Lead," replied Sacart, "Geetee, activate the subspace radio antenna."

[Negative lock on beacon Wolf's Lair 1. Planetary body blocking signal. Suggest increase in relative altitude.]

Sacart sighed and pulled back on the stick, zoom climbing above the moon's surface.

[Bridge, Imperial FRG *Pacifier*]

"Sir!" yelled the young officer manning the primary sensor station "Rebel fighters, 8 km out. X Wing class. They're heading our way!"

"Launch Alpha and Beta Flights. Destroy the Rebels, protect the bombers. We must complete our mission."

[X Wing Patrol]

"Fighters launching from the Frigate!" reported Drake "2 Flight groups of four eyeballs each."

"We'll take those, Lead, if you want the dupes," suggested Raiven.

Hardrive banged his head gently against his cockpit canopy. "Affirmative. I've got the dupes. Watch my back and make sure Sacart gets enough time to get that message off."

[There are 8 TIEs out there, all intent on turning us into free floating space dust!!

We're gonna die! We're gonna die!!]

"Shut up Arpin or you'll get us both killed. I need to focus!" said Raiven angrily.

Drake shoved his throttles to max and rolled onto his port S Foil, watching his forward sensor screen. He levelled out facing the TIE Fighters, who by now were less than 3 klicks out.

"Combat spacing," he said on the element channel.

Raiven double clicked his comlink and drifted slightly to the right.

"Looks like Alpha have an interest in me," He said, "Scissor cross?"

"Roger, I'll take Beta," replied Drake "On my mark..."

The two X Wings continued to drift apart as the Imperial fighters closed. At around 1.5 Klicks, the TIEs opened fire, Alpha flight targeting Raiven, Beta targeting Drake.

"Mark!" said Drake, and the two fighters rolled toward each other, crossed less than 3 meters apart and broke in opposite directions. The Imperial laser fire tracked the respective X Wings until crossover, then momentarily lost direction as the TIE pilots hesitated for a fraction of a second over which X Wing to fire on. This distraction was all the outnumbered Republic pilots needed. In a flash, both had inverted and dived in towards their respective targets.

As the TIEs attempted to manoeuvre, Hardrive dived through the centre of the formation towards the bombers.

Raiven's gunsight flashed green, and a fraction of a second later, Alpha 2 exploded in a ball of fire. Beta 3 went next as Drake's crimson laser beams converged on the fighter's cockpit. The remaining TIEs broke formation and scattered, trying to out-turn the less manoeuvrable X Wings, but Raiven reduced throttle to stay on the tail of Alpha 1. He fired a quad burst into the port side of the TIE, shearing it into two pieces and sending them both spinning towards the moon's surface. Bolts spattered across his rear shields as Beta 2 fired a high-deflection shot as he flashed past. The TIE rolled in behind Raiven, only to die less than two seconds later when Drake slotted neatly in behind him and vaped him with two quick bursts of laser fire. Raiven ignored his shield indicator - they were still well in the green zone - as he swooped on the nearest fighter from Alpha, who broke from a strafing run on Drake as red laser bolts flashed around him. Diving towards the ground, the TIE swung around the left side of one of the low buildings, while Raiven swept around the other side. Once behind the building, the TIE broke to the right for cover, flying straight into the path of

Raiven's X Wing. The Republic pilot fired a quad burst into the left solar panel, puncturing through the armoured durasteel and shredding the lightweight fighter. Raiven pulled up and turned away from the moonbase toward Drake in time to see the Arrebnacian pilot claim his third kill of the mission.

"Arpin, locate Alpha 4," said Raiven, checking his sensor screens. A white bracket outlined a red dot a couple of clicks away - and closing fast on Hardrive, who was busy blasting away at the TIE bombers. Another one exploded under the withering hail of fire from the flight leader's fighter as Raiven and Drake reformed and gave chase.

"Arpin, redirect laser energy to engines."

The R2 unit beeped an affirmative and Raiven's X Wing leapt ahead like a scalded tauntaun, closely followed by Drake as he likewise adjusted his power settings.

"Two-two, take lead."

"Two-two has lead. Thanks, slowcoach..."

As the range on Alpha 4 decreased, Arpin beeped. [TIE fighter Beta 4 approaching, 3 o'clock low, range 2 km.]

"Trying to sneak in on us while our attention's diverted. Hmm," said Raiven, thumbing his comlink. "Drake, your little friend is back. You want to teach him it's impolite to gatecrash a party?"

Drake grinned and reset his targeting computer to lock onto the remaining Beta group fighter.

"I've got him," he said, and rolled 90 degrees to starboard to set up for a head on pass. The TIE spattered laser fire over the X Wings front shields, but Drake waited for a fraction of a second past maximum firing range before tightening his fingers on the trigger, waiting for a target lock despite Ledner's shrieks. The quad burst struck the TIE slightly above the centreline on the front viewport, tearing the fighter apart and leaving the solar wings to spin off towards the dusty surface of the moon.

Raiven chased after Alpha 1 as Hardrive extended and started a long, looping turn to make another pass on the bombers. By now, four of the low buildings were destroyed or burning, as was one of the domes near the centre of the base. As Raiven reached 1.5 km from the errant TIE, he ordered Arpin to rebalance the energy systems and shunt shield power into the laser banks. By now, Hardrive had turned and was beginning his next pass on the bombers. Focused on the easy target ahead of him and secure in the knowledge that his fighter was faster than the X Wing in standard combat conditions, the inexperienced TIE pilot was unaware of Raiven's burst of speed, only realising when a laser bolt clipped his port wing, threatening to send him into a spin. Fighting the stick, he managed to stabilise the small fighter, just as the X Wing rolled in behind him and fired a pair of quad bursts into the engines. The TIE came to pieces and scattered across the crater floor.

Sacart's R5 beeped to signal it's lock on the Wolf's Den's communications beacon.

"Wolf's Den, this is patrol X-1. Have encountered Imperial Forces, Spiera IV, second moon, Escort Frigate plus TIES, firing on unidentified lunar base. Request backup."

[Bridge, Imperial Star Destroyer *Dominance*]

Vice Admiral Piett stood tensely, his hands clasped behind his back. *The time has come at last.*

"Communications, report," he ordered, in the clipped, precise voice which was his trademark.

"Admiral, jamming is successful, sir," a crewman reported from his pit. "They haven't got a single message off, sir." Piett nodded.

"Very good. Keep your eye out for possible new comms sources on the planet itself."

"Aye, sir."

Piett crossed over to his command chair and hit a switch set into the arm.

"Colonel Richt, report."

"Admiral, my troops and I are ready," the gravelly reply came back. "The transport boys flying Omicron assure me they're ready. We're already embarked and on standby."

"Good," the vice admiral replied into the intercom. "Stay sharp, you'll probably be launching in a few minutes."

"Affirmative, sir. Richt out."

Vice Admiral Norvad Piett looked out the bridge windows at the other Star Destroyers curving around to the left and right, getting ready to trap the planet Talonis in a deadly set of pincers.

"Launch Alpha and Beta squadrons now," he ordered.

[Flight deck, Talonian Space Platform *Stalwart*]

Captain Jergen Hunt strapped himself into his aging Z-95 Headhunter cockpit and immediately keyed his comm, even as he fumbled with his helmet straps.

"Condor Squadron, this is Condor One," he said tersely. "Launch by flights, One Flight leading. Stay sharp. All flights report in."

He began to lift his fighter off the deck even as the acknowledgments came rolling in.

"Condor Five, standing by."

"Condor Ten, standing by."

"Condor Fifteen, ready."

Within two minutes all his fighters were off the deck. An impressive effort, Captain Hunt thought. The rest of the Talonian Militia might be lazy and corrupt, but his pilots weren't. He saw to that.

"One, this is Five," the leader of Two Flight cut in. "I register four squadrons of bogeys, two fighter squadrons and two bomber." Hunt's response was immediate.

"Copy, Five," he replied. "One and Three flights, engage squadrons Alpha and Beta. Two and Four, break off and engage Gamma and Delta. Don't let a single bomber get through!"

[Comms Room, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

"Affirmative, Sacart, message received," replied Torpedo, the Squadron's Tactical officer. He looked up as Foxfire strode in from the adjacent bridge, closely followed by the Dens' Bothan captain.

"Looks like Hardrive's patrol has run into some Imperials in system S46. Frigate plus TIEs. What should I tell them?"

"Iceman's A & B Wing patrol is in the next search grid. Send them to help," ordered Foxfire. She looked around at the Frigate's Captain and raised an eyebrow.

"How long to reach them, Colonel?" she asked, as the TacO changed frequencies and began speaking to the B Wing patrol.

Colonel Gen'yaa suppressed her irritation at Foxfire's initiative, but Wolfshead Squadron was the commander's, not hers. She stepped back onto the bridge.

"Lieutenant Vaiweehanen. Plot hyperjump to system S46. How long?"

The Twi'lek navigator punched up a program calculated earlier in the day, when the patrol routes had been finalised. "Approximately 2 hours from jump to reversion, Ma'am."

"Alert the crew. Jump in two minutes."

She turned back to the comms room and raised a questioning eyebrow towards Foxfire. The squadron CO nodded respectfully, one professional to another.

"Thank you, Colonel. Torpedo, tell Sacart we're on our way as well."

Torpedo nodded and turned to the communications equipment.

"Help is on the way X-1, ETA..." he looked at the clock "...7 minutes. We'll be there ourselves in less than 2 hours. Hang in there!"

[Bridge, Imperial FRG *Pacifier*]

"Sir, sensor building 4 destroyed," reported Lieutenant Jarnik, the flight control officer.

"Good," said Captain Haart. "What's the status of the fighters?"

"Alpha and Beta groups destroyed. Gamma 4 destroyed... just a second, sir, Gamma 3 has also been destroyed by the third X Wing."

"Order the remaining Gamma group bombers to continue the strikes on the outlier buildings. Launch Iota and Theta groups to sweep those X Wings. What's the status of the fourth X Wing?"

"Engaging now, sir."

[Operations Room, PLT *Stalwart*]

Sergeant Yazd Wik sat bolt upright, drumming his huge fingers impatiently on his control board. Dammit, why wouldn't Central call him back?

No doubt there's some officer up there who's heard of me, and after my report ten minutes ago... He answered his own question.

Ah, what do I care? Whatever the Imperials want, I'm sure I don't have it. This isn't my fight, he said to himself. But the words which had characterised his life of the last fifteen years were hollow, and he knew it.

[Outer defence perimeter, Talonian space]

"Here they come!" Captain Hunt warned his pilots.

"Break – now!" The four Z-95s in his flight scattered as if a space bomb had gone off in the centre of their formation. It was useless, Hunt knew, to try and play chicken, even with TIE fighters, in a Z-95. The latter's shields were so flimsy as to be laughable, and the superior numbers of unshielded TIEs would ensure a quick but painful death.

In a flash Hunt had dragged his comparatively sluggish fighter around and onto the enemy lead's tail. His brown gloved hand found the fire selector switch on his stick and he thumbed it over to double fire. His two concussion missiles would be saved for any runaway bombers that might make it through the Talonian defensive screen. He'd instructed his squadron members to do likewise.

The Talonian Headhunter spat fire at the tail of the TIE evading it, but the Imperial pilot, Hunt had to admit, was very good. *Still, good is only a relative term...*

Jergen Hunt waited until the TIE pulled into a huge banking turn, then he slammed his throttle back down to less than half power. There was a jolt of deceleration as the Z-95 came rushing to a snail's pace, but at the same time the stick suddenly became almost free in his hands. Hunt slammed it hard over, overtaking the rapidly fleeing TIE, and he squeezed the trigger three times. Five of six laser blasts caught the enemy TIE, either on the ball cockpit or its solar panels. The fragile fighter shattered into fiery fragments as it spun out of control. Tense but jubilant despite himself, Captain Hunt keyed his radio.

"That's one for Talonis, Condors!" he growled exultantly.

[Bridge, Imperial Star Destroyer *Dominance*]

Vice Admiral Norvad Piett watched in fascination as the tiny specks which were his starfighters clashed with the pitiful, obsolete ships of the Talonian Militia. A shower of bright green and red laser blasts erupted, changing direction every second. To Piett, who observed the twisting melee from far off in his command

ship, it looked as if a large group brightly coloured laser blasts was reflecting off the walls in a tight space.

"Forward fighters have engaged, sir," Captain Gillett reported at his elbow.

"Very good, Captain," he acknowledged. "Get the Assault Transports launched." His XO needed no further prompting. "Yes, sir," he nodded.

"Launch Assault Transports Omicron," he ordered. Striding forward a little, Gillett could see the bulky little assault craft emerge from under the sharp point that was the Star Destroyer's bow.

"Remind Colonel Richt that he is only to secure their shield facilities and engage military forces," Piett said mildly. "I don't want a bloodbath down there," he muttered under his breath.

[Outer defence perimeter, Talonian space]

Things were no longer going so well for his squadron, Captain Jergen Hunt saw. Of his twenty fighters, only eleven remained, and half of them had sustained hull damage. He set his lips in a grim line.

"Keep at it, Condors," he said darkly. "We'll fight them to the last man, if necessary. We've got to buy time for reinforcements to arrive!" Even as the words left his lips, though, he knew their efforts would be useless. Any Imperial worth his salt would have jammed all communications; and with an isolated world like Talonis, no one would notice their silence or come to their aid.

We're doomed.

Jergen Hunt cursed and pulled his Headhunter into a tight roll.

But they're sure as Kessel going to have to work hard to kill us.

As his fighter came out of the roll he threw it over on to his port wing, cleaning intersecting the path of a TIE fighter and reducing it to free floating atoms with a double burst from his twin linked lasers. With a fierce snarl of exultation, he brutally whipped his Z-95 into a sharp turn.

[The Second Moon of Spiera VI]

Hardrive's finger tightened on the trigger. The laser bolts converged on the port hull of the TIE bomber in front of him, tearing it to pieces and detonating the proton bombs stored there with a brilliant flash. He blinked his eyes to clear the momentary blindness as a quad burst struck a bomber a kilometre or so ahead of him, breaking it in half.

"Nice shooting, Raiven, but you'd better watch your back. TIE Interceptors, 2 kilometres out, your 5 o'clock."

"Affirmative, Lead. You want to watch my back?"

Raiven pulled a loop and then executed a half barrel roll to place his fighter less than 3 metres from Hardrive's X Wing. At 1.5 km, the six TIE interceptors opened fire, scattering green laser bolts across the sky.

Drake was having difficulties of his own. After destroying the final fighter of Alpha flight, he had turned to follow Raiven towards the bombers, only to run into the four TIE Fighters of Theta Flight as they launched from the frigate. Obviously angry and seeking revenge for the deaths of their squad mates, Drake had destroyed one at extreme range, but had then been forced to evade fire from the remaining fighters. He was unable to fire more than snap shots at the imperial craft as they flashed past, never letting him settle long enough for an aimed shot that would destroy one of the unshielded TIEs without levelling out himself and leaving his rear arc vulnerable. Still, he had managed to hit one with a glancing blow, reducing its manoeuvrability somewhat. Another TIE fired a burst at his rear shields, striking with a few bolts and reducing their strength as it flashed past. Drake rolled slightly and fired a quad burst into the rear of the imperial, destroying it, as one of the others poured fire into his rear shields. As Drake broke to evade, a flurry of red laser bolts accompanied the flash of an explosion, and Sacart's X Wing flashed overhead without slowing down. The remaining TIE broke off from pursuing Drake and moved to chase the now fast-moving X Wing as Drake cut the throttle and heaved the stick over, pointing his nose towards the moonbase and the path of the TIE. He fired a pair of quad bursts, the first missing high, but the second striking the TIE with two bolts on the already damaged wing, tearing it from the fighter. A flash of light from the top of the cockpit signalled the pilot's ejection moments before the command chair threw him clear of the stricken fighter.

Drake pushed his throttle to the stops to chase after Sacart but it was clear that he would not catch him - the other pilot had clearly redirected energy to his engines, a luxury Drake could not afford as he recharged his shields.

"Damn it, Lead, there's two on me and my shields are taking a pounding."
Raiven's voice sounded in Hardrive's ear as he threw his X Wing into a tight right turn.

"Break left on my mark... Mark!"

Raiven heeled his craft hard over as Hardrive fired a stream of laser bolts across the path of the pursuing TIE Interceptors. Intent on sticking with his prey, one ran straight through the fire and was destroyed, while his wingman pulled up sharply. Hardrive stuck with him as Raiven turned to engage the Interceptor on his flight leaders' tail.

"That's four. Two left."

Focused too much on the X Wing ahead, the TIE pilot was not expecting an attack from such a high angle of deflection, but Raiven's precision quad burst hit the underside of the rapidly climbing fighter and blew through the floor of the cockpit, killing him instantly.

Clever boy thought Hardrive as he manoeuvred for a clean shot on the fleeing TIE *going for the Frigate's gun cover, eh? Well, too late.* He fired his lasers into the rear of the TIE as frigate opened fire from the lower gun turrets. Instead of pulling away from the frigate, Hardrive rolled slightly and climbed towards the main hull of the Imperial Warship above him, dodging the incoming streams of laser fire. His astromech unit beeped as the sensors collected data on the ship,

including the name. *Pacifier*. He pulled back on the stick and looped back towards the moon's surface.

To his left, Hardrive could see the remaining TIE bomber pair continue to drop bombs on the single undamaged periphery building, blasting open its thick walls and venting the atmosphere inside. They turned towards the central pressure dome, but as they did so Sacart's rapidly approaching X Wing opened fire. The laser fire stitched across one of the bombers - Gamma 6 - tearing it into pieces, but its wingman evaded long enough begin dropping its bombs on the central dome. Two laser bolts struck the rear of the fighter as the second and third bombs were released, throwing them off target, before the fourth was detonated by one of Sacart's stray shots. A flash illuminated the battle site as the proton bomb's high-yield warhead destroyed its launching fighter and the third bomb.

[Bridge, Imperial FRG *Pacifier*]

"Captain, Gamma 5 has been destroyed. We have destroyed all six sensor bunkers and the main base domes have taken heavy damage."

"Not good enough, Lieutenant. We need the base destroyed. Prepare to take us in I-"

"Sir! More Rebel Fighters! A and B Wings, 5 kilometres out!"

Haart's blood ran cold. *B Wings*, he thought, *Designed to destroy capital ships. Particularly frigates*. He weighed up the tactical situation. Two B wings approaching from above plus A Wing escort, four X Wings forming up below, undoubtedly for a torpedo run of their own. No TIE support. The Listening post largely destroyed.

"Load the warhead launcher with four torpedoes. Fire on the main base buildings. Move away from the moon and prepare to jump to hyperspace."

He stared at the image on the monitor in front of him, a computer-scrubbed image of the X Wing that had dared taunt his ship by sauntering in so close. *As if we weren't a threat! The Rebel scum will pay for this*. The silver image of a Wolf's head glinted in the light of Spiera IV's star.

[X Wing Patrol]

"Nice of you guys to drop by," said Hardrive into the comlink, grinning.

"Well, we couldn't let you guys get all the glory!" replied Iceman from his A Wing "Stand by."

Hardrive and Raiven orbited the still burning moonbase as Drake and Sacart rejoined formation, and as they waited, the A wings of Iceman's patrol leapt ahead of their slower companions, firing concussion missiles and lasers to draw the frigate's fire.

"Arm proton torpedoes!" ordered Hardrive "Prepare for run against the frigate..."

"Torpedoes launching from the frigate!" yelled Drake.

The blue torpedoes closed rapidly on the X Wings as the patrol switched back to lasers and opened fire. Two of the torpedoes were hit, destroying them, but the other two plunged past, striking one of the domes below and puncturing it like a balloon.

Raiven rearmed his torpedoes, dropping his targeting box over the frigate's silhouette, and was rewarded by a solid tone from Arpin. He pulled his trigger just after Sacart, and their torpedoes were joined not only by Hardrive' and Drake's, but also by those launched from Granite and Sparks' B Wings.

The frigate pitched up, away from the moon's surface and engaged her engines, climbing slowly from the moon's weak gravitational well. As the blue streaks of the fighters' proton torpedoes closed on the fleeing imperial warship, the *Pacifier's* cannon opened fire, spraying green turbolaser bolts across space. Four of the incoming warheads were hit, leaving eight to explode around the shield perimeter.

[Bridge, Imperial FRG *Pacifier*]

"Status!" yelled Captain Haart.

"Shields at 70%! Here comes another volley!"

The bridge crew grabbed the nearest fixed object and held on as the ship shook with second round of torpedo impacts. Seconds seemed to stretch into hours as he watched the numbers scroll slowly down to zero.

"Jump!"

The stars flared and elongated as the Nebulon B frigate jumped to hyperspace.

"Damn!" said Sparks, pulling his B Wing up from the strafing run on the frigate's engine section as the warship jumped to hyperspace "Almost had him!"

The X Wing patrol climbed away from the moon's surface, forming into a standard Vee formation as they approached the A and B wing patrol orbiting above the moonbase.

"OK, let's secure the area," said Iceman from the lead A Wing. "Solo and I will do a quick orbit over the rest of the moon, see if there's anything else of interest here. Granite, take a selenosynchronous orbit over the installation and watch for any incoming. Sparks, take a 15km altitude CAP orbit."

"Sacart, escort Granite. I'll stay with Sparks. Since you two like low altitude work so much, Drake, Raiven, you can check out the base," added Hardrive.

"You know your jobs. Execute," ordered Iceman, and the A wings leapt ahead. In unison, one X and one B Wing pulled up to head into lunar orbit as two X Wings rolled and dived towards the moon's surface.

"I'll start with the buildings over by the spaceport. See if you can find any of the TIE pilots who punched out," said Drake, adjusting his course appropriately.

"Acknowledged," replied Raiven, and headed for the rim of the crater housing the moonbase to start a spiral search pattern.

[Bridge, Imperial Star Destroyer *Dominance*]

“Sir, Alpha squadron reports fifty percent losses,” the communications officer informed his admiral.

“Acknowledged,” Vice Admiral Piett replied tightly. At his elbow, Captain Gillett watched his admiral – the captain of this ship – closely. The superior officer outwardly reflected calm, but a look at his whitened knuckles as they gripped his command chair, a moment of listening to the tightness of his voice in battle, led to...

What?

Inexperience? Maybe. Gillett had never served with Vice Admiral Norvad Piett before this current assignment, and even in this assignment, they had not yet seen any kind of battle until now. Now the Executive Officer of the *Dominance* was seeing another side of his captain. And he wasn't sure it was a side he liked. The XO's thoughts were interrupted by another sharp report from communications.

“Admiral! The *Pacifier* is retreating at full speed! She's encountered New Republic fighters!”

Piett whirled in his command chair.

“New Republic fighters? What type? What squadron do they belong to? Where is the *Pacifier* falling back to? Did they complete their mission?” The admiral asked these questions in a kind of smooth, flowing fashion, rather than an abrupt, intimidating and confusing staccato, his XO noticed. Interesting.

“Multiple types, sir,” the communications officer answered him, evidently listening to the report as he spoke. “An X-wing patrol followed by a combined A- and B-wing force. The squadron is as yet unidentified. Their markings did not match any we have on file. But they definitely did bear New Republic markings.”

Piett simply nodded patiently and waited for the rest of his answer. His communications officer was a very competent young man, and the answers he gave his admiral would be just as fast and as accurate as he could make them. Nothing Piett could say or do would change that fact.

“Sir, the *Pacifier* is retreating to a secondary system in case they're followed. They'll send us the co-ordinates on an encrypted channel when they arrive and confirm they don't have any company.”

“Very good,” Vice Admiral Piett nodded. At this report regarding the *Pacifier*, his initial response had been that he was mistaken in sending that ship in the first place. Better to have trusted the tried and true sister ship of the *Pacifier*, the *Angel of Fury*, and her more experienced captain. But Piett believed in giving promising young officers a chance to prove their mettle in real combat situations. Consequently, the relatively new *Pacifier*, and her young captain, Commander Kiyi Haart, had been given the opportunity to undertake this important mission. But Haart had at least had the good sense – and the courage, Piett added to himself, - not to flee straight back to the task force when attacked. This way, they would hopefully keep the position – and the very existence – of the task force a secret.

For a while, at least.

"They report structural integrity of all facilities compromised, sir," the comms officer continued unabated." All structural interiors have been exposed to vacuum."

Something about the wording of the report troubled Piett. Why hadn't they just reported *Mission complete*? He resolved to find out, but questioning one of his captains in front of his bridge crew was hardly fair or professional. Haart would have a good explanation, he was sure.

"Very well," Norvad Piett acknowledged. "Advise the *Pacifier* to rejoin us when Commander Haart deems it safe to do so. Until then they will cease all communications except in emergencies." Once more, Piett was entrusting more responsibility to the junior ship and her junior captain. He was, however, sure that both could handle it.

"Aye, sir." The communications officer's voice did not betray a flicker of doubt or hesitation as he moved to comply.

"Sir, Alpha squadron has been completely destroyed," the comms officer reported a few seconds later.

Captain Gillett almost jumped as he seemed to come back into the present. For a while he had watched the interplay between his admiral and the communications officer with a fascination which had allowed him to forget the battle going on. Clearly, the admiral hadn't forgotten. His response was measured and immediate, and delivered in that clipped, precise voice of his.

"Acknowledged. Launch Eta squadron and recall Beta squadron," he ordered. Without even glancing in Gillett's direction to see the unspoken question in his eyes, he inclined his head and explained his actions.

"Beta are beginning to take losses. Now that Alpha are no longer around to bear the brunt of the fighting, the already damaged Beta will be a vulnerable and easy target. The enemy are now weaker and more vulnerable themselves, Captain. We ourselves are nearly in weapons range. It'll be all over for those defence fighters very shortly." He turned his head to the port crew pits.

"Estimated time to weapons range?"

"Four minutes, sir," the answer came. Piett nodded.

"Very well. Helm, increase speed to three quarter sublight velocity," he snapped. Gillett felt the surge of power under his feet as the mighty warship surged forward in a new burst of speed.

"Two minutes thirty seconds, sir, present speed," the helmsman corrected himself. The vice admiral simply nodded in that way of his.

"Very good. Maintain course and speed."

[Inner defence perimeter, Talonian space]

Captain Jergen Hunt wiped his forehead with a grimy sleeve. His sleeve came away with a peculiar red stain on it, and Hunt blinked rapidly to clear his eyes of some liquid stuff that kept blocking his vision. He sniffed to stop the same sticky stuff from trickling down his mouth and chin.

“Condors,” he addressed the remnants of his squadron, and his voice was still resonant and strong. “We have fought bravely and valiantly here today. May history remember our actions favourably.” His squad mates did not answer, but he knew they could hear him, and he knew that their hearts agreed with him. And soon all their spirits would be together, somewhere else. That missile hit had made sure of it, in Hunt’s case. The explosion had nearly torn his fighter apart, the ejection alarm had started its incessant wail, but he refused to be parted from his fighter. In the end his shields had recharged a little and his battered craft had managed to repair some of its more critical damage. And Captain Jergen Hunt of the Talonian Militia had charged back into the fray.

“It is time for our last offensive,” the Captain said, his voice like iron as he watched the wave of TIE fighters – and a few bombers – regrouping for the attack. “May Talonis ever live free!” And with that he hurled his fighter at the oncoming menace.

[Operations Room, PLT *Stalwart*]

Sergeant Yazd Wik was getting impatient. In fact, he was getting more than impatient. He was getting *agitated*. And agitated was not a state of mind he’d been in for many long years.

Dammit, why don’t they raise me again? Still as he asked the question he knew the answer. And even as that answer came, something fiery, something that had once burned hot within Sergeant Wik’s breast, once again burst into flame, and he came to a decision. Abruptly he stood up and almost ran from the room, the door barely opening enough to let him pass.

[Bridge, Imperial Star Destroyer *Dominance*]

“Admiral, the last enemy fighter has been destroyed,” the weapons officer declared triumphantly. “One of our turbolaser batteries got it, sir.”

“Very good,” the vice admiral nodded. “Are we in position to attack the platform?”

“That’s affirmative, sir,” came the reply.

“Commence the attack,” Vice Admiral Piett ordered, and four Star Destroyers advanced upon the lone platform, their hundreds of turbolaser batteries all opening up at once.

As the answering fire came back from the platform, Captain Gillett felt a moment of discomfort. The turbolaser bolts from the platform splashed uncomfortably close to the bridge, and although they were well shielded, there was still the uncomfortable premonition of danger as you could actually see the warheads coming towards you. The Executive Officer glanced over at his captain. Piett just sat there, gripping the arms of his chair, sitting a touch forward perhaps, but Gillett fancied that he could almost see the admiral *smiling*. Well, not really, as the admiral didn’t really seem to smile much when things were serious, but still...nearly.

And in a flash, Captain Gillett knew what drove Vice Admiral Piett's manner in battle.

It wasn't inexperience at all, in fact it was far from it. Norvad Piett was actually one of those men who *thrived* on stress. Not just coped with it or put up with it, but actually thrived on it. He handled multiple disasters, contingencies, and mishaps ably. His hands and his voice were the only visible signs of his stress, but even they did not signify that he was unable to handle it. And indeed, Gillett reminded himself, Piett's voice was tight and clipped even at the best of times. Rather than doubting his admiral, this knowledge served to make the XO of the *Dominance* a bit more in awe of him. Gillett hoped he could command like that, some day. Indeed, the admiral's last Executive Officer had probably hoped the same thing. And now, he was getting his chance, out there commanding a ship of his own, the *Providence*. Across the other side of the platform, Captain Gillett could see the latter ship also pouring fire into the defensive space station that hovered between them. He could almost see, in fact, the ghost of a smile on the face of the captain of the *Providence* as he saw his old captain in battle in another ship for the first time. Captain Gillett relaxed a little and smiled.

I will command like that, one day.

[Gunnery station 4B, PLT *Stalwart*]

Despite many years of non practice, Sergeant Yazd Wik's hands easily found the straps and fastened them together. Long forgotten, long buried experience flowed back into his limbs and his trembling fingers rapidly closed the gunnery station, bringing the targeting system on line and shifting the targeting sight into a position just in front of his eyes.

Talonis may fall today, but if it does, it won't be because I haven't done everything I can to save it. Yazd Wik felt a strange rush of excitement, which equalled and then surpassed the thrill he felt upon making large amounts of money. Truly, *this* was what life was about. Not the selfish pleasure of sitting idle, getting fat, and getting rich, but the selfless sacrifice of sitting active, fighting for one's world, and having pride in both self and in planet – and in service.

Finally, after fifteen years, Sergeant Yazd Wik forgave the Talonian Militia. Even as he did, though, his thoughts were torn back to the present. A warning was shrilling in his helmet, and he swung the gun emplacement around to face the oncoming Imperials.

Cycling through the target list, Wik selected a TIE bomber. A perfect target for gunners, they were slow and also posed the most threat to the space platform with their warheads. Wik tracked his gun across, rapidly catching and then overtaking the jinking bomber. Wik briefly glanced at the bomber's designation as his fingers stabbed the trigger. Delta 4. The big turbolaser battery rhythmically pumped out powerful blasts, and the bomber literally flew into them, unable to swerve in time. The shots had been timed perfectly.

The bomber exploded into a flaming cloud of debris.

Sergeant Wik's weathered face cracked into a grin. *Damn, I'm actually having fun for the first time in years.* He thought about acquiring a new target, but the starfighters were all out of range. Instead he selected the Star Destroyer *Vociferous*, a *Victory*-class ship. Selecting the nearest laser turret as a target, Sergeant Wik opened fire.

[Planetary shield defence complex, Talonis]

Corporal Reston Breen of the Talonian Militia was, as usual, bored. The first excitement he'd had in years had happened not ten minutes ago – he'd actually been placed on alert.

Now, though, it was back to the dull routine of waiting.

Unlike a large portion of the Talonian Militia, however, the fact that Corporal Breen was bored did not mean that he wasn't alert.

When the klaxon siren blared its warning, then, he was not totally surprised, nor was he unprepared.

The young corporal blazed into action, immediately leaping through the doorway near him and closing the door as he passed. Next he grabbed his blaster rifle from the wall. He was already checking and loading his weapon as his three subsection comrades finally entered the room, puffing from the exertion.

"Hurry up," Corporal Breen growled as the other young Talonians scrambled for their own weapons.

Satisfied that his rifle was ready for battle, Breen slung it over his shoulder and snapped down the half-visor on his black battle helmet. He punched in his personal access code to open the armoury cabinet set into one wall, and set about retrieving the rifle magazines stored there. He began distributing them to his men, then checked each of their weapons to ensure that it was correctly loaded and ready. Thus satisfied, he nodded.

"Okay, let's take position. Move!" The four young guards filed out of the small ante-room and Reston Breen again keyed in an access code to shut the little ante area off completely. The subsection moved quickly through the complex to the nearest outer entrance and began setting themselves up in defensive positions within the outer shield complex perimeter.

[Bridge, Imperial Star Destroyer *Dominance*]

"Admiral, sir, the platform has been effectively neutralised," the weapons officer reported. Piett's thin lips compressed into a tight smile.

"Very good. Order the heavy lifters to stand by and move the fleet into position for orbital bombardment."

[The Second Moon of Spiera IV]

Within an hour, repeated passes by the X Wings had revealed everything about the installation that could be found out from above. The outer circle of buildings had been completely gutted by fires that had burned out rapidly as their oxygen supplies dwindled, as had one of the domes in the centre. Of the other two, one had been destroyed by rapid decompression when the *Pacificer's* torpedoes had hit, and the other was damaged and half buried with dust from a TIE's proton bomb hit and near miss, respectively. No life signs had been detected anywhere in the complex, which explained why the numerous turbolaser turrets scattered across the crater floor had remained silent throughout the battle.

Two hours and six minutes after the beginning of the battle, Granite reported the exit from hyperspace of the *Wolf's Lair*. The frigate immediately launched a CAP patrol of A Wings while the X, A and B wings that had participated in the battle over the moonbase returned to the hangar.

Cheers and whistles greeted the pilots as they shut down their engines and climbed down from their fighters.

"Report," ordered Foxfire, striding across the hangar floor with a grin on her face, closely followed by Vyper, the squadron XO.

"Twenty four TIEs destroyed, one frigate driven off, parts of a moonbase rescued and a whole lot of pissed off Imperials, Commander," replied Hardrive with a smile. "Minor damage to one X Wing - "

"Hey, they damaged my paintwork!"

" - Thank you, Raiven, with no friendly casualties," he finished.

"Any TIE pilots survive?" she asked.

"Negative, ma'am," replied Raiven, walking up behind Hardrive. "Arpin and I found four bodies that had ejected from their craft. The rest presumably died in their fighters."

"All right," said Foxfire, turning to leave the hangar, "You're dismissed. I suggest you get some rest."

Raiven turned to see Arpin being hoisted from the rear of the X Wing. The droid rolled towards him unsteadily and started bleeping and blating at him.

"Hmm. Don't tell me. You're angry that I dragged you into combat, right?" Arpin bleeped an affirmative. "Well, you seemed to handle yourself pretty well back there..." replied Raiven "...For a rolling hunk of tin, anyway."

Drake's R2 unit, Ledner, rolled up beside Arpin and the two began to converse. Ledner looked around halfway through and warbled accusingly.

"What's up with him?" asked Drake, walking over.

"I think it's something to do with me telling him I didn't understand him last night," replied Raiven. He spoke up a little louder. "Look, Ledner, I'm sorry about that, I just wanted to be alone last night. OK?"

Ledner seemed to consider this for a while, then emitted his electronic sigh and an affirmative beep. He and Arpin rolled out of the hangar, conversing quietly.

"I get this feeling we're in for it from those two," said Drake, sighing. "I'm not looking forward to them working together."

Raiven suppressed a shudder at the thought of *two* smartmouth R2 units. "I need a drink."

"Ditto," said Drake as they walked from the hangar.

[Briefing Room, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

"We're going in, ground assault groupings. Team Alpha will enter and secure the spaceport, while team Beta makes a direct forced-entry to the remaining pressurised dome. Team Theta will be ready to go in to assist in information retrieval for either of the teams that need help. Team Gamma, you're checking out the destroyed buildings. I hope you're all current on your pressure suit training."

There was a chorus of groans from the briefing room's benches.

"I don't like doing it this way, but it has to be done."

Captain Zhom "Cheetah" Kh'Arli turned to his second in command. "Lieutenant?" Lieutenant Ricam "Hyena" Nosal stood and walked to the lectern vacated by his commander.

"Once we're in, we'll fan out in pairs to confirm the base buildings have no survivors and secure the area, then we'll search for as much information as possible. Don't forget, this place has been blasted halfway to the rim. We don't know how stable the structures of the buildings are, and the dome has been half buried by a couple of near misses. Be careful, and be fast. Launch in 5 minutes."

The soldiers of Lynx stood and filed from the room, conversing quietly among themselves. Once the rest of the unit were gone, Cheetah turned to walk from the room, with Hyena falling into step beside him.

"So what do you think happened here, sir? A couple of warlords taking potshots at each other?"

"Well Lieutenant, we'll know in the next hour or so. I think it's either that or the Imperials pulling out with typical scorched ground tactics," replied Cheetah.

"If that's true, they certainly made a good job of it. That base is a mess."

"We shall see..."

[Flight Deck, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Cheetah walked over to Foxfire as the commandos filed aboard the Delta class transports assigned to the unit.

"Any other information, Commander?" he asked.

"That's the last of it. The X Wing recon passes detected no lifesigns, but undetectable doesn't mean non-existent. Good Luck, Captain."

"Thank you, ma'am." He saluted, smartly, and held the pose until Foxfire returned it, then turned and boarded his transport.

Foxfire stood and watched as the boxy, ungainly craft lifted from the deck and eased out of the hangar through the MagCon field on repulsorlifts. Orienting themselves to the moon's gravity, the craft ignited their engines and began the decent towards the lunar surface. Inside both transports, the commandos

passed the time running final checks on their equipment, and, in the case of Team Gamma aboard *Unicorn*, climbing into their pressure suits.

The pilot team brought the heavy transport to a smooth landing on the number 2 pad, 10 metres from the nearest building, a pressurised jetway. Passing through the airlock two at a time, Team Theta, under the command of Dantes "Caballero" D'Antonio, moved rapidly to secure the building and link the docking arm to the Republic transport.

Cheetah was first along the jetway as the team fanned out through the dock buildings, followed closely by the Jedi Eadrain and the giant form of Pier "Godzilla" Das. Once sure the immediate building and freight handling facilities were secure, he lifted his comlink.

"Report in," he ordered over the command frequency.

"Team Gamma, we've finished with the first bunker. It looks like it was some sort of sensor array. It's difficult to tell, the place has been badly damaged by the fire and decompression. No bodies. We're moving on to the next building."

"Team Beta, we're at the dome's north entrance. We've managed to dock the *Bear* to an emergency airlock on the corridor outside, but we can't risk using explosives on this door - the frame looks warped and damaged already. I've got TimeKeeper looking at an air duct that might get us inside. Give us a couple of minutes."

"Make it quick, Lieutenant. Cheetah out."

He looked around at the reassembled Alpha team, and then down at the partial map of the facility on his datapad. "Eadrain, Godzilla, you're with me. We're going to check out this hangar facility north of here. Motormouth, Short Circuit, see if you can find a working computer terminal and start pulling data. Double-O, watch their backs. The three commandos nodded and moved off towards what appeared to be a freight handling office while their commander and companions headed towards the stairwell.

"Let's be careful down here," said Cheetah "The flyboys reported a hangar but couldn't get detailed sensor scans."

He lifted his blaster carbine a little higher as the others nodded. Godzilla hefted a heavy blaster rifle, which seemed like a toy in his huge hands - the usual E-Web cannon had been left behind, too powerful to risk firing inside a damaged, pressurised structure like the base. Eadrain lifted his lightsaber but did not ignite it as the three crept down the metal stairs. At the bottom of the stairs lay a duracrete lined tunnel, illuminated by lights every 4 or so meters, running north and south. Lynx's captain took the point as the three men moved silently along the corridor, capped by a standard blast door.

The door opened on command to reveal a standard Imperial hangar, with the east wall forming the magnetic containment sealed entrance. The hangar was empty of spacecraft, although a few pressurised speeders were parked in alcoves around the deck's perimeter. The Lynx commandos moved without speaking to a waist high stack of small freight containers and took cover, scanning the hangar for signs of resistance. After a few seconds, Cheetah signalled for Godzilla to head for the flight control station, mounted in its glass booth halfway up the north wall. No enemy fire reached out to greet the big

commando as he moved rapidly but smoothly across the open hangar floor, using stacks of equipment, tools and the occasional depowered droid as cover. He reached the metal staircase leading to the booth and ascended cautiously. Inside, he activated the flight control computer and called up the logs. As he did so, Cheetah and Eadrain entered the booth behind him.

"Well?" asked the senior officer.

"Last entry is the launch of 2 craft - one Lambda class shuttle, one Delta class transport - both fully laden. They were on ferry duty - they'd only been here for about 20 minutes since their last landing, and the previous mission had lasted less than half an hour."

"Rats leaving a sinking ship..."

Hyena straightened up from the computer and raised the comlink to his mouth. The green glow from the holodisplay shone on his half smile, giving him a ghoulish look.

"Lynx One, this is Two. I think I've found what we're looking for..."

[Gunnery station 4B, PLT *Stalwart*]

Slowly and painfully, Sergeant Yazd Wik unfastened the charred straps and cast them aside. Hobbling, he rose from what was left of his gunnery station and took a few steps towards the door. He gingerly touched a hand to his forehead. It came away with sticky red blood on it.

Damn.

Slowly, reason began to reassert itself over the excitement of the battle and the pain it had brought. Sergeant Wik forced himself to move, heading to the nearest hangar bay at a trot.

[Planetary shield defence complex, outer perimeter]

Corporal Breen risked another glance over the thick duracrete wall through his binoculars.

"Here they are," he murmured to himself, instinctively thumbing the safety off his rifle.

"Looks like an Assault Transport group with a bunch of stormies, boys," he continued, staring as the bulky ships began to disgorge troops. "And sure enough, it looks like they're headed our way."

[Bridge, ISD *Dominance*]

"We're in position now, Admiral," Captain Gillett reported from Vice Admiral Piett's side. The latter nodded.

“Very good, Captain. Has Colonel Richt secured his objective yet?” After a faint pause of hesitation, the XO slowly shook his head.

“Negative, sir. They’re beginning the assault now.” He risked a sideways glance down at his admiral, who seemed to have frowned slightly for a second.

“Very well. There’s no sense us sitting up here waiting for them to be finished, doing nothing. Instruct all turbolaser batteries within range to finish off that Space Platform.” *It’s a loose end that needed to be tied up, sooner or later.*

“Aye, sir.” Captain Gillett turned and began issuing orders.

[Hangar bay D, PLT *Stalwart*]

“Wait!” The cry sounded hoarse as it burst from Sergeant Wik’s cracked and dry lips. He half ran, half hobbled towards the Lambda-class shuttle that sat in the bay amidst junk and debris that was the aftermath of the Imperial attack. The woman standing in the hatchway to the shuttle, a middle aged lieutenant, gaped at the grizzled old sergeant.

“Look at you!” she exclaimed. “All right, let’s go. Get to the back of the shuttle, where I can fix you up a bit. Hurry up, will you? We haven’t got all day.” The sergeant frowned, but did as he was told. He had barely passed through the hatch when it slid shut and the ramp ascended, even as the whine of engines filled the bay. Twenty seconds later, the shuttle lifted off the deck and left the bay, its wings unfolding even as the first turbolaser blasts of the renewed Imperial assault came flooding in.

[Shield defence complex, outer defence perimeter]

Corporal Reston Breen lined up his shot carefully and fired. In the distance, an armoured stormtrooper dropped. Without moving his head, he shifted the rifle a few centimetres and fired again. Another armoured figure collapsed.

Methodically, the corporal and his subsection continued as the Imperials advanced. Finally, Breen lifted his head.

“That’s it! They’re getting too close – forget precision shots now!” The four men now held their weapons against their shoulders, but began firing indiscriminately. The rate of fire increased as the accuracy decreased. And all the while the stormtroopers got closer.

Finally, the order came that the young men were waiting for.

“They’ve breached the perimeter. Get inside!” Corporal Breen did not have to speak twice. His men beat him to the door, and they propelled him through it before it slammed shut.

Once inside, all four of the Talonian militiamen shed their empty and useless magazines and exchanged them for new ones. Then they took position, crouching or standing along the walls, watching the door.

They were not long disappointed.

Soon the tell tale sparks of an Imperial welding cutter could be seen. Reston Breen set his lips in a grim line and his grip on his rifle tightened. In a sudden moment, the door fell inwards and smoke and red blaster bolts poured from the opening. One of Breen's men went down in that initial volley, but the corporal didn't notice. His blaster rifle was already spitting a barrage of death at the oncoming Imperials. He had killed two more when it happened. With a strange feeling, he realised that he wasn't firing at Imperials any more. His rifle was pointed at the roof, and was still firing uselessly straight up. His chest felt suddenly strange.

I've been shot! With a frown he tried to rise, but the pain in his chest forced him back down again. As he lay there, his ragged breathing tearing at his chest, Corporal Breen watched a seemingly endless stream of white armoured figures rushing past into the complex.

Talonis is doomed.

[On board the Imperial Star Destroyer *Dominance*]

"Admiral, Colonel Richt reports that the planetary shield is down," Captain Gillett informed his superior with satisfaction.

"Very good. Launch the heavy lifters; weapons, begin orbital bombardment of targeted resource sites. Make sure these volleys are on target," Vice Admiral Piett added sternly. "I don't want any unnecessary collateral damage."

"Aye, sir," the weapons officer responded, adequately hiding his surprise at such an order from a senior Imperial officer. The dozens of batteries of turbolasers again burst into their song of destruction.

[Three hours later]

Vice Admiral Piett stretched his aching muscles. He'd stayed on the bridge for the entire orbital bombardment and heavy lifting operation, and his body was starting to protest. With a frown, he turned to his weapons officer.

"Report," he barked.

"Sir, bombardment targets destroyed," the latter replied after a few seconds. "We may cease bombardment now." Piett nodded, his face showing relief.

"Very good. All batteries, cease firing," he ordered, and in an instant the bridge went deathly silent. After the hours of constant laserfire, the silence was almost deafening. The vice admiral turned to his Executive Officer.

"Have the Heavy Lifters been secured, Captain?" he asked. Gillett leaned down to check a report.

"Yes, sir," he replied after a moment. "Our mission in this system is now complete." Piett allowed himself a rare smile. Their first target, quickly and cleanly dealt with with a minimal amount of losses.

"Very good, Captain," he answered. "Helm, lay in a course to rendezvous with the *Pacifier*. Direct the fleet to do likewise, and enter hyperspace at your discretion."

"Aye, sir," the helmsman replied. Half a minute later, his voice sounded again.

"Admiral, sir, fleet will enter hyperspace in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1...mark!"

The stars outside streaked into lines as the Imperial task force burst into hyperspace.

[Gymnasium, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*, the following day]

Drake pressed the open button beside the door and stepped inside, just in time to see Raiven fly past, a metre off the deck, upside down. Raiven encountered the antigravity field at the edge of the red tumble mat and was brought to a gentle, bobbing halt 50 cms from the metal deck, still upside down.

"No, no, no! I told you, make sure your weight is correctly balanced on each foot when you approach. Otherwise, you'll get thrown all over the place. As you saw," said Moose.

"Yes, Captain," replied the embarrassed pilot.

Moose waived his hand, irritably. "It's alright, when we're trying smack the hell out of each other, you can stick to Moose."

"When you've finished playing with him, Moose, the Commander has scheduled a briefing in 15 minutes," said Drake, smiling.

"It's not my fault!" said Raiven, righting himself. "I was never any good at hand-to-hand combat. Give me a rifle any day of the week."

Drake raised an eyebrow as Raiven and Moose bowed to each other and walked from the tumble mat.

"Really?" he said "Any good?"

Raiven shrugged. "Not bad, I suppose."

"I was wondering why you took that cannon with you into the cockpit," said Drake as they left the Gymnasium and headed towards the pilot quarters.

"You never know when you might need it," replied Raiven. "Better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it." They reached Raiven's cabin door. "I'll just take a quick shower and be out in 5 minutes."

Drake stood, bored, while he waited for his wingman to get ready. Raiven walked from the room, combing his hair.

"So, what did the grunts find out on the moonbase, then?" he asked as they headed for the briefing room.

"I've only heard rumours, but apparently the base was an Imperial listening post. We caught them destroying the place to stop it from falling into our hands, but they didn't do a very good job," replied Drake, grinning wolfishly.

"Only stopped by the wonderful skills of the devilishly handsome and brave pilots of a certain X Wing patrol, right?" asked Raiven as the two entered the briefing room.

"Naturally."

Inside the briefing room, Foxfire stood on the raised briefing dais with Captain Kh'Arli.

"This is a briefing and brainstorming session for the squadron - at least, those of us who aren't out on patrol at the moment. Yesterday afternoon, Hardrive's X Wing patrol detected heavy weapons fire on the second moon of Spiera VI. They investigated and discovered a Frigate - the *Pacifier* - and fighters, firing on an unidentified moonbase. The Imperial forces were destroyed-

There was a cheer from the back of the briefing room.

"Yes, yes, quiet please. The Imperial forces were destroyed or driven off with no friendly losses. Our colleagues of Lynx Commando are currently investigating. Captain?"

Foxfire nodded toward Cheetah, who stood and walked to the lectern.

"Lynx discovered that the base was empty of personnel or remains. Most equipment was left behind, but some small or particularly expensive items had been taken. There were no traps, no signs of forced entry, no signs of struggle or fighting."

"So you think it was the Imperials pulling out and trying to prevent the base falling into enemy hands?" asked Arachnoid.

A brief wave of irritation at the interruption washed over Kh'Arli's face.

"Almost certainly. We have recovered several computer files under various levels of Imperial encryption, I'll get to those in a second. We were very lucky to find part of the computer system intact and still holding data - apparently, the Imperials didn't purge the computer, relying on the bombardment to destroy everything of value.

"The computer files sliced so far have told us that the base - official designation Listening Post IX745 - received a message yesterday roughly six hours before the patrol's encounter with the frigate. A short time later, the order was given by the commander of the base to prepare for evacuation. All of the data stored in the computer banks was downloaded and the staff prepared to leave - apparently they collected personal items and such as well. Once the *Pacifier* arrived, the listening post's staff was ferried up to the frigate by the transport and shuttle assigned to the base and then the bombardment began. Questions?"

"Any idea why they dinnae blow the place with explosives rather than bombard it?" asked Granite.

"No, and it puzzles me why they didn't. It would have been cheaper, faster and easier, and yet the imperials did not seem to bother. Best guess is that they didn't have the resources at hand - either the specialised equipment or properly trained personnel," replied Cheetah.

"But we already know that the Imps have a major task force operating in this sector. Surely they have a demolitions-capable commando team within a reasonable distance," commented Torpedo.

"Standard complement for an Imperial capital ship is at least one Naval Commando or Special Operations group, varying from a 10-man team right up to a Special Ops Battalion, plus attached support personnel," commented Raiven. Sacart turned slightly and raised an eyebrow. "You seem somewhat knowledgeable on the subject."

Raiven leaned forward and shrugged. "Personal experience," he said, simply. "Thank you, Flight Officer, I am aware of Imperial standard operating procedures," said Cheetah, cutting across the conversation. "This does raise the question as to where those resources are now."

"I think that's one question we now know the answer to," commented Hyena from the doorway. He strode into the room and handed Cheetah a datapad. Cheetah read it rapidly and turned it over to Foxfire.

"Well, that answers our question. We've just cracked the final computer file recovered from the listening post. It seems that the Imperial Special Forces were busy elsewhere. The file contains the order to evacuate, and explains that bombardment will be necessary since the rest of the task force - I assume that refers to the task force the *Pacifier* is operating with - was to launch a large-scale planetary assault in the Talonis System. The order is signed by an acquaintance of White Squadron, Vice Admiral Norvad Piett."

This brought gasps of surprise from several of the veteran pilots in the room. Raiven leaned over to Drake. "Piett? Any relation to the Admiral who commanded the Executor?"

Drake nodded "Father and Son, I believe. We ran into him back while we were part of White Squadron. He commanded a small task force - an ISD and a couple of frigates - and gave us some trouble. He seems to know his stuff and he's not as arrogant as most Imperial officers are - he knows when to back off and when to drive in. We'll have to be careful. The Commander said the task force consisted of multiple ISDs. One of them has got to be the *Providence*, his flagship."

Foxfire returned to the lectern and started issuing orders. "TacO, issue recalls or redirections to the patrols that are out there now. Captain Stauber, Captain Kh'Arli, you're with me. We need to pass this info on to the Colonel. The rest of you, begin preparing your fighters. The Imps will probably have finished with Talonis by now, but we're going there anyway, and I want to be ready in case they're stupid enough to still be there when we arrive."

Foxfire strode from the room with Vyper and Cheetah in tow.

"You think the Imperials will still be around, Commander?" asked the Lynx officer. "No," said Foxfire, "and I don't know what will be left after they've finished, either..."

[Flight deck, New Republic Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Commander Avery "Foxfire" Schroeder watched with satisfaction as the four elevators at the corners of the cavernous hangar bay lowered four more fighters onto the flight deck. Even as the new arrivals slowly lifted off the deck and were marshalled towards the centre of the bay, the elevators began to rise to pick up the next lot of fighters waiting in the hangar deck above. Foxfire turned back to the situation at hand. As the commanding officer of Wolfshead Squadron, her place was at the front of the waves of fighters that would launch as soon as the *Wolf's Lair* arrived in the Talonis system.

“Wolf Lead, this is Control,” a voice crackled over the comm. “Stand by for reversion in one minute.”

“Copy, Control,” Foxfire acknowledged, glancing out of her cockpit canopy again, this time at the Ready Five fighters which were moving out from their own waiting area off to one side of the flight deck. Arachnoid, Iceman, Gandalf and Cardinal were all flying A-wings, and they quickly moved into a line abreast behind Foxfire. On the other side of the hangar bay, Foxfire knew, Vyper in his A-wing would be facing outwards in the opposite direction, with an X-wing flight of Solo, Drake, Sacart and Raiven behind him. The comm crackled to life.

“All fighters, reversion in five, four, three, two, one...mark!” Abruptly the mottled tunnel of light visible from the hangar bay turned to starlines, then into a million points of light. Foxfire coaxed her fighter into motion even as she gave the order. “Wolves, let’s go...and be ready for anything.” Her A-wing glided smoothly forward, bursting out of the magnetic containment bubble and into the vastness of space. Barely a heartbeat behind her, the four A-wings exited the hangar and immediately spread out into a line abreast formation. All eyes in the Wolfshead flight scanned their displays for red blips.

Nothing.

Foxfire’s eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“Keep your eyes peeled, everyone,” she cautioned. “We didn’t really expect to find anyone still here, but that doesn’t mean that they won’t have left some nasty surprises for us.”

The rest of squadron’s fighters were launching in rapid succession behind the already airborne flights, and Foxfire smiled at how well the *Wolf’s Lair* launching system worked. *Certainly much faster than anything a Nebulon-B could do*, she thought with a twinge of guilt. *Not that both our Nebulon-Bs weren’t dear to us all the same.*

“Somehow, Lead, I don’t think we’re going to find much out here except floating TIE parts,” Drake offered over the comm. “Of course, we could slap a few of those together and then Raiven could have something better to fly than that piece of junk that he calls a TIE Advanced...”

“Watch it, Drake, or you’ll find that piece of junk introducing you to new methods of ventilat-“

“Cut it out, you two,” Foxfire admonished the young X-wing pilots. “Over all the senseless chatter, we might well not be able to actually hear something *important.*”

Two sets of double clicks acknowledged her order, and she resumed scanning the surrounding emptiness for anything that might pose a threat.

[Briefing Room, Strike Carrier *Wolf’s Lair*, two hours later]

Foxfire stood and waited patiently, with Captain Michael “Vyper” Stauber at her side, as the pilots of Wolfshead Squadron filed into the room and found their seats. There was little chatter for once, and Foxfire began quickly.

“Good morning, pilots. Now that we’ve cleared the system and confirmed that there’s nothing nasty left here, we’ve contacted the Talonians themselves and got a better picture of just what happened here.

“Basically, the Imps arrived in force and hit them. A clean, surgical strike, with no unnecessary risk taken and no real damage sustained. Apparently a fair amount of TIEs got wiped out, but a squadron of Z-95s is hardly going to stand up to the combined starfighter complements of an Imperial task group. The militia down on the planet put up some spirited resistance, but again, it wasn’t enough to stop Imperial assault troops from shutting down the planetary shields so that an orbital bombardment could commence.

“The bombardment lasted several hours, but at first it didn’t seem to be aimed at anything. Then, the Talonians realised that it was their natural resources that were being systematically destroyed. Naturally, though, their settlements and cities didn’t escape collateral damage resulting from such a massive attack.

“Our Intelligence, then, seems to be correct. The Imperial assault force stole whatever they could of value, and an orbital bombardment took out most of the rest. The Talonians have been left with next to nothing except for a lot of wounded people, so we’re going to do our best to help them rebuild their lives. At the moment we can’t chase the Imps, anyway. We don’t have any idea where they’re off to, and nor do the Talonians.” Foxfire paused for a while, letting her words sink in while the squadron discussed them in muted voices. After the brief murmur of conversation began to slacken off again, she continued.

“Rooster, you especially are going to have your work cut out for you over the next day, at least. You’ll be working with the pilots that fly the Lynx craft, ferrying medical supplies and passengers between the *Wolf’s Lair* and the planet.” The Lumi nodded her head soberly, and her receptors glowed a faint emerald colour, reflecting both her confidence in her ability to do the task, and also her sadness at what had occurred.

“The rest of you will be providing help with the relief effort, doing whatever has to be done. We’ll be co-ordinating with the local authorities on this, and they’ll have some measure of command over us, so hopefully the most important tasks will get done as quickly as possible.” Foxfire paused for a deep breath, and her face brightened a little. “Okay, that’s all about the mission for now. We’ve got a short while before the *Lair* gets in nice and close to Talonis so we can start rendering effective aid. On a lighter note, not long after arriving here we received a communication from Command detailing changes to Squadron Standing Orders due to our new ship. The ink hasn’t dried on these orders yet, but we’re going to implement them immediately.

“The squadron’s fighters are going to be divided into three groups – we’ve termed them Wolfgang, Wolfeye and Wolfclaw. Each of these groups will be made up of flights of at least four but not more than six fighters. At our present strength, this means that we’ll have one X-wing flight, two A-wing flights and a B-wing flight. The Command Wing and the Transport/SAR sections will be separate from the three groups.

“In addition, we’re now being brought into line with the rest of the New Republic military. Since our time as a ‘Rebellion’ is over following Endor, a lot of the

makeshift measures we used to use are being overhauled. One of the first of these is the ranking system we had in place. There's a whole heap more ranks these days, and a new set of insignia to go with them. I'll leave you all to read about it in the new Standing Orders, but suffice it to say that with a new rank system and new organisational structure, as well as our own good performance, some promotions were inevitable." A loud outburst of conversation met this comment, and Foxfire smiled and raised a hand.

"Before we all get too excited, listen up for the list of names who are going to be paying for drinks the next time we all have a bit of downtime together." The noise quietened considerably and Foxfire continued.

"Okay, stand up as you're called. Drake, you've been promoted to Lieutenant for long standing excellent service – well done. Solo, you're being promoted to Lieutenant Commander and also you're the new commander of the Wolfgang group – congratulations! Likewise, Groznik, you're now a Lieutenant Commander and leader of the Wolfclaw group – good work! Our Wolfeye group consists of two flights, so our new group leader is a Commander – yes, that's you Arachnoid! – and our Wolfeye XO is Hardrive, who holds a lieutenant commander's rank. Lastly, Vyper has been promoted to Major, myself to Lieutenant Colonel, Ibero to Commander and Torpedo to Lieutenant Commander. Congratulations to everyone," she finished, taking a deep breath after reading the long list, and all the pilots burst into applause, cheering and heckling. Foxfire let this continue for a short while, then continued.

"All promotions will be provisional until we get back from this mission and they can be confirmed and conferred officially. Likewise, at this stage it looks like the *Lair* will get her official commissioning when we get back, so there's a celebration to look forward to when we return!" More cheers interrupted her, but Foxfire continued unabated, quickly forcing the noise back down again.

"Before we leave and get ready to go planetside, I'm also going to tell you that each Group has its own ready room, and these have now been completed and cleared for use by Chief Engineer Boradelis. As of our next flight, we'll be staging from those ready rooms. Whole squadron briefings will still be conducted in here, but individual group meetings or briefings can be conducted in the relevant ready room.

"I think you've all heard enough from me. Our main concern now is helping those people on Talonis. Stay focussed, everyone, and may the Force be with us – and the Talonians. Dismissed."

[High orbit, Planet Talonis, Mantara Sector]

Drake glanced out the window of his X-wing at Raiven, who hung neatly on his wing, as usual.

"Okay, Raiven, you ready to go down and take a look?" he asked, nudging his fighter over slightly in preparation for a descent.

"Ready whenever you are, sir," Raiven's voice crackled back. Drake could have sworn that the last word sounded just a tiny bit smug.

"Knock it off, *Flight Officer*," he countered with a grin. "Every time you call me sir and there's no brass around, you owe me a beer. Understood?"

"Perfectly. Unfortunately, Arpin seems to be having trouble with the concept, and he's making his displeasure explicitly known to me..."

"You tell him he can either be quiet, or act as a target for my portside dorsal laser cannon," Drake growled, but the good humour in his voice was unmistakable. A sigh came over the comm.

"Don't you two ever shut up?? Even when things are as serious as they're gonna be down there?"

Drake's head spun around from Raiven's fighter to look at Solo's craft, ahead and to the left of him, along with Sacart, who was flying Solo's wing.

"Of course not, Ten," he answered genially. "*Especially* not when things are as serious as this. A little humour helps to relieve the tension. Otherwise we'd all go nuts."

"I think if the tension gets relieved any more I'm gonna go nuts," Solo muttered over the comm. Raiven and Drake both laughed, and the strange sounds of Arpin's amusement soon joined in.

"All right, enough chatter," Solo cut them off after a moment. "Wolffangs, we're leading the way down - the Wolfeyes and Wolfclaws will follow our lead. Stay in formation, we'll go down nice and steady." With a tight smile and without waiting, Solo plunged his X-wing into a steep dive, with Sacart and the other two X-wing pilots struggling to keep up with him.

Inside his cockpit, Raiven's lip curled into a vicious grin. He switched his communications over so that only he and Drake could hear.

"Not bad," he said to his wingmate, shrugging inside his cockpit. "We'll have to repay him for this one."

"Definitely," came the reply. "We can't have Group Leaders thinking they're actually *running* the show now, can we?"

"Of course not," Raiven replied vigorously. "Before we knew it, they'd be accusing us of dangerous flying, or some similar rubbish, and cramping our style."

"Exactly. If you haven't got style, what have you got?" asked Drake rhetorically as the X-wing flight plunged into the outer atmosphere.

Drake glanced once more at the wings of his X-wing, a little nervousness creeping into his voice.

"Getting fairly warm," he ventured with a slightly feigned nonchalance. Raiven just laughed.

"It never gets warm in a *shielded* craft," he scoffed. "Take a ride in an Interceptor with me, and I'll show you warm."

"Hey, those tin cans aren't that hard to fly," Drake retorted. "It's just that none of the clowns that they get to fly them are any good at it."

"Okay, that's it, now I'm insulted," Raiven's voice came back sarcastically. "If you think they're so easy, then one day you and I are going to fly a couple. Then we'll see if your skill is as big as your mouth."

"You're forgetting my ego, Two-Two," Drake admonished him. "It's bigger than both my skill and my mouth...hey! Pay attention - you just slipped a good foot closer to my wing!"

"Sorry," growled Raiven, adjusting his descent and feeling a little embarrassed. One of the skills that he prided himself on was formation flying, and the conversation he'd just had with Drake had actually distracted him enough that he'd let things slip a little. *Maybe I'm still a bit sensitive to insults aimed at Imperial pilots*, he mused thoughtfully. *How odd.*

"No worries," Drake answered him, his voice sounding serious for once. "Just keep an eye on it, okay? I'm not that keen to get fried today."

"Copy, Fourteen," Raiven answered him, even as their X-wings burst through the atmosphere and into the Talonian sky.

Drake looked down in horror. Huge gouges had been ripped into the planet's crust, leaving ugly brown scars which looked to Drake like open wounds.

"Would you look at that," he breathed.

There was an eerie silence on the comm.

"They certainly were thorough," Solo's voice came awkwardly at length. "Drake, you and Raiven can split off and take your own look from here on. The rest of the groups will be splitting when they arrive, too."

"Affirmative, Lead," Drake acknowledged him. As their communications were between their own group only, he used the designation usually reserved for a squadron commander.

Solo looked behind him, past Sacart's X-wing, as the two X-wings to the rear rolled onto their starboard wings and dived sharply towards the planet surface. His chest swelled with pride. *That was a good dive*, he thought with an inward smile. *And they're my pilots! Sacart, too - he's damn good at holding formation on my wing. The four of us are going to get on just fine.*

"Bloody hell," Raiven's subdued voice came over the comm, and Drake just nodded.

Below them the ravaged planet's surface rushed by. In some of the crevices the planet's crust had been breached, allowing molten magma to bubble up to the surface. To the two X-wing pilots overhead, the magma looked like blood.

"Hell is right," Drake murmured at length. "Maybe this is what hell looks like." The young pilot had never seen the effects of an orbital bombardment before. He hoped he never would again.

Raiven had seen the effects before, but usually when targeted against military facilities. He'd never seen anything like this, where the idea was to attack the planet itself. It was interesting, he reflected, that both he and Drake seemed to regard the planet as a living thing.

Or maybe it's just the millions of living things living on it that make us think that, he thought darkly, gazing again at the grim vista before him.

"We're coming up on Illium, the capital city," Drake's voice cut in harshly, interrupting Raiven's reverie. "Let's cut our throttle to half for a pass over the city."

"Roger," Raiven answered him, slowing his fighter appropriately and feeling the extra maneuverability that it gave him as the stick relaxed in his hands.

Drake glanced down as they passed relatively slowly over the sprawling metropolis that was Illium, the capital city of Talonis. Most of the city, he noted with an inward sigh of relief, seemed to be relatively intact. Here and there, though, prominent buildings seemed to be either partially or totally destroyed. One particularly large structure near the outskirts of the city looked like it had taken a direct hit. It looked like a giant hand, Drake mused, with five pillars like fingers curved inwards and stretched towards the sky. But the palm of the hand was a smoking ruin, and all around it was desolation and rubble. Drake keyed his comm.

"What do you think of that?"

Raiven followed his gaze.

"Shield generator, at a guess. The damaged area looks like it's taken a deliberate attack - notice the pillars are still standing? Too accurate for a turbolaser blast to hit." Drake nodded.

"My thoughts exactly. Probably the work of an assault force, although why they didn't bother to blow the whole complex is a bit of a mystery to me."

"Me, too. Perhaps they didn't have enough time."

Drake's only response to that statement was a grunt. He agreed with such an assessment, and that was what worried him. The only reason he could think of for the Imperials being pressed for time was that they had a number of targets that they were in a hurry to hit - they would know that the Republic would respond. Which meant that even now some other world could be suffering a fate similar to that of Talonis, as the Imperials would attempt to carry out their mission quickly and avoid contact with Republic forces. He shook his head, reminding himself of the need to focus on the job at hand.

"We'll make another pass, then head on back to the *Lair*," he said with a sigh.

"Sounds good to me," Raiven agreed, and the pair of X-wings curved around gracefully into a slow arcing turn.

[Presidential chambers, City of Illium, Talonis]

Foxfire glanced once more out the large, multi-paned window at the two A-wings which sat, looking grossly out of place, in the middle of the Illium central city square. The Talonians seemed to regard them with interest, but none actually stopped to look or attempted to climb over them. Most Talonians, Foxfire reflected grimly, at the moment doubtless had far more important matters that demanded their time and attention.

Beside her, Vyper smoothed his rumpled flightsuit and rubbed his brand new single silver pip vigorously to free it of any imagined tarnish. Foxfire smiled tightly, but surreptitiously checked that her own uniform was also in order.

Satisfied, she sighed and rocked back on her heels, prepared to wait.

She did not have to wait long.

Almost immediately the wood panelled door in front of the two Wolfshead pilots opened and a flustered looking young woman with a bandaged forehead stepped through.

"Ma'am, sir...you two are the New Republic fighter pilots?" Foxfire smiled tightly again, although this time the smile was sincere.

"We are. I'm Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder and this is Major Stauber." The woman nodded.

"Very good. The President will see you now. Please follow me." With that, she spun on her heel and strode away, leaving Foxfire and Vyper to follow in her wake.

The President's office was moderately large, Foxfire thought, and also moderately impressive. She'd seen better before - but, she reminded herself, she'd also seen a lot worse. Perhaps Talonis wasn't quite the backwater she'd thought it to be after all.

"Not a bad place to work," Vyper murmured beside her, drawing a murmured agreement from his CO.

As they approached, the young aide announced them to the man sitting behind what appeared to be a massive, ancient wooden desk.

"Sir, these are the fighter pilots from the New Republic. Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder and Major Stauber." The man nodded and rose from his chair, stepping around the desk to meet them and shake each hand. Foxfire examined the President of Talonis as he did so. He was slightly shorter than average height, she mused, perhaps five eight or so. His grey hair, kept at a medium length, was neatly styled, which was in itself remarkable given the dishevelled appearance of everyone else they had met so far on Talonis. It was his face, though, that was compelling, and his manner. It was at once warm, familiar, friendly and also coolly dignified. And yet, underneath it all was a hardness and a fire that seemed to smoulder in his eyes. His handshake was firm; his voice and his expression looked, at least to Foxfire, to be completely sincere.

"Colonel, Major." He smiled wearily at them both. "I'm Jarik Davon, President of the Republic of Talonis."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sir, despite the circumstances," Foxfire answered him politely, flashing him a brilliant smile of her own. Vyper sneaked a glance at her and his brow raised itself slightly. *Wow. I thought those smiles were saved for Moose*, he thought, a grin twitching on his lips. He nodded respectfully at President Davon in agreement with Foxfire's sentiment as the Talonian resumed his giant chair and waved his visitors into two very comfortable seats in front of his desk.

"Now, let's see...a lieutenant colonel and a major. You two are the commanding and executive officer of a starfighter squadron, then?" Foxfire and Vyper exchanged glances, impressed at the man's knowledge of New Republic military organisation. In fact, he knew something that the two of them had found out just hours before.

"That's correct, sir," Foxfire nodded. "I'm the commanding officer of Wolfshead Squadron, based aboard the Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*, and Major Stauber is my Executive Officer." The President nodded, but a frown creased his features.

"Pardon me, but Strike Carrier? I haven't heard of such a ship. The closest vessel I can remember is a Strike *Cruiser*, but-"

"Sir, she's just been rushed into service, and she's the first of her class," Vyper interjected calmly. "She's of Mon Calamarian design and construction, and she's essentially a large starfighter transport, with a few weapons and bits and pieces of her own." The President nodded.

"At some other time, I would be most curious to learn more of such a vessel. However, at the moment, more pressing concerns must occupy me." Foxfire nodded.

"Of course, sir. On behalf of Wolfshead Squadron and the New Republic, I'd like to offer our condolences for your loss, as well as any help we can provide." President Davon nodded gravely.

"Thank you, Colonel. When the aftermath of this attack is over, I do not doubt that we will look into becoming members of the New Republic to ensure that such a disaster is not allowed to happen again." Foxfire nodded graciously and the President continued.

"Colonel, Major, thank you for your time, your kind words and your offer of assistance. May I ask what form this assistance will take?" At this, Foxfire and Vyper shared uneasy glances. Foxfire shifted slightly in her seat before answering.

"We have an SAR shuttle, sir, and a Skipray blastboat that can be used to ferry supplies. Some of our pilots will also be on hand to assist with first aid, relief coordination, or-"

President Davon cut her off with an upraised hand.

"Sorry, Colonel, let me clarify. Your assistance consists of two small transport vessels and a handful of pilots?" His voice had acquired a hard, flinty edge, and his eyes were fixed intently on her, his face set in a deep frown. Foxfire felt herself redden, but kept control over her composure and her temper.

"That's correct, sir. We're an operational - and barely operational, at that - starfighter squadron, not a proper relief task force for a disaster such as this. We'll render whatever aid we can, but rest assured that the New Republic will also be sending further forces to help you and your people." The President's gaze softened slightly, and he sighed as he relaxed.

"Of course. I apologise, like many people here I'm not thinking as clearly as I might at the moment. If your squadron was the extent of the relief effort, though, I would certainly have been rethinking any decision to join the Republic." He sighed again, and shook his head. "It's a shame your people couldn't have got here this time yesterday." Foxfire frowned.

"Believe me, sir, we wish we could have. Unfortunately our intelligence on the task force that assaulted your world is sketchy at best - indeed, we're gathering our own intelligence rather than going through normal channels. It seems that out here, gathering information first hand is the order of the day." Vyper nodded his agreement.

"Which brings us to a point, sir - if you have any additional intelligence, or if you acquire any, we would be most grateful." President Davon nodded.

"On behalf of Talonis, I am grateful for your presence here, although I shall be better pleased when greater relief arrives. I must now hand you over to those who are in charge of the emergency relief efforts - politics and public playing are my arena, not practicalities. However, with regard to your request for intelligence, Major, we will do what we can, I can assure you of that. Unfortunately we have no idea of where the Imperials are headed next... we don't even know why Talonis was picked as the initial target. Perhaps because we are on the outskirts of the sector. Perhaps because we are more of a center for commerce than other worlds, and attacking us will make an example for others. Most probably, a combination of these factors, but we cannot be sure. The next target for the Imperials is anyone's guess, although we must try and determine their movements to prevent another assault like this." Vyper nodded resolutely.

"Rest assured, sir, we shall be devoting considerable time and effort to doing just that," he said firmly. "We hope to destroy or drive off the Imperials before this can happen again."

"Thank you, Major," the President answered him. "I wish you good luck in your efforts. And now, if there are no further questions, then I must thank you once again and hope for success in your endeavours. My aide will show you out." President Davon stood again to shake hands with the two Wolfshead pilots as the young aide reappeared and escorted them outside.

"Please wait here," she asked them as she closed the door to the Presidential office. "I'll just go and ensure your military liaison is coming."

She left, and Foxfire and Vyper were alone.

Vyper sighed deeply and rubbed his forehead.

"You can say that again," Foxfire said wearily. "I can't believe the scope of what they've done here. Knowing something intellectually isn't quite the same as seeing it in reality."

"That's for sure," Vyper agreed. "Apparently the planet's surface is a mess. It's going to take the Talonians a long, long time and a lot of hard effort to rebuild their society and their environment. And even then, it's going to cost a lot, in many different ways."

"There's a lot that's being put off as non-essential right now, but after the initial crises are over, then it's all going to need to be dealt with," Foxfire continued. "I - hello, this looks like our military liaison." A grizzled old man was striding purposefully down the corridor towards them, although he seemed almost imperceptibly to be limping. His head was bandaged, his cheek was cut, and the backs of his hands, Foxfire noticed as he walked in, seemed to have suffered severe burns. His features were jowly, but his eyes were bright, keen and clear, and his voice was gruff and sharp.

"I'm Captain Yazd Wik, Talonian Militia," he said shortly, briefly seizing their hands in a bearlike handshake. "And you are?"

"Lieutenant Colonel Avery Schroeder and Major Michael Stauber, New Republic military," Foxfire introduced the two Wolfshead pilots. Captain Wik nodded.

"Okay, thanks for coming. Let's go." Foxfire and Vyper had no choice but to follow the old soldier as he abruptly turned and began to walk away. As soon as they caught up with him, he began to talk.

"I guess I'm pretty much in charge of co-ordinating the relief effort, certainly at least for this region. I was on the orbital platform *Stalwart* and escaped just before she was destroyed by the Imperials.

"There were four Star Destroyers, a frigate and a bunch of smaller vessels attacking us," Captain Wik continued. "Two Imperial ships and a couple of the older *Victory* models. The whole operation was fairly efficient and businesslike. Our fighters scrambled to meet them, and didn't do too badly either, but there were just too many of them.

"The fighters were taken care of by a superior number of TIEs before the big ships moved in for the kill. We held them off as long as we could, of course - I strapped myself into a gunner's rig and managed to take out a few TIEs as well as at least two turbolaser turrets - but in the end, a single platform was no match for four Star Destroyers. Assault transports delivered troops down to the planet, where our shield generator was penetrated and disabled - not without a fight, mind you - and then the bombardment began. At first we had no idea what was going on, but eventually we figured it out. I suppose you've already been told about that, though." Foxfire nodded and Wik continued.

"Once the Imperials were gone, we didn't do much straight away because we feared they'd come back, or some of their buddies would," he grated, his ugly features twisted into a snarl. "But they didn't, and then you guys showed up. We didn't know what to make of you at first - we hadn't seen that new ship type before - but when New Republic starfighters launched, we were hopeful that you weren't here to attack us. We would've been sitting ducks if you were."

"Just how hard was your military hit?" Vyper asked him. Captain Wik glanced at him keenly.

"Pretty hard. Look, we're a fair way out, and we don't see much trouble, so there's never been much need for a large military force. We only have the Militia. A couple dozen starfighters or so, maybe five or six thousand troops spread across the whole planet. This attack has taken out not only a lot of people, but a lot of our command structure." He paused, a little self-reflectively. "Take me as an example. Before this happened, I was a fifteen-year sergeant who was never going to get promoted because once an officer decided that he didn't like me. We're so short of people that because of what I did up there- " Here he jerked a thumb skyward, "- I've somehow become a bit of a hero and won myself a promotion and a medal. That's also the reason why a captain is in charge of the relief co-ordination for an entire region." He paused and shook his head.

"No, our military was almost totally destroyed. Rebuilding it is going to take a long time. Hell, rebuilding all the damage the Imperials have done is going to take ages." Foxfire nodded.

"Okay. How can we help?"

"Well, the best thing you people can do for us right now is to ferry supplies down here. Emergency stuff - food, water and power - are the essentials that we need.

Shelter isn't too much of a problem, as enough structures are still intact. The problem is that the essential domestic services have all been knocked out."
"Well, we can start on that right away," Foxfire said with a nod. "Anything else you need, we'll see what we can do."

[Crew Quarters, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*, the following day]

Raiven stood at the large viewport, staring at the terrible sight below. Dust storms and clouds of debris coloured the planet's surface with streams of yellow and red, purple and black.

Lost in his thoughts, he barely heard the beep of his comlink. Pausing a moment to look once more at the macabre view, he shook his head and turned away, thumbing his comlink on.

"Raiven."

"Report to Conference Room 3" came the terse reply.

"Acknowledged" the pilot replied, switching off the comlink and heading for the door.

He reached the conference room on the deck below and entered. Ibero stood, datapad in hand, at the head of the table in centre of the room. He looked up and gave Raiven a grim smile as the other sat in one of the seats, nodding greetings to the other pilots, Drake, Arachnoid and Sparks, who were already sitting. A few seconds later, Sledgehammer entered the room, looking slightly flustered.

"Sorry. Got a little lost." He explained.

Ibero waved his hand for the B Wing pilot to sit and began speaking.

"New orders from the commander. Most of the squadron will be helping with the disaster relief, but we are going to start looking for the Imperials.

Captain Zh'Arli has assigned us Lynx's' Team Beta to help, and we can rely on at least some A Wing patrols.

"So far we know that the Empire has mounted one major raid - here at Talonis - and one minor one - Spiera VI. From computer files lifted from the listening post and eyewitness and sensor data from the assault here, we've managed to put together a good picture of what we're up against."

He pressed a button on his datapad, and the holopad built into the table flashed to life. The image was a frozen picture of the assault showing a pair of Imperial class Star Destroyers. The seated pilots leaned forward in their seats to take a closer look at their foe.

Raiven pointed at the rear craft. "See the way the second destroyer hangs back to cover the first? Surprisingly cautious considering the expected resistance."

Drake nodded. "From what we've seen of Piett, that looks about right. He's not willing to risk the second craft unnecessarily when the first can do the job more or less by itself."

"What other craft are we up against?" asked Sparks.

Ibero pressed a couple of buttons on his datapad. The holo image split to show several craft.

"We have the two ImpStars plus two Victories as the line capital ships. Two Nebulon B's, one here and the *Pacifier*, which was at Spiera, plus numerous Corvettes and Assault transports."

Sparks nodded and grinned. "So, a couple of Imps, a couple of Vics, and some B Wing fodder, right?"

There were smiles and chuckles from around the table.

"Where do we start?" asked Raiven.

"Well," replied Ibero "Drake here was a security officer. What do you reckon?"

Drake smiled "Well, we interview witnesses and investigate physical evidence."

"Ten points to the Arebnaccian. Drake, Raiven, Sledgehammer - you'll recover TIE debris from higher orbit and talk to some of the Talonian militia who survived the attack. We'll be back to help you as fast as we can."

Raiven and Drake shared glances.

"Where are you off to?" asked Raiven.

Ibero sighed. "The commander pointed out that Talonis needs a lot of help. One of the closest planets to here with the ability to provide that help is Iberya..."

"...And since a certain pilot not a million parsecs from here is currently rated somewhere between 'Hero' and 'Deity' there..."

"...And his squadron as well..."

"...And you get to see little Lucia again so soon..."

"...You're going to go ask them for help, right?"

Ibero smiled and waved his hands for silence. "Sparks and Arachnoid will be accompanying me back to Iberya. It's a 12 hour jump each way for the fighters, plus a day or two to persuade the Iberyans to help. Any questions?"

"Seems pretty straightforward."

"Good." He turned to Arachnoid and Sparks "We leave in 90 minutes.

Dismissed."

The pilots rose and filed from the room.

[Hangar Deck, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

An hour later, Ibero, Arachnoid and Sparks entered the flight deck and crossed to their fighters, parked in ranks at the centre of the hangar deck. Drake and Sledgehammer had already moved the latter's B Wing into Bay 4 at the forward bulkhead and were discussing with Hanniuska, the chief tech, how best to modify the B Wing for it's required mission. Drake spotted the Intelligence Officer and jogged over.

"Looks like we'll have to use Sledge's B Wing – both the shuttles and transports are in use and I don't think Granite will let us use his battlewagon without him watching over our shoulders," he reported, and then grinned and added. "So we'll be hard at work here while you to finish your holiday."

Ibero laughed easily and nodded. "Well, 24 hours in hyperspace and force knows how long talking to Iberyian officials are worth it for a half hour with the family, I suppose."

Drake looked over Ibero's shoulder and spotted Foxfire striding across the deck towards the X Wing.

"Well, here comes the brass" he said, "Better make this look good", and snapped a smart salute, Ibero following a second later as he heard the squadron CO's footsteps on the metal deck behind him.

"Oh, knock it off, the pair of you" said Foxfire with a grin "You look like you're about to burst."

The two pilots lowered their arms and relaxed with smiles of their own.

"How's the investigation going, then?" she asked, her face becoming serious.

"We'll be ready to start debris recovery within a few hours" replied Drake, brandishing his datapad.

"OK, don't let me keep you"

Drake nodded and stepped back. "Good luck, Dario," he said as he turned and headed back to Bay 4.

Foxfire turned back to the Iberyian pilot. "Yes, good luck." She handed him a datacard. "Here's an updated 'wish list'. Get whatever you can." Ibero nodded and accepted it, solemnly.

"And say hi to the family from all of us" she added with a warm smile.

"You know, there was no point in sending Drake away like that, Avery. The whole squadron knows you've got a soft heart. You wouldn't have lost anything by letting him hear," commented Ibero, smiling.

Foxfire's hands flew to her face in mock horror. "Tell anyone in the squadron that and I'll bust you down to Flight Officer" she said with a laugh.

Ibero laughed too and climbed into his fighter.

Twenty minutes later, the three fighters lifted off from the flight deck and flew towards their hyperspace point. As the starlines shifted to the mottled tunnel of hyperspace, Ibero slotted the card into his datapad and settled in to read the long list.

[Bridge, Imperial Star Destroyer *Dominance*]

Vice Admiral Piett was standing in his usual pose, hands clasped behind his back and staring out at the stars through the bridge viewport, as his Executive Officer, Captain Gillett, approached.

"Admiral, the *Pacifier* has just rejoined formation, sir," his second-in-command reported. Piett half turned.

"Very good, Captain," he acknowledged with a nod. "We're scheduled to re-enter hyperspace at 1900. I want all task element captains and their respective XO's on board and in the conference room by 1700. It's time we found out exactly what happened to the *Pacifier*, and worked out a solid plan for the assault on Picas." Captain Gillett nodded briskly.

"Yes, sir. I'll organise it straight away." Vice Admiral Piett nodded as he turned his head to again look at the void which stretched endlessly before him. Captain Gillett spun on his heel and headed for the secure communications center. He had work to do.

[Hangar Deck, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Raiven walked into the hangar holding a datapad and crossed to Sledgehammer's B Wing, where he and Drake were assisting Lt Mar Hanniuska modify the craft with a pilot recovery tractor beam generator.

"Hey, Drake" he said, walking up behind his wingman. Drake did not reply. Raiven frowned and looked over Drake's shoulder to see Mar crouched under the craft's engine pod, working on a power line.

The Ex-Imperial pilot rolled his eyes and clipped Drake gently across the top of the head with his datapad. "Flight Control to Wolfshead Fourteen. Please return to base. Repeat, stop flying and return to base."

Drake turned and rubbed his head. "No need for that. Just admiring the view."

"You know, I'm sure there's a rule against ogling a technical officer" whispered Raiven with a grin. "At least, if she catches you doing it you'll probably wish she could **only** throw you in the brig. Have you seen the size of those hydrospanners she carries?"

Drake shrugged. "We're almost finished here. You and Sledge can go look for a reasonably large piece of TIE out there while I look over the records of the battle and try to contact some of the Talonian survivors."

Sledgehammer walked over to join them. "Looks like we're all finished here.

Who's going out spotting with me?"

"That would be me" replied Raiven. He lifted his comlink and thumbed it on.

"Arpin, report to the flight deck" he ordered, rapidly switching off Arpin's harsh reply.

Drake and Sledgehammer tried in vain to hide their amusement. "Well," said the B Wing pilot, "at least a nav computer doesn't talk back at you, I suppose."

Raiven glared at him.

A few minutes later, the squat red and white R2 unit rolled into the hangar, conversing with Ledner, Drake's astromech droid. The two droids rolled over to the pilots, as Arpin rolled forward and started beeping and warbling.

There was a thump followed by a curse as Mar emerged from under the B Wing with a puzzled look on her face, rubbing her head.

"Bantha dung'? Oh, it's you, Arpin." She said, and turned to Raiven. "So you're the one who flies with this hunk of corroded tin?"

"Yeah," replied the pilot, "If I'd realised what he was really like I would have just spaced him and been done with it."

Arpin blew an electronic raspberry in response.

"It wouldn't have done you any good," said Hanniuska, "He may have all the innate lovability of the average trash compactor, but he can survive hard vacuum. Trust me on this."

Raiven pointed at his X Wing "Go ahead and mount up, short stuff. Start the preflight, I'll be with you in a minute."

The astromech trundled toward the fighter, turning his sensor dome back towards the assembled personnel and warbling at them. Ledner gave the R2 equivalent of a laugh while the woman mechanic smiled and shook her head. Raiven turned to Drake.

"Is that anatomically possible?" he asked, mock puzzlement on his face.

"Not for humans," responded Drake, smiling.

Sledgehammer looked at the grinning trio, the puzzlement on his face very real.

"What'd he say?"

"Best not to ask."

20 minutes later, Raiven's X Wing lifted from the flight deck and passed through the magcon field on the port side of the carrier, followed closely by Sledgehammer's B Wing.

"We've got a good candidate, looks like the remains of a TIE bomber. Vector 38 mark 74."

"Acknowledged, Raiven"

The two fighters slowed as they approached the debris field, where several fighters had been destroyed, both Imperial and Talonian. Arpin plotted the components of several Z-95 Headhunters and TIE bombers on the X Wing's HUD.

"Wait here while Arpin and I take a closer look" ordered Raiven, slowing the fighter to a crawling pace. He shunted energy to his shields, bringing them to full power.

"Roger that. Holding position."

The older Republic starfighter crept slowly into the field, heading toward the target TIE.

[Looks fairly intact] said Arpin, the translation appearing on the cockpit display screen.

The astromech was correct - the TIE identified as a possible target had lost its port solar panel and taken a blast to the cockpit viewport, killing the pilot. The remainder of the twin hull seemed otherwise undamaged, save the occasional carbon scoring mark.

Raiven brought the X Wing in to less than two metres from the TIE's wrecked cockpit and matched rotation.

[Registering low level power signature from the target]

"Raiven to Sledgehammer. We've got power on the target. Go for pickup."

"Roger that."

[Hey, laser brains. Aren't you forgetting something?]

"Err. What?" asked Raiven.

[You're in his way. The best approach to the target is the one you used]

"Good point" replied the pilot.

He pitched the X Wing upwards relative to the TIE bomber and fed power gradually to the drive. Behind him, Sledgehammer picked his way carefully through the battle debris, manoeuvring his larger assault fighter slowly but confidently.

Once clear of the field, Raiven yawed the fighter around to point towards the bomber to see Sledgehammer's approach.

[Something's wrong. He's too fast]

Raiven took a second to study the vector plot on the main display, then activated his comlink.

"Salvage 2, you're going in too fast. Back it off a little."

"I can handle it, One"

The B Wing slowed slightly and began to rotate about its engine pod.

Sledgehammer reached above his head and flipped a switch mounted there.

"Deploying S Foils, powering up tractor beam."

He watched the main display screen intently as the TIE slid under the hull of the heavy fighter.

"Alex, watch out!" came Raiven's warning cry across the comlink.

The B Wing began to turn from the danger, but it was too late. The tip of the main S Foil struck a Headhunter fuselage that had drifted too close, swinging the heavier craft around and slamming it into the target TIE.

Raiven watched in horror as the B Wing collided with the bomber, and was lost in a bright flash a second later.

"Alex? Alex!"

He blinked his eyes, trying to clear the bright afterimage seared across his retina. The cruciform shape of the B Wing resolved itself from the roiling fireball, spinning and rebounding from several smaller pieces of debris until clear of the field.

"Arpin, get me a status report on Sledgehammer's B Wing!" said Raiven, activating the comlink "Alex! Can you hear me?"

A status report on the B Wing flashed up on the display screen. The shields had collapsed completely from their previous full strength, but the hull had taken only minor damage.

"*Wolf's Lair* to salvage flight. Report in."

"This is Salvage 1. Salvage 2 has collided with the target TIE. Standby."

The B Wing slowed its tumbling flight and straightened out its flightpath. Raiven powered up and joined formation with the bomber.

"Alex. Can you hear me?"

"I hear you, Mike" came Sledgehammer's reply, sounding dazed "You were right... too fast."

"We're going back to the *Lair*. Just stay on my wing. Can you do that?"

"Sure"

The X Wing pilot moved his craft slightly ahead of the damaged B Wing and started a gradual turn back to the Carrier, while changing the frequency on the comlink.

“Flight Control, this is Salvage 1. Request emergency landing. Salvage 2 struck the TIE and is damaged. He sounds like he’s injured. Clear the flight deck and get a medical team ready.”

“Acknowledged, Salvage 1. 90 seconds. You are cleared for landing, portside.” Raiven smiled, grimly. “We sure as hell aren’t going around the other side, Control.”

“Roger that. Good luck, Salvage flight.”

“Arpin, see if you can pinpoint any damage on Sledge’s B Wing.”

Arpin trilled his acknowledgement without even a hit of sarcasm and turned his sensor dome, scanning for damage to the B Wing.

“Alex, you have to close your S Foils for landing.”

There was no response from the injured pilot, but the B Wing began to rotate about the cockpit and the S Foils closed. A few seconds later, the landing gear deployed. Raiven hit a switch and did likewise for his fighter.

Drake stood anxiously at the transparisteel viewport of the briefing room overlooking the hangar, where he’d rushed after being notified of the accident by flight control. The retractable blast shutter had been fully opened, providing a panoramic view of the deck as people ran for cover and spacecraft were moved rapidly from the centre of the deck.

“Are they down yet?” asked Hanniuska, walking up behind him.

“Not yet” replied Drake, absently, focused on the magcon field and the starscape beyond it. He spotted the two fighters a second later.

“There” he said, pointing.

“I see them” replied Mar.

The two craft flared and settled gently to the flight deck. A few seconds later, a crash team and a medical team ran from the sides of the bay towards the damaged B Wing. Raiven popped his canopy and jumped down even as his engines spooled down to rest.

“Come on,” said the mechanic, gently pulling on Drake’s elbow even as the pilot sighed noisily “They made it. Let’s go check it out.”

The two arrived on the flight deck a minute later to find Sledgehammer being laid down on a stretcher – despite weak protests that he was fine – and being carted away towards the nearest turbolift for the journey to the sickbay.

Mar split from Drake and headed for the B Wing as they approached, while the pilot headed for his wingman, who was conversing with Arpin.

“Mike? You OK?”

Raiven turned and nodded “I’m fine. But Alex struck the Bomber and was lucky to survive the blast. Looks like concussion or something, he sounded a little muzzy on the comlink.”

The X Wing pilot leant against his fighter, exhausted. To lose a squadmate in combat was bad enough, but to lose one simply *collecting garbage* was far worse. *Thank the force it hadn’t come to that...*

“Hey, relax. He’ll be fine, and I’m sure the good Lieutenant here can fix up his B Wing, right?”

Hanniuska’s head appeared from behind the B Wing

"Hmph. Flyboys. I lend you my fighters and you bring them back broken." She gave a wry smile. "Don't worry, I'll have this baby up and running for tomorrow. Drake's right, Raiven, Sledgehammer will be fine."

Raiven sighed and the tension seemed to flow from him. He nodded in understanding. "I hope he's better soon though. I'll wring his bloody neck for ignoring *my* advice."

[Conference Room, ISD *Dominance*]

"Attention on deck!" Captain Gillett roared as Vice Admiral Piett entered the room. The assembled officers braced to attention in their chairs briefly as their task force commander entered and took his place at the head of the long conference table. The vice admiral's gaze swept coolly around the room, surveying each of his captains and their executive officers. It lingered for a moment over Commander Haart, but quickly passed on, allowing the captain of the *Pacifier* to draw a relieved breath. At least the admiral didn't seem angry. That was a good sign.

"As you all know, the second phase of our mission is about to begin," Vice Admiral Piett began, in his clipped, precise voice. "After this system, we'll only have seven to go!" He smiled, and most of the assembled officers chuckled politely. Most of them, like Piett, were not often given to levity while on duty (if at all). Gillett suppressed a squawk of surprise. If he had ever seen his admiral make anything like a joke, then this had to be the first time.

"The first phase was a success," Piett continued, and a small, tight smile graced his even features for a moment. "We performed competently. However, Talonis was an easy target. Not the easiest we shall face, to be sure, but not the most challenging either." He paused for a moment to allow his words to sink in. It was typical of Piett, Gillett noticed - the man was rarely unnecessarily harsh to his men, but he was seldom overly generous with his praise, either. Although, the captain had to admit to himself, that did spur his subordinates on to greater acts in order to earn that rarely given, much valued praise. Captain Gillett had to shake his head again at the cleverness of Vice Admiral Norvad Piett. *I'm even beginning to think he's better than his father ever was*, Gillett thought to himself with surprise. *Perhaps we have another Grand Admiral Thrawn in the making here*. He smiled to himself. *And if we do, then he shall need a capable Captain at his side to be his second in command*. Gillett straightened reflexively. *Why, that could be me*.

"Commander Haart, good to have you back with us," Vice Admiral Piett said with a nod, his cool, penetrating gaze settling on the young frigate captain. "Your report?" Commander Kiyi Haart adjusted his position in his seat slightly. Piett appraised the man calmly. He appeared a little nervous, but the admiral didn't blame him. Forcing the man to provide his report in front of all his peers - who were, in fact, his superiors in rank at least - might be seen as cruel or sadistic, but Piett knew better. Sooner or later, the young Haart... - Norvad Piett's train of thought screeched to a halt at the irony. Already, he had begun to think like an

old man. He was not that old himself, yet he was even now in the habit of thinking of men like Haart as "young". *The lurks and perks of being an admiral, I suppose*, he thought to himself with some amusement. The amusement quickly faded, though, when he considered Haart's position. Sooner or later, the young man would have to learn to be able to present his decisions and actions - whether right or wrong - to his superiors and peers, and to acquit himself well in doing so. Vice Admiral Piett's thoughts returned to the present as Commander Haart attempted to do just that.

"Sir, we had just about finished our mission at Spiera VI when four X-wings showed up in a standard patrol formation. I immediately scrambled two TIE flights to intercept and protect the bombers already in flight. The Rebel pilots were good, and used their craft to good effect. Seeing this, I launched a further two flights, one of Interceptors. We might well have overwhelmed the Rebel scum, except that their reinforcements showed up - a combined A- and B-wing group. All buildings had suffered an atmospheric breach, so rather than risking the compromise of both my vessel, and the very existence of this task force -" Here Commander Haart straightened proudly and gazed fiercely around at the assembled officers, almost daring one of them to criticise him. Piett suppressed a smile. He liked this impetuous young captain, and was increasingly glad that he had entrusted the man with the mission. Haart continued, " - I decided to escape. Having recovered all the fighters I could, I launched a spread of torpedoes at the main base buildings and entered hyperspace just after the first volley of proton torpedoes struck the *Pacifier*.

"I still don't know what squadron these rebels were, sir, but they certainly bore New Republic markings. A blue wolf's head was emblazoned across a white NR symbol. I must admit I've never seen them before.

"Following our escape, I took the *Pacifier* along what was essentially a zig-zag route to mask our true destination. When no pursuit had shown up within twelve hours, I set course to rendezvous with the task force. That is my report, sir."

Commander Haart took a quick breath and sat back, waiting for Piett's response as he scanned the faces sitting around the long conference table. In most of them he saw very little at all - they remained perfectly impassive. In one or two, he saw what he fancied was approval, or at least encouragement. Or perhaps, even, admiration at how fiercely Haart was standing by his actions. Captain Draxus of the *Valorous* was one of these, Haart thought, although his Executive Officer, Commander Brasken, didn't betray any emotion at all. The latter, in fact, looked like he was a thousand light years away. Finally, Haart noticed, there were a couple of others whose faces seemed to bear frowns towards him.

Clearly, they considered him at best timid, and at worst a coward. Haart's gaze remained cool, but a smouldering defiance lurked behind his calm façade. The most openly hostile looking, the young commander noted with some surprise, seemed to be his closest colleague, the captain of the *Pacifier's* sister ship, the *Angel of Fury*. Well, if you thought about it, Haart admitted to himself, it did make sense. The latter was the obvious rival for Haart, and yet had missed the opportunity to undertake the mission himself. Haart leaving the mission area prematurely would definitely be seen as a failure by him, and a reason why the

Angel of Fury, with her more experienced captain and crew, should have been sent instead of her younger sister. Haart studiously ignored his fellow and kept his eyes steady on his admiral, who was rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"Very well," Piett replied at last. "Under the circumstances, Commander, you have done well. However, if by some chance the New Republic gains awareness of our existence or our mission through data gained at that base, I shall hold *you* personally responsible." Haart's right hand trembled slightly, but he kept his voice firm.

"Yes, sir." The vice admiral's gaze was chilling. He nodded in acknowledgement, then continued.

"Thank you for your report, Commander. Gentlemen - anything to add?" He turned and almost smiled at the answer.

"Yes, admiral." Piett allowed his fingers to drum on the table.

"Captain Jarrett." He could not help but feel a sense of pride and affection whenever he dealt with Jarrett. The man who now - very ably - captained Piett's own old flagship, the *Providence*, had once been the admiral's Executive Officer on that ship. Commander Jarrett had been with Piett (then himself a captain) when Piett's small task group of a Star Destroyer, two escort frigates and a handful of smaller ships had encountered White Squadron - what was it now - at least a year before. Jarrett had received his promotion to captain and his new command at about the same time that Piett had made vice admiral and been given his own new ship and task force. The two men occasionally still liked to reminisce over a drink, and Jarrett had been appointed by the admiral to take command of the task force if both Piett and his Executive Officer were killed or incapacitated. Captain Jarrett carried both Vice Admiral Piett's trust, and his respect. That was neither easy, nor common, and when Jarrett spoke, people listened. Particularly Captain Gillett, who, although he respected Jarrett, was inclined to dislike him. In moments of frank honesty, though, Gillett had to admit that this probably stemmed from a rivalry between the two. Jarrett was the admiral's favourite, Gillett his XO. For now, though, Gillett, like the rest of the senior officers present, kept his mouth shut and listened. Jarrett cleared his throat and began.

"Sir, just prior to flying over here, I received a Priority One message marked Eyes Only. Naturally, I was surprised, as I would have expected such a message to be sent to you alone, rather than anyone else here. The message was from Imperial Intelligence, although it was sent some time ago. It was obvious to me that it had somehow been delayed, although I am not sure how exactly. The actual authorisation for the message came from a man I knew reasonably well at the Academy, although we were hardly friends.

"I was only to divulge the information within to those of us that are present, and only by word of mouth," Jarrett continued gravely, looking around slowly at his audience and allowing the significance of those words to sink in. "We apparently have a well-placed operative on board the newest addition to the New Republic Navy's fleet, one *Wolf's Lair*. This ship is unlike anything I've ever seen before - her class of ship is apparently termed a 'Strike Carrier'. As you can see," he continued, producing a holo which the others all craned forward to see - "it looks

roughly like a mix between a Mon Calamari Cruiser and a Strike Cruiser. The Intelligence provided me in the message about the ship itself was very sketchy. Apparently, Intel hasn't managed to get too much information about the ship out of this operative yet."

"More likely Intel doesn't want to share too much of the information they have got about the ship with us," Captain Draxus rumbled. Jarrett nodded in agreement, respectfully. Captain Draxus was an experienced veteran who commanded Jarrett's full respect. *It's a waste of talent, having him command a Victory*, he thought with a twinge of anger, before focussing again on the present.

"It wouldn't surprise me at all, Captain," he agreed. "Intel is hardly known for showing all the sabacc cards they're holding." The older man chuckled, and Jarrett smiled as well, although he missed the way the former looked thoughtfully and intently at him.

"Nevertheless, taking a look at the sketchy holo they've sent us, it seems to me that this ship isn't so much a warship herself, but a carrier vessel, like her name suggests. Certainly, she's bigger than anything like our Escort Carriers, and I daresay better armed. I noted what looks like some sort of large ion cannon, but I can't be sure." Jarrett shook his head and pointed at a section of the slowly revolving holo.

"The operative on board, whoever he or she is, has indicated that the New Republic is not only aware of our existence and mission, but is prepared to take action against us. For that reason, the *Wolf's Lair* and its embarked squadron - Wolfshead Squadron - have been dispatched to this sector." Jarrett paused and eyed Piett meaningfully.

"Admiral, Wolfshead Squadron was created from the remnants of White." The admiral looked at his old executive officer keenly, his clear grey eyes piercing. "Then we know what to expect," he said at last, and Jarrett nodded. Piett slowly turned to address everyone present.

"For those of you who are unaware, gentlemen, White Squadron nearly succeeded in the destruction of myself, Captain Jarrett, and the *Providence* with her crew. And the *Angel of Fury*," he nodded briefly at the frigate's captain, who returned the gesture gravely, "and another frigate, the *Dagger of Truth*. All three ships were under my command well over a year ago when we encountered White Squadron, with her mothership, the Nebulon-B frigate *Joan d'Arc*. We barely escaped. If some of White Squadron are these Wolfshead pilots, then we are in for a very trying time indeed, should they meet us." He frowned for a moment, then turned to address Jarrett again.

"Did this message say who the captain of this new ship is?" Jarrett correctly guessed the question in his admiral's eyes and shook his head.

"It didn't provide a name, sir, but she's certainly a Bothan-

"A Bothan." Piett almost spat the word out, for once letting his contempt show. Spies were abominations to him, things that were to be barely tolerated and used, unworthy of a warrior's attention. He despised the entire Bothan race - a race of spies. And now, instead of learning that he might have a chance to even the score with his old adversary, Captain Ralne Orris, he was being told that a *Bothan* was in command of the New Republic's latest capital ship?

"Clearly, the New Republic is cutting corners," the vice admiral went on, his normally clipped, precise voice blurring a little and dripping with sarcasm. "If they have to place Bothan scum in command of their line warships, then their situation must be desperate indeed." There was a general round of sneering laughter, but Vice Admiral Piett quieted it with an upraised hand.

"Notwithstanding the commander of this new vessel, gentlemen, bear in mind that it *is* a new vessel, it has one of the Republic's most effective fighter squadrons embarked, and that it knows we are here and what we are doing. I want all of you to double the number of daily combat drills you run until we reach our next target. The apparent low risk factor of this mission has just risen significantly, and laxness will not be tolerated." The admiral looked sternly around the table, his eyes hard and his voice flinty. His captains and their executive officers accepted his orders in stony silence, and then he continued.

"Anything more, Captain?" Captain Jarrett shook his head.

"No, sir. You've heard about all of it. My guess is that the message came through me because the originator at Intel knows me, and trusts me to pass it on in the correct manner. The message was quite proper, sir, if a little late." Piett nodded slowly.

"Very well. There's little use in questioning Intel anyway, even if I could. Now, gentlemen, to the business of our upcoming assault."

[The New Bomb Shelter, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

"I don't like this, Mike," Drake said between a mouthful of his dinner and a sip of his Blue Stuff. "I'm really quite worried." Raiven looked at him mildly, lifting an eyebrow.

"Really? Whatever could be the matter?" he asked, taking a sip of his own, a twinkle in his eye. Drake frowned and nodded down at Raiven's glass.

"That, my friend, is the matter."

"What?" Raiven asked, surprised and indignant. "What's wrong with my drink?" Drake sighed as if explaining something to a small child.

"You see that glass?" he asked, tapping his finger against it for emphasis.

"Yeah. It's a glass, and it's nearly full of beer," Raiven answered him belligerently, taking a long belt from his glass defiantly.

"There's no frost on that glass." Drake folded his arms as if he had just brought a criminal to justice by spelling out some undeniable logical fact. When Raiven stared blankly at him, Drake suddenly became theatrically agitated.

"Don't you see? If there's no frost, it means that the beer is *warm*," the Arrebnacian exclaimed, the last word coming out as if was a swear word. "You can't drink beer warm!"

"How else can you drink it?" Raiven asked, his own voice acquiring a challenging edge. "Cold, eh? What, so that it's so cold that you can't taste it??" Drake snorted.

"Clearly, you don't understand. Perhaps you should take to a different kind of drink, one more feminine in nature, like a Long Island-" The young man stopped dead as he was interrupted by a very female voice.

"Do you two mind if I join you?" Drake looked up in surprise which changed quickly to gladness when he saw Razor standing over them, a plate in one hand and a drink in the other. He quickly composed his features and glanced over at Raiven.

"What do you think?" he asked nonchalantly. "Should we let an A-wing puke disgrace us with her presence?"

"Why not," Raiven rejoined in a like manner, but a grin pulled at the corners of his mouth. "After all, if we didn't have A- and B-wing pilots, there'd be no one to compare us to and make us look so good. After all, you can't have brilliant unless you have shockingly bad as well..." Razor smiled good-naturedly and sat down, the edge of her glass making a dull thud as it hit Raiven's head. She burst into an apology, but Drake fancied he could see laughter in her green eyes. Raiven rubbed his head, a deep frown on his face.

"Yeah, okay, it's all right."

"Oh, good," Razor replied, flashing him a smile before she set about eating her dinner.

"What was it you two were talking about before I sat down?" she asked after a moment.

"Hmm? Oh, nothing," Drake answered, flashing her a debonair smile. She nodded, screwing her eyes up at him in a way that he found quite charming.

"Uh huh." Her voice dripped with sarcasm.

"In fact," Raiven said with a grin, "I was just trying to get Drake to take the training mission that Vyper and I have been running. I think he's just about the last squadron member to fly it - well, except for you and Sledge, anyway. If you want to know the truth - " and here he leaned over to speak quietly in Razor's ear - "I think he's scared to take it because he might fail it." There was a loud snort from the other side of the table.

"Rubbish! I'll take your stupid mission now," Drake retorted, shooting to his feet.

"Can you believe this?" he asked Razor, jerking a thumb at Raiven. "Just because he used to fly those trash heap TIE Advanceds, he thinks that no-one here can beat him. Come on, then Raiven, let's see how tough this training mission of yours really is." Raiven started to rise, but was interrupted by Drake.

"Damn," he said theatrically, slapping his forehead. "I've already had a full glass of Blue Stuff, and I'm on to my second. Well, I can't really take the mission when I've been drinking, can I? I'm over the legal limit to drive." With that, he sat back down again with a wide grin and began eating. Raiven regarded him with a scowl.

"Like I said - scared," he growled, and took a swig from his glass. Razor laughed, and Drake risked a glance at her. To him, the sound was like music.

[Presidential Residence, Lorange City, Iberyia, the following day]

Sparks stood, gazing out of a nearby window, lost in his thoughts, while Arachnoid read from a datapad. The double doors opposite his seat opened quietly and Ibero was ushered from the president's office by a smiling aide. Arachnoid looked up with a smile of his own.

"Well, if it isn't the hero of the hour. How did it go?"

Ibero waved his own datapad.

"President Tanisco has promised to send a pair of freighters carrying construction equipment, droids, skilled technicians, medical supplies, anything that can help. They'll be underway within the next couple of days."

Arachnoid turned off his datapad and stood up. "Well, boss, what now? Off to see your family?"

Ibero grinned in reply. "Well, it has been over a month"

Arachnoid nodded. "You know, I think my A Wing could develop a sudden fault that grounds it for a day or two."

The Ibeyan pilot paused for a second, then shook his head wistfully. "I appreciate the offer, my friend, but we'll be needed back at the *'Lair'*."

The other nodded. "Fair enough. Sparks and I will go do the flight preps. We'll do it **really** thoroughly. See you in a few hours."

Ibero laughed and clapped his friend on the shoulder, and then walked out.

"OK, Sparks, we'd better make a move," said Arachnoid, turning.

Sparks was still gazing out of the window. "Hey man, you OK?" asked Arachnoid, curious.

Sparks jerked out of his reverie and turned with a wan smile. "Sorry. Parsecs away."

The two Wolfshead pilots turned and headed for the exit. A few short minutes later, they were heading for the spaceport.

[Flight Deck, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

A weary and a somewhat dishevelled Vyper stood on the cold flight deck – magcon fields were good at retaining air, but not so good with heat – as Ibero's delegation landed. As the engines on the fighters began to spool down to rest, Vyper walked towards Ibero's X Wing.

"Wow, Major, you look worse than I feel" commented Ibero as he climbed from the cockpit.

"We've been busy on the surface" replied Vyper "So, how did it go?"

Ibero nodded, firmly. "Success. The Ibeyan Provisional Government is sending a pair of freighters. Construction equipment, medical supplies, skilled technicians, some droids. Not bad, considering they're trying to rebuild after the Imperial Occupation."

"Good," said Vyper "The damage down there is pretty bad. Hell, you've seen it yourself."

Vyper pointed towards the nearest turbolift and Ibero fell into step beside him, followed by Sparks and Arachnoid.

Exiting the turbolift on the hangar deck, the quartet emerged by Bay 6 and walked past Sledgehammer's B Wing, partially repaired after the accident but still needing some work.

"The freighters leave Ibery tomorrow. They should be here the day after."

"Well, we may need some more help soon" said Vyper.

"What?"

Vyper sighed as the turbolift doors slid shut. "We heard that the Imperials hit Picas earlier today. Same task force, four Star Destroyers. They mostly concentrated on the orbital factories but the planetary surface was hit, too." Ibero nodded. "Looks like tomorrow could be a busy day."

[Co-ordinates 19D02-FG3291-MA1483, Galactic Standard]

"Keep it together! Just a little further to the jump point, we can make it!" shouted the pilot of the *Tol'ha'dor*.

A blast of verdant laser energy tore the Z-95 Headhunter from stern to stem, giving lie to her statement.

The YT-2000 freighter was running at full speed from the pursuing Imperial fighters, her escort fighters destroyed and her shields badly weakened. The upper gun turret swivelled slightly and opened fire on the two TIE fighters that had destroyed the Headhunter, blowing them to pieces.

A pair of pursuing Interceptors angled in slightly and stitched laser fire over the aft quadrant of the roughly oval shaped craft, punching through the remaining shields and cutting into the hull, severing pressure lines and power feeds.

"Upper guns have lost power!" shouted Nell'ta as he slid down the gun turret access ladder.

"Hyperspace in 30 seconds, make sure the hyperdrive holds together!" yelled Ast'yla.

The two TIEs were back, one firing on the aft quarter and the other on the cockpit. The first fighter blasted into the engine area even as she dodged the light freighter downwards, causing the TIE's laser fire to strike the cylindrical hull behind the conical cockpit. Her hand pulled the hyperdrive levers as the explosion pitched her forward in her seat and slammed her head into the instrument panel, pitching her into unconsciousness.

Unseen, the stars streaked into lines as the battered craft leapt into hyperspace...

[Bridge, Imperial Star Destroyer *Dominance*]

"Report!" ordered Piett.

"Both fighters have been destroyed. The freighter was badly damaged but escaped into hyperspace."

"Do we have a hyperspace vector?"

“Just a second, sir... Affirmative, sir, the computer has a match. From direction and speed, it predicts breakthrough for the freighter at the Relas system.”

“Understood. Get me Captain Abrans on board the *Confronter*.”

The communications officer nodded and got to work. Piett walked over to the holopod just as it flashed to life, showing a quarter scale image of Ler Abrans, Captain of the *Confronter*, one of the task force’s corvettes.

“Admiral.”

“Captain. I want you to take Patrol Group 2 and pursue the Corellian freighter. Astrogation will feed you the co-ordinates.”

The navigation officer nodded and punched a button on his console. Piett watched as Abrans turned to watch something out of the field of view of the holocamera. After a few seconds he nodded and turned back to the holo system.

“We have them, sir.” If the corvette’s captain was disappointed at missing the up and coming assault, his voice showed no sign of it.

“Very well. Capture the freighter, if possible, and if not, destroy it. Return to the primary rendezvous point when you are finished. Be careful, captain, I have taken great care to guard the location of the Task Force from the rebels. Do not allow that information to fall into their hands. Understood?”

Again, the captain of the smaller ship impressed the Vice Admiral by showing no emotion of any kind. “Understood, Admiral. We’ll get them.”

“Very well. *Dominance* out.”

The holo flared once and went dark. Piett turned back to the bridge.

“Recall the TIEs. Signal the rest of the Task Force. Set mission time at plus-ten and update the mission plans as appropriate, and prepare for hyperspace.”

As the bridge crew hurried to comply, Piett watched the holomap showing the positions of the task force’s ships. The red icon representing the *Confronter* moved out from the force’s perimeter, joined by a flight of gunboats from the *Providence* and a pair of Assault Transports. Patrol Group 2’s second corvette, the *Enforcer*, was forming up with a second flight – this one from the *Vociferous*. To Piett’s mild surprise, the *Confronter* and her escort jumped out without waiting for her sister ship.

Impetuous, thought the Vice Admiral. *Still, a sector patrol group can handle a single Corellian transport without difficulty.*

“Admiral, the status reports” said a young crewer, handing over a datapad. The Task Force commander pushed these thoughts aside and got to work.

[Relas system, several hours later]

The two A Wings of Peter “Iceman” Kovessy’s patrol cruised along the prescribed flight path, his wingman Michael “Gandalf” Kalus maintaining proper spacing above and behind his right wing. Both were tired, physically and emotionally, from helping with the relief effort on Talonis.

“Picking up Corialis radiation from an incoming ship, a small one. 265 mark 101,” reported Gandalf, reading from his main display.

“I got it” replied Iceman “move to intercept, be prepared for action”

The craft curved to a new heading as the pilots readied their weapons and shields.

“Sensors are clearing up a little. Transponder reads as blue neutral. Size looks like an Assault or Corellian Transport.”

“Could be part of Piett’s fleet.” Replied Gandalf.

“Affirmative. Be ready.”

[Comms Room, Strike Carrier *Wolf’s Lair*]

“She’s a Corellian Transport, YT-2000 class, transponder reports the name as the *Tol’ha’dor*. She’s pretty badly beaten up, no shields and the hull has taken a pounding... Stand by, Gandalf’s going in for a closer look.”

Lewis “Moose” Gregory looked up from the communications console as Foxfire entered the room, towelling her hair and wearing a scowl. She raised an eyebrow in question.

“Iceman and Gandalf have run across a wrecked YT-2000 out in the Relas system. They’re investigating now – “

Iceman’s voice cut across the conversation from the console speaker.

“Gandalf reports life signs from the freighter! Very faint! We need medevac right now.”

“Acknowledged, Iceman” said Moose, turning to Foxfire.

“What’s Rooster’s status?” she asked.

“Just making atmospheric entry now. She’s running medical supplies down to a hospital in the Cranto province.”

“The *Troubador*, *Bear* and *Unicorn*?”

Moose turned and punched a few keys on one of the computers.

“The *Troubador* is under repair – she took a micrometeorite through the portside Alluvial Compressor. Hanniuska is working on it, but it’ll be about four or so hours. The *Bear* is on its way back here from the planet’s surface with the Doc and a couple of critically ill patients, she should land in... 17 minutes. The *Unicorn* is a possibility, but the pilots are on a break, they were flying continuous shuttle runs to the surface for nearly 10 hours. We’ll need 20 minutes to ready her and do all the preflight checks – she’s no fighter.”

“Any alternatives?” asked Foxfire.

“Whatever you decide, better make it quick,” came Iceman’s voice from the comm unit “the ship’s losing life support, the cockpit has a slow leak and a large part of the ship is exposed to vacuum. The pilot looks badly injured.”

Moose punched a few keys and called up a full list of craft aboard the *Wolf’s Lair*.

“Perhaps we could tow it in” he suggested, “or, hang about, the *Bannockburn*!”

[Pilot’s Quarters, Strike Carrier *Wolf’s Lair*]

Granite turned over and reached for his beeping comlink.

“This hae’ better be importan”

“Granite? You up for a bit of flying? We need the *Bannockburn*, and fast,” came Foxfire’s voice from the comlink.

[Comms Room, Strike Carrier *Wolf’s Lair*]

There was a sound like booted feet hitting the deck - for example those of a manic Caldanian pilot leaping from his bed.

“Flight Deck, tae minutes.”

There was the sound of a comlink being turned off. Foxfire likewise turned hers off with a grin.

“Well, at least he’s enthusiastic, I suppose. Moose, you up for a bit of flying? I think we’ll need to tow in the YT-2000 for investigation, and I think a couple of B Wings would do the job nicely.”

“I haven’t flown since we arrived here” replied Moose, wistfully. “Meet you on the flight deck in two?”

Foxfire nodded. “I’ll get a medical droid, you get another crewmember to help out Granite.”

[The Bomb Shelter, Strike Carrier *Wolf’s Lair*]

Moose stuck his head through the doorway and looked around at the off-duty pilots within. He rapidly discounted those who were unconscious or more than 5° from vertical, which left him with just one candidate – Vyper – who was stood at the bar, about to lift a glass of Zwetschgensch snaps to his lips. He looked up to see Moose grinning in the doorway, then around at the other occupants of the bomb shelter, and groaned.

“Aw, come on, Moose. I haven’t even had a single drink yet. What’s up?” he asked, walking towards the door.

“Medevac mission. We need someone to keep an eye on Granite.”

Vyper abruptly pivoted on his heel and returned to his drink, downing it in one. He rapidly poured himself another and drank it just as quickly.

“OK, **now** I’m ready” he said to the bemused Operations Officer.

[Relas System, 15 minutes later]

The B Wings and the heavily modified Skipray Blastboat dropped from hyperspace around 3 klicks from the *Tol’ha’dor* and the A Wings circling her.

The heavy assault fighters moved into a loose escort formation around the Caldanian’s craft as the trio flew rapidly to the crippled freighter.

Inside the *Bannockburn*, Vyper took the controls while Granite headed aft and climbed into a pressure suit. He returned to the cockpit a few minutes later as the squadron XO eased the heavy fighter in close to the freighter’s cockpit, then

spun the craft around to place the main airlock over the upper surface of the freighter cockpit's transparisteel canopy.

"I dinnae like this" commented Granite, again.

"There's no other way, unless you can suggest one. With the fuselage behind the cockpit so badly damaged and depressurised," he nodded towards the huge hole torn into the cylindrical structure by an obvious heavy weapon hit, "We'll have to go in directly. A MagCon force cylinder will hold an atmosphere for long enough for you to blow the viewport, grab the pilot and get her over here. You're the one with the most explosives experience, so you get to play valiant hero."

Granite scowled at this description.

"Just 'cos it's the only way dinnae mean I ha' to like it."

He turned to find himself face-to-face with MD-42, the medical droid Foxfire had "appropriated" from the medical bay.

"Flight Officer Stone," said the droid, "visual inspection of the patient suggests head injury, and possible breathing problems. Please execute this operation with the greatest of care."

Granite nodded and closed his helmet faceplate. He moved to the rear door, confirmed the magcon field was active, and opened it. Grabbing his explosives pack, he pushed himself over to the freighter, grabbing hold of the viewport frame to steady himself. Working quickly, he pulled a strip of explosive from his pack and started fitting it around the frame of two adjacent rear ports, above the empty co-pilot seat. Less than a minute later, a pair of detonators were fitted and the pilot moved back towards the *Bannockburn*.

"Vyper, confirm force cylinder integrity"

"Currently at 80% standard atmospheric pressure. You're good to go."

Granite looked away from the explosives to Moose and Foxfire's B Wing fighters manoeuvring ahead of the hull mandibles, preparing for towing. He pressed the hand held trigger.

With a brilliant flash, the explosives cut through the viewports, dropping the panes more or less intact into the cockpit - a bad sign, since it showed that the pressure inside the cockpit was lower than the 80% standard inside the force cylinder. Putting these thoughts aside, the pilot activated his suit thrusters and dived through the hole left by his handiwork. Inside the cockpit, artificial gravity had failed, leaving various tools and pieces of junk floating around. Granite reached over the pilot's shoulder and slapped the seat harness' quick release mechanism, releasing the remaining shoulder strap - the other had failed, tearing free from the buckle - and gently pulled the unconscious pilot from the seat, trying to avoid aggravating any injuries.

Vyper was waiting by the door of the Skipray and helped manhandle her unconscious form to a makeshift stretcher provided by a couple of the reclined seats.

As MD-42 began to treat the injured Bothan, Vyper stood over them impatiently.

"How long before we can start moving?"

"It will take approximately 8 minutes to stabilise the patient" replied the droid.

Granite sighed and replaced his helmet over his head. He turned and collected two 100 – meter spools of high-strength durasteel alloy towing cables from the rear of the cramped cabin.

“8 minutes it is, then” he said, opening the door once more.

Gandalf was beginning another slow, sweeping pass over the upper hull of the *Tol'ha'dor* when he spotted Granite re-emerge from the Skipray's main door. The suited figure rapidly jetted to the rear of Foxfire's fighter and found the required attachment point, under the main engine pod just above the apex of the open S-Foils. He was moving across to Moose's fighter in order to repeat the operation when Iceman's voice cut across the A Wing pilot's attention.

“Incoming hostiles! We have incoming hostiles, they're approaching from the direction of the freighter's flight path. Moving to intercept.”

Foxfire took charge of the situation as the two A Wings turned and accelerated towards the incoming Imperial ships.

“What have we got?” she asked.

“A Corvette, two Assault Transports and four Assault Gunboats.”

“Dammit. Granite, forget about attaching Moose's B Wing, fit both lines to me instead. Moose, as soon as Granite is clear, power up and engage the imperials. Take out the Transports first. Good Luck”

“Affirmative, Lead” said Moose, looking over his left shoulder to make sure Granite was safely away from the B Wing's engines, then punching his throttle to max.

“Bloody Imperials!” swore Granite, returning to Foxfire's B Wing in order to fasten the second cable.

Gandalf's A Wing moved alongside his element leader's craft even as the Gunboats moved ahead of the rest of the Imperial ships to engage the Republic fighters. At 2.5 klicks, both sides began manoeuvring for missile locks, firing a few seconds later. The gunboats dodged up and down, left and right to avoid the incoming missiles, but the A Wings held steady, according to well practised drill, and moved into tighter formation. As the range to the incoming warheads rapidly wound down, the fighters opened fire with their lasers, striking the incoming warheads, destroying them.

In the blink of an eye, the A Wings had gone from being under fire to a superior tactical position behind slower, less manoeuvrable opponents. The experienced Republic pilots did not waste the opportunity, splitting to follow a Gunboat pair each.

Gandalf throttled back to avoid overshooting the heavy Imperial fighter and opened fire with linked cannon. Ruby energy infused the gunboat's shields, tinting them as he poured fire into the craft. The gunboat broke sharply to the left while it's wingman went right, inviting Gandalf to fall in behind one and risk fire from the other. The Republic pilot was too experienced to fall for such an old trick, and yet he turned after the wingman, pushed his throttle back to max and armed his concussion missiles. He screamed towards the aft of the Imperial fighter on a collision course, then yanked back on the stick and fired twinned

missiles into the aft of the Gunboat, blasting it into pieces. Dumbfiring was a trick most Republic pilots learned in flight training, but it was apparently one that the Imperials were not expecting. The original gunboat had turned, ready to fire on Gandalf's A Wing, its pilot apparently surprised that the Republic pilot had managed to destroy his wingman so quickly. Hesitating for a second he didn't have, the gunboat pilot failed to maintain a missile lock on the fast moving A Wing and was forced to switch back to lasers as his opponent approached from an oblique angle. The fighter spattered laser fire across the gunboat's forward shield, collapsing it, while the heavier craft's fire was fairly ineffectual, weakening the forward shields on the A Wing without penetrating them as it screamed past his port S Foil.

Gandalf cut his throttle to 1/3, snap-rolled 90° starboard and hauled on the stick, his eyes fixed on the HUD target cue. He levelled with the Gunboat in front of him, still attempting to turn for a shot. The red laser bolts slammed into the portside fuselage, just above the S Foil, punching deep into the engine and destroying the gunboat with a bright flash.

Granite confirmed the cable was properly attached to the starboard mandible of the Corellian-built freighter and turned towards the *Bannockburn*. As he did so, Foxfire lit off the engines of her B Wing and brought them to idle, then started to slowly open the throttle and move the fighter forward to take up the slack. Watching the engine readouts and velocity indicators carefully, she began a gradual turn towards her hyperspace vector.

By now, Granite had reached the Skipray and entered. He removed the helmet from his head and his XO from the controls, then powered up the heavy assault craft.

Gandalf levelled out as Moose's B Wing flashed past, firing at Iceman's remaining Gunboat. The cruciform fighter turned away towards the Assault Transports as it exploded, its shields depleted and its hull punctured. The two A Wings joined formation with the heavier fighter as they moved to intercept the remaining Imperial craft.

"I don't like this" commented Moose as the range to the transports passed 3 klicks. "They've lost their fighter support. An X Wing could handle the Corvette, let alone a B Wing, and the A Wings can run rings around the Assault Transports."

"It might be a trap. Keep your eyes peeled," said Iceman.

Granite brought the *Bannockburn* alongside Foxfire's B Wing as it laboured under the heavy load of the Corellian built freighter.

Vyper activated the comlink "Lead, this is Two. How long to hyperspace?"

"Twenty - six minutes. Computer reckons I can hit maybe 25% normal speed in hyperspace."

"Acknowledged, Lead. Looks like it might be a long trip home."

The A Wings swept their fire over the heavily shielded Assault Transports, dodging and weaving to avoid the fire from the craft's turreted weaponry. Moose's B Wing pressed onwards, firing a spread of torpedoes toward the Corvette. The turbolaser turrets mounted above and below the bridge opened fire, attempting to knock down the incoming warheads. They were only partly successful. Two of the torpedoes exploded into vapour as the cannons found their mark, but the remaining four struck the light capital ship on the bows and sides, bringing down the shields. Arming his ion cannon, Moose dived in on the Corvette, wreathing the craft in blue lightning as the ion bolts wrought havoc on the ships' systems. Ignoring the sporadic return fire as it splashed across his front shields, he kept up his fire until the computer showed the craft was completely disabled. The computer beeped and spat out the name of the craft on his MFD screen - *Confronter*.

As he switched back to lasers and came around for another pass, there was a flicker of pseudomotion as a new group – centred on another corvette covered by a flight of Gunboats. Moose ignored this new threat and concentrated his fire on the *Confronter*. As the three cannon tore holes across the patrol craft's dorsal surface, four escape pods popped from the underside of the central hull like explosive bolts. The scarlet laser bolts punched into the hull beneath the upper sensor array, tearing into the cooling system of the main reactor and blowing the craft to pieces a few seconds later.

Meanwhile, the second Corvette had begun moving forward towards Foxfire and the *Tol'ha'dor*, proceeded by the four gunboats. Finishing off his Assault Transport, Gandalf started to move on an intercept course, followed by Iceman.

[Cockpit, Imperial Assault Transport *Psi 2*]

Lieutenant Cassir Tolk raised his head groggily from the smashed control panel and wiped the blood from his cut brow. "Status!" he demanded.

His copilot, an experienced Master Sergeant, punched a few buttons on his controls. "The A Wing is moving to intercept our reinforcements. Our shields are down, hull is at 40% and Psi 1 and the *Confronter* have been destroyed."

"Then let's get the hell out of here."

"No arguments from me, sir."

The assault transport began to turn slowly and accelerate as the abused engines pushed the battered craft forward.

"We made it!" shouted Tolk "We're going to get away!"

As he spoke, a loud bang sounded from the aft compartment, and blue lightning crawled over the controls, shocking his copilot into insensibility. The B Wing overflew the transport, its four engine nozzles burning brightly against the black backdrop of space.

"Oh, shit."

[Cockpit, B-Wing *Wolfshead 3*]

"I just waxed the *Confronter*, and this Assault Transport has been put to sleep" reported Moose over the squadron channel. "Moving to engage the other Corvette."

As he spoke, green turbolaser fire began to flash towards the A Wings as they juked and evaded. Two of the Gunboats broke off and turned to engage the Republic fighters while the other two bored in at Foxfire and the crippled freighter.

"One, Two, this is Eight" said Iceman "Looks like you're about to get company!" "Aye, Eight, we see it" said Granite. "We've got 'em"

Vyper took control of the turret guns as Granite arced around and pushed the throttles to maximum.

"Flight Officer Stone!" came MD-42's distressed voice "This patient is in critical condition!"

"She'll bae in worse condition if we le' the Imperials blow us to pieces, EmmDee!" The droid was quiet for a second before replying "Good point, sir."

[Cockpit, B-Wing Wolfshead 1]

Foxfire had activated the subspace radio system and contacted the *Wolf's Lair*. "Affirmative, Wolf Lead. Will dispatch the *Bear* with Lynx Team Beta and escort to your location. ETA, 20 minutes. Good luck, Lead."

"Message received, *Lair*, Wolfshead Lead out." Foxfire switched to short range comlink. "Heads up, we've got friendlies incoming for the Assault Transport. Secure your targets as you see fit, let's have this wrapped up before they arrive." There was chorus of acknowledgements as the pilots re-engaged.

Granite armed the concussion missile system and targeted the nearest Gunboat. The range readout scrolled rapidly down to the magical 2.5 clicks. As it reached the outer range of the missile targeting system, the missile sight glowed yellow as the weapons strove for a lock, even as the threat indicator showed the Imperials doing the same. He waited for a second, allowing the Imperials to level out for a shot at the Blastboat, then suddenly punched the first-stage SLAM boosters, rapidly doubling the speed of the craft, and juked left. Caught flatfooted, the Gunboats' missile systems broke lock as the pilots failed to keep the craft in their gunsights. As they attempted to reacquire, Granite swooped the Skipray in on the lead craft and fired his missile from less than half a kilometre. The projectile caught the Imperial fighter on the front-left quarter, sending it into a spin as Vyper opened fire with the twin laser cannon. Punching through the weakened shields, the laser bolts struck the cockpit, blowing it from the front of the fighter.

Cutting the SLAMs and reefing the craft into a tight turn, Granite brought the *Bannockburn* around to face the remaining Gunboat. Shunting power from the cannons to reinforce the shields, he dodged the Gunboat's fire while the laser system recharged the energy expended. Vyper swung the laser turret around to

cover the rear arc and opened fire, spraying laser bolts over the aft shields of the Imperial fighter as the two crossed, only metres apart.

Cutting the throttle to less than a third, Granite shoved the stick hard over and began a tight turn, attempting to get in a firing position behind the Gunboat. Stomping hard on the etheric rudder, he slewed the nose of Skipray towards the enemy craft even as the craft crossed paths once more. A wave of blue and green energy leapt from the *Bannockburn* as the Republic pilots fired their weapons into the side of the gunboat.

Damaged, the Imperial fighter turned towards the corvette, attempting to get within cover of the capital ship's turbolasers. Granite brought the heavy craft around and punched in the SLAMs once more, closing the distance on the escaping fighter.

"He's going to get away!" shouted Vyper from the rear cabin as the corvette opened fire, streaking green laser fire across the inky blackness of space.

"Nae. Look."

Granite continued to evade the laserfire, gaining on the Gunboat, as the bright speck of light that was Moose's B Wing opened fire. Six blue needles ran in at the second corvette, blasting down its shields and punching through the hull. The cover fire from the Corvette faltered and then died away, leaving the Gunboat to fend for itself. It did not last long as Vyper fired a series of bolts into the rear of the fighter, blasting through the remaining shields and destroying it.

"Major Stauber," called the medical droid's voice from the rear of the compartment, "The patient's condition is deteriorating. She requires medical attention beyond what I can provide here."

"Understood. Lead, this is Two. If we don't get her back to the ship soon this might be a wasted trip."

The four Republic fighters formed up and climbed out of the gravity well of the system, easily catching Foxfire as her B Wing laboured along with its heavy load.

"OK, Twenty-One, escort Two and Eleven back to the *Lair*, maximum speed.

Three, Eight, you're with me. This could take a while."

Gandalf's A Wing and the *Bannockburn* shot ahead as their pilots redirected energy into the engine systems and jumped into hyperspace two minutes later.

As the Foxfire's motley group approached their jump point, a flicker of pseudomotion announced the arrival of the Commandos. The Delta-Class Stormtrooper Transport *Bear* was escorted by a pair of X Wings – Solo and Sacart – and a pair of A Wings, piloted by Hardrive and Joker.

"Wolfshead Trash Collection," came Joker's cheery voice over the commlink

"Just show us your trash and we'll haul it out of here for you."

Solo, in command of the group, reported in a more orthodox manner.

"Wolf Ten to Lead. We've brought the ground-pounders to grab the Imps.

Where do you want us?" More orthodox for the squadron, anyway.

"Psi Two is all yours, Ten. Don't take any crap, we'll see you back at the '*Lair*.'"

"Affirmative, Lead, 'Crap rejection mode on'. Ten out."

[Cockpit, Imperial Assault Transport *Psi 2*]

The flight engineer, a young man by the name of Trevin who had only just graduated from the Academy, yelled forward from his position, head down in the equipment bay in the main fuselage section.

“Try it now, sir”

Tolk pressed a sequence of keys on one of the control panels. The lights flickered briefly then went back out. There was the sound of more tinkering from the cabin.

He felt a tugging at his elbow. “Umm. Sir.”

“What is it? I’m trying to bring main power back on line here.”

“I think you should take a look at this, sir.”

Tolk looked over at his copilot, who was apparently still shaken from his encounter with the effects of the B Wing’s last Ion cannon bolt. He was pointing out of the transparisteel viewport. Tolk’s eyes followed along the line of his finger until he spotted what had upset his copilot.

Sacart’s X Wing was sat 100 metres ahead of the battered transport, it’s four laser cannon pointed at the cockpit. Tolk’s personal commlink beeped as Hyena, aboard the *Bear*, blanketed the frequencies with his own transmission.

“Imperial Transport *Psi 2*. You are hereby ordered to surrender your vessel in the name of the New Republic. Any attempt at resistance will result in the destruction of your craft. Boarding will now occur.”

A heavy thump indicated the docking of another craft to the upper docking point. Tolk opened the hatch himself and raised his hands as he looked over the barrels of six blasters pointed at his face.

“Err. I surrender this vessel. Sir.”

Hyena gave the half-grin that had earned him his nickname. “Excellent, Lieutenant... Tolk” he said, reading from the Imperial’s nametag. “Now, if your men would kindly step up here, we’ll get underway.”

Fifteen minutes later, the *Bear* disengaged from the badly damaged *Psi 2*, having been inspected by the Republic craft’s flight engineer and declared “unfit to haul Hutts to the Maw”. As the *Bear* climbed out the system’s gravity well, Solo fired a pair of quad laser bursts into the stern of the Imperial craft, scuttling her.

[Bridge, Strike Carrier *Wolf’s Lair*]

“Incoming ships on vector 14 mark 78” reported Nil Wumb, the ship’s First Officer. The Sullustan kept watching the display as the computers processed data from the sensors. “Fighters. IFF display shows the *Bannockburn* and Wolfshead 21.”

Captain Gen’yaa turned to A-PD5, the ship’s communications droid “Patch me through to the *Bannockburn*.”

“Connection established.”

“Wolf Two, this is *Lair* – Actual. Report.”

Vyper's voice sounded across the comlink. "Minor skirmish with Imperial forces. Two corvettes, eight gunboats and one assault transport destroyed, one captured. No friendly casualties, one neutral craft severely damaged and under tow, one neutral crewmember critically injured, she's on board."

Granite's voice cut across the link. "Two minutes to landing. Better ha' a med team waitin', ma'am."

"Understood. You are cleared for landing, starboard side."

"Captain" added Vyper "Request either yourself or your IntO meet us on the flight deck. I'll explain when we land."

Gen'yaa frowned and turned to her Intelligence Officer, a fellow Bothan.

"Acknowledged, Wolf two. Lieutenant Dey'jeaa will meet you when you land.

Lair out."

[Flight Deck, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Granite brought the *Bannockburn* through the magcon field and landed smoothly on the deck just inside the entrance. As he shut the engines down and Vyper opened the back door, a medical team led by Doctor Ben Al Saruff ran forward with a repulsorlift stretcher. Al Saruff climbed inside the fighter, bending his hammer-shaped Ithorian head to get through the low hatchway. Conversing with MD-42, the doctor rapidly took charge of the situation and got an update on his patient's condition.

"We must move quickly" he said, his stereo mouths lending his voice a melodic tone as he spoke. "We have not much time."

Vyper watched, impassively, as the injured Bothan was loaded aboard the stretcher and manoeuvred gently from the heavy fighter.

"Major Stauber!"

Vyper turned to see Lieutenant Mesch Dey'jeaa, the *Wolf's Lair's* Intelligence Officer, walking around the nose of the Skipray. "The Colonel sent me—"

The Bothan faltered as he saw the injured female on the stretcher.

Vyper was watching him carefully. "You know who she is?"

Dey'jeaa nodded and lifted his comlink to his mouth. "Captain to the Medbay immediately. Repeat, Captain Gen'yaa, report to the medical bay."

"Who is she?" asked Vyper.

"Her name is Fral Ast'yla" answered Dey'jeaa, "I can't explain right now. I'm sure the Colonel will tell you more when we get up there."

[Flight Deck, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*, 1 hour later]

The battered freighter shuddered slightly as the tractor beam manoeuvred it gently through the magcon field and onto the hastily prepared scaffold. Beside it, Foxfire and Moose's B Wings settled to the deck, followed closely by Iceman's A Wing. Crew techs and interested deck hands moved forward, securing the fighters and the freighter.

Foxfire finished shutting down the engines on her fighter and opened the canopy as a scanning crew, preceded by a pair of armed Republic Navy Marines, moved forwards to the main access ramp. The pilot climbed down as Drake came forward, a serious look on his face.

"We're ready to start, Colonel" he reported without preamble.

She nodded, walked forward and tapped one of the Marines on the shoulder.

"OK, Sergeant, we'll take it from here."

The Marine looked across at his partner. "If it's all the same to you, ma'am, we'll go with you."

Foxfire shrugged indifferently and peered at the powered down ramp control panel. Reaching underneath, she twisted a fastener and released the front cover. Drake looked around, almost furtively, until he caught himself.

"You know, if we were on Arrebnac, I'd probably be arresting you for doing that."

Foxfire grinned but kept working.

"Arrest me and I'm sure you'd regret it a short time later."

"I think I'd have to agree"

Foxfire made the connection she was searching for and the hatch locks released.

The ramp dropped to the deck with a loud clang as the pilots and the marines drew their blasters. Foxfire accepted a glowrod from Drake and the pair moved quietly up the ramp, sweeping their lights and blasters from side to side.

The air inside the craft was cold, having been filled by hangar deck air through the holes in the hull once the craft was pulled through the magcon field. Debris scattered the floors and walls and scorch marks showed where power lines had overloaded and exploded. The central gun well was littered with fragments of transparisteel from the lower gun turret, which appeared to have taken a direct hit from the Imperial fighters. As the two Wolfshead pilots rounded the corner of the main corridor, Drake's glowrod beam touched a familiar shape, that of a booted foot.

"What was that?" he asked, sweeping his beam back towards the shape.

"Ughh" said one of the Marines.

"That' was explosive decompression" said Foxfire over her shoulder.

Drake crouched down beside Nell'ta's body, not bothering to search for a pulse, and examined the burn marks covering the bothan's face.

"Looks like he was dead before the decompression" he looked around and nodded towards a high pressure coolant line that had exploded.

Foxfire nodded. "Let's finish the sweep and make sure there are no nasty surprises aboard, then the scanning crew can get to work."

Drake moved around the curved corridor to the main cargo bay, his security officer's instincts drawing him towards the probable location of any contraband on board.

Inside he found two black cylinders, each about a metre in diameter by two metres long.

"Foxfire? You might want to take a look at this."

Foxfire walked into the cargo bay and swept her glowrod beam over the cylinders.

"Probe droids?" she said, surprised "What the hell is going on here?"

[Corridor, outside Medical Bay, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Foxfire strode along the corridor, still dressed in her flight suit. As she approached the door to the medical bay, it slid open quietly and Gen'yaa stepped out. The Bothan paused, staring straight ahead, and then sighed. Turning, she caught sight of the pilot.

"Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder" said the captain of the *Wolf's Lair* "Have you recovered the freighter?"

"Yes, Captain. She's a Corellian YT-2000 called the *Tol'ha'dor*. I've ordered Commander Pozo's investigation team to go over it and see what we can find." Gen'yaa gave a thin, sad smile. "She's not called the *Tol'ha'dor*. Her real name is the *Al'yin'ia*. She belongs – belonged – to a friend of mine."

She started walking along the corridor, heading back towards the bridge. Foxfire fell into step beside her.

"The captain of the freighter?"

The Bothan nodded. "Fral – Captain Ast'yyla – served with me while I was with the SpyNet, and later with Rebel Intelligence. She and the *Al'yin'ia* have saved my life more than once."

"I'm afraid we found a body onboard, another Bothan, a male."

Gen'yaa nodded once more. "Nell'ta, her co-pilot, most likely."

"Well, it explains one mystery, anyway – we found a pair of deep-space probe droids in the main hold" reported Foxfire.

"Standard equipment for NRI deep space patrols" replied Gen'yaa. She straightened up, almost imperceptibly. "Thank you, Lieutenant Colonel. Please get me the data from the investigation team as fast as you can."

With a salute and a nod of dismissal, Gen'yaa turned and headed along the corridor.

[Imperial Recon Flight, 10000m above Redault, Mantara Sector, the following day]

"Targets confirmed. We have four heavy turbolaser batteries at site Red, and another four at site Blue. I wouldn't want to bring the Star Destroyers over this lot."

"Thank you, Rho Lead. We want reconnaissance, not opinions. Complete your sweep and observations. *Vociferous* out."

The three TIE/rc recon fighters banked to head back towards the primary target area.

[Tasdar Defence Complex, Redault, Mantara Sector]

"You got 'em?"

"Yes Sarge, but they're too high. These things only reach up to a couple of thousand metres." The trooper lowered the tubular missile launcher on his shoulder.

Sergeant Netton nodded and jogged back to the command vehicle, a modified Seinar Republic Systems *Overlord* speeder that was older than some of the troops under his command. Draped over the ageing, grey-painted repulsortank was a metallic sensor-baffling cammo net. Netton tossed a quick salute to his commanding officer, Captain Gallta, and stepped inside, ducking his head to avoid the low roof.

Gallta nodded "Well, it looks like the Imperials are coming here, after all."

"Did you doubt it, after what happened to Talonis and Picas?"

"I prayed that they wouldn't." said Gallto, simply, and he picked up the hard-wired field commlink.

"Prometheus Control, this is Guardian One. We have targets overhead."

"Roger that, Guardian. Stand by" came the reply.

Half a kilometre behind the command vehicle, one of the twin turbolaser turrets began to turn and track upwards.

"Lead, this is two. I've got movement on target Red-2."

"Don't worry, those things are anti-capital ship guns, they can't hit us here."

As if on cue, a stream of bright green laserfire reached up, missing the three fighters but tossing them around as the air superheated by the bolts washed over the lightweight craft.

"*Vociferous*, this is Rho group. We are under fire from Site Red. We are reducing altitude."

As Rho leader finished his report, green fire lanced out once more, this time close enough to vaporise the port wing of Rho 3. The TIE span laterally into it's dive, tumbling further out of control as its wingmates followed, their dives somewhat more restrained than that of their erstwhile wingman.

[Brig, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Lieutenant Tolk was having a very confusing time. Firstly, the Rebels hadn't shot him and his crew dead, the way he'd been briefed to expect. Admittedly, the fact that they had bothered to disable his craft instead of destroying it with all hands had given him a faint clue that things did not necessarily happen the way the Empire said they did.

Having survived the Rebel capture – and subsequent destruction – of his craft, he expected to be treated badly. Again, the Rebels had treated him well, offering him food and water, although the brown lumpy thing on the side of his plate was particularly suspicious, he thought.

After spending a further half an hour in the brig, he was moved to another room under armed guard and the interrogations had begun. First had come a man and woman team – the man asked all the questions, the woman just kept staring at him. He hadn't let anything slip.

Tolk sat back, careful to keep the smile off his face as the two interrogators stood and walked from the room. Their replacement was a large man carrying a briefcase. *So much for the Rebel's high ideals. Now they're going to beat information out of me?*

"Well, Laddae, let's ha' a wee chat, sha' wae?"

[Tasdar Defence Complex, Redault, Mantara Sector]

"Guardian, this is Prometheus Control. Looks like we got one, the others are diving for the deck. I - stand by. Guardian, we have incoming craft, multiple directions, low level."

"Roger, Prometheus. We'll take it from here, good luck. Guardian out."

Gallta punched a pair of buttons on the commlink base unit.

"Guardian, this is One. We have incoming, engage according to plan."

The two surviving Rho reconnaissance fighters joined formation above the TIE bombers as the lead craft crested the hill to the south of the Tasdar defence complex.

"Theta group, this is Rho Lead. Transmissions detected, downloading coordinates. Hit 'em hard."

[Flight Deck, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Solo walked slowly under the damaged freighter, his arm outstretched, his fingers brushing lightly over the scarred, cold hull.

"You look like you've just found an old friend."

Solo turned to see Arachnoid approaching the freighter, carrying a datapad.

"It's been a while since I've been this close to a YT-2000" replied Solo, wistfully.

"What are they going to do with her?"

"Well, she definitely needs some work" said Arachnoid with a grin. He brandished his datapad. "Gen'yaa has ordered us to pull as much information from her and then repair her as best we can – she is an NRI crate, after all."

"Mind if I tag along?" said Solo, "I've got a fair bit of experience with the YT series transports."

"Not at all. Come on, let's take a look."

[Tasdar Defence Complex, Redault, Mantara Sector]

"Fire at will!"

In twenty camouflaged positions around the defence battery, twenty soldiers triggered the missile launchers they carried.

"What the - Shit! Incoming!"

Rho leader jinked his fighter up and to the left, dodging the missile targeted on his fighter. The small missile shot underneath the hull, carried on a flare of gold and red fire. Arcing over, the seeker warhead selected another target and slammed into the hull of Theta Six, one of the lead bombers, detonating it. The recon pilot watched in amazement as a ring of explosions from around the target area signalled the death of Theta Squadron and half of Beta, too. Gone also was Rho 2, struck on the starboard wing and sent tumbling to the ground below.

"Yeehaa!"

"We got 17 in total, sir, but we've still got incoming"

Gallto nodded and spoke into his comlink once more. "Phase Two"

"Break off, break off!"

"Negative, Rho Lead. We have our mission. Fifteen seconds to launch..."

The remaining bombers volleyed off a pair of torpedoes each as a new volley of missiles leapt upwards, these from around the base of the southernmost turbolaser tower.

Each bomber had at least one missile targeted on it, many had two, and one was the target of four separate warheads. The heavy attack fighters were blasted from the sky even as their torpedoes fell onto the turbolaser towers of Prometheus South, known to the Imperial attackers as Site Red.

Four Battery, the same twin heavy turbolaser tower that had engaged the reconnaissance fighters, took four torpedoes on its north face. Tearing into the heavy slab armour, the projectiles damaging power lines and coolant feeds, before a fifth torpedo tore through the damaged side of the structure, detonating inside and felling the upper half like a rotten tree. The rest of the towers fared better, taking only shock damage and losing a little armour.

The remaining TIE recon fighter curved and headed away from the site, seeking a safe path to return to its native space.

[Corridor, outside Brig, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

"Arrrrggggghhhhhh!!!! Please, make it stop! Make it stop!!"

The faint strains of Granite's bagpipes started again...

[Bridge, Imperial Star Destroyer *Dominance*]

"Report" ordered Piett, striding towards the centre of the gangway over the two crew pits.

"The bomber raid on defence sites Red and Blue have failed" reported the communications officer, Lieutenant Kinsa. Even as he reported, Gillett called up a large map of the area on the holographic display on the bridge's rear bulkhead.

"Failed'?"

Kinsa grimaced. "Sorry, sir. The bombers were shot down with man-portable weapons at close range to the targets. Minor damage to the target batteries."

Piett stood at the map for several moments.

“Options?” he asked.

“TIE Bombers are vulnerable to the missiles. We could use gunboats to perform the strike” suggested the fighter-control officer, Haron. “But if we do, we lose our hyperspace-capable outer sentry fighters.”

Piett nodded his understanding and turned to the fire control officer.

“Orbital bombardment from the four destroyers could wipe out both defence batteries, however, we’d take heavy damage” said the junior officer.

“How bad?”

“Anything ranging from heavy damage to all four ships on the ventral surfaces if they split their firepower, up to loss of one of the *Victories* or even an *Imperial* if they concentrate on one vessel.”

Piett nodded and turned to his XO.

“We could leave them alone and cancel that part of the mission, but Red and Blue cover the industrial areas at Kry’ath and Ber’tarna. We’d lose the output from the fuel cell refineries, the raw materials from the mines in the Tarna mountain range... Around half of the material we intended to take from the planet” reported Gillett.

“Commando Raid?” asked Piett, already knowing the answer.

“Too heavily defended on the ground, we’d never get through.”

The Admiral nodded. “Major ground assault it is then.” He turned to Kinsa.

“Get me Colonel Richt.”

[Tasdar Defence Complex]

Netton returned to the command speeder, where Gallto was stood, poring over a map of the batteries and the surrounding area.

“Looks like those Plexes were worth the money we paid for ‘em. We got all the bombers and a couple of fighters.”

Gallto looked up with a thin smile and a nod. “Make sure everyone gets reloads for their launchers, then get them shifted to ground defence positions. They’ll be back.”

Netton nodded, saluted and ran to pass on the orders.

The ground rumbled. Netton watched as the young soldier next to him clutched his blaster rifle even tighter.

“Easy there, trooper – you’ll bend the metal” said the sergeant with a grim smile.

The soldier relaxed a little and gave a wan smile.

“Yes sarge.”

Netton peeked over the edge of the camouflaged trench and raised his macrobinoculars.

“Klick and a half out. Load up. Even missile teams, pick your targets and engage on my mark. Fire, then move. Good luck everyone.”

[AT-AT Striker 1]

Colonel Richt of the Imperial Army punched a button on his holodisplay. Eighteen red circles appeared on the map of the defence batteries, along with six orange ones.

"Well, at least we have some Recon data," said the colonel, almost to himself. "Move the AT-STs forward and have them scour for traps. Begin suppression fire against these enemy positions as soon as they are within range" he ordered.

"Chicken walkers moving forward!"

"Sarge, we can't engage the AT-ATs from here, the missiles will lock onto the scout walkers instead."

Netton considered this for a second. "Understood. Missile teams, punch us a hole through the 'STs first."

"Sir, we are in range of the first three enemy positions."

"Very well. Engage with suppression fire. Release Speeder Bike Group 4, have them scout the flanks. Tell them to watch out for enemy anti-armour missile teams." ordered Richt.

In the back of the first platoon of AT-ATs, the speeder hangars ground open and disgorged a squad of speeder bikes each, the Scout Troopers' white armour glinting brightly in the morning sunshine. Two squads moved to the east, another two to the west, before turning north toward the target area.

With the characteristic whine of heavy blaster bolts, the AT-ATs began to pour fire in towards the defensive perimeter. Netton cringed slightly as he waited, breathlessly, as the blaster bolts flew overhead, tearing into the ground and sending fountains of dirt into the air.

"They're engaging our old positions!" yelled the sergeant over the noise

"We've got speeders incoming" reported one of the lookouts.

"Acknowledged" replied Netton, returning to peer through the binoculars "Stand by.... FIRE! Teams 1 through 5, reload with GAMs and engage those speeder bikes!"

The red missiles arced up before tipping over and boring in on the scout walkers.

"Sir! Enemy missile fire!"

Richt's head was already coming up, alerted by the sensor feed to his holodisplay, when the pilot yelled. He watched as one of the missiles slammed into one of the lead walkers in front of his AT-AT, causing it to reel backward under the impact. Across the battlefield, more missiles smashed into his vanguard walkers.

"Well, looks like the scout walkers can take those missiles without much trouble -" said Richt as the AT-ST in front of him began to move forward.

Another missile streaked from the enemy lines and struck the walker directly on the front of the command pod. The missile punched easily through the armour

already badly damaged by the first missile and detonated inside, shredding the durasteel construction in a ball of fire.

“ – Well, one of those missiles, anyway” said Richt with a sigh. “Retarget the suppression fire.”

He faced forward again. “Gunner, I want that missile launcher ahead of us taken out. See to it personally.”

The command pod swivelled slightly and shook as the chin-mounted guns spat heavy blaster fire at the spot of ground hiding the impudent missile team.

Netton watched in dismay as the trench holding team 8 was blasted into pieces by the lead AT-AT.

“I said fire, then move!” he yelled into his comlink. “Guardian One, this is Two. We have Imperial walkers moving in from the south. We’ve lost one –“

An orange explosion blossomed to Netton’s left.

“-Correction, two missile teams. Four AT-STs destroyed, six damaged, four speeder bikes destroyed. Two AT-ATs damaged. We’re not going to be able to hold much longer.”

“Understood. Hold them as long as you can then fall back. Good luck. One out.”

[Three hours later]

Richt activated the comlink and wiped the sweat from his forehead. The battle had been vicious. Every time he had thought the strike force had managed to scatter the defenders, they had hit back. Ambushes, surprise attacks, close quarter fighting and even hand-to-hand combat among the defensive trenches had slowed down the pace of the imperial assault to that of a Coruscant Granite-Slug.

“*Dominance*, this is Striker One. Target sites Red and Blue secured.”

“Acknowledged, Striker One. Please standby.”

Kinsa looked up at Gillett “Sir, Striker reports sites Red and Blue are secure”

Gillett nodded and turned to his commander.

“I heard, Captain” said Piett “Order the heavy lifters in. Mission time?”

Gillett consulted his datapad before answering “We’re 7 hours, 46 minutes behind original schedule, sir. Two hours and 46 minutes behind contingency plan Clearance, and one and a half hours behind the Colonel’s Assault schedule.”

Piett grimaced, a rare display of emotion for the Vice Admiral, and nodded.

“Anything new from the probes?”

Gillett shook his head. “Sorry, sir, no. We don’t know of the current location of the Rebel Carrier. The last enemy contact was the Patrol Group in the Relas system.”

“And in that contact we didn’t come out too well, did we?” said Piett, again simply stating fact. “We still don’t know if the Rebels managed to salvage anything from

that engagement. If they did, we could have the *pleasure* of their company any moment.”

“Well, sir, according to the revised schedule, we should be finished here within the next four hours. Once we’re loaded we can break contact and reorganise away from the Rebels until we’re ready for the next assault.”

Piett considered this as he ran through possible scenarios in his mind.

[Cockpit, YT-2000 Freighter *Al’yin’ia*]

“You’ll have to give me some more juice”

“Just a sec... How’s that?”

Solo clambered out from under the control console of the pilot’s seat and took a deep breath.

“Come on baby, gimme a sign here” he said under his breath. He activated the power distribution system and brought it up to normal levels, checking the feed from the *Wolf’s Lair’s* systems was regulated properly – the engines weren’t in any fit state to start up at the moment, so the craft was drawing power from the hangar bay.

“Yeah! We got power!”

“OK,” said Arachnoid, coming forward from the engineering section at the aft of the oval shaped hull, “Punch up the flight logs and the navicomputer”

“Working on it now...”

Arachnoid peered over Solo’s shoulder as the pair scanned through the records of the craft’s recent movements.

“There!” said Arachnoid, pointing at a log entry, the last one made. It spoke of visiting a planet over towards *Albiar* – *probably to gather info or drop probes*, he thought – before joining a freight convoy heading back towards the centre of the sector. “Pull up the navigation computer and see where they went.”

Solo nodded and punched a few keys.

Both pilots were silent for a few seconds as they digested the information displayed.

“Here” said Solo, pointing at the display, “It looks like it’s in the middle of nowhere.”

“Could have been a rendezvous point, or maybe a deep space depot.”

“Hmm. Perhaps the sensor logs... Damn. Most of them are encrypted.”

Arachnoid straightened up and thought for a couple of seconds. “The esteemed Colonel could probably provide us with the encryption codes.”

Solo nodded and punched a few more buttons. “In the meantime, take a look at this.”

Arachnoid leaned back over Solo’s shoulder and looked at the holodisplay. “What the...?”

Solo grinned. “The Black Box”

“You mean the flight data recorder?”

“Yep” replied the X Wing pilot. “It’s set to record what the pilot’s instruments show – that includes the combat sensors.”

“The circular sensor displays on the Head-Up Display?”

Solo punched a few buttons and downloaded the record to his datapad.

“Correct. In this case, we have enough red dots here to give a squadron of rookies a collective heart attack.”

[Kruger Drift Asteroid Belt, Mantara Sector]

Karla “Chacal” Medina watched the timer count down towards zero and gently pushed the hyperdrive levers forward. The rotating tunnel of hyperspace collapsed into starlines and then into points as the X Wing dropped from hyperspace.

“OK, *Tronquito*,” she said, speaking to her R2 unit, “Poll the force. Make sure everyone made it.”

The little R2 unit trilled an affirmative and checked the sensor logs for the hyperspace breakout, then listed the data on one of the cockpit screens. The screen showed the names of the two freighters, which until recently had belonged to the Imperial Navy Supply Services, but had been re-christened by their crews as the *Castellia* and the *Jerezan*. Accompanying them was a Lambda Class shuttle, the *Nube*, and two flights of starfighters, each consisting of 3 Z-95 Headhunters and an X Wing. Chacal had overall command of the fighter screen, her second in command, “Oso” Chavez, headed up Two Flight in the second X Wing.

She punched up the comlink channel for the captain of the *Castellia*, the commander of the mission to Talonis. “Captain, this is Lead. Beginning our sweep.”

“Affirmative, Aguila Lead.”

As briefed, the fighter screen moved ahead of the freighters and moved towards the asteroid belt.

“*Castellia* to Taskforce Mercy. Looks like the channel hasn’t drifted much. Proceed as planned.”

The path through the asteroid field in the direction of Talonis had been plotted, but drift and collisions between the asteroids themselves meant that the taskforce would need to be careful in traversing the field.

As the Iberian craft approached the edge of the asteroid field, One flight moved to scout the field ahead.

“Lead, this is Three. The metal content in these asteroids is pretty bad. My sensors are all fouled up.”

“Roger that, Three, we’re getting if across the board. Execute plan Alpha.”

[Bridge, Strike Carrier *Wolf’s Lair*]

“Interesting. But it’s unsubstantiated” said Gen’yaa, slipping into her old role as an Intelligence officer.

Granite and Ibero traded exasperated looks.

“Yes, ma’am” replied the Intelligence Officer “But Flight Officer Stone is very... persuasive?”

“Yes, I’m sure he is. I’m still not sure whether bagpipes are actually legal under Republic Navy Regs, but we’ll let that slide for the time being. So you think he was telling the truth, that Redault is the next target?”

Granite cleared his throat “Hae went over his story several times. There were nae discrepancies.”

Gen’yaa smiled thinly and walked to a holodisplay showing nearby systems “That doesn’t answer my question. *He* may believe it, but that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s true.”

Ibero took a breath and began to reply, but was cut off by the Captain’s raised hand.

“You have reported this information to Colonel Schroeder?”

“Yes, ma’am. She and Wolfshead 5 have cut their patrol short and are on their way back as we speak – she told us to report to you immediately.”

“Very well. Navigation, plot a course for the Redault system, Communications, recall the other patrol, then find me Major Stauber and ask him to join us up here.”

[Deck 4, Strike Carrier *Wolf’s Lair*]

Vyper turned as he heard his name called and keyed the turbolift to hold.

Arachnoid and Solo jogged over, the former holding a datapad. Once they were aboard the lift car, he hit the resume button.

“Make it quick, I’ve been summoned to see *her*.”

“You may want to take a look at this. We’ve just pulled it from the logs on the *Al’yin’ia*” said Arachnoid, handing over his datapad.

“That’s a lot of contacts” said Vyper, peering intently at the screen “The Imperials?”

“It’s a good bet” said Solo “But we can’t pull the rest of the data without decrypting it – We figured it would be easier to see if the good Colonel could provide us with the codes.”

Vyper nodded. “OK, come with me.”

[Bridge, Strike Carrier *Wolf’s Lair*]

The doors swished open quietly, allowing the three Wolfshead pilots access to the nerve centre of the ship, the main bridge. Offset to the portside of the hull, the large viewport overlooked the curved bows of the Strike Carrier.

“Ah, Major Stauber, Commanders. I need you to send a patrol to the Redault System. Make sure it’s well armed.”

Vyper nodded. “In the meantime, ma’am, we’ve downloaded the logs from the freighter. They’re encrypted.”

Gen'yaa nodded and turned to her Intelligence Officer. "Bring the logs up and start trying our most recent encryption codes."

While Dey'jeaa got to work, Vyper crossed to Ibero

"Dario, take a pair of X Wings and check this out."

"OK, I'll get onto Drake and Raiven now" replied the Iberyan, pulling out his comlink. "We should be away within 15 minutes."

"Good. Give me a call before you launch."

"Ma'am, sir, we have it. It's a variation of the Trollo-4 and Keystone-8 codes. The computer is decrypting now."

[Asteroid 537A, Kruger Drift Asteroid Belt, Mantara Sector]

The cratered, misshapen asteroid rotated slowly, revealing a pair of Y Wings sat, powered down, in the largest of the craters.

"OK, I see a pair of mid-sized ships – probably Bulk Freighters, by their shapes. Four, six – maybe eight fighters."

Dosoc looked around at his backseater, Stemas, who was observing the incoming ships with a pair of macrobinoculars.

"Make your mind up." He said, acidly. "What types?"

"Look like Headers or Crosses"

Headhunters or X Wings, thought Dosoc Even eight of them shouldn't be much of a problem.

"Well, at least they're more or less on time." he said, punching a button to begin the preflight power sequence "Now let's see if that idiot Waznep can spring this trap properly."

Stemas sat back and laughed. The animosity between Dosoc, head of the Vulture's small but powerful bomber group, and Waznep, the X Wing pilot in nominal command of the fighters, was well known after an incident involving the pair, a substantial amount of money and an even more substantial amount of alcohol.

Since communications and active sensors would have given away their presence to their quarry, the pirate force were under orders to engage only when the leader began his attack.

[Bridge, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

"Captain, we have incoming craft from hyperspace – it's Wolfshead Lead."

"Thank you."

The bothan turned back as the senior officers watched the data spread across the huge holodisplay that made up one side of the bridge. The grey daggers of the Star Destroyers appeared first as the viewpoint craft dropped from hyperspace. A short while later the two frigates and several corvettes became visible as the range scrolled down.

Along the left side of the screen, the computer listed the data recorded by the spy freighter's powerful sensors.

"*Vociferous, Valourous, Providence and Dominance, Angel of Fury and Pacifier, Audacity, Antagonist, Ostraciser, Immutable and Radiance.* I'm going to have to get myself some more cheerful reading material" commented Arachnoid with a grim smile.

"That's one hell of a list" agreed Vyper with a nod.

"Navigation, I need relative bearings for the position of the Imperial Task Force and their heading" ordered Gen'yaa.

[Kruger Drift Asteroid Belt]

Most of the pirate pilots were fairly experienced, and each had a good feel for when they should begin the attack. Judging distances and speeds of the Ibeyan craft, several began their engine preflight sequences, preparing their craft for flight as the targets approached.

"Lead, this is six. I just got a power spike, a small one. 64 mark 21."

That was Aguila Six, "Ojos", who was flying a Z95R Recon Headhunter Variant.

"And another, and another... Six, eight..."

"OK, Six, I got the picture. Mercy Task Force, this is Aguila Lead. Enemy detected, starfighter power signatures. Looks like a trap."

"Roger that, Aguila Lead. Proceed as planned, situation Tango."

On board the bridge of the *Castellia*, Captain Santos turned to the communications officer. "Prepare the distress call, attach our co-ordinates and prepare for transmission. They'll probably jam our transmissions quickly, so set on repeat and try to get as many repetitions off before they do so."

[Bridge, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

"Captain! We have the results. The Imperial fleet was aligned for an exit vector pointing directly towards Redault."

Gen'yaa grimaced and flashed a look at Granite "Looks like we have our confirmation. Plot a course, maximum velocity. Report status of Wolfshead Patrols?"

"Wolfshead 1 and 5 are inbound, ETA one minute, 15 seconds."

"Looks like they'll need a fast turnaround" commented the Captain of the *Wolf's Lair* "Gentlemen, can I suggest you get to your fighters?"

[Kruger Drift Asteroid Field]

"OK, Waznep's moving!" said Stemas, "Go, go, go!"

Dosoc jammed his throttle forward, ignoring the danger of overspooling his engines – Y Wings were designed to handle a hell of a lot more punishment than that. The bomber lifted from the surface of the asteroid and began accelerating towards the Iberyan group, his wingman close behind. Ahead, a pair of X-TIE uglies – X Wing fighters repaired with TIE fighter solar panels replacing the S Foils – leapt off an asteroid to the left of the Y Wings and headed in.

“Raider Flight, report in!”

“Two.”

“Three.”

Dosoc risked a look over his shoulder towards the other two Y Wings, who had apparently launched from their asteroid hiding places without difficulty.

“Skull Lead, this is Raider One, Raider Flight ready. Better call in the *Spark*.”

“Shut up, Raider One. Just do your job and get those freighters!” snapped Waznep, irritably.

A flicker of pseudomotion announced the arrival of a Delta Class Transport with its escort of two Cloakshape fighters. Named “*Spark*”, the transport carried the pirate’s jamming equipment. A few seconds later the subspace radio channels were blanked by a loud burst of static.

[Bridge, Strike Carrier *Wolf’s Lair*]

“...Repeat, we are under attack by pirates, Kruger Drift Asteroid Field, co-ordinates attached. Please assist. Repeat, we – “

“Captain, we have an incoming distress call from the Iberyan aid convoy.

They’re under pirate attack near the Kruger Drift. They are requesting – “

The young communications tech quickly reached up and pulled her headphones from her head. “Ow.”

“What’s wrong?” asked Gen’yaa, who had been walking over to get more information.

“Someone just set off some serious hypercomm jammers, ma’am.” The Bothan could hear the static from the headphones even from halfway across the bridge.

“Dammit, belay the hyperspace jump. Get me Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder.”

[Kruger Drift Asteroid Belt]

“This is not good” commented Dosoc. “This is not at all good.”

The Iberyan pilots, far from being surprised at the appearance of the pirates, had cut their throttles and released a barrage of concussion missiles before splitting into pairs and moving to engage the pirates at close range. Raider 3 had taken one of the missiles on its port-forward quarter, depleting shield power but otherwise doing no damage to the sturdy craft. Several of the poorly- or un-shielded uglies had been less lucky, blasted into pieces by the fast moving warheads.

Dosoc did not like Waznap, but realised that the X Wing pilot was at least competent. At the loss of the Y Wing's Ugly support, he had dispatched a pair of fast T Wings to engage the Iberyan fighters until slower X-TIEs could move to cover the bombers.

With waves of green and red energy, the two fighter forces smashed into each other, jockeying for position. One of the Cloakshapes of Skull flight went first, followed by its Starchaser wingmate before the first Iberyan Z95 Headhunter was destroyed. Dosoc throttled back slightly to allow the other two Y Wings – both single seat A4 models – to creep ahead and gain cover from his own S3 twin seat fighter. The three Y Wings of Raider flight dived through the melee, with Stemas taking a few pot shots with the turret mounted ion cannon at an X Wing that flashed past.

"It's OK, we're through!" yelled Stemas as the bombers screamed past the fighter melee.

Chacal twisted the X Wing's flight path slightly to avoid the fire from the Y Wing and closed on her target, an R41-Starchaser that seemed to be a little too occupied with her wingman. A pair of quad bursts pierced the older fighter's weakened shields and tore the craft apart.

"Lead, this is Eight. The Y Wings are through!"

"Roger that" replied Chacal "*Castellia*, you have incoming."

"We see them, Aguila Lead. We'll take it from here. Good luck."

Anap turned to the tactical display and watched as the icons representing the pirate Y Wings approached the two freighters. At six clicks, three pairs of yellow-gold blips indicated a torpedo launch.

"Launch! Launch! Launch!"

Upon command, the three TIE fighters nestled between the twin hulls of each freighter, hidden from prying eyes, burst free. Forming into two three-craft flights, they screamed towards the incoming torpedoes, each aiming for one warhead. Closing rapidly, the captured Imperial fighters sprayed laserfire across space, destroying the incoming torps.

A few seconds later, half the TIEs engaged the pirate bombers in a flurry of red and green laser fire while the others rushed to assist their beleaguered wingmates.

[Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

The three X Wings screamed from the starboard side of the *Wolf's Lair's* hangar in V formation. Behind them, the Strike Carrier lurched and accelerated rapidly before disappearing into hyperspace.

"So I'm here to do the fancy flying," commented Drake, "Two-two makes the sarcastic comments and watches my back, and you... What is it that you're here for, anyway, Commander?"

[Maybe to try to keep your ego under control] commented Arpin.

“Very funny,” said Ibero sarcastically, grinning despite himself “Now be quiet and prepare to enter hyperspace on my mark.”

Drake looked over at Raiven, flying off Ibero’s port S Foil. The Tieosian pilot grinned and nodded.

“OK, on 5...4... -”

Raiven and Drake’s X Wings flashed overhead in perfect formation and leapt into hyperspace. Ibero sat startled for several seconds before pulling his own hyperdrive levers and leaping into the abyss.

[Kruger Drift Asteroid Belt]

“We’re gonna need some fire support” said Dosoc, as much to himself as to Stemas. He switched frequencies to the relay channel that passed through Spark. “Call in the *Brazen*. Do it now!”

“Raider One, that is not your concern! Spark, this is Skull On-“. The rest of the message dissolved into static as Aguila Eight shredded Waznep and his fighter. Dosoc sideslipped and cut his throttle, causing the TIE fighter to overshoot.

Levelling out, he snapped off a quick shot at the TIE, damaging the port solar panel. Pushing the throttle levers back to the stops, he turned back towards the battle and checked his sensors. Twelve of the twenty two pirate fighters had been destroyed or disabled, for a cost to the Iberyans of four Headhunters and a pair of TIEs. Both of Dosoc’s wingmen had been overwhelmed by the Iberyian TIE fighters that had so rudely surprised the bomber pilots, but they were not the only ones with sabacc cards up their sleeves...

“*Spark*, are you going to call them in or do I have to kill you myself?”

“*Message transmitted. They’re on their way*”

Another flicker of pseudomotion announced the arrival of the pirate’s previously hidden weapon – an ageing Nebulon B frigate, the *Brazen*. The deep booming voice of the pirate leader, Vitle, cut across the comlink. “What a bloody mess. Where’s Waznep?”

“He’s gone, Captain” responded Dosoc “These guys are good”

“Ha!” replied Vitle, “We’ll soon see how good they are in a second.”

Chacal wiped her nose with the back of her flight glove, ignoring the red stain.

“Lead, this is Five. You OK over there?”

“Sure, Oso, just banged about a bit,” replied Chacal, recharging her shields,

“You get the bastard? How are we doin’?”

“Yeah, I got him. They’ve pulled back to regroup around that frigate, which is on its way over here pretty damn fast. They’ll be in gun range of the freighters in a couple of minutes unless we do something.”

“Aguila Lead to Aguila and Halcón Flights. Form up and get ready. *Castellia*, status?”

“Shields have taken a bit of a battering, but we’re OK. Another run by those Y Wings, though, and we won’t be going anywhere.”

“Y **Wing**, sir. We got two of them. The third was an S3 twin seater, he held us off long enough to get back under cover.”

“Lead, this is Eight. Looks like they’re back together and heading our way.”

The X Wings dropped in behind the frigate at a distance of less than a click. Raiven took rapid stock of the situation and yelled into the comlink. “Break!” He banked and curved around to the frigate’s port side while Drake went starboard, followed a few seconds by later Ibero’s X Wing as it reverted from hyperspace practically on top of the frigate.

“Ibeyan craft, this is Wolfgang flight, do require assistance?” asked the Command Wing officer, once he had caught his breath from the surprise.

“Damn right, Wolfgang. They’re after the freighters for Talonis!”

“Roger that. We’re going after the frigate. Cover us.”

Without waiting for reply, Ibero levelled his craft out as he began to extend the distance out on the frigate. A flicker of motion from the portside indicated Drake settling into the wingman position.

“Here we go again...” he said to himself, reaching above his head and flicking the switch to open the S Foils. As the two craft passed four clicks from the target frigate, Ibero began a tight loop to make his approach.

The arrival of the Republic fighters had thrown the pirates into disarray, but only for the twenty seconds it took to realise that the vanguard X Wings were, in fact, the only X Wings.

“Ha! Look at ‘em run!” said Cosh Three, piloting an R-41 Starchaser.

“Shut up, Three. They’ll be back, you can bet on it” responded Dosoc “Cosh Two, Cosh Three, engage the single X Wing. Switchblade Flight, take Dagger One and take out the other two. The rest of the fighters, engage the Ibeyans!” The pirates were a little slow in following the orders of the bomber jock but moved to comply, allowing the reformed Ibeyan fighter group to move to within 4 clicks.

“OK, Halcón Flight, punch us a hole through there. Aguila Flight, launch at the frigate and then engage the fighters. Good Luck, everyone.”

Raiven waited until Ibero and Drake had finished their turns before executing a rapid vertical half-loop followed by a 180° roll.

[Typical. You’re never on time] commented Arpin.

“Leave the tactics to me, tin can.”

[Well, your wonderful tactics have left us without any cover, about to get blasted by a pair of fighters, before we even get to be shot up by the Frigate. I’ve seen Ewoks with better tactical sense]

Raiven looked at his sensors and rapidly ran through the timing of the attack in his mind. The pirate fighters would be on him around the time for him to launch his torpedoes, so he throttled back to half power for fifteen seconds to allow them to reach him sooner.

[And now you’re slowing down. Great thinking, sithspit-for-brains!]

“You ever considered a career as a military oppressor? You’re about as comforting as the average Stormtrooper.”

At 2.5 clicks out, Chacal and Oso opened fire with their torpedoes as their wingmen volleyed off their remaining concussion missiles, even as the two fighter forces ran headlong into each other.

[Bridge, Privateer Nebulon-B Frigate *Brazen*]

“Incoming warheads!” yelled the sensor operator, fear in his voice.
“Krayt’s Teeth! Saturation fire, forward guns! Five hundred credits to the gunner who brings down the most warheads!”

“He’s backing off!” yelled Cosh Three, gleefully “I’ve got him!”
Raiven waited for the fighters to close to within a click before jerking the fighter vertically to avoid the fire from the foremost fighter, an R-41 Starchaser. Corkscrewing over the line of fire, he snapped off a pair of quad bursts at the lead fighter as his nose swung backwards and forwards before settling in the direction of the frigate. The first burst took the older fighter on the nose, collapsing the remaining shields an instant before the second burst struck the engine compartment, blowing the R41 apart.

The Starchaser’s wingman, flying a venerable-looking Preybird fighter, jerked away from the explosion to save his craft, allowing the Republic X Wing to flash past. Raiven kept an eye on the range to this craft for a couple of seconds before deciding that it was too far away to threaten him for the time being.

“OK, Arpin, give me the Frigate.”

The frigate flashed up in the main Multi Function Display as the yellow torpedo targeting box on the HUD sprung to life, enclosing the grey, spindly-looking shape of the frigate.

“Here he comes!” yelled Stemas, swivelling his guns toward the incoming X Wing and opening fire.

Ibero swung his stick hard over as the ion bolts slammed into his forward shields, sending artificial lightning across them. As he did so, Drake sideslipped out from behind his fighter, guns blazing. Ibero nodded with satisfaction as the blood red laser bolts pierced the bomber’s shields and slammed into the port engine nacelle, leaving a pair of ugly black holes spewing vapour into the cold vacuum of space.

“Wolf, break left!” crackled the commlink.

Ibero broke to the left, followed a fraction of a second later by Drake, who took a slightly shallower path to protect his wingman’s back. A pirate T Wing flashed past, followed closely by an Iberyan X Wing, who in turn was trying to shake the pirate Pinook fighter clinging to his tail. Ibero quickly inverted and turned to follow the three ships, Drake returning to position above, behind and to the left.

“Ledner, get me an update on Two-two.”

The R2 unit trilled an affirmative and displayed a miniature map on the MFD showing the relative positions of all of the craft in the immediate area. A green circle surrounded the icon representing the lone Republic X Wing, now less than a klick from the pirate capital ship. Close behind was a pirate fighter, also intent on blasting this insolent X Wing to pieces.

"Two-two, what the hell are you doing?"

"I've got it covered, thanks" replied Raiven, dryly, and winced as one of the frigate's turbolaser bolts splashed across his front shields

[I bloody well haven't!] screeched Arpin. [Shields at 54%!]

The X Wing corkscrewed and jinked as it closed on the frigate. Raiven took one last look at the capital ship's status, confirming its shields were down.

"Arpin, give me the fighter behind us"

[Useless lump of Bantha dung] replied Arpin, but the image of the fighter popped up in the cockpit display.

"Steady, steady," said Raiven to himself, levelling out for a fraction of a second. His finger tightened on the trigger and a pair of Proton Torpedoes leapt from their launch tubes on each side of the long, narrow fuselage. Pulling up and away from the frigate, Raiven shunted power back to his shields, reinforcing them after the battering they'd taken.

The torpedoes flew straight from their launch tubes without guidance and detonated against the first solid object encountered - the portside main structural member holding the frigate's bridge in place above the join of the engineering hull with the central spine.

[Well, I'll be damned. You actually managed to hit something]

"Thanks" grunted Raiven as the inertial compensators failed to keep up entirely with a tight turn. Pulling the throttle back to 1/3 and turning hard to the left, he forced the Preybird to overshoot. Slamming the throttle forward, he accelerated in pursuit of the pirate fighter.

"Wow! Look at that!" said Drake in amazement as the frigate was decapitated, the bridge reduced to a roiling ball of golden fire on the engineering hull. "Mike?"

"I see it" replied Raiven, tension in his voice. Drake watched as his wingman carved the Preybird to pieces with precise quad laser bursts. The X Wing pulled away as the pirate fighter exploded.

"OK, I'm clear."

"*Brazen*, do you read? Anybody aboard the *Brazen*, report in!"

"This is Allyns, chief engineer. We've lost the bridge."

"Vultures, this is Raider Lead. All craft, pull back. Repeat, all craft pull back!"

A chorus of reluctant replies signalled the acceptance of the pirates.

"The frigate is turning" reported one of the Iberyan pilots.

"Damn," said Ibero "I was hoping they'd hit a couple of asteroids before they regained control. She must have a good crew in engineering. Looks like they're pulling back."

“Roger that, Wolf Lead” replied Chacal. “All Iberyan forces, pull back, let them go. There’s no need for anyone else to die here today.”

The order was largely unnecessary, as the remaining few fighters on each side had already disengaged. The Republic fighters reformed and then joined with the remaining Iberyan fighters – both X Wings, a Headhunter and a TIE – all of which showed signs of damage – and headed back towards the freighters. The *Nube* was already picking up downed pilots – both survivors and the not so fortunate – by the time the frigate had recovered its fighters and jumped out. Fifteen minutes later and the relief convoy was leaving nothing but scrap in the asteroid belt.

“Iberyan Forces, this is Wolfgang Lead. Form up and jump on my mark... and that includes Wolfgang flight, this time. 3...2...1...Mark.”

The craft leapt into hyperspace.

[Redault, Mantara Sector]

With a flicker of pseudomotion, the *Wolf's Lair* burst from hyperspace into the Redault system, scattering fighters from the flight deck as it bored in towards the primary planet.

“We’ve got nothing but debris up here” announced Arachnoid from the lead A Wing. The Wolfseye craft were flying ahead of the main body of fighters, launched first to scout the system as the carrier and heavier craft approached a little more cautiously. Split into flight pairs, the craft were each assigned an area of responsibility while they scanned the area.

Flying with the B Wings of Wolfclaw and the remaining X Wings of Wolfgang were the Command Wing, ranged ahead slightly to provide security.

“I’ve got something!” yelled Hawk, “Behind the moon, something big....”

[Hangar Deck, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Ibero triggered the canopy of his fighter to open as he unstrapped himself from the seat and stretched. It had been a long, long day, but at least by the time the three-craft Wolfgang patrol had arrived at Redault with one of the Iberyan freighters, the *Castellia*, the area had been secured.

A clang from the side of his fighter made him jump a little, before he realised it was a crew boarding ladder being hoisted - none too gently - into place. The Iberyan pilot climbed down to the deck and undid his helmet's chin strap and lifted it off his head, taking the opportunity to scratch that spot that always itched- “Welcome back.” It was Foxfire. The pair began to walk across the flight deck as the deck crew prepared to move the fighter up onto the Hangar Deck for maintenance.

“Thanks. We brought along some people to help-”

“Yeah, we noticed” said the Squadron CO “So, who were they? Pirates?”

"Certainly looks that way. One frigate supported by a couple of squadrons of fighters, Ugliers mostly. We fought them off, but the Iberian escort squadron took heavy losses. They stayed behind on Talonis while we continued on."

Foxfire nodded again "Well, I'd say that the supplies will definitely be of some help."

"So what's the news here? How bad is it?"

"Not quite as bad as Talonis" said Foxfire with a sigh "But it's not exactly a holiday destination down there."

"Any trouble with the Imperials?"

"We arrived a minute or so too late. All we caught were the back ends of a VSD and pair of Corvettes jumping into hyperspace from behind the moon. We got a rough track on their hyperspace vector, so Arachnoid and his group are out sweeping the area."

"You don't sound very optimistic," said Ibero "Think we've lost them?"

Foxfire sighed and nodded "I'm afraid so, but we'll find them again. I've got a few things I should be attending to. Do you have anything else to report?"

[Bomb Shelter, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*, Three hours later]

Foxfire stuck her head through the door to see Razor and Drake sat in one corner, talking. She walked over as Razor tilted her head back in laughter.

"Sorry to interrupt, have you seen Raiven?"

Drake looked up, still smiling. "I think he's in the ready room finishing some datawork. What's up?"

"Oh, nothing, just some good news" replied Foxfire, turning to walk away.

"This wouldn't have anything to do with the battle at the Kruger Drift, would it?"

Foxfire hesitated for a second. "Well, I suppose you'll find out soon enough" she flashed the datapad she was carrying "He's been promoted to Lieutenant."

Drake grinned. "Could I ask a favour...?"

[Wolfgang Ready Room, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Raiven was checking the maintenance record for his X Wing when Drake strode in, almost marching. Seeing this, he leapt to his feet, saluting smartly as he did when he thought his wingman was being a little *too* stiff.

Drake turned and raised an eyebrow, as if in surprise.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Sir, saluting a superior officer, Sir!" said Raiven in his best cadet-in-training voice.

"Really?" said Drake, making a big issue of looking around the room. "I don't see one here."

It took a few seconds for Raiven to catch on to exactly what Drake was talking about. He collapsed into his chair in surprise.

"No... that can't be right... how? Why? What?"

“Your personnel record came through from the *Katarina*. The Colonel’s been a bit busy recently, so she’s only just got around to sorting it out. Combined with your performance at the Kruger Drift, you’re now promoted to Lieutenant. Congratulations.”

Raiven sat, still in shock.

“Look, if it’s any consolation, don’t think of it as losing your opportunity to take the piss out of me, think of it as the opportunity to help me take the piss out of the Lieutenant Commanders without serious risk.”

Raiven’s face brightened considerably. “Ah. Solo. Torpedo. Groznik. Hardrive.”

“Just think of the possibilities...”

Raiven stood up, grinning like an idiot, and accepted Drake’s hand and congratulations.

[Bomb Shelter, Strike Carrier *Wolf’s Lair*]

“...So there I am in an inverted power dive, less than a minute from burning up in the planet’s atmosphere. Ledner’s screaming in one ear, Arrebnac Traffic Control in the other. I edge in a bit closer to the yacht and get a visual scan through the main viewscreen. What do I see? – “

“Do we want to hear this?” asked Razor.

“You may not but the lads will” said Drake “Anyway, inside there’s the captain and his first mate – nice girl – “

Razor elbowed Drake in the ribs.

“ – So there they were, horizontal and superimposed. Looked pretty busy so I fired a couple of rounds across their nose. Got their attention, anyway. They pulled out of their dive – so did I, naturally – and escorted them down.”

“What happened to them?” asked Sledgehammer.

“Flying without due care and attention’ for the pilot – hefty fine, but he was flying one of those things so he could afford it.”

“Without due care and attention?” said Vyper with a grin “I’ve never heard of it described *quite* like that before.”

Razor checked her chrono. “Well, time for bed.” She across at Drake “Are you going to walk me back to my cabin, then?”

Raiven, Vyper and Sledgehammer made suggestive noises.

“Sure” replied Drake “After you”

The pair walked towards the exit.

“Go for it!”

“Good on ya son!”

Drake paused at the door long enough to turn and perform a florid bow, before Razor’s hand reached from the side and pulled him from view.

“I’ll get another round in, shall I?” said Sledgehammer, getting up.

“Better make it the last one for Mike, I think he’s just about celebrated enough for tonight.” said Vyper, looking across at the other pilot, who was beginning to sway a little in his seat.

Sledgehammer returned with three tall glasses of Blue Stuff and set them carefully on the table. He turned to Raiven.

"Sorry it's not warm beer, mate, but at least it's got alcohol in it" he said with a grin.

"Ah-ha!" replied Raiven, straightening up. "That's what I've got to do."

"What?" asked Vyper, taking a sip of his drink.

Raiven slipped four flat discs from his pocket, each about four centimetres in diameter. He got up and staggered over to the bar, where he retrieved four cans of Arrebaccian beer that he knew Drake was saving for a special occasion.

"Mike, you've got a drink here" protested Sledgehammer.

Raiven ignored him, turned the beer cans over and clipped a disc into the hollow of the bottom of each can, before returning the cans to their place on the shelf.

"What're they?" asked Vyper.

"Thermal heat packs" said Raiven, slurring his speech a little "Triggered to go off when the can is opened. I'll show that bastard about warm beer." He added with a grin.

Sledgehammer waved his glass of drink from the table.

"Ugh, no thanks, I'll leave the hyperdrive coolant for another time" said Raiven, staggering towards the door. "Catch you tomorrow."

[Wolfshead Squadron Deep Space Patrol]

"Watch it, Lead, you've got one on your tail!"

Drake's head snapped around, painfully aware of the TIE Advanced fighter which was struggling to slot into position on the tail of his X-wing.

"Thanks, Two-three," he muttered tightly.

"Relax, Lead, I'm on him." Razor's voice was confident and as cool as ice in the middle of winter. "Break hard right on my mark."

"Make it quick, Two-three, or else Alpha Two is gonna break *me*," Drake growled, furiously juking his X-wing and sending it into a corkscrewing roll. To his frustration, the Advanced which stuck to his tail, although not able to get off a clear shot, wasn't being put off its flying either.

"Three...two...mark!"

Drake, startled at the abbreviated countdown, wildly flung his X-wing onto its starboard wing, slightly reducing speed as he pulled the stick back for all it was worth. As the X-wing slewed forcefully aside from its former flight path, its pilot re-engaged the throttle and it raced forward. The TIE Advanced pursuing the young Wolfshead pilot, making full use of its superior maneuverability, neatly sideslipped and sent a quad burst of bright green laserfire into the rear of Drake's fighter. There was an angry curse and a sickening crunch over the comm as a good portion of Drake's rear shields disappeared.

Razor, sitting in the cockpit of her A-wing, didn't respond. Her brow furrowed with concentration as she spun her craft one hundred and eighty degrees to port, letting the light Republic fighter fall like a stone, then pulling back into level flight on the tail of the TIE Advanced. The latter craft tried to move, but it was too late.

Even as her targeting reticle flashed yellow, Razor's gloved fingers found the trigger and a concussion missile streaked outwards in a burst of flame, almost immediately thudding into the TIE Advanced. The Imperial fighter spun wildly for a moment, then raced away in a burst of speed. Razor fought the urge to follow, instead closing her A-wing up into formation on Drake's wing.

"Lead, what's your status?" she asked, a little concern managing to creep into her usually calm and confident voice.

"A little shaken up, Two-three, and my hull has a few scorch marks on it, but otherwise I'm okay. Thanks, Razor," he finished softly.

"Any time, Lead."

Despite the situation, Drake risked a glance over towards his wing, seeing the female pilot give him a thumbs-up from her A-wing.

"Razor, dive!" Drake yelled, instantly pulling his X-wing up into a sharp climb. Without replying, the A-wing pilot drove her fighter down, rapidly opening the distance between the two fighters just as another TIE Advanced streaked through the gap, cannons blazing.

"I've got him, Two-three, go and teach Alpha Two some manners, will you? I'd be much obliged."

"Certainly, Lead," Razor acknowledged, and was gone.

As Drake's hands automatically strove to bring his X-wing in behind Alpha One, the craft that had nearly just ended his life, he evaluated his tactical situation. Of the four X-wings and two A-wings that he had started with for this patrol, only two X-wings and a single A-wing remained. There were still three TIE Advanceds hunting them, which made for very bad odds indeed.

Still, there's no way I'm going to let these Imps get the better of us, the young Wolfshead pilot thought grimly.

"Okay, Wolves, close it up on their leader now," he ordered, suddenly coming to a decision. "It's one to one odds here, and it's going to make life a whole lot easier if we concentrate our attacks and pick them off one at a time."

Drake got four clicks in acknowledgement, and he dipped the nose of his X-wing, squeezing off a quad burst of laser fire which splashed against Alpha One's starboard wing shields.

"Two-three, see if you can get a missile lock on this guy," Drake ordered. "I'll try and pin him in place with laserfire. That way, he'll have to choose between a rock and a hard place."

"Affirmative, Lead," Razor's voice came back, for once sounding a little strained.

"Be there as soon as I can. Seventeen, can you give me a hand with Alpha Two? He's starting to annoy me."

"Roger, Two-three," Sacart's voice broke in. "Alpha Three has broken off for a bit - I just gave him some hull damage to think about."

Drake glanced through his cockpit window, seeing Sacart's X-wing peel off towards where Razor seemed to be on the run from the second TIE Advanced, which was firing intermittent bursts at her. The third TIE Advanced was in a graceful arcing turn, slowly coming around to rejoin the battle as its shields recharged.

No, you don't, Drake thought fiercely. Cutting his speed by two-thirds, he spun his X-wing around ninety degrees and accelerated away at full throttle even before the Imperial flight leader knew he was gone. The pilot of Alpha One, however, didn't let his mistake last for long. With a grunt of his own, he whipped his fighter around after the speeding X-wing.

"I've got you now," Drake snarled as he laid down a withering hail of fire which Alpha Three was too slow to properly avoid. The Imperial craft, too late, tried to perform a split-S to escape, but the Wolfshead pilot had anticipated the move and was already firing at the empty space above the TIE, space that it quickly flew into. The New Republic flight leader grinned with satisfaction as he saw the bright's shields go out, its hull beginning to take a beating.

Abruptly, the enemy fighter straightened out, sailing serenely into space.

"Awww, his flight controls are busted. Isn't that just too bad," Drake remarked over the comm, just a little too smugly. He settled into position on the hapless Imperial's tail, thumbing his weapon selector over to proton torpedoes.

"Lead, watch out, Alpha One's behind you!" Sacart yelled, although the warning came too late. Green laserfire starting eating Drake's rear shields as the Imperial flight leader sideslipped in behind him, opening fire and twisting to stay with the Republic pilot that was trailing his wingman.

Gritting his teeth, Drake thumbed the trigger, pausing only to ensure that the torpedo got safely away on a streak of blue flame before wildly spinning his X-wing out of the Imperial's fire.

The torpedo sailed straight into the back of Alpha Three even as the Imperial pilot started his run into hyperspace. The heavy proton warhead ripped the already damaged fighter to shreds, forcing Alpha One to pull away to avoid being damaged by the fireball and wreckage.

Drake whooped over the comm.

"Alpha Three's down," he said unnecessarily, adjusting his shields and reinforcing them with energy from his lasers. "My shields aren't looking too healthy, though."

"Alpha Two's pulling away, Lead," Sacart's voice reported in response. "He's opened his engines wide up, and we just don't have the speed to catch him."

Drake muttered something that his wingmates couldn't catch.

"The coward. Never mind, form on me and we'll take the leader."

"Seventeen."

"Two-three."

Drake pulled away as the two craft approached, slotting into a triangular formation.

"Well done, guys," he said with a nod. "Stay tight now, looks like Alpha One wants to come and play. Two-three, you see an opportunity for a missile shot, take it, okay? My shields aren't healthy, and by the looks of it, Seventeen's are non-existent."

"Roger, Lead." Razor's voice was cool and calm again.

"And I'm hanging in there, Lead," Sacart assured him.

"Okay, good," Drake replied, keeping an eye on the range to his target, Alpha One, as it raced downwards through four clicks. "Let's make this quick and clean, because the other Imp is even as we speak trying to come around and finish us," the Wolfshead flight leader continued. "When this guy gets close...say, just under a click, break in opposite directions, then spin around and toast him." Four clicks acknowledged the Arrebnacian's plan, and the tight Wolfshead formation, showing its fragile status in a series of scorch marks along three snubfighter hulls, angled directly for the lone Imperial TIE Advanced that was also streaking purposefully towards it.

At two and a half clicks the shooting started, ten red laser blasts lancing out every two seconds and being answered by four green ones. The Wolfshead pilots quickly switched their deflector shields to full front, and the groping green laser blasts harmlessly splashed off their shields. The TIE Advanced fired a concussion missile just as the range reached point nine clicks and Drake shouted, "Break!"

The Wolfshead formation scattered like startled gazelles, but the concussion missile looped around and came after Sacart's fighter, homing in on the desperately jinking X-wing with deadly accuracy.

"Lead, I've picked up a-" Sacart's voice dissolved into a crackle of static as the warhead clipped his port wing, exploding and taking the whole X-wing with it. Drake's eyes closed briefly, and his fist clenched around the stick in anger.

"Stay focussed, Two-three," he said through gritted teeth. "Let's burn him." Alpha One was flying an odd mixture of offensive and defensive flying now, and doing quite well at it, Drake noted sourly.

Well, what did you expect? A rookie performance? he asked himself with a scowl. A few of the combined A-wing and X-wing red laser blasts were finding their mark, but not many.

"He's just too damned good, Lead," Razor's voice said curtly. "Any tricks you know of that can-" She stopped talking with an abrupt shriek as the almost-forgotten Alpha Two suddenly appeared on her starboard beam, sending deadly laser blasts into the body of her small fighter, rocking it and reducing its shields to red lines before she could pull away. With a roar of determination and rage, Drake broke off his pursuit of Alpha One and pointed his nose directly at the oncoming Alpha Two, diverting energy from his shields to his lasers to give him full powered blasts. Thumbing his fire selector mode switch over to single fire, he let the X-wing's four laser cannons cycle through at an incredible speed, laying down a hail of fire which the TIE Advanced flew through undaunted, still firing precise quad bursts of its own. Drake's other hand flicked his shields back onto full front, hoping that he'd win this particular game of chicken.

So far, his hope didn't look like it was going to be fulfilled.

The TIE Advanced pilot bored in on the X-wing, still firing, and the X-wing flew ahead to meet the challenge. With a flash of inspiration, Drake hastily selected proton torpedoes and dumbfired, sending a torpedo towards the oncoming fighter. At half a click, the Imperial evidently didn't like his chances of shooting it down in time, rapidly breaking off.

Drake sighed noisily in relief and rebalanced his shields, only then noting with alarm that he didn't have any.

"Shields are down, Two-three," he said tersely, redirecting all of his stored laser energy into his shields to bring them into the red, at least.

"They're forming up for the kill, Lead," Razor's voice came back, sounding subdued at last.

"We're not finished, yet, Two-three," Drake smiled. He still had one or two tricks up his sleeve.

"They're good, but they're not *that* good," Raiven observed smugly to his flight leader. Vyper's reply was immediate.

"Don't you bet on it," he said dryly. Raiven grinned. Let Vyper think whatever he wanted. *An X-wing and an A-wing, virtually without shields, against two TIE Avengers?* he thought, unconsciously adopting the Imperial name for the craft he was flying. His own shields were in the yellow, but he doubted that Drake or Razor were going to be able to do much about that before they both got waxed. *No wonder the Republic has such a hard time against the Avengers. Their fighters just aren't good enough.*

"Close it up," Vyper ordered quietly. "Let's go in together."

"Copy that, One," the young Imperial responded, pulling his craft into tight formation off Vyper's starboard wing.

Sorry, Drake, but it looks like you lose. Raiven allowed himself a grin. *Too bad.*

Wolfshead Fourteen was at that moment trying to formulate a combat strategy in the ten seconds he had before the two racing flight groups got within mutual weapons range.

"Two-three, try and get a lock on Alpha Two," he said, making a snap decision.

"I'll dumb fire a torpedo or two to distract Alpha One so that he can't lock on you."

"Affirmative, Lead," Razor answered him without question. Inside her cockpit, she licked her lips nervously. *Weapons range in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1...*

The laserfire started immediately, although this time Razor and Drake had to juke to avoid it, as their shields struggled to recharge. An intermittent beep filled Razor's cockpit as she strove to keep her reticle close to Alpha Two - Raiven's ship - while avoiding the green laser blasts that seemed to fill the space around her A-wing. Suddenly she heard the tell-tale warbling chirp of her in-flight computer telling her that someone was trying to acquire her for a missile lock. She opened her mouth to warn Drake, but shut it as a roar off her port side announced a proton torpedo launch. Drake's nose dipped slightly, then three seconds later another torpedo streaked away, followed a few seconds later by another.

Vyper's eyebrows raised slightly. *Nice try, Fourteen, but that's not going to get you anywhere,* he thought. Selecting his laser cannons, he switched to double fire and targeted the first torpedo, carefully lining up his targeting reticle before firing and destroying it. He almost smiled as he selected the next, watching out of the corner of his eye as Raiven accelerated ahead, sending a flurry of laser

blasts to cover his flight leader as the latter methodically destroyed Drake's sluggish torpedoes.

"I've got a lock! Firing!" Razor announced, as Raiven's TIE Advanced pulled ahead of Vyper's to protect the latter. Likewise, Drake took energy from his lasers and gave it to his engines, giving him a burst of speed that carried him forward. He began firing his cannons at Raiven, as two concussion missiles, fired singly two seconds apart, flamed away from Razor's A-wing and angled for the rapidly approaching Imperial.

"You little..." Raiven breathed, then raised his voice sharply. "One, I've got incoming!" Vyper clicked twice in response, turning his attention away from the cloud of debris which was all that remained of Drake's third and final torpedo. Immediately he turned his fighter and began firing at Drake's, which flashed past at high speed and then curved around to try and get on Raiven's tail. Razor, on the other side of the melee, was also bringing her A-wing around - very quickly, Vyper noted with admiration - to finish what she'd tried to start with her two missiles. Keeping his attention on the X-wing, Vyper accelerated and closed the distance between himself and Fourteen's tail.

Raiven remained calm, grimacing slightly as more of Drake's fire poured into his shields, but methodically he selected the first of Razor's missiles and fired. The missile disintegrated, but at that moment his computer squealed, indicating that his rear shields were out. The young pilot's hand darted over to rebalance his shields before his hull could be badly damaged.

The second that took was all the remaining missile needed, and it smashed into the front of the TIE Advanced's cockpit, destroying its front shields and inflicting hull damage. Raiven cursed as he dove forward, channelling all his stored laser energy into his shields and rebalancing them again, then juking desperately as he flew totally defensive.

Drake swore violently to himself as his own rear shields collapsed under Vyper's fire.

"...your status...not...d..." Razor's voice crackled over the barely functioning comm. Drake didn't bother to reply, instead trying to dodge Vyper's attacks to avoid further hull damage. He glanced upward at Razor, who was now firing at Vyper and trying to get him off the Arrebnacian's tail, and then to his left at Raiven, who, having escaped Drake and Razor's attentions for a moment at least, seemed to be turning slightly to re-enter the fight.

No, you don't. Setting his lips in a firm line, Drake redirected all power to his engines, shooting away in a burst of speed as he juked to avoid Vyper's fire. The latter, startled, started to compensate, as Razor adjusted her own speed to keep up with him.

"He's pulled away from me, Two," Vyper's voice reported calmly. "Looks like he's after you, now..." Raiven clicked his acknowledgement and nodded.

Here we go.

He redirected just a touch of his precious shield energy into his lasers - just enough to destroy his erstwhile wingmate's fighter.

Vyper stopped firing at Drake as Razor moved into position on his tail. The X-wing was getting away too quickly, and it was time to attend to this A-wing before she was the death of him. He held his course steady for two more seconds, then quickly retarded the throttle to a third, spinning almost on the spot and then accelerating directly at Wolfshead Two-three.

"Lead, what the hell are you *doing*?" Razor asked quizzically over the comm. To her utter amazement, she saw Drake's S-foils closing.

"Are you on a death wish, *sir*?" she asked, anger creeping into her voice a little.

"Don't worry about us, Two-three," Drake answered her evenly, although his voice was punctuated by static. "Just concentrate on Vyper and get out alive. That's an order."

Razor scowled and was about to ask the young flight leader exactly *how* she was supposed to kill Vyper, who alone of the four fighters currently had a good shield status, but she was forced to roll out of some incoming laserfire instead.

Drake glared intently at Raiven's fighter as his S-foils closed.

Shouldn't be long now.

"Goodbye, mate," he whispered with a devilish grin, redirecting all of his slowly depleting laser energy into his shields.

Raiven's eyes narrowed as his gloved finger began to tighten on the trigger.

What the hell does he think he's-

"Oh, bugger." He tried to pull his TIE Advanced off course, away from the head-on bearing that he'd been following, as he suddenly realised what Drake was doing.

Too late.

Drake whooped fiercely as he made a slight, delicate adjustment on the stick, pulling his nose up slightly as Raiven finally began to turn.

"No way, you're too late," he growled, as the two craft collided.

Razor glanced down as she saw Drake's X-wing plough nose first into the underside of Raiven's TIE Advanced, cutting it in half. The explosion of Raiven's fighter quickly enveloped the X-wing and tore it into shards of flaming debris.

Razor exhaled slowly.

Now it's just me.

She and Vyper were in a twisting, turning melee with neither one really getting the upper hand. The TIE Advanced and the A-wing were both in the hands of able pilots, and the two craft were evenly matched.

Razor gasped in surprise as a huge shape suddenly filled her view, unknowingly mirroring the sound that Vyper made in his own cockpit.

A Calamari Cruiser sailed into view, its gunners opening fire instantaneously. Before Vyper even knew what was happening, his shields had collapsed. Abandoning Razor, he turned and accelerated away at full speed, firing his last concussion missile.

Razor cringed at the computerised shriek that told her of an incoming missile. Without thought, her right hand reached over and pulled the hyperspace lever. Her A-wing slewed around and began its run into hyperspace.

Vyper watched angrily as the little A-wing began to pick up speed, outstripping his missile and streaking away, then disappearing into light speed. He cursed as another turbolaser blast shook his fighter, which was about to start its own run. His anger switched to alarm as his fighter ground to a halt at another red blast. His engines and hyperdrive had both been taken out, and his fighter was a sitting duck.

I'm dead, was his last thought before the cruiser's gunners found their target and his fighter dissolved into fire, then blackness.

The simulator pods hissed open and Raiven beat Vyper out of his by a hair's breadth.

"What the hell was that?" the younger man demanded of the assembled spectators. His only reply was shaken heads, and he turned expectantly with hands on hips as Drake slowly climbed out of the simulator, his helmet under his arm.

"You don't know anything about that, do you?" he asked, his eyes blazing. Infuriatingly, Drake just smiled.

"About what?" he asked innocently.

"You know damned well what," Raiven countered hotly. "That cruiser showing up. Just what do you call that?"

"Where I'm from, I'd call that initiative and original thinking," Drake answered him coolly.

"And I'd call it cheating," Raiven growled, hardly noticing the smiles that were forming on some spectator's faces.

"How did you do it, anyway?" Vyper asked. He wasn't taking this all quite as seriously as Raiven, although the young man *did* have a funny, almost mischevious look in his eye, but still he had to admit that he was a bit miffed. Not to mention curious.

"It wasn't hard," Drake explained, playing to his audience a little now. "A little reprogramming of my own, plus I got Ledner and Arpin to help me. If I manually closed my S-foils, then the cruiser was programmed to come and render assistance. Which reminds me, Mike," he added with an impish grin, "I think you should beat some loyalty into that R2 unit of yours. I didn't even have to offer him a bribe. Giving you a hard time seemed satisfaction enough for him."

Raiven snorted.

"I think you're right," he agreed, "I might borrow a hydrospanner off Hanniuska at her earliest possible-"

"Now, now," Drake admonished him. "I can't let you do it. You see, he thought you might try something like that, and he made me promise him protection." At this Raiven laughed.

"You may have been clever enough to think of the little trick with the cruiser-" he began, when Drake interrupted.

"Ah ha! So that's it, is it? A little jealous, are we?" Raiven grinned and studiously ignored the tittering of the assembled spectators.

"Jealous? Of course not. Personally, *I'd* never try such an underhanded trick as that," he said archly. "I'd prefer to rely on flying skills, thank you very much."

Drake nodded.

"I see. So that's how I managed to kill you, is it? Because you could only rely on those flying skills of yours?" Raiven's eyes glinted wickedly and he was about to retort when Foxfire stepped forward, wearing a smile of her own.

"Which reminds me, Lieutenant, is *that* how I can expect you to fly when you get in a tight spot? Going kamikaze?" she asked, in her most commanding officerial tone. Drake cleared his throat.

"Well, ma'am," he said stiffly, "you can expect that if a vital mission comes down to the wire like that, I'll selflessly sacrifice my fighter, my droid, and my life, heroically flinging myself against the odds in order to obtain vict-"

"Rubbish. 'Heroic', indeed!" Raiven scoffed with a chuckle, and several others joined in.

"Just because you'd tuck your TIE Advanced between your legs and run, Raiven, that's no reason to cast doubt on my courage or honour," Drake said with a sniff.

"Oh, knock it off, you two," Foxfire said with a laugh. "Drake, bear in mind I'm going to be watching your flying closely from now on - *very* closely." Drake opened his mouth to frame a reply, but Foxfire quickly turned to Razor.

"And to you, Razor, that was well done. You've taken on some great pilots from the squadron - and at the end of it all, you were the only one alive," she said, nudging Vyper, who pretended to be grumpy without really succeeding.

"Thankyou, ma'am," Razor acknowledged with a nod and a smile. "I couldn't have done it without the others, though." She glanced at Sacart and Cardinal, the other human pilots from her simulator team, and then finally at her exercise flight leader, Drake. The latter smiled brilliantly back at her and winked. Razor cleared her throat and averted her eyes slightly.

"Maybe so, but you held your own against some people who know their stuff," Foxfire insisted. "Let's go into the briefing room and we'll see just how things worked out and critique them," she finished, leading the way out.

Raiven and Drake walked out last, just behind Razor and Cardinal, who were discussing the mission before Cardinal had been killed.

"This ought to be interesting," the former Imperial murmured with a smug smile.

"Wonder what they'll say about your little do-or-die maneuver?" Drake flashed him a cheeky grin.

"I don't really care," he answered smugly, "so long as it's someone other than you doing the debrief." Raiven chuckled and threw him a playful punch.

"Yeah? We'll see."

[Pilot's Quarters, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*, 00:09]

Vyper jerked awake, drenched in sweat. The pain was terrible. He stumbled to the refresher and vomited. The abdominal cramps had started earlier that day and were getting worse. Dressing slowly, he opened his door and stumbled towards the medical bay.

The medical bay door swished open quietly to reveal a darkened bay – the doctor was obviously off shift, and with no patients to tend to, the medical droids were shut down. Vyper stumbled inside, his presence triggering one of the droids – MD-42, who had accompanied Vyper on the rescue a few days earlier - stood motionless at the end of the room.

“Major Stauber, are you in distress?”

Vyper nodded. “Stomach. Agony.”

The droid guided the pilot to a bed and rapidly began the diagnostic process. It also activated another of its colleagues, MD-44, to assist.

“Should we awake the Doctor?” asked MD-44.

“Let us attempt primary diagnosis first.”

Using scanners and rapid testing, the two droids quickly pinned down the cause of Vyper's discomfort.

“Major, you are suffering from acute food poisoning. You should have come as soon as the symptoms were first apparent. We're going to begin a series of treatment but you won't be flying for a few days.”

[Communications Room, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Raiven stuck his head around the door, scanning for any potential trouble – most likely Foxfire or the Captain. Upon seeing none, he stepped inside and made his way towards A-PD5, the ship's communications droid.

“Hey, Twinky, you got a minute?”

The droid turned. “Greetings, Lieutenant Rovardi. I have many minutes of time, and am willing to make several available for your use.” The pilot rolled his eyes and pressed on.

“Could you deliver a message for me?”

“Of course, Lieutenant. Communications is one of my primary functions. To whom am I delivering this message and what will it be?”

[Medical Bay, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

“So, how bad is he?” asked Foxfire.

“He will recover completely,” answered the doctor. “However, it was close. He was close to shock and could have suffered permanent organ damage had we

caught it any later. The treatment will leave him drowsy for a day or so, but he should be ready to return to flight duty shortly afterwards.”

Foxfire thanked the doctor and left. In the corridor outside, she ran into Ibero, who would be taking over Vyper’s duties until the XO was fully recovered.

“What is it with you men, anyway?”

“Eh?” replied the Intelligence Officer and temporary XO, confused.

“Why do you never visit the doctor unless you’re at death’s door and your legs are about to fall off?” said Foxfire, crossly. “You’re too bloody stubborn, that’s your problem!”

Ibero rapidly ran through several possible replies to her comment in his mind, several of which would have earned him a court martial in most New Republic fighter squadrons, but wisely kept his mouth shut as the squadron CO stormed away down the corridor.

[Pilot’s Quarters, Strike Carrier *Wolf’s Lair*]

A-PD5 shuffled along the corridor until he reached the correct cabin, and rapped his metal fingers on the door. It opened to reveal a half-naked Drake, who looked up and down the corridor before settling his gaze on the droid.

“Yes?” he asked – rather testily, thought A-PD5.

The droid made a noise like someone clearing their throat and began. “Sir! Sir! I’ve isolated the reverse power flux coupling!”

“What?!?”

“Sir! Sir! I’ve – “

“I heard you the first time. What are you talking about?”

“I was asked to deliver this message by Lieutenant Rovardi. He also asked me to say ‘Hi Jarn, sorry to interrupt’, but I don’t know why – these aren’t Flight Officer Stynter’s quarters, are they?” asked the droid, rhetorically.

Drake closed his eyes and bumped his head gently against the doorframe.

“Okay, thanks Twinky. Message received.”

The droid turned and shuffled off as Drake closed the door. He turned to see Razor sat up in his bunk, biting a pillow to avoid laughing out loud.

“I think he got you that time,” she said, replacing the pillow.

“Yeah, very funny. I’ll get him back.”

“Later,” replied the A-Wing pilot. “You can do it later...”

[Flight Deck, Strike Carrier *Wolf’s Lair*, the following day]

“Okay, Raiven, you work with Arachnoid on the *Al’yin’ia*,” ordered Ibero, “Drake, Sparks, Sledgehammer, try and get finished with the bomber. I’ve got to help out Foxfire while Vyper recovers.”

“How’s he doing, anyway?”

“He’s juiced up on the Force-knows-what at the moment, but he’ll be okay in a day or so,” replied Ibero.

"If you want to borrow some money off him, do it now – he probably won't remember lending it to you," added Sledgehammer with a grin.

The pilots laughed.

"Seriously, though," said Sparks, concerned, "what happened to him?"

Ibero shrugged. "Food poisoning, apparently."

"Granite been making his cocktails again?" asked Arachnoid. "Remember his, what was it, 'Highland Surprise'?"

The veteran pilots in the circle shuddered, leaving Raiven and Sledgehammer looking puzzled.

Drake noticed and spoke up. "So called because it felt like a mountain had fallen on your head the following day," he explained.

"Ahh – there's the 'Highland'," said Sledgehammer.

Raiven continued, "Don't tell me – he didn't explain that till the following day – hence the 'surprise', correct?"

The four veteran pilots shuddered again.

"Sounds like the Granite we've all come to know and love."

"Well, as far as I know he hasn't, but I'm not going to accept a drink from him if he offers..."

The group broke up as the pilots headed off to fulfil their respective duties.

Drake caught up with his wingman and tapped him on his shoulder.

"Very funny."

"Ah!" replied Raiven. "You got my message then?"

"Yeah. You have an absolutely incredible sense of timing, you know."

"And what did your better half think of the interruption?"

"Oh, she thought it was absolutely hilarious."

"Thank the Force for that. I'd hate to have her pissed off at me. I'd probably just shoot myself – it would be easier and less painful in the long run," commented Raiven with a laugh.

"I think I'd have to agree with that," said Drake with a grin. "See you later."

[Wolfseye Group Ready Room, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

"Any questions?" asked Hardrive.

Joker and Hawk shared a look, and then turned and shook their heads.

"OK, fly straight and shoot straighter."

At this dismissal, both pilots stood and saluted casually, and headed for the door.

"Well, while you guys go off flying, Tzadkiel and I have to sit in Alert 5 with Solo and Sacart," commented the newly promoted Lieutenant Commander, grinning.

"Enjoy yourselves, because you'll be sat around doing it tomorrow."

Hawk grimaced slightly while Joker smiled.

"Great!" she said, "It'll give me a chance to work on my sabacc skills."

"The Force knows you need it," replied Hawk with a grin.

"Hey, I thought it was the Commander of Coins!"

"It was the Idiot!" replied Hawk, who could teach a Corellian new tricks.

“Not my fault if Commanders look like Idiots,” said Joker with a sly grin as the two left the briefing room.

“Heh. Yeah,” replied Hardrive. It took him an extra couple of seconds to realise. “Hey!”

The turbolift at the end of the corridor took the two laughing pilots to the hangar deck, where they headed for their fighters, already undergoing launch preparations by the technicians. Halfway across the deck, Joker spotted half a TIE Bomber – the right side pod containing the cockpit - sat in one of the adjacent bays.

“Wow,” she said, pointing. “I don’t think much of yours, Hawk.”

“Funny. It’s the wreckage the investigation team managed to pull in from Talonis.”

Joker checked her chrono. “We’ve still got a half hour. Let’s take a quick look.”

The two sauntered over to the bay, number 3, and peered inside. A pair of booted feet stuck out from under the hull of the bomber, and Drake was clearly visible through the cracked viewport, head down and working on the flight controls. A thick cable ran from inside the cockpit, through the open top hatch and plugged into the side of Ledner, Drake’s R2 unit.

Joker handed her helmet to Hawk, who rolled his eyes but accepted it wordlessly. She walked carefully but silently across the bay with a skill not taught to most pilots – a holdover from her days as an Imperial Commando. Upon reaching the Bomber wreckage, she paused in front of the viewport and then suddenly knocked on it, hard. Drake’s head snapped up at the sudden noise, banging his head on an overhead display. There was a similar bump from under the hull of the bomber as Sledgehammer jumped. He scooted out on a repulsor trolley, rubbing his head even as Drake clambered from the bomber’s cockpit doing the same, while the R2 unit laughed its electronic guffaws.

“Joker,” said Drake. “I should have known.”

“Hi, guys,” she replied. “I see you’re glad to see me.”

The two men scowled theatrically.

“How goes the investigation?” asked Hawk, who was leaning nonchalantly on the doorway.

“Slowly,” replied Drake. He rapped on the top of the TIE with his knuckles. “Say hello to Delta 5. Stationed aboard the ISD *Dominance*, its unlucky pilot killed when one of the Talonian defenders cut it in half with a blast to the main spar.” He pointed to the blackened stump of the pylon that normally connected the two hulls of a TIE Bomber together.

“We can give you information on the craft itself, and the pilots who have flown it for the past two months. Construction date, maintenance schedule, even a fuel breakdown for engine tuning adjustments, it’s all in here. Ledner’s trying to crack the communications codes for the comlink system now.”

Hawk nodded and checked his chrono. “Joker, we’d better make a move. We’ve got a patrol to fly.”

“You two are flying together?” asked Sledgehammer, eyebrows raised. “I thought you usually flew with Tzad?”

Hawk shrugged. "Makes no difference to me, as long as my wingman covers my back."

"Well, I'll have to. It's definitely your best side," said Joker, blowing him a kiss with a grin.

The two A-wing pilots left the bay and headed over to where their A-wings were parked, as several technicians ran preflight checks on the starfighters. Twenty minutes later, the checks were complete. The pilots lit off the engines, bringing them to idle to power the repulsorlifts, and taxied into position on the forward – port elevator. Feeling cold, Joker leaned over slightly and turned up the heat on the cockpit's environmental control system. Twisting the heater control, she turned it to maximum to warm up the cockpit. As the blast of warm air washed over her face, she smelt a sweet, pleasant smell like Wielu nuts.

What the? She thought, then realised where she'd smelt it before.

Slapping her harness release, Joker opened the panel under the air duct. Fastened there were a quartet of grey rectangular blocks, connected via a small black box to what appeared to be the engine ignition system cabling.

Her hands went straight to the emergency canopy release even as she felt the elevator begin to move slowly downwards.

"Hawk! Bomb! Clear the area!" she shouted into the helmet mounted comlink as the explosive bolts blew the canopy clear of her fighter. She vaulted out onto the upper surface of the wedge shaped craft and ran to the portside wing. Jumping the two metres to the upper surface of Hawk's craft without pausing and aiming a kick at his front canopy seemed to be enough to persuade him that this wasn't a prank.

He pulled his emergency canopy release and released his harness, ignoring the alarmed calls over the comlink asking what was happening. The calls redoubled as Joker reached the edge of the platform elevator and, without pausing, jumped straight off the side to the deck below. Hawk leapt out of his seat and charged for the same edge that his wingman just jumped from. As he leaped from the platform, the accumulator system on the bomb in Joker's fighter reached capacity. Activated when Joker had started her engines, the system dumped its meagre store of energy into the bomb's detonators.

The explosion tore the lightweight fighter apart, propelling shrapnel in all directions. Worse were the secondary explosions as the volatile starfighter fuel in the crafts' tanks detonated with a bright orange flash, and streaks as several concussion missiles in the forward magazines punched through the forward hulls. Hawk was in the air as the shock wave caught him, propelling him forward even as orange flame licked over his back. The blast pushed him totally off balance, slamming him into the deck, hard.

Ledner began to make a sound like an electronic fanfare. Sledgehammer popped out from under the TIE, puzzled.

"What the hell?" asked the B-wing pilot. "Has he cracked the codes?"

"Yep," replied Drake, "he's just a little excited, that's all."

"What was that noise he made?"

“Umm. Nothing,” said Drake, sheepishly. “It’s just mumble mumble mumble.”
“Sorry, what was that?”

Drake cleared his throat. “Advance Arrebnac Fair’,” he said, a little embarrassed.
“You see, my supervisor back when I was part of Arrebnac Security was a tot-“
Drake was cut off by bright orange flash accompanied by a fearful shiver as Joker and Hawk’s A-wings exploded on the elevator behind him.

“What the hell was that?” shouted Drake over the ringing in his ears. The two investigators ran towards the elevator opening in the deck, along with various techs and deckhands, and looked down.

The elevator platform had evidently lost power and fallen towards the deck below, until the emergency repulsors had kicked in. Mounted under the deck, they had acted as designed and halted the fall a couple of metres above the surface of the deck, bringing the warped platform and its burning cargo down to safety.

On the elevator, the burning wreckage of the two A-wings were visible. The leftmost craft – Joker’s – had simply disintegrated. Hawk’s craft had been torn practically in two, with the front half left dangling precariously close to falling over the edge of the elevator platform and through the main flight deck magcon field. The flames burned brightly, spewing thick, black smoke that began to obscure the view as it gathered under the emergency magcon field triggered by the blast. “Let’s go!” yelled Sledgehammer, running for the nearest turbolift, one of those built into the nearby sidewall. Above the lift, a red light flashed, indicating that it was out of action.

“Alex! This one over here!” shouted Drake, pointing towards one at the back of Bay 1. A pair of technicians working on one of A-wings in the bay had already called the lift, allowing the two pilots to pile into the lift car, followed by numerous deckhands and mechanics, until the car was filled beyond normal capacity. Most carried tools, some small fire extinguishers. As the doors opened on the flight deck, some of the men and women fanned out, those with extinguishers using them on smaller pieces of flaming debris, others teaming up to ready the larger fire hoses and other firefighting equipment on the flight deck. The two pilots went straight towards the elevator with the majority of the others, searching for survivors. A shout was raised from behind the wreckage, and a med team rushed forward. Drake sprinted around the side of the elevator, dodging pieces of wreckage scattering the deck, meeting up with Raiven and Arachnoid, who had been working on the *Al’yin’ia* on the flight deck.

Lying on the deck were the two A-wing pilots. Joker was sat upright, obviously in pain from her right leg, which was bent at an unnatural angle at the ankle, but Hawk seemed to be in worse condition, lying unconscious with blackened burns covering his upper back and shoulders.

Drake crouched by Joker. “Keep still, Diana, or you’ll make it worse.”

Joker managed a smile through the pain. “Damn, I was just about to jump up and run around the deck, too.”

Raiven headed over to Hawk, who was being tended by a pair of medics.

“Come on, let’s get him up to the medical bay,” said one of the medics, looking up at the pilot stood over him “Can you give us a hand?”

“Sure.” He turned to Sledgehammer. “Come on, Alex.”

Sledgehammer stood, rooted to the deck, obviously in shock.

“Alex! Come on!”

The B-wing pilot shook his head clear and jogged over, crouching opposite Raiven by Hawk’s legs.

“Okay,” said the medic. “On three... 1... 2... 3... Lift!”

The four Republic personnel lifted the unconscious pilot onto the nearby repulsorlift stretcher and laid him on his side.

“Okay, move, move!” said the female medic, and the pair ran across the deck towards the lifts in the aft bulkhead, pushing the stretcher from the sides even as they began treatment.

Raiven walked over to where Joker was being attended by another pair of medics. The Quarren medic was affixing a splint to the damaged ankle while the other manoeuvred another stretcher behind her. Lowering it to the deck allowed Joker to shuffle aboard with some assistance and within a minute, she was also on her way to sickbay to join her unconscious wingman.

The fires were now under control – the *Lair’s* firefighting capabilities were phenomenal – and soon the clearup would begin in earnest.

“What the hell happened?” asked Raiven, walking up beside Drake. The other turned around.

“Good question,” he said. “But I get the feeling we’re going to have to find out.”

[Medical Bay, Strike Carrier *Wolf’s Lair*]

“Are you sure?” asked Foxfire, intently.

“My fighter is currently spread across the hangar bay in kit form, Colonel, courtesy of about 4 kilos of Charlie-Four-Seven. It was a bomb, no doubt about it. It was hidden inside the left-side air duct. The only reason I spotted it was because I turned the heat up – C47 gives off a sweet smell like Wielu nuts when heated.” Joker winced as Doctor Al Saruff gently tested her right ankle.

“This is most disturbing,” said Colonel Gen’yaa, who was pacing around the sickbay. Normally calm and collected, she was still a little shocked by the death of her old friend a few days earlier.

“*Disturbing!* Finding a Kalt snake in your bed is *disturbing*, Captain. Almost being blown into pieces alongside your wingman is beyond disturbing!”

Gen’yaa stopped pacing and raised an eyebrow at Joker’s tirade. The pilot took a deep breath and nodded a wordless apology to the *Wolf’s Lair’s* captain. The Bothan continued.

“I’m also beginning to wonder if the incidents earlier in the week were accidents.”

Joker nodded. “Sledgehammer’s crash, Vyper’s illness, the incident with the Iberyian Aid supplies? You think there may have been foul play involved?”

Gen’yaa nodded and turned to Foxfire. “Well, Lieutenant Colonel?”

The Wolfshead pilot was stood with a look of intense concentration on her face, showing no signs of having heard her.

“Colonel Schroeder?”

Foxfire started and turned to Gen'yaa. "Sorry, ma'am. I almost had something there, but it's slipped away now. It'll come back to me, I'm sure."

"Well, the question is, what next? We have to keep the cause of the explosion a secret."

"The only people with access to the fighters are the deck crew, and the pilots," interjected Joker. "That's a lot of people, but one of them knows who did it."

[Command Wing Ready Room, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

The other three healthy members of the squadron's command wing were seated around the table in the ready room when Foxfire walked in. The windows overlooking the flight deck were covered by their heavy blast shutters, cutting out the distraction as the pilots got down to work.

"Okay," said Foxfire. "Let's start with a squadron Status Report, please."

"Personnel," said Torpedo, "we are currently at a strength of 19 operational pilots, with Vyper, Hawk and Joker all off flight status."

"Assets," said Moose after the Operations Officer had finished, "Wolfgang flight are at 4 X-wings, Wolfseye is down to 6 A-wings, and Wolfclaw has 4 B-wings. Command Wing stands at 3 A-wings and 1 X-wing as Vyper is down. Adding his fighter to the reserve pool, we have a further X-wing, 2 A-wings and 3 B-wings available, but until our casualties have recovered, no one to fly them."

"Support," added Ibero, "Lynx Commando are ready and raring to go. Squadron maintenance and logistics personnel are nominal. The *Bear*, *Unicorn* and *Troubadour* are ready to fly, as are the *Bannockburn* and Raiven's T/A. The *Al'yin'ia* can fly but I wouldn't like to take it into combat."

Foxfire nodded and took a deep breath. "I'm afraid I have some bad news now. I have reason to believe that there is a saboteur at work on board."

The other members of the command wing exchanged glances, then Ibero spoke up.

"Sledgehammer, Vyper, Joker, Hawk? We know. Or at least, we suspected as much."

Foxfire nodded again, not particularly surprised her officers had been discussing the occurrences. She did not have to ask if they had been discreet about it.

"First up, we have Sledgehammer's accident. I asked Mar if there had been anything unusual about his fighter, she said no."

"I take it we're assuming Hanniuska can be trusted?" said Ibero.

Foxfire sighed and sat back. "We have to. She's been with us for a long time, and has the ability to kill every single member of this squadron like that -" she snapped her fingers "- without difficulty. No, we have to trust her." Foxfire looked around at the other senior officers, accepting each of their nods of agreement in turn.

"Next up, Joker and Hawk. The explosion was caused by a bomb, no doubt about that. Joker found it fitted under the control console of her A-wing, next to the ventilation system."

"Hence the quick exit, I assume?" asked Moose.

“Shame Hawk wasn’t as fast,” commented Torpedo, sitting back and pouring himself a drink.

“I’m sure he’ll agree once he’s out of his bacta bath,” replied Foxfire, dryly. “This will be all over the ship in no time, and that’s not going to do our morale any good.”

“What about Vyper?” asked Ibero. “I take it that his illness isn’t accidental?”

Foxfire nodded again. “After what Joker told me, I talked to the doctor. The toxin in his system can indeed be found in bad food, hence the Med droid’s diagnosis. But you can also synthesise it pretty easily and administer it as a poison. At the moment we have no way of knowing, at least not until Vyper is a little more coherent.”

“So, the next question is, who the hell did these things?” asked Ibero.

“And a good question that is,” said Moose, sitting forward intently. “The incident with Joker’s fighter suggests that it’s a pilot or member of the maintenance crew. No one else could get access to the fighters without raising suspicions.”

Foxfire picked up the datapad in front of her. “If that’s correct, we’ve got a few possibilities. Besides the three pilots we brought on board at Ibery, we also got a larger maintenance crew when we transferred to the *‘Lair.’*”

“Or, we could have brought the saboteur aboard with the last wave of recruits and they’ve deliberately laid low until a new crop has arrived, in order to allay suspicion. Or it might not be a pilot or maintenance crew after all, it’s not beyond the realms of possibility that another crewmember could have sneaked onto the hangar deck unobserved,” said Ibero. “I don’t think we can start pointing fingers right now.”

“No-one is pointing fingers, Dario,” said Foxfire, gently. “But it is possible, you must agree.”

Ibero nodded.

“So, what do we know about our newest recruits?” asked Torpedo.

“OK, Raiven is an ex-Imperial, with a good record both before and after his defection to the Alliance. He served aboard the *Katarina* for nearly a year before he transferred here. Hell, we promoted him to Lieutenant on the strength of his personnel record and his actions with that pirate frigate,” said Foxfire, again reading from her datapad.

“Besides, we came across some more information regarding Raiven’s situation, correct?” added Ibero with a grin.

“Razor was with Firebrand Squadron, aboard the Frigate *Stalwart*. Somewhat controversial grounds for her transfer, according to her record and letter from her previous CO. It would seem that she and one of her fellow pilots didn’t get on well, with a spot of bullying, I suspect. Anyway, after she laid this guy out in front of the *Stalwart’s* captain, I think the involved parties agreed she should move on.”

“Sounds a little... contentious?” said Torpedo.

“And energetic, too,” added Moose, winking at Foxfire.

Foxfire cleared her throat and continued. “Sledgehammer is the least experienced of the pilots, coming straight in from training. Specialises in heavy assault – Y- and B-wings.”

“Sounds okay so far,” commented Moose with a grin.

“Well, he got very good scores, no problems getting on with people there. A pretty good flight cadet, it would seem.”

“None of them would strike me as an obvious threat,” said Ibero. “But then, they wouldn’t be very effective as enemy agents if they did, would they?”

“Sadly, there’s no rule that says the Imperials have to be stupid,” added Foxfire, checking her chrono. “I’m afraid we’re going to have to shelve this discussion for a while, we have other business to deal with.”

“The Imperials,” said Ibero with a sigh.

“I’m afraid so,” replied Foxfire. “Okay, the current news is that we still haven’t found any sign of the Imperial task force after they hit Redault. We managed to get an estimate of their exit vector but patrols along the path have come up blank. We might not be looking far enough, or more likely they’ve regrouped and changed course. I’ve ordered all of the pilots except the command wing and those pulling Alert duty to stand down and get some rest. We’ll be sending out two and only two patrols tonight and they’ll both be short.”

The puzzled looks on the faces of the command wing pilots faded into reluctant acceptance as they figured out what Foxfire was implying.

“Okay, so we’re going to have a busy night tonight. Why? What’s so special, and why will the patrols be short?” asked Torpedo.

“Well, we *do* have another intelligence-gathering asset on board, one which we haven’t mentioned yet,” replied the squadron CO, looking over at her temporary XO and Intelligence Officer. Ibero sat, a little confused while he considered this.

“Sorry, Colonel. What do you mean?”

Foxfire grinned. “Well, we did take delivery a couple of days ago of a lovely pair of Probe droids, good condition, low mileage.”

“Ah!” said Ibero, “the probes aboard the *Al’yin’ia*.”

“Correct. I’ve asked Hanniuska to fit one to each of a pair of B-wings. After this meeting, I’ll take one while Moose flies cover, and Ibero can cover Torpedo in the other. We’ll deploy them in two systems ready to catch the Imperials at it when they next attack.”

“Which two systems are we going to?” asked Moose.

“That is what we’re here to discuss,” replied Foxfire. She pressed several buttons on the control console in front of her, causing the holoprojector in the centre of the table to spring to life. Displayed was a map of the sector, with three systems marked with red.

“Now, we have Talonis, Picas and Redault...”

[Pilot’s Quarters, Strike Carrier *Wolf’s Lair*]

Arachnoid opened the door to the quarters he shared with Drake and walked inside. He was surprised to see that the lights were out and his friend already in his bunk.

As quietly as he could – he had just come from the Bomb Shelter – he began to work his way towards his bed. Two steps in, the door closed behind him, cutting

off the light, and causing him to trip over a pair of flight boots and land on the floor with a loud crash. The light snapped on.

"You're about as stealthy as a Star Destroyer, you know."

"Hi, Mike," said Arachnoid, picking himself up from the floor "Where's Dan?"

"He and Razor wanted a bit of privacy," said Raiven, sitting up in the bunk.

"You're not out on patrol like last night, and I have my own cabin, so I let them borrow it..."

"And in return?" asked Arachnoid, walking into the refresher.

"I'm sure I can think of *something*," said Raiven.

"You know, I can *hear* your grin from in here," commented Arachnoid.

After getting into his bunk, Arachnoid laid still, staring at the ceiling.

"Mike."

"Mmph?"

"I've been wondering. You're a new guy to the squadron. How the hell did you get one of the cabins to yourself?"

"Oh, that. I put about a rumour that I snore like a Gamorrean with a head cold."

"Um. Do you?"

"G'night, Commander."

[Captain's Ready Room, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*, the following day]

"Captain," said Foxfire with a solemn nod as she entered the ready room.

"Colonel. I called you here to discuss the current dispositions of the fighter assets," replied Gen'yaa, her tone icy.

Here we go... thought Foxfire, suppressing a grimace. "Yes, ma'am?"

"You withdrew most of the fighter patrols last night, with only patrols flown by the command wing. Patrol duty today is being pulled exclusively by Wolfgang's X-wings. What is going on here?"

"Well, Captain, we've been pushing the A-wings hard recently. We're running out of spare parts, particularly for the engines. I thought it best to reduce A-wing flights before we're forced to ground them all." Foxfire grimaced before continuing. "We've also deployed two probe droids to two systems we consider most likely to fall under Imperial attack."

"Probe droids? Where did you get those from?"

"Well, ma'am, they were on board the *Al'yin'ia*."

Gen'yaa sprung to her feet. "Who gave you permission to use those droids!?!"

"As wing commander aboard the *Wolf's Lair* it is my *duty* to use all craft and other assets aboard to find the Imperial forces," stated Foxfire forcefully.

Gen'yaa glowered as she sat down. "Those probe droids are the property of New Republic Intelligence. In future, you will ask permission before performing this kind of operation. Clear?"

Foxfire nodded contritely, and Gen'yaa continued.

"Now, where are they located?"

"The Neljun and Lancion systems."

Gen'yaa sat back and considered this for a few seconds, then nodded. "Sounds like you made some good choices. Operating tempos suggest that the Imperials will probably strike tomorrow, assuming they're using standard Coruscant time conventions."

Foxfire nodded and accepted the seat that the Bothan colonel indicated opposite the desk. "I've talked it over with Vyper, he says that it's standard practice for this kind of operation. Still, I wouldn't put it past Piett to pull something unusual out of his hat."

"How are your injured pilots?"

"Joker is flight capable now, the doctor cleared her ankle this morning. Vyper has agreed to undergo a bacta wash to his stomach to repair the damage to his stomach lining. He's a brave man, I doubt I could put up with that. He should be back on flight status tomorrow morning. As for Hawk, he's still in the bacta tank. The doctor will be monitoring him carefully, with a bit of luck we should be able to pull him out and have him fly tomorrow if we need him."

"So, the squadron should be up to full strength tomorrow? Let's just hope the Empire is considerate enough to wait until then to attack, shall we?"

Foxfire grimaced. "Have we had any luck tracking down our security leak?"

Gen'yaa shook her head. "No, so we're going to have to undertake some unusual steps for mission planning."

[Wolfgang Ready Room, New Republic Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Solo regarded the three pilots before him gravely.

"As we might expect," he said with a sigh, "we've been given the hardest mission of the lot."

"Naturally," Drake interrupted with a grin. It faded after Solo gave him a grave look.

"Wolfclaw will engage the Impstars, and Wolfeye will mainly cover them and eliminate all the fighter cover. Our task will be twofold, firstly to cover the Lynx transports and secondly to engage the *Victory* destroyers. If they aren't present our next targets are the frigates and any dropships or landing craft. Plus of course any targets of opportunity and fighter threats as necessary."

"So will Wolfeye be able to give us any cover or are we on our own?" Sacart asked.

Solo paused as he framed his reply. "Wolfeye's precise disposition and targets, along with those of Wolfclaw and the Command Wing, are not available."

"What!?" Drake exclaimed, shortly before the others could do the same. "What do you mean, 'Not available'?"

"I mean, *Lieutenant*," Solo said forcefully, "that for security purposes, we're not getting briefed on the precise battle plans of the other groups. They'll be there, and as I have said, will be going after the ISDs and fighters, but beyond that, I have been given no further information. Clear?"

Drake looked sullen. "Yes, sir."

"Just how are we supposed to engage the VSDs with only 24 torpedoes, sir?" Raiven asked, clearly as unhappy as Drake was about this disturbing news. "Two points. Firstly, we'll be joined by Ibero, so there's another 25% firepower." "Well, hey, no job too hard for us," Drake said cheerfully. "That's right," Raiven nodded emphatically. "After all, boss, if you think about it, they probably only let the bomber drivers have the Impstars so that they don't look too bad compared to us. *Everyone* has to feel needed, after all." The three young Wolfgang pilots laughed, and Solo joined in, the tension definitely relieved. "You said there was a second reason why we won't be crash diving the VSDs?" Raiven prompted. "Ah, yes," Solo replied with a grin. "Secondly, we're going to be a pack of sneaky Sithscum..."

[14 hours later, Far Orbit, Neljun System]

The probe droid hung motionless, patiently waiting for its moment. Less than 36 hours after being dropped in place by Foxfire's B-wing, that moment came. Detecting the Coriolis radiation of craft emerging from hyperspace, the droid powered up its sensors and hypercomm generator and started recording. The first craft were a pair of Assault Gunboats, followed by another pair and then a pair of Corellian Corvettes.

The droid watched for a few seconds using only passive sensors, triangulating the courses of the intruders and comparing against the preset conditions in its memory. As it did so, the first Star Destroyer dropped from hyperspace a short distance behind the Corvettes and immediately heeled over to port, followed a few seconds later by another *Imperial*-class, this one moving to starboard, and closer to the droid.

The probe droid considered this new development for a fraction of a second and reevaluated its situation. In stealth mode the droid could probably have remained unnoticed by the second ISD long enough for the Imperial Task Force to pass by, but its hypercomm generator was active... Checking its instructions for this kind of situation, the droid powered up its active sensors and swept them over the Imperial ships, simultaneously transmitting all of its acquired data into hyperspace.

Rotating around to point its engine at the newcomers, the droid noted the arrival of another pair of Star Destroyers, these the smaller *Victory* class, and a pair of Nebulon-B Frigates, and similarly reported them to its masters. It fired its engine and began to run.

[Bridge, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

"Report!" ordered Gen'yaa as she stormed onto the bridge.

"We have transmissions coming in from the probe in the Neljun system, ma'am," reported the communications technician.

"Well?"

"An Imperial task force matching the expected composition has emerged from hyperspace near the Neljun system," reported Nil Wumb, the Sullustan First Officer, who was leaning over the communication technician's shoulder.

Punching a button on his datapad caused the bridge's holographic display to spring to life.

The image showed the rapidly assembling Imperial task force, bordered by collected sensor data, and as Gen'yaa watched, a pair of *Victory* class Star Destroyers reverted to realspace.

"What's the transmission lag?" asked Gen'yaa.

"About 3 minutes," replied Wumb.

The image shifted as the viewpoint began to accelerate away from the Imperials, then went black a few seconds later.

"What happened?"

Wumb punched a few controls on his datapad, causing the holodisplay to spring back to life, this time showing the last recorded data from the droid.

"There," he said, pointing. "Concussion missile sensor, from that Gunboat."

"Very well," replied Gen'yaa. "It looks like we won't be waiting for the reinforcements after all. Navigation, plot a course for the Neljun system. What's our ETA?"

"Estimated Time of Arrival, 76 minutes," replied Lieutenant Vaiweehanen, the ship's Twileki Navigation Officer, who had already preprogrammed the jump.

"Very well, jump when ready. Inform the crew. We'll go to General Quarters in 60 minutes."

[Bridge, Imperial Star Destroyer *Dominance*, on approach to the Neljun system]

"Rho 3 reports target destroyed," reported the *Dominance's* fighter control officer. Piett nodded acknowledgement and turned back to gaze through the bridge viewport.

"Opinions, Captain?" he asked. "Do you think they were waiting for us?"

"Perhaps," mused Gillett. He had also been taken by surprise with the presence of the Rebel probe. "But unlikely, sir. I think this was simply a matter of luck."

Piett raised an eyebrow but signalled for the captain to continue.

"The probe was too close to our reversion point – we almost came out of hyperspace on top of it."

Not literally true, of course, but in terms of stellar distances the probe *had* been too close – the manoeuvre by the ISDs had simply been to broaden the Imperial formation a little, but that had been enough to allow the ship's low-level sensor scans to detect the stealthy probe.

"And if the Rebels knew we'd be here they'd have something a lot more threatening waiting for us," the admiral added, neatly completing Gillett's line of

thought. "As it happens, the luck cuts both ways. Had the probe been in a better location, we'd not have known it was here and been taken by surprise when the Rebels do arrive. And they will come."

"Instructions, sir?"

"Put out a picket of hyperspace-capable fighters to watch the likely approaches to the system. They're to fall back when pressed, but I want to know when the Rebels arrive."

[Pilot Ready Room, Wolfgang Group, 60 minutes later]

The rest of the X-wing pilots were suiting up as Raiven and Drake ran in, responding to the call on the ship's PA system.

"...of course you're right," Solo was saying to Ibero, with a grin at last. He turned as the two late pilots opened their lockers and hurriedly began to prepare themselves. "Ah, there you are. So, Sacart, you're with me - you two miscreants can fly together and do your thing. Drake, you have lead." Drake shot Raiven a winning smile.

"At least you don't have to flip me for it, Lieutenant," he said under his breath.

"Nice. Just fly at a decent speed for once, okay?" Raiven shot back.

"Alright, save that stuff for when we launch, will you?" Solo interrupted them, then continued, "Any more questions for me before we go? No?"

Ibero spoke up as Solo finished. "Don't forget, we will have Rooster and the *Compassion* in the event of an ejected pilot. Let's hope we won't need them." His face darkened, showing clearly what he thought of that. "Make no mistake, this is going to be a tough mission. If we all make it back alive, with our ships intact, I'll be a happy man." The four Wolfgang pilots nodded grimly, and for once neither Drake nor Raiven made any comment. Solo, a little surprised, continued. "No more? Then good luck, all of you. May the Force be with us."

The four pilots all stood, zipping up flight suits and grabbing helmets from their lockers. Drake's locker, Sacart saw, had a holo of Razor on the inside of the door. The Arrebnacian closed the door quickly when he caught Sacart's gaze and gave the latter a saucy wink. Sacart laughed as he pulled on his helmet and strode out, towards the lift.

Drake turned towards Raiven as they put on their helmets.

"Last chance to say you've come down sick and can't fly," he warned, buckling his chin strap.

"Do you hear there, Navigator speaking," Lieutenant Vaiweehanen's voice came over the intercom. "Stand by for reversion in fifteen minutes. As we are entering a combat area, secure all non-essential compartments and services. All hands to battle stations, all hands to battle stations."

Raiven shot his wingman a look. "Too late."

[Bridge, Imperial Star Destroyer *Dominance*, on approach to the Neljun system]

"Sir! The pickets have picked up contacts - looks like the Republic carrier we've been expecting," Captain Gillett reported from his position, standing next to the sensors officer.

Vice Admiral Norvad Piett turned slowly.

"So, here the plot thickens," he murmured to himself, then, raising his voice, "Very well, Captain." He turned and looked through the viewport at his task force, which spread out to the starboard side of his ship. The two *Victory* ships took the centre positions of the line abreast formation, with the *Dominance* on the left flank and the *Providence* on the right. The two frigates hung just below the *Victory* Star Destroyers, and the smaller craft also.

"Plot the Republic vessel's approach vector," Piett ordered his navigator, who moved to comply. A few seconds later, the latter had his answer.

"Admiral, most likely approach vector given their current course is one seven five mark four," the young man reported. Piett allowed a trace of a smile to show as Captain Gillett moved quietly to his side.

"Almost exactly where you want them to be, sir," he said quietly to the vice admiral, who nodded slowly.

"Almost exactly where I want them to be," he echoed with satisfaction. Suddenly he braced himself up and spun around, issuing orders as he did so.

"Communications, order the *Vociferous* and *Valourous* ahead to carry out the assault, *Valourous* has lead. The *Angel of Fury* and the *Pacifier* will accompany the *Victory* ships, but hang behind and to the left and right of them, respectively. And order Captain Jarrett to come around to face the Republic vessel's approach vector, then keep formation with us." Even as the comms. officer moved to carry out Piett's orders, the admiral was turning again.

"Helm, bring us about! Come to bearing one seven five mark four, then engage sublight reverse engines at half power!"

Captain Gillett lowered his voice almost to a whisper.

"Sir...the planet's defences..." Piett cut him off with a raised hand, although not harshly, and drew his Executive Officer to one side.

"Think, Captain. The *Victory*-class ships were designed and built for planetary bombardments. Ships like the *Dominance* and the *Providence*, whilst retaining this capacity, are far more able to wage capital ship warfare. Therefore it makes sense to send the *Vociferous* and the *Valourous* ahead to do what they do best, while we hang back and deal with the New Republic threat. After all, the planet's defences are minimal, even if they have had time to prepare for us. The biggest threat comes from starfighters, and if the *Victory* destroyers don't have the capacity to beat them off, then the frigates will. By positioning the Nebulon-B vessels between us and the bombardment ships, we create a flexible situation where the frigates can lend their fighters wherever they are needed."

Gillett nodded slowly, once again feeling like a slow child that had been corrected by a patient parent. Piett managed a tight-lipped smile.

"Don't worry, Captain. If you never questioned an order I gave, then you'd be no good to me as an XO." Captain Gillett, brightening a little, nodded in

acknowledgement. Piett nodded dismissively, and headed back towards his place on the bridge.

[Bridge, *Victory-class Star Destroyer Valourous*]

Captain Listran Draxus stood quietly gazing out of the bridge window, hands clasped behind his back, when the announcement came over the ship's comm. "All non-duty personnel, report to the main cargo bay for a special address from the Captain prior to the upcoming mission," Commander Brasken's voice intoned, then repeated the order. The ship would soon go to battle stations, and then the majority of the ship's crew would be either at their post ready to do battle, or ready to take up their post. The ship was due to go to battle stations for the upcoming assault in a few minutes, so the "address" had to be now. Captain Draxus turned and paced the length of his bridge slowly, nodding slightly to the men and women gathered in the crew pits, which today did not consist mainly of junior officers and enlisted men, as was the norm, but of Draxus' senior officers. They nodded grimly in return, and Draxus turned his attention again to the stars, and waited.

He did not have to wait long.

Five minutes later, Brasken's voice filtered through the comm.

"Captain, all non-duty personnel are in the main cargo bay, sir." Listran Draxus' voice rang loud and clear in response.

"Very good, Commander." He turned to the crew pits.

"Seal the main cargo bay."

"Aye, sir," one of his officers, a lieutenant commander replied, and moved to comply. "Bay sealed."

"Flood it with the gas, and initiate the stun frequency pulse," the captain ordered, and a few minutes later the task was finished.

"Bay flooded and stun pulse completed, sir," the lieutenant commander reported.

"The rest of the crew and all stormtrooper detachments have been rendered unconscious, sir." Draxus nodded.

"Excellent, Lieutenant Commander Hurcsey," he said. "Communications, stand by with that coded transmission I gave you." The order was instantly acknowledged as Commander Kilroy Brasken stepped off the lift onto the bridge, his face wearing a broad smile.

"They'll never know what hit them. Let's just hope the New Republic can deal with all the prisoners." Draxus nodded and smiled at last, although his smile was tense and strained.

"Let's hope so, indeed. Let's also hope that we survive this battle, once Piett and the others discover what we're up to." Captain Draxus gave Commander Brasken a long, hard look, then took a deep breath and drew himself up to his full, imposing height.

"Sound battle stations."

[Hangar deck, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

"Flight Officer Stynter!" The voice rang loudly and clearly across the hangar bay. Jarn Stynter turned, her face blushing with a twinge of embarrassment, as Drake ran up, grinning.

"Yes, sir?" she asked perfunctorily. Drake poked his tongue out at her.

"Well, I had to get your attention somehow," he said by way of explanation for his outburst. "And yelling 'Hey, Jarn!' across the hangar deck wouldn't have exactly been very professional."

"Really," Razor said with an impish grin of her own. "So what professional matter have you come to talk to me about?"

"Uhh...it's not exactly professional," Drake said bashfully, but there was a wicked gleam in his eye. "Just wanted to wish you luck for the mission." Jarn planted her hands on her hips.

"Well - go ahead, then." Drake smiled and did his best to kiss her, despite the interference provided by their helmets.

"Good luck," he whispered, kissing her again, then he started walking towards where his X-wing sat waiting to get on one of the four elevators leading down to the flight deck.

"Well, aren't you coming with me?" he asked, waving at her to follow him.

"No," she called back with a laugh. "I'm waiting for Alex. His B-wing's sitting next to my A-wing down on the flight deck, so I told him I'd wait for him."

"Okay. See you when we get back," Drake said, and with a final wave turned his back and strode quickly towards his fighter. At the back of his mind there was a premonition that something was wrong, but he shrugged it off.

"You okay, Ledner?" he asked as he approached. The R2 droid chirped a cheerful affirmative and Drake smiled. "Good. Then make sure Arpin behaves himself for once," he said as he climbed up into his cockpit.

[Bridge, Victory Star Destroyer *Valourous*]

"Two minutes till they enter the system, Captain," Lieutenant Commander Hurcsey reported. He was the best sensor officer on board, and Captain Draxus was glad of the fact. "This is the last microjump they're going to make."

"Very well," he acknowledged. "There's not going to be enough time once they get here, because the shooting will start very quickly, given how Piett's positioned himself and the *Providence*. We'll have to send it now - there's a greater risk of interception, but it's a risk we'll have to take. This whole affair is one big risk, anyway." He turned and nodded to another lieutenant commander, who was manning the communications board. The latter pressed a button and a coded burst transmission, invisible but incredibly powerful because of its content, raced through the void towards the yet unseen streak that was the *Wolf's Lair*.

[Bridge, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Foxfire was already suited up, with her helmet under one arm, and Moose stood next to her, dressed in like manner. She was about to address Colonel Gen'yaa when the communications officer turned excitedly from her post.

"Colonel! Ma'am, we've just received a coded burst transmission, apparently from one of the Imperial ships ahead of us!" she exclaimed quickly. "It's in an older code, ma'am, one that the Imperials cracked a little while ago. It's no longer in use." Gen'yaa whirled around.

"What does it say?" she demanded. The comms. officer didn't answer, as she was scanning the screen in front of her.

"Oh, by the Force..." she breathed. Colonel Gen'yaa rushed impatiently to the young woman's side and read the message herself, then spun violently.

"Schroeder! The traitor - it's Carston!" Moose's hand had instinctively, but futilely, slipped down to his blaster, and Foxfire's jaw went slack with shock. *Of course...it all makes sense... the 'accident' with the TIE bomber... the flight deck bomb... perhaps even that food poisoning...*

"Better warn the crew," Moose said sternly, his face dark and clouded with anger. The Bothan shook her head.

"No. If we do, he'll know we're on to him, and if that's the case, he may kill in order to escape," she said. "No," and now she addressed the comms officer, "broadcast the information on a secure channel to the Wolfshead pilots only. They can bring in their own, and besides, they're the only people near him - on the hangar deck - at the moment. Tell them I want him, alive if possible, but dead if necessary," Gen'yaa ordered darkly, clenching her fists.

Lieutenant Vaiweehanen turned to face her. "Reversion in twenty seconds, Colonel," he reported, then sounded the reversion alarm.

[Hangar deck, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Drake looked up from his cockpit board at the sound of the reversion alarms ringing outside his cockpit. His X-wing was now mounted on the elevator, beginning to descend to the flight deck when the first wave of craft launched from below. He looked for Razor, who was just climbing into the open cockpit of her A-wing, having just finished talking to Sledgehammer.

Foxfire's voice crackled across the squadron channel.

"Flight Officer Carston, report to the Wolfclaw Ready Room."

This brought up several heads, including Drake's – there was no reason for a pilot to be recalled, especially considering how close they were to launch. He looked across the flight deck to where Sledgehammer's B-wing was parked, waiting for Alex's response.

Razor looked across towards the B-wing parked next to her fighter, expecting to see Sledgehammer turn away from his fighter and head for the exit.

"What is he doing?" she said to herself, noticing that he in fact did neither, continuing towards his B-wing.

Foxfire's voice cut across the comm once more, this time her anger showing. "Wolfshead Squadron, this is Lead. Arrest Sledgehammer immediately. Defend yourselves if necessary."

Drake looked in horror down at the flight deck, where Razor's A-wing sat next to Sledgehammer's B-wing. The scene below seemed to him to play itself out in slow motion while he watched helplessly from above.

Razor heard the message filter through her fighter's comm system and turned to face Sledgehammer's B-wing, where he was ascending his own ladder. She saw hatred flash in his eyes. Pulling her blaster free from its holster, she jumped to the deck below and started running for the B-wing. Sledgehammer calmly held his position on the ladder, twisting around and drawing his own weapon.

Ignoring the first shot from Razor, which harmlessly struck the B-wing's fuselage, Sledgehammer took aim and fired. His first shot caught the A-wing pilot in the chest, stopping her charging run and dumping her onto the deck on her back.

From above, Drake watched with a sickening feeling in his stomach as Razor's run was halted and she crumpled to the deck. His horror mounted as the Imperial agent fired once, twice more into her chest from close range.

The X-wing pilot's eyes were rooted to the spot, looking at Jarn's motionless and somehow sadly pathetic form lying prone and vulnerable on the flight deck.

He finally tore his eyes away as a group of techs rushed out to drag Jarn away from Sledgehammer's B-wing, which was about to launch. Drake tried to open his mouth, but no sound came. Dimly, he heard a call for a medical team over the comm, but his full attention was on the figure of the traitor as his cockpit canopy closed and the B-wing's engines powered up in preparation for takeoff.

The young Wolfshead pilot wanted to get out, to go down and see Jarn, but even as the thoughts chased each other through his head, he knew it would be useless. She had been hit in the chest at point blank range with no armour, and not even a doctor with the skill of Al Saruff could save her. Instead, Drake was anchored here, to his ship. It would serve as his instrument of vengeance. His gloved hands tightened on the stick.

Sledgehammer's B-wing rose slowly from the deck on repulsorlifts as the mottled tunnel of hyperspace visible through the magcon field resolved itself into starlines and then millions of pinpricks of light. With a grim smile and an exultant snarl, the Imperial agent pushed his B-wing forward.

A roar split the air of the flight deck behind him.

Drake's X-wing blazed forward off the elevator, swinging around in a violent turn just before it would have crashed into the opposite side of the hangar. The X-wing swooped down like a bird of prey, its quad cannons spitting fire at Sledgehammer's B-wing as it burst through the magcon field. Raiven, cursing, followed Drake, although a little more carefully, to the accompaniment of a cacophony of outbursts over the comm.

"Fourteen, Two-two. I share your sentiments about this bastard, but I don't think this is necessarily a good idea."

A brief click was the only reply Raiven got.

Arachnoid lowered his blaster and turned to Cardinal. "What the hell is going on around here!?!"

His subordinate practically cringed. "I don't know, sir!"

The two ran over to where the techs were tending to their fellow A-wing pilot.

The look on the deckhand's face was enough to tell the story, but the headshake confirmed it. Arachnoid swore viciously and yanked out his comlink, thumbing it on.

"Lead, this is Nine and things are going to hell down here! What's going on?"

"Nine, Lead, report!"

"Jarn's dead. Alex just shot her and flew out of here. Dan was on his tail like a flash and Mike wasn't far behind. What happened, Avery? What went wrong?"

His tone was almost plaintive now.

Foxfire was quiet for a second. "Alex is an Imperial agent. We haven't got time, the Imperials are almost on us. Get everyone launched, Moose and I will be down there in 30 seconds."

Arachnoid turned to the assembled pilots who were crowded around.

"Get back to your fighters, we've got an Imperial task force out there!"

He was strapping himself into his fighter when he realised what had been bothering him.

"Lead, Nine. Sledgehammer was coming from the armoury! Get Lynx down here on the double!"

Sledgehammer's B-wing was accelerating away at maximum speed - all his energy had been channelled to his engines. Drake, furiously cursing, was following hard but falling slightly behind. He had used what little laser energy he had stored firing at Sledgehammer as the latter left the hangar, and now he was forced to sacrifice speed in order to build enough energy to be able to hit the rogue B-wing. A pilot like Carston - *if that's even his real name*, Drake thought with a snarl - wasn't nearly stupid enough to allow himself to be destroyed by a pair of torpedoes. The flashing cloud of particles from the B-wing's aft signified a chaff burst, rendering warheads useless. Raiven, as usual, hung tightly on Drake's port wing. Raiven was dimly aware of the rest of the squadron launching behind them as he checked the tactical situation.

"Oh, bugger."

Drake, his hands and face white with fury, tore his gaze from the fleeing B-wing and down to his radar, even as he unconsciously flung his X-wing into a headlong dive.

"Lot closer to the Imps than I thought," he muttered over the comm. Raiven's reply was short.

"I'm glad you noticed," he snapped. "Nice to have you back with us. Meanwhile, we all seem to have walked rather nicely into an Imperial ambush."

Drake's response was spontaneous and spectacularly vulgar.

"Nicely put," Raiven interjected. "Although I don't think that's going to help us much - look out, you've picked up a couple of squints!"

"Roger," Drake acknowledged tightly as his X-wing corkscrewed to avoid the burst of green laserfire that suddenly streaked towards it. The two Wolfgang

fighters were streaking away from the Imperial task force at full speed, heading back to the line of ships that was Wolfshead Squadron.

Cheetah stepped to the side of the boarding ramp and began waving his troops on board as he answered the comlink fitted to his right ear. A sequence of three soft beeps signalled the system switching to encrypted mode, surprising him a little.

"Lynx One, this is *Lair* Actual on Encrypt Band D3," said Gen'yaa.

"Reading you loud and clear, *Lair*," replied the commando.

"Take four of your men and your explosives expert and sweep the main fighter magazine. Do it quickly, do it quietly."

"Understood," replied Cheetah. "What are we looking for, ma'am?"

"Booby traps. Be careful. Report back with your results."

"Acknowledged. Lynx out."

Cheetah swore softly under his breath and looked into the cavernous hold of the *Bear*, currently only holding the nine other members of team Alpha.

"Caballero, Eadrain, you're with me. Timekeeper, go over to *Unicorn* and fetch Monkey and Angel, bring them up to the hangar deck. The rest of you, stay there, we'll be back."

Caballero and Eadrain fell into step beside the Lynx captain as he strode towards the nearest turbolift. The platoon's third in command waited for the doors to slide closed before he asked the inevitable question.

"What's happening, sir?"

Cheetah frowned slightly – the fact that he'd been expecting the question since the others had left the *Bear* made the answer no less unpalatable.

"We're sweeping the main magazine for booby traps."

"What!?! I mean, I beg your pardon, sir?"

"You heard correctly. I don't know what kind of traps we're looking for but probably explosive, maybe antipersonnel. Standard bomb-defuse protocol – no comlinks, no loud noises, no heavy shocks. You find something, you come back and get Angel. Also, keep it quiet. Clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Affirmative."

"Good. Let's get it done."

"Looks like Fourteen and Two-two have got themselves into trouble," Vyper sighed over the comm.

"Looks that way," Foxfire's voice came hard over the comm. "Stand by, Wolves. As soon as those squints chasing them are in range, I want them toasted."

"Lead, Wolfgang Lead, copy," came Solo's voice in answer.

"Affirmative, Lead," Arachnoid acknowledged.

"Lead, Wolfclaw Lead, we'll see what we can do," Groznik's voice muttered. A few pilots snickered. The B-wing's track record against TIE Interceptors was not one of the finest in the New Republic armed forces, through no fault of B-wing pilots. The heavy fighter just wasn't as well equipped to deal with the nimble fighters.

"Cut the chatter," Foxfire ordered sternly, adjusting her position in her seat. "Here they come."

Six TIE Interceptors were still in hot pursuit of the madly fleeing X-wings of Raiven and Drake. The two Wolfgang pilots were getting increasingly stressed, and increasingly annoyed.

"When I turn around and get a chance to recharge shields and lasers, these guys are toast," Drake snarled.

"No disagreement here," Raiven muttered.

"We're coming up on the squadron," Drake noted. "As soon as they engage, break opposite, then come around and join the rear of the formation until we get our energy levels back up."

"Copy, Fourteen," Raiven acknowledged, his voice resuming some of its normal good humour. "You know, when I asked you to fly at a decent speed for once, you didn't have to take it to *quite* this extreme."

"Well, anything to escape your whining," Drake countered, then went silent as he watched the squadron race towards them. "Okay...three, two, one, break!" The two X-wings shot apart in opposite directions as if a space bomb had just gone off between them, even as the Interceptor flight chasing them ran into the waiting guns of Wolfshead Squadron.

Arachnoid's flight of A-wings blazed forward in a sudden burst of speed, their laser cannons spitting fiery death at the oncoming Imperials, who at the last moment broke apart and apparently decided that the odds were too great.

Two seconds later, Solo and Sacart charged into the fray, their quad cannons spreading laserfire everywhere. A series of explosions marked the Interceptors' demise, and Arachnoid whooped over the comm.

"Lead, Wolfeye Lead," he said, and Foxfire fancied she could almost see the grin on his face. "One squint flight splashed." Foxfire managed a grin of her own.

"Well done," she acknowledged. "Wolfeye, Wolfgang, rejoin formation. Wolfclaw, stand by for warhead launch."

The five X-wings of the Wolfgang group pulled into formation in the rear of the squadron as it streaked towards the waiting Imperials.

[Bridge, Imperial Star Destroyer *Dominance*]

Vice Admiral Piett was not a man of significant stature, Captain Gillett thought, yet he commanded attention on the bridge. Although he was not exceptionally tall or broad, Piett's presence was the whole driving factor that turned the collection of men, women, and consoles into the living, beating heart of this particular Imperial warship. Piett stood in the middle of it all, hands clasped behind his back, his jaw firmly set. Gillett could almost hear the strains of the Imperial March in the background as Piett commanded this task force through sheer tactical brilliance and strength of will.

At present the admiral stood conversing with a life-sized holo of Captain Jarrett, who was doubtless standing in a similar pose on the bridge of his own ship, the

Providence, which sat a few hundred metres off the port side of the Imperial flagship.

"He is flying to dock with the *Providence*, then," Vice Admiral Piett said, more a statement than a question. Captain Jarrett nodded.

"That's right, sir. A couple of X-wings pursued him, but our forward fighter screen forced them back."

"And got itself destroyed in the process," Piett noted wryly. Jarrett almost blushed, but he knew that the admiral was merely stating a fact, and probably testing him for a reaction at the same time.

"Yes, sir," he admitted, his voice and features even. Piett accepted this with a nod.

"I hope this man is worth the price that has been paid for him," he said, his impassive face barely masking his contempt for the spy. "Half an Interceptor squadron, and we haven't even recovered him yet."

"I doubt that he's worth it," Jarrett offered with a frown, earning a tight-lipped grin from his admiral. "Unfortunately, though, my opinion doesn't seem to be worth much."

"Nor does mine, sometimes," Piett agreed.

[Armoury, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

The small circle of light from the glowrod attached to the underside of Caballero's blaster carbine swept left and right as he and Eadrain moved swiftly along the narrow corridor between racks of concussion missiles.

To his left, he could hear Monkey and Timekeeper checking the cellular storage compartments at the back of the armoury.

The corridor ended at the centre of the armoury, an open area containing several stacked pallets of heavy Space Bombs. Normally used against static targets, the bombs had little manoeuvrability or speed and hence were difficult to use against capital ships, but they packed the explosive power of a full X-wing's load.

Caballero's glowrod passed over the dark, cylindrical shape of one of these weapons, then returned as a glitter caught the commando's eye.

He turned and whispered to Eadrain, "Go fetch Angel."

The small black box fitted to the nose of one of the bombs had but a single marking – a symbol depicting a pair of silver wings, topped by a circular halo.

"It's one of mine alright – straight timer, nothing special. Assuming he hasn't modified it," whispered Angel to Cheetah.

"Likely?"

Lynx' resident explosives expert shook her head. "Not really. I checked my equipment prepping for this mission – there was nothing missing. That was half an hour ago. I doubt he would have had time to steal it, modify it and plant it before he left."

"Very well. Disarm it."

“Sir, could you go check and see if anything else is missing from the demolitions locker? Only you, Hyena and I have easy access.”

“And someone else, it would seem, Sergeant,” replied Cheetah, moving towards the door.

“Yes, sir,” replied Angel, sighing to herself. She was going to catch flak over this one, she was sure.

Angel took out a small, sharp, ceramic bladed knife from her demolitions kit – a vibroblade might set a sensitive system off – and crouched by the timer, which was connected to the Space Bomb’s firing mechanism. She ran her fingers along the wires, separating out the dummies and closed-circuit tripwires to reach the three main transmitter wires. With a deft flick of the wrist, Angel sliced through the thin wires, and then got to work on the bomb itself. Two minutes later she sighed again, stood up, and pulled the box from the front of the bomb. Cheetah was already back, and shook his head in response to Angel’s silent question.

“Okay, it’s safe,” he said to the ordnance technicians waiting outside the door.

“Go over the bomb itself thoroughly. Clear?”

“Aye, sir.”

Angel tidied her kit back up and walked to the doorway. “Let’s go do some *real* work, sir.”

[A-wing Wolfshead Lead]

“Okay, Wolves, you know your missions. May the Force be with us!” With these words, Foxfire sideslipped slightly over to the left, followed by Vyper, who was her wingman for this mission. Behind them, under the command of Arachnoid, the eight A-wings of Wolfseye group also accelerated to maintain formation.

The next wave of Imperial fighters were TIE Interceptors, and the range rapidly scrolled down past 5 clicks.

“A-wings, missile volley then mix it up!” ordered Foxfire. “Select your targets and go!”

At 2.5 clicks, the targeting sensors on the A-wings began to lock onto the TIEs, and a fraction of a second later a volley of red advanced concussion missiles were on their way. After firing, each wing pair broke and scattered, then bored in at maximum throttle.

“I’ve got Gamma 4,” said Arachnoid, his targeting system still locked onto the Interceptor that he had fired his missile at.

“Roger that,” responded Cardinal, his wingman, “Gamma 5 is mine.”

The missiles reached their targets, some of which were attempting to evade, some of which were trying to target the very fast moving A-wings. The advanced missiles tracked them regardless, destroying nine of the twelve TIEs outright.

Gandalf fell upon his target, which had evaded the incoming missile and was attempting to track it as it came for another pass. Three linked fire bursts struck the Interceptor, hulling it and tearing off the port wing, sending the pieces

spinning into space. The engagement was less than ten seconds old and all ten A-wings had a kill.

“Wolffangs, we may get some leakers. Fourteen, pick up those two,” said Solo as the A-wings sped towards their next targets, having destroyed 16 of the 18 TIE Interceptors that made up the first wave.

The two X-wings rolled slightly to track on the two remaining TIE interceptors, then moved ahead slightly as the two pilots opened their throttles to full.

“Plan?” asked Raiven over the element comlink.

“The usual,” replied Drake easily, adjusting his aim slightly. The range meter wound down rapidly as the four fighters screamed toward each other. Raiven confirmed his target, Gamma 12, the rearmost of the two target fighters, and his weapon, shield and throttle settings with a single glance at his instruments before settling his attention back firmly on the tiny grey dot in the centre of his HUD targeting reticule. A brilliant flash of crimson light lit the cockpit as Drake fired a quad burst, then another, as Raiven’s targeting computer flashed green. His finger tightened on the trigger once, twice, as Drake broke away, avoiding the return fire from the interceptor as his bolts converged perfectly on the lead TIE’s cockpit, reducing the fighter to a glowing explosion. Raiven’s target shied away slightly from the blast, causing only two of his cannon bolts to land on target on the port wing, tearing it to pieces. The Imperial pilot was struggling to regain control of his shaking fighter when Raiven’s third quad burst struck the ball cockpit where it met the port wing pylon, ripping the fighter to pieces.

“Sloppy,” said Drake.

“Two,” responded Raiven, agreeing with his wingman.

The A-wings engaged the second wave of fighters, this time two squadrons of TIE fighters, less than 3 clicks from the two Star Destroyers. A volley of missile fire again cut through space toward the TIEs, but these pilots had seen the errors made by their Interceptor comrades. The fighters targeted by the missiles cut their throttles back and tried to shoot down the fast moving projectiles, while the other fighters in the group surged ahead to engage the A-wings, denying them the opportunity to swoop in on the distracted TIEs and finish them off with cannon.

“This is going to get ugly!” yelled Foxfire. “Break by pairs!”

With that command, the five pairs of A-wings armed their lasers and scattered.

“Okay, Wolfclaws. Link and fire two on my command. Command Wing, you’re with me on the starboard target, the rest of you take the portside,” said Groznik, his translator converting his low moans and growls into Basic.

The targeting computer sounded a pure tone as the torpedoes locked on, and with a firm trigger pull, the Wookie pilot sent a pair of torpedoes toward the *Providence*, the same flagship from which Pielt had commanded the battle at Tarsis II. He watched the ISD’s gun turrets attempt to track on the small, fast moving targets as he dodged the big assault craft around and turned to make another pass.

"Excellent. Phase Two."

[Bridge, Imperial Star Destroyer *Dominance*]

Piett turned at a report from one of his crew.

"Admiral, sir, their fighters have launched a spread of torpedoes!" the man reported.

"Brace for impact!" Piett barked, sitting in his command chair and gripping the arms. The holographic image of Jarrett did the same, and Piett allowed himself a small inner smile. Once, not so long ago, Jarrett had stood by his side as the warheads came flooding in. Now, it was Captain Gillett who hurriedly moved to the side of the admiral's chair.

"Order our rear fighter groups to intercept warheads," Piett snapped. "Tell them to use their own warheads if they have to. I don't want anything to get through." The order was acknowledged and the admiral again turned to his old Executive Officer.

"And so it begins for a second time," he said with a nod and a tight, grim smile. Jarrett managed a grin of his own.

"Although this time, Admiral, they don't have any planets to hide behind," he said with a chuckle.

"Indeed. Let us see whether this Bothan woman is worthy of her vessel or not," Vice Admiral Piett remarked coolly. "You know your orders, Captain. We are the vanguard. The real mission here will not be performed by the *Victory* ships, or the escorts, but by us." Jarrett caught the twinkle in Piett's eye and smiled again.

"The pride of the fleet, sir," he said with a laugh. "Don't worry. The *Providence* hasn't let you down so far, and she's not about to start. That goes double for her captain."

"I know, Captain," Piett agreed with a nod. "To battle, then." With that, he signalled the end of the transmission.

At that moment the remnants of Wolfshead's first volley of warheads hit the ship.

"Report," Piett barked as the Star Destroyer reeled under him.

"Shields still holding and at 90%, sir," his weapons officer reported confidently.

"Only half their torpedoes got through, and they didn't hurt us much." Piett nodded. *That's only the first volley, though*, he silently told the enthusiastic young officer.

"Launch the next two fighter squadrons," the admiral ordered, then turned to the communications officer. "Order the *Providence* to launch theirs."

"She's already launched them, sir," came the speedy reply. "They launched a few seconds ago and are moving across to enter a joint formation with our fighters." Piett smiled. His old executive officer was carrying his first captaincy very ably. *So ably, in fact, that he managed to beat his old captain to the mark getting his fighters away.*

"Ensure our squadron commanders form up with the *Providence* group," he continued. Together, even with their losses at Talonis, the *Dominance* and the *Providence* together could field nearly one hundred and twenty fighters. Eight of

that total number - four from each Star Destroyer - were the TIE Advanced models, which Piett had never commanded before, let alone tested in battle. Now, in this engagement, he was going to play his trump card against the New Republic pilots of Wolfshead Squadron, who were outnumbered almost six to one by the fighter complements of the Imperial Star Destroyers alone. Piett almost allowed himself to luxuriate in his supremacy of numbers, but he caught himself sharply. The Republic pilots were better than most of his, they had shown that the last time he had met them. The capabilities of their new ship, their Strike Carrier, were as yet unknown. And they trained with a minimum of three to one odds. Vice Admiral Norvad Piett shook his head. However this situation might initially appear, it was certain to be no easy battle.

"Steady, helm," he ordered. "Maintain course and speed." He half turned in his chair to look up at his Executive Officer, who stood at his side and seemed to be trying to suppress his excitement in a show of impassivity. "What's their rate of closure, XO?" he asked quietly. Gillett turned and examined a display, and his eyes widened fractionally.

"A lot faster than it should be, sir," he answered, surprised. Piett nodded thoughtfully and stroked his chin.

"Indeed. I don't know how powerful this Strike Carrier of theirs is, but I don't think it's powerful enough that their captain would *want* to run headlong into two Star Destroyers."

"More likely, sir, she's going to try and run the gauntlet, so to speak," Captain Gillett offered, his face a little flushed with excitement, and also at being able to actually offer the almost infallible Admiral Piett a suggestion. He knew that a lot of Piett's unbreakable reputation came from the man's father, and especially how much the son matched him in temper and manner. Many thought that the younger Piett was an example of what his father might have been, had he not had to play second fiddle to Vader, but Gillett thought different. He had never served under the senior Admiral Piett, but had studied him and his career extensively, all the more so when he found out that he was to be Executive Officer for his son. Captain Gillett had eventually come to the conclusion that Vice Admiral Norvad Piett was actually better than his father, mainly because of his tactical ability. Never before had Gillett seen what he considered to be Norvad Piett's tactical equal. The man must surely be, he thought, a younger, less experienced, and human version of Grand Admiral Thrawn. Indeed, Piett's last assignment before this one had been personally given to him by the famed Imperial military commander and tactical genius. Being able to actually guess at or arrive at a conclusion before Vice Admiral Piett was, for Captain Gillett at least, a little exhilarating.

"She probably intends to try and slip past us with minimal damage," the Executive Officer of the *Dominance* continued, "and try to stop the *Victory* assault. After all, she'll stand a better chance against them than she will against us, and they're her targets if she wants to prevent the planetary bombardment." Piett's brow furrowed for a second, then cleared, and he graced his XO with the ghost of a smile.

"Quite likely, Captain," he agreed. "We'll have to make it as difficult as we can for her to slip between us, then. If she's going to get past us, she's going to have to go around us and go the long way." Gillett nodded, allowing a smile to show. *If the admiral doesn't like this smile, tough*, he thought with a fierce sense of exultation.

"Communications, signal the *Providence*," Vice Admiral Piett ordered suddenly. "Order them to drop their position, I want them to maintain their distance on the port side, but to drop below us."

"Yes, sir," the communications officer replied, turning quickly to his console to comply. Piett turned to regard Captain Gillett, who wore a frown, but was nodding slowly. The admiral smiled slightly and waited for his Executive Officer to speak.

"I see, sir," Gillett said in a low voice at last. "This way, if they pass directly between us, they'll take fire from both of us. If they pass below us, all of the *Providence's* starboard guns will be facing them, and if they pass above the *Providence*, our port guns will face them. So the best way for them to go is either to our dorsal starboard...which is further to go, and they'll still be exposed to fire from us, or to ventral port of the *Providence*, also a greater distance to travel." Piett nodded.

"Very good, Captain. Now we may observe the measure of this Bothan captain." The vice admiral settled back in his chair and waited for his adversary to move.

[Bridge, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Colonel Gen'yaa stood towards the front of the bridge, her hands gripping the railing hard enough to make her knuckles white.

"Very clever, Admiral," she whispered as she watched the Star Destroyer on her right slowly dropping position to hang below the other one. "You two are covering each other quite nicely." She turned to her communications officer.

"Communications, raise Wolfgang Leader," she ordered, thinking as she spoke. "Tell Lieutenant Commander Tengroth that I want his X-wings glued to the Lynx transports. If those commandos die, tell Tengroth I don't want him and his pilots to come back."

"Yes, ma'am," the communications officer acknowledged, turning to her console. She knew that the message would doubtless irritate the pilots, as Gen'yaa's threats always did, but at least the Wolfshead fliers would get the job done. A thought suddenly occurred to the Bothan colonel.

"Switch to the Wolfgang frequency and put it on main bridge audio, " she snapped, just before the comms officer could acknowledge that the original message had been sent. Uneasily, the latter complied, and a conversation immediately began on the main bridge of the *Wolf's Lair*.

"...now, take good care of the *Unicorn*, Raiven," Drake's voice filtered through, in a horrible falsetto voice, clearly supposed to be Colonel Gen'yaa's.

"Like they were my own children in there," Raiven's reply came, none of its sarcasm lost over the distance that separated his X-wing from the Strike Carrier.

"Cut the chatter, both of you," Solo's voice admonished suddenly. "We may not like the way our orders sound, but we're still going to carry them out." Solo's voice, although the voice of reason, made it very clear that *he* certainly didn't like the way their orders sounded.

"Oh, of course we are," Drake shot back cheerfully. "'Don't come back', indeed! I'll give her don't come back! Why doesn't she devote her energies to threatening the enemy, instead of us? Let's see her tell us not to come back when the Imperial warheads and turbolaser blasts start raining in, eh..."

"You're not wrong!" Sacart's voice now cut into the babble of Wolfgang conversation. "I'm really getting tired of these stupid threats she dishes out. No way she'd act on any of 'em, anyway..."

Colonel Gen'yaa grinned wickedly, baring her teeth. Then she turned to her communications officer ominously.

"Patch me through to their frequency," she ordered. Very reluctantly, the young woman complied, and Gen'yaa took a deep breath.

"...as if we don't know how to do our own jobs, anyway!" Drake's voice continued.

"Hear, hear!" Raiven joined in. He was enjoying this, and it was good to keep Drake's mind off Jarn's death. "And all this from some spook colonel who wouldn't know the first thing about..."

"That's quite enough, gentlemen," Colonel Gen'yaa said, her voice hard and flinty over the comm. She still retained some of her impish delight in playing a prank on her pilots, but it was fast being replaced with genuine anger.

The comm went deathly silent.

"Nothing to say now, anyone?" she continued, her voice rising in volume and harshness. "Because if you are all quite finished, then I will begin. When I give an order, I expect it to be followed. Furthermore, I do not expect it to be a subject of debate over an open comm. In future, restrict your communications to mission-essential information. If I ever, *ever*, hear this sort of rubbish again, then I'll court martial all of you. Lieutenants Sutherland and Rovardi, that goes twice for the two of you," she finished with a snarl. "*Wolf's Lair* out."

[Flying escort alongside Lynx Commando transports *Bear* and *Unicorn*]

The two Lynx transports, along with the five X-wings, hung at the rear of the Wolfshead formation, waiting for the action to start before they slipped away and headed for the *Victory*-class Star Destroyers. Inside his cockpit, Drake clicked his tongue.

"Sheeeit," he said at last, drawing the word out and savouring it with a grimace. He thought for a few seconds and then grinned to himself.

"Ledner? Wake up, shorty."

An indignant beep sounded from behind him as the R2 unit told him exactly what he thought of that idea.

"Okay, okay. Look, find us a clear comlink band that we can talk on, then look around and get a lock on Arpin."

He sighed. "Well. We really did it for ourselves that time."

Using the holographic laser link between the R2 units, the flight had rapidly switched to a new comlink band and set it to rapidly cycle every second or so to make it very difficult to track by the *Wolf's Lair* communications crew.

"You really think she was burning us?" Raiven asked him after a moment. "I got the impression this was a bit of a practical joke for her. She seemed to actually be *enjoying* herself, and you notice she waited for a while before she jumped in."

"Are you kidding?" Drake asked quizzically, habitually glancing out to his starboard side to make eye contact with Raiven, and failing because the bulky shape of the *Unicorn* again blocked his way. "No, mate, I don't think she was joking."

"Shut up, both of you," Solo cut in, although he himself seemed to be having some trouble talking properly. "I-"

Wolfgang Leader, in a spectacular display totally lacking in professionalism, lost his composure completely and burst into laughter over the comm. In two seconds the other pilots, including Ibero, had joined in.

"Wait a second," Sacart burst out, as he suddenly stopped laughing. "She may still be listening to us!"

Again, there was a deathly silence.

"Nah, I doubt they could track us through that one," Drake replied after a moment's reflection.

"But just in case..." Raiven added.

[Bridge, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

"...they could... one... case..."

Colonel Gen'yaa tried not to let her irritation show, although it was very obvious to the smirking members of her bridge crew. In fact, she had *tried* to continue to listen in on the Wolfgang comms channel, but without much success. Angry that they had disobeyed her, but equally impressed at their ingenuity, she considered contacting them again, but rapidly dismissed the thought.

Still, a fight with the fliers is not the battle I have to win now, and it can wait till another time.

"Communications, order the transports and Wolfgang flight to stand by," she ordered sternly. The order was acknowledged, then came the reply.

"The *Bear* and *Unicorn* are both standing by, ma'am. Wolfgang Lead reports ready as well." Gen'yaa nodded curtly.

"Patch me through to engineering," she said quickly. "Engineering, bridge."

"Bridge, engineering," came Lieutenant Boradelis' voice over the intercom.

"Stand by," the captain of the *Wolf's Lair* directed. "We're about to make a dash for it. Is the ion cannon powered up and on line?"

"Affirmative, captain," came the somewhat gravelly reply. "Ion cannon is fully functional; engines are wound up and ready."

"Very good," the colonel acknowledged. "Hold on to your seats, and let's see if the engines and the ion cannon perform as well as they're supposed to. Bridge out." The colonel spun on her heel.

"Helm, stand by," she ordered, glancing at the main tactical display which showed the transport/X-wing group holding position just under the strike carrier, ready to move at her command.

"Go!" Gen'yaa snapped suddenly, and the sleek form of the strike carrier burst forward in a surge of speed as the deck trembled under her feet. Beneath the bulky bullet-shaped craft, the two Lynx transports and their X-wing escorts also increased speed to keep position with their mothership.

[Bridge, Star Destroyer *Dominance*]

"Around us, or around them, do you think, Captain?" Vice Admiral Piett's voice was easy and cool, quite conversational, but the rigidity of his posture, as usual, betrayed the tense anticipation that he surely felt as acutely as did his flushed Executive Officer. The latter considered for a moment.

"I think around us, sir," he said at last. "I can't justify it - it's just a guess." Piett nodded, slightly amused. *Now he's venturing guesses. He must be a bit more confident after his recent flashes of inspiration,* he thought wryly to himself.

"Admiral, the enemy carrier has drastically increased speed, sir!" Piett's head snapped around from his XO to where the *Wolf's Lair* was visible through the main bridge viewport.

"So, she's faster than we were first led to think," he murmured to himself, then raised his voice.

"Weapons, stand by to direct extra power at my order."

[Bridge, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Colonel Gen'yaa's knuckles were white against the railing, and her hair seemed to be rippling a little. Her jet black eyes seemed to burn with an intensity all their own, and her whole body leant forward eagerly in anticipation.

"This is where they expect us to turn," she growled, half to herself and half to anyone else who would listen.

"Stand by, Weapons, and watch your targeting," she ordered tensely. "Helm, hold your course..."

"Within ion cannon range....now, ma'am!" the weapons officer reported.

Gen'yaa didn't miss a heartbeat.

"Fire!" she barked.

The entire ship seemed to shudder slightly as huge blue ion bolts lanced out towards the two Star Destroyers, which grew closer by the second.

"Keep firing until those Star Destroyers are out of our field of fire," the colonel ordered. The weapons officer merely nodded, intently concentrating on getting as

much ion energy into the Star Destroyers as possible while the window of opportunity was open.

[Bridge, ISD *Dominance*]

Vice Admiral Piett's eyes widened in surprise as seemingly from nowhere, huge ion bolts came streaking towards his ships.

"That's no normal capital ship ion cannon blast," Captain Gillett muttered beside him. Piett had already quickly recovered his composure.

"No Captain, it is not," he agreed. "This is yet another surprise the New Republic has for us." He turned in his chair.

"Damage report!" he snapped.

"Admiral, sir, I've lost four of our port and ventral turbolaser batteries already," the weapons officer answered him. The man's voice was not a happy one.

Piett scowled. *That's some ion cannon*, he thought angrily, although his anger was mixed with a grudging respect for this Bothan captain and her ship.

"Very well, do your best to maintain full functionality," the admiral ordered at length. "Transfer extra power from the starboard and dorsal batteries down to our exposed areas, and direct extra shield power down there as well. As soon as that carrier gets in weapons range, open fire. Concentrate on her engines, if possible." He turned to Gillett.

"The *Providence*?" Piett asked calmly.

"She's been hit too, sir," the captain answered him, checking a tactical display.

"Harder than us, it appears."

"Very well," Piett said curtly. *You may have guts, Bothan, but guts may get you killed*. The vice admiral's hands clenched themselves into fists on the arms of his command chair.

[Bridge, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Colonel Gen'yaa allowed herself a smile.

"That gave him something to think about," she muttered savagely. "Hard to starboard!"

Dey'jaa resisted the temptation to grab the rail behind him as the view through the main port tilted due to the banking of the *Wolf's Lair*. The gravity generators provided a continuous standard G, eliminating any centrifugal force due to the turn, but the inner ear was easily fooled... He shook his head to clear it as the ion cannon released another barrage of fire against the port-side destroyer.

"Shift fire to Target-2," ordered Gen'yaa.

"We're within Imperial weapons range, Colonel," her weapons officer informed her, even as the ship began to shudder under the impacts of turbolaser fire.

Colonel Gen'yaa nodded calmly.

"Order the transports and Wolfgang group to stick close," she ordered.

[Bridge, ISD *Dominance*]

“Sir! I’ve lost contact with the *Providence*. Looks like she’s dead in space, sir. Shields, down, communications, down, propulsion, down, tactical systems, down-“

“Thank you, lieutenant, I get the picture,” replied Piett, cutting off the litany.

“Sensors, what are the Rebel fighters doing?”

“Looks like they’re forming up to attack the *Providence*, sir,” replied the sensors officer.

Piett nodded as he studied the holographic display.

“While the carrier uses the now disabled *Providence* as a shield against the *Dominance*’s firepower. Very good tactical thinking, certainly better than that I’d expect from a *Bothan* captain.”

“Do you think the intelligence reports were false, sir?” asked Gillett.

“It doesn’t matter. We have to deal with whoever is in command of that vessel, whether it’s a *Bothan* or a *Mon Calamari*.”

Piett considered the situation for a few more seconds before giving his next order. “Concentrate all our remaining firepower on defending the *Providence*. Order the batteries to drive off the Rebel fighters while she repairs her shields. Likewise any fighters harassing the Rebel capital ship should break off and assist in the defence.”

“And the carrier, sir?” asked Gillett

“Where’s she going to go? We’ll catch up with her in good time, Captain.”

[A-wing *Wolfshead 1*]

Foxfire jinked her way through the pattern of cannon fire put up by the *Dominance*, using reflexes honed in countless battles against the Empire. The brilliant green shaft of a turbolaser bolt grazed the underside of her craft, knocking a precious 20% strength from her shield system and eliciting a vulgar response. *Maybe I’ve got to work on them a little more...*

“Wolf Lead, this is Two. Is it me, or did things suddenly get a lot more hostile out here?” asked Vyper in an almost conversational tone.

“Affirmative, Two, looks like the *Dominance* is letting the *Lair* past while they concentrate on us.” She switched comm bands. “Wolfclaw, this is *Wolfshead Lead*. Hit the *Providence* with a torpedo barrage and then proceed toward the planet. Break to the *Providence*’s portside and use her as cover. *Wolfeye*, for the sake of the Force, cover their backs!”

[B-wing *Wolfclaw*]

“Just like old times, huh Groz?”

Groznik's low Wookiee laugh sounded over the comlink in response to Moose's comment.

"Okay, Claws," said the mechanical voice of his translator a second later, "you heard what the boss lady said."

"Aye," replied Granite, "but me an' Sparks could use a wee bita help over here. We got half a squad a' TIEs all over us."

"Affirmative, Eleven. Wolfeye, cover?"

"Roger, Groz," replied Hardrive on the same channel, "we got 'em."

With that, Groznik checked over his shoulder to confirm that Parody was still there, then swung around to face the darkened shape of the *Providence*.

[Bridge, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

"They've shifted most of their fire away from us, ma'am."

Gen'yaa nodded. "Order the strike teams to proceed."

A few seconds later the bulky forms of the transports and the five cross-shaped fighters could be seen emerging from under the bow of the *Wolf's Lair*, using her bulk as protection from Imperial fire as they sailed directly towards the *Victory* Star Destroyers in the rapidly decreasing distance.

"Helm, hold your course," Gen'yaa added, after making sure that the Lynx group was safely away. "Get us as close to those *Victory* ships as possible."

"Aye, aye, ma'am," the helmsman responded with a nod.

"Weapons, report," she barked. The weapons officer's voice was tight.

"Colonel, I'm doing what I can, ma'am, but it's not much against those Star Destroyers," she said quickly. "All batteries are functioning, they're just not doing that much damage. And the ion cannon is out of the field of fire, not that it could do much good anyway. It needs recharging, and that's time and energy we don't have at the moment."

"Very well. Keep firing," the ship's captain ordered, perhaps a little too harshly. The weapons officer nodded and turned back to her task.

[Spaceport, Nanwal City, on the planet Neljun]

First Lieutenant Jace Hyden wiped his cold and clammy face with a gloved hand. Like most people on the planet of Neljun, he'd spent his whole life living there, as had his family for two generations before him. The mainly agricultural world subsisted on what it could grow, and it had kept the Empire happy for almost all of Hyden's life through the minerals that were buried deep in the polar icecaps. Virtually the only industrialised areas of the planet, the icecaps were where the minerals were mined before being shipped off to the Empire in order to keep it satisfied and not send an invasionary force to keep control of the planet through a show of brute force. Only a small Imperial garrison had been posted on Neljun, and that had left not long ago. That had left a gaping hole in terms of the planetary defences, what little ones that Neljun possessed, and a militia had

hastily been recruited and trained to the best extent possible, with the help of another Mantaran star system, the Talonis system. Jace Hyden represented one of the brightest graduates of the six-week training program, but even his excellent training scores just couldn't make up for hard experience.

For that reason he was scared.

Scared, but not terrified, he told himself assertively, forcing his trembling hand into steadiness. He was experiencing fear - true fear, for the first time, but he wasn't going to let himself be mastered by it. He was the commander of his planet's only flight of defensive starfighters, after all. He glanced out his cockpit window at his men, who all sat in battered old Y-wings like his own, who all wore grubby green flightsuits like his own. His second in command, Second Lieutenant Kril Diva, gave him a thumbs up when she caught his eye. Hyden nodded and spoke into his comm.

"Well, people, I know we're new at this, and we've never been into battle for real before, but we've gotta give this our best shot. Our world may depend on it. There's a battle already being fought up there for our planet, and it's our job to do whatever we can to help. All fighters acknowledge."

Twenty-three acknowledgements came back over the comm, and Jace Hyden took a deep breath before going on.

"Very good. Eagles, power up your engines and we'll take off together on my mark."

Thirty seconds later, twenty-four Y-wings lifted from the tarmac at Neljun's one and only spaceport and blasted their way upward into the darkening night sky.

[Bridge, ISD *Dominance*]

"Helm, bring us hard to port, one eight zero mark zero relative to our current heading," Vice Admiral Piett snapped. His hands gripped the arms of his chair tightly as he willed his Star Destroyer to turn faster, to chase the ship that had just sailed out of his weapons range like a Corellian blockade runner. Beside him, Captain Gillett put his hand against the back of the admiral's chair for support as the deck apparently tilted under him. Abruptly shooting to his feet, Piett crossed over to one of the bridge viewports, noting with satisfaction the *Providence*, which sat below the *Dominance* and was already executing her own hard starboard turn.

"Tell the *Angel of Fury* and the *Pacifier* that I want their fighters launched," the vice admiral continued with a glance at his communications officer. "Order two of their squadrons to engage that transport group, but I want their bomber groups to concentrate on the Strike Carrier."

"Sir." The communications officer's reply was brief as he complied.

Vice Admiral Norvad Piett strode over to his command chair and examined the tactical display built into its arm. The Strike Carrier might have speed, but it wouldn't do her much good, he noted with satisfaction. There were just too many Imperial ships, and now they had the New Republic scum surrounded.

[Transport Group *Lynx*]

Captain Zhom "Cheetah" Kh'Arli cocked his blaster carbine and ensured the safety was on, glancing around him at the other shadowy figures sitting in the boxy transport. The figures were all silent, even Harpo "Motormouth" Temple, which surprised their commander a little, but pleased him as well.

"Weapons check," Kh'Arli barked, then he and Dantes "Caballero" D'Anconia, Lynx's RecO, each moved along a row of seated commandos, checking weapons. Across in the transport *Bear*, Cheetah knew, Hyena and Pier Das, better known as "Godzilla", would be doing exactly the same thing.

When the weapons check was complete and Kh'Arli was satisfied that all of his troops were properly equipped and prepared to fight, he resumed his seat.

"Relax, people," he said in a gravelly voice, which, although he would not have noticed it, was laced with irony. "We're all trained to do this job, and the job is the same no matter what the ship is." There were several slight nods, although a few frowns that in the darkened compartment aboard the *Unicorn*, not even Kh'Arli could see.

After all, they'd never tried to capture anything as big as a Star Destroyer before. But they had to make it there alive first.

[Wolfgang fighter group, maintaining escort pattern with Transport Group *Lynx*]

"Here's trouble," Raiven muttered tersely over the comm.

"Meeting three squadrons of Imp starfighters up close and personal isn't my idea of a good day, either," Drake agreed with a scowl.

"Stay sharp, Fangs," Solo's voice cut in. "Go for the squints first, if possible.

They're going to make things a bit ugly for those transports if we give so much as half a second. Look at the bright side, at least we're only facing three squadrons, instead of four. Apparently the *Pacifier's* fighter complement hasn't yet recovered from the hiding we gave them at Spiera."

"Affirmative, Lead," Drake acknowledged. "Two-two and I are closer to this Alpha flight, we'll take them if you like." Solo sighed.

"Of course you're closer to the lead flight, Fourteen, you two for some reason always have to be. Very well - Seventeen, Three, you're with me. We'll take Beta flight, and then that bomber group - Gamma - if it gets in range."

"Copy, Lead," Sacart chirped.

"Affirmative, Ten," Ibero's thickly accented voice came over the radio.

Technically, he outranked Solo, but the latter was the commander of this flight group, and Ibero wasn't the sort of man to take a man's command from him just because he happened to be flying with him. In this situation, Lieutenant Commander Tengroth had what was called "special" command - which meant that because it was *his* flight group, he could order his superiors if they were

attached to it. *But*, Ibero thought to himself with a grin, *there ain't no way I'm gonna call him "Lead"*.

Solo had noted the discrepancy, and smiled at it.

"Okay, Wolfgang, stand by to break on my mark," he ordered, watching the range to Beta 1 rapidly closing on his display.

"Three...two...one...break!" The five fighters scattered away from the transports, two pulling away to starboard and the other three to port, but not straying too far from the near-helpless *Bear* and *Unicorn*, which plodded onwards towards their objective.

At first the Imperials seemed heedless of the fighter escort, instead boring in towards the transports. A few of the lead TIE Interceptors managed to splash the bulky Lynx craft with laserfire, but a hail of red laser blasts quickly drove them into a scattered muddle.

"Two-two, I've got Alpha 1," Drake said tightly. "Think you can handle Alpha 2? I think he's coming around behind me."

"Affirmative, Fourteen," came Raiven's even reply. "Engaging the little bastard now."

Drake grinned at his wingman's reply as he dove towards the jinking form of Alpha 1. The Imperial craft, having suddenly realised that the Republic fighters were not going to allow Alpha and Beta squadrons to just destroy the transports, was now having a very unhappy time. He was furiously weaving, trying to get this X-wing off his tail or at least keep it missing him long enough so that one of his fighters could destroy it.

Unfortunately for the Imperial squadron commander, neither of those two things was happening.

Drake pulled his fighter tightly after the Imperial, slowly and methodically waiting for his targeting reticle to flash green before he pulled the trigger, his quad bursts intermittently chasing after the Interceptor. A stray blast caught its starboard solar panel, disintegrating a corner of the wing and sending the fighter into an unsteady wobbling pattern.

[A-wing Wolfshead 1]

Foxfire ran her eye over the engagement as she circled, recharging her shields. The last B-wings had engaged the *Providence*, which was now eerily lit by a dozen small fires burning along the Star Destroyer's upper port side, although the engine nozzles were now beginning to glow as her engineers brought their systems back online.

"Wolfclaw, land on the *Lair* to rearm with torpedoes, do it two at a time. Combat reload." That meant the fighters would land, keeping their engines running, while their magazines were reloaded, their fuel cells topped off where required, and extra energy shunted from the *Lair*'s power distribution system to the fighter's cannon and shield systems. "Wolfeye, looks like their fighters are beginning to chase after us. Go for the bombers first, you guys know the drill."

[Bridge, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

"The planetary bombardment is beginning, Colonel!" The *Wolf's Lair's* sensor officer's voice rose above the din of battle communications that filled the bridge. Colonel Gen'yaa clenched her fists.

Damn, we need to put a stop to this.

"Magnify the VSDs in the tactical display," she barked. The main bridge tactical display shifted and zoomed in, showing the two *Victory Star Destroyers* and their starfighter escorts, and, at the edge of the display, the steadily approaching *Lynx* assault group. Gen'yaa's eyes narrowed.

"Not as many fighters as you'd expect," she murmured softly. A muted agreement at her side caused her to half turn and see her Executive Officer, Commander Wil Numb, standing there, also intently gazing at the display.

"And you," Gen'yaa continued, wagging a finger at the *Star Destroyer* which sat on the right hand side, "you sent us a coded burst transmission before we arrived informing us of our traitor, and you used an old, broken code to do it. Why? Have you too got a traitor onboard?"

"If they have, then I have not heard about it, Colonel," a rich, deep voice said from behind the captain of the *Wolf's Lair*. She nodded.

"I thought not, Lieutenant Dey'jeaa," she noted. "Have you any ideas about what's going on here?" Her Intelligence Officer took his time before answering her thoughtfully.

"Naturally, they must know that the code they used is broken," he said slowly, logically structuring his thoughts as he spoke. "Plus they sent it directly to us, *before* we entered the system. So, we must conclude that they intended us to get it. As it happens, it arrived - not quite in time," he said, and his face fell. He had seen the young pilot, Jarn Stynter, and what had happened to her, despite Al Saruff's best efforts. "Still, why did they send it to us while we were out-system?" he asked rhetorically. "It faced a greater risk of interception than now, with a battle raging. Although that might be exactly the point - perhaps there wouldn't be time, once our forces engaged." He turned to his captain, who nodded.

"Very good so far, Lieutenant. Keep going, I'm listening." She half turned her head. "Inform me when we're within two clicks of weapons range on those frigates."

"Yes, ma'am," the sensors officer responded. Gen'yaa nodded and looked at Dey'jeaa expectantly.

"Now, despite all that, they're bombarding the planet along with the other *Star Destroyer*," the latter observed with a frown. "This doesn't really- wait..." he pulled his beard thoughtfully for a moment, then spun on his heel. "Sensors, give me an analysis of the second *Victory* ship," he said authoritatively. At a nod from Gen'yaa, the sensors officer set to work. He soon had his answer, and the puzzlement in his voice was unmistakable.

"Sir, ma'am, those turbolaser blasts are set at a very low power," he reported.

"And they don't appear to be aimed at anything. Our information on Neljun is a little sketchy, but it looks as though they're firing at nothing. Nothing important,

anyway. Certainly not at large resource deposits - which isn't true of the other Star Destroyer. They're firing close to full power, and turning natural resources into molten slag." Gen'yaa nodded.

"Very well," she said, and looked at Dey'jeaa, who seemed deep in thought.

"There's only one explanation that I can see," the latter said. "Defection."

That was enough to bring Colonel Gen'yaa's eyebrow up, he saw.

"Defection?" she repeated, somewhat dubiously. Dey'jeaa nodded vigorously.

"If you add it all up, ma'am, that's what you get," he said firmly. "He -that is, whoever's in command of that ship right now - couldn't send us a message detailing his intentions - that would be too risky. As it is, he risked much telling us of the traitor. And if the transmission about the traitor was discovered, it's possible that he could've explained it away somehow, said his comms officer was a traitor, anything. But a plain message announcing his intention to defect would be impossible to explain away. Now, given that fact, he's given us as much indication as he can that he's on our side. Now he's not really participating in the orbital bombardment as he should. He isn't hitting any targets, civilian, military or otherwise. Plus, there's an absence of fighters out there. Who does that really help? Us, ma'am. It doesn't really do the Imperials any good to have their TIEs on the flight deck, yet that's exactly what's happening over there. Somehow, he's managed to get both ships to keep most of their fighters on board. The only thing that troubles me," Dey'jeaa continued, and his normally level voice was obviously excited now, "is his ship's crew and stormtrooper detachment. I'm assuming that we're dealing with the captain, although there may have been a mutiny, we can't tell anything like that for sure. But the chances of the entire ship's crew wanting to defect are slim. That aside, it seems that the defectors - there have got to be more than one - have control over the ship. Certainly, control of its weapons and communications systems, but if they control those, then they must control the ship. It makes sense that they would have devised their own way to deal with the crew, though." He shook his head, then stared resolutely at his superior officer.

"No, ma'am, I'm sure of it. That Star Destroyer - what's her name?" He glanced at the tactical display, "the *Valourous*? She's going to defect." Colonel Gen'yaa shook her head.

"Incredible. I've never seen anything like it. I hope you're right about this, Lieutenant." Dey'jeaa just nodded.

"So do I, Colonel," he affirmed. "So do I."

"And if and when she does," the Bothan colonel continued, "then I hope she takes down one of these capital ships for us. That would make the odds here a whole lot friendlier."

[Aboard the *Valourous*]

Captain Draxus' eyes gleamed as he turned to his communications officer.

"Communications," he ordered with a devilish smile, "order the *Vociferous* to pull back to maximum weapons range. Inform them that I want both them and us ready to lend the frigates and the Imperial Destroyers a hand in taking out that

New Republic Carrier." The communications officer smiled as well, as he caught his captain's meaning.

"Sir." He turned to his station and began issuing Draxus' orders. Kilroy Brasken crossed the bridge and stood at his captain's side.

"Moving into position to take out the *Angel of Fury*?" he asked, although it was more of a statement than a question. The senior officer nodded.

"I am. And if those transports manage to capture or destroy the *Vociferous*, then there's a chance that they'll be able to take out the *Pacifier* as well." For a brief moment, a shadow passed across Listran Draxus' face. He liked the impetuous young Commander Haart, and he'd had to smile at the young man's defence of himself in front of his superiors, particularly the admiral. *But no*, Draxus reminded himself with hardened resolve, *he's just another Imperial starship commander in a galaxy full of them. And if his orders are to destroy innocent civilians, then he'll follow them to the letter - most likely because that will get him promoted, let him climb the ladder. But what they all don't realise*, Draxus thought with a mirthless inner smile, *is that the closer to the top you get, the more rotten it gets. Until you get to the twisted pile of corruption that once called himself "Emperor". Now the corruption's still there, but just has a different name.* And with that thought, the debate that once more threatened to continue in Captain Draxus' mind was silenced.

"We're going to have to show our colours soon, sir," Commander Brasken noted, his voice not betraying the nervousness he felt. "If we wait until the *Dominance* and *Providence* are in range, then this is going to be a very short defection." Draxus nodded.

"I know. That's why the *Angel of Fury* has to be gone before they can get that close. And when they do, things are going to get very nasty. I hope these New Republic types are the best there are, because the odds are very firmly set against us."

[Behind the planet Neljun, in high orbit]

First Lieutenant Hyden glanced out his cockpit window at the lone Y-wing fighter that held position further around Neljun's equator. His fighters were clustered in a rough box formation, except for the lone fighter, Eagle Nine, that alone was visible - or at least, in danger of being visible - to the attacking Imperial forces on the other side of the planet.

And then came the report that Jace Hyden was waiting for.

"Lead, this is Nine," Ensign Narek Both's voice crackled over the comm.

"Nine, Lead. Go ahead."

"The two assault ships, *Victory* destroyers, are pulling back - looks like we'll be able to get away after all."

"Pulling back? Why?" The puzzlement in the flight leader's voice was evident.

"Unknown, Lead. They're still firing, though."

Inside his cockpit, Hyden accepted this without comment. *Well*, he thought with a wry smile, *never look a gift tauntain in the mouth...*

"Copy, Nine. Form up. Eagles, I don't know why those ships are pulling back, but that'll give us the best chance we're going to get. Form up on me, Arrow formation, we're going in!" There was a chorus of acknowledgements, and Neljun's only fighter wing resolved itself - very quickly, Hyden noted with approval and pride - into a Vee formation, with one blank spot on the right hand echelon. Eagle Nine's Y-wing was racing towards them as they raced out towards the planet shadow's edge, and the combined rate of closure ensured that it wasn't long before Ensign Both's fighter slipped neatly into its place, and the squadron began to curve gracefully around, keeping its distance to the planet constant, and following the planet's surface into the gaping jaws of battle.

[Bridge, Star Destroyer *Dominance*]

"Admiral, sir, the two *Victory* ships are pulling back," the sensors officer called from the crew pits. Vice Admiral Piett turned.

"Pulling back?"

"Yes, sir... slowly, though," the man confirmed. The admiral inclined his head to his right.

"Communications?"

"Yes, sir," the young man at the comms station replied, acknowledging his admiral's unspoken question, his hand to his ear. His face brightened.

"The *Valourous* reports that they are pulling back to maximum weapons range, Admiral," he reported. "Captain Draxus indicates that in addition to the bombardment, the *Valourous* and the *Vociferous* offer their assistance in protecting the frigates and destroying the Rebel capital ship." Vice Admiral Piett allowed himself a tight smile. *Trust an old tiger like Draxus to want his slice of the action*, he thought. *Why that man is not in command of an Imperial Destroyer is beyond me, although I'll bet the reason is political and not near damned good enough to justify itself.*

"Very well," he said in his clipped, precise voice. "Acknowledge the order and inform Captain Draxus that if he can take any ships down, then good luck to him." The communications officer acknowledged and moved to comply as Captain Gillett smiled.

"Nicely put, sir," he said approvingly. "Although I doubt that this Rebel carrier is going to go down to the guns of a *Victory*." Piett favoured his XO with yet another of his rare smiles. *We are getting cocky, aren't we, Captain?* he asked silently. *But I can't say I blame you. And you're damned right, no Victory ship is going to best this Bothan.*

"That's the spirit, Captain," he said aloud. "I shall be happy enough that this Rebel ship is destroyed, but I will be that much happier if the *Dominance* can cut her teeth on it."

[Transport *Bear*]

"Pulling back?" asked Cheetah, puzzled.

"Yes, sir," replied the *Bear's* pilot. "They're both moving back, possibly to engage us."

"Well, it makes no difference, we're committed now, anyway," said the Lynx officer, turning to walk back into the main compartment. "Revised ETA, three minutes!"

"3 minutes!" came a number of yells as the commandos made sure everyone had heard the new information.

Cheetah turned back to the pilots. "Better have the flyboys start work."

[Wolfgang Group]

"Okay, there's the signal. Fourteen, Twenty-Two, good luck," said Solo.

"Roger that, Lead. Let's go, Two," said Drake, opening his throttle to maximum. He checked over his left shoulder to see Raiven's X-wing maintaining his position as usual, then slide slightly further out to the left to improve spacing.

"Ready to play rabbit, Two?" asked Drake as the range meter to the VSD dropped through 2.5 clicks.

"Just gimme the ears, Fourteen," replied Raiven with a grin.

"Go."

With that one word, the X-wing shot ahead as Raiven dumped his laser recharge power into his engines, gaining an extra 25% speed on his wingman.

"Okay Arpin, here goes..."

The R2 unit tweedled.

"Oh, we're just going to buzz the tower."

The droid beeped another question.

"That Destroyer's command tower."

The droid squealed.

"I hope this works, Lead," said Ibero, using the private channel his R2 unit had opened with Solo's fighter.

"So do I. But he's worked off VSDs before, he knows their layout, and since we don't have any A-wings, an X- will have to do."

Raiven ignored Arpin's jabbering and began to dodge and juke the fighter about as brilliant green cannon fire began to reach out towards him. The streams of energy whipped past, none close enough to cause danger, as the fighter crossed the one-click mark. Arpin stopped squealing as he ran out of insults to direct at the pilot, and began to whimper quietly as the laserfire intensified.

"Okay, Arpin," said Raiven to the now quieter droid, "here comes the hard part."

[Hard part!?!]

"It's working!" yelled Drake as his wingman's lead continued to stretch out. "Just keep dodging!"

He watched as his range meter scrolled down, armed a pair of torpedoes and linked them together.

Raiven's X-wing corkscrewed and dodged, jinked and juked its way closer to the rear of the *Victory* class destroyer as the desperate cannon fire continued to try to track the elusive fighter. He screamed low over the command tower, still jinking and dodging, and pulled up, climbing relative to the hull of the Star Destroyer as some of the cannons on the upper surface ceased firing at the planet and opened fire on this impudent attacker...

Drake was less than half a click out as he centred his targeting box on the portside shield generator. There was no targeting tone, the sensors switched off lest they alert his quarry...

He pulled the trigger and slewed the fighter to the right, searching for his next target.

The turbolaser blast slammed into Raiven's fully deployed aft shield, almost breaking through as the craft bucked, the tail threatening to break away from the pilot's control.

"Sith!" he yelled, rapidly evening his shields fore and aft – they were down to just over half power now – and continuing to dodge.

Arpin beeped his agreement, then displayed a message relayed from Ledner.

"Finally!" said Raiven, under his breath.

He yanked back on the stick, bringing the craft over in a loop and pointing it back towards the triangular shape of the Star Destroyer. From the position "above" the capital ship, he watched as the two sets of blue-trailed torpedoes impacted the shield generators, wreathing them in fire. The VSD's guns, now alert to this new threat, began to track on the new X-wing as it broke to the left, curving down past the hull. Raiven straightened up on the portside tower and fired a pair of his own torpedoes, just as another turbolaser blast streaked past his nose, forcing him to jerk away. The comlink crackled to life as Solo gave his next order.

"Fourteen, Two-two, break off!"

"But-"

"Negative, Fourteen," said Solo, cutting off Drake's argument before he could even begin. "The *Vic's* shields are less than 50% and she's launching TIEs."

"Roger that, Lead, we'll see what we can do."

Drake looked over as Raiven's X-wing pulled alongside, showing a nasty looking carbon burn across the nose, a sure sign of a near miss from a turbolaser blast.

"Hanniuska's going to have your ass," he said.

"Here's to hoping!" said Raiven with a laugh. "Now let's score a few ourselves."

[Bridge, VSD *Vociferous*]

Captain Parrins looked surprised as the lights flickered with the impact of the first torpedoes. He was even more surprised when one of his junior officers reported on the incoming craft.

"*They are going to board us?*" said Parrins, incredulously.

"So it would seem, sir."

"What's the compliment of a Delta-class transport?"

The junior officer looked at his datapad and punched a button.

"Uh. Between 30 and 50, dependent on configuration, sir."

"*100 troops! We have over 2000 troops aboard, and a further 5000 crew members, and they think they can board us!*" said Parrins, laughing.

"This is too much! Order Commander Hollis to organise the defense on the hangar decks. I want them cut down as they leave their transports!"

"Um. Sir—"

Parrins turned and stared at the lieutenant. He spoke in an ice cold voice. "I gave you an order."

"Yes sir."

[Cockpit, Transport *Bear*]

"Fighters and Interceptors!" said the *Bear's* copilot, pointing at the small shapes exiting the *Vociferous's* launch bay. Around the transports, the three remaining escort fighters moved slightly ahead to beat the brunt of an attack on the larger vessels.

"Concentrate on the *Victory*, that's our main concern right now," said the pilot, "besides, look there."

As he spoke, two X-wings completed their arc around the Star Destroyer's hull and plunged into the TIEs forming up below the ship's belly. The brilliant light of laserfire was not lost against the shining backdrop of the planet as the two X-wings claimed three kills in their first pass.

"On my mark," said Solo's voice from the comlink, tearing their attention away from the dogfight. "Mark!"

The three X-wings and two transports opened fire, each releasing two pairs of proton torpedoes. The torps, dumbfired from 3 klicks distance, raced in at the huge wedge-shaped craft, losing only one of their number to the Star Destroyer's guns. The first wave of torpedoes blasted the remaining shields to less than 20% before the remaining projectiles collapsed them, allowing the last couple to slam into the hull itself, destroying armour and tearing at the hull.

As the craft passed the two click mark, several turbolasers ceased fire at the planetary surface and redirected their fire against these arrogant newcomers.

"Evasive manoeuvres!" ordered Solo. "Seventeen, with me!" With that, he threw his X-wing into a corkscrew, Sacart tightly behind as Ibero broke to the left and back, careful to stay ahead of the two lumbering transports, which dodged left and right, up and down, but continued to bore in at maximum throttle.

Solo selected one of the TIE Interceptors that were dogfighting with Raiven and Drake and engaged.

Ibero's X-wing tore in at the VSD, guns firing to deplete any remaining shields and draw fire from those turbolaser turrets not firing at the planet below. A fraction of a second later, the scarlet laser blasts were joined by the electric-blue of ion bolts as the two *Delta* class transports hammered the underside of the destroyer.

"Shields are down and out! Seventeen, can you get a scan?" asked Solo as the grey cliff-like hull towered over them.

"Affirmative, Lead," replied Sacart. "We've got numerous lifeforms on the hangar decks!"

"Roger that. Proceed as planned, Lynx."

The *Bear* and *Unicorn*, which had ceased their jinking as the ion bolts overloaded systems all across the underside of the *Vociferous*, dove forward, headed directly for the crippled destroyer's hangar opening and ignoring the much depleted threat of the VSD's starfighters.

[Hangar Bay D3, VSD *Vociferous*]

Commander Hollis, the *Vociferous*' Naval Trooper Complement's commander, ran an expert eye over the troops on the darkened hangar deck. Three squads were waiting, taking cover behind a parked shuttle and several pieces of flight deck equipment, but the real surprise for the Rebels were the two full companies of troops – both naval troopers and stormtroopers – hidden in the corridors beyond the bay's twin blast doors, ready to pour through the doors into the hangar bay as soon as the Rebel transports touched down. Scattered through the remaining hangar bays aboard the *Victory*-class destroyers were similar traps, ready to overwhelm the arrogant Rebels the instant they stepped onto the deck. He risked a quick look out of the MagCon field and watched dispassionately as a TIE Fighter was destroyed by one of the attacking X-wings, but more importantly for him were the two *Delta* class transports – doubtless stolen from the Empire! – approaching rapidly from below. He turned and ran back towards the blast doors.

"Here they come!" he yelled to his troops as he left the bay and hid around the corner in the corridor with the surprise force, blaster pistol drawn.

Those idiot rebels didn't even fully disable the ship, he thought to himself, and now they're attacking heavily defended positions while vastly outnumbered. How stupid can they be?

As he finished this line of thought, he noticed a dim, eerie blue light casting a shadow through the blast door and glanced through the doorway.

He had just enough time to realise that maybe the Rebels weren't as stupid as he first thought...

[X-wing Wolfshead 4]

“Impact!” yelled Ibero as the proton torpedoes slammed into the hangar bays surrounding the opening in the underside of the Imperial ship, filling the entire space with fire and rocking the ship as if it were a child’s toy in the hands of a rancor.

The two Lynx transports had peeled away immediately after they, and Ibero, had fired their twin torpedoes, and all three craft headed aft, towards the bulging dome of the main reactor’s underside. The two transports split away from the VSD’s centreline and moved closer.

“There’s the target area!” said the *Bear’s* pilot, rolling the craft 180 degrees to present the underside to the *Vociferous’* belly. His co-pilot watched the instruments intently, and assisted him in landing within 0.1 m of their projected attachment point. It was close enough.

[Airlock, Engineering Decks, Lower level, VSD *Vociferous*]

The airlock door slid open with a low hiss, triggering a flashing red light and a low alarm in the chamber, a small prep area lined with pressure suits. The two naval troopers clutched their blaster carbines a little more tightly, and shared a quick glance. The senior of the two motioned for his partner to take a closer look, and turned to the comlink panel behind him to report in this unusual anomaly. As he did so, a single blaster bolt illuminated the dark interior of the airlock chamber and the prep room as Monkey picked him off, the blaster bolt sending him tumbling into a heap on the floor. The remaining trooper did not hesitate, charging forward, carbine firing. A pair of blaster bolts from low in the dark airlock intercepted the Imperial trooper, dropping him mid stride.

The Rebel commando picked himself up from the deck, where’d he’d dropped after shooting the first Imperial, and ran into the room, his carbine up and sweeping left and right for further targets. He settled to one side of the door leading out of the prep room as the airlock hissed behind him.

The remaining members of Lynx Team Beta poured into the room, moving without speaking, as they took up positions covering the doorway. Hyena and Short Circuit moved straight over to the comlink/computer panel and began their work. Removing the front panel, the two silenced the alarm in less than 30 seconds and quickly stowed their tools.

“We neutralised the alarm before it was passed on to the main computer,” said Hyena, “so we’re still uncompromised. Move out, plan BANTHA.”

With a nod, Short Circuit pulled the front from the door control pad and connected his datapad to the electronics inside. With a low hiss, the door slid open a few centimetres, allowing Monkey to slide a small mirror on a short rod into the corridor and check left and right. A nod signified the all clear and the door was opened fully. The ten team members slipped into the main corridor beyond and turned left, heading towards the main engineering spaces.

The lighting in the corridor was dim and tinged red by battle-alert lights spaced evenly on both walls. As briefed, Monkey and Double-O took the point, each hugging one side of the corridor as they slid forward as quietly as possible.

[X-wing Group Wolfgang]

Raiven's quad burst took the TIE Bomber on its port solar wing, tearing into it and destroying the bulky starfighter with a bright flash.

"Wolfgang flight, regroup," ordered Solo. "The *Vociferous*' fighters have been destroyed."

"Roger that, Lead," replied Drake, banking around to point back at the ventral surface of the crippled *Victory* class destroyer, where the X-wings were reassembling.

Raiven looked up at the underside of the capital ship as the fighters circled, forming into an arrow formation. The two Lynx transports were nestled on either side of the bulging dome that marked the bottom of the Star Destroyer's power core, attached to the airlocks there. Their light grey colour made them difficult to pick out against the similarly coloured hull, but that wouldn't be much of a defence if the X-wings allowed any Imperial fighters close enough to search. Likewise their sensor returns would be lost against the huge signature of the *Vociferous* herself, but if the sensing vessel got too close...

"Heads up. We've got incoming from the *Pacifier*. Looks like she's picked up a few replacements, we've got two flights of Fighters on intercept. Break and engage!"

[VSD *Vociferous*]

This was perhaps the most dangerous part of the mission – rendezvous. The two Lynx teams had entered the *Vociferous* separately to allow a more stealthy approach, and to enable the mission to go ahead even if one team were compromised. However, making contact with friendly forces in unfriendly territory – and the engineering spaces aboard an enemy capital ship definitely qualified as "unfriendly" – was a difficult and dangerous task, at best, and lead to Timekeeper almost shooting Monkey dead where he stood, before spotting his brother stood next to his target and holding his fire.

The two teams moved into an engineering workshop unobserved, and rapidly secured the two doorways while the commando officers conversed.

"Report," ordered Cheetah, tersely.

"We're still under condition BANTHA. Two troopers in the prep room downed, no friendly casualties. Safe traverse to the droid access conduits and successful movement to this deck without detection, four droids destroyed or restrained," replied Hyena quickly. Cheetah nodded.

"We encountered a four man squad of stormtroopers and carried out a tactical ambush, no detected signals. We're at condition DEWBACK, possible compromise but unlikely. We'll move out as DEWBACK."

Hyena nodded and stood up.

"Team Beta, we are now at DEWBACK. Lead off!"

Double-O and Timekeeper lead off into the corridor beyond, still heading upwards toward their next objective, the Power Core.

“Will someone get this bastard off me!” yelled Sacart, slamming his stick over to the left as the TIE fired at his tail once more, slamming into his shields with a sick sounding crunch.

“Steady, Seventeen,” replied Ibero, rolling slightly as he adjusted his aim. A pair of linked laser bolts slammed into the TIE’s ball cockpit, tearing it in half. “You’re clear.”

“Wolffang, pull back to the *Vociferous*. Sensors report she’s beginning to bring systems back on line, so we’ll have to deal with as many of those gun turrets as we can.”

The commando teams were less than a minute from their destination when their luck ran out. A random stormtrooper patrol marched past the end of the little-used corridor that the teams were using, and one of the stormtroopers had glanced down and spotted Double-O and Timekeeper. The fire from the platoon killed six of the stormtroopers in an eyeblink, but two escaped long enough to report in and the damage was done.

“LYNX, WE ARE COMPROMISED!” yelled Cheetah unnecessarily over the alarm. “CONDITION KRAKANA!”

The team immediately charged forward into the corridor from which the stormtroopers had spotted them, blasters blazing as they split their fire left and right against any targets that showed themselves, including several troopers and technicians, and the remainder of the stormtrooper patrol.

“Main engineering!” yelled Cheetah as the platoon ran toward their target. Under other conditions, the teams were to have bypassed the probably crowded main engineering areas and gone straight for the control core, but there was no time. The door leading to the engineering was a full grade blast door, and the alert would have locked the door down to those without the proper authorisation codes. With time, Hyena was sure he could break those codes but now they needed more direct measures. Cheetah took one look at the door and gave a terse order.

“Breach, bang and clear!”

Hyena nodded and gave his own order. “Beta, cover for threat!”

Team Beta settled into cover positions, hugging the walls for cover, weapons pointed up and down the wide corridor outside the engineering door.

Eadrain stepped forward and ignited his lightsaber, twisting his body to insert it horizontally, and checked left and right to the Team Alpha members flanking him, to ensure they were ready. With a nod on each side, he plunged the bright scarlet blade through the metal as if it were butter and rapidly moved sideways, sliding through the door at chest height. Halfway across, the door shot upwards as the blade slashed through the control mechanism, causing the door to move upwards past the blade and drop a chunk of door back down to the deck. Using

this cover and leaning around the frame of the now-open blast door, Team Alpha opened fire into the chamber beyond.

The main engineering area was dominated at the far end by the power core, which disappeared vertically up and down in its own huge shaft that stretched from the reactor at the bottom of the ship to the superstructure under the command tower. Along each side and in a double row along the centre of the room were control stations manned by technicians, and midway up the walls along each side were catwalks, manned by stormtrooper and navy trooper guards.

The commandos concentrated their fire on the guards on the catwalks and by each side as the remaining members hefted flashbang grenades through the doorway. The brilliant flash sent those without goggles or equipment stumbling blind as the Lynx troops concentrated their fire on the better-protected stormtroopers, whose helmets protected their senses from the powerful concussion.

“Contact!” yelled Hyena from the main corridor as Team Beta began to engage the imperial troops responding to the alarm. In cover, the commandos opened fire as the enemy troops rounded corners from adjoining corridors, shooting them down with precision blasterfire before they had even cleared the corners properly. The first dozen troopers into the corridor barely got a shot off as the disciplined Lynx commandos turned the corridor into an inpromptu shooting gallery.

In the main engineering chamber, half of Team Alpha lofted high explosive grenades into the room, throwing troops and technicians alike around as the powerful explosives tore into the milling bodies on the main deck area. The remaining team members continued to pick off the stormtroopers that fired down towards Alpha’s covered positions around the doorway.

“Assault! GO!”

The grenadiers leapt to their feet and charged into the room, now firing their blasters at any threat that presented itself.

“They’re beginning to get a bit frisky,” reported Archer as he ejected another power pack from his blaster rifle and inserted a new one, pulled from his webbing.

Hyena looked over his shoulder into the main engineering area, and, seeing that resistance had been more or less suppressed, gave his next order.

“Fall back by pairs! Use your frags and smoke, clear and cover!”

A chorus of acknowledgements were accompanied in several cases by grins as Archer and Bullseye flipped their blaster rifles’ fire control to the grenade launcher mounted beneath the barrel. Archer waited a few seconds for several Imperials to show themselves at the end of the corridor before releasing his first grenade, which sailed in a flat arc and struck the second stormtrooper full in the chest before detonating. A wash of warm air from the explosion passed over Archer as Angel, Double-O and Nomad leapt to their feet and sprinted across the corridor into Engineering, and a loud blast followed by a roar of approval signified a similar effect from Bullseye’s weapon.

“Go!” yelled Archer as he fired the second and last grenade in the launcher down the corridor, adding to the destruction started by his first grenade. On command, a pair of smoke grenades from Double-O, waiting just inside the doorway, bounced off the wall and landed a few metres in front of him, rapidly filling the intervening space with thick black smoke. A glance behind him confirmed that the rest of the team had withdrawn into Engineering, and a second smoke cloud filled the corridor behind him. Jumping to his feet, he levelled his rifle at the control panel and triggered a burst of blasterfire, tearing it to pieces, then jogged easily inside. Hyena completed his count and nodded to Short Circuit, who had already removed the door control panel on the inside and made his modifications. The door slid rapidly down to meet the piece left behind when Eadrain had made his grand entrance.

A quick inspection did not reveal much promise of security, with the door rent open in at least 3 places where the two pieces did not join properly.

“Let’s move!” yelled Cheetah. “Lieutenant, get on it! Team Alpha, cover for threat! Team Beta, secure the exit!”

The main engineering compartment opened at the distant end as the power core’s shaft disappeared up towards the superstructure and down a short distance to the ship’s Solar Ionisation Reactor. As Godzilla and Archer set up at each side of the shaft, covering the centre, Hyena and Angel sprinted across the bridge to the catwalk that surrounded the power core. The two immediately got to work.

“Dig in, take cover and resupply, we may have to hold off for a while,” ordered Cheetah. “Midnight, Motormouth, get us some supplies.”

The two named commandos slung their blaster carbines and drew their pistols before starting to search the bodies of the fallen Imperials, looking primarily for blaster power packs but anything else of possible value. The pistols were insurance, and several times blaster whines echoed around the compartment as an Imperial showed signs of resistance. The ammunition was distributed among the Republic Commandos, bringing most back up to a full supply, as they settled into positions around the compartment, taking cover behind anything that could stop a blaster bolt, and waited. Arrow and Slicer pulled coils of rope and gas powered piton guns and began to organise an exit for the team.

Cheetah took a few seconds to survey the shaft stretching above him and then pointed to a hatch 120 degrees around the shaft, several levels up.

“There.”

Caballero nodded and turned. “Monkey, Timekeeper, Double-O, you’re with me! Move!”

The four commandos jogged out to the power column and edged past Angel and Hyena, who was yelling back and forth with Short Circuit.

“Junction box D-14. Secondary Coolant control power!”

Short Circuit sprinted to one bulkhead and pulled open a yellow marked box. A couple of seconds later he tore a handful of components from inside and dropped them to the floor.

“Check!” he yelled.

“Box A-45D. Tertiary power core instrumentation repeater!”

In response, he shrugged his blaster carbine off his shoulder, levelled it at an innocuous-looking box mounted halfway up the other wall and blasted it with three quick shots.

"Check!"

They were still holding this bizarre conversation of destruction as the four scouts crossed to the opposite side of the shaft and began to climb the ladder rungs mounted to the smooth grey metal surface.

[Entering battle zone, Neljun system]

First Lieutenant Hyden flexed his gloved fingers around his flight stick.

"Eagles, this is Lead - watch out for those turbolaser blasts, one of them alone will fry you!" he warned, his hand adopting a tight grip on the stick, ready to fling his fighter over at the slightest indication of a green bolt heading his way.

"Spread formation," he ordered next. "Keep room to maneuver, and make it harder for them to hit us." *If*, he added to himself, *they even try*. "Stand by to engage targets," he added, scanning through his CMD list for an Imperial warship - a target of opportunity.

[X-wing Group Wolfgang]

Ibero threw his X-wing over in a corkscrewing roll to avoid the green laser blasts that groped like spindly fingers for his fighter. As the X-wing whirled, he glanced down at his radar, then quickly up again at the twisting melee going on outside his cockpit.

And froze.

Barely distinguishable from the blue background of the radar screen was a tight group of pale blue dots.

"Wolfshead Lead, this is Three," he said, making sure that both the Wolfgang and squadron-wide frequencies were active. "I've got a bunch of new arrivals, looks like from the planet itself, Y-wings - can't make out numbers as yet." Foxfire's answer was a few seconds in coming.

"Three, Lead...are you sure? I don't - ah, got 'em now," she said slowly. "I'm a bit busy, but I'll try and talk to them. In the meantime, Wolves, stay sharp. They're still blue blips, not green ones."

"Copy, Lead. Three out," Ibero said tightly, then returned his attention to the TIE juking to avoid him.

[Y-wing Eagle Squadron]

First Lieutenant Hyden jumped involuntarily as his comm unit suddenly hissed with static. However, almost immediately the static resolved itself and a clear female voice spoke.

"Incoming Y-wing squadron, identify yourself. And make it quick." Hyden's eyebrows shot up at that, and he would have exchanged looks with Kril Diva, except that she couldn't see him, behind and to the left of him as she was.

"Unidentified Republic craft - *if* that is what you are," Hyden returned, letting a little of the woman's abruptness sneak into his own voice, "this is First Lieutenant Jace Hyden of the Neljunian Militia, commander of Eagle Squadron. Identify yourselves, please." He scowled as he added the pleasantries, hoping that the rude woman might adopt some manners as well.

"Eagle Leader, this is Lieutenant Colonel Avery Schroeder of the New Republic, Wolfshead Squadron Leader," the voice came back. "We're in a tight spot here, and don't have much time. We're trying to prevent this Imperial task force from destroying all the resources on your planet." Hyden's face softened.

"We received word about you from Talonis just this morning, Colonel," he said, his voice calmer now. "If you're here to help, then we're glad to have you. We just heard what happened at Talonis and what you did there, and we don't want Neljun going the same way."

"Glad to hear it, Eagle Lead," Foxfire came back. "Picas and Redault were both hit by the Imperials, too, before we could get there. Finally, we've managed to beat them to the punch, so to speak. Although with the amount of firepower they're packing, this will be a close one."

"Copy that, Wolfshead Lead," Hyden answered with a grin. "If 192 proton torpedoes are any good to you, just tell us where to put them."

Foxfire smiled. She was going to like this young pilot after all.

"Hopefully you won't have to worry too much about those *Victory* destroyers for much longer, Eagle Lead," she said genially, "but the Impstars might give us trouble. Any and all torpedoes you unload on those two would be a great help."

"Consider it done, Wolfshead Lead," Hyden replied. "If I don't get a chance to talk to you again - then thank you. Risking your lives in defence of our home is something we'll never be able to repay you for."

"Seeing this Imp task force blown into small pieces will be payment enough for now," Foxfire said grimly. "And you're welcome."

[Bridge, VSD *Vociferous*]

"Report!" bellowed Parrins.

"We have severe damage across the lower decks, most of the hangar bays have been completely blown out. Shields are at 10%. Systems at approximately 40% capacity, we've lost most of our ventral weaponry and our fighters have been destroyed. The orbital bombardment is still underway using what weapon power we have being fed to the dorsal guns. We may also have intruders aboard."

"Damn it! They have 100 troops, *maximum*. Find them and destroy them!"

The stormtrooper commander stepped forward from his place by the security officers' station.

"We have reports of intruders near main engineering."

"GET THEM!"

[Main Engineering, Victory Star Destroyer Vociferous]

Pacman squinted through the scope mounted on his rifle, aiming at one of the rents in the blast door caused by Lynx's violent entry. At only five centimeters across its widest point, the hole was not large, but it was large enough to show the flash of white of a stormtrooper showing a little too much of himself as the Imperials prepared to breach the door.

The rebel waited a few seconds, fighting the urge to shoot before he had a solid target. The flash was probably from an elbow; it was at about the right height... Outside the door, the Stormtrooper ducked down and leaned his head over slowly to take a look through the gap.

There.

Pacman's single bolt slammed into the Stormtrooper's faceplate, taking most of the imperial's head with it.

[Main Computer Chamber, Victory Star Destroyer Vociferous]

Computer Technician 1st Class Din Loajker looked up from his console as he heard the slight scrape of metal. He looked around at the nearest Stormtrooper guard and summoned him with a nod. Loajker walked quietly over to the blank bulkhead where the noise had come from, the Stormtrooper following, curious. The computer technician placed his right ear against the cool metal and tried to block out the mute sound of the red alert sirens.

"I can hear some-"

With that word, the bulkhead burst inward as the shaped-charge explosives mounted on the other side detonated. The durasteel bulkhead was reduced to razor sharp fragments that tore into the room shredding personnel and equipment with consummate ease. Caballero's scout section dived into the room, blaster carbines firing at any Imperial personnel showing signs of life. "Move! Move! Move!" grunted Caballero.

The computer compartment, at only two decks high and covering half the floor area, was much smaller than that of main engineering. The cylindrical main computer core dominated the compartment, stretching from deck to ceiling, fully 3 metres in diameter. The status boards scattered around the surface blinked their friendly patterns of light as the less friendly lights of blasterfire crossed the room, neither side wanting to damage the core and the precious power it represented.

[Main Engineering, Victory Star Destroyer Vociferous]

With a brilliant flash, the Imperial troops blew a hole in the blast door barely wide enough to admit a pair of stormtroopers. A fraction of a second later, Bullseye and Archer created their own smaller explosions as they fired concussion

grenades through the opening, scattering the Imperial assault team, in some cases in several directions at once.

The remaining members of the assault team were cut to pieces as they came through the gap, the Republic squads firing from cover with great accuracy and immolating the Imperials as they emerged from the thick smoke.

Cheetah took a second to assess the situation before ordering Motormouth and Ghost, the two Commandos closest to the door, to retreat further into the engineering compartment.

Cheetah's comlink cracked to life as Caballero spoke. "Lead, this is Three."
"Go."

"Objective Red achieved.

Hyena nodded to Short Circuit, who immediately turned and sprinted across the catwalk towards the ladder used earlier by Caballero and his team. Hyena paused for a second and then followed, ignoring the blaster bolts that splashed nearby as the Imperials renewed their assault.

The two moved rapidly along the droid accessway towards the still-smoking hole in the bulkhead that lead to the computer core, which was guarded by Timekeeper.

Ducking inside, Hyena paused long enough to survey the situation and turned to Short Circuit, pointing to one of the computer consoles that lined the compartment chamber.

"Let's get on with it, shall we?"

[Wolfgang Flight]

Drake grunted as he slammed the stick over to one side, causing the TIE Interceptor's cannon fire to miss by a narrow margin.

"Come on, come on, come on..."

Ibero performed a perfect half-barrel roll over the surface of the *Vociferous* and slotted in behind Drake's attacker, shredding it with a pair of linked cannon shots.

"Thanks," said Drake "You know a guy called Raiven? He *should* be watching my ass right now."

Raiven's voice cut across the comlink before Ibero could respond, the amusement in his voice plainly evident. "Sorry, I was busy watching Sacart's. Thankfully he doesn't talk out of his, unlike your good self..."

A beep from Ledner signalled that the final T/I had been destroyed, interrupting Drake's reply.

"OK, form up."

The three X Wings slotted in with Solo and Sacart's fighters before the flight leader spoke.

"Wolffangs, that's the last of the *Pacifier's* fighters - now she's on her way over here. Anyone got any torpedoes left?" asked Solo, already knowing the answer.

"Fourteen. I've got two."

"Seventeen. Two here."

"Twenty-Two. Four onboard."

Solo himself had a pair of torpedoes ready to fire, *but ten torpedoes against a frigate? This could be awkward...*

[Bridge, *Victory Star Destroyer Vociferous*]

The engineering technician blinked as the readouts scrolled across his holoscreen. He read them a second time to ensure he had understood correctly before motioning to Ensign Midic, his immediate superior, that he had something to report.

"Yes, Schaum?" asked Midic.

"Uh, sir, I'm getting some strange readings from the power core."

"What? Have you checked your instruments?"

"Just running a quick diagnostic now, sir," replied Schaum. Midic leaned closer over his shoulder as the diagnostics reported the monitoring system as fully functional.

Midic paled as he read the screen.

"What in the name of the Emperor is going on?" screamed Parrins from the walkway by the bridge viewport, "Why has the bombardment stopped? I gave no such order!"

He turned to the gunnery officer, who was frantically going over the readings from his batteries.

"Sir, we have a power failure! All upper gun batteries report zero power"

All eyes, including those of the gunnery officer, turned to his neighbour, Ensign Midic.

"Sir," reported Midic, trying hard to keep his voice from trembling "We have power irregularities in the main reactor"

"*Irregularities!?*" yelled Parrins "You'll have to do better than that!"

"Sir, the reactor is spiking hard. The computer systems that should be controlling the reaction aren't doing so. We have dangerously high temperatures and pressures throughout the system."

Parrins turned to the Stormtrooper Commander. "Have you swept the vermin from the engineering compartment yet?"

"No, sir, they're putting up strong resistance."

"I want them out of there, now!"

He turned back to the engineering officer. "Very well. Take control of the main reactor from here. Use the secondary control systems. Ensure that Engineering can't regain control without authority from the bridge."

"Uh. Yes, sir."

Midic turned back to Schaum and the two got to work.

[Primary Computer Core, *Victory Star Destroyer Vociferous*]

"There!" said Short Circuit, watching the screens.

“Yep, thought they might try that,” said Hyena, watching as the Imperials did exactly what he had expected, “OK, let’s pull their plug and give them a little surprise.”

[Main Engineering, *Victory Star Destroyer Vociferous*]

“Go! Go! Go!” yelled Cheetah as the rest of Team Alpha covered Team Beta, lead by Godzilla, as they retreated to the power core.

The Republic commandos had repulsed three assaults on the engineering compartment before Hyena’s call that the reactor, power and therefore computer systems were under his control. The message preceded the screaming alarms by only a few seconds, and, prebriefed or not, had been very disconcerting for the Lynx teams as the sirens cut across the sound of blasterfire.

Ghost jerked his head back as the Imperials increased their volume of fire, scattering scarlet blaster bolts into the engineering compartment and driving most of the remaining members of Lynx Commando back into cover. He looked over at Angel, who was crouched beside him.

“I know, I know!” she said, hurriedly planting the last of the explosive charges on the power control column.

The Duro simply shrugged and popped around the column, blaster rifle blazing at the Imperials as they poured through the shattered blast door.

Along the sides of the compartment, half of the members of Lynx retreated under the covering fire of the other half before switching roles, covering their now-retreating teammates. As the Commandos reached the lip of the power control core shaft, each grabbed one of the cables fastened to a piton in the deck and clipped it to their webbing harness before turning back to the now smoke-filled compartment and spraying it with covering blasterfire.

Pac-Man jerked his blaster rifle up as a dark shape solidified out of the thickening black smoke.

“Easy, mate,” said Motormouth as he ducked under his teammate’s rifle barrel, reaching on the deck for a line... with his *left* hand, Pac-Man noticed.

“You OK?” he asked.

Motormouth nodded, twisting his body to let Pac-Man see a minor blaster burn on his right forearm “I’ll be fine.”

Cheetah emerged backwards from the smoke, blaster firing at an unseen target.

“Team Beta! Go!”

On command, the six members of Team Beta who were present dropped from the lip of the shaft, some rappelling face first, some using the slightly more sedate method of abseiling. Their target was a wide catwalk that ringed the shaft four decks below. As each commando landed, they disconnected their lines and unslung weapons, sweeping them around their assigned sectors. They moved quickly to secure the two hatchways leading forwards and the one leading aft from the catwalk, two team members to each.

[Bridge, *Victory Star Destroyer Vociferous*]

Midic was definitely having a bad day. The screens told him so, in big red symbols.

"Uh, sir?"

He was overridden as the alarm system was triggered, bathing the bridge in flashing red light and sounding an ear splitting siren.

"Report!"

"The reactor's going critical!" screamed Midic over the sirens "We can't stop it, we can't take control!"

Parrins went pale as he realised what was happening.

"Abandon ship," said Greard, Parrins's XO "We must abandon ship!"

[Bridge, *Victory Star Destroyer Valourous*]

Captain Draxus had watched as the Republic ships had assaulted and boarded the *Vociferous*. Now, the mighty Star Destroyer's guns had stopped.

It was time.

"Cease the bombardment," he ordered his weapons officer. Immediately, the thundering roar of turbolasers that shook the deck plates under his feet stopped, and a deathly silence hung over the ship.

"Target the *Angel of Fury*," the grizzled Imperial captain barked, his lips set in a grim line.

"Weapons are at the ready, Captain," the weapons officer reported moments later. Captain Listran Draxus took a deep breath and gazed intently at the stars as he gave the last order of his Imperial career.

"Fire!"

[Aboard the *Imperial Star Destroyer Dominance*]

Captain Gillett watched in utter disbelief as the assault on Neljun died. The *Vociferous* had been boarded, a fact that had not pleased the admiral at all. Then the *Valourous* had stopped firing. And before even Vice Admiral Piett had ordered an update from Captain Draxus, the latter's ship had started firing on the *Angel of Fury*. Had the universe gone mad?

"What on Coruscant is going on?" Gillett heard his admiral mutter between clenched teeth.

"Communications, raise the *Valourous* immediately!" he roared, in an unprecedented show of temper. "Tell whoever it is that's in command that I want to speak to them, now." The admiral's voice had resumed its normal calm, but his burning fury remained just beneath the surface and threatened to break through at any time, Gillett thought.

[Bridge, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

"Colonel! Ma'am...they're firing on one of the frigates!" the sensors officer had never seen anything like this, and his report was rushed and almost incoherent. Colonel Gen'yaa didn't notice.

Her dark eyes were riveted to the tactical display, and to the drama as it unfolded beyond her bridge windows.

"What on Bothawui..." she breathed. Lieutenant Dey'jeaa was triumphant.

"Defection, Colonel," he said with a grin. "And it looks like they're going to do us a favour and take out the *Angel of Fury*."

"It does, indeed, Lieutenant," the captain of the *Wolf's Lair* agreed with the faint beginnings of a smile. "The frigate's beginning to return fire, but she doesn't stand a chance against that Star Destroyer, especially not with the *Vociferous* incapacitated."

"The *Pacifier* looks like she's moving over to help, ma'am," the sensors officer reported, having regained his normal composure.

"I don't envy those Imperial captains," Gen'yaa grinned. "For them life must have suddenly gone crazy. And I don't envy Vice Admiral Piett, either."

[Wolffang flight]

"Holy--"

"What the hell?!?"

"We have a red-on-red situation here, Colonel!" yelled Solo into the squadron command channel. "The *Valourous* is firing on the *Angel of Fury*!"

"Roger that, Wolffang" replied Foxfire, her voice more composed than Solo's.

"Will advise. Out."

"What the hell is going on?" asked Drake over the flight channel. He watched in amazement as the Frigate twisted futilely under the storm of cannonfire from the Star Destroyer's portside guns, her shields shrinking under the barrage of energy. The Frigate's return fire, enough to make most capital ships at least pause, looked pathetic in comparison as it splashed across the *Valorous's* shields.

"No idea, but our responsibilities haven't changed," said Solo. "Let's set up our attack runs on the *Pacifier*."

A beep from Ledner distracted Drake's attention from the frigate as the R2 unit displayed a new contact.

"Bastard's getting away," he said, viewing the image of a B Wing in his MFD.

Tinged by the red text above it designating the IFF contact as Imperial, the image of the B Wing showed the heavy fighter turning to run away from the planet and away from the fight.

"Stay focussed, fourteen," cautioned Solo, "We have a mission to complete."

"Roger that, Lead," replied Drake, "I'm glad he's gone - now he won't be taken out when the Providence goes down."

"You OK over there, Dan?" asked Raiven.

"Fine. I just want him alive so I can hunt him down myself."

[Bridge, *Imperial Star Destroyer Dominance*]

Vice Admiral Norvad Piett's eyes blazed coldly, and widened fractionally, as a holo of Captain Listran Draxus appeared before him. Draxus was unnaturally formal.

"Admiral."

"Captain." Piett's calm, clipped voice somehow managed to make the rank sound like an insult.

"You wanted to speak to me? I am rather busy," the holo said after a brief silence. No trace of sarcasm or rancor, the old captain held the admiral in the utmost respect, even if they were now fighting on opposite sides. Piett took a breath and willed himself to relax. The man might be a traitor, but at least he was conducting himself like the exemplary officer that his admiral had always thought him to be.

"To be truthful I thought you'd had a mutiny on board," Piett answered. "However, as I find you still in command then I can make no conclusion except that you are a traitor. Whatever your reasons are, I can't and won't hear them now. I warn you, though, Draxus - though I respect you, I will see you destroyed for this."

"I would expect nothing less, Admiral," the ex-Imperial captain replied evenly, with a nod. "For what it is worth, I think you are the most capable officer I have ever served under. Unfortunately, your loyalties are misguided. Talent like yours could be better used elsewhere. I will say only two things, and then we will likely never speak again. First, if I am to be defeated, then there is no dishonour in being defeated by you. And second, although I may die fighting, at least I will die fighting on the right side. Think about it, Admiral. Think about what your brilliant career has led to, and look at where you are and what you are doing. You, one of the Imperial Navy's best rising stars, and they have you destroying resources, raping planets and murdering innocent civilians. Think about that, and ask yourself who Vice Admiral Norvad Piett really is. Not as his father's son, or as Thrawn's successor, or as his task force's leader, or as the *Dominance's* captain - ask yourself who *you* really are. Farewell, Norvad Piett." And with that, the holo disappeared. Listran Draxus had had the last word.

Vice Admiral Piett, his fists clenched on the arms of his chair, turned to Captain Gillett, who stood at his side gaping in disbelief.

"Captain, order the *Providence* to engage and destroy the *Valourous*," he grated.

"That ship is not to leave this system."

[Bridge, *Victory Star Destroyer Valourous*]

Captain Draxus shook his head grimly.

"Think that it had any effect?" Commander Brasken asked his captain.

"I doubt it," the old man said skeptically. "Still, you never know." He turned to his weapons officer as another sheet of green turbolaser fire swept out from his ship and thundered into the battered *Angel of Fury*. The latter attempted to return fire, but compared to the massive amounts of firepower that even a *Victory Star* Destroyer could bring to bear, it was feeble.

"Sir, the *Providence* is moving towards us, presumably to intercept," Lieutenant Commander Hurcsey reported from his position.

"We've lost communications contact with the task force, Captain," communications reported almost simultaneously. "They've switched frequencies and I've no way of telling what the new one is." Draxus nodded. He'd been expecting as such, and Piett would not be nearly stupid enough to simply use the secondary frequency that had been earlier designated. Listening in to Imperial communications would do him little good, anyway. The time for subterfuge and strategy was over - here, it was just Listran Draxus, his comrades, and his Star Destroyer and its guns against the Empire - and maybe the New Republic, too, he thought grimly to himself.

"Sir, incoming transmission from the New Republic carrier," communications reported abruptly. Draxus nodded. "Let's hear it," he snapped.

The three foot high projection of Colonel Gen'yaa did not do her justice. Captain Listran Draxus looked her up and down for a couple of seconds before she spoke.

"Captain, I am Colonel Talina Gen'yaa of the New Republic Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*, and it appears that I am in your debt." Draxus nodded gravely.

"Colonel, I am Captain Listran Draxus of the Imperial Navy, commanding officer of the Star Destroyer *Valourous*. I hereby announce my intention to defect. I offer myself, my ship, and my loyal officers to the New Republic, and the rest of my crew - currently sedated - as prisoners of war, provided that they come to no ill treatment or harm." If this announcement shocked Colonel Gen'yaa, then she did not show it, Captain Draxus noted. Although anyone worth their salt would have figured out what Draxus and his crew were doing. It was still a few moments before she spoke.

"Captain, I accept your offer. As of this moment the *Valourous* is to be granted a New Republic field commission, as are you and your officers, who will continue to hold your current ranks. Welcome to the New Republic Navy, Captain," the NR colonel said, and for the first time her voice softened and she smiled a little. "As the senior New Republic officer here, I am issuing you your first set of orders - to do whatever is in your power to hinder, harass or destroy the Imperial task force that is in this system. For assistance, you have us, Wolfshead Squadron, Eagle Squadron from the planet Neljun, and soon, hopefully, the Star Destroyer *Vociferous*. That is all."

"May the Force be with us, then Colonel," Captain Draxus nodded. "I'll see you on the other side." And with that, the transmission ended. Commander Brasken waited until the holo had disappeared and his captain had turned to face him before he spoke.

"What do you think?" Listran Draxus took a deep breath.

"I think," he said at last, "that we're going to be lucky to get out of here alive."

[Wolffang Flight]

The X Wings of Wolffang flight scattered as the *Pacifier* came into gun range. As expected, the few warheads had little effect on the Frigate's shields and the gunners aboard the frigate drove the X Wings back as they attempted their strafing runs. Regrouping behind the cover of the *Vociferous'* inert hull, they recharged their shields while Solo considered their next move.

He looked up from his sensor boards as they suddenly began to fill with dots, surprised by the flurry of activity. The *Vociferous* had begun to eject life pods like spores off an alien plant, and more launched as he watched.

"Wolfshead Lead, this is Wolffang Lead. Looks like the *Vociferous* is out of the fight, Colonel."

"Roger that, Wolffang, what about the *Pacifier*?"

"She's underway and heading toward us. We've used up our torps and we're not having much luck slowing her down."

"Roger that. Try to pull her towards the *Valourous*, perhaps she can help you."

"We saw, Colonel. We'll see what we can do."

[Primary Computer Core, *Victory Star Destroyer Vociferous*]

Cheetah set his blaster carbine down on the console and leaned over Hyena's shoulder.

"Report."

Hyena looked up at his commander for a second before motioning to one of the screens in front of him.

"Looks like most of the crew have abandoned ship," he said, punching buttons to change the numerical display over to a graphic displaying a schematic of the ship, with red dots marking the now empty escape pod cradles, and green dots those that had not yet launched. Cheetah pointed to the mostly green lights that clustered the upper superstructure of the Star Destroyer, particularly around the command tower.

"Do we have a noble captain? One who's going down with his ship?"

"Hah!" laughed Hyena, "If he's noble, I'm Darth Vader. The computer says they're still trying to take control of the reactor systems."

Cheetah raised a single eyebrow and looked at his second in command. "I'd say a noble captain is not out of the question, but I agree it's unlikely in this situation."

Hyena nodded. "It doesn't matter if the bridge crew have gone or not, sir. I've locked them out - they can't regain control of the ship without coming down here and grabbing this computer core. Even then, we can make life very difficult for them."

"OK," said Cheetah, "Give me a sensor sweep of the surrounding area."

Hyena nodded to Short Circuit, who had access to the ship's tactical systems already prepared. Projecting an image from the sensor system onto his screen

was not especially difficult, although the data was rather small and difficult to read once it was there.

Cheetah pointed at the remaining Imperial Frigate and then at the X Wings that were sheltering behind the bulk of what was now *his* ship. "Looks like she's giving those flyboys some trouble. Let's put our control to good use. Set a course to intercept."

Hyena nodded his compliance and began making inputs to the computer – he had already penetrated the control systems, ready for such an order.

"No problem, sir, but to do that, I'll have to knock her out of emergency mode."

"Explain," ordered Cheetah, tersely.

"Well, when we triggered the alarm system, the computer knocked itself into preservation mode – mostly providing life support for the crew without placing undue load on the reactor. In order to revert to manoeuvring, we need to kill the emergency systems and return to normal operations, but when we do that, the alarms will stop. Everyone left aboard will know something is wrong."

"Can you override it, give us manoeuvring without cancelling the alert?" asked Cheetah.

Hyena shook his head. "Not without several weeks' worth of modifications to the computer system. Even if I could do it, there'd be no point, any idiot aboard can tell when the engines kick in and run up to full throttle, and that doesn't match with the alarms sounding."

Cheetah nodded. "Very well. Do it, intercept course for the Frigate."

"Yes sir."

[Bridge, *Victory Star Destroyer Vociferous*]

Parrins holstered his blaster pistol and stepped over the lifeless body of his XO. "Coward," he muttered under his breath. He started with surprise as the alarms cut out.

"Midic!"

The Ensign cringed at the sound of his captains' voice.

"Yes, sir?"

"What's happening? Have you stabilised the reactor?"

"Uh. No, sir," replied Midic "I didn't do anything. The system seems-..."

He was cut off as the thrusters units came back online.

Parrins spun back around to look at the Helmsman.

"What's going on?"

"I don't know sir, we're on autopilot. Navigation?"

"Navigation! What are you doing?"

The Nav officer turned around, looking bewildered.

"Nothing, sir, I haven't input any commands."

"Override!"

The helmsman shook his head as he tried the controls, without success.

"Sorry, sir, I can't regain control!"

Parrins yelled in anger and with one smooth motion, he spun around and shot the Navigation Officer dead with a single bolt.

"I want answers!"

[Primary Computer Core, *Victory Star Destroyer Vociferous*]

"We're underway, sir," said Hyena, watching the engine readouts as the huge craft slowly began to move.

"Can we get control of the guns?" asked Cheetah, a note of hope in his voice.

"Sorry, sir," replied Short Circuit "The control systems are too decentralised, probably to stop people from doing what we want to do."

"Shame," replied Cheetah "but I wasn't expecting it anyway. Gimme a ramming course with the Frigate."

[Bridge, *Nebulon-B frigate Pacifier*]

Commander Haart blanched. "Sir?"

"You heard me, Commander," Vice Admiral Piett replied coolly. "The former Captain Draxus is a traitor and the Star Destroyer *Valourous* is to be destroyed."

"Aye, aye, sir." Haart nodded, a gesture which Piett returned just before the holographic projection faded.

"Captain, the *Vociferous* is underway and heading toward us."

"Good. Raise Captain Parrins," Haart ordered.

"Yes sir," replied the Comms tech. After a few moments the technician looked up, puzzled.

"Sir, I can't get any response from the bridge."

"Nothing?" said Haart, equally puzzled. "Are their comm arrays intact?"

"Affirmative, sir, they appear to be functioning correctly, but we're not getting any response."

Haart turned to look back through the bridge viewport, looking for the Rebel X Wings his gunners had driven back. He looked again at the *Vociferous*.

"Navigation, what is the *Vociferous*' course?"

"They're heading toward us, sir."

"Can you be more precise?"

"Just a second sir... uh, sir, they're coming towards us... **directly** toward us!"

"Collision alarm! Evasive manoeuvres!" ordered Haart.

[Wolffang Flight]

"The *Vociferous* is underway!" said Ibero over the flight channel as he dodged away from the *Pacifier*'s guns.

"Which way?" asked Solo, dodging a laser blast that would have disintegrated his fighter by less than 3 metres.

"This way."

[Bridge, New Republic Star Destroyer *Valourous*]

"The other frigate is approaching weapons range, Captain," came the report as the deck below them shook. Captain Draxus nodded.

"Concentrate fire on the *Angel of Fury*. She's the weaker of the two." The sheets of turbolaser fire that were rippling out from his Star Destroyer concentrated on the damaged *Nebulon-B*, its healthier sister now desperately trying to evade the incoming bulk of the *Vociferous*. Commander Brasken noted, however, that the sheets were starting to develop gaps - gaps that meant dead turbolaser batteries. As usual, the fact was not lost on his captain.

"This is where it gets ugly," the latter noted, dryly. Brasken just nodded. Some help from their new comrades wouldn't go astray, but there didn't seem to be any available in the area, and the earlier attack runs by the New Republic X-wings were futile.

Well, we all knew that we might not make it out of this.

As if on cue, the *Angel of Fury's* shields collapsed with flash, allowing the *Valourous'* cannon fire to start chewing into her hull. The Star Destroyer's guns fell silent for a moment, then lashed out with a single barrage of fire at the relatively thin spine connecting the frigate's main and engineering hulls. The smaller ship was torn in two by the massive blast, with the vessel's hard port turn sending the hulls into slow spins in opposite directions, burning from multiple cannon impacts.

[Bridge, *Victory* Star Destroyer *Vociferous*]

"Sir, it must be the Rebel intruders!" blurted Midic.

Parrins lowered the blaster pistol.

"Explain."

Midic looked at the two bodies at adjacent duty stations, still smouldering from the blaster burns.

"The initial emergency was triggered by the notion that the Rebels had destroyed the primary power control core. If they used it as cover to hit the computer core... they could do all this from there!"

Parrins holstered his blaster pistol.

"How many crew are still aboard?"

Midic pushed the sensor operator's body from his seat and punched a few buttons to call up the internal sensors. "Around 130, based on commlink signals. Most of them in the superstructure."

"Very well, have them assemble on Deck 14 at the armoury. We'll arm ourselves and deal with these rebel scum."

[Wolffang Flight]

"She's underway."

"Roger that, Fourteen," replied Solo as he and Ibero formed back up and fled from the *Pacifier*. "Direction?"

"You guessed it, Lead," replied Drake "Right towards you and the *Pacifier*."

"Let's hope that's a good sign," said Solo, "Wolffang, let's cover behind the *Vociferous*."

[Bridge, Imperial Star Destroyer Providence]

"Status!" Captain Jarrett snapped.

"Shields are currently at 40% and climbing, sir. Engines at 60%, weapons at 30%."

Jarrett nodded and turned to the next console. "Tactical?"

"The enemy carrier has passed us, and their fighters are retreating toward the planet. Fighter losses have been moderate, remaining squadrons consolidating."

"Very well. Engineering, fast as you can, we have targets to engage."

[Bridge, Strike Carrier Wolf's Lair]

"Estimated rendezvous time with the *Valourous*?" asked Gen'yaa, striding across to the navigation stations.

"18 minutes, ma'am."

"And the Star Destroyers?"

"The *Dominance* and the *Providence* are heading this way. We should be able to stay ahead of them until we reach the planet."

The captain moved over towards Tactical.

"Fighter status?"

The fighter control officer punched a button to recentre his display as a holomap of the area.

"Wolfshead still at 22 fighters, nominal. Wolfclaw are currently returning for a reload/recharge cycle. Wolffang are covering the Commandos aboard the *Vociferous*, and Wolfeye are covering us."

"And the Imperials?"

"We have numerous Imperial fighters, mostly T/F with some T/l's. They are currently providing cover for the ISDs while they are under repair. They are not pursuing ahead of the *Dominance*."

Gen'yaa straightened up and looked once more at the main holodisplay.

"Looks like we have a lull, gentles. Stay alert, that could change very fast."

[Primary Computer Core, Victory Star Destroyer Vociferous]

“They’ve stopped trying to signal us, sir,” said Hyena “Looks like they’re onto us.” Cheetah watched the display impassively.

“Can we still get them?” he asked.

“I’m not sure, sir, Vics aren’t exactly fast. But frigates can’t turn very fast, either.”

“Plot their course, assume that they’ll turn as fast as they can. Then plot an intercept.”

Hyena nodded as he overlaid the frigate’s prospective course and the *Vociferous*’ velocity vector, then adjusted the VSD’s course until the two met.

“Got one, sir.”

“Set it up then lock it in.”

Cheetah was just straightening up when he heard the whine of blasterfire from outside the door, preceeding Timekeeper’s report of advancing Imperials by less than fifteen seconds. He turned to Hyena and Short Circuit, who had stopped their work to see what was happening.

“Finish it,” he ordered, and with that he grabbed his blaster carbine and headed for the door.

[Bridge, *Imperial Star Destroyer Dominance*]

“Status of our bombers?” Admiral Piett asked, eyes still locked intently on the tactical display.

After a few seconds the Fighter Control Officer replied.

“We have three and a half squadrons of TIE bombers split between ourselves and the *Providence*.” Piett nodded.

“Very well. Have them loaded with heavy rockets and prepared for launch.

Likewise, load up four TIE Advanced with advanced torpedoes.”

“TIE Advanced, sir?”

“Yes. The other four Advanceds can cover the attack.”

”Target, sir?”

“The *Wolf’s Lair*,” Piett replied, “Inform me once they are ready to launch.”

[A Wing *Wolfshead 1*]

Foxfire finished off the TIE Fighter before looking down at her computer system.

“Damn it, here we go again! *Wolf’s Lair*, this is *Wolfshead Lead*. Enemy Bombers and Advanced launching from the ISDs.”

“We see them, Lead,” replied the Tactical Officer aboard the *Wolf’s Lair*.

“Concentrate on the Bombers first. Good hunting, ‘*Lair out*.”

“Naturally,” said Foxfire, without triggering the commlink. Still, it did make good tactical sense, not that that was much comfort.

“Things are going to get ugly,” said Vyper, mirroring her thoughts.

“You said it, Two,” said Foxfire, then switched to the squadron-wide channel.

“Wolfclaw, form back up.”

“Lead, this is Wolfclaw Lead, only one flight has reloaded,” protested Groznik.

"I know, Groz. Put the fighters with torpedoes up front. All Wolfclaws, your targets are the Bombers. Wolfeyes, engage the TIE Advanceds. Good luck, and good hunting."

[Power Shaft, *Victory Star Destroyer Vociferous*]

Angel looked back up the shaft as she disconnected the descent line from her harness. The thick grey smoke billowing from the engineering spaces had filled the shaft at that deck level and begun to drift downwards.

"Any sign?" asked Godzilla as she unslung her blaster carbine and moved into one of the doorways.

"Any second now," she replied.

The Lynx personnel moved quickly through the one remaining open door – the other team members had sealed the other doors to make it more difficult for anyone to follow them – with Godzilla the last through. As he reached for the button to close the door, a series of cracks sounded from above, followed by the horrible screeching of abused metal. With a loud crash, the catwalk leading to the power core, carefully mined by Angel and triggered by anyone stepping onto the metal grille surface, dropped past the Commando team's position, accompanied by a pair of luckless stormtroopers.

"Well done, Angel," said Godzilla with a smile as he sealed the door, "A nice piece of work."

He looked up at Ghost. "Let's move out!"

[A Wing *Wolfshead 2*]

Vyper cursed as his computer catalogued the targets. The commlink channel crackled to life again as Foxfire gave her orders.

"B Wings, we need the bombers taken out. Use your torps on the formations, go for splash damage. A Wings, we've got the T/As. Remember your lessons, cover your wingmen, and good luck."

Vyper ensured his commlink was set to respond on the element channel he shared only with Foxfire.

"We're going to need a miracle to get through this one."

Foxfire watched as the TIE Advanced manoeuvred ahead of the TIE Bombers in two groups of four, squaring up against the A Wings that, for once, outnumbered.

"Here goes nothing," she replied.

Vyper armed a single Concussion Missile – one of the two remaining in his depleted magazines – and selected one of the TIE Advanced as his targets.

[Bridge, *Strike Carrier Wolf's Lair*]

"There's bound to be some leakers," said Numb as he watched the red and green dots begin to converge.
Gen'yaa nodded. "Guns, activate the quads, bring the warhead system online."
The Gunnery Officer nodded and began punching buttons on her console.
Scattered around the ship, covers retracted and quad laser batteries extended as the *Wolf's Lair* once more prepared to fight.

The warheads went first, scarlet slashes of light denoting concussion missiles, the heavier torpedoes from the B Wings burning blue-white.
Hawk's Advanced Concussion missile impacted first, a nova-white flare of energy against the T/A's shields. The imperial fighter's return missile slammed into Tzadkiel's fighter, tearing away most of the A Wing's shields and ripping into the fuselage.

"Mayday, mayday, Wolfshead 6, I'm hit bad!" yelled Tzad into the comm. as he banked away from the fight, hard, trying to stabilise a nasty wobble in his flight control system. He coughed as his cockpit began to fill with smoke.

"Wolfshead 6, this is the *Compassion*."

Tzadkiel punched a button on his commlink "*Compassion*, this is Six."

"Six, I'm on my way. Hold tight."

[SHU *Compassion*, Flight Deck, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Roo ensured she had cleared the magcon field, then slammed the throttles of the *Compassion* wide open. A flick of the switch above her head extended the wings for greater stability. *Here we go again.*

The Lumi checked her sensors and turned towards the boiling maelstrom of the dogfight, seeking a single fighter, a squadmate in distress.

"Better watch yourself, Roo," said Hardrive as he looped around to rejoin the fight. The *Lambda*-class shuttle had rendezvoused with Tzadkiel's A Wing, holding position a short distance from the remains of the fighter's starboard cannon, as the two limped back towards the carrier. At this distance it was easy to spot the damage, even for a pilot who hadn't flown combat fighters for a while. The smoke in the cockpit was a dead giveaway.

A quick check of the sensors updated her to the current tactical situation. The boiling dogfight had degenerated and was moving rapidly in her direction as the Imperial fighters fought their way toward the *Wolf's Lair*. Twice she and Tzadkeil had been passed, first by a trio of TIE bombers, which had released several heavy rockets before being splashed by Hardrive and Hawk, and again by another damaged A Wing – Hardrive again, this time running on a single engine after a TIE Advanced had pummelled his fighter before being forced off by a pair of Wolfclaw B Wings.

"We're getting worn down awful fast out here," said Arachnoid as he dodged more laser fire.

"And we're catching up on the *Lair*, too," chipped in Groznik. He looked down at his display screen, which showed a graphic of the *Wolf's Lair*. The status

information around the screen painted a bleak picture – her shields were almost gone, less than 5%.

Vyper lined up a shot at the back of one of the TIE Advanced and scored two hits before responding.

“Roger that, it looks like- Hey!”

Vyper’s exclamation were joined by numerous others as the T/As, as one, suddenly swung away from the dogfight, turning towards the *Wolf’s Lair*.

The A Wing pilots, acting with all their instincts and training, turned to follow, guns blazing.

“They’re...”

[Bridge, Strike Carrier *Wolf’s Lair*]

“Incoming! We are tracking multiple inbound warheads, aft quarter!”

“Engage! Fire at will!” ordered Gen’yaa, her eyes fixed on the holodisplay. Her instincts were screaming at her with one message.

Too many. Too close.

[A Wing Wolfshead Lead]

Foxtire finished off the TIE Advanced and looked up to see one of the blue-white warheads flash into vapour as it was intercepted by an advanced concussion missile fired from the *Wolf’s Lair*.

Not enough.

She watched with growing horror as the high speed projectiles slammed into the aft of the Carrier. Had she been fully shielded, the torpedoes would have been an inconvenience, nothing more, but in her current state...

The first of the torpedoes struck the shields, penetrating and clearing the way for the next torpedo to hit the upper-port engine nacelle, followed in rapid succession by three more. The stern of the carrier ship was lit by wreaths of fire as the torpedoes slammed into the ships’ hull and detonated.

[Bridge, Strike Carrier *Wolf’s Lair*]

The lights flickered as power was interrupted, and came back at about half-intensity.

“Report!” bellowed Numb, picking himself up from the deck, where he’d been thrown as the acceleration compensators had likewise flickered.

“Multiple torpedo hits on the port quarter! We’re drifting, no propulsion!” announced the helm.

“Power is down all over the ship” said Tactical “Shields are out, weapons on minimum power.”

"Damn it, where's our cover!?" shouted Gen'yaa as she stood up. Her hair was in disarray, and a small cut was visible over her right eye, but she seemed otherwise unaffected.

"Wolfshead have four A Wings and three B Wings close in, plus the X Wings engaged with the other Imperial ships," said the fighter control officer, "The rest of the fighters have either returned to the hangar deck or have been destroyed." "Ma'am!" shouted the Navigation officer, "We're drifting, very little propulsive power."

"I heard, Lieutenant," replied Gen'yaa

"Yes, ma'am. But the Star Destroyers – they're closing fast. Very fast."

[Bridge, *Imperial Star Destroyer Dominance*]

Piett smiled tightly as the aft of the *Wolf's Lair* flared briefly and went dark.

"Report," he ordered, tersely.

"The enemy carrier has been severely damaged," reported Gillett, reading over the shoulder of one of the sensor operators. "Her engine output is down to 5% of previous readings."

"Time to intercept?"

"Gun range in 2 minutes, sir," reported the gunnery officer, trying to contain his smile.

Piett nodded, his face still impassive as he turned to the fighter control officer, who was looking decidedly less happy. "Fighter status?"

"We're down to four squadrons, two escorting the *Dominance* and the others around the *Providence*. Mostly TIE Fighters, a few Interceptors."

"I see," replied Pielt gravely. "The TIE Bombers? Advanced?"

"Sorry, sir. They're all gone."

Piett nodded and looked across at Sensors.

"Enemy fighters?"

"There's a lot of debris out there, sir, but it appears that they are clustering around the Carrier, sir." The sensor officer nodded to the three technicians manning the sensor consoles. "We're switching over to IFF transponder mode to help us distinguish between the fighters and debris."

Gillett had returned to Pielt's side. He leaned slightly and spoke quietly into the Admiral's ear "Engage them with the TIEs, sir?"

"No, keep the TIEs in close until we get into gun range with the *Wolf's Lair*," replied Pielt. He looked up at the distant shape of the *Valourous*.

"And after we've finished with the Rebels, it will be time to deal with the Traitors."

[Y-wing Eagle One]

"Eagle Lead, this is Wolfshead Lead," Foxfire's voice sounded again.

"Wolfshead, Eagle, go ahead," First Lieutenant Hyden responded.

"We're going to need some fire support, and fast. The *Lair* is hit, we need you to engage the ISDs. They're both shot up already, we need you to finish them off."
"Copy, Wolfshead," Hyden said with a smile. "Leave them to us."

[Bridge, New Republic Star Destroyer *Valourous*]

"Looks like they're having trouble," Commander Brasken muttered. If Captain Draxus noticed, he gave no sign.

"Pull back!" the grizzled old captain barked. "And set us on an intercept course with the *Dominance*." The ponderous bulk of the *Victory* Star Destroyer slid backward as the battered wedge of the *Vociferous* bored in on the *Pacifier*.

"Is the *Wolf's Lair* still on a rendezvous course with us?" Draxus asked, inclining his head towards his navigator.

"Negative, sir," the latter replied, "She's drifting."

The New Republic's newest captain clasped his hands behind his back and stared through the viewport at the twin wedge-shaped starships he was about to battle.

"Time until the *Providence* and *Dominance* are in gun range of the *Wolf's Lair*?"

"Less than two minutes, sir. We'll be in range in six minutes."

Draxus grimaced. "Time to bug out, Colonel."

[Airlock, Engineering Decks, Lower level, *Victory* Star Destroyer *Vociferous*]

Godzilla counted the heads as the Lynx Commandos with him piled through the airlock into the *Bear*. Leaving Ghost and Angel on guard duty at the door, the giant Sergeant-Major headed straight for the cockpit.

"We were separated," he said without preamble. "Have you received word from the other team?"

The flight engineer manning the communications array shook his head. "Nothing yet."

"Well, we know they were successful," said the pilot, pointing out of the viewport. The *Pacifier* was very close now, turning hard away from the Star Destroyer as it plowed relentlessly towards her. The pilot keyed his engines and began pre-flight.

"Are we in danger?" asked Godzilla, anxiously.

"Not if we leave in the next thirty seconds," replied the pilot. He nodded towards the location of the *Unicorn*, hidden behind the reactor dome. "They'll be on their way in a second, too."

"But the others...?"

"We'll circle and hope we can pull them off in time."

[Corridor D-X-45, Portside, Main Hull, *Victory* Star Destroyer *Vociferous*]

Cheetah looked across at Short Circuit.

“Anything?”

The commando shook his head and made an adjustment to the tactical commlink. The commlink was of a backpack type, capable of communicating from a planetary surface to a vessel in orbit, and, it was hoped, from inside a capital ship to outside...

“This is Lynx Alpha. Anyone on this net, please respond.”

“Lynx Alpha, this is *Unicorn*. Beta are here, where are you?”

“I’ve got them, sir,” said Short Circuit.

Cheetah leaned over and took the commlink handset.

“*Unicorn*, this is Alpha. Request hot pickup. We’re near airlock VP-45.”

“Roger that, VP-45. *Unicorn* is moving.”

Cheetah dropped the handset and picked up his blaster carbine, setting himself ready to repulse another attack.

[Transport *Bear*]

“HOT PICKUP!” yelled Godzilla. The Lynx team members hurriedly prepared, drawing fresh blaster power packs to replace the ones expended, and divesting themselves of any unnecessary equipment. Minor burns and injuries were hurriedly bandaged where necessary. Angel felt in one of her pockets to confirm the reassuring weight of the controller she had put in there.

The *Bear*’s pilot keyed a tactical overlay as the two transports rounded the hull of the *Victory*-class Star Destroyer, headed aft. The co-pilot entered the code number of the airlock, providing a head-up telltale for the pilot to aim for.

“It’s a vertical one,” said the co-pilot, confirming the details from the tactical computer.

“Good,” replied the pilot, “We can go for an aft-dock.”

He keyed the intercom.

“Thirty seconds!”

In the main compartment, the loadmaster prepared the door controls as the Lynx Commandos took up firing positions.

With a heavy clunk, the aft-mounted docking clamps engaged the universal units mounted around the airlock door. The Airlock was located on the Star Destroyer’s equator band near the port-aft corner of the triangular hull. The transport’s door dropped, forming a ramp, allowing the commandos access to the airlock itself, with the outer door opening unbidden as the transport docked. The inner door was already open.

Angel kept the blaster carbine up and tucked tightly into her shoulder, scanning left and right as the Lynx squad moved rapidly along the corridor toward the sound of a firefight. Less than a minute before, the team had blundered into Monkey, Timekeeper and Double-O, the latter nursing a badly bleeding leg and having to rely on his brother for support as they hurried along.

"We were separated," he reported, "There's a lot of Imperials, a few Stormtroopers, a few Naval troopers, but mostly armed crew members."

"Are they any good?" Godzilla had asked.

The scout shook his head. "Not really. Their only advantage is sheer weight of numbers, and they're taking horrendous losses."

Godzilla had nodded at this and sent the two along the corridor to the airlock and the relative safety of the *Bear*.

"Here we go again!" called Short Circuit as another volley of blasterfire spattered across the corridor wall. The Lynx commandos at the intersection ahead returned fire, streams of red blaster bolts carving through the air on each side of the fleeing Republic Commando.

"Keep moving!" ordered Cheetah.

The Lynx commandos broke into a sprint as they ran along the corridor, dropping a couple of smoke grenades to cover their retreat.

The dark grey wedge that was the *Vociferous* now neared its target, which it had tracked despite the best efforts of the *Pacifier* at evasion. Commander Haart had played unknowingly into Hyena's hands, by pressing his ship as hard as he could in his escape attempt. Now he had realised the fatal extent of his miscalculation, but it was too late. The *Pacifier* started to reverse her turn, and was perhaps a quarter of the way through it when the *Vociferous* collided with her.

The bow of the *Star Destroyer* plunged straight through the forward section of the frigate like a knife through butter, engulfing the smaller ship in flames which rapidly spread along the superstructure and began to eat the stardrive section as well.

The force of the impact caused the *Vociferous* to shudder like a dewback in a sandstorm, throwing the Lynx team members around the corridor.

Motormouth looked around apprehensively as the sounds of stressed metal and destruction were transmitted through the ship's structure. Before he could speak, his thoughts were echoed in a voice behind him.

"Sounds like it's time to leave, sir."

Cheetah looked around to see the approach of Beta's advance team.

"Impeccable timing, Lieutenant. No arguments from me," he replied.

Hyena's grin faded.

"We'd better move, sir, I think the Imps are trying to circle and cut us off."

The Commandos began retracing their steps toward the airlock in the hope of reaching it before the remaining Imperials found them. They almost made it.

[Airlock VP-45, *Victory Star Destroyer Vociferous*]

The team resisted the temptation to run as they rounded the last corner to see the airlock in front of them. The corridor was crossed by another at right angles

just in front of the airlock doors, with the *Bear* visible beyond. The Lynx members reached the intersection and paused before moving cautiously across. Pacman spotted the motion in the corner of his eye a fraction of a second before the blood-red blaster bolt burned the air in front of him. Diving to the deck, he rolled and brought his blaster carbine to bear as more fire erupted from the darkened corridor to his left. An explosive *whuff* of expelled air behind him told him that at least one of his teammates had not been so fortunate.

The response fire from the Lynx team was impressive, as four streams of rapid blaster fire tore through the air of the corridor. Pac-Man counted at least 5 Imperials down before they were driven back into cover, allowing the team to reach the relative safety of the airlock. Pac-Man was the last to move, still firing down towards the Imperials.

He looked down as he backed into the *Bear* and slapped the control panel to close the rear door.

"Oh, shit, Angel!"

Angel's armour vest had borne the brunt of the blaster bolt, but it was not enough. She lay dying on the deck of the transport, surrounded by team members giving her first aid. Her left lung was rapidly filling with blood even as they applied Medipacks in an attempt to stop the bleeding.

The deck plates beneath her throbbed as the pilots through power to the engines, throwing the transport away from the dying *Vociferous*.

She reached unsteadily to her breast pocket and retrieved the controller. Her eyes sought out Cheetah's.

"With your permission, sir?" she whispered, hoarsely.

Cheetah nodded.

[Bridge, *Imperial Star Destroyer Dominance*]

Vice Admiral Piett watched the scene unfolding before him with a strange mixture of anger and fascination. Somehow, the tide of battle had turned against him and he had lost control of half of his Star Destroyers. Still, he had enough to complete the job.

"Get me Captain Jarrett," he ordered, and immediately the familiar holo appeared before him.

"Admiral." His former Executive Officer was respectful and grave. His ship had taken a beating.

"Unless I'm mistaken, Captain, we are soon going to find ourselves with no task force and a *Victory* Star Destroyer and a Strike Carrier arrayed against us," Piett said, almost sadly. "Are you and the *Providence* ready to complete our mission?"

Captain Jarrett braced to attention and kept his voice even and resolute.

"Don't worry, Admiral, she won't fail you. Even," and he looked meaningfully at his former captain, "if she dies in the attempt."

"Bless you, Jarrett," Piett breathed. "We'll be in range of the Rebels in about a minute. Until then, repair what damage you can. Be ready."

"As ordered, Admiral." The hologram disappeared.

Once more, Vice Admiral Piett turned to watch the battle's dying stages unfold before him.

[Transport *Bear*]

Angel flicked the guard on top of the controller up and pressed the button. The explosives packed around the power control column exploded, severing it in two and dumping the lower half onto the reactor vessel in large pieces.

Completing the destruction begun by the collision, and mirroring the earlier alarms, the reactor began to overrun. With the safety and control systems severed, the reaction tore the ship apart less than 15 seconds after the explosives were detonated.

Pacman looked down from the explosion, visible through the viewport, to look at Angel.

"Bingo, Angel. She's gone."

The explosives expert smiled and closed her eyes for the last time.

The X-wings of Wolfgang flight, with the Lynx transports in tow, powered clear, heading back towards their crippled mothership.

[Bridge, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

"My thanks for the assistance, Captain."

Captain Draxus bowed slightly from the shoulders. Colonel Gen'yaa was equally formal, and grave - although traces of excitement still showed in her manner.

"Your status?" asked the captain of the *Valourous*.

Gen'yaa shook her head. "Propulsion is out, we're drifting, and our shields are almost depleted."

"I think it is time for your crew to abandon ship," suggested Draxus, "We'll collect as many pods as we can before we flee."

"This isn't over yet, Captain."

If only Piett could have seen wisdom!

[A Wing Wolfshead Lead]

"OK, let's buy them some cover!" yelled Foxfire. "Wolfclaw, engage those Star Destroyers! Wolfeye, cover their backs! One more time!"

She risked a quick look at her sensor screen, and gritted her teeth at what she saw – only five of the A Wings were flying, and only three B Wings. None were in particularly good condition. Thankfully, operating so close to the *Wolf's Lair* had allowed most of her pilots to put their badly damaged fighters down on her decks rather than have them shot completely to pieces, but even so, Roo and the

Compassion had been required to pluck Gandalf, Sparks and Torpedo from the vacuum of space after their ejection seats had been required.

“Heads up, Lead!” called a voice on the squadron channel “Fangs coming in on the deck!”

Foxfire smiled for the first time since battle had been joined “Solo! Good to hear from you. Welcome back, boys.”

“Well, with a welcome like that, we’ll have to go away more often!” called Raiven as the X Wings tore past the drifting *Wolf’s Lair*, having left the two Lynx transports to make their own way home.

“Redirect power and engage!” ordered Solo as the five X Wings dropped into a delta formation and punched through the dogfight, aimed directly at the point of the *Dominance’s* hull.

“Wolfclaw, you’re next wave, Wolfeye, let’s move!”

The X Wings carried no torpedoes, but their shields were fresh and their laser banks full. Spattering laserfire across the *Dominance’s* hull did no physical damage as the shields absorbed the scarlet energy, but Foxfire could see the ISD’s shield strength estimate lose at least 10% as the X Wings split and broke away from their attack run, chased by futile turbolaser fire from the *Dominance’s* upper guns. In close behind were the B Wings of Wolfclaw, mixing red laserfire with the electric blue-white of ion cannon bolts and the occasional deep blue of a proton torpedo as a pilot emptied the remaining warheads from their magazine. Foxfire banked slightly as she selected one of the TIE Fighters angling in on the B Wings as her target. With the throttles pushed to the stops, she swung in behind the TIE and planted a perfect pair of laser bolts into the rear of the command pod, tearing through the portside ion engine and blowing the fighter to pieces. His wingman broke to avoid being hit by debris, curving off to the side towards the *Providence* as Foxfire gave chase.

Solo inverted and rolled back in on the *Dominance*, stitching laserfire over the command tower. In the distance he could see Raiven and Drake coming in just a few metres apart in fingertip formation, concentrating their fire on a turbolaser turret on the Star Destroyer’s portside that was attempting to fire on Moose’s B Wing. The red laser bolts converged on an area less than a metre square, pounding into the shielding and weakening them across a very small area. The following rounds tore through and started ripping into the armour of the turret itself, before the turret exploded in a geyser of flame.

Solo toggled the comlink. “Just keep them occupied!”

[Y-wing Eagle One]

“Eagle Teams, you have your targets! Fire at will!”

With that order, the twenty-four Y Wings began launching their torpedoes.

[Bridge, *Imperial Star Destroyer Dominance*]

The sensors operator almost jumped out of his skin at the surprise.

"INCOMING! Multiple inbound warhead tracks!"

Vice Admiral Piett span around in surprise. "How many? Where from-?"

He stopped as he saw the updated sensor tracks on the holodisplay when the sensor operator switched out of IFF mode. He then turned back to Captain Jarrett's image for the last time.

"Admiral." The captain was grave, and proud. "Captain. It has been the privilege of my career to have served under you, my captain," he said, his mind half on a battle long ago and far away.

"And to you, Captain," Piett replied, the genuine feeling in his chest matching that of his comrade. "Perhaps we may yet sit on the bridge of a Super Star Destroyer together." Jarrett nodded, but it was a lie, and both knew it.

The torpedoes, most flying unhindered by the counterbattery fire from the Star Destroyer's guns, began to impact across the shields of the *Dominance* and the *Providence*, with the majority hitting the *Dominance*'s stronger shields.

Of the 108 torpedoes fired at the *Dominance*, 84 impacted with devastating results, her energy shields flashing away to nothing as the torpedoes spent their destructive energies upon them, leaving the remaining warheads to blast through to the hull, tearing it into several pieces each massing more than a Frigate.

The *Providence* lasted a little longer by virtue of being somewhat further away from the Eagles than her sister ship. Mortally crippled by the torpedoes tearing away half her portside and wrecking the main reactor, she managed to release most of her escape pods before the reactor's explosion reduced the remainder of the ship to little more than dust.

The battle for the Mantara sector was over.

[Flight Deck, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*, 3 hours later]

Vyper shut down his engines and climbed wearily out of the A Wing. He and Arachnoid, whose fighters were the most serviceable, had patrolled the area as the *Valourous* had towed the *Wolf's Lair* into a stable orbit around Neljun. Foxfire was already waiting at the bottom of the ladder. Her joy at the successful completion of their mission had been spoiled by the deaths in her squadron, in Lynx, and aboard the *Wolf's Lair*. The treachery of one of her pilots magnified her anger at the death around her.

"Razor?" asked Vyper. Deep down, he already knew the answer.

Foxfire simply shook her head.

"We have to stop him," said Vyper angrily, "There's no way in hell I'm going to let him go after what he did here today."

Foxfire nodded. "It's going to have to wait. The captain of the *Valourous* is paying us a visit."

Various members of the ship's crew and of Wolfshead Squadron waited on the cold hangar deck. Around them, the bustle of the crew repairing some of Wolfshead's damaged fighters echoed around the deck. In addition to the command wing, Gen'yaa had ordered the presence of several others, chosen apparently at random from those who were available. Dressed in their dress uniforms, the pilots of Wolfshead who were present fidgetted nervously. Hardrive leaned over to whisper in Raiven's ear.

"Damn," he said, "wouldn't you rather be down in the bombshelter hoisting a beer right now?"

Raiven leaned back and spoke without turning. "I'd rather be keeping an eye on Dan. You seen him?"

"Yeah, he was up in the Medical Bay. He said he wanted to be alone for a while."

Raiven nodded, grimly. "We'll have to keep an eye on him."

"Roger that," replied Hardrive, "Heads up, here we go."

As he spoke, the moving white dot that the pair of them had been watching for the past minute or so resolved itself into the three-winged shape of a *Lambda*-class shuttle heading towards the port-side hangar opening of the *Wolf's Lair*.

The shuttle folded its wings at the correct time and settled to the deck less than ten metres in front of the waiting New Republic officers.

Raiven fought the urge to reach for his sidearm as the first pair of men began to descend the ramp, dressed in the grey uniforms the Imperial Navy. They carried sidearms but had wisely kept them holstered, and stood to attention at the bottom of the ramp.

"Permission to come aboard" announced the older of the two.

"Permission granted, Captain," replied Gen'yaa, returning their salute, "Welcome aboard."

Draxus stepped forward. "This is my XO, Commander Brasken."

Gen'yaa nodded in greeting. She began to walk along the line of officers stood behind her, allowing Draxus to fall in step beside her.

"Allow me to introduce my XO, Commander Numb; Commander of Wolfshead Squadron, Lieutenant Colonel Avery Schroeder; and her XO, Major Michael Stauber."

Draxus paused midway through shaking Vyper's hand and stared into his eyes.

"I see. This would be former Commander Stauber of the Black Knights?"

"Correct, sir."

Draxus threw an amused look at Gen'yaa's inscrutable face.

"And these ladies and gentlemen?" he asked, pointing at the assembled pilots.

"Some of Wolfshead's pilots," replied Vyper, introducing them one by one.

"Commander Pozo, Lieutenant-Commander Tengroth, Lieutenant Rovardi, Lieutenant-Commander McKay, Flight Officer Agar, Lieutenant Miller and Lieutenant Rus'ti."

Draxus nodded, "And how many of these pilots used to be part of the Empire?"

Gen'yaa stepped forward and spoke.

"Very astute of you, Captain. You are indeed correct, many of these pilots have served the Empire, and, like yourself, saw the error of their ways."

Draxus did not respond to the implicit challenge to justify himself, simply shrugging.

"Colonel," he said, "I believe that we have business to attend to."

[Captain's Ready Room, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

"Very well, Captain. What is the status of the *Valourous*?" asked Gen'yaa, sipping her Ithorian Frrzt Tea.

"We're in pretty good shape," replied Draxus, "We have begun repairs on the damage inflicted in the fighting, which was, thankfully, minimal. We are, however, somewhat understaffed at the moment: only a third of the crew defected with us."

"What about the remainder of your crew?"

"They are currently being transported under guard to the planet surface," replied Draxus, "My thanks for the loan of your transport craft and armed personnel. Few of the security staff were let in on the plan, for obvious reasons, and they must be kept under guard until their loyalty can be ascertained."

"I have informed Fleet Command of what has happened here, along with a suggestion that the *Valourous* becomes the flagship of the Mantara Sector Fleet." Draxus raised an eyebrow. "I wasn't aware that the Republic **had** a sector fleet for Mantara."

Gen'yaa nodded. "We don't, yet, but with the number of planets in this sector which have already applied, or are about to, for membership in the New Republic, I would imagine we soon will. Likewise, I'm recommending that Eagle Squadron be founded as a Republic Starfighter Corps Squadron as soon as Neljun becomes a member."

Draxus smiled warmly.

"They're good kids. A couple of them put down on the *Valourous* for emergency repairs incurred before the remaining Imperial fighters surrendered. I don't think they had been aboard anything as big as a Star Destroyer before."

"They saved the *Wolf's Lair* and their own planet. They deserve our gratitude."

"What of the *Wolf's Lair*, Colonel, what is your status?" asked Commander Brasken.

Gen'yaa nodded to Wumb, who was sat opposite her desk, next to Brasken. He keyed a command into the notepad he was holding and began to read.

"Currently, we have 20% nominal propulsion, shields are capable of around 50% normal power, and most of our weapons systems are functional. During the fight, we lost 11 people, one pilot, one Commando, and 9 in one of the engineering compartments when the torpedoes hit. Our hyperdrive is currently non-functional – we're expecting a replacement unit with the CRS *Mon Estana* and her task force, ETA 36 hours."

"So, the *Wolf's Lair* will be stuck here for at least... say... 48 hours more?" asked Draxus, sitting forward.

"Yes," replied Gen'yaa, "approximately two days."

“Two days may be enough. Commander Brasken here has some information you may find useful.”

[Troop Quarters (“Commando Country”), Strike Carrier *Wolf’s Lair*, 03:14 the following day]

The door swished open, revealing a surprisingly alert looking Eadrain.

“Daniel,” he said, checking his chrono “It is past three. Why are you here?”

Drake exhaled a deep breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding.

“I’m sorry. I need to get my lightsaber back.”

The Jedi Commando cocked his head. “I thought we had agreed. Your lightsaber has been touched by the Dark Side. It is dangerous.”

“I know. But I have to do something. Something that might be even more dangerous. The saber could help.”

Eadrain’s eyes narrowed. “Very well, Daniel.”

Retrieving the lightsaber from his room, the Jedi brought it to the door. He held it out to Drake. As the pilot’s fingers closed around the hilt, Eadrain spoke.

“Beware anger, fear, hatred. They are of the Dark Side. When you seek revenge, you must not cross the line.”

Drake took another deep breath and exhaled slowly, nodding.

“I know. This is not about revenge; this is about Justice.”

Eadrain let go of the saber.

“I’ll bring it back, and we can have that talk. I promise.”

The pilot turned and began to walk along the corridor toward the hangar bay.

“Daniel.”

He turned.

“As you hunt him, ask yourself. Whose justice do you seek? That of the Republic, or your own? That of your head, or that of your heart? Remember my warning and beware of the Dark Side.”

Drake lifted the lightsaber and flicked a salute. The Jedi nodded in return, and re-entered his room.

Reaching the flight deck a few minutes later, Drake checked for any signs of life – there was little movement at the moment, although he knew that could change in an instant. The Alert-1 ready room held four pilots – Drake did not know who was pulling that duty at the moment – who could be up and away within a minute of an alert coming in, and the rest of the squadron could follow them out within the following ten.

He crossed to the darkened hulk of the *Al’yin’ia* and strode up the boarding ramp. Walking into the craft’s saloon area, he found Raiven waiting for him.

“You still want to do this?” he asked Drake.

Drake gave a firm nod, then looked around the interior of the freighter. “Will she fly?”

Solo walked around the circular corridor from the engineering section at the back of the oval shaped craft. “She’ll fly,” he reported.

“The engine, power and hyperdrive systems are running OK, the hull is patched and there aren’t any major leaks. I can get about half shields, the forward weapons are as deadly as ever. Lower gun turret is still trashed – we’ve welded an armour plate over the viewport until a new one can be fabricated. You guys can repair the power feed for the upper guns while we’re underway.”

As he finished, footsteps sounded lightly on the boarding ramp. Drake turned to see Hawk walking aboard, carrying his big Repeater gun.

“Let’s move” said the new arrival.

Drake turned back to Solo and Raiven. “I thought you were going to get Sacart?” he asked, puzzled.

Solo shook his head. “I pointed out that someone will be needing to fly enough X Wing patrols and missions to make high command think the whole flight is still aboard. Ibero can help him.”

“Then let’s go.”

Vyper stood at the doorway of the ready room, watching as the YT 2000 freighter kicked in her repulsorlifts and lifted off the deck. A few seconds later, the craft was through the magcon field and into the void.

“Are they gone?” asked Joker, quietly.

“Yeah,” replied Vyper, regretfully. “They’re away. And I wish them luck.”

Joker nodded, for once no wisecrack to break the tension. “Foxfire was right.

Any command wing personnel missing from the squadron would be noticed.

High Command are suspicious that we’re going to be taking so long to get to Mon Calamari as it is.”

“I suppose we can only fake engine trouble and take detours for a limited time,” replied the squadron XO. “I still wish I was going with them.”

“We all do, but someone has to help cover their asses. And like it or not, that’s us.”

[118 Krandos Turnpike, Level 12, Kalla Sector, Nar Shadaa]

The road was deserted at this time of night. Not that it was bustling during the day, for that matter.

A lone man walked to a recessed doorway, hidden in shadow. His dark jacket did little to hide the dark coloured pilot’s flight suit he wore. He reached the door and hesitated a second, taking a deep breath. Reaching out, he pressed the call button by the door. After a second, a gruff voice answered.

“Whadda ya want?”

“Hi there,” said the man “Is Alex in?”

“Don’t know no Alex. Frag off.”

“Sure you do,” answered the man on the doorstep, looking up at the holocam partially hidden in the shadowy corner and smiling. “About my height and build, dark hair, a murdering traitorous bastard who I’m going to kill, very slowly and very painfully.”

The voice on the entryway comm seemed to consider this for a while. "Wait." The man in the jacket was about to reply when he felt a hard cylindrical object jabbed into his back.

"Freeze," said a matter-of-fact voice from behind him. "Put your hands in the air. Slowly."

Drake slowly raised his hands and placed them behind his head, fingers interlocked.

The pressure of the blaster barrel remained more or less constant as a hand searched under his jacket and retrieved the blaster pistol holstered under his shoulder.

"Now turn around."

Drake turned to face the gunman. Heavysset and tall, the man carried a blaster carbine, pointed straight at the New Republic pilot's ribs. A few feet away a similarly armed woman stood, her back to him, scanning the buildings on the opposite side of the road.

The armed man stood, regarding Drake quizzically. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm going to kill that bastard. In person."

The armed man shrugged. "Tough. Our orders are to see him safely back to the Empire." He began to raise the blaster to his shoulder. Drake lifted his little fingers so they showed above his head. As he did so, a ruby blaster bolt flashed soundlessly from one of the buildings opposite and struck the gunman in the back of the head, removing most of it with a sickening pop. The woman did not hesitate, lifting her carbine to her shoulder and opening fire on the darkened window hiding the gunman, momentarily forgetting the recently disarmed man behind her. Drake pulled a holdout blaster from its hiding place just under his collar and shot her with a single blast.

Feeling his comlink vibrate under his jacket, he reached in and thumbed it on.

"Yeah?" he said, taking a deep breath against the adrenaline rush.

"It's working. Movement 'round the back" said Hawk.

"Roger that. Numbers?"

"OK, Four man team. Professional cover patterns. They're heading for an airspeeder – looks like an old SoroSuub job. Ahh, there he is – he's got his cap pulled low over his eyes. That won't stop a blaster bolt. Come to papa, you bastard."

"One-Seven. He's mine," said Drake, sternly.

Raiven arrived alongside his wingman, dropping an equipment pack at his feet.

Drake nodded a thank you while waiting for the A Wing pilot's response.

Hawk was quiet for a second. "They're getting into the 'speeder."

"Ten, this is Fourteen. Target is moving."

"Understood" said Solo "Thirty seconds."

Drake looked across at Raiven and raised one eyebrow, questioningly. Raiven took a deep breath and nodded. The pair had discussed the plan several times, going over it from several angles.

"Right, the speeder's on the move," reported Hawk.

"Go meet Ten."

Hawk leapt up from his hiding place and ran towards the back of the deserted apartment. Reaching the back balcony, he ran and vaulted over the railing into space...

He landed with a thump on the upper surface of the *Al'yin'ia*, held hovering there by Solo. Running to the open upper hatch and dropping through, he headed straight for the upper gun turret and strapped himself in.

"Let's move!"

The two X Wing pilots waited for the recognisable oval shape of the *Al'yin'ia* to overfly the rear of the house with a deep rumble, as the Wolfshead pilots began their pursuit of the fleeing speeder into the dark night. Drake ignited his lightsaber and swept it through the door at chest height, making sure the cut reached a good half meter or so to each side of the metal frame. There was a gurgle and a slight tug at the end of his cut, accompanied a second later by the sickly sweet smell of burning flesh. He quickly withdrew the blade and swept it again, this time in an overhead arc, slicing the metal door in half in a vertical cut. As he stepped to one side, Raiven swung in from the other and kicked the door pieces in, bringing his rifle up to his shoulder and sweeping the barrel from left to right and back again. Stepping over the pieces of human body lying on the floor, he advanced into the dark hallway.

A flicker of shadow from a doorway on the left hand side near the end of the hallway alerted the pilot a fraction of a second before the black clad man appeared. Raiven's first blaster bolt struck the wooden doorframe, scattering splinters across the assailant's face and arms. The second bolt slammed into the man's chest, throwing him back into the room.

Raiven held his position as Drake nipped past, his blaster carbine held ready. Reaching the side of the doorway, he pulled a small cylinder from his belt and threw it through the door. The flash-bang grenade exploded a second before Drake spun and leapt into the room, sweeping the area with his blaster.

"Clear!" he yelled.

Raiven moved forward towards the other door off the hallway, this one closed on the right hand side. Switching across to the left side of the hallway, he kept the muzzle of the rifle moving from the target doorway to the remaining exit at the head of the hall, which appeared to open out into a kitchen / dining area. Drake exited the other room behind him and flattened himself against the right side of the wall, moving up to just beside the door. Crouching down, he extended the folding stock on his blaster carbine and traced the butt gently across the doorway at waist height, creating a whisper of metal on wood.

Without warning, three blaster bolts erupted through the thin wood door, clustered at chest height, passing well over Drake's head and slamming into the wall on the other side of the hallway. The Arrebnacian pilot did not hesitate for a second, rolling onto the floor in front of the door and triggering his own burst back through the wood, scything fire in a vertical arc. Hearing a grunt and thud, Raiven took a long step over towards the door, into the space vacated by Drake, and smashed the butt of his rifle hard against the old fashioned handle, causing the door to fly open.

The wounded imperial staggered forward towards the open door, blaster firing once more at chest height. Realising his mistake, the blaster fire began to track downwards towards the prone pilot just before Drake's well aimed shot struck him in the face, pitching his body back, dead before it struck the floor. Raiven stepped around the doorway, again bringing his rifle up to scan the room's corners.

"Clear!"

[YT-2000 Transport *Al'yin'ia*]

"You still got him?" called Hawk over the comlink.

"Yeah, on sensors" replied Solo, "Hang on, he's running out of cover"

On cue, the airspeeder shot from a narrow alley between two tall buildings and into the main air corridor above the highway. Solo swept the *Al'yin'ia* down behind the ageing SoroSuub airspeeder, ducking the freighter slightly below the flight level of his quarry.

"I've got a shot" reported Hawk.

"Negative, Drake promised Foxfire we'd try to take him alive first. Let me try with the ion cannon first. We'll have to wait 'till he gets a bit lower, though – at this speed and altitude, he'll splatter when he hits the ground."

Solo nudged the freighter in closer to the fleeing speeder.

[118 Krandos Turnpike]

As Raiven turned to exit the room, a blaster bolt from the kitchen area struck the wall above Drake, spattering hot duracrete fragments across him. Spinning on his belly, Drake swept covering fire across the kitchen area, digging craters in the walls and exploding cooking pots into fragments of ceramic and metal, driving the imperial back behind the breakfast bar separating the kitchen from the dining area. Raiven stepped over to the door, pulling another grenade from his belt. Thumbing the release, he pitched it into the kitchen area.

"Foxtrot!" he yelled, the prearranged signal for a flash-bang grenade that might affect the other pilot.

Drake ducked his head and squeezed his eyes shut, his hands flying to his ears. The grenade exploded with a thunderous detonation, the concussion practically lifting the prone pilot from the floor. Raiven swung around the corner into the kitchen doorway, his rifle coming up to his shoulder as he did so, spitting red death.

The dining and kitchen area was wide, reaching the full width of the house, and the large dining table to the right was separated from the kitchen area by a breakfast bar. A flicker of motion in the corner of his eye caused Raiven to pull his head back a fraction of a second before a burst of blasterfire from the right tore a hole in the doorframe.

The sound of shattering glass from the right side of the room brought Raiven around the corner, spraying cover fire across the dining table. He was just in time to see a familiar man diving headlong through a broken window over on the right side of the room.

A second man crouching outside popped up, firing into the kitchen to try and cover the escape. Raiven's fire slammed into the window frame, raising a cloud of splinters but otherwise causing no harm to his targets.

Shaking his head, Drake retrieved his blaster carbine and ducked under his wingman's line of fire, throwing himself to the base of the large breakfast bar. As he landed, his eyes scanned the visible half of the room.

Raiven saw Drake snap his carbine up, pointing up and to the left as a blaster bolt flew in from that direction, gouging a hole in the top of the work surface.

Even as the bolt impacted, the imperial agent behind the breakfast bar began to rise, taking a blaster bolt to the head and another to the chest for his trouble as Raiven picked him off.

"Dan! He's here! He just went through the window!"

With an angry roar, Drake swept blaster fire towards his target on the stairway to Raiven's left.

[YT2000 *Al'yin'ia*]

Solo triggered another burst of ion fire, this one slicing past the airspeeder's left side.

"Damn!"

The Corellian had discovered the misaligned sight on the ion cannon when he fired his first burst of ion bolts at the fleeing speeder. Despite being right under Solo's crosshairs, the airspeeder had escaped harm as the ion fire traced blue-white lines under the craft.

The airspeeder pilot reefed the craft into another tight turn between high rise buildings, forcing Solo to cut in his repulsors to avoid striking the outboard building and allowing the fleeing craft to edge ahead slightly.

"Zulu, Zulu, Zulu!" came Raiven's voice over the comlink.

"Dammit, I **knew** this would happen" said Hawk "That slimy bastard's got us on a wild goose chase!"

Without speaking, Solo switched to the forward laser cannon and spitted the airspeeder on his gunsight. Tightening his finger on the trigger sent a stream of laser fire into the airspeeder's cabin, tearing it to shreds. He pulled the stick back, bringing the *Al'yin'ia* into a high loop. Reaching the zenith of the loop, he began to roll the craft on its long axis in preparation to head back towards the house.

[118 Krandos Turnpike]

“Roger that,” said Raiven into the comlink. He returned it to his belt and yelled across the room to Drake, who had scooted around the breakfast bar and was laying down suppression fire. “Daniel! Come on!”

Drake nodded grimly and continued his fire up towards the top of the stairs. “Go!” he yelled.

Raiven ran forward and slid behind the breakfast bar, covered by Drake’s fire. Rolling to his feet, he ran crouched over to the rear door and opened it with a slap to the control panel on the left of the door. Checking that the area outside the back door was clear, he swung back around the corner of the door and began laying down his own cover fire as Drake withdrew from the kitchen.

“There!” yelled Drake, raising his carbine to his shoulder as the pair rounded a corner into another alleyway. His shot missed Sledgehammer by a couple of inches as the Imperial agent ducked through a low door on the right. The two Republic pilots charged after the fleeing Imperials, pausing for only a second to check the doorway was clear.

Drake again took point, leading his wingman into a small warehouse. The two moved quickly but silently between tall rows of stacked shipping containers, heading towards the front of the building. Drake held his hand up silently and the pair came to a halt, weapons sweeping left and right, listening intently. The swish of an opening door and a sound of traffic moving on the street outside sent the two pilots running for a front doorway. Taking flanking positions on each side of the doorway, Drake risked poking his head around the corner of the door, only to pull it back as a shot splattered metal near the doorframe.

“Where?” asked Raiven.

“Over the road” replied his wingman, “Behind the red speeder. On 3... 2... 1...”

A flurry of red blasterfire forced Sledgehammer’s head back behind the landspeeder.

“Hurry up!” he yelled to his companion.

“OK, we’re all set,” said the ISB minder, a Coruscan called Brandt. The sound of blasterfire striking the opposite side of the speeder intensified.

“Let’s find some better cover,” said Sledgehammer.

Brandt popped up and laid down a stream of cover fire while Sledgehammer ran, crouched, to a blue vehicle ten metres along the road, where he turned and covered the agent’s withdrawal.

“Damn,” he commented. “Persistent, aren’t they?”

Sledgehammer nodded, still a little breathless. He noticed that the other man wasn’t even breathing hard.

“Well, at least they botched the assault. I don’t know where the rest of their assault team is, but they should have sealed off the safehouse properly.”

Sledgehammer popped up and volleyed off another burst of blaster fire, forcing Drake to dive headlong behind another parked speeder “How many were there?”

“Two, maybe four, plus they’ve got that freighter chasing Team Phi. I thought you said they had access to a 20-man commando team? Where are the rest of

them? Could they be staking out the ship?" said Brandt, firing off a few blaster rounds at their pursuers.

Sledgehammer shook his head "That wasn't Lynx. The guy with the rifle was a member of the squadron, a pilot, as was the other one I saw. If they're leading the assault team then Lynx aren't here."

"What!?! You mean to tell me they only sent a couple of rebel pilots to get you? If I'd known, we could have stayed at the safehouse and held them off, we'd have outnumbered them two-to-one!"

Another burst of fire tore into their cover, forcing another move and cover manoeuvre.

Sledgehammer's eyes narrowed "Don't underestimate them, Captain. The one with the carbine walked up to the door and *told you* he was there to kill me. That takes balls."

"Yeah, but no brains."

"Think, what have they done so far? They've spooked us into using our decoy. They forced us out into the open on foot. They've probably taken out the rest of the team at the safehouse. They've been separating us and whittling us down." Raiven and Drake had closed to less than fifteen metres by now, but Sledgehammer pinned them both down with a long burst of fire.

"Not for long. Look!"

Thirty metres beyond the Republic pilots, a landspeeder pulled up hard and settled to the road surface. The doors opened, revealing four armed men carrying blaster carbines and pistols. Taking cover behind the open doors, they opened fire on the now trapped pilots.

"Oh, nice," said Raiven, his first sarcastic remark since they had landed on this Force-forsaken planet. The pair were trapped between a pair of parked speeders, covered by concentrated fire from behind as the four men – undoubtedly more ISB agents – began to advance.

Drake risked a look towards Sledgehammer's hiding place, and was surprised to see the pair running, still in partial cover from the line of parked speeders on the opposite side of the road.

"Damn, they're making a move" said Drake.

Raiven sighed. "OK, you go, I'll cover your back and catch you up."

"There are four of them!"

"So I won't be very long," said Raiven with a grim smile. "Make sure you get the bastard."

Drake nodded solemnly.

The four ISB agents seemed to be approaching along the middle of the road, so Drake made his move along the pavement side, mirroring Sledgehammer's escape. As he rounded the bumper of the speeder, the ISB agent covering the pavement, ready for just this eventuality, raised his weapon with a shout. The shout rapidly changed to a gurgle as Raiven's blaster bolt struck him in the throat, almost decapitating the luckless imperial.

"Three!" yelled Raiven, almost gleefully, as his wingman continued the pursuit.

Sledgehammer reached the gate and stopped, checking behind him for signs of pursuit. The dark tunnel denied him any visual sign of his erstwhile squadmate, but the click of a boot tripping on a piece of trash was unmistakable.

"They're still behind us!" he hissed.

Brandt twisted two wires together, hotwiring the gate lock and opening it with a click. "Not for long. Come on."

The gate opened into a parking area in front of a pair of huge factory buildings – the sign on the gate marked this as a pharmaceutical plant. A glowrod in the distance marked the position of a security patrol over by the bottom of the rightmost building, forcing the pair towards the left side structure.

"How long?" asked Sledgehammer as he climbed the access ladder running up the east wall of the building.

"Four minutes out. Not long now."

Drake topped the ladder and dived prone, expecting a flurry of blaster fire from his prey. Scanning left and right, he jumped to his feet and ran, crouched, to a metal structure a few feet in front of him. Carefully poking his head over the top of the metre-and-a-half tall construction – it appeared to be an air-intake duct – he scanned his surroundings.

The roof was constructed of a series of shallow slanting sections, dotted every ten or so metres by an air intake, forming a regular grid parallel to the roof edges. A flicker of motion to the left caused Drake to jerk his head back, just as a blaster bolt tore a hole in the lightweight metal sheeting. Ducking around the side of the intake, he triggered a burst from his carbine, tearing into the duct from behind which the shots had been fired. His target – he was too tall to be Sledgehammer – ducked back behind his air intake before sprinting to the next in line. As Drake lined up a killing shot, a blaster bolt struck his cover, this time from the right, forcing him back.

Damn, thought the pilot, *Double team*.

The blaster fire intensified, tearing pieces from the air intake as Drake considered his situation. Footsteps sounded from the left – that would be the ISB agent moving in for the kill while Sledgehammer kept his head down with cover fire. Grabbing his last concussion grenade, Drake thumbed it for a ten second delay and jammed it into the grille of the air intake. With a deep breath, he hit the activate stud and ran, crouched, to the right, to the next air intake. Blaster bolts slammed and ricocheted from the rooftop, forcing the pilot to dive headlong behind the cover of his destination intake.

Brandt was approaching the intake hiding the rebel pilot when Sledgehammer's fire began to track to the next in line. Rounding the now badly shredded lump of metal, his raised blaster began to track downwards towards the prone shape of Drake, who was beginning to roll over.

The flash-bang concussion grenade exploded. Although the effect was diminished somewhat by the outdoor environment, the intake's open end pointed directly at the ISB agent, channelling the blast directly at the side of his head.

Brandt was thrown away from the intake, sending him tumbling past the ladder and over the edge of the roof.

Scrambling to his feet, Drake pressed himself against the intake and looked around for his blaster carbine. The weapon, dropped when he had been forced to dive into cover, had ended up a metre or so away, in direct line of fire of Sledgehammer. Cursing to himself softly, he drew his blaster pistol.

Sledgehammer gaped, open mouthed, as his plan to kill his remaining pursuer had fallen apart in a bright flash of light and a blast that was felt as much as heard. The intake had been reduced to a twisted pile of scrap metal, torn apart from within by the grenade. Sprinting over to his left, the Imperial agent was forced to duck as Drake rounded his cover and triggered several blasts in his direction.

Sledgehammer reached cover and checked the charge on his pistol. Only a few rounds left.

“So, you’re here to kill me then?” he said loudly, in an almost conversational tone.

“Give yourself up and I’ll take you in alive. Not necessarily intact, but definitely alive.”

The Imperial strained his ears, listening for any sounds as his mind whirred.

“You really expect me to believe that?”

“That’s up to you,” replied Drake, moving forwards, stealthily. Sledgehammer could imagine, correctly, the shrug that accompanied this.

“Come on. I burned down your lover and tried to kill half your squadron.”

Silence.

“You know, it was never aimed at you,” said Sledgehammer, continuing. “It was the others.”

“What others?” asked Drake, curious now.

Sledgehammer grinned to himself. His opponent was talking too much.

“Didn’t you notice who I went for? Joker, Hardrive, Raiven, Vyper?”

Drake’s mind clicked. “They’re all ex-imperials. But what about Hawk and the Iberyan convoy? And I don’t recall you going for Mike or Nik.”

“Ha. He was too pissed to drink what Vyper had. Hardrive was supposed to be flying with Joker. The bomb should have gotten them both. As for the Iberyans, that was a coincidence, nothing to do with me.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“It doesn’t really matter. Besides, why would I lie? You rebels are bad enough, but those traitors who turned against their own – betrayed the Empire... Well, they’re who I was there for...”

Sledgehammer eased his head around the side of the intake, and was forced to jerk it back to avoid Drake’s blaster bolt. He scanned the dark sky, looking for approaching lights. There. He smiled to himself again. Endgame. He spun around the opposite side of the intake and triggered two precious blaster bolts, forcing his opponent into cover behind the nearest intake, adjacent to his own. As quick as a flash, he ran forwards, firing the last couple of rounds from the pistol to cover the sound of his footsteps.

Drake reappeared from behind his cover, pointing his blaster pistol towards Sledgehammer’s previous hiding place. The Imperial agent waited until the blaster was level with him, past the corner of the intake that stood between them,

before grabbing the outstretched arm and yanking it toward him, slamming Drake's forearm against the edge of the intake. The blaster pistol dropped to the roof and slid away as Sledgehammer rounded the corner to make a follow up attack, only to meet Drake's left fist coming the other way, slamming into his ribs and knocking out his breath with an explosive *whuff*. Yanking his arm free, Drake jumped back to take stock of the situation, rubbing his forearm where it had caught the metal edge. Sledgehammer lifted his arms up into a standard guard while Drake stood, left side forward, arms raised. The Imperial moved first, gliding forward. His left hook was blocked in close, but his right jab struck the Arrebnaccian in the side of the head, jerking it back. The victory was short-lived, however, as Drake pivoted around on his left foot with a roundhouse kick aimed firmly at his opponent's head. His foot struck Sledgehammer's upraised right shoulder, glancing off and clipping him across the top of the head. The two separated, then Drake came in with a one-two combination to the chest, only to be sent flying as Sledgehammer lived up to his callsign, his right fist slamming into the side of Drake's head, just above the ear. He risked a quick look around – the approaching lights were almost there.

Drake was rolling onto his hands and knees as Sledgehammer moved forward to finish him off. A kick aimed at Drake's ribs was intercepted with both hands before a leg snaked out slammed into Sledgehammer's left ankle, sending him sprawling to the roof. Scissoring his left leg around past his right forced Drake to release his ankle, and the pair rolled apart, panting.

Sledgehammer climbed to his feet and signalled Drake to come forward again. Drake dived at Sledgehammer, throwing him bodily against the intake behind him with a loud, hollow clang. Grabbing hold of his opponent by the collar, Sledgehammer delivered a perfect right hook to Drake's cheek, sending him sprawling. He looked around and spotted Drake's pistol less than half a metre away, lying in a gutter. With a quick step and crouch, he scooped up the weapon and brought it to bear on Drake, who was still gathering himself from Sledgehammer's stunning attack.

"Freeze!" he yelled, his mouth forming into evil grin. The loud howl of an ion engine sounded behind him, and a brilliant spotlight illuminated the scene.

"Looks like my ride is here," said Sledgehammer, his voice filled with gloating. He turned, expecting to see the familiar shape of a Lambda-class shuttle, but was dazzled by the light from the powerful spotlight. Without warning, the light flicked off, revealing the side-on silhouette of a Correllian Transport against the lights of the city.

"What the –"

A single ruby blaster bolt lanced out from the side of the freighter, striking Sledgehammer in the forearm, causing him to drop the blaster with a scream of pain.

"Got him!" yelled Raiven, triumphantly, watching his target double over, clutching at his arm in pain, through the powerful MuBHAS scope fitted to his rifle. The pilot was sat in the open hatchway of the *Al'yin'ia*, his weapon still trained on the Imperial agent, this time directly at his head.

“Ok, take us in a bit closer.”

Solo sideslipped the craft closer to the building and reduced altitude, bringing the freighter in few metres over the roof. Behind Sledgehammer, Drake climbed unsteadily to his feet.

Four laser bolts slammed into the rear of the *Al'yin'ia*, shaking it like a toy and throwing Raiven's aim completely off target. As quick as a flash, Sledgehammer bent down and grabbed the dropped blaster in his left hand before sprinting for cover, heading towards the northern edge of the rooftop.

“We've got a Lambda class shuttle – he's coming around for another pass!” shouted Hawk as he swivelled the upper gun turret to face the threat.

“Damn, I've lost him. No shot, no shot!” said Raiven.

“We're gonna have to move,” said Solo, dipping the nose of the YT-2000 freighter.

Raiven made a snap decision and jumped out of the hatch. He fell the four or so metres to the roof, landing heavily on his right leg.

“Ten, this is Two-two. I'm on the roof.”

“Roger,” replied Solo, dodging the craft to the right to avoid another quad burst from the shuttle.

Drake grabbed Raiven by the shoulder, helping him to his feet and over to the nearest air intake.

“You OK?”

“Yeah, I think I sprained my ankle. I won't be running anywhere. You?”

Drake shook his head again. “I'll be alright. Just a little dazed by that punch.” He grinned. “Couldn't you have turned up a little earlier, like before he beat the hell out of me?”

“That wouldn't have been as much fun,” replied Raiven.

“What happened down there?”

Raiven smiled. “I owe Hawk a couple of drinks. Have you ever seen him fire that repeater gun? Nice.” He turned serious as he looked around. “Where's your piece?”

“That bastard nicked it.”

Raiven drew his heavy blaster pistol from his belt and handed it to his wingman, butt first.

“Loose it and I'll shoot you myself.”

Drake accepted the pistol and motioned in the direction of Sledgehammer's flight. “Are you going to cover me or just stand there insulting me? On second thought, don't answer that.”

Raiven flipped out the bipod legs on his rifle and, with help from Drake, stood, leaning heavily on the intake and his left leg. He hoisted the rifle over the top of the intake and switched the scope to Infra-Red.

“OK, there he is, four down, one over.”

The green-tinted image showed the heat signature of the fugitive pilot behind the intake. The heat source began to move.

“Heading north. I've got a shot – no, I've lost it.”

“He's mine, Mike.”

Raiven kept his aim on the target. “Understood.”

Drake eased his head around the corner of the intake and ran to the next row to the east, then repeated the manoeuvre over to the row beyond. Turning north, he headed at a right angle to his previous path, closing the gap on Sledgehammer. He made it past two intakes before a blaster bolt scorched the air behind him, forcing him into a running crouch as he sprayed the area with fire from the heavy blaster pistol.

Raiven watched impassively as the blaster bolts crisscrossed the rooftop in front of him, keeping his aim point on Sledgehammer's torso when the Imperial showed himself as he ran from cover to cover.

Solo dodged the *Al'yin'ia* left, then right as he fed more power to the repulsorlifts, striving for more altitude as the shuttle came in for its second pass. A stream of fire from Hawk in the upper gun turret caused the pilot of the Imperial craft to shy away, sending it over the factory rooftop. Punching the engines to max, Solo banked in the other direction as the craft began to build speed and headed for a pair of silos a half mile away.

[SHU *Vulture*]

"Quick, let's grab him before they come back!" said the pilot of the *Vulture*. The shuttle began to retract its wings as it tightened its spiral and came in low over the northern end of the building, its boarding ramp extending.

"I see a rebel!" shouted Hardy, the crew chief aboard the shuttlecraft. He was crouched at the end of the boarding ramp, training a stormtrooper blaster out into the air. Raising it to his shoulder, he began to lay down cover fire.

Drake dived flat on the roof as the blasterfire from the shuttlecraft rained down on him. Raiven shifted his aimpoint upwards, centring on the man's chest, and gently squeezed the trigger.

Sledgehammer was just metres from the shuttlecraft when a blaster bolt sailed over his shoulder and struck the shuttle's crew chief square in the chest, coring through his body. He watched in horror as the man's corpse tumbled from the shuttle ramp, limp as a rag doll.

"They're coming back."

"Don't worry, the lower gun turret is totalled. They've only got the front guns – we can take one pass."

The *Al'yin'ia* banked hard around the twin silos, turning back towards the factory and executing a perfect half-roll. Hawk gave a roar of triumph as the shuttle was rolled perfectly into his waiting gunsight.

A wave of red and blue energy washed over the side of the shuttle, hammering into the shields with a flash. The flight crew of the *Vulture* realised too late what was happening and kicked the repulsors up to full power. Lifting away, the shuttle managed to reach ten metres above the rooftop, overflying the amazed Sledgehammer as it clawed for greater altitude.

The stream of laserfire from the inverted upper turret pounded relentlessly through the weakened shields as the *Al'yin'ia* shot past overhead. Hawk adjusted his aim slightly and walked his fire along the vertical fin, tearing huge holes in the grey durasteel before blasting into the hull and detonating the starboard engine in a brilliant flash.

"NO!!" screamed Sledgehammer, his voice filled with anguish and loss.

"It's over," said Drake, stepping from behind one of the ubiquitous air intakes, heavy blaster pistol levelled at the imperial agent. He was surprised at how calm he felt. Gone was the burning rage that had gripped him when he had first seen Jarn killed. Gone was the deep seated desire for revenge, replaced instead by icy calm reason.

Sledgehammer just stared at the burning wreckage that was to have been his escape.

Drake brought his left hand up to join his right on the butt of the blaster and aimed at Sledgehammer's head.

"Drop your weapon!"

Sledgehammer looked around and seemed surprised to see Drake stood there. His arms hung limply, right forearm burned and bleeding from Raiven's blaster bolt, left hand still gripping Drake's blaster pistol. He looked back towards the shuttle wreckage.

"Over."

"That's right," replied Drake, stepping forward, blaster still rock steady on Sledgehammer's head.

"Over."

"Just drop your weapon."

Drake could see the arm muscles tense even as the blaster pistol began to come up and begin to track towards him. His finger tightened on the trigger before Sledgehammer even got the weapon above waist level. The blaster bolt struck the Imperial agent in the face, followed a fraction of a second later as Drake fired a second bolt that hit an inch above the first. Sledgehammer's body collapsed limp to the rooftop.

Keeping the blaster trained on his opponent, the Republic pilot glided forward and kicked the weapon from the hand before inspecting the damage and relaxing, realising that such measures were as unnecessary as the second blaster bolt had been.

A shuffling sound brought Drake spinning around, bringing the heavy blaster pistol up.

"Hold it, Dan," said Raiven, limping forward and using his rifle as a crutch. Drake relaxed and stood, silent, as his wingman limped over to Sledgehammer's body.

"It's over."

Drake nodded. "That's just what he said."

"You OK?"

The Arrebnacian pilot took a deep breath and let it out with a long sigh.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm OK."

The scene was harshly illuminated as Solo brought the *Al'yin'ia* back in over the rooftop and turned on the powerful spotlights.

"Time to go."

[Exit vector D4, High Orbit, Nar Shadaa]

Solo twisted in the pilot's seat as the door swished open behind him.

"I've not had that smooth a ride since I took a TIE through a cyclone on Preeka IV. Gave a new meaning to the term 'Wind Shear,'" said Raiven, limping slightly as he made his way to the co-pilot's seat, above and behind Solo's.

"Oh, thanks," said the Corellian, pretending to be offended. "Next time you can fly her through an electrical storm and see how smooth you can keep her. Still, she handles beautifully."

To emphasise his point, Solo threw the freighter into a rapid barrel roll.

Raiven watched with a wide grin as the starfield outside the viewport wheeled and spun before settling down again. He swung the mini-MFD screen around on its armature and punched a few buttons.

"Looks like the navicomps finished the calculations. Ready to jump?"

"OK, here we go. Next stop: the Calamari system."

Solo pulled smoothly on the hyperspace levers, and, with a blur of pseudomotion, they were away. He checked the hyperspace readouts, confirming course and speed, before speaking again.

"Where are the others?"

"Hawk's working on the upper gun turret power feeds, Dan's getting some sleep."

"How's he doing?"

Raiven was quiet for a few seconds, then sighed. "He'll be OK. He's released his anger, now he just needs to release his sorrow."

"The memorial service will help," added Solo.

"Yeah" replied Raiven. "ETA back at the 'Lair?" he asked after a couple of minutes of silence.

"About 14 hours or so."

"Go get some rest, I can handle it for a while," volunteered the ex-Imperial, settling his hands on the fighter-style sidestick and throttle, and his feet on the pedals.

"What about your ankle?"

"It's strapped OK, I'll be fine in a day or so. Go on, get some sleep."

Arachnoid swung his fighter in from below the oval shaped freighter, settling level with and to the right of the cockpit, and watched as Cardinal pulled his fighter into a matching position over on the left. *Wolffang isn't the **only** group of hot-shot pilots*, he thought with a grin.

"Welcome back," he said over the comlink on the squadron frequency.

“Good to be back,” replied Solo, waving.
Arachnoid grinned again and switched to another frequency.
“Lair, this is Wolfseye patrol. Contact One has returned; we’re coming in now.”
Hawk, again in the co-pilot’s seat, kept an eye on the instruments as Solo deftly brought the freighter into the well-lit flight deck of the *Wolf’s Lair*.
“Looks quiet,” commented the ex-mercenary.
“A quick sleight of hand, I think,” replied Solo. “Five creds says a fire drill”
“No thanks,” replied Hawk.
Solo nudged the stick slightly and settled the Corellian-built freighter on the spot designated by a deck hand with a pair of light wands.

Foxfire stood with Gen’yaa, slightly impatient, as the engines on the freighter spooled down to rest. A minute later, the boarding ramp lowered to the deck with a hiss, and booted feet sounded on from inside the dark interior. Solo and Raiven descended first, the latter still limping slightly from his injured ankle. The two halted at the bottom of the ramp and saluted.

“Lieutenant Commander Tengroth, report,” ordered Gen’yaa after returning the salute.

“Mission was partially successful, ma’am. Subject was killed while trying to resist.”

Gen’yaa raised an eyebrow but did not comment, instead shooting Foxfire a look that could have frozen water at noon on Tatooine. She turned back to Solo. “Did you recover the body?”

“Yes, ma’am, the ISB won’t know if we got him alive or dead, or even if his escape was real or a trap. The doctor can see if he can get anything else from the body, too.”

“Good. Offload the body and take it up to the medical bay, and do it quickly. I have to perform a ‘surprise’ inspection of the crew quarters.”

The NRI colonel saluted again and marched away. Foxfire raised an eyebrow, mimicking the departed Captain.

“So,” she said, slowly, “who took him down?”

“Dan,” replied Raiven.

“And?”

“And what? Are you asking me if my wingman murdered a piece of shit traitor?”

Foxfire grabbed Raiven by the arm and dragged him around to the back of the craft, where she shoved him up against the hull.

“Yes. Now cut the crap and tell me what happened.”

Raiven stood, shocked at the behaviour of his commanding officer.

“Solo and Hawk totalled his ride off planet. Dan tried to arrest him – I was watching through my scope – when Alex tried to pull a blaster on him. Dan double tapped him in the head. It was Alex or Dan, Avery. If he hadn’t shot when he did, I would have nailed him myself.”

Foxfire visibly relaxed and released the X Wing pilot with a nod. “Good. Get the body offloaded.”

Raiven watched as the squadron CO stalked off towards the nearest turbolift. "What the hell was that about?" he asked Solo. "If I'd been in Dan's place, I don't know if I would have even given him the chance to surrender before I fired." "You haven't been with the squad for long, have you? She was making sure Dan kept control. There's no place in this squadron for someone who'd endanger us all for a personal grudge."

[Wolfgang Ready Room, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Raiven pulled his on flight gloves and picked up his helmet from the shelf in the locker. Stepping out into the gangway, he met up with Arachnoid, Joker, Moose and Sparks.

"Ready?" asked Arachnoid, who would be leading the flight. Raiven nodded wordlessly.

The five pilots made their way to the turbolift at the end of the gangway and took the lift up to the hangar deck, still without saying a word. Even the normally buoyant Joker remained quiet. Now was not the time for wisecracks.

Waiting in the centre of the hangar deck were five fighters, Arachnoid and Joker's A Wings, Moose's veteran Y Wing, Sparks's B Wing and Raiven's X Wing.

[Flight Deck, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Foxtire walked to the lectern by the portside MagCon field. Outside the blue-tinted energy field was the mottled tunnel of hyperspace.

Assembled before the lectern were the pilots and support crew of Wolfshead Squadron, the soldiers of Lynx Commando and various members of the crew of the *Wolf's Lair*, all in full dress uniform.

Taking a deep breath, the squadron CO began to speak.

Behind her, the swirling colours of hyperspace changed to starlines then collapsed to pinpricks of light as the Strike Carrier dropped back to realspace just inside the Calamari system.

The A Wings lead off, dropping on repulsorlifts through the open elevator hatches on the starboard side of the ship, followed closely by Y and B Wings, and finally by the X Wing.

Deliberately keeping the engines at minimum power to minimise noise disruption on the flight deck, the fighters slid through the magcon field. The craft began a leisurely orbit, moving into a standard V formation, Arachnoid leading, Sparks and Moose to the left, Joker and Raiven to the right.

The X Wing pilot was listening to the memorial service as the fighter formation matched speed with the Strike Carrier and came to a relative halt above the ovoid capital ship. Drake was speaking.

The seven members of Lynx honour guard raised their blaster carbines to their shoulders, aiming them through the magcon field.

"Fire!... Fire!... Fire!"

The assembled personnel snapped to attention and saluted as the pods lifted from the stand by the lectern. Gliding noiselessly through the field, the simple autopilots controlling the manoeuvring thrusters kicked in, turning the pods towards the bow of the ship and accelerating them up to cruise speed.

"Stynter, Alba, Berelli, Larrs, Till'na..."

"...Tras, Ferneaux..."

Still without communication, the five starfighters swooped down over the hull of their mothership and slid smoothly into position in over their fallen comrades.

"...Allson, Suus..."

Arachnoid checked the course and position of the formation against the plan, confirming the pods were directly on course for their destination, the star at the heart of the Calamari system.

"...Vengra, Rachon."

As the last name was read out, Arachnoid spoke his first word since the flight had launched.

"Execute."

Joker rolled her fighter 45 degrees to starboard and pulled sharply away, leaving a gap in the formation between Arachnoid and Raiven, as the X Wing pilot matched Moose's flying, the perfect "missing man" formation, their precision flying forming the pilots' final tribute.

Foxfire's voice rang over the comlink channel.

"From the stars we are born, to the stars we return..."

The two X Wings of Barracuda squadron, one of the fighter units assigned to protect the valuable Calamari shipyards, climbed warily from the system's gravity well to meet the incoming craft.

"Transponders confirmed, registering a single *Wolf* class Strike Carrier, one flight of escort fighters... and several coffin pods," reported Silverfish One, a Quarren by the name of Pri'dsar.

"Understood," replied Shipyard control.

Pri'dsar looked over at his wingman. "Let's pay our respects"

"Two."

The two X Wings swept in towards the forlorn convoy, joining with the honour guard flight, Pri'dsar to the left of the Y Wing, his wingman to the right of the X Wing. After a few seconds, the craft reduced speed and drew back, taking flanking positions beside the magcon fields on each side of the flight deck, before breaking away and heading back to Calamari. Behind them, the *Wolf's Lair* began a slow turn, settling into the new course, before the Wolfshead flight, reluctantly, did the same.

[New Republic Naval Command, Mon Calamari system]

Fleet Admiral John Collins smiled broadly as he gripped the sides of the podium. "Distinguished guests, members of the armed forces of the New Republic," he began genially, reminding himself that a simple "ladies and gentlemen" would be rather rude given the rather large number of non-humans present. "It gives me great pleasure today to stand here on behalf of our Commander-in-Chief, who is unfortunately unable to be with us, and formally commission the first of the New Republic Navy's latest class of capital ship, the *Wolf*-class Strike Carrier.

"Traditionally, at this point I would allude to how well the new ship, the *Wolf's Lair*, had performed during testing and evaluation, how we all hold high hopes for her during her time in the fleet, and so on. However," and now the admiral's gaze stopped traversing the room and settled on the section where the ship's company of the *Lair* and Wolfshead Squadron were seated, "today's commissioning will be different." Collins straightened up, and waved an arm at the gleaming hull that could be seen through the viewport behind him.

"I stand before you all today with pride because the *Wolf's Lair*, despite being ill-prepared and even uncommissioned, recently travelled into harm's way to save the inhabitants of the Mantara Sector from destruction. An Imperial task force, consisting of no less than six capital ships, was destroyed in an engagement with New Republic forces in the Neljun system. Ladies and gentlemen," - in his excitement Collins forgot about protocol, but his audience was spellbound and would forgive him for it - "I will tell you that the *Wolf's Lair* performed exceptionally in her trials. But, far more importantly, she and her crew achieved victory, despite the odds being stacked against them, in the most important trial of all: combat against an opposing force. The Empire have seen first hand what our highly-trained and well-equipped military can do, and it has cost them dearly, in ships, in lives, and in senior, experienced commanders. The ship you see behind me has been the bulwark that stood between millions of innocents and an oppressive Empire.

"The *Wolf's Lair* and her fine crew - which I shall note includes those personnel who make up Wolfshead Squadron, one of our finest starfighter squadrons - have been forged through a test of fire into a sharp fighting instrument that will see us through the coming struggles of a fledgling republic. It is therefore fitting that I now ask Councillor Borsk Fey'lya to commission the *Wolf*-class Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*." Fleet Admiral Collins stepped aside as the smiling Bothan councillor made his way to the podium.

Drake barely stifled a yawn as the Bothan began to speak, and he traded rolled eyes with Raiven, who sat next to him. They both glanced over at Colonel Gen'yaa where she sat - her attention was rivetted to her fellow Bothan. Drake scowled. *He got her the job in the first place. No wonder he's so happy.* Raiven's thoughts were running in a similar vein. *You can never trust any race that schemes for a living,* he thought wryly.

Finally, the speech was over and an orderly brought Fey'lya the time-honoured bottle of Coruscan champagne - worth a small fortune as little of it had been produced during the reign of the Empire and production had only just been restored. The Bothan smiled, nodded and crossed to a receptacle set into the

bulkhead behind him. He carefully inserted the bottle - which fit perfectly - and pressed a button which was set next to the opening.

The assembled crowd watched in silent fascination as the dark green bottle slowly spun through the void, until with a soundless crash it shattered against the newly repaired and polished hull of the *Wolf's Lair*.

The newest ship in the New Republic Navy had been commissioned, and the crowd burst into cheers and thunderous applause.

Fleet Admiral Collins took his place back at the podium and thanked Borsk Fey'lya, then smiled the same knowing smile from before.

"Before we move on to the refreshments, friends," he said slowly, "there is just one more task I have to perform - and that is confirming a number of field promotions and commissions."

One by one, the newly promoted members of Wolfshead Squadron were called, and they filed up, resplendent in their new (if slightly uncomfortable) dress uniforms, receiving their promotions officially from the admiral and saluting before taking up positions behind him.

"Finally, there is one last group of commissions to recognise," Fleet Admiral Collins continued, his pulse quickening. He'd never done *this* before. "Rear Admiral Listran Draxus, Captain Kilroy Brasken, and members of the former crew of the Imperial *Victory Star* Destroyer *Valourous*." At this a shocked gasp rippled around the crowd. This particular part of the ceremony had been kept a secret from them.

All heads turned as a procession filed into the room, highly polished boots clicking methodically on the equally polished floor. The newly promoted Admiral Draxus led the party, shoulders back, face stern and proud. Captain Brasken followed, striding in a similar manner, as did the rest of the last bridge crew of the *Valourous*, a ship which now sat at rest in a dock at the nearby Mon Calamari shipyards, her fate as yet undecided.

Fleet Admiral Collins read out the names and ranks of all of the defectors - although only their former captain and XO had been promoted - and then looked slowly around the room.

"Friends, you will notice before that I said 'New Republic forces' in the Neljun system. Those forces included these men and women before you, who, in an act of immense moral and physical courage, defected from the Empire and joined the New Republic, bringing their ship, their skills and their service with them. Without them, we might well not be commissioning the *Wolf's Lair* today." The fleet admiral turned to the ex-Imperial captain and saluted.

"Welcome to the New Republic, Admiral." Rear Admiral Draxus returned the gesture, and his grizzled face broke into one of its rare smiles.

"Thank you, sir," he said, accepting the welcome on behalf of his crew.

This time the applause was deafening. The formal part of the ceremony was over.

The pilots of Wolfshead Squadron stood in a corner of the spacious observation deck and talked amongst themselves, as the buzz of a celebration in full swing swirled around them. Colonel Gen'yaa had already spoken to the group, giving a

brief congratulatory speech, and then departed - she was now, as Drake elegantly put it, "hobnobbing with the brass". The mood amongst the pilots was not morose, but neither was it jovial - the ordeals of the Mantara Sector campaign had left their mark on all of them, and one most of all.

Drake stood quietly, surrounded by his group mates from Wolfgang, as well as Ibero, Vyper, Arachnoid and a few of the others. All had now had the chance to share their condolences privately with him; he was grateful, and the sorrow evident on his face was softened by the compassion of his squadron mates.

"Well, we did it." The young Arrebnacian's voice was uncharacteristically soft and tender. "She would have been proud of us." He thought a little, then smiled. "If she had've been there, she would have been more than that. She would've walloped more than her fair share of Imps and then complained that the rest of us didn't do enough."

It was a poor attempt at a joke, but everyone laughed softly, sympathetically. Almost everyone in the squadron had lost someone dear at the hands of the Empire, and therefore knew that humour was a key tool for dealing with grief. There was a brief silence. No one wanted to speak and interrupt Drake. The young man sighed, then pulled himself together with a visible effort and grinned weakly.

"Well, Jarn wouldn't have wanted us moping about at such a festive occasion, would she?" The assembled pilots all caught the change in Drake's mood and did their best to encourage it.

"No!" they chorused. Drake raised his glass, and made no effort to hide the tears that wet his cheeks.

"To Jarn Stynter," he said, his voice strong, "and all those who have lost their lives fighting the Empire." They all raised their glasses, echoing the toast, and drank.

"Well, I'm glad we all made it out of *that* campaign alive," Vyper said, wiping his mouth. "I must confess that I wondered if we'd make it for a while there." There was general agreement, and sips of champagne, and then Drake grinned and set his glass down.

"Wait a second," he said excitedly. "This Coruscan dishwashing liquid is okay for toasts, but to properly celebrate, we need a *real* drink. Hold on." He strode over to the bar and motioned to the bartender. Raiven watched him with a positively evil smile.

"Don't drink anything till after he's had his first sip," he told the assembly, who looked puzzled but nodded.

The young pilot headed back over with an armful of cans and began passing them out.

"Genuine beer from home," he said proudly, "and worth a fortune here in Mon Cal. Well, worth more than it is at home, anyway." With that, he popped open the last can - his own, and took a deep draught.

Immediately, spectacularly, Drake spat out the brown liquid.

"Warm!" he managed to splutter through a choking cough. There was a roar of laughter as realisation dawned on everyone. Raiven folded his arms, and stood

grinning, looking for all the world as if he had just destroyed the whole Empire with a single master stroke.

"You...bastard!" Drake managed, still coughing from beer that had gone the wrong way. "I should've guessed..."

"*Should* have, but *didn't*," his wingmate said smugly. "So now we're even, lad."

"Sith we are," Drake said, straightening up now. "Watch your back, Rovardi. I'll make you pay for this, even if I have to fly to the Unknown Regions to do it."

"Sure you will," Raiven countered scornfully. "Just make sure you take Ledner with you - otherwise I know you'll get lost..."

The banter continued, and the night wore on, the mood light and merry despite all that the squadron had been through. Drake did, however, occasionally glance out through the viewport at the stars, and particularly the blazing bright one that burned not so far away, and thought of life and love lost. But then, with a small smile, he would think of friendship gained and shared, and how they had all lived through the hardships of the campaign together, and been forged through fire.