

Imperial Storm 2021 Fiction Serials

Mice

COL Marenta approached General Naiilo and General Stryker in the cantina off the COM's mess. Raising her hand in a salute, she greeted them, "Generals. How are you both this evening?"

Silwar gave a short nod as Stryker replied, "Discussing some tactics for Imperial Storm." "Fantastic!" the Colonel replied enthusiastically. "That is precisely why I needed to speak with you both. I've got an idea that I already ran past Commander EvilGrin, and he thinks it's brilliant."

Stryker crossed his arms, shifting his weight with a look of interest. Looking around the cantina, Silwar shot Stryker a raised eyebrow. Stryker returned the look with a slight tilt of his head to the barbot maintenance locker at the back of the room. The three of them moved toward the door at the other end of the bar in an easy fashion, nodding and greeting the other pilots enjoying the freshly recycled Chalquilla.

They walked into the small, dark room and formed a loose circle in the tight space.

Silwar waved his hand to indicate that Marenta had the floor.

"We are going to be going into Imperial Storm, and I have an idea, but I need Firebird's and Tempest's help."

"Go on." Silwar said.

Taking a deep breath, Marenta started explaining, "We are bound to run into both fleets at some point in the games. What if we used a diversion tactic to draw attention somewhere else and infiltrated their ships to maybe do some light sabotage? Nothing serious, but just enough to give us an edge during our first encounter?"

"How do you propose to do this?" Stryker responded smarmily.

"We take 1 or 2 pilots from Firebird to draw attention and pull out the squadrons from their ships, because only the Infiltrator Wing flies out of the Challenge, or they are actually Rebels, but they have to investigate! Tempest has a few training TIE Defenders that we could put some Epsilon colors on for the Hammer and Inferno has some TIE Interceptors we can put some Rho colors on for the Warrior. So, what I'm thinking is that we... uh, program a few MSE-6 droids to release on the ships who are programmed to..." Marenta makes pulling apart motion with her hands.

"Let's just say we make sure that they do some careful disconnections on some select craft. Then we zoom back out of the hangar before they pull the docking arms in and make an escape run."

"That... Well, that is an insane plan." Silwar remarks with some disbelief.

"No." Stryker puts his hands on his head and stares. "That's not even a plan, that's a sure-fire way to get my pilots taken out of the games for good!"

"Well, you do always claim that the best pilots are in Firebird. Don't you have faith in your squadron?" Marenta says in a chiding tone.

"Except we all know that Tempest has the best pilots." Silwar says with a small smirk on his lips. Marenta and Stryker turn to face him with matching blank stares.

Closing her eyes, Marenta sighs. She motions toward Stryker with her right hand. "Look, General Stryker, this plan needs you to work. It has to be an IW pilot that draws their attention

away so we can sneak in.” Marenta then gestures toward Silwar. “And, General Naiilo, you’re the one directing the Challenge’s fleet during the games, this op would have to go through you.” Marenta moved her hand to behind her back and nodded. “I formulated the plan and discussed it with Major EvilGrin. He thinks it could work. You both know that Inferno Squadron would be willing to go in and drop some mouse droids, for the glory of the Challenge.” Marenta smiles evilly when finishing up the sales pitch.

After a few moments of silence, Silwar says, “Thank you for the creative plan.” Stryker scoffs quietly at the remark. Silwar continues speaking in a firmer tone, “Both General Stryker and I will discuss the details. I am certain that should we carry this plan out, Major EvilGrin will brief you.” Marenta shifted her eyes between an agitated Stryker and placid Silwar. “Very well.” Marenta saluted and left the room when the salutes were returned. Stryker waited until the door shut before he shouted, “She is insane! They’re never going to fall for it! Using us as bait like that!” “You have to admit, the plan has merit.” Silwar said with amusement.

“I don’t have to admit to anything. We shouldn’t even think about this! Straightforward fleets battling is what will win the games.”

“Perhaps. But, think about the bragging rights that Firebird would have. Fooling both the Hammer and the Warrior? The tales they would tell across the fleet of the pilots who ran that mission.” Silwar sighs, dreaming of the glory that the Challenge fleet would have.

“While that sounds amazing to you, how are we supposed to lead 5 squadrons on a merry chase with only a handful of craft?”

“There are two squadrons in the Infiltrator Wing, maybe it could be a joint effort?”

“Maybe then. But, only maybe. There’s still a lot that could go wrong.” Stryker flings his hands out to the side to indicate everything around them.

Silwar looks around the room at the equipment to repair the barbot from the Chalquilla exposure. He bends down to pick up a busted MSE-6 droid and starts inspecting it before looking back to Stryker. “You’re right, a lot could go wrong. But, if it went right, it’d go right quite well.” Silwar slaps the droid into Stryker’s still outstretched palm and moves to the door.

“Coming?”

Stryker looks up at the ceiling, sighing heavily, then deposits the busted mouse droid on a shelf. “Yeah.”

Sweet Revenge

Silwar sighed heavily before leaning back in his chair and rubbing his face with both hands. Hours of reading After-Action Reports had a tendency to make people weary, and these reports were not lighthearted. Yes, the subterfuge worked, after discussing with Stryker and Horus and letting them lead the squadrons stationed onboard the Renegade to distract the Hammer's fleet at Kammia to allow Tempest and Inferno to sabotage their craft. It was a strong, bold plan; but it is not a sustainable strategy going forward.

The intel that Eagle and Firebird fed back to the fleet was invaluable. It allowed him to make the decision to hold the Interdictor Rapier and MC-90 Renegade back further afield. This meant that the squadrons doing the distraction had to travel back further and would not be able to be deployed to help protect the fleet. This left the MC-80 Redemption and Cruiser Hermes to shoulder the brunt of the attack in the forward position. Even with support from the Gunships Dempsey and Blizzard, a portion of the fleet was lost.

Silwar leaned forward and drummed his fingers on the glass desktop, looking at the remaining fleets and their positions. He stared at Kammia's planet profile and glanced up to the projected battle map of the planets, marking the confirmed positions of the fleets, thinking about the next move. He leaned back again, intertwining his fingers and letting his thumbnail scrape repeatedly over his bottom lip.

The holocom beeped, breaking into Silwar's thoughts. He reached over to accept the incoming video call and greeted, "Lieutenant Colonel."

Tygra responded in a clipped tone. "Admiral, a word?"

Silwar extended his hand toward the projection and nodded.

"Sir, as you know, I have no love for Beta Squadron."

"I'm aware, Tygra."

"I want to push toward Mokivj. It isn't worth as many points, but after our victory..."

"Hard earned victory, with many losses, Tygra."

"Yes, sir. But, it is a victory, nonetheless. I still think we should take Mokivj. It would strike the Hammer's fleet hard. They would not expect it, and the loss of their home base would be a major blow to their morale."

"You do realize that Beta only painted your craft pink because you put an additive in their Chalquilla to turn their mouths black, right?"

"Sir, what Thunder did was a prank, what they did compromised the integrity of us completing our mission!"

Silwar smiled slyly at the projection of the unusually agitated Tygra. Tygra Shadowclaw was usually very stoic and seclusive, preferring direct and terse conversations. To see his constitution visibly shaken was a welcome surprise to Silwar.

"While I don't think that pink paint hindered your mission, I do think that your idea has a certain level of appeal. And, I do think that Horus is enjoying the engagement we have thrown his way, so you know he would be willing to have you in the battlegroup. Stryker may be less willing, since he was used as a diversion and didn't particularly care for us using him that way."

"Sir, respectfully request to move Thunder to support our fleets moving onto Mokivj."

"Tygra, I appreciate your enthusiasm to upset the Hammer, but I will have to think on this."

"That's all I am asking, sir."

“Very well. Is there anything else?”

“No, sir!” Tygra snapped.

“Good.” Silwar nodded at the projection.

Tygra nodded back and ended the video call.

Tygra looked around his stateroom after the call, looking for the answers that weren't there. He knew who he had to speak with and he pinched the bridge of his nose, as he rubbed in small circles. The one conversation he had, even over video call, had taxed him. He hated talking and he hated interacting with people. He only just tolerated the people in his squadron, and that was because he was Commander and knew he had to be somewhat approachable.

Tygra's head jerked up and he knew how he was going to approach the craziest group of people in the fleet, outside of Horus, that is. Tygra felt his lips twitch in anticipation. He leaned forward and scrolled through his contact list to find Lieutenant Commander Coldsacks. Coldsacks and Tygra were of a type, both stoic and logical, both having grown up on Imperial controlled planets with the same understanding of their place in the galaxy.

Tygra pushed the connect button and waited for Coldsacks to pick up the video call.

“Lieutenant Colonel, how may I assist you today?” Coldsacks' clipped voice and sweaty appearance showed that he had been interrupted during his training regimen.

“Lieutenant Commander, I would like to employ Tempest on an errand that I believe Vice Admiral Silwar would like done.”

Coldsacks' eyes narrowed slightly as he took in Tygra. “What type of errand are we talking about here?”

“The kind of errand where I need all of Tempest to help Thunder take Mokivj and strike fear into the heart of Hammer's fleet by taking their home base.”

Tygra watched the smile spread over Coldsacks' face. Tempest was one of the most crazy squadrons in the Emperor's Hammer fleet, and Tygra counted on convincing Honsou through Coldsacks' concurrence with the plan to move on Mokivj.

“You want Tempest and Thunder to bolster the Infiltrator Wing and take Mokivj?” Coldsacks asked through his smile, teeth gleaming white.

“Yes. They need us to support them as the skirmish with the Hammer's fleet removed half of our capability, and I can think of no other squadron I would want to fly against. Plus, I owe Beta.”

Tygra's slight smile slipped off his face by the time he finished speaking.

“Why call me, then, and not Honsou directly?” Coldsacks' brow furrowed.

“You know why.” Tygra said calmly. He watched Coldsacks nod solemnly.

“Very well, let me talk to Honsou. You know he's always ready to go where the fighting is good.”

“I'll leave you to it, then.”

“Good day, Lieutenant Colonel.” Coldsacks saluted and signed off.

Tygra's face lit up again in a smile. The next phase of Imperial Storm was going to be sweet, sweet revenge.

Dogs and Waiting

Coldsnacks snorted as he shut down his wrist com and looked to the side to see Commander Neko finishing up her training in the weight room. Neko was a great sparring partner, since she has the agility to make up for her size difference. Commander Honsou liked to ensure that his squadron got just as much training done with their physical bodies as they did piloting craft. Sound body, sound mind.

"Neko, guess who that was?" Coldsnacks smiled at Neko as she was walking over to get some water.

"Uh, Tygra?" She gasped as she gulped the water down.

"Yep."

"And, what'd the sneaky sith want with you?"

"Wants me to convince Honsou to take Tempest and reinforce Kammia to move onto Mokivj." Neko's face contorted up in barely contained humor. "Wait, wait! I bet he's seething over the pink paint and wants revenge on the Hammer! Oh, that's just too rich!" Neko sputtered the last few words as the laughter finally came out.

Coldsnacks' smile returned, seeing Neko's humor about the situation. "It's a smart play, but I'm betting that since we're not hearing about this in a briefing from Admiral Silwar that Tygra is hoping to convince Honsou to help him make a plea for the strike. And, since we know that our Commander likes the chain of command, having me try to convince him will be more effective." Neko sighed after her laughing fit and agreed, "Probably would be easier to digest coming from you."

"Yes, most likely. Do you want to come along to the meeting, then?"

"I wouldn't miss this for anything!"

Neko wiped down the equipment she was using while Coldsnacks got a drink which he finished quickly. They both left the training room and made their way to the lift.

"Do you think the Admiral is going to have us use the Mouse Droid trick again? It worked against the Hammer fleet, right?" Neko asked, wonderingly.

"No, we probably will not use it again, not even against the Warrior's fleet."

"Pity, it was fun messing with Epsilon."

"Don't worry, I'm sure we'll get our chance to mess with them again."

"Can't come soon enough, I always say!"

They stepped onto the command level and made their way to Commander Honsou's office, nodding at the deck officers walking with purpose down the hallways. Coldsnacks reached up to press the entry pad chime and waited.

A muffled "Enter" sounded behind the door.

Lieutenant Commander Coldsnacks and Commander Neko stepped into the room and assumed an at-rest stance in front of his desk. Lieutenant Commander EchoVII was standing beside his chair, where he was currently sitting, and her scarred hands were holding maps and reports down while they studied the information. Honsou sat back when EchoVII straightened to a standing position.

"Lieutenant Commander Coldsnacks, Commander Neko, getting in some physical training?"

"We just came from the training room, sir." Neko replied.

"That's good, then, maybe we can discuss some potential movements for Imperial Storm since you're both here."

Coldsnacks cleared his throat, "Actually, sir, that's why we're here."

Honsou raised an eyebrow and steepled his fingers, effecting a listening posture.

"During my workout, I received a call from Lieutenant Colonel Tygra. He mentioned having Thunder and Tempest move to support the fleet at Kammia for a possible move onto Mokivj."

Honsou's brows came together and he tapped his lips with his index fingers in a repetitive motion. "I'm assuming that since he contacted you and not me, that he would like my assistance to convince the Admiral of this plan?"

Coldsnacks waited a few moments before answering the supposition. "I cannot assume to know his intentions, but that is the logical reasoning I came up with as well."

Honsou closed his eyes and gave the matter some thought. He preferred to follow the structure and the rules, and the detached but mischievous way that Tygra used his Sith powers gave him some measure of concern. Neko cleared her throat, indicating she had something to say.

Honsou opened his eyes, focusing on her Bothan features and nodded once.

"Sir, maybe we could use this to our advantage? Maybe we back up their play against Mokivj and the Hammer fleet and in return ask them to back up our play against the Warrior and Rho squadron?"

At that moment Honsou felt the mood lift in the room, the same voracious smile on all the faces at the mention of exacting some justice upon Rho. It was in Honsou's opinion, and much of the rest of Tempest's, that Rho was unfit to be the Honor Guard of the fleet and that position should belong to Tempest instead.

EchoVII extended one of her hands towards Neko, the fingers not quite straight from the scarring caused by being the Challenge's bartender and handling the caustic Chalquilla.

"Commander Neko makes a fantastic point. We could do a whole lot of damage to the Hammer's fleet with Thunder, and combine that with the Eagle and Firebird, that would be a fitting end to both the Hammer and the Warrior, don't you think?"

Honsou liked that his subordinates were trying to cajole him, but he was already somewhat invested in the idea, as long as he could get compliance for the assistance from the serious and wily Sith, Tygra.

Lieutenant Commander LegionX stood next to his Cathar Commander, pouring over the maps and suspected fleet movements. LegionX was normally imperturbable, but the last day or so, Tygra's normally stoic demeanor had been missing and he was more agitated and easily irritated. LegionX suspected that something was bothering the Sith, but did not dare ask, since he knew how Sith dealt with people making too many inquiries.

"LegionX, do you suspect that the Hammer will be challenged on Bunduki?" Tygra's voice snapped as he turned toward his Squadron Executive Officer.

"Sir, I do believe that the Hammer's fleet sustaining control is untenable. We do not yet have confirmation about the size of force the Warrior fleet has on Rattatak or Cattamascar." LegionX laid a finger over the space between Bunduki and Panatha. "I would assume that they sent light fleets to the two planets and collectively moved the bulk of their forces toward Bunduki to swiftly

remove whatever forces the Hammer might have sent to secure the location. Perhaps leaving a force out here,” he tapped the map a few times, “to reinforce Bunduki when they took it.”

“Do you think then that pushing toward Mokivj is a bad idea?” Tygra asked in a low, growly tone. “Sir, I think it’s a smart move if the Hammer believes that the Warrior is going to push them off Bunduki and that they’ll pull rear reinforcements more forward into the field. But, we don’t know what we’re dealing with until we get more information from the Admiral.” LegionX replied in an almost conciliatory tone.

“True, true.” Tygra turned toward his com just as it started chiming. LegionX was always a little perturbed by the way he seemed to predict what was going to occur around him. Plus, reading the emotions of a Cathar was always a tricky task.

LegionX stood to the side of Tygra as he answered the call.

“Commander Honsou, I suppose this means that you have spoken with Lieutenant Commander Coldsacks?” Tygra replied, seeing his Commander stiffen waiting for a reply.

“Yes, we did have an interesting discussion. Seems to me that I don’t have orders to reinforce the Infiltrator Wing at Kammia, but you would like to make that happen.” LegionX flinched inwardly, since Honsou was a master at getting people to respond to statements that sounded like questions but weren’t. He watched a cunning smile play over Tygra’s lips at the manipulation attempt.

“I believe us approaching the Admiral with the proposition to move onto Mokivj would benefit you and me. I would have approached Inferno, but they are currently busy with other tasks. And, since the Admiral once held your current position, I do believe he would acquiesce more readily to the attack.” LegionX saw the shift in Tygra’s demeanor from stiff, to confident, to excited as he spoke about possibly removing Beta from the games.

“How would you feel about a trade? We assist with your Beta removing efforts, and you help us pack Rho out of their spot in the fleet?”

Tygra’s chair squeaked as he leaned back and LegionX made a mental note to call maintenance to come oil the joints, since his Commander had more important things to occupy his time. “... believe that could be agreed upon.” The words broke into LegionX’s thoughts and he gave a mental sigh.

LegionX heard Commander Neko’s voice in the background, “We’re going to wipe the floor with those dogs!”

Tygra snorted a reply, “More like make dog kabobs out of them.”

Neko laughed, “Dog stew!”

LegionX could hear the amusement in both Tygra’s and Neko’s voice, and their shared hatred for canines. Suddenly, an announcement came over the ship’s main com: “All pilots, report to the main briefing room. All pilots, report to the main briefing room.”

“Guess that concludes that, we will talk later, Tygra.”

“Absolutely, Honsou.”

LegionX waited patiently for Tygra to regroup after the com call and to bolster his tolerance for people before they left Tygra’s office. He followed his Commander silently down the hall to the lift. The entire trip down to the briefing room was just as silent as LegionX pondered how much more talking his Commander is going to put up with. They entered the room and took seats near the head of the holoprojector, LegionX sitting to Tygra’s right, waiting for the Admiral.

As more people shuffled into the room, the lights dimmed and the projector lit up, showing Vice Admiral Silwar standing in front of a map.

“Pilots, I want to congratulate you all on an upset victory on Kammia. They fought hard, the same with us, but the war isn’t won yet. There’s another battle, this time on Bunduki.”

Appropriations and Modifications

The briefing room sat still, the only sounds were that of breathing. The stunned silence seemed to drag on forever. Everybody had been briefed about the Battle of Bunduki between the Hammer's and Warrior's fleets, and there was a distinct lack of excitement thrumming through the air that had once been vibrating before Admiral Naiilo started addressing the flights. Each pilot had their own reactions: concerned, shocked, smug, ambivalent; but each pilot remained silent and let the news wash over them. Somehow, the fleets were using live ammunition and each fleet had taken some real losses. Nevermind the simulated outcome that the Hammer fleet had taken sustained, massive damage and was limping or that the Warrior's fleet had been wiped completely out; live ammunition was used.

The projection of the Admiral remained stalwart, and his normally well-kempt uniform looked a bit ruffled, as if he'd recently slept in it; his face was lined and unease marked his features. Silwar cleared his throat before continuing on, "I have been meeting and discussing the battle with the COMs, TCCS, and EHCS. And, I want to ease everyone's fears about our MSE-6 droid ruse. The mouse droids did not cause the malfunction, the crafts responsible for using live rounds did not have any of the repurposed droids onboard."

Lieutenant Commander Critical Hit, Lieutenant Hijacker, and Lieutenant Taurus all visibly relaxed at the news that the compromised droids weren't the reason for the live fire, as all three of them had assisted in the modification process for the droids.

"There are some reevaluations of the rules and further engagements that are occurring, and it is due to this that we are pausing Imperial Storm for 36 standard hours to come to a decision and pick a direction on how to proceed." Silwar moved his eyes across the room as if he were looking at a great number of faces. "Limited liberty and short shifts until you receive further direction."

All the heads at the table nodded in acknowledgement toward the projection.

"Very good. Commanders, expect further discussion on this. Dismissed." The projection shut off and the room remained as if it were in a state of suspended animation until General La'an pushed his chair back from the table. All eyes swung toward him as he stood up. La'an held his hands up with his palms out as if to push away an oncoming assault, he closed his eyes and shook his head slowly.

"I cannot, nor will not divulge the context of the discussions that have been occurring. While I am privy to the information, in the context of Imperial Storm, I am flying as a pilot for Firebird Squadron." La'an opened his eyes while addressing all of Eagle and Firebird squadrons, meeting their eyes one-by-one, and dropped his hands to his side. "I will continue to advise General Stryker and Captain Travis in my own capacity, and they will get *my* honest opinion, not that of the EHCS." La'an walked behind his chair and pushed it into the table, every set of eyes on him. "General Stryker, may I be dismissed?"

Stryker stared at the other General for a moment, then said, "Dismissed."

La'an walked out the door, leaving the rest of the room to mull over the information. Colonel Horus clapped his hands together abruptly, causing Lieutenant Shadow and Lieutenant Sylas Pitt to startle.

"Wasn't that something? That was something, wasn't it?! Oh, man, these games are going to be fun!" Horus slapped the table hard and exclaimed out loud with a beaming smile on his face.

Shadow stood up from the table next, "Sir, may I be dismissed?"

Horus waved his hand toward the door, "Yeah, go ahead."

Shadow eased around her chair, pushing it into the table to leave as Syllas Pitt stood up and looked toward General Stryker. Stryker nodded once in response and Syllas also pushed in his chair, walked around the table and left the room.

"I guess that means we can chip away at all that Chalquilla we have in storage. Whatdya say, Cupcake, Stryker? You guys wanna get back behind the bar and start dishin' out drinks again?" Horus goaded the Lieutenant Commander and General equally.

"Perhaps their time could be used more effectively, Colonel?" Commander Turel smiled calmly at Horus' exuberant expression which started falling at the continued confident glare.

"FINE! Cupcake doesn't talk when he serves drinks, he just looks at you with those dead eyes, and Stryker only serves straight Chalquilla, like he's got no time to even put ice in the glass."

Horus responded in an affronted tone.

"Well then, what now?" Lieutenant Quintillian practically vibrated out of his seat at the idea of 36 hours of down time.

After a few seconds of shrugged shoulders, scoffs, and general lack of direction, Lieutenant Hijacker cleared his throat and lifted a finger. "I, uhm, may have been saving these for Raise the Flag coming up, but since we have some down time..." Hijacker looked around the room, shifting his weight, and continued discussing his appropriated equipment. "Uh, so, I relieved an owner of his desire to continue to hold on to his chromium plated quadranium slip rings for nimble engines. And I was kinda hoping to utilize Critical Hit, Wolf, Taurus, and myself..." Hijacker pointed to each individual in turn as he said their names, "to upgrade NiksaVel's and RedKnight's ships in a trial run. If they work, then put them on everyone's ship. These rings are supposed to give up to thirteen percent increase in power and seven percent increase in maneuverability."

"I'm in!" RedKnight leaned forward, an eager expression on his face. "I'll do it!"

"Same, count me in." NiksaVel nodded with a small smile.

MagnoMoose looked between the two daredevil pilots, "Now, brothers, I really do think you ought to involve the Deck Chief in this..."

Captain Travis slapped Lieutenant Eriksen1803 on the back, "Count us in, too!" Eriksen1803 turned toward his squadron Executive Officer with a look of sheer panic on his face.

"I want in on this, too." Commander Graf D'Jinn nodded at Hijacker with an anticipatory smile.

Lieutenant Xylo held his hand up and nodded once to indicate that he'd be in on the upgrade as well.

"If RedKnight is doing it, then I'll do it as well. We'll just let him fly first since he likes risking his life!" Lieutenant SirCaleb chimed in with a laugh.

"I always say it ain't worth flying unless it's on fire!" RedKnight responded with a belly laugh.

"Far be it for me to be the one left out. I'll also take the upgrade, Hijacker. Thank your *friend* for us, will you?" K Perkis' dead-pan face almost hid his humor.

"Well, you all know I'm ALWAYS ready to have some fun!" Quintillian responded in a chirpy tone, showing his excitement.

"And you, MagnoMoose?" Critical Hit leaned toward him with his hands flat on the table, expecting an answer. Stryker gave an almost imperceptible shrug followed by Horus' exaggerated nodding and smiling.

MagnoMoose looked around the table and huffed an exhausted sigh, “Fine, I’ll do the modification.”

Drunken Musings

Sector Admiral Kamjin “Maverick” Lap’lamiz sat slouched in the captain’s chair on the bridge of the Luxury 3000 Space Yacht, *Drunken Admiral*. He stared blankly out the viewing screen at the vast emptiness of space. *Is space really empty, though? There’s a whole lot of nothing with little somethings here and there, and sometimes those things are interesting... or annoying.* Kamjin snorted to himself and turned his glazed eyes to the protocol droid standing at the navigation panel.

“Hey, droid!” Kamjin snapped loudly.

The droid jumped and turned toward him. “How may I assist you, sir?”

“Where?” Kamjin grunted.

“Sir, we are currently holding the pos-”

“NOT WHAT I MEANT!” Kamjin leaned forward and yelled at the droid. “Where are our orders sending us?”

“Sir, we have not received any movement orders from Admiral Naiilo at this time.” The droid replied curtly. *Do droids have feelings? Nah. I need more Chalquilla.*

“Bah, stupid COM of the stupid Challenge! He should use ME! I would win all the battles! Droid, get me more Chalquilla!” Kamjin thumped his glass down on the panel next to his seat and flopped back into the chair.

The droid scurried over to pick up the glass and shuffled out the door to refill the glass. *Alone, on this stupid ship. Why? Nobody ever really wins these stupid exercises. Except me, I’m the winningest ever.* Kamjin’s slack face slowly molded into a grin as a very bad idea started forming in his not-so-sober head.

The droid returned with the glass full of the caustic Chalquilla and placed it on the armrest of the captain’s chair. “Anything else, sir?”

“Yeah, we’re going to move from this position.”

“Shall I chart a course, sir?”

“Yup!”

“To where, sir?”

Kamjin picked up his glass, took a sip and made a wince as it burned his mouth and throat.

“Somewhere fun.”

****More to Come (Kammia 2, Turn 10)****

Lieutenant Commander Cupcake rubbed the pad of his thumb over the line of his jaw in repetitive motions while he read the Imperial Storm reports that were just released. They indicated some ship movement, near and around Bunduki, which was many days travel away from where Eagle was stationed, on Kammia. He slouched back in the frame of the display port, crossing his ankles and absentmindedly scrolled through the reports. The holo pad thumped against his thigh as the door to Eagle's common room swished open to admit Commander Graf D'Jinn and LT K Perkis.

The Commander raised his hand in greeting with a slight nod of his head and continued walking into the room toward his stateroom. Instead of walking to his own stateroom, K Perkis walked to the table, a gathering place where the people in the squadron routinely lost and gained Imperial Credits playing Sabbac, and straddled a chair backwards facing him propping his elbows on the back of the chair.

"So, uh... Commander, did you hear the news?" K Perkis said haltingly.

"I was just reading the reports. Is there some other news I am not aware of?" Cupcake replied smoothly with a slight lift of his eyebrow.

"Well, we just heard in the mess that we'll be deploying soon."

"Interesting." He deadpanned.

"Oh, come on! Except for the first battle, we haven't done anything. I hate just sitting here!"

"We modified our ships with new slip rings."

"That doesn't count! I want to fire my lasers at things and fly around, and not only in the training simulator. I want to watch my shots hit something. Don't you?"

"I'm here to do a job." He lifted the holo pad back up, meaning to end the uncomfortable conversation with the Lieutenant.

"Fine, be that way!" K Perkis shot up and started to make his way to his stateroom.

The proximity alert went off over the main comm line followed shortly by the battlestations klaxon. Cupcake walked to his stateroom, shutting off the pad on the way. He slapped his holo pad onto the magnetic surface beside his bunk and grabbed his flight gear and helmet. He started shrugging on his gear, making his way to the flight deck for the briefing.

Cupcake gave a quick chin lift to his squad as the crew of the Renegade gathered around the briefing holo.

Silwar pulled up a map with 3 vessels outside of Kammia. "Our communication buoy picked up three signals. These signals correlate to one Strike Cruiser, one Interdictor, and one Missile Boat. Our forces outnumber them, but let's not take this engagement lightly. I expect you to minimize losses as much as possible." He zoomed the map in and pointed at the formation. "I want the Renegade and the Suppressor to swing wide, luring them into the area next to the planet. I want the Formidable, Tyrant, Derrick Quaven, Spirit of Zosite, Darkstar, and Rapier to be in a jumbled formation. You need to look loose, uncoordinated, easy targets. We need to lure them close so that the Renegade and Suppressor, and the squadrons they carry, can come in a pincer so that they are surrounded." Silwar closed the map down and stared at the assembled group of pilots. "For the Challenge." The hologram winked out as everyone turned and ran toward their ships.

“Let’s shoot some shit! WOOOO!” Cupcake’s Commander, Colonel Horus Blackheart, was heard shouting as they all made their way across the hangar bay to their X-Wings. Cupcake nodded to himself in agreement, as he reached his X-Wing, bumping his droid with his helmet before slipping it on. He climbed up into his cockpit and started doing the pre-launch checks, noticing that the deck chief already had his engines warmed up. Static crackled through his helmet as he checked his fuel and the diagnostic readout, “Renegade, prepare for movement.”

He felt his cockpit shudder as the Renegade made flightpath adjustments to bring them to the Rimward side of the planet so they can flank the Hammer’s small cadre of ships. He looked down at the deck chief indicating that the bay was being cleared for launch, and he nodded as he finished buckling his helmet.

The coms crackled again as the Renegade flight officer came on the line, “Sound ready, Firebird.”

“Firebird One One, ready.” Stryker’s voice chirped over the line. Each consecutive pilot sounding off as they secured their canopy and lifted off from the deck.

“Sound ready, Eagle.”

“Eagle One One, ready to kick some ass!” Horus’ distorted voice came through, sounding as if he had screamed it.

“Eagle One Two, ready!” K Perkis’ excited voice piped up.

Cupcake toggled his coms, “Eagle One Four, ready.” He pulled up on the yoke, and flipped the switches for the front and rear landing gears as soon as he cleared the deck. He leaned over and engaged the shields, shifting power to them to overcharge. **Can’t be too foolhardy, regardless of the size of the enemy.** He flew out the bay doors and into formation with the rest of Eagle.

The Renegade flight officer spoke up in a tinny voice, “Eagle, Firebird, I need you to provide cover for Raven and Crane. Looks like we lucked out with the side of the Interdictor, so I want them to drop as much ordinance as possible on that ship, then move onto the Strike Cruiser.”

“Firebird acknowledge.” Stryker clipped out.

“Eagle’s got this covered, acknowledged.” Horus semi-shouted back into the coms.

“Engage now, they have the Rapier pinned down.”

Cupcake followed behind two Y-Wings from Crane, keeping an eye out for missiles or rockets after shifting power to engines. One of the Y-Wings veered suddenly and clipped the other.

Shit. Cupcake pulled back and felt the additional thrust from the slip rings. Pulling up he banked toward a Missile boat to screen the incoming fire, blasting the ship with the modified lasers. The Missile boat only followed him until they had another clear shot at the Y-Wings.

“Crane, move! The Missile boats are targeting you!” Cupcake called out to get the Y-Wings to evade and swing under the closest Missile boat. He saw his squadmate circling around the top and said, “Xylo, pressure, pressure, more pressure.”

The Missile boat started rolling to keep the Y-Wings in sight, launching modified missiles at the Y-Wings. One-by-one, the Y-Wings registered enough simulated damage to disable them, and identify them as being destroyed. A bevy of Interceptors flew toward the Missile boats flying around the Interdictor, breaking up the tight formation.

"I got this!" RedKnight called out as he flew in front of the Missile boat and blocked the shots fired, absorbing them with his shields. RedKnight pulled down and fired alongside the ship until it went dark.

Cupcake swung around noting that only two Y-Wings were left from Crane, one by Critical Hit and one by SirCaleb.

"Critical, SirCaleb, you lay down as much fire as possible toward those Missile boats, let those Y-Wings launch." Graf said, his X-Wing lurching in a roll to the starboard to avoid getting hit by laser fire.

One... Two... Cupcake swung around to fire, the nose pointed toward the aft hull of the Interdictor, watching two modified goliath missiles move toward the ship. Both struck the underside in a blinding cascade of sparks and flashes of light. Cupcake shifted power back to shields, as the Interdictor's lights went out, indicating that the ship was officially destroyed per the rules of the game.

"Raven finished the Strike Cruiser, we're clear." Captain T1-40026 spoke up, as he escorted the last of the Raven Y-Wing squadron back to the Renegade.

"Looks like that's it." K Perkis spoke up, a bit forlorn.

"Don't worry, Imperial Storm isn't over yet. I'm sure there's more to come." SirCaleb was heard as they flew back toward the Renegade to call out the rescue crews and retrieve the "dead" pilots and ships.

****Temper Tempest****

Commander EchoVII stood behind the bar, wiping the glasses with a rag that never quite seemed to remove the chromatic sheen of oil from the Chalquilla. The bar bot had broken down again, the Chalquilla eating away some of the hydraulic actuators in the hands and arms. With Imperial Storm raging, the parts for the bar bot would have to wait. She was nevertheless thankful that there weren't many bar patrons, since most of the squadrons were reading reports, working on tactics, flying patrols, or getting practice in the training simulator. The only reason she stood behind the bar right now was because it was a short time until shift change and the off-going watch section would come in for a quick nip before going off to bed to wake up early for more training.

She placed the glass down on the mat and picked up another glass to wipe it down when she heard footsteps approach the bar. She looked up to see her squadron commander, Commander Honsou, step up and place his hands on the bar, leaning forward.

"Commander, I would like you to accompany me to a meeting with the Admiral about our potential movement." Honsou said evenly.

EchoVII continued wiping the glass, her scarred hands moving efficiently to smooth out the rainbow shimmer with the rag. She looked down and thumped the glass onto the mat, folded the bar towel and hung it on the hook. She turned to face Honsou and removed her bar apron and rolled down her sleeves, addressing him, "Very well, sir."

She walked around to the other side of the bar and rolled the cage door shut at the entrance, locking it with a **snick**. She followed Honsou from the turbolift, down the hall to one of the smaller briefing rooms. Honsou abruptly stopped right in front of her, leaving her to almost lurch forward and back with her momentum.

The room felt a bit tense as she noticed that Commander LegionX and Lieutenant Colonel Tygra Shadowclaw both stood as if Honsou's and her presence were an unwelcome surprise.

As was protocol, Honsou spoke up first, "Colonel, Commander."

"Commander." Tygra replied.

EchoVII nodded at Tygra and then LegionX. It wasn't that the Sith was a bad guy, they all had some limited (or perhaps not limited, you never knew) abilities with force sensitivity, it was just that he was imposing and his power radiated off of him. Sometimes it was a subdued assurance that there was a predator nearby, sometimes it was a raging wildfire ready to incinerate you for the smallest transgression. It was EchoVII's experience to always be deferential to Sith, always. The small cadre of four stood around the table, waiting for the Admiral's appearance. The silence seemed to stretch on as if it were a physical presence so large it would buckle a portion of the ship until the Admiral stepped into the room. The tension dissipated immediately as everyone snapped to attention and rendered salutes. He walked quickly up to the table and placed his holo pad on the surface, glancing at everyone in turn after rendering a quick salute back. EchoVII assumed an at-rest posture, waiting for the news.

Admiral Silwar Nailo was her previous squadron commander, so she felt comfortable around him and could tell by his body language that while he expected some agitation over the news, he wasn't overly concerned about the impact it would have.

"Tempest, you're going to rendezvous with Infiltrator Wing at Kammia and move onto Mokivj." Silwar spoke directly to Honsou, not even bothering to include Tygra and LegionX into the fold.

EchoVII's fingers started tingling, and she knew it wasn't from the Chalquilla scarring but from the sudden burning cold the room was plunged into. She tightened her muscles and locked herself in place to prevent an involuntary shiver from taking over her body. Tygra stood taller than everyone else in the room, and his physical form seemed to loom over everyone assembled. Silwar turned his head to focus on the icy daggers that Tygra was throwing with his eyes and the two stood staring at each other, sizing the other up. Silwar's eyes narrowed slightly as Tygra's head ticked slightly to the side.

The Admiral inhaled a deep breath through his nose, and proceeded speaking. "Thunder, I know you wanted to move onto Mokivj with the IW and tried to coordinate with Tempest to make that argument." Silwar swept his hand out in a spreading motion, then put his index finger down upon the table and tapped it once before he started speaking again. "I agree with taking Mokivj, but I," he tapped his finger on the table again, "need you to stay here with the Challenge on Bunduki along with Inferno. We've started receiving reports that there is another fleet in the area. Commander Honsou is a bit more level-headed and balanced and isn't afraid to use stealth to accomplish his goals. Stealth isn't in your lexicon, Colonel, I'm afraid to say. I need your abrasive power near Bunduki to help secure it for our fleet."

EchoVII shifted her eyes between the Admiral and Colonel, looking for the minor shift in expression, posture, and demeanor; all things she had gotten good at reading by spending her many hours behind the bar serving the patrons Chalquilla. EchoVII flexed her fingers and took what felt like the first full breath in a handful of minutes as Tygra shifted his weight to stand more upright, the looming pressure in the room pulling back.

Tygra snorted, "Fine." He looked at Honsou and then EchoVII felt his gaze on her like a hit to the sternum. "Wipe them out." He nodded at Silwar then hitched his head towards the door. EchoVII noted the passive face that Silwar wore and the quiet tone he used when he said, "Dismissed." That was not normal behavior for him, she knew that Imperial Storm was starting to weigh on him. The entire Challenge fleet's success weighed on him. As soon as Tygra and LegionX left the room, Silwar shifted his focus back onto Honsou.

"Pack up, I want craft up at zero-six-hundred tomorrow for your squad."

EchoVII glanced at Honsou as he relaxed his posture a fraction and nodded toward Silwar. "Yes, sir. We will be ready to depart first thing in the morning."

"Good. Dismissed." Silwar tugged on the bottom of his uniform to pull it taut and looked between Honsou and her as they walked to the door.

The Admiral exited the room right after they did and went the opposite direction, back toward the bridge. They stood in the hallway and watched him walk onto the turbolift.

"Well, that was certainly exciting, Commander." EchoVII smiled slightly at Honsou who wore a pensive expression.

"As excited as I was to go to Mokivj and then move onto Rho, I didn't think I was going to be in the same room when the Admiral told Tygra."

EchoVII's face split into a knowing smile as she felt the humor run through her. "In case I forgot to mention it, welcome to Tempest."

****Price of War (Bunduki #2, Turn 16)****

Commander Neko sat in her rack, letting the rabble of conversation from the flight room pass by her as she whittled away at her nails with a knife. She was exhausted from the recent patrol they had just come back from, and she just wanted the quiet that wouldn't come for a few more hours since the entire squad was amped up from the news a few days ago. They were settled in at Bunduki, fortifying their defenses and sending out regular patrols now that they knew a fleet was attempting to see the size of their force by using a probe droid. The OpTempo was starting to grate on her, but it kept her unusually nosey squadmates out of her business.

Commander Iam Thinking came into the bunkroom and flopped onto his rack and sighed heavily. "Dice and Green are getting into it again. Green keeps saying that Dice cheated last night, I just wish they would give it up. I can't think with them going at it."

Neko just looked at Iam, snorted once and turned back to cleaning her nails.

"It doesn't make sense." Iam said.

Neko dropped her hands to her lap and looked at Iam again, "What?"

"The probe droid."

Neko rolled her eyes and made a rolling motion with her hand to prompt Iam to continue on with his thoughts. She was unwilling to push people to talk if they didn't really want to. She enjoyed silence more than anything else.

Iam resituated in his bunk to lace his fingers behind his head and finally finished his incomplete thoughts. "The probe was sent almost two days ago. We should have heard something else by now. What are they waiting for?"

"Tempest." Neko replied dryly, looking back at her nails to inspect the result.

"But, how would they have known that we were going to split our forces like that? It doesn't make sense, right?"

"Gamble?" Neko said with a verbal shrug, indicating her lack of interest in speculation.

"We're missing something, I can feel it." Iam sighed again and rubbed his hands down his face.

Lieutenant Ryuzokin entered the bunkroom and started walking towards Lieutenant Dice Goblin's rack.

Ian propped himself up on his elbows, looking at Ryuzokin, "What are you doing in Dice's rack, Ryu?"

Ryuzokin hopped down from the small step ladder and looked around absently. "Uhm, Green wanted me to check and see if Dice had anything to help him cheat... but, uhm, I don't know what I am looking for."

"Commander, XO?" Neko looked at an agitated Ryuzokin, wearing a guilty look on his face.

"I, uh... they went to sleep, so did Dynamus. And, Impulse is in the head, taking a shower." Ryu responded like he was confused. Neko knew that Ryuzokin was sometimes a little lost or preoccupied and so he was hard to talk to, but he mostly stayed silent, so she liked him. She found herself taking pity on him, plus she also wanted to get some sleep herself, so she jumped out of her rack and walked back into the flight room.

Neko looked around the flight room, noting that Green was very twitchy and jumpy, darting back and forth like he expected Dice to clock him at any moment. Green was making comments, asking for proof of Dice's innocence while Dice stood stoically, watching the display. Neko rubbed her eyes with her thumb and index finger, took a deep breath and spoke firmly, "Lights

off, rack out, patrol at 2000.” She walked over to the lights and flipped them to the night setting; a dark, blood red that made the room awash in a macabre feel. She stood by the lights, staring at the two men until Green huffed and walked into the bunkroom.

“Battlestations, battlestations. This is not a drill. All hands to your battlestations.” Lieutenant Green was jolted awake by the klaxon and almost hit his head trying to sit up. Getting to sleep had been rough, and he was still angry with Dice. **He has to be cheating, I just know it.** He groaned, stretched, and then slid the curtain to the side, putting his feet on the cold metal deck, which sent a small shiver up his body. Colonel Impulse landed on the deck right beside him and grabbed his flight suit off the hook, putting it on in a rush.

The klaxon continued to sound as the overhead lights flared to the daytime setting, disorienting him as he started to reach for his flight suit. He fumbled it on as he heard Commander Dynamus yell from the flight room, “Two minutes!”

Green shoved his arms through the sleeves, pulled the zip, and reached down to finish tightening his boots; reaching up he grabbed his vest and helmet from the top of the lockers and walked out to the flight room where everyone was mustering.

LegionX walked out, fixing his collar, “Everyone to Briefing Room Cresh. The Commander is already there. Let’s go, people!”

The entire squad jogged out of the room and to the closest turbolift to make their way down to the hangar bay level. They all ran out of the turbolift down the passageway to the briefing room, along with the last few straggling pilots of Inferno squadron. Major EvilGrin stood next to Lieutenant Colonel Tygra reviewing a map on the holoscreen mounted on the wall, they were pointing and discussing the ship movements for a moment longer as the door shut behind the last squadron pilot.

Tygra and EvilGrin turned around to face the pilots waiting for orders. “The Crimson Blade, all squadrons stationed onboard, and the Fairchild have intercepted a massive fleet from the Warrior’s armada. They are currently engaged near the planet’s atmosphere. They are engaging as many ships as possible to give us time to deploy around them.”

EvilGrin nodded toward Tygra and extended his hand to point toward the fleet around Bunduki. “It appears that there are five VSDs, multiple TIE squadrons, multiple Corvettes, Cruisers, and Dreadnoughts, with an ISD holding the rear position approximately 15,000 clicks from our fleet. Our job is to fly perpendicular to the fleet and come at them from the top and bottom. Each group will have a Nebulon B Frigate as their reference and support.”

Tygra took a step toward the table and clinched a fist while looking at every pilot in the room, his fury feeling like a lash across Green’s back. “Let the Crimson Blade contingent deal with the TIE squadrons. I want you all to pick Corvettes, Cruisers, and Dreadnoughts to attack. Each flight will need to focus on one ship and then move onto the next. Leave the VSDs for the Frigates, Interdictor, and ISDs to handle.” Tygra’s eyes glowed in his tigrine face and the room felt noticeably colder as he emphasized every word spoken. “Eliminate. Every. Last. One.”

EvilGrin slapped the table and shouted, “Let’s go!”

Green turned around and ran for the door, keeping pace with Dice as they made their way into the hangar bay and to their TIE Phantoms. Green looked at Dice as they rushed and gave him an excited, hungry smile. Dice just rolled his eyes, shook his head and held his helmet out toward Green. He bumped their helmets together as Dice split off to his own craft; he slammed

his helmet over his head and ran up the ladder of the next section to hop into his own craft. He clambered into the cockpit and pulled the canopy down to seal it, flipping ignition switches and warming up the engines. He hooked his helmet into his vest and started warming up the cloaking drive, waiting for the familiar static to indicate launch.

The tinny voice of the Flight Officer spoke directly into his ear, "Hangar Bay, cleared. Thunder, sound ready."

"Thunder One-one, ready."

"Thunder One-two, good to go."

On and on, down the line, until Green's turn to launch, "Thunder Three-four, ready!"

The Phantom jerked once as the tethering clamps released and Green pushed the throttle to accelerate out of the hangar bay to form up into the flights.

Tygra's rough voice came over the coms, "LegionX, Dynamus, lead flights to north position.

Drop on top of the rear-grouping of Corvettes. Four per ship. Stay cloaked until the last minute."

LegionX spoke up, "Roger."

Dynamus, Green's own flight leader chirped, "Got it."

They flew out with the Surefire, Typhoon Squadron, and Cyclone Squadron toward the rear of the fleet, eating away at the 13,000 clicks they had to traverse.

Dynamus' voice echoed again, "Flight Three, that group of Corvettes off to the side of that VSD, those are our targets. I want a one-two-one approach. I am, you're the best with evasion, I need to you draw fire as soon as we decloak, so pull forward. Evade like this is real, we will have three Corvettes on you, so make it count. I will strafe along the top and take out the turrets so that the rest of you can bombard the sides. You'll be open to attack as you're firing alongside them, but you need to stay up as long as possible. Recloak if you have to, just get them down."

"You got it!" I am spoke up.

Green snorted, "Yup, clear." He may not have been on bait or turret clearing, but he was going to bombard the hell out of these Corvettes.

There were two things that Lieutenant Commander Cody Lance was afraid of: getting caught in one of his pranks and the Thunder Squadron commander, Tygra. Cody looked at his best friend, and squadmate, Lieutenant Thatcher. They went through the Imperial Naval Academy together and were the same age. They were both the youngest in the squad, and they preferred to have fun, but also really liked shooting things. Thatcher nudged Cody with his elbow as the Inferno and Thunder pilots hustled out of the briefing room toward the hangar bay; sharing a conspiratory look they bumped fists and followed after Colonel Marenta and Commander Erisi who were running but sharing strategies on the fight.

"I bet I get more kills than you do." Thatcher smiled wolfishly at him as they made their way to their Interceptors.

"Not in this lifetime! See you when we get back!" Cody put his helmet on top of his head to rest as he climbed up the ladder and dropped down into the top hatch of the Interceptor. He stepped into the seat, turned around and thumped down onto his backside, flipping the toggle to warm up the engines and the bank of switches to warm up the lasers. He pulled his helmet on and connected it to his vest, securing the straps to maintain the seal. He reached up to shut and lock the top hatch as the Challenge's flight officer started the ready check for Thunder.

Verifying that his lasers were working by shunting power, he noted the start of Inferno's ready check for launch.

Marenta's cool voice sounded out, "Inferno three-one, ready."

Dirty Ari's excited voice almost interrupted Marenta's, "Inferno three-two, good for launch!"

"Inferno three-three, ready." Lieutenant Commander Dougal Ceallaigh's dry voice was next.

"Inferno three-four and the best, good to go!" Cody exclaimed, ready to fly more than just patrols and small skirmishes.

"Inferno, stay on the frigate Hellfire. Do as much damage as you can with Hurricane, Tornado, and Omicron. We have more craft, but theirs do much more damage. Stay. Away. From. The. VSDs. And. Dreadnoughts. We've got the south vector, there are more cruisers and Dreadnoughts. Do strafing passes, take out the turrets first then use larger ordinance when you have a clear shot. Let the Neb-B work on the Dreads and VSDs."

A series of affirmations rang out as Cody added his to the mix. Cody watched Thatcher follow behind the rest of flight three to his right, and looked up to see the rest of his flight.

Erisi's low voice directed them into formation, "Look alive, I'll take point, the rest of you stay close and prepare to target those cruiser's turrets, we want them unable to fire so we can take them out." Cody flew right in front of the frigate, down behind Erisi. He knew that the diamond formations they were positioned in would cut through the first ships and clear a path for the frigate to work on the larger, more deadly ships.

"Engage in 3... 2... 1..." Erisi said as they cleared 1000m. Laser fire shot towards them, focused on the Hellfire behind them. "Weapons hot, now!"

The laser fire loosened up the formation, causing Lieutenant Scarlette to almost clip his wing. Cody pulled back slightly on the throttle to let Scarlette move alongside Erisi, both of them firing on the front turrets of the nearest cruiser. Cody targeted the turrets on the rear of the cruiser and fired three short bursts, disabling them. Cody split off with Scarlette to the right of the cruiser to come along under it and strafe to disable those turrets.

"Tornado, Omicron, clean up these cruisers behind the Hellfire. We will keep on clearing a path to get it as near the ISD as possible!" Marenta's cool voice said over the coms.

"Inferno, eyes up, Dreadnoughts behind next wave of cruisers." EvilGrin said, causing Cody to flip his interceptor back toward the rear of the Warrior's fleet.

"Let's let Hurricane clean up these two cruisers, Inferno can take out that Interdictor and maybe one of the Dreads." Dirty Ari offered.

"Yes, let's." EvilGrin said with a smile in his voice.

"We need three people on each gravity well, or that interdictor will do a lot of damage to the Hellfire!"

"Scarlette, Cody, with me. We have the rear port-side well." Erisi said. EvilGrin, Dirty Ari, and Marenta called each called out a team and what well they were going to hit.

Cody pulled alongside Erisi and Scarlette, moving in front since they would have the longest distance to travel.

Scarlette made an angry noise as one of the turrets got a lucky shot and clipped her wing before eventually falling to her laser fire. Cody fired at the turrets along the side, focusing fire wherever Erisi and Scarlette were firing. He nosed his craft to the topside of the Interdictor and targeted the gravity-well with his modified ion missiles.

“Missiles away.” Cody said as he saw his missiles penetrate and hit the well directly, followed by 2 more bright blue streaks from Scarlett and Erisi.

“Again, we need another pass!” Erisi called out. Erisi swung left, Scarlett swung right and Cody went up over the gravity well only to come face to face with the Warrior’s TIE Defenders. Cody rolled the Interceptor sharply to the right and watched as Scarlett was disabled and officially “dead” for the battle. He pulled into the engine wash, taking a chance on suffering real hull damage to dodge the two Defenders who followed him. He shifted his power to engines and then cut the throttle pushing down to stall the engines, barely missing the shots from the Defenders. His Interceptor’s momentum carried him back around to face his pursuers, shunted his power back to lasers and unloaded his lasers into both craft. Cody breathed heavily as both Defenders went dark, indicating that they were “dead” as they drifted by him, their momentum carried them past his Interceptor. He closed his eyes, and leaned his head back to rest on the top of the seat, taking a moment before sitting forward and running through the engine ignition sequence. His interceptor powered up and lurched forward as he applied the throttle to escape the underside of the Interdictor.

Lieutenant Shiro Kusanagi moved around in circles near the gravity well on the interdictor, putting as much laser fire as possible into the dome. His commander, Major EvilGrin was keeping two Defenders busy and off of him so that he could continue to take down the last gravity well on the Interdictor. He continued to pull left and swing around the dome until he saw the familiar blue sparks and the lights go out on the section indicating that it was “dead” and he could help with the Defenders. He pulled his Interceptor around and noticed that there were a lot of “dead” craft floating in the area; he noted with grim determination that some of them were Inferno craft and the rest were the Warrior’s.

Shiro felt his eyes widen as EvilGrin was pulling around to get a clear line of fire on the remaining Defender when he was hit multiple times from another Interceptor, one clearly marked as being from the Warrior’s fleet.

“Damn it all!” Shiro exclaimed. He opened up his coms as he flew toward the rear of the Interdictor, toward the Dreadnoughts who were taking a beating from the Hellfire but also returning a concerning amount of fire themselves. “Inferno, who’s still alive?”

“I’m still up,” Cody responded immediately as he came around from the bottom of the ship, avoiding the engine wash.

“Me, I’m here, just... busy.” Lieutenant Orren Brimarch grunted.

“Just got done clearing that last Defender on me.” Lieutenant Commander Dougal Ceallaigh said. “Regroup on Orren, then we’ll move on to clear turrets off those Dreads and give the Hellfire some breathing room, yeah?”

Shiro pulled back around to find Orren being changed by three Interceptors along the top of the Interdictor. He pulled up and away from the top of the ship so he could come behind, lining up his shot on the furthest Interceptor, leading it, then firing a short series of blasts, causing the Interceptor to go dark and float on.

“One down, Orren!” Shiro called out.

“Thanks!” Orren’s harried voice called back.

Shiro flew in behind the other two Interceptors chasing Orren, when he saw laser fire take out the closest one, causing him to pull back on the controls and fly up to avoid hitting the “dead” Interceptor.

“Sorry, ‘bout that Shiro! Another one down.” Cody’s normally excited voice sounded exhausted and upset.

“Fly out past the bridge, Orren, lead that last Inty right into my line of sight.” Doug said, parking his Interceptor near the tower connecting the bridge, waiting for the Warrior’s Interceptor to follow Orren around. Shiro flew toward Cody to regroup near the aft of the ship and press onto the Dreads, watching as Doug released a blast right into the side of the Interceptor chasing Orren, causing it to go dark like all the others and continue floating away.

“Thanks... guys... that was... getting... pretty tiring...” Orren huffed out, like he had just gotten done with a routine physical fitness test.

“Without taking some of those turrets down on those Dreads, the Hellfire isn’t going to last much longer. Same patterns as before?” Doug assumed command of the four remaining pilots from Inferno, probably since he was the oldest and most seasoned.

“Yep, let’s do it.” Cody said.

“I’m game.” Orren said, still heaving from the chase.

“Roger, let’s go.” Shiro said, pulling alongside Doug, heading for the Dreads to finish clearing a path for the Hellfire.

Vice Admiral Silwar Naiilo stood on the bridge of the Challenge and threw his holocom across the room, watching its screen shatter. He was no more happy about the outcome than he was about knowing that the attack was imminent and *still* not being able to prevent the loss.

“Uh, sir?” A mousy navigator spoke up, breaking the silence on the bridge with the exception of the battlestations klaxon.

He looked at the woman and squinted his eyes, the leather of his gloves creaking from the clinch of his fist.

“Sir, uhm... you are the leader of the fleet, sir. You should evacuate so that you can continue to lead the Challenge’s fleet in Imperial Storm.” The woman couldn’t keep eye contact with him and she nervously ran the tips of her fingers across the seam in her pants.

“This is *MY* ship, and I *WILL* stay with it until the end. Do I make mys...” Silwar halted abruptly as he felt a sharp blow to his head, falling heavily into darkness.

Silwar groaned and reached up to feel his head, which was throbbing like it had been trampled by a bantha.

“Oh, sir, please don’t touch the bandage. I’m afraid you suffered an injury to your head.”

Silwar opened one eye a sliver and was immediately assaulted by the harsh lights in the room, making everything appear as if it had an aura. “Where...?” Silwar started, his voice a dry rasp, like he had slept overly long.

“Sir, would you like some water? I can retrieve some, if you are thirsty?” Silwar noted the droid sounded awfully placatory and almost a little afraid of his response.

“Yes, please, some water.” Silwar said.

The droid left the room and came back quickly with a glass of water.

“Here you are, sir.” The droid offered the glass to him as he reached out with a shaky hand to grasp it. The cool liquid touched his desiccated lips and tongue, and he almost moaned from the relief. He drank the water in huge gulps until the glass was empty.

“Thank you for the water. Where am I? What ship am I on?” Silwar asked, holding the glass out for the droid to take.

“Sir, you are onboard the Drunken Admiral.”

Silwar groaned again, but for an altogether different reason.

****Rodian Standoff****

"FOUR DAYS?" Silwar bellowed.

"I apologize sir, but that is the correct date. It has been four standard cycles since your last transmission, sir." The droid replied to him, putting his palms up in a calming gesture.

"I need to check the traffic, and alert my fleet that I'm alive and can start transmitting movements again." Silwar attempted to rise to his feet, still groggy from waking up after taking a hit to the head. The droid made a startled movement to prevent him from moving off the bed.

"Sir, I do believe it is best for you stay there to prevent further injury. If you would like, I can see if the Sector Admiral is available?" The droid shuffled toward the door.

"Yes, do that." Silwar grunted as he flopped back down to his back and covered his eyes with one hand. His head was killing him. Whatever he was hit with was an effective weapon, and he'd have to look at the footage from the bridge to see what happened and ensure they're properly punished for their ingenuity. That is, if the footage wasn't already erased as the Challenge was escorted out of the AOE. **My head really hurts.**

The door whooshed open and a rather disheveled Sector Admiral Kamjin Lap'lamiz walked in, thumping himself down into a chair on the opposite side of the room with an irritated sigh.

Silwar's hand fell onto his forehead as he turned his head to look at Kamjin. "You look how I feel, Admiral." Silwar snorted and closed his eyes again.

"Wonderful way to say **Thank you** for picking you up like a piece of detritus." Kamjin replied in a sharp tone at louder-than-normal volume.

Silwar winced at the lance of pain in his head from the sound and mumbled a grudging, "Thanks."

"I was supposed to be used in battle. You haven't used me once." Kamjin leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees and intertwining his fingers. "Why?"

He had to admit that trying to talk to the prickly Admiral in his state was a chore, but not one that he'd ever mention to another being. "We weren't able to fix the onboard navigation before you were deployed. Only 5 or 10 inputted commands actually register. So, you weren't reliable to use in battle."

"You could have told me!" Kamjin's voice rose to a piercing volume, making Silwar recoil and groan.

"You wanted to command your own vessel, we gave you the only one we had that was spare. At least you're still alive!"

"Alive but bored. I only brought so much liquor with me. Thank heavens there's only 10 more turns to go in this damned exercise." Kamjin's eyes bored into him as he leaned back in the chair, extending his legs and crossing one ankle over the other.

"Fine, next exercise we will give you a fully working ship. Can you **please** tell me what has happened?"

"Well, like an idiot, you lost Bunduki. Entire fleet, gone. Good job." Kamjin replied irritably.

"Yeah, figured that since I ended up here and not with the crew of the Challenge. Anything else?" Silwar closed his eyes and covered them with his hand again.

"You took Cattamascar from the Warrior after you lost Bunduki."

"Well, that's good at least."

"Yeah, but the Hammer's forces took Timora and B'Knos."

Silwar jerked upright, but put both hands to his head and screwed his eyes shut tightly then let out a groan. He cracked one eye open and noticed the droid came back into the room holding two glasses: one with Chalquilla and the other with water.

"Here you go, sir." The droid said with an almost quavering voice as he offered Kamjin the glass of Chalquilla. Kamjin took the glass and brought it to his mouth to take the first sip of the repurposed alcohol. The droid shuffled toward him and offered the glass of water. Silwar reached out with a shaky hand, took the offered tumbler.

"I need to start sending orders out to the fleet again." He grunted and took a large gulp of water, replenishing his still dehydrated body.

"I'm kicking you off my ship unless you take me to where the fun is." Kamjin stared at him over the rim of the empty glass.

"Admiral..." he groaned. "I can't fix your ship, but I need to relay orders."

Kamjin suddenly stood and threw the glass at the wall, barely missing the droid's head. The droid startled and put his hands up with the palms out in a defensive gesture. "Silwar, I said battle, or no deal."

Silwar stared at Kamjin, who was glaring back. The constant eye contact was causing the throbbing in his head to grow. He breathed through his nose and maintained the focus, even though it was taxing his waning strength.

"Sirs, there are reports of a Hammer fleet near our location." The droid squeaked out.