

ONE

START

[REDACTED]

ORIGINATOR : Major Graf D'JINN, [REDACTED]

CLASSIFICATION : RESTRICTED-PERSONAL (non-military encryption)

ATTENTION : Colonel Ginojoh MELBIL, Mid-Rim Directorate, Security Operations, IMPERIAL SECURITY BRANCH

Greetings from [REDACTED], old friend.

I hope this finds you in good health and cheer, and not too far gone into the politics that your rank and position now invariably brings. I remember well our short stint in StratComms, under Colonel Millarren, and how we both withered under the to-ing and fro-ing of the bureaucracy. I'm sure you're much better equipped to deal with the Millarren's of today however. It also helps when *you* are the Colonel.

The last intel assessment from SO-ISB, whilst anonymised, still has all the hallmarks of your authorship. It would appear that only you can write that way. I'm surprised that your colleagues or direct reports haven't started duplicating your style. But then, most others don't see the threads in between the cracks behind the curtains that you do. It makes copying you that much harder.

I'll spare you the details of the Tusorix incident. You probably know more about it than I do by now, and I was there! Suffice to say, we were caught with our pants down (some quite literally), and it has forced perhaps a long-overdue review of how to manage shore-leave and ensure battle-readiness.

The new COM has been a worthy successor to Dempsey. He is Silwar Naiilo. A Mandolorian. I suspect you've already met him through the back channels that you move in, though I don't know if he has much respect for the ISB in general.

The Challenge herself has been a good home to me since my transfer from the Hammer. You'll remember I was promoted to the commander position for one of the Infiltrator squadrons? We're equipped with old T-65 X-wings. Ancient. Beautiful craft though, but the maintenance on them is horrendous. One of my squad lost his hyperdrive *on the way* to Tusorix, and managed to cross a whole NR-controlled system unscathed. I'll come back to these craft soon, as I have a request to ask of you in regards to them.

Despite our best efforts, the NR has a firm grip in this region. Its made for some risky feints, on both sides. Strategy best not discussed here, of course, but it would be remiss of me to not mention that we've had slow but steady recruitment of some top-tier NR pilots. The further one is from the core worlds, the more the cracks appear to be bigger. And its those cracks that continue to highlight the greed and corruption and factionalism that have been the hallmarks of the New Republic since its

self-appointed reinstatement. But more and more systems are longing for the universal prosperity and safety that existed under Imperial power. We fight the good fight.

30ABY mere weeks away. Tusorix was supposed to have been time away from the routine, but my squadron barely got a sip of a shared bottle of Chalquilla. The COM has prioritised downtime, but how this will be managed without compromising our security remains to be seen.

As we enter the new year, I have one extremely self-centered, short term goal - to replace our T-65s. Along with one other squadron, Firebird, we have the only NR ships in the fleet, and their unreliability has become too great a risk. Firebird has T-70s in their makeup, yet the Challenge's mechanics spend two-thirds of their time just trying to keep my X-wings flying, let alone maintaining space superiority against newer NR or pirate fighters.

I know this is outside of your remit, but I am calling in every favour you owe me (remember the Duke's concubine's hand-maidens on Caladan?). I can't keep putting my pilots' lives at risk, or my own, for that matter, when there has to be some alternative. We have a hugely important role in reconnaissance and supply line disruption, but at some point very soon, we will be a greater threat to our own people than the enemy.

I am asking for you to do what you do best, and find me either a batch of newer models that are being flown by rookies, or a shipment of NOS replacement T-65 parts. Shit, I'll even take whatever R-unit droids that can be scrounged up, as they're the perfect complement to our mechs here and will help lessen the maintenance loads.

I haven't spoken with the COM about this yet; I'm doing my own enquiries through my old ISB network and contacts. I need to present him with a solution rather than the problem (which he is absolutely aware of). I'm certain that between the two of us, I can provide some solid intelligence that the COM can action with a level of confidence in success.

Its back to the sim for some more training for me. We've been practising a new tactic of using 3 fighters against NRN Frigates with some success. The load-outs aren't exactly what you'd call traditional, and we'd be in a hell of a time if those Frigates launch their own fighters, but our simulations consistently point to scenarios where we can disable the Frigates before they can deploy. Destroying them is a different matter ...

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

GDJ

END

TWO

START

PERSONAL COMMS

ORIGINATOR : *Colonel Ginojoh MELBIL*, Nar Shaddaa, Mid-Rim Directorate, Security Operations, IMPERIAL SECURITY BRANCH

CLASSIFICATION : RESTRICTED-PERSONAL (non-military encryption; +FG235 cypher)

ATTENTION : *Major Graf D'JINN*, Wing X, ISD-II CHALLENGE

I really hope you remember the 235 cypher, or else this is going nowhere! I figured best to use it, specific to our references below. At least you won't have black redaction boxes throughout.

Graf, you one-eyed eel, at some point you're not going to be able to use Caladan as an excuse. If I'm counting correctly, this will be the third time you've brought up Caladan to get me to do 'a favour'.

I will be the first to admit that what you did for me there will never be forgotten, but I could argue that if you save a person's life you're ultimately responsible for it. Having said that, I doubt I can ever truly repay you. At the very least, in galaxy full of deception and betrayal, you can be assured that I will always have your back.

Greetings from Nar Shaddaa.

I hate this place, Graf, I fucking hate it.

Despite a solid team of agents and a surprisingly effective network of informants, the Hutts remain steadfastly in control. No issues from me in that regard, but you'd think they could at least clean up this forsaken Narsh City. 30 years of the same; the Hutts have no love for anything outside of their periphery, unless, that is, if its good for business.

Suffice to say, Narsh City is as dangerous as it ever was, so at least one can count on that. The sewers bubble up through the streets of the middle-levels. It has been years since I've been to the lower-levels. An epidemic broke out earlier this year; forcing a huge percentage of the population to remain indoors. The death rates were horrendous; even though it only affected humans, every other soul on the planet felt its touch. Trade dropped through the floor, even the black market stuff. The legitimate merchants cut their losses and changed to neighbouring planets and systems, which meant that the black market runners became prime targets for NR patrols and Hutt-controlled private security. Early estimates have put the trade down 45% across the board. People have been dying in the streets, and not just from the infection either.

Bah, who am I to complain? We maintain a balance with the Hutts, feeding them with intel and the occasional 'security assistance' against the local NR militias. They leave us well alone, and well paid for the information. They maintain a precarious position between the NR and their own vested interests.

They have always straddled that line, and they will always play one side against the other. It makes for interesting times down in the Mid Rim. You'd enjoy it here.

OK, let's talk about your X-wing problem. I do not, as you well know, have unlimited resources and access to the ISB networks. My position allows a certain amount of leeway in collation and interrogation of data outside of my sphere of influence, but finding starfighters, or even starfighter parts, will raise too many red flags. Your COM may uncover what you're seeking before you do. That will not be presenting him with a solution, rather, it will be presenting him with a problem, which I believe he would not be appreciative of.

But I can do this; I can point you in a general direction, and you will have to do the rest. Surely you haven't forgotten your analytic skills? I imagine they would transfer well to your current role.

I have reinstated your access to the ISB tool- and datasets. Specific to Incom-Freitek Corporation, Fresia, and the Torranix sector.

My suggestion to look: the partners, specifically Alnitak Spar. My words of advice: as always, follow the money.

Good hunting, you Serrenian fox.

Again, this will not count towards Caladan. I would enjoy such an adventure again, at least once, before its all too late. Though, I highly doubt we'd get out of it twice.

Your friend,

Gino

END

THREE

Graf crossed the floor of the expansive maintenance hangar. Huddled around one of Firebird's Y-wings was a group of pilots, engrossed in the outcome of a droid ball fight being played out underneath the starfighter's nose. He absent-mindedly sidled up to the pilots, who quickly realised the presence of the Major and swept up the tiny ball droids and pocketed them out of sight.

Mutterings from the group made it apparent that one of their number had failed in their duty of standing watch for precisely such an incursion as a senior officer. Judging by the long glance to the hangar floor, Lt Perkis seemed to be the beneficiary of the displeasure of the other pilots, indicating that it was he who had failed to properly stand guard. The rest of the pilots stood uneasily, knowing they'd been caught. Gambling was something that had, and likely would, always occur during the long downtime between sorties. The pilots of the Challenge were known for a broad variety of games to place bets on, but would usually ensure that such games weren't played so brazenly.

In normal circumstances, the presence of gambling would be considered a serious breach of protocol, and would usually see those involved submitted to some form of disciplinary action. The group of pilots waited expectantly for the Eagle Squadron Commander to mete out an appropriate punishment; at the very least, a sharp reprimand and a promise to have their own Commanders dole out some menial tasks. But Graf was not in a normal circumstance frame-of-mind, and stared blankly at the pilots, who by now were nervously shuffling their feet. The group had become more uneasy; expecting Major Graf D'Jinn to eventually break his silence and unleash some pent-up rage in their direction.

When the Major failed to break the silence, it was LCM Sylas Pitt who stepped forward. Clearing his throat, he asked "Is everything ok, sir?"

Graf blinked, as if coming to from a deep sleep. His eyebrows went up, and he looked with purpose at each of the pilots. He spent quite a bit longer looking at Lt Perkis, who was the only Eagle pilot amongst the group, before finally turning back to Sylas and replying, "Everything is fine, Lieutenant Commander. Unless you are all involved in maintenance of your craft, or there is a mission that I'm not yet privy to, I would suggest you immediately return to your respective quarters."

The group noticeably relaxed, and quickly dispersed. Lt Perkis did not stick around, but fell in with the other pilots and hastily departed the hangar.

He leaned against the smooth nose of the Y-wing. The ambient sounds of the hangar returned; compressors automatically switched, plasma torches spat, the low hum from the power generators. His eyes caught the familiar lines of his squadron's T-65 X-wings, their streamlined shapes low and menacing, despite the state of disassembly of several of them, his own included. He noticed his personal R2 droid happily working away under the port wing. Graf could just make out the droid's whistling. "It's getting better", he thought. "More tuneful. Not so random. What a strange little machine it is."

His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the hulking figure of Commander LegionX. Graf was a very tall man himself, but LegionX was a commanding physical presence. Almost as broad across his shoulders as the business end of a turbolaser, Graf always wondered how the Commander squeezed himself into the cockpit of a TIE.

"This is uncharacteristic of you."

LegionX wore a mask and a rebreather, and in public it never came off. The mask was disconcerting to most, with a permanently nightmarish grin. With the stilted, mechanical edge to his voice from the

rebreather, as well as his size, LegionX was amongst the most feared officers in the Emperor's Hammer fleet. Behind closed doors however, the Coruscanti giant was known for his patience and empathy. Amongst the senior officers of the Challenge, Commander LegionX was seen as a voice of calm and reason. It remained a closely-held secret amongst the commanders, as Vice Admiral Nailo preferred to employ more traditional Sith ways, whereby fear was as useful a tool as was respect. Graf had always been at odds with this approach, and wondered if his Squadron Commander counterpart would've preferred to be a bit more open with his Thunder pilots. Regardless of his disposition, the mask would remain on, and the Imperial pilots would always treat him with a level of uncertainty that comes from not knowing what lies beneath.

Graf sighed, and looked squarely at the grinning mask. "I should've disciplined them?"

"That is correct. And you would've done so normally, albeit leniently. What concerns you?"

"Do you remember when one of my pilots was lost on our way to Tusorix? His hyperdrive failed, and he found himself stranded parsecs away from the nearest Imperial outpost."

"Yes, I recall this unfortunate situation. I also recall that the pilot conducted themselves in an exemplary manner, as befitting a pilot of the Infiltrator Wing, and safely returned himself and his craft back to our fold. You refer instead to the X-wings themselves."

Graf nodded, impressed that LegionX had picked up on the core of the problem so quickly.

LegionX continued, "You are worried as to the longer-term issues that these craft will continue to present. You believe that the failure of your pilot's X-wing is symptomatic of the entirety of your squadron's readiness."

Graf smiled faintly. "Am I that transparent?"

"Not at all," LegionX responded. "But it is apparent that you have serious concerns for your pilots. You made it clear during our last strategy meeting when you acquiesced for Firebird to take on tasks that you would normally fight for."

"The COM will of course take these things into account, but will not accept faulty starfighters as an excuse to deploy."

"To which he is correct. The COM has a growing number of concerns in this sector alone. The loss of an entire squadron is unacceptable."

Graf visibly bristled.

LegionX cut him off, and continued, "You believe that unless something is done, he will literally have the loss of an entire squadron due to the unreliable Eagle starfighters."

There was silence between the two men. Graf focused again on the R2 unit. "It's changed its whistle again," he thought. "Is it picking up on the tone of our conversation?" Indeed, the R2 was whistling a tune that comprised of two melodies; one was high and trilling, played in a minor key, discordant and depressing. The other was slower, steady and grounded, anchoring the first melody to itself, and not letting it get away.

LegionX followed Graf's gaze across the hangar. "You have a plan?"

Graf shook his head no. "Not entirely, no. But I have information. I have the beginnings of a plan."

“When will you share this with Silwar?”

“When I have the plan in its entirety. I need to present the COM with the solution, not the problem.”

LegionX tilted his head. “Is that R2 unit whistling a song?”

“You picked up on it too, huh? Yeah, it’s been doing it for a while. It’s getting much better as well.”

“That is very interesting. But back to your problem; your command is suffering because you are too caught up in this as an issue. Ignoring small disciplinary infractions such as gambling in the hangar might not mean much to the pilots, but it means a great deal to Silwar. If you drop the ball on the little things you are certainly dropping the ball on the big ones too. Tie this up quickly, and present something to the COM, regardless of whether it is a complete plan.”

Graf turned back to the Coruscanti. “Alright. I will. I’ll almost there.”

“If you have doubts before bringing this to Silwar, seek out advice from someone better versed in battle tactics. I would suggest Major Honsou. I cannot think of a finer tactician. I do not doubt your analysis, but a second opinion on the *how* will only strengthen your argument.”

LegionX bowed his head towards Graf, and strode away towards one of the exits.

Graf walked over to his X-wing. He stooped down, and moved underneath the wing, to where the R2 droid continued to work on a power coupling. The droid’s eye swivelled to watch the Major. “Do we have enough data to make a call?” he asked the droid.

The R2 let out a long whistle and series of beeps, and then broke into a melody that was cheerful and bright. Graf nodded, and rapped his knuckles on the R2’s dome head. “Alright. Let’s go over it one last time.”

FOUR

The Major's quarters were on the starboard side of the star destroyer's wedge, just underneath the bridge superstructure. It was a large area, with an adjoining bedroom, bathroom and a small kitchenette, which all led off from the main room. A ceiling to floor viewing port dominated the space. Two wooden armchairs faced outwards, a small sidetable nestled between them.

Against one wall was a series of shelves groaning under the weight of books. A long, narrow couch rested alongside the wall adjacent to the viewing port, with a large canvas artwork hung above it. The art itself was bright and colourful, quite at odds with the muted tones of the furnishings of the rest of the room. A solid, freestanding desk sat off to one side, a series of monitors sitting atop, and a holo floated in space directly above it. Graf's black R2 unit stood silently beside the desk, projecting the holo from its lens.

Graf sat at the desk, the familiar blue glow from the holo illuminating his face, his eyes darting back and forth among the clusters of infographics, cargo manifests and comms logs. He scribbled on a datapad in his lap without taking his gaze from the screens, and occasionally nodded, as if answering a question that he had put to himself. His hair was a mess. He sat in a plain white t-shirt, his uniform jacket thrown across the back of the desk chair when he had removed it hours earlier.

After a long while, Graf triumphantly threw the datapad onto the desk. He stood up and stretched, his tall frame arching back over itself. He crossed the room into the bathroom, splashed some cold water on his face and yawned deeply.

A chime notified the Major of a visitor at his door. He poked his head out of the bathroom and looked towards the screen set into the door frame. It was the Eagle Squadron XO, Commander Xylo Pethtel. "Come in!" shouted Graf. He grabbed a towel and started to dry his face and wet hair. The door slid open and the SQXO walked into the room.

"What is it, XP?" Graf asked, without turning from the mirror.

"Sir, you missed the sim training again."

Graf knew his SQXO well enough that if he let the silence linger, Xylo would fill it. He was tired, his focus was elsewhere, and he wasn't in the mood for pleasantries or chitchat. Xylo recognised the look on his CMDR's face, and obliged.

"Sir, this is the second sim session you've missed in a row. You will recall this was a training session with Firebird, and General Stryker was none too happy with your absence."

"General Stryker can get...." Graf started to mumble under his breath, but caught himself.

"Is everything alright?" Xylo asked.

Graf dropped the towel and walked into the living room. He smiled and nodded.

"Yeah, yeah I am now. And I want to show you something. Before that, please go and see if Major Honsou and Colonel Marenta will come to my quarters right away."

The young commander nodded, saluted, turned sharply on his heel and headed for the door.

FIVE

Xylo returned about twenty minutes later, accompanied by Colonel Marenta. The two officers buzzed themselves into Graf's quarters, and were greeted by a fresh-looking Major in a clean uniform.

"Major Honsou will be with us momentarily," XP announced.

"Please, sit, make yourselves comfortable," Graf motioned towards the armchairs. Colonel Marenta had been in many officer's quarters, and took the room in a single glance, with her eyes resting momentarily on the painting above the couch. She moved one of the armchairs so that it was facing inwards, seated herself, and let her gaze go back to the art. XP remained standing off to the side of the desk.

The door buzzed again, and Xylo crossed the floor to let Major Honsou enter. He stepped into the room, nodded to Marenta and Graf, and sat in the other armchair.

"What's going on, Graf? This a mutiny?" Marenta asked.

Honsou snorted. "Mutiny or not, I'll take a drink please."

Graf smiled, "No to the mutiny, but yes to the drinks. Marenta?"

"Yes please," she said. "I'll take some Corellian wine if you have any. I can do without the hard spirits for a while."

Graf nodded to Xylo, "would you please fetch everyone some drinks? I will have the wine also. Honsou?"

"Wine will be good, thanks."

Xylo walked into the kitchenette and busied himself with glasses and a bottle opener.

Graf turned to the two senior Challenge officers. "I have a proposal."

"See? Mutiny!" Marenta said to Honsou.

Honsou raised his eyebrows. "Let's hear it."

Xylo brought the drinks out, poured a glass for all but himself, and took a seat. Honsou took a deep mouthful of the dark amber liquid. Marenta merely swirled the wine and breathed in its perfume. Graf left his on the desk.

"Please allow me a brief history lesson, my good officers," Graf began. "Our story is about the T-65 X-wing ... the fighter that killed the first Death Star. Incom Engineering took the best bits of the ARC-170 and the Z-95 Headhunter and packaged it into a revolutionary design that was revered for its role flexibility and refined combination of speed, durability and combat lethality.

"This fighter was the spearhead of the rebellion push against the Empire. Favouring the strategy of avoiding large-scale fleet actions, the Rebels successfully deployed snub-fighters against lone ISDs, with significant capital ship losses on the Imperial side. The X-wings, in force, were simply too fast and too well-armed, and could easily hold their own against our TIE squadrons. In short, a devastating and outstanding fighter.

"The Emperor's Hammer brought the Infiltrator Wing into operation in about 4ABY, before being

disbanded about ten years later. The Wing utilised captured NR-fighters and an MC-80 cruiser, and were very effective at behind-line disruption. The Redemption was a hugely decorated ship, and caused significant consternation for the newly formed Republic forces in contested territories. Following the destruction of the Redemption and the catastrophic losses to the Infiltrator Wing, the surviving IW pilots were returned to the TIE lines, and the remaining X- and A-wings were mothballed or destroyed.

"Fourteen years passed, and under the instruction of High Admiral Plif, Admiral Dempsey revived the Infiltrator Wing aboard our own Challenge..."

"Graf," interrupted Marenta. "I'll drink your booze. I'll hear you out. But get to the point already."

Graf nodded. "OK. Here it is. Our T-65s are forty years old. They're slow and unreliable. At our last analysis, we're spending an average of eight hours in maintenance for one hour of flight time. I've got one pilot missing, not in combat; another who managed to crawl back to our forces after his hyperdrive failed; and the possibility of transfer requests coming up on the grounds of personal safety which I will not refuse.

"I want to ground the Eagle X-wings, mothballed and stored in a disused hangar on an allied planet."

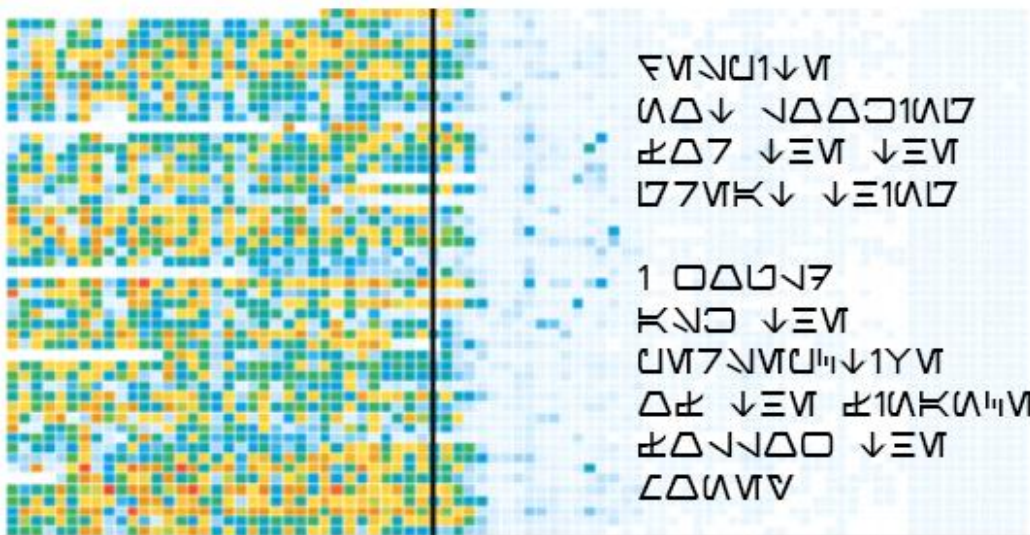
"You want to tear your own squadron's talons out?" asked Honsou. "To be replaced with what?"

"Fresh-off-the-line Incom-FreiTek T-85s."

Marenta and Honsou snorted. Xylo shifted in his seat, but looked thoughtful.

Marenta said, "The NR can't produce them fast enough for their own navies. We have encountered none since entering the Outer Regions. How are you going to get twelve brand new versions of the republic's latest starfighter when we are hundreds of parsecs away from the closest - and I might add, *armed and ready* - NR squadron that actually has them?"

Graf sat at his desk, and started typing. A second later, the viewport dimmed and a solitary image was displayed on the glass. The other three officers were silent while they studied the image. Honsou spoke first, "What the hell are we looking at here?"



Marenta shushed him, her eyes darting furiously back and forth, before quietly speaking, "These are

cargo manifests. He's found twelve - well, it doesn't say what they are - but twelve *things*. They're moving across the Mid-Rim, very slowly I might add. Graf, you'd better tell us the rest of the story."

"Marenta is bang-on. I have assessed that these are T-85s, noting their departure point, size of the freighter, and the players involved. I surmise that they're disassembled and currently not operational."

Xylo spoke up, "Sir, how do you know they're T-85s. There can be a lot of things that will fit in a freighter."

"You're damn right. It's a *Baleen*-class heavy freighter, so there is an *awful* lot of things that will fit. Let me show you some more datafiles..."

"Before you do that," said Honsou. "Answer me this: where did you get all of this info?"

Graf fell silent for a beat. "I can't say."

"You're trying to convince us..."

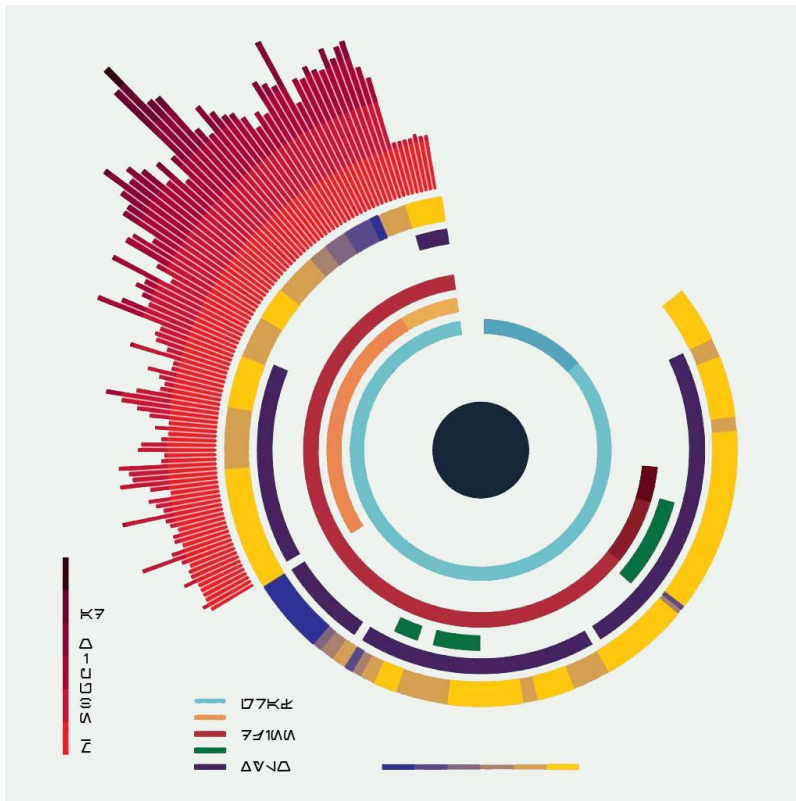
"I'm not trying to convince *you*," Graf interrupted.

"Fine, then you're trying to convince the Commodore..."

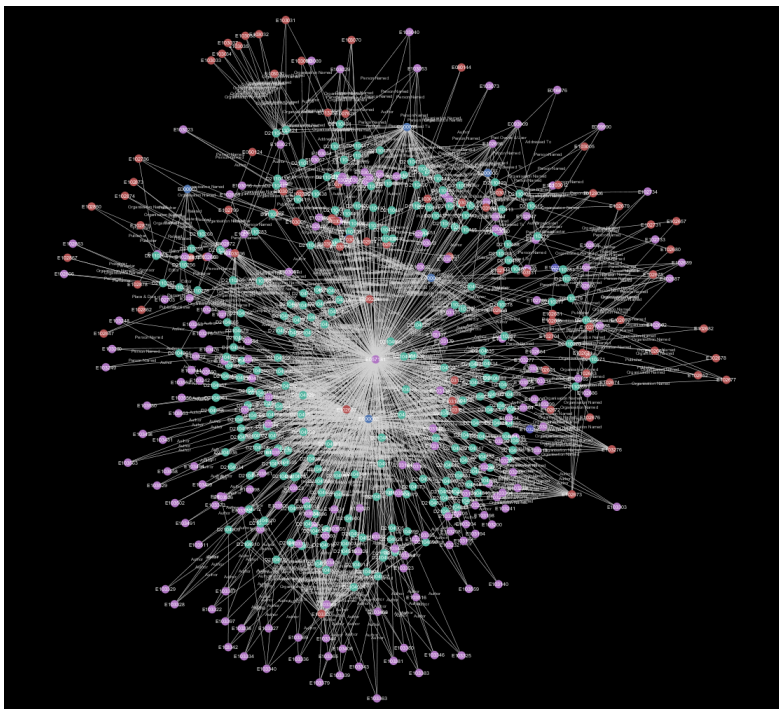
"The Commodore will understand that this information is valid and accurate. He will be advised where the intelligence has come from. For now, I am not at liberty to advise you any further on how this information has come to me. I have invited you here review the intel before you, and make a determination as to whether or not this is viable, and a risk worth taking. If you see value in this as a possible operation, then I will take this to the Commodore."

The officers mulled on this for a while. Honsou leaned back in his chair, and smiled. "Fine, let's continue."

"Let me show you the next datafiles." Graf replaced the previous graphic with two new analysis pieces. "What do you see here?"



Both Marenta and Xylo pulled up their own datapads and started typing. Honsou spoke first, "I know that name. Alnitak Spar. She used to work for Kuat Drive Yards, prior to Moff Maksim handing them over to the NR. A senior project director, if I recall. This was thirty odd years ago."



"That's right, Major, Alnitak Spar used to work for the Empire. Since, she has become an executive at Incom-Freitek."

"And you have linked her, through credit flows, to Vrad Di?"

"Who is Vrad Di?" asked Xylo.

Honsou replied, "Vrad Di is the successor to Rinnravin Di's crime syndicate. Based out of Tallaan, they control virtually the entirety of the Tapani Sector. Smuggling, gambling, piracy, you name it. Heavy hitters. They rival some of the Hutt clans in wealth and influence. Well, they did, until Rinnravin was killed.

"What's the connection?" asked Marenta.

"This is where it gets a bit murky. Either Spar has some very serious gambling debts - of which I can find no further proof of - or its political. My guess is she wants to take a run as Senator for her home planet of Kiffu. It makes sense for Vrad Di to back her as well, considering Kiffu is virtually part of the sector. They'd make a strong alliance."

"So she needs a lot of capital," Honsou said. "OK, I'll accept that there's a relationship between Vrad Di and Spar. I'll accept that she's trying to buy the senatorship. How are you convinced that these are -85s?"

"Think about it - she's only going to get the large funds she needs from an illegitimate source. Her only bartering point is products that her company manufactures. Incom-Freitek have shifted almost all of their manufacturing capability to T-85 production, following T-70s and U-wings being superceded. They continue with spare parts and engine production for older models, but the T-85 is realistically the only thing the company creates anymore. And why would they diversify? They've got a devastating starfighter design, and a rock-solid contract with the NRDF."

"But why would a crime syndicate want them? Why not commandeer a frigate or even a Star Destroyer? I'm sure one of the remant Imp warlords across the Mid-Rim would be willing to offload one for the right price?" asked Xylo.

Marenta answered for Graf, "If they get a Star Destroyer, they become a literal military threat, regardless if they could even summon enough people to effectively crew it. They become a target for the NRDF. With a squadron of X-wings, they're much less obvious. They will be arguably more of a military threat, but they can hide their numbers."

Graf continued, "It even makes sense for them to cosmetically modify the T-85s so that any observations of their capability is further mitigated. An untrained eye will state they were T-70s; obviously still a concern, but less so."

Honsou added, "A syndicate with a squadron of T-85 X-wings - even NRDF will think twice about attempting to intercede within their systems. To pirates and smugglers and free merchants, they will, in effect, represent a sovereign navy. What about pilots?"

"Loads of mercenaries, left over from the Galactic War, plus any number of NRDF-trained pilots who are bored and looking for a pay rise," replied Graf. "Probably not battle-hardened, but with those ships and under a competent commander..."

"Why are they being transported so slowly?" Marenta asked. "It's taken them, what? Eight weeks from their departure point."

"They're planet-hopping, under the guise of normal trade. They're smuggling these craft out under the noses of the NR Defence Fleet. No long runs. Spending time in the ports. Probably some legitimate trade thrown in there for good measure."

"So it means that we have time to intercept?" Honsou asked.

Graf nodded. "That's how I see it. And I think I know where they're stopping next."

"Skip that bit, we can return to it. Tell me about the plan to intercept," said Honsou.

"One last hurrah with our T-65s. Considering where the freighter is likely to be, and its recent traverse of the Galaxy, sending an Imperial battlegroup is too risky. I want to depart with as much haste as possible, accompanied by a small contingent of stormtroopers aboard a U-wing, if we can get it flying in time. I'll have one of my pilots flying the U-wing.

"Using the X-wings under the guise of NRDF on a sortie, we should be able to move across the Mid-Rim with no resistance and hopefully no detection. My pilots are well trained in navigating NR systems. Upon arrival, we will drop out of hyperspace and take up a defensive perimeter around the freighter. If we've timed it well, most of the crew should be planetside. Those big *Baleen*-class freighters can't enter atmosphere, so they're usually left with a skeleton crew in orbit."

"An *armed* skeleton crew," Marenta pointed out.

"Nothing that the stormtroopers won't be able to deal with."

"And then?" asked Xylo.

"Take over control of the ship, and make the jump to a rendezvous point with an Arquitens cruiser, where we can transfer the -85s over. Dump the freighter and hop it back to the Challenge."

Honsou looked thoughtful. He rubbed absent-mindedly at his elbow, and tapped his foot, taking in Graf's basic plan and considering the angles.

"What if they're escorted?" he asked.

"As in, the possibility that the freighter has been shadowed this whole time by a more heavily armed ship?"

"Or ships, but yes. What if you arrive on scene and are immediately under fire when your intentions become clear?"

"This is a full squadron of Eagle pilots, sir," Xylo proudly spoke. "We can handle ourselves."

"No doubt about it, Commander," Honsou replied. "Let's say that Eagle immediately comes under fire and you can deal with it - but what if the escort specifically targets the freighter? What if their instructions are 'if that freighter so much as moves without our authority, then destroy it'? That's a lot of work and risk for no payoff. Plus, your cover is blown by that stage and you will be hunted."

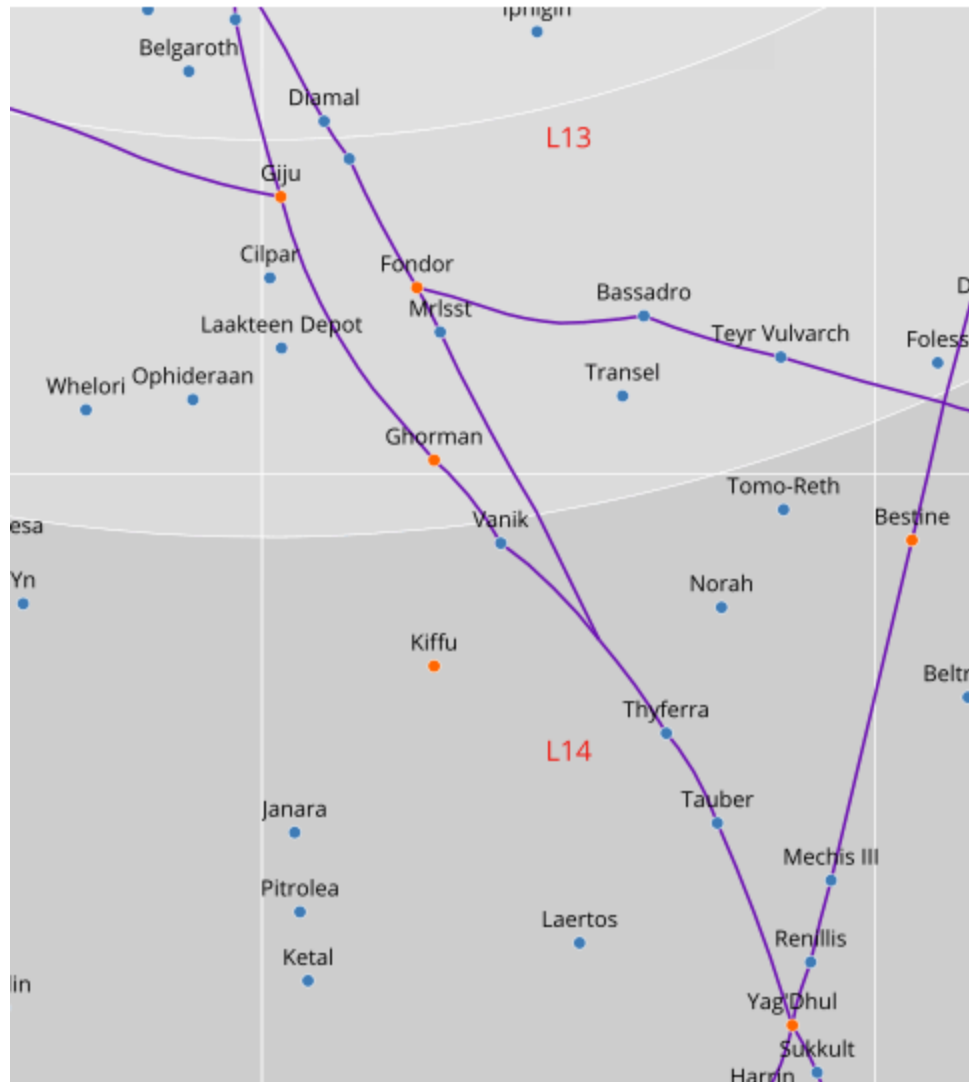
"What do you suggest?"

Honsou shrugged. "Difficult situation. Where do you think they'll be?"

"They've had quite the run. Tracking them has proved very difficult. They departed Fresia, following the Metellos Trade Route for the most part. They diverted around Corellia, but found themselves on the Corellian Run, where they made it as far out as Druckenwell before doubling back to Corellia. They're

now on the Corellian Trade Spine. We're going to meet them at Yag'Dhul, the intersection between the Spine and Rimma route. I think their plan is to transfer to the Giju Run, and go all the way to Tallaan. If we don't get them at Yag'Dhul, we *may* have a couple of attempts at either Ghorman or Giju, but I doubt they'd stop considering how close to their destination they'd be."





"Ooof, Inner Rim. Was hoping for a bit further out," said Honsou. "That'll be rough territory."

"You're right, it will," Graf agreed. "Especially those trade routes converging on that system, there will be a lot of traffic. But we've got a number of hyperspace lanes to exit on. And, the more traffic there is, the more we can blend in."

"As much as a squadron of X-wings can," Honsou retorted. "I think you either need a proper recon of the area, and ascertain as much as possible if there is an escort, or, you could try a feint."

"How so?"

"Send in some pirates. Small crew. Something that could easily be overpowered and dealt with. It does two things. It allows you to test their defences; and it provides you with evidence of an overt armed escort. Seems unlikely they'd destroy the shipment for a pirate crew of two or three, unless it becomes obvious to them they'd gained control of the freighter and were preparing to jump to hyperspace. It would also give you an understanding of resistance and defences on-board the freighter. Plus - if they do

blow it all up, your squadron remains unengaged and undetected."

"It's a good idea. But who would volunteer for a mission that potentially gets them vapourised?"

"That's not for me, but you've at least got some options to go to Silwar with now."

Graf looked over at his XO. "What do you think?"

"I like it. High risk, high reward."

"Marenta?" Graf asked.

The Colonel stared at the datafiles before turning to Graf again. "Glad it's not for me to decide. But your intel looks good. It would be quite the coup. A squadron of those starfighters would provide some very serious reconnaissance firepower. I think Silwar will have plenty of things to pick at though, which will only make any plan you execute better."

Graf looked pleased. "Thank you all. I will take this to the Commodore right away. XP - I want you to prepare Eagle squadron for departure within 12 hours. Any fighters not ready to fly are to remain grounded, and maintenance crews shifted to the remaining craft. I want Eagle pilots in the hangar assisting. We cannot afford any issues, or to lose anyone along the way like we did with Cupcake.

"Prioritise the U-wing as well. I want it ready to be test-flown by the time I return from seeing the Commodore. Full weapons and systems check."

"Acknowledged sir. Anything else?" asked Xylo.

"That will be all. You have your orders."

Xylo stood, saluted to his commander, and departed the room.

"Anything else?" Graf asked his two colleagues.

Honsou shook his head. "If you get this up, call me immediately and I will come and assist with the tactical planning."

Marenta said, "You didn't tell us where you got this data from, but it's fairly obvious that you've got access to some serious intelligence sources. Vice-Admiral Nai'ilo may not be pleased that you have this information before he does."

"To be fair, this was information I sought out, rather than it coming to me. But, point taken," Graf replied.

"Otherwise, best of luck."