



## Head of the snake

BY VA HAWKINS

***“The soul languishing in obscurity contracts a kind of rust, or abandons itself to the chimera of presumption; for it is natural for it to acquire something, even when separated from anyone.”***

Quintillain

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Colonel Darkill of Theta Flight I banked his Imperial Landing craft hard to the right, but even that was not enough to avoid the incoming barrage of fire. It raked across the port shields, sending crackles of blue-green energy dancing over the dome of force that protected his ship.

“Will someone do something about those damned turrets?” he called into his comms system, hammering his ship back to the left, returning on course towards his target. Before him loomed the long, sleek, organic looking hull of a Calamari Cruiser, the flag ship of the fleet sent under General Kargath to 'encourage' the forces of the Emperor's Hammer to return to their own space and not sure systems under Republic protection for fleet training exercises.

What few even in the Corps knew was that the training exercise itself was a ruse, it's very aim to draw out this General Kargath. The choice of system was deliberately provocative. The Rebels couldn't help but respond, and predictably, they had. Their mistake was to assume that this was an exercise in ego – an effort to show off to the Republic, gain a rise, then return to Imperial space suitably aggrandized. Perhaps they suspected that it may be a tentative territorial grab, a probe to see if Imperial influence could be extended without significant response. Either way, the Rebels had sent their forces under the command of one of their most experienced generals – a general who now had an appointment to keep in a certain chamber aboard the Challenge. Darkhill, and the troopers he carried in his

landing craft, were tasked with ensuring the general would not be late.

“On it!” a voice replied over the comms. Darkhill recognised it as the voice of Commander Leocadio, leader of Flight III of Kappa squadron. Almost immediately, the four TIE Defenders that were his escort cut across the nose of his ship, heading for the Cruiser. Kappa's missileboats, armed with double loads of advanced concussion missiles, were handling the fighter screen. The yellow glow of warhead boosters zipped back and forth across Darkhill's view screen, and even in the depths of space he was sure he could hear the deep explosions of Rebel craft as they were scattered to the stars. His own squadron were tackling two other cruisers, the TIE Advanced of Flight II protecting the rocket-armed missileboats of Flight III. Beyond his target vessel, he could see a stricken cruiser already turning to make a run for hyperspace, although by the look of her, the jump might be fatal. Great, glowing rents were visible in her hull, and she trailed streams of escaping gas and atmosphere. One of her engines had been utterly torn away, and the majority of her turrets lay in flickering ruin. Darkhill refocused his attention. Watching the death of the cruiser would be entertaining, but flying blindly into the teeth of the cruiser before him would mean death and, worse, failure.

Kappa III made good on Leo's word. Each Defender tracked towards a different turret, missiles and linked laser fire taking down turret after turret. One Defender especially weaved gracefully, each quad linked shot taking down a different turbolaser. That would be Tempest. No one else in Wing II handled a TIE Defender like that.

Despite their efforts, this was still going to be a hot extraction. Originally, the plan had been to use the two Interdictors to trap the Republic fleet. However, the Rebels had made those ships a target priority. They had lost a Liberty class cruiser and two full squadrons of B-Wings in the effort, but both Interdictors now drifted listlessly away, one damaged beyond repair and the other disabled. Say what you like about the Republic, but they hadn't lost the guts and determination that had left two Deathstars little more space dust. They may be naive, but they had many skilled pilots, trained by some of the most formidable opponents the Empire had ever faced. Where capital ships had failed, VA Hawkins had turned to his most reliable asset; the pilots of the TIE Corps. The rebels would be made to pay dearly for their insolence.

The tactic Hawkins had turned to was daring, and deeply dangerous. By targeting the other cruisers, the General's ship would provide cover for the other vessels to retreat. However, to ensure he didn't flee himself, the ship could not be brought near to being disabled. Sensors already detected that the ship was preparing for hyperjump, so a straight up attempt to disable it would no doubt lead to an immediate jump away, and the loss of the General. So, Theta's landing craft would ferry the strike teams directly onto the cruiser; COL Astin through the front door and into the hanger, and Darkhill through a specially modified breaching hatch built into the ventral hull of his craft. None of that would matter if they couldn't get there in one piece.

A shudder through his ship returned his attention to the mission. A warning siren wailed, announcing missiles launched at his craft. He didn't know if it was from the cruiser or a fighter that had got past Kappa's missileboats, but he turned his ship into a corkscrew role and shunted more power to the shields. Seconds later, the craft was rocked by the impact. Shields dropped to 16%, but held.

“Kappa, shields are nearly down. Watch for warheads targeting me.” Darkhill ordered. Replies came quickly, and he saw the Defenders peel away, one towards the launchers on

the cruiser, others to take up defensive positions around him. To his right, he saw the second lander move off towards the hanger, two Defenders following, lasers still targeting the remaining laser turrets. Darkhill jinked and weaved his way across the hull of the cruiser, making for the area his scanners told him was directly above the bridge. He quickly hammered the controls, and a loud hum sounded throughout the ship. The magnetic locks had engaged, and were pulling the craft onto the hull. As the secondary whine of the breaching hatch came alive, the viewscreen was filled with a blinding light – The fleeing cruiser had failed to reach her jump point in time. A barrage of rockets had impacted around the engine blocks, causing a chain of explosions that tore the stricken vessel apart. If there was a time to do this, it would be now. No doubt the crew of this cruiser were aware of his ship, but the loss of such a large vessel so close to this one would distract the bridge crew for precious seconds.

“Staff Sergeant,” Darkhill called, “It's now or never!”

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Sergeant Redren was trying hard to shake the feeling that he'd been here before as the landing craft was buffeted by a warhead impact. Luckily, this time the shields held, as there were no Sith warriors aboard this vessel, as far as he could tell! He checked his chair harness, and then his blaster. It was set to stun, as the General was wanted alive. That was a risk. Stun was not nearly as effective as it was often believed. A stunned enemy was not always unconscious or entirely disabled. You had to hope your target stayed down. More than once he'd seen a stunned enemy pull themselves back into the fight – groggy, but still able to point a blaster and pull a trigger.

A glance out of the view screen beside him showed a scene of chaos. Capital ships on both sides had taken a pounding. Clouds of debris and vented atmosphere clouded the space around them, whilst flashes of exploding warheads and streams of laser fire criss-crossed his view. The fact that this glorified shuttle was weaving its way through it all was a testament to the skill of the pilot who flew her.

Suddenly, the hull of a large cruiser was flashing past the window.

“Troopers! This is it,” Redren called, “I want us in and out in thirty seconds. If the General is not on the bridge, I'll give you another ninety to find him. I expect us to be the team that get him, not those nerflings from Vo's Boys. Got that?”

“Sir!” came the single reply, in perfect unison.

“Troopers, attach lines.” Redren ordered. The rappelling lines would allow them to drop quickly into the bridge, grab the general and be gone just as quickly. He was determined this would be a perfect retrieval. He had allowed himself to languish in self pity too long, but Admiral Pellaeon had shaken that from him, no doubt about that! The rust he had felt within him, the presumption of failure, was gone. Now there burned a spark of ambition that had long been missing. He had no force sensitivity that he was aware of, but he sought for that flame, that anger he had felt whilst in the presence of the admiral. He hadn't realised until afterwards just how intoxicating it had felt. He allowed the anger to build up once again, making him all but oblivious to the rising hum around him. A loud whine beneath his feet snapped his attention back into place. The breaching hatch was engaging.

“Staff Sergeant,” the pilot called, “It's now or never!”

“Troopers, on my mark!” Redren called. He waited, listening to the whine of the hatch. A sudden loud clang signalled the completion of the breach, and a moment later the hold of the lander was bathed in a red light – the signal that atmospheric equalisation was achieved and the breach was complete.

“Mark!” Redren barked. A loud explosion sounded as the hatch blew in the hull, and the hatch slid open. A cluster of stun grenades were dropped, primed on a short fuse. Barely a second later, the hatch was lit with multiple flashes and a loud sizzle of discharging energy. Without the need for further orders, his team dropped through the hatch, into the very brain of the cruiser below.

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General Kargath stared the mission screens before him, desperately looking for a way to turn the tide of the battle once more. The initial diplomatic contact had failed, and the forces of the Emperor's Hammer attacked with a strength far exceeding that which they had expected. They had been trapped by two Intidictors, but the painful loss of one of his valuable cruisers and two squadrons of dedicated pilots had freed them of their gravity wells. Despite the odds, the tide was turning. That was when the elite squadrons had been deployed. The Missileboats and Defenders outmatched his fighters, upgraded as they were. His pilots had fought valiantly against desperate odds, allowing their fleet to retreat in some semblance of order. He was risking his own vessel to provide cover for her wounded sisters, whilst preparing to flee herself. Training exercise, he mused. When he got back to Republic space he'd have a thing or two to say to certain intelligence operatives.

“Sir,” the scanner officer called, “We have Imperial assault craft inbound. Landers, Sir.”

“They mean to board us,” Kargath replied. “Redirect the turrets to target the landers. Use the launchers if you have to.”

“Sir, what about the 'Destiny'? She's lost her aft turrets,” the tactical officer interrupted. The General looked at his screens. Tactical was right. The Destiny wouldn't make it to her jump point without the protection of his own weapons.

“One salvo at the landers, then back to the missileboats.” Kargath ordered. His officers went to their work efficiently. He hoped it would be enough, but doubt was creeping in. He'd fought Imperial forces or their allies for years, from Coruscant to Corellia. But this was a fury like he'd rarely seen.

He began to order the remaining fighters to break off and make for hyperspace when he was interrupted by a loud clang.

“Sir! The lander had attached itself to the hull!” The radar operative called.

“Arm yourselves! They'll be...” He began.

“The Destiny! She's gone!” The Tactical officer called. For a brief moment, the screens

were blinding bright as the fireball that had been the Destiny filled their view. It lasted only a second, but that proved too long by far.

An explosion from the ceiling tore a chunk of hull away, sending it crashing to the floor. Small objects followed it.

“Get dow...” Kargath never had time to finish. The stun grenades detonated instantly, blinding and disorientating the entire bridge crew, himself included. He stumbled against the wall, his vision gone and his hearing dull and distorted. Vague shapes moved across the white-out that had replaced his sight, voices shouted distantly. Despite his hazy perception, there was another flash, this time bright blue. His world went black. General Kargath was out before he even hit the deck.

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The whirr of the rappelling lines signalled the return of the troopers. Twenty two seconds had passed from the breach to the Troopers returning aboard the Lander. Darkhill was impressed. The last trooper came aboard, carrying something bulky, and was helped to carry the prone body to an empty chair before it was securely fastened in place. The sergeant of the troop hurried over to Darkhill, leaning into the cockpit through the hatch separating the pilot from the main hull.

“Time to go, Colonel,” The Sergeant said.

“Took your time, didn't you?” joked Darkhill.

“Yeah, I'd hoped for fifteen. Still, better late than never,” the sergeant replied. He leaned over and reached for the shuttle's main comms unit, grabbing the hand microphone. He punch a control, and the system crackled to life.

“This is Sergeant Redren to Vos' Boys. Disengage, and return to extraction craft.” The sergeant didn't wait for a reply, clearly expecting his orders to be followed without question. “Redren to Aggressor,” he continued, “Please pass on my compliments to Vice Admiral Hawkins and request that he allow us to transmit a message to the Challenge; message to read 'We have him'. Redren Out.”

The shuttle flew straight and true back towards the VSD Aggressor, bathed in the glow of