

Crossing the Picket Line – RTF Fiction Submission #4 – GN La’an (#10540)

The corvette dropped from hyperspace, the half dozen TIEs with their distinctive bladed profiles snapping back into sublight alongside and in tight formation. As per their deployment plan the paired Defenders from Rho pushed out from the group to fly a wide racetrack and secure the immediate area. La’an’s own flight split by wingmen, with a pair flying ahead and to port of the larger ship, the other pair astern and to starboard. His communications panel lit up as Colonel Schueler made a first broadcast from what La’an belatedly realised was the *Obsidian* as he finally checked the corvette’s IFF tags.

“First area of five, we’ll let Rho carry out their circuit while the *Obsidian* sets to work with her sensors, if we get nothing then we’ll move on to point Bravo in 1-5 minutes. Same plan when we get there, with Theta 5 and 6 taking up the racetrack.”

“Roger that.” La’an kept his own comms short and terse, he very rarely displayed the exuberance of many of the other Squadron Commanders, he often said very little indeed and prepared to watch – perhaps too many years as a combat pilot had led him to dissociate, but he preferred to keep his own counsel until it was needed. They had all had the mission brief and all of them had served at least 8 years as a TC pilot, they wouldn’t make a mistake.

Time passed as the *Obsidian* continued its slow crawl, no external sign emerging of the busy activity within its long, sharp hull. A short data burst again lit the comms panel, the non-verbal recall signal to reform and move on – Rho caught it immediately, circling back and putting on further speed to rejoin the main group. As they closed to 2km another data burst from *Obsidian* signalled a solid connection to their navicomputer, ready for a slaved jump. La’an checked the route details and sighed inwardly, 4 hours... TIEs and corvettes had many wonderful features, but a Class 2 hyperdrive was not one of them.

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Bursting again back into hyperspace some 12 hours later La’an stretched against his grav couch, flexing his back as best he could. This was the 5th and final area and thus far there had been nothing of interest, only the hint of ion trails and sensor ghosts. It was becoming clear that their intel had been patchy at best, or rather that the Hammer was staying close in to her starting area and venturing beyond in limited force only.

The stars looked much the same as they had previously, La’an scanning ahead noted the wide spread of an asteroid field marking the edge of the unnamed system they were approaching. It was hopefully the location they were looking for, the staging point that previous experience suggested Admiral Dempsey would seek to establish before pushing on into a broader stage of the engagement. Previous experience seemed to be worth sticking with, La’an picking out the flare of powering engines visually just as his sensors returned reports of energy flares from the edge of the field, around 6km distant.

“Push back against them, sensors are showing a flight of Assault Gunboats sitting as a drifting picket, expect their reinforcements in 6-8 minutes. We’ll be out of here in 5!” Schueler’s voice burst across the comm, his excitement bubbling to the surface.

“Understood Leader, after you Rho” La’an smiled as he spoke, already seeing the two Defenders barrelling into the combat at a prodigious rate of acceleration, their warheads reaching ahead as three of the Gunboats closed the gap while the fourth appeared to be lifting out of the combat – perhaps to gain a clear signal for a warning transmission. He frowned, while the belt of asteroids was the perfect barrier to sensors and probing recon craft it limited the defenders as much as it did the attackers – if they could shut down the gunboats they could progress further in-system without the Hammer even knowing.

His own pilots read the situation quickly, moving into a staggered-V behind him as the Advanced’s closed to their own warhead range, highlighting the fleeing gunboat. Sparing a glance for his own sensors La’an watched the first 2 gunboats flicker off the screen, going from operational to disabled/destroyed in a heartbeat as a cluster of fast moving simulated torpedoes caught them as they lumbered apart in clumsy evasive turns. The third had sufficient time to loose its own payload, a pair of missiles snaking out from a chin launcher and tracking the nearest Defender as it dove away, its partner taking the opportunity to kill its entire forward momentum, rolling on its axis to track the gunboat as it stormed past at close range. A blistering combination of ion and laser left it equally crippled to its comrades in a little over the time it took La’an to smile and turn back to his own target.

Torres pushed ahead of his comrades, clearly dumping additional energy into his engines from weapons or shields and putting out a quartet of missiles – a sensible strategy in the situation, but it would all come down to the last gunboats pilot choices. If he made to evade the missiles he would break any chance of establishing a comms link with whatever units lay in-system, but if he accepted his inevitable if simulated death he would give his fleet a chance to reform or relocate. He chose to safe himself, clearly an instinctive reaction that he must have immediately regretted, dodging into the edge of the field to shake off the missiles. It worked, with all four losing him quickly, but it worked for little more than 10 seconds as the Defenders of Rho pounced to claim their fourth scalp. The gunboat pilot had become too focused on dodging warheads and Thetans and seemed to have lost combat awareness of the two TIEs that had spent the previous minute or so ripping apart his comrades.

“Well that went better than expected... well done guys. *Obsidian* is going to sit here at the edge of the belt as a comms relay back to the fleet, keeping Rho here as an escort with... Torres and Caine. La’an, push ahead with Horus and see what lies beyond this belt. As soon as

you hit resistance or look like being detected, withdraw, preserve our element of surprise while we get in touch with the Warrior.” Schueler’s voice was calm again, his adrenaline having ebbed rapidly.

“You’re the boss, Leader. We’ll stick to narrowband comms and passive sensors. Bug out in 2 hours if you don’t hear from us and assume we’re out of play – we won’t get a clear signal to you if we’re intercepted. On the plus side they may assume we’re the only scouts if they catch us.” La’an shared his thoughts on a private channel, hearing the double click of agreement from mark, a shorthand that none the less spoke volumes.

“Come on then Horus, we’ve got a job to do.”