

First Blood – GN La’an (#10540) Bonus Fiction Submission

The TIE Defenders of Rho’s Flight I burst apart like a flock of startled birds, all four breaking in separate directions and executing a series of eye-wateringly complex barrel rolls. Their erstwhile hunters flashed through the now empty space, banking hard to try and follow the spinning fighters as they looped around to reform their formation and turn the tables on their attackers. The TIE Advanced fighters of Lambda, three flying in a tight arrowhead, realised their danger too late, having flown too fast and too confidently in to the initial engagement. They broke into their own evasive maneuvers but far, far too slowly – while as agile as any TIE series fighter they couldn’t hope to outfly Defenders, particularly when piloted by Rho’s veteran Majors and Lieutenant Colonels. The lead Advanced hesitated as it’s wide looping turn began to bring it around, easing off the throttle for a heartbeat as the pilot rethought their decision – the opening that a stalking Defender needed to invert their own turn and launch a blistering attack from above, low powered exercise weapons registering against the fitted detectors and shutting down the targets systems in a simulation of real damage.

The remaining Advanced’s corrected their own movement, coming back together in pursuit of a disabled Defender, falling onto its stern to line up killshots. La’an smiled as he realised the ploy, imagining the look on the Lambda pilots’ faces as the Defender dropped the pretense of damage and increased speed, drawing out of danger as his two ignored comrades slashed across the face of the pursuing fighters, crippling both in a single emerald volley. Returning his attention to his own situation La’an checked his immediate area for enemy fighters, an eye on his sensors backed by a gut feeling that he was safe for now. His flight of Thetan pilots had trailed Rho’s flight as a combat patrol in strength, cautiously probing ahead of the advancing Warrior and her task group as they moved through the exercise area. The Hammer had shown a tendency to set ambushes and clearly Admiral Plif expected the same tactics for a third year.

So far the three-ship flight from Lambda had been the only enemy force encountered, stumbling into the area in their bold attempt to catch Rho off-guard – La’an doubted they had even registered the Thetan fighters coasting on low power, keeping their emissions discrete and lying in wait. As soon as Rho disengaged he expected whatever other assets the Hammer might have in area to show themselves or trail Rho back to their origin point. As the thought crossed his mind Rho disengaged smoothly, their flight reforming and gliding back into hyperspace on a jinking route that would throw off the most rigorous pursuit. The Lambda TIEs restarted their systems and coasted away, awaiting confirmation from the watching probes that the exercise officials had registered their “destruction” and scored the Hammer accordingly. A network of probes had been seeded across the exercise area days previous and was ensuring that fair-play was just that, with both sides playing to the rules... or at least bending them without breaking them.

The minutes passed slowly, at some stage the Lambda TIEs hypered away and left Theta maintaining their vigil. A half hour passed without incident, no sign of any further action or enemy interest appearing. Checking his chronometer La’an silently wished the time away, another 30 minutes and they would follow the same procedure as Rho – bringing their engines up and disengaging from the area. The deadline approached without any alerts or passive sensor returns and Theta’s fighters rumbled back into life as engines were brought back up to combat levels, the four fighters closing back in from their scattered positions at the edge of the area. The chime of his

navicomputer signalling a loaded route was matched by the three tones announcing the other fighters had slaved to his co-ordinates.

An hour more passed, with three further jumps to throw off any chase, before Theta approached the Warrior's last reported position. A sweep on active sensors picked up the body of the task group a little further out than previous.

"New heading 255, staggered line, remember to re-check IFF as we approach the picket." La'an kept his communications short and professional, keeping the combination of boredom and grumpiness from his voice. He was self-aware enough to know that it was misplaced, their mission had been an important one but ultimately fruitless – they were none the wiser as to the Hammer's movements but unless these attempts were made both forces would end the exercise having blindly picked their way around for 4 weeks.

"Roger that Leader, about time" COL Torres' voice contained the same hint of boredom that La'an knew the others would be feeling. The others kept their thoughts to themselves and the flight proceeded unmolested, approaching the Warrior's picket of light frigates and patrolling fighters. The IFF unit in his cockpit twittered as it was interrogated, with short data bursts between the defending ships confirming the identity of the returning fighters and letting them through the cordon.

La'an frowned as he noted additional fighters in the vicinity of the Warrior, older model TIE Interceptors running what looked to be attack drills against a lumbering escort shuttle. General Frown had presumably insisted on putting the newer pilots through their paces, which La'an supposed was a sensible precaution if they were expecting to encounter such potentially difficult opponents. As they closed the distance to the vast white dagger of the ISD the exercising TIEs fell into their own ragged line, heading back to the Warrior as the shuttle returned to an outlying escort carrier. Out of curiosity La'an cycled his own comms into their squadron channel, listening in as their flight leader chastened the three rookies, taking no prisoners as he systematically ripped apart their tactics. The situation became more heated as the rookies returned their own criticism, one losing his spatial awareness and drifting to starboard, his solar panel clipping his colleague, sending both into momentary spins from which they thankfully recovered quickly. La'an tuned out of the comms channel as the language turned decidedly nasty. He expected that when those fighters landed the situation could get more heated, so at least there would be some entertainment on hand to alleviate the boredom of the last few hours.

"Theta 5 to Control, requesting landing clearance to main hangar, 4-ship flight flying in by stick" La'an keyed in his link to the fighter controller, imagining their rising frustration as they attempted to manage the bickering trainee flight as well as a complex CAP and incoming traffic. Knowing that this would be taxing them he waited the few seconds he knew it would take them to get their thoughts in order.

"Theta 5 this is control, primary vector is clear for you, starboard approach, landing window is yours for 3 minutes" La'an recognised the smooth tones of the lead fighter controller, a Colonel and ex-combat pilot who had turned to executive duties when injury in a dogfight ended his flying career. The man's affectation of an eye patch and his impressive facial scarring usually meant his will was rarely questioned. La'an smiled as the smooth tones hardened in his following communication, directing the trainees onto an approach astern of Theta.

“Good job guys, debrief in 15” La’an clambered from his cockpit as the other Thetan pilots did the same, their landing having progressed without incident. All four TIE Advanced’s with their distinctive squadron crests sat close in at the rear of the packed hangar, the noise levels high as fighters cycled engines and human and droid traffic passed back and forth, engaged in maintenance and other tasks.

“Whatever you say Lead, just going to watch the fun first” Horus chimed in, La’an smiling as he noted the veteran pilot sitting on the strut supporting his port solar panel, arms crossed and feet swinging as he waited for the trainee flight to land in front of them. The interceptors were tractoried in on a guided approach, the controller taking no chances as they passed through the magnetic field keeping the air and environment of the main hangar intact. The lead interceptor glided back to its own squadron area while the three rookies settled in their cleared space – two with matching damage to paintwork and the suggestion of further warping to their solar arrays and the systems around them. La’an noted the red face of the assigned crew chief and maintenance team from across the hangar – he pitied the Lieutenants for the double header they were about to receive from their own leader and the engineers, never mind whatever inventive debrief the Wing Commander would wade in with. The TIEs groaned as their cold hulls warmed, engines powering down and hatches popping open as their pilots practically burst from the cockpits and a crowd quickly gathered.

Fists flew as the two pilots went for one another, helmets scattering as their owners threw them to the ground in an effort to free a hand or get an arm around their comrades before real damage was done. The seniors hung back, knowing from experience that youthful anger and righteous fury would fade with the adrenaline in a matter of minutes. The last thing a junior pilot needed was to strike a superior officer in a moment of madness and end up with a court martial rather than a simple shouting at from their Squadron Commander and Flight Leader in turn.

As expected barely 90 seconds passed before both pilots, with bloodied lips and rapidly bruising faces, were pushed back together for an awkward shaking of hands, the tension on deck boiling away in an instant as the first insults and jokes began to fly – mostly aimed at the pilots struggling to locate their hastily discarded helmets. La’an turned back to his post-flight routines, shutting down his navi-comp, checking the cooldown rates on his engines and noting with a wry smile that his heartbeat was still steady, slow and relaxed. It had been a long while since he had felt the same adrenaline rush, the exercises and friendly drills were useful but lacked the fear factor that only real combat would bring. If he had known then how the exercise would end then perhaps a life of boredom might well have sufficed...