



Pell was sitting on his desk checking last information and orders for the fleet on his data pads. All ships reported a green status. Pell smiled. VA Pete Mitchell has organized an escort for his journey. Excellent! His organizing and leadership abilities are increasing from day to day. Pell never had regrets appointing him to his XO.

He opens a com link: "Major Nolex, how far you are with your preparations?" – "Last technical check, we can launch in about 10 minutes." – "Superb, I'll be in about 15 minutes on the ship. Giving last instructions to my Officers now. Pellaeon out!"

Two seconds later he opens another channel: "Pete, my ship is ready in about 10 minutes. My plan is to depart in 15. Saw you set up an escort for me. Excellent work! Inform them about my departure. See you in the hangar." Channel closed.

'Damn!' Pell thought 'I haven't gave him a chance to answer anything' ... 'Time to leave'

Several minutes later Pellaeon arrived in the hanger awaited by VA Pete Mitchell and MAJ Nolex.

"Pell, why are you in such a hurry?" Pete asked. "I just hate long and affective good byes." Pell

replied. "You and emotional?" Pete grinned. Pell's face frowned. "Pete, I'm going to meet the Grand Admiral to organize my retirement and the future of the TC." – "You are going to do what?..."

silence "But..." – "No buts Pete. We have to move forward. Myself, the TC and of course you too. Don't look back in sorrow, look in future confidently. Maybe the Fleet Commander refuses and puts me in the mines of Kessel." Pellaeon laughed.

VA Mitchell tightened his uniform. "You are right Pell. I'll keep the light on until your return." – "I'm sure you will. See you in one or two days. The TC is yours, Admiral."

Pellaeon walked up the stairs in his ship. Silent Major Nolex followed him and closed the door.

Two minutes later the "Bus", an Imperil Landing Craft commanded by COL Mark Schueler launched. The old Fleet Admiral felt safe on board of a ship of such an experienced pilot. Kappa Squadron launched several minutes ago as forward guard. Flanked by Theta Flight II and III they entered hyperspace. Stars became lines.

Even in his current situation, Pellaeon was studying the last evaluations and reports as a clunk jarred the ship. The lights switched from white to red. Alarm signals barked loudly.

“What the hell is going on?” Pell snappy asked. As fast as the alarm bells started their disturbing noise, they died. Pellaeon looked out of his window and gasped for air. The “Bus” was surrounded by ion-laser mines and a black shape of an Interdictor appears portsides.

“This is not the way I planned my leaving.” Pell thought loudly. He enabled a distress call on his pad, which was not influenced by the ion blasts as a raspy voice swells out of the speakers:

“Years of wasted time I was hunting you. Finally you entangled yourself in one of my traps. The welcoming committee is waiting for you. Don’t be scared ‘Admiral’, ... the judge for all of your crimes is waiting for you”

silence

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CHAPTER 1

FIRST FIRE

Space was alive.

Beams of blue ion energy cut through the swirling, multi-hued clouds of gas and dust of the Solaria Nebula, creating a web of cross-fire calculated to be impossible to avoid. Glancing at the flickering tactical display, Fleet Admiral Pellaeon could see the carefully constructed chaotic patterns within the rapidly closing web of disabling ion fire. The Imperial Lander on which he was travelling, affectionately known as ‘The Bus’ amongst the elite squadrons of the TIE Corps, lurched sideways in a hard bank, lights and displays stuttering on and off as the electronic interference disrupted their function. A burst of crackling electrical discharge arced between consoles, eliciting a loud curse from the Lander’s pilot, Colonel Mark Schueler. Pellaeon frowned at the expletive, less at the breach of decorum in the presence of a superior officer, and more at the fact that the present situation was of sufficient severity to draw such a reaction from the usually calm and collected Commander of Theta Squadron.

“Apologies, Admiral,” Schueler grunted, battling with the flight controls of his craft. A Lander was hardly the most agile of craft at the best of times, and a quick glance at the damage control unit indicated his craft had already taken several ion hits, heavily depleting the craft’s shields and compromising several of the ships systems.

“Theta One to all Flights,” Schueler switched to the comms, “I’m taking hits, shields dropping rapidly. Two, clear these mines. Three, take out that damned Interdictor so we can get out of here.” He listened as a hasty chorus of acknowledgements came back through the comms link. Grunting in frustration with the situation, he swung the nose of his craft across a line of ion mines that stretched away from the craft, firing a string of green laser fire in their direction. He was rewarded with a number of secondary explosions as several mines detonated, before he shunted what remaining laser power he had into the shields, buying his squadron a few more seconds to take out the rest.

“Kappa, what the hell are you doing out there?” Schueler barked, “You are supposed to be the escort for our cargo!”

"Kappa One to Theta One," came the crackling reply. "Three one is with your TIEs, if you care to look, as is all of flight two." Commander Alaric's tone held a hint of reprimand at the suggestion his squadron had been idle. As if to punctuate the point, the four missile boats of Kappa flight one barrelled past the view screen of the Imperial Lander Schueler was piloting, almost causing him to flinch. Their flight path was clearly one aiming to close with the hostile interdicator, but they did not fly towards the medium-sized cruiser idly. Although each Missile Boat was armed with a single laser, the four advanced fighter combined their firepower to clear the mines in their flight path with impressive efficiency. As an escort squadron, Kappa knew better than most how to clear a path through a mine field. Schueler allowed himself a momentary scowl at their efficiency. Kappa and Theta had enjoyed a fierce rivalry for years, with pilots from both squadrons begrudging in their praise for the prowess of the other. Both were fully aware it was there in abundance, but it would rarely be admitted.

"Colonel," Pellaeon asked, interrupting Schueler's thought process.

"Fleet Admiral?" Schueler replied after a moment, as he paused to briefly manoeuvre his cumbersome craft out of the path of an incoming ion barrage. Pellaeon was impressed that Schueler had managed to keep the craft functional in the face of such an all encompassing mine field. Despite the efforts of both Kappa and Theta, however, Pellaeon could read the situation clearly.

"I estimate," Pellaeon began, "We have less than 120 seconds before we are disabled."

"Sir," Schueler replied, holding his anger at the suggestion that he would be disabled in check, "Theta will get us out of..." Pellaeon cut him off.

"Colonel, I am fully aware of the tactical situation and, despite the efforts of you and your squadron, we will be disabled. This trap is too well set to avoid that. Focus all your efforts on sending as much data to the Corps as possible. I have already sent the distress signal, and this close to our home world, help will undoubtedly be here shortly. Ensure they have the fullest details on the tactical situation. Seventy seconds now, Colonel."

Schueler wanted to argue, but a glance at his systems display stubbornly supported the Fleet Admiral's assessment. His fingers gripped tighter around the flight stick in anger, but he was first and foremost a pilot of the TIE Corps, and would not allow pride to go before the good of the corps. Reaching over to the communications panel, he flicked a switch. A continuous data stream began transmission. It would be picked up by the wide network of comms satellites filling the Aurora system, and soon every vessel in the Emperor's Hammer fleet would be fully apprised of the situation.

A warning tone announced the final collapse of the shields protecting 'The Bus' from the incoming ion fire. As Pellaeon had predicted, despite the efforts of two thirds of both Kappa and Theta, the mine field was too intense to have avoided for long. A second tone warned that Theta 1-4, the sister ship to Schueler's own, had already been disabled. The Colonel wondered how much longer he could avoid the same fate. He heard Pellaeon activate the comms unit from his position in the hold.

"This is Fleet Admiral Pellaeon to all Imperial fighters," He began, "My craft is facing imminent disabling. Take out that Interdicator, clear the mines and await the repair vessels that will already be en-route. That is all." Schueler glanced back at the Admiral. Having given his orders, he was now sat almost leisurely in his seat, quite calm about the situation and obvious danger they remained in.

Schueler refocused his attention, lurching his increasingly sluggish craft out of the way of a barrage of incoming ion fire, buying them a few more seconds. But no more. Moments later, the carefully

designed cross fires of the mine field, constructed with multiple redundancies, bore their inevitable fruit. A cluster of mines aft of the Lander fired into the rear arc of the unshielded ship, causing every electrical system in the vessel to die. Schueler felt the artificial gravity fail, and the press of his harness intensify as it was now all that held him in his seat. The internal lighting died also, bathing the cockpit and hold beyond in the eerie light of the swirling nebula beyond the view screen.

Schueler thumped his head back against the headrest in frustration.

"Krell," he cursed.

"Language, Colonel," Pellaeon replied. The sheer formality of his tone made Schueler stifle a smirk.

"My apologies, Admiral. I have failed you," The admission pained Schueler more than he could have explained.

"I do not see how," Pellaeon answered. "You avoided being disabled for a full thirty seven seconds longer than was mathematically possible, given the density of the mine field. Defeating the laws of physics and mathematics is, I feel, the minimum requirement for a position within our elite squadrons, would you not say?"

Schueler took the compliment, but the situation remained a bitter pill to swallow. The elite of the TIE Corps did NOT get disabled, damn what the laws of physics, maths or tactics may say. He peered around the view screen, trying to catch sight of the remaining Imperial fighters. The interdictor was a distant silhouette against the broiling gas clouds, illuminated more by the detonation of warheads against its shields than the pale light of the nebula. Closer explosions told of the efforts of Kappa and Theta as they cleared the still-expansive mine field, preparing the way for the relief vessels that would already be approaching. He could not help but feel the frustration of inaction as he watched his comrades still taking the fight to this so far unidentified foe. He turned to the Admiral, still sat leisurely behind him.

"Permission to speak, Admiral?" Schueler asked. Such formality was usually unnecessary, but he felt it would indicate the possibility of a difficult question to come.

"Within reason," Pellaeon answered. Schueler only hesitated briefly. You did not get to be Commander of an elite fighter squadron if you weren't prepared to take at least a few risks.

"When we were first pulled out of hyperspace, whoever this is messaged you directly, claimed to be your 'judge'." Schueler ventured.

"Indeed." Pellaeon answered, curtly. He seemed disinclined to say more, but Schueler pressed on. He needed to know who to direct his vengeance towards, and it seemed as if the Admiral might be able to shed some light on the matter.

"Any idea who this 'judge' might be?" He asked, before quickly adding, "illegitimate judge, of course."

"Colonel, when you have served the Emperor's Hammer as long as I have, there will be a very long list of people seeking the opportunity to sit as your judge. I do not doubt you have a reasonably long list already. A few previous Kappa Kommanders seem to come to mind." That raised a smile from Schueler, despite himself.

"I admit, I've never thought of it like that," Schueler mused, "Surely you have some idea who would attempt such an audacious move so deep into EH territory?"

“Several.” There was a tone in Pellaeon’s voice that indicated clearly that, for the moment, was as much as Schueler was going to get. The Colonel turned once again to gaze out of the view screen, watching the silent battle still raging around him.

“A question for you, now, Colonel,” Pellaeon voice came. “Where, do you suppose, are their star fighters?”

Schueler had no answer.