

PROLOGUE

Captain Neez Jino of the Dreadnaught *Night Shadow* looked through the transparisteel viewport that separated the bridge of his ship from the cold emptiness of space. In the distance he could see the exhaust glow of the last of the transports that had delivered a large supply of warheads. A half dozen TIE starfighters were escorting the transport to its hyperspace jump point. It wasn't long before he saw the short flash indicating the transport had made the jump to lightspeed, and then he saw nothing. He knew the TIE fighters had already turned back towards the *Night Shadow*. Still - the fighters were so small, he wouldn't actually see them until they were very close.

"We're ready to jump, sir," the navigation officer said. Jino nodded. "We'll jump as soon as our fighters have returned," he said. Jino's thoughts wandered off. In a few hours, he would deliver the weapons in his storage bays, and a large sum of Imperial credits would find their way into several of his accounts. He allowed himself a smile.

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Ten clicks from the *Night Shadow*, Commander Salk held the yoke of his TIE fighter as he steered it back towards the *Night Shadow*. On his screen, he could see 7 blips. One of them represented his fighter, five others his flight mates, and the last one his target, the Dreadnaught. If he squinted his eyes, he thought he could make out the shadow of the medium sized starship. He wasn't sure though if he really saw it: it was far away, and the hull was painted in a very dark color. He could just be imagining things. Still - only one minute and he'd be so close there would be no trouble at all to see it.

"Leader to flight," he said into his mike. "Report in." He waited, as one by one the five pilots in his wake acknowledged their status. He smiled. He had trained them well. Slowly, the shadow that he thought was the *Night Shadow* grew clearer. Only a little longer and he could leave the cramped cockpit of his TIE fighter.

A bleep disturbed his thoughts. He glanced at his computer and noticed a new blip, a yellow one, on his HUD. At the same time he heard the alarming shout of one of his pilots. Salk quickly looked around outside his fighter. At first he didn't see anything. Then he turned left, and he saw a bright green flare. His eyes opened wide as his brain registered what he saw and identified it. The next moment the green light passed through his canopy, and before he could utter another sound, his TIE fighter was ripped apart when the ion engines right behind him exploded.

From his TIE fighter, not far behind Commander Salk, the newest pilot in the *Night Shadow's* squadron looked with his eyes wide at what happened before them. Out of nothing, a massive grey, dagger shaped ship had appeared. The young pilot knew enough to recognize the shape of a Star Destroyer. What he didn't understand was why the Star Destroyer, as soon as it had exited hyperspace, had opened fire on the shieldless TIE fighters flying right under its belly. He didn't have time to ponder the strange things either, as only moments after he watched Salk's fighter be destroyed by a direct hit from the Star Destroyer's turbo laser batteries, his own fighter suffered the same fate.

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Aboard the *Night Shadow's* bridge, Jino was raging with anger. Only a handful of clicks away, a *Victory-class* Star Destroyer had come out of hyperspace and started blasting his TIE Fighters. Even worse, it had also started raining fire from turbo laser batteries towards him. For a moment he thought about recovering his pilots, but he already knew it was hopeless.

Explosions on the outer hull of his ship resonated through the entire ship. "Raise the damned shields!" he shouted. The Star Destroyer was far enough away for him to realize the shields should be able to withstand the barrage. The violence that made his ship tremble made him suspect they were caught with the shields down.

"I can't raise the shields!" a panicked voice shouted in response. "They hit the shield generators!"

Jino's mind raced. This was **not** how he wanted this day to end.

"Make the jump to light speed!" he shouted. "Get us out of here! Now!"

A moment silence followed, and another voice responded. "Ready for jump to hyperspace. Jumping in ten seconds!"

Jino's mind raced. Ten seconds seemed like a lifetime. The Star Destroyer had already turned towards them, and was bringing all its forward batteries to bear now. One explosion followed another, and Jino realized ten seconds was probably a few seconds too much. He closed his eyes and sighed, accepting that this was not going to be the best day in his life, but it probably was going to be the last day.

Right at the moment one of the officers pulled the handle that engaged the hyperdrive of the Dreadnaught *Night Shadow*, a volley of turbo laser fire pierced the hull of the ship. The *Night Shadow* trembled as the hyperdrive kicked in. As the ship started its rapid acceleration, the turbo laser fire penetrated the ship's cargo bays and hit the cargo of warheads. As the *Night Shadow* accelerated, the weaponry exploded with enough power to completely rip the Dreadnaught apart. As the ship broke into two with the midsection ablaze, the rear section with the hyperdrive at full power accelerated while the front section, completely separated, lost its momentum. The rear section smacked into the front section, flattening it and everyone and everything inside, before one big explosion set the entire ship in flames.

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Aboard the Star Destroyer's bridge, Vice Admiral Hfaga stared at the fireball emanating from the Dreadnaught. She watched, as large chunks of the ship's hull were flying in all directions, some clicks away from the explosion itself as the remnants of the ship were flung across a large part of the area. She heard loud clangs as parts of the ship's hull collided with the Star Destroyer's hull. They'd been very close when they had opened fire, she knew they'd have to take some collateral damage, but there was little to be done. She knew the Dreadnaught would only need seconds to escape, so opening fire with all batteries was the only course of action.

"Target destroyed, ma'am." The voice behind her informed her only of what she already knew. She had seen the Dreadnaught explode just at the moment it tried to enter hyperspace. A perfectly executed attack, just as she liked it.

"Advise the *Karimba* they may make the jump," she said. "It appears the area has been secured,"

A few minutes later, a large passenger cruiser entered the area a few clicks from the Star Destroyer. Hfaga looked to her side. "Launch Alpha squadron," she said. "Standard patrol maneuvers. We'll start ferrying over the supplies in five minutes. Advise them we do expect trouble, that Dreadnaught was not alone here."

CHAPTER ONE

RESUPPLY

Major Whick climbed into the cockpit of his TIE Interceptor starfighter. He put on his helmet and connected to oxygen hoses to his pilot's suit. Then, he closed the canopy and locked it above his head. A quick glance around him told him his flight mates had also entered their fighters.

A computerized voice echoed through his comm system. "Flight One. Launch sequence initiated. T minus fifteen."

Whick smiled. He placed his hands on his knees as he always did at this point. Unlike many other pilots, he never held the yoke of his fighter during launch. It was a superstition of his - he always feared he would make a crazy move with his arms during launch, and then smash his TIE fighter into the launch arms that were to release him from the Star Destroyer's hangar bay. It was an irrational idea, as it was virtually impossible to actually do that, but superstition was irrational.

A tremor went through his fighter as the launch arm started moving and lowered his fighter. He looked through his canopy, and saw the hangar bay of the Star Destroyer disappear out of view and be replaced by the blackness of outer space. As soon as his fighter was cleared, the arm stopped moving. A bleeping sound told him the docking clamps had been released, and he punched the throttle. For a slight second, nothing happened. Then the ion engines whined and the fighter jumped forward. Free at last. To Whick, there was no greater feeling than what he felt at the moment of release, the first moment of complete control over his fighter. Not even that Terellian slavegirl he'd met a few months ago could best this feeling.

Whick pulled on his yoke, and the fighter swerved away from the Star Destroyer. He glanced at his HUD, and saw three red dots right behind him, following his every move. In the distance, a yellow dot sat silently. He turned on the targeting computer, and selected the yellow dot.

According to his targeting computer, the craft was a Leonore Incorporated C-3 class passenger liner. According to the briefing officer who had briefed his flight on their mission, it was a modified version for cargo transport. Unarmed, but with a large cargo capacity and a small hangar capable of holding, launching, and retrieving a handful of starfighters. He smiled, as his computer decoded the craft's IFF signal. The computer beeped as it labeled the craft with its name. The *Karimba*, just as he was told. So far, everything checked out. He pointed his craft towards the *Karimba*, and hit the throttle. As his fighter accelerated to maximum speed, he watched as the computer quickly rolled down the number indicating his distance from the craft. Eight clicks. Only little less than a two minute flight.

About a minute later, Whick's computer signalled the arrival of a new craft. He thumbed a button on his yoke, and the targeting computer brought up the new arrival. A Tyderian shuttle. Whick swerved and pointed his fighter towards it. Long ago, he had learned never to take anything on face value. A quick flyby should reveal to him if the shuttle was carrying the cargo it should. No surprise there, his computer quickly scanned the shuttle, and confirmed the craft indeed carried a supply of bacta as it should. Whick smiled. Easy game. Whick swerved his fighter and slowed down to match the shuttle's speed. The shuttle needed a good four minutes to reach the Star Destroyer, and it was only the first. This was going to be a very long day.

"This is gonna take awhile," a voice echoed in Whick's helmet. He snapped out of a thought, momentarily unsure of who spoke.

"Cut the chatter, Two," he responded almost on the spot. He knew how his wingmen felt though. The second shuttle had just exited the *Karimba's* hangar, and he had turned his fighter towards it. The first shuttle only needed a few more seconds to enter the Star Destroyer's hangar bay, so he could safely turn his attention on the new arrival. This was boring him. Only a few months ago, he had flown with a squadron on the front lines. But when he was offered a command position, he'd jumped at it. Little did he know his days of action were going to be over.

As he approached the shuttle, his computer blared a warning. He glanced over his HUD and saw a green blip appear. Whick frowned. Green meant hostile. He hadn't heard a word about possible hostile action during his preflight briefing. He flicked a button on his yoke, and the targeting computer revealed the image of a *Nebulon B*-class frigate. The modified version. Whick cursed through his teeth as he started charging his weapons. More alarms blared, and Whick realized the frigate had started launching fighters. A quick glance told him they were launching both fighters and bombers. Thoughts raced through his mind, but he decided to stay with the shuttle until he knew what the enemy was doing.

It didn't take long to figure it out. The computer indicated the enemy TIE Bombers were targeting the *Karimba*, while the enemy fighters were targeting him. He flicked a switch.

"Alpha Leader to Flight Control. Enemy bombers are engaging friendlies. Engage them or stay on target. Please advise."

A moment of static followed, and then a familiar voice responded.

"Alpha Leader, stay on target. Additional fighters will be launched to deal with the enemy Bombers."

Whick flicked another switch, changing the comm frequency back to his flight group's. "Alpha flight, we're staying on escort, but keep an eye on your six." He didn't bother waiting for responses. He knew his wingmen were doing exactly what he was doing. Finally, action, and they were sitting on the sidelines.

A few moments later, a flight of TIE Interceptors shot past him en route to intercepting the enemy Bombers. He cursed. What he wouldn't give to swap places.

"Leader, watch your six!" The voice broke the silence, and Whick instinctively pulled on his yoke. As he veered off, he saw green lasers shot by his fighter. He sighed. Without that cry from his wingman, his fighter would have taken that quad burst without escape. He targeted the closest attacker and noticed that the enemy fighters were way too close. He hissed.

"Alpha flight, get those squints out of my sight." At the same time he targeted the nearest of the enemy fighters, and pulled his own fighter into a tight roll until the enemy appeared before him. He linked all four of his laser cannons, waited until he had the enemy in his crosshairs, and fired two volleys. His quad bursts hit the enemy fighter directly aft, they pierced the hull of the enemy, and the fighter's ion engines exploded, taking the fighter along.

"Nice shot Leader," he heard over his comm, but he didn't register it. He was flying on autopilot now. He targeted the next enemy fighter, and started to pursue.

Only moments, a voice cracked through his comm that he did hear.

"Flight Control to Alpha. The *Karimba's* taking damage, they're launching the remaining shuttles now. Get over there and stick with them."

Whick grunted. Still, there was little he could do. "Alpha, form up on my six," he said as he hit the throttle and pointed his fighter back towards the *Karimba*. Even from this distance, he could see an explosion close to the ship. An enemy torpedo that had detonated on impact with the *Karimba's* shields. He punched up his targeting computer, and saw that its shields were failing quickly, they were already below 50%. It seemed they had already started to move towards the hyperspace jump point. If they didn't need much longer to jump, they would probably make it.

What worried Whick more were the three shuttles flying in close formation, turning themselves into a rather easy target. And he wasn't the only one to notice it. One of the enemy flight groups had turned towards the shuttles.

"Alpha, tag the shuttles and start going after whoever's gunning for them. We need those shuttles safe!" With this, he picked the closest of the enemy fighters, broke formation, and started an attack run. As he approached the enemy, he saw they'd started firing, and he noticed from the corner of his eyes the enemy's laserfire bouncing off the shuttle's shields. But those shields wouldn't last too long. Without a solid lock, he unlinked his lasers and hit the fire button. Alternating, the four laser cannons on the tips of his solar panels started spewing green light. The lasers strayed and didn't hit the enemy, but the effect was the same. They still caught the enemy pilot off guard, and he veered his fighter away from the shuttles. Unfortunately for him, he turned his fighter in the exact direction Whick had anticipated. Another quad burst, and a moment later he saw the enemy fighter spin off as the strut holding the portside solar panel had been blown. With only one panel, the fighter had lost all stability and was beyond control. Whick pondered going after it, but decided against it. He pulled his yoke, and turned his fighter ready to attack another enemy.

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On the bridge of the *Victory*-class Star Destroyer *Indomitable*, Vice Admiral Hfaga watched as the battle was nearing its end. The *Karimba* had made the jump to hyperspace shortly after its shields had completely failed, all five of the shuttles had safely reached the hangar bay, although one had sustained some heavy damage, and the last of the enemy fighters were being chased down. In the distance, she saw the burning bulk of the once proud *Nebulon B*-class frigate that had attacked them. A foolish act, they were no match for the firepower of a Star Destroyer of the Emperor's Hammer. She smiled.

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Major Whick was cursing himself non stop. One moment of losing his attention had cost him dearly. While he had chased an enemy TIE Bomber down, he'd gotten a little too close. The heavily damaged bomber was limping away with nowhere to go. The bomber had no hyperdrive, and with its mothership in flames, there was no escape. Whick linked his laser cannons, and fired two bursts of fire into the bomber's aft. The bomber rocked, and exploded. Whick veered off, but he was too close. While he overshot the enemy fighter, shrapnel from the explosion collided with his fighter. The portside solar panel was shredded, and one of his ion engines also took a beating. Whick did not like the sound it was making, and instinctively he ejected. Seconds later, his fighter was torn apart by the exploding ion engine.

And so he was now drifting in space. He was angry with himself for making a mistake like this. One he would never make again. Even if it was because he didn't like his current situation. His flight suit protected him from the vacuum of space, but it could not keep out the cold. He was shivering. Still, soon the search-and-rescue craft from the *Indomitable* would pick him up and his ordeal would be over. After all, it couldn't take them long to pick up his flight suit's emergency beacon.

In the mean time, he stared at the shape of the *Indomitable* in the distance. A mighty sight indeed. Then his eyes widened, followed by his mouth making an inaudible sound, as he watched the Star Destroyer make the jump to light speed. Instantaneously, Whick realized there was not going to be a search-and-rescue craft...

CHAPTER TWO

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

Vice Admiral Hfaga went over the report on her desk for the third time. She'd been double crossed. It was hard to believe. Here she was, an Admiral aboard a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer flying under the flag of the Emperor's Hammer, and those sithspitting mercenaries had double-crossed her. She knew she would never allow them to get away with that. Unfortunately, there were more pressing matters at hand. The supplies she'd received were rather crucial in the near future, supposing of course that she wanted to actually survive. As soon as her superiors figured out something was not quite right with the way the *Indomitable* was going about its business, there'd be hell to pay.

She glanced at the report again and sighed. These mercenaries had been the only non-Imperial source for the equipment she'd wanted. Although a mighty warship, a Vic was no match for its big brother, the *Imperial*-class Star Destroyer. Sooner or later, the *Indomitable* would have to face one of those, and she wasn't to keen on the outcome of such a battle. Not without the equipment that was stolen from her grasp.

The supplies she had paid for were not easy to come by. Not because they were expensive, but for the very simple reason they were pretty dangerous toys. But, when used right, they could amplify the output of the *Indomitable's* shield generators. Preliminary calculations had indicated she might even be able to boost their output to match that of a Deuce.

She sighed again. She knew of only one place where she could get this stuff, and she didn't like to go there. For the moment, the Emperor's Hammer was unaware of her true intentions. The Dreadnaught *Night Shadow* had been caught unaware and had been unable to transmit a signal to betray them. But if she were to engage an Imperial facility, there would be no such happy outcome. And so, a full frontal attack was out of the question. Soon, the Fleet Commander and his new TC COM pet would learn the truth, but not yet. Not while she was unprepared.

And so, the only alternative was deception. The wheels had been set in motion already. The only reason she kept going over the report was to stop herself from pondering her next move. But there was nothing that could be done.

A bleep from her comm unit told her it was time to make an appearance on the *Indomitable's* bridge. And so she got up, and walked out the door.

A few moments later, Hfaga stepped onto the bridge of her Star Destroyer. Floating in space before her was the silhouette of an old and battered bulk freighter. She looked at Captain Freque. "Are we ready, Captain?" she asked.

The Captain, a man with grey hair, simply nodded. "Engineers were dropped off onto the freighter eight minutes ago," he said. "The cargo transport is preparing to board as we speak. After that, it should be only a few hours before she's ready."

Hfaga didn't respond. A few hours was a long time to wait, but she knew there was no other way. The freighter would hyper to the Imperial research facility at Glann Dore Daichii. There, it would head towards the platform at flank speed. Only a minute or so afterwards, the *Indomitable* would hyper in. And if all went according to plan, she would hyper out before any Imperial warship in the area would arrive in response to a distress signal. And even that was doubtful, as the plan didn't include giving the facility enough time to send one.

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Shada Ronal, Lieutenant First Class, Junior Grade, was sitting in the chair on the observation deck of the Imperial Research facility Glann Dore Daichii. It was the first time he was running a shift without the direct supervision of a superior officer. Finally, he had earned enough credits to be allowed to run the shift alone. Just like a real Imperial officer. Ronal had dreamed of this day for a long time. It was going to be his first step on a long and difficult road that would eventually lead to an Admiral's rank. And command of his own space station, or even one of the mighty Star Destroyers in the Emperor's Hammer's Navy.

But today, he was just the night shift, making sure no crazy things went wrong. Then again, nothing ever went wrong in this corner of the galaxy.

Ronal looked at the dozens of security images flashing on the screens before him. The hangar bays, access doors to the labs, landing platforms, everything looked normal. He switched to the surveillance system outside, keeping an eye on the supply containers in close proximity. Nothing there either. Or was there. Ronal frowned. Did he see something or was it his imagination playing tricks with him? He pulled the camera up on his main viewer, and went with maximum magnification. There definitely was something there that had not been there a moment before. He looked at the readings taken by one of the security satellites. It had detected a ship coming out of hyperspace, but had not bothered informing him of such. He made a mental note to himself to make a full report of this.

He punched a few keys on his station, and the image on the main viewscreen was replaced by a schematic. The computer had identified the new arrival: a *Brayl*-class bulk freighter, a SoroSuub design. The computer also mentioned that the ship was not an expected arrival.

Ronal punched his comm system. "Unidentified *Brayl*-class Freighter, this is Emperor's Hammer outpost Glann Dore Daichii. Identify yourself and state your purpose." He waited, then repeated his hail. Nothing. He punched another key. "Observation Deck to Duty Officer. Sir, we have an unidentified freighter on approach, it's not responding to communications."

Several decks below the observation deck, Major Ven listened as the young officer transmitted what little information he had. Ven didn't need long to consider his options. He flicked a switch, and dialed the hangar.

The deck officer on Daichii's main hanger barked some orders, and less than 30 seconds after the orders had come in, the first of the station's Z-95 Headhunters lifted off the deck, and move through the forcefield separating the hangar from space. As soon as they were through, the engine exhausts glowed red, and the fighters shot away into the blackness. In quick succession, six fighters took off. The deck officer grimaced as he decided to schedule some extra training drills. Thirty seconds for the first fighter to clear the hangar was too long.

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Commander Dakis quickly directed his fighter towards the *Brayl*-class freighter in the distance. The freighter was moving towards the station, although there was no danger of a collision, and was not responding to attempts at communication. He had not been told any more. He figured that either they knew more and didn't tell him, or they didn't know anymore themselves. He didn't care. He was a pilot, and he would point his fighter where they wanted him to go.

He quickly approached the freighter. It might be moving fast, but that was relative to a freighter's cruising speed. His Z-95 Headhunter was faster. And so, it took him less than a minute to reach the freighter. Dakis didn't bother sending a signal. If the freighter's crew wasn't responding to a signal from Daichii, they wouldn't respond to him either, and so he just activated his short-range sensors, and went for a close flyby.

His computer was apparantly having a hard time figuring out what to do with the signal the sensors received from the freighter. In the end, the computer came up with an error message. Dakis smacked the computer with his fist and tried again. Again, without success. He keyed his comm system.

"Daichii, this is Big Daddy. The sensors cannot confirm the freighter's cargo. Advise." For a moment, the radio went silent.

"Big Daddy, you are cleared to open fire. Make sure that freighter does not get much closer. Target is red. I repeat, target is red."

Dakis smiled. It had been way too long since he'd had the chance to shoot at anything that wasn't part of a drill. And so, he flipped on his lasers, looped his fighter back towards the freighter, aligned it in his sights, and hit the fire switch. Red lasers shot out from the wing-mounted cannons, and hit the freighter's hull. The first few didn't do much, but he could see some of the laser piercing the ship's hull. '*Piece of cake,*' he thought. A moment later, his fighter shot past the freighter. Dakis prepared for another run, as suddenly his targeting computer went blank. A weird whining sound came from his engines, and then they stopped making any sound at all. His cockpit went dark. He frowned. Then a shockwave slammed into his fighter and threw it into a roll. As he rolled, he saw the explosion fade away that had destroyed the freighter. In the distance he saw Daichii station, but something was wrong. As the station rolled out of view, he realized all the lights had gone out. Dakis had seen this before. An electromagnetic pulse. But he was unaware of a pulse weapon strong enough to knock out power all over Daichii station. He wondered if he was right, or imagining things. He would never know, as a moment later he blacked out.

CHAPTER THREE

GLANN DORE DAICHII

Lieutenant Galto grabbed the yoke of his Cygnus XG-1 Assault Gunboat as the fighter returned to realspace after a short stay in hyperspace. He quickly assessed the situation before him and found everything to be as he had been told during his briefing. The Glann Dore Daichii Imperial Research station had lost all power, and the few starfighters on patrol were also drifting. Quickly he pointed his fighter towards the nearest enemy fighter, and hit full throttle. At this speed, it still took him almost twenty seconds to reach the fighter. Galto had no love for Assault Gunboats. Yes, they could take a beating, yes, they could pack some serious punch, but they were simply too slow for his taste. Still, that didn't matter when the enemy could not run away, and so he lined up the fighter in his crosshairs, and sent three bursts of lasers in quick succession. The Z-95 Headhunter exploded, and before the explosion had faded, Galto was already going for the second fighter. Less than thirty seconds later, all enemy fighters had been destroyed.

Galto keyed a signal and sent it. All that he could do now was wait. He double-checked all his systems, and waited. Fortunately, his wait didn't take long. Only moments later, three craft emerged from hyperspace: two assault transports, and a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer. The Vic took position not far from the station, while the transports quickly made their way towards the station. Galto smiled. Piece of cake.

Or maybe not.... suddenly his computer showed several green blips - enemy starfighters. He targeted one. The outpost was now launching more Z-95 Headhunters. Galto smiled some more. This would be far more enjoyable than shooting the disabled ones. He turned his fighter, and kicked the throttle hard. The three Assault Gunboats moved as one, but three Gunboats against a full squadron of Headhunters were not favorable odds. Galto listened as his flight leader ordered him and the third fighter to engage the enemy Headhunters. The ones attacking their transports would be the priority targets, and so Galto picked one of them. Just as he got in range he saw the Headhunter fire a missile. Moments later, Galto's laserfire slashed through the thin shields of the Headhunter and it exploded. Galto's eye followed the missile as it was headed straight for one of the transports. It slammed into its shields, and Galto saw on his scope that the shields held. Good. Without being delayed any further, he punched up the next target, and pulled his yoke to get him in line with his target.

By the time they had dispatched of the entire Headhunter squadron, both Assault Transports had entered the station's hangar bay, and all they could do now was wait until the troopers aboard had what they had come for. Galto was not a fan of waiting.

"Three," a voice sounded in his headset. "I'm picking up 6 containers in close orbit of the station. Go check them out, perhaps they carry any useful supplies."

Galto acknowledged, and veered out of formation towards the first of the containers. Even though it was some distance away, he could clearly see its shape. The container was huge, far bigger than his fighter. But, unshielded and unarmed, it was not much to worry about. As he approached the container, his computer did a quick scan to reveal it was loaded with bacta. Quickly, Galto made his way to the other containers, and scanned their contents. Once he had completed his run, he transmitted his data to his flight leader, who would undoubtedly transmit it through to the flight officer aboard the *Indomitable*. Galto imagined how it would all go. The flight officer would probably take the data to his superior, who would then decide what to do. Then his orders would travel all the way back to them.

And indeed, it was not long before the signal came: all containers were to be destroyed. And so Galto saw his flight leader and wingmen head towards the containers. Only moments later, he saw blue flashes as their proton torpedos started on the way.

Just as he was about to fire a torpedo himself, a voice entered through his headset. "Transports have emerged from the station. Theta flight, destroy that station." Barely noticeable, Galto swallowed. For a moment he hesitated. He hadn't worried about shooting down the enemy starfighters, but this was different. The station was carrying mostly civilians, not soldiers.

Galto's hesitation lasted for only a fraction of a second. Then he turned his fighter towards the station, waited until his targeting computer acquired a lock, and then he fired all of his torpedos at Daichii station. He saw from the corner of his eye that the others had also fired their torpedoes.

Without the energy shields to protect it, Glann Dore Daichii was an easy target. One after the other, the proton torpedoes smacked against the outer hull of the station, exploding on impact, or tearing through the hull and exploding after their penetration. It didn't take a very long time before most of the station was burning, and venting atmosphere into space. Smaller explosions from within the station told Galto that it wouldn't take long for their fuel supplies to detonate, the power core to overload, and whatnot else. He turned his fighter back towards the *Indomitable*, and flew home. He did not look back, and did not see the huge fireball engulfing Daichii station when indeed the power core overloaded and vaporized the entire station.

CHAPTER FOUR

PORTENTS OF TROUBLE

Declan Turr was the best in his field. Pretty much everyone in the field knew it, and so did he. Over the years, it had made him arrogant. More than once, it had gotten him into trouble with his superiors. It was just about the only reason he was still a major. Everytime he was up for a promotion, he'd manage to get into an argument with some knucklehead up the chain of command, and it would fall through again. He was overdue that promotion by the better part of a decade. And that made him even more arrogant, as there was little to lose. That promotion was never going to come, too many feathers had been rustled.

And so Declan had come to accept his fate. Well, he could handle it, accepting it was something he would never do. And someday, he knew, he would get back at all those who had prevented his ascension to the upper echelons.

Still, at this moment, these thoughts were far from his mind. He was flying the *Tambourine*, a craft of his own design. Years ago, he had combined parts from Tyderian shuttles, stormtrooper transports, and several Assault Gunboats, and constructed the ugliest sight most pilots had ever seen. Still, he had not built it to win beauty contests. The *Tambourine* was designed to match his exact needs. Over the years, hundreds of modifications had been made, and he was proud to say the hardware and software that came with his sensor equipment was the best that money could buy.

At a crawling pace, Declan was piloting the *Tambourine* through the debris field that at some point had been the Imperial Research facility of Glann Dore Daichii. His sensor array was operating at full capacity. In the distance, the *Imperial II-class Star Destroyer Challenge* was silently staying out of harm's way. A few dozen tugs and heavy lifters were collecting debris and returning it to the *Challenge* for analysis. They had arrived almost a full day earlier, on a simple routine mission to this place, investigating the station's failure to present its weekly status report to the Science Office. What they had found was not the station with a failing transmitter as they had expected, but a large debris field. Someone had completely obliterated everything here, leaving no apparant survivors to tell the tale. Despite reservations, Admiral Darklord, Commodore of the *Challenge*, had insisted they bring in Declan Turr. And so, here he was.

Declan looked at the millions of bits of information his sensors had collected. He decided to make one more pass around the debris field, and then head back to the *Challenge* to start analyzing the data. That would take the better part of the day, he knew. And then, only a small part of the information contained in the data would have been found. A complete analysis would take at least two to three weeks. Still, his preliminary report would find itself to Darklord's desk before the end of this day, he knew. Someone was making waves, and they had to be stopped.

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Around fifteen hours later, Declan Turr hit the chime next to the door to Darklord's office aboard the Star Destroyer *Challenge*. The door opened, and he stepped through. Without waiting for a sign from the Admiral, or even the obligatory salute, he sat down. He noticed a slight movement in one of Darklord's eyebrows and knew he'd already hit a wrong button. He didn't care. The whole chain of command could swim with the dianoga's in the trash compactors as far as he cared. He casually dropped his pad on Darklord's desk. Darklord grabbed it and started reading.

"How accurate is this?" he asked. Declan smiled. "There's always a chance of error," he started, "but I'd guess the margin of error on this one is about as small as it gets." He pointed at the pad. "It's all there. They're very vague since this attack happened several days ago, but the evidence is there. Remnant energy signatures, battle damage, debris, everything points to an attack using heavy Imperial weapons. I've even found a piece of debris that indicates they used the new Mark 3 proton torpedo."

Darklord frowned. The Mark 3 was still classified, and only a handful of ships had been issued them for testing purposes. Someone like Declan had no business knowing of their existence. On the other hand, it did not surprise him at all Declan knew. In his line of work, information was key. "Anything else?" he asked.

Declan smiled. "I have my systems working on a complete analysis of all the information I have," he said. "I'll return to my ship shortly and go over the info as well. I will have a complete analysis for you in around a week or so."

"A week is too long..." Darklord started, but was interrupted when Declan raised his hand.

"That's too bad," he said. "It's the time I need to do the job properly, so you can either get a half-cocked report loaded with Bantha dung conclusions, or you can be patient and get something actually useful. I'll have a semi-definite report in 3 days, and that's it."

Darklord clinched his fist under his desk. He'd like to grab the man before him and smack his head through a bulkhead. But, he had brought this upon himself when he insisted they bring him in on this.

"Anything important comes up I want to know about it immediately," he said. "Now get going, you're behind schedule." He knew that probably had no effect on Declan, who got up, turned, and left the office. Darklord looked the the info on the datapad again. Everything so far was pointing to an Imperial attacker. This was not good.

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Vice Admiral Hfaga stared out the transparisteel window on the bridge of the Star Destroyer *Indomitable*. For ten days straight, every engineer on the ship had been working on only one job: upgrading the *Indomitable's* shield generators. And now, they had informed her they were prepared for a preliminary test. And so she had ordered the *Indomitable* out of hyperspace. Ever since the attack on the Glann Dore Daichii facility, the *Indomitable* had been flying around in hyperspace, making one jump after another, allowing only minutes between one jump and the next. It was a necessity. While the engineers were working, the *Indomitable* was extremely vulnerable, as the shield generators had been taken off line. Getting them up and running again would take a few hours, so they couldn't risk running into any surprises. And hyperspace was a pretty safe place to be. The past ten days had put an enormous strain on the hyperdrive engines, and Hfaga knew she would need to get them replaced as soon as the shield generators were done. With the amount of running time in the past few days, they had seriously overstrained the engines. Already a few instabilities had crept into the hyperdrive system, which meant it had now become unreliable. And she could not use unreliable at this moment.

A loud noise reverberated through the ship as the *Indomitable* reverted back to realspace. She cringed. A hyperdrive was not supposed to make that sound. Ever. And she knew everyone on this bridge was thinking the same thing she was. Still that was for another day. In the distance, she could see the red dwarf star of the Pakuuni system. The system had been devoid of life for decades, after the Pakuuni people had decided to revolt against the Empire. The Empire's response had been swift and thorough. The planet Pakuuni had suffered orbital bombardment for days, six Imperial Star Destroyers firing their weapons at the surface unrelentingly. She had been there as rookie officer, amazed at the power of the Empire. She longed back for those days.

"All systems report green, sir," one of the officers said. She smiled. "Then I suggest we get our test going." She turned and looked around the bridge. No one was looking at her, all paying attention only to their task. "Raise the shields, 25 percent power."

She heard a slight hum as the shield generators came online. She intensely stared out the window. Every time she thought she should be able to see something, and everytime she couldn't. The hum grew fainter until she couldn't hear it anymore.

"Shields stable at 25 percent," the officer said. She motioned with her hand. "Increasing shield output, 5 percent per minute."

Salis Weir was an experienced officer aboard the *Indomitable*. He was sitting behind an impressive array of monitors, switches and information screens, glancing over all of them and taking in their information. Right now, most of his attention was divided between the sensors reading the shield strength, and the reactor core's power levels. He was slightly worried. Although the shields were slowly increasing as planned, so was the reactor's output. And that had not been planned. The engineers had told him they would be draining a lot of energy from the *Indomitable's* main reactor, but that they would be compensating that from other systems. Power output levels were to remain more or less stable. For a few moments, he wondered about his options.

"Admiral," he said, a little hesitant. "I am not sure if this is a problem, but the reactor's output is increasing, it is now 10 percent above nominal." Uncharacteristic for the Admiral, she didn't respond from where she stood, but actually walked over to his station.

"Unsuspected," she murmured. He nodded. "We are still well within the safety limits," he continued, "but you did ask to be appraised of anything out of the ordinary." Hfaga motioned with her hand, and the officer handling the shields pulled a lever back. "Shield output stable at 58 percent," he said. Hfaga looked at the monitor on Weir's station. The energy output of the main reactor was still climbing. She didn't like this. Several thoughts shot through her mind. "Disengage shields," she said. The officer pulled the lever back, and another soft hum was heard as the shield generators powered down. "Shields are now offline," the officer said.

Hfaga returned to her favorite spot on the bridge and pondered her options. "Have the science team analyze the situation," she said. "I want a detailed explanation of what happened to the reactor core."

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Grand Admiral Rapier, Dark Lord of the Sith, was sitting at the head of the table in the oval shaped office set aside for him aboard the Star Destroyer *Sovereign*. Although the *Sovereign* was no longer in active service, Rapier kept it on. The ship was huge, and no enemy could possibly threaten it. The only threat to the *Sovereign* was its sheer size. From the day it was commissioned, Rapier had seen its decline. From the massive flagship of the Emperor's Hammer, one by one decks, sections and wings had been abandoned. From time to time, it made him wonder how the Emperor had ever kept the Death Star operational. Then again, the Emperor had all the resources of the Empire at his disposal, and the Emperor's Hammer had only the tiniest fraction of those resources. Under Palpatine, this *Sovereign*-class Star Destroyer would have been a most formidable weapon. To him, it was merely a resource-devouring obstacle. But, now that it had been decommissioned, it still made a nice office. And a safe one.

Across the table sat his second in command, Sector Admiral Havok. Most of the other chairs around the table were vacant. The recently appointed TIE Corps Commander was not here. Daniel Bonini had taken on a mission of the utmost importance for the future of the Emperor's Hammer, and was somewhere not even Rapier knew. He had a general idea, but he specifically had ordered Bonini to go about this his own way. And part of that was not knowing the details. Still, as a former Executive Officer, Bonini was the man for the job. Rapier had every bit of faith in the man.

One of the other empty seats belonged to Dempsey, his Tactical Officer. Dempsey was the longest serving member of the current Command Staff of the Emperor's Hammer. The decline of the Hammer's forces had also resounded through the Command Staff, causing several people to resign or be replaced in key positions. Rapier himself was the third to occupy the seat of Fleet Commander in recent years, and at least as many people had served as Executive Officer. With his recent appointments to key positions, Rapier hoped some stability was to return to the Emperor's Hammer. Without that, he knew there was only one way this could end. Dempsey was a stable factor in this all, but he still didn't know what to make of her. Rapier didn't have the discomfort with Dempsey being female as many other officers had, but she was extremely unpredictable. He knew little about her past, even to him, he Imperial records remained sealed. He knew she once served under Grand Admiral Thrawn, that she had risen quickly in the ranks of the

Emperor's Hammer, being appointed Tactical Officer within only a few years of service. She had ascended to the rank of Jedi Master under his tenure as Grand Master of the Dark Brotherhood, and also occupied a command spot in one of the squadrons of the Star Destroyer *Hammer*. And here she was, blatantly absent during this meeting. The only members present were his Security Officer and Logistics Officer. Both capable officers, but both fairly new to his Command Staff.

"Let's get this done with, gentlemen," he broke the silence. "I have received a most disturbing report from the Star Destroyer *Challenge*. Action is needed, and quickly." He flicked a switch, and a holographic image of the Glann Dore Daichii research facility appeared above the table.

"This is our research facility at Glann Dore. The Daichii facility was classified Level Omega back in the days of Astatine. It's primary focus of research is weapons technology. The technology for our TIE Praetors was developed there, as well as several of the high tech features that make our Star Destroyer far more formidable than those back in the days of the Empire."

The image of the facility disappeared. "As of two weeks ago, this is how the facility looks." He noticed the faces of the men sitting at the table. "An unknown enemy has obliterated this facility. We have no idea who it is, and only a single clue to work with. Whoever is responsible for the destruction of this facility, it is most likely it was one of our own."

For a second, he opened his senses to gauge the reactions of those in the room. He had little doubt it was not one of them, but their emotional response to his announcement would make certain of it. Inside, he smiled. There was no doubt none of these officers were responsible. The first bit of good news he had seen all day.

"There are many mysteries here that we need to resolve," he continued. "First of all, I want to know exactly who is responsible for this. There are only a handful of officers who knew the exact location of this facility, as well as its importance to our weapons research programs. All of those officers have been questioned quite thoroughly, and they have been cleared of involvement."

He felt uneasiness from the Security Officer. "Admiral Palermo," Rapier said. "This unsettles you?"

Palermo nodded. "Why was I not informed of this breach of security before," he asked. "I need to know stuff like this." Rapier nodded. "Yes you do indeed. Which is why I am informing you now. Remember, your security clearance does not include Level Omega information. Such is for me, the XO and the Supreme Director of the Intelligence Division." Palermo stared at Rapier. Obviously, he was not enjoying this situation. "Rest assured, the complete file on the matter will be on your desk before you leave this office," Rapier said.

He stood, and walked around the table. He froze at Dempsey's chair. "There are a few bits of information we have to work with," he continued, "although not much. We were able to piece together most of what went down at Daichii." He punched a button, and the hologram of Daichii reappeared. "About fifteen days ago, a massive electromagnetic pulse weapon was discharged close to the facility. It was probably delivered via some inconspicuous cargo freighter. The detonation was powerful enough to disable the facility's defenses and communications systems. Which in itself is quite an accomplishment, as the facility was equipped with shield technology that was supposed to have protected it from such an event. It appears someone has made some serious improvements to the current MagPulse technology. Several teams from Intel are already working on figuring out who and what is behind that."

"According to the information we have, a considerable supply of a Phrik-Cortosis alloy was stolen from the facility before it was destroyed. That is, no trace of the alloy was found in the debris field of the facility, leading to the conclusion that it was taken. The alloy has been the focus of research at Daichii as theoretically, it is capable of increasing the output of our shield generators considerably. Research indicates the alloy is extremely unstable when used in shield generators though, and Daichii has been trying to fix that problem for the past five years. So far, all efforts to stabilize the systems have proven fruitless. As such, I doubt whoever took it will fare any better, but that is not my concern. If the perpetrator knew the alloy was there, and knew what we were trying to do, there is a whole load of other top secret research programs he might be aware of. And that could be extremely dangerous to our continued existence."

He walked back to his own seat at the table. "Before you go, gentlemen, there's more. Recently, I have appointed General Daniel Bonini to the position of TIE Corps Commander. He has assigned Fleet Admiral Jarek La'an to be his second. Together, they have set upon a mission known only to me and the XO. Their objective is to ensure the supremacy of the Emperor's Hammer. They are pretty much on their own. To accomplish their goal, they have conscripted several of our ships to their cause from all over the Fleet. You are both aware of some of our ships disappearing off the grid. Those ships have joined up with Bonini and La'an. There will be little to no communication from them back to Aurora. I urge you not to start prying too much into their affairs as that could put their mission in serious jeopardy." With that, he got up, and walked out of the office.

Admiral Havok looked at the other two. "That is pretty much the gist of it," he said. "Dempsey and the *Sinister* have disappeared as well, but that's nothing new. Rarely have I seen a Tactical Officer with less regard for the chain of command as that woman. I would like to know for certain she is not the one behind this, though. As far as I know, she had no knowledge of the Daichii facility or the research into the Phrik-Cortosis alloy, but I want to be absolutely certain. That will be your top priority, Palermo. I want to know where Dempsey is, and how big the chance is she was behind this attack. Dismissed." He stared at Palermo, who took the hint. He got up, saluted, and walked out of the office.

"Schueler, you'll be getting a list of all ships Bonini has taken with him. Assess the holes that leaves in all the Hammer's operations, and figure out the best way to fill those holes." Mark Schueler stood up, nodded, and walked out of the office too, leaving Havok on his own. Being a Sith Lord himself, he had sensed everything Rapier had. Hard times were ahead.

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On the Star Destroyer *Indomitable*, Vice Admiral Hfaga read the report from her engineers for the fifth time. Their findings were very clear. The alloy had been incorporated into the shield generators, and initial readings indicated it had exactly the effect it was supposed to be having. With the shields up at 25%, an external sensor array had estimated the shield's strength at almost double of that. Unfortunately, there was a small feedback loop going into the power core. The feedback was small, but it was a cumulative effect. The cause was completely unknown, and there was no prospect of a quick solution. She was extremely unhappy with this. She had taken a big risk in order to acquire the alloy, and it appeared for the moment to be useless. She had no doubt it was only a matter of time before someone would link the *Indomitable* to the attack.

And even worse, a lot of solid matter energy convertors were wasted on the freighter they had used to deliver the MagPulse warhead to Daichii station. They were in dire need of replacements for those.

The door chimed, and Salis Weird entered. He saluted, and waited for her to respond. "Your report is done?" she asked. He nodded. "It is not good, Admiral," he said. "Not only are we unable to incorporate the alloy into our shield generators, it is also unstable. We have erected a stabilization matrix in which it's now stored, but that requires some heavy duty equipment. We're running short on those. The hyperdrive engines are on their last legs, if we want to prevent disaster, we need to replace a number of parts. We don't have those in storage. We also have a minimal amount of the solid matter energy convertors left. We do not use those all that often, but I would rather not be short on them when we do need them."

Hfaga nodded. She had feared as much as what she just heard. It wasn't as bad as she had expected, but close. "Thank you," she said, and waved him out. For a few moments, she sat motionless thinking about the options. Then she signalled her Chief of Operations. It was time to go get some supplies.

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Hfaga stared at the battle plan laid out before her. She was amazed at the audacity of the plan. She also wondered about the sanity of whoever concocted it. She looked at Moedir, her Chief of Operations. "Are you seriously suggesting we split our resources three ways to engage three targets at the same time?" she asked.

Moedir nodded. "We are pressed for time," he said. "We don't have the luxury of taking down each target one at a time using the *Indomitable's* firepower. We have to assume it's only a matter of time before Rapier will figure out what we're doing, and if we don't have what we need before he does, we're done for. We need to get those supplies, and fast."

He pulled up the holographic projection of the sector they were in. "We are here," he continued as a red bleep appeared. "There is a convoy with the parts we need to sustain the stabilization matrix for the alloy headed through here." A green blip appeared. "Our intel says there's a single gunship on escort duty as these aren't exactly high tech, high profile parts. A single flight of Gunboats should be able to take care of that gunship. A transport with troopers will grab the freighters and fly them back here. We unload the parts we need, and get rid of the rest." Hfaga nodded. This was not the part of the plan worrying her.

"Over here we have Mektits station. It's a neutral system, so there's no chance they'll be calling the Hammer for help, especially not when we convince them we **are** the Hammer. The *Indomitable* will hyper in and deal with the station defenses, while we launch interceptors to take care of the enemy fighters. Once the station is disarmed, our elite troopers will engage resistance within the base while a tech team gets the solid matter energy convertors. The biggest problem will be the corvettes on patrol around the station, and of course the possibility of reinforcements."

"Last but not least, we have the *Victory*-class Star Destroyer *Abecassis*. It is operated by the local warlord in this part of Emperor's Hammer space. As far as we know, the *Abecassis* never goes anywhere without the Strike cruiser *Antares* close by. We'll have to disable both those ships before we can move in. Once disabled, we'll need to deliver troops to the *Abecassis*, who will need to fight their way to the hyperdrive. Fortunately, we should be able to do that quickly - all we need is the security codes needed to jettison the hyperdrive. We dump the hyperdrive, and pick it up and get out of there."

Hfaga nodded. "Remind me - why do we not engage them with the *Indomitable*?" Moedir pondered for a moment. "Two reasons," he said. "First off, we're vulnerable. Putting the *Indomitable* in a fight against another Star Destroyer is simply too dangerous. Second, I think there's a bigger chance of success if we have the Escort transports engage them. They are well shielded, and can fire the heavy rockets."

For several minutes, he was silent. "Very well," Hfaga finally said. "Brief everyone as to their mission. Remind them this is do or die. Either we succeed, or it is the end of all of us."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE RAID - STAGE ONE

THE CONVOY

Major Onagu pulled the lever on his hyperdrive, and watched as his Assault Gunboat reverted back to realspace. Spot on target, he saw the two conveyors and the Corellion Gunship, just where they were supposed to be. He keyed his comm while he activated his torpedo launchers. "Here we go, people. Engage the enemy gunship. Sigma, engage the freighters."

He hit the throttle and his fighter accelerated to attack speed. He linked his warhead launchers, and targeted the gunship in the distance. For a moment there was silence, and then the targeting computer told him he had a solid lock. For a moment he pondered firing his warheads, but then decided against it. He was five clicks out, and the odds of the gunship's defense systems shooting down his torpedoes was too great. Onagu had played this game before, and he wasn't going to make that mistake again. Instead, he turned off his targeting computer, and veered off slightly.

He watched as his wingmen did as instructed: several blue streaks of torpedo exhaust shot past him towards the gunship. And just as he expected, he saw several of them explode prematurely as they were hit by defensive fire. Only one of their torpedoes made it to the gunship, and it did little damage to the ship as its shields withstood the explosion. While his wingmen started firing their lasers at the gunship, and quickly taking a barrage of return fire, Onagu crept up close behind the gunship, lined it up in his sight, and quickly fired a half dozen proton torpedoes at the gunship. Without the targeting lock, the gunship's sensors shouldn't see them coming, and indeed he was right, as one after the other the torpedoes blasted away at the gunship's shields. By the time the last one struck, his targeting computer told him the gunship's shields were failing.

"Leader to flight, switch to ion cannons," he ordered. "Disable that gunship so it can't fire back!" He watched, and saw the green lasers be replaced by the blue energy of the ion cannons. He pinched in, and only moments later, the gunship ceased firing as its electrical systems shorted out all over. Onagu smiled. Then he turned his attention towards the freighter. The Assault transport accompanying them had started its attack run, and fired a few torpedoes at one of the freighters. Onagu punched up the other freighter, and started a run of his own while his wingmen were content firing their weapons at the gunship.

Without the gunship for protection, the freighters were easy targets. In quick succession, both were disabled, and the transport commenced the docking operations. The troopers only had two jobs: get rid of everyone aboard the freighters, and get their systems back up. A skeleton crew would then fly the freighters back to the rendez-vous point with the *Indomitable*.

A few minutes later, the transport signalled him they had completed the first part of their mission. Onagu keyed up the first of the freighters, and noticed that it was flying under Imperial IFF now. '*That's one,*' he thought. He watched, as the transport started for the second freighter. In the distance, a big explosion signalled that his wingmen had finally managed to destroy the gunship. Before he could smile though, an alarm blared in his ears, as several green blips appeared on his HUD. He punched hem up, and saw a squadron of Z-95 Headhunters and a two B-wings coming from hyperspace. Onagu cursed.

"Get with it guys," he signalled his wingmen. "Concentrate on those B-wings first, I don't like them. Get the backup, I'll take the leader." He targeted the lead B-wing, and kicked his throttle to maximum. He activated his warhead launcher, and waited patiently until it acquired a lock. He wasn't sure if the torpedo would hit its target, a good pilot would be able to out-maneuver it, but at would distract the B-wing's pilot from his target. By now, it was obvious the B-wings were headed for the transport and freighters. Onagu knew he had to stop the B-wings - if they managed to take down the transport, the mission was a bust. The bleep indicating a target lock sounded, and he punched the button, releasing two torpedoes. He watched as both of them sped away towards the B-wing. As he had hoped, the B-wings pilot had noticed, and aborted his run, trying to outrun the torpedoes. As this would keep him busy for a while, Onagu turned his attention towards the other B-wing. Both his wingmen were firing their lasers at it, slowly chipping away at its shields. Onagu smiled, as he turned his attention to some of the fighters pursuing his wingmen. He picked one, and opened fire.

Z-95 Headhunters were old, obsolete fighters, and Onagu knew it. Only a few bursts of sustained fire was enough to rip their shields away, and he didn't need a lot of time eliminating two of them. He grinned, as he punched up the B-wings. One of the B-wings had been disabled he saw. His wingmen obviously using the same tactics as they had on the gunship. The other B-wing was nowhere to be seen. '*Looks like the torpedoes did their job,*' he thought.

"This is two, I can't get rid of him!" He heard the shriek in the voice of his wingmen. He punched him up, turned his Gunboat, and targeted the attacker. He closed fast, but he was too late. Just as he opened fire on the attacker, he saw the Gunboat spiral out of control, and explode in a blaze of fire. Onagu cursed again, as he sent the Headhunter into oblivion. He punched up the next one, and started another run. In the corner of his eyes, another explosion took out another of the attackers. At the same time, a bleep on his screen told him the second freighter was now also under their control. Mission accomplished. He keyed his comm system. "Watch it Three, targets nabbed, but make sure they get out of here safely."

Still, from this point on, the mission wasn't in peril anymore. Whether he and his wingman made it back or not, the freighters would soon jump to the rendez-vous point, and nothing could stop them. So he tried to enjoy the remainder of this dogfight.

CHAPTER SIX

THE RAID - STAGE TWO

THE *ABECASSIS*

Colonel Darvis Jekinn was the most senior of all the pilots serving aboard the Star Destroyer *Indomitable*. As such, he had been given command of what was looking to be one of the most difficult missions of his career. His flight of Gunboats, accompanied by some large transports, had been given the task of engaging a hostile Star Destroyer. Occasionally, he had put his squadron in such a situation in the flight simulator, but it was frowned upon by many. Star Destroyers were Imperial ships, it was not done to train your pilots at fighting them. But Jekinn knew better. The Emperor's Hammer was by no means the only organization these days deploying Star Destroyers. Many of the Empire's ships had fallen into Rebel hands, and many Imperial admirals had taken their ship, and started their own little empires. And so, Jekinn knew there was a great chance of success today.

Moments later, Jekinn and his team came out of hyperspace not far from the intended targets. Intel had done their job right: the Star Destroyer *Abecassis* in the distance was accompanied by an old Strike cruiser, the *Antares*.

"Switch to warheads, and engage. Take out the Star Destroyer first. Just as we trained, people." With that, the flight of Gunboats turned towards the Star Destroyer. At the same time, the transports in their wake oriented themselves towards the Strike cruiser. "Watch it, people," Jekinn said as his board lit up green. "They're launching defense fighters. Stock TIEs from the looks of it, nothing we can't handle. Drop your torpedoes and engage fighters."

Jekinn followed his own command, as he fired a couple of torpedoes at the Star Destroyer in the distance. He balanced his shields, turned to his laser cannons, and picked the closest TIE starfighter. Without shields though, the TIE fighters were no match for the Assault Gunboats. Green laser fire filled the space between them, but the mostly bounced harmlessly off the shields of the Gunboats. At the other end of the dogfight, the lasers took down one after the other of the unshielded defenders. It wasn't long before Jekinn's HUD told him there were no enemy fighters left to engage. He turned his attention back to the enemy. One of his transports was gone, he figured it had probably fallen to enemy fire. The Strike cruiser by now was disabled, and the Star Destroyer's shields were quickly failing. Still, its forward guns were firing relentlessly at the attackers, and a scream in his headset told him one of his wingmen had been caught in the blast. Jekinn switched back to his warheads, diverted all power to his engines, and shot towards the *Abecassis*. As he approached, he jerked to avoid defensive fire from the turbo laser batteries, and lined up the ship's shield generators. As soon as he had a lock, he fired torpedoes, and pulled his yoke, away from the ship.

Both torpedoes slammed into the Star Destroyer's shield generator towers. They exploded, and he saw the shields on the *Abecassis* quickly fall to zero. He saw the transports open up with their ion cannons, and shortly after, the firing from the batteries of the *Abecassis* faltered, and ceased.

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The Escort transport *Janus III* was closest to the Star Destroyer when the all-clear was given, and so it quickly made its way to the Star Destroyer's dorsal side. The original idea had called for them to board the ship, and make their way to the hyperdrive bay. However, that idea had quickly been discarded when they realized the strike team would have to traverse half the ship across a dozen decks to get there. Odds of success would be small. Instead, one of the engineers had come up with an alternate plan. They would dock with the Star Destroyer near the hyperdrive bay, drill their way through the ship's outer hull and hijack one of the power conduits. With the proper equipment, they could simply jettison the hyperdrive from their position.

Major Wilhont still couldn't believe it would be this easy. Even when the engineer had explained to him the system to jettison the hyperdrive was a necessity in starships the size of a Star Destroyer, he had doubts. It was hard to believe anyone commanding a Star Destroyer would, at any time, voluntarily ditch his hyperdrive, effectively stranding his ship. Still, the engineer had come up with a few scenarios that were not completely ridiculous in which he could see the merit of such a system. And so, this mission was going to be easier than planned.

A few minutes later, the transport locked its docking clamps onto the Star Destroyer's outer hull, and his team set to work. With laser torches, they started working on the outer hull, removing small bits of hull plating at a time. This wasn't a quick job, after all, a Star Destroyer was a heavily fortified ship, even without its energy shields to protect it. But half an hour later, the last of the plating was removed. His men stepped aside, and the two engineers who had been sitting in their seats all day long got up. They carried a small cart with them, and crouched near the hole in the Star Destroyer's hull. They quickly assessed the situation, and then started hooking their equipment up to the mass of wires below them. It took them only minutes, then one of them signaled everyone to step back. He did so too, and then hit a switch.

Nothing happened. At least, not that Wilhont could see. But one of the engineers crouched back down and started unhooking his equipment. "Are we done?" Wilhont asked. The engineer nodded. "I suggest you start looking for that hyperdrive before it drifts too far off," he said. "It's not emitting any energy signatures whatsoever at the moment, it might be hard to spot if it gets too far off." Without turning his head, the man continued his work. Wilhont turned to the pilot of the transport and nodded.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE RAID - STAGE THREE

MEKITIS STATION

Aboard the Star Destroyer *Indomitable*, everything had been set in motion. Hfaga had seen a flight of Assault Gunboats hyper out with an Assault transport in its wake. Moments later, another flight of Gunboats accompanied by a handful of transports and a flight of TIE Advanced starfighters followed suit. "That's it," she said. "All hands, battle stations. Jump to hyperspace on my mark." She paused for a few seconds. "Mark!"

The *Indomitable* appeared motionless for a moment. Then an unpleasant sound could be heard all over the ship as a surge of energy flowed through the battered hyperdrive. Hfaga cringed, fearing it would not engage, but then the ship jerked as it entered hyperspace. Inaudible, she made a sigh of relief.

Ten minutes later, the *Indomitable* exited hyperspace. Immediately, the skilled crew raised the shields, and the gunners in the turbo laser batteries opened fire. Before the crew of the unfortunate outpost below them realized what was happening, it was raining lasers down upon them. Down in the hangar bays, the first flight of starfighters was released from the Star Destroyer, and by the time their pilots were picking targets, the first of the Corvettes protecting the outpost was already burning as its atmosphere escaped. A flight of *Supa*-class bombers emerged from the Star Destroyer and started their attack run on the outpost itself, which was now firing all of its weapons at the massive Star Destroyer positioned close above. It was an easy target, but a tough one. Torpedoes were raining down on the platform, quickly eating away at its shields.

Quicker than she had anticipated, Hfaga saw that both Corvettes had been put out of the battle, and the platform's shields had failed, although its main guns were still firing at the underbelly of her ship. "Ventral shields are failing," someone yelled. Hfaga quickly responded, ordering the Star Destroyer to roll around its axis. That way, the gun fire would now be taken by the dorsal shields. But before the roll was complete, the signal came that the platform had been disabled. She smiled. This was almost too easy.

"Transports are entering the hangar now," she heard. "Anticipating little resistance." Hfaga wasn't too sure about that. Although the station had taken a lot of damage, its inhabitants wouldn't be too shy of defending themselves. The Emperor's Hammer wasn't well known for leaving survivors behind.

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Down on the station, the first of the transports set down on the deck. Already, small arms fire was already raining down harmlessly on the craft. As the hatch opened, the elite troopers within were already taking cover. A few grenades flew through the air, and moments later the entire hangar was filled with smoke. Troopers in gasmasks and heat sensitive goggles poured from the transport, and opened fire at their targets. The inexperienced defenders were little match for the well-trained stormtroopers. Only moments of fury, and the stormtroopers knew the hangar was theirs. In pairs, they darted through the corridors of that station, occasionally running into some resistance, but making short work of them. A larger group of troopers followed, escorting a group of technicians and zero-G sleds. Almost without any opposition, they made their way to the level where the station's power center was located. Again, the stormtroopers had no problem breaching the security doors, and soon enough the technicians were starting their work. A dozen energy converters quickly found themselves being loosened from their positions, and one by one they were carried onto the zero-G sled. Occasionally, the station rocked as another explosion tore through it.

"Hurry up," one of the stormtroopers said to the technicians. "This thing's gonna blow, and I don't wanna be here when it does!" One of the technicians turned towards him. "Then you'd better be patient," he retorted. "If we screw this up, these converters will blow us all into oblivion." He turned back, and resumed his job. The stormtrooper grunted. He hated waiting for techs.

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Hfaga stood on the *Indomitable's* bridge as the first of the transports emerged from the station's hangar. She smiled. Everything was going as planned. She wondered if the other teams had the same success.

"Incoming contact," one of the officers yelled. "Mon Calamari light cruiser, bearing three-niner-niner. It's launching starfighters."

Hfaga snapped to. "On screen. Who are they?" For a moment, there was silence. Then the officer responded. "It appears to be coming from the other side of the system. It must have been hiding in the shadow of the star." Hfaga cursed. This was not good.

Another officer told her the second of the transports had emerged from the station's hangar. Almost there.

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Commander Stennis turned his starfighter towards the cruiser in the distance. He saw the ion exhaust of the TIE Advanced starfighters ahead of him, racing towards the enemy fighters. Stennis had already targeted the cruiser, and linked his warhead launchers to be able to quickly release his entire payload. He figured his wingmen had done the same. He watched, as the counter on his HUD slowly rolled down the distance between him and the cruiser. '*Almost there,*' he thought. Just then, a laser bolt smacked into his bomber. The craft rocked, and he lost his target lock. Still, the bomber was a sturdy craft, and capable of absorbing the energy. As long as it didn't happen too often. He waited, but no other bolts followed. Either a lucky hit, or one of the TIE Advanceds had distracted his attacker. He didn't know which one, nor did he care. He turned his head back forward, and reacquired the targeting lock. This time, he didn't falter and launched all his torpedoes at the enemy cruiser. As soon as all his warheads were away, he veered off. He'd wait around a bit to see how much damage was done, and then decide his next move. If the cruiser's shields were to survive the barrage of torpedoes, there was little use in continuing. However, if the shields were to be obliterated, he could probably use his laser cannons to finish it off. It would require some fancy flying, but if the TIE Advanceds were to chip in, certainly doable.

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Hfaga smiled as the last of the transports entered the *Indomitable's* hangar. In the far distance, the enemy cruiser was suffering under heavy fire from the bombers and TIE Advanceds. She was informed the cruiser was trying to limp away into hyperspace. It didn't matter. She wouldn't mind if her pilots managed to take it out, but its escape was not important. She had what she came for. In the mean time, her gunners had started blasting away at the outpost as the Star Destroyer was slowly pulling away. The hyperdrive engine was slowly powering up. It just needed to make one more jump, then she could rendez-vous with the third strike team with the replacements. This was actually going to be a pretty good day.

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Hours later, Vice Admiral Hfaga stood once again on the bridge of her Star Destroyer. An hour before, the strike team that had been sent to retrieve the energy converters had returned, with their cargo intact. And only moments ago, several transports had come out of hyperspace as well, signalling they had retrieved the hyperdrive parts. All missions had been a complete success. Her teams would need a few more hours, and then all her problems would be behind her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DRASTIC MEASURES

Grand Admiral Rapier glanced the report on his desk. It had contained bad news, terrible news, and even worse news. It was hard to believe one of his own admirals had brought so much trouble in so little time. Another scientific outpost destroyed, and although fortunately not one of his, it did belong to an ally. An ally, who was seething at the sight of a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer obliterating one of their primary outposts. It was going to be a long day trying to convince them the Emperor's Hammer was not responsible for this attack.

At virtually the same time, a small strike team had engaged one of his old friends, a small time warlord with a Vic of his own. Rapier, although officially at war with any Imperial warlord and wanna-be emperor, had always held the man in good standing. Regularly, he had employed the man for shady business he didn't want the Hammer to be connected to. But no longer, a small strike team had managed to defeat the Vic and its escort, and all that was left was a mass of debris.

But worst of all, two Intel teams had independently and based on different pieces of evidence come to the conclusion that the Star Destroyer *Indomitable* commanded by Vice Admiral Hfaga had been the ship responsible for the destruction of the Daichii outpost. How Hfaga had come to know of its existence he didn't know. The fact she did, meant this was not the end of it. Someone had told her about that outpost, and the research they were doing there. Intel was already on it, but he didn't expect them to come up with anything soon.

Rapier had already dispatched hundreds of probes across Emperor's Hammer space. The *Indomitable* had to be found before it escaped from Emperor's Hammer space. Rapier had ordered the *Imperial-II* class Star Destroyer *Subjugator* to full battle readiness. As soon as the *Indomitable* was found, the *Subjugator* was to intercept it, and destroy it. Rapier wasn't even going to bother catching Hfaga alive. To ensure success, he had recalled the Interdictor cruiser *Restrainer* as well. He didn't want to take any chances.

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Admiral Doran, Commodore of the Star Destroyer *Subjugator* smiled. A lot sooner than expected, the information he had been waiting for had come to his desk. The coordinates had been fed to his hyperdrive, and they were on their way. Thirty more minutes and they would come face to face with the traitorous Hfaga. He only hoped the *Restrainer* wouldn't be too far behind. He doubted Hfaga would stand and fight, she would most likely turn and run at the sight of the superior *Subjugator*.

Two dozen decks below Doran, the *Subjugator's* flight deck was alive with activity. Dozens of crew were prepping the starfighters for launch. Torpedoes were being loaded onto Assault Gunboats, while TIE Advanced fighters were being loaded up with concussion missiles. The pilots, already in their flight gear, were standing around waiting for the signal to board their fighters. One flight group had already been loaded onto the Star Destroyer's launch system.

A half hour later, a mild tremor went through the Star Destroyer. The last of the groundcrew evacuated the hangar bay, and the blast doors closed behind them. The red lights above the launch chutes went green, and one by one, the *Subjugator's* starfighters were released.

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Hfaga's eyes went wide in a mix of panic and surprise as sirens started blaring on her bridge. In the distance, the Star Destroyer *Subjugator* had come out of nowhere, and started launching fighters. She knew she was on the wrong side of this battle. Her Vic was no match for the firepower of a Deuce, and while the *Subjugator* was equipped with a full wing of starfighters, she had barely enough fighters and pilots for half a wing. Add to that the fact that most of their fighters were the more advanced ones, and she only had a handful, she didn't like their odds.

"Are we ready?" she asked. For a moment, nothing happened. Then an officer reluctantly shook his head. "The final test in running now. If it goes well, we will be able to jump to hyperspace in ten minutes, no sooner."

Hfaga cursed. She knew the kind of damage a well trained fighter wing could do in ten minutes. She turned. "Launch all TIE Advanced fighters. We'll jump as soon as we can, they can follow us." Someone nodded and blurted some orders into the comm system. Hfaga didn't favor their chances. Two full squadrons of enemy fighters were coming her way, and she only had a handful of the advanced fighters. Little did she knew things were about to take a turn for the worst.

"New contact, bearing three-one-seven," a voice disrupted her thoughts. "Identification positive..." The man's voice faltered. "What?" she yelled at him.

The young man looked at her. "It's the *Restrainer*," he said meekly. Hfaga's heart sank. With an Interdictor here, there would be no escape, whether the hyperdrive worked or not. Her options were quickly running away from her. Knowing what she would ask of the pilots, she looked back at one of the officers. "Launch all bomber craft. Gunboats and Supa bombers. I want everything going after that Interdictor." The officer knew what she asked. The pilots in the Gunboats would follow them, but whoever was unlucky enough to end up in the Supa Bombers would be left behind. And the *Subjugator* would most likely not take prisoners.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LAST STAND

As Jekinn's fighter was released from the *Indomitable's* hangar bay, he took a good look at his targeting computer, trying to assess his situation. He grunted. His flight group was outnumbered at least ten to one. And getting rid of all the enemy Assault Gunboats targeting the *Indomitable* was not going to be easy with so many TIE Advanced fighters protecting them.

In the distance, two starships were visible. Jekinn frowned. His short briefing had explained the *Subjugator* had found them and launched fighters. No word of another starship. He punched it up and swallowed. The image of the Interdictor *Restrainer* sent a shiver down his spine. This would complicate matters. He was trying to come up with the best idea for this engagement, when the *Indomitable* took his options away from him.

"All fighters, we are launching bombers to engage the Interdictor. Protect them at all costs. If they fail, we are done for. You must prevent the enemy from attacking our bombers." Jekinn didn't think. He turned his fighter around, and headed towards the Assault Gunboats and Supa Bombers being launched from the *Indomitable*. He wasn't too enthusiastic about the idea. These orders meant the enemy bombers would have a free run to attack the *Indomitable*. Still, he knew it made sense. The only hope of escape was knocking out the *Restrainer's* gravity well generators. And so, protecting the bombers was the only thing he could do to help them.

Jekinn didn't have to wait for long. He'd been shadowing the Bombers for a short while when his computer started shrieking that an enemy fighter was targeting him. He jerked, and saw laser bolts shoot past him. He targeted his attacker, and looped his fighter. The TIE Advanced was already racing away from him. Jekin linked his lasers and sent two quad bursts after the enemy. The first one scored a direct hit, the second burst nearly missed, but the enemy was running. Jekinn turned back towards the bombers when the corner of his eye caught an explosion. Jekinn checked and noticed one of his wingmen was now missing. He cursed. Still, he couldn't start pursuing the enemy just yet. Ahead of him, the Assault Gunboats had already started firing torpedoes at the *Restrainer*, and soon the TIE Bombers would be in firing range as well. As soon as they had fired their warheads, he could play with the enemy.

By now, the *Indomitable's* turbo laser batteries had opened fire onto the incoming bombers. It was against Jekinn's instincts to abandon the *Indomitable* to the enemy Bombers, but he knew it was their only hope. *Indomitable* after all didn't have to come out of this unscathed, just in one piece. Jekinn looked up *Indomitable*, and saw the first barrage of warheads had eaten away a large chunk of its shields. An the good note, his computer also reported a large number of enemy Gunboats destroyed by *Indomitable's* defensive

fire. For the moment, she was safe, the biggest threat after all was a while flight of bombers launching warheads from beyond her firing range. By now, they were so close they made easy targets for the gunners, so it was a lot harder for them to launch their warheads. Still, *Indomitable* wouldn't survive a whole lot longer.

Jekinn stopped his pondering, and watched as the Bombers just before him started firing torpedoes at the Interdictor quickly closing in. Jekinn smiled. Then he keyed his system to tag the nearest enemy starfighter trying to take potshots at him, and kicked his fighter into a high roll. He hit the accelerator, and sped towards it. Long before he got within range of the enemy's lasers, his targeting computer reported a lock, and he fired a missile. He watched as the red wash of the missile sped away from him. The enemy pilot, realizing his predicament, jerked his fighter in an attempt to evade the missile, but it was too little and too late. A bright explosion signalled one less enemy fighter to worry about. Jekinn smiled as he picked another enemy fighter.

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On the *Indomitable's* bridge, Hfaga started to see a light at the end of the tunnel. The incoming bombers had done less damage than she had anticipated, her pilots were doing well against the superior forces, and they were beating away at the *Restrainer*. The bridge crew had already started feeding coordinates to the hyperdrive's navigation computer. As soon as the *Restrainer's* gravity wells would go down, they would be ready to make their escape. They would need three short jumps in quick succession to make sure the *Subjugator* wouldn't be able to track them to the rendez-vous point. All hyperspace capable fighters had received similar orders. She started believing again that she was going to win this.

"Status on the enemy?" she asked. Several officers responded. The *Restrainer's* shields were on the verge of failing completely, which means the gravity well generators were closely behind, her pilots were taking down many of the enemy fighters, and the *Indomitable's* gunners had successfully decimated the incoming bombers. She smiled. Things were definitely going her way today.

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Jekinn was in a similar state of mind. He was blasting away at the enemy, and so far he had only caught one burst of fire from the enemy. Right now, he was chasing down a wounded TIE Advanced from one of the *Subjugator's* squadrons. He fired another quad burst, and saw the starboard side solar panel clip off the fighter. What remained went into an uncontrolled spin. Jekinn smiled as the next two bursts went wide. This way, the enemy was even harder to hit than when he was flying at full power. Still, the third burst hit home and the fighter exploded.

The voice of *Indomitable's* Flight Controller spunded in his headset. "All fighters, *Restrainer's* gravwells are gone. We're making the jump to lightspeed in ten seconds. We will see you all at the rendez-vous point in four hours. Good luck. *Indomitable* out."

Jekinn smiled. The battle was won. He looked over his shoulder, and saw the silhouette of the *Indomitable*. Two seconds after, it disappeared as the Star Destroyer jumped to light speed. Jekinn, sat back straight, and grabbed the hyperdrive actuator. Just as he was about to pull it, he saw the green burst of laser coming straight at him. Before he could react, the burst from one of the *Subjugator's* turbo laser batteries shattered his canopy, completely fried him, and exit the fighter through the ion engines which promptly exploded in a nice little fireball.

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Lieutenant Jove didn't hesitate. He saw Colonel Jekinn's fighter explode after a direct hit from the *Subjugator*, and immediately pulled the yoke. He steered is Gunboat away from the explosion, fired the last of his torpedoes at the *Subjugator*, and pulled the lever. Stars faded from his view, as his fighter followed the *Indomitable* to safety.

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Lieutenant Commander Sella sighed. Mission accomplished, the *Indomitable* was away safely. He smiled. he had done well, and with any luck, someone would remember him. For the moment, that's all he could do. After all, he had drawn one of the short straws, and ended up in this old Supa Bomber. He blankly stared in the distance as he saw the remaining Gunboats and TIE Advanced fighters jump away, leaving him and two others behind. No safe retreat for them. He knew what awaited them. And so he throttled up to maximum speed, and set his fighter on a trajectory directly towards the *Imperial II*-class Star Destroyer directly ahead. He swerved his fighter, trying to avoid the turbo laser fire, but the Supa Bomber was too sluggish. One of the bursts clipped one of his engines, and his fighter went into a roll. Sella tried to regain control of his fighter, but before he realized it was a useless attempt, he lost consciousness. Moments later, his Bomber smashed into the hull of the *Subjugator* and exploded.

EPILOGUE

Grand Admiral Rapier read the report from the *Subjugator's* Commodore. *Indomitable* had escaped. In an all-out attempt to escape their fate, they had managed to deliver a striking blow to the *Restrainer*, which caused the Interdictor to lose control of their gravity well generators. Rapier pondered what he read. It was obvious to him that Admiral Doran had made a serious error in judgement. He had underestimated the threat of *Indomitable's* pilots. They knew what was at stake, they knew there was no escape for them. Doran had underestimated the desperation of *Indomitable's* fighters, and it had cost them dearly.

Doran's fate was already sealed. Several minutes before, Rapier had signed the execution warrant for Doran. No matter how low the Hammer's numbers would go, he would not accept or forgive failure of this magnitude. Probes sent out by the *Subjugator* had all reported back without success. *Indomitable* had disappeared, and by now was probably long out of Emperor's Hammer controlled space. Which means the odds of taking them down had gone from decent to marginal at best.

He keyed the comm. "Send a signal to High Admiral Daniel Bonini," he said. "Encryption algorithm Sigma-niner. Advise him *Indomitable* has gone rogue and is to be destroyed on sight. Send the same message to the *Victory-class* Star Destroyer *Sinister*. And send word to Rear Admiral Hukas. I want to discuss his reassignment with him before he takes command of the *Subjugator*." He turned the comm system off, dimmed the lights in his office and closed his eyes. He had a lot of thinking to do.