

## XV - MISSION ON DENARR

Colonel Silwar Naiilo was backwards to the rest of the crew gathered behind him. Wing Commander Lt. Colonel Elara was standing on the other side of the holo-map. Colonel Stryker was clearly visible in the hologram projector. The rest of the people gathered in the room were silent, a sporadic cough could be heard, but otherwise, the atmosphere was thick and grave. CMDR Naiilo, then turned around to face his audience as Wing Commander Denys Elara, started to explain the situation. The Infiltrator's Wing was going to be rebuilt and Colonel Stryker had assumed command of Firebird Squadron, a new unit with a small, skeletal crew. However, captured republican ordnance was scarce and almost unavailable. Therefore, an interdiction and seizure mission on New Republican materiel had been authorized by the Commodore and the TCCOM. The operation was going to be a simple one, as remarked by WC Elara. Some transfer relay station in the Denarr system had been thoroughly monitored in recent days, and complements of both, fighters available and escorting forces, were ideal for a deep strike, such as Tempest was tasked to do. CMDR Naiilo continued the thread, by explaining the details of the mission at hand, in a few sentences, followed by the respective icons on the holo-map as he spoke. The escort element of TIE Defenders in Tempest 1 were to attain space superiority, and eventually, disable as many opposing fighters as possible, without risking any of the ordnance deployed on the field. Missile Boats from group 2 were supposed to assist against fighter opposition, and Flight 3 was tasked of destroying the Platform Insurrection, and eventually leave no survivors. There were two major reasons to perform this thorough massacre. The alphabet fighters retrieved in the mission were going to be used constantly in hostile republican environment, then it was of paramount importance, that none could be related as missing or inactive, much less as stolen or captured. This meant total destruction of any records of the ships in dotation to the platform, nor leaving any living witnesses. Colonel Naiilo, cleared his throat again to repeat the "no survivors" sentence again.

Colonel Stryker started talking from the hologram projector. His unit, was to be deployed as soon as space superiority was obtained. The Interdictor cruiser Fairchild, would jump in and deny the possibility for any rebel fighters to escape, but for a certain amount of time, the whole task of containing, killing and disabling every single ship in the field, was up to Tempest Squadron. Firebird Squadron pilots were going to be delivered by a group of Assault Transports and take command of disabled alphabet fighters and jump into a yet undisclosed location. The ISD-II Challenge would take command of the battle once the Platform had been destroyed and the rest of the operation was progressing, to receive the ATRs, and if possible, as many of the alphabet fighters that were not manned sending Cargo Ferry units to retrieve them. Colonel Stryker seemed worried, although he was a holographic projected image, because some of his men where already inside the platform and would give the initial signal for the attack, and supposedly, these men had to be evacuated by their own means of transportation, outside of the enemy base and into friendly safe havens.

"This will be a hard one, people. I know, but we will succeed. It is imperfect, as usual. Don't worry Stryker", said Colonel Naiilo.

"Well, Sil. For you up there in your cockpit, it's imperfect. For us, on the ground, it's unforgiving", sourly responded Colonel Stryker.

Stryker saluted and the image disappeared, the lights were turned on. CMDR Naiilo and WC Elara were standing side by side, facing the whole assembled squadron.

"Any questions?", asked Lieutenant Colonel Elara.

Silence in the room.

"Yeah, can we shoot down our own while they're flying that rebel crap?. Nobody could blame any of us...", finally said Captain Kalve Ryder. A room-wide laughter exploded in the room. Even the Wing Commander, -normally bore a face gesture worth of General Frown's best expressions-, chuckled with the crowd. "No, Ryder. You may not kill your fellow officers even if they fly alphabets", said, while still laughing, CMDR Naiilo.

Ten hours later, a group of TIE Defenders exited from hyperspace. Some 20 parsecs from the objective, reading a small patrol of Z-95s in close formation orbiting the outer perimeter of the base. Apparently, the intelligence gathered on this target was accurate. A series of B-Ws and X-Ws could be seen in the radars, and so far, it seemed only a small crew of Z-95s, probably cadets, and then another group of X-Wings were the only present opposition in the area. Tempest 1 flight group, was approaching in tight diamond formation to appear as a small, hard-to-see, capital ship, in any of the enemy detection sensors. The X-Wing flight group disengaged from their previous patrol loop and now were flying directly towards them, as it was clear for them, there was no small sized vessel in that area but the radar still detected something. Colonel Naiilo ordered the rest of his crew to use ions-only and no warheads. They needed these X-Wings still able to be used after capture. Lieutenant Commander Neko quickly dodged to starboard of Tempest Leader as Lieutenant Iamthinking did the same to the port side, LT Synapse broke high and COL Naiilo was left alone facing the four X-Wings, which were yet unable to decipher whether that thing was a flower opening or some cockroaches

running from the light. This hesitation was too late, as Tempest 1-1 engaged in a full blast of combined lasers and ions, stopping the first X-Wing with a single burst, and leaving it stranded while sparking and smoking, a hot coal in the middle of nowhere. Naiilo did not break his trajectory and rolled to his starboard side while drifting and ascending, placing himself right on the six of another X-Wing. He shot a full burst of the combined rays on the enemy, but only a few of those hit the target. The X-Wing suddenly broke left and Naiilo passed through, like a loose cannonball, trying to brake and chase back his prey. Then a huge explosion to left was seen, and confirmation from LT lamthinking, of "one down", was heard on the radio.

"Good kill, LT. Thanks, but let's try to disable rather than burning them", replied Naiilo. In the distance he could see the pale blue reflections of the ion cannon barrage that some T/D had disabled another X-Wing. A few seconds later, he could hear on the message board that 2 more flight groups had been launched and one of the initial X-Wings was trying to make a jump to hyperspace. The Z-95s remained within the protection of the Platform turrets range.

"Neko, smoke that bandit, don't let him escape!" said Naiilo, now genuinely worried as he also turned to assist his wingman in preventing any survivors flee the field.

The X-Wing was fuming like a meteorite in a clear night sky. Unable to recover any shields back, the republican pilot probably had opted for a full swing to the engines and crossed his fingers to reach the nav buoy in one piece.

Again, another huge explosion, then another one, then a third one. The escaping X-Wing was now a huge fireball. "Tempest 2 here to assist", said Lieutenant Commander Marek N'yrafa, one of the best pilots the squadron had to offer. "Tempest 2-3 here, another bandit down", said Captain Kalve Ryder. Colonel Naiilo thanked them and again advised his crew of leaving as many fighters as possible for capture. No one clearly acknowledged. Everybody was busy either trying to kill or to be killed.

A third party of Missile Boats jumped out of hyperspace.

In the distance, those bright fireworks, colored rays and explosions, of this familiar deadly dance could seem like a pleasant spectacle, thought Lieutenant Colonel Phalk Sturm. A close formation of four black trimmed Missile Boats was conveying on to the Platform Insurrection, approaching it from the lower side of the structure.

"Tempest 3 here, initiating bombing run on the platform", said Sturm.

"Negative, Tempest 3, this is Tempest 1. Please assist us and await my confirmation on the primary objective. We don't know if the people from Firebird have fled or not, Phalk", replied CMDR Naiilo.

"Ten four, Tempest 1-1. Tempest 3, approaching to assist. Break formation, engage bandits.", answered Sturm on the radio, while thinking that he'd rather not risk any of his men because some of Stryker's were still dangling with their pants down, in a toilet on the platform. Sturm briefly remembered what Stryker said, and if for us this was imperfect, for them it's unforgiving, and that, made him smile. He engaged the SLAMs and was pushed against the back of his seat.

Seconds later, beam tractor was activated and at short distance dual missiles were launched, obliterating a couple of Z-95s in close formation. A short burst from the laser cannon, did the job on the third enemy. "3 victories in less than 10 seconds, this was not a bad timing", thought Sturm. In the distance he could see more explosions around some containers and one of his men, apparently Tempest 3-2, being chased by two A-Wings which had been launched from the platform, a minute before. The A-Wings were turning the space around the escaping Missile Boat into a field of blazing fire, although Tempest 3-2 was trying to roll and evade, one of the enemies was clearly using a tractor beam, otherwise LT Rhygaar should have bugged out long ago.

"Rhygaar, I am right behind you and SLAMming, on my mark, break high", said Sturm as he engaged again the boosters and was approaching so fast there was no time for the missile heads to lock on the targets, but a dumb fired dual launch to the adjacent rebel fighters, should do enough to save his wingman.

"NOW! NOW Rhygaar, BREAK!", shouted Sturm firing a salvo ahead with his beam tractor engaged, and the Missile Boat flying some meters ahead of him abruptly stopped and was dashed upwards like a rocket. One of the A-Wings was literally vaporized and the other broke to the left in flames. Meanwhile Tempest 3-2 had rolled on her axis and was blazing lasers at the crippled enemy fighter. Another explosion.

"Good kill, 3-2. Good kill.", echoed Sturm in Lieutenant Rhygaar's earphones.

Three Transports were launching from the Platform. Colonel Naiilo ordered the closest fighter available to pursue and identify. It was Major Hermann's turn to disengage and follow the wedge formation of those three unremarkable transports. Two of them were carrying astromech units, clearly headed to man the parked B-Wings and X-Wings, but the other transport as soon as Hermann

approached to identify, switched the IFF to neutral and some loud, distinct voice was heard aboard every Tempest fighter. "Do not shoot! We are Firebird!", it pleaded.

"Tempest 2-2, engage and destroy the Transports. Tempest 2-3 escort Firebird to its destination", the voice of Colonel Naiilo sounded sketchy in the static, and his fighter could be seen taking damage from a pair of A-Wings shooting from opposite directions. Another TIE Defender came in his aid, eventually disabling one enemy and destroying the other.

Now, a pair of Assault Transports bearing imperial markings, emerged from hyperspace.

"Firebird Six, here. Initiating capture operation. Cover us, Tempest!", it was Colonel Stryker, loud and clear inside every cockpit of Tempest fighters.

Tempest 1-2 and Tempest 1-3 disengaged to assist the ATRs while en-route to the parking space. The Platform's gun turrets had been very careful not to fire in the vicinity of any of the unmanned parked fighters, but now they were concentrating on the ATRs entering the area, with increasing danger, until one of the Missile Boats, started shooting missiles at them, diverting the fire away from the transports and their risky boarding operation.

"Tempest 3, please light up the Platform.", said Naiilo, now free of bandits in his sector, and slightly relieved that the operation was half-way through completion, and so far, flawless and no casualties.

INT Fairchild and ISD-II Challenge jumped out of hyperspace. The void around them bent outwards with a deaf thump.

The Missile Boats of Tempest 3, engaged SLAMs and accelerated away from the platform, like if they were disengaging towards a jump point. About 6 parsecs away, they turned 180 degrees, and created an inverted triangle formation, being Tempest 3-1 the bottom edge, which launched a quadruple salvo of missiles that blew up the warhead defenses. Simultaneously, all three gunships, unleashed their full load of heavy rockets towards the PLT Insurrection. Almost all of the over 50 nuclear rockets hit the central hull of the base. The explosion was catastrophic and ten seconds later, an area of half-a-mile was engulfed in a huge white fireball. Suddenly, the void around the explosion, was distorted and bent in unnatural ways and most of the containers docked nearby the platform were instantly disintegrated as well. A cloud of debris and dust turned visibility almost impossible. Scattered among the wreckage, there were sections of the station still working which emitted light

beams and electricity rays around them, steam, human fragments and small flames burning in oxygen pockets floating in the vacuum. The spectacle of death and destruction was dantesque.

Tempest 3-1, continued to fly towards the wreckage while his three wingmen patrolled above the dust cloud. LC Sturm engaged his fighter's sensors to detect any life form which could have survived the nuclear explosion. Nothing. Not a single living cell could boast to be a survivor of the Insurrection. His ship clunked against the remnants of what appeared to be part of the command center of the station. A slashing thought of himself and his crew burning and gasping for air amidst the flames, crossed his mind. He pushed on the throttle and the boosters leaving all behind.

One of the Assault Transports was in trouble. It straggled behind the other ATRs and republican fighters were laying vicious fire on her. It resembled a lioness defending against multiple hyaenas which took turns in attacking. TIE Defender Tempest 1-2, piloted by LT Synapse was flying fast trying to assist, but Synapse was far from being a veteran, and mistakenly using lasers against the fighters, also he was rolling in too hot, is what Lieutenant Commander Richlet thought, arriving from behind to help both his fellow Tempest wing mate and the people inside the ATR. LCM Richlet threw dual missiles to one of the A-Wings while trapping it in the tractor beam, and the enemy starfighter was cut in half and no pilot managed to eject.

Tempest 1-2, was still in its same original trajectory, ballistic fast and the turn he attempted to do was imprecise, thus crashing against the X-Wing which was systematically pounding Firebird Six from the starboard side. Both fighters melted into a blazing ball of steel and flames. The X-Wing exploded and the blast ripped off all of the TIE Defender's solar panels. Only the cockpit remained, spinning like a flaming bullet, but then a pilot ejected.

"Tempest 1-2 is down, I repeat, Tempest 1-2 is down", said LCM Richlet as he flew nearby the floating body, hopefully living, of Lieutenant Synapse.

The Assault Transport had managed to survive the previous explosion and her gun turrets destroyed the last of the remaining attackers. Fumes running from the hull of the transport and some minor short-circuits alongside her panels, were a clearly visible from the cockpit of Tempest 2-4. This starfighter was some parsecs ahead of the previous scuttle and reduced speed to fly-by above the Transport and assess the damage from the outside. "Firebird Six, this is Tempest 2-4, head back to the Challenge, do not attempt a hyper jump in your current situation. I will escort you to safety", said Captain Kalve Ryder, as he matched the speed of the only ATR remaining as the rest of Firebird Six had already been sucked by the hyperspace vortex.

2 A-Wings, 4 X-Wings and 6 B-Wings were flying in close formation, most of them unarmed, and started to jump in sequence to a secret location. Only a pair of A-Wings remained stranded in space.

"Attention, this is Challenge Six speaking. Tempest 1, please provide cover for SAR operations. Tempest 2 return to base as soon as Firebird has entered hangar. ETA 4 minutes. Tempest 3 destroy any remaining structures. Mop up ladies and gentlemen, we need to go". Wing Commander Elara's voice was as cold as usual, tight as a funeral drum.

A Combat Utility Vehicle was approaching LT Synapse inert body and Tempest 2-2, in the able hands of Major Hermann was flanked by his Flight Leader, Lieutenant Commander Marek N'yrfra, the best pilot in the whole Wing X, and probably in the Fleet. Unfortunately for him, today was a poor count of scalps, but the tension was still high and palpable, as the operation was far from over. LCM N'yrfra looked at his targeting computer, unbelieving its readings. A group of hostile TIE Defenders had just emerged from hyperspace and were flying at full speed towards them. The familiar beep from the acoustic missile indicator, started to buzz inside the cockpit.

"Hermann, look alive! We've got company!", said LCM N'yrfra and engaged SLAMs to accelerate and face the bandits.

Major Hermann was already flying in a different flight path trying to flank the close formation who had clearly targeted Tempest 2-1, and completely disregarded him. "They are so sloppy, they have to be some wannabe imperial dilettantes" thought Hermann, while outrunning the enemy TIE Defenders and flying further up to 2 or 3 parsecs passed after them. The close enemy formation was now unleashing hell on the solitary Missile Boat of LCM N'yrfra.

"Hang on, kid. I am right behind you" shouted Hermann in the radio.

Tempest 2-1 had managed to evade enemy fire, though not unscathed, flying in fast Immelmann maneuver and all of a sudden it reversed all power to the lasers and shields, making the tiny gunship come to a full stop in a matter of meters, and his pursuers ahead of him like a group of sling shots. He then engaged the tractor beam and shot eight missiles in a close sequence, two of them hit the first Defender, literally disintegrating the fighter, two of them destroyed the solar panels on one of them and the rest landed somewhere in between the close formation, igniting the shields of the enemy starfighters. As N'yrfra tried to bring full power to engines again to disengage, a cloud of fire engulfed him as both of the remaining fighters were hit by some torpedoes Major Hermann had launched from behind.

"You are crazy Hermann!. You almost killed me!", said in a frantic tone and audibly shocked, the Flight Leader of Tempest 2.

"Thank me later, Marek, you're welcome", and Tempest 2-2 was already flying towards the ISD-II Challenge.

The operation was almost finished. Assault Transports had exfiltrated to assigned locations, except one had to made an emergency landing on the Challenge. Only one Missile Boat had been lost in exchange for twelve successfully captured alphabet fighters, now awaiting at a secure location. The New Republic had lost a hub in this remote region and all pilots were accountable as they jumped to hyperspace in sequence. The only casualty was bruised and injured, but alive and safe back in the Challenge.

Tempest 3 was left behind and ordered to destroy any remaining fighters which had not been seized. Only one of the TIE Defenders, Tempest 1-1, the squadron commander, remained in the area, overseeing the operations. The ISD-II Challenge jumped out into hyperspace as the INT Fairchild never had to power her gravity-well generators, during the operation.

40 minutes later, the Challenge hangar bay was teeming with activity.

Colonel Silwar Naiilo thought to himself: "No urns to display. No flags to fold. No fellow officers to mourn this time."

"This is the Tempest way!" shouted and he laughed as he entered the elevator, thinking of Chalquila.