

Colonel Naiilo was scratching his ginger-red beard as he was listening to Wing Commander Elara's orders for the upcoming battle. The Challenge was to lay steady and appear as stranded in order to bait whatever pirate forces were present in this remote sector.

LC Denys Elara was looking as impervious as usual in her stern demeanour, but something betrayed her gesture. As she was debriefing both Firebird and Tempest Squadrons' pilots, her hands were clenched in what seemed crispation. The standing orders were coming directly from HA Dempsey herself and were supposed to be followed by the letter. The strategy ahead was to even sustain some minor hull damage in order to give realism to the ruse and risky gamble the Commodore was planning to roll-in today.

No one in the room spoke a word, after the holographic map was dimmed and came the turn for questions. Silence. The deadly kind of silence.

"I bet neither Silwar or anyone are liking these orders. Losing a finger in order to catch a biting crab does not sound very healthy", thought LC Phalk Sturm, sitting in the back of the Wing X Assembly Room.

"Pilots, if no one has questions, get to your ships. Commanders!. Await signal to be deployed", said now in a more nervous tone, the Wing Commander.

Colonel Naiilo was still very much thoughtful as he did not express one word as he turned to his pilots with the usual look. "These are the orders, what can I say? Let's go.". All that long sentence in a single sight and slight nod to both LCM Maarek Ny'Irfa and LC Phalk Sturm, who had approached him as everyone was exiting the room.

"This is not good, Sil. Staying still in plain sight? Getting shot at and no cover? People are going to get killed. You know this.", whispered Sturm as he faced his commanding officer. LCM Ny'Irfa just smiled.

"Come on, Phalk. You are being a bit pessimistic. What can they throw at us? These are lowly prepared pirates. The Commodore knows what she is doing. We will sweep them like roaches. Don't worry!", Lieutenant Commander Ny'Irfa was the second Flight Leader in the squadron and very much in his energetic mid-twenties. His nonchalance did not bother the other Flight Leader, a very much aging and sour Lieutenant Colonel Phalk Sturm. It just made him sad.

"I hope so, kid. I dearly hope so. But I haven't come to get this old by showing my ugly mutt across the line of fire. I still don't like this. We are going to bleed", replied Sturm in a tired and even graver voice.

"Yeah, well. Let's hope not, Phalk. Now we are rolling with these dice", said Naiilo and turned to count the line of pilots following him out, over the two men's shoulders.

"We all have to die, old friend. This as good as any other day", commented drily Major Hermann as he exited the room with the rest of the squadron.

In the hangar bay, everyone was doing something and no one else spoke to each other, but some short commands and orders. Firebird Squadron was ready to launch first in their recently acquired T-65 model X-Wings and Colonel Stryker, the Squadron Commander was kneeling in front of his

fighter. Then after a quick gesture he climbed the stairs and hopped inside his spacecraft, closing the cockpit's lid.

X-Wings of Firebird were supposed to give space superiority in coordination with Tempest Flight I. Tempest Flights II and III were loaded with standard loadout of Heavy Rockets to sweep any capital ships present.

Time passed. The Imperial Star Destroyer mark II "Challenge" noticeably came to a full stop. The usual engines vibration inside the ship was no longer there. Then, the lights were dimmed and the hangar was dark as pitch. Only the lights inside the cockpits glowed on the pilots faces and a sporadic blinking beam here and there. The service crews were standing still in order to avoid bumping into anything dangerous. Everybody was holding their breath.

Time passed. Now a humming sound was heard close to the starboard side, right below the hangar's exit to open space. A small shock cradled the Destroyer. Almost like a gentle caress, followed by a huge explosion somewhere ahead of the hangar. Fire alarms started chiming and then a blood red light blinded everybody. Loudspeakers across the hangar featured the Wing Commanders' voice: "All fighters deploy!".

The X-Wings launched in a precise and coordinated maneuver like if they were a single unit.

Missile Boats from Tempest II accelerated in full speed and fanned out as soon as they were out in space, and so did Tempest III. Tempest I in their TIE Defenders just hovered in the opposite direction.

Inside his Missile Boat, LC Phalk Sturm could see three Light Cruisers conveying on the Challenge. The Lorinar-class Strike Cruiser Hermes had been unnoticed by the enemy ships and started firing volleys causing some damage. The radar in Sturm's cockpit signaled 6 friendly fighters launching from the Hermes. Y-Wings in two separate and tight formations.

"Those are Firebird 3, this is getting nastier by the minute. Tempest 3. Sitrep.", said Sturm to his wingmen.

"Acknowledged, Sir. All green here. Ready for orders". Lieutenant Honsou, a veteran fighter from one of the many imperial remnants that had been crushed to the grip of the New Republic in the past months. He had been recently incorporated into Tempest III after some replacements in the squad, and was still very much respectful of protocol and rules. That is what Sturm thought at least, and he liked it. The blood, the suffering and the dead were unavoidable but good manners were a touch of civility.

"Up and running, LC. Locked and loaded." said Lieutenant Morgoth. LT Morgoth had proven to be a natural born ace. His impressive record and improvement in such a small amount of time, both made Sturm happy and proud. The fresh cadet had evolved into a seasoned pilot with icy resolution and a deadlier aim.

There were only three fighters in Tempest III.

Lieutenant Nindo Ardinn, formerly Tempest 3-3 had been shot down while on patrol in a nearby sector, and was removed from active duty as he healed from his wounds on FRG Salvation.

The Missile Boats were flying at standard speed of 122 MGLTs and Sturm received confirmation from Colonel Naillo to attack one of the cruisers focused on the Hermes. Flight II, would do the same on the opposite vessel, while Y-Wings from Firebird 3 would concentrate in the remaining light cruiser.

The three tiny spaceships accelerated with their SLAMs and formed in the usual inverted diamond shape, shooting half of their ordnance in one coordinated barrage of rockets. The shields around the cruiser were ignited in bright yellow flashes and its laser batteries once focused on the Hermes' hull, immediately turned to the aft side, in the general direction of the attack.

Space around Tempest III glowed in a myriad of green and red beams intertwining in a lethal web of light.

One of the rockets finally punctured the hull of the cruiser while the three fighters had not entered the deadliest range of the enemy ship. All of a sudden, those three closely flying spacecrafts fanned out in opposite directions avoiding almost all of the thorough fire drawn from the enemy cruiser. A quick inspection on the cruiser, informed that it had no significant cargo and that IFF was definitely not rebel, but of an unidentified origin. Sturm relayed this to his CMDR. Now from three different directions, port, starboard and bow, the Missile Boats unleashed the rest of their death ordnance. The cruiser seemed to remain unharmed, for a second, then a huge explosion was seen inside the hangar and other multiple fires and flashes were seen across the whole fuselage of the now, sinking, enemy light cruiser. Remains scattered around the area, and the usual pockets of oxygen could still be seen burning. No escape pods managed to launch.

"Tempest 1, this is Tempest 3. Sil, scratch us one. Assisting Tempest 2. Please confirm.", said Sturm through the microphone.

"Order confirmed, Tempest 3. Assist Tempest 2 immediately" was the short reply heard inside the still intact, Missile Boats of Tempest 3.

Flight II of Tempest Squadron was having a hard time. Lieutenant Commander Richlet was trying to, what appeared, draw enemy fire from one of his wingmates. He was flying really close to the hull of the targeted Light Cruiser, and the enemy gunners were having a hard time to aim at him but were nevertheless attempting to, therefore directing almost all their defensive fire on his Missile Boat. It seemed only 2 of the flight's members were engaging the cruiser.

"This is odd", thought Sturm. "Where is Maarek? Or Hermann?", again he asked himself.

Behind the Light Cruiser. Pilots from Tempest 3 were able to identify a full wing of TIE Bombers, all vectoring in close formation onto the ISD Challenge. In the midst of that wide, menacing mass of enemies, scattered X-Wings could be seen trying to break the enemy's formation, and 2 lonely Missile Boats were seen firing missiles over and over again. Closer to the ISD Challenge, a lonely Light Cruiser was approaching fast while being attacked by Firebird 3 and Tempest 1.

"Maarek? What the hell are you doing?", yelled Sturm on his intercom.

"Hermann? Please come in!", again Sturm was yelling and now losing his apparent calmness.

No response.

"Tempest 3 here, initiate attack on the cruiser". Sturm's voice was cut in the static, but the order was simple and audible enough for his pilots.

This cruiser however was not unaware of the five Missile Boats surrounding her and was not to be caught so easily as her now sunk, twin ship. Missile launching alarms started buzzing inside every cockpit of the imperial fighters closing in. The cruiser was desperately trying to cover both the entrance vector of the TIE Bombers as much as herself in the same maneuver. The gunners aboard this one, however, were better trained. Lieutenant Honsou was getting hammered by persistent fire from the starboard side. LT Morgoth was busy to avoid missile after missile. On the other side, LC Sturm was trying to aim at the turrets, dumb firing his remaining warheads since the single tiny laser in the Missile Boat was more of a sick joke than an effective assault weapon. This coordinated diversionary action, gave some time for LCM Richlet and his wingman Captain Kalve Ryder, to regroup and probably recharge shields before starting another bomb run on the cruiser. Hopefully, this time the rockets would land on the target since the gunners and defensive countermeasures were busy at pounding the other three tiny fighters around them.

"Tempest 3, keep them busy please! We are rolling-in hot, now", said LCM Richlet. The two Missile Boats were flying side by side but within close range, they separated and engaged SLAMs while firing their last salvo of rockets.

One single missile erupted from the cruiser, hitting CPT Ryder's starfighter above the cockpit. The explosion blew away the central upper fin. Captain Ryder's voice on the radio was sketchy, but he was clearly bugging out as smoke was emerging from both engines and one of the warhead pods.

Then, it happened.

The space bent outwards, with the familiar deaf thump. Two cruisers. Not light cruisers this time, but Victory-class Star Destroyers. Right above the formation of TIE Bombers. Although decimated by Tempest 2 and Firebird 1 and 2, the bombers were very much capable of launching their torpedoes and rockets on the Challenge. And they were doing just so. A field of glowing lights, blue and yellow, was expanding closer and closer to the ISD-II Challenge. Many enemy bombers were falling here and there but they were approaching in the same unaltered formation.

The Victory Star Destroyers engulfed the space above and around the formation of TIE Bombers in a giant bursting sphere of green beams, as their laser and turbo laser batteries immediately engaged in firing against the imperial fighters presently reaping on the bombers below.

Lieutenant Colonel Sturm, saw this in shock and awe. Two fighting destroyers and perhaps more to follow was just what the Commodore had been asking for. You lay dead and all kinds of scavengers come to feast

on the carrion. People were dying now. He could see several fighters from Firebird missing and one from Tempest 2. Colonel Naiilo had managed, with both luck and skill, to keep his crew alive so far, and Tempest 1 was still intact.

Any Victory-class Star Destroyer, though much smaller and less capable than a standard Imperial-class Star Destroyer, has a deadlier feat than its bigger counterpart. It has twice the number of warhead launchers.

The area around them was pure mayhem. A swarm of warheads were launching wave after wave onto the imperial fighters, in such overwhelming quantities, almost all fighters from Firebird 1 and 2 were entangled in some dodging maneuver, and leaving now the immense tide of bombers undisturbed in their final approach on the Challenge.

Two lone fighters. Precisely, Missile Boats from Tempest II, piloted by Lieutenant Commander N'yrfa and Major Hermann, disengaged and flew directly towards one of the destroyers.

"Tempest 1. Tempest 2 here, initiating attack on the Vics. They are grinding us to dust, boss!" said a not-so-cocky-now Lieutenant Commander Maarek N'yrfa.

"Negative, Tempest 2. Eliminate Light Cruisers first." was Colonel Naiilo's command from his TIE Defender, somewhere in the fray to the south, escorting the Y-Wings, and also fighting for his life and those of his wingmen.

"Unable to comply, Tempest 1. We need to stop those launchers. Tempest 2-1 out." was the last radio communication from LCM N'yrfa.

Closely behind him another MIS was vectoring on the same Victory Star Destroyer. Major Hermann. It was unlikely that Hermann would bail on his Flight Leader, and this was clearly the case. The two Missile Boats broke formation to take simultaneously the two multiple-warhead launchers on each side of the bridge, from very close distance beneath the destroyer's protective shields, but very much vulnerable to their own explosions and the enemy laser batteries on top and below the castle of the Star Destroyer.

Within less than a parsec from the hull of the enemy VSD, the amount of laser fire intensified into a smaller area. The captain of the enemy ship had rapidly guessed the invasive, almost suicidal maneuver of these two lonely fighters. Major Hermann managed to blow one of the launchers with a single heavy rocket but the shockwave from the explosion left his fighter with substantial hull-damage and expelled his tiny craft like a pea in a tube, away from the shields in an uncontrollable spin.

Lieutenant Commander N'yrfa, however, was not so lucky. Although he had correctly guessed dual advanced missiles would have incapacitated his targeted warhead launcher and a smaller explosion for his starfighter, the enemy gunners were faster than him. As he flew-by the Star Destroyer's bridge, the top turbo laser turret and the rotary missile launcher concentrated all fire on him, disintegrating his craft in a single burst. A part of his remaining Missile Boat's fuselage was shot again from one of the starboard laser cannons. Nothing survived, neither an ejecting pilot nor a fragment of MIS Tempest 2-1.

"Tempest 1, Firebird 2, here. Bad news, we've lost Tempest 2-1 and 2-2, no survivors". It was Lieutenant Commander Turel, aboard one of the X-Wings which were closer to the Victory class Star Destroyer.

A pause of static in the communication line, then Colonel Naiilo replied: "Acknowledged, Firebird 2. Requesting SAR. Tempest 1 out". Static again.

The battle was raging now.

The Challenge was slowly changing course to gain distance on the attacking Victory Star Destroyers. All Light Cruisers were either destroyed or incapacitated, as the Y-Wings and TIE Defenders from both Firebird and Tempest had the skill to disable the last of them. The enemy TIE Bombers however had been sufficiently successful to damage the Challenge and a noticeable hole in the hull could be seen from the distance in LC Phalk Sturm's Missile Boat. Now, with the inventory almost depleted, he was pondering whether to request a retreat for reload or try to chase any of the Supa Fighters and Z-95 Headhunters which were being launched from the Victory Star Destroyers.

All remaining squadrons of Wing X were now engaged either in chasing enemy starfighters or conveying onto the remaining and almost unscathed, pair of enemy destroyers.

Even, the Wing Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Elara was coordinating the efforts from her TIE Advanced somewhere in the field.

The TIE Phantoms of Thunder were approaching to the closest "Vic" to the Challenge. Finally, the warhead launchers were destroyed with the advantage of the cloaking ability of Thunder's fighters. However, two Phantoms were destroyed in the ensuing attack, and the enemy destroyer was now within firing range of the Challenge.

Things were not easy for any of the remaining Tempest elements, either. Ryder, Hermann, N'yrfa were out of the fight and LCM Richlet had teamed with Tempest 3 to coordinate an attack on the Shield Generators of the second Victory Star Destroyer, with whatever ordnance they had. Actually, only Richlet was warhead-capable and he was going to attempt a direct strike to the launchers, while the other Missile Boats were engaged in diverting enemy fire, as they had been doing for a good portion of the battle.

Richlet maintained a steady course close to the enemy bridge, unshaken from the ignited space around him. LT Morgoth was hit once, twice, then a dozen times by the laser batteries on the port side of the destroyer. A bright flame and a long tail of smoke erupted from his engines.

"Phalk, I'm hit pretty bad." informed Morgoth to his Flight Leader.

"Disengage Morg, now!. Head back to the Challenge if you can" was Sturm's response as he was busy trying to engage the bow batteries successfully destroying one and grazing the hull as well.

"Honsou, escort Morgoth to safety. Richlet made it!. Tempest 3, evasive maneuvers and disengage at once." ordered Phalk to the rest of his flight members.

He throttled down to place his fighter in the underbelly of the Star Destroyer. If lucky enough, his fighter should match the destroyer's speed behind the Power Generators, in the blind spot between the bulbous shape and close to the hull.

"Luck probability is zero in the long run" he thought, but this time it favoured him. His small fighter was flying meters away from the power generator, and although he had only a pair of missiles left, the ordeal was worth the try, as every gunner in the enemy ship would be scanning for the attacking craft hammering on the lower hull, and it would divert fire for some time, enough if luck helped again, to allow some of the fighters in Eagle, or Inferno, or Firebird, or Thunder, or even Tempest 1, to blow out the shield generators.

He directed his shields to the front and launched his last missiles. The explosion ate up almost all his remaining shielding capabilities, but all around him he could see lasers of all kinds frantically trying to nail him, unsuccessfully so far and also hitting the destroyer's hull as well.

"It's up to my laughable laser cannon now", and he pulled the trigger of his only weapon left, in anger. A long burst of green fire was landing in the same place on the generator. Yellow smoke and steam was visible distinctively from his cockpit. One more long burst and maybe he could shut down the entire destroyer, but it also meant he was not able to sustain a second explosion and come out of there in one piece. He was going to throw a last salvo of lasers and cross fingers to notice when to stop before the explosion.

He did not guess it right.

Colonel Naiilo was flying in tandem formation with Lieutenant Echo VII as they both approached as fast as they could to assist his subordinates in the attack on the now-crippled Star Destroyer. LCM Neko had managed to evade enemy fire and rack up a substantial amount of Supa Fighters while protecting the Y-Wings from Firebird, and she was left behind with LCM Iam Thinking escorting the now battered and incapable Y-Wings back to the safety of the STRKC Hermes.

A group of Tuscan Fighters had been launched minutes before from the now heavily damaged Star Destroyer. They were using ion cannons rather than lasers to try and stop the Challenge from gaining distance. In seconds, those TIE Defenders from Tempest 1 managed to close on them and quickly destroyed two, scattering the formation. Colonel Naiilo turned swiftly to one side and hit the escaping Tuscan with combined bursts of lasers and ions. The Tuscan came to an abrupt stop. Sparks coming from everywhere in the fighter signaled Naiilo this one was disabled.

Lieutenant Echo VII was chasing one of the other Tuscons. A missile exploded on the fleeing enemy fighter, and a rain of lasers fired from the TIE Defender ripped its hull in two.

As Naiilo's TIE Defender was approaching, he could see a single MIS below the Star Destroyer. A huge explosion ensued after the Missile Boat fired a long burst of lasers. The Power Generator was now destroyed. The Missile Boat was also in pieces, the cockpit apparently intact, but her winglets and launchers remained floating in space as the main fuselage became a white fireball in a ballistic trajectory.

Then, a pilot ejected.

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Phalk opened his eyes and all he could see was water. He was inside a water tank.

Or at least it felt like warm, pleasant, soothing water.

Wait.

He had experienced this sweet embracing liquid feeling before.

Bactha?. Was he not dead?. Last thing he could remember was his fighter exploding ahead of him and dying in space.

Where was he now? Prisoner? Safe? A whirlpool of thoughts came rushing to blot out his still cranky brain.

Some kind of droid was standing close to the tank.

Phalk was lifted from the tank. He was not willing to go quietly if he had been captured. His helpless naked body was placed inside a medical pod. Although he could feel all his limbs and was awakening fast to full senses, he sought and could not find the familiar itching feeling of aggressors around him. Was he safe? Had he lost his lightsaber?

The same droid approached him. He could not distinguish the manufacture, imperial or otherwise. Then a familiar red bearded man in imperial duty uniform entered the room and approached his pod. He was relieved. It was Silwar, his squadron commander.

"One more line of stitches on that old skin of yours, Phalk." The man was smiling and seemed happy to see him.

"What... What happened, Sil?", Phalk could barely articulate the words coming out from his mouth. He felt like if numbness was still gripping on his tongue and cheeks. Even his teeth felt like a humming vibration.

"Easy, friend. Don't talk. Just nod. We made it in one piece. Or at least the Challenge did. We had some casualties though. Rest now. I will see you later. And by the way. I found your lightsaber. It's in my custody. Get some sleep, now." The bearded man wavered and stayed still. Phalk's vision range went darker again as the medical droid injected something into him.

Some days later, Lieutenant Colonel Phalk Sturm was deemed fit to serve again, and as he walked out of the Medical Bay in Deck 88A, now wearing his standard uniform, he crossed some of the maintenance crew members in the hallway. He was informed then that the Challenge was now in some sector with all her support fleet and performing repairs. The pirates were actually one of the New Republic newest factions and the outcome of the battle was a hefty prize for Wing X and the Challenge. 3 Light Cruisers. 2 Victory-class Star Destroyers and one Mon Calamari MC80 heavy cruiser had been sunk, along with their entire fighter complements.

The turbolift doors opened with a slight vibration as LC Phalk Sturm walked towards his Squadron Commander's living quarters.

Inside the tidy and spacious room, he saw Colonel Naiilo sipping coffee from a black mug.

Sturm saluted the red bearded man, and he returned the salute. Then, they both chuckled.

A lightsaber was resting on the desk alongside another steaming mug of black-pitch coffee.

"What happened, Sil?. Somebody told me downstairs we won the battle, but what happened to our squad?" said Phalk, as he sat on a chair and grabbed the mug. "This is delicious" again he spoke to greet the quality of the coffee.

"Well. We won, but we had more than we could chew. The Challenge is in shambles although we can be operational within 2 weeks. Firebird, Inferno, Eagle and Thunder, all lost pilots. 7 to be exact. We lost Maarek. Hermann was badly injured and has been transferred, let's say, to a more quiet and less dangerous assignment. Sin Squadron on the Warrior. As for the rest of the squadron, almost everyone has been promoted for gallantry in combat. Echo and Morgoth are now Lieutenant Commanders, and I suspect Honsou's promotion is coming up shortly. Your people excelled as usual. Rich has been promoted to full Commander rank, after his exploits and is now Flight Leader of Tempest 2. Kalve, Neko and Iam are well and also earnt their huge share of shines like the rest of the squadron. You, on the other side, have a long medical bill to pay, and no promotion, barely a bottle cap for a medal. No one wants old men in this ship. Plif told me." He burst in a loud laughter.

"Oh well, it could have been worse. Is my bike still in storage?" calmly replied Sturm, as he clipped his lightsaber to the left side of his belt.

Both men laughed again.