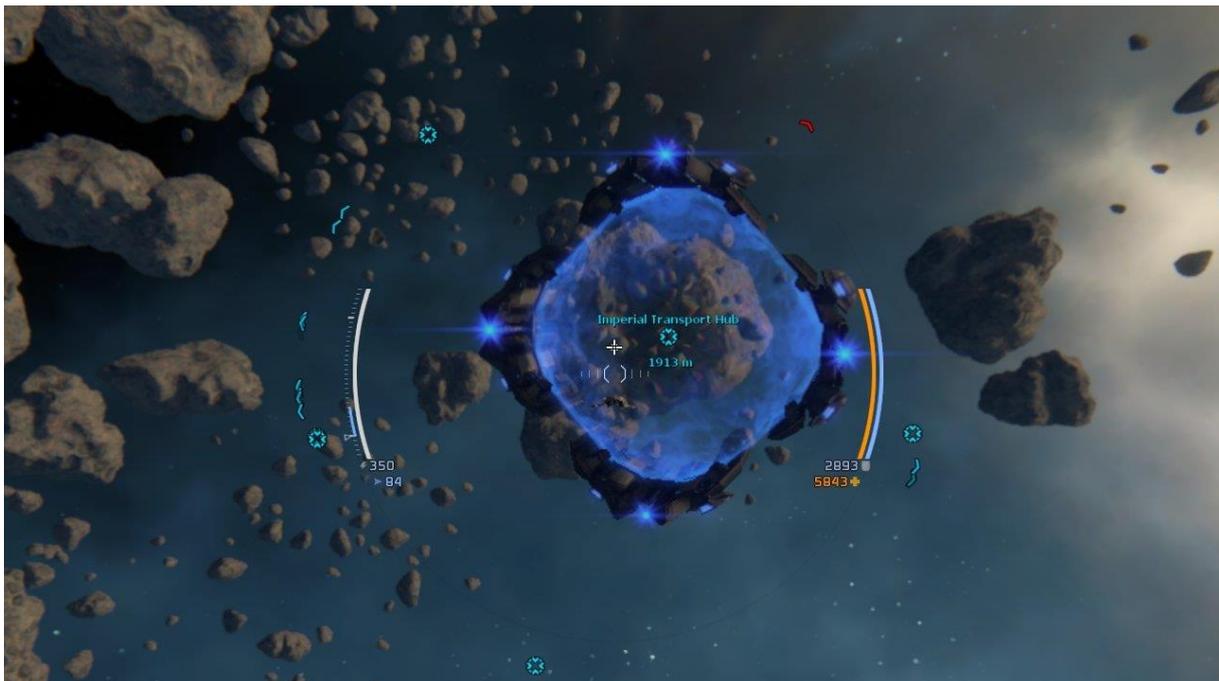


The Hunter

High Admiral Dempsey climbed into the cockpit of the new *Nibelung* starfighter she had acquired. The sleek fighter, which had only recently come into her possession, was turning out to be something interesting. In her preliminary tests, the TIE range of fighters was hopelessly outclassed in one field or another. So far, against even the best of the *Hammer's* testpilots, she'd been able to defeat them in direct combat, even against a TIE Defender.

As she activated all systems, the canopy closed and the engines started to hum. A few seconds later, she gently lifted the fighter off its gear, and pointed it towards the force field sealing off the hangar bay from the cold vacuum of space. She hit the throttle, and the *Nibelung* fighter quickly accelerated and glided through the force field. Free of the *Hammer's* environment, she immediately felt all resistance fade away. She smiled as she pointed the *Nibelung* towards a jump gate. The fighter, unable to carry its own hyperdrive system, relied on a network of jumpgates to travel between systems. Dempsey sometimes wondered who had built all these jump gates. She probably would never know. As she approached the gate, she activated a switch, and heard the now familiar beeping.



On the other side of the gate, Dempsey needed a few moments to get her bearings. In the distance she could see an old abandoned facility with the remnants of what would have once been mighty warships. She had seen - and investigated - these hulks before, as several had been located. It was a good thing these massive ships were long destroyed - an Imperial *Deuce* would not have been able to withstand an assault, she ventured. She wondered if the *Sovereign* itself would be able to, huge as it was - these things had been bigger!



As she peered around, suddenly one of her proximity alarms started blaring. She punched up the radar, and immediately spotted the problem: in the distance, she could see a green trail - the usual indicator of activity. Who these aliens were, no one knew, but they were everywhere. Almost everywhere anyway. Each time one of her people went through the jump gates, they came back with tales of the alien ships. Shapes never seen before, weapons never seen before, and tough as a small Corvette. And deadly - the amount of people who had not returned from an encounter with these aliens was too high already. Dempsey just felt relieved they didn't seem to be using the jump gates, which made it unlikely they would find the *Hammer*. At some point, she had collected enough data for her experts to estimate where the jump gate had taken her. The distance had been tremendous, more than a Star Destroyer could do in well over two months worth of travel at flank speed.

Dempsey kicked the throttle and pointed the *Nibelung* towards the alien. The onboard computer had identified it as a *Hunter*-class vessel. That was good, the Hunters, she could handle. There were other aliens out there as well, in bigger and stronger ships. The *Predator*-class ships were the most notorious of them. As she approached the alien ship, she engaged the *Nibelung*'s cloaking device. For months, the *Hammer*'s best techs had tried to extract the device from one of their prize fighters, but they had failed. Just as they had failed extracting most of the technology they found, and what they were able to extract simply refused to work inside a TIE class fighter. It was a nice little gadget though, she thought as she crept up behind the alien ship. Then, as she came within 2000 meters of it, she opened fire. The *Nibelung*'s array of offensive weapons made short work of the *Hunter*'s shields. Its primary weapon had been identified as a thermal weapon which was apparently called a Phase Suppressor. How exactly it worked was unknown, but it worked great against the alien ships, far better than the standard laser weapons of a TIE model starfighter, Dempsey expected. The second offensive weapon she had at her disposal was even better: once activated, it would drain the shields of its target, and transfer the drained energy to the *Nibelung*. These two weapons, combined with her expert piloting skills, ensured the alien

Hunter did not stand a chance, and it didn't take long before her sensors started showing serious damage to the ship's hull.



Dempsey hit the launch button on the control yoke once again, and the fourth of her supply of eight missiles sped towards the *Hunter*. As it tore through the ship's hull, the missile detonated, almost immediately followed by the massive explosion of the *Hunter* itself. Dempsey smiled. *And another one bites the dust*, she thought. She turned the *Nibelung* around and headed back towards the jump gate that would return her to the *Hammer*.