

## PROLOGUE

Dempsey sat in her office aboard the Victory-class Star Destroyer *Sinister*. The report that lay before her was interesting. Only hours after the Fleet Commander had appointed an old friend to the position of TIE Corps Commander, a new Strategic Operations Officer quickly followed, and the both of them abandoned the Crusader and set up office aboard the Star Destroyer *Hammer*. She wondered what Daniel Bonini was up to. It was hard to believe he'd just head off to the *Hammer* for no specific reason.

Well, technically speaking he didn't move since he was already assigned there as the commander of one of the *Hammer*'s squadrons, but when he took the position of TIE Corps Commander, he should have assumed command of the *Crusader*. Food for thought, definitely.

Next to this report was a list of Fleet movements that her officers had compiled. As Tactical Officer, she liked to stay apprised of movements within the Fleet that were out of the ordinary. For the last few years, she had personally trained a few officers aboard the *Sinister* for exactly that job: go over all the lists of all the movements of every single ship in the Fleet, weeding out strange things. And not without cause: several times already, problems were caught early because her officers had picked up something. And now, suddenly, there was a rather conspicuous list. Each movement in itself was nothing strange. But several ships, seemingly without any connection, had strayed from their usual pattern during the past two days.

She glanced over the list. The Interdictor cruiser *Derrik Quaven* had abandoned its position in the Phare system, and had been reported to have taken position near an uninhabited moon in the Karana system. Although technically speaking this was Emperor's Hammer controlled space, other than the odd recon mission, no EH ship had been actively patrolling that system in years. A few hours later, the Star Destroyer *Zerstoren* had also abandoned its assigned patrol, joining up with the Escort Carrier *Crevent Thrawn* and the Frigate *Hyperion*. After the three ships had entered hyperspace, they had disappeared off the map.

Dempsey frowned. A few more ships were on the list. The Star Destroyers *Indomitable* and *Retribution*, along with the Assault Frigate *Implacable* and Modified Nebulon B-2 class Frigates *Thunderchild* and *Eviscerator* had also hypered away from their battlegroups. Quickly Dempsey pondered the options. There was no doubt in her mind these movements were coordinated. This many ships, so little time. So many ships, all from different parts of the Fleet, all assigned to accompany another of the EH's Imperial-class Star Destroyers. There was but a single conclusion in her mind. She wondered.

A few minutes later, she walked off her private turbolift that connected her private office aboard the *Sinister* to the Star Destroyer's command bridge. Most of the bridge officers, having served aboard the ship for years, didn't move. Although Dempsey had a thing for etiquette, especially from lower ranking officers, this was exactly how she wanted it. She was not on the bridge often, but her arrival should not provide a distraction for the officers there. And so, each continued with their task as if she had never set foot on the bridge.

The only one to respond was the man sitting in the Command Chair. He stood straight, and saluted. "Admiral!"

Dempsey nodded, and the man relaxed.

"Captain," she said. "Set course for the Karana system. Signal the ships here we'll be taking a small excursion to Pyrath..."

At this, she noticed the man flicked his brow. Barely noticeable, but still. She wasn't surprised. Karana and Pyrath weren't exactly in the same neighbourhood, and why tell the ships they were going one place when they were actually headed almost in the opposite direction. Still, he said nothing. She smiled inside.

"Signal *Empress Theta* to run a Code Red drill and run a Level One diagnostic on all the *Sinister*'s systems. You may jump when ready."

Without waiting for an answer, she turned about, and walked back to her turbolift. As the door closed behind her, one thought kept going through her mind. 'What in Palpatine's name are you up to, Bonini?'

## CHAPTER ONE

Aboard the Imperial-II class Star Destroyer *Hammer*, High Admiral Daniel Bonini, TIE Corps Commander, stood firm on the bridge of the massive ship. He stared through the transparisteel viewport into the vast blackness of space. In the distance, he could see the huge triangular shape of the Super-class Star Destroyer Avenger. He had been staring at the ship for close to five minutes now, wondering if he should replace one of the other ships with it. But everytime he arrived at the same conclusion: it wouldn't work out. It was too big, with too many people aboard. It would simply require far too many resources. He had selected a number of ships, and all of them combined still required less than half of what he would need to keep the *Avenger* going. He'd need to set aside far too much time to acquire supplies for it.

Still - it was a shame. The *Avenger* would come in handy from time to time.

"New contact coming out of hyperspace, bearing Delta One Niner." The voice cut into Bonini's thoughts. He turned his head towards the officer who had distracted him.

"Lambda-class Shuttle with a three-fighter escort. TIE Advanced class."

Bonini smiled. "Signal them clearance for docking bay Three. Captain, I suggest you head there yourself and meet our guest."

The man sitting in the Hammer's command chair stood up, saluted, and walked off. Bonini watched as in the distance he could distinguish the reflections off the shuttle's armor plating.

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Thirty minutes later, Binini was seated in his new office on the *Hammer*. There was a bleep, and the door opened. A small contingent of stormtroopers step aside, and let another man in. Then the door closed behind the man.

"Welcome aboard, La'an," Bonini said. He smiled.

Fleet Admiral Jarek La'an returned the smile. "It's good to be back," he said. "It's been too long since we've served together."

Bonini nodded. "I just wish it was under better circumstances. Still, we should start getting this show on the road. Everything's been set in motion. We'll be jumping as soon as the last of the supplies are aboard."

"Good," La'an responded. "I saw a steady stream of transports heading for the *Hammer* as we came in. Are we taking the *Avenger* with us?"

Bonini shook his head. "I doubt it. It would slow us down far more than help us. It's a good ship, but we simply don't have the resources to keep that thing operational anywhere else than right here. Same reason we pretty much scrapped the *Sovereign* from active service."

Bonini stood up and walked around the table. "Our squadrons are stocked with fighters and pilots, we've got the support ships we need. I think it's time to start finalizing the plans." He placed his hands on La'an's shoulder. "We're heading towards glorious times, my friend."

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Several hours later, La'an and Bonini both stood on the bridge of the *Hammer*. Through the transparisteel viewport, they could see the starlines so typical of hyperspace travel. Bonini intensely listened to the silent humming of the Star Destroyer's hyperspace engines. Almost no sound, almost no vibration. The *Hammer* was in peak condition. It had been a long time since he'd been aboard a ship in this good of a condition. The Emperor's Hammer's downfall from glory had had its effects on the condition of the Fleet. But not this time.

A slight tremor went through the ship as the hyperdrive cut out. The starlines reverted back into single dots as the ship decelerated and jumped back into normal space. In the distance, Bonini could see two stars, one a Red giant, the other a smaller blue one. *The dual suns of Karana. One of the unsolved miracles of the universe*, Bonini thought, knowing very well this combination of a dual star system was very rare.

"Unknown contact," one of the officers said, breaking the silence.

Bonini stared at him. "Pirates?"

For a few moments, there was silence. "Negative, it's a Star Destroyer, Victory-class."

Bonini murmured. The *Zerstoren* and *Indomitable* were not due here for two days. Could he have missed a Vic being assigned to patrol this sector? No way.

"Unknown Star Destroyer is not emitting an IFF signal," the officer said. "It's not moving either. But it has launched a transport."

"Transport?" La'an asked. "What type?"

Again, a few moments of silence. "Unknown. The computer can't match it to anything on record."

Bonini cursed. "Battle stations. Prep Delta for launch. Gunboats only. If they've not identified themselves I want that thing disabled before it comes anywhere near my ship!"

The officer spoke a few commands into the comm system and punched a few buttons. Bonini returned to staring out the window. The Hammer had slightly turned, and it was now facing the planet below. In the distance he could see the shape of the Victory-class Star Destroyer. A million thoughts were racing through his mind. It didn't really make sense.

"We have confirmation, sir," the officer said. "The Vic has identified itself as the *Sinister*. Their communication signals the transport is carrying the Tactical Officer.

Bonini didn't know whether he should be smiling or not. He most certainly had not sent a signal to Dempsey or the *Sinister* about this operation. He knew La'an hadn't either. What in the name of the Sith was she doing here....

He turned and briskly walked towards his office. "Have a squad of stormtroopers meet her in docking bay Eleven. Escort her to my office."

## CHAPTER TWO

La'an and Bonini were standing in the large office aboard the Star Destroyer Hammer when Dempsey, High Admiral of the Emperor's Hammer and Tactical Officer entered the room. Bonini knew he had to tread carefully. Yes, she was a squadron commander on this ship, but her position as Tactical Officer made her outrank him. Not to mention the fact that she was strong in the Force. From the corner of his eye, he noticed the lightsaber dangling off her belt.

He gave her a short salute, and offered her a chair.

"What brings you here?" he asked.

Dempsey smiled. "Oh, I think you know very well why I am here, my old friend," she responded. "You've been quite active since you assumed command of the TIE Corps."

Bonini frowned.

"Don't tell me it's a coincidence that nine of our capital ships have suddenly abandoned their assignments without orders coming directly from you.... The Fleet Commander certainly didn't order it, and since I'm quite certain that I didn't either, the leaves only one person. "

At that moment the comm on Dempsey's wrist bleeped. She glanced at it and smiled. "Ah, I see the *Zerstoren*, *Crevent Thrawn* and *Hyperion* have arrived on schedule. That means the *Derrik Quaven* should be here in about 15 minutes, wouldn't you say?" She felt Bonini tense up. Up until now, she had not been completely certain she was right, but there was no mistaking this. He was indeed responsible.

"Tell me, Admiral," she continued. "What's the big scheme you're running. You don't pull several Star Destroyers and an Interdictor off their assigned missions without a very good reason."

Bonini glanced at La'an, who simply shrugged. He sighed, and stood. He walked over to the wall, hit a few buttons, and a holographic map appeared over the table. Dempsey knew it well, it was a map of the galaxy. Quickly, the map zoomed in to a region on the edge of the map. The Emperor's Hammer Territories. The map split into several sections, each colored. She recognized Aurora, Pyrath, the border regions with the New Republic. A yellow light blinked.

"This is the Karana system," Bonini said. As of a few days ago, this will be our home system. And with 'our' I mean a select group of ships and people from the TIE Corps. All personally picked by me and La'an. And all with the Fleet Commander's approval. We have several objectives, for which we have been given three years to accomplish. All objectives strive for the same thing: supremacy of the Emperor's Hammer as it was many years ago. A force to be reckoned with, that strikes fear into the heart of all those who would oppose it."

Dempsey folded her hands as she watched.

"We have reassigned several ships to do this," Bonini went on. The *Hammer* will lead our task force, accompanied by the Star Destroyers *Retribution* and *Zerstoren*. Several frigates will join the support fleet, and the *Derrik Quaven* will be our key to victory."

Dempsey nodded. "A fine collection of ships," she said. "The *Indomitable* will bring up the rear I take it?"

Bonini frowned. "*Indomitable*?" He looked at La'an, who shook his head. "I'm afraid we have not commissioned the *Indomitable* as part of our task force.

Now it was Dempsey's turn to frown. "Still - according to my intel it has abandoned its assignment around the same time the other ships did. If not to join you here, then why?"

Bonini shook his head. "That's something I cannot tell you at this moment," he said. Almost imperceptably, he signaled La'an. Bonini's second in command saluted, and left the office.

"Very well," Dempsey continued. "I'd be interested to hear more about this task force of yours. May I assume one of your objectives is to regain control of this sector?"

Bonini nodded. "Pirates have been ruling here for too long," he said. "Objective Alpha is their demise. Once that is done, we can start construction of our foothold in this sector, and then we start looking towards expansion. The Hammer has done nothing but shrink and give up territory for the past decade. It is time this changed."

Dempsey nodded in agreement. "Very well, Admiral," she concluded. "The *Sinister* and *Empress Theta* will be at your disposal as well. It's not like we're needed elsewhere, and the sight of Aurora and the *Sovereign* isn't what it used to be...."