

PREPARING FOR THE ENGAGEMENT

As the Interdictor cruiser *Shire* exited hyperspace in the Gelnis sector, its crew was frantically working on getting the ship working at 100% efficiency. Even though 100% was unattainable, the *Shire* had been chosen to do what no cruiser of its size had ever done before. It was now serving as the command ship of the fleet.

In the small hangar bay of the Interdictor, twelve starfighters were lined up, each painted in its own colors, and each modified to the specific wishes of the pilot. The Science Officer had his personal experimental TIE Fighter, and just for the occasion, the Tactical Officer had taken the modified tactical Gunboat out of the mothballs that at one time had been the personal ship of one of her predecessors, Marcin Szydłowski.

Only four people were working in the hangar bay. These four people had the highest security clearance a non-command officer in the Emperor's Hammer could have: they and they alone were responsible for keeping these fighters in pristine condition.

It was a rare occasion that all twelve starfighters were together in one place, and the *Raise the Flag* competition was definitely one of them.

On the *Shire's* bridge, the ship's owner stood, looking through the bridge viewscreen at the yellow star in the distance. His duty uniform was creaseless, and his hat bore the insignia of his rank. As the only one of his rank in active service, he displayed the insignia with pride. In the captain's chair, the only woman aboard the ship was sitting down, browsing through a stack of reports.

"Looks like we're good to go," she murmured, more to herself than the High Admiral standing a few feet away from her.

"Good," he said. "I have a feeling we're going to be surprising our pilots this year." He smiled.

Once a year, the Raise the Flag competition was held between all ships of the Fleet. And every year, the Command Staff ended at the bottom of the ranking. '*But this year*', Frodo thought to himself, '*this year we are not going to finish last!*'

He turned towards the Fleet's Tactical Officer and looked at the mysterious woman. He wasn't particularly fond of mysteries, and he certainly didn't like knowing as little about her as he did, but she had proven herself in the short time she had served as Tactical Officer. There was more to her than meets the eye, and given enough time, he would get to the bottom of it.

"Wanna take your fighter out for a test run?" he asked. "Our supply ship isn't due for another hour."

Anahorn Dempsey looked up. Well, proverbally speaking anyway, as Frodo March, known as the Hobbit, only measured about a meter in height, almost half her size. She nodded in agreement. She dropped the reports on a table next to her seat, and stood up. The uniform still wasn't entirely comfortable. Whoever had designed the Command Staff uniforms obviously had not imaged a woman ever wearing one of them. But if you looked at her, you'd never know.

She activated the commlink on the chair's armrest, and keyed for the hangar bay.

"Hangar Bay One, prepare CS-3 for departure." Without waiting for an answer, she walked towards the nearest turbolift, and disappeared from the bridge. Frodo started at the closed turbolift door for a moment, and then turned to some of the crew.

"Prepare a half dozen drones," he said. Set them to launch one minute after she clears the hangar. Set their objective to disable." One of the techs nodded, and returned to his console.

After a visual inspection of the fighter, Anahorn climbed into the cockpit. She'd never really like the XG-1, and this modified version really wasn't any better. Next year, she'd have her own personal fighter, catered to her exact wishes. One of the perks of being a Command Officer in the Fleet. This year, she'd just borrowed Szydowski's. He wasn't using it anyway.

She put on her helmet and connected the wires. After she closed the canopy hatch, she flicked a few switches and the cockpit quickly came to life. The two computer displays in front of her started scrolling off data as they ran a check on every system. Anahorn quickly glanced at the Head's Up Display. It indicated her shields, lasers and ion cannons were fully charged. She grabbed the yoke, and cycled through the weapons systems. Had she not worn the pilot's helmet, a faint smile would have shown as she noticed her warhead launchers were filled up with eighteen advanced missiles.

A beep from the computer alerted her that it had completed its check of the fighter's systems. She engaged the repulsor lifts, and the Gunboat slowly rose from the deck. As she retracted the landing struts, she flicked the comm switch.

"CS-3 to flight control, all systems are go. Deactivate primary force field."

"Affirmative, CS-3. Have a good flight."

Anahorn slowly pushed the yoke a bit, and the fighter started to move towards the gaping hole in the deck from where the Imperial capital ships launched their fighter waves. A flicker around the edges told her the primary force field was down. The secondary field was still up, but that was just to maintain atmosphere and pressure inside the hangar bay.

Her fighter would be able to pass through it without any trouble, something it would not be able to do with the primary field still activated.

As she cleared the hangar bay, she switched her targeting computer to the *Shire*, and watched as the distance indicator quickly increased to two clicks. As the distance hit two clicks, she turned the throttle, and accelerated the fighter to full speed. She turned it around, and headed straight for the Interdictor. Though a lot smaller than the *Sinister*, her Victory class Destroyer, it still measured an impressive 600 meters in length, dwarfing her 10 meter long gunboat. As she quickly closed the distance, the massive vessel became even more massive. She knew she shouldn't be this amazed at the size of the ships, but it never really stopped.

A beep from her computer caught her attention. She quickly hit the right button on the yoke, and the HUD displayed a drone fighter exiting the *Shire's* hangar bay. The computer indicated six of them had just been launched. She looked away from the drones, and back at the *Shire*. Then her computer started beeping frantically as the first of the drones was locking on to her.

Anahorn quickly pulled the yoke and broke away from the Interdictor. She switched to a random pattern of flight, and in moments was rewarded when the beeping stopped, indicating the drone had lost its target. She switched her weapons systems to missiles, linked her missile launchers, and swung about, going straight for the drones. Immediately, the computer started beeping again. She glanced the HUD, and noted the nearest drone was only two clicks away now. Nowhere near enough to get a good missile lock on her, so she ignored the warnings. She targeted the second drone in the flight group, but didn't wait for a solid missile lock. After two seconds of locking on, she released the two missiles, and then broke away. From the corner of her eye she watched two red streaks shoot towards the drone. The first one seemed to go straight through it, and then the drone exploded as the missile's detonation tore its hull apart. The second missiles impacted with the explosion, and exploded as well, causing an even bigger fireball.

One down, she whispered to herself. She put her fighter into a nose dive, and after a few quick yanks at the yoke, she found herself right behind the second drone. She switched back to lasers, and linked up both the laser and ion cannons. She fired two burst, and then pulled away. The red and blue energy bolts sliced through the drone's unprotected hull, ripping away parts of the hull plating. Some of the bolts sliced straight through the drone's engine systems. The ion fuel immediately destabilized, and as another laser bolt shot through the gas, the drone exploded as the gas detonated.

Anahorn targeted the next drone, but as she turned her fighter to get on its tail, she saw green darts of laser energy shoot past her fighter. The Threat Indicator alerted her

that one of the drones had targeted her, and she felt the vibrations and heard the thuds as lasers bounced off her fighter's shields.

She pulled away, and quickly evened out her shields again. Then she rolled her fighter, pulled it into a looping, and managed to get behind the drone. She switched to missiles, and fired two missiles at it without even waiting for a target lock. She could almost see right into the engine exhaust, and before she had a chance to change course, the missiles already blew apart the drone. As her fighter shot through the explosion, Anahorn was already working on getting behind the fourth fighter.

Less than a minute later, she had completely evened the odds. One of her, one of the drones. As she managed to position herself behind the last drone, she activated her tractorbeam, and switched to missiles. She held her finger on the trigger button, waiting for a solid lock. With no other threats left, she had all the time she wanted. But just as she was about to fire, she released her grip on the trigger. Instead, she slowly started nudging her prey, steadily changing its course.

After a few minutes, she had the drone exactly where she wanted it. Right in front of her was the *Shire*, and both she and the drone were now flying straight at it. She corrected some more, until they were on a direct course for the Interdictor's bridge viewports. The massive superstructure on the dagger shaped body of the ship quickly grew larger, as the distance decreased with every second.

"Erm, what's she doing?" Frodo looked out the viewport, but couldn't really see anything. His computer display told him Dempsey and the drone were both flying straight at the bridge viewport, but the two fighters were too small to see.

"She's on a collision course, sir," one of the deck officers said. "Sensors indicate she has the drone caught in her tractor beam. She's maneuvered it right at us. Impact in thirty seconds."

Frodo frowned. Would she really allow the drone to crash into the Shire? And more importantly, did he want to find out whether or not his blast shields could withstand the explosion of an ion engine. After a few seconds, he decided against it, and turned towards an officer at the far end of the bridge.

"Fire control, take out that drone. But make sure you don't hit that gunboat right behind it."

The man he'd spoken too nodded, and turned his chair.

In her gunboat, Anahorn realized the Interdictor was powering up the primary weapons array. She smiled. Frodo liked playing hardball too. For a moment she considered

destroying the drone and pulling away, but then decided against it. She was going to see this through.

A few seconds later, the green energy from the Interdictors turbo laser batteries shot at her. The first two volleys engulfed the drone, vaporizing the hull plating and releasing the gaseous fuel in a bright flare. The rest of the lasers danced around her, harmlessly.

One of the turbo lasers grazed her shields, sending an energy surge through the fighter. But it was the last one. Whoever had been at the controls of that battery had been very cautious to take out just the drone and not her. Good, that meant Frodo's crew knew what they were doing.

She pulled the yoke, and steered her fighter down the side of the *Shire*. With a wide loop, she turned back towards the hangar bay, as she slowed down to a crawl, waiting for the Interdictor's tractor beam systems to bring her back in. A bleep sounded and she keyed her comm system.

"Nice flying, admiral," a voice said. Frodo. "Looks like we're going to be having some fun this month."

Anahorn smiled and pressed the send button on her comm unit. "Just make sure next time you send some drones for me you make it actually challenging," she said. "This isn't even enough to break a sweat."

At the other end, Frodo laughed. "Will do, ma'am!"

Anahorn clicked off the comm system, as she felt the familiar shudder through her fighter as the tractor beam locked on, and started pulling her in. Frodo was right. This was going to be a fun month. And next time out here, she wouldn't be fighting drones. She just hoped that somewhere along the way, they'd run into the ISD *Challenge*. She was interested to see how she'd hold up against her former shipmates.