



## Part I

*It was the best of times but it would become their greatest nightmare ... The business of exploration entered a boom period and the galaxy had been at peace for almost 10 years. The people of the Republic had put the horrors of the Clone Wars behind them and were well on their way to rebuilding what had been lost. Two years into their exploration voyage, the crew of the Mon Calamari cruiser Argo discovered another promising solar system deep in a nebula. Located near the borders of the 'Unknown Regions', it consisted of two small stars each orbited by 3 and 2 planets respectively.*

*Note: The Explorations Unlimited Mon Calamari cruisers are in the original, pre-Rebel Alliance configuration. They are not the same as the versions that have been upgraded, up-gunned, and modified with military-grade hardware and additional hangar bays for the Rebel Alliance. "The Mon Cal cruisers were originally civilian ships designed for pleasure cruises and colonization efforts... After forcing the Empire from Calamari, the Mon Cals converted their ships to military duty by adding thick hull plating and numerous weapon emplacements." (Essential Guide) It is not a stretch to say that they were also quite popular as exploration ships.*

One of the newest ships in the fleet of Explorations Unlimited, the *Argo* had already garnered a reputation as a nearly indestructible ship. Its banks of shield generators allowed it to easily shrug off ion storms that often left victory star destroyers crippled. In fact, once they had rescued one such ship. The *Argo's* primary purpose was not search and rescue however. It was built for one purpose: exploration of space.

### **[Newly discovered system. Designation Unspecified. Argo's Hangar Bay.]**

The atmosphere was jubilant as the sleek exploratory vessel slid into orbit around the planet designated "Little Brother" and the sensor technicians and cartography teams went to work. One year had passed since the *Argo* had left the Company headquarters in Corellia on another exploratory foray into the unknown regions of space. As was common in exploratory missions, months flew by without encountering a planet suitable for colonization or terra forming. In fact, simply finding a new solar system was cause for celebration. In the year since they departed, the *Argo* had not had any luck at all and everyone was understandably eager for a change of pace. After determining that the atmosphere was not toxic and mapping the surface thoroughly, the eager science teams were finally allowed to disembark and begin their study one week after orbital insertion.

With a wild cheer, various personnel began to rush into landing craft laden with various equipment and

supplies needed for the duration of their stay on Little Brother. On the other side of the cavernous hanger bay, there was an equally enthusiastic rush towards a small rank of escort fighters. Enconced in the fighter staging area were a squadron of shiny, new Z-95 Headhunters, a squadron of Albatross sensor platforms, and a half squadron of prototype interceptors. As the mechanics watched, a four-ship escort slid from their service bays and into the take off pattern. Followed closely by the landing ships and one more escort group, they slipped out into space through the atmospheric curtain surrounding the hanger door. After the fighters and landing ships left, a few maintenance bees followed them out to do a little repair work on the outer hull.

### [Headhunter Ghost 1.]

In the lead Headhunter, Lieutenant j.g.. John "Wildman" Samuels reveled in the sensation of flight after a two-week turn on the bridge as flight coordinator. A quick look at his scanners revealed the ungainly landing ships strung out in a neat line closely shepherded by the two flights of Headhunters. He stifled a laugh as he watched his wingman break out into a barrel roll. 6 months without flying save for simulators could drive anyone off the wall. His flight of four consisted of two elements, himself, 'Bird one', and Flight Officer John "Bird" Collins his wingman, 'Bird two'; and Lieutenant Dan "Big 'Olet" (A story for another time.) Mazza and Flight Officer Stephen "Ace" Chiu, Bird three and four respectively.

As they began to enter the atmosphere, Wildman turned his attention to the planet below. About the size of Corellia, Wildman's home planet, Little Brother was half covered in water. The 5 continents seemed heavily wooded and he could spot a few mountain ranges in the distance.

*This could be a nice place to spend the rest of my life, he thought to himself absentmindedly. Toobad it's so far away from everything. Maybe in a few years, he mused, I could come back here and get a colony started.*

He led the Headhunters on a flyby of the landing zone and then ordered the squadron to make a perimeter sweep before landing. As they began their sweep, Wildman could see the security personnel and armored vehicles pour out of the drop ships. A rudimentary defensive position was formed almost before the scientist's ships touched down. By the time Ghost squadron had finished their perimeter sweep and landed at the temporary landing site, the prefabricated structures were already going up and the pilots threw themselves into the work with gusto.

### [Worker Bee on repair detail along the Argo's hull.]

Worker bee 215B was drifting slowly along the dorsal side of one of the large engine pods when its sensors begin to squawk at the pilot, Jonathan Swift. "Wha?!" Jon was startled out of his cheerful contemplation of his newest novel. "Foreign object off the starboard bow, 230 meters? Aw... great. Not mynocks again?!"

Several weeks ago the *Argo* unsuspectingly passed too close to an asteroid belt while charting a newly discovered solar system. The resident horde of mynocks had literally blocked out the sun. They had had to flee the system ignobly with mynocks nipping after them the entire way to the nearest jump point.

Grumbling deprecations about the ancestry of the engineers who consistently ignore reports about insufficient shielding, Jon powered up the small blaster that had become standard worker bee issue after the first couple deep space missions. As he approached the spot however, his floodlights failed to reveal the expected warped frame of a mynock. Instead, Jon's heart leaped into his throat and energetically tried to jump out and hid under his seat.

A midnight-black droid about the size of his ship popped out of the shadows and began spraying blaster bolts at him. With a terrified howl, Jon flung his throttle past the 100% mark and tried to pull his flight stick out of the floor. As his worker bee sluggishly pulled away, he opened a link to C & C and tried to update them on the situation. Before C & C replied, the speakers emitted a loud squeal, characteristic of an extremely high-powered Omega signal and a big explosion sent his worker bee tumbling end over end.

"I think it blew up on purpose! No it wasn't one of their designs. I don't know! I didn't exactly have time to sightsee."

"Very well. Return to the hangar bay immediately for debriefing, C and C out."

### **[Explorations Unlimited Camp on the planet temporarily named "Little Brother".]**

"So when do you think we're gonna be movin' out boss?" asked Big 'Olet later that night. Wildman waited until his plate had been filled before answering his friend of six years.

"Well, one science team just left for the North Pole yesterday and there's another leaving for one of the southern continents tomorrow. I'd give it another two months or so before we've gathered all the data we need." They moved through the crowded mess hall and sat down at one of the tables outside of the plastic, prefabricated structure.

"Then it's back to months in space looking at the scanners and telescopes again, huh" Big 'Olet mumbled to himself. "I wonder how things are going with Stephen and his new lady love in the pathfinder's squad. Scuttlebutt says they're gettin'--" 'Olet's comment was forgotten as their COM links began beeping simultaneously.

They reacted with the seasoned reflexes of combat veterans and were running for their fighters even before the Mon Calamari communications officer began to speak. The gurgling distortion that was one of the trademarks of the Mon Calamari was unable to hide his nervousness when he spoke. "An unidentified vessel has exited hyper space on the far side of the planet. It is not broadcasting an ID. I'm putting on the flight coordinator." Wildman's hackles rose as he heard that. "Come on! Move your asses!" 'Olet was screaming at his squadron mates. "We've got trouble headed our way."

"Commander! The Ghost squadron fighters remaining onboard will be providing cover for the *Argo*. The ship has not answered our hails and is powering up weapons-- Incoming fighters!" barked the flight coordinator of the shift. Pirates, he thought viciously as he strapped on his helmet and life support systems. As he lowered the canopy and triggered his engines, he could see Ace and Bird already taking off on repulsor lifts.

### **[Bridge of the *Argo*. Far side of "Little Brother".]**

Since all-out combat with heavily armed space pirates was not part of the itinerary, the *Argo* was only lightly armed with 10 turbo lasers and a quad-concussion missile launcher. Thankfully its shields were more than strong enough to keep the ship in one piece long enough for them to evade pirate attacks. Capt. Hans Tokagawa was taking no chances though and ordered a withdrawal to the other planet while the squadron took care of business. "Scramble the 4 Ghost squadron fighters remaining on board to provide cover for *Argo*."

Even as he gave the order his face showed how much he hated to leave the squadron outnumbered 8 to 12 without support. But there were civilians on his ship to consider and a pirate squadron if armed with an ample supply of proton torpedoes could with some work disable or destroy his ship especially considering his scant fighter support.

"Do you have an ID on those fighters yet, Sensors?"

"Not yet Captain, just a little longer... Y-Wings!! What the devil?"

"Sensors, this isn't the time or place to fool around. Y-wings! Come on. They're the newest fighters on the market. Double check your readings."

"They still say Y-wings, sir."

"Oh brother, pirates with Y-wings. The Republic is going to Hell in a hand basket."

The bridge of the *Argo* was tense as the communications officer tried to hail the unknown ship and its fighters: "Unidentified ships, this is the Republic ship *Argo*. Please identify yourself." After repeated attempts to establish communications failed, the unknowns were designated hostile. "Activate shields and weapons. Bring *Argo* to general quarters!" Capt. Tokagawa barked. The bridge crew leapt into action.

*Good luck my friend and may the Force be with you.* Capt. Tokagawa watched helplessly as Wildman's squadron formed up above the Company's camp and sped towards the intruders glowing red on the scope.

### **[100 km South of the Company camp. 3000 ft.]**

Wildman fidgeted as he watched his shields and weapons levels climb. 5 km ... 4 ... 3 ... 2 ... He bit out orders even as the pirates came into visual range: "Y'all know the drill. Stay with your wingman and don't let any of them get through to the base. Now get down in there and wrassel 'em around some!" A chorus of affirmatives was heard as the pirates came into view throwing spears of light at the squadron. Drawing on skills honed by 20 years of service with the Republican Navy, he ducked below their fire and then brought his fighter's nose back to bear on the enemy. Concentrated return fire from the massed Headhunters blew away two of the attackers with the help of a judicious, last minute concussion missile barrage on the first pass. "Big! Heads up. I want you to take number 2. I've got leader."

As they flew past each other, Wildman was amazed to see that the pirates were flying battle-scarred Y-wings rather than the more common Ugliers, a hodgepodge mixture of different fighter parts that the builder happened to have on hand. He realized what was going on when he saw that none of the Y-wings carried R2 units and spied hastily painted over unit patches. Later, he spotted one whose ioncannon turret was still partially disassembled. Probably recently stolen from a repair depot along the Outer Rim. The Koensayr BTL-S3 Y-wing had only been unveiled last year. Some poor S.O.B. of a Republic officer is getting his ass chewed off for first getting a squadron of the Republic's newest advanced star fighters torn up and loosing them. "I'm hit! I'm hit! Ejecting!" *Unfortunately for us, they must have been repaired before being stolen since they seem to be in prime working condition* he thought angrily as he saw his wingman take multiple hits and break up. Thankfully he caught sight of the canopy blowing off and the blur of an ejection seat before the Headhunter exploded.

"Sax, break right! Break right! Harder!"

"Got the bastard!"

"Eat this sucker! Haha!"

The Y-wing squadron would have been more than evenly matched against his Headhunters save for that fact that Ghost squadron pilots were all combat veterans and that these particular Headhunters were block AF4 Z-95s. It also helped that Capt. Tokagawa had sent his CAP to assist after he saw the pirates would not be getting anywhere close to the cruiser. Even Ace, their newest pilot, had several fighter kills under his belt from his time with a planetary space force. Wildman saw Ace and 'Olet execute a complicated weave pattern that resulted in a collision between two over-eager pirates and the destruction of another.

"Scratch three bogies."

"Ace, vertical scissors on my mark."

"Wildman, you've got one on your ass! Move it."

"I see it but I can't shake him."

"Not to worry big boy, I'm on 'em." "Yee-haaa!"

An Y-wing pulled into a steep climb directly into the path of a headhunter. The headhunter twisted and slid between the Y-wing's two engine pods but then was caught by four dual laser blasts simultaneously. Another Y-wing broke left into his wingman causing a large explosion that engulfed half of a headhunter's wing leaving it singed and half slagged.

20 incredibly tense minutes later, it was all over. The pirate squadron shattered, the pirate ship fled into hyperspace after recovering the tattered remnants of its squadron. Three pilots downed. *Not bad considering we were up against 12 Y-wings, Wildman thought. He opened a channel to Argo and confirmed the S & R shuttle's ETA as well as an assault transport to pick up the pirates. After the pilots were picked up, he contacted his squadron, "Ghosts, let's get back to the Argo. I've got a date." With a bed, he failed to add as a few tired catcalls came over the comlink.*

They later found out from the captured pirates that the unlucky thieves had been tracking the *Argo* in hopes of an easy capture. They were not aware of the quality of *Argo's* fighter squadrons until it was too late.

Two months later and with surveys completed on all of the planets, the *Argo* left the orbit of Dantooine and entered hyperspace bound for Corellia. Once at Explorations Unlimited headquarters, Wildman retired and was succeeded by Lieutenant Dan "Big 'Olet" Mazza. Lieutenant Stephen "Ace" Chiu and Lieutenant Heather Chung in the pathfinder's squad were married. By the time they left on the next survey mission 2 years later one child, Hank, had been born. These events coincided with the takeover of the Galactic Republic by a previously little known Senator Palpatine and the establishment of the Galactic Empire.

## **Part II**

*In an attempt to bring the Republican worlds more firmly under his control, Emperor Palpatine ordered suspension of exploratory activity. Many of the exploratory companies went out of business while others relocated into the Corporate Sector or the areas less 'enthusiastic' about Imperial rule.*

*Explorations Unlimited was one of the companies that decided to move its headquarters to avoid Palpatine's restrictions. It eventually settled on Bespin, which was uninhabited at that time. Forming a partnership with some chemical companies and Coruscant crystal dealers led to the construction of ADCC1 (Advanced City Concept 1), the forerunner of the famous Cloud City. The *Argo* and its sisters were quietly up gunned but otherwise continued in the same role as before. The Council of Explorations Unlimited watched with growing unease as the abuses and ambitions of the Empire grew. Finally, secret evidence provided by the Rebels verifying the destruction of Alderaan convinced the Council that a tentative understanding with the Rebel Alliance would be the wisest course of action. They began secret negotiations soon after.*

### **[Onboard ADCC1 two weeks after the destruction of the first Death Star. Hangar Bay 5b.]**

It was the middle of the night shift on ADCC1 and Hank "Spook" Chiu was bored. Very bored. The *Argo* had been in dry dock for a week getting the latest upgrades and maintenance. A week's worth of shifts in the business department had left him itching to take his Headhunter out for a spin and blow something up. He had already refurbished his armor and weapons, upgraded his survey suit's sensors, replaced the shield lenses on his Headhunter, recalibrated its sensors package, cleaned the concussion missile alleys, and gone over his lasers with a fine-tooth comb. With a sigh, he stood back and regarded his battered Headhunter with pride. Then his funk returned as he turned and saw the tantalizing swirls of cloud outside of the hangar bay. "Well I guess I could recalibrate my rifle." At this point, his Sullustan wingman, Manx call sign Bat, walked in.

"Spook, what are you doing still up? We went off shift 4 hours ago!"

"Aw come on. I don't have another shift scheduled for 2 days!" Spook protested. Manx's green eyes fell on the grease stains on his flight suit and the shiny Headhunter and slitted. She snickered as his stomach growled.

"Spook, come on. Let's get something to eat."

### **[ADCC1. Drop Zone Café.]**

Five minutes later they were comfortably ensconced in a plush booth in the 'Zone', the informal 'pilot's hangout' bar/café. Manx ordered a Sullustan dish with lots of strange looking ingredients and Spook decided on two Nerf Burgers and a tankard of cider. For a while, nothing was said as they devoted most of their attention to their food.

"How's the family?" Manx asked.

"Ace is having a great time modifying his new drop ship. I swear he almost has more fun flying that overpowered monstrosity than a fighter! Him and Mom are on with the *Intrepid* at the moment in the M308 cluster somewhere. But enough about me, what have you been up to Manx?" Spook asked.

She lazily smiled at him while playfully flicking sweetener packets around the table, "I've been hanging around some of my friends in the cartography department. They told me that the *Intrepid* discovered another useful planet near the Unknown Regions. I also heard something about some big cover-up going on at Alderaan."

Spook asked "What about it? ... You mean the Rebel broadcasts were telling the truth?"

Manx nodded gravely, "Yes. The Death Star exists and it comes out from under the bed where it lives next to the bogeyman to scare children at night." The pair dissolved into laughter. "Personally Spook, the very idea of someone wasting the time and money to build a space station that big is ... ludicrous! Anyway, the *Jason* is en route to Alderaan to find out whether about this mysterious communications blackout has anything to do with those periodic ion storms. If that's the problem, the council thinks that we could finagle a deal with Alderaan to supply them with a better hyper-communications system. We should be hearing back from them in a couple of days."

A few more path finders joined them at the table bringing with them more gossip about the newly discovered planet, something about a ski resort from Hell, as well as the temporary lost of communications with the cruiser *Mercury* two weeks ago. Apparently some little gizmo that was crucial to the operation of the communications systems had broken down and of course that was the one thing that *Mercury* didn't have replacements for. A BTL-S3 Y-wing was ferrying the spare part out to the *Mercury*. By time some Ghost squadron members came in, Spook was starting to nod off. Finally he took his leave and returned to his quarters for some long needed sleep. As he nodded off, his mind kept drifting to the new planet that had just been discovered. Maybe *Argo* will be assigned to investigate as well if it's that bad. That would be nice. I haven't done any ground missions in a while and it would be nice to see my parents again, he thought wistfully.

### [200 km South West of ADCC1.]

"Yahoooo!" Spook grinned as Bat vocalized what he felt precisely. Two new X-wings tore through several wispy high-flying clouds. They were on a routine patrol of Bespin in between ADCC1 and Cloud One, their newest floating city. Since their patrol coincided with the delivery of a test batch of what could possibly be their next primary star fighter, the X-wing, Spook and Cat were easily convinced to take the two X-wings on a check ride.

*Note: This was shortly before the Empire nationalized the Incom Corporation. It had just been announced on the open market when the Imperial Security Bureau began to suspect some of the Incom designers had rebel sympathies.*

Spook redlined the throttle and watched as the digital speedometer crept past 130 mg/lts. He dipped the X-wing through a couple of clouds and then threw it into a few barrel rolls. Through it all, the X-wing didn't miss a beat. Its quad pack of engines screaming behind him supplied him with plenty of power. Then he yelled in surprise as an enormous school of baleens surfaced out of the clouds right in front of them. He shoved the flight stick to the side so hard his knuckles collided with the side of the narrow cockpit in order to avoid ramming a brightly colored one that surfaced about 50 meters in front of his X-wing. Simultaneously, Bat howled as her X-wing dove between the wings and membranes of an enormous 20 meter long baleen and then immediately shot straight up to avoid one which surfaced just below her. Spook swung his ship around one only to have another baleen surface directly in front of him. He almost ripped the stick out of the control panel in his attempt to pull up. Bat barreled through a small cluster twisting and diving madly. One particularly violent turn sent her spinning into a loop. Their X-wings twisted and dodged their way out of the school after about what seemed to be an eternity of emergency avoidance maneuvers.

Baleens were a common sight this time of year. They fed by filtering the nutrient rich lower atmosphere of Bespin. Decorated with a combination of colors, they pulled in a modest amount of income from tourists each year. Spook himself had spent many lazy afternoons on a prospector's platform watching the baleens swim by. Flotation was provided by air sacs and rudimentary wings provided propulsion. Membranes that were the means of gathering food hung underneath. Harmless creatures that they were, a mid-air collision

with one would probably not affect the systems of the new, rugged X-wing or an Y-wing but the fragile shields of a Headhunter might not hold. Unfortunately it would most certainly be fatal to the Baleen.

Their luck held and both made it through the school without any damage to the X-wings and the baleens. "Whew!" Bat mumbled as they both slumped in their cockpits. "THAT doesn't happen to you everyday." "Was that cool or what!" Spook said. "Very impressive", Bat said, "Especially when you get such a CLOSE LOOK AT THEM!" "Do you think we can report that these ships are fully operational now?" Cat murmured. Then they both started to chuckle as the adrenaline rush wore off.

### [Traffic pattern around ADCC1.]

As they were landing in one of ADCC1's hanger bays, Bat tiredly watched the sun set. A river of lights flowed through the spires of the city and around the docking bays where the *Argo* and a few other ships were parked. She could see the distant flares and sparks of the welders as they worked in the cavernous bays. Distantly she heard Spook acknowledge the air traffic controller directing them into the landing pattern and she held formation easily. Suddenly, they were surprised when the controller suddenly ordered them back out. After an irritated inquiry, they were told hurriedly to contact the flight coordinator. "The *Artemis* has entered the system and it's not answering our hails! Sensors indicate a large debris trail. The rest of your squadron is scrambling right now and so are the Paladins. They will be flying cover for you. I want you to fly escort for the *Artemis* and talk them down out of orbit. Tugs have been dispatched. Move it. NOW!"

The X-wings swung out of their approach heading and lit their afterburners. A star field quickly replaced the reddish sunset. "This is Lieutenant Chiu speaking. Come in *Artemis*. *Artemis* please respond." The communications mystery resolved itself as they drew closer to the mute cruiser, silence fell over the two when they saw the condition of the ship.

### [Bespin Orbit.]

A gaping hole resided in the communications section's former location. "Holy cow! What happened to her?!" Spook spoke after he finished gaping at the damage. The *Artemis* had been badly damaged. Half of its port wing was missing. The left hanger bay was a blackened mess. Laser burns scarred most of the ship turning the ship's formerly white, pristine hull into an ugly mess. As they watched, one of the *Artemis*' five laboring engines gave out.

Seeing that the ship's hull was compromised in far too many positions to enter the atmosphere without help, Bat radioed ADCC1 and recommended that they also dispatch several heavy lifters. Spook managed to maneuver his X-wing into visual distance of the bridge, which was thankfully intact. Inside, the bridge was lit with the red general quarters lights and a few figures could be seen moving about.

Spook managed to signal the bridge that help was on the way and Bat took the opportunity to circle the ship to catalog the damage. Her unease grew as she noted the precision with which the laser burns had been applied. *Imperials? What have we done to attract their attention? We've avoided contact with the Rebellion and minimized our normal activities.*

After a few minutes, the heavy lifters arrived along with a squadron of tugs. With a delicacy that was incongruous for ships their size, the lifters maneuvered over the crippled ship and activated their powerful tractor beams. The tugs attached themselves directly to its hull to contribute their engine power to the effort of landing the *Artemis*. After the tugs linked their flight computers with those of the heavy lifters, they began the slow, nerve-wracking descent. After a few tense moments when a tug lost its engines due to the stresses, the ensemble finally moved into one of the dry-docks. Through the whole event, the Paladins and the rest of Ghost squadron flew a racetrack pattern first in space above the *Artemis* and then above ADCC1 itself. The com. channels were silent as the pilots watched the battered wreck ease into dry dock.

As the heavy lifters and tugs detached themselves and headed in, Ghost and Paladin also headed to their docking bay. A steady line of the Paladin's shiny, new Y-wings preceded the Ghost's sturdy, old Headhunters into Docking Bay 5b. The docking bay began to fill with disembarking pilots and the smell of exhaust as the frustrated pilots disembarked in silence. The normal good-natured bantering was absent and the mechanics watched mystified at first but with mounting edginess as the reason for their hasty departure was laid out before them.

The *Artemis* settled into dry dock with a moan of stressed metal and plastic composites. In the sudden silence left by the departure of the tugs and lifters, one could hear the sound of electrical short sand makeshift supports giving way. The crew was unable to disembark from the main hatches because they had all been jammed or melted shut. After repeated attempts to open the doors failed, repulsor transports were flown into the one barely functional hanger bay and the crew flown out in shifts. The wounded and the dead were the first out and flown to the main hospital. Engineers shook their heads over the damage and then begin to plan repairs. Technicians and repair droids swarmed over the ship. It would take weeks of work before the ship began to look like a ghost of it's former self.

As the remaining crews were slowly and carefully debriefed, a terrifying episode began to slowly reveal itself. The *Artemis* had been surveying the Beta quadrant for about one and a half years. (The average survey mission for the Company is about 4 years.) They had already discovered one solar system with a possible habitable planet when they discovered yet another solar system in a heavily ionized nebula. They literally stumbled upon it as the *Artemis* dropped out of hyperspace so the science teams could study the nebula. This system was not suitable for colonization without substantial terraforming. However as they surveyed the outermost planet, it was discovered that it was very rich in iron ore deposits and other useful minerals. The Company itself used systems like this to guarantee a steady source of income so the crew was understandably delighted about the find. In the excitement and due to the distortion from the nebula, no one noticed at the time that the system had several unfriendly guardians. Unfortunately, the Imperial system patrol craft stationed in the system spotted them first and launched a surprise attack supported by a wing of TIEs.

#### [ADCC1 Dry Dock Observation Lounge]

Lieutenant Franz Richards stood at one of the observation bays overlooking the dry dock where the *Artemis* was presently interred. He watched in a state of shock as the stream of wounded and dead trickled off and the repair chiefs began examining the hull to see if it was worth repairing. Even from his rather distant vantage point, he could see a whole lot of head shaking going on. *It's not fair. It's just not fair. We didn't do bantha poo-doo to them and they had to go demolish my ship. That fateful mission had started out so quietly...*

#### [Newly Discovered Solar System. Temporarily designated AG12.]

What a booorriinnng shift, I wonder if I should run another turbo laser optimization test? That way I might be able to go the entire shift without falling asleep. Franz was the chief turbo laser officer aboard the *Artemis*. He watched as Tomas fidgeted restlessly at his sensor station across the quite bridge of the *Artemis*. It was late at 'night' and the sensor officer, Tomas Dalgren, stretched as he fought off a yawn. He's been trying unsuccessfully to focus his attention on the sensor screens for several minutes now, Franz noticed in amusement. With a groan of frustration, Tomas turned to his friend at the nearby science station, "What's up Sam?"

"Can you cover for me while I go grab some stim tea?"

"Sure man, make mine a small one will you Tomas?"

"No problem. I'll be right back, Sam."

He made his way to the dispenser located near the rear of the bridge and punched up two stim teas and then walked back to his station. Suddenly he gasped, dropped the two steaming cups he had been carrying



on an unsuspecting technician, and lunged for the alert button at the sensor station. The cause for his alarm was displayed rather prominently on his primary display, a squadron of system patrol craft converging on the *Artemis* from all directions escorted by a wing of TIE fighters.

Franz quickly turned to his station and begins to alert the gunners in the laser turret clusters. Dimly someone could be heard yelling for a medic to assist the poor, burned technician. He soon became immersed in the task of coordinate the gunners against the patrol boats.

"Launch the fighters, get the weapons and shields up, and someone get the captain up here!" To the technician who was screaming in agony, Tomas said "Hey relax it's just some fresh, pipping ... hot.....stim tea...oops."

Commotion broke out over the ship as the General Quarters lights and sirens went off. Crewmembers rushed to their battle stations blearily pulling on their clothes. Orange suited pilots raced towards the hanger and the sound of activating star fighter engines could be heard in the hanger bays.

The captain took in the situation as he walked onto the bridge and sat down in his seat radiating confidence and security as usual. "Lieutenant, what is the situation of our fighters?" he asked.

"Both squadrons have been launched and are holding formation around the *Artemis*. The Y-wings all have full loads of proton torpedoes but we have a shortage of concussion missiles for the fighters."

"Very good. Thank you Mr. Damon. Order all ships to concentrate their fire on the three patrol craft in front of the *Artemis*. *After that, they are to attack targets of opportunity. The last thing we want is to be caught in a crossfire.*"

Even as he finished speaking, the blue vapor trails of proton torpedoes sped out in front of the bridge view port and converged on the three shiny dots in the distance. The Headhunters came in to view as they sped towards the same targets in a tight, orderly formation closely followed by the Y-wings.

The first torpedo salvo blew one patrol craft out of space in a spectacular explosion but a significant number of the torpedoes were shot down or decoyed away by jammers and chaff. The patrol craft launched their own salvo of concussion missiles and both sides engaged in a brief spasm of evasive maneuvers. A few unlucky Y-wings and two Headhunters were destroyed and their pilots cast adrift in the vacuum as they waited for the rescue shuttle. The unshielded TIEs uniformly fared worse. A full quarter of the wing was destroyed in the first pass. Then the fighters entered laser cannon range and space lit up with laser bolts crisscrossing in space as the two sides closed in on each other bent on destruction.

As the fighters methodically took apart the remaining two patrol craft with a few more torpedoes, the *Artemis came under attack by the remaining squadron of patrol craft. In an attempt to exploit the hole in the patrol craft screen left by the fighters, she redlined her engines. Her turbo laser batteries opened up on all of the attackers at once in a dazzling display of pyrotechnics as the return fire pounded her shields. The TIEs buzzed about the barrage impotently taking pot shots at the fighters. Slowly the tide began to turn against the patrol craft as the superior shielding of the *Artemis* began to show. But the *Artemis took damage as well. Every once in a while, a laser blast got through a hole in the shielding* blowing away a laser turret or vaporizing some armor. The situation for the *Artemis* was fast becoming untenable as more and more laser blasts made it through the weakening shields taking out a laser turret here and a shield emitter there.*

A hail of torpedoes against one of the patrol craft heralded the return of the remaining fighters triumphant over their three targets. Missiles exhausted, they threw their ships against the remaining patrol craft in a brave attempt to shield their mother ship. One by one the remaining patrol craft fell but the fighter squadrons paid a steep price for it as the patrol craft began to target them. Only the rescue shuttles were exempt from the patrol craft's attack due to the fact that they were picking up Imperial life pods as well as their own.

Finally there were only two patrol craft left but the *Artemis*' systems were beginning to fail. Suddenly the tables turned against the embattled *Artemis* as an additional squadron of TIEs came into sensor range and threw themselves into the fray with zeal. By this time, the *Artemis* had finally reached the hyper limit and began to pull away from the battered patrol craft. After the few surviving Company fighters were ordered to jump out to a recovery point, the *Artemis* jumped into hyperspace with a flicker of pseudo-motion leaving behind the shattered remains of a patrol craft squadron and some pissed off TIE pilots...

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A detailed analysis of the *Artemis* and its fighter's sensor logs was undertaken in an attempt to discover the reason behind the unprecedented attack in a recently discovered solar system. Although the Empire had outlawed exploratory activities, it had never taken military action against Explorations Unlimited before. This had everyone wondering what was in that solar system that was so important to the Empire that they would have orders to destroy all non-Imperial, incoming ships. Finally the sensor logs of one of the surviving Long Probe Y-wings yielded pay dirt of sorts. As the fighters had finished off their three patrol crafts, the Y-wing's sensors caught a brief glimpse through the interference of an enormous artificial construct approximately the same size as the Death Star. Because the Y-wing's computer could not decide whether to classify it as a planet or as a ship, the anomaly was not brought to the attention of the pilot immediately.

An emergency meeting of the Council was called and lasted for 2 hours. As soon as the meeting was over, the *Athena* was sent on a top secret courier mission to their rebellion contact.

### ***Part III***

*As the Athena hurtled through hyperspace, the Imperial forces were belatedly reacting to the Artemis's excursion. A task force was charged with the task of protecting the vulnerable construction station as it evacuated the system. Consisting of 3 Carrack cruisers and one Imperial star destroyer, it bristled with firepower and squadrons of star fighters. Even now, the crew of the task force is bringing the mothballed construction station back to life.*

#### **[Unnamed Solar System AG12. Shipyard X.]**

Although indisputably the largest in the known galaxy, the enormous shipyard was known only to a select few. It was where the famous Death Star had undergone its final testing and was crewed and equipped for its anticipated rein of terror. Then due to the incredible budget constraints brought about by the strain of constructing several Super-class Star Destroyers as well as other ships-of-the-line, the facility was sent into hiding and mothballed.

The head of the task force, Captain Proctov, stared in awe at the ovoid station as his captain prepared his fleet for docking maneuvers. As the ships closed on the main docking bay, a steady stream of shuttles streamed from their landing bays to the various landing bays of the construction station. They ferried the crewmembers not essential for the docking of the task force to the station to begin the procedure of expediting the re-animation and departure of the station. He turned away from the bridge view ports as the Imperial Star Destroyer *Imperious*, came to rest in one of the medium size cradles with a resounding clang of cold steel. Enormous grapples the size of AT-ATs reached out from the docking bay to grasp the star destroyer firmly. Long slender gantries rose from the sides of the cradle to connect disembarking tubes to various hatches along the sides of the ship.

"XO, you have the bridge. I'm going over to the construction station to oversee the reactivation," he said as he walked out of the armored bridge hatchway. His executive officer acknowledged him and moved to sit in the Command chair. As he walked through one of the cavernous disembarking tubes, his footsteps echoed quietly. As he reached the other side, Proctov paused in the adjoining lounge for a moment to watch as the automated systems activated and began to restock his ships' stores. A large hatch opened of the cavernous docking cradles and ferry drones carrying food and other items began to stream out. He marveled that even after being mothballed for so long, the station was still in such good condition.

Several loud thuds echoed in the distance startling him as he stepped into a turbo lift. Then with a buzz, the lighting systems began to come online. The dim red lights blinked off to be replaced by bright incandescent lights. From a distance, the station, which had previously been almost invisible in the darkness of space, began to reveal its enormous bulk. Lights slowly came on one by one. Soon the lounge was brightly lit and corridor lights continued to activate. He smiled as he approached a quintet of turbo lifts. The rebel scum would be returning soon. This time, they would find a rather unpleasant surprise waiting for them.

After about 5 minutes of waiting, he got tired and sat down on one of the benches thoughtfully provided by the designers of the lift. The lift shot out of the tunnel it had been in and entered a transparent tube running beside one of the manufacturing compartments. He blinked at the sudden, brilliant lighting. By the time his eyes had adjusted, the lift had already stopped and the doors were hissing open.

He stepped out into a brightly-lit compartment approximately the size of his ship's main hanger bay. It was a micro-manufacturing plant. He walked to the enclosed command room that was about 3 meters above the floor of the compartment. From that room, he had an unrestricted view of the compartment. After a few minutes of familiarizing himself with the control boards, he brought it to life and watched as the compartment came live with motion. Parts were brought in by conveyor belt from other rooms and construction robots of various shapes and sizes went to work welding the pieces together assembly line style. In the midst of this, a storm trooper contingent suddenly stormed into the room with blaster rifles raised followed by a troop of engineers. When the lieutenant saw that it was Captain Proctov, he muttered an inaudible curse and then triggered his helmet microphone.

"Sorry sir, we didn't know it was you."

"Not a problem", the Captain responded congenially as his attention remained mostly on the information streaming past him on the console displays, "Carry on, Lieutenant."

"Yes Sir." The storm troopers came to attention and then filed out the door. The engineers spread out throughout the room to do their jobs. Their supervisor came into the command room and saluted, "Sir, I can take over for you now if you wish. I'm sure that you have more pressing business to take care of."

"You may, but I will stay a little while longer. I wish to see first hand this TIE that has the Imperial Research and Development Department all worked up." He stood back from the console and let the engineer get to work.

An enormous grasping claw unfolded itself from its storage position and moved to the end of the assembly line. It descended out of view behind the various machines. After a few moments, it began to come into sight again. This time it carried an ominous sight: A TIE Defender.

*Three days passed since the Athena was sent on its emergency courier mission. Cloud nine and its sisters were put on alert. Exploration Unlimited's entire fleet of ships was recalled to Bespin as a security precaution.*

### **[Cloud 2. Hangar Bay 2.]**

"Man, I hate this! I'm a pilot not a drudge" Crazy complained as he and Spook pulled a repulsor truck up to a pile of crates being unloaded from a freighter.

"Quit complaining and help me!" Spook grumbled as he tried to put one of the crates on the repulsor truck. "There's a few more tons of stuff where that came from and we've got to get it all tucked away before the Empire figures out that it was our ship that found that huge shipyard and comes calling." "Besides if we didn't have anything to do, you'd probably be complaining about that too." Spook added with a small grin.

Several trips and thirty minutes of hard, sweaty work later the landing platform was cleared of crates. As the repulsor truck trundled through the entry hatch with its cargo bed dangerously overloaded, the freighter began preflight checks. "Well that was fun," Spook commented as he piloted the truck into the entry tunnel.

Crazy managed a baleful glare at his demented, cheerful friend. "Now all we have to do is unload all of this junk in a warehouse."

A tired silence fell in the cab as they moved past a cluster of anti-aircraft batteries. Workmen and technicians swarmed over the enormous energy batteries like bees. The scene was repeated over and over again throughout the floating cities as they prepared for the inevitable conflict with the Empire. Worn super-conductors were replaced and new canisters of Tibanna gas were stockpiled near the energy batteries. Security personnel could be seen drilling relentlessly in a park as they piloted the truck through the city towards one of the warehouses.

As they entered the warehouse, a tiny, ball-shaped messenger droid sped up to them. "Gentlemen, you are relieved of transport duty. Mr. Wawrzaszek, you are posted to the fighter pilot simulation facility. You also have 24 hours of leave starting now. Mr. Chiu, you are being temporarily re-assigned to survey squadron D for 2 weeks. They are located in Hanger Bay 2 aboard Cloud 1. Departure is set at 12 hours from now. Gentlemen." The droid bobbed companionably and sped off as a squad of warehouse droids began unloading the truck.

"You lucky duck! You get sim-time while I'm stuck with putting up sensor stations on the far side of Bespin," Spook grouched.

Crazy laughed and twirled an imaginary mustache, "This is no doubt due to my massive piloting abilities. Now run along and play with your sensor arrays, you grease-monkey!" The two friends laughed and hailed a taxi.

#### **[Unnamed Solar System temporarily designated AG12.]**

Captain Proctov watched the continuing preparations with great relish. In addition to his Imperial Star Destroyer Relentless, 3 Carrack cruisers, and their fighter squadrons; his technicians and engineers had managed to construct and activate two entire squadrons of TIE Defenders before running through the remaining raw materials stockpiled on the station. His TIE interceptor squadron from Relentless and another squadron of men chosen from the Carrack cruisers' TIEs were already halfway through the training course for the Defender. Sienar Fleet Systems had truly outdone themselves with this one, he thought. Not only could it out-maneuver the interceptor but it was also quite a bit faster. Then he sighed. The primary drawback, which he thought sourly also happened to be larger than a pyramid of banthas, was the incredible cost of the ships. As it stood, the Empire could only reasonably and safely afford 10 or so squadrons of this fighter at the moment. These two squadrons were to be delivered directly to an Imperial flight testing facility for further evaluation as soon as his men were qualified to fly them there. They would not get the chance to fly the marvelous ships in combat anytime in the foreseeable future. However, there was a chance that, Proctov brightened slightly, the Rebels would attack before the Defenders left. He bent his head back to the pile of reports on his desk.

#### **[Far side of Bespin from ADCC1. Aboard a sensor platform.]**

At about that time, Spook was cursing the monkey-lizard that designed the wrenches he was using. The idiot who said this thing was suitable for use in an environment suit should be shot out of a torpedo tube, he thought angrily as the wrench slipped of the nut he was struggling to tighten once again. The nut popped off as well and began a leisurely spiral into the gaseous core of Bespin accompanied by a new, more enthusiastic round of curses. He and a few other assorted pilots and technicians were busy modifying survey platforms which were scattered across Bespin for use as sensor arrays. One of the technicians yelped as he slipped on an ice patch and fell off of the survey platform they were working on. The screaming technician fell a good 300 meters before his suits emergency repulsor rig activated itself bringing him to an abrupt, bruising halt. The light freighter a kilometer away from the platform, which served as their

base of operations, pivoted slightly and its tractor beam began pulling the terrified technician towards an open cargo bay.

Mira watched nervously as the technician was pulled into the cargo bay and sent inside for a well-deserved rest. A beeping from the analyzer in her hand pulled her back to her work. "Control, try it now. It should work."

"Roger Mira, booting software now..." spoke the technician on the other end of the comlink, "It's green across the board. Good job, Mira, I'll buy you a drink when you get back to the barn."

She smiled as she activated the link to her team members. "Alright folks, we're done here and headed back to Cloud 1 as soon as you jokers get back to the ship." A ragged cheer greeted her announcement and the freighter began to approach the platform as the team members filled towards the extending gangplank. Her mind turned to other business as she clumped up into the ship with a small grin, I wonder if I should wear that blue dress or the green one.

None of them noticed the stealthy Imperial probe droid that clung to the repulsor engine of the survey platform. The freighter swung away from the platform and accelerated back towards Cloud 1. Once the freighter was out of sensor range, the droid let go of the engine and plunged a few dozen kilometers down before activating its engine and then began its run towards one of the few remaining gaps in the sensor net. It was part of an effort by Imperial Intelligence to keep track of the various companies that the Empire thought to be leaning towards aligning towards the Rebel Alliance. If they demonstrated such leanings, Explorations Unlimited would be ... dealt with accordingly.

## ***Part IV***

### **[Prearranged meeting point.]**

When *Artemis* arrived at the deep space rendezvous point, she was greeted by a lone communications satellite that after *Artemis* transmitted authentication codes broadcast coordinates in a near by nebula. At the new coordinates, the bridge crew was greeted with the sight of three Rebel frigates hovering protectively around an enormous Mon Calamari Cruiser. Of infinitely more interest was a squadron of B-wings with their S-foils deployed in attack position closing on their ship at full speed. The piecing sound of multiple missile lock alarms sounded across the bridge.

Captain Mito tore his eyes away from the Rebel fleet and nodded to his communications officer. The woman nodded and turned to her console. "Alliance ships, this is the explorer vessel *Artemis*. I repeat! This is the *Artemis*. We would prefer you not blowing us into little bits.

### **[B-wing Squadron *The Delivery Men*]**

The B-wing pilots blinked and chuckled at the non-standard greeting. "Orders boss? I'm pretty sure those are friendlies there." "Hold your banthas man, I'm getting confirmation now..."

### **[Artemis]**

"Our captain must meet with your command crew immediately!" finished the comm. officer. The bridge relaxed when the B-wings slowed and turned away. "Attention Mon Calamari cruiser *Artemis*! Welcome to Mynock's Rest. Our captains will join you aboard the *Intrepid*."

Mito turned away from the transparisteel viewport and spoke, "Prepare my shuttle for launch and have our briefing team assemble in the docking bay. I will be leaving shortly."

**[Bespin, far side]**

Spook was flying a routine (read as extremely boring) patrol with Bat and another pair of Ghost pilots. The 4 X-wings were a few hundred miles from the sensor station that Spook had helped upgrade when the flight leader caught a glimpse of something on his sensor screen. "Hey Spook, I've got an anomalous contact. Take Bat with you to check it out. Transmitting coordinates"

"Understood." Spook and Bat peeled off and dove steeply towards the coordinates the flight leader transmitted.

**[Probe Droid 39873B]**

The reason for the anomalous contact, a replacement for the probe droid that had been posted at the sensor station, came online as it entered the atmosphere and shed its hyperspace pod. The probe droid's hyperspace pod was the source of the sensor reflection before the discarded sections fell out of sensor range into Bespin's core.

The first thing the droid's sensors picked up was the two approaching starfighters. It reacted instantaneously by turning its smallest cross section towards the fighters and cutting its repulsors. It dropped several kilometers while its passive sensors watched the fighters. A rogue Coruscant crystal fragment slashed through one of the droid's sensor probes causing a power surge through the droid systems. The stealth systems were briefly disrupted before they were reset by the droid. "*Probability of detection high. Activate self-destruct.*" Unfortunately, the power surge had fried the self-destruct circuits. This allowed the fighters to confirm that it was a probe droid. It barely had time to broadcast a signal announcing its discovery and impending destruction before one of the fighters blasted it into flaming debris.

**[Ghost 4]**

Bat howled in triumph as her cannon fire exploded the probe droid. Spook was too busy to respond as he was contacting the flight leader with the bad news that the Empire had already penetrated their security. As they rejoined the formation, they pondered the new developments.

**[Imperial Star Destroyer *Imperious*. Bridge.]**

Commander Proctov was not happy. His men were behind the squadron from his Carrack cruisers in their training. At this rate, they would be ready to depart from the shipyard a full week behind the other squadron. His captains would be insufferable. It seemed that he would be paying for several bottles of hard liquor.

The shipyard was almost ready to be moved. Proctov watched his technicians swarm over the last of the shipyards engines. He turned to his executive officer as he approached with the latest status reports.

"Everything is on schedule, Captain. The shipyard will be mobile at full capacity as soon as the last 3 engines are repaired. The hyperdrives are already fully operational. Work is proceeding on schedule on the dry-docks. In three weeks, we'll be home."

"Excellent, XO. You have the bridge. I'm going to check on our hotshots." He saluted as Proctov walked towards the turbo lifts against the back of the bridge, his heels clicking against the black, polished decking.

**[ADCC 1. Council Chambers.]**

"They found what!" The committee member sputtered angrily.

The sensor technician spoke nervously, "Our analysis of the fighters sensor readings are positive. An Omega signal was broadcast before the fighters could destroy the droid. The Empire knows that we know that they were here. They also know that we destroyed their probe droid"

"Thank you for your report, you may go now" said another Committee member. The room was silent as the technician left. A Committee woman broke the silence timidly. "Perhaps the Empire might be willing to overlook the destruction of their droid an—"

The first councilman broke in tiredly "Don't be silly, Emily. This is the excuse the Empire needs to shut us down."

"How did they penetrate our security so quickly?"

"What are we going to do now? Evacuate?"

"I'll bet they've been spying on us since the beginning. We are after all one of the more successful—" The presiding chairman put an end to the rising hysteria with a few determined pounds of his gavel.

"Ladies and Gentlemen! I demand order! Our first order of business is to decide whether we should evacuate Bespin. Ben, what is the status of our cities?" "At the moment, every one of our cities is space and hyperspace capable save for Cloud 9 which is still under construction." "How much longer until it is completed?" There was a pause as Ben consulted a datapad.

"Projected completion date is set at one year from now."

"Is it mobile yet?"

"Unfortunately not. Budget cuts had forced us to postpone installation of the engines until next month."

"Damn! When we evacuate, we'll lose it" one of the Committee members cursed. "The costs and effort put into it would make this a grave loss for our company."

"Are there any more questions?" asked the chairman. "In that case, enter your votes."

"Thank you. Explorations Unlimited evacuates Bespin ASAP in accordance with emergency evacuation plan A. I would like to give our personnel the option of joining the Rebel Alliance while we are in isolation. Are there any objections?" No one spoke.

### **[Mynock's Rest. Shattered Cloud Nebula.]**

The Rebel fleet detachment at Mynock's Rest was on the move. The instant Captain Mito had finished his report, the Rebel Admiral sprang into action. "Gentlemen this is bad news indeed. The fleet will move to Bespin to support Explorations Unlimited. XO, have our communications officer notify Home 1 of our intentions. Captain Mito, it was a pleasure meeting you. This yeoman will conduct you back to your ship. We depart within the hour."

Exactly one hour later, the flotilla exploded out of the nebula at 2/3 thrust. After adjusting course for entry into hyperspace, the entire group roared into hyperspace.

### **[Bespin. Station keeping near ADCC1.]**

*Argo's* main hanger bay was a mad house as a steady stream of shuttles and conveyors came in and unloaded supplies. A small army of workmen and technicians swarmed over the unloaded crates and whisked them away into storage even as fighters were launched in the midst of the barely controlled chaos. In every ship of the fleet, the same thing was happening. The Priority 1 announcement broadcast one-hour ago put all of the cloud cities and Explorations Unlimited's fleet into high gear. Explorations Unlimited was evacuating Bespin. First to leave the system was *Apollo*. She was headed to the primary evacuation site to scout the area and make sure the Empire hadn't beaten them to it. Loaded for bear, *Apollo* boasted four of the X-wings squadrons that Explorations Unlimited had put together and two Y-wing squadrons. If the Imperial forces were waiting for them, they would hopefully be unpleasantly surprised. Ghost squadron was the only X-wing squadron that remained with the main body of ships and the floating cities. The rest of the squadrons were comprised of Headhunters and Y-wings.

**[Hyperspace enroute to Bespin]**

As Apollo sped through hyperspace, *Artemis* and the Rebel fleet detachment were nearing Bespin. Captain Mito stared meditatively out of the view ports in his cabin into the swirling chaos of hyperspace. A chirp from the com. system built into the wall interrupted his reverie.

"Captain?"

"This is Mito. Go ahead."

"20 minutes to reversion into real space. You asked to be notified, sir."

"Thank you. Mito out." He walked out the door projecting a confident air.

When *Artemis* and company entered the Bespin system, they knew something was wrong immediately. A convoy of three cloud cities and their escort of exploratory vessels was half way out of the system. The two groups passed within visual distance. "Cathy, hail Cloud 6. I need a status report."

"Sir the Admiral aboard *Intrepid* is hailing us."

"Thank you, put him through to my bridge station."

"Captain Mito. What is going on? Is the situation that bad?"

"I don't know yet. I'm expecting an update momentarily. Ah. Here we go. I'll transmit it to you."

"Thank you."

Mito's voice turned sour as he read, "It seems that the Council has decided to abandon Bespin for the time being."

The Admiral though furiously, "You know the Rebel Alliance would be delighted if a company like Explorations Unlimited were to throw in with us."

"Our board unfortunately has previously decided that Explorations Unlimited remain neutral in your conflict in the hopes that we will escape the notice of the Empire...even though it is a moot point now, I doubt that they will change their minds."

"I'm sorry to hear that. We will of course still help you evacuate."

Eventually it was decided that the Rebel fleet would remain in the Bespin system unless the evacuation site came under attack. In that case, they would move quickly to reinforce the ships under attack. The Council's decision to allow any personnel to join the Rebels after the evacuation was complete was greeted with surprise. (Apparently the Council usually holds contracts sacrosanct.)

*The evacuation proceeded without mishap until only Shangri-La, its four escorts, and the Rebel ships remained. A messenger A-wing from Home 1 brought news of the impending attack on the Death Star shipyard. After Shangri-La and its escorts were well out of the gravity well, the few Explorations Unlimited personnel that had taken the Council up on its offer were officially detached from active duties with Explorations Unlimited and were sent off with many tearful scenes. One of the many who decided to wait out the firestorm in hiding was Manx and all but a few Ghost squadron members. Spook's parents in the path finding regiment decided to stay with Explorations Unlimited saying, "We're too old to be running around blowing things up now son." In the end, only a motley squadron of a few X-wing and Y-wing pilots departed with the Rebels to attack the Death Star shipyard. The entirety of Explorations Unlimited disappeared completely from time and known space. Even their accounts were completely drained or moved somewhere leaving the Imperials buzzing around Bespin without anything to shoot at but the unfinished Cloud nine.*



## Part V

*As the separate sections of the Rebel assault fleet closed on the last reported location of the shipyard they had come so far to attack, Explorations Unlimited disappeared quietly towards the void of intergalactic space.*

*Meanwhile, the TIE pilots of the Carrack cruiser squadrons triumphed over those of Commander Proctov's Indomitable by departing for the Imperial R & D facility precisely on schedule. Proctov's pilots still lagged behind and had a few more simulator runs and training programs to complete. As expected, the Carrack cruiser captains were delighted since as expected, Proctov made good on their wager and provided several large bottles of Castilean's Reserve for their use.*

### [Indomitable, main flight deck]

"Officer on the deck! Sir! I present to you Lambda Squadron from the cruisers *Pit Viper*, *Anaconda*, and *Rattler*."

Commander Proctov stepped forward. "Thank you. At ease men. I am very proud of you. It took only 3 weeks for you to get qualified on the TIE Defender. My men are still stumbling around trying to find their asses!" The assembled men chuckled quietly. "I understand you are all being reassigned to the R & D base. I hope you will continue to make us proud."

"Gentlemen, man your ships." The ranks broke up as the pilots walked into the waiting ranks of the TIE Defenders. After a few minutes, the whine of engines begins to grow as ear mufflers were handed out on the hanger deck. One by one, as directed by a few ground crewmen, the TIE Defenders slipped out of the hangar bay and into space. Once in space, the squadron formed up behind their leader and leaped into hyperspace.

### [Intrepid, fighter country.]

"What do you mean you don't want to accept a permanent commission into the Rebel Alliance?!" The poor recruiter was beginning to lose his temper. None of the other ex- Explorations Unlimited people had given him any trouble. In fact, most had signed on gladly.

"I'm only in it for this operation. Nothing more nothing less. What don't you understand about this? I'm not going to be floating around for the rest of my life. Explorations Unlimited is coming back!"

"You can help them by joining our fight against the Empire. If we fail, who knows how long they will remain in power."

"Look! Standing toe to toe with an empire with hundreds of solar systems behind it is not my idea of a brilliant career choice. I'm just here to pay the Empire back with a little pain and anguish before I head off on my own. Their little secret base cost several of my friends their lives. But after this, it's even."

"That's rather shortsighted son. Think about all the people and races that will be hurt by Palpatine and his henchmen."

"That's none of my concern. They can take care of themselves." With that, Spook got up and walked out of the temporary barracks he was living in. The recruiter stared at the spot vacated by Spook and shook his head. "I've heard that way too many times. These young people just don't understand what's at stake here."

Two light years out from the last known coordinates of the Death Star shipyard, the combined elements of the Rebel fleet were conducting exercises and practicing combined tactics. Reconnaissance A-wings had

reconfirmed that the shipyard was still there. Due to regional interference, they were not able to get close enough to confirm the size of the Imperial task force that was currently docked. All they could make out without being detected were a few blurry images of a pair of Nebulon-B frigates.

### **[Intrepid, flight simulators]**

His quad linked lasers tracked towards a TIE interceptor but on the way crossed on a pursuing X-wing. After a few hits, the X-wing vanished in a puff of metal and fire. "Oops. Sorry pal."

"Dammit Spook!" vocalized his unfortunate wing man.

"Spook! Say it ain't so! This is the third time you waxed your own wing man. Who are you shooting at anyway? Try to remember this, the bad guys are flying the ugly ships!" The sim-officer leaned back in his seat and sighed, "Kid's a little tense isn't he? All right, Harry reset the simulators. Let's do one more mission and then we can break for the day." A series of groans emanated from the speakers and the brown haired technician sitting beside him. "This time we'll put flight sections 2 and 4 in A-wings and the rest in X-wings. What say we give them an interception mission on a Mon Calamari?"

"Working on it Jack... how about this mission? Number 205B?"

"Perfect." Jack leaned in towards the microphone, "Listen up kiddies! This next one is an interception mission against two SDs and their complement of star fighters. Groups 2 and 4 are in A-wings. They are the primary interception team. 1 and 3, you've got X-wings. Your mission is to catch leakers from the A-wings. This is the last mission of the day so give it all you've got. Don't forget the tactics you've been learning and Spook! Be more careful what you're shooting at. 20 seconds." There was a brief round of chuckles and ribbing that had Spook turning pink.

The black wraparound screen that was his "canopy" flashed and turning into a star field with a Mon Calamari cruiser prominent in the background. A nearby G2 star provided more than ample illumination and his helmet visor polarized in response. Spook looked around his less than familiar A-wing cockpit and sighed. "Red squadron! Sections 1 and 2 form 2 clicks off the bow and Section 3 and 4 do the same off the stern and then start a clockwise patrol."

"Roger boss man." The squadron broke formation and Spook wobbled slightly as he over controlled trying to stay with his wing man. The A-wing wasn't his favorite ship although it did have its perks such as considerable speed and a sensor suite superior to that of a standard X-wing. Compared to a standard X-wing, the A-wing was the space bound version of a tricked out sloop verses a family speeder.

Suddenly a Star Destroyer flashed into normal space 10 km away between the Mon Cal and the G2 star. A few moments later, another much larger one did the same except outwards, sandwiching the 'disabled' Mon Calamari between them. Thankfully this one was almost 20 km away. A groan came from Spook when they were identified as "Imperial Class: Unknown" and "Super Class: Unknown." The squadron leader spoke up, "Alright people, listen up! We'll take the Imp Star's fighters first. A-wings do your stuff. Go to max thrust! X-wings spread out. I want to see some really tight defense."

Spook pulled back on his joystick and pushed his throttle as far forward as it would go. He also redirected shields and lasers to engines. With an accompanying roar, he was pushed back into his seat by gravity generators located around the simulator. His A-wing rewarded his actions with a delighted shriek of power and leaped to a blazing speed of 150- mgts. Soon the two A-wings sections were only visible to the X-wings as twin tails of fire. Spook toggled through the ships in his CMD and selected a TIE interceptor and settled down for a wait. 10 km became 5 and became 3. Finally they entered visual range and everyone began straining their eyeballs to spot the fighters.

"Tallyho! Fighters at 11 o'clock!"

"Break and attack by pairs!" His target came into view with a computer projected box superimposed around it. Spook grinned and selected concussion missiles. His HUD indicated a solid lock on accompanied by a steady beeping as he thumbed the trigger. Then the TIE interceptor opened up with a laser barrage and Spook had to quickly dive or get shot to bits. As it was, when he passed the massed TIEs his shields were down to 50%. A cheerful beep from his CMD indicated that his missile had hit. Suddenly one of the indicators on his HUD started flashing and he craned his neck around frantically looking for the fighter that

was pouring fire at him.

He dove and suddenly burst into a Fokker's Feint. None of his maneuverings could shake the TIE interceptor off of his 6 and the TIE's accuracy was improving as laser fire could be heard hissing off of his shields. Then his wing man was there and the TIE was not. "Thanks buddy."

"Don't mention it. Just try not to kill me again?"

"You got it. I've got your wing. Go for it!" His wing man's A-wing heeled over and sped towards the approaching bomber formation. Their sensor data registered about the same time as the storm of turbo laser fire and they both twitched in surprise.

The Imperials were not following standard procedures: The Imperial Class Star destroyer's captain had flung his ship into the battle as escort for the bombers. What seemed to be a solid wall of laser fire appeared from the SD's guns and 3 A-wings vanished without a trace accompanied by howls of frustration. The remaining 5 A-wings dodged quickly and tried to close with the bombers but every time the laser fire from the SD drove them off before they got into range. Spook imagined that Jack and his technicians were having a blast tormenting the squadron with this development.

This was when the X-wings arrived with the force of a sledgehammer on a wet cardboard box. From 3 km out, they launched a torpedo barrage using targeting data provided by the remaining A-wings, which caught the distracted SD almost completely off guard. Counter missiles were launched but the torpedoes were already far too close for all of them to be destroyed. As it was, both of the shield generators were destroyed and the shields were brought down to 35%. The SD gunners made their first mistake when they redirected some of their firepower towards the approaching X-wings. This took enough pressure off of the beleaguered A-wings so that they could close with the bombers tucked under the SD's belly. Laser fire from various directions tore into the bomber formation even as a few underside gunners returned fire. In a few moments, the bombers disappeared in a flurry of concussion missile explosions and then suddenly the SD was in trouble.

The A-wings recharged their shields out at the perimeter of the battle between the X-wings and the SD and then swooped back in. Their primary targets were the hundreds of gun turrets that speckled the SD's hull. Spook targeted one just in front of the secondary hangar bay and started firing when something big and gray flashed by in front of him. As the turret exploded and Spook pulled out of his dive, he saw that it was a shuttle fleeing from the ship towards the SSD. A jarring hit from a gun turret brought his mind back to the game and he twisted his ship into a spiraling ascent as one of his indicator panels 'exploded' (actually it just displayed a picture of a destroyed panel) with a whiff of smoke.

His wing man hollered suddenly, "Spook help me out with this cluster of turrets, will ya?! Go in high and I'll take 'em low."

"Roger." Spook inverted his ship and dove on the cluster of turrets located on the back of the bridge tower and started pouring laser fire in the general direction. He couldn't see his wing man until return fire had forced him to break off. He came in from space skimming the exhaust from the SD's main engine nozzles and came in on the gun cluster from the opposite side, catching all the turrets pointing the other way. Spook could hear his friend laughing gleefully as he opened up and quickly dispatched the turrets. After a few more minutes, the vengeful A-wing pilots had gleefully picked off all of the gun turrets and missile launchers on the SD and started pounding the hull with the X-wings. A final proton torpedo barrage from the X-wings and suddenly the SD was spinning wildly out of control.

Spook was caught off guard as he skimmed the upper hull firing at the bridge tower. Suddenly with a bone jarring crash the SD's hull came up and hit his A-wing. The majority of his indicators save for his ejection system exploded or went blank as he went spinning out of control away from the SD. Spook let out a feeble moan as he peeled his face up out of his instrument panel where it had landed in the confusion.

"All fighters redirect towards the Super." A few seconds later, the Mon Calamari flickered and disappeared into hyper space. Fingers of light reached out from the Super Class star destroyer as it passed within cannon range. Spook decided that the instrument panel would make a nice headrest after all and his head went back down with a thud as his helmet hit.

"Finally given up huh Jack?!" yelled a hoarse pilot. The remaining pilots laughed tiredly as the mission complete message flashed and their statistics were displayed. Jack chuckled, "Was it as good for me as it

was for you?"

In the simulator compartment aboard the Mon Calamari Cruiser Intrepid, as the 'canopy' of his sim-pod raised itself up, Spook squinted as the relative darkness was invaded by the brightly lit sim-room. Full of sim-pods, technicians, and computers; it quickly became even more crowded and smelly as the tired pilots climbed out of their seats and congregated in the corner which held a small auditorium and, thankfully, cold drinks. Jack and his technicians joined them as they flopped into their seats clutching drinks in their hands.

Conversations sprang up particularly with the more attractive members of the opposite sex. "Nice move back there with the two Bombers. Two for one missile is one I've never seen before. How did you do it?" "Hey there honey, wanna go out with me?" "Shaddup moron!" "Why don't you sit on my lap and we can talk about whatever pops up?" "Cretin!" <Loud slap "Ouch!" "So you flew a few of the TIEs during the sim, eh? Did you engage me? Red 5?" "Actually, I think I might have. I flew the Eta 1 Interceptor." "So that was you. I thought it was a real challenge." "So you come here often?"

After waiting a few minutes to let everyone unwind, Jack reluctantly detached himself from a fascinating redheaded pilot and climbed up to the podium. "Settle down people. Settle down. It's time to debrief." The people settled down and he began after a few seconds. "First of all, very impressive job, Alpha squadron. Hard to tell you've been together only a week. Sorry you guys had to be pulled from your regular squadrons like that but we didn't have the operational ships there so here you are..." He continued in that vein for a few minutes fielding and asking questions and then he finally dismissed everyone.

Spook got up and was walking towards the exit when he spotted his friend Red 10, Wilson Chuang, otherwise known as Willy as in Willy Nilly for his unconventional dancing style. (Or lack of style, depending on whom you listen to.) Wilson was a rather skinny fella with black hair and an infectious grin. His worn flight suit still sported unit patches from his regular squadron, the "Mad Dogs." Spook waved and joined Willy as he walked towards the 'Eatery' for dinner.

They were joined at a table by the dynamic duo of David and Helen Donner. David was a doctor specializing in molecular biology while his sister was a hotshot B-wing pilot with it was rumored at least 2 solo Victory Class star destroyer kills under her belt. "So how's your research going?"

"Not bad. Pretty soon we'll have the last few genomes figured out. Then the fun part begins."

"Sounds great. You'll have it licked in no time" said Wilson.

As their orders arrived, another person named Wilson joined them. He came in at a fast walk and sat down with a mumbled excuse about practice running late. He was also relatively tall but with bigger muscles than little Willy. Unit patches on a black coverall proclaimed him as a sergeant in the Rebel Commandos, SpecOps. He was a part of the commando team that would be sent in to set the demolition charges or capture the shipyard depending upon the circumstances.

As soon as Wilson sat down, he let loose on the topic that Spook and Willy had hoped would not come up. "So how was the sim-session guys? I heard a couple technicians laughing about the looks on your faces when a Super Class star destroyer appeared in the exercise. I think they said something about making a video collage with them."

Spook and Willy made appropriately vague noises as they swallowed and tried to answer at the same time. David and Helen looked on with amusement. "Uhhhhh... well um... you know..." was Spook's inspirational answer. "Uh-huh. Really." Willy spoke more coherently; "Well it wasn't too bad. We only really had to deal with an Imperial Class. The cruiser we were protecting got away before the Super could close the range."

"Oh. I hope we don't meet one of those. I mean if that sucker is big enough to build the Death Star, it's got to have dry docks big enough for Super Classes."

"Definitely!" was the fervent chorus from the two pilots. "So the attack is still scheduled for 3 days from now?"

"Yup."

"Are you nervous?"

"Nope."

"Is that all I'm going to get out of you two?"

"Yup."

"Argh!!"

### **[Intrepid, Hangar bay]**

It was 23:37 ship's time when Spook wandered into the main aft hangar bay. Scores of fighters were stored in drop racks for quick deployment. More were in the service bays that Spook was more familiar with. It was towards a group of ten service bays near the far end of the hangar that Spook meandered. Technicians were still doing maintenance and miscellaneous tasks. To his left, he could see a team of technicians aided by a heavy labor droid replacing one of the engines in an Y-wing star fighter. Sparks flew on the left as Spook walked by. He squinted and made out the figure of a welder cutting away a damaged portion of a B-wing's main airfoil. As he passed the transport pool, he could see a few troops doing maintenance on their weapons. A quartet of them was involved in a very active card game, which broke up into a small brawl when a debate started about the merits of a laser rifle versus a plasma rifle. "I'm telling you the laser rifle is the better sniping weapon. The way the magnetic bottle is configured for the plasma rifle makes it horribly inaccurate at distances farther than 1000 meters!"

The other card players made disagreeing noises. "Nah! You're just saying that cause you can't hit jack with a plasma rifle! In fact, I wonder how you got into the sniper corps in the--" The speaker was unceremoniously knocked unconscious by a hard right launched by the beleaguered sniper. "You bastard! -" The argument was still escalating as Spook walked out of sight and hearing range behind an Assault Transport chuckling at the general insanity of assault troopers.

When he reached his X-wing, he watched with a sigh as mechanics finished painting the standard Alliance colors over his old, familiar dark grey color scheme. After they left, he climbed up into the cockpit and sat down. From his vantage point he could see the entire hangar bay including the four assault troopers, one of the two observers were splashing water in the faces of the two semi-conscious fighters. The other was merrily stacking the deck.

A flight of A-wings taxied out from below the drop racks into take off pads. After a few moments, they were given the green light and blasted out of the hangar at the max allowed speed. One unfortunate crewman who had been standing a little too close shook his slightly singed fist at them. Outside of the hangar door, nicely outlined by the blue magnetic containment field, he watched the small armada as they slowly paced the Intrepid. There were mainly Nebulon-B frigates and corvettes with a few troop transports holding position. The Intrepid was the only Mon Calamari in the task force. With a sudden roar, a flight of X-wings came in through the containment field and gingerly set down in front of the waiting ground crew.

Spook frowned slightly as he wondered at the composition of the enemy forces. *With this light force, we'd be hard pressed to make it out alive if the Imps decided to heavily reinforce their overgrown shipyard.*

## **Part VI**

### **[Shipyard X, Control room.]**

"Sir, all of the engine rooms except one are reporting that they are good to go!" The excited technician said to his supervisor. Lieutenant Anderson leaned over the status board and studied the lone red icon in a sea of green. "Hmm...what's the problem with this team?" he mumbled as he called up the status report from engine room A11. With a sigh, he turned to the technician nearest him, "Put up the head engineer from engine room A11 please."

"Yes, sir"

The blank screen was replaced with a close up of a man in a grease stained coverall. The Lieutenant leaned closer to the pickup, "What seems to be the problem chief?" The engineer waved for a moment as

he picked up a headset.

"Sorry sir, I didn't catch that last transmission." As he spoke, the background din leaked in.

"I said, What seems to be the problem chief? This is the only engine room that isn't ready to go." In the background trolley loaded with enormous circuit breakers rumbled past.

"We're almost done. I'd give it about three days. Um Lieutenant, the crews that I have working on it are tired. They've refurbished 3 engine rooms in the past 4 weeks. This one makes 4. Perhaps we should swap them out. I'd hate to burn out my best teams just before we try to jump into hyper space."

"The projected deadline is in a day and a half isn't it, chief?"

"Yes sir!"

The Lieutenant pondered this for a moment. "Your team is off duty for 3 days. Tell them to relax and have a good time. They've earned it. Also, call up team G, they've had a chance to rest. I'll let the Captain know we'll be a bit late."

"Yes sir." With a happy, tired salute, the engineer cut the line. With a nervous sigh, Anderson hit the necessary keys to contact Captain Proctov.

When the Captain's face appeared on screen, Anderson straightened and saluted. "Captain, this is Lieutenant Anderson."

"Go ahead son."

"I regret to inform you that we might be a day and a half late on the engine rooms."

"Why is that?"

Anderson resisted the urge to fidget and tug at his collar, which had just gotten a little tighter. "Crew fatigue sir. We've been pulling double shifts since we got here."

"I see..." Proctov peered at his computer as he called up the necessary files. "That will be fine. Thank you Lieutenant." The screen went blank and the nervous Lieutenant let out a sigh.

### **[Intrepid. Pilot's briefing room. Two days later]**

The CAG stood up and began to speak to the room crowded with pilots. "All right, listen up. Our timetable has been moved up. The Alliance needs these ships elsewhere. The Admiral will go over our battle plan so pay attention."

Admiral Bagnanovich stood quickly and walked to the holo tank. "We will enter hyper space at 1:23 tomorrow morning. Our ETA to the system is 10 minutes. The exit point is right here." He gestured at the 3D map that had popped up. The last report from our scouts indicates the shipyard is still in the system. However we must assume the reason for an Imperial presence is to either defend the platform or destroy it." In the holo tank, tiny blips appeared at their entry point into the system. "As soon as we revert to normal space, all star fighters will be launched. They and the corvettes will run up to maximum speed and then shut down all active system. The Intrepid, its frigate screen, and the troop transports will follow at best speed. The silent running craft will continue as such until they are within 8 km of the shipyard before bringing their systems online. Their first target will be the docking slips that contain a few Nebulon-B frigates and the enormous portal that allows larger ships entrance to the innards of the shipyards. Then fall back towards the Intrepid. By that time, the Intrepid should have caught up. Depending on the situation, the assault troops will be landed or they will proceed to our prearranged rendezvous point. The A-wings and X-wings will be responsible for interdiction of any bomber aircraft while the Y-wings will attempt to disable the previously mentioned Nebulon-B that should be trapped and thus easy pickings. Are there any questions?"

The pilots looked surprised at such a cavalier plan. "What if there is anything heavier than a Nebulon-B around, sir?"

"Then the highest threats should be eliminated first. The corvettes will assist you."

"This guy is going to get us killed," a less than enthusiastic pilot mumbled. Another pilot stood up, "Sir, will we be getting any recon reports just before we enter hyper space?"

"Additional surveillance would be counterproductive as they would raise the chances of detection. Is there anything else?" The Admiral paused for a moment, "good, coordinates are being downloaded to your data pads as we speak. I want everyone in the hangers and ready to go by 0:30. We launch fighter at 1:00. Get plenty of sleep. Dismissed."

The mass of pilots and gunners stood up and began to trickle out of the room or talk to other people. Spook caught up with Willy and a few of his friends. "—gonna capture a shipyard the size of a small planet with just one Mon Cal, 3 frigates, 5 star fighter squadrons, and a squadron of corvettes?"

"I don't know about you slim, but my squadron can handle it."

"Humph."

Spook tried to lighten the mood: "Well at least there won't be a super laser to fry our mother ships." This earned him several dirty looks. "What? What did I say?"

#### **[Bridge of the *Indomitable*.]**

Captain Proctov stood at the front of his bridge staring at the enormous banks of lights, which barely lit up the docking slip where his ship was moored. "Captain, the shipyard's engine board shows a green light. The shipyard ready to move on your command."

"Excellent, release docking clamps and umbilicals. I want us in free space as possible. As soon as we clear the bay doors, tell the shipyard to move out at maximum burn. Oh and tell the frigates to cast off as well. I want them in a diamond formation around the shipyard. We will take the lead." Almost immediately, he heard a harsh clang and groans as the docking clamps that had held his ship began to retract.

#### **[0045 *Intrepid* Port Hangar Bay.]**

It took two tries for Spook to get up the ladder into his X-wing. Once there he began to strap in. All around him, star fighters were powering up. Ground crewmen drove trolleys with munitions around to each ship and loaded torpedoes and concussion missiles. A few worked frantically to get a recalcitrant X-wing working again. Troops dressed in battle armor marched in formation to their assault transports. The mottled colors of hyper space cast a surreal light over the entire spectacle. "You're good to go Spook!" The crewman had to yell in order to be heard over the din. This remark brought Spook back to the present with a start and he began his preflight checklist.

The moment his communications board lit up he could hear his squadron members checking in. "This is Alpha leader. Sound off."

"Alpha 2, 4 hot."

"Alpha 3, good to go, 4 in the green."

"This is Alpha 4! Dude! I am ready to rumble!!!"

A bell tone sounded in his helmet signifying a general, all squadrons broadcast: "10 seconds to reversion into real space. Squadron leaders stand by."

**[On the edge of Solar System AG12.]**

The Rebel task force came out of hyper space right on time. They also came out of hyper space directly on top of the Imperials. Three of the 9 corvettes crashed into the Nebulon-B frigate guarding the left flank of the shipyard. The resulting fireball and wreckage consumed another corvette before the squadron could vector away. They came under fire from the startled *Indomitable*. The *Intrepid* tried to skirt the expanding fireball and almost succeeded. The port side was caught by the edge of the explosion. As the crew of the cruiser tried to turn and increase speed, the maelstrom engulfed the hangar bay. Large chunks of wreckage entered through the hangar door crushing fighters and unsuspecting ground crewmen alike. A fuel truck was hit and exploded causing even more problems.

Spook watched in horror as a gigantic fireball appeared out of nowhere and the semi orderly formations were tossed about as if by a giant hand as the artificial gravity fluctuated and then disappeared as engineers drained the power to boost the ship's shields. Then his world went black when his fighter was hit from the side with a large chunk of hull plating.

**[Bridge of the *Indomitable*.]**

Captain Proctov spun around at his XO's horrified gasp. Then he did a little gaping of his own. The impact of laser and torpedo fire brought him back out of it. "Signal all ships: Battle stations. Shields up. Weapons free! My god! Have they gone insane?!" He watched helplessly as one of his frigates disappeared from the sensor screen accompanied by a few of the attacking corvettes. The Mon Cal altered course frantically trying to avoid the expanding fireball and debris. Come on die you bastards, Proctov thought. "Gunners concentrate on the corvette under us. After the path is clear, launch all fighter, interceptor, and bomber squadrons. Hurry!"

**[*Intrepid*. Corridor leading to the port hangar bay.]**

Spook swatted at the annoying voices then jolted out of his daze as he realized someone was dragging him along a corridor. The paramedic doing the dragging felt him wake up and set him down. "How are you feeling? Any headaches or broken bones we missed?" Spook looked at him blankly and his gaze traveled past him to the long rows of wounded stretching down the corridor.

"Wha- No I'm fine...what the heck happened?" With that rousing statement, Spook got to his feet and stumbled to the blast doors currently sealing off the hangar bay.

The hangar bay was a wreck. The drop racks were spread along the deck. Fighters and bits of fighters were scattered all over. He bit back a groan when he spied the ruins of his X-wing. A large plate of hull plating had chopped it in half just behind his pilot's seat. I'm lucky to have gotten out of this intact, Spook realized. Then his gaze was drawn outside of the hangar bay where star fighters spun and spat death. He spun towards one of the damage control crew who was approaching the blast doors. "Are there any star fighters that haven't taken off yet?"

The man looked at him thoughtfully, "I don't know. The starboard squadron got out safely so I doubt there's anything left over there but we just finished sealing the fuel lines and putting out the fires here a few seconds ago..." The rest of his words were lost on Spook as he stepped away and slapped the door release. The man stepped into the airlock with him with a smirk, "You might want to put on a space suit, the mag field is still deactivated."

The moment the airlock finished cycling, he headed towards the service bays where his X-wing had been parked, his reasoning being that the possibility of finding a serviceable fighter was higher since each service bay was surrounded on all sides save the one facing the hangar bay.

At first, he thought he had the best luck in the world when he came upon an A-wing which seemed unharmed. Then he saw the cracks in the canopy. He stood there pondering his choices, his breath the only sounds he could hear in his space suit. I wonder what the endurance is for one of these suits, Spook thought with a smile.

**[Bridge of the Mon Calamari Cruiser *Intrepid*.]**



The Admiral cursed as one of his few remaining corvettes brewed up in a spectacular explosion. All he had left was one star cruiser with more than half it's weapons on the port side slagged by the fireball, 2 of the five star fighter squadrons he started with, 2 corvettes, and 2 Nebulon-B frigates, both of which had taken significant damage. On the other hand, he allowed himself a bitter-sweet smile, the Imps had the Imperial Class, 2 frigates left, half of their star fighters left, and the shipyard. He was amazed that the Imperials had designed that monstrosity to be mobile. It also had significant defenses, he noted as well organized cannon fire from the shipyard broke up an attempted torpedo run by his Y-wings.

"Admiral, we think the shipyard is attempting to go to hyper space!"

"WHAT! That thing is too big. It'll break up on entry...wont it?" He paused for a second, "Damn! Signal all ships to ignore the two frigates and concentrate on disabling the shipyard. Fire Control, concentrate all firepower towards the shipyard. Alternate turbo lasers and ion cannon. Helm, bring the shipyard between us and the Indomitable until we can disable the shipyard." *Then we fight for our lives*, he thought grimly as his two frigates died. "Do we have any undamaged couriers onboard?" he asked.

"Yes sir, one left."

"Good, send it out of the interference and signal Home 1. Tell them we need help and give them a situation report."

### **[A-wing Alpha 8.]**

Spook gave a happy shout as the last of two TIE interceptors attacking a Y-wing exploded under his lasers. The CAG had told them to concentrate all firepower towards the shipyard with the A-wings providing cover and that was exactly what he was getting. Spook got a glimpse at the shipyard and watched with awe as torpedoes and laser fire hailed against the shipyard's mighty shields. Even with all that punishment, enough cannon fire was coming up towards them to make getting a firing solution a tough prospect. *Damn that thing is a hard nut to crack*, he thought.

His comm unit crackled with another call for help. After shooting down the offending TIE, he targeted the shipyard, which was still absorbing all their firepower with relative impunity. A quick flip of the switch and he volleyed his concussion missiles at whatever targets of opportunity he could find. He lifted one hand to try to straighten his space suit's helmet but accidentally knocked it even more off center in the cramped cockpit. *Note to self, never EVER try this again*. His space suit had already been the cause of two almost collisions with fighters.

A spattering of laser fire and a missile lock buzzer made him jinx and twist. A pair of interceptors had locked onto him. In the background, he heard excited shouts about the shipyard's shields. The lead interceptor was easily eliminated but his wing man proved to be very hard to get off of his six. Just before his rear shields died, a battle scarred X-wing swooped in and sent the interceptor spinning into the darkness.

Shouts of frustration caused him to snap his neck around his pilot chair in an attempt to see what was the matter. Spook managed to bring his A-wing around in time to see the shipyard enter hyper space. His heart sank. It did some more sinking when he took a good look at his sensor displays. The scope was covered in a blizzard of red with only a small number of green dots remaining. "I've got a bad feeling about this," Spook muttered to himself.

The SD seemed emboldened by the successful escape of the shipyard. It advanced on the two remaining rebel corvettes quickly destroying one and disabling the other. Thankfully the two Imperial frigates and the Imperial star fighters had their hands full with the remaining rebel squadrons. After a while, the shields and heavier armor on the rebel ships began to even the odds.

### **[Bridge of the *Indomitable*.]**

Captain Proctov leaned back in his chair and tried to look suitably cunning. I'm winning, he thought giddily. "Ignore that disabled corvette for the time being, I want that star cruiser dead. Alternate turbo laser salvos with the ion cannon."

The two ships circled each other trying to find an advantage. The SD due to the fact that most of its

turrets were still functional and its shields hadn't been barbecued early on quickly gained the upper hand but both ships were in sorry shape.

#### **[Engine room of Rebel Corvette *Viper 9*.]**

"Try it again Lieutenant!" The grimy officer nodded and bent to his console again. This time the startup sequence worked and the reactor began to hum with power. "YES!!!!" Dim emergency lighting was replaced by the standard flood lights and battle stations flashers. "Get me the Captain."

#### **[Bridge of *Viper 9*.]**

"Captain, Jon says main power is back online."

"Wonderful, when will we have weapons" asked the captain as he uneasily eyed the two capital ships slugging it out only a few kilometers from the bow of his ship. "We've got it now sir." Now what do we do with it, the captain wondered.

#### **[CIC of the *Intrepid*.]**

Smoke and fumes filled the air. "Admiral!!! *Viper 9* is back online!" The admiral spun around.

"Tell them to get themselves out of here. They can't do us much good," he said heavily.

"Yes, sir" replied the white-faced ensign.

#### **[Bridge of *Viper 9*.]**

"He wants us to WHAT?!" the captain asked. The hapless comm. officer repeated himself. It didn't sound any better the second time around. *Like hell I'm turning tail now, the captain thought.*

#### **[Bridge of the *Indomitable*.]**

The tech. manning the sensor displays had most of his attention riveted on the dazzling display of firepower. As a result, he missed the sudden wild surge of energy in the rebel corvette until it was almost too late.

He took a glance at his display when it began buzzing at him. Horror riveted him to his chair for a few crucial seconds. "Captain!!! The Rebel corvette is trying to ram us!!"

Captain Proctov didn't even take the time to confirm it. "All cannon, KILL THE CORVETTE QUICKLY!!"

#### **[A-wing Alpha 8.]**

Spook watched as the dormant corvette surged towards the preoccupied SD. The few remaining turrets it still had operational spat laser fire at the bridge. *Nice move*, Spook thought.

Then he watched as the SD suddenly focus all available cannon on the hapless corvette turning it into a funeral pyre in seconds. The burning hulk sailed above the SD, missing the bridge by mere meters.

#### **[Bridge of the *Indomitable*.]**

Captain Proctov watched in horror as the Rebel corvette focused it's fire on the vulnerable bridge view ports. One of the heavy transparisteel panes suddenly exploded into space as he watched helplessly.

"Evacuate the bridge," he yelled desperately as he staggered towards the nearest exit. The exit began to close on automatics. "Nooooooooo..."

### [A-wing Alpha 8.]

The bridge of the SD seemed to be spewing out into space from the hole made by the corvette's desperate firing run. Cheers could be heard coming from the few surviving rebel fighters as the SD started to spiral out of control.

But that didn't last. *Someone must have gotten to the auxiliary control room, Spook thought. Rats.*

A suprisingly violent volley of turbo laser, ion cannon, and torpedoes from the Indomitable silenced the remaining guns on the Intrepid. The defenseless ship beat a quick retreat. Spook and the few rebels in the vicinity of the SD suddenly found themselves the sole targets of one slightly irate crew of an SD.

*This is NOT what I signed up for, Spook babbled to himself as he tried to avoid the heavy fire. One of his evasive jinxes send him into the edge of an ion cannon blast.*

### [Tractor beam control room 3.]

The chief that was manning the panel could hardly believe his luck as an A-wing floated right into the center of his targeting recticle. *Another capture fee, wow! My luck is great so far.* Soon he had the fried A-wing settled into a capture clamp.

As he approached with the two storm troopers that were already there, he noted with disappointment that the canopy was missing. *Rats, he must have triggered the manual eject. His next though was much more energetic. Oh !#\*@, where'd he come from?!!!!*

### [Bridge of the Intrepid.]

The Admiral picked himself off the floor where most of his officers were still lying either unconscious or dazed. A look at the sensor displays told him that the only sane course of action was a retreat. He stumbled to the astrogator's control panel. "Can we still enter hyper space?" he asked the man who was dragging himself back into the seat.

"Yes sir."

"Good. plot a course for Hoth."

The communications officer didn't need prompting when the admiral looked at him. "Sending recall messages now sir."

### [Capture room 3.]

Spook ducked back into the engine casing of the A-wing where he'd been hiding. *I'm going to be dead soon and I STILL CAN'T GET THIS FREAKING HELMET OFF!!* The helmet popped off.

*Two people downed. One storm trooper left, Spook thought happily now that he could see better. He slid silently out of the casing and crawled under his A-wing where he could see the boots of the approaching storm trooper. His two earlier targets were slumped on the floor with matching blaster burns, courtesy of Alpha squadron.*

"Come out with your hands up! You can't escape." the storm trooper coaxed. Spook responded by placing his blaster on the floor and firing off a quick double tap which catch the hapless storm trooper in the

foot. The follow up stun blast silenced the storm trooper's pitiable moans.

### **[Bridge of the *Intrepid*.]**

"All fighters recalled sir. The SAR shuttle is enroute to our starboard hangar bay." "Good. Helm, engage hyper drive as soon as possible." A strafing TIE fighter flashed across the view port.

A few moments later... "SAR is onboard sir." "Engage hyper drive!" The *Intrepid* fled into hyper space.

### **[Capture room 3.]**

Spook wriggled out from underneath his A-wing in time to see the *Intrepid* vanish into hyper space. "Oh jeez, perfect, just perfect!!!" He stiffened when he heard a series of muted clicks behind him.

"Drop your weapon and get down on the floor." A quick peek revealed four storm troopers with their weapons pointed right at his head. His blaster fell from his hand and he started to lie down. Apparently this wasn't fast enough for one of them as Spook was hit from behind with a stun blast.

### **[Auxiliary Control Room of the *Indomitable*.]**

Captain Proctov watched as the *Intrepid* engaged its hyper drive leaving his fighters buzzing around aimlessly and sighed. "Recall all fighters. Helm, plot a course for our meeting point." Moments after the TIEs were recalled the *Indomitable* jumped as well.

### **[Stockade of the *Indomitable*.]**

Spook awoke when he was thrown headfirst into a small cell. After a few minutes of intense concentration, his stunned muscles began to respond and he lifted himself into a sitting position. He tried to cheer himself up a bit: "I'm sure that the Alliance will come back for us. Won't they?"

**THE END**



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