

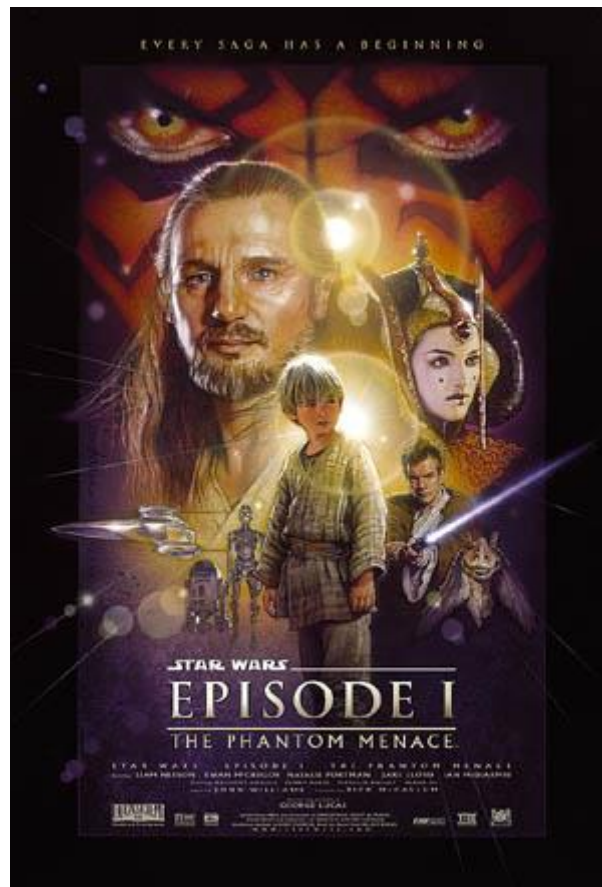
The Dark Sentinel

Issue #52

May 9, 1999

Emperor's Hammer Strike Fleet

Aurora System, Outer Rim Territories



The Official Star Wars Episode One: The Phantom Menace poster painted by Drew Struzan, taken from www.starwars.com. 10 more days.

Edited/authored by Sector Admiral Jahn Compton
XO/SA Compton/CS-2/SSSD Sov

Emperor's Hammer Strike Fleet
SSSD Sovereign

2,902 members worldwide

office of the fleet commander

Grand Admiral Ronin has gathered articles and submissions regarding the development of the Emperor's Hammer. These include Fleet events, overall EH Plotlines, personal anecdotes, etc. The Fleet Commander wishes to emphasize that all development proposals for the Emperor's Hammer MUST be approved by the Fleet Commander prior to release to the rest of the Fleet.

Prequel Updates...! As copied From: <http://www.starwars.com>

"May 3, 1999 -- The Episode I music video is available for our online fans here on www.starwars.com. Composer and conductor John Williams prepared the music sequence based on one of the new themes he wove into his Episode I score, and this became the backbone of a visual spectacle that brings together feature footage from Episode I as well as behind-the-scenes segments.

May 5, 1999 -- Internet community site Talk City has been chosen as the official online chat provider for Episode I and will host 12 moderated online chats with the stars and key contributors to the prequel. The chat series will begin this Thursday, May 6, at 6 p.m. PST, with an online chat with world-famous composer John Williams."

X-Wing Alliance Reviewed at CNN.com

As Emailed From: FAKhyron@aol.com

If you weren't already aware of it, you may want to check out the review of X-Wing Alliance posted at CNN.com: <http://www.cnn.com/TECH/computing/9904/30/xwing.idg/>

New EH Internet Relay Chat Ownership Finalized

As Emailed From: Flight Officer (FA Kawolski)

Thanks to the efforts of our Flight Officer (FA Kawolski), the Emperor's Hammer IRC channel is from this point forward OFFICIALLY moved to: #Emperor's_Hammer... "The channel has now been transferred to you. You now have 500 access and own #Emperor's_Hammer."

New Training Officer Appointed

As Submitted by: Fleet Commander (GA Ronin)

With the recent resignation of FA Chuck due to "other obligations", the new Training Officer has been selected...FA Astatine, Dean of IWATS. Based upon our conversations, the new Training Officer will soon be consolidating some standards and reporting formats for ALL EH Academies (including Subgroups). This will NOT mean anything significant will necessarily change within these already existing and healthy institutions, but merely that they will all also now be centrally linked through one overall "Emperor's Hammer Imperial Academy". The new TO will most certainly provide more details and an updated Training Manual as he settles into his new job.

New Science Officer Appointed

As Submitted by: Fleet Commander (GA Ronin)

Due to inactivity in the Science Officer over the past several months and especially considering the release of several new LucasArts Star Wars games coming to the market (i.e. XWing Alliance), the Fleet Commander (GA Ronin) has decided to appoint Vice Admiral Ajax Fardreamer, the former CA:SCO, as the new EH Science Officer. VA Ajax is herein promoted to the Rank of Admiral. Some of his EH experience is presented below:

"I joined the Emperor's Hammer in November of 1996 into the Infiltrator Wing. I became interesting with Slicing at this time for the game XWCD. When the former IWCOW Dogger developed the E-wing SE in 1997, I was one of the first to download it, and figure out how he did it. I remained interested in Custom Ships for the game platforms. I created several rudimentary ships for TFCO, and even dabbled into graphics editing.

In the summer of 1998, I became knowledgeable with X-wing vs TIE Fighter:Balance Of Power and the OPT Project of Datamaster's Website. I was addicted to the editing, and soon began slicing everything left and right in the game. As many will tell you, I became famous for my work. I developed several of the Project Atlantis Custom Ships, including the A-9b Vigilance, (although I don't know if I was credited with it... I made it late '98), the TIE Phantom, and many Non-Atlantis ships.

Currently, I am a member of Darkov's Project Origo (designing an Imperial XWA Campaign), and one of Darkov's main assistants. As Darkov will tell you, I believe I'm doing a pretty good job, and would be an asset to the ExO position.

As a side project also, as SA Compton knows, I'm putting together a full-functioning XWA Pilot Editor that would allow the EH Flight Office to examine incoming Trainees. There have been several advances I have made, and within a short period of time, I'm sure I will be able to release it."

Two other Applicants were reviewed:

- KE (Krath)/CON/Nighthawk/Clan Arcona
- DC/LSG/LSG AD Obiwan (CA:FC)

New Corporate Division Executive Officer (ExO) Appointed

As Submitted by: Fleet Commander (GA Ronin)

Due to IRC "differences", AD BlackHawk has been replaced by AD Obiwan as the new Corporate Division Executive Officer (ExO).

The following also submitted qualified Applications:

- CT/Col Sithspawn/GS-5/CSMA
- Dark Prelate Assassin
- Amason

AD Obiwan Awarded EH Imperial Cross

For his efforts and dedication at the Position of CA:FC, AD Obiwan is herein awarded the Emperor's Hammer Imperial Cross...Congratulations!

Star Wars Film Competition

As Emailed From: comwedge@hotmail.com (Matt Joyce)

Please post to all members that there is a Star Wars Film Competition being run in Australia. If they want in they have to contact me here.
Thanks Ronin.

<http://www.angelfire.com/fl/Nakata/main.html>

Regards, Lord Com Wedge

Order The Official Phantom Menace CD

As Emailed From: Christopher@SoundStone.com

Greetings from SoundStone.com, where we've just received copies of the Original Motion Picture Soundtrack to Star Wars: Episode 1 - The Phantom Menace. The soundtrack's absolutely fantastic; our Department of Star Wars Fans can't get enough of it. We've got it on sale now for \$11.39--that's 40% off the regular price! Head to:

<http://www.soundstone.com/scripts/starwars.cfm>

for your chance to pre-order the CD, or to join our Affiliate Network and make this CD available for your own website visitors right now.

Best, Chris Gannon

"Something you might be interested in..."

As Emailed From: Dean of IWATS (FA Astatine)

As taken from <http://www.thedarkredemption.com/>

"...The Dark Redemption is a 26 minute short feature film based on the Star Wars universe created by George Lucas. Set 2 days before Star Wars IV - A New Hope, it is intended primarily for a competition run by the Melbourne based Australian Star Wars fan club - Starwalking Inc..."

Features of this little production include:

- Peter Sumner, who originally starred in ANH as Lt. Pol Triedum ("TK421, why aren't you at your post?") reprising his role.
- Replica costumes, including Boba Fett, Jawas and Stormtroopers.
- A plotline set two days before ANH
- Characters including Kyle Katarn, Boba Fett and Mara Jade
- Very cool looking space scenes (I think they're done with Lightwave)

Should be pretty nice when they finish it. Apparently, they've been filming on weekends for 5 months already.

episodeii.com call for stories

As Emailed From: theforce@episodeii.com (chris sherman)

"Hey,

I'm launching episodeii.com at <http://www.episodeii.com/two.html> to cover news and rumor on Star Wars: Episode II. With so many Star Wars sites out there already I've decided post mostly headline news and link out. Think of episodeii.com as an index - where people can go to get Episode II headlines and then click over to view the whole story. So, if you hear of any Episode II news or rumors let us know and will run the headline and summary with a link to your site. If you'd rather be anonymous we can work that way too.
thanks chris"

Clan Alvaak WWW Site Overhaul

As Emailed From: Dragon128@aol.com

The address is: <http://members.tripod.com/lgdave/Alvaak/enter.html>...

DJK Dave (Obelisk)/Proconsul/Clan Alvaak [GMRG:INI]

Fleet Commander's Note:

Soon the above WWW Site awaits transfer to a site without an "ad banner"...those are so annoying and not befitting Alvaak Dark Jedi Clansmen. However, the above template is certainly excellent work and the basic design has been approved (and applauded...:)
FC/GA Ronin/CS-1/SSSD Sovereign

New Internet Officer Appointed

As Submitted From: Fleet Commander (GA Ronin)

The Internet Officer is directly responsible for maintaining the Main EH WWW Links Site and assists with maintenance of the EH WWW Domain...The Main EH WWW Links Site serves as a central link for ALL EH related links/pages in the Fleet...(i.e. Subgroups, Battlegroups, Ships, Wings and Squadrons). The Internet Officer also aids the Fleet by looking for new areas of exposure and opportunities for the Emperor's Hammer on the WWW.

After consideration of several well qualified Applicants, the Fleet Commander (GA Ronin) has decided to appoint Admiral Thedek as the new Emperor's Hammer Internet Officer. The Internet Officer assists the Fleet with the creation and maintenance of an overall Fleet Links page, submits weekly recommendations for EH Site of the Week and generally oversees all WWW EH operations. His hard work and dedication to so many aspects of the Fleet (i.e. SG Rosters and www sites) as well as his demonstrated ability at HTML, has won him the Position.

The following candidates' Applications were also received and reviewed:

- CA:FO/VA Horn/CA-4/SSSD Sov
- COM/RA Eric O'Flynn/ISD Col
- Elliad Tarissis Gavron
- FM/CM George/Praetorian 1-2/DGN Lichtor V

Episode I Game Previews

As Submitted/Investigated by: Fleet Commander (GA Ronin)

With the upcoming release of Star Wars: Episode I - The Phantom Menace on May 19, 1999, LucasArts is also planning the release of two hot new game titles for the PC and Playstation...

Episode I: Phantom Menace

As copied from: <http://www.lucasarts.com/products/phantommenace>

"You will participate in the dramatic events from the Star Wars: Episode I story – and beyond. The action in The Phantom Menace picks up where the movie begins – as two heroic Jedi Knights dock on a Trade Federation Battleship above the planet Naboo. The journey takes you to such locations as Naboo, Tatooine, and all the way to the Galactic capital world of Coruscant as you confront imposing threats to freedom in the midst of a galaxy in crisis."

Star Wars Racer

As copied from: <http://www.lucasarts.com/products/starwarsracer>

"TWO ENGINES. ONE CHAMPION. NO LIMITS.

Climb on, strap in and experience the pure adrenaline-pumping excitement of the Podracing sequence from Star Wars: Episode I The Phantom Menace. Take the controls as Jedi-to-be Anakin Skywalker, or any one of over 20 Podracers, and feel the full-force blast of two massive jet engines at simulated speeds of up to 600 mph. Rein in a turbine-driven chariot through 8 spectacular worlds. Negotiate through flaming methane lakes, Tusken Raider assaults, anti-gravity tunnels and much more in a pulse-pounding, do-or-die fight to the finish where anyone will do anything to cross the finish line. How far will you go?"

EH WWW Site chosen as a Netscape Open Directory Cool Site

As Emailed From: npellizzer@aol.com (nick pellizzeri)

"This is to inform you that the website (<http://www.emperorshammer.org>) has been designated a Cool Site in the Netscape Open Directory Bookmarks/N/nickp12/Star_Wars/Clubs category at:

http://dmoz.org/Bookmarks/N/nickp12/Star_Wars/Clubs/

Your site has been chosen as a cool site in my star wars clubs category on the ODP."

XWA Mission Design Kit (Alpha)

As Emailed From: Flight Officer (FA Kawolski)

A new version "X-Wing Alliance Mission Architect" (0.2) (NOT endorsed by LucasArts) came out yesterday. The xwingalliance.net download doesn't work again, so I put it up on my webspace:

<http://www.tiecorps.org/files/xwama02.zip>

office of the executive officer

Sector Admiral Compton has gathered submissions pertaining to all of the Emperor's Hammer Subgroups.

the dark brotherhood	db
the hammer's fist	hf
infiltrator wing	iw
corporate division	cd
the bounty hunters guild	bhg
intelligence division	id
eh directorate	dir
the fringe	eh rpg
combat operations officer	coo
lord ambassador	la



Good little Imperials...

by SA Compton

In a matter of days, a dream that is older than many of you will come true.

You see, being the old guy that I am, I remember seeing Star Wars: A New Hope in the theater for the first time. I remember the rumbling as the Imperial Star Destroyer flew over everyone's heads. Heck, I even remember getting my first Star Wars figures a few months later. That's just the sort of Star Wars freak I am.

But there's one thing I've been waiting to see for almost 20 years. Y'see, beofre even The Return of the Jedi was released, die-hard SW fans knew that A New Hope was Episode Four of the Star Wars saga. And we knew that after ROTJ was released, George Lucas would go back and make the first three movies. So when ROTJ came out, die-hard fans waited for news that Episode One was on the way.

And we waited.

And waited.

And waited some more.

And now, on May 19th, that wait will come to an end.

It's been a long wait. I, my loyal Imperial friends, fully expect to just about break down into tears at some point during the film.

Many of you have written to me in the last month to let me know how much you enjoyed last month's column in which I told the tale of how it took me 2 hours to get my copy of X-Wing Alliance. Yes, my tale of angst and woe seems to have brought no end of amusement to you people. I can't tell you how happy I am that the pain and agony I went through in finding that game of games has brought people joy. The outpouring of laughter instead of sympathy was truly touching.

Well, as I've told some of you, there's an odd little epilogue to that adventure. A few days after NL 51 was released, I got this in the mail:

I just finished reading your NL entry and it is some of the funniest stuff I've ever read. My wife and I both enjoyed it. Now to add something to it under the category of Adding Insult to Injury...

When I had told you where I got it I was also telling my wife about what I was telling you and literally seconds after you logged off and began your trek she told me that they had it at the Anaheim Walmart too as she had been there earlier in the day. I looked all over for you including AOL Instant messenger but to know avail.

Sorry about that

AD Rapier

In other words, if I had decided to stop by the store, instead of driving right past it as I did, I would have saved myself a lot of grief. I would have saved myself a lot of agony. I would have saved myself a few gallons of gas.

But then I wouldn't have had anything to write about in these last couple NLS.

XO/SA Compton/CS-2/SSSD Sov
...NL 53 subs are due May 31st...

squadron ready room

The Tactical Officer herein presents any special updates and events related to the tactical operations of the Emperor's Hammer Strike Fleet. New Battle Plotlines and missions are also posted herein. This section also provides directions on copying and playing the new EH missions.

This month, the Tactical Office has been experiencing a great deal of changes. Firstly, my CA, AD Thedek, has been promoted to Internet Officer. We'll miss him for all the hard work he did, but congratulations on the richly deserved promotion. This opens the position of CA:TAC, which I should have filled within a few days. Secondly, the Battle Board is moving to a new server, tiecorps.org. The URL for this will be posted on the domain when it's ready.

Also, a new CAB will be created soon-more on this to come later.

The winners of the FCHG comp was LCM Gray, with CPT Callista in second place.

URLs:

The Tactical Office is up at:

<http://www.city-net.com/~dev/tac>

The FCHG Homepage is up at:

<http://www.city-net.com/~dev/fchg>

From the TAC Office,

Tactical Officer, Fleet Admiral Dev

the command staff

Herein are presented sections for the offices of each Command Staff Member. Please use the menu on the right to view each Office's report.

the flight office	fo
the internet office	io
the training office	to
the operations office	ops
the communications office	comm
the security office	so
the science office	sco

the logistics office lo

the reconnaissance office ro

officer's deck

The Executive Office periodically releases fiction submitted by Command Officers and Flag Officers of the Emperor's Hammer.

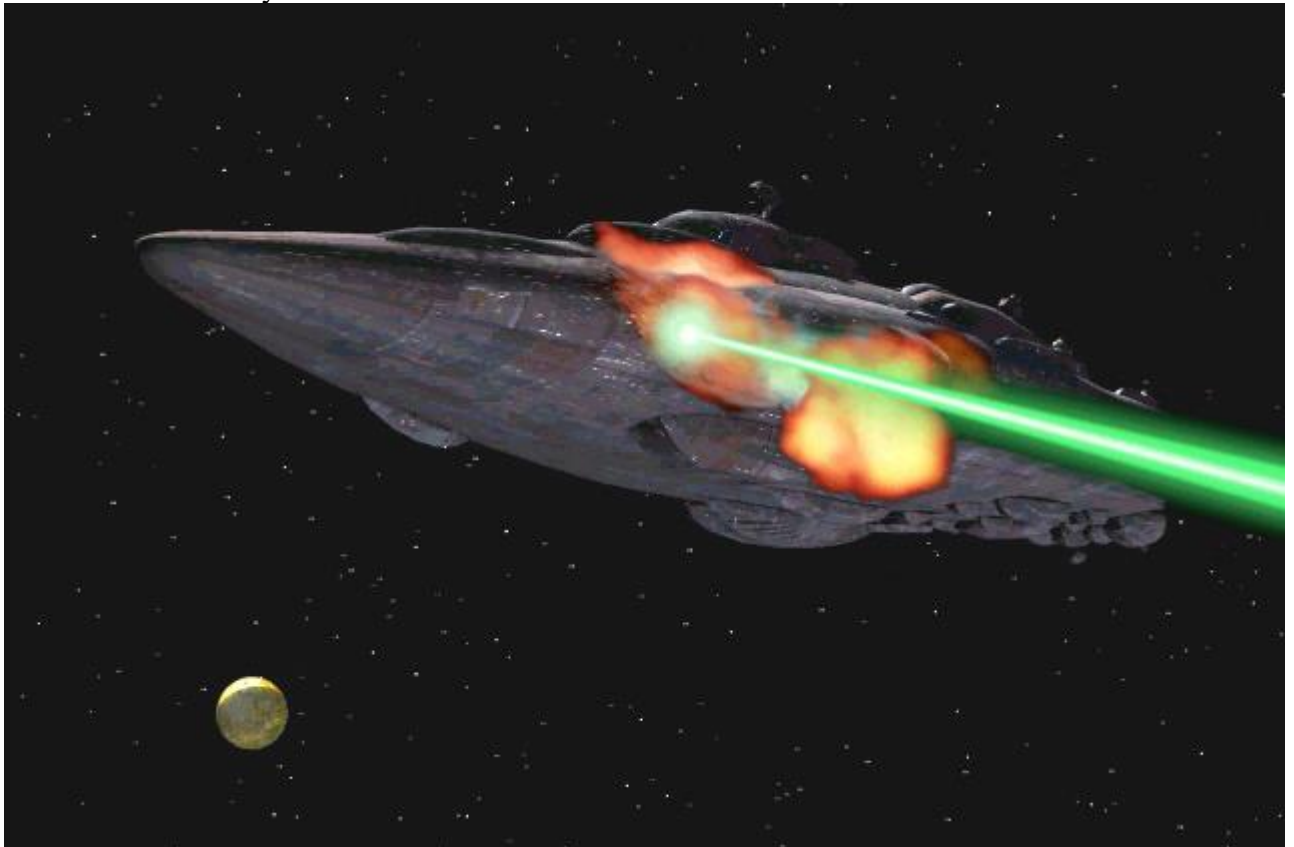
SovCOM Kramer promoted to FA!

New Republic News Service

News Flash!

This just in!

In a display of synchronized flying never before seen, the infamous "Omega Squadron" of the despised "Emperor's Hammer" used the combined quad lasers from their 6 Tie Guardians to create a single beam which they used to quickly destroy one of our prized Calamari Cruisers near Dar'Telis I in the Minos Cluster. The name of the ship has been withheld pending notification of family members.



When interviewed via long range telecommunications and asked about this vile and heinous act, members of Omega responded that they were not acting under orders, but were simply out ...

" fragging rebel stuff to celebrate the promotion of our Commodore Admiral Kramer to Fleet Admiral!"

Those participating were:

COLs Devin, EmpReach, Dread, Tad, Lt COL Pavel, and CM Tiberious!

Needless to say, high command is authorizing a substantial increase in the bounty on their heads, as well on the head of this now even more abominable enemy of the New Republic, Fleet Admiral Kramer!

End Transmission

Well Kramer, looks like we just can't keep you out of trouble!
EmpReach

*(Editor's Note: Although it's **very** rare to include Rebel propaganda in the Dark Sentinel, this news release is close enough to the truth for inclusion herein. Congratulations, Fleet Admiral Kramer!)*

THE SITH LEGACY

CONGRATS TO COL KESSLER AND CPT DARKFIRE OF TORNADO SQUADRON ON YOUR ENGAGEMENT TO EACH OTHER.

COM/RA Torres/ISD Challenge, Knight.

PC/ISMx2/MoT/MoI/IWATS=Q,IIC/3,I,TT/MoC=g,6xb

<<http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Dunes/8234/>> ISD Challenge

Slamming his fist down, FA Kawolski almost broke the com-unit in his desk. He had just managed to forward the latest roster updates to his assistant, VA Horn, when an urgent call had arrived. Assuming it was the GA, he was a little angry to find that it was RA Torres, the COM of the ISD Challenge. With more than enough work for two officers, Kawolski was not in the mood for the hot-tempered, stubborn Torres and soon the conversation ended up in a shouting match between the two officers with Kawolski ordering the Challenge to convoy duty and Torres refusing to allow Kawolski onto the Challenge for a month.

“Bad day, K?”

Looking up, Kawolski saw it was VA Piett, BGCOM, and Torres’ immediate superior.

“Yeah, your pain-in-the-butt younger brother has gone and done something really stupid...again.”

Piett shock his head in wonder as Kawolski went into detail about Torres’ latest decision. The two of them had been good friends back when Kawolski was the COM of the Relentless and Torres was the CMDR of Inferno Squadron on the Challenge. It was a common sight in those days for the two of them to be in a cafe or bar drinking a few ales whenever the two ISDs where in the same port. But then things changed and now Piett was caught between a very-worked out, short-tempered Kawolski and a pig-headed, hot-tempered Torres. What made it worse was that Torres was his younger brother who had a habit of completing ignoring the chain-of-command and doing things his way. This did have a way of getting results, but it also stepped on some of the Command Staff toes which seriously hampered Torres’ chances of a promotion.

“Well I’ll deal with it, K. You know Torres is, he thinks of the Challenge as his own little

domain and does his own thing.”

“Look, Piett, I won’t deny that Torres gets results and is now commanding one of the most prestigious ships in the fleet, but he had better learn that he is under my command. Perhaps a time commanding a base would benefit him.”

“A ground command? Oh yeah that would go down with Torres like me telling him he cant fly a fighter anymore.”

“Well, sort him out or I’ll throw him out of the Challenge’s command chair. Clear?”

“Crystal, K. Now what is it you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Right. An intell strike team on its way back from a raid on a Rebel Special Forces base reported that their ship’s sensors detected a large mass in deep space, just inside EH borders.”

“Thats all? Have the DIR fleet check it out.”

“We would, except the mass seems to indicate its a warship of some kind. I want one of the VSDs out there and see whats there.”

“Hmmm, all the VSDs are either in drydock or out on missions. The only ship capable of this mission thats ready is the Challenge.”

“The Challenge? Nope, out of the question. I’ll contact Yacko and see if he can get one of the ASF’s ships.”

“Look, K, you may have problems with Torres...hell who doesnt have problems with the guy? But one thing that keeps him from being court-martialed is that he supports his people no matter what and his crew would follow him into any situation because they know he’ll get them out of it. Now if you dont want Torres on the Challenge, then give him another command for the time being or let me do something, but dont take out your revenge on the Challenge...especially if you want them to follow whoever you put in Torres’ place.”

Silence ruled as the two officers stared off into the viewport which showed the Challenge matching the Sovereign’s slow orbit around Aurora Prime. Time flew by as Kawolski continued to watch the Challenge sail through space with the ease of an elite crew on her. He was thrown out of his thoughts when a flight of starfighters launched from the Challenge’s main bay and went on a patrol of the area.

“Very well, but I dont want Torres on the command deck when the Challenge leaves. Its not personal, but at the moment I dont trust him. Give him some shore-leave on Aurora Prime, but if he wants to do some duty while the Challenge is gone, tell him he is attached to my office.”

“Aye, sir. I’ll make sure that Striker is in command in Torres’ absence.”

“No, I want RA Davnae in charge.”

“Davnae?”

The look Kawolski gave Piett made it clear that this was not request.

“Aye aye sir.”

Piett stood up, saluted, and then walked out of the office, leaving Kawolski starring at the Challenge.

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

“You wanted to see me, Piett?”

An hour after returning from the Sovereign, Piett had finally commed the Challenge and asked Torres to see him aboard the Colossus. During the last hour, he had been trying to find a way of delivering Torres’ removal of command in a way which would be make it easy for him, but in the end he decided that he owe Torres too much to be nothing but blunt with him.

“I did. I’ve justed talked with Kawolski...after your little conversation and he wasnt very happy. In fact, he had the Challenge slated for convoy duty for the next month.”

“Yeah I know. I just over-reacted and lost my temper.”

“Torres, the last time you lost your temper was during the Mauser investigation and that was with Thedek. This is the third time you’ve lost your temper in relation to the Command Staff and the second with Kawolski. So effect immediately you are relieved from your position as COM of the ISD Challenge and placed on shore-leave with the option of duty with the Flight Office. The orders have been transmitted to the Challenge and Striker should be reading them now. Until your replacement arrives, he will be in charge.”

For one long second, Torres stared at Piett as he listened and then something happened. Piett saw the defiance flare briefly in Torres’ eyes and then suddenly it crumbled as the entire situation become apparant to him. Someone else would be commanding the Challenge and this removal from command effectively sealed Torres’ career for good. He wouldnt be promoted or given the command of another warship like the Challenge. If he was lucky, he might be given the command of a corvette, but Piett couldnt see Torres accepting anything like that.

“Orders understood, sir. Permission to depart?”

Piett had been ready for every reaction of Torres, but for this one. He felt a shiver of fear go up his spin as he nodded and Torres walked out. Torres had walked in the COM of the Challenge, one of the most powerful commands in the Empire, and was now walking out a shell of an officer, an officer who had seen everything that mattered to him taken away and given to someone else. The door had barely closed before the com-link beeped. Opening it, Piett saw that it was Kawolski.

“Well?”

“He said nothing at all. He just acknowledged the orders and walked out. This may break him Kawolski. That ship is one of the few things he has left and when he realised what was happening, something in him broke. It was almost as if his warrior’s spirit gave up. He didnt even ask who was replacing him. It was scary. I was prepared for eveything, but this. I’ll keep you informed on his situation. Piett out.”

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

At the same time, on the Challenge WC MAJ Striker had gathered all the CMDRs into the COM’s chambers where a large conference table was situated. Looking at the orders again to confirm what he had read, Striker looked up at the gathered officers and tried to guess what their reaction would be. CPT Manitsas(Inferno) would be spitting turbolasers, given the long history of service between him and Torres; CM Wet Willy(Cyclone) would probably be breaking walls; CM Corran Horn(Tornado) would try to keep his cool, but Striker knew he would be as angry as Wet Willy; CPT Nightflyer(Tempest) would be breaking heads before the end of the day; CM Corran Force(Thunder) would be helping Nightflyer in the breaking of heads; CPT Callista(Typhoon) was the one person who Striker wasnt quite certain about. Oh he had no doubts about her loyalty or abilities, but given that Kawolski had signed the order made it hard. For Kawolski and Callista were married and it wa suspected by many of the Challenge’s crew that Torres had a ‘thing’ for Callista, something which may have landed him into his current situation.

“Ok everyone sit down and listen. Torres has ben relieved as COM, effective immediate.”

With that one sentence, the entire table erupted as the CMDRs started shouting their heads, demanding to know why or refusing to believe it until Torres arrived back. Striker decided to let them let off some steam until continuing, but when Manitsas accused Callista of causing the situation, he changed his mind.

“SIT DOWN!!!!”

His sudden outburst shocked the gathered officers who all fell into a silence with Manitsas glaring at Callista who had a slightly shocked look on her face.

“Now let me make this clear. Callista has absolutely nothing to do with this change in command and I won't hear anymore of this. Is that clear?”

All officers nodded their heads, although Manitsas still seemed convinced that Callista had something to do with it. Striker shook his head in sorrow as he watched one of the best teams in the Empire threatened to break apart over the dismissal of one man. They were better than that damn it!!!! They owed it to themselves and if not then they owed Torres by remaining the one of the best teams around and getting on with the job.

“I don't know why he was relieved of his duties, but Torres is on shore-leave.”

“You mean he's been put on half-pay?”

Striker swallowed and nodded to Manitsas' question. Half-pay was a term Torres had brought with him and it meant that an officer was without a command and had no reason to be receive full pay. For an officer at Torres' stage, half-pay was an effective end to a career.

“Whose been selected as his replacement?”

Despite her shock at the news and Manitsas' accusation, Callista managed to remain professional.

“RA Davnae.”

If the news of Torres' removal from command shocked the gathered CMDRs, then this caused an eruption which nearly blasted the roof off. Davnae had been an officer in the Deep Core command who was transferred to the EH after he lost his command, an SSD, in a battle against the Rebels. At first, it was believed that he was simply overwhelmed by the Rebels, but when VA Rapier had requested Davnae's file he had found that the Rebel force opposing him had barely the firepower to destroy a VSD, not an SSD. Eventually, Deep Core command acknowledged that Davnae had been transferred because of his incompetence. Now that very man had been given command of the Challenge and not one person at the table was happy about it.

Manitsas and Wet Willy declared their refusal to obey Davnae's command and Corran Horn and Corran Force were almost declaring they seize command. Nighflyer was so angry that he just couldn't say a thing while Callista looked stunned. Striker was about to order them quiet when he noticed a figure leaving the turbo-lift. Very few people had access to this part of the ship and nearly all of them were here...all but one. Striker was about to announce Torres' arrival when he saw his face and the words died in Striker's mouth. Only Callista noticed Striker's look and she turned around to see Torres enter his quarters. She then turned back and looked straight at Striker who agreed with her silent suggestion.

“Everyone out now!!!!!!”

Still arguing among each other, the CMDRs departed the level, leaving the silence only to be broken by the sound of someone preparing to leave. Twenty minutes later, the seven officers were still arguing on the bridge when Torres appeared there. Silently he walked onto the command deck and looked around for what could be the last time. All conversation died as everyone looked at Torres and for a moment Striker moved to speak. Then Torres made a slight gesture with his right hand and shook his head slightly. Striker stopped and nodded his head, acknowledging Torres' order. He knew now that it wasn't the job that had made Torres into an officer the crew would follow into hell, but it was the man himself and everything about him wouldn't change even if the circumstances did. They all knew that Torres would be waiting for the day when the Empire needed his services and until that day, they would honour him by doing what he expected of them...to serve as Imperial officers. After gazing out of the viewports, Torres nodded to Striker and the rest, giving Callista a quick smile of reassurance and left the command deck. As he left, everyone felt as if something had been snatched out of their lives and the Challenge had become a little smaller and sadder.

To be continued.....

RA Torres

This has be brought to you by I-Completely-Screwed-Up-This-Time Pty Ltd.

Any officers who may have been offended by their depiction in this story, my apoligises to you.

Author:David Dunn.

sovereign cantina

The Executive Officer herein presents fiction submitted by the Squadron Commanders, Flight Leaders and Flight Members of the Emperor's Hammer.

Recruitment Speech For EH

Do you want a job that gives you an education and pays you at the same time? Do you want a job that lets you see the universe? Most importantly, do you want a job that gives you security? Is this what you look for in a job? The Imperial Navy will give you this and more. We have jobs for all sorts of professions. You could be a proud Stormtrooper. Those of you who have knowledge in the arts of space travel could be officers on one of our fine ships. You could even be a pilot and fly for the Empire. The Empire has been protecting us from the Rebellion for so long, but the fight has been difficult. Many young men and women have died for the cause. Let their sacrifice not be in vain. Our new leader, Grand Admiral Ronin, is systematically freeing annexed systems from the rebel tyranny. His leadership is like a guiding light that will free us in the end. 'But' I hear those of you with a high level education say 'Why should I give up my high paying job and join a Empire who has spent so much time fighting itself and not the Rebels'. The answer is simple; we should all help the Empire. It has sacrificed so much for us. Now, we must sacrifice for it. Those of you with a high skill level, high education or a long and distinguished career in the Imperial Navy could even join our elite force; The Emperor's Hammer! This force gives all its troops high paying jobs. You will be able to take command of regular troops. You will have the training to save lives and stop the rebellion. The Noghri know all about the Rebellion. The Rebels who left a ship in the atmosphere annexed their homeworld. This ship fell and nearly killed their civilisation. The remaining members of their race joined the Empire. They had the courage to fight the Rebellion; Do you?

However, don't think that joining the Empire is no fun either. While on duty, you must do your job, but off duty you can go out with friends. As a bonus, Grand Admiral Ronin promises that all Emperor's Hammer members who complete their tour of duty will receive free land on our new Imperial capital (Auora Prime). For more information, go to the Emperors Hammer main facility on Auora prime (It's co-ordinents are [Http://www.EmperorsHammer.org](http://www.EmperorsHammer.org)) The Imperial Navy needs new blood; It could be yours.

Commander George,

Praetorian Squadron (Elite): DGN Lichtor V

FL/CM George/Stalker 3-1/Wing I/SSD Avr

DEFECTION

Commander Gabe Hood looked at the collection of pilots before him... He felt a large burst of pride threaten to swallow him as he realised that these pilots were the best of the best and they were his. Hood glanced at RA Gibbs, who nodded his approval. Hood began the briefing,

“Fellow Fire Demons” he said, “Before I begin this briefing, I’d like to welcome Commander George Lukic to Prae. George joins us from Stalker Squadron, aboard the 1st Wing of the Avenger”. The pilots of Praetorian Squadron welcomed George and then returned their attention to Commander Hood. “Okay” continued Hood, “Firstly, just remember that this briefing is classified, okay? Special Ops and all... Anyway, at approximately 1800 hours, Auora Standard Time, Grand Admiral Ronin received a communique from a Vice-Admiral Resu of the New Republic Navy. The Vice-Admiral wants to defect to the Rebellion, along with his entire crew of a Mon-Calamari cruiser. Lord Ambassador Manesh has asked for our help specifically in this matter. As such, Praetorian Squadron will escort the Lord Ambassador to the designated pick up site, which just happens to be in New Republic territory... However, because such a long journey is impossible for fighter craft, our Praetor’s and Manesh’s Escort Shuttle will be docked on the Lichtor V for the majority of the journey. We were considering sending the Tranquility, but Corvettes are not known for their ability to hold their own... Once we reach the MC-80, we’ll escort the Gopal IV, the LA’s Escort Shuttle, to the MC-80. The MC-80’s name is Pride by the way. Once the Gopal lands, we shall land after it. Two of us will still remain in flight just in case Peace try’s something sneaky. Okay, besides your usual flights, we’ll each have wingmen on this mission. I’ll be with Commander George, and I’ll be in charge, of course. Lieutenant Commander Jedgar will have Lieutenant Commander Derk on his wing and will be in charge. Jedgar will also take charge of the squadron, should I go EV in the mission. Good Luck everybody, now suit up and get to your Praetor’s!

A Imperial Dungeon ship dropped into the Malia System, unnoticed by all but a MC-80 called Peace. Peace moved closer the the DGN, identified it as the Lichtor V... And powered down the Turbo-Lasers. Lichtor did like wise. From the belly of Lichtor came four TIE Praetors, followed by an Escort Shuttle.

Vice-Admiral Resu looked out at the collection of fighters making their way to his Mon-Calamari. The time was almost right... Resu keyed his Comm, “New Republic Fleet 124-A” he said, “Attack!”

Rear-Admiral Gibbs looked out at the Mon-Cal that was awaiting the boarding of Praetorian Squadron and the Gopal five... Suddenly, a startled yelp turned his attention to his sensor chief. “What is it?” asked Gibbs...

“Sir!” said Ensign Ku, “A Rebel fleet has entered the system!”

“A Rebel fleet!” replied Gibbs, “How many ships and what sort?”

“Two Interdictor cruisers, five Corvettes and another Mon-Calamari”...

Gibbs slammed his hand onto his control panel... “Power up our turbo-lasers!” he said, “And try and get us out of those ships line-of-sight!”

Derk Parchon had now idea what was happening... One second, he was escorting the Gopal V, the next second a fleet of rebel ships has hypered in and Derk was trying to avoid a sand-storm of turbo-laser fire. Quickly ducking his ship to avoid a stray turbo-laser, Derk’s computer beeped as four squadrons of X-Wings launched out from one of the Mon-Cal’s. A further four squadrons of A-Wings launched out from Peace. Finally, one last X-Wing squadron launched out from another MC-80... Derk couldn’t see the X-Wings but he could

see the green and gold checkerboard pattern on their side...

"Is that the squadron I think it is?" he asked to the rest of Prae. George answered,

"It is Derk – Rouge Squadron's here..."

-Submitted by: CM George

Rogue Squadron stormed into the fray just about the same time as the DGN fired a salvo from her cannons

Lieutenant Commander Derk Parchon looked for his wingman Lieutenant commander Jedgar. Another quick glance at Mortis' scanner display showed a large unknown blip near the DGN. Seconds alter a shuttle leapt away from one of the Mon-cal cruisers. Then from out of nowhere came a sleek starfighter Derk recognized its base as being that of a Tie Phantom. It flashed overhead taking a few A-wings that got in the way out. Then headed for one of the MC-80s a flash of blue shot out and skewered the Mon-cal for about three minutes. The ship started spewing space craft. Desperately trying to flee a dying ship. Then in one big flash the Mon-cal exploded. Leaving nothing left in space. Then a familiar voice came through the comm.

"Greetings Praetorian pilots for the point of conversation lets just say I'm agent "G"."

Astonished gasps passed through the pilots as they vaped the few stragglers. Rogue Squadron had been escorting the shuttle, and had entered hyperspace. Only 2 corvettes had survived the onslaught from the praetorians.

Derk thumbed the comm.

"Hey George, Jedgar got any missiles left?"

"Do these things have missiles?" said George back.

"I have Derk two and they're locked on to that left-most corvette" replied Jedgar.

Jedgar let fly with his missiles and followed them in.

Derk would have if he had by now figured how to get the missiles to work. So he went in normally and quickly the two corvettes were space junk.

As they headed back to the DGN they talked.

"Who is G?" said someone

"He is some kind of weapons designer and supply quartermaster for the regular ID people.

Oh yeah not to mention a complete psycho." Replied Derk

"Hey guys did you see a blip on your scopes during that?" said Derk thoughtfully.

"Nope." The replies came in.

RA Gibbs stared out of the viewport and sighed.

SDIR Brad came up behind him and spoke.

"You still wish you were out with them." It wasn't a question it was an answer.

"Yes I do." Was the unneeded answer.

Just then an alarm went off on the bridge.

"sir you won't believe this but 20 Mon-cals just jumped in along with their escort craft.

"Oh, its one of those days." Muttered SDIR Brad

-Submitted by: LCM Derk Pachron

LCM Jedgar checked his scanners.....and checked again. "Twenty Mon Cal Cruisers?!?!?!?" "That's right Jedgar, scanners are showing 20" replied CM Hood. "That's not possible, they have to be tricking us" "Yeah, I believe so too" put in Derk. Jedgar flips over to the DGN Lichtor's frequency..."RA Gibbs, are your sensors picking that up also?" "yes they are Jedgar, something is up..." Then Gibbs flips to the all Squad Frequency "I want you all to identify those ships, a lot of them have to be hoaxes!"

With RA Gibb's orders, the squadron breaks up into its two flights and heads out towards the 20 Mon Cals. "Fire Demons, you're going to have to hold off the enemy for at least 30mins, until the M/FRG Revenge is able to arrive with reinforcements" added Gibbs. "30mins and the Revenge will be picking up scraps!" said the esteemed Hood, "Let's go demons!"

About 5 clicks out from the Mon Cals the fighters started pouring out of them....a lot of fighters..."This is Hood, I'm going in to identify those Mon Cals, rest of you form up on Jedgar. Jedgar, you guys cover me" "Gotcha Hood" Replied CM George, who then took up on Jedgar's left flank.

Aboard the DGN's deck RA Gibbs looks out through the screens. "Well, fighters have deployed from almost all of those Mon Cal's...either they are actually there, or smaller ships are there deploying them..." The DGN shakes from hits taken from the Pride..."What is the Prides status and ours?" "They are almost down to no shields, we are about 25%" reported the deck officer....Gibb's looks back out of the viewscreens to see the Praetorian pilots begin to engage the Rebel Fighters...

-Submitted by: LCM Jedgar

CM Hood was mesmerized by the amount of firepower being targeted at Praetorian. Thousands upon thousands of turbolaser and laser blasts. But he was confident Praetorian would be able to hold there own, at least for awhile. What interested him at the moment was the ship in front of him.

"Lichtor V, this is Hood. The ship in front of me is definitely a Calamari Cruiser. My sensors are picking up another ship less than a kilometer away. Moving in at top speed and while I'm out of it, I'm going to see if I can shake them up a bit, over"

"Roger that, scare them to death," came Gibbs' reply over the comm.

Moving closer to the Calamari Cruiser he began the strafing run. He got so close, he could actually see the crewmembers his sensors were reading it as the Dauntless.. running for cover as one of his laser blasts blew away a viewport. This brought a grim smile to Hood's face. He knew they're were going to be a lot more deaths before the day was out.

RA Gibbs stood on the bridge of the Lichtor staring at the Tactical Map looking more determined than ever. He wished he could be out there once again in his TIE Praetor, but his place was here on the bridge. "Has Hood ID'd the other ship, yet," Gibbs asked his tactical officer. "No not yet, the Cruiser will stop blocking his sensors in 5 seconds," replied the tactical officer. Gibbs was still staring at the Tactical Map when the young tactical officer gasped. "Calm down, I see it. Two squads of X-wings moving in on us. Communications officer, recall Praetorian squad and tell them to protect the Lichtor V," ordered Gibbs without any emotion registering on his face. He turned to the Supreme Director, "Brad, I think it's about time you get in your shuttle and get ready to escape. We'll protect your retreat." "No, I'm staying here," replied Brad before he took his seat on the bridge. "Understood, sir," replied Gibbs allowing himself a smile. Brad would stay and fight with his ship if it was necessary and it was Gibbs job to make sure it wasn't necessary.

Hood had just cleared the Calamari Cruiser when he saw.....a freighter, but his sensors were reading a Calamari Cruiser. So it was a trick. Some of these ships were definitely not Mon Calamari Cruisers. But which ones, they couldn't be sure. Just then the call to pull back was received. Hood flipped on the comm, "You heard them man, pull back and protect the Lichtor V. Remember the Supreme Director is our highest priority. Also I have confirmation that not all of these ships are Calamari Cruisers." He got a round of acknowledgments from the squad.

-Submitted by: RA Gibbs

“Ok fire Demons, form up by flights, protect the DGN at ALL Costs” Hood says to his Squad, receiving replies from all....plus a new voice...”Pilot Identify” asks hood. “Greetings CM Hood, I am LCM Mauser, just arrived. I’m a new pilot to your squad!” Said Mauser. “That is right Hood, he was nearby luckily, guess he gets the Crash course” Adds Gibbs. “Ok, Mauser, your gonna be on Jedgar’s flight” “No problem” replies Mauser. The Praetorians plowed full ahead towards the DGN Lichtor, each flight taking targets. “This is Prae 9 (LCM Derk) I have positive ID on Rouge Squadron as an attacker” “Alright, this is Lead, don’t worry about dogfighting too much here, our objective is to take out any and all ships attacking the DGN, no time for showing off, get to it, and keep covering each other” Hood receives replies from all.

RA Gibbs watches the tactical screens, watching as the Praetorians battle the Rouges...”Seems as the Rouges are avoiding us and letting the other squad be attacked by the Praetorians” A couple of red dots (enemies) disappear off the screen. Gibbs notices a change in the Rouges formation...”Prae Leader, watch out, Rouges are entering fighting, they are just there to take you out, take the necessary precautions” “Copy DGN, all fighters, if the DGN is clear from attackers, commence attack on the Rouges, but keep an eye out for new attackers, and don’t lose your Wing man or you’ll be dead.”

Gibbs looks back at Brad “Now we’ll see how they do...”
-Submitted by: LCM Jedgar

“Ok All Pilots, heads up Rouges are inbound, and looking to take us out. Since we are outnumbered, stay close to the DGN for the extra firepower and to protect her. Jedgar form up on Derks wing with Mauser. Me and George will take them out one by one, you 3 cover us” Hood said.

With that the Praetorians went at it with the Rouges...within the first couple of minutes the Praetorians took the Rouges number down by 3. “Ok guys those were the rookies of the squad, the rest of ‘em are gonna be tough” reminded Hood. It took another 5 minutes for the Rouges to lose 2 more....1 from a collision with debris, the other shot by a Praetorian.

The Rouges, down to 7 members suddenly broke off and headed towards the Mon Cals’. “Good work Praetorian, lets keep the DGN protected, let the Rouges go.” Announced Hood.

The Praetorians picked off the remaining fighters attacking the DGN...then the sensors went crazy....”Commander!!!! A majority of the Mon Cals just turned into Freighters, they seemed to have gotten closer to the DGN while we were fighting the Rouges! They seem to be entering Ram Speed!!” screamed CM George.

RA Gibbs looked at the sensors “Damn!!” “All firepower on the incoming Freighters, destroy them!” Gibbs sank into his chair realizing that the Rouges were a diversion....
-Submitted by: LCM Jedgar

It was definitely one of those days thought LCM Derk Parchon as he skilfully slid into the wake of a freighter and started pumping bolt after bolt from his guns into the engine core of the craft. With a blast of light the core went critical and detonated sending a flash wave through the void. The blast caught an X-wing ripping it to shreds.

"Hey guys I think I got one" said Derk enthusiastically

"Nope Derk that wasn't there they go." Said Jedgar.

Two flights of X-wings jumped to hyperspace. While this happened a large out of control speeding freighter headed straight for the top of the DGN.

"Hey laugh at that fool people." Said Derk trying not to laugh "That’s the Rebel pilots wing."

"Shut it Derk that’s my ship you're talking about destroying." Came an angry RA Gibbs'

voice

"Okay sir I'll fix that. Come on guys lets show it praetorians teeth." And with that half of the squadron shot off after the freighter. With a long run in they locked on the new prototype torpedoes they had been given from ID supply. With a flash of green, 4 torpedoes shot out of their tubes. They quickly homed in on the freighter, with a flash of a greenish light they impacted. The freighter started to burn spinning as it went, then as if by magic pieces started to disappear with a slight flash the freighters main hold disappeared. By the time it reached the pilot cells only the large comm array was left. For some reason that part didn't vanish like the rest and struck the DGN. It pierced the shields like a javelin and hit the hull.

Commander Harji Palad of the new republic starfighter corps stared at his wrists he had just been through a pain amplifier. He was felling bad. Just behind him he heard a crunch he turned around just as a large spike flew into his cell he turned to run. With a sickening crunch the array tore into his body. Then the vacuum of space took hold and sucked the array almost back out again only one thing stopped in. Palad's body. He shuddered into consciousness he stared down at his body all that was there was a spike he was bleeding badly. Before he was about to pass out for the last time. The array disappeared into nothingness he was sucked out of the hole and into vacuum. He died in a implosion of organs that quickly froze.

"hey I got someone's guts on my canopy." Cried a revolted Mauser
-Submitted by: LCM Derk Pachron

The frieghter's were closing in fast on the DGN Lichtor and the brave pilots of Praetorian were doing their best to take those frieghters down.

RA Gibbs looks at the incoming frieghters, then looks back to SDIR Brad "You might want to buckle in this might get rough" Brad looks up "No need to worry, I have a couple of surprises left for those rebels." Gibbs looks at Brad, slightly confused "Ok then"

"Ok guys, concentrate your fire on one frieghter at a time, make sure they're dead" said Jedgar. Then Jedgar went to bank left and noticed a new ship exiting Hyperspace...."This is the INT Versklavung reporting for duty!" Immediately the dagger shaped ship's guns opened up on the smaller frieghtors, ripping them apart. The Rebels then decided that they should leave, but since the INT had its grav wells powered up they were stuck, and most of the people were captured.

Gibbs looks back to Brad "Looks like you got a lot of people to interrogate" Brad looks back up with a devilish smile and says "I know"

- Submitted by: LCM Jedgar

THE END

Imperial Navy Pilot Record Personal Background information (Imperial Security Bureau)

Name: Andrew Halcyon

Callsign: Chronos

Position/Rank: FM/SL

Current Assignment: Trooper in Squad 4 Charon Platoon

Sex (M/F): M

Race: human

Date of Birth: 12.24.84

Place of Birth (Please include Homeworld): Apotross

Marital Status (Single, Married, Divorced, Separated): Single

Family: Father, brother.

Social Status (Destitute, Poor, Well-to-do, Wealthy, Nobility): Nobility

Quote: "The object of war is not to die for your country but to make the other bastard die for his." --George Patton)"

Significant Events of Childhood & Adolescence:

His father was once the king of the main world in the Lanlo System, Apotross (his mother died bearing him). When the Rebels found out about the secluded system they went there.

The King being a good Imperial citizen sent his army to destroy them. After taking severe losses after the first battle. The King decided to lead the army himself. The King was killed.

The Rebels then stormed the palace. Only the young prince and a servant survived. From that moment on the young prince swore vengeance, and changed his name to Chronos.

Significant Events of Adulthood: Meet Emperor's Hammer recruiter on trip to Crousucant.

He realized Chronos had the ability to use the force, and convinced him to join the Hammer's Fist and the Emperor's Hammer.

Alignment & Attitude: All Rebels should die.

Former Occupations (if any): Soldier, and Jedi

Hobbies: Martial Arts, Flying, and Reading

Tragedies: His family was murdered and he lost his identity.

Phobias & Allergies: None

Personal views of the Empire (and Emperor's Hammer): The Emperor's Hammer is the best way to destroy the New Republic, just like they destroyed his kingdom.

Reason for applying to the Emperor's Hammer Elite Strike Fleet: To kill as many Rebels as possible.

Other comments or information (optional): None

I hereby confirm that the above information is legitimate and accurate to the best of my knowledge.

Signature:

FM/SL Chronos/Rho 1-3/Wing II/SSSD Sovereign-[TIE]

Date: 4.16.99

A Conflict of Loyalties

Prologue

<NETFEED/NEWS>DEFENCE CRUMBLES ON ARGIMILIAR II AS TIE CORPS WITHDRAWS.

VIDEO: Y-Wing Fighter Bombers, unopposed, release Proton Bombs on Hammer's Fist garrison defenders. Camera view is rocked by explosions. a building collapses in flames and Stormtroopers dive for cover as X-Wings strafe landing fields. In the foreground, a Trooper slings his blaster rifle to help a badly wounded TIE Corps Officer crawl to cover...

VOICEOVER: It's all over for the defenders of Argimiliar II. Rebel Forces raised the flag

of the so-called "New Republic" over the colony at sunset yesterday, after almost a week of bitter fighting, both in orbit and on the surface. Early statistics estimate Hammer's Fist losses at over 85% of defenders killed or captured, but it was the failure of the TIE Corps to break the blockade which sealed the fate of the Imperial Battalion on the surface. With the loss of all three escort Frigates and faced by a vastly superior enemy force, the ISD Challenge was forced to retreat in order to save the ship from destruction or capture. It's well acknowledged that the TIE Corps can ill-afford to lose a ship as valuable as an Imperial II Class Star Destroyer, but bitter voices in the Ground Forces are asking just how valuable High Command deems a whole battalion of crack Stormtroopers? These and other questions will doubtless be asked at the Command Level Inquiry which has already been convened to investigate just what exactly went so wrong at the fiasco that was Argimiliar II.

VIDEO: Montage of three battle scarred freighters surrounded by support vessels on an Aurora Prime landing apron. Streams of wounded Stormtroopers and civilians are ferried from the ships to waiting paramedics.

REPORTER: This was the scene at the Palpatine Memorial Starport today as the sole survivors of the Battle of Argimiliar arrived on Aurora Prime. From an original group of seven civilian vessels which attempted to break the Rebel Blockade, only three escaped. Their cargo - critically wounded soldiers and civilians, too ill to fight or defend themselves, many of whom died in the two day long transit from the battle zone.

VIDEO: A middle aged spacer sits exhausted at the boarding ramp of a light freighter, blood soaking his arms to the elbow. At his feet, a body is covered in a tarpaulin, the white-booted feet of an Imperial Stormtrooper protrude from underneath the cover. The tarpaulin is soaked in blood. Teams of medics rush past the boarding ramp shouting instructions to FX-7 Medical Droids. The spacer wears the cap of an officer in the TIE Corps, but with that one exception he is dressed exclusively in civilian clothing.

REPORTER: Retired TIE Corps officer Kyle Kessler was the captain of one such freighter - the Corel's Dream." Colonel Kessler, how did you become involved in the evacuation of the wounded from Argimiliar II?

VIDEO: The spacer looks up at the camera slowly and shrugs. "I was delivering electronic components for the factory they were building to supply themselves with homegrown machine tools. I dropped out of hyperspace just ahead of the Reb assault fleet. Had to ditch my cargo in a hurry and tear my engines up getting planetside before the A-Wings caught up with me..." He shakes his head, dazed. "We were all stuck down there through the bombardment...went on for days. Once the Fleet retreated, we knew there was no way we were getting relieved early enough for it to make a difference. A bunch of us had hidden our ships under cover of the jungle to the east of the colony, so we offered General Donner the chance of getting his most badly wounded offworld before the Reb Commandos had us encircled. He gave us his four remaining TIE Interceptors for cover, but it didn't make much difference, out of the seven cargo ships that launched, three didn't even make it into orbit. Another was disabled and boarded before we could all jump out, but the TIE boys stopped the Y-Wings long enough to let the rest of us get the wounded out. Last I saw there were around a dozen X-Wings closing on those boys, but they couldn't come with us - no hyperdrive, see. I don't know if they made it back planetside in one piece..."

VIDEO: Graffiti-daubed wall bearing the painted slogan: "Traitors!" adorns the perimeter wall of TIE Corps Fleet Headquarters on Aurora Prime.< CUT> Off duty TIE Corps pilots pelted by angry crowd as Hammers Fist Trooper patrols watch without action.

VOICEOVER: Whatever the outcome, it is certain that despite the bravery of a handful of private citizens, the Battle of Argimiliar II has been an unmitigated disaster for the forces of the Emperor's Hammer as a whole, and a public relations humiliation for the TIE Corps in particular. Divisions have been sown here that even a Command Enquiry may be too late to

heal. The Gold Wings of the TIE Corps were once a badge of honour in the Emperor's Hammer's domains. Now, opinion has it that the Corps should hang its head in shame in over what many are coming to call "The Betrayal at Argimiliar."

ONE.

The bar was called "The Weary Trooper." It was a favourite of off-duty Stormtroopers stationed at the Aurora Prime Capitol District. The owner and barkeeper was Curzon; a retired Master Sergeant who made it his business to ensure that Troopers were always welcome and made to feel at home. The decor wasn't anything to write home about, more art militaire than art nouveau, but it suited his patrons and that suited him. Lights were kept low, regimental mascots and plaques covered what little drab olive paint showed beneath the mass of battle honours and Nominal Rolls of fallen comrades in arms. Pictures of grinning youths in pristine fatigues shoulder to shoulder with stills of grizzled veterans in battle - scarred armour holding aloft defiant Company Colours. It was a soldier's bar, with a soldier's sense of occasion and circumstance. Rough, no-nonsense; on occasion melancholy, for every soldier has an old comrade in whose memory it is sometimes necessary to raise a glass in salute.

There were a lot of glasses being raised in The Weary Trooper today. Curzon watched the regulars with a wary eye. Soldiers are a curious lot if you don't know them. A bar full of drunken, raucous soldiers isn't the disaster waiting to happen that most civilians assume it is. Unless the civilian in question tries to join in, of course, in which case he should have had the sense to know better. But a bar full of soldiers steadily drinking can be very dangerous, especially if they're going about it quietly and purposefully. Curzon was worried. It was very quiet today, but the bar wasn't empty. It wasn't a case of if trouble was going to start, it was a case of where and when. He flicked a glance at the window table. There. That was where it was going to start. Ordinarily, Curzon would have politely suggested that it was time for the newcomers to leave, but not today. Not today of all days, and especially not these newcomers. His own regulars would cut his throat if he tried to suggest it. One way or another, however, someone was going to take exception to the TIE Corps cap that the oldest of the three was wearing, and when they did, it was going to get ugly.

Kessler grunted as Kerrigan nudged him in the ribs a second time. With the minimum of effort he looked over at the lean spacer and raised an eyebrow.

"Refill?" Kerrigan slurred, pointing at the empty glasses. Kessler grunted in the affirmative and kicked at the slumped figure snoring in a puddle of brandy at the other side of the table.

"I think Van Basten's had enough" he observed.

"Like crap he has. I'll get him another, he can finish it later" Kerrigan argued. With some effort, he raised himself to his feet and walked to the bar. Curzon raised three fingers and Kerrigan nodded in assent. "How much credit we got left?" he enquired of the barkeeper.

"You men can keep drinking all night as far as this lot are concerned" Curzon answered. "After what you three did today getting those boys out of that hell-hole you'll be hard pressed to find a Trooper in this sector who wouldn't buy you a drink." Curzon was careful to keep his voice and manner steady. "However, these guys tend to get a little surly when they've had a few, and your friend over there..." a nod in the direction of Kessler "...is wearing a cap that isn't likely to make him very popular once these guys have had enough to

drink.” He carefully placed the last drink on Kerrigan’s tray. “Someone might get themselves the notion that he thinks he’s being funny, if you know what I mean.”

Kerrigan considered Curzon’s advice. “Look, I’ll ask him, but you don’t know what he’s like.” He shrugged apologetically.

Curzon nodded. “Fair enough. But I know what this lot are like.” He resumed polishing glasses. “Don’t say you weren’t warned, and you’d better pick a side quick when it happens, because these boys don’t give as much warning as I do.”

Kerrigan picked up the tray with the exaggerated care that only the truly drunk possess and slowly made his way back to the table. Picking up his first glass, he raised it in salute.

“To the boys of...which one are we up to?” he asked of the crowd in general.

“Third Platoon, B Company” someone offered.

Kerrigan shrugged. “I’ll drink to that.” He downed the drink and slammed the glass upside down on the table, a motion that was repeated around the bar. Several regulars stood to refresh their drinks. It was then that Kessler did it. In retrospect, Kerrigan should have seen it coming, but in all fairness, it wouldn’t have made much difference. Kessler had that dangerous look in his eye again, and Kerrigan knew from experience that when he brooded on something you only had one choice, pick your side or walk out.

“Here’s to the memory of Lieutenant Commander Horn, Lieutenant Franks, Lieutenant Carlyle and Sublieutenant Pellaeon; Arbiter Squadron, Argimiliar Garrison. Unsung heroes of the escape from Argimiliar and four of the TIE Corps’ finest. They gave their lives so that others might live.” Kestrel’s gaze wandered from table to table, his glass raised. Patrons at the bar froze, the tension in the air ratted up half a dozen levels.

“Oh shit.” Kerrigan wondered if he could make it to the door in time with Van Basten over his shoulder. He doubted it. Curzon slowly reached under the counter for the stunstave he kept there.

“What?” asked Kessler of the deadly quiet room. “No-one want to drink to the memory of four TIE Corps officers who volunteered for a one-way trip to try to save the asses of a bunch of groundpounders?” A couple of patrons rose to their feet, their expressions indecipherable.

“Here it comes” thought Curzon, wondering why it was taking the duty watch at the garrison across the plaza so long to respond to the silent alarm he’d just triggered.

“Surely the brave men of the Hammer’s Fist will drink with me to the memory of Arbiter Squadron? Hell, they lost sixty percent of their men on the first damn day of fighting trying to stop those bombardments and they still volunteered to fly cover for us even when the garrison troopers were spitting on their boots every time they ran past to scramble against the latest bomber raid.” Kessler’s arm wavered, his glass trembled. “Ah well... guess I’ll drink alone then.” He drained his glass and set it down in one swallow, the crack of glass hitting table ringing about the bar like a gunshot. Looking around defiantly, he reached for another drink. “I guess Arbiter Squadron goes unremembered then? Okay, maybe you’ll drink to the memory of the crews of the Frigates Emperor’s Fury, Tribune, and Hammer’s Vengeance then?”

“That’s enough, Kess” Kerrigan tried to force Kessler’s arm down and succeeded only in spilling some of his drink, but it was too late. Four troopers were pushing their way through the silent crowd towards their table. Kessler seemed oblivious to the threat. He contemplated the spilled alcohol seeping into the floor and shrugged. “Oh well, I suppose only the lice get to drink to their memory.”

The first trooper squared himself off in front of their table and looked Kessler up and down. “Word has it you boys did the Legion a proud service today, for that you get some slack.” He leaned down and brought himself face to face with Kessler’s eyes. “But don’t push your luck, flyboy.” He leaned back, crossing his arms. “And as for your choice of headgear, I reckon it’s a little inappropriate. I’d suggest you get rid of it. Now.”

Kessler smiled and pushed his TIE Corps forage cap further back on his head. “And who’s going to make me, you steroid-sucking, sorry-assed, stack of horseshi...”

<NETFEED/NEWS>FLEET ADMIRAL KAWOLSKI AUTHORISES RECALL OF ALL TIE CORPS RESERVISTS TO ACTIVE DUTY.

VIDEO: Fleet Admiral Alan Kawolski, TIE Corps Commander, stands at lectern reading from a prepared statement at Fleet Command Headquarters.

Fleet Admiral Kawolski: “...and until such time that the Fleet Academy can make good the training shortfall in manned strength on the rosters of the Battle Groups, a total recall of all trained Pilots, Flight and Starship crews is in force. All nominated personnel should report to their nearest TIE Corps office for their postings and uniform issue. Rest assured, the failure of the Fleet to break the blockade at Argimiliar will not go unavenged, but Fleet’s priority has always been, and will always remain, the safeguarding of Aurora Prime and the Core Colonies first, and outlying colonies and outposts second...”

VOICEOVER: Despite demands for his resignation and accusations of treachery within the TIE Corps, Fleet Admiral Kawolski remains adamant that all that could possibly have been done, was done to save the colony at Argimiliar II. Dismissing the idea that the TIE Corps had betrayed the Hammer’s Fist Legion, he cited chronic undermanning at Squadron and Battle Group level, as well as overwhelming Rebel numerical superiority and the Aggressor Strike Fleet’s continued inability to repel Rebel incursions throughout the Minos Cluster as a whole. Showing a rare hint of divisions within the Command Staff, Kawolski seemed to hint that he felt responsibility for the Betrayal at Argimiliar should lie with the EH Directorate, rather than with Fleet.

Fleet Admiral Kawolski: “The colonisation of the Argimiliar system was always deemed risky in the view of this Fleet Administration. The system was too close to the front lines and too difficult to effectively resupply and patrol. Any Rebellion sponsored incursions would always have been extremely difficult to repel in the first six months of any colony that deep within the Minos Cluster and that close to the Rebel border. Until such time as a System Defence Platform can be built, the only alternative defence in this kind of situation would be to permanently station an ISD insystem. <Uproar from assembled reporters. FA Kawolski raises a hand.> That proposal was completely unacceptable to Fleet, and goes against all our established doctrine. We simply do not have the ships to maintain that level of security, let alone the crews; and in any case, as events have shown, even the arrival of the ISD Challenge and her support ships was insufficient to reverse the situation at Argimiliar. The Directorate gambled, despite grave TIE Corps reservations, that the Argimilian Colony would remain unobserved or untroubled by the Rebellion long enough to fortify to a self - sufficient level. We lost that gamble, and General Donner’s 3rd Battalion of the First Auroran Shock Legion paid for that mistake with their lives...<Increased uproar from assembled press, Kawolski raises his voice> ... As did the crews of the TIE Corps Frigates Emperor’s Fury, Hammer’s Vengeance and Tribune!”

VIDEO: Hammer’s Fist Veterans Association march in protest outside Fleet Headquarters. Focus on banner bearing the slogan: “FIST DOES THE DYING, CORPS JUST DOES THE FLYING” Imperial Naval Troopers have assumed responsibility for policing the march. The regular Stormtrooper patrols are conspicuous by their absence.

VOICEOVER: Members of the Hammer’s Fist Veterans Association today staged a protest march outside Fleet Headquarters. It is clear that many feel that the TIE Corps should have done more to save the troops stranded on Argimiliar. It is equally clear that TIE Corps Headquarters no longer feels it’s security should be entrusted to the men of the Legion, as evidenced by the Fleet’s own Imperial Naval Troops which have this afternoon taken over

security duties at all Fleet facilities from the Stormtroops who until today were responsible for guarding all key Emperor's Hammer military installations. An official communiqué was recently released by Fleet, claiming the changeover of security responsibilities was due to Hammer's Fist troops being recalled for redeployment to more vulnerable areas of responsibility. Prefect Thrawn of the Hammer's Fist was unavailable for comment at the time of going to press.

Related Articles: ISD Challenge undergoes repairs. EH Directorate Colonisation Programme under review?

Kessler nursed his bruised eye and sore head gingerly. His head hurt. A lot. Actually, the state of his head wasn't the least of his problems. He'd lost his cap, too.

Kerrigan had been released from the E.R half an hour ago, while Kessler was still waiting for minor surgery. He had no idea what had happened to Van Basten, neither did he care. They were all men thrown together by circumstance, just dumb and unlucky enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time with ships that were theoretically capable of breaking the blockade. He touched his forehead and winced, he was fairly certain he hadn't gotten any prettier after that Staff Sergeant had danced on his face. He shook his head and sagged lower on the E.R waiting room bench. There was a news report running on the holo, something about blame for the disaster being apportioned? He squinted, fairly sure he knew the face onscreen..."Fleet Admiral Kawolski? Wasn't he a Vice Admiral last time we spoke?" With a sigh of resignation, he admitted to himself that perhaps he hadn't been keeping up with current events as much as he should. He ignored the rest of the report, waiting for someone to bring him some painkillers. That damn patrol had taken it's time breaking up the fight...

The doors to the E. R burst open with a startlingly loud crash and a gurney was rushed in bearing another victim of the evenings' festivities. Kessler struggled to his feet, it was about time he made his way home. He needed some sleep.

The Corel's Dream lay deserted on the landing apron. The flurry of activity that had consumed her and her two sisters earlier in the day had long since subsided. A light was on in the cockpit of the Far Trader. He assumed Kerrigan had made it back in more or less one piece and was sleeping off his battle wounds. Van Basten's Lady Alyssa appeared battened down tight. Not his problem.

The Corel's Dream was a standard YT-1300, built on Aurora under licence from Corellian Engineering. Reliable, reasonably fast, but most importantly, cheap. There were millions of these ships plying the space lanes throughout the galaxy. Favourites of smugglers due to their modular component design, it was relatively easy to upgrade them. Corel's Dream was about as standard as they came, however. He didn't have the money or the inclination to go tooling up some hot-rod of a ship these days. A retired TIE Corps Colonel's pension didn't stretch very far, and for a man who'd spent his entire adult life in the cockpits of various military vessels, life on Aurora Prime was just too...tame. So Kessler had bought a cheap ship and worked out a few reasonably profitable, safe trading routes. He enjoyed the change of pace and the chance to visit cultures without having to look at them from the wrong end of a targeting scope for a change. Gradually, he lost touch with his comrades in the Corps and his extended family. It had been six months since he'd bothered answering his mail. If pressed for a reason, he'd probably say he never had the time to get around to it, but the truth was he didn't have an answer. Since retiring from active service as the Wing Commander of Wing X on the ISD Challenge, he'd begun to find it too much effort to keep acquaintances going with men and women still in the Corps. Their respective lives were just too different now. Kessler had taken the path of least resistance and simply let his past fall by the

wayside.

Reaching the cockpit, he slumped into the pilot's station and cradled his chin in one hand. His head still hurt, but his major problem was lack of sleep. Cursing, he noticed an insistent red light on the Comms Array demanding his attention. It was a recorded message from starport control. Move your ship to the civilian quarter of the port area by midday tomorrow. You are reminded that this is a military installation. Your co-operation etc, etc. Some things never changed. He erased the message and sighed, wondering how he was going to be able to afford the docking bay rental. He closed his eyes, that was tomorrow's problem. Tomorrow was another day.

Someone's insistent banging on the boarding ramp hatch was what awoke him. The second thing he noticed was the "Incoming Message" alert on the Comms Array. Groaning, he wiped the sleep away and winced as he touched his injured eye, forgotten in the just-woken funk.

"Alright already" he mumbled, making his way aft to the hatch. He triggered the lock release and peered down the ramp into the bright sunlight outside. Two Navy Troopers were waiting impatiently below.

"Captain Kessler? Owner of the Corel's Dream? Registration D223476C?"

Kessler sighed. "Do you have a point, son?" He'd never been a morning person. Catch him late at night and he was your kind of man, but anytime in the first two hours after he'd risen and especially before he'd had at least his first two mugs of java, and you were guaranteed not to catch him at his most receptive.

"Captain Kessler, the Tower has been trying to contact you for half an hour. You're overdue raising ship. We have military transports queued to use this facility. You are required to raise ship and relocate to..."

Kessler checked his watch. It was half past twelve. Shit. He triggered the ramp closed, ignoring the rest of the demand and cutting off the indignant squeal of outrage from the stunned Trooper. "Yeah, yeah, yeah" he muttered as he groped his way back to the cockpit. "And that's Colonel Kessler..." Firing up the thrusters, he began switching systems online. He rubbed at the cramp his neck had developed from sleeping in the cockpit acceleration seat as he completed the last of his pre-flight checks. With a slight lurch, Corel's Dream became airborne. He kept her in the hover for a second as he fumbled with the comms headset, then flicked to the Tower Control frequency and requested clearance to lift. An officious sounding controller cleared him and wished him a slightly too rehearsed "good day", then he slowly pulled her about and gained a little height, trying to get his bearings and locate the Commercial Port Control's nav beacon. Once locked on, he requested a docking bay. Within minutes, he was cleared and landed in the cheapest place he could get. Once safely powered down, he made himself a pot of java and returned to the flight seat to check his mail.

There were three messages, according to the computer. He settled back into the seat and sipped at the scalding hot liquid. "Play" he ordered.

"Captain Kessler of the Auroran registered trader Corel's Dream, D223476C. You have been fined C500 for contravention of Port Administration article 0312.4: Failure to follow instructions from Tower Control; and article 1734.1: Unauthorised Use of Military Landing Facilities. This fine must be paid within seven days or your license will be suspended and your assets may be repossessed to recover any legal costs..."

"Erase. Play next." Assholes.

"Uncle Kyle? Hi. This is Risua." Kessler's eyebrow raised in surprise. He never admitted it, but he was always secretly pleased when his niece sent him one of her infrequent messages. It had been a long time since he'd replied to one, but Risua Darkfire Cantor never

gave up on him, a fact which he was both grateful for and which he knew he didn't deserve.

"Well I figure I missed your birthday, wherever you are these days, but Happy Birthday anyway. Hope you had a good one! How old are you now anyway? Fifty? Sixty?" He laughed. Cheeky kid....I'm forty four and she knows it!

"Well I don't have a lot of news to tell you that you probably didn't already know just from watching the news, but here goes. Dad made Admiral at last, he's taken command of the Aggressor Strike Force, uhh, I guess that was what used to be the Aggressor Wing when you were second in command there. Whatever, anyway, he's real busy of course, so we don't see as much of each other as we'd like, but you know how it goes I guess. Same with Uncle Piatt, did you know he made full Admiral? He's in charge of the Battle Groups, which is basically what he's always wanted, so we're all happy for him. Of course, that means I get to see my second favourite Uncle almost as little as my favourite Uncle, which brings me to point of my message. I know you're still alive Uncle Kyle. I saw you on the news last night. I...I know you're here on Aurora this time, and...well, I'd like to see you again if I could. I guess you'll be here if you can make it. You know my address, I still live in the same place."

Kessler's gaze dropped from the Comms Array. Risua had been his favourite relative. For all the wrong reasons. She was bright, cheerful without being perky, a beautiful girl grown into a fine young woman, the smartest of all the Cantors by far; but there was one problem with Risua that caused Kessler to find her company painful on occasion. She reminded him at times too much of her Aunt Kayta, and the memory of that love could still cause grief even twenty years after her loss.

"I miss you, Uncle Kyle. Please come. Goodbye."

He cleared his throat abruptly. With the exception of the patient beep of the Comms Array reminding him that he still had one message cued, the cockpit was silent.

"Save message, store in "Family". Play next."

"Colonel Kyle Cantor Kessler, service number TC-WCR1011..." He began to pay attention. It had been a long time since anyone had bothered to get his name and rank correct.

"As a registered member of the Fleet Reserve Corps, you are ordered to report to your nearest TIE Corps Office for compulsory re-enlistment within two standard days of reception of this recall message. Upon presenting yourself at such offices you can expect to be immediately reassigned to active service pending a short refresher course of no more than one week's duration. Failure to comply with the contents of this message will be construed as a deliberate act of desertion, punishable by the full weight of military law, with all the consequences which that entails."

All in all, it was turning out to be a pretty shitty week.

It was later that same night when he ran into Kerrigan again. The bar was called Safe Landings. He hated the name, but it was a spacer's bar and he knew he could blend in there. Kerrigan took the seat at the bar next to him and waited for him to speak. Kessler glanced over at his one-time partner and ordered another pair of drinks. They both waited patiently, listening to the jukebox play some tuneless popular melody while the barman got their order, then raised their glasses and drank.

"You look pretty" Kerrigan observed.

"Your mother thought so" Kessler shot back.

Kerrigan laughed good naturedly. "Isn't it about time you learned a new joke, Kess?"

"I'm too old to learn a new joke," Kessler grunted back. "Besides, you're too dumb to

understand them anyway.”

“Kess, you are an old joke, and you’re the only one who doesn’t get it.” The two raised their glasses again, the same old ritual of greeting complete.

“So,” Kerrigan continued. “You got your recall orders yet?”

“Yep.”

Kerrigan waited. “So?”

Kessler took another pull of his beer. “So what?”

“Don’t give me a hard time, Kess. When are you reporting for duty, and what are you doing with the Dream? I could give you a good price for her. I’ve been looking for a cheap ship to expand my line.”

Kessler leaned back in his chair in mock surprise. “Since when have you been rich enough to afford to run two ships?”

“There’s a lot of stuff about me you don’t know you ugly old fighter jock, and answer the bloody question.” Kerrigan eyed him suspiciously. “You’re not, are you? You’re not going to report in at all are you?”

“What I do with my life is my business, Kerrigan, and keep your voice down in here goddamn it!”

Kerrigan raised his hands in a gesture of conciliation. “Okay, Kess, but can you be serious? The Corps will have your ass in a sling before you can say “Juri Juice!” Besides, the way you keep boring everyone with your old war stories I’d have thought you’d have jumped at the chance to get back in the saddle...” Kerrigan hunched himself over his beer in a fair imitation of Kessler’s traditional drinking pose. “When I was in the TIE Corps...”

Kessler threw a mock punch at the younger spacer. Kerrigan avoided it easily, but stopped laughing at the troubled look on Kessler’s face. For all his feigned levity, Kessler seemed serious.

“Shit, Kess...why?”

Kessler seemed to struggle for a response for a while, then his shoulders slumped in defeat. “I don’t know Kerry. It’s just not the same Corps I retired from anymore.”

The two men nursed their beers silently for a few minutes. Kerrigan was the first to speak..

“It’s the Argimilian thing isn’t it?”

Kessler paused for a long while before answering. “I don’t know, Kerry. It’s a lot of things, I guess, but one thing I do know - when I was in command of Wing X, we would never have left those men to die on that godforsaken rock. We’d have found a way to save them, somehow.” He raised his glass to his lips, then set it down again without drinking. “It’s just not the same anymore. I just belong in a different day and age.” He cracked a humourless grin. “I guess it’s true what you young punks all say about me. I am getting too old for this shit.”

Kerrigan signalled the barman for another round. “Well, I’m not about to try to tell you how to run your life, but you gotta realise that you can’t stay in Hammer space with a Desertion Notice over your head. The Bounty Hunters Guild will track you down, and I mean sooner rather than later.” Kessler nodded. “So what’s your plan?”

“It’s a big galaxy.”

Kerrigan’s eyes widened. “You mean you’re making for New Republic space? You’ve got some balls, Colonel Kessler. You know what they do when they catch Imps over there? Have you heard the word “spy”? They still execute them in this day and age.”

“Yeah, well, first of all, that’s Rebel space, not “New Republic”, and secondly, I’m happy to take that chance.” He took a long pull of his fresh beer. “But that’s not exactly what I mean to do, and I might need some help doing it.” He set the glass down and turned to face Kerrigan squarely. “You still have contacts who can set me up with false ID codes and papers?”

Kerrigan grew interested. "Maybe, but it'll cost you."

"I'll find the money, that's my problem. I also need a partner with a fair amount of storage space for a little high risk, low profit enterprise I've been thinking about. I ain't kidding you, Kerry, it'll be dangerous."

Kerrigan gave him a long hard stare. "Kess, what exactly are you proposing?"

"I'm an Imperial Officer, Kerry. I always have been, but there's something I need to do back on Argimiliar II before I can lay my past behind me."

Kerrigan's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Kess, you simply cannot be serious."

"I need to find out what happened to the men we left there. Once I've done that, I can get on with my life, wherever that may take me, but I need to know what happened. You with me?"

Kerrigan looked uncertain. He was a businessman after all. "Kess, running Imperial licensed ships into Reb territory isn't exactly good business sense."

"Don't give me that crap, Kerry. I know you do a little smuggling on the side, you already admitted you could fix me up with fake ID. Besides," he lowered his voice. "I know you don't feel any better about what happened than I do."

"Maybe so, Kess, but I prefer to deal with my regrets from the right side of a prison stockade. You'll have to prick more than my conscience if you want to get me interested."

Kessler set down his glass on the bar. "Okay, I figured it might take more than my relying on your spirit of human compassion. If I don't make it out, you can have Corel's Dream. I'll sign my ownership papers over to you and in the event that I drop the ball somewhere along the line, she's yours. Lock, stock and barrel. Deal?"

Kerrigan thought about it for a while, but not for too long. "Deal."

"Okay," said Kessler. "But you get to front the money for the fake ID's and transponder codes." He grinned. "I'm out of cash. That cargo I dumped when we got jumped by that Reb blockade on the way in was all the collateral I had."

"Asshole."

TWO

<NETFEED/NEWS>HAMMER'S FIST DEPENDENCY ON TIE CORPS - A RETROSPECTIVE VIEW

VIDEO: The ISD Grey Wolf and VSD Aggressor patrol an un-named system deep in the Minos Cluster. TIE Avengers make regular sweeps past the camera, vigilant for trouble.<CUT> Hammer's Fist Stormtroopers file into an Assault Shuttle, fully equipped for battle. In the background, other shuttles lift off and exit the docking bay<CUT> On the surface of a nameless world, Navy Flight Controllers co-ordinate Shuttle landings from a hastily constructed command post. Stormtroopers charge from the ramps of newly arrived ships as distant turbolaser blasts shake the ground.

VOICEOVER: Two short years ago, the Hammer's Fist was a truly independent fighting force in every sense of the word. Each Stormtrooper was dropped into battle from Hammer's Fist Assault Shuttles or Landing Barges, carried by Hammer's Fist Dreadnoughts. Fleet involvement with Fist Operations was limited to escorting Hammer's Fist assault fleets and providing supporting fire or fighter cover wherever needed. All of that changed with the adoption of Command Directive 135, part of the Annual Defence Review, which called for tighter interoperability within all arms of the Emperor's Hammer military forces. In essence, the Directive called for each Arm of the Hammer's forces to look to its own practices and evaluate how best to evolve its procedures and tactics to conform to the new Doctrine of "Joint" Operations.

Simple on paper, but as far as the Hammer's Fist was concerned, devastating in

practice. The direct result of Directive 135 was that the Hammer's Fist was stripped of its Assault Fleets and became completely reliant on the ships of the TIE Corps for mobility, firepower and support. In defence of the decision to suborn Fist Operations within Fleet Command, it must be acknowledged that the ships consisting of the Hammer's Fist Assault Fleet were rapidly coming to the end of their operational lifespan in any case. The Fist retained autonomous control over any non-capital class vessels in its inventory, all others were turned over to the TIE Corps. Those few ships which were considered to have any remaining operational use were subsumed within the Fleet structure, those which didn't, such as the ageing Dreadnought class, were mothballed. It cannot be denied that Directive 135 brought certain advantages as far as Fist operations were concerned. Having the support of Imperial Class Star Destroyers with their full complement of TIE Squadrons on combat operations was a luxury rarely experienced by Hammer's Fist veterans. However, there were some who predicted that the loss of Fist autonomy and the reliance on Fleet for support was a recipe for disaster. TIE Corps' most valued resource, it is generally acknowledged, are its Star Destroyers. In almost every situation in which there has existed a good chance that Fleet might lose one of its superships to enemy action, Fleet has turned and run. As far as Fleet Command is concerned, an ISD is simply too valuable to lose. The Hammer's Fist has a radically different philosophy. Its single most valuable resource has always been its troops. While the Fist was responsible for the running of its own operations, this single overriding factor has always been the linchpin of Fist operational doctrine. Put Fleet into the situation where it has to choose between the certainty of losing an entire battalion of Stormtroopers or the possibility of losing an ISD, and Fleet will sacrifice the troops every time. Fleet Command hotly denies this allegation, although recent events on Argimiliar II would seem to suggest otherwise. Whatever the truth of the matter, it is certain that while outwardly, Hammer's Fist Command present a unified public front with TIE Corps Command, inwardly, there can be few within the Hammer's Fist who trust Fleet to look after their men with the respect and honour which they feel they require to function effectively as a "Joint" fighting force. The implications of this could have long-term consequences for all future Emperor's Hammer Operations...

The navcomputer proximity alarm went off right on schedule and Kessler readied himself for sublight speed. He flicked the brand new and highly illegal transponder code modulator from standby to active and grasped the control surfaces as realspace coalesced about the cockpit. To external inspection, the Corel's Dream was the Coruscant registered YT-1300 freighter Cardshark. He and Kerrigan had been over the plan in minute detail countless times. It was common knowledge that the Rebellion's Medical Support Frigate Redemption had been critically damaged during the orbital battle over Argimiliar II. The remaining two MC-80 Class Cruisers and four Frigates, two of which were themselves heavily damaged during the brief battle with the ISD Challenge, would have been badly stretched to provide medical cover for all the combatants. Kessler and Kerrigan were gambling that neither a relief medical ship would have had time to be diverted to the battlezone, nor that the wounded and prisoners would have been evacuated from the planet yet. They were going in as profiteers, hoping to make a killing from selling emergency medical supplies, bacta and field hospitals to the Rebel forces on the surface. Once they'd gotten clearance to land, they hoped to play it by ear. With a great deal of luck, the Rebellion would be too busy fortifying and preparing for possible Imperial counterattack to worry about two civilians snooping around any prison stockades. With a great deal of luck. The plan had holes you could drive a Death Star through, but it was the best Kessler could come up with at short notice.

Kessler ran a short range sensor sweep of surrounding space. Kerrigan's Far Trader dropped out of hyperspace two clicks to starboard. There were no Rebel ships that his limited sensors could detect within scan range. All going to plan so far.

He'd purposely dropped out of hyperspace far enough from the planet to be out of immediate sensor range of any ships in orbit, but the massive flare of x-rays generated by their exit from hyperspace would have been detected by now; there were no outlying planets in the Argimiliar system behind which they could mask their exit flares. Rebel sensor ops would be reporting their presence and fighter patrols would be vectoring to intercept right now. As far as the Rebel Task Force commander was aware, their hyperspace exit signatures could just as easily have belonged to two flight groups of Imperial Missileboats as to a couple of itinerant black market freelancers. There was no sense in giving the Rebs any reason to get any more twitchy on their trigger fingers than they already had reason to be, but it was necessary to arrive as far away from the Reb Task Force as possible, in order to allow themselves time to get the hell out, just in case everything went belly up early on. He spoke briefly to Kerrigan on short range UHF. "Going public, Kerry?"

"Roger that, Kess. Stick to plan and we'll be okay."

He took a deep breath. "New Republic Task Force, this is Captain Coolidge of the freighter Cardshark, travelling in convoy with the freighter Shamrock. We are carrying medical supplies and request permission to approach, over."

IFF transponders worked on a relatively simple principle. A signal was sent to the ship's transponder on a frequency agreed by interstellar law, querying the identity of the ship being scanned. The transponder automatically replied with a transmission containing registration details. This was sufficient to identify any civilian vessel. Military transponders operated on secret frequencies that were changed on a daily basis, however. The signals were also encoded, and the transponders wouldn't reply to any signal unless they received the correct coded query on whichever frequency was being used at that particular time. Therefore, if a military ship queried your transponder and it didn't get any reply, civilian or military - you were enemy until proven otherwise. Hence IFF - Identify Friend or Foe. Kessler and Kerrigan's ships were transmitting on the civilian wavelength as usual, the only difference this time was that they weren't transmitting the correct data. Their code modulators were supplying false registration details to the Alliance picket ships. That would be enough to get their foot in the door, but you could guarantee that this sort of trick had been tried countless times before, by pirates, smugglers and covert military operatives. Simply relying on their fake IFF codes wouldn't be enough to get them in, they'd have to be boarded and searched first. At least, Kessler was praying they'd be boarded and searched. That would at least indicate that the Rebel commander down there needed the supplies they were carrying badly enough to agree to let them in. If they'd been resupplied by their own side already, Kessler's plan was screwed. If they'd already moved any Hammer's Fist prisoners offworld, Kessler's plan was screwed. If the Rebel commander didn't need any medical supplies, Kessler's plan was screwed. Hell, if the Reb commander was just feeling plain suspicious today, Kessler's plan was screwed. All in all, he was depending on a lot of good fortune to even get as far as Argimiliar orbit today.

"Freighters Cardshark and Shamrock. This is New Republic warship Drakensberg. Maintain your current course and speed and standby to be boarded. Ensure you have your cargo manifest, bill of lading and registration documentation ready for inspection."

A relieved grin cracked Kessler's weathered face. They'd taken the bait. "Roger that Drakensberg. Standing by for further instructions."

Kessler waited nervously for the airlock to cycle. His DL-44 blaster lay holstered in his gunbelt, slung over his shoulder; his arms raised, palms open, facing the airlock. The light

above the lock flicked to green and the hatch hissed open. He found himself staring down the barrels of half a dozen blaster carbines. Rebel troopers surged from the hatch, one relieving him of his weapon, another forcing him face down on the deck with the barrel of a blaster pressed behind his ear. Others took up covering positions on both entrances to the cargo bay.

“You boys go right ahead and make yourselves at home now” Kessler quipped.

His attempt at levity was ignored. The muzzle of the carbine pressed tighter into the back of his ear. “How many crew?”

“Just me, guys.” He wondered how Kerrigan was reacting to this treatment.

“Take us to the cockpit. Now.”

He was hauled roughly to his feet and propelled towards the cockpit with a rude shove in the back. Nothing out of the ordinary so far. At least they haven’t blasted me out of hand. Let’s see if they fall for the forged paperwork.

Once in the cockpit, he was spun around to face the Boarding Officer and his bodyguard, as the remaining members of the boarding party secured the rest of the vessel.

“Papers.” The Reb officer had cold, blue eyes, like two chips of ice. He seemed professional about his business. Kessler hoped that meant he could rely on him to follow procedure. He’d been boarded before, he knew how this was supposed to work.

“Over there, on the Navigation Station.” The bodyguard picked up the folder containing Kessler’s documentation as a third trooper entered the cockpit.

“Ship’s secure sir. Preliminary investigation confirms his story. He’s carrying medical supplies.”

“Okay, private. Get the ship’s computer hooked up and run a match on these papers.”

“Yes, sir.”

A datapad was produced and connected to the S-Comp terminal of the Corel’s Dream’s computer. As the comtech worked, Kessler sat down slowly in the pilot’s chair.

“Make yourselves at home, boys. She won’t bite.” He indicated the three spare seats in the cockpit.

The Boarding Officer seated himself, but the two troopers remained standing, carbines ready. The officer began studying Kessler’s registration papers.

“Captain..?”

“Coolidge.” Kessler answered.

“Had this ship long?” the Rebel officer asked casually, studying the data before him.

“Six years, almost. She’s for sale if you want her.”

A brief smile pulled at the corner of the Reb’s mouth. “Not today thank you. She’s a little long in the tooth for me.” He flipped a page. “Where did you pick up this cargo?”

“Ord Mantell. Picked it up on the cheap. Been looking for a buyer for a week, then news came in about this little adventure you boys had going.” He shrugged. “Figured we might be able to help you out in our own small way.”

“And make a tidy little profit for yourselves into the bargain, no doubt?”

Kessler smiled, his very best shark’s grin. “Got to keep body and soul together somehow, Major.” He deliberately overestimated the officer’s rank.

A trooper entered the cockpit and saluted. “Scanning crew reports all clear, sir. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Data check’s complete sir. He checks out.”

The officer looked slightly disappointed. He stood, handing the manifest back to Kessler. “Very well, Captain Coolidge. If my superiors don’t decide to just confiscate your stock out of hand, you’ll be met on the surface by an officer with whom you may negotiate prices. You may power up your engines and follow our fighter escorts to the surface. Give us a minute to return to our ship and she’s all yours.”

Kessler smiled. “You’re too gracious, Major. You boys have a safe trip home

now.” Privately, he couldn’t give a good damn if his cargo was seized or not. After this stop, he wasn’t planning on returning to Imperial space to face his creditors anyway.

The airlock indicator turned red and the Dream lurched slightly as the Rebel Lambda class shuttle disengaged its docking tackle. He waited for it to get clear and powered up the ion drive, making sure to follow the two X-Wings ahead of him. This is it. We’re in.

The two freighters approached the embattled world at a cautious rate, escorted by a flight of X-Wing Space Superiority fighters. Not wishing to use his active sensors, Kessler was limited to the Dream’s severely limited passive sensor array to glean whatever data on the Rebel force he could. Orbital electromagnetic activity indicated the presence of several large Rebel ships, and navigational sensors confirmed at least one MC-80 Cruisers and three, possibly four frigates. There were almost certainly additional Rebel ships over Argimiliar II’s radar horizon, but they were undetectable from Kessler’s current position. If that was the case, it was seriously bad news. The Rebels had brought in additional ships to support the blockade already in place here. It was probable that these additional ships had been summoned when the ISD Challenge and her support ships had attempted to lift the blockade, but had arrived after the Imperial battle group had been ignominiously forced to retreat, leaving the men below to certain defeat. Kessler desperately wanted to ask Kerrigan his opinion of what the situation below might be, but he knew he couldn’t run the risk of his transmission being intercepted. He’d just have to be patient and play it by ear. Checking his sensors, he realised he had another, less pressing problem. Where’s the damn colony beacon? He had to pretend he didn’t know the location of the colony, and that meant relying on the surface navigational beacon, unless the X-Wings were going to shepherd them in all the way. As a pilot, he hated having to rely on another’s navigation, flying blind, relying on someone else to do your pathfinding was something he balked at, but he realised that he should have expected security to be tight. All the same, just who were the Rebs expecting to keep the colony’s exact location secret from anyway? It was a captured Imperial outpost, after all. The forces of the Emperor’s Hammer knew exactly where the colony was located. Something just didn’t add up.

A sudden flash of inspiration left a cold, gnawing fear in his stomach. A moment later, his worst fear was confirmed.

“Cardshark and Shamrock, this is ground control, standby for deactivation of energy shield. On my mark... three, two, one. Energy shield has been deactivated. Confirm you have the colony beacon on your navigational plot, over.”

There it was, the beacon, previously blocked by a defensive energy field, showed up loud and clear on the nav display.

“This is Shamrock, roger that ground control. I have you loud and clear.”

“This is Cardshark.” Kessler cursed silently. “Roger that also, I have your beacon five by five.”

“Acknowledged, you are clear of the shield, re-energising. Welcome to Argimiliar, please follow your beacons to your assigned landing spots.”

This was serious trouble. The one thing they hadn’t even briefly considered was that the Rebs would be able to get a shield generator up and running in the short space of time allowed to them. This changed everything. Shit. Kessler thought frantically. How the hell would it be possible to stage a breakout with an energy shield enclosing the colony? This venture had been doomed from the start. This was just the final nail in the coffin.

The colony itself appeared, low on the horizon. Ahead, the escorting Rebel fighters broke off and climbed away, returning to their patrol stations. Off to his right, Kerrigan’s ship flared its braking thrusters and began to decelerate. Kessler started the landing cycle himself, possibilities coursing through his brain. No matter which way he looked at it, their options

were severely limited.

The outskirts of the colony proper began to fly past below him. Argimiliar II had been colonised two months before, primarily as a military outpost. It had taken just short of two weeks to offload and set up all the necessary equipment and troops to enable them to be mostly self-sufficient, then the first of the engineers had arrived to begin building the starport for the TIE Corps detachment which would control traffic in the system and begin construction of the orbital defence platform which would finally secure the system from threat. Once the necessary support infrastructure was in place, work began on the housing, power and subsistence agricultural facilities which would be needed to support the workers due to arrive once the facilities to provide for them were in place.

The plan was to turn Argimiliar II into both a strategically important forward base of operations in the Minos Cluster, and to begin converting the jungles into farmland to feed the ravenous billions in the Emperor's Hammer domain. After two months of vigilance, the ISD Challenge had been required to leave in order to resupply with fresh equipment for the new colony. Her escorts, the Frigates, Tribune, Hammer's Vengeance and Emperor's Fury, were left to oversee the safety of the engineers constructing the factories which would begin to produce the agricultural equipment necessary to fulfil the Directorate's second objective for Argimiliar. Work had begun on the orbital platform which would safeguard the first. As she was due to leave Aurora Prime, fully loaded with prefabricated parts and construction materials, word came in of lightning Rebel attacks on Imperial traffic and installations all over the Minos Cluster. The resources of the TIE Corps were stretched nearly to breaking point dealing with the Rebel hit and fade attacks. The Aggressor Strike Force was pinned down in several running battles with Rebel interlopers, and it was clear that the Rebellion was poised for a major attack somewhere along the line. Fleet analysts were frantically trying to predict exactly where the strike would fall. Quietly, the ISD's of the Battle Groups and Auroran Home Guard were deployed to defensive positions around the Core worlds, while the ISDs of the ASF continued their holding actions as best they could within the Minos Cluster itself. The ISD Challenge returned to Argimiliar at flank speed, her orders to prepare the defence against possible Rebel attack. What happened next was history. Argimiliar had been the Rebel's true objective all along. Upon her arrival, the Challenge had been jumped by an entire Rebel Sector Defence Fleet. Hopelessly outnumbered, and with her three escort frigates destroyed long before her arrival, Rear Admiral Torres had been forced to order a fighting withdrawal. Fully loaded with engineering and industrial equipment, he no longer had his usual complement of heavy assault equipment to deliver to the Imperial troops desperately battling on the surface. Without his transports and landing barges, he had no way of evacuating them either. It was a case of cut your losses and get out, or lose your ship and crew as well as the colony. Torres was forced to ignore the pleas for assistance from the beleaguered garrison and withdraw to the safety of hyperspace. He'd been lucky the Rebs hadn't had any Interdictor Cruisers in their arsenal, or he'd never have made it out with ship intact and crew alive.

None of which mattered a damn in the eyes of the Hammer's Fist or the public. The TIE Corps had betrayed the Stormtroopers on the surface. It was that simple. The problem was, no matter how well informed Kessler was on the subject, he felt the same way too.

The devastation caused by the orbital bombardment and the subsequent ground fighting was evident even from this altitude. The Rebels, however, had wasted no time in repairing the damage they'd caused and were even now using the colony's heavy construction equipment to fortify and clear rubble. The Dream slowed over the starport, the TIE launch cradles in ruins, but otherwise, mostly intact. It occurred to him that the colony centre hadn't been too badly damaged at all. Most of the devastation was confined to the perimeter. It appeared that the Rebellion had wanted to take the core colony complex intact. That would explain why

they hadn't asked twice about his offer of medical supplies, the fighting around the centre must have been savage if they hadn't wanted to risk using heavy assault equipment.

The Corel's Dream flared its braking thrusters once and landed amidst a cloud of dust in an open space amongst a small fleet of shuttles and transports, busily loading and unloading a multitude of cargoes. He was met at the boarding ramp by a dishevelled looking Rebel officer and a handful of wary-looking troopers. From the state of their uniforms and their generally unkempt appearance, it seemed that they were obviously having a busy time down here.

"Captain Coolidge?" The officer asked, shielding his face from the bright sunlight.

"That's me," Kessler answered, stripping off his gloves as he descended the ramp.

"Welcome to Paradise, Captain," the officer greeted him. "As you can see," he indicated the battle damaged starport with a broad sweep of his arm, "we're running a little behind schedule getting the landscape gardening finished. I'm Major Horn," he shook Kessler's hand vigorously. "I understand you have some supplies for us?"

Kessler shifted his gunbelt and stuffed his gloves behind his waistband. "Sure thing, Major. I've got a shipful of bacta, surgical supplies, three packed-away field hospitals and half a dozen FX-7 medical droids in storage. Think you can make use of all that?"

"Oh, I think we can come to some kind of agreement," Horn smiled. He made a chopping motion with his right hand and the troops behind him filed up the ramp and onto the ship.

Kessler watched them go with a smile. "Now, Major...you haven't even started to bargain with me yet." Taking a cigar from his shirt pocket, he bit off the end and spat it onto the dusty ground. "What kind of businessman are you?"

The smile left Horn's face briefly. "I'm not a businessman, Captain Coolidge. I'm an officer in the New Republic Navy, and I have a lot of wounded men down here who need those supplies you're carrying." He paused for breath, then his manner seemed to soften. "Look, Captain, we're not going to rip you off. You'll get standard market prices for your cargo. We're the New Republic, not the damned Empire, after all."

Kessler grinned. Here it comes, the part about how you're bringing peace and freedom to a troubled galaxy. But Horn appeared to be finished. "Okay, Major. I guess I can leave your boys to get on with unloading by themselves. You want to sign for my stuff now or when it's all off the 'Shark'?" Idly, he patted down his pockets for a lighter.

Horn raised his eyebrows dubiously. "I may not be a businessman, Captain, but I wasn't born yesterday. I think we'll pay up after we've checked out your goods."

Kessler laughed good naturedly, clapping Horn on the back as he strode by him. "Hell, I like you, Major, you're my kind of Navy. I won't even charge you extra for my expenses!"

Horn laughed and turned to climb the boarding ramp as Kessler made his way to Kerrigan's ship. The Far Trader, aka Shamrock was surrounded by a similar group of utility vehicles, already making short work of unloading Kerrigan's stock. Kerrigan waved at Kessler as he approached.

"Top of the morning to you, Captain Coolidge"

"And the top of the morning to you, Captain Hart!" Kessler replied.

"A quiet word in your shell, Captain Coolidge, if you don't mind" Kerrigan whispered. Kessler nodded, the two of them slipping away some distance from the noise and bustle of the unloading process.

Kerrigan produced a lighter and attended to Kessler's cigar. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

Kessler raised an eyebrow as he puffed away to get the cigar lit. "The energy shield?"

"The very same. We didn't figure on this. I think we're royally screwed, Kess. No way we can get anybody off this mudball with that shield in operation."

"Maybe."

Kerrigan stared at Kessler in undisguised horror. “Holy crap, Kess! Are you out of your tiny mind? What are you suggesting? One of us takes out the shield generator while the other one stages a mass breakout from the prison stockade we don’t even know exists yet, evades those turbolaser batteries, breaks for orbit, fights his way past the entire Rebel fleet and somehow gets into hyperspace before getting himself reduced to his component atoms? Are you freakin’ insane?!”

Kessler grunted. “Turbolaser batteries? Must have missed them. Where are they? South or West?”

Kerrigan gaped.

“Okay, okay, you’re right. It does look hopeless.” He sighed. “Kerry, we’ve come this far...there has to be a way.” He looked at the burning tip of his cigar for a long moment, refusing to meet the other man’s stare.

“Look, maybe we can at least find out what happened to the prisoners they took? Maybe find out which world they’re being held on? Maybe if you can get word back to someone, at least there’d be a chance there might be some rescue attempt?” Kessler’s eyes pleaded with Kerrigan, mutely. “Come on, Kerry, we have to try something.”

Kerrigan gave up. “Goddammit, Kess! Okay, okay! But that’s it, alright? You’re just going to have to admit that TIE Corps screwed these guys over and left them out to dry, and there’s nothing you can do to make yourself feel any better about that!”

Kessler seemed to retreat within himself. Kerrigan wondered if he’d gone too far, nevertheless, there was something he wanted made absolutely clear.

“Look, Kess, I’m sorry okay? But you can’t keep punishing yourself for something that TIE Corps is responsible for. If this is some quest of yours for personal redemption you can count me the hell out. Now are you with the programme or are you going to flake out on me and do something real stupid at the worst possible time?”

“I’m with you.”

“Are we clear?”

“Crystal.”

Kerrigan grasped his friend by the shoulder and squeezed. “Okay, now get out of here and go dig us up some evidence, you old bum. I’ll meet you back at the Far Trader in an hour with what I find, okay?”

Kessler smiled, “See you in an hour.”

“And don’t do anything dumb. I don’t want your ship that badly!”

The frenzied activity in the shuttle port was in stark contrast to the colony centre. The damage here wasn’t nearly as bad, confirming Kessler’s suspicions. Pock-marks etched the walls of the structures, indicating where blaster fire had made its mark, here and there were black scorches where thermal detonators had ignited. Apart from this evidence, there was very little substantial damage. The fighting had been street to street, house to house. The Rebels had obviously been made to pay in blood for every metre they’d gained. It must have been a vicious fight. You took plenty of the bastards with you, didn’t you boys?

In half an hour, Kessler had seen no evidence of any kind of structure that might have housed prisoners. The core of the complex had been rapidly repaired and put to military use. Weary troops rested on street corners or ate at field kitchens. The colony command centre had been restored to its original use and troops guarded the entrances, but no other building appeared to be guarded to any degree that might have indicated the presence of Imperial prisoners. Kessler began to despair of ever finding anything of use. It looked increasingly likely that the 3rd Battalion of the First Auroran Shock Legion had either fought to the last man, or had already been lifted offworld to serve out the rest of their lives on some penal colony.

He turned another corner, only to be stopped by the sight of rows of flyblown bodies, covered with sheets of plastic. A lone Rebel soldier stood over them, looking lost and forlorn. Kessler's heart leapt, then he realised that the bodies were Rebels, not Stormtroopers.

He slumped onto a sidewalk in defeat. Look at me. Who the hell do I think I am anyway? This is hopeless. Did I really think I was going to personally save those men? Me?

"Got a light, mister?"

Kessler looked around in surprise. He was a Rebel Fleet Trooper, he seemed impossibly young, but his eyes told a different story. The last time Kessler had seen eyes like that was when he'd said goodbye to General Donner, after days of bombardment and perimeter fighting, just as these very Rebel troops were preparing to encircle the colony. Get my men out of here, Colonel Kessler, or die trying.

He hastily searched his pockets, but still couldn't find his lighter. Taking his cigar from his mouth, he offered it to the Rebel soldier.

"Thanks," said the young man, once he'd managed to light his own. Kessler noticed that his hands trembled slightly. Battle fatigue? He returned the cigar to Kessler, eyeing him curiously.

Kessler grunted. "Those things'll kill you one day you know?"

The soldier laughed. "Yeah, and I'm blaster-proof!"

Kessler chuckled softly. "Well, when you put it like that..."

The two men regarded each other for a while.

"Who the hell are you, old timer?"

Kessler tapped the side of his nose in a conspiratorial manner. "Don't tell anyone, but I'm a smuggler."

The soldier grinned. "I won't tell a soul... you flew in on one of those old Corellian birds just now?"

"That's me."

This seemed to satisfy the soldier for a while. Kessler decided to take a chance. "It must have been pretty tough here, at the end?"

The soldier nodded, staring at the patterns of blue smoke from the cigar before they were dispersed by the slight breeze. "You could say that. Got a bit like a starship boarding operation at one point, just before the end."

Kessler whistled. "That bad?"

The soldier nodded. He seemed to be having trouble holding his cigar steady. "It didn't make sense. They just refused to give an inch. Even when we got one of their positions surrounded they'd just keep fighting. We had to clear the bastards out building by building. Hell, I even saw the wounded shooting at us. We'd lose a dozen men taking a position and when we'd finally overrun it, they'd be gone...like ghosts. Pulled back without any warning. Then they'd start firing at us from another prepared enfilade position further down the street. They just would not quit." The young soldier whispered softly. "Their position was hopeless the second we ran that ISD out of orbit, and they must have known it, but they point-blank refused to surrender." He shuddered. "Afterwards, when it was all over, we counted the bodies. There were hardly any of them! Compared to us, I mean. We must have gotten almost all of them in the bombing, but the few who were left fought like lunatics... I never want to face another Imperial Stormtrooper again as long as I live. Pirates, smugglers...at least they know when the game's over, but Stormtroopers..." The young man turned to face Kessler, his eyes bright, his lips trembling. "You think they want this system badly enough to come back for it, old man? You think they'll try to take it back?"

Kessler felt strangely responsible for the soldier's misery. Awkwardly, he found himself grasping him by the shoulder, trying to reassure him. "Relax son, they won't be back. You

showed them who was boss this time.”

The young soldier tried to smile anxiously, looking back at the long rows of Rebel troopers lying silently under the plastic shroud. “Yeah...we sure showed them didn’t we?”

Kerrigan was waiting for him in the cockpit of the Far Trader when he returned just before dark. He sensed there was something wrong instantly.

“You okay? You look like shit.”

“Your mother didn’t think so.”

He put down his drink and frowned. “No, Kess, I’m serious. You look terrible. What happened?”

Kessler heaved himself into the co-pilot’s station and picked up the bottle Kerrigan had carelessly left on the navigation console. “Ask me some other time.” He took a long, hard swig of the bottle’s contents.

Kerrigan eyed him curiously but let it pass. “So...you find anything?”

“Not much. Hell, nothing. No prisoners, no bodies, not even any sign that there were any prisoners. You?”

Kerrigan sipped his drink. “Well I found something weird. A handful of prisoners being kept under guard in a warehouse overlooking the landing field.” Kessler looked up, alert and hopeful. “Calm down, Kess. They were civilians, engineers mostly, no more than a dozen of them. They’re still here because all the Reb transport capability is being used to stock this place up with war supplies and so on...the weird thing is, they say they didn’t see any Stormtroopers being ferried offworld, at all, and I didn’t see anything that looked like it was guarded heavily enough to be a Stormtrooper prison facility.”

Kessler nodded. “Me neither. So where does that leave us?”

Kerrigan spoke quietly. “Kess, I think we might just have to get ourselves used to the notion that they’re all dead.”

Kessler nodded, but something indefinable was bothering him. “I don’t know, Kerry. There’s something wrong here that I just can’t place my finger on.”

“Kess, give it up, they’re gone, man.”

“It’s not that, Kerry. I know what you’re thinking, but it’s not like that this time. Something’s wrong.”

Kerrigan hissed in disgust. “Kessler, leave it, will you? Even if we had found prisoners here, we still haven’t come up with a way of getting them out of here in one piece! It’s over! Why can’t you just admit it?”

Kessler suddenly felt the weight of his years. Kerrigan was right. Maybe he was trying to find personal redemption for the failures of the TIE Corps on Argimiliar II. It didn’t matter, however. Whatever had happened to the 3rd Battalion, 1st Auroran Shock Legion seemed to be lost to history. They’d failed.

“I’m going to get some sleep, Kerry. See you in the morning, okay?”

“Okay, Kess.”

Kessler paused on the way out of the cockpit. “Seems you won’t be getting your hands on the Dream after all. You can have my share of the profits on this trip to compensate you, okay?”

Kerrigan laughed. “Forget it, you old bum. I figure you’ll need all the collateral you can get where you’re going.” He clutched at his shirt pocket suddenly. “Oh, nearly forgot!” He pulled a small metallic object from his pocket and threw it to the older man. “Your lighter.”

“Thanks, Kerry.” Kessler smiled. “You’re not quite the cold hearted, cash-greedy monster you make yourself out to be are you? You’re a good friend, Kerry.”

Kerrigan’s expression became strangely unreadable. Regretful, perhaps? “You deserve better friends than me, Kess. Goodnight, old warrior.”

Something about the way he said it troubled Kessler more than the acceptance that he'd failed in his mission. It wasn't like Kerrigan to be fatalistic. Maybe his friend was more troubled about this whole affair than he liked to let on? It seemed probable. Nevertheless, it was a strange thing to say. Kessler shook his head thoughtfully. Kerrigan seemed full of surprises.

THREE

That's it! Kessler woke from his slumber with a start. The cockpit was almost pitch black, illuminated only by the glow of instrumentation on standby and the insistent winking of the "Message received" light on the comms array. The alarm accompanying it must have been what startled him awake. Outside, work crews laboured under arc lights, no respect paid to the lateness of the hour. Kessler shook his head to clear the cobwebs, the realisation that had gripped him in sleep slipping away like a dream. Think damn it! Something about why there weren't any Stormtroopers left on Argimiliar? He clutched feverishly at half forgotten memories, something about what that scared Rebel kid had said... "Afterwards, when it was all over, we counted the bodies. There were hardly any of them..."

What was it about that that was so important?

Something was wrong. It took a moment for him to realise that the Far Trader was no longer on the landing apron. Something was very wrong. Across the far side of the field, armoured ground transports were springing to life. Work crews were stopping in mid-action. A siren began to wail mournfully across the complex.

Kerrigan you son of a bitch! What have you done?

"Play message!" He began to warm up the thrusters, skipping all but the most essential pre-flight checks. Something told him that he needed to get Corel's Dream airborne now!

"Hi Kess, Kerrigan here. By now the Rebs will undoubtedly have noticed something amiss in those medical supplies we sold them. Those FX-7 medical droids have just begun to start murdering the wounded troops they're meant to be treating. They're not ordinary med-droids, obviously. Each of them has been reprogrammed with assassin protocols. With any luck, one of them has even assassinated the Rebel ground commander and another has self destructed in the communications uplink. Unfortunately, I wasn't aware of any energy field generator when we uploaded their new programming or we'd have taken pains to ensure that one of them was programmed to take care of the generator, too, but I guess you can't plan for everything, can you?"

"Son of a bitch, Kerrigan! What have you done to me?" He frantically flicked switches, bringing essential systems online. Kicking the navcomputer on, he began the calculations needed for a hyperspace jump. Panicking, he remembered something

important. Shields! He threw the necessary switches and a blast rocked the ship on its landing struts. He heard a loud crack amidships and smelled something burning. Too late.

"Sorry to leave you in the lurch like this, but we thought it might be useful to have something else down there to keep their attention focused, so you're going to just have to do your best to get out of there on your own. I'd recommend you make for an area of heavy geothermal activity four clicks just west of your position. Don't try to make for orbit, Kess. You won't make it. At least the thermal activity will give you time to land, escape from the Dream and get under cover of the jungle before they can track you, but I wouldn't

waste any time, they're liable to be very pissed at you.

Good luck Colonel Kessler. Serve the Empire above all others."

Too much happening, too little time to react. The engines surged into life and he lifted her into the hover. Boarding ramp! He withdrew the ramp and the Corel's Dream turned about and surged into motion. Did he say due west? West was as good as any other direction. He killed his landing lights to make himself a less visible target and gunned the throttle. West? Wait a second...something was wrong with west!

The ship lurched over to starboard with a mighty roar and Kessler was thrown from his seat crashing into the cockpit canopy, the cabin briefly illuminated with a dazzlingly bright red flare.

Oh yeah...the turbolaser batteries.

Master alarm warnings were going off all over the cockpit. The Dream seemed to hover in mid air for a timeless moment, then he was thrown back into the pilot's station as if by a giant hand as she dropped like a stone, nose first. With a desperate effort, he grasped the controls and heaved back, killing throttle power and willing the repulsorlifts to respond. Come on baby, don't let me down now!

Without landing lights and with most of his instrumentation trashed, he had no idea how close the ground was. Pilot's instincts told him he was approaching level flight, when a second lurch rattled his stricken ship and he almost lost the controls. A shower of foliage briefly obscured the canopy and the engines shrieked in protest. Metal screamed as it reached breaking point. He was caught on something! What?

Landing struts!

A second volley of turbolaser fire illuminated the night sky far above. At the very least, his unplanned crash-dive had thrown off the gunners' aim and he was now too low for the turrets to track him. Well break out the booze...maybe I should be celebrating? He punched the landing gear retraction switch and something groaned ominously. Come on you ugly old bitch! Do me a favour here! Something broke below him and the Corel's Dream surged clear. Think, damn you Kessler! You're a Colonel in the Emperor's Hammer TIE Corps! You're too good to die in a damn freighter! His heading was still, by some miracle, due west. He'd passed the turbolaser batteries but even without the trashed damage indicators he could tell his ship was doomed. Something Kerrigan had said seemed vitally important. "Don't try to make for orbit, Kess. You won't make it..." That was obvious, he'd never make it past the blockade in this state, but Kerrigan couldn't have counted on the turbolaser gunners being alert enough to take him out. There had to be something else.

His engines chose that moment to cough and die. The Corel's Dream became very silent, save for the sound of wind whistling against a spider's web of cracks on the cockpit canopy and the crackle and pop of burning wiring. All alarms died and the entire cockpit instrument panel winked out at once. You sabotaged me? He began pulling at the restraints on the pilot's seat, clipping them into place onto the quick release catch. With seconds to go, he braced for impact. Kerrigan's voice floated back to him, seeming to mock him from a distance. "You deserve better friends than me, Kess. Goodnight, old warrior..."

She hit the surface.

Something was burning and he couldn't breathe properly. He tasted something salty in his mouth and coughed, spitting it out. Blood. His mouth hurt. He opened his eyes and realised that blood was leaking into them from a wound on his face. He took a shuddering breath and coughed violently. The cockpit was filling up with smoke rapidly. Releasing his straps, he clambered unsteadily to his feet. He had no idea how long he'd been out, but he didn't appear to be in any immediate risk of capture. Escape from his burning ship was his immediate priority. A quick glance at the smoke billowing from the fires raging deep within

the Dream confirmed that there was no getting out the old fashioned way. He drew his blaster, thankful to find it was still holstered and fired a burst into the canopy. It shattered, already weakened by the multiple impacts of the crashes, he followed up with a kick from his booted feet and struggled through to clean air. Outside, it was too dark to accurately judge the distance to the ground, and the crash had cleared away any jungle vegetation within reach that he might have used to lower himself to safety. He gritted his teeth and dropped, trusting more to luck than judgement. The impact, when it came was embarrassingly easy. He couldn't have dropped more than four feet, but he was winded all the same, caught off guard. He staggered to his feet, somehow still holding the blaster, and stumbled off into the jungle, tripping over roots and vegetation. The first time he'd been here, the jungle had hidden their ships from detection only because the Rebellion had no reason to know there were any ships in hiding. Any detailed scan would have picked them up easily enough. Today was different. He knew he had to put as much distance between himself and the Corel's Dream as he possibly could.

"I'd recommend you make for an area of heavy geothermal activity four clicks just west of your position..."

He would have killed for Stormtrooper battle armour right now. The armoured suits weren't just designed to protect their wearers in battle, they also contained night vision scopes, navigation aids, limited sensor packages and most importantly, they filtered out chemical and thermal waste elements, making their wearers virtually impossible to detect with typical battlefield sensor equipment. He could only hope that the myriad of wildlife native to the Argimilian jungles would confuse tracking long enough for him to make it to the geothermal vents and so avoid detection until he could figure out how to smuggle himself onboard a shuttle and somehow escape this mess.

Myriad of native wildlife? Just what kind of predators lived in the jungles of Argimiliar anyway? He checked the power level of the heavy blaster pistol, wishing it was something bigger.

"Halt. Drop your weapon and lie face down on the ground."

That was it, then. Game over.

He dropped the pistol as ordered, and assumed the prone position, trying to decide if it would be possible to take his captor by surprise.

"Perell, Cornell, check him for hidden weapons."

Okay, make that captors. Not a chance and he knew it. It was then that he realised the voice had come to him filtered through a helmet microphone. Rebel troops didn't wear helmet microphones. With a surge of joy, he realised what had happened to the Argimillian Garrison.

"Afterwards, when it was all over, we counted the bodies. There were hardly any of them..."

Someone patted him down expertly and he was pulled roughly to his feet. He was facing two Imperial Stormtroopers. Their breastplates clearly identifying them as members of the 3rd Battalion, 1st Auroran Shock Legion, despite the accumulated grime and carefully applied jungle camouflage that had been diligently and professionally applied to their armour.

"Identify yourself."

Kessler straightened his aching back with some difficulty and turned to address his captor, a Stormtrooper Captain. "I'm Colonel Kyle Kessler, formerly Wing Commander of the ISD Challenge and currently of the Fleet Reserve Corps, and son, am I glad to see you!"

General Donner cursed softly as the spacer was marched into the camp. "Kessler. I'd hoped not to see you again so soon. I take it you didn't make it, then?"

Kessler squinted into the gloom. "General Donner, sir? Is that you?"

Donner gestured and the two troopers escorting Kessler released him from his cuffs. One

returned the blaster to his holster. “Yes, Colonel, still alive and still waiting for an answer.” Kessler stared around him at the makeshift command post. He’d counted thirty Stormtroopers on the way in, and that was just the ones he’d been allowed to see. Nearby, a trooper had plugged his helmet into a communications pack and seemed to be filtering through Rebel frequencies. A small field kitchen was in operation, preparing hot food, which was being ladled into containers and sealed for transport, presumably to outstations further off in the jungle. All around him, troopers either slept or stripped and cleaned their equipment.

“Colonel Kessler?”

“No, sir. Three of us made it back to Aurora Prime, we saved a hundred and thirty two of your men, all told. I came back with Captain Kerrigan to try to find out what had happened to you all, to try to get you out if we could, but Kerrigan...” Kessler searched for the words.

“Yes, Colonel?”

Kessler lowered his head. “Kerrigan betrayed me, General. I don’t know why. We found no trace of you or your troops and were preparing to leave when Kerrigan sabotaged the Rebel facilities and slipped away, leaving me to take the blame.”

Donner motioned Kessler to sit and called for some food. A silent trooper obliged, then returned to his duties. “So you’re stuck here with us? That was your ship going down out there?”

Kessler sighed. “Yeah, I could have gotten you out if I’d known you were here. I guess that’s all academic now, though.”

Donner chuckled. “You came back for us? Hell, Colonel, we’ll make a trooper of you yet!” He sobered abruptly. “But you came back in vain, Kessler. The gesture is appreciated, but we’re not going anywhere, we still have a mission here.”

Kessler felt a surge of anger. “What are you talking about? Argimiliar is over, General. The Rebs won. Fleet ran for home with its tail between its legs and left you here to die.” He stood, gesturing about him. “What you’ve achieved here is remarkable, but you can’t exist here as guerrillas forever. You’ll run out of supplies one day, or they’ll find you eventually and they’ll kill you all one by one.”

Donner looked up at Kessler, his watery blue eyes glinting in the moonlight. “You’re the one who doesn’t understand, Colonel. We’re the Fist of the Hammer. Dying’s what we’re good for. And in case you hadn’t noticed, we’re damn good at making sure we take as many of those Rebel bastards to hell with us as possible. That’s what we do. That’s all we do. You Fleet boys talk a good fight, but you don’t understand what it means to be a warrior.” Donner stood and faced Kessler down. “Have you ever killed a man with a knife, Colonel? Ever twisted it in his guts and watched his face as his life drains away over your fist?” Kessler felt himself retreating under the force of Donner’s baleful gaze.

“When you kill a man face to face, you know what it means to be a warrior! Every man here would give his life to take just one enemy of the Empire with him. We’re the last, best defence of the Emperor’s Hammer. When all your fancy starships have given up and run for cover, when the enemy is knocking right on your door, we’re the ones who take his hand and rip it off at the shoulder, then beat him to death with the bloody end. We do not retreat, we do not surrender and we sure as hell don’t give up when we still have breath in our bodies to curse the enemy’s name and strength in our arms to smash his face into a bloody pulp. Do you get me?”

“Crystal, sir.”

Donner’s craggy face broke into a broad grin. “Scared you there didn’t I, Kessler?”

Kessler swallowed. “In a manner of speaking.”

Donner laughed, flicking his head towards the Rebel fortifications. A short bark of a laugh that sounded like a gunshot. “Imagine how those sons of bitches must feel.”

Kessler looked back at the distant lights of the garrison, remembering a scared, young soldier standing amid rows of dead comrades. "I think I know exactly how they feel, General."

Kessler sat gratefully as a medic tended to his wounds. "I guess you guys could have used those medical supplies a little more desperately than the Rebs?"

Donner nodded. "They'd certainly have come in useful, but we're not desperate yet. We still have our field kits, and one of the somewhat double-sided blessings of this battle armour is that any shot powerful enough or accurate enough to get through is almost certainly going to be good enough to kill you." He chuckled. "We don't get many wounded."

Kessler grimaced at the gallows humour. Stormtroopers, he was rapidly discovering, were just a completely different breed of people. He wasn't completely sure Donner had been just trying to scare him earlier.

Something occurred to him. "You know something General? Apart from myself, my entire family were Stormtroopers. I was the first in my family to apply for TIE Corps training."

Donner looked at him calculatingly. "I'll bet you broke your father's heart."

Kessler didn't deign to answer. Donner was uncomfortably close to the truth.

Donner chose not to pursue the matter too deeply. "Who was he? Your father, that is? Which unit?"

"Lieutenant Colonel Marius Kessler, Executive Officer, First Coruscant Shock Legion."

"He died at Hoth?"

Kessler was astonished. "The very same. You've heard of him?"

Donner nodded. "Well, heard more about the battle than your father per se. It was a fairly pivotal event in the history of Imperial ground warfare, I'm sure you'll agree, but yes, I thought your name was vaguely familiar when I first met you. Strange that your father should be one of ours."

Kessler nodded slowly. He hadn't really thought of it that way before. Hoth had always just been the place his father had died. Donner had at least been able to see it in the perspective of history. Perhaps somewhere, his father's name adorned the wall of some bar frequented by old soldiers? Kessler found that strangely comforting.

"So, General, how do you plan to stay functional as a military unit out in this green crap?"

Donner appeared genuinely baffled. "We're Stormtroopers."

Kessler got the sense that he was running up against a brick wall mentality. He tried a different approach. "I mean, how long do you think you can survive out here before getting picked up, without being detected by the enemy?"

Donner gave Kessler a long, hard look. "You still don't get it, do you, Colonel? We're Stormtroopers. We stay out here, doing whatever we can to harass and confuse the enemy without giving away the fact of our existence, for as long as it takes for Fleet to return in force, sweep the skies clear of enemy ships and give us the opening we need to storm that garrison and kill every last one of those Rebel sons of bitches. Do you get it now?"

"But General, don't you realise that could take months? Years?"

"Yes, Your point?"

It was that stonewall mentality again. Surely Donner wasn't stupid? "But how long will your equipment last out?"

Donner seemed to be trying to work out if Kessler was serious. He decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. He unslung his blaster carbine and passed it to Kessler. "Do you know what this is?"

Kessler handled the unfamiliar weapon carefully. It was lighter than it appeared. "It's a blaster rifle?"

"Wrong. It's a Blastech E-11 Blaster Carbine. It has an integral targeting scope for use in low light operations and a folding stock which can enhance its use in confined spaces, like

house clearing or boarding ops. It can be fired in vacuum, underwater and in extremes of temperature ranging from minus 45 degrees to 150 degrees Celsius. It can be fired with extreme accuracy in single shot mode as a sniper's weapon or for controlled, aimed shots; or it can be fired in burst mode for rapid or suppressive fire with a variable fire cone of up to twelve degrees spread. It can be left propped up against a tree in the jungle and I can return to it ten years later, pick it up, wipe it down and kill anyone with the first shot. Are you beginning to get my point, Colonel?"

"I'm not sure."

Donner sighed. "Look, they designed this weapon to be Stormtrooper-proof. My boys couldn't break one of these if they tried, and believe me, some of them do. All of our equipment is designed this way. Everything we use is built to be battlefield repaired, built to last for years without spare parts if it has to, because sometimes, it has to. Now, do you get the point?"

Kessler got the point. Donner was beginning to make sense.

"We don't have the luxury of having a crew of dedicated support staff just waiting to check every system in our precious TIE Fighters every time we park them in the hangar to go and spend some quality time in the Officer's Mess." He pointed to a trooper stripping his weapon down for cleaning. "Cornell there, he's a Stormtrooper first and foremost, but he's also a trained armourer, rated to strip and repair anything from that DL-44 you're carrying in your pants to a Golan Anti-Infantry Battery." He pointed to the trooper preparing the meals on the field kitchen. "Clark there, Stormtrooper first and foremost, but also trained as a survival expert and battlefield cook. He can find nutritious foodstuffs in the middle of a desert or a polar waste, and use it to keep a squad on their feet and fighting fit for weeks if necessary." He paused. "Okay, it may still taste like shit, but it'll keep you alive and fit enough to break someone's teeth with the blunt end of your rifle."

Kessler laughed, some things were the same in every branch of service. You always complained about the food. He still wondered how Donner could tell the men apart under their blank, featureless helmets, though.

"Okay, General, I get the point. If Fleet arrives, you'll be ready. But how long do you expect it to take?"

Donner grinned wolfishly. "Could be sooner than you think, Colonel" He sipped at his mug of java. "And when they do, we'll be ready. We have every inch of that Rebel perimeter mapped out, we know exactly where their command posts are located and we have them scared to even step into this jungle without armoured support." He laughed mirthlessly. "They think there's some kind of dangerous predator out here that keeps taking their patrols."

They were right.

"General Donner, sir!"

Donner grabbed his carbine and jumped to his feet. "Report!"

The Trooper manning the communications unit looked up, one hand pressed to the auditory speakers on the side of his helmet.

"The Rebels have repaired the damaged communications uplink, sir. I'm getting reports of a space battle. Fleet is in orbit, currently engaging the Rebel blockade. The Rebels count three Star Destroyers and numerous escorts are pushing the blockade back. It's the Challenge, Relentless and Grey Wolf, sir."

Donner picked up his helmet, stared briefly skyward, then fastened it into place. "Send runners out to alert all positions. This is it boys, payback time. Colonel Kessler. You know how to use that hand-cannon you're carrying?"

Kessler stood, brushing off dead leaves. "It's not there for decoration, sir."

"Good, get yourself into a spare suit of armour. We could use every good firing arm we can

get. Just don't get in the way."

"Sir, I'm picking up a transmission from the orbital Task Force Commodore to the ground Commander. He's assuring him that as long as the energy field remains up, TIE Corps won't be able to land AT-ATs in the jungle to get beneath the shield. He's ordering him to hold for two days in the event that they are forced to withdraw and reinforcements have to be sent. The space battle appears to be in the balance at the moment, sir."

Donner's voice seemed to growl in feral satisfaction as he heard the news, Kessler wasn't sure, it could have just been the voice filters built into the helmet mikes.

"Then let's go and ask them to switch that energy shield off, shall we?"

The Rebel base was on alert. The outlying buildings, mostly wrecked by the previous bombardment, were deserted. The Rebels had pulled back to the more defensible inner perimeter. Donner's men approached to within fifty yards of the pickets before holding position. At no point did any of the Stormtroopers use their radios. Secrecy was their primary weapon, any chatter on the electromagnetic spectrum might give away their positions. All orders were conveyed by hand signal. It was eerily efficient. Every man seemed to know exactly where to be and what to do. For the first time in his military career, Kessler felt like excess baggage.

Through the visor of the helmet he was wearing, Kessler could clearly see the Rebel Troopers on perimeter guard duty. He knew that they would be unable to detect the Stormtroopers stealing up on their positions with thermal imaging devices, they would have to rely on image enhancement equipment, and Kessler knew that only Rebel officers and selected sentries carried these. The problem with image enhancement gear, was that it only worked at its best against moving targets in stark contrast to their backgrounds. Donner's men were making full use of that fact, moving with exaggerated slowness any time they were in direct line of sight of the Rebel positions, their outlines broken up by the customised camouflage paint applied to their armour. Donner signalled to a Trooper back down the line, and a message was passed further back. A few seconds later, it began. With his amplified hearing, Kessler heard the faint whistle of something flying by, high overhead. Then the repeated low crump of concussion grenades detonating deeper within the Rebel perimeter. Something flared, bright in the night ahead of him and behind a cluster of buildings. then the night was lit up with a huge flash. Fuel dump. Kessler's optics automatically adjusted to compensate for the brief flare of photons, protecting his night vision. The Rebel sentries weren't nearly so lucky. He heard a strange noise, repeated several times and Rebel troopers clutched at their chests and fell, boneless, to the ground. He realised the noise was from the Stormtrooper's carbines, but the helmet's auditory pickups had tuned out any harmful high or low frequencies.

Donner's men surged forward and Kessler stumbled to his feet, struggling to keep up with them. He cleared the first of the barricades and dropped into a combat crouch, searching for a target. Five dead Rebels lay about him. Sightless eyes staring accusingly at the stars. He began to run after the Troopers ahead of him, melting silently into the shadows and cover afforded by the utility buildings around him. Three Rebel troopers stumbled out of a bunkhouse in the road ahead, fumbling with their weapons and helmets. They were shot dead before they'd barely cleared the doorway. A thermal detonator was thrown into the building and it detonated with the same, strange crump Kessler had heard before. Three Troopers vaulted over the bodies and into the bunkhouse before the explosion had died, he heard more shots, then they re-emerged and the squad continued, hugging both sides of the street, without pause. They appeared as painted ghosts in the night in their camouflage and encrusted grime. Kessler was reminded of primitive warriors, daubed in warpaint, anointed for battle. He knew he couldn't keep up with them, they were battle elementals and this was

their playground. He didn't deserve to be here, watching them perform their deadly rites to gods of blood and war. They were primeval warriors from another time. He felt vaguely ashamed, as if he had been caught spying on some sacred act.

All of this was so far removed from the realities of war as he was used to it. In space, you got your target in your sights and squeezed the trigger. Then you moved on. The technicalities were the same but the execution was radically different. Down here, in the blood and the dirt, you saw your target's face as his life spilled out over your fist. Starfighter combat was antiseptic, clinical, removed from reality. This was reality. Down here in the real world with dead men all round you.

Kessler felt sick. He leaned against the bunkhouse wall for support, a wave of dizziness washing over him. Suddenly, wanted to be out of this armour, he didn't deserve to wear it, it was suffocating him, accusing him of unworthiness. He felt he was dishonouring it's real owner, the man who'd died in it, the man who'd earned his warrior's death. He fumbled with the hermetic seal on the helmet's neck fastenings and it came free with a hiss of air.

Kessler smelled burned flesh and vomited.

Afterwards, when he'd purged his guts, he looked inside the bunkhouse. Dead men lay everywhere. Most had died in their sleep, denied a warrior's death in battle, but these men weren't true warriors. The true warriors were out there now, sowing death and destruction in the night which they'd claimed for their own.

He heard sounds in the distance, explosions and cries as men were sent to meet the gods, kicking and screaming at the injustice of it all. They didn't deserve the honour they were being granted. Didn't they understand how blessed they were that the Angels of Death were dancing amongst them tonight?

From the sky, Kessler could hear them, the screech of the banshees, calling out for blood and smoke. A shadow, thrown by the moon, passed over his head and for a second he was sure that they had come for him. He reached out, tears streaming down his face, stretching his arms heavenward in a gesture of supplication, he was unworthy, but he was ready. Another shape screamed overhead, and he seemed to recall it's pattern from a distant memory. Then the world opened into flame and he suffered no more.

EPILOGUE

<NETFEED/NEWS> TIE CORPS RETAKES ARGIMILIAR II - HAMMER'S FIST GUERRILLA FORCES EMERGE VICTORIOUS FROM SECRET JUNGLE BASES AND DECIMATE OCCUPATION TROOPS.

VIDEO: The ISD Challenge and her sister ships fly victorious in orbit over Argimiliar II. Swarms of fighter and escort craft stream past the camera.

VOICEOVER: As a new day dawns on Argimiliar II, the Emperor's Hammer has reconquered the world and returned it to it's rightful owners. The ISD Challenge, in company with the ISD Relentless and the Aggressor Strike Force's ISD Grey Wolf, has returned to the scene of its defeat and put right what most consider to be TIE Corps' darkest moment. Rear Admiral Torres, commander of the makeshift Battle Group released this brief statement earlier today:

Rear Admiral David Torres: Today marks the conclusion of a successful venture in Joint mission planning that vindicates the adoption of Command Directive 135 into general Fleet policy. This operation would not have been possible without the dedicated efforts of TIE Corps, Aggressor Strike Force, Hammer's Fist and Intel; all working hand in glove together, without the bickering and petty rivalry that has characterised Emperor's Hammer operations in the past. This Fleet Administration fully believes that without the interoperability forced

on us by the Fleet Commander's decision to go ahead with Joint Operations, we would never have had the understanding of how our sister services operate necessary to pull off an operation of this complexity. A further statement will be issued in due course by Fleet Admiral Kawolski. That is all, ladies and gentlemen.

VIDEO: Smoke rises from several locations within the colony, most notably from the shattered power generator in the colony centre. A shield generator is still intact, so are several turbolaser batteries on the horizon, but without power, they are impotent.

VOICEOVER: The most striking and surprising event surrounding the victory on Argimiliar II was the re-emergence of the believed lost 3rd Battalion. The martyred Stormtroopers were, in fact, far from lost, but were waiting for Fleet's return in improvised bases, deep within the Argimillian jungle. It was largely due to their heroic efforts that the siege was lifted so quickly, catching the Rebel blockade fleet completely off-guard and swinging the balance in TIE Corps' favour as their panicking crews attempted to evacuate the system. The majority of the Rebel ships were slaughtered as they attempted to escape, and almost all of the Rebel transports and assault ships on the surface were captured and quickly drafted into TIE Corps use.

Intelligence Division's involvement in the success of this operation has been alluded to, but of course, such information must remain classified. Fleet knows, but they ain't talking.

<light>

"This one's still alive. Facial burns are pretty bad, he lost his helmet somehow, looks like he got caught in the blast of whatever created that crater."

"Let me see, I got him...yeah, he's salvageable. He'll need bacta treatment though. Better get him shuttled up to orbit before he goes so deep into shock that bacta won't even help him."

"You got him?"

<grunt> "Yeah, he's secured. You see anyone else here?"

"Nahh, just a lot of dead Rebs. Say, isn't this guy one of the 3rd?"

"Are you kidding? Look at that armour, of course he is!"

"You don't suppose he killed all these guys by himself?"

"Nahh, probably they all got hit by that blast."

"Wrong place, wrong time?"

"Yeah, dumbass Stormtroopers!" <laughter>

<Darkness>

Swimming. Cool darkness. Gentle tides, caressing seared flesh. Eyes open. Soft light. Faces.

How long, doctor?

Another four days General. He has regained semi-lucidity for brief spells, but we prefer to keep him under using artificial means, if necessary, in order to stimulate healing.

I want to see this man decorated, Major. He deserves that much at the very least.

Not possible, I'm afraid, General. He is, technically, a deserter, a smuggler and a Rebel defector.

Voices? Familiar. Disturbing.

Bullshit, Major. You and I both know the truth of this matter. This man did what he did out of pure and unselfish motives. He did it for his brothers in arms, but I wouldn't expect a treacherous, backstabbing little Intel shit like you to understand any of that.

On the contrary, General, I understand exactly why he did what he did, that's exactly why we knew how he could be relied upon to react when we pushed the correct buttons. Besides,

we both know that your own motives aren't quite as pure as you'd like everyone to believe. It's your fault he's in this state. You know as well as I do that you should never have allowed him to accompany your attack. He's a starfighter pilot, and an old one, at that. He was a liability and you left him behind when he began to slow your advance.

You little shit.

True, General, but soldiers like you need little shits like me to do your dirty work for you. People who aren't afraid of getting their hands dirty from time to time; and I repeat: He will never be officially recognised for what he did. His involvement will remain secret. We wouldn't want him setting a bad example to anyone else with a conscience now, would we?

<Silence>

Oh relax. He won't be punished. We'll put him somewhere where his... unique talents will be appreciated. Who knows, he may even be grateful?

Excuse me, gentlemen, but the patient's stress levels appear to be increasing. I must ask you to leave now. Nurse, another shot of cortazine.

Darkness.

His cell was bare of all ornament, except for a steel bench jutting from one bulkhead.. A simple, iron grey box, he slumped, withdrawn in the corner. The door opened and someone entered, the hiss of the door closing behind him the only sound.

Kessler looked up. His visitor was wearing the uniform of a Major in Intelligence Division. He had a familiar face. Kessler didn't seem surprised.

"Hello, Kerry."

Kerrigan smiled. "You look like shit, Kess."

Kessler didn't bother to reply.

"Well I suppose I shouldn't expect you to be overjoyed to see me." Kerrigan activated a datapad he'd been carrying under his arm.

"Let's see...Colonel Kyle Cantor Kessler, Service Number TC-WCR-1011, you are formally charged with desertion, smuggling, defection and supplying aid to the enemy. The usual penalty for this sort of thing is death," he smiled. "But I'm sure I don't need to tell you that, do I Kess?"

Kessler dropped his gaze to the deck. "Go to hell, Kerrigan, or whatever your name is."

Kerrigan deactivated the pad and sat himself on the edge of the bench.

"You've responded well to bacta treatment, but I think you've picked up a few more scars to add to your collection."

Kessler raised his gaze and stared Kerrigan in the eyes. For a while, he matched wills with him. Kerrigan didn't flinch.

"You knew they were there all the time, didn't you?"

Major Kerrigan smiled, thin lips drawn tight across perfect teeth. "Of course. It's now standard policy when a world is overrun by the enemy. Fleet Admiral Kawolski's idea, I believe. Secret, of course, but standard."

"So why did you need me, Kerry?"

Kerrigan shrugged. "It's your own fault, Kess. I was going in there alone as per orders to assess the situation until you showed up, all balls and conscience, determined to put right all the sins of the world as you saw them. I figured I could use you just like you were using me. You made it too easy."

"Don't mention it."

Kerrigan's smile widened.

"It really was a brilliant idea, Kessler. We had an assault force on that world for the entire duration of the Rebel occupation and they never knew it. That shield generator was a nasty surprise, though, but in the end, it's presence vindicated the whole plan. Donner's men took

it out without an extensive orbital bombardment or the need for an opposed orbital landing, which would have been tricky in that terrain anyway. Once the shield was knocked out, everything fell apart.” Kerrigan chuckled. “You should have seen the chaos in orbit! The Reb Task Force were actually fighting us to a standstill, but once that shield dropped, they panicked. They couldn’t understand how we’d managed to get an assault force past them and take the colony so quickly. They assumed the colony was lost, but in effect, all Donner’s men had done was kill the power generators and capture the communications uplink. The Rebs broke and ran, and TIE Corps butchered them. The men on the surface saw their fleet running and surrendered almost instantly our TIE Bombers began their attack runs.”

“Sounds like you got it all worked out, Kerrigan.”

Kerrigan nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, yes, I believe we did. Of course, Fleet had to endure a major public relations scandal until the operation was over. We couldn’t exactly broadcast the news that the 3rd was still mostly intact and in hiding on the surface, after all; but on the whole, the operation was a storming success. And the best part is, the Rebs probably still don’t know how we did it, so we can use the same tactic again.” He grinned expansively. “Like I said, it’s standard policy now.”

It was all coming together now, but Kessler still couldn’t understand one thing.

“Why me, Kerry? Why was I so important?”

Kerrigan at least had the grace to look apologetic. “I’m sorry, Kess, but you really weren’t that integral a part of events.”

Kessler sighed. “Figured as much.”

“Look, you were determined to go back there, with or without me. I couldn’t let you mess up my operation, so if I couldn’t deflect you, I had to control you.” He shrugged. “Sure, I could have just turned you over to Military Police but I’ve heard all about your family, you’re as thick as thieves, Kess. I couldn’t guarantee one of your bloody House Cantor Admiral cousins wouldn’t pull strings and have you released, so I kept you along for the ride. As it turns out, you were the perfect fall guy for the sabotage we planted on Argimiliar, and your escape provided endless distractions for the Rebels on the surface.”

“You’re a son of a bitch, Kerrigan.”

Kerrigan tutted disapprovingly. “Now, now, Kess. At least I pointed you in the right direction to find Donner’s men, and I did leave you a tracking beacon so we could find you in case you managed to screw up too much.”

“So that’s where my lighter went?”

“Exactly. Those things will kill you one day, you know that?”

“Spare me, Kerry. So what now?”

Kerrigan picked up his datapad and stood to leave. “Now? You’ll be returned to active service and all charges will be dropped. You won’t be put in a command position, of course, but you can keep your rank.” He stopped as the door to the cell hissed open. “I understand Tornado Squadron on the Challenge have a few spaces open for seasoned pilots.”

So this was where he ended up, right back where he began? He left the Challenge a Wing Commander, he returns as a fighter pilot? Funny how things worked out...

“I’ll see if I have an opening in my diary.”

Kerrigan laughed, then paused, serious for a second. “Good luck, Colonel. You do deserve better friends than me.” And with that he was gone.

Kessler made himself comfortable and waited patiently. Some things were inevitable. He seemed destined to live in the cockpit of a starfighter. He waited. Eventually, someone came for him.

Captain Striker looked up from the training report with barely concealed annoyance. “What is it?”

The door to the office of the Tornado Squadron commanding officer opened with a hiss of pneumatics and Lieutenant Commander Horn entered breathlessly.

“Sorry to disturb you, but some Colonel is on his way in, sir.”

Striker groaned. “A Colonel? We don’t have any Colonels onboard! Hell, Wing Commander Taliesin’s only a Lieutenant Colonel....what’s he here for? An inspection? Who is he?”

“Sorry, sir, don’t know, but he’s looking over the ships in the hangar. I just saw him talking to Chief Tech Toranaga, they seem to know each other.”

“It can’t be an inspection! We’re not due our quarterly until next month, you sure you didn’t recognise him? There aren’t that many TIE Corps Colonels around. Was he TIE Corps?” Striker stood and straightened his uniform, looking about for his cap. “Where’s my cap?”

“On your locker, sir. And all I can say is he’s pretty old-looking and he had a chestful of medals and battle ribbons.” Striker gave Horn a sideways glance. “Not as many battle ribbons as you though, sir” Horn added quickly. “Whatever he’s here for, it looks official.”

Striker sighed. “Well let’s get this over with.” He stepped outside onto the hangar deck and spotted the offending officer immediately. He appeared to be in his mid forties, hair shot through with grey and a face that seemed to have drawn more than its fair share of scars.

Striker stopped just short of the tall newcomer and coughed politely. Once he had his visitor’s attention, he saluted smartly. “Captain Striker, Commanding Officer of Tornado Squadron, at your service, sir. How may I help you?”

The newcomer returned the salute. “Colonel Kessler, reporting as ordered, Captain.” He handed over a movement order.

Striker seemed confused, but to give him his credit, he recovered quickly. “Colonel Kessler? Wasn’t there a Major Kessler who commanded Tornado a few years ago?”

Kessler smiled. “The very same, son. Made it to Colonel and Wing Commander before I retired.” he waited while Striker studied the movement order. Striker’s eyes boggled.

“You’ve been reassigned here?”

Kessler’s grin broadened. “Yeah, makes you think doesn’t it? Where do you want me, Captain?”

Striker gave up. “Colonel...you’re an ex-Flag Officer and they put you in a Flight Member’s slot? Who the hell did you piss off?”

Kessler put his arm around Striker’s shoulder and led him off to the bar. “More people than you ever met in your entire life, son. But anyway, I was wondering if my old quarters were still available? You know, the cabin next to the Officer’s Mess turbolift?”

“The one with the en suite shower and toilet facilities that didn’t get taken out at our last refit? Well, we have Lieutenant Veers in there at the moment, but...”

Kessler nodded, smiling broadly. “That’s the one, but we can talk about that later. Did I ever introduce you to my cousin, Rear Admiral David Torres? He used to be Commander of Inferno Squadron. Do you know, I believe he’s Commodore of this very ship now?”

Striker began to get the feeling that things were only starting to get complicated.

CMDR/Col. Kessler/Tornado/WingX/ISD Chal

**Imperial Navy Pilot Record
Personal Background Information
(Imperial Security Bureau)**

Name: David Lundgren
Position/Rank: Sub Lieutenant The Z / Inferno Squadron
Scandoc Transmission Code (Callsign):Hywel
Sex (M/F): Male
Race:Human
Date of Birth:N/A
Place of Birth (Please include Homeworld):
Marital Status (Single, Married, Divorced, Separated):Single
Family: Died in a rebel raid.
Social Status (Destitute, Poor, Well-to-do, Wealthy, Nobility):Well-to-do
Significant Events of Childhood & Adolescence: His parents died in a rebel raid when he was 15
Significant Events of Adulthood:Joined the Empire strike fleet when he was 20 and ended up on the ISD Challenge
Alignment & Attitude:He gets angry very easy.
Former Occupations (if any):None
Hobbies: Slaughter rebels
Phobias & Allergies: Allergies: Rebels
Personal views of the Empire (and Emperor's Hammer): Nothing special
Reason for applying to the Emperor's Hammer Elite Strike Fleet: Because his parents where brutally slaughtered by some rebels.
Other comments or information (optional):Let's burn!

I hereby confirm that the above information is legitimate and accurate to the best of my knowledge.

Signature:David Lundgren
Date:14/4-99 kl 19:13

FL/LT Space Ace/Thunder 2-1/WingX/Isd Challenge

The ISD Challenge slid through the blackness of space like an arrow speeding towards its mark. Onboard Lieutenant space ace was awakened by the ships intercom. "Lieutenant Space Ace?" It was Corran Force, commander of Thunder Squadron.

"Yes sir?" Space Ace replied.

"Could you please report to my office with your flight gear?"

"Yes sir. Is there trouble?"

"I will brief you when you arrive."

"On my way sir"

Space Ace got dressed quickly knowing from the tone of the Commander's voice that it was urgent. When Space Ace had joined thunder 2 months earlier Corran force had been his flight leader so he knew him pretty well. When Corran became Thunder Commander he named space ace as his replacement for flight leader of flight 2. Space ace finished dressing grab his flight gear and left his quarters. As he was walking down the corridor towards the commander's office he ran into captain jack the flight leader of flight 3 and saluted.

"At ease Lieutenant." Jack said

"Space Ace relaxed. "So where are you going this late Captain?"

"Commander called me to his office."

“Same here. Know what this is about?” Space ace asked.

“No but I’m sure we will find out soon.”

Together they continued down the corridor when they arrived the commander was at his desk.

“Space Ace, Jack come in.”

Space ace saluted “Sir.”

Corran force stood up from his desk “Relax Lieutenant this is a informal briefing have a seat you two.”

As he sat Space Ace asked “what’s this about commander?”

“I will get to that but first Jack this briefing is for Space but I wanted you here because I want my flight leaders to always know what’s going on.”

“Of course” Jack replied.

Corran force faced space ace. “Lieutenant we have a problem. About an hour ago the Challenge’s Scout ship jumped one system ahead to make sure the area was clear. When they got there the scanners picked up a bunch of rebel craft in the area, Following imperial procedures the jumped back to report in. I need you to make a run out there make a detailed scanner sweep on what’s there and report in. Any questions?”

“Yes sir what kind of resistance can I expect?”

“The captain of the scout ship reported that he thought he seen about a dozen fighters but were not sure what type. But under no circumstances do you get engaged in combat we need this info.”

“Yes sir”

“Oh Space ace good luck.”

“Thank you sir”

Space ace got to his TIE defender 5 minutes latter and got her powered and activated his COM unit.

“Challenge control this is snoop flight I’m all systems green.”

“Copy that snoop flight your cleared to launch good luck Lieutenant.”

“Thank you control see you shortly.” At that space ace powered up his repulsors and headed out of the hanger.

“ Challenge departure this is snoop flight I am clear and outbound “

“Copy that Snoop Flight your hyper space vector is 612 by 435 by 534 Read back please”

“Copy departure vectors are 612 by 435 by 534”

“Copy that snoop flight good luck departure out”

“Snoop flight out”

Space ace hated all this radio chatter but for a solo mission it was required. Entering the

vectors into his nave computer space ace changed course. When the nav computer beeped he pulled back the hyper drive levers and watched the stars turn to lines.

The flight had taken 20 minutes and space ace was now leaving hyperspace. As he entered normal space his sensors came alive with rebel contacts. Space ace spoke into his voice recorder for a vocal record of what he saw

“Sensors detect 12 star fighters X-wing class 2 cap ships Corvette class 8 containers and a class 3 platform I am beginning my inspection run” At that he dumped all the power from his lasers into engines ran his shields at minimum recharge and punched it to full throttle.

“Im inspecting the platform it seems to be a manufacturing plant.” Space ace banked hard right as the platform fired turbo lasers at him ”The corvettes appear empty earthier they’re waiting to load cargo or their protection for the platform. The containers are holding packed A-wing star fighters it looks like we hit the jackpot.”

Just then the X-Wings turned towards him ”The X-wings have noticed me I’m making a run for it.” His COM unit cracked to life on a unencoded channel “You imperial slug you can run but you cant hide.”

“So rebal Scum” Space ace replied ”You show your teeth how about I kick them in for you.”

The X-Wing pilot was quiet for a minute then he spoke “It can’t be Gavin is that you?” At that space ace froze for a second “How did you know my name?”

“Gavin it’s me Corran.”

Space Ace turned white it was his brother Corran Horn trader to the empire and to him. Space ace noticed a sound his nav computer was ready and as he entered hyper space he thought its time the commander hear the classified truth. When he arrived back to the ship he reported directly to the commander’s office to find the commander captain jack and Major Striker Wing X’s wing commander there. He saluted.

“At ease Lieutenant” Striker said” What have you got to report”

“Well sir “ Space ace started “we found a A-wing manufacturing sight there are currently 2 corvettes there plus a full squadron of X-Wings.”

“Any thing else”

“Yes sir I have reason to believe the x-wings are Rogue Squadron”

“How so?”

“What I am about to say is extremely classified and can’t leave this room.”

“Of course” striker said

“Well sir lets start with my true name it is Gavin Horn during my time in the regular navy I was a squadron commander aboard the Relentless. At that the room got silent

Finely jack spoke” you’re supposed to be dead. I remember the story you were taking your squadron out on a routine patrol when your Tie Advanced exploded”

“That’s the story” Space Ace replied ”But what really happened is at the time I joined the navy my brother was a officer in CorSec.”

Excuse me L.T striker said, " What is CorSec?"

“Correlian security sir it is the planet wide security force on my homeworld of Corellia. Any ways when CorSec was disbanded I found out my brother had joined the Rebal alliance as a member of Rogue squadron. The captain of the Relentless knew when it came out that my life as I pilot would be over so he told me about the Emperor’s Hammer and when I said I was interested we gave me a new identity and rank. Then we sent my fighter out on that mission remotely controlled set to detonate at a certain time. I was in a cloaked shuttle and snuck off.”

“What about your brother?” force asked

“Sir when I was on the mission I was taunting one of the X-Wing pilots and my brother contacted me recognizing my voice.”

“Good enough Lieutenant, lets plan this mission”

TO BE CONTINUED

FL/LT Space Ace/Thunder 2-1/WingX/Isd Chal

Imperial Navy Pilot Record
Personal Background information
(Imperial Security Bureau)

Name: Talin Andronicus

Rank: Sub-Lt. (TIE Corps) Acolyte (Dark Brotherhood)

Current Assignment: Yod Squadron, Wing IV

Scandoc Transmission Code (E-Mail): mad_dog_mcd@tdef.freemove.co.uk

Sex (M/F): Male, but not afraid to show his feminine side. ?

Race: Scottish (Human off-shoot; originated on planet Scotti IV)

Date of Birth: 30/07/80 (30th July 1980, for all mm/dd/yy date types out there)

Place of Birth (Please include Homeworld): Virine, Scotti IV

Marital Status (Single, Married, Divorced, Separated): Single (and hating it :-P. Any offers by attractive female officers should be directed to the e-mail address above).

Family: Father (deceased), Mother (slave to corrupt rebel-ruled Scotti IV government), 3 brothers, 2 sisters, 13 nephews & nieces (all true BTW)

Social Status (Destitute, Poor, Well-to-do, Wealthy, Nobility): Depends on what day it is...

Quote: “All you need in life are the three Ms; Music, Money and the Mperor’s Hammer!”

Significant Events of Childhood & Adolescence: At the age of eleven, Talin’s father (a Jedi Master in hiding from the Empire) was captured and killed by Darth Vader. Vader found his son, Talin, and decided to train him in the ways of the Dark Side (Vader sensed that Talin had a ‘dark edge’). He begun training with Vader, but before he could begin his advanced raining, Vader was called away...

...To Endor.

When the news got back (no prizes for guessing what it was [Here's a hint; download Newsletter 18]), Talin got the first liner off Coruscant and went as far as his money and minor influence could take him. He ended up on a planet named Balenarphus IV, a backwater trade world in the Mid-Rim, working as a courier pilot.

Significant Events of Adulthood: After working on Balenarphus for a few years, he was approached by a Dark Brotherhood member. The Brotherhood had apparently been keeping an eye on Andronicus since his departure from Vader's entourage, and had decided to try to recruit him. Andronicus accepted, and joined the Order of the Krath as a member of House Gladius.

About a week later, a TIE Corps Recruitment Officer approached him, stating that his piloting skills were well known on Balenarphus. The Recruitment Officer asked if the young Dark Jedi wished to sign up as a military officer. He accepted. Within several days of being stationed as a Cadet in Yod Squadron, he had completed his pilot training and received the rank of Sub-Lieutenant.

Alignment & Attitude: A true Imperial through and through, but like any native of Scotti, he knows how to have fun and gets on well with his fellow pilots and Jedi.

Former Occupations (if any): Courier pilot, member of Dark Lord's cadre of Jedi students.

Hobbies: Tabletop holographic battle simulations, Music (listens to a strange form of music called 'Rock'), VDU-based holographic entertainment simulations (video games).

Tragedies: The death of Lord Vader, finding out his father was a corrupt light-side Jedi.

Phobias & Allergies: No real phobias, no real allergies (AFAIK)

Personal views of the Empire (and Emperor's Hammer): The Empire is the only true path to order. I can't say I'm as alien-biased as some people in the Empire, however.

As for the EH, it is a fleet of ships and men that should strike fear into the hearts of any Rebel scum. I am truly proud to be in its service.

Reason for applying to the Emperor's Hammer Elite Strike Fleet: In SW terms, I came to the EH through my joining the Dark Brotherhood and displaying remarkable flying talents. In RL terms, I joined because I was starting to know some of the people through IRC. Also, I have an alter ego that is a member of an ally group of the EH (the Galactic Empire, found at <http://www.pangea.ca/~ge/>, a good place to join up with to learn some discipline), and I decided I wanted to be a member of both the top Imperial groups on the net!

Other comments or information (optional): I have rapidly-developing website design skills. To see a site I designed for the Squadron in the galactic Empire I am a member of, go to <http://www.tdef.freemove.co.uk>.

I hereby confirm that the above information is legitimate and accurate to the best of my knowledge.

Signature: Sub-Lt. Talin Andronicus

Date: 15/4/99

file archives

The Executive Officer herein posts descriptions of files attached to this newsletter.

supergam.jpg - An article on the Emperor's Hammer from one of Germany's premier computer magazines. Kudos to Callista for her work in getting the EH some incredible press!

rpgsta~1.zip - An archive of RPG statistics from FL/LT Zsinj/Samekh 3-1/Wing V/SSSD Sov

iwto.jpg - The new Infiltrator Wing Training Officer banner, by WC-FOA-IOA/GN Wolly/Wing I/SSSD Sov

cato.jpg - The new banner for the Command Attache to the Training Officer, by WC-FOA-IOA/GN Wolly/Wing I/SSSD Sov

iwbattle.mim - A collection of recent Infiltrator Wing battles presented by IWTO/CG Depriest/PLT Destrier/IW

ehgraphic.jpg - A new image by JH Matthew D'Varak (Obelisk) House Senryaku of Aquillas

fleet order of battle

FLEET COMMANDER'S NOTES:

Herein are presented the Capital Ships of the Fleet as recognized by the Fleet Commander. Only those Capital Ships presented below in **boldface** are assigned Emperor's Hammer Members as crew, pilots, etc. (i.e. TIE Corps pilots). Other Capital Ships in the Fleet are assumed to have 'standard Imperial crews' (i.e. non-players).

The SubGroup vessels presented below are also manned with their respective SubGroup Members. Emperor's Hammer Members desiring more specific information on the capabilities of each of the Emperor's Hammer capital ships should review the EH Fleet Manual...

Flagship/Escort

SSSD Sovereign (SSSD Sov)

Aggressor Strike Force

ISD Grey Wolf (ISD GWlf)

ISD Intrepid (ISD Int)

VSD Aggressor (VSD Agg)

VSD Gilded Claw

M/FRG Implacable

M/FRG Rage

M/INT Vertex

ESC Corrupter

TFC Virulence

4 Strike Cruisers

12 Carrack Light Cruisers

6 Corvettes

22 Assault Transports

dozens of dedicated transports, tugs & freighters

BattleGroup I

ISD Colossus (ISD Col)

VSD Formidable

VSD Monitor
M/FRG Imperator
M/FRG Ardent
M/FRG Onamo
ESC Iron Fist
3 Strike Cruisers
7 Carrack Light Cruisers
10 Corvettes
20 Assault Transports
dozens of dedicated transports, tugs & freighters

BattleGroup II

ISD Relentless (ISD Rel)
VSD Ravager
VSD Stalwart
M/FRG Invader
M/FRG Fogger
M/INT Harpax II
TFC Roxanna
M/CRV Phantom (Deep Recon)
4 Strike Cruisers
12 Carrack Light Cruisers
6 Corvettes
18 Assault Transports
dozens of dedicated transports, tugs & freighters

Auroran Home Guard Battlegroup

The majority of the Auroran Home Guard ships can be found either in the Aurora System (see the EH Systems Manual) or on extended patrol nearby...The Homeworld of the Emperor's Hammer Strike Fleet is always defended in these uncertain times...

Torpedo Sphere, Empress Teta (TS Emp Teta)
ISD Challenge (ISD Chal)
ISD Hammer (ISD Hamr)
ISD Warrior (ISD Warr)
VSD Bombard
VSD Rapier
VSD Crusader
VSD Shield
M/INT Fairchild
3 Modified Frigates (hospital/tender M/FRGs)
5 Strike Cruisers
5 Escort Carriers (TIE Fighter shuttles)
5 Modular Taskforce Cruisers (one w/each module type)
8 Dreadnaught Cruisers
13 Carrack Light Cruisers
17 Corvettes

25 System Patrol Craft
60 Skipray Blastboats
120 Assault Transports
hundreds of dedicated transports, tugs & freighters

Auxiliary (SubGroup) Vessels

Dark Brotherhood

SSD Avenger (SSD Avr)
ISD Subjugator (ISD Sub)

Hammer's Fist Stormtrooper Legion

DREAD Retribution (DREAD Ret)
LCF Excelsior (LCF Exc)
LCF Friggia (LCF Frig)
LCF Falcon's Eye (LCF Falc)

The Guild

Star Galleon IvanHoe (SGAL Ivan)

EH Directorate BattleFleet

M/ISD Tiger's Claw
INT*2
VSD*4
DREAD*2
ESC*2
M/VSD-II Firebat

Aurora System

AHG already commissioned

Phare system

VSD Rampart
FRG Raging Bull
FRG Hornet's Nest
4 Carrack Cruisers

Lyarna System

VSD Concorde
FRG Veneable

FRG Assault
4 Carrack Cruisers

Carrida System

VSD Hood
FRG Pompous
FRG Arrogant
4 Carrack Cruisers

Heir System

VSD Conquest
FRG Conquistador
FRG Cortes
4 Carrack Cruisers

Karana System

VSD Ronin
FRG Balboa
FRG Snake
4 Carrack Cruisers

Setii System

VSD Raptor
FRG Rex
FRG Galimimus
4 Carrack Cruisers

Pirath System

VSD Patriot
FRG Rebellion-Crusher
FRG PoliceMan
4 Carrack Cruisers

Minos Cluster Battle Fleet

ISD Crimson Blade
ISD Crimson Dagger
VSD Crimson Sword
VSD Crimson Knife
VSD Crimson Knight
VSD Crimson Guard
16 Carrack Cruisers

Infiltrator Wing

Task Force I

MC90 Bismarck
Assault FRG Alemene
FRG Exeter
Gunship Centurion
Gunship Scorpion
Gunship Bellum
Corvette Vanquish

Task Force II

MC80b Saratoga
FRG Repulse
FRG Vindictive
Corvette Meteor
Corvette Daring

Task Force III

MC60 Warhammer
Assault FRG Leander
Gunship Conquestor
Gunship Scimitar
Corvette Harlow

Task Force IV (Stationary Defense)

M/PLT Destrier
Corvette Scythe
Corvette Akron
Corvette Kraken

Intelligence Division

Imperial Dungeon Ship Lichtor V (DGN LichV)
FRG Stormwind (FRG Storm)
Corvette Grau (Heimlichkeit Strike Team)
Corvette Guren (Nazgul Strike Team)
Corvette Rune (Jaeger Strike Team)
Corvette Ietra (Moerder Strike Team)

Corporate Division Picket Fleet Flagships

VSD Rhadamanthus (Corporate Division Flagship)

EH Advanced Guard

Core Galaxy Systems Dreadnaught Tranquility

Bases of Operations

Aurora System

The FAC Triad (Support PLTs for the SSSD Sovereign)
Dark Hall on Eos (Dark Brotherhood HQ/Homeworld)
PLT Stiletto (Headquarters of the Intelligence Division)
PLT Dagger (Project Reno Central Command)
PLT Destrier (IW Command Platform)

Phare System

M/PLT Daedalus (Assault Platform/Pilot Training Center)
M/PLT Haven (IW Command Platform/EH Recreation Center)
PLT Revenge (Headquarters of the Corporate Division)

Lyarna System

Lyarna Station - M/PLT (Guild Station/Outpost)

Heir System

PLT Cerlun - M/PLT - FAC (Guild HQ)

Carrida System

PLT Declaration (Hammer's Fist HQ)

pilot manuals

This document contains the current list of EH related files.

The Emperor's Hammer Training Manual

version 4.0

By GA Ronin, FA Paladin (ret.), and SA Havok

This is the most important manual for all the EH members. It contains all general information about the Emperor's Hammer ranks, positions, medals, ID lines, everything. It's a must for every EH member!

Sites:

<http://members.aol.com/gmfchuck/tm/trainm.htm>

The Emperor's Hammer Fleet Manual

version 3.0

By GA Ronin and SA Havok

Contains detailed descriptions of all the Emperor's Hammer's starships and starfighters. Also a good manual to read. Especially valuable information to the fiction writers.

Sites:

<http://sco.is-god.com/flt-man/>

IWATS Help file

Sites:

<http://members.aol.com/garonin/iwats.hlp>

<ftp://narsissi.tky.hut.fi/hammer/other/iwats.hlp>

Uniform Template Help file

Sites:

<http://members.aol.com/garonin/uniform.hlp>

<ftp://narsissi.tky.hut.fi/hammer/other/uniform.hlp>

The Map of the Empire and Emperor's Hammer Territories

Sites:

<http://members.aol.com/garonin/eh-camp1.zip>

<ftp://narsissi.tky.hut.fi/hammer/other/eh-camp1.zip>

Emperor's Hammer AVI Logo

Sites:

<http://members.aol.com/garonin/emplogo.zip>

<ftp://narsissi.tky.hut.fi/hammer/other/emplogo.zip>

Emperor Palpatine & Lords of the Sith WAV files

Sites:

<http://members.aol.com/garonin/imp-sds.zip>

<ftp://narsissi.tky.hut.fi/hammer/other/imp-sds.zip>

The Emperor's Hammer Operations Manual

version 2.0

By FA Dev

Another essential manual for everyone interested in uniforms (practically almost everyone). It also contains information about medals.

Sites:

<http://faraday.clas.virginia.edu/~mrw3p/images/quix/ops-man.zip>

The Emperor's Hammer Systems Manual

version 3.0

By GA Ronin and SA Havok

The Systems Manual has very detailed information about all the Emperor's Hammer star systems. Very essential to the fiction writers.

Sites:

<http://home.fuse.net/havok/sys-man.htm>

TIE Fighter CD Bonus Goal Help file

By FA Compton

Sites:

<http://members.aol.com/garonin/tiecd.hlp>

<ftp://narsissi.tky.hut.fi/hammer/other/tiecd.hlp>

The Fleet Commander's Dark Brotherhood Grant of Arms

Sites:

<http://members.aol.com/garonin/ga-grant.zip>

<ftp://narsissi.tky.hut.fi/hammer/other/ga-grant.zip>

Poster Art

Sites:

<http://members.aol.com/garonin/eh-postr.zip>

<ftp://narsissi.tky.hut.fi/hammer/other/eh-postr.zip>

Tie Fighter Missing Man Formation AVI

Sites:

<http://members.aol.com/garonin/missing.zip>

<ftp://narsissi.tky.hut.fi/hammer/other/missing.zip>

If you have any questions please contact the Logistics Officer.

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