

### Outer Sectors XIII

Swarms of TIE Fighters flashed through the space around the Imperial fuel depot. The grey dagger of the VSD Warhammer hung close overhead. Explosions danced shadows across the hull of the depot's platform. Still more fighters flew on their twisting, turning paths between deadly green laser bolts and brightly burning torpedoes.

One of the fighters passes by now; the distinctive, five-pointed wings of an Assault Gunboat. In the cockpit, Lieutenant Commander Muscat of Iota Squadron.

Muscat's hands raced over the controls, adjusting shield distribution, dumping cannon energy to boost their strength, and all the time weaving through turbolaser fire. Beneath him, two Dreadnoughts were blasting away at the Warhammer, the platform, and – critically – the supply shuttles bringing the Victory-class Star Destroyer its much needed fuel rods.

A flicker of motion in his peripheral vision, and Muscat switched focus. Whipping his flight stick to the right, moving his craft towards the fast-moving opponent. Lining up for the shot -

His green lasers struck home, tearing through the cockpit and cutting off one of the solar panels.

The solar panels of an Imperial TIE Interceptor.

From the bridge of the Warhammer, Captain Vortagh witnessed the display. He hadn't been happy about having to stop for fuel; and he was much less happy that the Rebellion had used the opportunity for an attack. What made him *furious* was that they were attacking with stolen Imperial craft.

He scanned the tactical display in front of him. The Rebels were using Imperial IFF codes, and the display was awash with red icons. Red for friendly craft. Red, too, for the enemy. Tactical were doing all they could, but there was no avoiding the confusion such a trick caused.

“Commander La Forge?” Vortagh called to his first officer. “Instruct Iota Squadron to concentrate fire on the nearest Dreadnought. Dumb-fire their warheads towards the engines. And tell Zeta - “ he cut off as a tremor rocked the bridge - “ Tell Zeta to take out those Bombers, they're starting to annoy me.”

La Forge relayed the instructions, then turned to his superior.

“Sir?”

Vortagh looked over to him.

“Yes, Commander?”

“I can't help wondering, Sir – but where did the Rebels acquire TIEs in such number? It's not even that they're older models – they have full shielding.” Shields were only fitted on regular TIE craft after the Battle of Endor, and only in the past seven years had they become standard.

“Hmm.” Vortagh mused. “The pirates had many of our fighters, too – most notably the very Gunboats that Lieutenant Commander Muscat and his squadron are using today.”

“That still doesn't explain where these came from. And the quantity – the pirates had a great deal

less, from the Nemesis logs I've studied.”

“Other Imperial factions, maybe?”

“You don't think - “ La Forge hesitated - “it's got anything to do with Geonosis? With Grand Admiral Daemon's uniform?”

“That uniform could have belonged to anyone, even tailored specially for us to find.” Vortagh said firmly. “This bridge is not the place for such speculation and rumour. Particularly not,” as another hit shook the ship, “when we have scores of torpedoes heading towards our increasingly stretched shields.”

“Alex, on me! Go for a torp run. Target the engines, dumb-fire.”

“Yes, sir! Following your lead.” Cody Alex pulled back on his stick to follow his squad leader. Toggling his targeting system to warheads, he switched off his CMD. While this meant the proton torpedoes would have no guidance, it made it that much harder for the enemy Dreadnought to spot and intercept them. Sticking tight to Muscat's tail, Alex copied each manoeuvre his superior made.

It was a tactic they had been practising for hours in the simulator: one craft would fly lead, taking the fire and the attention of enemy gunners, while the second would follow closely enough to appear as one ship on the enemy sensor screens. This gave the second craft space to target vital systems on the enemy capital ships. The Assault Gunboat's heavier shielding and lower top speed made it ideal for such a technique; just as Alex was doing now.

The two craft hurtled as one towards the aft of the Dreadnought. “In range... Two away – four – pull up!”

“Confirm four hits to the engines,” Muscat called. “Good work! Ready to switch?”

Alex glanced out of his viewscreen back at the enemy starship. “Negative, it's gonna blow! Scatter and clear!”

The two Gunboats broke from their tandem flight, and raced in opposite directions away from the stricken Dreadnought. Where the torpedoes had hit, explosions ripped through the entire aft section of the ship. Lights were flickering off throughout the vessel. A massive explosion tore the engines from the midsection, and flames licked the hull as the ship vented atmosphere. The engines themselves exploded, leaving what remained of the rest of the ship a charred husk.

“Commander, this is Iota Leader. Scratch one Dreadnought.”

“Nice work, Muscat. Care for a repeat?”

“We're on it. Cody, you take lead.”

“Sir, I've got two on my tail!”

“Easy, I have them.” Muscat brought up a targeting profile for the first of Alex's attackers.

“Sir, I can't shake them!”

A chill passed down Muscat's spine. How many pilots had shouted that to him, over the comm?  
*How many have survived?*

One of the attackers, another Interceptor, flew straight into Muscat's path and was duly shredded by his lasers. The speed of approach, though, meant that some of the debris bounced Muscat's fighter off course, spinning away from Alex and the other Interceptor. Briefly out of control, Muscat wrestled with the controls to point himself back into the action, but it gave the Rebel pilot a clear moment...

Three astern, Muscat and the enemy TIE fired at once. Muscat's shots disintegrated the faster craft. For a moment, the flash obscured his vision, and he couldn't see his wingmate.

"Cody?"

The blast cleared, and Muscat saw what was left of Alex's fighter. The primary wing, directly above the cockpit, was missing; the port wing was melted off halfway. But the cockpit was intact.

"Ensign Alex? Report!" Muscat repeated.

"...I'm here, sir. The blast scrambled my comm. I'm OK but I'm out of this fight."

"I'll cover you back to the hangar. Rather you than me when the Captain sees what you've done to his toy!"

"I think right now he's more worried about a bigger toy – there's still a Dreadnought beating up the Warhammer."

"Right. Meet you in the debriefing room."

Alex's crippled Gunboat limped in towards the hangar of the Warhammer, where a tractor beam was waiting to grapple on and bring the craft to safety. Muscat inverted, then flew back towards the remaining enemy capital ship. It had moved closer than before, and now it was in range of the lasers on the platform. *A Dreadnought, and a platform... reminds me of a time I'd rather forget.* He had been held prisoner for two weeks by the Rebellion, and only a daring rescue by Captain Vortagh had saved him from execution. *Only this time, the platform's on my side – which gives me an edge.*

Checking his shields, he brought up his warhead launch system. A look at his CMD changed his mind, and he switched back to lasers. *Too close for a warhead, it'd damage the platform as well. Dammit, I wish Draz was here.* Lieutenant Drazhar, the squadron's XO, was due back from leave any day now, and was a skilled pilot.

As soon as his targeting box lit up green, he started shooting. His craft spat green light at the Dreadnought, whose shields were showing the pressure from the platform's bombardment. Dancing between turbolaser bolts from the Dreadnought, Muscat switched to ion cannons. Rather than causing structural damage, ion cannons took out the electrical systems of the target, effectively disabling them. Sparks flashed around the Dreadnought's hull and, finally, the firing stopped. The red glow of its engines faded.

"Good thinking, Muscat. Help Zeta with the fighters. We're a few shuttles short of a full fuel load."

"Acknowledged, sir, on my way."

"And Captain Vortagh wants to know just why you let your kids smash up their toys like that."

A smile played across Muscat's face. "Send my apologies to the Captain, and ask how the door-widening programme is going." He targeted the nearest enemy fighter, switched back to lasers, and set off.

"Tactical, report."

"The last of the Rebel fighters are being picked off now, sir. The disabled Dreadnought is being prepped for tow away from the fuel depot."

"Good. Once the Rebs are destroyed, recall the fighters." Vortagh looked out from the Captain's chair.

"And not a scratch on our hull, sir." La Forge chipped in.

"Maybe not, Commander, but the location of the fuel depot is compromised. We'll have to arrange an evacuation."

"What of the Dreadnought?"

"A shame to waste potentially useful hardware, but we can't crew it right now. Once it's been towed far enough away from the platform, we'll destroy it."

"Captain Vortagh!" The tactical officer called out from the other side of the bridge. "We have a shuttle exiting hyperspace."

"On screen. Comms, get an IFF – and do it early this time."

"Sir – it's Lieutenant Drazhar, returning from leave."

"Put me through." A hologram of Drazhar appeared in miniature in front of Vortagh. "Lieutenant Drazhar, welcome back from leave."

"Thank you, sir. Did I miss much?"

"No, Lieutenant. Not at all. You have docking clearance."

"Yes, sir."

Vortagh turned to La Forge. "Get down to the debriefing room. And see to it that Lieutenant Drazhar is brought up to date." He turned to the tactical officer. "Recall the fighters. Navigation? Plot our jump back to our planned course." *Still unanswered questions here. But for now, they can wait.*