

Operation Deep Strike:
The Aftermath Of Contruum – Part One
Lieutenant Commander Muscat

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...

After a daring strike deep into Rebel-held territory, the ISD CHIMAERA has succeeded in destroying its target: the shipyards at Contruum.

Badly damaged in the battle, the Chimaera is crippled. As the ship waits on emergency power, unable to escape to the safety of hyperspace, Alpha and Iota squadrons are returning to their mothership after finishing the shipyard's remaining fighters...

“Sir, we're not getting a response from the tractor beam controller.”

Muscat checked his own display: sure enough, there was not the normal “Activate tractor beam to enter hangar” request. “Copy that, Lieutenant. Looks like we're going in manually. Lieutenant Stark?”

“Acknowledged, Sir. Alpha Squadron, take it slow.”

The four TIE Interceptors of Alpha Squadron swung round towards the primary docking bay of the Star Destroyer. Muscat watched from his cockpit as they oh-so-slowly edged towards the gaping hole in the *Chimaera's* belly, eventually disappearing into the superstructure itself. He called his own squad to follow suit, and they headed towards the bay. Lieutenant Drazhar, on his left wing, commed him.

“Sir, what do you think has happened?”

Muscat looked up again at the ship. “Well, if we're lucky, Lieutenant, it's just a temporary power loss. If we're not...”

“Sir, get in here quickly! We have a situation!” Stark's voice was panicked.

“Calm down, Lieutenant, I am on my way. Iota Squadron, initiate manual docking procedures. Don't go for a full shutdown though – I get the feeling we might need a quick escape route.”

His quartet passed through the magcon field, protecting the hangar bay from the vacuum of space. Except...

“Stark, why is the magcon field not powered up?”

“That's the situation, sir. The ship has lost almost all power. All nonessential systems are powered down.”

“I'm sure the hangar crew wouldn't consider that field nonessential, Lieutenant. Get your squad to jury-rig a power source for it.” Muscat dipped his fighter's nose down, and eased into his fighter's rack. “Iota Squad, when you're down pop your lids but leave your flight suits on. There's no atmosphere in the hangar bay. Join me down there.”

“You mean to say this ship has no power at all?”

“Apart from basic life-support and minimal lighting, Ensign, no.”

“So we're sitting ducks, in the middle of Rebel space, and we've just blown up one of their shipyards. Great, just great,” Drazhar piped up.

“We can't reach anyone on the comlink. The internal system must be down.” Stark looked up from the makeshift control desk they had assembled in one corner of the hangar. “We could try using the comm from one of our fighters, it might get through better.” The desk itself was little more than the small collection of consoles that still worked, were able to be moved, and (because of Drazhar's insistence) were the right shade of gunmetal grey. The consoles were cobbled together using spare TIE parts and anything else to hand. It wasn't pretty, but it was functional. Barely.

Muscat nodded. “Do it. We need to reach Commander La Forge.” Stark moved to his fighter, carrying one end of a patch cable. The other end was attached somewhere in the desk. It was best not to enquire further as to where. “And make sure, if you take your flight suit off – have a rebreather to hand. If the magcon fails we can't afford to be caught short.” The magcon field was powered again, after Stark had been able to hardwire it to the drive system of a spare TIE Fighter. The system worked, but sparked occasionally causing fluctuations in the field. Should the field fail, the hangar would be left without atmosphere. Muscat had taken the precautions of not trying to open the internal hangar doors, risking a loss of atmosphere throughout the ship. Not that they could have opened the doors anyway, without power to them.

Once Stark had connected the cable, he called out to Muscat. “Sir, comms should be operational.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. Let's see...” He gingerly pressed a button. “Lieutenant Commander Muscat to Commander La Forge, do you copy?” Pause. “Muscat to the rest of the Chimaera, anyone there?”

“...e have no power here... can you hear us? I said, we have no power here!”

“Who am I speaking to?”

“Dodd, sir. We're on the auxiliary bridge.”

“I need to speak to Commander La Forge.”

“Er, he's in the medical unit, sir... I can't even patch you through, we don't have any power...”

“I am aware of the power situation, Dodd. We're quite happy, sitting here in the hangar with the threat of no atmosphere. In fact, you could join us if you wanted! Now get me Commander La Forge!”

“Y...yes, sir.” The operative known as Dodd turned from his station and headed towards the manual access ladder. Even as he did so, a head appeared, followed by a torso and then the legs of the Commander.

“Problems with the new accommodation, Lieutenant Commander Muscat?”

“Yes, sir! Drazhar doesn't like the colour scheme at all, and we were hoping for a stimtea machine in the corner.”

“Well, you'll have to survive on caff. Report!”

“Sir, all eight fighters from Alpha and Iota are onboard. With permission, sir, I'd like to keep my squad on patrol, at least for a while.”

La Forge barely paused to consider. “A good idea, Commander. Arrange a rota so Alpha can relieve you. We'll try and give you some more oxygen down there for when you get back.”

“It's appreciated, Sir. Muscat out.” He turned to the assembled bunch of pilots. “Draz, Jamie, Cody – get your fighters fuelled and ready. Alpha pilots – try to get some rest, we could be here a while.” He motioned the pilots to get going. “Lieutenant Stark?”

The Lieutenant moved toward him. “Yes, sir?”

“Make sure your squad are ready to relieve us at 0300 ship time. I'll transmit flight data direct to your CMD while we're in flight.”

“Good luck, sir. And may the...”

“Don't say it, Stark. Just don't say it.” Muscat smiled. “Make yourself comfy here. See you at three.”

The four Interceptors, with their dagger-shaped wings, flew in perfect formation through the still-sparking magcon field and out into space. Muscat, in the lead fighter, activated his comm. “Remember that this was a shipyard. Expect some freighter traffic. Try to inspect any incoming ships.” The squad signalled their acknowledgement. He headed out from under the belly of the Star Destroyer, and up towards the top side of the ship. Flicking the “F9” switch up one position, he boosted the laser charge rate; he simultaneously transferred their current charge to the shield generators. This was his preferred combat configuration – while it compromised speed slightly, it let him charge his shields quickly and kept enough power in his guns to do some damage.

A blip on his forward sensor alerted him to a craft exiting hyperspace in the area. It was green – *Rebel!* - but a glance out of the viewscreen reassured him that it was nothing to worry about. Just a freighter. Diverting power back to his engines, he vectored towards the bulky craft for a sensor sweep. His comm crackled to life.

“What the... oh no... a S... Star Destroyer!” His computer had locked on to the freighter's comm frequency. The IFF transponder registered the ship as the *Starry Night*. “Our mistake! We'll be... going now...” The boxy ship started to turn away from Muscat's fighter. Not before he had been able to get a copy of the ship's cargo list though: fertiliser wasn't really worth fighting for. To starboard, green darts of light shot out and licked against the freighter's shields.

“Let them go, O'Moran, we want to avoid a fight.” *Epecially a fight for Bantha dung*. A flicker of pseudomotion launched the *Starry Night* back into the hyperspace it had come from.

“Sorry, sir.”

“Not a problem, Sub-lieutenant. Probably added to their cargo. But save your lasers for when we need them.”

Further blips appeared, on the other side of the system. His sensors showed them as blue, for civilian craft. Their IFF transponders showed them as Container Transports registered to Xizor Transportation Systems, a Coruscant company that had major dealings with the Empire in the past.

“Xizor Transportation freighters, state your cargo and destination.”

A quick, babbling voice responded. “This is XTS-0732. We have water and grain for... Contruum Station?”

“Sorry, XTS, you're too late...”

“Understood, Imperial pilot. Awaiting your further orders, sir.” The two ships shut off their engines and, true to their word, waited.

“Iota 2, order the freighters home.” Muscat wanted Drazhar to learn to negotiate with third parties in-flight, a skill he'd found useful himself on several occasions. He missed the transmission himself, but as the container transports powered up their drives and shot into hyperspace, he knew Draz had got it spot on. *We'll make a squadron leader from you yet, Draz.* “Squad, form up on me.”

Receiving the command, the four ships tightened their formation and headed back towards the stricken *Chimaera*. Muscat's CMD lit up, indicating a data feed from one of the squadron.

“Lead, I managed to get a sensor sweep of the XTS freighters. I'm sending you the dump now.”

“Good thinking, Draz. I doubt there's anything untoward this time, but it pays to be vigilant.”

Ensign Cody Alex, in the fourth fighter of the group, interrupted. “Sir, I'm picking up a narrow-beam transmission. Looks like it comes from the Nemesis.” He punched a button on his console, viewing the feed on his CMD. The message was short, and to the point.

“On our way. Try not to spill the sandbox before we get here. ETA 0600,” the transmission read. It was unencrypted – *they didn't know if the decrypt systems on the Chimaera would be functional*, thought Muscat – but it was clear who had sent it. Help was on the way.

“Iota Squadron – do not discuss this message on this frequency. Wait until we get back to the hangar. Don't want our Rebel friends knowing any more than they do already.” The rest of the group signalled their acknowledgement...

Pirates! Muscat registered the four purple blips instantly as they appeared, and before even this had started to manoeuvre towards them. As he did so, he saw the threat -

“R-41s attacking the *Chimaera*! Stop them!” Switching weapons control to missiles – they'd found a stash accessible from the hangar, and planned to make full use of them – he targeted the second-closest of the pirate craft. His targeting box turned yellow, showing the warheads were locking on. Muscat waited, holding on for the solid tone and red box signifying a lock; before it came, a flash of blue light changed priorities.

“Torpedoes!” Muscat switched back to lasers, and flew straight for the pirate warheads. *Better shoot them down before the Chimaera gets a sieve makeover.* In regular combat, the *Chimaera*'s shields would have no trouble absorbing the damage from the six – *no, eight* – proton torpedoes, if the ship's gunners hadn't shot them down first. *But today, there are no shields, and no gunners. Only us.* His lasers struck home, killing first one, then three as two got caught in a single blast. To his left, O'Moran got two more. Alex was caught with one of the pirates. Draz got one, and Muscat swing round to take out the remaining two. Suddenly his threat indicator was red, and scarlet laser bolts struck his aft shield causing his craft to shake.

Throwing his TIE into a tight downward spiral, he yelled on the comm. “*Chimaera*! Brace for

torpedo impact! Two, repeat, two warheads incoming!” He had no idea if the message had got through. Pulling out of the dive, and flipping his craft over, he was now on the tail of the R-41 who had shot him. He lined up the shot – his box went green – and pulled the trigger.

Green darts of hard light ripped through the pathetically weak shields on the older craft, burning through the pilot's seat and tearing the starboard wing from the fuselage. The rest of the craft, now unstable and without a pilot, spun aimlessly through the vacuum and exploded.

Glancing at his sensors, he saw that the rest of the squad had mopped up the other three pirates. “Anyone see what happened to those other two torps?”

“Got one, boss,” Drazhar replied. “Other one struck the hull right below the bridge. No word on if it caused casualties or not.”

Sithspawn! Muscat swore to himself. *Still, could have been a lot worse. Eight torps all at once could have blown the bridge section clean off.*

“Could have been worse, Boss,” O'Moran commented. “If all eight had struck at once, there may not be a bridge section left.”

“Copy that, Three.” Dumping cannon energy to his shields, he balanced and restored them to full power. *Four pirates, for Daemon's sake! And we nearly lost the Chimaera for good.* “They must have intercepted the distress call we sent out. That means the Rebels can't be far behind. Better warn Lieutenant Stark to be ready.”

“Copy that, sir.”

“Stark?”

“Managed to patch into the external comm system, sir.”

“Isn't that security-coded?”

“*Was* security-coded, sir.”

“Right.” It *was* an emergency situation, after all, Muscat reasoned. By now, his flight path had taken him past the Chimaera, and he was now heading away from the Star Destroyer. Without warning, his threat indicator lit again – but green, this time. *Cap ship? Where?* Glancing at his sensors he saw the arrival of a Muurian Transport, dead aft. From the entrance it was making, it was clearly hostile.

“We're taking fire!” cried Drazhar. “It's hostile!”

“Copy that, Two. Three, Four, go for warhead strikes on their laser turrets. Two, with me, draw its fire away from the *Chimaera*.”

The squad signalled their acknowledgement, and Alex and O'Moran pulled out of range for their missile strike. Though powerful ships with decent shields, Muurian Transports were impotent if you could destroy or disable the two turbolaser turrets, dorsal and ventral. In the meantime, they were spewing lots of red towards the disabled Star Destroyer.

Drazhar danced his Interceptor to the right, and Muscat to the left. Sensing the opportunity, the two of them opened fire, weakening the shields of the freighter and distracting it from two things: the sleeping Chimaera below it, and the two pairs of concussion missiles streaking towards it.

The manoeuvre was successful. Focusing on tracking the two attacking TIEs, the ship's gunners failed completely to see the warheads. Simultaneously, the missiles broke through the shields and vaporised the turrets. Toothless, the captain of the transport – Muscat registered it as the MUTR *Tusk* – decided to make a bolt for it. “Finish him off!”

The squad were only too eager to obey the command. The four starfighters launched a barrage of laser fire, some shooting wide, some hitting the rear shields, some breaking through. *He's nearly at his hyperspace point. Just a few more seconds...*

And then the *Tusk* exploded. Muscat didn't see who had fired the fatal shot – but it was obvious that Draz knew.

“Chalk up another one for the Drazhar!”

“You get it?”

“Must have hit its hyperdrive just as it powered up.”

“Lucky, Mr. Drazhar. Very lucky!”

Four more blips appeared on his sensor. These, though, were red – friendly craft. A voice crackled through on the comm.

“Alpha to Iota, you are relieved of patrol duty.”

“Copy that,” Muscat responded as Stark's four fighters dropped from the *Chimaera's* belly. In the battle he had lost track of time. Sure enough, the ship's chrono read 0300. “Heading home.”

In formation, Iota Squadron cruised towards the hangar, dark and dead.