

**Operation Deep Strike:  
The Aftermath Of Contruum**  
*Lieutenant Commander James 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. Victory comes at a cost – the Chimaera is crippled, and on emergency power.*

*As Iota Squadron hand over defensive patrol duty to Alpha Squadron, the pilots must work together to defend the Chimaera, and restore peace to the Contruum system...*

PART TWO

“That's funny, the damage doesn't seem as bad from here,” Muscat heard Stark say. He allowed himself a thin smile as he took his Interceptor through the magcon field – *still working, then!* - up into the hangar. *Here's a thought – how are we going to set down? Hangar crane won't work, can't rest on the wings...* Without landing gear, there was no way of safely setting down the fighters without the hangar crane.

“Looks like someone had a party here, all right!” Draz said over the comm. Muscat looked up, and saw: Alpha, thinking ahead, had somehow cut down some of the overhead gantries and scaffold used to hold the TIEs ready for launch.

“OK, squad, looks like they've made a bed for us; now it's time to lie in it.” Easing forward on the throttle, Muscat moved directly above one of the newly created landing bays, and cut the power to his engines.

His spine felt like it had shot upwards two feet, through his skull and out of his flight helmet, as his fighter fell with a crash. Over the comm, he heard Drazhar and O'Moran laughing. “Something funny, you two?”

The laughter muffled. “No, sir, nothing at all...”

“Glad to hear it. Your turn then, Mr. Drazhar. And be careful, you're further above the scaffold than you think.”

Once the rest of the squad had landed, all in equally spine-juddering fashion, Muscat popped the egress hatch above his flight seat and climbed out. Making full use of the scaffold to climb to the hangar floor, he found O'Moran already out of his fighter and heading toward the makeshift control desk. Jogging, the senior officer caught him up.

“Good work out there, Jamie.”

“Thank you, sir. Nice landing.”

Muscat let it pass, with a slight grin. They reached the desk, which had grown even more wires than it had previously. Attached to one of the consoles was a yellow post-it note with the words “Do Not Press The Red Button” in black. Next to the note, a red button blinked on and off gently.

The other two joined them. As they stood round, contemplating the note, Draz leaned forward and jabbed the button with his index finger. It stopped blinking. The group took a step backwards.

Nothing.

Then the console lit up, and started scrolling data from their mission. Kill count. Percentage shots on target. Overall “score” - the pilots had long ago devised a scoring system for their missions, taking into account just about every conceivable area. Killing an enemy Z-95, for example, gave you less points than an A-wing; the latter being a harder kill. But using a warhead would gain more points than lasers. And so on.

The squad's scores started scrolling up the screen.

2LT Drazhar / Iota: 17412  
EN Cody Alex / Iota: 10001  
SL O'Moran / Iota: 4755  
LC Muscat / Iota: 320

This last hung on the screen for a long while, then slowly turned red. So did Muscat's face. “Yeah, well,” he said, “if it weren't for me we'd never have gotten out of the hangar now, would we?”

Before the group could respond, a voice crackled over the comm. “We have Rebel craft entering the area!” The humour in the air disappeared. They had a job to do. Pulling the post-it from the screen, Muscat screwed it up into a ball. O'Moran, I want you giving me as much as you can from Alpha's sensors. Route it to the main screen if you can. Alex, comms, keep Alpha informed and give Commander La Forge updates every few minutes. Drazhar, with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“To get a drink.”

Drazhar followed his commanding officer across the hangar. “I like it. Mine's a spiced lomin-ale, with ice. You buying?”

“Not quite, Lieutenant.” Muscat turned to his XO. “I meant a drink for your fighter.” Draz looked blank. “Refuelling them?” Still blank. “You didn't think they flew all by themselves, did you?”

“Of course not! Just missing my drink.”

“Look, we get the Chimaera out of this and the Nemesis arrives, then I'll buy the drinks. OK?”

Draz screwed his face up in mock consideration. “Weeeelll...,” he said, extending the 'ee' for a full ten seconds, “... OK then.”

Muscat sighed inwardly. *Since when did the crew of an Imperial Star Destroyer take alcohol in lieu of wages?* A second thought occurred to him. *How long has Commander La Forge been on the ship?* He had a feeling the answers to the two were in some way related.

As the pair headed for the refuelling pumps, O'Moran called out from the desk. “Rebel A-wings, sir, looks like a standard recon op. They're coming in by twos. Alpha don't look like they're having difficulty.”

“Thank you, Sub-lieutenant. Ensign?” he called to Alex. “Is Commander La Forge up to date?” The ensign nodded the affirmative. “Pass word to Lieutenant Stark, we don't want any of the A-wings getting a message out.”

“Yes, sir!” the ensign called, and turned back to his mic. *It's a good bet they are already on the edge of the system, just collecting data ready for a microjump in. I just hope the Nemesis arrives before the Rebels do...*

He helped Drazhar drag the fuel hoze over to the nearest fighter. He climbed up the scaffold, locating the intake valve and twisting it open. Draz pushed the hoze upwards – quite some effort, as it was normally operated by mechanical arm – and Muscat secured it in place. “Now, the hard work begins.”

“Sir?”

“Well, there's no power to the pumps... and the gas needs to be at a high enough pressure...”

“What are you saying?”

“One of us is going to have to manually pump the stuff through.” Alex interrupted from the makeshift comm unit.

“Sir, Commander La Forge requests a personal update from you.”

“Sorry, Draz;” Muscat said, “looks like I'm needed over there. Let me know how you get on. Just keep thinking of that drink!” He made a mental note to tip Alex for the timely interruption. But first, there was the commander to deal with. He took the headset from the ensign, and activated the comm.

“Commander, you requested an update?”

“Yes, Lieutenant, I believe you are well overdue on your next report.”

“I haven't been able to get to my desk of late, sir, for some reason. But anyway, my squad are landed and we're starting to manually refuel.”

“And Alpha?”

Muscat glanced at the tactical display O'Moran had managed to drag up. “Not a scratch. They had to chase off some Rebel recce units a few moments ago, sir. It won't be long before we have company.”

“Blast it. Do we know if anyone got our distress call?”

“Yes, sir. The ISD Nemesis sent an unscrambled broadcast while we were on patrol. They're expected about 0600.”

“Any intel on the Rebels?”

“Not at this time, sir. I suspect they won't be much further than the edge of the system.”

“You said this broadcast was unscrambled? So presumably the Rebels know when to launch their attack.”

“Unless, of course, they said six knowing the Rebels would hear, and are actually due here sooner.”

“We can hope, Lieutenant. Keep me posted. I'm... I'm going to head down to the medical suite.”

“Everything OK?”

“Fine, Lieutenant, just a mild concussion.”

“Don't go playing with the database, then. I'll keep you informed.”

La Forge terminated the connection. Muscat turned to Alex.

“OK, get an update from Lieutenant Stark, find out what the situation looks like. O'Moran?”

The sub-lieutenant swivelled in his chair. *Why do I never get the swivel chair?* thought Muscat. *I'm the commanding officer, I demand a swivel chair!* “Sir?”

“What do we know?”

“Two civvie freighters dropped out of hyper not far from here. One of our fighters managed a sensor sweep, nothing untoward. The last of them entered hyperspace a moment ago.”

“Can we access the *Chimaera*'s sensor banks from here?”

“I can't, sir, and there's no guarantee they'll be operational even with the clearance-” Pink blips distracted his attention. “We have company. Remember those pirates we finished off earlier? Looks like they brought friends.”

“What have they got?”

Stark's voice, over the comm, answered the question before O'Moran had the chance. “Hostile pirate corvette entering area! Engage it!”

“Are those R-41s again?”

“Yes, sir, though from what I can tell they're focused on Alpha Squadron, not us.”

“It won't last long. Try and get a sensor feed on the corvette.” Muscat took the comm headset from Alex. “Commander?”

“The commander is not on the bridge at the moment. Anything I can help with?”

Muscat grimaced; Dodd was back at the comm upstairs. “Yes, actually. We have more pirate raiders off our bow. I'd clear everyone from external bulkheads if I were you, we don't want anyone hurt from loose fire.”

“With respect, sir, why not just destroy it?”

“Firstly-” he noted three of the R-41s' blips wink out - “that is what my friends are currently doing. Secondly, the blast may still affect outer bulkheads.”

“Sorry, sir. Understood.”

He took off the comm. He was only thirty – or was it thirty-one? He could never quite remember – but he all too often got the feeling that the Empire wasn't quite what it was. They worked hard, but ever since Endor they had been short of experienced officer material.

It was a gap that he intended to fill, to the best of his ability. The ship shuddered violently, nearly knocking him from his feet. The lights cut out.

“O'Moran?”

“I would guess we've been hit, sir. I can't access any diagnostic routines. But I think...”

Muscat held up a hand, silencing him. From the corner of the hangar, some machinery sounded like it was on its last legs. Fizzing, popping...

“The magcon field! Everyone, suit up! Get to your fighters! Or at least, hold on to something!”

Dropping the fuel hose, Draz yanked on his black flight helmet, and jumped down into the cockpit of the fighter he was working on. O'Moran leapt from the desk, running for the second fighter, grabbing a helmet as he went. The magcon field flickered, and the hangar seemed to get colder. Alex was still at his console. “Cody! Get a helmet on!” Muscat's voice sounded muffled; the atmosphere was getting thinner already. At least there would be no sudden decompression; it would have sucked the hangar's contents into the vacuum outside.

Alex just managed to get his helmet over his head, and Muscat did the same, when the magcon's power unit exploded. Sparks flew across the hangar, casting strange shadows across the dull grey, and the sudden decompression they had feared, happened. A powerful wind swept through the hangar, knocking Alex through the air. Muscat managed to get a hand to his leg as he passed, and held on to the solar panel of his fighter for support. Just as suddenly, the wind ceased. “Decompression in the hangar! Repeat, decompression in the hangar! All of you, report!”

One by one, the squad affirmed that they had managed to activate their flight suit's own air supply in time. Through the comm – though the helmets had vocoder units, they were useless without air for the sound to travel in – Muscat warned Alex. “You be more careful. When I give an order, it's for a reason, Ensign.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now, to your fighter, and sit tight.” Muscat turned, and climbed up the side of the cockpit ball of his own craft. Dropping down, back into the metal flight couch, he flicked on the lights and assessed the situation.

*Hmm... Not enough fuel to join the dogfight out there – if it's still going on. Just enough for a short flight, maybe three minutes. The others will be the same, except Draz, maybe?* “Draz?”

“Yes, sir?”

“How much fuel did you get in?”

“Not much, sir. The system really wasn't designed for manual pumping.”

“I make about three minutes' worth in my fighter, I expect the others will be the same.”

“I could probably double that. Still not much.”

“And certainly not enough to engage that corvette. No, sit tight.”

“Sir, I can try to patch into the data feeds from here, and retransmit them to you.” O'Moran joined the conversation.

“Do that, but try to get me internal comms first.”

“Yes, sir.”

Muscat switched frequency, to Alpha's channel. “...or just let them die, even better!” Stark was saying.

“Lieutenant Stark, this is Muscat.”

“Reading, sir. We dispatched the corvette, and the rest of the fighters.”

“Good work. We've had some problems here – the magcon field blew, we have no atmosphere. We managed to suit up in time, no-one hurt.” He glanced at the chrono. 0525. “We need to hold out for the Nemesis. What is your fuel status?”

“Not great. I say about twenty minutes, ten if we get bogged down in a dogfight. Any chance of a refuel?”

“None, we tried. The pumps aren't designed for manual use, it took about an hour to get ten minutes' worth.”

“Better hope the Nemesis shows up soon, then. Stark out.”

Muscat's CMD lit up; O'Moran had achieved his feed patch. He saw a two-dimensional map of the vicinity around the Chimaera: Alpha squadron were represented as small squares with a schematic drawing of an Interceptor. Muscat traced their path, an orbit at about a kilometre from the Star Destroyer. Zooming out, he panned round to scan the rest of the system. “O'Moran, have I got internal comms?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Put me through to the auxiliary bridge.”

“Done.”

“Iota Leader to bridge. Come in, please.”

“This is Commander La Forge. Report.”

“We've lost atmosphere in the hangar. We can't refuel our fighters, we have about three minutes' worth left. Alpha aren't too much better, twenty if all goes well. They dispatched the pirate corvette that caused the lighting blackout back then. We still have limited power down here, and we're in the dark, otherwise we're OK.”

“So Alpha will have to come back in before the Nemesis arrives?”

“Yes, sir, unless-”

His screen suddenly cut out. “O'Moran?”

“Something big just arrived, the system wasn't expecting it.”

“Sub-lieutenant, this is Commander La Forge. Bridge has no tactical feed, you're the eyes for all of us. Get that link back up!”

“Yes, sir.”

“I had hoped for more time before the Rebels launched their strike. Crew – be prepared to receive boarders. We won't go down without a fight.”

Muscat's CMD sprang back into life. “Belay that order, Commander – it's the *Nemesis*!” Sure enough, the screen now showed two Star Destroyers; the *Nemesis* was several clicks away, and moving closer.

“Lieutenant, get your fighters into the *Nemesis*' hangar. Order Lieutenant Stark to do likewise. Their fighters can cover you.”

“Yes, sir. Iota Squadron, light up!”

Vibrations shook the hangar as eight ion engines thrummed into life. “Iota Leader, two lit and ready.”

“Iota Two, two lit and ready,” Drazhar confirmed.

“Iota Three, two lit and ready.”

“Iota Four, two lit and ready to go!” Alex sounded more eager than he had done before.

“Squad, move out!”

The four fighters moved in unison, accelerating from rest to achieve phenomenal speed even before they passed through the gaping hole in the hull. “Alpha Leader, this is Iota Leader. Your orders are to head to the *Nemesis*' hangar for refuel and debrief.”

“Confirmed, Iota Leader. Alpha squad, on me.”

The two groups of fighters vectored in, and cruised through the vacuum towards the *Nemesis*. “Let's get them out of there!” Muscat heard over the comm – *Must be Commander Wedge*, he thought – and as he closed on the hangar, an Escort Shuttle dropped into flight. “Tau shuttle is carrying techs to try to get the engines online.”

“Iota Squadron, this is one event we'll be staying on the sidelines of. We need some rest – and, Mr. Drazhar, I haven't forgotten that drink.”

“Copy that, sir.”

“Oh, sir – better warn the tech crews not to press that red button...”

“I'm sure Engineering will be interested in the modifications we've made to the hangar, Sub-Lieutenant.”

As they made their final approach to the hangar, Muscat glanced at his sensors. A chill went down his spine. “They've found us.”

“Looks like we aren't the only ones trying to get the *Chimaera*!” Captain Wedge said. “Alpha and Iota squadrons, report to the *Nemesis*' hangar immediately! Epsilon Squadron, get on to those fighters!”

As the fuel level indicator edged towards zero, Muscat was happy to surrender control to the tractor beam operator. An unfamiliar voice came through on the comm.

“All pilots from Alpha and Iota squadrons, report to Debriefing Room Two immediately.”