

Imperial-II Star Destroyer *Hammer*, First Recon Fleet, Emperor's Hammer. 30 ABY.

-*"The man did what?"* A startled Pryde replied after choking on hearing the news while drinking his up of coffee. He couldn't hide his laughter.

-*"Exactly as I told you, Pryde"* Araujo assured. *"Stunned the kid 3 times"* trying as hard as he could to hide a faint smile on his face. Internally, he was laughing hysterically.

He received a report about an incident involving a random junior officer (who seems to be too young to be on a ship or in anything else than primary school) with a rather desperately annoying conduct and Lt. Commander Scorel "Hopfot" Hayde. Someone you don't want to mess with. Indeed, quite a few of the "Alpharites" as some previous CMDR called them or "Penguins" as they're called now, are well known for their ruthlessness. Araujo himself has no wish to hide unpleasant truths most of the time, not even when dealing with his superiors, not after being stuck on his quarters during this journey.

Hopfot simply used his blaster on stun setting to do away with the guy and shot him, 3 times, and all Araujo and Pryde could do about this was to laugh.

-*"At least he got to shoot something"* added COL Blackheart sardonically, staring at Pryde. The trio were sharing a table on the *Hammer's* pilot lounge. Most pilots would spend their spare time on the clandestine bar but not them. They had their own reserves of special beverages but they saved them solely to celebrate *certain* victories. Achieving actual objectives and dealing with the enemies of the Empire was a passion they shared. They were the austere staff running the 7th SO "Alpha" Squadron. -*"Now you have to pull him out of his detention block and you can't say you condone him"*.

-*"Horus is right, you know?"* Pryde confirmed what was going to happen next as he turned to look back at his CMDR, sipping again from his cup. Not that Araujo truly cared. The official policy on the Emperor's Hammer TIE Corps was one of politeness but in reality, the TC had all sorts of "incidents" including the tradition of airlocking personnel, running clandestine distilleries on military vessels, Jawas stealing mechanic parts here and there, Ewoks regularly crashing fighters on the hangar. Araujo sighed -*"More paperwork. And a bit of acting, pretending that I have to reprimand him. Whatever"*. He didn't frown either for the Empire (or the TIE Corps in this case) now recruiting non-humans or younglings close to being adults. He actually thought including diverse races would strengthen the idea that the Imperial forces are here to maintain peace and order for everybody and it was every race's duty to collaborate. What he frowned upon was the apparent lack of discipline. Hopfot? he was actually providing some badly needed lesson to one of those new juniors. He should award him he thought.

Tapping his datapad twice, Araujo glanced at the display and his eyes froze. -*"uuuhh"*.

-*"Uhh what? You 'lagging' again? I thought we were past the point where we mastered whatever it is that you do?"* Horus' expression was resigned, more resigned than annoyed. He himself had some incidents with this mysterious "lag" in the recent past but didn't want to publicly admit it.

-“Remember I told you we’d meet our newest addition? Well he is requesting urgent help on the ‘bar’. The last place I wanted to go.” Araujo explained, rolling his eyes and parting his lips in clear annoyance. -“You two come with me”. He added and without expecting an answer, he stood up, tugging his uniform a bit down and introducing his small datapad on his pocket, set towards the lounge’s blast door. The other two exchanged glances and followed him. *Finally, some fun* thought Pryde.

As the trio walked down the corridor toward the elevator, Pryde stumbled upon a mouse droid on a hallway crossroad and attempted to force crush it – “Pryde...” Araujo warned without looking, knowing the sound came from his left and that Pryde has little regard for droids. Not that Horus cared for them either from what he knew about both. He could be wrong, however.

-“Just warming up...” he muttered *If I don’t blow something up soon I’ll go crazy*. He thought as he let the mouse droid go. Araujo didn’t want any more trouble.

-“Araujo, good you brought your men, we might need help” Fleet Admiral La’an intercepted the trio, on a second crossroad accompanied by a detachment of Stormtroopers. Araujo had a good impression of the man. A practical officer who preferred efficiency above bureaucracy. -“I wish we met under different circumstances” Araujo replied after saluting the superior officer. -“Where is Admiral Phoenix?” he also asked, just as a casual thought.

“He is busy trying to deal with another of Solohan’s ‘landings’. I’ll handle this one. You’re lucky I was on the ship.” La’an explained. *Landings, who could’ve thought an Imperial Star Destroyer could be so chaotic*. Araujo thought.

When the men entered the bar, they found the pilots of several Infiltrator Wing units that were invited on the Hammer, surrounding one man holding his datapad in his right hand.

The man who was about to get lynched by the IW mob.

“The party is over, stand back, that’s an order!” said one faceless Stormtrooper and the rest set on the task of pushing back all the involved pilots.

An alert sound came to Pryde, Blackheart and Araujo’s datapads but only Pryde paid attention and pulled his device to check it while La’an’s men seized control and he begun asked what happened. After a mere seconds, Pryde reached Araujo -“Have I gone mad? Did I destroy our base? I got moved to 2-1? What did I miss?”

-“Oh, they decided to place all SQXOs in 2-1 and give, I think, almost equal database access than CMDRs for all SQXOs” Araujo felt a bit sorry for forgetting to let them know. It was more evident that command’s policy now was not to disclose procedural information so to incentivize further communication between officers and subordinates. A waste of time Araujo thought. In the old days, everything was specified down to the smallest detail on the manuals and an officer could assume his subordinates would be aware on procedures and informed on updates. Now CMDRs have to inform each member and virtually educate

them on the intricacies of TIE Corps' procedures which were a bit more elaborate than former Imperial ones. Clearly, the lack of combat took a toll on military efficiency. Nothing he could do as a lowly CMDR even if he was the most senior one in terms of time served on the post – In a month it'll be 4 years since he was assigned as commander of Alpha Squadron. Araujo then made a mental note to inform the rest of the squadron. Then he distracted himself running a list of everything he'd have to inform now his squadron, even making sure they were fully aware on current procedures...he'll have to spend a lot of time in admin duties, unnecessary admin duties instead of drilling and preparing for combat.

Enough time passed by and La'an interrupted Araujo's thoughts –*“Lieutenant Colonel Araujo, you might want to hear this”*. He voiced loudly across the chaotic scene that was the bar and signaled him with one hand. As Araujo, Pryde and Blackheart, approached. The latter two were just standing by in silence. They knew the man and realized what Araujo had done. He is handpicking pilots for further SpecOps training. La'an turned to throw a glacial look at Captain Drake Starfire –*“Now captain, could you repeat what you said so your commander can listen?”*

There was no need to restrain him La'an judged and the puzzled Alpha Squadron staff looked at the man as he explained –*“I...I just offered them my holopictures”*

–*“Pictures of what?”* Demanded La'an.

–*“Pictures of my feet”*

–*“Ah, yes, hairy feet, I presume”* Araujo added with a glacially cold look and a casual voice which in the end, meant full irony given the circumstances *Pictures of what? Hahaha*. He thought, mentally conceding his decision to invite Starfire back to Alpha was bold, quite bold. The man was a charismatic pilot and a good one. Alpha was needing someone with his traits, as strange as they might be. *I should be afraid of asking any further questions here in public* he told to himself. *But I'm not. I'm just too tired to deal later with a bunch of disgruntled officers so I'll remain silent and pretend I care. Not that they have had past incidents with cheeks...what was that wookie's name?*

–*“Then maybe a booty pic in a pilot suit, I dunno”* Drake added as if he was discussing a shopping list.

Horus turned to his left. Pryde's look was priceless he thought. He could swear the man was using the force to prevent bursting out with laughter. –*“Only on Tuesdays”* Pryde managed to say.

–*“Not on Fridays please, because I'm in love”* Araujo randomly completed, remembering a holorecording of years past. Then he suddenly understood a joke Hopfot made 3 days ago but that wasn't the moment to laugh. Lag and its effects. So far it looked like Pryde and him were being half sardonic, half derisively which has become the hallmark of the penguins. Few would understand their sense of humor and Starfire was one of these few. He was indeed a former Alpha coming back home. Not that the rest of the *Hammer* or the TIE Corps didn't have a particular, colorful sense of humor either way.

Maybe Horus was the most serious among the group - "*We always need airlock testers*". He let the afterthought be heard on the place but his own faint smile betrayed him as he frowned upon what Starfire was exposing.

Pryde didn't need the force to sense it. In fact, Araujo came to same conclusion - "*I can imagine the good Colonel Blackheart's mind busy nightmarishly visualizing pictures of hairy feet at 3:00 local time, waking up in screams*". He continued - "*what happened then?*" his eyes staring at Starfire for a moment, then glaring around the room as if looking for something to distract himself.

- "*They rejected my offer and I said their fighters were bantha poo-doo*" shrugged Starfire staring at the detained IW pilots. A Stormtrooper pointed his blaster towards him as a caution.

A moment of silent could be felt as La'an turned to Araujo "*I'll reprimand him for the unethical offer but other than that, he's yours*". Araujo saluted La'an, paralyzed for a minute but everybody were familiar with the effects of lag, and then a burst of laughter could be heard across the room. Araujo simply had enough and laughed out loud, turned on his back and walked away the room dismissing the entire situation with a waving of his hand "*hahaha yes, he's one of us! Hahahahaha*" and then walked away on the corridor still laughing. Not exactly what an Imperial officer would normally reply but these weren't normal circumstances nor they were the Galactic Empire anymore but a mere ex-Imperial faction. Everybody else who wasn't in Alpha, couldn't help but looking at each other bewildered at the entire incident.

- "*Welcome back to Alpha, penguin*" Pryde patted Starfire on the shoulder. Then he saluted La'an with Horus and Starfire mimicking the gesture, then the three of them exited the bar.

A.A. / A.H.

