

“Atrophy”

COMBAT SIMULATOR CHAMBER
ISDII CHALLENGE
PRESENT

Lieutenant Colonel Kadon Beir heard the alarm ringing in his ears, piercing into his skull, but he already knew he was dead before the chirping had begun. The data screens died as their images winked into black. Some of the status displays were still active, but the damage was too severe. He knew that the X-Wing on his tail had but to only finish the job. He tried to save himself anyways, he pushed the control yoke, while turning the control portion of the yoke to the left, but the avionics damage had cut the feedback feel actuators and he slammed it to the physical stops, knowing the moment he had started his action, it too, was dead. The sounds of rupturing metal from laser blasts was piped into his ears and all the screens, even the main view screen went blank.

Beir sighed heavily as he felt the sweat on his face bead up and run into his eyes under his helmet. “MISSION FAILED,” appeared on the main viewer as the large upper shell of the simulator released with a hiss of hydraulics and pneumatics and raised it above him, the external lights in the simulator chamber flooding in. He removed his helmet and wiped the now cooling sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief he kept to the side of the simulator pit.

“Analysis?” He asked the RA-7 droid, assigned to run the simulators and provide analysis in conjunction with the computers of the simulators themselves.

“Analysis between the last dozen simulators, and those of eleven years ago, interpolated with extant combat data from your history shows an approximate reduction of skills as follows: eight-percent reduction in general spacemanship, nineteen-percent reduction in general combat skills, twenty-percent reduction in basic flight maneuvers, thirty-six-percent reduction in advanced dogfighting skills, four-“

“Enough!” Beir cut the protocol droid off. He’d been out of the seat for quite some time. Over a decade spent making ends meet, searching for any shred of evidence regarding his wife, and occasionally returning to the *M/FRG Phoenix* occasionally when he needed rest, or the money had run out, as it often did. He was not quite up to his old self, his age had been laying weary on his shoulders like a great weight that could never be removed. His thoughts swirled as he wiped some sweat, now cold from the air of the simulator chamber off his brow. “Anything positive to note?”

“Mental acuity has increased five-point-three-percent, decision-making reactions twenty-four-percent faster than previously recorded data.”

Small victories, Beir thought to himself. “Okay, spool up Battle Twenty-Eight, Mission Seven.”

INFERNO SQUADRON SPACES
ISDII CHALLENGE

The placard was neatly placed next to the door at eye height in stark white Aurebesh on a black background : “CMDR, Inferno Squadron.” Slid in a slot beneath it was another placard but newer, and not as worn as the one above it: “CM Evilgrin.”

Where do they come up with these names? Beir wondered to himself quickly. He rapped on the door in a quick three-beat knock. Loud enough to be heard and recognized, but not too obnoxious to attract attention in the passageway or annoy whomever was inside.

“Enter!” a muffled voice said inside as the door slid open instantly with a woosh. Beir stepped inside and was about to report when Evilgrin interrupted him: “Colonel Beir, a pleasure, don’t bother with the reporting stuff, you know I’m pretty much in charge here, but I defer to your rank and

experience. You know how things go here in the Hammer.”

“Well aware.” Beir responded as he smoothed some wrinkles on the front skirts of his duty uniform.

“What’s the occasion?”

“My performance.” Beir coughed out, he’d had a long explanation and plan formulated in his head, but again he was interrupted:

“And what about it? Something wrong that I haven’t noticed? Reports off-kilter?”

“Nothing like that, I’ve been putting some time in at the sims.” Beir sighed.

“I’ve noticed. So have the others, no crazy amounts, but it seems like you’re trying to get back in to the game right.”

“That’s the problem,” Beir managed a moment of relaxation before tensing back up, “things are not going well to say the least, I’ve been out of it for too long. I’m a liability to the squadron.”

“And here I just put you in place as a flight lead, look, being away for a decade is more than enough to erode anyone’s skills. We all know you still got things together up here,” Evilgrin tapped the side of his head with two fingers, “steady leadership and a good tactical head are worth more than some bloody hot dog in the seat with no senses or thoughts from the top of his head to his arse.”

“Right, but this doesn’t keep me from dying or failing to uphold my end of a mission, I’ve lost the edge and it’s keeping me from making some real contributions around here.”

“If you feel that way. I’ll make a deal with you though, we’ve drawn the next long-range patrol going out and it could get right dicey, Mell is down with illness, so you take his Interceptor, and bring one of yours along in a Reaper for support. I promise, even if the twenty Hells of the New Republic came crashing down on our heads, you’d do fine. Deal?”

Being back in a fighter again would be great, TIE Reapers were interesting, special mission craft, mainly for inserting special forces teams, or transportation for whomever wanted it. The former was more common, especially in keeping with Inferno’s mission. However, the squadron hadn’t seen any missions of that manner in quite some time, so Flight Three often stayed behind, but there were uses for them if they could be planned ahead and installed: long-range surveillance, early warning, electronic warfare and other mission profiles could be assembled and installed on the Reaper along with extra crew if needed. Thing is, routine patrols or flying close-range CAP, or being on stand-by really didn’t see the Reapers getting used. But, an Interceptor? Sleek. Agile. Heavily armed. Beir could feel some shivers down his spine as he felt just the *thought* of the rush he would have.

“Okay, deal Commander, you’re the boss.”

“You don’t have to be so damn placatory Colonel.”

IN SPACE

NEAR BETA SECTOR

TIE INTERCEPTOR *INFERNO 1-3*

“*Inferno 3-3*, tighten up a bit more on our rear, don’t want you getting lost out here when we need your assistance.” The Reaper had been outfitted with a long-range early warning system, so Lieutenant Ceallaigh had the company of a few technical officers and several technicians trained in the use of the specialized sensors package.

“All right Inferno, let’s keep it smart, keep it cool, and keep it good.” Evilgrin called out on the comms. The flight of TIE’s arced out as the *Hermes* began it’s runup for hyperspeed,

“See you shortly Inferno, good hunting.” The radio crackled and the Strike Cruiser winked out of the system, moving on to drop off other picket flights to cover this sub-sector in

patrols. The New Republic was getting lazy, or tired, and was not aggressively patrolling the space near Imperial Remnants, or particularly unruly systems on the Outer Rim.

Inferno Squadron swept through various nav points as they followed their patrol routing, but nothing was showing up on any of the individual TIE's sensors, nor the package onboard the TIE Reaper.

"Nothing, no Rebels, no Republic, not even a smuggler or something we could seize for the prize shares." Lieutenant Setroc called over the comms.

"It is quiet." Evilgrin replied.

Beir stretched out in his seat and tried to work his aching back muscles and knee joints, sitting in a fighter for hours on end was starting to tell on an aged body. His ears were overwhelmed as an excited Ceallaigh burst through the speakers:

"1-1, 3-3, they're picking up some faint contacts, bearing," he paused, obviously listening to the information being fed from the operators in back "1-1-5, Mark 4-0, extreme range."

"Copy, let's check it out Inferno, stay in formation." Inferno 1-1 winged over to the new heading and the other Interceptors followed suit with the Reaper trailing in close. "Keep an eye on your sensors."

Beir eyed his sensors, but if they were at extreme range, only the more powerful set on the Reaper were going to pick things up.

"1-1, contacts resolving stronger, we'll know how many and how big in a moment."

"Roger."

Beir tightened his grip on the control yoke and could feel his gloves stretching with the pressure, he was getting amped and giddy at the prospect of combat, almost like his first time. The combat cocktail his body was producing began to have an effect. He shook his head to try and clear his mind. He focused, *just like the sims, don't get excited like some fresh nugget from Daedalus.*

"1-1, we've got four fighters and a small starship, CR90 sized."

"Excellent, I'm beginning to get them on scopes, let's get some attack vectors to hit them from a few sides Inferno; Two, you're with me, Four stay with Three, 3-3 stay on this present course, don't get involved unless you have to." Evilgrin winged his Interceptor to port as Setroc followed. The updated plan and data had them hitting the Republic ships on their left flank, while Beir and Freddo would come in from the right and below. Beir quickly pressed the keys to get the plan set as waypoints for their ingress. He brought the Interceptor to starboard and angled it down a small amount and Lieutenant Freddo followed suit.

Fight's On.

Inferno One and Two grabbed the Newfie ship's attention first: "Identified, four X-Wings, and a CR90 Corvette." 3-3 called before they came into visual range themselves. Beir and Freddo raced their Interceptors through a series of nav points that would vector them in on their target. The escorting fighters peeled off to meet Evilgrin and Setroc.

"Four, let's do a pass on the corvette, get their attention and move in behind those fighters." Beir knew they would more than likely be picked up by the corvette by now and they would be telling their escort any moment. He anticipated some of the X-Wings would double

back to deal with them. Inferno would meet them. The corvette, which had begun as a small visual dot, was becoming larger as they raced at it. It began to maneuver and spin to be able to unmask its dorsal turret as well and red lasers began to streak out towards the speeding Interceptors. "Stay evasive."

Beir jinked the fighter as they closed to firing range and both Interceptors let off a barrage of laser cannon fire that impacted and burst along the corvette's shields. "Don't waste too much energy, we're just keeping it interesting and weakening their shields." He checked his sensors and found that two of the X-Wings had left the furball with Evilgrin and Setroc and we're almost back. "Freddo! Merge!" Beir slammed the controls and adjusted energy as he brought the Interceptor to face the incoming fighters. "Split starboard and up after!" The X-Wings came in and Beir picked the closer to him and watched the range countdown as the computer attempted to give him a good tone for a good firing solution. It was always just a tad too slow though.

Green and red lasers passed each other as the fighters sped towards one another, both were jinking as they loosed bolts towards one another, glittering in the star-filled void. Some superficial hits impacted and burst against shields. Beir managed to take a single hit to one of the winglets. It jerked him in his seat, but nothing important seemed damaged, so it was not of immediate note as the fighters merged and began maneuvering. He was faster and more agile for sure, and had the energy to do as he wished, unlike the ageing Newfie fighters. Beir pitched the Interceptor "down" and pulled it into a tight circle as he searched visually for his opponent and Freddo. Rule #1 is to never leave your wingman. Equal numbers made this a little more difficult, but if he could, he was going to support Freddo.

The young Lieutenant was doing well and slowly coming around on his opposite, Beir moved to support and was in an extended lag chase as he watched Inferno 1-4 bring his target into his sights. Beir kept searching for his opponent however and seemed to have lost him. "Four, I have your back, you've got it!" Freddo fired a too-long burst of single bolts which was accurate, but too many bolts when wide. The volume of fire was enough however, and the shimmer of the X-Wing's shield relented under the barrage and popped as a few laser bolts cut through the fighter, causing it to explode. "Good kill, splash one!"

"THREE! BELOW YOU!" The Reaper had still kept watch as it closed in on the corvette with a small load of torpedoes. Beir snapped the column to the left and pushed it forward while he gave the pedals a hard kick to the left in an attempt to corkscrew down and to the left and create a tight circle to give his opponent a smaller shot window. Red lasers traced around his Interceptor and beyond it as he narrowly maneuvered out of the shots.

"Freddo, help!" Beir kept his maneuvering up, he was on the defensive and his only hope would be a wingman. He snapped the Interceptor on a turn reversal to the right and the X-Wing kept pace. He put all his energy into his engines, he needed to use his energy to open the range some and he could turn the fight around.

"He's slippery Colonel!" Freddo came over the comes as he tried to get a clear shot on the X-Wing.

"Shoot better!" Beir was sweating heavily under his flight suit and helmet as he continued his maneuvers, but he didn't know how much longer he could keep up this type of extended high performance maneuvering, it taxes the pilot heavily to fly at the envelope like this.

“We got your back Three.” Evilgrin’s voice emitted into Beir’s ear as the other two Interceptors tore into the X-Wing, destroying it outright as the combined and overwhelming firepower of three Interceptors gave it nowhere to run.

“Corvette’s splashed.” Ceallaigh reported as the Reaper turned to rejoin the others.

“Continue patrol until our ride comes back.” Evilgrin replied. “Say Three, if you worried about your ability to fly, and then you fly like that, I think these youngins had better start to worry. And you think twice as fast and hard with that team flying, we’ll win fights every time.”

Beir reflected for a moment as he worked himself back into a calm and checked his systems over, some extensive damage to a few tertiary systems and non-critical ones, but a gaping hole and destroyed solar panel on the Interceptor’s upper right wing.

“Yeah,” Beir wheezed, “I s’pose you’re right.” He winged his Interceptor back into position as Freddo followed and the Reaper closed up on them.

“Let’s finish the job and go home Inferno.”