

The planet of Tusorix was definitely a more refreshing experience than most of the ones Eagle had gotten to experience thus far in the Battlegroup's mission. Weeks on end spent locked up in the quarters or flight simulators weighed heavy on every pilot's psyche as the sand met their boots. Down to 8 members, Flight 2 and 3 forced to fly as one, the Squadron hadn't been part of any flight mission since they'd lost RedKnight. Perhaps that was why when the ChalCom had given Captain Graf their first mission in months, the excitement in the air of their cockpits was palpable. In reality all they were doing was heading to the surface in uniform to secure the small depot they'd been lended from the planetary government for logistics, and really it was a way to get the members of the squadron busy, their unit most suited for the overwatch of such a tiny atoll. None of that seemed to matter to the squad's mood as they finished yet another routine effect run however, finally doing something outside of the hangar.

"Z-23, Z-23, this is Eagle 1, you are approaching the final waypoint, ready for landfall, over."

The chipper voice of the Squadron commander skipped along the line to Eagles 7 and 10, taking up the other points of the typical triangle escort. The skies this far out to sea were often far less bright than those further in to the Archipelagos, and this day was no exception, an angry towering mass of planetary condensation rolling over the forlorn grey overcast below ever so steadily. For now however, the thin grey sheet of gloom was nothing more than a small blip on the run for the incoming vessels, breaking the cloud cover to discover the distinct horseshoe of their target destination.

"Z-23, Z-23, this is Eagle 1, you are clear for final approach, welcome to Xiros, over."

Xiros island was a thin sliver of sand, slate, and coral stuck several hundred kilometers out from the Senipp Archipelago. Bent like the two prongs of a cantina fork, the island, more akin to an atoll in true nature, stretched for 5 kilometers at its longest, by only a couple wide at its broadest shoulders. Made of barely more than the volcanically displaced sand and soil that comprised its sandstone banks atop the Cinae aquatic range, Xiros was by all accounts of every geographer and historian that knew of it in the galaxy, which weren't many, a meaningless palm beach on the oceans of a planet well accustomed to them. To the government that ruled Tusorix, and the TIE corps that had now employed its services, it was the lifeblood of transit and communication from Senipp to Spratley, where their populations were concentrated. Across the wider lower lip of the horseshoe, the sandstone ridges had been flattened and their exotic flora cleared for a several hundred meter long strip of duracrete, poured and hardened into what solid rock foundation there was along the greater length. This airstrip provided not just the safe and flat landing spot for all the freighters and transports that frequented the port for a fueling on their way to and from the Archipelagos, but also as an anchor of civilization, of sentient accomplishment against the middle of the raging seas and untouched atoll wilderness. Accompanying this primary strip, lay several break runs and 2 dedicated Cargo pads, at both of the island's shoulders, laid into the soft white sand and connected by their facing ramparts to the island's depot on the Lurlet Lagoon.

It was around these ramparts that the gale force of a Zeta cargo shuttle's hot engines mixed with the cold ocean wind in a whirlwind of light sand and leaf. The concrete of the artificial pad met the terribly tiny landing legs of the Empire's forefront shuttle class, as hot steam exuded from all its ports, lapping temporarily up against the rolling temperature drop.

"Copy and Complete, Eagle 1, thanks for the assist, Z-23, over."

The Cargo Carrier's wings had folded straight up in moments, and the barely recognizable forms of several planetary hired arms rushed out from the ramparts, escorting bulk droids and repulsor platforms as the standard Imperial orange container pod was pried open. Even as the wind steadily built, and stray sand blew across the flat decks of the sentient built island on top of its natural course, they worked hard and fast to bring the latest shipment of equipment and effects from the fleet into the depot's wings of storehouses before the storm fully closed on them.

"Copy, Z-23, Over." And Captain Graf flicked his backhead switch to close the common channel, leaving only the line to 7 and 10 open, perhaps on purpose, not long to be left in silence.

"Another spectacular milk run eh?" Called the now right alongside voice of SirCaleb, off the commander's starboard. A remark was almost immediately jokingly offered by the X-wing forming on the opposite side of the tri flight.

"Cmon Caleb, are you not glad to be in an actual cockpit again, feeling the heat of the seat, the fun of flicking buttons that you can feel moving?"

"Not that I don't enjoy the feeling of flight, but I'll be forthright when I say, even I have my limitations, we're stuck here on mission milk running non-essential transport after transport, while the rest of the wing gets their requiem, I can't even see the fake form of rebel fighters blowing up in front of me any longer."

"Wow, some feelings cooped up like some island chickens in there?"

"We both know Drummer, that your island chicks are much more a myth than a mystery."

"Hey, can't fault a man for thinking of his chicks and clicks."

"If you start one of those nonsensical beats again, I swear on the Emperor's name I will thenceforth shoot you out of our sky myself."

"Remind me to release the album when we get islandside so you can't!"

"Alright alright you two, we're trying to conserve our own fuel, and that includes our mental fortitude pilots, who knows, we could be under attack by storm aliens at any moment!"

“Yeah right Commander, I know we haven’t seen clouds in quite some time indeed, but I sincerely doubt the condensed water of this planet has any aliens hiding within it.”

“Oh I’m well aware SirCaleb, I haven’t forgotten my basics stuck on a Star Destroyer, these clouds are even almost the same shade of grey.”

“Just as humid too.”

And at that comment from Eagle 7, a light chuckle escaped all 3 pilots as they circled in for their own final approach. 5 other T-65s painted in striking gold and blue stood out like sore thumbs against the greys, blacks, and natural greens of the island. The sight brought all of the flying pilots a little moniker of relief and comfort, especially as they observed a wind whipped set of 5 accompanying bodies beside them. Clearing their paths as their 3 comrades made their own jet marked descent, the wind from their maneuvering engines only adding to the already present pulse of the storm front ever closing in. Clambering out of their fighters, the 3 pilots greeted their comrades as they turned out of the holding area for not just their, but their replacement’s craft too, flown down the day prior. It was a bittersweet moment, knowing they now were now free to relax but also free to loiter as they already had been for so long. They hadn’t even long to wait either, but minutes later, the distinct form of yet another Zeta transport had fallen over the opposite cargo pad shoulder, blowing sand and silt much as its predecessor.

With rain coming down in small doses at this point, lightning and thunder cracking with goering intensity, it was already a fringe decisions to greet the arriving Firebird pilots and enjoy an under the wing rain sit out, but it had been decided upon regardless. Sharing jokes as the pilot’s already ready flight suits soaked in the ever increasing downpour, they’d all huddled under a few X-wing foils when the desperate, crackling call had been made, echoing across the vessel’s radios in frantic bursts.

“ALL HAMMER PILOTS, THIS IS NOT A DRILL—“

“ALL WARRIOR PILOTS—”

“ALL CHALLENGE—”

And the disorganized mess of a transmission had already faded into obscurity, all long range radios crackling into incoherent messes through the thrashing Storm front above. Immediately arresting the panic, General Stryker ordered an immediate call to battle stations, all of the Infiltrator wing pilots luckily by their craft and in flight uniform already. In moments long and short statutes cockpits alike were snapping ipekbalong the mine of readied rebel craft, and without waiting for any signals or lights or otherwise, they’d all lifted off in a rather unbecoming mess of starships. Their seats soaked and thei tired bodies less zippy than their comrades, the 8 Eagle X-wings were only just powering on when much of Firebird had already ascended. Assessing the situation critically, The General ordered Captain Graf and his squadron to hold at the atoll and wait for further instruction, “Patrol and protect” were the last intelligible words from the short

range radio line before Firebird disappeared into the clouds, en route to the Fleet for orders and clarity.

Pulling himself and his unit together in the chaos of confusion and command, Captain Graf immediately took in the panicked state of the island, both Zetas were rapidly attempting to lift back off, and a small call among many came from the atoll ATC that could not be ignored.

“Civilian carriers, evacuate Senipp-Spratley!”

The despairing voice of the Tusorian from the tower rose above all the cacophony to the forefront of attention, and as Eagle’s Commander took in the exposed sight before him, he focused in, followed his orders, and inspired out of the paralysis that so often shocked him out of opportunity.

“Perkis! Drummer! Take Z-23 and ZF-6 and get them out of here, don’t stop and don’t come back, those Civilians are top priority understood?”

“Sir yes sir!” Was the call that responded, here was no playfulness, none of the duo’s usual energy and imagination, this was *real*, and it was equal parts terrifying and thrilling to all, the emotions clogging vocal chords as much as the radio had choked their communications.

Watching the two T-65s circle and split the two baiting Zetas across the distant frothing water of the great Ocean that enveloped them, Graf watched perhaps a tad forlornly as they skipped off alone. He so desperately wanted to reinforce them, but he had only 8 pilots, and the island’s own craft still hadn’t taken off yet, he and his remains squadron were needed where they were, he told himself, patrol, and protect...

“The rest of you, form up on me in three flights, climb to the Storm rim and circle, we need to keep eyes on the sky for what might be coming.”

This time the command was followed wordlessly, not even the charismatic charm of AyePea or Caleb poking through the seriousness of the situation and its stunning suddenness, a suddenness only to double when no sooner had they reached their patrol positions than did 2 dozen Unidentifiable figures burst from the sea, right into the one spot they’d never have been seen coming. The call to engage, shout, more than spoken, came far too late for the island’s fate. These aquatic alien predator ships, long and tubular in body shape, with massive guiding tail fins, almost exactly like that of an aquatic fish of any kind, stabilizing a massive central turbine of engine and prop fin, were deadly fast, and incredibly efficient. It took several moments to realize that their inhuman accuracy came from a missile payload and not bomb, by which point the utter confusion of their creation, usage, status, and incredibly strange deployment, had been wiped aside by awe.

The initial attack had lasted perhaps 2 minutes at most, not a single Eagle or other laser finding its mark before their depth defiling attackers had disappeared into the dark and murky dark waters of a storm that had changed them cold from their Crystal norm. Xiros lay in ruin, the airfield had been broken along its entire spine, shattered duracrete and flung rock. It’s

warehouses, if not for the now torrential rain, flaming wrecks made dark smoked piles of rubble. Both Shoulder pads and been broken up with extreme prejudice, battered and blocked to all form of usage. The wrecks of 11 local craft lay burning from oil fire across the crumpled rows of support equipment and a collapsed tower, dozens dead in its wake, its mass fallen on the decimated terminal beneath it. Red flora burned its native color in blackened smoke started again by the storm's increasing intensity, it's blessing and curse to the on and off of an in shock squadron, and a burning island.

And as the tumbling forms of 2 Firebird Y-wings haphazardly stumbled back onto the atoll and it's 6 failed defenders, lost and confused as much as anyone else was shocked, colors accenting the fireball blasted view of a horror scene, Captain Graf could only look on with shock, and with a renewed determination The faint lights of some brave soul along the softer and flatter Lurlet lagoon beaches, directing him to land as of usual, ignited the same in his chest and heart. A moving pair of lights, flashing on and on, towards a direction, towards a cause, towards a people as if his job. Patrol, and *Protect*.

2 hours later...

"Talon, take off!" Was the call that rang across the personal radios of the ad-hoc unit. With another enemy formation closing in on the makeshift island radar, time was of the essence, their enemy was overconfident in their success, and were coming in broad storm light, and Captain Graf was not about to let the opportunity slip him by. One by one, the shaken but sturdy forms of 8 commonly rebel craft lifted from shattered slate into the grey maw. Staying low to the churning Lurlet lagoon, the displaced Firebirds and their pilots awaited the order from their triple winged formation comrades above to initiate their own devastating strikes, the talon's hidden fire blade. The anxious pilots and their atoll attaches had not long to wait before the storm produced more than spark and rain yet again, and not 2 minutes from take off, the cloud churning forms of an enemy strike wing appeared on the grey misted horizon, fins flinging around their midsections on a direct course to finish off the stragglers.

"Break, Break, Dive in and slam, you know the task pilots."

Within seconds the Chondrich Bowfin strike force found themselves under fire from all of their blind angles, all at once. Red lasers streaked against cerulean seas and dark skies, their resultant fireballs flashing and lighting the backdrop like the lightning that had occasionally plagued the sights an hour earlier. Immediately 4 massive mechanical fish tails were falling to the churning ocean below, and 2 more were spinning uncontrollably in rolls off the Starboard, streaking smoke, heat, and fear. As panic suddenly overtook the helpless Bowfin formation and their pilots, the whole formation broke into uncoordinated pieces desperately diving for the safety of the sea several thousand feet below, hoping to hope's sake that their stronger shark built bellies and guns could repel these unknown attackers, it was of no use. Breaking the ever thinning cloud cover the survivors of the squadron discovered a smoking but set and resilient

atoll ready for their revenge. Green, red, and the occasional shot of slug flashed from the beaches and rocks their gunners holed up on. Forced to swerve or die, 3 of the enemy craft hit the water hard on their belly, and the splashes of their crumpling frames accented the quenching fireballs of their comrades, smacking the shallowed surface with deafening slaps of momentum and explosive kinetics. For a moment, everyone had a pause, a moment of silence where nothing but the crackle of distantly past thunder and the crash of waves greeted them. They had done it, defeated an enemy they thought unfightable moments before, the evidence of their efforts in the smoke rising off the stem of the foam on the waves in their view.

“Contacts close at C-74th, That wasn’t all! Large forms from the water!” The call from the corp’s radar operator came clear across the short range radios that still penetrated their adverse conditions.

Of 2 Y“Copy, Firebird, follow us in!” The Captain’s strained voice called back, his 6 T-65s diving from the cloud to find a dozen rising whitewashed whales. Their massive mechanical forms broke the waves with their mass, and plowed right through the wrecks of their comrades with little concern. Eyes widened as the beast’s fins shot upwards, and yet more missiles joined the smoking trails of many others against the island. Explosions rocked sand and sent new glass shards in all directions, the brush fires of the royal flora dying in their throats as the rain continued it’s downpour. The shut eyes of the forced back atoll defenders only opened when the streaking forms of 2 Y-wings they’d once learned to fear came to their aid. Rocking and rattling their craft against the missiles and heavy lasers they unleashed, the displaced firebirds made wrecks of several of the enemy advance craft, steel sheared and sparked up in immense concussive fireballs. Forced to sharply sheer off their intended course, one of the enemy Blacephalons ran aground on the Atoll’s coral, and yet more made uneven landings against the concrete cargo pads of the island’s shoulders, their disembarking enemy forces briefly terrifying the island’s defenders with their sharp forms and snaring teeth, but found themselves flailing on wet sand and cracked duracrete with little cover, lasers having great effects on their skin same as any other, reinvigorating a defense that seemed to be a swimming success.

Such a relief was it, that when Captain Graf and Syllas Pitt made their rounds of the water close and beach, annihilating enemy survivors, and breaking apart their whale craft, they dared to believe that they’d won for good, no enemy ships in sight. Alas, in sight was the key. Lieutenant AyePea barely had the chance to scream across the comms “Bandits from the surf! Bandits from the Surf!” before his X-wing was slammed by half a dozen converging lasers, breaking open his shields and scoring several direct hits to both port thrusters. Spiralling out of control to the left, the Lieutenant waited and time his slam precisely so that his ejection was straight up, saving his life as the T-65 tanked into the same surf that several dozen unidentified spinning hammer craft had emerged from. They had been late to their prescribed escort, but knew they could not return failures, and so flung themselves into the fizzling fray.

Briefly unaware of AyePea’s fate, panic and fear overtook the pilots still in the air, trying to reform in the dim sky and see their attackers. “Break, Break and engage! Keep those bandits busy!” were the Captain’s orders in spite of their now devolving situation. Spinning their craft to

face their new foes. Every pilot's cockpit screens filled with the vaguely familiar hammerhead shape of the many rebel craft they'd faced before, spinning in intense propellor rotations, dozens of angry shark spiked laser cannons coloring the skies shades of blue, red, and green. Rolling to re-engage, Sylas had counted 4 enemies down in the initial head on, just as he heard a hearty curse and a laugh, the chuckle escaping the normally timid pilot's mouth with a clear sense of fear. "Well shit, fishy bastards." as Bad Kid's Y-wing found it's lower port nacelle sheared clean off, the power imbalance turning his bank into a spin. Sylas's screams over the comms were a deafening audible sign of the shifting tides once again, another dozen Bowfins detected inbound with yet more reinforcements. The enemy was committing their reserves, and the Hastily assembled Talon Taskforce had already played their cards. Desperate and despairing in the ever growing chaos, both sides of a rapidly deteriorating battlefield on all fronts threw their full fury at their fronts.

Jerking his throttle to dodge another emerging Hammershot, as the group had begun calling the single laser strike craft, LCM Cupcake screamed across the radio as the bowfins approached their launch angles. Shouting more than stating his orders over the torrential laser and water rain, Graf ordered LCM Xylo and Sylas, closest to the formation, to engage, just as LCM Critical hit off his starboard wing took a glancing hit to their lower wing. Wrapping up and around a cluster of 3 enemy craft, the Captain and his 3 remaining wingmen dove back into another flight, Red lasers flashing hot as the 4 Hammershots disintegrated in sparks of metal. The Commander knew he was splitting his command dangerously thin, but what other choice was there? Abandon the island and its people to their fate? Abandon his post? Flee to the safety of a Star Destroyer he had spent months looking out at others risking their lives aboard? No, this was not another simulation, real lives, real land, and real ships were at stake here, and he'd be damned if he was going to pretend it was and bail out by pressing the power. Yanking his throttle back and over, Graf threw his T-65 into a tight barrel roll the steaming, exerted craft yelled at its own hinges to do, watching as the sapphire blue lasers of his opponent flashed through the gaps in his flying foils. Cursing under his breath, he continued the roll in sync, a flurry of triangulated fire as the trio fought off their numerous attackers, widening the gap in numbers ever steadily even still. A cry came out across the radio, an almost humorously long winded curse off the Commander's top side, the fireball that encompassed SirCaleb's lower thrusters sending red over his cockpit glass. "Bloody righteous Shafter's!" Rapidly and efficiently diving, he could watch as the Lieutenant Commander's X-wing expertly ditched right against the reef. Little time could be spared for Caleb's predicament however, as the battle raged on, and another laser flashed turquoise on his straining shields.

Up above through finally relenting clouds, Xylo watched as the firefight raged behind him. Briefly taking but a second to catch his hyperventilation, he resumed formation alongside Sylas; their enemy came through their grey misted cover right into their guns. More prepared than their comrades had been, dozens of Ion bolts screamed, sparking in sync at the duo, throwing his craft into a roll, the Lieutenant Commander attracted the gunner's attention, giving his brain a little room to breathe as his wingman took the opportunity to unleash their barrage. Already, 2 of the beasts of burden exploded in flashy flames across the tip of his cockpit view screen. There was no time to celebrate as the pilot cursed his poor judgement, having rolled belly instead of dorsal, now subjugated to the Tubers rear cannons. Shields straining against the Ion onslaught, Xylo brought another of the beast's tail sections into view, squeezing the trigger as he watched the fin and craft fall away. No more kills were to be had by the LCM however, his cannons immediately freezing up to continued ion fire, then the thrusters, systems sparking and sputtering out of sync. Unable to re-engage, it was all the pilot could do to make a last ditch repulsor throw to align himself to the Lurlet beach. Watching softly as his disabled craft descended to the sand, yet another loss. Sylas had watched his escort plummet hard into the sand below, relieved at the barely distinguishable seat laid next to it, but had no time to dwell on it, his own fury and fear piercing through as he turned to see his remaining comrades in arms faltering. Throwing his hand against the controls, he did what no Imperial pilot codebook had ever prescribed, but what his months flying alongside rebel wings had, and sent a hopeful thought into the force, a curse and a wish, that he'd been alongside Firebird instead of here, watching his allies fall and destruction reign. Barely finding the courage to line the payload dropping bombers in his sights again, his poor bird's engines sputtering and straining after their Ion bath, the Y-wing pilot thought it truly hopeless.

Suddenly, as if an omen from that same forbidden force, the dimming clouds sent the tiniest ray of sunshine to the waves watching from below. Streaking in on appropriately fiery wings were the rest of Firebird Squadron, the fearsome and facetious forms of 4 Imperial Defenders beside them. It was all Captain Graf could do to the passing forms of the friendly fighters as a dozen enemy craft went off the radar at once, to salute them, an immensely relieved face on both his and his craft's features. Slamming into the enemy swarm, Firebird craft made short work of the pursuing Hammershot, multi missiles spreading and detonating like the inside of a popcorn bowl, the Chondrich formation utterly ruined. Unable to react to Tempest's incredibly quick strike, The remaining Tuber Bowfins, barely half way through their second payload drop, found themselves under intensely concentrated fire, their central fins breaking and burning as the whole formation broke and dove, a fiery and shaken atoll returning fire at the pause in bombardment. Not a single one of them hit the water alive, their ripped steel pieces flaming atop calming lagoon waters, coral and kip shattered under their weight. Sylas whooped and hollered as his squadron came barreling down on their attackers, cries of joy as entire formations of those damned fished bombers broke on the rocks below. Able to finally, truly, for the first time since this leave had even commenced, able to take a rest, Sylas took it. Leaning back into the cockpit seat and letting his hands fall from the throttle in a rare moment of brevity, the Lieutenant Commander smiled, almost feeling the slowing breeze and softening rain on his bird as its ioned engines continued to slow. Down, down, down his Y-wing went, until a barely conscious repulsor maneuver put it in for a calm ditch, just a dozen meters off shore, the intact vessel bobbing

along with Sylas's heart rate, slowed and sentimental from the day's experience, drifting off into a little slice of peace...

Below the waves, watching on as the first sign of sunlight hit the periscope from which she was watching, Rear Admiral Squatina dropped the handles she had been gripping with her fore fins and turned, ever proudful and high held but with the distinct hint of true fear in her features, something her crew and command had rarely ever gotten to see. Her towering stature of grey, light boned skin visually contorted as if sucking in a gut she might have been hit in for her failures, her entire entourage well aware of it as a possibility. Poising on her thinner standing legs, she spoke with a tone and air of confidence that betrayed her own thoughts and feelings.

"The battle has been lost, our enemy has received reinforcements we have proven not to be able to face. Their tenacity in defending this meaningless communication outpost has cost us not just valuable time but resources. We have little to gain from this operation, and everything to lose including our lives. Retreat so that Requiem may be obtained is always the preferable course of action. Captain, order our remaining interceptors and bombers to dive, we must link with the Chordata before this entire war's tide has turned to crush us under its tumultuous fortunes."

The words were clear, concise, and concentrated, there would be no more as the second Blacephallon wave made their silent about face and turned to escape. The now emboldened pilots of the Corps above could only watch in disbelief as their few remaining enemies turned about and splashed into the now softly glistening, wracking waves of the ocean below. Under its surface forming in the watery abyssals of defeat and decay, falling away from the one that got away...

He'd never really gotten the chance to feel sand, not real sand, not this sand, back home, the tan and red dust of Courstillious was nothing like this, not least of which because of its pleasant dampness. His back was almost certainly injured, and he dared not move his right arm, sprawled out and half buried under the ejector seat that had pinned it down its depths, but for now, the feeling of soft and damp silt under him felt soothing. Barely able to force his tired eyes to open, Xylo Pethtel took in the last few laser shots that flew across the sky. Briefly, his heart rate quickened at the thought that they'd lost, and the rest of the squadron had been well and truly defeated. The sudden jolt of Adrenaline brought fresh pain from his arm and he leaned back into the softening cold embrace of wet rain sand. Black hair blown in the wind, catching sand as the seconds passed by the Lieutenant Commander briefly thought to play dead, before catching himself, thinking of half a dozen other scenarios as engine and repulsor sounds mixed with the... ever distantly sounding wind? Slapping his mental mile tracker back into gear for but a moment to assess what even was truly happening, he opened his eyes. Squinting as the

realities hit him, the faded Red of a Xiros Island Palm greeted the corner of his vision, only partially obscuring the bright system sun that shone directly down on him. It was the first planetary sun he'd seen since arriving, and the sight of its yellow accompaniment was calming in a truly nostalgic way. Hearing the distinct whir of a repulsor off his fore, accompanied by the feeling of a thousand tiny knives sent up his fragile face, Xylo strained his tired head up to see the landing forms of 2 Eagle X-wings, all that remained operational, but all that was needed to tell the ever thinking young pilot everything he needed to know.

“Some Vacation, eh Commander?”