

## Hammer and Anvil - RtF Fiction #10 – GN La'an

The Hammer's engines brightened, each throwing out a halo of flaring ions with the intensity of a star. Her reactor struggled to meet the demand for power being placed on it, with the various engineering stations echoing to safety alarms and breach of tolerance reports – exercise it may still be, but it appeared that Dempsey was taking it just as seriously as any brushfire conflict or full blown war. With her weapons firing and shields brightly lit she almost whited out La'an's sensors as he nosed towards her for another attack run.

The quiet, still hulks of her escorting frigates littered local space, their simulated damage having crippled them or registered them as “destroyed” as the Warrior's task force ripped into their lines. The Hammer had been caught unawares at long last, her force strung out between two rendezvous points and leaving her vulnerable to a carefully planned attack. Mere minutes earlier she had been forcibly dumped from hyperspace by the gravity wells of the Harpax II, falling into subspace in disarray alongside the lazily named frigates Ratchet and Chisel, as well as the more familiar and well known VSD Anvil – a veteran of the EH that had, despite its classes general obsolescence, maintained a fearsome reputation amongst the lawless borders of EH territory.

The Hammer had launched a mere 3 squadrons, suggesting the remainder were flying escort with the vanguard or rearguard of the group – a sensible precaution in a combat zone, but in this case far too predictable. Her escorts had launched the same again, as well as a cluster of assault shuttles and heavier craft, a trio of Skiprays being the threat La'an kept a close eye on. Admiral Plif's policy of constant reconnaissance had paid off in time, despite La'an's lack of patience, with the fighters of Kappa stumbling across a fresh ion trail and managing to maintain trailing contact with the enemy, with the aid of a TIE Phantom flight from the Decimator – another VSD with a reputation for excellence in combat.

Plif had read the deployment pattern well and positioned his pieces carefully – the Hammer's vanguard had been allowed to pass completely, the Harpax powering up to catch the ISD herself before cutting power again and switching to a broadband local jamming of hyperwave frequencies. By this point the Hammer's rearguard would be about to jump and receive no sign or communication that anything was wrong until they arrived at their endpoint and noted the absence of their flagship. It was a risky gambit as it meant there was nothing to stop the Hammer escaping in the absence of a gravity well – nothing except the massed guns of the Warrior and her entire task group of course.

La'an checked his chronometer, noting that less than 5 minutes has ticked by. It would take the Hammer at least another 3 to make a new calculation and jump away, a blind jump from this position would be far too dangerous to risk – hence Plif's careful selection of their ambush point.

“Theta, that's the bulk of their fighter screen engaged, time for another go at the target I think?” The voice of the Kappa CMDR cut through, his comms crackling with distortion as the flurry of laser fire he was barreling through came close to clipping his hull.

“Kappa Lead, couldn't have said it better – missile boats, converge on Kappa 1 and follow them in as a second wave, I'll be the third and see if heavy rockets can even the odds.”

“Roger that boss, flight two will cover you. Their entire screen isn’t quite dead yet!” La’an whooped as his guns tracked a weaving TIE Avenger, watching it’s engines die as it registered “destroyed” on his scopes.

The Anvil suddenly filled his vision, his hands twitching into a rough evasive turn that brought his fighter around in a tight loop. La’an couldn’t help but admire her captain, the VSD driving hard between the guns of the closing ISDs in an effort to give the Hammer time to escape. Kappa and Theta didn’t hesitate however, nearly a dozen missile boats and a Sentinel simply slipping past the onrushing VSD with their eyes already fixed on the real prize. La’an spotted the rest of his flight flying above and around them and brought his throttle up to full to rejoin his pilots. As he cleared the Anvil he noted her rapidly falling stats, her shields collapsing in response to the simulated onslaught and her hull and operational status tumbling as she continued to take damage. Falling astern of La’an’s accelerating fighter she registered as crippled, her engines switching to idle, and then destroyed as the Eradicator, Annihilator and Decimator lived up to their worthy namesakes, bracketing her with heavy weapons fire as their own fighters and bombers picked at her carcass like vultures.

2 minutes until the Hammer could jump away – her shields continued to deplete, registering as 22% as she continued her desperate effort to escape, undoubtedly sacrificing her entire fighter complement in the meantime. The Anvil’s sacrifice had bought her time, but not enough, as the Warrior again opened fire, her own hull tilted at 40 degrees past the horizontal as she dove under the hulk of the drifting Anvil and her weapons fired as they bore.

“All fighters, her forward shields are failing – focus all firepower on her dorsal fore-section.” The Warrior’s fighter controller came through clearly on the tactical network.

“Theta, adjust vector by 3 points, fire as Kappa break” Mark’s voice was a little less clear, the power of their squadron net nowhere near that of the ISD and far more susceptible to interference. None the less Theta adjusted together, a seamless example of what years flying together could produce.

“Kappa firing... now, break!” Drachen’s own voice broke as he yelled at his own attack craft, the missile boats each pulsing out a half dozen warheads, simulated torpedo payloads flashing through the kilometre of space between attacker and target in mere seconds. 72 torpedoes became 47, some successfully intercepted by the frantic point defence weapons of the Hammer, others set off in sympathetic detonation as their neighbours exploded. The rest speared into the hull, albeit without the fiery explosion of their non-exercise variants.

“Shields are down, shields are down” Theta’s commander couldn’t keep the excitement from his voice as he added a pair of heavy rockets to the mix, followed by another – all 4 flew on unchallenged and impacted the same area of the Hammer’s hull.

“Power levels are fluctuating, showing impending system failures – including propulsion.” The Warrior’s tactical network sounded again. “All fighters clear the target, Warrior firing in 5.”

La’an led his fighters away, all intact despite the chaos of the last minutes, returning to the Warrior via a wide, looping course. Glancing left for a moment he paused, the breath in his lungs fixed at the sight of the two ISDs in such close proximity, the Warrior executing a slow roll to port to bring every single one of her heavy turbolaser turrets to bear as she showered the crippled Hammer with fire.

Simulated or not it looked the part and La'an, having seen ISDs die before, struggled to recall seeing one so convincingly trapped.

"She's gone, well done Warriors – mop up the survivors, we're showing 6 active craft in... belay that 9 active craft – we have a shuttle and 2 escorting fighters on an escape vector. Intercept. I say again, intercept, high priority!"

He frowned at the message as he heard it, flicking his sensors to full gain and sweeping for the fleeing shuttle – 6km distant and closing only slowly. The IFF signals of Sigma's lead flight were closest, their TIE Avengers closing the gap – so much so that both escorts dropped behind the shuttle, absorbing the chasing laser fire to keep the shuttle clear of danger. The first fell away, crippled, a Delta squadron TIE Defender whose IFF faded to neutral. The second Defender weathered even more incoming fire, finally finished by a snaking concussion warhead as its Alpha IFF signature faded away.

"Damn it" La'an thumped his console hard enough that his hand stung from the blow. The shuttle disappeared into hyperspace, undoubtedly taking the enemy Admiral and her command staff away. It looked like there would be no early finish to the exercise after all.

"All vessels, return to your ships and standby for a pursuit course!"