



CHAPTER TWO

FIRST ARRIVAL

Space was alive.

Commander Aldaric of Kappa Squadron forced the throttle of his Missile boat to full, rebalancing his power levels for speed and laser recharge. The incredible speed of the Missile Boat would serve as his primary defence, shielding would need to act as little more than an 'added bonus'. The space around him was lit up by a shifting, undulating network of ion fire, giving an eerie, blue hue to the drifting gas clouds that formed the Aurora Nebula. They had flown right into a trap so deep inside Emperor's Hammer space that, for a fleeting moment, he had suspected it was in fact a drill. The coded warning and distress signals that the Fleet Admiral had begun sending from aboard 'The Bus' had very quickly silenced that thought. His mind snapped into full tactical awareness, his consciousness slipping quickly into processes that had been honed through intense training and psychosocial conditioning.

"Kappa! Sound off!" He called, a chorus of replies coming in tight succession, confirming the Squadron was as ready as he'd have expected. A flash of green told him that his squadron knew their business well, and were already responding to the threat, without the need for orders. Flickering explosions told that they were already making an impact, whittling down the vast field of mines they had found themselves in.

Moments before, Kappa squadron, escorting Fleet Admiral Pellaeon aboard Theta Squadron's lead Landing craft, 'The Bus', and all her squadron mates, had been wrenched out of hyperspace. The dark silhouette of an interdictor cruiser hung against the coloured gasses of the nebula, the distinctive, bulbous gravity well generators giving it a distinctive shape. Until that ship was taken out, the Admiral would be trapped in the midst of this mine field, along with both Kappa and Theta squadrons.

Aldaric took a moment to take in the situation, prioritising tactical and situational awareness over a few quick 'kills'. The interdicator's gravity well generators had destabilised their hyperspace corridor, forcing their craft to drop back to real-space in the very centre of an immense mine field. Each mine was now firing a barrage of blue, ionised energy that would disrupt the electronic systems of any target they hit, eventually completely disabling it. Glancing between the radar and viewscreen, Aldaric was almost shocked at the scale of the trap. The mine field stretched to beyond visual range in every direction, and seemed constructed to confound any escape or destruction. Arcs of mines shifted in every direction, creating a chaotic pattern that defied systematic clearing. He calculated the odds of getting the Admiral safely away. They were not good.

"Kappa, let's get to this. Nine, with Theta 5 through 8, they'll be clearing the mines closest to the Landers. Flight two, clear a path towards Aurora Prime. Flight One, with me." A quick combination of key presses indicated the interdicator as target priority one to his flight. Aldaric's three wingmen, Polo, Grayson and Hawkins, formed up and followed their Commander, releasing a stream of laser fire ahead of them. Individually, each Missile Boat was laden with a double load of heavy rockets and concussion missiles – enough fire power to decimate an entire fleet. But against the tiny mines, such weapons were ineffective. They would need to rely on their single laser cannon to deal with them. The four fighters working together gave them a higher chance of clearing a large number of the mines as they made for the cruiser.

"Kappa, what the hell are you doing out there?" the crackling voice of Colonel Mark Schueler, Commander of Theta squadron and pilot of 'The Bus' barked over the comms net, "You are supposed to be the escort for our cargo!" Aldaric did not take kindly to the insult.

"Kappa One to Theta One," Aldaric replied, his voice stern in the face of such provocation by the Commander of a squadron with whom Kappa shared a deep rivalry. "Three-One is with your TIEs, if you care to look, as is all of Flight Two." Despite his training, Aldaric couldn't stop himself from making a brief course correction. Pitching his craft slightly to the left, his flight barrelled past the nose of the Imperial Lander carrying the Fleet Admiral, the green of their lasers flashing provocatively close to the vessel as they cleared the mines before it. As they passed, Aldaric took a momentary visual survey of the vessel. Static charges were already arcing across the hull, evidence that the intense ion-fire was already taking its toll on the lead Theta craft. The odds really did not look good.

"Two here," A voice came; General Dunta Polo, Aldaric's primary wingman. "Commander, the Lander won't last long with those mines." Aldaric knew Polo was correct. HE took out a further two mines before replying.

"Neither will we," Aldaric said, hating to make the admission, "But this close to Aurora Prime, help will not be far off. If we take out the cruiser, they can jump in safely, clear the mines, and pick up what is left of Theta. If any of you get yourselves disabled before all of Theta is down, you'll be on rec-room cleaning duty for the rest of your tour."

"Who the hell pulls this sort of thing in our space? Especially here?" Grayson asked, the sound of his near continuous laser stream clear over the comm link.

"Shoot first, ask questions later," replied Hawkins. Aldaric found it hard to question the logic given their current situation, as Kappa's first flight tore through the mines between them and the interdicator. It took mere seconds to close to missile range.

“Single rocket, on my mark,” Aldaric ordered. He toggled through the interditors systems, selecting the shield generator mounted on top of the vessel’s bridge. He was surprised to note that the ship had one a single, large generator, rather than the two that were standard in those Star Destroyers used by the naval forces of the Emperor’s Hammer. There was no time to interrogate the matter further, as his HUD indicated a firm lock on the target from all four Missile Boats in his flight.

“Mark,” he ordered, and four yellow trailed blazed away from the quick moving fighters, closing rapidly on the interdicator. The kilometres ticked away; six, six point five, five... The audio feedback Aldaric enabled beeped in ever quickening pulses as the warheads raced to their target. Three. Two point five. Two. One point... A stream of turret fire rippled from the hull of the interdicator; small, rapid streams of laser fire tracing and intercepting the incoming missiles. Not one made it within one click of the cruiser.

“Point-defence effective to 1.5 clicks,” Aldaric announced, although he knew each of his pilots would have noted the same thing. “We’ll have to do this up close and personal. Break formation at two-point-five, watch for splash from close impacts. Good hunting!”

Seconds later, Grayson and Hawkins shot ahead of Aldaric’s fighter, engaging their boosters to maximise their speed on the approach. Grayson climbed and Hawkins descended, each flying a complex, twisting path towards the interdicator. Aldaric prepared to make his own move, but held his course a moment longer as his comms again crackled to life.

“Mission critical craft is about to be disabled,” A tinny, electronic voice announced. Krell, Aldaric thought, he had hoped they had more time. As he banked his craft right, moving to cross the bows of the interdicator, the Fleet Admiral addressed the squadrons directly.

“This is Fleet Admiral Pellaeon to all Imperial fighters,” He began, “My craft is facing imminent disabling. Take out that Interdicator, clear the mines and await the repair vessels that will already be en-route. That is all.” Aldaric would not let the Admiral down. He pushed his throttle to full, and began his attack run.

Explosions burst around the interdicator as Hawkins and Grayson made their initial passes. Even at almost point-blank range, the defensive turrets of the interdicator were proving difficult to outsmart. Two warheads detonated early, the flash of fire momentarily illuminating the cruiser’s black hull. A second pair of warheads impacted on the shields, the bursts of plasma-fire and shield energies leaving glowing after-images dancing before Aldaric’s eyes, despite the protective lenses of his helmet. He saw Hawkins peel off from the interdicator, his boat jinking erratically to the left.

“Damn it, that defensive fire is heavy. Watch it on your run,” Hawkins called.

Aldaric frowned. A vessel of this class should be no match for even a single Missile Boat, never mind four. Even as he thought this, weaving steams of defensive fire snaked towards his own fighter. He dove hard, skirting so close to the hull of the Interdicator that his shield bubble flared and crackled as it grazed the armour plating protecting the craft. At this proximity, warheads were useless, unless he were to make this a suicide pass. Switching to lasers, he released a spray of green energy towards the bridge column, before corkscrewing up and away from the cruiser, hammering his afterburners to give him space. As he did so, his auto-comm crackled into life once more.

“Mission critical craft disabled,” It announced. Pell’s ship was down. He punched a console in frustration, hard enough to smash a data-screen.

“Emperor’s sake, Kappa, you’re supposed to be protecting the Admiral!” He grunted.

“He’s still alive, Commander,” came a curt reply from Lieutenant Commander Drakon, “He’s just delayed...”

“Let’s hope it stays that way,” Crsepe added, “Take it from me, a delay is bad enough to an admiral. A guy like Pell... Getting killed, that will just make him angry.”

Aldaric was about to reply, ready to order his squadron to pull it together, when something changed. The almost constant blue glow of the ion fire vanished. The entire, vast mine field shut down. A glance at his sensors showed the entire field was inactive. After the near constant blue strobe lighting, all seemed calm.

“Incoming enemy fighters!” came over the comms. Aldaric recognised the voice of General La’an. Aldaric cursed himself, angry Theta had spotted the threat first.

“What the hell are those?” Came Hawkins’ voice. Aldaric couldn’t draw a direct line of sight to the incoming fighters, as he still moved to clear the defensive fire of the Interdictor. However, if it was launching fighters, it would need to lessen its defensive output, else risk hitting its own fighter screen. This could be their chance.

Before swinging back for another pass at the cruiser, Aldaric hit a button on his targeting screen, identifying the newest vessel to enter the combat area. The display showed a peculiar TIE variant, clearly based off the standard TIE Fighter design. It reminded him of some of the old experimental models he’d seen when flying simulator missions. Between the two, large hexagonal solar-array wings hung twin pods. The first appeared much like that of a standard TIE, although the coloration was far darker. Aldaric wondered if it was a new alloy or simply aesthetic. The second pod mounted a large cannon, probably a variety of turbo laser, the sort usually found on larger vessels, along with a second pair of under-slung laser cannons. Whatever this new design was, it was heavily armed – perhaps the equal of a TIE Defender. It was fast, as well. The distance counter showed that this new fighter was closing on him more rapidly than he would have expected for any standard TIE design, closer to a pace that he’d have expended in the advanced fighters the TIE Corps used.

“Flight two, on the fighters – engage at range. Three, protect the Admiral,” Aldaric ordered. “Theta 2-1, respond.”

“Two One, here. I’m assuming command of Theata,” La’an answered. “Flight Two is with me on the fighters, Three is with you on the Interdictor. Let’s take these bastards down.”

Reassured Theta was performing to expectations, Aldaric swung his craft back towards the Interdictor, finally seeing the swarm of incoming fighters. Despite their awkward appearance, in the gravity-less environment of space, they moved with an unexpected speed and grace that Aldaric had come to expect from much sleeker designs. Within moments, they opened fire. Green and blue lasers streaked towards him, and he rolled to the right to avoid the incoming fire. The craft closing on him rolled with him, keeping up a heavy volley of linked fire and forcing Aldaric to disengage from his initial run at the Interdictor. Against the mines, speed was of sufficient defence to have allowed him to forgo charging shields, but against fighters able to move with him, even if not quite match his full speed, his dwindling shields presented a very real and immediate danger.

“Shields down! Pulling back!” That was Hawkins. He had been coming in on his run as Aldaric had been heading out. Locating him on his screens, Aldaric saw Hawkins had been at almost point-blank range when the new fighters had launched. They would have been on him before he had time to react. Aldaric swung back towards the Interdictor once again, forcing his craft to accelerate beyond safe limits. He was thrown into his seat as the acceleration kicked in, and the added spiralling

approach pushed his body to the edge of unconsciousness. Through a red haze, he watched the twin-podded fighters flash past his view screen, and his fighter rocked with laser impacts. Warning tones sounded from several systems, but he was past the fighters and still had control. In the seconds it would take his pursuers to match his course, he could close with Hawkins and...

The thought never had time to finish. Up ahead, he saw the unmistakable silhouette of an Imperial Missile Boat, three of the new fighters bracketing it in an inescapable crossfire. From the bulky cannons standing out from the secondary pod, brilliant green laser fire closed in on the Missile Boat, and with an grim inevitability, it disintegrated in a cloud of fire and debris.

With a primal scream, Aldaric hammered the trigger for his concussion war heads, a spray of missiles released dumb-fire at close range as he swung past the enemy. The first two fighters were a moment too slow to react, and missiles impacted against their solar arrays. One was engulfed by secondary explosions, tearing itself apart. The second barrelled wildly out of control before crashing against the hull of the cruiser. The third pilot reacted more quickly, and swung away from the path of the war heads. With no target lock, the concussion missiles continued on, slamming into the Interdictor's hull to little effect. Although his heart burned with a need to take out the third fighter, to gain a measure of revenge for the death of Hawkins, his mission priorities were clear. He had a clear shot against the Interdictor. The impact of the concussion missiles had shown the point-defences were either down or significantly reduced. It was a chance he could not miss. Switching to heavy rockets, he linked the launchers and rolled left to take him close to the hull of the cruiser. Dodging between the bulbous gravity-well generators, he flew swiftly across the dorsal hull, before pulling up close to the bridge column. His target was clear. At this range, no lock would be needed. He straightened up, and launched a pair of missiles directly into the single, large shield emitter mounted above the bridge. The detonation was colossal. Shockwaves rippled across the bridge hull, which viable buckled and cracked, venting atmosphere and the generator burst apart. Aldaric's own fighter was buffeted by the waves of energy, sounding more warning tones and causing his hull integrity indicator to shift from green to red. The pass had been costly, but the Interdictor was now open.

"The cruiser's shields are down – generator destroyed." Aldaric announced to both squadrons. "Hawkins is gone, and I'm not far behind him. Pulling back to allow time for system repair."

Aldaric checked his flickering radar – with the remaining six missile boats of Kappa plus four from Theta closing on the Interdictor, the heavy fighters pulled away from his pursuit, and addressed the more immediate threat. That was rare competency from the usual fighter squadrons he encountered. Switching to a rear camera view, he watched the fight evolving. The missile boats from Kappa and Theta made several passes, each turned back by disciplined volleys of heavy fire. Laser, turbo laser and ion fire cross space, and the premature detonation of warheads flashed around the cruiser. Wild chatter came across the comms – requests for support, shield and hull status updates, curses and insults hurled at the enemy fighters.

The fight was desperate, but without any shields, the cruiser was still vulnerable. A sudden cheer from the comms echoed a bloom of fire from the hull of the Interdictor as a rocket penetrated the hull near one of the gravity-well generators, causing it to burst outwards like some steel balloon. An immediate argument erupted as Colonel Eode of Kappa and Colonel Madon of Theta both claimed the hit.

"Shut it," La'an's voice came. "Concentrate all fire on the rent in the hull." Despite his near crippled craft, Aldaric responded to the order. Swinging the nose of his craft back around, he sent volley after

volley of rockets heading straight for the gaping wound in the side of the cruiser. Missile boats weaved above the stricken vessel, loosing multiple warheads deep into the bowels of the cruiser. Despite the skilful counter-fire of the twin-podded TIEs, several warheads got through and detonated within the hull. The ship bulged, shook and buckled as great explosions erupted with the Interdictor. Lights across the ship flickered and died, as generators failed and power systems went down. As atmosphere vented from multiple breaches in the upper hull, the Interdictor drifted into a slow spiral, pushed by the jettisoning gasses. She was adrift and dead in space.

But there was still the matter of her fighter squadrons. Several fighters now displayed as nearing critical hull condition. The price of the Interdictor had been the TIE Corps pilots risking their own lives to score hits, deliberately taking fire in order to open up a window of opportunity to strike at their target. Pilot after pilot reported that they were running low on concussion warheads, and against such agile craft, the rockets would be useless. Only Theta's TIE Advanced and Kappa's sole TIE Defender had the laser cannons to match those of the strange, new TIE's. This was far from won yet.

"Incoming vessel!" called Repulsor. Aldaric checked. There was something wrong. The vessel was showing as a large capital ship, but not on a vector that would suggest it was relief coming from the Emperor's Hammer's home world of Aurora.

"Stay on your toes, we don't know..." He didn't need to finish the sentence.

A dark black vessel, emblazed with a red, spiked cog that bore some resemblance to the Imperial icon, dropped into real space so close the whirling fighters that Aldaric felt he could reach out and touch it. It was massive, easily double the size of the Warrior. It was clearly a Star Destroyer – the iconic wedge shape and board bridge tower announced that. Although significantly smaller than a Super Star Destroyer variant, the sheer bulk of this vessel was still deeply imposing.

The radio cracked to life, and a mechanical voice boomed from it, amplified to level Aldaric thought the speakers incapable of.

"Pilots of the 'Emperor's Hammer'," it announced, "I have come for your Admiral, and him alone. I see you have incapacitated my Interdictor. I commend you – my mines and Aggressors were calculated to ensure that was not possible."

"Who the hell does this – who ever it is – think they are?" La'an asked on the secure squad to squad channel.

"I am The Judge, General La'an," The voice answered – how, Aldaric did not know. Somehow, he had picked up the secure transmission. It continued, "And I offer you the chance to leave now, lest you all be judged."

Aldaric checked his warhead load. Six concussion missiles, and two heavy rockets. He pulled up his squad data channels, and saw he was the most heavily armed member of Kappa or Theta.

"Commander," Repulsor called, "They're launching more fighters."

Rep was right. Hundreds of fighters swarmed from the huge Star Destroyer, flanking numerous shuttles and transports. At this close range, Aldaric could see the fighters, a mix of TIE designs, including the twin-podded fighters 'The Judge' had referred to as Aggressors. Aldaric was about to tell the voice just which hell it could direct itself towards when he stopped. An intense pressure built within his temples without warning, causing him to flinch. A voice, distant and yet right inside his head spoke.

"You are no good to the Corps dead. Bravery is commendable, stupidity is unforgivable. Take your scans back to the Warrior. They will be needed."

The voice was a deafening whisper, and it echoed around Aldaric's brain.

"Commander, did you just hear..." asked Romanov.

"Was that Pell?" returned Polo.

Aldaric keyed into La'an. "Options?"

"Retreat, or go down fighting." La'an replied. There was little time to choose.

"You have your orders." The voice came again. It was unmistakably Pellaeon's. Aldaric had heard the Admiral was strong in the dark side of the force, but this was the first time he had experienced it first-hand.

"Kappa, Theta, we have our orders." Aldaric spat, hating every word. "Return to the Warrior." Aldaric watched as each craft pulled away from the fight, making for the jump point that would send them home. He too swung his ship away, glancing back at the small shapes of the two Landers, now surrounded by several shuttle and transports.

As he turned away, and the light of real-space stretched and shifted into the swirling vortex of a hyper-space corridor, he once more felt the stabbing pressure about his temples.

"I expect to see you again soon. Take your scans back. They will be needed."

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