

Esterox Exploration

Despite the length of the briefing in preparation for the upcoming mission that the Warrior squadrons were about to depart on, it was fairly straight-forward: scan the habitable planets of the system for any signs for the mysterious Ishtari. Sin, Rho, and Kappa had already departed for the Saratoga, an MC-80 in Battlegroup 2, that would ferry them to the nearby Candcorza where they would execute that mission. The two remaining squadrons aboard the Warrior, Sigma and Theta had the same mission on the closer, Esterox. With only the two squadrons to explore the desert planet of Esterox, Battlegroup 2 Commander Marenta decided to keep the Warrior in orbit as support.

Once the hangars were clear of the Saratoga-bound squadrons, Doc led his pilots to their TIE Defenders, which were already prepared on the Warrior's launching mechanism. The twelve pilots of Theta, whose main goal was Special Insertion and Extraction, felt most prepared to find any enemy fighters and also be able to report back without being spotted. Doc led his flight to the first row of Defenders while his XO, Colonel Wolfverine led his flight to the next row. Lastly, Lieutenant Commander Lobsord led Theta's final flight to the remaining Defenders. The pilots climbed into their fighters, began their preflight checklist, after which, reported into their Flight Leaders.

"Engines, check. Shields, check. Primary Weapons Systems, check. Missiles, check. All systems ready for take-off," came the sequence of responses from Doc's three flight mates. After the squadron commander heard confirmations from the other flight leads, he switched frequencies to the Warrior's bridge.

"Warrior Bridge, Theta 1. Theta Squadron is prepared for takeoff. Requesting permission to launch," Doc radioed expertly.

"Launch tube is clear, permission granted, Theta 1," came the Warrior bridge reply.

Doc switched back to the squadron frequency and ordered, "Release tethers and launch on my mark."

The Warrior's automated launch system took over from there, quickly releasing the first flight's Defenders sequentially. The next two flights followed in a similar fashion and Theta squadron was quickly in formation, flying a slow orbit around the Warrior.

"Glad you could join us, Theta 1," squawked across the radio. Sigma squadron had launched first and was already in orbit of the Star Destroyer.

"Thanks for the warm welcome, Wreckage," Doc replied. Major Wreckage was an experienced veteran, and Commander of Sigma Squadron. "Whatcha say, Theta will take the northern hemisphere, Sigma, the southern?"

“Deal,” replied Wreckage, “If you even spot one of those Ishtari, contact me on this frequency. We’ll have a faster response time than the Warrior.”

“Same goes for you,” Doc replied, “Happy Hunting.”

The two squadrons broke their artificial orbit of the Star Destroyer and began the short journey to Esterox. From space, the planet looked like a giant ball of sand. There were no clouds to be seen, just a never-ending tan spreading across every visible inch of the planet. Previous scans had indicated there was nothing living on this planet, but that would make the perfect place for a group of pirates to hide out. If the Ishtari were here, the TIE Corps forces would find them.

Atmospheric entry was one of Doc’s favorite parts of flying, the turbulence and the heat really brought into perspective just how fast he was normally flying. In space, there is no point of reference close enough to really appreciate the speed. The Defender was a smoother entry than Doc’s previous TIE Interceptor; the third wing of the bigger craft added a lot of stabilization when flying in any level of atmosphere. The twelve tri-winged fighters roared into the planet’s lower atmosphere and leveled out.

“Alright, Theta Squadron, we’ll be splitting up by flight. Each flight will execute a pattern search over a third of the hemisphere. Once your search is complete, flight leaders report to me. Any questions,” Doc paused, “Excellent. Break off and begin the search.”

Doc led his three pilots, General Pete Mitchell, Lieutenant Nerdle Eyeff, and Lieutenant Alistair “Vargus” Vianna, to the start point of their search grid. As they began the search pattern, the flight broke from a tight formation to a more spread out, search formation that let them scout more ground in less time. As they began the relatively boring process, some chatter sprung up.

“Another dust ball. I doubt the Ishtari would hide out here, it’s hardly a vacation destination,” Vargus said.

“I doubt they were considering the relaxation offerings of a planet when looking for a base,” Pete replied.

“True, but there are also not a lot of places to hide on this planet,” Doc added, already a little doubtful they would find any signs of the Ishtari here.

Esterox was indeed a desert planet. As they flew over the desolate planet, all Doc noted was sand dunes, islands made of rock, and an occasional oasis with a puddle of water and a few strange trees. From everything Doc had seen of this planet so far, nothing led him to believe that this would be any kind of base for the Ishtari. He hoped he was wrong, but he suspected that Theta would not be seeing any action today.

After about two hours, Theta squadron had made it almost halfway through their designated search area with absolutely nothing to show for it. Doc was starting to feel the boredom creep in, just sitting in the cockpit with very few changes of course, watching the endless sand dunes go by. Doc felt like he was counting the sand grains looking for an enemy that may not even be there. Checking the nav panel, there was still another 50 kilometers until the next course change. Doc decided there wouldn't be any harm in resting his eyes for a couple minutes, his flight would keep diligent watch for that brief time.

Just as he closed his eyes, a slow alarm sounded from the Defender's controls, a small blue light blinking in pace with the rhythmic alarm. Doc checked the alarm, it was a radiation warning. He disabled the audible signal, letting the light flash. The Defender's shielding would protect them from any harm, but it was good to know. If one of them went down here, there would likely be no rescue mission due to the hazardous conditions. Doc was fully alert, the radiation warning had sent a shot of adrenaline through his body. Doc got his breathing under control and resumed scanning the planet's surface.

"Sir, I think I see buildings in the distance," Nerdle's voice squawked into Doc's helmet.

"Nice spot, I think I see it too. Pete take Nerdle and go get a closer look. See if anyone is home and report back," the squadron commander ordered.

"Yes sir," came Pete's smart reply.

As Doc and Vargus maintained their course and speed, the other two Defender's broke formation, diving down and away toward the distant buildings. Doc didn't have to wait long, only a few minutes, to hear back.

"Sir, the buildings appear empty. Also, our radiation alarms spiked higher as we approached. Not sure what happened here, but it wasn't good," Nerdle reported back.

"Affirmative. Return to formation and make sure you take good notes for debrief," Doc replied.

Nerdle and Pete pointed their Defender's toward their flight-mates, and accelerated to rejoin the search. As they flew back into formation, Nerdle made note of the location, radiation level and type, and a few other details to relay back to the battlegroup.

The rest of the search turned out to be more of the same, Theta squadron found two more groups of abandoned buildings, also with high levels of radiation. Despite not finding the Ishtari, Doc knew that the data they had gathered would help tell the story of what happened on this planet. With any luck, maybe they would learn something about their enemy.

Doc had returned to the Warrior with Theta Squadron. After getting out of their flight suits and grabbing a bite to eat, the squadron headed back toward the barracks while Doc had to go

to a debrief with Battlegroup Command. He made his way to the lift, the conference rooms were on the upper floors, closer to the bridge. Doc pulled out his code cylinder, which granted him access to the upper levels, and keyed in the floor. Just as the door closed, a mouse droid rushed in at the last moment. Normally, Doc wouldn't mind, but a mouse droid always meant a stop at a floor that wasn't the occupant's final destination. Sure enough, Doc arrived at his destination with an extra stop in-between. Normally, it wouldn't bother him, but he was a few minutes late to the debrief.

As he entered, everyone was waiting for him. Doc looked around the table, closest to him sat Wreckage, then General Frown, Battlegroup Commander Marenta. Past them were Westric "Dav" Davalorn, Aardvark, and Talon Jade who joined the meeting via hologram. They had just returned to the Saratoga, still in orbit around Candcorza.

"Glad you could join us, Doc," Marenta said and quickly moved on, "Now to begin. First, everyone made it back, no incident?"

The group of Squadron Commanders nodded, none of them had encountered any Ishtari. The meeting continued, each Commander relaying what their Squadrons had seen. The planets the two groups of squadrons had scouted were very similar in that they both had ruins of a civilization and were covered in radiation, but different in temperature. That resulted in Esterox, the warmer planet, being a desert, and Candorza was a snow covered planet. Both bleak and, as far as battlegroup two could tell, uninhabited. The ruins of a civilization did indicate that there was intelligent life on this planet, once.

"We were not expecting the radiation levels that were detected on both planets. After some analysis, it is the same type, Zeta radiation," Marenta explained, "The only time we have seen Zeta in Imperial records is when the Death Star fired it's superweapon."

"Didn't the Death Star completely destroy a planet, not just destroy any signs of life?" Dav interjected.

"Indeed," Marenta confirmed, "We do have some early records from the testing of the weapon of the Death Star. In the early stages, they did a lot of low power, targeted blasts. When focused on a city, it was strong enough to break bonds at the biological level, but not for certain metals and stones. This may indicate that someone is building a new superweapon."

"We will have to include this in our report back to the Grand Admiral. Before we are adjourned, there is one more matter of business," General Frown interrupted, he was never one to let a meeting go short, "Early reports from the teams on the ground at both planets may have turned up some clues as to what species inhabited the structures you all found."

As Frown spoke, Marenta pulled up a holographic display of some images from the structures. Whatever had happened was at least a few years ago, all the buildings were crumbling on one side and being engulfed in a dune from the other. Still visible on the largest building was a seal, a crescent moon which had wave-like lines inside the moon, above the

bottom curve. Finally, there was a four-pointed star above the waves, near the top curve of the moon.

“That seal looks familiar,” Aardvark chimed in, “In fact, I think it was on the Ishtari shuttles that were stealing the supplies. Kappa was mustered for the response force to the Ishtari invasion, we shot a lot of them down and I got awfully close to a couple of those shuttles. I’d swear that was their symbol.”

“You nailed it,” Davalorn confirmed, Rho had also fought the Ishtari.

“We’ll let Command confirm, one of the other Battlegroups most likely found them. If these planets were their home, there could be some useful information down there. Have the ground teams collect artifacts, texts, anything they can find that might have some insight into their culture and way of life,” Marenta said, “If a super weapon was tested here, it might explain why the Ishtari are raiding other civilizations for supplies.”

“I will help you write the report for the Admirals,” General Frown said.

“Any other business?” Marenta asked, paused, and then continued, “Alright, adjourned. Return to your squadrons. We’ll be in orbit until the ground teams return and we hear back from Command.”

As the Squadron Commanders filed out, Marenta and Frown remained, preparing the report to Grand Admiral Rapier and High Admiral Plif with everything they had learned. Soon they would have more information into the Ishtari, and with any luck they might find something they could exploit about the Ishtari’s culture or some weakness in their materials. They may not have got to fight the Ishtari, but the mission was not a failure. Information is power.