

RtF Fiction Submission #9 - Supply and Demand – GN La'an

His frustration had made him increasingly irate, a surprising lapse that he had always thought himself immune to. La'an arched his back again, struggling to stretch on the grav couch without his hands moving on the TIE's sensitive controls. The optimism of the previous week had been replaced by unexpected monotony – the recon mission had entirely failed to lead to the task group engagement that had been anticipated, Admiral Dempsey having clearly read the situation well. It was quite possible that the Warrior had relied too much on the same general tactics that had served them well for the previous 2 years of annual exercises – the Hammer had clearly learned from their own mistakes. Whether that would change the outcome, well... that was a decision truly out of La'an's hands.

"Six, continue your sweep with Eight and report when you're approaching the end point." His terse command over the flight channel was acknowledged with two clicks, neither Caine nor Torres was tempted to try their hand with humour.

The day had run poorly so far, with Theta's second flight detached from the Warrior on an escort duty for a supply convoy, running empty back from the Warrior to an out of exercise area RV. Maintenance issues with Horus' TIE had grounded him, the violent misfiring of his engines having thrown his Advanced as he completed a launch – even for a veteran the experience had been stressful and his nerves had been rattled, they had both seen the effects of engines misaligning and detonating, beyond the ability of inbuilt safeties to control. Ultimately it now meant that their three fighters were flying shotgun to the quartet of bulk conveyors approaching the edge of the exercise area, while the others watched the rear La'an would conduct the handover to the next escorts – part of the force maintaining the security of the exercise area and ensuring its bounds were not breached by civilian traffic or any other interfering factors. The area was well marked and patrolled but he knew of at least three breaches in the last week alone – a senator too important to heed mere military orders, a civilian trader whose ship looked to have predated the Old Republic and whose eyes had proven more useful than his sensors, and an entire TC warship – the Captain of the VSD Ravager, a Home Guard unit, had apparently thought cutting his homeward journey by a parsec was worth cutting the corner of the exercise area. Bearing in mind that he was now awaiting court martial, La'an couldn't help but disagree.

"Incoming flight, confirm ident." La'an responded to the ping of his sensors tracking a hard return, a 4-ship flight approaching at speed from outside the area. He frowned at the silence of his comms receiver, repeating his previous command clearly.

As the distance closed to 15km La'an nosed his Advanced between his charges and the oncoming ships, still too distant to clearly make out.

"Supply, I don't like this, execute action Beta – reverse and fall back at speed," La'an expanded his comment for the benefit of the chartered civilian freighters. They often chose to forget precise details of orders in favour of keeping their ships undamaged and profit margins intact at the hint of danger. He had no desire to spook them, but the approaching ships were beginning to give him a bad feeling. He switched back to his flight channel as the four freighters turned, clumsily, by pairs.

“Torres, keep with the freighters, in close. Caine – 3km out from them as a fast picket, if it looks like danger I want you to herd them and jump as soon as you can to the arranged RV. Confirm?”

“Roger, I’m 7 clicks back from you and closing, can’t get a read on them but they’re certainly not flying casual.” Caine’s voice was clear and serious, as much justification as La’an needed to feel confident of his choice.

“I’m going to close the distance, as soon as you get the signal from me, you know what to do.” La’an was answered with another double click.

Pushing his throttle forward he put himself on a collision course, watching the distance to the potential threat close and the freighters fall behind rapidly as they lumbered back to the cover of their escorts.

8km... sensors confirmed fighter scale craft inbound. 6km... high energy outputs, looked like they were coming in hot – shields raised, engines at combat thrust. His sensors sounded again, no IFF, no transmissions – squinting through his helmet visor he began to pick out the flare of their engines, arming his own weapons and powering his shields from a resting 25% to full power screens, forward and aft. He checked his weapon load out from habit. No live warheads, quad lasers in exercise mode but with a safety toggle that would restore them to full power.

His alarms sounded as the craft types fed through his systems – his targets were Z-95 snubfighters, flying in a tight line, a surprise as they were largely out of favour with the EH or even the civilian or trading groups within the sector – although it couldn’t be discounted. He activated live weapons, removing the physical locks placed over his arming switches and rerouting power, hearing the subtle change in pitch as the energy output of his twin engines flooded into the weapon capacitors – or that’s what he thought he heard, years flying TIEs led pilots to feel almost symbiotic bonds to their fighters, but he suspected it was as much in his head as it was fact.

“Incoming fighter... er... authorisation code is... Sithspawn I dropped it... er... Tango-9-Aurora-6-Sovereign, we’re here to pick up our company’s freighters. Well not my company... I mean...” The voice on his comms unit trailed off, replaced by a beep as the fighters belatedly activated their IFF systems and broadcast the correct codes. La’an signalled the recall to his own flight and their charges, ordering a reversal back to their original course.

“Escort flight this is Theta 5 – reduce speed and await handover, confirm your designation and name?” La’an did his best to sound professional but imagined that his tired voice probably came across more menacing than he intended.

“Stopping now, this is Haymaker flight, we’re part of AgriFlex Conglomerates, Security Division. This is Lead Pilot Anders Re. Er... sorry”, La’an almost laughed out loud, cutting his comms back to mute as he chuckled. Having planned to tear the man in two he couldn’t bring himself to do it.

“4-ship flight is yours, recommend that in future you follow the laid out regulations – you’re lucky I’m not trigger happy.” La’an turned his fighter away and returned to RV with his own ships.

“You’re not happy in general boss” Caine decided to add a few seconds later, on a private channel.

“I’d say cynical, downright nasty sometimes...” Torres added, the pair well versed in their comedic routine.

“Terrible person really...” Caine added again; La’an felt his frustration fade away and, for the first time in several days, just laughed.