

The Axe Falls - RtF Fiction #12 – GN La'an

The Decimator's Captain had served as her commanding officer for over a decade, consistently refusing promotion in order to stay with his ship, an act several of her senior officers had mirrored. Even had he never met them before, this fact alone would have given La'an supreme confidence in her spirit and capability as a fighting ship. Too many officers trampled over their peers in an effort to climb the slippery ladder of promotion, rewarded only with fleeting success and leaving behind them just as many broken careers and spirits. The Decimator rarely operated with the rest of the Warrior task group, more often deployed on anti-piracy duties at the fringes of EH space where her rugged design and speed were more than a match for the continuing threat of outlaws, gangs and smugglers. With only a trio of gunships for company, La'an suspected, they were on far more familiar ground.

That same command team would be stood on the bridge now, awaiting the drop out hyperspace and into the next search area – in this case a loose and broad nebula of purple gases, a weave of confused space sat in the void between three star systems and of no strategic note whatsoever. Well, perhaps some... the sensor distorting qualities of the gas could well hide something the size of a capital ship, albeit with little subtlety. Celestial phenomenon were always the first hiding places to be checked, but in a time of desperation how much thought had any of the Hammer group's surviving elements really been able to spare? Regardless, this was the eighth of sixteen assigned search grids, while the Bastion and redoubt groups carried out their own linked sweeps in an effort to drive the Axe and Pliers from whatever cover they lurked.

The light in La'an's cockpit turned a dull red, signalling an imminent return to sublight speeds. On the grav couch he felt nothing more than a slight change in the vibration through his boots as one engine type switched to another. A slight lurch signalled the cycling of the TIE launch racks, the armoured blast door ahead of him opening to flood in the bright white light of the hangar proper as TIE Avengers and Interceptors began to be dropped into the void below, the rack moving them over the black mouth of the hangar before rotating them to face outwards and releasing them.

A slight sense of static tingled the hair of his arms, even under a heavy flight suit, as the Avenger dropped through the magnetic field keeping precious, life preserving heat and oxygen in and the cold dark of space very much out.

"Sensors detecting a signature emerging from the gas cloud, bulk consistent with a capital vessel – commencing the flush." The Decimator's Captain reported over the tactical net, keen to keep her pilots informed. This had been her idea and its simplicity was pleasing. La'an recalled her logic...

"Auroran rats – nasty creatures, six legs ending in sharp claws, wide mouth with sharp teeth, they like the dark. They'll stay in their warrens come hell or high water, coming out in the night and slinking back before the dawn." She had smiled as she recalled a memory. "My family had a method for getting rid of them – concussion shells dropped into their lairs. Worked a treat, in goes the shell and out comes the rat."

"Gentlemen, our rat simply needs the right motivation to emerge from his lair."

Theta lined up as they deployed, forming into two flights either side of the Sentinel, as the twin squadrons of the VSD's Interceptors formed a broad cordon. A pair of shuttles launched, holding

back to act as a SAR flight while the gunships held station above and to either side of the destroyer. As they launched, every single warhead launcher on the VSD spat a trio of torpedoes into the cloud, their fuses set for proximity detonation. Dozens soared in on their arrow straight courses, seconds passing... a cluster of exercise strength detonations spiked on sensors, all clustered in the upper, spinward portion of the cloud. La'an smiled, number eight had been the charm – thankfully... they didn't have that many torpedoes left after all, exercise or not.

The cloud roiled for a moment as something moved beneath, spilling back as the hull of a Strike Cruiser emerged, engines powering it clear and into an attack run, recovering quickly from its surprise. The first fighter launched within 30 seconds, a TIE Interceptor quickly followed by the remainder of its squadron. The Decimator's own fighter screen pushed forward quickly, the gunships forming a cordon ahead of the VSD and watching warily for the missing frigate – but it looked like the Axe had gone to ground alone after all.

“Theta – hold back and cover for now, wait for the fighters to sort themselves out and target the Axe as it bears.” Mark's voice sounded clearly over the comms, with a host of rapid clicks signalling assent from the other pilots.

The Decimator's squadrons, as veteran as their ship's commander, made short work of the fighter screen, losing only a pair of their own fighters for the loss of the entire enemy complement. As the dogfight began to swing against them the Axe started to fire into the swirling melee in an attempt to break the attacking formations open. They weren't going to succeed, the TIEs swarming towards the embattled cruiser, joined quickly by the gunships punishing rate of turbolaser and heavy blaster fire. Like dogs attacking a tauroid they closed the distance quickly, their turrets continuing to track the target while nimbly evading the cruiser's fire. The situation worsened as the VSD's own laser fire began to join the fusillade, even as Theta surged forwards into the attack. A stream of warheads emerged, a mix of torpedoes and rockets fired at close range.

Like every ship so far the engines faded, simulated damage exceeding the vessel's capacity to control or repair. She hung in space, the axe for once having fallen the other way round.

“Theta, recover onboard, we're not done yet – Bastion reports a lead on Dempsey and the last element of the Hammer group. We've a course to intercept, if we leave now we should be there in time for the fireworks.”

