



CHAPTER THREE

FIRST RESPONSE

“Damn!”

Admiral Mitchell slammed his clenched fist upon the tactical display unit so hard he heard the crack of plasti-glass. The holographic scene that floated before Mitchell and Fleet Admiral Silvius flickered briefly before reconsolidating into a cohesive image.

The scene glowed as it rotated slowly, casting a pale blue light around the darkened chamber. Dim lights showed only the faint outlines of the equipment that lined Admiral Mitchell’s personal tactical chamber, giving the air a menacing feel that matched the mood of the admiral himself.

“How did they pull this off?” Mitchell asked, massaging the side of his hand and staring at the complex network of flightpaths, ship display icons and a myriad other pieces of data hovering above the tactical display.

Silvius did not answer immediately. His own mood was as dark as Mitchell’s. Fleet Admiral Pellaeon, Commander of the TIE Corps and the most experienced member of the admiralty board, had been snatched from within the grasp of two of the most elite squadrons in the TIE Corps roster. Theta and Kappa often occupied the top two or three places in the squadron rankings, and to see them both humbled before a new enemy was a bitter pill to swallow. Silvius wanted to rage at their failure, but the closer he studied the data recovered from the flight recorders of both squadrons, the more he understood that the TIE Corps may have, in fact, been more fortunate than he wanted to admit. As hard as he stared at the data, no matter the tactics he mentally reviewed in his mind, he could not help but be astonished that the encounter had cost only four members of the TIE Corps, even if one was an admiral. The fact that any of Kappa or Theta had managed to escape from the trap was all but miraculous. He cast his eyes over the immense holographic minefield arrayed before him, the sheer number of this new TIE variant that had been deployed... He found himself wondering if even

he could have escaped unharmed. It was an unpleasant sensation for a man who was undoubtedly one of the finest pilots to have ever sat in the cockpit of a Starfighter.

"I do not know how they pulled it off," Silvius eventually replied, "Or how they evaded our border sensor networks, or how they established such a significant minefield this deep within our territory."

Mitchell's frown deepened.

"We cannot let this go unanswered." Mitchell said. He knew he was stating the obvious, but voicing it strengthened his resolve. Silvius nodded slowly, reaching a hand forwards to adjust the sensor display. The holographic display whirled, focusing in on the Star Destroyer that had arrived in the wake of the destruction of the interdictor that had dragged the TIE Corps Commander into the trap.

"Resurgent class," Silvius muttered.

Mitchell nodded, and sighed. "I had wondered how long we had before they turned their attention to us."

At a gesture from Mitchell, a patch of the Resurgent-Class Star Destroyer's hull was bracketed, and an enlarged, digitally enhanced image of the selected hull section was displayed for the admirals' review.

"The Curia", Mitchell read the words written beneath a large, red icon – a spiked ring enclosed within a thin hexagon – the symbol of the First Order.

Thus far, the Emperor's Hammer and First Order had, to a large extent, ignored one another. Each held themselves to be the true inheritors of the Empire, setting them at an ideological impasse from the moment of the First Order's creation. However, until recently, the New Republic had stood as a barrier between the two groups. With the final collapse of the Republic, and the alleged defeat of the Resistance, that barrier had been removed.

"Why now?" Silvius asked.

"I would have thought with your... interests..." Mitchell indicated towards the lightsabre hanging at the waist of Silvius, "You would have heard the rumours."

"Ha!" Silvius burst out with a laugh, "What, that Skywalker himself stood alone before the forces of the First Order and single-handedly fought them all to a standstill, then escaping with the remainder of the Resistance?" Silvius shook his head. "Skywalker forsook this galaxy long ago. I very much doubt if he still lives, never mind was able to perform such a feat." He began to chuckle at the very notion, but it died in his throat. A distant sensation, a gossamer-light touch upon his hyper-natural force sense that he could neither identify nor dismiss flittered through his consciousness. Mitchell interrupted, breaking whatever connection Silvius had just felt.

"That may well be, but the rumour is enough, even without the fact." Mitchell replied. "If I am not mistaken, this could well be their response to that rumour. Such a rumour suggests weakness, and could encourage dissent. A show of strength; the defeat of a powerful opponent... That would go a long way to turning the tide of propaganda and rumour in their favour."

"And you think we are that opponent?" Silvius asked.

"It appears so," Mitchell replied.

Silvius could see the sense in Mitchell's assessment. The Emperor's Hammer was a small, but powerful player in west of the galactic core. Despite controlling only around 11 populated systems, the fleet assets of the TIE Corps allowed the Emperor's Hammer to punch far above its weight. Each of the elite squadrons of the Corps were a match for an entire fleet, if deployed correctly. Bring the Hammer to heel would indeed be quite the coup for the First Order.

"They do not wish to destroy us, I think," Mitchell continued, "Our fighters were allowed to leave the system by this so-called 'Judge'. Whoever they are, it seems that they believe in that most ancient metaphor – cut off the head..." Mitchell trailed off as he saw Silvius nodding in agreement.

"Better we accept their rule and add our strength to their own, than face the cost and risk of full on confrontation." Silvius added.

"Exactly."

Both admirals stood a moment in thought. They had both known such a day would come. The First Order were the rising force within the Galaxy.

"What do we know of this new fighter?" Silvius asked.

"From what we can gather, it is being called the 'TIE Aggressor'. It seems to be an amalgamation of the old TIE Brute design, and the newer TIE Fighter designs, the TIE/sf to be precise. It does not seem to have yet entered wider service – this is the first instance we can find of them being deployed."

"Between these new craft, and their TIE Silencer design, they may be beginning to rival us in the use of advanced fighters."

"You are likely correct," Mitchell answered, "By all accounts, the Resistance and their fighters gave the First Order a bloody nose more than once. Perhaps they are coming to the realisation that bigger ships are sometimes just bigger targets."

"We may need to take steps to hamper that ambition," Silvius said, "Our use of advanced fighters has long given us an advantage that has preserved our power base. We cannot allow that to be threatened."

Mitchell sighed, and rubbed at the stubble on his chin. It had been a long day of bad news and extended debriefings, and it looked like this may just be the beginning of a long campaign.

"First, we have a captured admiral to consider." He said.

A light on the communication console flashed into life. Mitchell reached over and displayed the waiting message.

"Rapier wants to know how we intend to respond to this outrage," Mitchell said, summarising the message for Silvius.

"We go and get our Admiral back," Silvius replied, firmly. Mitchell nodded in agreement.

"Who shall we send to do this?" Mitchell asked. Silvius smiled.

"Everyone."

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