**Begin Log: T5B4M5 - Two from Column A...**

***Rensal "Bigfoot" Darklighter: Non-flying, alternate p.o.v.***

I walked into the Ready Room as the pilots going out to fly were suiting up.

Taan noticed me first. "Biggy! Great to see ya up and about!" He said, and the others murmured agreements.

"I am glad to be back up! Took me a couple extra hours in the tank, ‘cause part of the shrapnel had lodged into my shoulder and severed some tendons and muscles."

"Yuck! How long are you out for?" Asked Vender.

"I got one more one hour stint in the tank, then I’ll be done. As for the shoulder... it’s pretty much healed, and I’ll be able to fly in the next mission. "

"Thats good!" Said Taan.

"Maybe you should go help Captain Ra with the fighters." Said Vender in a joking tone, taunting Bigfoot about the discussions he’d had with the Pit Boss.

"I doubt the Captain would like to see me at all. I’m going to go to the Bridge and watch it unfold."

"Wish you could be out there having fun with us." Said Taan.

"I wish I could be there too. Good luck out there! And May the Force with us!" As I said that, we all shook hands with each other and did our normal Pre‑Flight routine. May have been just superstitious ritual, but no one talked about it, and no one wanted to test it by not going through it. I walked out of the Ready Room with the other Greys, and as they mounted their assigned rides, I took the lift to the bridge.

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***Taan “Hawk” Ronar: Flight 4.1 Main P.O.V.***

Thirty‑four craft lost.

Nine pilots and three officers killed in action.

One Calamari Cruiser destroyed.

All in all, not exactly the way this campaign would have proceeded ideally, in Taan’s mind. Just once he’d like to see the fighter inventory’s numbers go up.

Of course, then there was the small matter of Greedo.

Much of this loss was both directly and indirectly related to him, yet without him Grey almost definitely wouldn’t have made it this far into Malachite’s space. Surely there would have been a better way to get here, without losing so many good ‑ no, not good, the best ‑ pilots and a whole damn Cruiser! Death and loss is a part of war, something that’s drilled into every cadet’s head at the Academy. But needless loss is something to avoid, and the question of whether so many people died needlessly was still left unanswered. Regardless, everyone’s efforts and sacrifices would be in vain if the Star Hammer was not destroyed, leaving Taan and the rest of Grey with very few options but to press on. Taan hoped the sacrifices made so far would be worth it.

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Castor dismissed the team assembled in the briefing room and Taan immediately pulled his datapad out to discover that he was allocated to a TIE Avenger. Along with his relief at flying one of the best fighters on the *Black Widow* came a sense of anxiousness ‑ not only would he have to disarm the platform, he’d also have to protect two starships, fight off any resistance and try to keep the Squints alive as well. Though he had every confidence in the ability of Grey, if the base was holding Triwings ‑ which was likely ‑ then Squints wouldn’t stand much of a chance by themselves, even with superior numbers.

"Taan!"

Taan swung around, realizing that he had already reached the flight deck without knowing. Mira waved at him from on top of the towering Avenger, motioning for him to climb up. Taan scaled the ladder up to the catwalk and peered inside his fighter. "What have you done to it this time?"

"I had a flash of inspiration. I hope you don’t mind, I had to borrow Blackie for a little while."

Taan narrowed his eyes. "I better still be able to fly this thing."

"I’ve done better than that." Mira grinned uncontrollably. "Go on, get in and see what I’ve done."

Taan hopped in and fired up the avionic systems, receiving a shock when he heard a beep and a whistle. "What the..."

Mira laughed. "I remotely wired up Blackie to your fighter. As long as you’re in range of the *Widow*, he’ll act as if he was actually installed on your ship. Apart from physically repairing stuff of course, I left that to the onboard computer. But he’s got full control over navigation and stuff."

"Wow! I don’t know what to say." Taan tried out a few more things, eliciting various responses from his R5 unit. "I seriously owe you a drink or ten when I get back."

"Don’t worry about it. We’re going to hyper out soon, so make sure you’re settled in and everything’s working, although I’m sure it is. My handiwork is perfect."

"Whatever you reckon," Taan quipped, though he knew she was correct. He shut the hatch and tested the sensors and critical systems. "Comfortable enough on the flight deck, Blackie? Don’t you want some of the fighting action?"

Taan’s R5 unit beeped a retort.

"I know, I’ve been neglecting you a bit lately. I had some stuff to think about. I swear I’ll make it up to you later, this ship has to have some decent droid‑cleaning facilities."

Blacktop whistled a much more encouraging reply.

"Yeah, figured you’d like that. You have to help me out this mission though, if I’m getting shot at you need to tell me. I don’t trust these Imperial systems, just between you and me."

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*Reentering normal space in...*

*three...*

*two...*

*one...*

*now!*

Taan watched through his cockpit’s transparisteel front panel as the blue tunnel of hyperspace melted into white lines, then to the deep blackness of space.

*All Thorns, you are cleared to launch. Happy hunting.*

Taan put his hand on the throttle and pushed it up. "Roger that Control, be back in a jiffy." Taan hit the release button and the clamps holding his fighter in place opened up, allowing the Avenger to shoot forward and out of the hangar.

Once outside, Taan quickly assessed the situation. The platform stood overhead, but the ultimate goal was a few klicks away, and dangerously close to where the *Widow’s Web* had hypered in. "Uh, Control, does the *Web* know it’s about to crash into one of those containers?"

*We’re well aware of that, 4.1, continue with your mission.* The sense of urgency in the control officer’s voice was apparent as she frantically tried to coordinate a battle that was off to a bad start.

Taan headed up to avoid the turbolasers from the platform. *So much for them shooting at the starships,* Taan thought, and winced as one of the containers exploded as the Interdictor scraped its underbelly on it.

*Flight Four, check whether what we want is in the remaining three,* Control ordered.

"No problem, I’m already there," Taan replied. "Sithspit." Taan did a quick flyby of the three B‑type containers, and was relieved with what he saw. "Recycle Three has some Gunboats in it, the other two are holding TIEs. That was lucky."

The control officer breathed a sigh of relief. *Thanks Flight Four, much appreciated. Continue with mission.*

"Yes ma’am! Blackie, what’s the threat analysis look like?" Taan requested. The Avenger’s CMD changed to show a three‑dimensional map, with potentially dangerous ships highlighted. Taan immediately recognized the distinctive shapes of TIE Defenders, but it took a second to register that there were Escort Shuttles out in the fray as well. Wow, they must be low on defences if they’re using them. Taan concentrated on the platform and quickly checked where the main turbolasers were, though flight training had already drilled the specs of nearly every commonplace ship in the galaxy into his head.

*About 1.5 minutes left on our shields Thorn,* Control prompted.

"I’m working on it, give me some time." Taan switched to missiles and quickly locked on to one of the top cannons. "Blackie, as soon as each turbolaser is destroyed I want you to lock on to the next one, okay?"

Blacktop whistled a positive response.

"Okay. Get ready." Taan fired the second his HUD lit up red, sending a single advanced concussion missile towards the nearest turbolaser cannon. The warhead punched through the shields and left a molten mess of twisted metal where the cannon used to be. As soon as it was destroyed, the focus shifted to the next turbolaser and Taan fired another missile in quick succession, with similar results. Once all three topside cannons were destroyed, Taan headed underneath and repeated the process. Within a minute, the platform’s starship defenses were totally destroyed, leaving only the weaker laser cannons and already‑weakened shields to defend itself with. A few strafing runs stripped the platform of its remaining cannons, leaving Taan to deal with the next greatest threat.

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Vender pulled hard around to get on the shuttle’s tail. *Flight Three, form up and attack on my command.*

"Need some help, Ven?"

*Only if you’re not too busy, Hawk.*

Taan formed up above Vender’s TIE Interceptor and concentrated his fire on the shuttle’s rear turret to draw its fire while the Interceptors closed in on both sides to vaporize its hull. "I’m going to look after these Triwings, they’re harassing my wingman a little."

*No problems, we can take it from here.*

The TIE Defenders were concentrating on the other Avenger, punishing its shields and staying constantly on its tail. *Hawk! Nice of you to show up, mind giving me a hand?*

"All you have to do is ask, I’m already on it." Taan quad‑linked his cannons and fired a couple of bursts at the nearest Triwing, forcing it to break off it’s attack. Taan pursued it as it climbed away, breaking through its rear shields and breaking off a couple of its wings, sending it into a death roll. Turning around to face the next one, he saw his wingman’s shields fail and sparks fly from the fuselage.

*Gah! They’ve knocked my flight controls out! I’m paralysed here, I have to eje...*

Taan winced as he saw a small object fly out of the fighter a split second before it perished under a two‑pronged barrage of laser fire. "Control, is he alright?"

*Life signs are as good as can be expected, we’ll pick him as soon as the shooting’s finished.*

"Glad to hear it, Control." Taan narrowed his eyes and picked out one of the two triwings that was responsible for the loss of a Grey fighter. "Time to die, pal." The Bright descended from six o’clock high on the Trip, firing a series of quad‑linked shots into its fuselage, puncturing it and causing it to explode in a fireball of metal and flame. The second fighter realized what was going on and pulled around to get away.

"Oh, no you don’t! You’re not going anywhere." Taan switched back to his two remaining missiles and fired both of them at the Defender. The simultaneous hits left nearly no trace of where the fighter had once been as a few pieces of scrap metal were scattered from the resulting explosion.

*Nice shot, Hawk,* Vender commented.

"Thanks, they sure as hell deserved it. Nice work on those shuttles, too."

*They were easy, they might as well have hired heavy freighter pilots to fly those things.*

Another flight of fighters exited the platform and the remaining Thorns reformed to create a coordinated attack. Outnumbered, outperformed and outclassed, the Triwings didn’t stand a chance. The remaining waves were quickly dispatched, and Taan brought down the platform’s shields. "Control, the platform is defenseless, you can bring out the *Brier*."

The Assault Transport launched almost immediately and headed for the platform, firing its ion cannons and disabling any remaining systems. The *Tarantula* launched shortly after, unloading its complement of Shock troops to take control of the station. In just a few minutes, Shock reported that they had control of the station.

"Well done Thorns, you may reboard the *Widow*, our mission is done here."

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***Adam “Vender” Fene: Flight 3.1, alternate p.o.v.***

Vender began to think people had little or no respect for TIE Interceptors. They weren't as fast or deadly as the Avengers, but if you underestimated any kind of strength it held, it would come back to bite you. He intended to prove it on the battle field, as once again he was flung on‑board a TIE Interceptor.

It was quickly becoming his starfighter of choice, with or without shields. Preferably without, so he had the extra speed, and extra maneuverability. Interceptors with shields, hyperdrive, and any other odd addons were often slower, and more sluggish as the ion engines struggled to keep top performance under the extra weight. He had requested that they keep those disgraceful machines off the honorable craft, at least his.

A veteran in TIEs, they realized he knew what he was talking about. Vender shook his head. "Keep it off, I don't give a hoot'n'nanny what anyone else says. It stays off or this TIE stays here." Vender glared at the chief mechanic, whoever it was. "Go ahead and get Castor down here, I don't care. I know what I'm talking about a little bit better than you do, because frankly I have to fly that thing, that's my life, and I'd like to think I know what I'm doing despite some grease monkey!"

The mechanic took a step back, fuming. "Fine then! I hope you die out there, it'd be worth the lashing for losing another fighter and seeing your body jetted off into a star."

Vender grinned. "That's more like it. Now make those modifications, I have to leave soon."

The mechanic gave a shake of the head. "It'll be ready."

"Better be."

"It *will*."

"I'm sure."

The mechanic gave up the debate and stomped off. Vender turned to the Interceptor, "Sorry you had to see that, don't worry, I won't let'm put any nasty adjustments on you."

The Interceptor almost looked like it was squinting in a frown, though, that was probably coincidence.

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"This is Thorn Flight 3, are we clear?" The mission was stupidly obvious. Draw the local defenders away from the actual force that would take down the platform's weaponry.

*Three Flight, you're clear to launch.* A woman said, in Flight Control. Been a while since he launched on her shift. The change was nice, since he didn't care for the yokels he usually talked to in Flight Control just before launch.

"Thanks Control. Flight 3, lets launch." His two other wingmen launched from the hangar bay into space, right behind him, though in a slower sluggish fashion. He couldn't get over how stupid they looked as they sloshily jigged out of the hangar. It was gross compared to what he was used to.

The Avengers, he noticed began to start pounding on the station when station defense, Escort Shuttles, poured out of the Platform. Slow but powerful, he didn't like the look of it. Usually stations sent out a flight of TIE Fighters or some other nimble easy to kill craft.

A few Avengers broke off their escort, as one stayed behind to harass the station. There was not much turret fire going after him, as it concentrated mainly on the *Black Widow*, and the *Widow's Web*. The station’s weapons would be out in minutes, or at least he hoped they would be.

“Three Flight, stick close and hammer those shuttles, follow my lead, I'll draw some fire while you go in for the pounce." Vender hit his rudder and the TIE immediately spun towards his port wing as he kicked up the throttle. He shot off a few bursts to get their attention, some made contact, some didn't. The Shuttles no doubt noticed him though, as they began to direct fire towards him.

Vender brought his Interceptor up into a loop as the guns concentrated their fire on him. Some Avengers swooped by to take out their shields almost immediately, as the rest of his Flight took the kill, piercing the hull snapping parts of its odd looking wings off. Another few shots ignited its engines, taking them out of the fight. Three were left, and then, as they'd feared, more visitors arrived.

"Lead, two, we have company." Vender checked his sensors and identified the incoming craft. Defenders, though not many of them, even still posed a very dangerous threat, especially with three other Escort Shuttles looming around. If they grouped up, it would be like making suicide strafing runs on a Corellian Gunship, or a Lancer Frigate. The laser fire he imagined was too much for comfort.

"Ignore them, let the Avengers play. Lets take out those Escort Shuttles or this could get really nasty soon." Vender turned into a half roll that would loop him back around to distract the shuttles. "Two, Three, you're wings. I'll split them up and you two concentrate on one at a time. Ready, Mark."

Vender noticed his flight join back up, except for him, as he shot a line of fire through the flight of Escort Shuttles. One of them flinched and broke off, and directed its cannons at him. Vender dodged a few sets and quickly switched to quad fire, snapping off a shot that took one of the long arms clear off.

He was surprised, it should of had shields. It wasn't important, as he had to do this quickly as the Avengers couldn't keep them separated forever, and the Defenders would eventually join up with the Shuttles, if they did not die soon. Vender rolled as another shot sizzled by his starboard wing, ironically as he rolled, it gave him a clear shot at its engines which he gladly took.

The engines ignited, blowing the craft up from the outside in. Two down. The other Escort Shuttles had broken formation, trying to box his flight in. It would have worked, if they had one more. Vender cruised in at top speed, and lanced a few shots past the cockpit of one of them. They were starting to ignore his diversion tricks, and concentrated on the two shielded Interceptors.

"Two. Three. Status." Vender saw them take a few shots as they tried to sluggishly maneuver out of the mid‑field the Shuttles made. Their swiveling turrets made it easy to keep them in the center of the line as they could move with them.

*Lead. Two. My shields are getting pretty bruised and I can't break off their shots.*

*Lead, Three. I'm not in any better shape.*

Vender grit his teeth. "Hold on, I'll have you out in a jiffy." Once again, underestimated, he hated it when that happened. The pilots of those shuttles would soon regret they chose to ignore him. Whoever was in command of them knew what he was doing, though, as the gunners skillfully kept the TIEs in a tight area of safe flight. If he could just distract one of those gunners, it'd give them a hole to punch through.

"All right, I'm going to do a flyby of one of their gun turrets. Nearest craft to me, southern port wing. That should distract the gunner and give you a hole to jump out of. If I'm lucky, maybe I can eliminate this little monkey in the middle trap they've put together."

Vender cut the comm and jetted in, firing into the aft section of the nearest shuttle to him. It didn't wince, the only reaction he got was sparks flying off its shields. "Drat you!" Vender spit a quad fire into one of the wings, as they lanced off harmlessly again. "One more." He fired another off and finally they penetrated, ripping one of the long wings off from the fuselage. Fuel began to leak, and the ion engine's jet wash caught it, instantly igniting the fuel creating one large Shuttle bomb that exploded in fire and fury.

His pair of wingmates broke free, immediately shunting power to the bow shields and set off a rapid spray over the last Escort shuttle, Vender joining them. The Escort Shuttle tried maneuvering to dodge some shots, even helplessly firing on its assailants shields. Soon they couldn't hide any longer, and twelve laser linked shots ripped through the shuttle as Thorn Flight Three fired all at once.

"Nice shots, lets go help out those Avenger pilots now." Vender checked his sensors. "They aren't far from here, looks like more than just three Trips came in." Vender also heard comm chatter, briefly, about a few flights of them being destroyed. "Form up on me, we're going in. Vic Abreast formation."

His wingmen, knowing the strategy, slowly formed up in front of him on both sides of his wings as he reduced speed so they could take position. "Once we get in, fire like mad. They should be looking at the Avengers as a higher threat, so if we're lucky we may not even be noticed while we clip their wings."

His wingmates waggled their wings in agreement and satisfaction. "Engage at will."

Suddenly his wingmen broke off, splitting left and right as Vender throttled up to continue straight ahead at a dancing Trip. It was on the tale of an Avenger, and so far they didn't seem to think he was much of a threat. Once again, he hated being under estimated sometimes, but in this case it was probably saving his life. Soon he would save a fellow Grey's.

Switching to duel fire, he spat out sharp bursts of fire at his target, as it flew by him in a mock roll. His shots ate up its shields. Rolling, he headed into the Trips flight path as it didn't break its pursuit of the Avenger. With a quad shot from the Trip, it hit the Avenger reducing it to dust in a brilliant explosin. "Crap!"

The Trip broke off, Vender following closely behind. Their maneuverability was nearly equal, but the Trip had the advantage in speed. It rolled into a loop, trying to come in on his tail, but Vender wouldn't give him the chance as he slowed, flipping around, that increased his maneuvering, as the Trip shot past where it intended to be.

It frantically danced between his crosshairs as it tried to break off, but they lit green, and he spit a quad shot right into its aft section, taking out its engines, and then a wing. It began to slow and roll off as its engines went off line, and soon, exploded just as the pilot ejected.

"Flight Three, Report."

Vender heard victorious cries. *Two. No more threats, you dusted the last of them. I'm good.*

*Three, A‑O‑K. Nice shooting.*

"Thanks." Vender felt a moment of pride, but went back to concentrating on the mission, as he checked his sensors again. "Looks like the station was taken, the *Brier* is out. Form up, we'll run one last patrol loop and wait for the mission complete, then dock back in the *Black Widow*."

*Copy, Lead.*

The mission was soon completed as the shock team boarded the station in a large scout craft. There were minimal losses, just the one Avenger. No pilots. Once back on board, he could begin gloating to the doubtful mechanic he argued with earlier, as the mechanic would begin painting a silhouetted TIE Defender and two Escort Shuttles on his ball cockpit.

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***Tacomah “P2" Somers: Flight 4.3, alternate p.o.v.***

I followed Taan out, an’ stayed on his right side wing. We looped once ta see ‘xactly what we had. Tha *Web* came in on tha same line that tha containers were, an’ we watched one scrape its belly an’ end up in shreds. Tha junk started tumblin’ out, an I watched a crumpled Avenger go by.

*Fardels! We cudda used that.* I thought ta me. *Oh, well. No sense in cryin’ over split andafir.*

There was a cuppla nasty lookin’ Escort Shuttles goin’ toward tha Squints. Vender’d had his shields yanked. Not sure that was a good choice. Tha guns on those things could give a shielded TIE a pretty bad case of turrets sydrome, say nuthin’ about a unshielded one. But he liked tha Squints, an’ he was pretty good in it. I just hoped he really did know best.

*Four. Lead. I’m going for the base.* Taan came over tha comm. *You guys might be better off helping out Three.*

*Copy, Lead.* Came from tha other Avenger. *P2, you ready?*

“Good ta go.” I answered. “I’m your wing. Good huntin’, Lead.” Two clicks was tha only answer, an’ all that was needed. We jacked up our shields an’ were headed for tha Shuttles when tha Trips launched from tha base.

“Nerts!” Said I. “Two. We may wanna help with those Triwings.”

*Agreed. Which would you rather? I’ll take the other.*

“I’ll go with tha Shuttles, if’n it’s all the same to ya.”

*Works for me, P2. Good hunting!*

“I’ll buy ya a beer when we get back.”

*I’ll bring you a souvenir.* I sent him two clicks an’ veered off ta the Shuttles.

In tha meantime, Vender’d been doin’ pretty good against the Shuttles, but tha Trips was startin’ to harass him. He couldn’t be everywhere at once, even with tha extra speed. They’d corralled tha other two Squints, who was not doin’ so well, an’ Four-Two couldn’t distract all tha Trips.

Tha weird thing about Escort Shuttles is that ya’d almost rather be aheada ‘em, an’ not behind ‘em. Tha turrets on tha back make it so ya get shot at while yer tryin’ ta git at ‘em. But we ain’t got no fighters that shoot backwards, so ya kinda gotta just pull yer straps tighter so they can get tha chair out easier later on when you was done. A while back, before I got ta Grey, I heard it took one guy three extractors an’ a full tank of lube ta get the chair back, an’ then a pound of alum to get hisself back ta round after, he’d sucked in so deep. But they din’t have muchuva problem shootin’ forward either.

One of tha Shuttles had zeroed in on Vender. I don’t think he was lookin’ at that one, ‘cause he was kinda busy with one of tha others. I was in range, comin’ up high an’ behind Vender an’ ta tha right. I punched a few shots at it, an’ my threat indy lit up. It caught me once with both barrels, an’ I jigged up an’ out.

That’s when I saw that I’d missed tha missile lock tha Trip had on me.

Tha missle slammed inta my rear shields, an’ tha Shuttle slammed me again in tha front. Sparks flew from tha console, an’ I punched my laser energy ta my shields. ‘Cept the sparks came from tha laser batteries, an’ there weren’t no energy left in ‘em. So no energy ta put ta tha shields. I got slammed again, an’ my engines went.

No way I could save the Bright, so I dumped.

Well.

I din’t.

‘Xactly.

I don’t care what they said about my suit.

That was a gasket failure.

I swear!

But I did ditch tha Bright.

Just before they dusted it.

That was when I got hit.

An’ it’s a good thing that I’m little, ‘cause it went right through my suit just below my knee.

Okay. So I mighta dumped.

It’s a good thing I wear my kitch on tha outside of my flightsuit, though. I don’t remember much else past that.

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Lessa tracked Tacomah’s PLD. The *Brier* had disabled Tourmaline’s base, and she’d been released to recover the young pilot.

“Jila! How’s he doing!” She clicked off the mic. “Come ON! FASTER!” She kicked the underside of the control panel to spur the Transport on.

*He’s okay so far.* Jila replied. *Life signs low, but stable and even.* Lessa could hear the waver in Jila’s voice. She knew that the woman who sat at Flight Control was just as worried about the boy as she was.

“Fifteen hundred meters and closing fast.” Her copilot reported. “Don’t run him over.”

Lessa ignored her co, and ran the *Brier* to a distance of sixty-two meters before she threw the engines into full reverse. She pulled up on the stick just enough to bring the belly of the Transport to face Tacomah. “Tractor!”

“Got him!” The copilot called.

“Bring him in!” The indicators showed when the hatch opened, and when the boy was pulled through the atmosphere shield.

“He’s in!” The medic from the back reported.

Lessa slapped the release to her harness and ran back to the hold. Tacomah had had his suit punctured by a piece of his starfighter just below the knee. Somehow, he’d managed to get his kitch - what he called the talisman he always wore around his neck, but usually wore on the outside of his flightsuit - tied around his leg, the tough fiber cord tied just above the puncture in a tourniquet type knot, with his gloved finger supplying the tightening twists.

They removed his helmet, and checked his stats. “Vitals low but within range.” When they moved to cut the cord around his leg, Lessa yelled.

“No! Find another way!”

It took a few moments to loosen the cord enough to get it off. They handed the little skin bag with its long looped cord to Lessa, and cut his flightsuit away. No one commented on the smell. His lower leg was swollen and purple, having had the trapped blood pushed to the surface of the skin. The narcosis in that limb would be worse than painful if the boy woke up any time soon.

“He’s okay, but he needs work.” The medic reported. “Let’s get him home.”

“I’m already there!” Lessa took off for the control booth. She broke some of the safety range specs getting back to the *Widow*, but got Tacomah, along with her ship and crew back in one piece. The headaches the crew had from the squeal of the landing gear screeching across the deckplates not withstanding.

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“I’m okay.” Tacomah smiled. “I was just kinda talkin’ ta my Mom for a while.”

Lessa looked at the boy in the bed in MedOps, and raised her right eyebrow.

“It’s kinda hard to explain.” He looked uncomfortable. “We don’t usually talk about it much anyway. But I was okay.”

“Do you need anything?” Lessa asked, not pressing the issue.

“Nah. I can git inta all kinds of trouble right here with my data pad.”

“Not right now, you can’t.” Sheryl Iagin interrupted the conversation. “It’s time for your dunk.”

“Nerts!” The boy exclaimed. “I hate that stuff! Do I hafta?”

“If you can’t pay, you shouldn’t play.” Sheryl said with an evil smile.

“If you can’t do the time, don’t do the crime.” Lessa added with a wink.

“Not fair! Two against one!” He yelled as he was wheeled off to the tank room, bed and all.

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“Hmm....” Dave said. “I understand why you want to, and I can’t stop you, but I really think you should reconsider.”

“Why?”

“You know why.”

“So.”

“Listen, P2,” Dave said softly as he sat at the foot of Tacomah’s bed. The smell of bacta still fairly fresh in the boy’s hair. “I know that’s the first time you’ve gotten blown out of the sky. And far too often a pilot’s first time is also his last. But we need you now. You’re a good pilot, and you just might make the difference between Grey’s winning or failing.”

The boy frowned, not looking at Dave.

The old pilot lowered his voice so only Tacomah could hear. “And I know it scared you.” He paused to gauge the boy’s reaction, and knew he’d hit it right on the mark. “But there’s not a time I have to fight that I’m not scared. There’s a fine line between being brave and being crazy. And that’s what most people have all wrong about it. Being brave isn’t being fearless. It’s being scared and being smart enough to deal with the fear.”

“I can remember Castor saying something that his master of the tunnels told him.” Dave got a far away look to his eyes, trying to dredge up the exact words. “He said courage is the compliment of fear. A man who is fearless can not be courageous. He is also a fool.” Dave paused to watch the boy for a moment, and tried a different tack. “He also said never try to out stubborn a cat.”

Tacomah looked up sideways at Dave, who patted the boy’s good leg, and got up from the bed.

“I’ll check on you in a while.” Dave said as he winked. “I gotta go argue with someone I really don’t want to.”

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As Dave walked down the passageway from MedOps, he held his comm to his face. “Katie?”

*Yes, Admiral.* The droid responded.

“Location of Admiral Efrata-Landis, please.”

*He’s in SimOps. In a pod at this moment, sir.*

“Thank you.”

*You’re welcome, Admiral.* Katie repied. *General Greedo is here as well, sir.* She added after a short hesitation.

*No time like the present.* He thought.

By the time Dave reached SimOps, the shouting from the room was carrying well into the corridor. Those that passed by the door, skittered by it with due haste, keeping an eye on it as if it might open like a mouth and swallow them.

As Dave got close enough to recognize the voices and content of the words, he passed the door by as well, thinking *On the other hand - discretion is the better part of valor. And I think I might be preaching to the choir, taking this up with Castor right now.*

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End log: T5B4M5

**Battle 5: Grey Solution**

By R.C.Miller (Castor@RebelSquadrons.org)

A Grey Squadron, of the Rebel Squadrons, Additional Text Briefing

for Grey Squadron’s add-on Battle 5, Tour 5

for the Star Wars TIE Fighter Combat Simulator game.

Castor walked through the captured station, his comm unit at his ear. With Lessa reassigned to the *Brier,* along with helping with other parts of the station, Arnie and Katie were at his side, scanning for what ever life forms, or traps, they might be able to find. The little R9 droid had a number of devices extended, some of which whirled upon their retractable stems. They opened every door, keeping to a left wall search pattern and making note of any other options, hidden or otherwise - of which they’d already found many. Wyeth and Moriah had refused to leave him while the inspection of the station was in progress. They had their own scanning equipment operating, and triple-checked every place they were about to enter.

He probably shouldn’t have been out here without at least one of the commandos, but time was running out. Castor had argued against the wisdom of his wives accompanying him, but they’d refused to listen. He was beginning to understand the complexities of the female mind; mostly that it was just too damned complex for him to understand, and that he didn’t have much choice in the matter. Not that he had much choice in ANY thing concerning the two females lately. Or had since he’d met them. Or that he really wanted to, for that matter. Or maybe not. He shook his head, which tended to spin whenever he thought about analyzing anything about the two, as they didn’t exactly fit well into the neatly ordered world with which he’d surrounded himself.

He needed to think. But right now he needed to think about what he was doing. Time was short, and the clock was racing headlong into the future, turning the present into the past and bringing them closer with their destiny at an alarming rate. Every wall was suspect. Every floor. Every ceiling. Anywhere there was enough room for a single microbe to pass was inspected. Station defense, in the form of personnel, droids, or manufactured biochemical weapons could hide behind anything. Anywhere. Inside anything. Even though they probably wouldn’t find anything of that sort, it would be wisest to leave no place on the entire station unchecked, unscanned, uncatalogued.

Droids of all shapes and sizes were running down every pipe, cable and conduit, constantly giving coded status reports to Teke who was engaged in his own section of the sweep. The codes changed frequently, on a scheduled and prearranged basis, just in case someone might be listening or any attempt at a counter-strike made. Any and every anomaly was instantly checked by sentient personnel, and they had found a number of hidey-holes and weapons caches already. Some of the places had hidden some of Tourmaline’s stormtroopers, along with a few various other intrusion personnel or droids. Some of these were found mostly because of the additional efforts and most amazing equipment of Castor’s wives.

As they walked cautiously down the passageway further into the station, the small group was surprised by an assassin droid as it burst into the passageway, floating on its repulsors. A few of its many weaponed appendages snapped toward the group. Castor and his entourage dove for cover as the droid opened fire, one of the shots burned away a fairly good sized divot through the short hair on the top of Castor’s head as he rolled up to a position where he could move again.

Castor grabbed for his light saber. He’d thought to use it to deflect the projectiles the assassin droid would fire, but he sensed something else that he couldn’t place, something with which he wasn’t quite familiar, only a very short fraction of a second into the future, and stopped just before igniting the sky-blue blade. Moriah instantly materialized beside him and, as she wrapped her long arms around him in a vise grip that squeezed the breath out of him, slammed him to the floor. She yanked him harshly to the side and rolled. He could feel right off that she wasn’t trying to hurt him; the difference, though obvious to a wookiee, often escaped the victim of their attentions due to the fine line between. Another blaster bolt burned the deck just behind where Castor’s head had been.

Her warm body pulled him in and the weight of the wookiee pressed him down into the floor plates in the corner between the deck and the bulkhead, protecting him from any further danger using her own body as a shield. Wyeth, from where she had rolled on the other side of the floor, managed to fire off two shots, and the droid exploded before it could actually do any one real harm. The sounds of the pieces rebounding from the walls faded into silence after a few short seconds.

“Admiral! Under the assumption, of course, that is you underneath Mistress Luzerne. Are you injured, sir? Do you need assistance?” Katie quickly asked.

But Castor could only feel Moriah’s hot breath and her corded muscles as she kept him protected a few moments longer, and Wyeth scanned the passageway ahead. Not knowing, or really caring, what else to do, he held onto the female wookiee tightly. He was just a little dazed from being slammed to the floor, and more than slightly lost in the physical contact of someone who actually cared deeply about him on a personal level too. Someone who *loved* him. Someone whom he could love in return. If only he could remember what had happened between them so long ago. *Gods! It’s still all so new.*

Moriah barked, growled, and stood, helping Castor up. Castor felt another pressing up against his back, sandwiching himself between. His two wives squeezed him tightly, but even above their scents he could smell his own burnt hair. He felt a wetness on his cheek where Wyeth’s face had come to rest. *Tears. Gods! They’re driving me to distraction!! I can’t concentrate!!*

“Ladies.” He looked up into the wookiee face and found no less concern there than he could sense from her human counterpart as he gently pushed himself clear of the two. “We have to talk. Right now.”

Arnie and Katie made themselves immediately inconspicuous. While the little droid knew he shouldn’t leave Castor, Arnie whistled a soft nondescript tune while seeming to help Katie in her detailed inspection of the assassin droid’s remains, and plugged in to the nearest computer access port to continue with its task.

Castor shook his head as if to clear his thoughts.

His wives stood and waited for him to speak, emotional pain in their eyes at the thought of what he might say.

“If I had the right and the freedom to do so, I would leave here right now and go with the two of you. It pains me more than you know to see you look at me the way you do.” Castor clenched his fists in front of himself, his own pain evident on his face.

“But I don’t have that freedom. I am an officer of the New Republic, the Alliance, and the Rebel Squadrons. But most importantly, I am Grey Leader and the leader of this task force. I have a responsibility to my unit and these ships over all, and I have the duty to perform. And perform to the best of my capabilities. I can not do anything else but. My training in the force, my allegiance to the Rebel Squadrons, and my fight against the Empire is the sum-total of what I remember. Wish as I might for things to be different, I don’t know either of you. I don’t remember you. So I don’t have the right to take or make any assumptions where it concerns any possible relationship with you.”

He could see the hurt in their eyes, along with the up welling tears, and could feel their inability to accept his words. Their love for him was so deep, and they’d missed him for so long. How could they find him again, know that he was alive, be this close to him, be able to touch and smell him, and know their husband to be just as dead as he had been for so long. His own frustrated tears started to flow as he reached down to bring up his light saber, holding it openhanded between himself and his wives.

“This, and my ability to build and use it, changed everything. All that I learned, and all that I did in the tunnels... I lived off raw spice and the bodies of prisoners who had died in those tunnels for so long... years... erased everything that came before... that I may have been before... killed the man you knew, and built the one you see in front of you. It took me down to nothing. My master of the tunnels built me back up. All the fighting and responsibility and deaths... all the blood on my hands... has swept everything that was before away. And all that’s left is me. This is me. Just me. This me.”

He paused to gather his thoughts, and almost dropped his saber as if he forgot he’d been holding it. It was so hard with the two females driving to be primary in his existence. “I can’t do this!” He nearly pleaded. “I can’t lead both of these two lives. I can’t try to reclaim what I had with you when I don’t remember what that was!” He gripped fists in the air in front of him, so tense that his shoulders shook. The pain just wouldn’t go away. “I can’t love you for what *was*. Only what *is*. And I can’t meet you halfway. There is no halfway. I can’t live a lie, and I can’t lie a love.” He leaned back against the bulkhead and slid down to a sitting position with his knees up and his arms hanging limply over them. His head was down and ached, and his chest felt like the wookiee had jumped onto the middle of it with both feet and continued to stand there.

But there was a job to do, and he needed to have his full concentration to do it.

“We can’t lose you again.” Wyeth breathed the words, and he felt emotions stir that he never thought he might ever have.

“Wyeth,” Castor shook his head sadly, “you have to understand.” He looked up at her slowly. “You didn’t find your husband. You found ME. And I can’t concentrate while you’re here. Everything could end so easily... so quickly... if I’m not paying my fullest attention to what’s going on.” Castor squeezed his eyes shut tightly and rubbed his forehead. “If I’d been thinking only just slightly slower I might have killed Moriah! I was pulling my saber, and was so close to turning it on. I could have cut her in two!”

Moriah gave a short moaning bark.

“I know, Moriah. I know.” Castor wasn’t at all fluent in the wookiee language, and he was more than just a little surprised that he had almost understood her. “I stopped wishing for a miracle a long time ago. There’s no way that my memory is ever going to be restored. They even had Master Skywalker do his own diagnostics on my head once, when they were testing my use of the Force, and considering whether to accept my help in the war, and testing to see if I was a plant, or a time bomb, or any kind of a potential problem. But it’s all gone, wiped clean by all the spice in the tunnels. There is absolutely no way to recover it. It’s been tried. You don’t know how hard I’ve tried, how deeply I’ve gone to hunt for any shred of what might have been. You have to understand that the Castor you love truly died along with those memories down in the tunnels of Kessel. You have to know that I would change it all if I could, but I can’t. I’ve never felt like this. And it hurts. I’m caught between past and the future, and it’s killing me. I want to love you. I need to love you. But I can’t. I’m not your Castor. He’s dead. A long time ago. I’m not him. And I can’t ever be him.”

Castor felt Wyeth’s small hand on his shoulder. She squeezed it harder than he thought possible for such a small human female. Her slightly slanted eyes looked into his so searchingly that he felt nearly overwhelmed in them. For nearly a full minute he paused, longing once again for the memories that were forever gone, and knowing only the folly and failure in the consideration of that path at this time.

“All I can do is hope that you can love me as much as that long dead Castor.” He didn’t know where to go from here. He was normally so good with words. He could normally think ahead into the future so that he could plan his strategies and contingencies. He could normally deal with the here and now far better than how he currently was. “But you gotta not love him in me. He’s not here. It’s only me.”

“Ahem.” The droid’s female voice called reluctantly, while Arnie trumpeted, buzzed and squeaked excitedly while rocking back and forth so hard that he seemed to be trying to yank his extended arm out of the computer terminal. “Excuse me, sir. I wouldn’t think about interrupting, but R9 says that he’s found something that may be quite important.”

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It was a wide door, and not hidden at all, but it had a security access that Castor’s R9 droid couldn’t get through. Arnie had found the room while connected to the station’s computer and searching through the station plans. The little droid was still at the task, working from the station commander’s office, but this time it was verifying the station plans with readings from the security observation lens. These were scattered completely throughout the station and Arnie collated the images seen by each lens with the other images to make sure that each lens which was supposed to be viewing something different, actually was. The R9 unit was also tracking all of the video observation cabling to verify the presence of lens which might possibly require security codes of their own before becoming accessible.

At the chamber door, Greedo and Castor watched as the bothan Comp/Comm commander worked her way slowly past the security built into it. Both were quietly distracted with their own thoughts as she sat on the floor with her back against the wall, punching the keys on a larger mobile console board which she’d jacked into her data pad which, in turn, was connected by long thin hanging cables to the inner circuitry of the door control panel above her head. She mumbled to herself as she worked, sounding sometimes as if berating an uncooperative circuit with quite exotic curses from what little Castor could catch. Her facial expressions changing animatedly, and every now and then she would drop the keyboard into her lap, bare her teeth and shove her fists in the air above her head - a sure sign of progress, or so Castor assumed.

The fact that this sealed room was next to the station’s starfighter bay, and that there were no accessible observation lens showing the room’s contents, led them to believe that there was something, or more likely someone, behind that door that it would be prudent to find. The Shock Commandos were ranged along the passageway in the event that it might be a “someone” in the room beyond, and that someone decided that they might exit said room in a hail of blaster fire.

“Yes!” The Comp/Comm Lead barked. Dropping her data pad she stood with her fists pushed high in the air and jumped twice. “I’m goo-od! I’m goo-od!” She sang softly as she waggled her backside and circled her fists in front of her all the while dancing herself in a little circle. “It’s my birth-day! It’s my birth-day!” Definitely a victory dance, although her success was only apparent as the door still remained closed. When her dance turned her far enough around, she came face to face with Castor. Although he had one eyebrow up, and was obviously struggling to keep his display of amusement to a minimum, the bothan’s celebration came to an abrupt halt.

“Admiral.” She coughed slightly, embarrassment plain on her bothan features when she realized that she’d forgotten just exactly who was present. “Um...” she hesitated, glancing quickly at General Greedo and Admiral Daggerscout. “It’s ready, sir,” she said directly to the Shock commander. “I still can’t tell you what to expect on the other side of that door, or if there’s some kind of trap or explosive on the other side, but just push this key and that door will open up like a Hutt’s mouth with a *jumpie* dangling in front of it.” She held her hand in the air in front of her as if teasing a young Hutt with such a delicacy.

“Good work, Chiri!” Castor congratulated the Lieutenant Commander with a light slap to her shoulder. During the time Castor had known her, the bothan seemed predisposed to physical expressions, to use her arms and hands as punctuation marks and clarification for her verbal statements. From the way her pointed teeth showed as she grinned, this slight contact from Castor, rather than offending her, seemed to convey his praise even better than his words.

“Sirs,” Teke interrupted gruffly. The Shock Commander was in full commando battle regalia, and more than ready for some action. He’d been tied down with coordinating the entire assault team from their command center far longer than he had really wanted to be. He motioned toward another door a short distance down the passageway. “If you’ll just wait over here so that my men can work. Now, please.” His meaning of *time to get out of the way and let the big boys play*, though polite, was unmistakable.

Greedo inhaled, and Castor could hear the scathing retort being worked up about the rodian’s bravery and survival abilities, and how he did not need to be protected like a child. It was a situation that would surely end with the Shock commander stunning the General to ensure compliance, at the very least. Teke was out of patience for dealing with Greedo. And there would probably be blood shed when Greedo regained consciousness. The only question would be who’s. Probably Castor’s for getting between the two.

“General, if you please.” Castor rushed with them down the passageway, nodding to Teke, and guiding both the rodian and the bothan into the next room before the words could gush forth. The sour look on the Greedo’s face let Castor know that he wasn’t pleased with being manhandled. Or outranked. Or reminded of the fact. And there would undoubtedly be ramifications.

From their position, the three heard the door slide open, and running commando boots. No shots were fired, though.

“Admiral. The area is secure.” Teke’s voice came over the small comlink clipped to Castor’s shoulder. In a short time the giant Kanashaak came back around the corner into view, to escort the trio. “No traps, no problems, but you’ll want to see this.” Teke spoke quietly from the farther room. Castor and Greedo followed the huge wookiee back around and entered the now open room. Both stopped short when they saw its contents.

“Mag-pulse!” Greedo spat.

The storage room was filled with rack upon rack of mag-pulse missiles! Missiles which could temporarily take down a ship’s systems long enough to make even the largest craft vulnerable to an opposing force. The fact that Tourmaline hadn’t armed his own craft with them implied that this might not have been their final destination. Should the Star Hammer defense have been armed with these, it would have been an invincible force as it rolled, entirely unstoppable, throughout the galaxy.

“We have him now!” Greedo’s excitement was barely containable. It was a very rare display indeed, and Castor gracefully chose to ignore it. “This is exactly what we need to see the end to this!”

Castor considered the Gunboats and Avengers they’d gained, and felt far more comfortable now than he had in the last two years. And very particularly the last ten days.

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The simulator hatch hissed as it opened. Castor removed the helmet from his sweat soaked head, and exited the chamber.

“So much depends on how quick we can be.” Castor shook his head showing Greedo his estimation of their chances. “Too many lives are going to be lost, even with all the Avengers that we found here. And the four Gunboats. We need a better way.”

Greedo’s long fingered fists slammed against the console where he sat - sparks flew from it and Castor knew the repair team would have to be called in to fix all the keys the rodian had just mortally jammed - and shouted in his buzzing voice. “Your priority is to destroy this project and its creator. What are a few thousand lives compared to the billions upon billions of lives that may be saved?”

Castor was tired. Tired of arguing with his former commander. Tired of people under his command dying. Tired of letting down people who looked to him for safety, when the slightest mistake meant their deaths. And there had been far too many deaths already. Far, far too many good people had died already. And he was tired of the General’s casual attitude toward it all.

“NO!” Castor shouted back and slammed his helmet down onto the console station chair. “I am not going to sacrifice either the *Widow* or the *Web!* Nor will I spend another single life needlessly!”

Greedo jumped from his chair, a murderous look on his face, and lurched half the distance to Castor. “Malachite and his people must DIE! The Star Hammer project MUST be destroyed! YOU will be the one responsible for uncountable deaths if this is not done!” Greedo’s nose twitched so with the strength of his voice that spittle few from the end of his muzzle. But Castor didn’t back down. He went the rest of the distance, got right up in Greedo’s face, and continued to shout.

“You’re right! I’M the one that’s going to be responsible! I’M going to be responsible for the destruction of the Star Hammer. I’M going to be responsible for bringing in Malachite. This is MY watch, and MY ships... and MY crew, and I’M going to make sure that as many of these people see tomorrow as possible! I swear that they will all see their families again! AND that Star Hammer is destroyed. AND that Malachite is brought to justice!” The veins in the sides of Castor’s forehead bulged and looked as if they might explode.

“COWARD!” Greedo’s teeth clicked and saliva flew as the word spat out of his mouth. His fists repeatedly clenched in front of him as if he’d rather grasp Castor by the throat and choke the life from him, but was only barely restraining himself.

Castor drew a deep breath. His whole body shook with his anger. He let his breath out slowly and took another, calmer one. When he spoke it was in a low voice, controlled only with great difficulty, and a terrible look to his face.

“I’ve taken up the gauntlet in your crusade, and I will see this thing through to the end, with or without your further assistance, which, incidentally, has so far has been invaluable. But if you can’t help me find a better way to accomplish this goal, keeping my other priorities in mind, then you are free to leave this ship, and I will muddle through it as best I can. I will not lose another single life more than is absolutely necessary. I swear I will find a way to make it so, even if I have to suck vacuum myself, and use only my teeth to destroy every ship in Malachite’s arsenal.”

Greedo turned and flung his data pad against the wall as he left the SimOps. Castor could only stand and watch the scattered pieces bounce along the floor as his former commanding officer hurriedly left.

Castor drew a deep breath and sighed.

Greedo had always been a demanding commanding officer. One of the most such. But he never used to be so thoughtless and calloused about wasting the lives under his command. Castor could only think that the time spent tracking down and infiltrating Malachite had turned into an obsession for Greedo, and that had to be the factor which made him so different. So much more like he must have been before Greedo had joined the Rebellion against his former master. Palpatine’s continuous cruel treatment, along with his casual and repeated deaths and rebirths, had finally driven the original Greedo’s ninety sixth clone to desperation, to leave the Emperor’s service, and to fight in the war against him and his Empire.

But why? Why the obsession? Why the total disregard for personnel in the attempt to destroy Malachite and the Star Hammer project. The importance of the task was obvious, but why was it so personal? The strength and depth of his hatred toward Malachite was also obvious. But why? In this war against the Empire, and in the pursuit of its remnants, with all their weapons of total devastation that they’d managed to develop over the years. ...what made this enemy so different? ...so special? Why did Greedo seem so incredibly far over the edge? What was the connection?

Castor tapped Katie on the shoulder. The droid turned from where it had been minutely, and unobtrusively, studying the trainer chamber’s control panel intently, as if it would prefer to be anywhere but in SimOps right at the moment.

“Katie.” The droid turned quickly toward him. “Can you see that something for me to eat be brought down here, please.”

“Yes, Admiral.” Katie turned away to use the comm to send the request. “Galley, thi...”

“And invite Teke and the TacTeam to join me here.” The droid turned to face him again.

“Right away, Admiral.” Katie turned away to send that request. “Admiral Dag...”

“And see that a cot is set up down here.” Katie faced him again. “I’m probably going to be here for a while.”

“I’d be happy to, Admiral.” Katie turned to the comm again. “Major Shel...” Before the droid even finished the word, it turned back to face Castor.

“And do it over there, please. I need to use this panel. The General kinda did this one in. Thanks.” Castor reached in and started punching keys to change the simulator programming while the droid trundled off toward the comm station on the other side of the room muttering to itself.

“I do believe the Admiral must have known General Solo at one time or another.” The droid’s exasperated voice was modulated low enough that Castor probably couldn’t hear it.

“And get Arnie down here, too!” Castor called without looking up from his console.

The droid gave a metallic sounding sigh.

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**Begin log: T5B5 - Grey Solution**

***Jila Cosa***

*NO!* I screamed to myself *Not again! Not like this!* Then I saw the Tacomah PLD spot eject from the red spot that was his starfighter’s spot seconds before it disappeared in a flash. My whole chest went tight.

*Jila! How’s he doing!* I heard the worry and anger in Lessa’s voice through my comm set.

“He’s okay so far.” I told her, reading Tacomah’s vitals from the scanners. “Life signs low, but stable and even.” I know my voice cracked at least once. *Damn! Why was Tacomah so eager to be out there at a time like this. He’s just a kid for the God’s sake!* A very smart teenager, I had to keep reminding myself, but still just a child compared to some of the other Greys.

I watched as the *Brier’s* indicater seemed to inch it’s way closer and closer to Tacomah’s PLD spot and then merge with it. He was taken aboard and then mere seconds later the Brier all but hypered back to the *Black Widow*.

As soon as the rest of the flights had returned to the *Widow*, and my job was done in TacOps, I signed my reports and headed to Droid Maintenance to see what there was there for me to do. It sounds odd, but I was getting to the point where every time the Greys went out I wanted to be down in the landing bay to hug each pilot as they returned and descended from their fighters. Just a *Glad To Have You Back* kind of thing. The death toll was already too high for me.

Without realizing I had done it, I detoured myself to pass MedOps on my way to Droid Maintenance. Lessa was there with Sheryl Iagin talking to Tacomah. He sounded weak to my ears but his words were full of his usual mischief. I didn’t stop, I didn’t want to let on to Tacomah just how close he had come to... I couldn’t think about it. He still had so much to do in his life. I was sure of this.

Thankfully not much had happened to the droids this time and I was able to get the work that was waiting for me done quickly. Which was good because by the time I had signed my reports my right hand had started to really hurt. When I turned my hand to see if perhaps I’d cut it on something I was almost in shock when I saw that from the fingernail of my pinkie to my wrist was swollen and purple. The last time I saw something like this was when I sprained my ankle, and broke the blood vessel on the ankle bone, as a teen. The doctor had told my parents that there wasn’t enough damage to rate a bacta treatment, but it would pretty ugly for a while. How had I done this? I thought about it all the way to MedOps. Then it hit me. Or rather I had hit it. When Tacomah ejected I had slammed the side of my fist into the wall.

“Can I help you Jila?” Sheryl asked as I walked through the door. “Come here and sit down.” Sheryl frowned. “You look as white as Palpatine’s ghost.”

I took her word for it and sat down where she directed me. “It’s my hand.” I said holding it out for her to see.

“Hmmmmm.” Sheryl said as I winced and she ran her fingers lightly down the bones of my hand. “Jila, do you have masochistic tendancies?”

“Wha..?” The question had taken me by surprise, but when I looked at her face she was grinning.

“Well you know, this is the second time you’ve been in here for something like this. Nothing’s broken.” She told me as she ran a scan on my hand. “This time. Just a bit of muscle and blood vessel damage. I’ll give you a hypo for the pain and I want you to sit here for a bit until it takes affect.”

“Thank you ma’am.” I said screwing up my courage to ask her a favor. “Can I go sit in by Tacomah while I’m waiting?”

“I don’t see any problem with that.” Sheryl shrugged slightly, then administered the hypo. “Just remember he can’t really hear you if you talk to him.”

I walked into the room with the bacta tanks and immediately spotted Tacomah floating peacefully in the filled tank. He looked so young, my heart hurt. I walked over to the tank and pulled up a chair in front of it. Sighing I looked at his legs. I couldn’t tell which one had been damaged by the breach in his flight suit. From what I was told the coloring of that leg had been worse than my hand. I shook my head and sighed again. People say “Poodoo happens”, but why did it have to happen to people who didn’t deserve it?

It wasn’t a very long wait before Sheryl Iagin came in, knocked on the bacta tank, and pointed up for Tacomah to exit the tank.

“It’s not your fault, you know.” Sheryl said as he kicked his way to the fluid’s surface, and she turned in my direction.

“I can’t help but feel like I am at fault. Mine is the voice they hear relaying orders and whatever.”

“Nobody can predict what the IMPs are going to do, or where the next missile or laser bolt will hit.” Sheryl pulled up a chair while she waited for Tacomah to dress. “Not even the Admiral.” Sheryl paused for a moment. “Tacomah’s going to need to stay here for a short while. Why don’t you sit and talk with him. Get his opinion on whether you’re at fault or not.” She turned to the boy as he approached. “Aah, Tacomah! Any pain?”

“No ma’am.” Tacomah shook his head slowly. “Nodda bit.”

“Fine. I still need you to stick around so I can run a couple of scans.” Sheryl turned to me and tilted her head slightly to the side. “Jila, why don’t you help Tacomah to a bed while I get the scan equipment ready.”

“Uh... S’okay Lieutenant Commander, I can git it.”

“It’s okay” I chuckled softly. “And please, just call me Jila. Okay? Actually, this is Sheryl’s way of giving me time to ask you something.”

“Yah?” Tacomah stopped and gave me a look full of curiosity. “I know you. Wadminute. Oh, yah. Lessa introduced you. You’re Flight Control.”

“Yeah.” I said looking down at the floor.

“So... Whatcha got?” Tacomah started walking again and made it to the first available bed just as his leg started to wobble. “Not like I know much more’n how ta git inta trouble. I can hep ya big widdat.” The boy grinned. “What kinda trouble ya wanna git inta?”

I smiled inspite of myself. “Well, thanks, but... It’s just that since the first of the Greys died, and now you ejecting, and the breach in your suit... I’ve felt like these things are my fault.” I let the words rush out of me. I knew that if I thought about the words before I said them they’d never come out. “Sheryl reminded me that you’re a Grey. And who better to ask.”

“Ain’t no way. Ain’t yer fault, an’ you seriously got no worries there Leiu... uh... Jila.” Tacomah said emphatically. “Every onna us know it’s your job ta jes’ tell us what’s what an’ all. Someone’s gotta let us know what tha brain‑cases want done, an’ what we gotta do according ta tha plan. Staying in our starfighters, an’ gettin’ what they want done is our job. We go EVA, it ain’t yer fault, it’s ours. An’ you coudna known ‘bout my suit. If I’d stayed in my fighter, I woudna got holed.”

We talked all the while we waited for Sheryl, while she brought her equipment in, while she ran her scans, and then even after she left. I gave Tacomah all my reasons for feeling at fault, and he seemed to keep coming up with better ones on why I shouldn’t. Finally, when Tacomah started to yawn, I gave up. He had made me feel a lot better about my job. I shook my head again as Tacomah layed down and closed his eyes.

“Thank you Tacomah.” I said quietly. His insights were incredible for someone still in his teens.

“Welcome, Jila.” He half sighed as sleep took him away.

I sat there beside him for another minute, and then moved a stray lock of hair out of his face. What I needed was a hug. A large one. Perhaps even a Large, Furry one. Lessa had told me after her “capture” by the IMPs that Kanashaak gave the best hugs when you were down. She also told me that he had a huge heart and a wonderful understanding of human emotions, so that’s where I decided to go. Straight to Kanashaak.

Unfortunately just as I had made that decision my datapad beeped.

*REPORT TO SIM‑OPS* was the message I received. The only reason I could think of for me to report there was that the TacTeam was also to report there.

*Damn. I guess that hug is going to have to wait.*

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***Dave Trebonius-Astoris***

Dave was sitting quietly in his quarters, studying some of the documents that had been all over the *Widow’s* computers. Apparently nobody had thought to wipe the Star Destroyer’s memory during the chaos of the take‑over operation. Upon request, Castor had, through Katie, duly gave Dave authorization to access all he wanted. The information was startlingly interesting. Dave hadn’t had the opportunity to read Imperial‑esque communiques in some time. Sure, he was looking for useful information, but he was also satisfying an almost insatiable urge to learn as much as he could from the files. He...

Suddenly his door chime sounded. “Come,” Dave grunted.

Admiral Teke Daggerscout stepped into the room, took a look around, then strode right up to Dave’s desk and began without preliminary “Did you hear?”

“Hear what?”

“Castor just had it out with Greedo down in sim ops. Said he wasn’t going to accept anymore unnecessary casualties. Basically asserted his authority over the little wretch.”

“He did...” Dave’s voice trailed off, and he even missed the opportunity to comment on Teke’s unusually open vindictive derogatory comment. Dave was already off in his own world, the world of his mind. Unbeckoned his thoughts sped along the corridors of his brain, and the sequence of events swarmed him almost instantly.

I knew Castor was having it out with Greedo... but I never dreamed he would go this far. *Castor, Castor! I knew you had it in you somewhere. It’s about time that horrible little rodian got his come‑uppance. You had to make me wait this long to know for sure whether you were actually going to do this though, didn’t you?*

This news settled several of Dave’s outstanding problems. Now I won’t have to make that request of Castor after all. Though he would never tell a soul, Dave’s plan had been to request a transfer to the *Web*. It was a smaller ship, and more importantly, Greedo was nowhere to be found on it. That was the reason Dave had tracked Castor to SimOps in the first place. All my thought processes, all my logic, lead me to that decision. And it was all put to a grinding halt by chance timing and Castor finally getting a yelling voice. The circumstances were almost amusing.

Time had not been progressing well for Dave since he sat out his first mission in protest over the rodian’s return. I managed to fly some support the last mission to get us more starfighters, but that was only upon the intense intercession of Biggie. If he hadn’t been out in medbay and begging me to go out there and give everyone a better chance of surviving, I wouldn’t have even been there. But I knew I sure wasn’t taking any special orders from Greedo while I was out there. Fortunately Dave’s resolve was not tested that mission.

The truth was, Dave was intensely aware of his decision not to fly under Greedo’s command. He had not come to the decision to request a transfer lightly. *But now everything has changed. Now that Castor is more firmly under control, I am more confident about serving under him. But I must let him know that I will not accept special orders from Greedo. And if that rodian gets in my face, he might just lose his nose!* Yes, the old resentment was still there. But it was tempered now. Tempered by the knowledge that Dave had somehow won a victory in Castor’s stand. Dave didn’t feel as... threatened by Greedo anymore.

“Dave?” Teke had a curious look on his face.

Dave shook his head and looked up toward the other man. Surely no more than a few seconds had elapsed. Dave actually smiled. “This is great news, Teke. This is what we’ve been waiting for.”

Teke nodded curtly, not allowing himself as much emotion as Dave indulged in. “I agree,” he replied. “Now that Greedo’s role has been minimized, I expect battle plans to start being a little less reckless.” Dave nodded, musing to himself.

Dave suddenly smiled again. Looking up toward Teke, he reported “Grey Squadron is back online!”

Of course Grey Squadron had never went offline. But the implication was clear enough. Now that the correct man was back in charge again, what could possibly go wrong?

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***Adam “Vendor” Fene***

Vender sat in a chair in the hangar, staring at his TIE Interceptor. “I’m invincable, you know.” His gaze shifted from the Interceptor to Taan, who stood behind him, probably wondering if Vender had gone insane.

“I think you’re insane.” Taan said flatly.

Grinning, Vender shook his head. “No, see, I am.”

“What, insane?” Taan prodded.

“Yes... No! Not insane. INVINCIBLE!!” The shout echoed through the hangar, Vender’s casual laugh trailing behind it.

“An invincable crazy person.” Taan muttered.

Vender stood and folded the lawn chair that clashed with the hangar floor. “Take it how you will. Perhaps maybe I’m being just a tad overconfident. You’re right, I’m insane, I’m sure all the dead guys I’ve flown with and Commanded will agree too.”

Taan growled at him. “Watch your tongue.”

“Sorry. I’m just pointing out.. We’re not dead yet. Not only am I invincible, but you are too. I don’t mean that in a good way either. We’re cursed.” Vender flung his folding chair across the floor. “Cursed in this life!”

“So you’re saying life is a curse? Then go shoot yourself.” Taan flipped the blaster out of his holster and caught the barrel of it in mid‑air, offering it to Vender.

Vender walked forward, pushing the blaster away. “No, cursed with talent, cursed with having to see our wingmen and squadmates die. Sometimes for nothing.” He looked down for a second, and then turned to look up at his Interceptor.

Taan stared at Vender, and realized why he was so attached to the craft he flew. “Those deaths weren’t your fault you know.”

“Oh, weren’t they, though?” Vender hid the smile as he kept facing away from Taan. “Every shot taken, every evasive manuver..”

“..is unpredictable. Get a grip.” Taan held up his blaster. “Maybe I should just shoot you, now I’m the one cursed.”

A booming laughter echoed through the hangar once more. “At least if I lose my craft, I know that it truely indeed was my fault. Myself to blame for causing its destruction. No..I don’t blame myself for the death of my friends. I can’t prove it.”

Taan was taken aback. “Uh..?”

Vender shook his head. “We’re cursed with knowing, each mission, someone is going to die, or may die. We knew that when we joined, I know. That’s the price of war. For the death we’ve brought to the enemy.”

Taan nodded. “I still think you’re crazy.”

Vender grinned, finally turning to face him again. “Aren’t we all? You stick your neck out with mine, you know.”

Taan stared blankly at Vender. “Quit screwing with my head.”

Vender shrugged. “Ok. I’m hungry, lets get something to eat. Up for Sabaac later?”

Taan shrugged. “I won’t make any promises. I’ll let you know. Won’t hurt to get something to eat though, I’m sort of hungry myself.”

Vender nodded. “We almost lost Tacomoh out there.” A shiver went through his spine. “I don’t know who’s more affraid of that actually happening.”

Taan nodded, understanding suddenly what Vender was jabbering about. “He’s a good guy, he’ll be a great pilot some day.”

“Like us.”

Taan snorted. “We aren’t exactly legendary.”

“Speak for yourself!” Vender grinned, throwing his nifty scarf over his shoulder. “I’m invincable remember. I have a long time to work myself up to legendary status. Besides, I’m just great..not legendary. Like a pilot of my ego is going to let a kid take fame over me.”

Taan grinned. “Talk to Luke Skywalker.”

“Shut up.” Vender left the hangar, and started down the hall toward the residential areas of the the ship, just as Greedo brushed passed him in mad fury, nearly knocking him over. “There’s trouble.”

Taan stuck his head through the doorway, looking down the hall as Greedo walked hastily by. “No kidding.”

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Vender removed his boots, and went through his check list. “Boots. Check.” Then he turned off the light. “Light. Check.” THEN he turned on the super‑cool‑swirly‑thing he made out of scrap metal that glowed in the dark, attached to a motor that made it spin on the ceiling. “Super‑cool‑swirly‑thing that glows in the dark. Check.”

Vender stared at the super‑cool‑swirly‑thing as he lay in bed, almost hypnotised by the. . swirly...things. “Hehe. Cool.”

He wondered what the rest of the Greys were up to, and what Castor was planning, and why Greedo was as angry and ill‑mannered as a Tuskan Raider.

“Such..questions..” Vender began to get dizzy and turned the lights back on, shutting off the super‑cool‑swirly‑thing. Vender clicked the comm “Taan, you there?”

Taan’s voice, groggy, answered back. “What is it now Vender? If it’s about that swirly thing..”

“Nah. I’m just bored now.” Vender yawned.

Taan seemed to answer bitterly. “Then quit interfering with my time to be bored.”

“Pfft!” Vender clicked the comm off. “Ah well.”

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***Taan “Hawk” Ronar***

Taan stood at the top of the castle, lightsaber ignited in hand. A hooded figure stood opposite him, igniting his own dark red saber. Taan didn’t know who his opponent was, only that he had some connection to him and that he must defeat him. The dark figure swung first and Taan deftly pulled his lightsaber up to block the attack, then swung low at his enemy’s stomach. The two traded blows atop the ancient castle, which Taan vaguely recognized as his old home, more than fifteen years ago. Equally skilled, neither was able to get an advantage over the other as each blow was blocked or dodged. The battle raged for what seemed like hours, both Taan and the hooded figure showing great skill in using the Force to their advantage.

Knowing that continuing in his current style would prove futile, Taan decided to change his tactics. He put himself on the defensive and began to move towards the edge of the castle. His opponent, thinking that he had gained an advantage, pushed harder and forced Taan further back. A few small steps away from the edge and certain death, Taan quickly rolled to the side, his opponent turning to chase him. Taan leapt up and took a massive double-handed swing at his opponent’s chest, the dark figure barely blocking in time and getting pushed over the edge. Just as he began to fall, the hood fell back to reveal the defeated opponent.

The figure was an exact likeness of Taan.

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*Taan, you there?* Vender’s voice permeated through Taan’s dream.

Taan got up and sleepily reached for his comlink. “What? If it’s about that swirly thing...”

*Nah, I’m just bored now.*

“Then quit interfering with my time to be bored,” Taan replied, still trying to open his eyes.

*Pfft.* Vender shut off his comlink and Taan sat up in his bunk, wondering exactly what that was about. No doubt it had something to do with their earlier conversation.

*Invincible. Heh. Whatever.*

Taan’s mind wandered back to the dream he just had. That was the second time he’d had a dream like that, something that seemed far more real than anything else he’d felt. Only it couldn’t be real, because he didn’t own a lightsaber, and how could he be fighting himself? So many questions needed answering, and Taan had a feeling not even Castor could answer these ones. He’d have to discover the answers himself.

Shaking off the cold feeling he was starting to get used to after these dreams, Taan threw some clothes on and checked his chronometer, surprised. He’d only been asleep for a couple of hours, since he had returned from the debriefing. Dreams usually only occurred after a few hours’ sleep, furthering Taan’s suspicions that this was more than his imagination going stir crazy. This had something to do with the Force, and Taan was getting a little tired of everything coming back to that. After a bit of thought, he decided to have a look at the library and see what he could find.

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The library was an extensive collection of data on a huge variety of subjects, and thankfully someone had the forethought to back it up off the *Aragorn* before it was scuttled. Settling down in front of a spare terminal in one of the CompOps rooms, Taan typed in “Force” to see what he could find, and opened up the first entry: “The Force is a universal energy that binds all living things. Sentient beings can tap into the Force and manipulate it to varying degrees according to their midichlorian count...”

Taan scrolled down, having heard most of this before. He stopped at an interesting part: “Apart from the concepts of light and dark, there are two forms of the Force at work at all times. The first is the *living Force*, which can be manipulated by trained Jedi or Sith. This is the better-known form of the Force, mainly because it is the most obvious. The second is far more subtle, a greater, cosmic Force which binds everything and controls the destiny of every being in the galaxy. More passive than the living Force, it can also be accessed by Force-sensitive beings, allowing them to see the past, the present and possible futures. The teachings of the Jedi Order focused on being able to use both aspects to a Jedi’s advantage, allowing one to gain a greater insight into their own thoughts, feelings, and, ultimately, their destiny.”

Taan stared at the screen for a moment, lost in thought, then closed it down. Perhaps this was the key to his dreams. Was he getting a glimpse of what might be? That still didn’t explain why he was fighting himself. Taan stopped mid-thought. It all made sense; his light side battling his darker side. Within his soul there was a battle between good and evil, one that could not easily be resolved. Without proper training, Taan was in real danger of succumbing to the Dark Side of the Force. He thought of how his powers could be used for evil. The ability to project fear into the hearts of enemies was a powerful tool. He wouldn’t even have to commit acts of evil  
for his foes to quake at the mere sight of him.

A very powerful tool indeed.

*NO!* Taan forced himself to calm down and suppress the anger building up in him. That was enough of delving into such matters for now. Although his dream showed his light side winning, the dark side was so tangible he didn’t want to risk it.

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“Pure Sabacc, you lose.”

Vender stared at Taan. “I don’t like you, just for the record.”

“Duly noted.” Taan calmly reset the deck, the slightest hint of a smile creeping through. “Go again? At this rate you’ll have to win the next five games to catch up with me, but I’m willing to let you try.”

“Bring it.” Vender looked at his cards, then looked up at Taan. “Anything bothering you? You usually laugh in my face when you beat me.”

“Um……personal problems, I wouldn’t want to burden you with them.”

“Aw, come on, I can handle it.”

“If you say so.” Taan proceeded to explain his predicament with the Force to Vender, whose mouth was hanging open slightly by the end of it. “Any questions?”

“Yeah. One. Why in the seven hells did I ask to know about your problems? Next time, remind me not to ask.”

“I’ll do that. Show your hand.” Taan flipped his pad around to reveal his cards, and grinned when Vender cursed. “You know, at this rate you’ll be buying me drinks until we’ve destroyed every TIE fighter in the galaxy.”

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***Rensal “Bigfoot” Darklighter***

I walked onto the bridge as we reverted back to real space at the Depot. I approached the sensor boards to watch the battle unfold and I heard amid the sudden chaos Castor’s voice. “Control. Launch Grey!”

Immediately on the heels of that comand, Jack ordered. “Bring us over that station now!”

A second later Grey was rocketing toward the station. They laid‑waste to the station’s weaponry then started tangling with the fighters that came out. I spared a glance at the Admiral and saw the relief as no Trips launched. The Battle heated up, and it seemed that Grey became invincible, as all the shots fired everywhere out there only occasionally grazed a friendly craft. No one got damaged more than just additional laser scoring on the sides.

I glanced at the many bridge crew faces, and saw puzzlement in their eyes when they looked at me. They saw the despair and pain of not being out there flying in my starfighter. They couldn’t understand why someone would rather be in a tin‑can instead of on the nice comfy bridge. They couldn’t understand why someone would want to throw their life away.

As the Greys were recalled, I nodded to Jack and trotted off to MedOps for my date.

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I entered MedOps. A 2‑1b droid greeted me and then got me ready for my last dip. I noticed the medtech walk in. “Hey, Sheryl!” I said.

“Hello, Darklighter! This will be your last session then I’ll reexamine your arm.”

“Ok. See ya in an hour.” She walked out, and I was dunked into the bacta tank.

While I floated in the red stuff for an hour, I decided to think back over the last few days.

*We started out... what... only ten days ago? Man! It seems more like ten weeks instead of just ten days! I can’t believe just ten days ago we had a fully functional Calamari Cruiser and now we have an Imperial Star Destroyer, and our cruiser is gone! I can’t believe just ten days ago one of my wingmen I’ve had almost since joining the Alliance is gone. I can’t believe that just ten days ago I still had my cousin alive and fighting along beside us!*

I drifted off thinking about the good times I had with my old wingman, Nils, and my cousin, Alty. And before I knew it, it was time to come out and rejoin the world. I got cleaned up and Sheryl checked out my arm.

“How’s it looking?”

“Got any pain?” She asked while finishing up her checks.

I moved my arm through the whole range of motion. “Nope!” I said.

“Its one hundred percent healed. I’ll report to the Admiral telling him your clear to fly.”

“Thanks!” I bolted out the door and to the ready room.

“I don’t know about those pilots TwoBee. They are too eager to fly and die out there!” Said Sheryl.

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Taan noticed me suiting up. “Your Cleared?” He asked.

“I sure am! I am headed to SimOps to test my reflexes. Want to join me?”

“Sure!” Taan replied. “I’ll enjoy whippin’ your butt back into shape!”

“I am sure you will.”

A few minutes later as we walked down the corridor with about half the squad we nearly got ran over by the General. And, boy, did he look like he was ready to blow! We hurried into the sim chamber to get out of his sight, and we decided to fly one of the last missions Grey’d had in it’s Tour Three, since, undoubtedly, we’ll face something similar in the near future.

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**End log: T5B5**

**Battle 5, Mission 1: To Kill a Commingbird**

by R.C.Miller (Castor@RebelSquadrons.org)

A Grey Squadron, of the Rebel Squadrons, Additional Text Briefing

for Grey Squadron’s add-on Mission 1, Battle 5, Tour 5

for the Star Wars TIE Fighter Combat Simulator game.

Again Castor stood in front of his pilots and command teams. No one had seen or heard from Greedo, Flame or his wives in a number of hours. And that tended to make Castor slightly wary. Not to mention weary. But he could sense that the mood of the group was easier without them, and confidence was high. Bigfoot was ready to fly again. As was Tag. Unusual of her to lose her footing getting out of her starfighter, but everyone was tired, and sometimes things happened. Tacomah was a little iffy, but he sensed that would clear itself in a while. One way or the other. Dave even seemed more at ease.

“We have one last task before we go after the Star Hammer.” Castor began. “Since there isn’t normal traffic that goes there, the navbuoys we picked up didn’t have them, but the comp team found the locations of Malachite’s communications net in the station’s banks. Apparently, Tourmaline was responsible for the maintenance and relocation of the project’s comsat relay sites.”

“There are a total of fifteen comsat sites in the communications net. According to Tourmaline’s records, these sites are not normally heavily guarded with mines. There is, however, a respectably armed craft that does the maintenance on the sites, referred to only as *Mite*. We have no reference as to exactly what kind of craft it is, but logically it must be at least the size and armature of a corvette to collect and move or maintain an entire comsat installation if it’s guarded by a minefield similar to what we found at the buoy sites. We have its schedule, and we’re reasonably certain where it is.”

“The big problem, though, is that the Gunboats haven’t been cleared by the Pit yet, and only two of the Interceptors are ready to go out. We’ve got six of the new Avengers cleared, but that still leaves us seven short. Time is running out, and the Pit has got everyone they have on the starfighters. So we’re going to send out what we have; the six Avengers, two Interceptors and three of the Fighters. If everyone is successful, that will take out more than two thirds of the net, and everything close to the Star Hammer site.”

“The Avengers will be going to the location we’re pretty sure the Mite is at, along with two or three sites on either side of that. The Interceptors will take the two sites on either end of that range, and the Fighters will take the ones on the far ends. Any one of you yahoos in an Avenger ought to be able to take out whatever craft the Mite might be.

“We’ll use the Brier, the two Aranae, and two of the Assault Shuttles that we just picked up, which have also been cleared, to tow three of our TF2s and the two TI2s out to the remote sites.” Some of the pilots groaned at the thought of having to go through that tow-release again, particularly with an Assault Shuttle.

“That will leave four operational comsat sites.” Castor continued. “Not a complete shutdown of Malachite’s net, but a severe communications problem that won’t be fixed before we attack the Star Hammer. That, along with the navigational disruption, ought to buy us plenty of time at the Star Hammer site. At that point, it’ll just be a matter of how well we use what time we have.”

“Considering all of the Avengers, the four Gunboats and all the mag-pulse we now have, I’m reasonably confident that we can take the Star Hammer and Malachite. The only problem I’ve come across,” Castor hesitated, unexpectedly, and quite out of character for him. “Under the conditions of expected resistence, I’m finding it extremely difficult to come up with a strategy that won’t cost most of us our lives.” He said apologetically.

“Admiral,” Ace stood up slowly. “As new to Grey as all of my squadron mates are - and I have to say that I’m honored to have flown beside each and every one of them - they may not have been around the first time we went after the Star Hammer. But I remember what you did then, under the same constraints. Or worse. I’m pretty sure that you’ve considered and rejected that particular strategy already. Under the circumstances, and considering the sacrifices already made by the members of this unit, I think I can speak for us all when I say...” Ace swept his gaze over his fellow pilots, and looked back at Castor with a deadly resigned calm. “Just tell us what you need us to do, sir, and we’ll get it done. We know the price.”

“Ace,” Castor swallowed and hesitated. Not a person in the room couldn’t recognize the emotion Castor was keeping a tight rein on. Not a one of them missed that they might just be called upon to make that sacrifice. Tacomah paled, and Dave put his hand on the boy’s shoulder as Castor continued. “I appreciate what you’ve just offered. And I take the offer just as seriously as it was made. But I swear to you that I’m not going to sacrifice one more person than I have to. But regardless of whatever else we come up with, this strike at the communications net is absolutely necessary.” Castor made that statement with a finality that left no room for argument.

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In the time remaining before the Greys headed out for their specific missions, Castor decided to take a short break before heading back to SimOps and the TacTeam to stop by Tesserak’s Place to see how the project was progressing. He couldn’t mistake the large entrance straight at the end of the passageway which had been decorated like an island paradise; one of the many choice vacation spots of the well-to-do. As he passed through the main hatch, he entered a short dark airlock type hallway with whirling patterns of deep blue lights, vaguely reminiscent of the patterns one saw during a hyperjump. A series backlit signs ranged down the short corridor, and Castor read them.

“All ye who enter upon these premises be at peace.” *If only.* Castor thought.

“Share a meal, a drink, and maybe your thoughts with a friend.” And Castor nodded.

“All rank is to be left at the door.”

He chuckled and read the last one. “Tipping the bartender IS permitted.” He laughed whole heartedly as he went into the Bar and Grill proper.

The first thing he noted was the huge assortment of plants that hid just about every bit of wall space there was. He knew just how big the room was, and assumed that Tess must have sectioned off the area into a maze of smaller adjoining rooms. All the plants served to deaden sound waves, making the new B&G very quiet. But they also left the room with a lot of oxygen, so Castor felt as if his brain was sorting things out before he even had a chance to think about them. Some of the plants had large colorful flowers, but most were vines of one type or another. The gotal had gotten someone to make the pots for his plants out of thin sheets of hull metal and had them made long, deep and narrow, so that the plants themselves hid the vessels that held their roots.

Most of the tables were permanently attached to the floor but some were movable, allowing a longer and more complicated configuration if so desired. The floor was riddled with small holes into which the legs of the chairs fit. Castor noticed that the chairs were all built so that while they were strong enough to hold some of the larger species aboard, the legs had enough play and flexibility to reach a number of the holes to accommodate many positions. The holes themselves were spaced far enough from each other for walking on them to remain comfortable for the species who did not normally use footwear, but also close enough together to allow the chairs to be turned at a very wide variety of angles. He nodded his approval at the gotal’s compromise to ship safety.

“Admiral!” The call came from somewhere off to his left, and was immediately answered by a bellow from the bar, which was straight ahead.

“I don’t see any Admiral here!” The gotal popped up from behind the bar and stared straight at Castor with both hands flat down and spread wide on the bar. “Do you?” He asked Castor loudly.

“I believe I may have seen one over next to the door.” Castor answered. “But he stayed outside.”

The gotal nodded his approval, and went back to the task he’d been at. As Castor came up to the Bar, adjusted the stool and sat down, Tesserak popped back up from what ever he was doing.

“What can I get for you, Mr. Efrata-Landis?” The bartender asked and waited expectantly.

“Well, my friend, that all depends on what you have,” Castor returned inquiringly.

“The Grill is fully functional, and while the Bar won’t be until we can stock it properly, we do have juices and soft drinks, and even a few things a tad stronger but should be aged a little before we decide to serve them.” Tesserak offered seriously.

“And tested for lethality?” Castor questioned jokingly.

“You wound me, sir!” The gotal grabbed his own chest. “I would never serve anything lethal in my establishment! Well...” He corrected. “Certainly not lethal to whom we served it.”

Castor squinched up his eyebrows. “I don’t know, Tess. I remember one of your rougher brews that might have been a tad over the edge.”

“Foul! I cry foul!” The bartender waved his arms dramatically. “I was not the one that confused those kegs! I never would have served you from a container labeled *floor cleaner*. And I’ve made certain that all of my help since can read at least two languages, including simple basic!”

“Except for the fact that you haven’t let a single living being step behind your bar since.” Castor countered.

“All the better!” The gotal slapped the bar as punctuation.

“In any event,” Castor conceded the point. “I’ll leave it up to your excellent judgement.”

“Hmmm...” the gotal rumbled deeply. “I think I have just the thing.” Tesserak disappeared around the corner for a moment. He returned with a steaming mug of something and placed it on the bar in front of Castor, who picked up the mug gingerly and sniffed the contents.

“Honey,” Castor guessed.

“Sweetheart,” came the gotal’s quick retort as he batted his eyelashes. Had Castor gotten to the point of actually taking a sip yet, he probably would have passed the entire mug along with its contents through his sinuses. As it was, though, he only just almost spilled the brew due to the speed at which he turned to look at the bartender, who just stood roaring with laughter at his own joke.

“Hmm...” Castor frowned over his own appreciation of the gotal’s humor, but continued. “Lemon. Tea. But I can’t place anything else.”

“It’s a little portion of one of the raw brews I’m making in the back, mixed with some correllian tea and the ingredients you mentioned. It also has a touch of salt to cut the bitterness of both the brew and the tea and a pinch of a secret mixture of spices retrieved from the galley.” The bartender explained. “The whole drink is a restorative, both calming and energizing, and even has a vitamin supplement that is well hidden by the spices, I might add. Guaranteed not to dull the senses or wit, but still sooth and relax.”

“Sounds great!” Castor said appreciatively.

“My mother used to give this to me when I had the flu.” The gotal said in a low, conspiratorial voice.

“And yet another reason then that I should thank your mother.” Castor grinned.

“Listen, Castor,” the gotal said hesitantly, changing the subject. “I don’t want to rush you off when you could really use my services, but I know you’re a busy man right now.”

“Yes, you’re right.” Castor said, taking the hint and placing the mug on the bar. “I should really be at SimOps trying to figure out what we’re going to do.”

“Take the mug, Admiral,” Tesserak narrowed his eyes as he handed the drink back to Castor. “You can bring it back for a refill, or send it along with one of your droids,” he nodded, “and I’ll gladly fill it up again for you.” The gotal smiled at him. “As many times as you need, or want.”

“Thanks, Tess.”

“You’re quite welcome. And I’ll have more sent to you before that one gets cold.” The bartender waved and nodded at Castor as he left. As soon as the inner hatch was fully closed the gotal spoke softly to himself. “Most effective when the entire dose is consumed, and intuitively creative thought is required within twenty minutes of ingestion.”

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