

## **Fighting Dirty – RtF Bonus Submission (Fiction)**

### **GN La'an**

The first team finished their detailed search after over an hour of laborious work, relying as much on old-fashioned fingertip searches as well as their range of electromagnetic scanners and survey equipment. Once their team leader signalled the all clear, the team departed without leaving a trace – every item and stray hair replaced where they had first been found, meticulously recreating the setting. The location itself was less than hospitable, a rented set of rooms deep in the bowels of the Arkayn Casino, a den of inequity that combined oppressive heat with near intolerable humidity. This far into the ancient platform's innards very few systems worked within reliable parameters – the distant sound of rushing water and the flickering of light strips hinted at failing systems on the levels above and below them.

The second team, smaller than the first, took up their positions slowly. A Twi'lek on the bad end of a night's drinking lay slumped across a neighbouring corridor, forming the far end of a constricting cordon. To the passing eye, or nose, she was unconscious and stank like an open sewer, in reality the compact hold out blaster at her back was all business and she had the skills and intent to use it. A bent backed human male made slow circuits of the opposite accessways, muttering to himself in convincing imitation of an escaped patient – all the while ensuring the discrete scanning wand in his robes remained watchful. Another half dozen operatives, spread across three levels, tightened the net with patience and settled down to wait.

One man approached the rented rooms, keying in the pre-agreed code and gaining access quickly. His cream and blue uniform was a stark declaration of identity, his rank pins those of a Colonel and his patches marking him as an ace. Until an hour earlier he had been occupying himself in stripping money from gullible fools on the other side of a Sabbac table, a sport he would have continued if not for sudden orders to act as an intermediary. RS command had received word that a defector had made themselves known to them – an Imperial pilot of some sort who had decided life in a remnant of the former Empire had outgrown its attraction. He sympathised, of course, but they had all picked their sides long ago and it was too late in the game to decide that their life's efforts had been wasted.

The Colonel checked his chrono, noting that the rendezvous time was approaching. A simple pilot, he of course hadn't been briefed on the intelligence agents that had searched and now surrounded his position. He was perhaps vaguely aware of the security team that had been mustered while he was en-route, more as moral support than practical defence. The potential value of the defector had clearly been weighed against the Colonel's value and found more attractive – the seconds ticked by.

Idly checking the room he found himself in, the Colonel struggled not to gag as the smell of the place seemed to gradually intensify. He checked his dataslate, a nervous effort to make sure he remembered his lines and the identity of the defector. A General, they believed, undoubtedly an Emperor's Hammer pilot, narrowed down to one identity by the analysts – a Jarek La'an. The Colonel hadn't heard the name before, but he recognised the squadron flashes and his eyes narrowed, as they had when he'd been told the first time. Theta squadron... twice now that squadron had humiliated his forces, routing superior numbers through frankly insane levels of risk taking. He'd gotten his own back of course, destroying two of their fighters in the last engagement in what he viewed as a fair exchange. He must have earned their respect at least, one warrior to another, as he had been requested by name to take the defecting General in.

The smell continued to intensify, becoming overpowering. As the meeting time arrived he activated his comms link, speaking briefly and tersely into it.

“He’s not coming, what do I do?”

“Hold position. Give him time.” The clear and commanding tones of his senior instructed him.

“Roger, will do.” The Colonel considered complaining about the smell, but it would hardly paint the fighter corps in a great light in the eyes of their intel colleagues. He kept quiet, holding a gloved hand across his nose instead.

With a sudden spark of light, the overhead lumens blew out, the door locks shorting at the same time and locking him in. Activating his comm link again, he made every effort to report the sudden change. With a hiss of static, his comm link screamed with the sound of broadband jamming for a moment before suddenly clearing.

“Good evening Colonel, many thanks for responding to our invite.”

“Who the hell is this? What’s going on?” His voice betrayed panic.

“Theta remembers its enemies, Colonel, especially those that pick on crippled fighters and then declare themselves an ace. Bad sport really, fighting dirty.” The voice on the comm link was calm, almost terrifyingly so.

“I... what? We’re at war you mor...” The Colonel’s efforts to respond were curtly cut off with another squawk of static.

“We still have a code of sorts, even in war. So in reward for fighting dirty, please accept our gift. This platform currently has 2423 souls onboard, all with a variety of digestive systems. The contents of those systems have been steadily filling a series of effluent tanks over the last few hours. Shame, really, that a mysterious fault has prevented their emptying.”

“I... I don’t understand.”

“You will in around 30 seconds Colonel. At present the largest of those tanks has been redirected, with every valve in the system forced shut. You may have noticed the smell from that refresher unit in the corner, think of that smell as the bow wave. Helpfully, it’s also the one valve in the system we’ve left open.”

“You wouldn’t... you can’t...”

“We would and have. We’ve taken a few bets, but even the best outcome for you is that it’ll take 48 seconds for them to cut through that door when they realise something is wrong. In that time a few thousand gallons of liquid are going to flood your small compartment. I hope you can hold your breath.”

The Colonel glanced at the refresher, just as a series of gentle bubbles gurgled and popped. The smell worsened again as a distant rumble sounded, the unit itself beginning to vibrate. Silence fell for a moment before, with a roar, a high pressure torrent burst forth so hard it struck the deckhead before splattering across every surface. The Colonel screamed. The commlink shut off, to be replaced by the security teams equally panicked signals as they realised something had gone wrong.

Four decks up, La’an quietly withdrew the system override from the terminal he had co-opted and headed for the docks. Within minutes he had boarded a transport and started the journey back, via a few stops, to Aurora Prime with a satisfied smile on his face. Checking his tap into the platforms

fairly unguarded comms network, La'an was pleased to see they had guessed about right on volume and timings – it had taken 51 seconds to get into the room. The Colonel was currently huddled in a corridor as a medical team gathered the stomach to check him out, the decks and every inch of him caked in... well, caked. It was a fairly unusual form of revenge, more a childish prank on a large scale – but it felt very apt.