

Ambush

30 ABY

Weitu stood beside his TIE, spanner in hand, and looked at me, confused. “*Skira Naasad?* What does that even mean?”

I laughed. “It’s a Mando’a phrase I was taught. *Vengeance Sated.*”

“Clearly there’s a lot about the last week you haven’t shared quite yet.”

“In due time, Lieutenant Colonel.”

CPT Davalorn walked into the hangar, and Tiran spotted him first. “Attention on deck!”

We all snapped to attention. Dav approached. “As you were. But keep those salutes ready, Frown has summoned us to the briefing room. We’ve got our first mission in these Avengers.”

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Frown glared at us, beginning another of his traditionally succinct briefings.

“Rho, you’ve been tasked with the destruction of an unmanned Rebel facility in orbit over an undisclosed planet. You will jump in close, guided by precise coordinates proved by Intel. There are no enemy fighters, the only resistance being a combination of automated light turbolasers and laser cannons.”

A holoprojector mounted from the table in the middle presented the image of a space station, roughly a klick in length. A round, fanned bottom tapered upward to a point two clicks above. Small laser installations dotted the entirety of the structure. Two large red zones on the bottom of the station began to blink.

“Target either of these two reactor vents. Even a glancing hit from a missile will be enough to overload the reactor and cause a crippling explosion. Following destruction of the station, jump out using the pre-calculated coordinates back to the fleet. Easy in-and-out, no complications. All twelve of you will be departing first thing tomorrow, and I expect all twelve back. Be in the hangar at 0600. Dismissed.”

We filed out, one after another, and walked to the mess hall for the traditional post-briefing drink. We found an unoccupied area in the partitioned bar, crowding into two dim booths. I sat with Dav, Squid, Fame, Tiran, and Weitu.

Dav laughed at an inaudible comment from Squid before raising his voice so our booth and the other could hear. “No drinks tonight, Rho, we’re up too early tomorrow. Be like Captain Morgan here and keep a clear head for our mission.”

He sat back down and turned back to Squid. “This is your first real flight, right? I think the last time we flew a real mission was, what?” He turned to the rest of us. “Was it Tusorix?”

I nodded. “The Tusorix scramble. What a time.”

“We’ve trained quite enough for this simple run, though. Don’t know why they’re not just using Sigma and bomb it to oblivion, but our missiles should be enough if we can hit those vents, which are wide enough for us to all fly through together in tight formation.”

Weitu laughed. “Sounds like you’re confident this will be an easy run, Dav.”

“So is Frown. Our intel is pretty solid, the contact has been historically accurate. And if anything goes sideways, we’re more than prepared to handle it, in between our training and our Avengers.”

“Speaking of which,” Fame said, “how do these shields hold up? I know we’ve ran through countless sims in the things, but I can’t recall getting hit by a turbolaser.”

Dav smirked and pointed to Tiran, who laughed and turned red. “I remember. We were assaulting an MC-80 *Liberty*-type, and the gunners definitely had drank their caf that morning. It was maybe three or

four light turbolaser hits before the shields gave, then an A-Wing got me. But,” he added, “that was after I had chalked five.”

“Quite impressive indeed,” Dav said through his smile, “and a valuable contribution to capability knowledge.”

The conversation continued, switching from merits of the Avenger to the TIE Corps news, and from that, ever invariably, to bold boasts and unreachable promises of performances, past and future. Fame faux-menacingly threatened me, promising if his performance was not better than mine he would find some unspeakable way to execute revenge. I assured him he need not waste the brain power, as I was still a little rusty in the Avengers and had just gotten lucky last time.

Slowly the conversation began to simmer, and I took my leave, citing exhaustion. But I was not tired, I was nervous. I wandered the halls before deciding on my destination.

I climbed up my Avenger in the hangar and slid into the cockpit, sitting in my seat and simply looking around. It had been only a few days in the new craft, and I was already being asked to fly it into combat. I felt the knobs, buttons, and levers in the still largely unfamiliar ship, knowing it would bear me into combat. The seat didn't have the depressions from all the time spent in it yet; the flight controls didn't have the almost-imperceptible indentations from hours of my hands on them. This craft would carry me to my glory or my doom, and I didn't yet know it like the back of my own hand. That slight disconnect, a pilot and his ship, not a single, synthesized unit, often limited effectiveness. But I didn't have much choice, so I sat there, hoping I would suddenly and miraculously understand the ship, and hoping it would suddenly and miraculously understand me. Not two separate entities, but each an extension of the other.

A knock on the Avenger's hull shook me from my reverie. I popped my head out of the hatch, surprised, and saw Dav standing there, looking up at me, wearing a self-congratulatory grin.

“How did you find me?” I asked, chuckling.

“You're quite easy to predict,” he replied. “Although you'd be pleased to learn this was not the first place I looked for you. I stopped by the sims, I was sure you'd be there.”

I didn't bother disguising my concerns, because apparently Dav could sense my every intention. “It's not about battle preparedness, it's about familiarity with the ship.”

“Well, I've got something that may help.” He smiled even larger, and reached into his back pocket. “I saved this before they took away our Interceptors.” He pulled out a piece of slightly-mangled wiring, a chit-reader with wires and cords hanging from it, and tossed it up to me.

I chuckled in disbelief, incredulously turning it over in my hands. “I was never going to be able to make another one of these. How did you know about it?”

He winked and tapped the side of his head. “A commander always knows, Morgan. Also, you always listen to music during sims, so I figured you would also during real flight. I hope that can make the *Naas* more like home.”

“The *Naas*? Is that what you're calling it now?” I laughed loudly. “I like it, that's funny.”

“*Skira Naasad* is too much for the heat of the battle,” he chuckled. “So *Naas* it is.” He turned, tossing a casual salute over his shoulder on his way out. “I hope that helps, Morgan.”

“It will, sir. Very much.” I sat back down in the seat, still examining the chit-reader. I knelt in front of the comms box on the interior, and opened a small hatch. Thankfully, the comm system was no different on an Avenger and a squint. Twisting the wires into where they were meant to go and stuffing the reader into the remaining space, I instantly felt more at home, more in the right place. The ship was now mine, and I was its.

“Yeah, this is more like it.”

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The sound of twelve TIE Avengers emerging from hyperspace tore through the thin upper atmosphere of the undisclosed planet, a mining colony ruined by an overzealous industrial corporation or two. The station, only five clicks out, hung level with us, its odd bulbous bottom hanging towards the surface. Its turbolasers, clearly boasting advanced tracking programs, whirred to face us and wasted no time expending their gas canisters. Odd reddish-orange lasers burned the space in between each ship.

The comm system crackled and Dav’s voice cut my music. “Rho, maintain formation and head to the bottom of the station. Don’t get shot and we’ll be out of here within ten minutes.”

“What’s with the laser color? I’ve never seen this before,” Bronx chimed in.

Fame chuckled. “Doesn’t matter as long as it doesn’t hit us.”

“Let’s maintain some sense of comm vigilance, shall we?” I could imagine Dav frowning underneath his helmet, with his usual mixture of amusement and obligation.

The comms fell silent, and the clicks began to close. Everyone tensed in the unnerving silence, alone with the scream of the TIEs and the turbolaser fire.

And then, with the sense of something that was an inevitability yet not expected, a swarm of starfighters appeared on the far side of the station.

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Fro called out first. “I count twenty six Separatist relics. Tri-fighters? Void, how do those still fly?”

Fame, ever the expert on spaceships, chimed in. “Those won’t have central control, so we can’t hit the station to get them. We’ll have to fight them old-fashioned.”

Dav called out orders. “Morgan and Marr: eliminate the turrets. We won’t get much done with those still active. Everyone else, put yourself in between the Tris and the station, and stay alive.”

I jammed my throttle to max and rolled, peeling away from the crowd with Tiran on my tail. I shot to the station, dipping and curving with the rhythm of the Corellian ballads, dodging the orange streaks of death.

Tiran spoke up. “I mark twenty total turrets. We’ve gotta get those out of here, for us and for them. I’ll take the left ten, you can have the right.”

“Copy that,” I replied.

I veered off to the right, spinning again and turning on my targeting computer to aim at the turrets. The new technology now had a chance to prove itself, and it did not disappoint. It automatically selected the closest turret and highlighted it in red brackets in my HUD. The computer estimated the target’s durability and automatically selected unlinked single-fire for maximum efficiency. I chuckled in amusement at its proactive assumptions, and shrugged in reluctant acquiescence, trusting the machine.

And the trust was well placed. The brackets turned green, indicating a firing solution. I squeezed the trigger twice. Two shots lept from my TIE and sped to the turret, both colliding with the target and instantly vaporizing it.

One down, nineteen to go.

The others fell just as easily, small adjustments as I raced across the surface of the station. Dodging lasers and dipping between protrusions, I let go of conscious control, letting the music and the TIE carry me into, through, and out of the fight.

It was not Captain Morgan flying the ship. We were one unit, one entity, riding the current of the deep Corellian vocals.

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“Morgan, Tiran, report in.” Dav’s voice dimmed the ballad. I pulled my eyes from their focused glare and checked my progress.

“One more,” I replied.

“Ditto,” Tiran reported.

“Alright. The Tris obviously had something wrong with them, their maneuverability wasn’t up to snuff. They’re all gone, so why don’t you two send the missiles up the vent and join us here at the jump point?”

“Roger that, One. Stand by for one massive explosion.” I hit my mute button, and dove back down along the station to the squished bottom. Tiran led in front of me and off to my left.

Along the bottom there were no turrets, only a massive hangar bay. As we flew by, I peered through my hatch’s small windows. It was pristine, well-maintained, with rows of empty hanger mounts for the Tris.

The vents lay on the other side of the station, but the clicks rapidly dwindled on the display, already toggled to target where the missile needed to go. We rose from hugging the station in tandem, creating distance for the angle we needed for the missile shot.

“You take close, I take far,” I said, unmuting myself.

“Copy.”

The two vents were separated by only fifty meters of solid material, but even that was too much to knock both out with one missile. Two were needed, and two were had.

“Missile away,” Tiran whooped.

And then my computer played a tone, in harmony with the ballad, and I toggled to my missile fire. I squeezed the trigger.

I felt the missile torpedo out of its launcher, the recoil tangible even with the compensators cranked for atmo flight. I saw it speed away, rocketing towards the ultimate explosion.

We both turned sharply, feeling the effects of the thin atmosphere, and thrust the throttles forward all the way. The acceleration took my breath away, and the TIE lept from underneath the station to the rest of the squadron quicker than I would have thought possible, backlit by the station exploding piece by piece, before culminating in a massive orange fireball in the upper atmosphere of the tarnished planet.

“Plug in the coordinates, and jump on my mark,” Dav ordered. “Comm silence en route. See you on the other side, Rho.

Standby.... And jump.”

I slowly ratcheted the hyperspace lever forward and watched as the stars slid into horizontal lines, my cockpit bathed in blue light and the *Naas* hurtling through the ultimate mystery of the galaxy to the tune of Correllians yearning for the stars.

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