

## ***Interstellar Connections***

### **Taldryan Tower, Kasiya**

An incoming call notification sounded across the Proconsul's desk, and a channel opened without Erinyes ever touching her console. "General."

"General." It was a little strange to Erinyes that she'd spoken to Zxyl more since finding out he was backing the Traditionalists—her nominal rivals—than she had while he was "just" a Dark Councilor, or whatever they called themselves nowadays. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Someone bought a Tartan-class patrol cruiser from Arx Fleet Systems, then defaulted on their loan payments."

"That's why you don't go into the loan business. I don't see how it's my problem, though."

Zxyl ignored the barb. "The signal from our homing beacon is moving Rimward down the Corellian Trade Spine. Last spotted at Kaal one hour ago. There's a reward."

"How much?"

"Enough to get your Wild Schuttas good and drunk."

Erinyes raised an eyebrow. She wasn't surprised that Zxyl had been keeping track of her new pet project for the Summit Guard. She *was* surprised that he'd bother to challenge it directly, until she thought about hit from his perspective: the Regent would get both his lost ship and valuable intel on a Republican naval capability, for no risk and comparatively little cost. Two birds with one stone.

"There's only so generous I can be, you know," the Zeltron warned the Zabrak. "You're sure they haven't spoofed the signal?"

"Yes." A beat of silence passed, and it became clear the Regent was unwilling to elaborate further.

Erinyes sighed. "Think on how you're going to return the favour in the future. General."

"General." The desktop display went dark. A message from the Regent arrived a moment later, bearing their target's transponder codes and registration data. The ship was flagged as the *Sunder*, and registered to nobody Erinyes cared about. It would make a good first target for the Wild Schuttas to cut their teeth on.

Erinyes punched a button on her terminal. "Tempest Squadron and QRF, report to the briefing room."

### **Berrol's Donn System**

Ahh, the slight chemical taste of filtered air. It was the perfect compliment to that new-starfighter smell.

Erinyes brought the *Hellcat* into a shallow turn to circle a flight of *Gamma*-class assault transports bearing Taldryan markings. A flight of TIE/BA interceptors mirrored her motion. Two more flights of starfighters held their positions dozens of kilometres away, visible on sensors but too small to see with the naked eye.

"Proximity alert," one of the Tempests said over the comlink. A few more pinpricks of light appeared in space as the squadron's engines spun up.

"Cronau spike," a transport pilot confirmed a moment later—the radiation that signalled a ship's emergence from hyperspace. "New contact! IFF is the *Sunder*!"

Erinyes tugged on the Silencer's control yoke, and the craft's wingtips swung around to face the new arrival. "Proceed, Tempest." She toggled her targeting computer on and frowned at the distance: well over forty kilometres. It might've been a hair's breadth on a galactic scale, but it seemed an awful lot bigger when you had to cross that distance under enemy fire.

"Two Flight moving to intercept," Tempest Five reported. "Target is twenty clicks out."

The next voice came from Commander Luca Brumarch, better known as Tempest One. "Roger that, Five. Engage at best speed. One Flight, topside. Three Flight, keelside. Weapons free." A click and a pop of static came through as the squadron leader changed com channels. "Cruiser *Sunder*, this is Commander Brumarch, representing A.C.E. Interstellar Collections. Power down your engines and weapons and prepare to be boarded. If you surrender peacefully, your crew will be dropped off on Berrol's Donn unharmed."

Erinyes drummed her fingers against the *Hellcat*'s throttle as she waited for the reply. For long seconds, the cockpit was silent except for the pitter-patter of fingertips against control knobs. In fact, no response came at all, until Erinyes' sensor readout showed the *Sunder* turning away from Two Flight and accelerating. Sighing, Erinyes opened the Silencer's throttle to the max. The cruiser was still far enough away that it looked no bigger than the Zeltron's thumb, but glowing green needles of light lancing through space highlighted its position nicely.

"Two Flight, engage SLAM drives." Spots of blue-white light flared into streaks as the four TIE/BAs launched themselves forward at breakneck speed. Brumarch soon gave the same order, and the other Tempests blazed past Erinyes' viewport like bloodthirsty phosfleas. Unfortunately, of all the modifications the *Hellcat* had received, turbocharged engines weren't one of them. Instead, Erinyes pattered along, grumbling in annoyance as she watched the range indicator scroll down.

Long moments passed as the battle turned into a stalemate. The *Tartan*-class cruiser spat bolts of emerald light in all directions like a rathtar flailing its tentacles at a swarm. Tempest Squadron answered by hugging the *Sunder*'s hull as closely as they could, relying on their speed to pass through each laser cannon's firing arc faster than the gun could track. The tactic seemed to work, though flashes of laser bolts impacting starfighter shields filled the space around the cruiser, and the sparks that spewed from the TIE/BAs' hulls after near-misses were worrying.

The TIEs answered the *Sunder*'s assault with volleys of blue fireballs. Lightning crawled over the cruiser's superstructure as the first salvo of ion missiles hit home, and the cannon fire stuttered as the *Sunder* struggled to keep its systems online. The second salvo, though, revealed a dangerous flaw in the Tempests' approach: pinned close to the *Sunder*'s hull by the risk of straying into its cannons, one Taldryanite was caught in an ion missile's blast. Erinyes saw the cockpit light flicker as the TIE spun out of control, and an opportunistic gunner sheared one of the wing pylons off with a well-placed shot.

Brumarch ordered a change of tactics: knock the cruiser's cannons out individually, using pinpoint fire from the Tempests' own lasers.

*I was going to finish this, but ran out of ideas and got distracted until the day it was due. So, enjoy my participation-only entry.*