

***Supreme Chancellor's Office  
Taldryan Tower, Kasiya  
41 ABY***

“Okay, let me get this straight.” Cassandra frowned over her flute of Toniray. “You want to take a squadron of fighters, and train them to destroy anti-fighter defences.”

“Yes.”

“The defences that are designed to counter them.”

“Yes.” Erinyes took a slug from her flask. She knew the Consul was no expert in military matters, but sheesh, this was like pulling teeth.

Cassandra paused for a beat to take the information in. “Why, though?”

“Because we’ll lose fewer fighters as a whole that way,” Erinyes said. “Our naval strategy relies on small craft to flank and engage enemy capital ships. Our fighters can cover the bombers against enemy fighters, but point-defence laser cannons will shred both the bombers and their bombs. So, we send a fighter squadron in first that goes under the enemy shields and takes out the point-defence cannons, and the bombers can make their runs in peace.”

“Does that actually work?”

“It can, if the pilots are good enough. Look up the after-action report from the Battle of D’Qar sometime. The Resistance did the same thing with a First Order dreadnaught.” Granted, that was more due to the First Order’s incompetence than the Resistance’s skill, as far as Erinyes was concerned. “It also gives us options if the conflict with the Traditionalists ever heats up.

Cassandra set her drink aside and tented her fingers together, tapping them against her chin in thought. “Okay,” she said after several seconds. “Take a squadron from the Summit Guard and train them the way you want. If it works out, we’ll start expanding it to other parts of the armed forces.”

“I already have one in mind,” Erinyes said, rising from her chair.

***Berrol's Donn System  
Weeks Later***

Thirteen starfighters sat in the black of space, waiting.

Twelve of them were TIE/BAs of Tempest Squadron, the newest addition to the Summit Guard’s naval forces. While Hyperion Flight had to play “poster boys” and escort the Supreme Chancellor around, the Tempests spent all their time being the best space-superiority pilots Taldryan had to offer—in heated competition with Hyperion, of course. Already used to fighting outnumbered and outgunned and coming out on top, Tempest Squadron had been the natural choice for this kind of mission.

Erinyes was the thirteenth pilot, hanging at the back of the formation in her TIE Silencer, *Hellcat*. She’d trained alongside the Tempests from day one, making the same mistakes and learning the same lessons as the other pilots. It had been a convenient excuse to get back into a cockpit after being away for too long.

“Proximity alarm,” a voice came over the comm. In the same moment, *Hellcat*’s sensor board lit up with warning of an imminent arrival from hyperspace.

Erinyes drummed her fingers against the control yoke and waited for the ship’s sensors to finish their work. After a few seconds, the blob on the display resolved itself into a dot. The

sensors identified it as a Corellian YZ-900 light freighter. The -900 was fast, tough, and heavily armed as light freighters went—just the kind of ship you’d want for running cargo through a lawless backwater like the Berrol’s Donn system.

“IFF says it’s the *Mertana*. Stay frosty.” Tempest One said. Erinyes sat up a little straighter in her pilot’s seat. This operation wasn’t just a test for the Tempests; it was a joint effort with OSI to weed out a spy in the Caelus government. One particular pirate ship, an old *Victory II*-class frigate called the *Dactillion*—not the *Victory II*-class Star Destroyer, the other one—was suspiciously good at catching valuable cargoes moving from Caelus to Berrol’s Donn, including those shipped under TEAD’s flag.

In an uncharacteristic show of unity, Erinyes and Anders had both agreed the problem was irritating and needed to be dealt with. Anders had concocted a scheme to discover which Caelus customs officer was passing information to the pirates, with the *Mertana* as bait. He’d also arranged for Taldryan slicers to take over the sensor buoy the pirates used to spot their prey when it arrived from the Caelus system, and erase any evidence that a squadron of Taldryan starfighters was waiting for the pirate frigate. Now it was up to Erinyes and the Tempests to disable the *Dactillion* and capture its captain.

Erinyes watched as the transport maneuvered itself on to its new course. It would only take a minute or two for the -900’s navicomp to calculate the next leg of its journey. If the pirates wanted to catch the *Mertana*, they’d have to get moving—

“Proximity alarm,” a third Tempest pilot said. Seconds later, another blip showed up on *Hellcat*’s sensor board. This time, the signature resolved itself into a *Victory II*, with the IFF confirming that it was the *Dactillion*. “Contact at our eight o’clock, range three-zero clicks.”

Right on cue. Erinyes transmitted a prearranged message to Anders, informing him that the trap was sprung.

“Tempests, form on me and block the *Mertana*,” Tempest One ordered. As one, the squadron wheeled around and angled themselves towards the space between the pirate frigate and their ward. Triple ion engines flared, and the TIE/BAs surged forward like a flock of hungry shriek-hawks.

“*Mertana*, this is *Hellcat*. Get to safe distance and wait for our signal.” Erinyes dropped her Silencer into formation and opened the throttle.

As the Taldryanite fighters streaked forward, another voice boomed over a public comm frequency. “This is Captain Ranev of the *Dactillion*. I see you have some valuable cargo aboard—what do you mean ‘they have an escort’, Fonn? They were supposed to be alone!”

*And you’re not supposed to share intel on an open comm, laser-brain*, Erinyes thought.

“Kriff it, it’s just one squadron,” Ranev grumbled. “*Mertana*, if your crew wants to live, stop and prepare to be boarded. Don’t bother trying to jump to lightspeed.” Another light began to blink on *Hellcat*’s control board.

“Gravwell up,” another Tempest confirmed.

The dance had already begun. The *Mertana* charged towards the Taldryanite formation like its aft was on fire, spurred on by the desire to keep its aft from *actually* being on fire as it jinked and juked to avoid a hail of glowing green spears from the *Dactillion*’s guns. The maneuver forced the pirate frigate to turn and give chase, and placed the Erinyes and the Tempests between the *Dactillion* and its prey.

“Break by pairs and engage,” Tempest One ordered. Erinyes sensed the Tempests split into six pairs of fighters, with one member of each pair closely tailing the other, just as the squadron had practised. The distance indicator on *Hellcat*’s HUD plummeted as the fighter screamed toward the *Dactillion*. Twenty kilometres, now.

It wasn’t long before the pirates responded. Glowing emerald threads from the *Dactillion*’s quad laser cannons stitched through space to try to ensnare Tempest Squadron. The Force growled a warning, and Erinyes nudged *Hellcat* into a corkscrew turn to avoid the bolts. Fifteen kilometres. The *Dactillion*’s gunners had gotten ahead of themselves, Erinyes noted; older-model quad laser cannons were most effective at less than eight clicks.

As the distance indicator hit ten kilometres, Erinyes pulled up and angled *Hellcat* to approach the pirate frigate from the top. The anti-fighter fire was more intense now, with green lines radiating from the centre of Erinyes’ front viewport as a second turret joined the first. *Those gunners must want bragging rights*, Erinyes thought drily. The *Dactillion* grew ever larger in front of her, close enough now that she could no longer see the entire ship at once.

Three kilometres—or three thousand metres, as her HUD automatically converted. Erinyes dove straight for the *Dactillion*, as though she intended to ram the much larger ship. One of the quad laser cannons tracking her broke shifted targets, but the other kept spewing laser fire. Two thousand metres. Erinyes toggled her weapons systems to link all six of *Hellcat*’s laser cannons. Without a wingman to draw fire, a torpedo was more likely to get shot down in her face than strike its target.

One thousand. Turbulence rocked *Hellcat* as the fighter passed through the *Dactillion*’s shields. If she didn’t pull up soon, she’d be a pancake on the frigate’s hull—but that kriffing quad laser gunner was still after her. Seven hundred. Her fighter wouldn’t take more than a couple hits from a turret like that. Six hundred. No choice, now. Erinyes’ hands flew over *Hellcat*’s controls, angling her deflector shields forward even as she yanked back on the control yoke. Five hundred. She was so close she could practically pick out individual hull plates.

Four hundred... three... two.. one... fifty metres...

The range indicator levelled off at twenty metres, when Erinyes finally pulled the fighter’s nose around to face the quad laser cannon. Emerald bolts hammered against *Hellcat*’s shields, but Erinyes didn’t have time to be unnerved by a face-to-face meeting with a turret. Instead, she stomped on her rudder pedal and threw *Hellcat* into a sideways drift. The fighter’s upgraded maneuvering thrusters shaped its momentum into a sideways orbit around the quad laser emplacement, while keeping its guns trained on their target.

The quad laser battery tracked sideways, spewing fire at *Hellcat*. From where the momentum had pressed Erinyes against the trailing side of the cockpit, the laser bolts passed hair-raisingly close, shaving away the fighter’s meagre reserve of shields. Erinyes mashed her trigger, and *Hellcat*’s heavy laser cannons poured fire into the gaps in the armour that allowed the turret mechanism to rotate.

After several tense seconds of watching the shield readout creep closer and closer to zero, the quad laser battery’s rotation jerked to a stop. Erinyes switched rudder pedals and pulled up to stop herself from orbiting back into the battery’s sight, grunting as *Hellcat*’s momentum slammed her into the cockpit’s opposite wall. Once she’d opened a little bit of momentum, Erinyes cut her engines and rotated *Hellcat* so the ship was flying backwards. A fireball shot out of one of the torpedo launchers and slammed into the turret’s base, blowing it to slag. The

shockwave jostled *Hellcat*, but not enough to damage the craft before Erinyes reignited its engines and pulled away.

With the one-on-one duel over, Erinyes once again heard the Tempests' comm chatter through her helmet speakers. "...-sal turrets and shield generators are disabled. *Mertana*, begin your run," Tempest One said.

"Copy that, Tempest One." *Hellcat's* sensor readout showed the transport reverse course and increase speed as it approached the pirate frigate. The *Mertana* used the *Dactillion's* new lack of topside guns to protect itself from incoming fire during its approach. Once it was in range, pairs of ion torpedoes streaked out from its warhead launchers and slammed into the *Dactillion's* hull. Tendrils of electricity cascaded across the frigate's armour with each impact. Engines and running lights flickered, until finally, everything went dark.

"Target is disabled," the *Mertana* reported over the comm. "Commencing our boarding action."

Erinyes smirked. The "valuable cargo" the transport carried was a team of Cohors marines and SRI slicers, tasked with discovering exactly where the pirates had gotten their intel. Anders would be pleased—well, as pleased as he ever was.

More importantly, the Tempests had performed admirably on their first AA-suppression mission. *Hellcat's* sensor readout reported that a few of the TIE/BAs had taken mild or moderate damage, but critically, there hadn't been any losses. All in all, the operation had been a massive success.