

A Leaf on the Wind
Invictus, #91
House Qel-Droma of Clan Arcona
Ziost Special Forces

His stomach lurched and brilliant points of light whirled around him as Invictus slewed to port, twisting his Clawcraft on its port solar panel as he did so. A cascade of crimson plasma slashed across his peripheral vision, bare meters from his starboard wing array, and the Chiss mouthed silent gratitude at Marick for convincing him, just a few months back, that he had been getting rusty in the cockpit. Rolling out of his turn, the commander of Void Squadron looped up and back towards his pursuer, a classic move with an equally predictable response. His mercenary quarry gunned the throttle on his Ugly, intent on outdistancing the Clawcraft then coming around for a head-to-head pass.

Unfortunately for him, Invictus hated everything classic and predictable. His fingers flicked a dull, red switch that he had added to his console when he transferred to Void. Reaching out with the Force, he grasped the thrusterless shadow bomb that dropped from the ship's belly and hurled it at the mercenary's X-Wing/B-Wing amalgamation. Without a targeting package or thrusters, the bombs failed to register as threats to enemy fighters - and ordinarily, as inert, timerless explosives they wouldn't be. Within moments, however, the dull grey cylinder came within two meters of the cockpit and erupted in a roiling explosion. The four X stabilizers that had, moments before, been rotating around the Ugly's cockpit seized, then their laser cannons exploded as well, vaporizing the cockpit and the unfortunate - and tragically, unpaid - mercenary within.

Invictus cut his thrusters and rotated 180 degrees, then kicked his engines back to full and headed once more into the fray. With shields set fully forward, he angled towards a pair of beat-up TIE Interceptors. The two broke off from the main engagement, zeroing in on the lone fighter - presumably considering the Imperial-esque craft to be as shieldless as their own. Even now, after the Vong conflict and various ensuing crises, few outside the Ascendancy had grown familiar enough with Chiss technology to recognize it for what it was.

The Chiss dropped his thrusters to two-thirds of maximum, the better to maneuver, and set himself in a gentle spin as he closed on the TIEs. At two kilometers he flicked the selector on his piloting yoke to ion cannons and began firing lazily at the pair. The sapphire bolts slashed through the starlit sky, but the interceptors - obviously piloted by veterans - didn't so much as juke out of the way. Most of the shots went wide, and the handful that did strike home played ineffectually off the crafts' solar wing arrays, too dissipated at such a distance to do any harm. Just before hitting a klick and half, Invictus flipped the selector back to lasers. Though the control panel indicated the change, blue bolts continued spitting forth at the incoming fighters.

Confident in their ships' ability to withstand the ion beams at anything more than a kilometer, the two pilots rushed heedlessly towards the lone clawcraft - and the port fighter erupted in a brilliant ball of flame, singing his wingmate. The Sith Battlemaster grinned as the remaining mercenary broke off in confusion.

Though Charric blasts looked like nothing so much as ion blasts, they burned flesh and metal the same as traditional lasers. A fact Invictus was all too ready to exploit whenever possible.

Invictus maneuvered into the Interceptor's backdraft, diverting shield power to his engines and closing on the fleeing bogey. Though anyone seeing his expression would be forgiven for thinking him feral, the Chiss could hardly remember the last time he'd felt so good. He cast his recollection back over the years, and finally seized on the moment that had been niggling his subconscious...

Sixteen years after the destruction of the first Death Star. A decade after Mitth'raw'nuruodo's disappearance from Nirauan. Invictus had spend years seeking him out, eventually finding himself a member of the Emperor's Hammer TIE Corps. A pilot in Praetorian Squadron, he'd been sent on innumerable suicide missions, thrown headlessly against superior numbers of mercenaries and Imperial Remnant forces. He'd been sure, on a nearly-daily basis, that he would die.

And he had loved every minute of it.

Little by little, over the years, he'd succumbed to duty. To the incessant chains of honor that various positions of responsibility had forced upon him. He'd forgotten just how much he'd loved fighting. How good he was at killing.

The Interceptor pilot was good, juking and jinking in an attempt to throw off the Sith's aim. He briefly considered releasing another shadow bomb, then dismissed it, tightening his grip on the piloting yoke and forcing his eyes to unfocus slightly, looking for subtle patterns in the mercenary's movements. Invictus watched, and waited for an opening...

Invictus had felt the null-Force bubble coming slowly towards the freighter's ramp, and knew the Invicta's troopers had found the ysalamir he'd sensed in the cargo hold. That was good. There wasn't much time before they'd have to throw themselves back into the fray above Ziost. Better to get this over with quick.

He had turned on his heel to make his way back across the hangar deck when the troops began escorting a half dozen prisoners down the ramp - but not their prisoners. Their malnutrition and ragged bonds made it obvious enough that the ship's crew had held them hostage.

As they reached the bottom of the ramp, they outpaced the troopers struggling with the ysalamir nutrient frames, and Invictus felt a tugging through the Force. One of them was Force-sensitive. He spun back towards the group, watching the soldiers lead the humans from one brig-like cargo hold to another. One of the group - a dark-haired Hapan of no small beauty, turned and looked at him, eyeing his blue skin with derision, and the confused spark in her eye matched the spark he felt through the Force.

"Well," he mused to himself, "I'll have to deal with that after we finish crushing the One Sith."

Three to port, then up. That was the pattern. It was confused by a truly random assortment of dives, rolls, and dodging in between. But always it ended with three jukes to port and a lurch upward.

As he waited for the pattern to play itself out, the Chiss took stock of his situation. He was hale, hearty and, finally, sane again. He had little to worry about, beyond his own squadron. He might have found himself a new apprentice - if the chit didn't get herself killed first. They were on the verge of defeating their enemy and retaking the ancestral domains of the Sith Empire - as little as he personally cared, it was quite the coup.

And one last thing, he thought, the Interceptor juking to the left.

He was flying again, full-time - for the first time in a decade.

His fingers tightened on the trigger just as the TIE jerked upwards, the Clawcraft's charric blast boring through the ball cockpit and incinerating the pilot within.

It was simple and clean. Deadly and life-affirming in unison. He felt free.

Sometimes war is funny like that.