The battle had gone on for some time, but as both sides took losses, a lone TIE was chasing the last of the X-Wings. The Imperials had done well to fight their way out of the ambush, and the convoy they had sworn to protect had long escaped intact, but the final Rebel wasn’t to be beaten.

In the cockpit of the TIE, its pilot refused to take his eyes off his target. The X-Wing dipped, dived and jinked, but the Imperial matched each movement almost perfectly. He was driven on by an insatiable desire for revenge; this particular X-Wing had destroyed several of his wingmates.

*You chose not to leave. Now you’ll pay, you terrorist bastard* the Imperial thought as he continued to give chase. His targeting computer beeped almost continuously as the X-Wing slipped in and out of the TIE’s sights.

Twisting his flight yoke, the Imperial pilot smirked under his helmet as his enemy, outfoxed by an unconventional manoeuvre, turned straight into his path. Squeezing the trigger, the pilot’s smirk widened as green laser fire engulfed the Rebel ship.

Almost as soon as the X-Wing had been destroyed, an Imperial-II Star Destroyer hypered in.

“Command, this is Gamma Seven. Convoy is away, but my squadron is down. Requesting landing permission,” the pilot broadcast.

Before the larger ship could answer, it, along with its surroundings, began to fade away. With a whirr, the simulator pod opened.

“Impressive, Inahj. We weren’t sure about letting someone below regulation height into our training program, but you’ve surpassed expectations. Keep this up and you’ll be on duty by the end of the month!” Commander Valane declared.

“Not that that means anything, sir. You told me yourself that we’re not likely to see any real action. Certainly not against those frakking terrorists,” the young man answered.

Rekjin Valane smiled. The training program was certainly going well for Andrelious J. Inahj. After he and his parents had fled the Core to avoid awkward questions about the family business and its work for the Empire during the Galactic Civil War, they had travelled to a sector of the Unknown Regions that was now firmly controlled by a group of Imperial holdouts. Whilst Parck and Licon Inahj were mostly retired, Andrelious’ potential as a pilot hadn’t gone unnoticed. The young man was also excelling in other areas: his views on the Empire made him popular with his more traditionalist commanders, though he had also picked up a reputation for speaking his mind a little too much.

“We need to be prepared, Inahj. If those Rebels find out we’re here, they will come for us. They will try and use their Galactic Concordance to call us war criminals,” Valane explained.

“They can try. Their so-called Republic is an illegal government, and their Concordance an illegal treaty. Palpatine’s Empire was formed by a legitimate vote of the very body they’re trying to force back on the galaxy. People will not stand for it,” Andrelious responded.

“The galaxy believe their lies, I’m afraid. You probably know how it is. Just mention Alderaan and everyone hates us. How old were you when that happened, Inahj?” the Commander questioned.

“I was eight, sir,” Inahj replied.

“I was only just starting out in the Imperial Navy. Anyway, we can talk another time. Big day for you soon. You should get some rest,” Valane ordered.

**-x-**

Andrelious found an Imperial bunk surprisingly comfortable. The fact he was shorter than his fellow Cadets allowed him to sleep without being too cramped.

This time, however, as the young man slept, he was dreaming unusually vividly. Images of a woman, taller and probably stronger than him, filled his mind. He couldn’t picture her face, but could see that her hair was black, with purple tips.

The dream wasn’t clear enough for specifics, but the woman was angry with him about something.

“Your people destroyed my home!” the female snapped.

Andrelious sat up, awake. Despite the coolness of his quarters, he was drenched in sweat.

“Go and take a walk and then get some more sleep, Andrel!” one of his bunkmates advised crossly.

**-x-**

Rather than go for a lengthy walk, Andrelious had taken to staring through one of the ship’s many transparisteel windows. He didn’t possess an interest in the stars, but he did admire how unrelenting they were in staying almost exactly the same. The political state of the galaxy was changing all the time, but the stars themselves were static.

“You need to get some sleep, baby!” a female voice echoed.

The young pilot didn’t need to turn around to know exactly who was addressing him. Nonetheless, he spun on his heels, a smile on his face.

“Shouldn’t you be as well?” Andrelious queried.

The young woman, though the same age as Andrelious, was a foot taller than he was. She had long red hair, that, when combined with her piercing blue eyes, gave her an intimidating appearance. This was enhanced further by her muscular frame.

“I’m on my final training unit. Means I get these night watches. Didn’t expect to run into something so pretty,” the female replied.

Inahj felt his cheeks burning. He’d known the female for years, even before the Empire had been defeated at Endor, and had watched her grow from a confident tomboy who picked fights with the boys, to the tall, powerful soldier-in-training that now stood before him. Granta Prackx, though only sixteen, was well on the way to becoming a fully trained instrument of war. The only thing that appeared to equal her passion for the cause she now served was her ongoing interest in pursuing a romantic relationship with Andrelious.

“I’d best not keep you then. If you’re caught with me when you’re meant to be on duty-“ the male began. Prackx answered by kissing him firmly.

“You let me worry about that!” she declared.

Andrelious smiled again.

Granta Prackx always seemed to have the right answer for everything.

**-x-**

The next morning, a groggy Andrelious ate his breakfast ration. He hadn’t forgotten his dream, or the late night encounter with his lover, but he was looking forward to another scenario in the simulators. Rumours floated around the breakfast tables that Commander Valane was going to start upping the ante, giving the barracks an unusually nervous atmosphere.

“Well, you’ll be alright, Large,” a Cadet remarked.

“How so?” Andrelious questioned. Large was the ironic nickname he’d been given on his first day.

“Valane seems to have you mapped out for great things. Can’t blame him. Datapad had a look at your test scores. Top five every time,” the Cadet, a dark skinned male who had acquired the nickname Torp replied.

“Datapad needs to be more careful. Snooping in those records is risky,” Inahj responded.

Datapad was a slightly overweight Cadet who had picked up his nickname due to his penchant for computers and slicing. He wasn’t the best pilot, but Valane and his fellow Commanders seemed determined to keep the boy firmly on their radar. He looked up when he heard his name, nodded, then finished his breakfast.

“That reminds me, Large. Found something interesting. Seems that they’ve known about you and Prackx for some time. Couldn’t slice into the file on that, though. Used a top level encryption,” Datapad explained.

“They can’t know, Datapad. Cadets that get caught fraternising are re-assigned. Remember that girl Torp liked?” Andrelious stated. Torp scowled and kicked his fellow Cadet under the table.

“Yes. And there weren’t any classified files back then. The whole incident was made public to put the rest of us off,” Datapad replied.

“I think it’s best that we just play it by ear. If Command intervenes, there won’t be much Granta and I could do about it. Who’s flying with who today, Datapad? I’m going to guess that you found those assignments,” Inahj asked.

“Valane’s joining us today. The three of us are going in Interceptors as his wingmen. I think they’re wise to what I’m doing because there’s no info regarding the scenario itself,” the larger Cadet said, his eyes not moving from his datapad.

Torp and Andrelious eyed each other.

Valane entering the simulator meant things were getting serious.

**-x-**

“Cadets Inahj, Tordemal and Sw’rixo, you’re with me. We’re going to represent this flight of TIE Interceptors. Our mission is to cover these TIE Bombers,” Commander Valane ordered, pointing at various icons on the briefing map as he spoke.

Andrelious and Torp both studied the briefing map with care. Though young, they were already showing the discipline required to serve in the Imperial Navy. Datapad looked too, with a little less confidence; Valane either didn’t notice or didn’t care.

“What are the Bombers doing, sir?” Torp asked.

Valane smirked. “Their job, Tordemal, is to eliminate a group of ships believed to be carrying Rebel troops into our space. We must stop them,” he explained.

“Cover the Bombers. Sounds simple enough. What opposition will there be?” Andrelious queried.

“That’s where it’s not going to be so simple. We’re going to operate without the luxury of knowing what’s coming at us. You’ll have to be ready for anything. Just like the real thing,” the Commander replied.

Datapad shifted around on his feet nervously. He didn’t relish the idea of going into the unknown.

**-x-**

Commodore Brentaque and his second, Captain Colyford, were preparing themselves to observe how Valane and his charges handled the mission. Brentaque was a veteran of the Galactic Civil War, and had a reputation for being particularly tough on Cadets who wished to serve as pilots in the Imperial Navy.

“Right. Valane said to watch this one. He thinks that Cadets ZT-7078 and 7079 are ready for the next stage. ZT-7080 is looking like he won’t make the grade, though. Valane’s recommended he be moved across to Intelligence,” Brentaque stated.

Colyford nodded. “If 7080 fails today, I’ll arrange for the transfer at once. If that boy spent as much effort on improving his flying as he did fooling around on that datapad of his, he’d have half a chance!”

“He’s trouble, but Intel should keep him busy. If we ever make any coreward moves, anyway,” Brentaque answered ruefully.

“One other thing, sir. ZT-7078 has been found fraternising with one of the Army Cadets. Why hasn’t action been taken?” Colyford asked.

Brentaque sighed. “I’ve been ordered to encourage that particular relationship, Captain. All I know is they are deemed to be of suitable genetic stock,”

Colyford raised his eyebrow. He didn’t understand the changes that were being made. Having joined the Imperial Navy just weeks before the Battle of Endor, he longed for the order and peace that the Empire had once brought across the galaxy. Instead, he was forced to witness as the Emperor’s successors surrendered to the so-called New Republic. When it became clear than much of the Imperial military did not wish to comply with the Galactic Concordance, Colyford had eagerly boarded the Star Destroyer *Zathura* as it jumped to the Unknown Regions. When the *Zathura* was designated as a training vessel, Colyford’s skill as a pilot earned him a promotion to the rank of Captain, and the role of second-in-command of pilot training. Since then he had enjoyed a solid working relationship with Brentaque, as well as the trainers and pilots-in-training that they were in charge of.

“They’re going into battle now. Let’s see if Valane’s right,” Brentaque declared.

**-x-**

“This is Gamma One. Look sharp! The convoy and its escort will be here shortly!” Valane ordered.

“Those Rebels won’t know what him them!” Torp cried.

“Just be ready, Three. Sensors indicate something’s coming in,” Andrelious replied.

Sure enough, a dozen X-Wings hypered in, followed by a trio of CR-90 Corvettes.

“Three to one? Sir, we need to withdraw,” Datapad said, panicking.

“Get ready to engage, Four. Just remember what you’re fighting for here,” Valane answered.

Andrelious and Torp were already prepared for battle. They each targeted one of the X-Wings, taking care to keep an eye on their rear sensors.

The quartet of TIE Bombers launched from the nearby Star Destroyer. Andrelious’ eyes darted briefly to his sensors to register the arrival of his allies, but he remained fully committed to his own task as he shot at his target, managing to down the X-Wing with a volley of well-aimed laser fire.

“Good job, Gamma Two! The first kill is ours! Command is sending another four Interceptors to help us!” Valane declared.

The new Interceptors sped towards the battle zone as Torp destroyed his own target, spinning his ship around on its axes to avoid enemy fire. Valane was also in the thick of things, having decided to pursue the squadron leader. As was standard with simulations, its pilot AI was a little higher than the rest of the enemy squadron, but Valane nonetheless chased it down with relative ease.

“I’ve got two on me! Someone help!” Datapad complained.

Andrelious heard his wingmates’ plea and turned to engage, but realised that Datapad’s message was far too late. Two X-Wings bracketed Gamma Four, destroying him with little ceremony.

The loss of Datapad seemed to increase Andrelious’ focus. Though he was in a simulation, he felt a wave of anger taking control of his body. Rather than ruin his concentration, the Cadet’s rage allowed him to almost predict what the enemy was going to try next, allowing him to pick off another three X-Wings in quick succession.

Meanwhile, the Bombers had flown into warhead range and were firing a salvo of proton torpedoes at each Corvette. The Bomber pilots were a second group of Cadets who Andrelious wasn’t too familiar with.

**-x-**

“7080’s out, sir. His real name is Crevax Sw’rixo. His colleagues call him Datapad. Should have been sent to Intel ages ago,” Colyford said.

“Looks like ZT-7078’s setting the pace today. No surprises there, given his talents,” Brentaque announced.

Colyford glanced quizzically at his superior. “Something you’re not telling me, sir?”

The Commodore cursed under his breath. Cadet ZT-7078 was Andrelious J. Inahj. What he knew and his Captain didn’t was that Inahj was Force-sensitive, and was expected to be transferred away from the *Zathura* to allow his unique abilities to be developed properly. More curiously, his lover, the Army Cadet Granta Prackx, was also Force-sensitive. Brentaque suspected that was why his own superiors allowed the relationship to continue; they wanted as many Force-sensitives serving in the military as possible. He’d also heard rumours that plans were afoot to recruit children at far younger ages to allow for better indoctrination. The idea of his own daughter who was thirteen and only a few years away from enlistment age herself, filled the Commodore with a mixture of emotions: pride at how well she could do, but also dread at the idea of her being killed in action.

*Focus, Jaspin. Get the current batch into service*. Brentaque thought to himself as he resumed watching the simulation.

**-x-**

“Torp, look out. One coming at you from your nine,” Andrelious warned.

Torp silently acknowledged his colleague’s message by turning his ship violently to the left. Spotting the X-Wing, the Cadet let rip with his lasers.

“Excellent work, Gamma Two! Three, very nice recovery!” Valane encouraged.

The three Corvettes that comprised the convoy began to be hit by the Bombers’ warheads. Each ship’s shields collapsed in short order, exposing their hulls to further abuse from the remaining torpedoes. Within seconds, the Corvettes were in pieces, leaking atmosphere into space.

“Beta One here. Mission complete. Thank you for your help, Gamma group,” a female pilot broadcast.

Buoyed by hearing that the Bombers had succeeded, Valane finished off the final X-Wing.

With only a single loss, Gamma group had done very well.

**-x-**

Andrelious and Torp were very pleased with themselves. They hopped out of their simulator pods with an extra spring in their step. Commander Valane clambered out to greet them.

“Tordemal, Inahj, you both did well. I will be recommending that you move onto the next phase of your training,” the Commander declared with a smile.

Datapad took his time in climbing out of his pod. The dejected look on the young man’s face said all that needed to be said; he knew that he was in trouble.

“Sw’rixo. Your performance wasn’t of the level that we expect. I’ll be speaking to Commodore Brentaque about your future,” Valane stated, his tone sympathetic.

Datapad simply nodded in response.

“He’ll be fine. With his skills he’ll be sent to Intel,” Torp whispered to Andrelious.

**-x-**

Andrelious and Torp were wandering back to their quarters. Though they had done well in their training over the past few days, both were looking forward to a day or two off as their next step forward was prepared.

As the pair walked past a side corridor, a strong arm grabbed Andrelious and pulled him away from his colleague.

“Oh. It’s you,” Andrelious stated, not too surprised to see Granta Prackx towering over him.

Prackx pulled her lover in for a hard kiss.

“Pretty *and* a good pilot. My little Inahj is getting a name for himself,” the female said warmly.

“Didn’t take you long to find out about that,” Inahj responded.

“So what are your plans for the next couple of days, babe? I’ve managed to wrangle myself a couple of days off. Perhaps we could check the leisure deck out?” Granta asked.

“I promised my parents that I would visit them next time I had some time off. You’re more than welcome to come,” Andrelious replied.

The female chuckled. “Your mother always has liked me, babe. I’d be delighted to look after you on the way down,”

**Inahj Homestead**

**Colony 4954**

Parck and Licon Inahj were coming to what they hoped would be the end of a very busy time in their lives. In the past few years, they had moved from the affluent worlds of the Core into the Unknown Regions, mostly to avoid potential retribution from Parck’s dealings with the Empire. Licon, too, had reason to flee: potential Republic discovery of her Force sensitivity would have led to additional problems. The fact that Andrelious was of interest to the Imperial Navy had given the Inahj family the chance to escape with their lives and assets largely intact.

Inahj Intergalactic, Parck’s company, was now contracted to remnants of the Empire’s vast military to ferry equipment, and occasionally, personnel. The contract paid well enough to allow Parck and Licon to live in reasonable comfort, but the lack of resources on Colony 4954 left certain things hard or impossible to get hold of.

“That’s our last bottle of that wine, Parck. They might not even drink anything with some of the rules that those stuffy officers make,” Licon warned.

“Ha! Most Star Destroyers have more alcohol on board than they do water. Cadets and officers alike love the stuff!” Parck answered with a chuckle.

The sound of the doorbell echoed through the living room.

Opening the front door, Parck was presented with the sight of his son holding onto Granta Prackx’s arm.

“Andrel! Granta! Nice to see you. How goes the training?” the senior Inahj questioned.

“I’d like to think it’s going well. Just one more unit for me. As for this pretty little thing? He just passed one of his assessments! We’ll be in service in no time!” Prackx beamed.

Licon smiled over at the young couple. “ And they’re not coming after the two of you? After you told me about that friend of yours, I’d have thought that you’d have been separated. Are you sure they know about you?” she asked.

Andrelious nodded. “Another Cadet confirmed that they know about us. No idea why they aren’t coming for us,” he responded, gazing admiringly upwards at his young lover.

“I’ve always known that you were mine, babe. They just don’t want to stand in the way of true love,” Granta said warmly.

The young Inahj smiled again. Granta Prackx was both very forward and very aggressive with her displays of affection, but Andrelious didn’t mind. He liked not having to worry about such things. He was even expecting that she would relieve him of the burden of deciding when to propose marriage, though he’d heard nothing yet.

“So. Dinner’s about ready. Shall we sit down?” Licon asked.

**-x-**

Dinner went largely as expected; Andrelious and Granta discussed their training, whilst Parck and Licon listened on, adding to the conversation with news from home.

“Glad to hear you’re both doing so well. Will you hear news of assignments soon?” Parck queried.

“I’m just waiting to see what’s next in my training. Granta’s already getting a lot of the more remedial side of things. Night watches, mostly,” Andrelious explained between mouthfuls.

“I have a contact who’s telling me that they’re looking at reducing the amount of training undertaken as a Cadet. Seems they want their new blood to learn a little more from active duty. Perhaps you’ll be assigned sooner than you were thinking,” Parck declared.

The comment chilled both Andrelious and Granta. Neither was sure why, but something told them that Parck Inahj was spot-on.

Soon they would be assigned.

**2 Days later…**

**Imperial-II Star Destroyer *Zathura***

“Cadet ZT-7078. Inahj, AJ. You’re going to be assigned to one of the TIE Interceptor squadrons aboard this ship. A senior Imperial Navy officer will meet with you shortly to take you to your new squadron. Say your goodbyes to your fellow Cadets,” an Imperial Lieutenant ordered.

Andrelious moved away, noticing that Torp was the next man in. He crossed his fingers, hoping that his training partner would be assigned to the same squadron.

Granta Prackx was waiting outside the assignment office. She greeted Andrelious with a hug.

“So. Where’s my baby going?” she asked.

“I’m staying here. TIE Interceptor squadron. You got your assignment yet?” Inahj asked.

“They’re doing all of the pilots, first. Once you flyboys are dealt with, I’ll find out then,” Granta explained.

Torp exited the room, smiling.

“TIE Interceptor here on the ‘Zath,” he declared.

Andrelious smiled, too, as he realised that his friend was staying put.

“Naval assignments done! Army now! Cadet ZP-4011! Prackx, GQ!” a voice shouted.

Grabbing Andrelious roughly, Prackx kissed her lover, not caring that Torp and a few others were watching.

“I’ll be back in a minute, baby. Don’t you go anywhere,” she ordered.

**-x-**

After a ten minute wait that felt to Andrelious more like ten days, Granta Prackx exited the assignment office. The young pilot could tell immediately that something wasn’t right; the flame haired female looked like she was about to go on a killing spree.

“They’re sending me to another frakking ship! Some frontal assault nonsense!” Prackx snarled, punching a durasteel wall so hard that it left a small dent. Another Cadet looked over with a disapproving frown.

“Frontal assault? But that’s the most likely to see any action. You might actually get a chance to crack some skulls. Don’t you want that?” Andrelious asked.

“Of course I did, babe. But I wanted to do it with you by my side. Killing those Rebels won’t be the same without you to go home to,” the female responded, her anger beginning to give way to sorrow.

“Can’t you just put in for a transfer, Large?” Torp interjected.

“I could if these were the good old days, Torp. But with things as they are, we pretty much have to go where we’re told,” Inahj replied.

“I’ll think of something. You just be a good little pilot,” Granta stated.

A heavy set man wearing the rank insignia of an Army Captain approached. He glanced up and down at Andrelious and Torp, before turning to Prackx.

“Come along, Prackx,” the Captain ordered.

“Don’t you worry, my little Inahj. I’ll get back to you,” Granta said, kissing her lover’s hand gently.

*FIN*