

## *Deep Space*

*Near the wreckage of the INQ Vessel Psi Terminus I*

*The XS-800 Bleusmobile*

It was dark inside the freighter, even in the cockpit, which was usually filled with the lights of displays and consoles. El Gordo the Hutt sat upon his low backed cushion, mounted to the floor as it was to keep the pilot from sliding away while maneuvering. His crash belts hung loosely from the backing; the young Hutt saw little reason to restrain himself while the ship was coasting towards its destination in stealth mode. It was worryingly quiet aboard the XS-800 freighter, any sound made by one of the three occupants seeming to echo throughout the darkened vessel.

Upon one console, the one controlling ship weapons and shield systems, lay chips and cards, forgotten for now. There was no cause for alarm should the items shift or hit a switch, depress a button. In infiltration mode, the only systems online were life support and maneuvering thrusters. One was keeping them alive. The other was essential to the mission's success. Behind Gordo came Sprout, passing up a bottle of water from the *Bleusmobile's* well-stocked pantry. The tiny Falleen settled on a crate they'd brought up from the back, staring out the forward viewport of the bridge. It was their master's, Kordath's, ship, which meant these were the only windows that hadn't been covered with black paint to assist with the Ryn's flight issues.

Not much was to be seen this far into space, but the floating hulk that was once the listener vessel, *Psi Terminus I*, hung ominously in the dark. They had a plan, a solid one as far as the math was concerned, but insanely dangerous as well. Which was one of the reasons the third member of their crew was happily humming further back in the crew quarters, dressing in one of the ship's spacewalk suits. Convincing Stres'tron'garmis to take part in this little venture had been almost distressingly easy for Sprout. There was intelligence to be recovered from the wrecked ship, the kind that would hopefully make life easier for their boss. And if life was better for Kordath, it meant less stress on them; the Ryn had been a ball of anxiety and pent-up anger the last few weeks.

They'd come together with the plan of 'borrowing' his ship, the *Bleusmobile*, and going to retrieve the black box of the Inquisitorius ship themselves. As it was, Kordath had given El Gordo express permission to use the freighter whenever the Hutt wished, as long as the Ryn didn't need it. And the Consul almost never needed to fly outside of the fleet these days, so it wasn't *really* stealing it. A flash of light, barely a flicker of a glimmer in the darkness, caught Sprout's eye. From the way Gordo shifted in his seat, he suspected the pilot saw it as well. It was why the trio was flying in dark, the ship occasionally releasing a short burst from the maneuvering thrusters to slow them down. They'd been flying like this for three days, barely speaking as they came into sensor range of the patrolling fighters that flew around the shattered *Psi Terminus* like flies on a corpse.

They were hopeful that the fighters didn't have the scanning power to pick up the freighter while it was powered down; their ship was, after all, designed with this sort of covert flight in mind. It

was with bated breath that Gordo would fire off the thrusters to adjust their speed for the stealth insertion, the one time they were putting off some kind of signal that could be tracked. The three were so paranoid that they'd barely spoken in the three days they'd spent getting thus far. As it was, the remains of the listener craft were growing in the forward viewport, and they heard Strong struggling behind the cockpit. Sprout craned his neck to look at his friend, who was twisting a helmet into place and fiddling with the catches until a satisfying click filled the silence.

The big blue man's glowing red eyes met the Falleen's, who got up from his crate and began using the manual crank to seal the hatch to the bridge compartment. Sprout stood on his toes to look through the window set in the door, watching Strong step into the airlock and seal it behind him. Even through the heavy door the pilot and his companion heard the sound of the airlock cycle, the shift in pressure causing their ears to pop. The noble son of Garmis hadn't understood any of the math that Sprout had tried to explain, but he'd accepted the premise of the mission. They'd been slowing the *Bleusmobile* for days as they approached, hoping to come to a stop with a quick burst of thrusters just under the wreck. It was hoped the fighters patrolling would write off the energy reading as systems from the *Psi Terminus* releasing stored power.

They couldn't see, nor hear, from Strong as the big Chiss was disembarking from the side of their freighter to float through the cold void to the wreck 'above' them. He'd be tethered to the *Bleusmobile* of course, but if things went wrong, they'd have no way to know. Setting up even short-range communications would have been too great a risk. As it was, the freighter wasn't built for speed or fighting. They'd be spending just as long creeping away from the patrolling Rose Squadron as they had getting here. A thump resounded through the craft shortly after Strong was set to begin his part of the plan, and the air pressure shifted once more. Sprout and Gordo looked at one another and then back in alarm when the cockpit hatch opened once more, showing a helmetless and dejected-looking Strong.

"What the frak, Strong?" hissed Sprout.

**"I fear we have failed, my friends,"** spoke the bodyguard with a sigh. He blinked and looked up as Gordo grumbled towards him, looking to Sprout for a translation.

"He asks what you meant. You weren't gone long enough to find out the thing was already gone, so—" the Fallen began, before realizing his friend wasn't looking at either he or the pilot. He turned to follow the Chiss's line of sight, squinting as a bright light flooded the cockpit. Tears leaked down the small medic's face. It was the most radiance he'd been exposed to in days. Gordo threw a slimy looking arm over his own eyes and growled in Huttese, his other hand stabbing blindly at the controls in an effort to tint the viewport.

**"I believe they've discovered us."**

"No Sith, Strong," grunted Sprout, blinking spots from his eyes as the X-Wing outside shut off the light. "What? No! Gordo, just cycle the power back up for the main systems."

**”And the weapons, of course! We must not be defenseless!”**

Gordo waved a hand over his shoulder dismissively at Strong, grunting in Huttese. “Right?” replied Sprout, shaking his head. “They’ve got their weapons trained on us, Strong, if they pick up power going to our blasters they’ll disintegrate the cockpit with all of us in it. Best chance we’ve got is to escape later.”

He sighed and slumped against the side of a console as the lights began to flicker on across the bridge. “Kord is gonna be so pissed off we got his ship taken by these guys.”

A large blue hand fell on Sprout’s bald head. **”Do not worry, young Sprout, I will take full responsibility for this folly.”**

Normally the Falleen would shrug off the touch of his colleague, but the solid strength of the man was reassuring right now. “Wasn’t your plan, Strong, was ours. Mine. I can’t believe we screwed it this bad.”

A light began to blink, drawing the gaze of all three Arconans and a collective sigh as the X-Wing in front of them dropped out of sight, only to be replaced by a trio of them. A quick look at the scanners showed another flight sitting on their aft, the rest of the squadron patrolling nearby. The trio sat in silence, looking to one another, each hoping the others had a plan, while the light on the communications console continued to pulse. A flash of light from outside caused Sprout and Gordo to duck where they sat, the lead X-Wing having fired a shot just over the front of the ship. Strong stood solidly, glaring out the viewport, ignoring the purple line imprinted on his vision from the blaster’s incandescent glare. Gordo let out a hissing sigh and reached out to answer the hail.

*“-vessel, you will identify yourselves. This is Captain Rose of Rose Squadron. The next shot goes through the viewport and between the Chiss’s pretty red eyes if you do not identify yourselves. Respond.”*

“Uhh, yes this is, uh, the uh, trade ship *Cannor*, coming from the uh, Kessel system en route to Nal Hutta. Glad you found us, we’ve been running on auxiliary power and—” Sprout began to spiel, only to duck as another flash of lasers filled the Falleen’s vision. “What the hell, woman!?”

*“Don’t play me, Shorty. I’m impressed you got this far, but this ship is already in our systems. I just wanted to see if you had the balls to lie to me. I see you, the Slug and Big and Tall back there, nice shoulders, big guy. What I don’t see is a little rat-tailed, self-proclaimed ‘Shadow Lord’ along with you, and this is his ship.”*

“Not that short,” mumbled Sprout, slumping further down.

*“Now, you boys have given me a great toy to play with. I’m sure my bosses will find a great use for the Ryn’s inner circle, so we’re gonna sit here until the Skylla comes to pick us up. And don’t try and tell me you’re defectors. Or do, it’ll be fun to see how long you hold on to that lie while they break you.”*

Strong leaned over the bulk of Gordo, much to the Hutt’s annoyance, and spoke at the comm device.

**”Perhaps, Captain Rose, you should board our vessel, and we settle this like warriors! Your name carries much renown, as does my own noble name of Garmis! Let us have an honorable battle to decide the fate of my fellows and I, fighter to fighter, man to woman!”**

There was a long pause, in which was filled with Sprout thumping his forehead against the console he’d taken residence behind, before Rose replied.

*“Do you think me such a fool as to board an enemy ship, alone, to deliver myself to an obvious trap? Even if the idea of...sparring, with yourself, Garmis, has a certain appeal, don’t think it means I’ll fall into the arms of my enemy as easily as, well, you have.”*

“Lady, none of that was a euphemism or a trap, the big idiot really thinks you can sort everything out with trials by combat. And he’d probably space me and Gordo before we let an ‘honorable duel’ turn into a trap. I, for one, say blow us out of space now, it’ll be less painful than hearing him shout, you torturing us, or our boss catching up.” Sprout punctuated his statement with a final thump to the side of the console, a red splotch spreading across his forehead.

*“Seriously? Trial by combat? Maybe my superiors will entertain that, but I’m not staking your freedom on my skills outside of a fighter, big guy. Now, just sit quietly while we call the— what the hell are all those signals!?”*

The comms cut off with a squeal, causing the Arconans to wince and Gordo to mute the audio output. He turned to Sprout and spoke in Huttese, sounding perplexed. Next to him was the scanner screen, popping up with icons that were rapidly turning from gray, unknown, to green friendly.

“Gordo says the comms are being jammed, and it looks like the...wait what?”

The Hutt pointed at the screen and gave the kind of wide grin only his people could give, allowing a ‘hohoho’ after he spoke.

“The frakking Arconan Expeditionary Fleet is here!?”

**”Master Bleu pursued us, perhaps? He had mentioned that he was busy preparing the AEF for an excursion, it is why he gave me the week off.”**

Sprout slowly turned to look at his large friend, muscles around his left eye twitching the only movement upon the Falleen's face.

"They were preparing to take the *Psi Terminus* by force, you mean? You couldn't have mentioned that!? We wasted days!"

Strong shrugged. "**Perhaps? I was unaware of his intention.**"

"Oh my gods," muttered Sprout and Gordo in unison, the Huttese confusing the Chiss. "Look, we have to get the shields up before this crazy Rose lady uses us as hostages."

"*Done,*" rumbled Gordo, flicking a switch and looking out at the fighters floating before them. The scanner lit up with further movement, shuttlecraft heading towards the wrecked Inquisitorius vessel and fighters escorting them. An abrupt squeal came from the speakers of the comm unit, an all channels override pushing through and flooding the system. "*No more jamming, but as long as they're talking, Rose can't call out. Probably.*"

"So the AEF wants to chat with them?"

**"Would you two please speak Basic?"**

"You know he can't, don't be racist, Strong."

**"I— that— I apologize, Gordo, that was not my intention!"** spoke the Chiss, bowing his head to the Hutt, who was attempting to contain his laughter. The squeal from the comms cut out and was replaced with a voice they were intimately familiar with.

*"Right, okay, this thing on? Great, if you can hear this and your ship isn't gloriously colorful and a testament to the possible insanity of one of my predecessors, you should power down and surrender now. Do nae wish ta go blowin' a single squad o' fighters out of the sky, even if for some reason you lot are...threatenin' my personal ship. Sure I'll figure all that out later. Fer now, power down your weapons, lower your shields. Surrender now, and I'm sure we'll come to an arrangement that does nae involve you lot freezin' ta death in the void."*

The speaker went silent, and then back to a white noise that filled the frequencies.

"*Well, I hope Kordath didn't expect a response,*" rumbled Gordo, powering the engines up and plotting a course towards the fleet. A flash of energy rippled across the freighter's shields.

"That seems like a response!" shouted Sprout, covering his head and groaning. Strong crouched over the Falleen protectively and stared out the viewport, preferring to see what would kill them all. Cascades of white light filled the space around them, and the *Bleusmobile*

shuddered, the electronics flickering and dying. "Oh, what the hell now!?" groaned Sprout, filling himself start to float.

"*Ion cannons,*" grumbled Gordo, lifting his hands into the air. He waved at the viewport for Strong's sake, chuckling at the sight of the X-Wings spinning in the void. The freighter lurched, and it looked like the wrecked *Psi Terminus* was falling away. "*Tractor beams too, looks like the Invicta is pulling us in. Boss is probably aboard. Waiting for us.*"

**"What did he say?"**

"We have got to get you a crash course on Huttese," grumbled Sprout. "We're in a tractor beam, looks like the Roses are too. Fleet disabled everyone. Now we wait," spoke the Falleen, grimly.

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"You want to do...what, My Lord?" asked the crew chief of the hangar bay.

"Ya heard me, mate. Poor Strong there'd have a fit if I lined these folks up for a firing squad or somethin'. Not honorable, he'd say, have ta hear about it for weeks."

"So we're going to let the enemy's most illustrious fighter squadron, which we stumbled upon clustered around a freighter, and had the opportunity to wipe them out, go. After we disabled them, towed them aboard the *Invicta*, and...modified their ships."

"Yup. Captain Rose ain't gonna crack ta interrogation, the rest probably are zealots what look up ta her. Pointless, either kill 'em or let 'em go and this," he gestured at the dozen fighters arrayed around the hangar bay under heavy guard, "this is far more fun."

"The white paint was a nice touch," mused the crew chief, unable to help but smile. "The Lady would have appreciated the irony, I think. We also disabled their sensors, so they'll be, uhm, flying blind, as it were."

"Fantbleedintastic, chief. Now, let 'em go. We got what we came here for," the Ryn turned and looked at his pilot, medic, and bodyguard. "Some a bit more than expected, eh?"

"*He's headed our way,*" rumbled Gordo, puffing his chest out and sitting up taller as Bleu approached.

"Alright, so, from what Sprout has told me already, I get tha gist of what ya was doin'. I got no problem with this sort of, um, mission, but tell me ahead of time, eh? Coulda saved you lot a load of trouble."

"Really letting them go, boss?" asked the Hutt, watching the X-Wings get lifted and flung out of the hangar bay with tractor beams, tumbling into space.

"Oh, yes," grinned the Ryn, viciously. They'd recovered the recorder from the *Psi Terminus* and were sending Rose Squadron back with a bit of poetic justice. "That one's fer you, Blinky," he whispered, watching the fighters come back under control of their pilots, but too terrified to move.

"*Twisted*," muttered Gordo, shaking his head and turning to shuffle his way off. The Hutt was referring most likely to how the *Invicta's* crew had coated the Rose Squadron fighter's canopies with white paint, so visual navigation was impossible, and then damaged their short and long range sensors. The X-Wings were flying literally blindfolded, much to the amusement of those who blamed the Collective for the loss of the *Shadow Lady* a year past.

Splashing them all over with spare chromium paint that was used on the hulls of the AEF ships was just a bonus, and left them a cluster of sparkling, floating objects in the *Invicta's* wake.

"Have fun explain' that ta yer commanders, Captain Rose," muttered the Ryn, turning back to his freighter. "Idiots."