

The view outside the VT-49's cockpit shattered, the smooth walls of hyperspace split off into millions of streaks, which shortened into stars as the VT-49 slammed back into realspace. The pilot, a full Commander named Finon Tane, a short, stocky man with a shock of brown hair and brown eyes, hadn't explained before they'd departed why he'd decided to replace the ensign that normally commanded this particular Decimator, but Crysenia Orainn knew. Crysenia's emerald eyes tracked over the unfamiliar layout of the cockpit as she did her best to refrain from running her fingers through her hair, thus messing up the copper-colored braid she'd painstakingly woven earlier that day. She was untried, new to the clan, and this was her first operation. *It's natural to be nervous.* Crysenia grimaced at the thought.

Before Tane could prompt her, Crysenia ran a sensor sweep of the area. During the brief hyperspace jump, she had looked over the cockpit's controls enough to feel comfortable with them. She was lucky enough to have a gift when it came to figuring out cockpits. Once she found what she was looking for on the radar screen, she keyed up on the galactic standard space traffic control frequency. "Corulag control, Victor Tango Four Nine designation Neutron One. Requesting permission for polar orbit, eight-eight degrees at angels four-five, en route to rendezvous with freighter *Lin Done* for personnel transshipment."

Tane didn't say a word, but his silence was elegant. Having a clandestine rendezvous above a core world was definitely not the usual way of doing things. It was Crysenia's plan, however, so rather than telling her what he really thought he'd simply replied: "Yes, Prefect." When she explained the plan and her reasoning behind it. Nobody would expect a clandestine meeting of such import to take place above a core world, where all orbital traffic is logged, tagged, and scanned. As she'd argued to the Consul, this way they'd be hidden among the flood of other orbital traffic, and since they would not be touching a station or the planet, Corulag's administration didn't care about fees or inspections. That had been her primary inspiration for choosing Corulag, and so far it seems to have paid off. "Neutron One, control. You are authorized polar approach to polar orbit, eight-eight degrees, angels four-five."

Crysenia repeated the instructions back to control while Tane smoothly accelerated the Decimator up to the maximum allowed port speed and pulled up in relation to the planet, so they could drop down into orbit next to the *Gozanti*-class cruiser, which looked to any curious eyes like a private freighter. Once their Decimator was close enough to the freighter, Crysenia laid a comm laser on the freighter's antenna. The communication was encrypted, another precaution over and above the comm laser, which guaranteed that nobody could even see they were communicating in the first place unless they physically intercepted the laser. One of the multifunction displays lit up with the BlasTech representative she'd come to meet, "Mr. Javand, I presume?" Crysenia asked. She doubted that was his real name, but that didn't matter. He nodded, "And you must be Prefect Orainn."

Crysenia was about to respond when something drew her attention to the scanners. A quartet of small readings, fighter-sized, were moving towards them, abandoning subtlety now that they were close. Crysenia grabbed the control stick and cranked the wheel on it to the right

as hard as she could while slapping the throttle forward. Mr. Javand started to ask what the hell she thought she was doing but was interrupted by a shout from his own command deck. *Too late, especially for a ship their size.* Tane was equally caught by surprise but recovered quickly, taking over the controls. Crysenia release the controls, and her long fingers flew over the controls while she highlighted the targets on the ship's computers, identified the potential hostiles, and keyed her intercom, "Gunners! Targets are two Y-Wings, two X-Wings, moving to engage and not squawking. Presumed hostile, engage as you bear." Four fighters accelerating towards them with their IFF beacons off could only mean trouble, likely a flight of Collective fighters. How they learned about their rendezvous was a mystery left for later.

Any doubts as to their intentions ended when one of the X-Wings fired a pair of proton torpedoes at the *Lin Done*. The pair of blue streaks reached out towards the freighter, then vanished in a pair of brilliant golden explosions against the freighter's shields. The shields flared blue, turning opaque for a second before collapsing. The shields took the brunt of the explosions, but not enough. Hull plating buckled, and the telltale signs of atmosphere escaping showed the freighter was clearly in distress. The freighter began to list off to the side, lights flickering as the crew struggled to regain control. Both Y-Wings came boring it on the Decimator, holding fire until they could get closer. Crysenia looked over at Tane. "My guess is they're attempting to take us with ion cannon fire."

Tane finished bringing the Decimator around. "Looks like." Crysenia gave a tight-lipped smile as her firing solution came back as valid, and she called "Two out!" as a pair of concussion missiles leapt from the Decimator, arcing towards the trailing X-Wing of the pair attacking the *Lin Done*. Crysenia wasn't able to observe their effect, as Tane screamed "Brace!" while jerking the Decimator around as both Y-Wings opened up with their ion cannon. Sparks arced as one of the Y-Wings connected, and a scream sounded from the dorsal gun turret. Crysenia spared a quick glance back to see the gunner clutching his face, the panel in front of him in shreds. The other gunner kept firing, and the Decimator rocked from an explosion while he roared in triumph.

Crysenia looked again at her tac screen. One of the Y-Wings was clearly in trouble but was still in the fight. One X-Wing was still on the screens, as was the freighter. Corulag Control was screaming over their frequencies, ordering non-combatant ships out of the area as well as ordering a ceasefire. Neither side bothered with a reply. The *Lin Done* seems to have figured itself out, as it was again moving under its own power. The X-Wing moved towards the freighter again but was unable to engage before it disappeared into the relative safety of lightspeed. Deprived of its kill, the X-Wing swooped up towards the Decimator, but held its fire, no doubt hoping the Y-Wing that was attempting to close would finish neutralizing the Decimator for capture. As the freighter left, Crysenia told Tane, "The BlasTech guys are gone, it's time to get out of here."

Tane nodded in agreement, continuing his evasive maneuvers while Crysenia plotted a very brief hyperspace jump. "Set!" Crysenia called when she was done, then put her hand on

the lever controlling the hyperspace generator. Tane brought them on the proper heading, then breathed an audible sigh of relief as the stars elongated. Crysenia was unable to resist the urge to run her fingers through her hair this time. The Consul would not be pleased with the outcome. They'd managed to escape the trap, but it was obvious that somebody had talked. *Now, to find out who.*