

*It's time to leave.* Crysenia knew the sentiment would be considered traitorous if she ever dared voice it. All the more reason to keep her activities... under wraps. To leave, she'd need a hyperdrive. She was a division officer on a warship, hardly someone with the means to requisition or custom-build a fighter like many Imperial admirals were wont to do. What she'd found instead... no right-thinking Imperial would consider it, which was a definite plus.

The Empire was in trouble. Everybody knew it. As a consequence, every hyperdrive equipped TIE was firmly secured away, only the Empire's most trusted pilots allowed to fly them. Those TIEs were far superior in every way, and it showed in their performance. That was an academic concern for Crysenia. What mattered most was that her most capable platform for getting away was secured in a bunker that was far more heavily guarded than the one for her own TIE Interceptor.

What was not guarded, Crysenia had been pleased to learn, were the New Republic ships that ships assigned to this fleet station had captured or downed. The hangar where they were stored was not guarded, since the Empire had little use for them. Crysenia had found the hangar one night while wandering. In the center of the hangar was her salvation: An Incom T-65B X-wing.

The X-wing in question was damaged. Scoring along the fuselage and a ragged upper left wing spoke of the battle the fighter's previous pilot had waged. Still, the fighter was far from ruined. The primarily white paint was accented by a few bold green strokes, and the previous pilot's name still graced the fuselage under the fighter's canopy. A few other X-wings in significantly worse condition decorated the hangar, along with a pair of A-wings, a trio of Y-wings, and even a B-wing. One of the Y-wings yielded an astromech droid. A week of working on the droid and it was working. She was careful, tasking the droid with only subtle repairs during the day, and supervising the more intensive repairs at night.

Two months of repairs, of the little droid she'd named "Hope" working vigilantly, both with her help and without it. Two months of watching her beloved Empire flounder. Two months...and she was finally ready. She knew that by taking this step, she'd be burning bridges behind her. She knew she'd be hunted and despised. But the truth of it? She was relieved. The Empire she knew had died. It had died with her father, in the harsh lights above Fondor. It had died at Jakku. It had died in the petty squabbles that saw a dozen breakaway states all claim to be the *true* Empire.

Crysenia carefully brought up the fighter's power systems. She'd done checks of the X-wings various systems, but she'd never brought all four of the Incom 4L4 fusial thrust engines online, for fear that her work would be discovered. Indeed, she was a little surprised she'd gotten away with as much as she had. From sneaking into the decrepit hangar, to volunteering to run opposition in simulator scenarios in order to gain a measure of experience with her new craft, the risks she ran were enough to make her break out in a cold sweat.

Now, though... Four violet engines glowed. The fighter's landing lights flicked on, as did her running lights. Crysenia had a little time, but not much. The noise and light escaping the hangar simply had to draw some attention. Before panic could rob her of her motor skills and her reason, she took a deep breath and forced herself to slow down while running her preflight checks. Better to do them slowly than to try to rush, botch them, and be forced to start over. All four engines were acceptable, the hyperdrive was online, shields were stabilizing, if not quite as steady as they should have been, her four laser cannon were online and charging. She'd only been able to salvage one of the torpedo launchers, but she could only find two torpedoes in the hangar anyways so it was a moot point. If she had to engage anything other than a few TIE starfighters or interceptors, she'd be in serious trouble.

Hope lifted itself into the astromech cradle, the servos locking the droid in place with a satisfying *thunk*. Despite her formidable self-control, she found her hands shaking as she advanced the throttle. Rising a meter above the ceramacrete floor, the fighter dipped out of the open hangar door before she pointed it skyward and slammed the throttle to the stops. Both the Imperial and General frequencies lit up as her fighter screamed towards space.

Crysenia knew that she couldn't *actually* hear the sirens start to whine, but she heard them nonetheless. She saw the TIE pilots being woken from their beds, dragging on their flight suits and life support harnesses before sprinting for their hangars, some of them friends. She saw stormtroopers running, and turbolasers activating in the dim light of a new moon.

What she *definitely* saw was the bright emerald of a bolt of coherent light whip by her cockpit. Crysenia made a snap decision. She knew she wasn't getting away clean, so she hauled back on the stick. As the fighter's nose pointed back towards the planet, Hope whistled mournfully.

Crysenia frowned. "Sorry, Hope. We've gotta make sure they can't follow us." She ignored the larger ships, they'd need too long to get airborne. She reached over her left arm and flipped the switch to lock her S-foils into their open position. She only had two torpedoes, but no sense in saving them. She armed and fired one at the main hangar door. The torpedo lanced into the steadily widening gap between the two massive doors and erupted into a fireball. Both hangar doors bucked and ground to a halt. *One hangar down, now the other.*

Crysenia hauled the stick to the left side of the cockpit and then towards her stomach, pulling the craft towards the second hangar, the guarded one.

Crysenia felt an undeniable glee as she fired her last torpedo. That glee faded as she watched a TIE Defender slip out of the hangar doors. Another Defender began to exit the hangar, only to run into her torpedo. The explosion threw pieces of the Defender back into the hangar, and another explosion from inside buckled the roof.

Turbolasers lit the sky, harsh bolts flashing as the base's turrets went into a planned air-defense pattern. Luckily for Crysenia, few of the guns detected her fighter. She'd

programmed the IFF to read as Imperial, so the base's automated defenses treated her as a friendly. The one TIE Defender that got out, on the other hand...

"Unknown X-wing, land and surrender. *Now.*" Crysenia cringed, it was the last voice she'd hoped to hear. Captain Gepard, unpleasant shrew of a man who thoroughly enjoyed executing deserters. Crysenia knew better than to reply. She hauled the stick towards her, then pulled it to the left. Linking her lasers with her left hand, she pointed the fighter's nose at the rapidly growing TIE Defender. Hope whistled out a low, mournful tone as the range began to close. "Hang on, Hope. One way through this."

The X-wing's display flashed red as the range hit 2 kilometers. Crysenia's trigger finger twitched, sending a quartet of ruby darts flying towards Gepard's Defender. They crossed paths with a pair of green bolts before burrowing through the Defender's shields. The bolts, attenuated by the shields, merely scored a furrow into one of the Defender's pylons. The green bolts, on the other hand, spent their fury on the X-wing's shield.

The display flickered as the shield generators whined in protest over the abuse they were taking, and Gepard's fighter whipped past Crysenia's left wing. She slapped the stick over to the left then hauled it back towards her, pulling the X-wing into a tight turn. She was pushed down into the ejection seat. She'd dialed the craft's inertial compensator to the standard .95, so she felt some pressure, but nowhere near enough to risk blacking out.

Unfortunately for her, Gepard's Defender was able to turn even tighter, and Hope screamed as a missile shot out of the Defender's launch tube on a streak of blue flame. Crysenia slammed the stick forward and to the right, pulling out of her turn, then hauled back on the stick again before slamming it to the right side of her cockpit. "All shields rear, Hope!" If she knew Gepard, that missile was absolutely going to hit her, but it wouldn't have enough punch to get through her shields. She hoped.

Hope started chirping, the pace increasing as the missile got closer. With nothing else for it, she continued her evasions, forcing herself to be slow and deliberate in her movements. Far too many new pilots will slam the stick from side to side and not realize their craft was barely moving. The sky and the ground both disappeared as a tremendous *wham* crashed through her cockpit. Hope screamed, voicing the feeling Crysenia was doing her best to push away.

A quick glance at her display showed her shields were down, but her craft was otherwise intact. Two pairs of emerald darts flickered by her cockpit's transparisteel before a sharp *bang* changed the display. Crysenia sat up straighter so she could look at her fighter's nose. The faded green and white paint on one side of the fighter's nose had been replaced by a jagged hole and carbon scoring.

Settling back into her chair, Crysenia took a deep breath as she whipped her fighter around. More green flashed by her cockpit as her turn took Gepard by surprise. Crysenia smiled a wolf's smile at that. He was arrogant, and he was predictable. She started to roll back

the way she came, then hauled into a tight immelman loop. Her fighter shook as she broke the sound barrier hurtling towards the ground. She knew Gepard would follow. She was counting on it. She flicked a switch on the right side of her cockpit and the split S-foils collapsed into a single pair of wings. She'd need the clearance for what she had planned.

"I have you, X-wing. Shut down your shields and land or die." The imperial sneer coming over her radio was impressive. She ignored it. She was close. A heartbeat later and she pulled up on the stick, chopping the throttle as her fighter's nose rose, then slamming the throttle back to claw her out of her desperate dive. She slammed the stick forward to duck under a walkway then hauled it back yet again, her fighter rocketing into the sky.

As predicted, Gepard attempted to match her. His fighter's shape meant that the same maneuver would be far far tighter. His need to prove himself better than any rebel pilot meant that, of course, he sought to match her. Gepard avoided the ground, as she had, but he did not have enough time or space to fully avoid the walkway.

The fighter's shield flared into visibility, lighting up the alley in a flash that lasted a fraction of a second. The shield then died, overwhelmed by the mass of the walkway. The Defender's top solar array struck the walkway next, the quadanium steel buckling as the fighter struck the walkway at greater than the speed of sound. The fighter tumbled as the pylon shattered, then slammed into a spire rising off the officer's housing block. The fighter shredded, pieces thrown hundreds of meters as the spire sagged then collapsed. Crysenia's radio fell silent, Gepard's sneering contempt now nowhere to be heard.

Crysenia sighed and sagged into the ejection seat. She should be elated, she was free. Instead, all she felt was mildly queasy and the overwhelming need to work her shoulders and try to get her neck to stop aching.

Outside her cockpit, the dark sky gave way to an even darker night. With the planet finally behind her, she started cycling through her displays and wondering where she should be headed. "Any ideas where to, Hope?"

The droid trilled a negative, leaving the decision completely in her hands. She decided it didn't matter. Anywhere was better than here.