Begin Log: T5B5M1 - To Kill A Commingbird

***Adam “Vender” Fene: Flight 3.1, Main P.O.V.***

“You have GOT to be kidding me.” Taan said, looking a little disturbed.

Vender looked up from his datapad as the pilots filed out of the debriefing room. “What?”

“I picked up an eyeball for this mission,” Taan replied with an overly grand show of dismay.

“Ah well, poodoo happens. If I were you, I’d scrap it so you never have to fly it again.” Vender liked TIE Fighters, and knew the awesome power they could yield if used properly, but obviously Taan didn’t know how to do this, and he promised himself he’d get less angry at disrespecting pilots and more concerned for their safety. In this case, if Taan wasn’t comfortable in TIE Fighters, he shouldn’t be flying them.

“I’m seriously considering that. Who knows, maybe Castor thinks I’m such a good pilot I can get the job done in such a crappy excuse for a fighter.” Vender listened to Taan as he said the words, and started to get a sideways smile on his face.

*Yes, that’s right,* Vender thought. *Join me, and together our invincible egos will rule the galaxy...*

“Yeah, sure. Whatever.” Vender waved a hand and began walking to the launch bay. “Come on. We’re expected down in the hangar. Less talk, more walk.”

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Vender watched across the hangar as Taan began pleading with Mira to rig his TIE Fighter with more ‘charms’. He had a bad feeling about it all. Taan seemed, overall, too nervous. Not like the confident, cocky, big headed pilot he was used to seeing.

He turned back to his own Fighter, looking at it from the bottom until his gaze reached the top. “Mike sure loves these things. I know why too, would whoop an Interceptors’ butt.” Vender knew that their small profile made them hard to hit, which he would need against anxious turbolasers.

“Back to the basics, baby!” Vender grinned. Malachite was in for a surprise when he chewed up the ComSat site. “Mwahahahaha!” He maniacly laughed to himself, noting Malachite’s impending doom. “No chance. NO CHAAAAANCE!!!”

The hangar activity suddenly stopped and the techs close enough by turned to look at him. Vender noticed, and blushed. “Uh... Just preppin’. You know.” He bobbed his head and stepped behind his fighter in embarrassment, until people resumed their duties. Next time he wouldn’t think out loud like that again.

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Vender awoke as the comm buzzed. *It’s not fair!* He had just started to dream of a lusciously beautiful Corellian woman he was supposedly friends with. He swore to himself that when he retired from service, all alarm clocks and comms were to be thrown out.

*Vender, wake up. We’re coming out of hyperspace.*

“I read you, *Aranae*. Lets hope this area has the *Mite* in it. Lets also hope I’m a better pilot in TIE Fighters than Taan is.” Vender grinned.

The *Aranae* pilot gave a short chuckle that wasn’t supposed to be heard and coughed. *Cut the chatter, we’re dropping out in... three... two... one.*

With a sudden jolt, the restraining straps that held him in went taught against his chest. The *Aranae* released him, and he had about two seconds before he was about to slam into the back of it. With a quick course adjustment, he flung his yoke portside and spun the Fighter out of the way with delicate ease and professionalism.

*Show off.* The *Aranae* controller said.

Vender grinned. “All right. Doing my sensor sweep now. Let’s see what we got.” Checking his status displays he noticed everything to be in good order, then he looked at the sensor results. “*Aranae*, the *Mite* is here, repeat, *Mite* is here!”

*Advise immediate abort.* There was a short pause. *Wait one, Grey! We’re reevaluating.* There was yet another pause, and Vender wondered if they were talking to Castor himself. *Advise proceed with mission. But only if confident.*

“Confident?! I think you’re forgetting I’m invincible here. Of course I’m confident!” Vender grinned as the *Aranae* controller scolded him for being so cocky.

*Watch out for those mines. Taan took a number.*

“I remember. Thanks *Aranae*. I’ll see you when I get back. Engaging NOW!”

Vender broke out in dizzying roll pushing his throttle to full power. He began to approach the asteroid field as one of the guns caught sight of him.

But only too late, of course, as Vender quickly squeezed off four shots to reduce the turret into rubble. From there, he began to make his quick strike on the *Mite*. “*Aranae*, are those Avengers going to come in soon or what?”

*They’re all on their own missions, Vender.*

“Heh. Fantastic. More glory for me.” Vender smiled as he felt young again. “Engaging the *Mite*. Wish me luck. Wait. No. Screw luck. It’s all skill, baby!” Vender threw his fighter into a wide corkscrew as he began to open fire on the *Mite*. He must of caught it by surprise, and he didn’t blame them. Who would of expected to see a TIE Fighter in the middle of nowhere, unless it was one of their own? The Captain was most likely lazy.

His shots lanced out at the Frigate *Mite*, and indeed, he did catch them by surprise. Their shields weren’t even up yet, and that gave him the opportunity to take out one of its turrets. Quickly by reflex, he took advantage of the situation and shot a few more lances across the bow taking out a few laser guns and scalding the neck of the beastly frigate.

The shields quickly shot up after that, as his lasers bounced away harmlessly. And opened fire. He began his corkscrew maneuver again, fleeing from the shower of laser fire the frigate produced.

Almost in unison, a laser battery on an asteroid locked onto him and began firing as well. Vender thought about an old strategy, and began to grin to himself. “*Aranae*, you remember what an *Ackbar Slash* is?”

The *Aranae* controller responded confused, wondering how he could be so confident with a three hundred meter frigate firing on him. *Um. No? I didn’t take advanced strat‑*

“Anyway. It’s where you fly between two ships to make them fire on each other if they miss you. Granted, it’s only been done with Capital craft, but, three to one says this will work in my situation.”

*Ah. Interesting.*

Vender made sure the Frigate was directly on his six, and then flew straight for the asteroid that was firing at him. Another volley of laser fire poured from the frigate, as well from the asteroid. Slamming his foot on the rudder, he quickly rolled out of the incoming fire spray and watched the asteroid get incinerated with chunks of rock escaping the blast.

Likewise, the laser fire coming from the battery lashed over the frigate. Not doing much damage at all, but it bruised its shields quite nicely. Vender of course, was overjoyed with the results. Having been a Commander of a Fleet, he knew a few tricks to help him turn disadvantages into his own personal playground, free to manipulate as he chose.

The tricks were running out though, and he knew he wouldn’t last long against the frigate if it kept firing at him the way it was. The gunners on it were good. Too good. Further, if they decided to grow a brain,Vender knew they’d use warheads on him to effortlessly kill him.

Shunting his shields full forward, which he forgot he even had, he dove back in towards the *Mite*. Bobbing to avoid some fire, he staged an all‑out assault on its warhead launcher until it exploded in mass anger.

“*Aranae*, ETA?”

*No assistance expected. And we’re in a communications black out. Remember. That satellite is down, and if they don’t have a relay, we don’t either.*

Vender hadn’t thought about that. So much for Fleet Command skills.

Then, he had it. Switching the comm frequency, he hailed the *Mite*. “*Mite*, this is...” He paused, not wanting to blow Grey’s cover. “Well, forget who this is. I’m clearly outmatched here. I surrender.”

A voice responded. *Perhaps I should just blow you out of the sky instead!*

This wasn’t going to be easy, he had to play it cool. “Well, now, that wouldn’t be a very good idea.”

There was a pause in the Captain’s response. *Oh? And why is that?*

“Well do you see the destruction I just caused? Yeah, man. That was my way of showing you what I can do. I wanna join your team. You know how lonely it is sitting out on a moon? I was lucky to scrape together this TIE Fighter. I need solid employment.” Vender crossed his fingers.

*Your skills, I will admit, are most impressive. The way you demonstrated them are inexcusable though. If my Commander was here, he would probably execute you on the spot for the damage you’ve done.*

Vender grinned. “You’re so negative. You could easily turn things around. You know, a few lies here. A little slicing there. He’ll never know. And, presto! You have a highly skilled pilot which the likes even Baron Soontir Fel has never seen.”

He knew the captain was beginning to consider it. *We’ll meet in the hangar. If you so much as flinch while our tractors bring you in, I’ll destroy you.*

Vender pounded his chest. “That hurts, Cap’n. It really does.”

*We’ll see.* The comm clicked out, and the plan was set. He circled around the *Mite* towards the hangar bay, and let the tractor lock on to him.

And, in that instant, in the few seconds it grabbed him and the shields dropped to pull him in, he squeezed the trigger and rotated the craft. His shots landed right on the mark, as he began to see bridge officers float out of the shattered transparisteel.

Tractor beams disengaged, and he set off around towards the engines, before they could get to the secondary bridge to bring up the shields. It wasn’t fair, it just wasn’t. He knew capital ships inside and out, they had no chance. Squeezing the trigger again, his lasers dug through

a thin layer of hull and cut a fuel line that made one of the engines explode and shatter the neck of the frigate.

“Hehe. Adios!” Vender said, as he blew up the ComSat that was hiding directly underneath the frigate’s protection, and watched the shattered pieces incinerate in the explosion of the Frigate.

“*Aranae.* Mission Accomplished.”

*You crazy bantha sith! That was the craziest thing I’ve ever seen.*

“Should be. No one’s ever done it. I’m coming into dock. Let’s get out of here before more of Malachite’s goons show up.”

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***Taan “Hawk” Ronar: Flight 3.2, alternate p.o.v.***

“You have GOT to be kidding me.”

Vender looked up from his datapad as the pilots filed out of the debriefing room. “What?”

“I picked up an eyeball for this mission,” Taan replied with an overly grand show of dismay.

“Ah well, poodoo happens. If I were you, I’d scrap it so you never have to fly it again.”

“I’m seriously considering that. Who knows, maybe Castor thinks I’m such a good pilot I can get the job done in such a crappy excuse for a fighter.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever. Come on, we’re expected down in the hangar. Less talk, more walk.”

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“Can’t you even increase the shield power a little?” Taan pleaded with Mira.

“No.” Mira popped her head out from inside an Interceptor’s maintenance hatch. “Ra’s got us all working overtime to get the rest of these fighters operational, I don’t have time to tinker with your ship. I’ve already done a quick integrity check, and I can assure you it’ll hold together. Just don’t prove yourself correct by managing to kill yourself in it, okay?”

Taan nodded resignedly. “Okay. I don’t particularly relish the idea of going EVA, either. We’re about to send Malachite a very strong message, and I want to be around to ensure that he gets it.”

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“Dropping out of hyperspace in three... two... one... now!”

Taan was thrown forward in the fighter’s cockpit as the Assault Transport pulled them both out of hyperspace, his restraining belt the only thing stopping him from giving the viewport a Corellian Kiss. “This isn’t my day,” he muttered to himself. He didn’t have much time to think about it though, as the ATR released him almost as soon as they entered realspace and Taan pushed forward on the stick to avoid becoming its new coat of paint.

*Nice release, Grey.*

“Thanks *Aranae*, I’m clear.” Taan did a quick visual scan, followed by a sensor check. There was the ComSat, surrounded by a bunch of asteroids. Except the asteroids were giving off unusual sensor readings.

“Uh, *Aranae*...”

*We see them, Grey. Proceed as planned, they’re not much more dangerous than normal mines.*

“If you say so.” Taan moved in and adjusted his shield and laser settings, heading straight for the satellite but keeping an eye on the nearby laser batteries. As he closed in almost within firing range, the first line of batteries opened fire, forcing Taan to move slightly to avoid a stray shot. The first few volleys were usually off‑target, the battery’s way of determining where it needed to shoot to hit its target. After that though, they could get fairly accurate. Taan let off a few bursts from his own cannons towards the ComSat then immediately pulled away to avoid another shot from an asteroid that he had flown a little too close to.

There was a small flash of light just outside Taan’s field of view, his sensors telling him what he needed to know. “*Aranae*, confirm target destruction.”

*Confirmed, ComSat has been destroyed. Nice work, Grey.*

“Thanks *Aranae*. Let’s go‑“ Taan’s fighter was thrown around as a laser battery he hadn’t seen opened fire and caught him from above. “Spast...I just lost my shields. Get ready for a quick exit, *Aranae*.” Taan pulled around, searching for the safest route out of the asteroid field. Not flying in a straight line for fear of another shot, circled erratically out of the field and put all power to the engines, heading for the *Aranae*. The Assault Transport’s tractor beam picked him up as he was still slowing down, making for a rough dock. They quickly entered hyperspace, and Taan climbed through the docking ring into the transport, collapsing on to one of the benches,

exhausted.

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“Damn! What did you do to that poor starfighter?”

“One of the mines caught me by surprise,” Taan replied as Vender looked at the damaged fighter.

“Yeah, well, I’m surprised you made it out alive in that thing. Look at the scarring on the top! A few centimeters further back, and you would have been leaking coolant all the way home. Ra’s not going to like you for giving him more work.”

“Believe me, I won’t be shedding any tears if that thing isn’t ready for the next mission. We’ll have plenty that are by then.” Taan gave the Eyeball one last look before turning in the direction of the Bar and Grill. “I hope the rest of the pilots had better luck than I did.”

“Reports are looking good so far. Don’t forget, you did complete the mission. The ComSat was destroyed, and you brought your ship home.” Vender couldn’t help laughing a little. “Barely.”

“Don’t laugh! You’re the one who managed to put himself in a coma, remember?”

“That was all part of my grand strategic plan, of course.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot. Which plan is that again?”

“The one where I don’t get myself killed in the first few missions.”

“Right. Come on, with any luck Tess can give you something to put you in another coma.”

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***Rensal “Bigfoot” Darklighter: alternative p.o.v.***

*Comm satellites. Easy prey depending on what’s guarding them.* I thought as I looked at the datapad. I noticed I was tapped for an Eyeball. “Great.” I said sarcastically as I entered the pit.

“Whats wrong, Biggy?” asked Vender.

“I got tapped for a Fighter.”

“Hey, Taan and I got the other two.”

“Sheesh! Good luck out there!”

“You too.”

We parted going to our respective ships.

I climbed into the fighter and dropped into the pilots chair. I started running through preflight and I got a red light. “Great! Just what I need! A problem.” I said as I lowered my head before looking at the indicator.

*Eighty. This is control. Are you live and ready?*

I glanced over at the illuminated red light. “Control, I have a red light on my life support, showing a twenty five percent decreased capability.”

*Standby, Eight.*

“I copy.” I finished powering up, rose up on the repulser lifts, and lined up for launch.

Eight. Power down. We’re going to swap you out.

“I copy, Control.” I responded with pure dejection clearly coming through over the comm. As I was settling down on the deck again, I had to quickly power down because the suit diagnostics board started to look like a light show. I climbed out, and stormed to the bridge to find out how the other missions were going after handing the failing flightsuit to a tech.

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***Tacomah “P2" Somers: Flight 1.3, alternative p.o.v.***

Tacomah was second off the center, which was two Grey positions away from the Avenger going to the location the *Mite* was scheduled to be at, by their best estimate. His coordinates were set, and his Bright was ready. The boy was a little nervous when he gave his status to Control. It must have been pretty obvious, because Jila Cosa added, *It’s okay, Tacomah. Just fly like you know how to.*

“Are they sure about where tha *Mite* is supposed to be?”

*Pretty sure! Katie said the it’s almost a sure bet where it is in the maintenance schedule. The only thing that would change that schedule is a ComSat failure that we didn’t cause.*

The boy chuckled in spite of fears. But she was right. He was in an Avenger, and there wasn’t much that he really had to worry about as long as he concentrated and took his time. But it sure didn’t feel like it after he’d gone EVA.

*Summatha things tha Admiral said make a whole lot more sense now.* The young pilot thought to himself. *How many times he done the Zero Gee Boogy, ya think?*

After reverting back to normal space, Tacomah threw all his energy to his shields and maxed his laser recharge, dropping his shield recharge rate by one. That punched up his speed while topping his lasers quickly. Then he cycled through his targets, counting four asteroid laser batteries, along with the expected ComSat.

*No* Mite. *Good. An’ nothin’ else to worry about. Let’s see what else we got.* Tacomah settled down into the business of calculating. *All tha asteroids overlap tha ComSat by almost half tha distance to tha opposite one. They can’t reach each other, but there’s a whole big circle where they can all reach anything close to tha Sat.* He maneuvered around, out of range of the batteries until he was looking straight at a square with the asteroids in the corners and the ComSat in the center. *Quickest way. Straight into tha worm’s mouth. Miss tha teeth. Down it’s throat. Slice out it’s heart. Miss tha other teeth. An’ run out the mouth on tha other end! Sorry, worm, but ya din’t leave me no choice. Ya gotta quit eatin’ tha bulls.*

The huge meat eating worms back home had two heads, joined by a single body, but the brains weren’t connected. One could devastate a wild herd, and then would lay dormant while it’s slow working stomach acids digested it’s meal over the course of decades. If it was attacked by hunters, it would wake up and it’s two heads would cooperate in it’s own defense. But if you got inside it, you could kill it by attacking it’s heart. The problem was getting out again before the worm collapsed in death. If you were quick enough, the second head wouldn’t know you were there before you were out again. It was very creepy, but it worked. And it took a few days before you got the smell out of your nose. A few weeks more before your skin was the right color again. No one actually knew who figured the process out the first time. Or how.

Sitting at a dead stop, he charged his laser and shields to full, then punched up his speed to the maximum. He lined up with the ComSat and locked on to it. Then he shifted his laser recharge rate to zero, increasing his speed even further, and shut his shield recharge rate down, pushing his speed well past it’s rated capacity. As he closed to the danger zone, he punched his laser recharge to zero, kicking his speed up to the starfighter’s maximum. He sprayed the ComSat area with a constant stream of laser bolts, and constantly shifted energy from his lasers to his shields.

His Avenger bucked once as it was hit by a solid wall of laser energy from at least one of the batteries. The laser energy gauge dropped all at once as it displayed the shift. The rear shields showed red. And as quickly as he’d entered the danger zone, he was out of it again. He threw his laser and shield recharges to their maximum, and made a slow turn back to face the square, flicking quickly through the targets.

*No ComSat.* The boy observed. *Decent!*

A quick systems check showed all systems in the green, so he punched up his return back to the *Widow* procedure. After his lasers and shields were full again, he took his bearing off the square of asteroids, pressed the button throwing the craft into hyperspace.

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End log: T5B5M1

**Battle 5, Mission 2: Stocked, Locked and Ready to Rock!**

by R.C.Miller (Castor@RebelSquadrons.org)

A Grey Squadron, of the Rebel Squadrons, Additional Text Briefing

for Grey Squadron’s add-on Mission 2, Battle 5, Tour 5

for the Star Wars TIE Fighter Combat Simulator game.

“I’ve been trying to do this all wrong!” Castor yanked off his helmet and practically jumped through the sim hatch as it opened. His movements were short and quick, and his face and voice were very animated. “The large scale defenses are all out on their separate tasks maintaining and supplying the project!” He spoke quickly and looked at Katie more to be speaking at someone rather than a bank of sim control panels. He seemed to have forgotten about the TacTeam present.

“Yes, sir.” Katie said, more out of a loss to follow Castor’s train of thought than the need to respond to his statement. She looked once quickly at the large mug sitting on the console which the gotal barkeep had sent up. Her synthetic brain didn’t quite allow her to question what was in it.

But Jila didn’t have that disadvantage, and Castor definitely seemed buzzed on something. *I sure hope Tess knows what he’s doing. Or I may really regret not going to get that hug from Kanashaak a lot sooner.*

Castor grabbed Katie by her synthetic shoulders, and spoke directly at her. As opposed to *to* her. “The project’s main defense is the space around it,” he rattled on quickly. “It’s all in rings. The project is all in rings. Maybe not actual physical *rings*, spatially, but rings nonetheless. Maybe *layers* would be more accurate. The outer layer is the depots and supply areas. The next one in is the buoy link sites. Then the bases and stations. At the center of it all is the Star Hammer project. Nothing that Malachite doesn’t want can get in unless it can get through the layers before it, and that’s its greatest defense of all.” Castor was pacing back and forth, his steps short and quick and his eyes darting around with the furious speed of his thoughts. “I’ll bet Tacomah could have done all the short cuts in his head if he’d been on the Sapphire when they were infiltrating the project.”

“It takes too much time and effort to have to move stations and bases around. All you have to do is move the buoys and make sure that every one has to go to a buoy link site before they can get to an inner circle. Then just ensure no one makes any recordings of the flight path, and even that doesn’t matter. Even if they run a comparison on the flight paths, just changing the buoy sites should take care of that; way too many variables involved if you add at least one course change along the way. All they have to do is pick freighter pilots who don’t ask many questions, aren’t overly ambitious, pay them well, and their concerns are minimal. The only reasons we’ve gotten this far at all is because...”Castor ticked off the points on his fingers. “One: We’re Grey. They didn’t know that, and we’ve been entirely underestimated from the beginning. Two: We’ve dealt with Malachite and his minions before, and we are familiar with many of their methods. And three: We’ve been able to draw on Greedo’s expertise and knowledge, who’s been able to partially penetrate Malachite’s organization!”He raised his hands in the air quickly, and leaned his head back. “Hah!”

If Katie had been able to emote with facial expressions, she would have been wearing one of deep concern. Jila, on the other hand, was able to. And did.

“They weren’t counting on a Greedo and his obsession.” At this point Castor was just speaking out loud to no one in particular. But it didn’t seem to matter as he continued on hurriedly. His pacing had turned from a line into a circle.

“With the outer defenses in place, the weapon itself doesn’t need to be heavily guarded, hence, Star Destroyers and other capital craft are not necessarily present at the weapon site. There’s got to be a station processing ore and building the weapon, but it wouldn’t necessarily be armed. Personnel actually at the site would have to be kept to a bare minimum, due to security. You don’t want to have too many people having access to your super weapon, particularly when it’s nearing completion. That means high powered small craft that don’t take much of a crew who can be rotated out on a regular basis. No one stays on site except for the for any length of time except for construction crew. And those are most likely mostly specialized droids. Again, no ambition. No betrayals.” Castor was silent for a few seconds.

“High powered small craft. Assault Shuttles. Escort Transports. Possible. Something else? Very possible. We’ve seen Avengers and Defenders. They won’t use those inside the center when anyone getting in has already been able to wade through an ocean of those to get there. Anyone that’s gotten that far in knows how to deal with them, so they’ve got something else. But they’ve got to have a limited supply of both pilots and whatever they are using there. Get past their fighters, and deal with any station or Star Hammer guns, and we’ve got the project. No muss, no fuss, no greasy kid’s stuff!”

Castor grabbed up the mug of Tesserak’s brew, which had been sent up while he was in the simulator, and turned to the SimOps chief. “What’s the toughest, fastest fighter we have in the simulators?” He asked quickly, hoping against the off chance that Spinel may have had to train a combat pilot or two for center circle duty.

After checking through the data listings for a few seconds, the chief responded. “Just the Defenders, Admiral, and the other craft you’ve already thought about.”

“Work me up a sim without the big craft, but with a dozen Defenders and Assault Shuttles. Twice the shields. More speed and it becomes a liability. No way to maneuver quickly. Toss in a Modified Corvette, or two. No. Make that four. They’ve got to have something moving supplies, and those are better suited to that than Modified Frigates, which are a total pain in the ass.”

“Yes, sir.” The Sim Chief was at a loss to follow Castor’s entire thought process, but his instructions were clear.

“And be prepared to make changes to the mission while I’m still in there. I may be here for a while.”

“Yes, sir.”

Castor grabbed up his helmet again, and rushed back toward the sim chamber. As he did, he saw Greedo standing in the open SimOps entry hatch, and wondered if the rodian had been standing there through for long.

“You’re going to kill more of your own people than you say I would have. At least I wouldn’t lie to them. They don’t have a chance your way. You’re going to fail. And Malachite will live. And thousands of star systems are going to die.” The rodian spat on the floor, turned on his heel and left peremptorily. The door closed and Castor could only stare at where Greedo had stood.

But he only stared for a second, before he compulsively entered the sim.

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Castor stood in front of the Greys looking tired. The dark circles were around his eyes again, and he looked like he’d been sleeping in his uniform.

“First off,”he began. “I want to just say that this is it. This is the point that we’ve worked so hard and long to get to. We’re going to confront the Star Hammer.” The pilots took that statement with due gravity; no one cheered and there wasn’t a bit of celebration in evidence. “With all that we’ve been through so far, you’d think that the tough part would be over, and it may be, but I’m not going to count on it.”

“The primary axiom concerning security is: The fewer people involved, the better a secret is kept. A corollary to that would involve something like this...” Castor pushed a button that activated the holoprojector above the table. A bulls-eye pattern of layered spheres formed in the air. As Castor spoke, sections of the pattern expanded to show close up views of specific areas. “Allow fewer people access to each succeeding layer of security. The innermost circle having the fewest people having access or knowledge.” The six spheres glowed from the outer to the inner in succession.

“Malachite’s best defense is this dead area of space...” The holograph zoomed out to include the edge of the galaxy, a very large area of empty space, and the huge dark nebula between them. “The chances of successful navigation into and out of this area decrease proportionately with the number of reference points. Since the project area has none, those chances are pretty much less than zero unless one has a map, so to speak. It was very easy to set up the Star Hammer project, as directions were simply *point-and-go* for a certain length of time from the area entry location. Once outsiders came into play, security became a major factor, and the map of those points had to be changed on a regular basis.”

“Now. Exactly, what do they need to successfully build the Star Hammer under tight security?” The question was rhetorical, and Castor didn’t wait for anyone to try to answer. “They need their constant entry point that gives them their beginning reference from which all directions to specific points are based. They need a supply depot that they can direct all their outside freighters to; a central point from which all other areas are accessible, and where they can reroute everything coming in. Most everything can be dropped off there, but some of the items they might want to send on. They need an interior base where they can centralize dispersion of weapons, materiel, and more sensitive supplies; and that’s the point that no outsiders can get past. And they need the actual construction site.”

“To make this function more like a labyrinth, rather than shuffle everything around which would be not only expensive and time consuming but also risky, one only needs to introduce an intermediate point, the navbuoys, and move those. From there, you only need to keep people from figuring out the deception by making it just one level deeper; the nav chips carrying the locations of the buoys. They need maintenance crews to do the buoy site shuffling, but that doesn’t require a heckuvalot else. The construction site is already behind six layers of security and defense, and each layer helps support and defend the next layer in. At this point, we’ve virtually taken away five layers of that defense, which leaves us only the project and whatever is at that particular location.”

“Don’t misunderstand me. I don’t believe for a minute that we’ve stripped Malachite of everything except for the Star Hammer and its local defenses. And I don’t believe that confronting Malachite and relieving him of the Star Hammer along with his liberty will be easy. Not even for a moment. I do believe, however, that we’ve severely limited his options. On the other hand, the most dangerous animal is a cornered one. His responses are limited by his options. So here’s the meat of the whole thing. And it’s contingent on many conditions. You’re going to have to make a lot of choices depending on those conditions. We’ll try to help you out from here if at all possible, but I don’t expect that we’ll be able to do much but get ourselves killed if we enter the battle directly.”

“Apparently, the Star Hammer is Malachite’s brain child, and he’s determined to see it built. He’s escaped us once, so he’s likely got that alternative set up again, as well. We haven’t seen the Gezzoop lately, but I’m expecting to see it at the Star Hammer site. If it is, or if it enters, make sure that it’s disabled. That’s *disabled* not *destroyed*. If Malachite is on it, we want him alive. That’s priority one. Malachite is to be captured. The *Web* will aid in that part. With her generators up, nothing will be able to leave the area except on a very long run. The *Widow* will mainly be backup for the *Web* during this operation.

“Priority two is to disable any large ship or base that’s firing at you. The gunboats are going to play a very large part in this. If you can strip its guns or shields, then that’s ideal. If it can’t fire it’s just as good as disabled. It doesn’t matter if it’s a capital ship, a base, or the Star Hammer itself. We’re going to need a little room to breathe. If you end up with anything that has shield generators, take them out and disable it.

“Priority three is to strip or disable any other large craft in the area. If any. Just because they might not be firing at you doesn’t mean they won’t.

“And that brings me to the last. I’m expecting a fighter craft that we haven’t seen before. I don’t know what it is or might be, but I’m pretty sure that there’s going to be a bunch of stuff that’s going to make Defenders look like go carts. If you get the chance to disable any, then be my guest, we’ll pick it up when all is said and done. But the Avengers are going to have to keep everything else busy, along with clearing out these new fighters so that the gunboats can work.

“I want to reiterate why I think that gunboats are the key in this...” Castor started ticking off the list on his fingers. “They are very heavy assault fighters. They have a hull that can take a severe pounding, if it’s necessary to do so. This puts them in about the same class as a B-wing. They have shield generators which can support both their laser and ion weaponry. These alone rival the generators on B-Wings and those that we’ve got on the Avengers, and far surpass the generators on an X-wing or our Interceptors. While they are not as maneuverable as an Avenger, they are far more maneuverable than a TIE Bomber or a Y-wing. Their pinpoint accuracy bests TIE Fighters and even A-Wings, and far surpasses the B-Wing. And because they have shields, lasers and ions, their top speed is far understated. For an all around general use, and going into an unknown situation, personally, I’d rather be in a gunboat every time. My second choice craft would be an Avenger, but with someone I really trusted in an ion capable craft along side of me.” Most of the pilots groaned. They weren’t real enthused about ion capable craft as it always meant slower and less maneuverable. But Castor knew that the key was knowing your craft to the point where it became an extension of you.

“Malachite isn’t a fool.” Castor continued. “To even consider that notion will mean your death. You’re going to have to fly harder than you’ve ever flown before. Never will your combat skills and instincts be more required or tested. He’s spent far too much time and energy on this project to walk away from it unless there just wasn’t any other option left. And he’s certainly not going to just hand it over to us. Not even if we said *please*.”

“I’m not real comfortable with Spinel on board, even in stasis. But I’d much rather have her than Malachite. This game is for keeps, boys and girls. Make no mistake about that. We’ve skated by a number of times recently, but this time you’ve got to be Johnny-on-the-spot. You’re going to have to think through this entire mission. And I’d very much appreciate it if you and the rest of Grey, along with both the *Widow* and the *Web* all saw tomorrow morning.”

“Any questions that can actually be answered at this time?”

“Um...” Tacomah hesitated. “Do I have time to run up to the B&G and get something to eat?”

Castor frowned at the lad. “When you get back, I’m going to have MedOps check you for a tapeworm. You eat more than any two of us present.” He looked at the rest of the group. “In any event... anyone stuck in the bacta tanks after all this will miss the party at Tess’s. I’ll be buying. Your assignments are on your datapads. Nest high, my Greys. And soar with the highest.”

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