

The Colonel and the Cadets: Kinbelka Blues

ReMob 5 Fanfiction submission by COL Mordred

Golan Space Station Nun, Phare System.

A very confused Colonel looks at his orders.

"Flight Officer, this was verified, right?" The old Chiss asked the junior officer.

"Yes, Colonel, sir. Came in last night."

"And our leaders are gone?"

"Yessir, the battlegroup deployed last night. Things got nasty at the Valdeso frontier. We had orders to let you stay, sir. For the mission."

This was intentional, then. A Battlegroup doesn't deploy overnight. Of course, if he knew what was going on, he'd have deployed with them. His squad leader probably volunteered Mordred to another annoying mission. Not that he didn't deserve, anyways.

But the mission was clear and he had luggage.

"Where can I find my crew, then?"

"They should be assembling now in the briefing room."

Mordred nodded in thanks to the flight officer and made his way to the briefing room. Taking up a little breath, he opened the door, and four cadets stood in attention. As the cliché goes, Mordred had seen hundreds of similar faces, barely out of training. Mixed group, two girls and two boys. One of the boys almost dropped his helmet getting up too fast.

"Good evening, pilots, sit down, we have work to do."

"Sir, the Battlegroup deployed last night, are we set for a special mission?"

"Cadet Crolt? Is that it? You normally wait your CO do the talking and if he's permissive enough you get to ask questions. Clear? And relax a bit. Not much, just a bit."

The four of them smiled faintly and Mordred continued.

"Yes, we are setup for a special mission, but not the kind of mission you want though. We have been left behind because protocol demands a reply from command to any kind of distress signal we receive. It was deemed low priority enough that a 43 year old Colonel is enough military power to go check it out. Parallel to that, you four are way too green for the heavy entanglement I've heard the battlegroup is heading for, then you stay with the aforementioned Colonel and do some training."

Some groaning and sighing took over the room, but at least discipline was still holding.

"Sir, of the entire battlegroup, only WE stayed behind? The Five of us?"

"There are some hundred crewmembers that will stay here, but, yes, the only fighting capability being deployed to the Amavis sector is in this room. And no complaining, you are still technically cadets, not even assigned to squadrons. Something on your curriculums must've attracted the TO's attention and for some reason, I don't think it's positive. Anyone care to explain?"

The grumbling subsided at once. A cadet named Graken offered.

"We trained together. Our TIE Defender scores are suboptimal for full qualifications."

"You can fly an Interceptor but not a Defender?"

"It's not fair! We CAN fly it, just can't work on the secondary systems very well. My grades are on the nearest decimals." Answered Popgy.

"We'll have to work on that... Now, the mission."

The holotable switched to a wide view of the galaxy, and Mordred maneuvered the high detail focus to the topmost strata of stars over the Emperor's Hammer territory. A lonely cluster was assigned the name 'AMAVIS', and on the upmost star, the name KINBELKA.

"Here is our target, the loneliest outpost in EH's System Directory. They are not even a colony, just a mining outpost that cycles miners weekly, according to our latest report that was signed 8 years ago. This is the kind of place that gathers people with no hope, people without futures and a lot to hide from their pasts. If they are attracting our attention, something went bad. Probably pirates."

"Sir, a question?"

"Go on, Sacla."

"If they are further away from the frontier than the sector capital, shouldn't we have heard about any attacks before? I mean the attacks must be covering some part of our territory to reach there."

"True, there isn't many stars to hide from in this region compared to the star density around here, but we are still talking about hundreds of stellar bodies. This area is also uncharted but for a few routes. Our targets, if any, could be lurking anywhere."

"Sir, what if there are pirates?" asked Crolt hopefully.

"We are most definitely not entering combat. Provisionary name Zebrek Squadron. Boss wants us to find out what happened that entitled the message and get back. Since no freight was assigned to our flight group, we'll hyperjump on our TIEs to Amavis proper, refuel and head to the final destination. We'll take the scenic route to Amavis with stops at every eight hours so we can stretch our legs. There our mission starts."

"It's a long trip sir, you mentioned refuel, but Amavis is just half the distance to the Kinbelka station..."

"We should have enough fuel to just turn back and return to Amavis and wait for backup there if things go nasty. Combat means waste of fuel, No fuel means stranded, stranded means bad. Clear?"

Mordred could tell from his experience that the four pilots in front of him were now contemplating if fighting was as bad as staying stranded in a frontier outpost.

"Ok, let's get set for departure. At worst case we are looking at two days inside our suits, get your bios done and make sure the recyclers are working."

"Tw-two days?"

"It might happen, depending on how compromised the target is. I'll see you in twenty minutes on hangar bay... Uh.... Four."

Two days later.

They had stopped in a colony couple of parsecs from Amavis system and set up a training location to spend a couple of hours there. Mordred was no certified instructor, but he had helped his share of pilots to find their ground. The kids were not bad, they could use the Defenders to its nominal capabilities, but it was a tricky ship and there were tricks to be learned. Also, if the boss didn't want him to fall on "evil trainer" mode he shouldn't have given him this weird assignment.

"Two, close in the formation." Mordred ordered Sacla.

"I know, I know..." she murmured over the comms to much of her trainer's impatience.

"If you know, do it. One's left flank is open and the foes are coming in hot." Mordred was flying at a reasonable distance from the duo, grunted as he could see the maneuver unfolding, and quickly switch to Popgy and Crolt's channel.

"Three, ready? It looks like target One will break left, I'll go for it." Crolt, or Four, was starting to get basic maneuvers.

Popgy, as Three, acknowledged and throttled back just a tad. Just as they got into firing range, targets One and Two split as predicted and got shot down almost instantly.

Sighing, Mordred opened the channels to both teams.

"That was appalling. I want you to compare notes on this and present it to me on our next stop. Zebrek squadron, let's dock on the station, refuel and go on our way."

For saving time, they were sleeping on their cockpits while the fighters did the work of hauling them dozens of lightyears. Not really comfortable, the suits could now take over life support for an extended period of time. The noises made inside the helmet had been a constant complaint since the early days of the empire, and a seasoned pilot learns to "tune out" the hissing eventually.

They arrived at Amavis system a couple of hours later, ever climbing the galaxy. The only station in the system sent out an automated reply and pointed the berths for docking. Surprisingly enough, the dockings had clamps that fit the Defenders and a nice set of docking rings to make sure the pilots entered the station safely. So far none of the kids complained about the helmet or the suit, but they were reaching the final refuel point before reaching for the target.

It took 38 seconds for them to find trouble once disembarked.

"Imperial! What do you think you are doing here?!" A raspy voice echoed from the corridor. Mordred finished removing his helmet.

"I want no trouble, nor care for your views of the Emperor's Hammer. I came to buy fuel and lodging."

"You think you can waltz in here and-" A tiny man walked in front of the troublemaker.

"I'm the dockmaster, Mr Graton. Always pleased to work with the Emperor's Hammer. How much fuel?" The tiny man put a hand in the chest of the other man, pushing him away.

"I'm Colonel Mordred from the Emperor's Hammer. We need enough to top the five ships, extra refined, as close to 90% you have. Should be about half a standard container."

"Tricky, we work mostly with freight juice here, very crude. I'll have to check older stock. And don't mind Vittry, he had some nasty business in the past. He's harmless."

"Been there before. Do you have lodging available?"

"Nothing fancy. Go down the corridor, there's a droid that take care of the miner's quarters, he should find something."

"We don't need fancy. Thank you, mister. One last question, is the cantina safe? My people might wanna stretch their legs."

"No one had any permanent damage been a while, but five imperials might ruffle some feathers. Pro and Con if you get my drift." And he turned his back to Mordred and laughed his way down the corridor.

Mordred sighed and addressed his pilots.

"Let's get cleaned up first, then we think if it's worth adventuring ourselves into the wonderful realm of cantina brawls."

The pilots visibly changed their demeanor.

"Oh, look at you, so eager. Remember, no bacta baths here. Unless it's deadly you don't get much attention." He smirked as they toned down a bit."

Fortunately, there was plenty of rooms available, but they were more on the practical side than even the quarters back home. After an hour they reconvened at the cantina for a meal. Mordred steeled himself for the inevitable. These guys had nothing against him or the Emperor's Hammer, maybe even the old Empire, but they were bored, full of hormones and he had just handled them an excuse. Five excuses.

An old grey wookiee tended the bar and on the back an unenthusiastic rodian filled small containers with different kinds of pastes and foods. The monitors play some kind of soap-opera and a few heads were actually looking at them. A Dejarik table was abandoned in the corner. Over the door an old Emperor's Hammer crest, outdated been some 15 years.

One by one the people inside the cantina looked up their heads to check the group entering the door, some taking a double-take as if unsure actual imperials would dare to join them.

Approaching the bartender, Mordred asked "Need meals. Five to eat now, ten nutritional pastes to go."

The wookiee replied with a guttural sound and Mordred nodded, sliding him a credit chip.

"We are Emperor's Hammer, not any imperials. That logo on the wall is ours. We are the contact the sector has with any civilization on the galaxy. I just came to buy food and complete my trip, maybe buy again on the way back, and that's it. Honest work for honest pay."

The wookiee shrugged and replied laughing. And promptly five guys get up all over them.

"Are you serious, Baccafrocebecca? He's Empire, doesn't matter the color!" The wookiee replied something and another five people got up from their chairs.

"Bacca is right, this is a business, we don't care who asks for food! The EH never bothered us here!"

"Are you going on about this again, Mutt?"

"Shut up, Danella, I'm done with your..." His voice was cut when the first fist hit his face and then it was on. Fifteen seconds later, Grake was pulled into a skirmish between two zabraks and a chiss; Sacla was dodging a particularly large dressellian; Popgy tried to hide behind Mordred but an aqualish found her, only to be saved by a human that hit the aqualish; Crolt took the initiative and jumped into the mess but was somehow being ignored by the mob.

Mordred laughed on the confusion, but Vittry's voice came from behind him. He could barely make any words when a well aimed punch hit him in the nose. Mordred lost his bearing for a second and took several weak hits to the stomach. His vision restored from the initial blur, and he was able to return the favor to Vittry, right in the nose. Both men stopped fighting and stood there cursing and holding their noses.

"Ouch that was a good one, didn't even see it..." Vittry cursed.

"Can't complain about yours... Damn man..." Mordred replied. His eyes scanning the room for his pupils. In the brief seconds the fight had taken form and was moving to finish. There was a ring of people trying to avoid Sacla and a couple of bodies by her feet. Crolt apparently found the fight he was looking for, as he was sitting on a table holding the left side of his face. Popgy was sitting on a chair in the corner, intact. Grake was sporting a broken nose and a cut on his forehead. Only Crolt really worried Mordred, as a bad punch could damage the kids eye and generate a lot of paperwork.

Mordred waved the bartender for a drink and was soon given a small glass with a foamy drink in it.

"Colonel Mordred, shouldn't you help your people?" Mr Graton's voice came from behind him.

"Hello Mr. Graton. They'll survive. Found my fuel?"

"Got half a metric ton of high grade, 85%. No one here has any use for it at the asking price."

"It'll have to do. You have access to EH's network, correct? Payment is good, don't worry."

Crolt had indeed taken a punch right into the eyes, and it was so bruised he could barely open it. So, being the good instructor he never was, Mordred popped up a small amount of bacta and applied to the kids face.

"So, how about your cantina brawl? Enjoyed it enough?"

"I was half expecting you to punch everybody and save us from that mess..." Popgy confessed in almost a whisper.

"That's a good lesson. Even if I was a seriously good fighter, which you noticed I'm not, you need to learn to fend for yourselves."

"How was for you, boss, your first fight?"

"Shocking. That's not a cultural thing amongst my people, I was sitting innocently in the cantina at the academy and suddenly the world exploded an everyone was punching everyone. Broke my nose far more times than I care to remember. Alright, enough chit-chat. Get on your bunks and rest, you'll fell the side-effects of our real adventure in a few hours."

A prophesized, they were all moaning on their way to the cantina. Crolt's face was still purple and yellow but his eye was clean and he responded promptly to impulse. Mordred applied just a bit more bacta and they went in for food. The patrons greeted them casually, and the wookiee just laughed at their confused faces.

"Did you get that order last night, Baccafrocebecca?" Mordred asked with a smile. The wookiee nodded and pulled a bag with 10 small cylinders. They took a table on the corner and Mordred showed them the contents.

"Ok people, here's the deal: the next step is between 16 to 20 hours straight into the void. I have a plan, but I need you on top shape. Food matters from now on. The nutritional paste on the bottle can hold each of use for a week, hi-calories and low waste. Should go straight on your suit's life support. From here onwards, there's only the unknown. We're doing a cruiser jump with starfighters.

With no hyperspace relays nearby, we'll have to coordinate hourly jumps to the edge of their comm range to prevent the convoy from splitting up. It's going to be a mess, with capital M. You are not graduated pilots, to be honest they probably mixed the orders and put you here with me, so you can stay and send a message home for a pickup. No one will think any less of you for that."

Crolt smiled and looked at Mordred;

"You forgot to say, sir, that if we accept your word is law. Like in the holos."

"Nah, if we get to that point you are probably dead anyways. Go or no go? Grake? Popgy? Sacla? Crolt?"

One by one the cadets nodded, their expressions determined.

"Alright, buckle up."

Flying 20 hours with the occasional navigation correction is taxing and really annoying. The pilots were all tense during the first jumps, but they relaxed a bit after jump 6 or 7. Popgy became the astronavigator as she had an easier time than most to find and correct the deviations in the coordinates. Sometime by the eleventh hour Crolt jumped outside the designated area and had to do a microjump to rejoin the convoy, but there were no significant problems. All in all a good, uneventful trip.

By the last jump, Mordred called over the team.

"Join formation everyone. Saclas, any significant chatter on comms?"

"No comms, but there is an EH's IFF somewhere in there."

"Popgy, as soon as we reach our destination I want a path plotted to get us out of there if needed. Our job will be to make sure you focus on your calculations if there's any hint of a battle. On my mark... Let's go."

The last leg was only half an hour long. As tired as they were, the anticipation was pumping enough hormones through their systems that they felt fresh as the seconds drifted by. The clock on Mordred's cockpit reached 00:00 and they left hyperspace. A huge chunk of ore was floating 500 meters ahead so he dodged it lazily, taking in all information from the field ahead. Nothing appears

to be moving, sensors painted just a couple of debris and the four familiar signatures coming from behind him.

"All fighters report in." Mordred ordered and one by one they replied.

"Zebrek One standing by."

"Zebrek Two standing by."

"Zebrek Three standing by."

"Zebrek Four standing by."

"One and Two, set your sensors to passive and get us a wide range ping on all frequencies. Three, find us the station. Four, the plot."

They all went about their business reporting progress as they went.

"Five, this is Three, found the station, it's inside that huge asteroid 7 clicks towards the star. EH beacon coming from the same location."

"This is One, transmitting area telemetry. No signatures detected, couple of asteroids and some debris."

"All pilots set course for the station."

These were the longest 7km Mordred even flew in his career. No contact, the station was just transmitting autoreplies, unidentified debris scattered about. They kept a tight delta formation. Protruding from the asteroid shell only tiny markings and mounts, just one appeared big enough to be of importance, but whatever it was had been sheared off.

"This is Four, navigation reports we have a plot straight back to Amavis at 23% fuel. Uploading now."

The computer beeped just as they broke the visual range with the control tower.

Someone was down there in the edge of the magnetic seal with a pair of flight control rods signaling the fighters to enter the hangar.

"Boss?"

"I guess we go in. Follow the instructions on the deck. I have a wide visual of the hangar and looks okay. There's even a stormtrooper near the door."

Slowly the first fighter maneuvered into the docking range and the tractor beam pulled it in into a fighter rack. Five minutes later and they were all tucked in and pressurized inside the hangar.

Two people went there to meet them, the stormtrooper and an ugnought.

"Greeting, I'm Colonel Mordred and there are my cadets. Who is in charge here?"

"I am Administrator Prej. You came to help?"

"Yes administrator, we'll do what we can."

"Good, I leave you to it then." Without another word the ugnought turned his back to the pilots and moved away.

"Sorry sir, they are kinda like that. I'm Lance Corporal Hina." The Stormtrooper saluted the pilot.

“Well corporal, at easy. Two questions, how urgent this is? And depending on the first answer, where can we find some food and rest?”

“We think they are pirates sir. Or scavengers that found themselves some tech and are enjoying to use it. They come in by the dozen, capture any ship in the area and vanish before we can power our defenses. The first thing they took was our antenna, which disabled our hyper relay and sensors, but so far, the infrastructure is intact. Anything that has our IFF gets taken off. We have no sensors outside and hangar, but there’s the recording of the first attack.”

“And the inhabitants of the station?”

“Two humans and almost forty ugnoughts. The rest evacuated few days ago on our last ship. The ugnoughts don’t appreciate having any piece of their equipment malfunction, so from what they tell me, they are already working on a hyperrelay to send a proper help message. Your presence here will soothe some nerves, that I guarantee. For resting, I can accommodate you all on the old garrison quarters.”

“We can afford a quick rest. One and Three, you go first freshen up, half an hour. Then we switch. Meanwhile Two and Four get some food.”

“And you Sir?” the trooper asked.

“I’ll be on my TIE’s cockpit examining the recording you mentioned and ready for trouble if they need me. Meanwhile you can tell me more about the station.”

The corporal gave precise instructions so the pilots could get some rest, including referring them to the other human in station.

“What is this station, anyways?”

“This was a weapons research facility dating back to the old republic, two hundred or so years ago. War came and the ugnoughts took over in search for rare minerals. Then we came by and took control, but left them alone as long as the regular mineral trade was ours... I was stationed here some 20 years ago and as far as I can tell, command just forgot about us. Days become weeks and weeks become years very quickly. The garrison slowly disbanded. Some deserted, some didn’t even go to the trouble of being political and just left.”

“And you decided to stay? Just like that?”

“I have company... Good company. We decided long ago to help the maintenance of the place, and after a food shortage or two we setup some hydroponics and mostly work on that on day to day basis.” He smiled and that told Mordred everything he needed to know.

They entered the control room and the trooper traded a few words with one of the workers there. A little later Mordred was back on the cockpit of his TIE, ready to scramble if needed, and started examining the recordings.

It was pretty forward. Looked like pirates alright. They came in, almost 40 fighters in tow, attacked the antenna and left. The second attack’s recording was too noisy to piece together, but the third one was clear, they took an old barge with only 4 fighters. Without proper sensor data there wasn’t much to be done. After a while the pilots checked in and Mordred ordered them to switch tasks. That would leave the kids occupied.

Five minutes later, the TIE's sensor beeped an alert. IFF unknown. Crafts unknown, possible match Skipray Blastboats, twelve of them and a freighter. Mordred's TIE was already ready to go and with a flick of a switch the clamps holding the craft left it go and he crossed the threshold of the hangar's magnetic seal.

They were coming from the sun, so visibility was appalling to say the least, but sensor data confirmed their locations. Mordred throttled up and met them before they could reach the station. The new TIE Defender was faster than the old version, but could withstand less hits heads on. As soon as he crossed the firing range the twisted left and opened fire on the enemy formation before he could even see it.

Clearly they were not expecting that, as they broke up in all directions. Mordred could see two contacts blinking off his HUD and followed one of the others, trying to get a lock on it. He rolled right to avoid fire from an incoming bogey and pulled left, crossing the field of fire a second after the shots came through. His HUD blinked and he opened fire, destroying another enemy.

Nine to go.

With a wide turn he got two more foes, they weren't exactly dogfight material. The bulk of the bogeys was still making a wide turn to try to get behind him, so he throttled up and move to outmaneuver them, when a particular enemy got into his six. Mordred tried to drift, but he never got the hang of it and failed to shake the bogey off. Changing speeds and making a hard break worked to get off that foe, but put him in range of the others, but they were too slow to take aim. He drifted again and managed to lock on, destroying the craft.

There were clearly two types of enemies here, good fighters and those who could barely fly the ships. Looking at the dispersal pattern he could see two bogeys incoming for direct contact while the rest were more like flying around trying to be menacing. He marked the two veterans V1 and V2 and tried to give them priority.

The first one, V1, came past him, guns blazing but hit mostly on the fore shield. Bad news was that Mordred no longer had fore shield. Setting part of his power to heal the shields, Mordred shifted vectors, and tracked down the enemy to get a clear shot, but V2 came blazing from behind.

"This should've been easy, old man..." He muttered to himself and shifted target to V2 second foe and scored a glancing shot. Probably took down something in the port engine as it slowed down a bit. Plotting a route on his head to intercept V1, he heard his comms beeping.

"Sir, we are warming up our fighters. One and Three should be ready in two minutes."

"Roger One. I want you to make an attack run on that freighter and try to disable it, okay?"

"Roger that, setting up priority target."

Two minutes. The kids could use some combat experience. Mordred just had to dance around with these fighters for a bit. Problem is whenever he tried to open up to get into firing position, the other would cover and on top of that, the remaining five were just flying circles cutting him down.

Old school then. Circle around, box it in and ignore the rest.

He let the enemy get behind and suddenly pulled the yoke, while slowing down the craft. The enemy tried to pursue the original arc, giving Mordred a clear shot from the top down. A nice cloud of

debris followed the maneuver, and then it was time for V2, who was desperately trying to move out of the way. Mordred got behind him, ignoring eventual hits on the aft shield. The Skipray tried badly to escape the lock, but the old pilot didn't let it budge. A nice show of lights 2 km away showed Zebrek One and Three taking care of the freighter with imperial efficiency. Unfortunately once they got close enough, it jumped into hyperspace with the remaining fighters. Mordred marked the vector and let them go.

"All fighters, return to the station. I think we've bought ourselves a couple of hours."

One and Three stayed on their ships until Two and Four could properly eat and rest a little, then they switched without trying to bother Mordred too much. They had been up for almost 24 hours, 20 of those spend on hyperspace, without proper food or water. The troopers were good hosts and accommodated all their needs.

Once everyone had freshened up and rested, they decided on four hour shifts for the watch, and Mordred agreed. Just one thing was bugging him out.

"Everyone can hear me on comms?" He asked and got positive replies. "We have a problem. We've burned too much fuel. The mixture was not as pure, and the fight took its toll. There's no resupply on this station, and the nearest is our friendly Amavis. We can't send a message home and we have no other ships here. A lot of fuel was wasted in the hourly stops to align the convoy. We load all useable fuel on a single fighter, which can navigate faster and more efficiently to the other side and contact home in Taddux, way past Amavis, where is guaranteed to meet friendly forces."

"Sir, they will return with more ships." Popgy pointed out.

"That still leaves us with some 40% fuel to defend the station. They don't have that many experienced pilots, four of us should be able to hold the front until helps comes."

"Then I'll go, I'm the fastest with the navcomputer." Popgy offered.

"No one to call if this goes bad." Mordred gave her his most serious look.

"I can do it, Sir."

"Very well, let's start the fuel juggling then. One and Three, keep an eye out. Five, Two and Four to the hangar."

Hours passed by while they moved fuel from one craft into another. Mordred was the last on the list, His TIE linked to the pump station. Sacla called him on his private channel.

"Boss, are you doing okay? It's been a time since you've had a complete rest."

"I'm fine, just worried about you guys, do you think everyone is okay? Popgy?"

"She's fine, the boys are too, don't you worry, but you've been in that cockpit since the attack." There was worry in her voice and she wasn't far from it. So many days in the cramped cockpit wouldn't to him any good.

"Alright, let's get Popgy under way then I stop for refreshments. Form up with One and Three."

The transfer was almost complete, just passed the 100% mark and was filling the final 10% of reserve tanks. A blinking light in this cockpit announced it done.

"Four, you're capped up, ready to go?"

"Sure thing, boss, I'll be back with reinforcements soon enough." The rest of the team sent out their encouragements and the TIE graciously aligned to its destiny and jumped into hyperspace.

24:00

"Okay cadets, you tree hold the fort for a while, I'll going to take a shower and eat something."

"Copy that, sir."

His TIE was already docked for the fuel transfer and Mordred had little trouble disembarking from the starfighter. Lance Corporal Hina was nearby as usual, ready to provide assistance.

"Hello sir, how are you feeling?" He asked with a friendly voice.

"Been a long time since I've flown without support."

"Figured as much. Wanna freshen up or eat first?"

"I guess I'll freshen up, thanks Hina."

Mordred barely had time to undress when his comm beeped.

"Sir, this is One. Pirates again, 8 units, Three thinks there are just two or three of the better variation."

"Can you deal with them?"

"So far so good."

"No heroics, I'm on my way."

By the time Mordred cleared the hangar, only one enemy remained. His arrival probably got the enemy's attention enough to cause him to slip and Two came blazing, another hit.

"Good job people. No freighter appeared this time?" Mordred asked.

"If it did, jumped out instantly. Five easy to three regulars we can do, apparently. The enemies are most unimaginative." Grake replied.

"This is Three. There's something that it's bugging me. Whenever we get a hyperspace signature, these guys scramble, then silence." Sacla added.

"Automated? But then why fail and don't try again immediately?" Grake pondered.

"How are our long-range scanners? Can we do a proper scan from here or must least the station?" Sacla asked.

"It will take a toll on the fuel. Again. If these attacks are triggered by hyperspace signatures, best we can do is keep watch and wait until Four complete her mission. It's been only two hours."

"We could do a microjump and test it..." Crolt was feeling brave.

“Okay, okay, loads of ideas, not many resources. For now we keep a T-3 active duty from the hangar so we don’t waste fuel and keep an eye on the clock. By my calculations Popgy will rendezvous with friendly forces in 20 hours.”

16:00

“I’m bored.” Mordred yawned.

“I don’t think you’re the one supposed to be saying that sir.” Sacla laughed on her comm.

“I’m not so much of a role model.” He laughed back.

“What, I’ve heard you even have some high scores under your name.”

“That’s from a long forgotten past. Four days sleeping on the cockpit non-stop is really enough to break a 40 years old. You’ll get there in time.”

“Hope I do.” She murmured.

Minutes drifted by, Grake passed the news that the ugnoughts were about to try to set an antenna in place. It was a very simple model, strapped under a tug boat.

“Should give us at least 10 lightyear range and a clear view of the system, they say.”

As if summoned, they walk into the hangar with a long column with several branches attached to it. The poor tug came to life with a jolt. It was probably older than the Empire, and two ugnoughts in zero atmosphere suits settled themselves inside. Couple minutes later and they are welding the thing in place.

“Sacla, get ready, if anything is happening, it is now.”

The lights on the antenna switched to operational and they were flooded by the feed.

“I see a signal on the edge of the system, all passive. Looks like a broken asteroid dispersion.”

“I see something off angle, same dispersion. Just over 45°, beyond the planetary disk.”

“Comparing to older charts.... Both are regular occurrences. Everything under control.... Wait. From the second debris field.” Sacla pointed out.

“Grake, can you see this from the station perspective?” Mordred asked.

“Positive, we are counting a since huge element... Hundreds of contacts in coherent movement. Too many to track.”

“Setup a watch perimeter and see if any group come our direction. At least we should have an early warning”

5:00

They didn’t. It was Sacla’s turn to be in the control center, while Coltro and Grake were down in the TIE’s. Mordred was eating something when the alert lights turned yellow in every room.

He barely finished chewing, swallowing a bit larger than recommended piece of chow. "On my way!" He managed to groan. Coltro and Grake took off as he entered the hangar, Sacla almost tripping over a poor ugnought on the way.

"Sir, there are a lot of them out there."

"Well, this is the first time all four of us will be there, so I'm not very worried." The flicked the switches. "Attention squads, try to find the regular ones, I'm going to fry that freighter once and for all."

A chorus of acknowledgements came through the comms while Mordred heated up his engines listening to the chatter.

"One, I think that bandit is going for the antenna!"

"There's a whole flight on the antenna, need backup."

"I'm crossing on your twelve then, it's going to be close."

Sounds of weapon discharges and metal chunks hitting the wall of the station echoed the hangar. On Mordred's panel two lights still refused to go green.

More noises. The radar was fully initialized by now, linked with the station feed.

A clunking sound sent Mordred's TIE clear of the clamps, and he carefully took it from the hangar. A beep informed Sacla was right behind him.

There were about a dozen fighters and it took them no time to go on about their business.

"Keep that antenna intact by all means."

The battle raged on. One and Three assumed defensive positions around the antenna, Two and Four ravaging the main body. But differently from before, as they thinned the herd, more jumped into the station area. Almost one hour passed in that the crazy skirmish.

Sacla and Coltro made a move for the container but had to pull back to defend the antenna. Meanwhile the telemetry computer inside the base fed more and more data to the fighters.

"If the computer is fine, there's a block of more than 100 getting ready to jump here" Grake informed them. "I'm reaching 5% fuel."

"We gotta hold up. We don't know what will happen to the people in the station if..." A shadow was suddenly cast over the battlefield, a familiar shape restoring the hope in the pilots.

"Zebrek flight this is ISDII Challenge flight control. Stand by for telemetry link up. You are clear to return home. We'll take it from here."

Dozens of TIEs poured from the hangar, immediately engaging the drone fighters. The elusive freighter once again vanished into hyperspace. With relief the Zebrek flight docked into the Star Destroyer's Hangar.

A Very unamused Major was waiting for Mordred as he left the cockpit.

"Mordred! What were you thinking?!? Taking four cadets and taking them into a mission like that?!?" Maj Colo was barely contained. "Just tell me why?!?"

"But those were my orders! Garbled message, investigate; take the four cadets."

"Investigate as in send a probe! Not 'go take a look'! And that wasn't even for you! That was for recon desk!"

"Oh I see. I guess I just glimpsed at the screen... My bad...."

Colo almost banged his head on the wall.

"But why bring the Challenge all the way up here?" Asked Mordred.

With a sigh the flight leader answered. "The Science Officer took a great interest in talking to Cadet Popgy about the seemingly autonomous craft. And here he is." Admiral Impulse was smiling with guilty looking Cadet Popgy on tow. A smiling Admiral was a rare sight, Mordred hoped it was for the best.

"Mordred! What a find! What a find! Excuse me Major, I need to debrief this man and his flight before we lose this info forever." AD Impulse dragged Mordred to a room where the cadets were already standing.

The more intelligent units, the freighter, the cloud of contacts that is growing deeper into the system. Every aspect was examined. It took four hours of interrogation of every technical aspect until the Admiral was satisfied.

Eleven hours later and the life on ISDII Challenge was as busy as ever. CM Iam banged on the door.

"Wake up old man, we gotta go."

"Did I just get myself a designated alarm?" Mordred laughed.

"Yeah, Colo isn't trusting you to wake up by yourself anytime soon. Luckily for you, you found a mystery for the SCO and that probably saved you from another time in the brig."

Mordred got into his jumpsuit and followed Iam.

"Did you hear what happened to the cadets?" He asked Iam.

"Yeah, they endured another four hours of chatting with the brass. Word is they did well and got the clearance they needed to finish training. Poor things were wasted but they might make into the fight."

"Good, I hope they find a good squad."

"Oh you old softie. Ah, another news, maintenance crews fixed the station antenna. The ugnauts agreed to trade research with AD Impulse and he's very happy."

"So, for us what's left is to find out what is this cloud."

They walked together to the briefing room, it was packed. Few more pilots arrived sparsely until most seats were taken.

"Alright, settle down. Gentlebeings, we have some work to do. The SCO has something for us." AD Stryker ordered and people got quiet very quickly. He moved to the side and AD Impulse took over.

“Greeting all. Five days ago, while you were deployed to Valdeso, Col Mordred from Tempest took a group of cadets to investigate a garbled emergency message. What they’ve found is an old automated system of some kind, designed to attack a certain pattern of signals. Signals that we utilize. Under my office I was able to requisition the Battlegroup III for this mission. I know you’ve just returned from a deployment, but such are those things. The operation is simple enough. The targets have been traced to deeper into the system. We’ll microjump to the area of operations and assess what dangers could this pose against the Emperor’s Hammer. Considering we have upwards a thousand targets flying around a core, possible a station, we don’t know what to expect. It is about 2km wide and it’s on constant movement. The individual targets are reported to mimic Skipray Blastboats with same tubular look, only more lethargic. More competent variations were found at a much lower rate. There is some kind of residual interference that we cannot properly clear up, so much of the operation side will be decided on the fly. Admiral?”

AD Impulse moved from the podium and AD Stryker took over. The holotable updated with a tactical readout of the are of operations.

“Battlegroup III will drop around 10km from the target. The Cruisers will deploy in umbrella formation and provide tactical support. If required, the Strike Cruiser Roost will advance to help thin the cloud. Once we are deployed, Tugs will deploy special satellites and will start broadcasting the signal. If they react and attack us, we carve a path and reach the core. If they just stand still, we go poke them, carve a path and reach the core. Tempest will lead the charge with the pilots from provisional Zebrek squadron filling in for flight three, as they have a little more experience with those things. Typhoon and Thunder will deploy as normally. Once the core is reached, four Assault Transports will be ready to dock with the core station. Everything clear?”

Grunts of acknowledgement came from all around the room and people start to get up. Major Colo herded all Tempest’s pilots together to a corner, Thunder and Typhoon squadrons gathering likewise. The cadets looked like scared puppies trying to show confidence, but Colo was in a welcoming mood after being given a proper mission and new pilots to play with.

“Ok people, you’ve heard it. The cadets have been officially given flight status to accompany us. Anything you guys can point us about the enemies? I know you’ve been debriefed to exhaustion, most of the squad wasn’t there to listen.”

They traded looks and Crolto explained.

“There are two types of them; the slow ones are the majority, they like ganging up, while the faster types are more independent. Kill enough of them or target the freighter and they break up and run.”

“Good report, pilot. I’ll pass it to the other flight leaders. Let’s gear up.” Colo approved.

Some time later and Tempest squadron was undocking from ISDII Challenge. Around them the Arquintens Cruisers were getting into position. COL Mordred was back at his position of Tempest 1-4, under orders to keep a watch over the new kids, so he was keeping a watchful eye on the sensors.

“Sacla, careful with your spacing.” Mordred pointed out and 3-3 moved slightly away from the other.

Behind them the other squadrons deployed and joined formation.

“All flight groups, this is ISDII Challenge. So far, no change in enemy movements, we are deploying the satellites.” A non-descript voice announced. “Keep up on patrol pattern.”

Minutes dragged while the tugs maneuvered with their payloads.

“Okay, here we go, stand-by.” MAJ Colo announced to the squadron when he received the information from command. The satellites lit up and a noise signal filled the background of Mordred’s comms. For a moment nothing happened, but then even the starfighter’s reduced resolution sensors could see a movement in the cloud, focused on reaching the satellites. Almost a minute passed until the first targets were in range.

“I guess we’ve got their attention.” Someone said in open channel.

“All fighter groups, be mindful of the cruisers’ attack vectors and do not deviate from your assigned areas.”

The cruisers were already firing a barrage of turbolaser fire on the incoming enemies. Hundreds of enemy drones were destroyed in less than a minute. Mordred’s cockpit was suddenly illuminated green when Conquest’s powerful turbolaser barbets opened fire against the cloud, taking visible chunks of it. Tempest was still on stand-by, aligned and ready to face the enemies.

Sensor data was showing a significant reduction in enemy quantities, but there were still so packed the sensor showed a single stream from the base to the destroyer.

“All cruisers, switch to local fire patterns. All starfighters, commence attack.” The order finally came.

The two forces met straight head on. The enemy concentrated attack opened in a blossom of a klatoonian mapa flower, and the EH’s more powerful ships followed the formation, destroying an unbelievable number of foes each pass. And then it was on, pure dogfight. Technology and prowess weighted heavily on the EH’s side on the scales, but at 50 to one ratio, the sheer number of enemies took away much of that advantage.

Mordred still had the kids to keep an eye on, so he focused on them than just blasting drones. And they were doing fine. Graken just took out two in a row, rolling away from incoming fire. Croto carefully aligned himself behind an advanced drone at high speed and hit it with a 6 cannon salvo. Sacla preferred long bursts, trailing behind the enemy. Popgy took careful shots, and quickly scanned the battlefield for vulnerable target.

Around them the battle progressed slowly. Someone took a disabling hit that forced the pilot to return home, while most pilots were already reporting empty warheads’ tubes. The space was starting to fill with debris and Mordred’s shield rippled in blue. An advanced drone zoomed by and Mordred took pursuit. Matching speeds and keeping with the sudden direction changes, Mordred dispatched the drone and moved to the next target. And repeat. And repeat.

“Attention fighters, cruisers moving to new area of operations.” Challenge flight control announced. On his cockpit displays Mordred could see the routes lighting up. Not long enough they were moving ahead, culling the cloud closer to the origin with an impossibly dense barrage. Almost one hour of non-stop action has passed and the enemies were finally thinning up. Once all fighters had been dealt with near the satellites, ops gave them order to advance past the cruisers’ exclusion zone, escorting the transports.

Nothing much remained there. The infamous Freighter was docked to an old station, model unknown and only about a gross of fighters patrolled the area, lazily flying around the station until an enemy crossed the threshold. The Battlegroup’s starfighters made short work of the final foes and the menace reached to a sad end. Whatever it had created those fighters, it was no more.

The transports docked to the station and reported no life support enabled. It took them four hours to scan every room and consider it clear for the science team. After a couple of days, the SCO published an annex to the battle report filled by the BGCOR and life went on.

The mystery was simpler to understand than most. It was an old republic station, sister to the Kinbelka station. It was designed to, upon receiving a certain signal, send targets to Kinbelka station so they could test the new weapons they were developing. But for some reason the mystery station ended up without resources and had to move to another celestial body for mining, with only maneuvering jets. It took it 50 years. Once it was back only and found Kinbelka's signal, it resumed function.

The four cadets officially received their promotions and got assigned all around the fleet. COL Mordred survived the earful he received from MAJ Colo.