

The stretch of space filling the bridge viewports of the Inquisitorius Listener Ship was dull and dead, the few faint blots of light from Dajorra's satellites lost against the cosmic backdrop as the ship idled at the edge of Arconan space. The ship, engines on reserve power and sitting idle with all passive scanners on standby, was waiting. Patient, cold and almost invisible, it waited. But it would not do so for much longer.

The energy spike preceding a jump from hyperspace registered on the ship's scanners, the captain allowing himself the faintest of grins. They'd waited long for a way in and now they finally had it. As the Action IV tramp freighter suddenly appeared on their scanners, fresh out of a long distance hyperspace jump, the sharply dressed man gave the order he'd been itching to announce.

"Vector thrusters three-five degrees to port. One-three degrees ascending. Nine second burn. Helmsman, bring us in their baffles and cut the power. Communications, send a message back to base, *Ivy Four* infiltrating."

The cramped bridge snapped into activity, the minute shift in gravity causing the stoic captain to shift ever so slightly as the stealthy vessel burned its ion thrusters for but a moment and aligned itself like an oceanic predator in the tramp freighter's wake. Once they were in its ion slipstream, they would match speed and continue to drift into Arconan space within a cocoon of sensor-confounding ionic turbulence and none would be the wiser.

Ten seconds later, the viewports dutifully showed the approaching ion-blue glow of the Action IV's thruster banks and he logged the encrypted transmission to Arx. Aboard the freighter, a sensor operator furrowed his brow as something flickered on his screen for a split second, but a solid tap on the screen made the offending sensor shadow melt away.

Sitting huddled in a damp, cramped corner of the Action IV's cargo bay, Totherin Murill broke off a piece of his ration wafer and offered it to a small rynlette. The child's mother nudged the small girl, encouraging her to reach out and take the offered food while the pale-furred trader continued to smile. "This musta been 'er first jump? Brave lass," he chattered calmly, kind features shifting with the engrained creases of a hard life.

The girl nodded, timidly, before reaching out and snatching the piece from his hand and retreated to the safety of her mother's bosom. Totherin chuckled under his breath and leaned back against the durasteel bulkhead. "She'll make a fine Ryn, I tells ya," he mused to her mother, patting down the pockets of his vest in search of his pipe. "Lass ne'er flinched when we jumped an' is eatin' right after. Has tha makin's of greatness in 'er," his words were clearly meant for the girl's ears more so than her mother's, but the woman still nodded all the same.

"Gratitude," she offered, ruffling the mop of her daughter's wild hair affectionately.

Up on the bridge, the tramp freighter's crew were settling in for a long sublight burn. Their cargo wasn't exactly contraband, but depending on the moods of the customs officials on Selen, they might have preferred staying on the down low. Hence the distant jump point.

With all the relevant checks completed to ensure nothing had been damaged during the hyperspace transition, the bridge crew could lean back and queue the music while they slid silently towards their shady destination.

“Captain?” the sensors officer raised his voice, tapping his screen and pointing at a reading that refused to fade.

The trader captain, a seasoned veteran of his trade, pulled up the sensor sweep readings on his screen and leaned forward, rubbing his stubbled chin. Darkened eyebrows furrowed as he recalled the signature he was reading, the spikes and valleys of the spectrum reminiscent of a Marauder-class. But that couldn't be. He knew the Dajorran security forces inside and out and they did not deploy Marauders on picket duty...

“Captain, we're being scanned!” The warning came with a hint of genuine alarm, the idle music dying down immediately as the weapons officer made the announcement.

“Who in the hell's scanning us?!” the captain spat, silencing the warning flashing on his screen.

“I don't know, sir. Shall I raise the shields?” the weapons officer had his hands on the controls, but the captain knew better.

“Halt. If it's the DDF, we don't want them to think we're resisting. Now what the hell is on our scanners?”

“I'm cleaning the signal...” the man at the scanner fidgeted with his console for a moment, almost losing the signal momentarily before managing to get a firm lock. “Got it! Marauder-class, straight ahead of us and it's... deploying fighters!”

The captain snapped his attention to the view ports where, against the black backdrop of space, small flashes were visible as ship after ship passed through the Marauder corvette's flight deck force field. His knuckles blanched as he squeezed the armrests on his chair, a bead of sweat pearling down his forehead.

“Shields, sir?”

“On stand-by. Are they hailing us?”

“No sir, they... They've turned on their IFF, it's the *Nighthawk!*”

“The *Nighthawk*? What the hell do they want from us?” the captain spat, feeling his pulse racing. He'd only heard stories of the elusive ship that allegedly worked for the elite of Arcona. Some sort of hit squad, if he recalled. It did not fill him with confidence. “Hail them, tell them we'll comply to any sweep or boarding. We're unarmed and transporting goods to Selen on a valid commercial license.”

The comms station erupted into a state of controlled chaos, until the dismayed operator turned to face the captain with static buzzing from her earpiece. "No response, sir."

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The mood on the listening ship's bridge was so tense even the humm of machinery seemed to have died down, fearing that any disturbance might have shattered whatever held their collective nerves together. The transponder reading from the *Nighthawk* had shown on their sensors as well and the captain had immediately ordered jammers into effect. He needed time to think and that meant keeping the transport on its current speed and heading.

The situation was tense. How in the stars had that warship known to intercept them? Mere chance? Or treachery? The Inquisitor in him decided upon the latter. The stifling atmosphere around him was charged with expectation and every single crewman aboard the cramped ship was poised for action. But until their cover was blown, inaction would be their best bet.

Then the *Nighthawk* had launched fighters.

Precious seconds were ticking past, each moment bringing those snub fighters closer and closer. They could not hope to evade them if they were spotted, but could the Arconan pilots be so blind as to not see them? It was either that, or abandon the mission and make an emergency jump. His pride would not allow it and so he'd ordered his crew to do the one thing they loathed the most; wait.

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"Fifty, forty five, forty, thirty five..." the scanner operator aboard the Action IV called out the range of the approaching squadron of X-wings. The freighter captain knew the maximum effective firing range for them would be at five thousand kilometers. Until that number was called out, they could still make a move.

He could raise his shields, come about and engage the hyperdrive. The snub fighters would get off a salvo, the Marauder maybe two before the drive core had spooled up. He wasn't sure if the old gal could take it on the chin. Maybe, but the proton torpedoes would be her doom. He was a gambling man, but he didn't like his odds here.

Still, the silence was murder on his nerves and the way the looming Marauder continued to hold a lock on them was not comforting in any way. But if they wanted him dead, they would have opened fire. Surely.

"Twenty five."

"Sir?" the comms officer's unsure voice broke him out of his distraught thoughts.

"Yes?" his voice was a bit snappier than he'd intended, but considering the circumstances it was probably warranted.

“Fifteen.”

“I’m getting... something. But... I think we’re being jammed.” She fed the comms feed into the intercom and a moment later the garbled transmission filled the tramp freighter’s bridge.

“...zzzshion... eer port... sssshzzzz...eer port now...”

“Ten.”

The last word had been spoken by a living being. Though mangled and choppy, almost lost to static and interference, it held the unmistakable impetus of a seasoned officer giving a stern order. The captain’s mind was racing, inching towards a horrid, potentially profound conclusion. “We’ve got a tail! Helmsman, turn hard to port, full burn. Scanners, I want a full sweep of our aft.”

“Shields, sir?”

“Stars damn you and your shields! We’re sitting in the middle of them and their real target!”

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“They’re breaking off!” The observation was pointless as the Inquisitor captain could see it with his own eyes. The banks of heavy engines lit up suddenly with a bright ion glow and the ponderous rear began swiveling to the right. They were clearing their baffles.

“Battle stations! Bring us hard to port and prepare emergency jump to lightspeed!” The mission was ruined, he had no illusions about that fact, but he could still salvage their ship. The listener ship had excellent hyperdrives, but they still took a few precious moments to spool up and if could keep himself obscured behind the tramp...

“Launch transients! The fighters have cleared the freighter!”

“Sithspit! Shields up and...” He never managed to finish his order as the X-wings opened fire. Zooming past the Action IV, they descended upon the sleek listener ship with all guns blazing. Blue streaks of proton torpedoes mingled with the bright crimson fire of laser cannons as the squadron strafed their target, the Inquisitorius ship racked by blooming explosions.

The bridge was annihilated in a heartbeat, but the ship still kept on going. Bleeding oxygen and belching smoke, it veered to port with engines on full burn. The crew acting on their last received orders, the hyperdrive core was spooling up for a jump and the X-wings could see as much. But the *Nighthawk* would not be denied.

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“Ascend, ascend! They’re still behind us!” the freighter captain called out to his helmsman who fought heroically with the controls, trying to make the lumbering ship pitch up and clear the firing line between the *Nighthawk* and its prey. The ship responded sluggishly, superstructure groaning in protest as the venerable vessel was pushed through maneuvers it was never meant for.

“They’re charging weapons!” a frantic cry came from his right and the captain could almost see the faint green glow of turbolaser muzzles on the Marauder’s wingtips. “They’ve still locked on!”

“Raise shields!”

Those words would prove his last as the *Nighthawk* opened fire with its main guns, a searing broadside striking the Action IV in the engine compartment. The struggling shield generators had not yet come to full power by the time the barrage struck and were overwhelmed immediately. The aft of the freighter shook before a horrific explosion tore the engines apart, sending the ship careening out of control and into the path of the fleeing Inquisitorius vessel.

Ten decks below, Totherin clung on to a bare bulwark as the ship twisted around once more, the rynlette crying in a high-pitched squeal against her mother’s chest, the pallid woman doing all she could not to join in. “T-tha’ ain’t nothin’ ya hear, just annover...”

His world exploded into fire and flame, a gout of ravenous heat sucking the air out of the cargo compartment and setting the mother’s fur ablaze. Gasping for air in the near vacuum, Totherin watched as she slumped upon her child, shielding her with her own body, before blissful unconsciousness claimed him.

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The stealthed prow of a heavily modified Arquitens-class light cruiser pierced its way over to the scattered debris field, still warm after a recent engagement. The subdued emblem of the Technocratic Guild embellished its wedged deck, near a pair of massive clamps that began to extend in order to begin sifting through the wreckage.

The Inquisitorius ship was of little interest to it. The wreckage would hold no vital information since the ship’s memory cores were wired to self-destruct. However, the transport might contain some morcels of value. An initial scanner sweep detected a handful of life signs still trapped within. The Arconans clearly hadn’t bothered to finish the job.

A small wonder that they had swallowed the bait, but then again, the target had been presented to them on a silver platter by the Technocrats who’d by now been tracking the Inquisitorius ships for weeks. Their stealth drives were sophisticated, but nothing beyond the Guild’s means of overcoming. Of course, as long as the would-be spies thought their ships were secure, they would not evolve their tactics in a manner that might actually pose a threat. Hence it was imperative that the destruction came in the hands of their other enemies.

It also had a convenient side-benefit of leaving them with fresh carrion to pick clean and excellent subjects for modification. Rath Oligard might be a rousing speaker, but even his fabricated anger paled in comparison to genuine hatred for those who'd almost killed you. And engineering collateral was a prime means of producing it on a near-industrial scale.

The massive mechanical pincers moving out to grab a section of the crippled Action IV, the cyborg salvage teams deployed to venture inside and subdue and recover anything still left alive. The surgeons and bio-engineers would be working overtime again...

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Beep, beep, beep, beep, beep

"Vibroscalpel, please. Removing excess tissue."

Schlick, schlick, schlick

"Flesh pliers, please. Opening cavity."

Schlriip!

"Applying fleshgraft."

"Cauterizing. Graft appears to hold, subject stable. Proceeding to phase two, cognitive surgery."

"Cranial drill, please. Ingressing at frontal lobe."

Hriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!

Blissful blackness –

– and an overture

The sounds were by now a distant echo in his mind. A half-remembered nightmare that he could recall only in the most abstract of ways. The surgery had saved his life, or doomed him to it. Recalling what had happened before that *thing* had entered his skull was arduous and the constant pain made focusing on even the most basic acts a herculean task, let alone trying to reflect on his past.

Closing his eyes, he buried his face in his palms, one still flesh and the other a tangled heap of cables. The reek of antiseptics, burned flesh and lymphatic fluids seeping out of the raw cuts in his arms was overwhelming, but not even that could distract him from the agony crippling his body from within. It was like knives to his bones, a shooting pain lancing through his spine, a piercing agony that refused to relent despite the copious drugs he'd been given.

It all came back to him, crashing like water from a broken dam. The scent of burning plastoids and scorched durasteel bulkheads. The choked air heavy with acrid smoke. The tortured, high-pitched screams of a small being burning alive, trapped beneath the smouldering corpse of her mother.

He could not move. His limbs were trapped beneath a collapsed strut. He could not feel his feet any longer, but the bloodied stumps of his thighs were still caught by the crushing beam. He'd tried to reach her. Did his all to somehow reach the frail arm that flailed from beneath her mother's burning body in desperation.

But he'd been trapped. Forced to bear witness as the cries, pleas for help grew higher and higher as the girl repeated the only words she could, unable to comprehend the situation in which she found herself.

"Mommy! I'm hot. Too hot, mommy! Mommy, I'm hot!"

The bitter tear stung as it parted his eye, running down a cheek of raw flesh graft and clumps of matted, pale-white fur. He could smell the desperation. He could taste the charring meat. He could hear the piercing wail as the flames finally caught her.

"Subject is active." The words came in as if from some great distance away, muffled and muted.

He reared his head and beheld a stocky figure of white and chrome. As his vision adjusted, he could see smears of red upon the hem of his lab coat. The man's visage was hidden behind a mask of chrome and layered optics. His voice muffled by the same.

"How are you feeling?"

The question held no empathy, only cold, scientific curiosity.

"It hurts," he admitted, sucking in a pained lungful of air. Several of his ribs were still broken.

"It will pass," the man stated, though for some reason he was not inclined to believe it. "Can you stand?"

He stood up slowly, searching for balance as his body felt sluggish and weird. As if returning to a home that someone had redecorated. It felt *wrong*.

"You have been through a great deal, Totha," the man droned on. "What is the last thing you recall?"

He shook his head. That wasn't his name. It wasn't. It was... He couldn't remember anymore. He couldn't remember.

"I don't remember," he gave voice to his thoughts, the man taking them as an answer.

"You were a stowaway, Totha, aboard a freighter. It was attacked by Jedi and Sith. You were caught in the middle, you and your ship. They found your presence an inconvenience, so they removed you."

He clutched his head. His flesh hand rubbed against durasteel. What had they done to him?

"We saved you," the man continued. "But we couldn't save everyone. The girl..."

He remembered her. He remembered the girl, he remembered the scent, the pain. He winced as the agony seared through his spine anew, aching along his joints.

"You remember her?" the doctor asked, intrigued.

"I do," he replied through clenched teeth.

"We could not save her, Totha."

He was not surprised.

"But we found the Jedi and Sith who were responsible." The words were almost coy. His head perked up. Something inside him ticked, his heart beating faster, his senses on edge. Somewhere, faintly, he could hear music.

He twisted his head towards the man of white and chrome, a pale hand gesturing down a corridor. He shuffled along, eager, anxious. He could smell them. He could smell their fear. He could taste their pain. He would *be* that pain.

An open door led him to a small room, its plain walls lit bright by lumens overhead. Within stood two hapless forms, bound and wearing tattered uniforms. He could not recognize the symbols, but they were hateful to his eyes. One of the men had soiled himself, the other whimpered softly to himself.

Totha turned around, peering over his shoulder. The man of white and chrome stood in the doorway. And nodded.

Music, glorious music erupted in his mind, washing away the pain in mind and limb as he descended upon the pair. His flail arm crackled with power as he swung it around, rending deep gashes into their torsos and flaying flesh from bone with glorious ease. His cybernetic legs were swift and precise, finding knees and ankles, wrists and throats all the same in a sensational staccato of cracks and pops. Even his tail, by now a slithering serpent of durasteel, joined in the symphony of gore as it lashed out and clove the head off a screaming man's shoulders.

Behind him, the man of white and chrome smiled beneath his surgical mask. "*Oh yes, he will do nicely,*" he muttered to himself.