**Objective 3 - Recovery**

“No.” The Aleena stood, not sat, in his chair with his arms crossed like a petulant child. Looking back at him from the holoprojector on his desk was Consul Rian Taldrya in blue-hued translucent miniature.

“Quaestor Drake, you are intelligent enough to understand that was an order and not a request,” the half-Mirialan stated bluntly. “We have a chance to put the Inquisitorius in the debt of Taldryan and I will not miss this opportunity.”

Justinios’ body language did not change one bit. “Oh yes I fully understand that it was an order and that does not change my response. Send that traitor Andrelious and some of his fancy new Archanis minions. This seems like an operation much better suited his *elite* piloting skills anyways.” The Quaestor of Ektrosis was still very sensitive that his former Aedile had gone behind his back to reform another House within the Clan and it was only making him act even more insubordinately.

“Andrelious is on another task. Also, even if he was not I am asking this of you for a reason. I need to know that your loyalty is to Taldryan first and your own machinations second.” Rian left a pause in his statement and Justinios knew exactly why. The Consul likely wanted Justinios to recall all the reasons he had given his Consul to doubt the Aleena’s priorities. To be fair, Justinios agreed that Rian was right to be concerned. The Quaestor had very consciously been putting his own plans for House Ektrosis well before the needs of the Clan, even allowing the Collective to verify that Taldryan had set up shop in the Caelus system. Justinios didn’t regret any of these decisions but he realized that if he was going to get a chance to continue along with his pet project that he needed to regain the goodwill of Rian and probably some of the other veteran members of the Clan.

“You are right. I have been selfish, single-minded and in many cases reckless.” Justinios knew he had never been a great liar so when he had spin falsehoods he found it was best to root them in truth. He had been all of the things he listed, he just didn’t have any remorse for his decisions. “I will show you with this task that I am someone the Clan can count on.” Also true, his project would eventually be a boon for the Clan if they would let him continue. “When Justinios Drake sets his mind to a task, it always gets completed.” Bravado but 100% honesty. He fully intended to complete Rian’s orders to the letter, even if he hated every second of it.

Even as a tiny hologram Rian’s sigh of relief was perceptible, although his tone remained serious. “You and your Ewok friend will not be asked to do this alone. As Lorekeeper you have the *Penumbra* at your disposal and I am also assigning Prophet squadron to you as escort. In addition to your personal craft that should allow you to overwhelm the starfighter that the Collective reportedly has patrolling the area.”

*Overwhelm an unprepared enemy, just like what was supposed to happen at Nancora,* the Quaestor thought to himself. He was still upset with how close he had come to dying in that trap the mighty Clans of the Brotherhood were drawn into.

However, Justinios knew that the time for dispute was over and he’d have to make due with the resources available to him. Plus, he knew it was probably his own fault that Rian wasn’t just sending a full naval task force to recover the black box of the Psi Terminus I. The Grand Taldryan Navy was still reeling from their year on the run from the Dark Council and the Aleena had been the reason that the Caelus system was no longer unknown to the Collective. As much as Rian wanted the Inquisitorius, and by extension the Dark Council, in Taldryan’s debt he also wasn’t about to leave Caelus vulnerable.

“I should get to work then,”Justinios stated. Rian nodded and switched off the holocall from his end, no doubt to direct other members of the Clan to their own tasks. Next to his holoprojector Justinios’ own Inquisitorius datapad had been receiving notifications most of the day. The Advanced Inquisitorius Network was abuzz with activity and despite his best efforts to stay out if it, Justinios had been sucked into the fray once more.

The blue skinned Quaestor took in and then let out a deep breath. This was a simple retrieval mission at its core, recover a black box and retreat.

*How much could really go wrong?*

“How the frak did this happen?” Justinios screamed into his comlink as his put his Lancer Pursuit Craft, the O*rder of Magnitude III,* into another spinning dive. It took all of his piloting skill just to avoid incoming fire as Balz Ack returned what fire he could from the topside turret. The forward facing heavy laser cannons packed a wallop but the Aleena was outmatched in every way by the Collective pilots who were continuing pushing him further away from both his small task force and their objective. Staying alive to relay orders to his own forces had been priority number one since the enemy pounced on them almost as soon as they had reverted to realspace. “Captain Nischal what does the battlespace look like?”

Nischal was in command of the Raider II-class Corvette assigned to Taldryan’s Lorekeeper, a title which Justinios currently had the honor of holding. With what seemed like X-Wings coming from every direction, his best chance to formulate a plan to counter the Collective ambush came from the Captain relaying what his larger ship’s sensors were seeing.

“Three squadrons of enemy Starfighters, all T-70 models.” A muffled command to the crew of the Penumbra interrupted the situation report, the Captain clearly moving himself away from the comlink in the process. Returning his attention to Justinios’ command Nischal continued, “one full squadron is very deftly attacking this ship. Our defense are keeping them at bay but they are highly skilled. We have only managed to damage one of their number so far.”

That gave Justinios pause. Despite the impressive armament of the corvette it’s gunners had only damaged, not destroyed, a single X-Wing so far. Justinios agreed with the captain’s assessment that this squadron was highly skilled but Justinios took his conclusion one step further.

“My guess is that isn’t just a highly skilled squadron but also where the command of their entire operation iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiis,” Justinios heavily elongated his last word and he had to send his craft into another set of highly evasive maneuvers. “How many are following me, it feels like two dozen.”

There was a pause and what Justinios was certain was a giggle, “Just two X-wings, sir.”

“Nib yacht-ta usib,” Balz Ack growled into his own comlink.

Justinios translated for the Captain’s sake, “Balz says there must be at least half a squadron attacking us from his vantage point.”

“Sorry sir, our scanners show us only those two with our TIE Defenders engaged with the other twenty-two X-Wings.” What the Captain didn’t add, and didn’t need to, is that even though Prophet Squadron outclassed their opponents ship for ship that they wouldn’t be able to hold out against those odds for long. Justinios may not be a military mastermind but arithmetic came pretty easily. Twenty-two was definitely a bigger number than twelve.

Unfortunately for the Collective, the Aleena’s ego was also now bruised. “Underestimate me will they, I’ll show them.” Justinios mumbled into the comlink.

“You are about to do something ill advised, aren’t you?” The droid K1-L0, affectionately called “Kilo”, had been oddly quiet up until this point. The droid occupied the co-pilot seat and was quite the sight to behold. The station was modified to be accessible to Justinios and Balz, which meant things were a bit smaller. This included the seat itself which meant that to fit into it that Kilo had to pull his lugs up under his torso like a battle droid in sleep mode. The result was that Kilo looked like a black egg with arms and a head as he worked the controls. “May I suggest you share it with me before beginning so I can at least attempt to assess the strategic merits of your plan?”

While Justinios would have preferred that outcome, there wasn’t time to put this to the committee. “Request appreciated but denied, we need action.”

“The droid has a point sir, a few moments won’t…”

“Time is not on our side, Captain. This battle has already been raging for the better part of five minutes now and we haven’t made a dent in the Collective fighters. They also seem to be fighting not to lose.” As Justinios spoke he aligned his ship with the transponder from the black box and put the proverbial hydrospanner down on his Lancer. He continued explaining himself as the ship rocketed back towards the middle of the battle. “You see, they just need to prevent us from leaving with that box and my guess is that they called for backup before jumping on us and jamming comms. Even if their cavalry takes another hour to get here, nobody is coming to relieve us. They win the waiting game.”

The *Order* was fast enough to stay ahead of the perusing X-Wings but their long range shots had already pierced the crafts thin shields. Luckily the armor was more than enough to keep the craft intact, for now. Justinios knew that would change as more X-Wings joined in the pursuit.

“I am not sure how much of a beating this ship can take so you will need to ensure that you make them pay when they break ranks.” Justinios knew his order would be relayed to the commanding officer of Prophet Squadron by Captain Nischal.

A flurry of angry Ewokese spat out of the cockpit comlink.

“Yes we are the wild mynock in the wild mynock chase but we have to break this stalemate. Just think if how many more targets there will be now.” As much as Balz loved taking his aggression out on Collective members as revenge for what they did to him, he clearly was unhappy with being part of the bait.

Kilo remained surprisingly silent as the ship continued unabated on its intercept with the black box. “Nothing to add, Kilo?” Justinios asked, highly confused. “No admonishment for my impulsivity?”

“Just one suggestion sir,” the droid replied.

*Here it came*. Jusitnios was almost relieved. It wouldn’t be a Drake operation without a soliloquy from the former Imperial automaton.

“After the first pass pull up and to the right, you should be able to strafe some of the X-Wings attacking the Penumbra with your forward facing cannons.”

If it he wasn’t piloting a starship in the middle of a pitched space battle Justinios would have keeled over and died right there from shock. Kilo, the over analytical and highly insecure droid who usually skulked off if you didn’t take his advice on what to eat for breakfast hadn’t just predicted Justinios’ haphazardly conceived plan but seemed to have agreed to it. On top of that, he had offered advice on how to best proceed with said plan.

Just as Kilo had anticipated, Justinios did not make any attempt to slow down to grab the small object everyone was fighting so furiously over. He did however pull up and to the right, pegging one of the T-70s that was attacking the *Penumbra* right between the engines. The ship had no chance, exploding into a brilliant fireball. “Great suggestion Kilo.”

The droid didn’t respond. Given his history of feeling underappreciated this was either growth for the automaton or just a side effect of being preoccupied. Even as his photoreceptors were looking out of the viewport, Justinios knew that wasn’t his focus. Kilo was plugged into the Order’s computer which gave him access to data relays from the Penumbra. “Two enemy craft have broken away from their engagement with Prophet Squadron,” the droid added. “Four T-70s now pursue us.”

“Ich-ta, yiha!” Balz exclaimed over the ships comlink.

“You are disgusting. I hate the Collective as much as anyone but you can’t call someone’s mother that!” Justinios wasn’t above a little swearing but he would really need to speak to Balz about word selection after the battle was finished even if the discussion would be fruitless. The psychotic Ewok would just growl something at Justinios about the impurity of his ancestors before stomping off to destroy something valuable.

“Excess vulgarity notwithstanding my analysis of the starfighter sortie predicts that, with the current numbers, Prophet Squadron will prevail. However they will experience an 83.3, repeating of course, percent casualty rate.”

Even if the droid was correct, and he likely was, that cost of victory would be too high and the margin of error too thin. Justinios knew that his TIE Defenders were the key to the operation and his fake run at the black box had helped even the odds, just not by enough. If the TIEs could prevail over their own attackers, they could come to the aid of the *Penumbra*. Against those odds, even if the Collective pilots attacking the surplus Imperial corvette were the best in the galaxy they would not be able to hold their ground against the ships guns and the pilots of Prophet Squadron. The problem was that the Collective pilots would only fall for so many of his fake runs at the black boxz

As the Aleena directed his ship back towards the outskirts of the battle, he communicated his nee plan to Kilo in real-time, speaking as fast as the plan took shape in his brain. The X-Wings continued their chase, popping off withering fire the entire time. Once he had put enough distance between the Order and the black box, Justinios flipped his ship back around in a upward spinning loop that could have made a droid vomit.

Captain Nischal’s voice broke into of the Lancer’s cockpit once again. “I just received firing solutions from your droid and this is the definition of danger close. Do you trust them?”

Looking over at the midnight painted form of Kilo he responded, “You bet my little blue…”

Another explosion interrupted the response along with another expletive laden exclamation from Balz Ack.

“Captain transmitting new solutions for the three surviving targets.”

“Received, K1-S0.”

“Kilo the throttle is yours, I will ensure our heading and course are precise.”

“Five seconds, master Drake.”

Moments later. neon green exploded into the space around the *Order of Magnitude III*. Justinios swore he could taste green, feel it, smell it. The neon green of the *Penumbra’s* guns surrounded their ship utterly and completely. Any blindness was temporary as the transparisteel viewport darkened automatically and it was Kilo, who wasn’t relying on any visual sensors, who spoke first.

“All three targets down. No major damage to ship systems. Hull integrity at 85%.”

Justinios giggled to himself a belly laugh that other species may have normally attributed to their young but that he never outgrew. “We may have really outdone ourselves this time boys. Let’s go help out our lovely TIE pilots so they can swat these gnats off of the *Penumbra*.”

Within the main briefing room of the *Penumbra* Justinios once again stared at the blue translucent form of Rian Taldrya. Captain Nischal, Kilo and Balz Ack all had to stay outside because of the third member of the call. As his tiny blue hands punched in the second set of numbers the connection was encrypted, encrypted again, re-encrypted and then encrypted one more time for good measure. Once the line was secure, the form of a man Justinios only knew by reputation joined that of his Consul in holographic form.

“Quaestor Drake, the Brotherhood is grateful for your assistance with this matter.” While the words of the statement were those of thanks, there was little emotion behind them and none at all showing on the Hapan’s face. The rumors of Marick Tyris’ stone cold demeanor were apparently true. “I am to understand you are on your way to Arx with the objective secured.”

“Well, about that,” the Aleena said with a sly grin.

Rian looked as if he was going to jump through the holoprojector, travel as pure energy through the holonet and kill Justinios himself. The Voice of the Brotherhood, to his credit, made no reaction.

“Calm down boss I am just having a bit of fun. My task force and I are already on route to Arx and the little black box is all yours,” the Aleena paused, “if you honor my one demand.”

“Justinios Drake I swear on the Force,” Rian growled through gritted teeth.

Tyris was still a rock, giving no reaction to Justinios’ obvious proddings. “Speak.”

Justinios jumped up onto the holotable and stood in between the projections of the two powerful men. “The next time you need someone to clean up another mess,” the Aleena flashed his reptilian teeth in a wide grin, “make me and my crew your first call. Helping out isn’t so terrible, every once and awhile.”