

A Dark Encounter

An Emperor's Hammer tale by AD Silwar Nailo (#12630)

Chapter One: Boots on the Ground

“Honestly, it was just a mild rash”, complained Cadet Thurm, trudging through the damp gravel road. “I don’t know how these rumors keep spreading.”

“If your indiscretions would spread less than these rumors,” I replied, “we’d have more budget for Bacta instead of antibiotics.”

–Besh Team 3 Comms Log. 10:28 Day 254, 31 ABY

The TIE Reaper shuddered violently as it entered the atmosphere. Despite their training, a few cadets involuntarily tilted their heads towards the viewports, fearful that we were under attack or plummeting planetside towards our doom. “That’s not how troopers of the Hammer’s Fist should behave,” I thought to myself. “I’ll have to reprimand them... but it can wait for when we land.” As for me, I had no reason to doubt the skill of our pilot, and I didn’t like the way that fear tends to spread like a subtle disease. Or rather, I didn’t like it for my soldiers, anyways– fear was a fine tool when used correctly. We would need to stand as a united front for whatever we would encounter; after all, we were the finest soldiers in the galaxy, and that’s why we were sent on this mission.

“ATTENTION!” I called out, and eight white helmets turned towards me in unison. “Final review.” I pressed a button on the hologram controller in my hand, and... nothing happened. I tried a second time. Nothing.

“Lieutenant Tornald, status report?” I called out to the pilot. He was from Odyssey squadron, assigned to the ISDII Warrior in Battlegroup Two. That alone told me that he was dauntless, and gave me the confidence I needed that we’d make it to the surface.

“Just a little electromagnetic interference from atmospheric entry. Should be clear in a moment,” he replied.

I waited, observing the troopers on the ship. It was impossible to see their faces from behind their helmets, but over the years, I had learned to read body language. The last time we were deployed was in an offensive against an unknown enemy called the Ishtari, and now we were on our way to a planet without any contact for over a decade, deep within the appropriately-named Unknown Regions. We had no idea what to expect; we may encounter friends or foes, and the restlessness of the troopers reflected their concern over our lack of intel. But, the TIE Corps Commander demanded “boots on the ground inside the hour”, and we wore the boots.

The hologram flickered, then finally turned on. The troopers were still trained on me. “Good,” I thought, “they’re at least a little self-aware. Better to be concerned about the consequences of failure than a bit of wind outside.”

The hologram displayed a planet pockmarked by massive craters and a gigantic gorge which crossed the center from southwest to northeast. “This is XC five-zero-three-nine-one dash two”, I announced. “A planet without any name in our archives.” I pressed another button on the controller, and the hologram highlighted a large crater on the northern side of the planet. “This crater was created by an icy comet– by our reckoning a few thousand years ago– forming a

lake. Due to the richness of minerals on the planet's crust, and the availability of fresh water, we established a small mining colony of three thousand Imperial citizens. However, we have had no contact for the last twelve years."

I paused briefly before continuing.

"Because we haven't had contact in twelve years, we don't know what to expect. It's equally possible that they've moved on, been eliminated, or died out from some horrible flesh-eating disease. Emperor knows that at least one of you has gotten infected with a 'horrible flesh-eating disease' from an encounter with a Twi'lek," I said with the barest hint of a grin, "and you know how bad that can be. The medical bills were astonishing, Cadet Thurm, and we don't expect the colony to have had access to our resources."

You could almost see the red glow from inside the Stormtrooper's helmet as his face blushed. He smartly chose not to respond to my goading.

"Our mission is to round up any remaining leadership for Imperial Security Bureau interrogation. They need to know what happened here and why we've lost contact. We will leave any questioning to the ISB, unless it pertains to completing this mission. We will land on the eastern side of the colony and head due west, searching for any signs of activity. Team one will split from our detachment and maintain a distance of 200 meters north of us, team two 100 meters north, and we will be 100 meters south of them. Aeolos and Kappa Squadron will provide air cover in our area. Aurek and Cresh detachments will enter the settlement from the north and south, and we'll all meet up at the administration building by the end of tomorrow. Our objective is capture, although resistance may be met with force. Just don't get trigger-happy; remember, these are our people. Your blasters should be set to stun, and you've all been equipped with binders and flash grenades. Any kills *will* bury you in paperwork. Any questions?"

I was greeted by nods all around, and so I continued on with the presentation. Pressing another button, the hologram expanded to show the settlement in detail. Built on the edge of a curved, sweeping cliff was a small city. At the center of the projection was the administration building; a pyramid-shaped structure with expansive views over the crater and the settlement. Multiple roads radiated outwards from it, drawing lines across neatly planned zones. The northern side held wide, flat buildings, meant for aquaponics and protein farming. The center held a number of apartment blocks, occasionally broken up by parks. The south was where most of the work was done; from refinement plants and factories, long roads spidered outwards to the edges of the map, where rich ores were mined for off-world shipment. The southernmost edge of the settlement housed the spaceport.

“As you can see, we’ll be making our way through the residential areas on our way towards the administration building. Cresh will take the spaceport and move inwards, while Aurek will sweep the farms.”

The Reaper shuddered again, and we began to feel the deceleration as we neared our landing zone. “Check your gear and prepare for landing,” I announced, then sat down, strapped into my seat, and began reviewing my own gear. Stun grenades. SE-14r Blaster- set to stun. Binders. Electrobinoculars. I put on my helmet. “Mic check,” I said aloud.

My radio crackled. “Loud and clear, ‘Tooie’”, came the velvet voice of my XO, Corporal Rama. If I were to be honest, half of the reason that I picked her as my XO was that she always sounded so collected over comms, in any situation; she had displayed her steel nerve against the Ishtari hive-mind soldiers, and it didn’t take her long to rise to her position.

Tornald spoke, this time within our helmets rather than out loud. “On the ground in thirty seconds. Gate opens five seconds after. Twenty... fifteen... ten... nine... eight...”

The TIE Reaper’s ramp unfolded to display a sepia landscape, dark buildings silhouetted against an amber sky. The only sound was the wind, and then boots crunching against gravel. We had landed in a relatively flat area about two kilometers away, so we had a bit of a march, but the troopers in my team seemed to be in high spirits. They were bantering over comms, and due to the lack of readings on the ground, I let it continue.

“Hey, what do you get if you mix a bounty hunter with a tropical fruit?”

“What?”

“*Mango Fett.*”

“Oh, I’ve got one. Why do TC pilots hate flying in the simulator against each other?”

“Why?”

“Because they always end up in a TIE.”

On second thought, maybe I should have stopped it earlier. I used the excuse that we were within visual range of the residential buildings to shut down any further attempts at humor.

“Clear comms. XO, get me a scan,” I ordered.

The radio went silent. Corporal Rama unloaded a set of electronics from her backpack, setting up a small radar dish on a tripod and then connecting a wire to her helmet. She took her electrobinoculars and pressed them to her visor.

“Nothing on the EM bands.” She rotated a dial on the binocs. “Wait...” she paused. “I’m getting some heat signatures, on the ground and in the buildings. Possible lifeforms. Humanoids. But no electricity... that’s odd. Take a look.”

I took the binocs from her outstretched hand and scanned for infrared signatures. Sure enough, the buildings seemed to give off heat, and there were people wandering around in the streets.

“I guess it isn’t as dead as we thought. Form up and prepare to move in.”

Chapter Two: Sad Devotion to an Ancient Religion

“The Kilji Illumine? A bunch of idiots. Hmm... a bunch of potentially useful idiots. Inquisitor Honsou, I’m going to need you to head to the planet with Stingray. I’ll brief you while you descend.”

“What ship am I taking, boss?”

“Take the TFC Senator.”

“That’s a big ship. Just what are you planning?”

–Grand Master Silwar Nailo

“Welcome!” shouted an adolescent Rodian, standing barefoot outside of an apartment building. She handed me a pearlescent white flower, freshly cut. “Have you come to receive Enlightenment from the Master?”

“The master? Which master?” I responded, curious. A small crowd began to gather around our team. “We were sent here to find leaders,” I thought to myself. “That seems to be on the right track...”

“*The* Master, silly!” she responded teasingly. “The one who... who enlightens us and gives us our bounty!”

I looked at Rama, who shrugged. I handed her the flower, and she put it into a power pack holster, its shining white petals sticking out ever so slightly.

“Yes, I’m... here to see your master. Can you take me there?”

“Hahahaha,” she giggled, “no, of course not. You can’t go and *see* the Master. But you can learn about him in the temple.”

“The temple?”

“Yes! The big building in the center of town. All of the roads lead there.”

“Um. Thanks. We’ll... just... head on over there, then.”

“May you be Enlightened!” the girl replied, as she danced off across the street. Meanwhile, the crowd continued to gather around us, each offering words of wisdom or gifts. One elderly human offered to share dinner, a middle-aged Chiss woman offered a bottle of “home-made wine”, and a Devaronian man offered us a place to stay the night. Despite the temptation of the wine, we turned them down and continued our march towards the city center.

“Sir?” asked Rama.

“Rama?”

“What the kark is going on in this town?”

I stopped in my tracks. I was witnessing the first time Rama had ever shown a crack in her stoic exterior. The other troopers were missing this historic moment, preoccupied with fending off townspeople trying to give them baskets of fruit and handwritten prayer sheets.

“Maybe they’re just friendly?” I replied with an unconvincing shrug.

We continued onwards towards the “temple” as the crowds grew, both streaming ahead of us as well as following behind. I absolutely wanted to be enlightened- about what was going on. I reflected on our mission; we already had attracted too many people to be able to single out any leaders. It seemed the whole colony was following this “Master”, and was pushing us towards an inevitable end. There wasn’t much eight troopers could do without causing panic, so we were simply along for the ride.

I declined four separate offers to spend an evening of prayer and consultation with Twi’leks before the Administration building appeared on the horizon, rising above the rest of the buildings, just as the Rodian girl said, where all streets converged.

“That’s our target. Once we secure the building, we can call the ISB in to tap into the archives. Rama, are you getting any EM readings yet?”

She waved away a pushy Dowutin man who was trying to give her a flower necklace. “Give me a sec... I’m not going to try to set up properly in this crowd, but I can check my binocs.” She took them out, “accidentally” elbowing a teenager who was trying to press a prayer sheet into her hands, then gasped. “It’s the only building in the settlement with any kind of electricity. And it’s very, very active.”

I took the binocs from her and motioned for her to keep an eye on the crowd, which had begun to grow bored and was streaming towards the temple. “Looks like we’ve got no chance at a quiet arrival.” Looking through, I saw exactly what she did; it was the only building we could see that was lighting up with electricity. Its comms dish seemed active, too. “Radio out to Aurek and Cresh, let them know about the situation and to expect... I don’t even know. Whatever this is, at the temple. I mean, the administration building. Sithspawn, they’re starting to get in my head.”

We continued another half kilometer or so along the path, leading to the very front of the pyramid-shaped administration building. Surrounding it was what could only be described as a serene city park; fruit trees decorated a grassy lawn encircling its obsidian base, verdant berry bushes hedged pedestrian walkways, and a vast, sparkling lake stretched out behind, commanding the horizon. It was idyllic, but efficient and functional; all of the plants here had a purpose, and were clearly descendents of the original crops that were sent with the colony. The radio crackled.

“Captain Otooiee, this is Battalion Commander Grayson. You are to secure the building immediately.”

“Yes sir,” I replied, then switched to team-only comms. “We’re not waiting for Aurek and Cresh, we’re moving in now. We’re going to head to the communications control center. Hopefully they’ve still got an active elevator. And Thurm, that handkerchief wasn’t given to by that Chiss because she found you attractive. She can’t even see you under your helmet, so stop daydreaming.”

The interior building looked like your standard Imperial outpost, if it wasn’t for the legions of villagers- mostly wearing muted colors and barefoot-milling around. Some had formed a circle and were chanting; the contrast of beeswax candles to Imperial technology was starting, a little charming, and thoroughly concerning. I’d heard that the pilots of the ISDII Challenge acted like a commune from Admiral Marenta, but it wasn’t until now that I’d really been able to picture it. I wondered if they burned the same herbs in the hallway as the incense that I smelled here, outside of the security checkpoint, where there was a complete lack of security guards.

We made our way past the turnstiles and metal detectors, which beeped a few times, bothering nobody except for my team. The chants, prayers, and songs grew louder as we made our way to the elevator, which was surrounded by offerings; lit candles shined upon vegetables, bread, honey, jams, and glass bottles. We pressed the “up” button, and the room went silent. The Rodian girl walked up to us, eyes wide.

“The master... you’re actually going to try to see him?” Her mouth was agape. “He’s only let one person up in... as long as I’ve been following him. That’s...” She paused, and counted on her fingers. “At least eight years.”

“Yes,” I replied, “we have something very important to talk to him about. Why don’t you go and continue your prayers?”

She nodded and skipped back to one of the circles.

The elevator dinged, and a pair of transparisteel doors slid open, revealing a drab interior and a quiet Jizz tune. “Hans, Blutt, Yori, and Domas, you stay outside and make sure nothing follows us. I’ll take Rama, Orin, and Therrz’jut with me.” After affirmative confirmations, the four of us stepped inside, and waited as the elevator rose to the top.

“What should we expect?” asked Rama.

“A priest? A prophet? A scam artist? No clue,” I replied. “I think whatever it is, it’s dangerous if it’s turned the entire colony into zealots. I don’t think it’s physical danger, though, we just need to stay on our toes. Battalion Commander thinks it’s safe enough.”

Therrz’jut scoffed. “They don’t even know what’s down here.”

We rode the rest of the way in silence. I double-checked that my blaster was on stun, a careful finger on the guard next to the trigger. The semi-transparent door chimed and then opened, revealing a sunset view over a lake, golden light spilling across a black tile floor. In the center of the room was a circular table, while the walls were lined with computer banks.

“Welcome, my children,” came a voice from the center of the room. I looked, and saw nothing. Rama instinctively took out her binocs and scanned for heat. “Nothing,” she whispered.

I stepped out of the elevator. “Who are you? Where are you?”

“I am everywhere. Come, sit at my table, and be enlightened,” came the disembodied response. “I am the voice of the Kilji Illumine. The leader of the Illumine Kilhorde, the Enlightened One. We spread our message throughout the galaxy; you have made your way here from far away. Rejoice in our message!”

I racked my brain, trying to think of if I'd heard the name before. I came up with nothing. While I believed in the Force, I wasn't much for religion. I gestured to the other troopers to sit down; we had nothing else to do. We could at least take our helmets off and get out of the recycled air. And, maybe drink some of the wine I snagged on the way to the elevator. I took my helmet off, leaned back, put my boots on the table, and took a swig.

“Okay, well, I'm Captain Jesh Otooiee. You can call me Tooie. And you are?”

“Inquisitor Honsou Kessen,” he replied, materializing from the shadows. “Kindly remove your dusty boots from my freshly polished table.”