

## Zaryan's Bounty

31 ABY

The moon's surface was carved and creviced by explosives, latticed with hovertrains overburdened with mined material, and smothered in smoke from countless processing refineries, but the mundane logistics and strategic priorities could be ignored for a moment against the unfolding vista from the minister's window. His home planet, Tusorix, hung low and large against the horizon of its second moon, Zaryan. The stunning visual graced the otherwise-desolate mining wasteland daily, and Imperial-class Star Destroyers orbiting Tusorix were visible as small specs of reflected prismatic light glittering on the horizon.

Night was sweeping its darkening hand westward across Tusorix, city lights winking to life as the planet's orbit drew the line of dusk forward. Watching this transition from his desk was the Minister of Resources. His Zaryan office was more ornate than the one on the main world since he spent more time here than planetside. It was a sacrifice he made willingly in light of his duties. What constantly amazed him, after his thirteen years in service, was the sheer variety of this moon's offerings. Zaryan was incredibly wealthy in metal deposits. These deposits were of such great variety in size, type, and quality that Zaryan's spoils had long served Tusorix as a thriving economic asset. Rivers of neuranium, osmium, platinum, diatium, and vanadium ran just under the surface of the moon, and, even after mining these resources for hundreds of years, there were still untapped sectors.

The Minister sat back in his hoverchair, still facing his sweeping windows, watching his homeworld lower itself beneath his domain. This moment's peace was interrupted by a buzz from the desk behind him. With a sardonic shift of a brow, he slowly spun the chair back around and clicked the flashing comm button.

"What is it?"

"Minister. The mining chief. He says it's urgent," a female voice answered.

He sighed. *No peace on this rock*, he thought. "Send him in."

The door opened, and an exceptionally large man strode through. He looked like he was born for his work: dark thick hair covered his face and exposed arms. His large stature and equally large width gave him an almost comical gait, and his skin was so darkened by grime he looked made of the rock he moved. His calloused palms dwarfed the datapad he held.

"Minister Rtopi," the miner said, stopping before the desk with a brief dip of his head. He seemed slightly out of breath: excited or panicked.

"Chief Nerea. What causes you to be here this... tranquil evening?" The Minister might have been more rude if it was anyone else, but Nerea was a close acquaintance and thus partially forgiven.

"A new metal was just discovered, sir. A small deposit that we haven't fully mapped yet, but it's more than large enough to warrant our focus. Centered around sector K13, and deep enough that we hadn't caught it with scanners until now," he reported, reading off the datapad.

Minister Rtopi straightened in his chair, his thoughts of the setting planet long vanished, "New to us or to the galaxy?"

"New to Zaryan, sir, but rare elsewhere."

"Spit it out, Ner."

"Rhodium, sir. A metal for building extremely strong ship hulls and —"

Rtopi interrupted, his voice humming with amazement. "Ship hulls and weaponry of unrivaled strength, protection, and unique coloration. Moreover, capable of remarkable results when used as an

alloy: losing almost none of its properties even when mixed with more standard materials.” He paused and chuckled, “Yes. I know it, and very valuable on the galactic market even in small quantities.” His eyes began to wander as he mentally perused imaginary charts, illustrated figures of prospective riches and ran figures on the potential boost this might give the economy of Tusorix.

Nerea nodded. “Can I give the order to start mining and refining?”

Rtopi nodded back sharply, a hand snapping up as he pointed warningly at Nerea, “Yes. But carefully. Don’t waste a single kilo. I’ll notify the First Minister of this news.”

Nerea bowed deferentially and strode out as Rtopi dimmed his windows and lights. He flicked on his holotransmitter and dialed up the First Minister.

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The pilots of Rho Squadron had commandeered one of the sim pod rooms aboard the ISDII *Warrior*. The twelve were scattered between various activities including flight practice, duels, and socializing between turns in the pods. Giant screens above each pod displayed the scenarios inside: some pilots battled freighters and frigates in their TIE Avengers while others dodged through explosions and minefields in combat against the pilot in the pod beside him.

Three pilots, Squadron Commander Alexandre Morgan, Executive Officer Adom Wietu, and Flight Leader Westric Davalorn, sat to the side talking in slightly hushed tones.

“Look at them,” Davalorn said, “Flying like experts. Putting in honest work. They are taking this competition very seriously.”

Wietu nodded, “Between this and the other challenges Command assigned us, it’s looking like we are going to complete them all.”

Morgan frowned and sighed, “This is a predicament though. Last year, with our success in this same competition, we earned our Avengers, but Command doesn’t have anything else better for us now. It seems a shame to walk away from this empty-handed after all the effort the squadron’s put forward.”

A shout came from across the room accompanied by raucous laughter, “Fr0Zen! You’ve been challenged!”

Wietu shot the other two leaders an apologetic grin, “To be continued?” Heaving himself up, he trotted over to a pair of sim pods where Lieutenant Kamaria stood, a mix of faked, smug confidence and amusement written on her face. Even from Morgan and Davalorn’s seats in the back of the room, they could see Wietu’s eyes playfully roll as he tugged on his gray-decaled helmet and climbed into one of the empty pods. Kamaria threw on her artistically decorated helmet, the pitch black crisscrossed with fascinating red patterns, and clambered into the one right next to him. Another pilot started their simulation, and both of them in TIE Avengers began their face-off.

Westric turned away from watching the screen and shrugged, “It’s a dilemma. I don’t think we can just end this and have nothing to commemorate it.” Rubbing his chin he gave a deep grunt, “Well, regardless of any reward, Rho will see it through to the end, and perhaps some opportunity will present itself. Hard to say, after all, what Command might have up its sleeve.”

Morgan sighed again, dropping his chin into one hand, “I suppose so. Let’s see how it pans out.”

They both turned back to watch the showdown, joining in the hooting, hollering, and cheering that had unanimously turned against Wietu in favor of the upstart challenger, no matter how doomed they knew her bid to beat him was.

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Rtopi was stunned, “You want to what?”

The miniaturized hologram version of the First Minister frowned, blue mouth turned over in frustration, “Don’t make me repeat myself just because your ears refuse to hear anything besides the click of credit chips, Rtopi.”

Rtopi’s confusion battled with his mind, a visual tableau that played through shock, disbelief, and, finally, horror, “Opiff, sir, I really don’t think that that is the best course of action. We don’t have an excess of this rhodium, so we need to maximize our earnings for the sake of our economy - our people. Of course, I understand the motive for your generosity, sir, and it is well-founded, but, surely, this metal can do more good for our planet than this occupying force.”

First Minister Opiff glared, eyes piercing even over the far distance, “Watch your tongue, Rtopi. Saviors. They are saviors. Saviors who have enough firepower to level our cities. What the kriff would you do with an economy then? Not to mention the devastation to Tusorix such a result would entail.”

Rtopi began to speak again but was cut off by the lift of a holo hand as Opiff continued, “I’m not saying we give it all to the Emperor’s Hammer. Your point is well understood. I’m saying we give *some*. This and their ship repairs is our way to thank them for their efforts against the Ishtari.” He laughed, not without bitterness, “Without them, we wouldn’t have lasted long enough to find this rho-whatever-it-is under the moon’s surface.”

Rtopi sighed, shoulders slumping as he pinched the bridge of his nose. He had known his superior long enough that he knew there was no argument he could offer that would dissuade the First Minister from this course. Breathing in deeply, Rtopi squared his shoulders and looked up slowly, his agreement coming out with a defeated sigh, “Yes, First Minister. I’ll set aside some for them.”

“Half.”

Rtopi almost shouted, his voice momentarily hitting a pitch that made it crack, “Half?”

“If I have to repeat myself one more time, you’ll be spaced on our way to the fleet to deliver it *all*. Give them half. That’s enough to make an alloy to coat a squadron of twelve, with some leftover for repairs, no? I’m sure whichever squadron is granted the metal won’t be needing extra. Those pilots, they fly more expertly than anything I’ve ever seen.”

Rtopi clenched his jaw and hoped that it wasn’t visible on the hologram as he choked out, “That would be about right.”

“Then see to it that it is done faultlessly, Minister Rtopi,” Opiff’s tone was icy, the implied threat only thinly veiled with a perfunctory smile, “Brole will be joining you soon. He will... ensure that you are conducting this business as I’ve asked - including helping the engineers of the Emperor’s Hammer effectively utilize this new metal. That will be all, Rtopi.”

Opiff cut the holotransmitter signal, leaving Rtopi alone in his darkened office with a threatening migraine. *He takes my autonomy and gives me a babysitter*, he thought. *All in the name of appeasing this military force?* His resigned sigh followed that thought. There was no choice to be made now. The Emperor’s Hammer would have their metal, and he would simply have to maximize profit on the half left to Tusorix.

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A low-rank officer walked up to Major Lorner during her meal break, catching her with a large mouthful of whatever monstrous conglomeration of nutrients had been labeled ‘lunch’ that day. The officer was holding a datapad that he placed in front of Lorner.

“Captain, this just came in from planetside. A message for you.”

Lorner swallowed, grimacing at the texture of the gruel amalgamation, and nodded. Clearing her throat, she glanced at the officer’s rank plaque while picking up the pad, “Thank you, Lieutenant.”

The lieutenant saluted and walked away, leaving Lorner to her reading.

*To the Tusorixian - Emperor's Hammer Liaison, Major Lorner  
Re: Ship Opportunity*

Her eyebrows lifted and lunch was pushed further away as she continued to read, scrolling a little faster now that her interest was piqued.

*From Chief of Ministerial Engineers Hashel Brole*

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*Esteemed Ma'am,*

*I have been given the great honor to present to the Emperor's Hammer a gift from First Minister Opiff. We recently uncovered rhodium on our mining moon and felt compelled to, in a gesture of gratitude and thanks, offer a portion of it to our saviors.*

*Even though the vein uncovered is small, Opiff believes it correct to offer half of what we refine to you, as well as furnishing myself as an advisor on how to deal with this metal. He believes that this amount is enough to establish a squadron of twelve ships with a special coating of a rhodium alloy. In addition, we're pleased to offer our own expertise in the creation of a new craft as a joint effort that merges the aesthetic of the venerable TIE fighter line with our own Tusorixian tradition.*

*If this is found agreeable, please reply to this missive so we may begin to make preparations.*

*Cordially,*

*CME Brole*

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Lorner was stunned at the prospect, her lackluster lunch forgotten entirely as she skimmed over the message once again. A new TIE, jointly designed, with a new alloy variation? *Command will be elated*, she thought. It's only on looking up that she's reminded of the gritty, tasteless mush masquerading as lunch. Wrinkling her nose, she breathed in deeply and pulled the tray close, scarfing down the rest of her food like it was a hurdle to be cleared and not a meal. Racking her tray quickly, she grabbed the datapad and half ran to her office. She needed to contact the Fleet Commander with this news.

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Aboard the ISDII *Warrior*, the sounds of metal crackling and sizzling as new welds were fashioned penetrated through the transparisteel window above the engineering laboratory. The people in the observation room, a mix of Tusorixian officials and Emperor's Hammer officers, monitored the production of the new joint effort craft. In the lab below, an officer collected a datapad and a piece of shiny white and silver metal before climbing the stairs to the observation room. Offering the two items to Major Lorner, he took a step back and stood at attention near the door. The hunk of metal Lorner passed off to Brole who examined it carefully.

"It looks like," Lorner commented thoughtfully, skimming the datapad as she scrolled through the data readout, "the engineers have finally found a perfect alloy. It's taken some experimentation, but it seems they've found the ideal quantities at which the rhodium and quadanium steel can mix while not compromising the attributes of either. The rhodium color is obviously preserved, and it loses almost none of its energy-dissipating or heat-resistant abilities. However, the alloy uses only a little rhodium thus preserving overall weight and power calculations in regards to engine, payload, etc. The strength of the

hull to sustained fire or heat damage will be so incomparable to standard TIE hulls, they promise here, and I quote, ‘if you want to forgo shields, this craft will still be more survivable than the average shielded TIE Defender.’”

Brole raised his eyebrows, an impressed smile curling his lips as he handed the rhodium alloy to the curious officer on his left, “And now with the metal decided, I suppose it’s time to design the real ship.”

Lorner approached the lab’s presentation holotable and keyed it on. “We’ve selected a squadron to fly these craft already - for a couple of reasons. They specialize in interceptor tactics, so we’ve searched our archives for suitable ships for our engineers to start from.”

She clicked a button that pulled up a TIE Advanced model projection, “This is what the squadron currently flies: high-tech interceptor models, a technical upgrade from their previous TIE Interceptors.” With another tap, an Interceptor model replaced the TIE Advanced.

Glancing up at the gathered officials, Lorner lifted a brow and smiled, “However, in our databases, we found this alternate version of the Interceptor.” With a final key tap, the displayed Interceptor model grew small protrusions off each wing, stabilizing fins that distinguished it from the standard Interceptor. “This is the Royal Guard model.”

Brole turned to his fellow Tusorixian delegates, a brief hushed conversation following the Lorner’s presentation. Turning back to Lorner a moment later with a small nod to one of his colleagues, he stepped forward, “Funny enough, Major, you’ve gotten oddly close to a craft my team has already prepared for consideration.” Plugging his own chip into the holotable, a primitive seafaring ship materialized, with multiple outrigger sails in complimentary triangular patterns. A newer and sleeker ship flashed up, its sails still in the same shape, followed by another, and another. The images began to blur together, hulls blending into amorphous evolving variations but the wing structure remained stagnant.

“This wing structure is characteristic of Tusorixian craft, as you can surmise from the obvious pattern,” Brole commented as the images continued to flip by. “We researched your own craft and saw the TIE Interceptor with its similar wing form to our traditional ships. So, we designed our own craft to meet the Imperial aesthetic while more closely matching traditional Tusorixian designs.” The blur came to a halt on one ship. Brightly colored from rhodium plating, a modified TIE Interceptor shone in the hologram. Each of the four energy-collecting wings had a slightly smaller extra beside it, with a roughly hundred-and-thirty-degree angle between the two. It was a Royal Guard TIE, but the winglets were replaced with nearly-properly sized wings that matched the Tusorixian pattern.

“We call it the TIE Rhodium.”

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The pilots of Rho Squadron stood at rigid attention with boots polished, flight suits crisp and gleaming helmets held at their sides. The squadron modeled Imperial rigidity and self-command to the assembled crowd. This was not the first Rho had been informed of the new TIEs, but it was, finally, time to officially unveil them.

All eyes were on the podium where Grand Admiral Rapier stood finishing his speech. “It is not without careful consideration...”

Rapier paused at this moment and looked over the crowd as he gave a slow nod, “That we present to one squadron an opportunity the others do not get.”

At the back of the stage above and behind both Rapier and Rho Squadron, a larger-than-life hologram of the finalized TIE Rhodium spun slowly. Turning himself minutely towards the display,

Rapier gestured with a grand sweep of his hand, “But this TIE, the TIE Rhodium, was made for Rho Squadron and was designed with their skills and talents in mind.”

The Grand Admiral paused again, letting the echo of these last words settle on the crowd. A small, satisfied smile curled his lips a moment before he continued, “And, in recognition of their exceptional performance in the internal Squadron ReMobilization competition, it is my great honor to formally present Rho Squadron with their new TIE craft.” Rapier motioned with a sweeping wave of his arm to the gleaming, silver-coated TIEs that flanked the crowd.

Turning towards the squadron he inclined his head with a sharp nod adding, “May they carry you swiftly to victory.” The crowd exploded with applause and whooping cheers.

Rho Squadron seemed to stand all the taller having their achievement recognized in such an extraordinary fashion. Their broad smiles spilled into whispers between them as they eased out of perfect rigidity. Some had colorful expletives to describe the new TIEs while others were content to hand down a joke about the long-winded speech.

Lieutenant Commander Maston Dane leaned to his right and chuckled as he whispered to Davalorn, “I just hope they included the damn cup holders for us. They are the one thing I asked for!”