

LCM Sylas Pitt
Firebird Squadron
The Challenge

Hoist the Colours

In collaboration with LCM Xylo Pethtel's "Battle of Xiros Island"

Sylas laid on his back, drenched with salty sea water, staring up at the blazing sun above them. Shifting around, he could feel every bone and muscle in his body screaming in agony. He was able to roll onto his side, then on his belly. Shifting his arms next to him, he stood, groaning and coughing. He looked around, feeling dizzy and disoriented, his vision was a blur, hearing the waves lap on the shore behind him. Looking to his right, he sees Badkid312, laying facedown on the sand. Sylas slowly and painfully crawled over to his comrade, sending a silent prayer to whomever cared enough to listen. As he got closer, he heard Badkid312 begin to cough, and he breathed a ragged sigh of relief. He reached over and helped his comrade over onto his back, who groaned in painful protest. Sylas helped him sit up, holding his back and letting him breathe.

"You alright kid? You scared me there," Sylas said as his eyes did a quick scan of the beach, spotting one other body on the shore. *Shit*, he thought to himself.

"Are we really alive?" Asked a dazed Badkid312, looking around as his vision slowly cleared.

"Unfortunately," responded Sylas. "Stay here, I'm gonna go check if this guy is alright," he said as he stood up, shakily regaining his strength. He walked over to the body, seeing it begin to shift as he got closer. He kneeled and checked their vitals, noticing it was Lieutenant Commander Xylo Pethtel from Eagle Squadron. Xylo groaned as he opened his eyes, looking up at Sylas.

"Glad to see you made it, Lieutenant Commander," Sylas said as he helped Xylo up to a sitting position. Xylo groaned again, coughing a little. Just as he sat up straight, the whirring of engines brought both pilot's attention upwards, seeing two blue-streaked X-Wings folding their S-Foils and coming down for a soft landing not far from them.

"Some Vacation, eh Commander," mumbled Xylo as he rubbed his head. He looked around as Sylas stood up, looking over at Badkid312, who had finally stood and was limping over to them. Sylas extended a hand down to Xylo, helping him stand. Once on his feet, Xylo did a full scan of the shore, looking for his other fallen comrades. The only thing on this beach besides the three conscious pilots and the two Eagle X-Wings was Xylo's ejected seat, and some pieces of metal debris from the fallen crafts. In the distance, a cloud of smoke could be seen bellowing above what remains of Xiros island. Reduced to rubble in a matter of minutes by their attackers, it was nearly unrecognizable.

"Did anyone else from Eagle go down?" Sylas asked, noticing Xylo scanning the scene, as Captain Graf and Lieutenant Commander Critical Hit exited their cockpits, climbing down onto the soft sand.

"Cupcake, AyePea, and SirCaleb came down too..." Xylo said, a note of dejection in his voice.

Sylas sighed softly, rubbing the back of his neck. "Sorry to hear that," he mumbled, a little lost for words. Sylas wasn't exactly the comforting type, but he understood the pain Xylo was experiencing.

Just as Sylas opened his mouth to try to find some words of comfort, Xylo launched into a sprint directly into the ocean. Confused for a moment, Sylas watched, before noticing the two bodies floating, clinging onto a piece of driftwood. Sylas sprinted after Xylo, jumping into the water with him. They swam up to the two bodies, grabbing the piece of driftwood, and pulling it back onto the shore. The strong current made it difficult, but with the two of them, they were able to get it to shore, dragging the unconscious bodies onto the sand. Graf and Critical helped the two unconscious pilots onto the sand, laying them on their backs, recognizing them as Lieutenant Commanders SirCaleb and Cupcake, respectively. Checking their vitals, a faint pulse was felt.

“Good news is they’re alive,” Graf said. Badkid312 had silently joined them, watching, and listening.

“Any bad news?” Sylas asked.

“Bad news is we don’t know if or how much water got in their—”

As if on cue, both pilots began coughing in a violent fit, prompting the other three to scramble and help them onto their sides. Both pilots coughed up almost a liter of ocean water before regaining their breath. They sat on their hands and knees, slowly regaining their breath and consciousness. The seven of them sat in silence, as Sylas looked up. The storm had dissipated, giving them a clear view of the battle going on around the planet’s orbit. Distant explosions and laser fodder decorated the cerulean sky.

“Now what?” Sylas asked, looking at Captain Graf.

“Now that the storm is gone, we need to get in contact with the *Challenge*,” the Eagle responded, as he helped SirCaleb to his feet, as Critical helped Cupcake up off the ground. “Does your communicator work?”

Sylas shook his head. “I lost mine to the sea. BK?” He asked his comrade who also shook his head. The three looked at SirCaleb and Cupcake, who checked their pockets, not finding theirs as well. He looked back at the Captain “You don’t have yours?” he asked. Graf and Critical both shook their heads.

“Our communications relay was hit during the fight,” Critical said, looking back at the two X-Wings sitting on the shore.

“Awesome...” Sylas muttered.

“Maybe the locals will have something we can use,” Cupcake suggested.

“I agree, we should contact the native heathens of this planet and request their assistance,” SirCaleb chipped in. He looked over at Xylo. “By any chance, did AyePea make it?”

Xylo sighed and shook his head, folding his arms over his chest. “No, we haven’t found his body,”

“Ah. Shame, then,” SirCaleb responded, feeling at a loss of words. The Eagles stood in silence for a moment, mourning their fallen comrade.

After a moment of silence, Sylas spoke up. “I don’t mean to be that person, but we should really think about finding someone who can help us,” he said in a soft tone, trying to be considerate. As they began to turn to walk back towards the nearest town, a strange sound of uneven wave

crashes caught their attention back to the shore. Just as they turned to look, they spotted a gasping Lieutenant AyePeaBea, breathing heavily and crawling onto the shore.

Critical and Xylo rushed over to him, helping him out of the strong current and onto the sand. Laying on his hands and knees, the Lieutenant slowly regained his breathing, standing up on his own. He was drenched, breathing a little heavily, but he was able to stand. He looked at Xylo and smiled a bit.

“Don’t look so relieved, Lieutenant Commander. Not like I would’ve allowed myself to die in such a dumb way,” he chuckled jokingly, causing him to cough a little.

Xylo shook his head and began walking back towards the rest of the squad, followed by AyePeaBea and Critical. Once regrouped, the party made its way into town, looking for any signs of survivors among the remaining rubble.

Once within the town limits, the scenery before them was nothing short of barbaric. The buildings had been bombarded to shreds, most of which left nothing more than a crisp and burnt floor, having all the walls blasted clean off. Towards the center of the town was the only building left standing. Well, standing in a sense that it still had a roof and four walls. As far as its foundation goes, they had a better chance of survival anywhere else. However, they noticed that the few survivors of this town were slowly trickling into the building, seeing as it was the only shelter left standing.

They walked inside, seeing the disheveled and somber Tusorixians. Most seemed to be farmers, who lived on the outskirts and away from the concentrated attack; Perhaps spared by nothing more than pure luck. Towards the back of the room sat what looked like political leaders, based on their clothing. The Tusorixians were an odd breed in Sylas’ eyes. Humanoids with small, rounded, bony horns above their foreheads. Standing about a head taller than the average Imperial, their skin tones were rather like humans, ranging an entire spectrum, solely based on their location. Being so close to the equator, most of the Tusorixians were tan, with some variations between certain individuals.

The party made their way to a table near the back. The Eagles sat down with a groan as Sylas and Badkid312 stood, letting them rest their feet.

“It doesn’t seem like any of them have any kind of communicator on them,” Badkid312 muttered to Sylas. “How are we going to get in contact with the *Challenge?*” Sylas understood the fear in his tone, but he knew they had to remain calm and think. He turned to the table, resting his hands on the edge, leaning forward to speak with them in a hush tone.

“We need to speak with the leaders here. Looks like the locals won’t be of much help,” He whispered to them.

Xylo stood from his seat, nodding to Graf. They both walked over to the back of the room, where the Tusorixian leaders sat in a huddle, speaking their native tongue in hush, scared tones. The two pilots glanced at each other before clearing their throats to get their attention. The Tusorixians stopped talking and turned to look at their intruders with a scowl. Upon realizing who was intruding, they all stood, taking a defensive position.

“*You are the cause of all this!*” One of them hissed in their native tongue. Thankfully, they realized their translators still worked.

“With respect,” Graf began, his tone edging on irritation with good reason, “We were victims of this onslaught just as much as you. These attackers came from *your* oceans.”

"They had not attacked in centuries!" Another protested in what sounded more like a growl. *"They kept their operations beneath the waters. We left them alone, they left us alone. But then... You and your kind arrive."*

"Perhaps," the third member chimed in, *"they thought we were collaborating with these extraterrestrials against them."*

"My thoughts exactly..." Xylo muttered, glaring at the first two politicians. Graf nudged him discreetly, giving a side eye.

"With respect, gentlemen, we need your help to communicate with our leaders," Graf continued as if these aliens weren't considering pinning the blame on him and his comrades. "Our communication has been shot and we have no way to get our surviving pilots off this planet. Any help you could give us would be repaid by the Emperor's Hammer."

The Tusorixians glared at the captain before the third responded *"Our power supplies have been blasted to rubble."*

Xylos and Graf both sighed dejectedly. "Let me get with my pilots. I'm sure we can help you get your power back online."

"We don't need your help, Imperial Scum," spit the first politician. Graf's grip on his helmet tightened, somehow being able to maintain his posture. He curtly nodded once before turning on his heels and walking back to the table. Xylo followed, giving the politicians one last glare, who went back to their conversation in a huddled whisper.

Graf set his helmet on the table as the other pilots turned their attention towards him, hoping for some good news.

"In terms of power supplies... There are none," Graf said, cutting to the chase with no hesitation.

"Which makes communication much harder," Sylas confirmed, crossing his arms over his chest. Graf nodded before continuing.

"On top of that, these... Tusorixians... Seem to think that our presence here has caused this attack," all the other six pilots naturally shot a glaring glance towards the huddled politicians. "They seem to know who these aquatic creatures are, but they don't seem too keen on speaking about them."

"So, you're telling me... We're sitting Banthas?" Cupcake asked, looking back at his Captain, who nodded somberly.

"For the time being, yes. But we should be looking into restoring power out here,"

"Why would we help them?" Lieutenant AyePeaBea asked, standing from his chair. He glanced over at the politicians who had stopped their conversation in favor of watching their guests. The pilots had not noticed that they had stopped whispering and were being heard by the rest of the mess hall.

"Because we have to," Graf began, only to be cut off by the same Lieutenant.

"They want to blame *us* for being attacked by an entity we *don't know!*" He argued with his Captain. Graf gritted his teeth.

“Keep your voice down...” He said between his teeth. The Lieutenant was having none of it, though.

“No, screw that!” He yelled. “They want to blame us when we had *nothing* to do with it! This is an enemy *they knew about* and told us *nothing*! Why would we assume—”

“We are assuming *NOTHING*,” Graf bellowed, forcing the Lieutenant to stop and listen. He looked at the other pilots before continuing. “We are part of the *Emperor’s Hammer*. We are the best pilots our organization has. We crawled our way through IWATS and blasted the New Republic back into their corner of the galaxy. We are not fighting for ourselves out here, Lieutenant,” he turned to AyePeaBea again, meeting his pained gaze. “We are fighting for all who want order and peace in this galaxy. That includes this planet. We opened communications with them, and we had hoped to welcome them into our folds. If we are to prove ourselves to these people that we are worthy allies that can aid them in their desperate time of need, we not only gain a planet, but we gain *support*. Fighting alongside them is one thing but helping to rebuild and repair is a humanitarian concept that the New Republic lacks, something we *pride* ourselves in excelling.”

Around them, the Tusorixians had stopped all private conversations to listen to these foreigners. Sylas glanced around them, seeing all their weary and fearful eyes trained on them. He could’ve sworn he saw a small glimmer of hope in one of the younglings’ eyes. He returned his attention back to the Captain.

“Without our allies, we are nothing more than fanatics stomping around our corner of the universe, playing soldier and pretend. Without systems who believe in us and our ability to bring stability, we are nothing more than an empty shell of what once was. We have to do *something*.” Graf finished, as he looked around his somber pilots. Sylas and Badkid312 shared a glance before looking back at the Eagle captain. Badkid312 bashfully raised his hand like a school kid. The other pilots looked at him with scrutinizing expressions before he spoke up.

“I have experience with power cells... I could try to help...” The shy pilot said, putting his hand back down. Graf smiled softly.

“Great, kid. That will be helpful. Anyone else?”

Before any of them could respond, a loud whirring came from outside of the mess hall. Graf and the other pilots quickly exited the building and looked up, seeing an unknown X-Wing slowly making a landing approach. Sylas squinted his eyes and was able to make out the orange streaks of Stryker’s T-70 X-Wing.

“It’s Stryker,” Sylas confirmed to the others. The tension within the party relaxed, as they watched the X-Wing touch land at the edge of the town. Sylas and Badkid312 broke into a sprint towards the craft, relieved to see their General.

Xylo stood next to Graf, smiling a bit. Graf looked at Xylo with scrutiny. “What?”

“That speech was something else, Captain.” Xylo said as the three Firebirds made their way back to them. “I knew you’d find your inner Squad Leader in there at some point.”

Graf rolled his eyes but made no comment as Stryker approached.

“Already got a transport headed towards us,” Stryker began as Graf saluted him. Stryker waved him down. “Relax, you guys have been through it. Any other stragglers?”

“We were the only ones that went down, sir,” SirCaleb responded. “Captain Graf and Critical came to our aid, but their form of communication was shot. We owe you much.”

Stryker smiled a little. “I don’t need repayment for looking out for my shipmates.” He looked at Graf again. “The battle is still raging up above. I saw your ship by the shore. Is it still operational?”

“Aside from the broken comms, it’s still flyable.”

“Good. Once we’re back up on the *Challenge*, everyone is to go directly to the med bay. Once you have gotten clearance from the medical staff, every one of you is to report to your replacement craft and follow up with your Squad leader for further instruction. Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir!” came the response from all pilots except for Graf, who simply saluted Stryker in response. Stryker turned and looked upon the horizon, seeing a transport ship from the *Challenge* skimming over the ocean waves towards their location.

“It’s not over, is it?” Stryker asked Graf in a volume only he could hear.

“Not by a long shot,” the Captain responded. “We got some fish to fry. “