

JORM NA'TREJ

EXCIDIUM



THE RAPTURE OF BATTLE

A CSP "SUBTERFUGE" FICTION

Two days ago - Teyr, Judecca

A beautiful day was coming to an end. Not that anyone still on the beach cared. Students at the university and local adults had spent the afternoon swimming in the warm ocean and the evening pillaging the nearby grocery shops. Now, at nightfall, they set up their campfires in large, flat metal bowls and hung grills above them.

Shadow Nighthunter observed them as she walked down the beach, shoes in hand, doing her best not to draw attention from the carefree youngfolk. She wasn't older than them, but she did not want to interact with them at all. How could she? These people were blind to the secret, remorseless war which was being fought right under their noses. The worst they risked here on the beach were the sniffles, while Shadow expected House Imperium troops to drop on her head any second. She knew better, of course, but that didn't make walking on the enemy's home soil any less dangerous.

She found a firepit maintained by a single man rummaging through a backpack. A full head taller than her, bronzed skin, dark cornrows barely visible between the starlight and the orange glow from below. When he withdrew his arm from the backpack, the fire reflected in it's brilliant tattoo twin on the forearm and on the pack of steaks in the belonging hand. His perpetual smile grew a notch right before she approached him.

"Jorm." She was distant. They held no particular sympathies towards each other.

"Good evening to you too, Shadow." He pulled her into a short and friendly embrace. She could barely even think about clawing out his kidneys before he released her and settled back down on his towel.

"Don't do that again", she hissed. Jorm just shrugged.

"Blend in, girl. This isn't a planning table, this is the beach. And we're just people from the town who came to relish in the local custom of a beachside barbecue after a long week at work. Speaking of... did you bring them?"

Shadow reached into her bag and produced a set of wraps, which went on the side of the grill.

Current Day, Morning - In Orbit Around Ptolomea

The orders had been received almost two days ago, and the men and women in the orbital freight depot had worked in shifts around the clock to fulfill them. Freight containers had been rerouted, loaded and prepared as instructed and were now docked with one of those ubiquitous old GR-75 freighters which ran supplies for the Imperial Navy. The only thing setting this one apart was the huge mural of a Wampa on the bow. The work force didn't think about what the Navy needed large amounts of steel and cement for, but instead pocketed their overtime and bonus pay and went home.

The freighter *Hoth* left the freight depot and went deeper into the system to a facility on Antenora, where it collected even more containers. Those had been delivered by a Navy freight shuttle just hours ago. During the flight, technicians on the *Hoth* added and adjusted

further equipment on the freight pods. Fully loaded now, the unassuming little freighter continued on its scheduled flight path to Judecca.

Two days ago - Teyr, Judecca

Rosh approached the fireplace only a few moments before Alara did. Like his subordinates, he wore casual and civilian clothing and carried a backpack. Unlike Shadow, he didn't miss a beat when Jorm extended his fist, but returned the friendly bump before he handed over his contribution to the barbecue: vegetables filled with cream cheese, and sauces. Alara thankfully picked up on the hint and echoed Jorm's greeting hug before she produced bread and drinks for the group. With the fire going and the food on the grill, the four settled down on their towels, just another group of friends to all but the most observant eyes - and those were busy at other places.

"You wonder why we are meeting here", Rosh opened quietly, "Why three of Excidium's four leaders come together on enemy territory, and with one of our flashiest members to boot." He shot a glance at Jorm.

"This is a brainstorming session. Lucyeth and I agree that Imperium's might is useless when they lack knowledge of their target. As their target is Excidium, we have to help them forgetting. And I want your input, lest we get stuck in a single mode and easily snuffed out." The Aedile looked around. Shadow to his left was almost hanging at his lips, Alara across the fire was listening with inclined head, and Jorm to his right mimicked clubbing someone over the head with his barbecue tongs before he turned the steaks.

"Right idea, Jorm, but a club won't work on their central database on the March Isles."

"There's always a club big enough", the Kiffar snorted in response and pointed at the stars above.

"What is Arch up to anyway?"

"Archangel and the Warspite can't act directly. The fleet largely stays out of this. Thankfully, or Krennel would turn his guns on everything."

"So what? I bet he can be in the way of someone. And we have a few ships of our own. Real sucker punchers. Would be a shame to forget about them now."

Rosh saw Shadow shooting Jorm an indistinguishable look before she spoke up.

"A few freighters against Imperium's main base? No matter how much you have modified them, they don't stand a chance."

"Not in a fair fight, but I don't understand those anyway. What would you do? Swim over to the March Isles, Imperium's greatest troop concentration, and kill everybody there, one by one, until you are cut down? That's just awfully ineffective."

Rosh cut their discussion short with an impatient gesture.

"Sneaking in would be the obvious and expected thing, I fear. Let's hear Jorm out. Sometimes there's something useful in all that crazy."

Jorm thought for a moment.

"Depends. What's the job, exactly?"

"Primary goal is destruction of the database and eradication of all saved knowledge they have about us", Rosh replied, "Secondary goal should suit you: as much mayhem as possible."

"Can we turn those around?"

"If you can pull them both off..."

He watched Jorm filling his paper plate with grilled goods and followed the example.

Current Day, Noon - Close to Judecca

Warrior Delak Krennel, known to everyone in the Cocytus Empire's Naval Forces as the commanding officer of the Third Flotilla or "The Old Geezer", stood over a strategic map of the Cocytus system with his brother and Katalana Tamplin, Captain of the *Indomitable*, aboard that exact ship. They were brooding over shipping routes and sensor logs, trying to identify vessels that might break cover to support Excidium forces. The fight had went... strange so far. Imperium forces had achieved successes, but the elusive House seemed not to be hindered in any capacity. Even his own Battleteam did not see much action - using Shadow Guard as field troops was wasteful in Delak's eyes, and sending them out to strike at anything less than a confirmed core member of Excidium was just as bad. He was absolutely sure that suppressing their spaceborne assets would nail the spies and criminals he had begrudgingly called brothers and sisters a short time ago down.

He just was not prepared for them.

The proximity alert on the bridge went off, just a hatch away from the trio.

"Command staff to the bridge!"

The officer of the watch spoke with an urgency that even the intercom could not distort.

Krennel rushed onto the bridge right behind Tamplin, who was faster.

"Report!", the Captain demanded.

"Ma'am, the Second Flotilla just jumped right on top of us!", one officer replied.

Krennel lost a beat or two. *The Second Flotilla is commanded by Archangel Palpatine... from Excidium. Could they be so blunt and pull two thirds of the fleet into this feud between the Houses?* His train of thought was interrupted by the comms officer.

"Ma'am, we are being hailed by the *Warspite!*"

Delak shook his head and hurried to speak before Tamplin. He was in command, he could not afford to look like a drooling idiot on the sidelines.

"Open the channel!"

The transmission turned out to be holographic and live-sized. Even though he was only represented in translucent blue, Archangel Palpatine intimidated everybody on the bridge with his sheer size and stature.

"Delak," he opened, "have you forgotten about the maneuvers?"

Krennel was taken aback. *What maneuvers?* Archangel interpreted the Warrior's expression correctly and shook his head.

"So you did forget about them. You didn't look into your schedule or orders just a single time in the past week or so."

"What the hell are you talking..." Delak started, but before he could build momentum, his brother interrupted him and passed him a compblock. Delak read over the screen twice. There were indeed scheduled maneuvers for planetary blockade and assault, along with the Grand Marshall's authorization... *Why do I not remember those!?* A quick look showed him

equal confusion on the faces of the Captain and the other officers. Archangel seemed unfazed.

“Well then, when you all forgot about those, you’ll just have to start cold. A true invader won’t give you warning either, anyway.”

And he cut the transmission with a sharp gesture. Delak cursed under his breath.

“Get me a line to Grand Marshal Oscura, NOW!”

Archangel directed his gaze to his electronic warfare officers. The briefed men flipped their switches and flooded the void with electronic junk, confusing unadjusted sensors and effectively blocking all communication in the unprepared Third Flotilla. A man in an unlabeled uniform walked up to Arch’s side.

“Did they all receive it?”

Instead of answering himself, the *Warspite*’s ruler gestured towards his leading comm officer, who promptly answered.

“Yes, Sirs, all ships in the Third have received the exchange and the data package.”

“Thanks” Arch replied, “there you have your answer, Lucyeth.”

The Quaestor of Excidium nodded in approval. None of the bridge crew knew about the true nature of the data package, which had smuggled falsified documents into the Third Flotilla’s computers and erased all traces of itself. Neither did they know that they were merely a distraction.

Two days ago - Teyr, Judecca

“I could make do with two of our ships. And a few troops. What is the time frame?”

Alara was distracted from her thoughtful meal when Jorm spoke up. She set her half empty plate aside, shook the sand off her feet, and tucked her legs under her body, leaning forward slightly while Rosh carefully considered his answer.

“I won’t lie, Imperium is coming for us. They are clawing at our network, trying unravel it thread by thread. So far, all they got was peripheral assets. A few safe houses, a few storages, a couple of informants and low-level couriers. But they’ll be at our throats on three or four days. Two if they get lucky. That’s your deadline.”

Jorm just grinned.

“When you already throw stuff my way...” Jorm looked at the two women, “I have use for our Golden Girls too.”

Current Day - Minutes Ago

Sound does not travel in space. Only light. And heat. And objects.

All of these were useless to Delak Krennel, as Archangel Palpatine’s forces drowned out every kind of comm contact and blocked courier ships and shuttles with fighters, keeping Krennel in the dark and without verification whether the maneuver orders were genuine or false, with his fleet knowing just as much. It was a noiseless, bloodless, deathless - and for one side clueless - battle being fought between two fleets which the opposing commanders

were not quite ready to escalate into a civil war yet, but the contractors supplying paint to the Imperial Navy would be set for months to come.

Hundreds of kilometers away, an obscure little GR-75 followed a flightpath that had been approved weeks ago, or so the databanks said. Nobody in any of the groundside control centers bat an eye at it, instead concentrating on guiding civilian traffic around the warship stand-off. Nobody was near or paying attention from afar, especially when the warships turned up their electronic warfare to eleven and suffocated any sensor screen within a few planetary diameters in white noise.

The Wampa painting on the prow growled silently, but fiercely all the same into the void while the freighter's lower hull split and opened. It jettisoned three groups of freight pods, a dozen each, before a large ball-shaped device in the front of the cargo bay began to rotate and pointed a short tube at the planet below. Last minute calculations were passed around among the crew, last short-range signals were sent to the drifting pods. Just as the first dozen of containers started to move towards the planet, the *Hoth* flared up her engines and repositioned itself a bit farther away from her former cargo. When the dozen hit the atmosphere and started to glow red, Captain Bort gulped down the last bit of doubt that had plagued his mind and gave the order. Beefed-up generators spun up from their usual idle state and delivered their full power for half a minute, in which the obscure little ship commanded as much energy as a small Star Destroyer, and the massive v150 ion cannon delivered fifteen blasts at the planet - towards the March Isles. The impacts of the reddish bolts were visible as small flashes even from orbit. The *Hoth* did not stay to enjoy the show which was to come, but closed up her freight doors, returned her generators to idle mode, and switched places with a fully loaded and harmless GR-75 minutes later, vanishing into the black under the cover of friendly electronic warfare and false names. Behind her, the second group of freight pods accelerated towards the planet.

Current Day - Now

The March Isles were as fortified and alert as one could expect, with the strongest shields activated and the hardest ferrocrete buildings sealed tight under the not-quite-battle in orbit. However, the strongest shields were purely ornamental to a long burst from a gun that could one-shot Imperial-class Star Destroyers. The first few bolts dispersed on the invisible wall and painted the sky blood red, but more than two thirds broke through and dispersed their charge through everything that wasn't a heavy duty isolator. Arcs of lightning danced over every surface and burned what could burn, melted what could melt, and knocked out all electricity on the base. For a minute, all was quiet. No siren disturbed the glowing ashes of man and machine on the surface. Then came the *real* first strike.

Twelve freight containers from Ptolomea, loaded with steel bars, had been filled up with ferrocrete during their time on the *Hoth*. Spare engines had been bolted to their designated rear and guided their fall from orbit through the atmosphere towards their target. The pods were glowing white hot in their multiple supersonic fall. Each of them weighed thirty tons.

Today, whatever God was on duty had twelve fists, and they all struck down on House Imperium's home.

A few kilometers above this unfolding apocalypse, powerful antigravs harvested from life pods came to life and decelerated the second wave of freight containers. These ones had been modified on the *Warspite* and held two speeder bikes and four men each. Twenty-four bikes, forty-seven soldiers in sealed armor... and Jorm Na'trej. The Kiffar sat on a bike behind his driver and peered and kept an eye on the altimeter and gravimeter. One hundred meters above ground, the pods were ripped apart by controlled explosions, and the bikes and their riders descended on their own power onto a wasteland. The soldiers activated their breathing apparatuses to protect themselves from the ash and heat, while Jorm trusted in the Force.

They landed without resistance. The twenty-four back seat riders including Jorm hopped off the bikes, which accelerated and went out to search and destroy just about anything. The soldiers on foot took their bearings and made for a ruin. Consulting stolen plans, they set up powerful explosives, and blew their way into Imperium's sub-terran bunkers through weakened walls and floors.

Jorm sprinted ahead of the group, following a path mapped by Excidium spies weeks ago. They had not yet encountered resistance, but that was only logical - the potential resistance just had the sky fall on their heads, if anybody still lived at all, they were dazed. Just as he observed this fact, the Kiffar actually came across a group of stormtroopers. He did not bother to draw his lightsaber or go for his gun, but just dropped a grenade between them as he ran through the group, propelled by powers they could not understand, let alone command. When their cries mixed with an explosion, he was already close to his target: the central databank. But not only to that.

Lexiconus Qor, Quaestor of House Imperium, was present on the base and had by what means ever deduced where the invading force would strike. Or maybe he just had luck guessing. What he did not account for: for all his power, he was not a God, and as smitten by the impact minutes ago as his few surviving men were. Had he been at full strength, he would have put up an interesting fight, but the way things were, he could barely stand - and faced one of the fastest fighters in the whole Clan. To call it a fight would have been shameless embellishment. Jorm just charged Qor with a speed most cities didn't allow speeders to maintain within their borders, slammed him into a wall, and plunged his lightsaber into the Quarren's gut. He did not stay to mutilate the Quaestor though; he had a job to do and a schedule to keep. A few more steps took him to the central servers, where he dropped his backpack and retrieved a data disc, which he promptly inserted into a drive. The upload took only a minute. He grabbed his gear and went to rejoin his team, which still advanced on his position, but stopped dead in his tracks when he spotted something - or the lack thereof.

The wall had a hole which still smoked faintly - lightsaber damage. But the floor which should have been occupied by a dead Lexiconus was suspiciously empty, save for a few empty syringes. *Damn squid... tough bugger. Ah hell, next time.*

Jorm rejoined his team without further incident and returned to the surface, sending out a handful of encrypted signals which snuck their way through the blanket of white noise. The speeder bikes returned, and the ground team climbed aboard without losses, save for a few dozen kilo of explosives. One minute later, they were speeding over the open ocean, and were picked up thirty minutes later by a two civilian repulsor barges commandeered by Shadow and Alara.

Behind them, the virus uploaded into the Imperium database did its work. Accessing emergency power and holonet receivers, the database began to copy and destroy itself - but instead of reaching the *Indomitable* or some other safe location, the data was sent to the *Warspite* and immediately dissected by specialists. Their goal was to find out what madness had turned Imperium against the Clan, and give Excidium the best tools to deal with the situation. They found it almost immediately, and bumped it up to Arch just as fast. The large Shaevalian considered the new development briefly and ordered his flotilla to retreat, leaving Delak first clueless, then shocked when news about the March Isles finally reached him, and then clueless again when Arch sent him an uncommented copy of Excidium's orders. By that time, the third group of freight pods had homed in on the Imperium database, fallen through the atmosphere, and were just then turning the island to dust with their load of heavy proton bombs.

Two Days Ago - Teyr, Judecca

The food had been finished. Their plans had been made. Their firepit had been cleaned and their junk been disposed of.

Rosh, Shadow, Alara and Jorm stood with their luggage and a bottle each. Everything had been said, save for one thing.

Rosh raised his bottle and spoke the toast quietly.

"Arise, Excidium."

The others clanked theirs against his and answered in unison.

"Arise!"

Then they dispersed into the night.