

JORM NA'TREJ

EXCIDIVM



OPERATION STARFALL: TAKE OVER THE COLONY!
A CSP FICTION

Mune Cinteroph stepped out of the dirty, nondescript Lambda-class shuttle that had served him through the past three weeks, and crossed fifty meters of the *Dark Paladin's* hangar deck to board a far more modern and impressive Upsilon type with enlarged passenger compartment. The white and light gray craft with golden trim swallowed him whole, closing its front hatch behind him - and the Stormtroopers who had guarded it until now.

The interior was mostly dim, only illuminated by fingernail-sized navigational lights. Only far to the rear of the spacious cabin, a bright spotlight wrestled a cone of brightness from the artificial dusk. The man within, regal and resplendent in his white, grey and purple dress uniform, could not be mistaken for anyone else but the Emperor.

Mune felt more than he saw the guards retreat to seats by the ramp he had just climbed. Another person approached him from the side, barely recognizable as member of Xen'mordin's Chamberlain's staff drones, and addressed him quietly.

"Sir, if you would follow me, please?"

Mune glanced at his Emperor, who seemed completely oblivious of him, and did as he was asked. The drone led him to a small refresher cell and passed him a bundle of neatly folded and pressed clothes - Mune's gala uniform, as he recognized by touch alone before he stepped into the brighter lit refresher.

A few minutes later, Mune stood at attention at the edge of the Emperor's circle of light, hoping that his hasty grooming would not be totally insufficient. That hope was shattered when the Emperor finally looked at him and sighed, though.

"Mune, Mune, this will just not do. Come here, step into the circle," Xen'mordin said as he stepped towards his System Moff and took him by the elbow, beckoning him into the center of attention. A short gesture, and a staff drone - Mune was unsure if it was the same man as before - started to tend to the Moff's appearance.

Meanwhile, the Emperor started walking circles around his subordinate, hands clasped on the small of his back, skirting the line between light and dark.

"Now, Mune" he began, "I know you will author an explicit and detailed after-action report later, but I wish to know the basics right now, before I set foot on Aesirus. Speak openly, all ears and lips aboard are sealed."

A near-imperceptible shudder under his feet and a slight change in the ambient noise told Mune that the shuttle had begun its short journey from the *Dark Paladin's* waiting position in deep space towards the Emperor's destination. Xen'mordin showed no sign of noticing either, continuing his inquiry instead.

"Just how did you manage to make the world secede from SoroSuub and petition me for membership in the Cocytus Empire? In a mere *three weeks*?"

Mune took a deep breath and began.

“Four weeks ago, when you ordered me to take Aesirus, I assessed the available forces and decided on a three-phased plan. Phase one, *The Infiltration*, was a three-pronged attack against all levels of SoroSuub’s Aesirus operation, carried out by only six members of the Clan over a week.”

He lifted a hand to count them out for the Emperor, who had stopped his pacing and faced him in quiet surprise.

“The first prong was our Trade Negotiations Delegation, consisting of my predecessor Eetherbial Zarih’Taen and Shadow Nighthunter. They landed on the planet openly and were received as guests. They spent the first few days establishing a faux trade deal and being visible.”

A second finger came up. The Emperor continued pacing.

“Prong two was made up of Blade Ta’var, who was hired by SoroSuub as a nurse-in-training with the minimal medical staff on Aesirus; and a bounty hunter whom Excidium employs as a peripheral asset. His name is Bale Andros, a Zabrak with a background in enslaved mining and demolitions. He was hired and employed as a mining engineer. Between his ability to relate to the miners and her charme, they became the working force’s darlings within days.”

The third finger joined the other two while the Emperor walked on.

“The third prong infiltrated the system aboard a SoroSuub freighter which was subsequently sabotaged and destroyed in orbit. They used the debris and an escape pod to approach one of Aesirus’ satellites and take it over, crippling the sensor net, then continue to do the same to the other rough dozen. In the end, they had total control over not only the sensors, but also interstellar communications. The team was made up of Quaestor Qor from Imperium and your former apprentice, Warrior Na’trej.”

The Emperor barked out a laugh, interrupting Mune’s report.

“Do they both still live? Did you expect them to?” Xen interjected.

“They are both alive and in one piece, although I too wonder. I had to invoke Na’trej’s status as a Dark Paladin even before they left Judecca. When I arrived at Aesirus at the beginning of the second phase, Qor approached me directly and claimed that, since his Techweaver talents got him into this situation, he’d rather lobotomize himself and pour bleach into his brain than be teamed with Jorm again. He then went on to ask every single member of the second phase to teach him something that would get him away from Jorm.”

Mune sighed.

“Those two really have problems.”

Xen laughed. Not a giggle, not a chuckle, an honest to the Force laugh and smile. It took a few moments for him to catch himself.

"I'm sorry for the interruption, Mune, but that was just too funny. Yes, they hate each other. The details behind that relationship are murky at best, but I think it started before your return, in a feud between the Houses. Lex disappeared for twenty-four hours, and when he finally was found by Stormtroopers, he killed every last one of them and locked himself in a shower for a day. To this day, he refuses to justify himself, rather incurring my wrath. I know Jorm was close by when Lex disappeared, but whenever I ask him, he breaks out in fits of drooling laughter. And all differences in power aside, I dare not enter his mind, or throw away his uses for an answer that, in the end, is trivial. But please, continue."

Mune swallowed as the Emperor continued his rounds.

"This concluded the first phase. Phase two, dubbed *The Escalation*, took place over the next two weeks. First, we brought in additional members, focusing on such who had experience with and power over wildlife. The indigenous species of carnivorous birds which was mentioned in the reports was to be our focus. We found their nests and effectively enslaved them, using them to raid SoroSuub security forces. We had found out that of Aesirus' ten thousand inhabitants, only about five hundred were actually armed security."

"The birds - we started to call them Rippers - were very effective at picking off small patrols in large numbers. We let the corpses disappear and collected their items and the occasional survivor. Between our control of long-range communication, some torture, and Na'trej's psychometric talents, we collected codes, bank accounts, relationships, intel on people... you name it. All without more than a garbled transmission going out."

"Meanwhile, we monitored and altered any communication between the planetary manager, Eyar Nep, and SoroSuub proper. Eether and Shadow, in constant negotiations with him, manipulated him and his staff into ever growing paranoia and despair when his calls for reinforcements were unanswered, the holonet was down, and the freighters started bringing the wrong items. Since foodstuffs and security equipment also suffered from dropping quality and beginning shortages, Ta'var and Andros had no problem with riling the work force to a point of near-riot. This was worsened by people like Rosh Nyine assuming the identities of security people and beating workers up or selling them overpriced foodstuffs 'from the manager's tables,' reinforcing the growing sentiment that the workers were only slaves to corporate interests. It all came down to Nep issuing martial law and trying to contain the miners to the mines."

Mune took a deep breath to order his thoughts.

"Throughout all this, Eether and Shadow presented themselves as epitomes of reason and gentleness to workers and managers alike, and as example how well non-humans could do in the Cocytus Empire, a crass difference to the Galactic Empire of old people remembered and heard stories about. Ta'var and Andros did the same in the mines, telling stories of their prior employment and replaying holovids of Papalapa Dilago going nuts on snooty journalists. Hearts

and minds of the miners quickly embraced the idea of your Empire over the oppression they felt there and then. Nep had no real choice between his ignorant superiors and his near-rioting workers other than to apply to the Cocytus Empire for help,” Mune finished this part of his tale.

“And that was a week ago,” Xen’mordin picked up the thread, “to which I reacted by sending the ‘big game hunters’ slash clan members you requested, as well as humanitarian relief and a small security force. They were received well, I suppose?”

“Indeed. The ‘hunters’ and parts of the security force set out on their own to purge the Ripper nests, which our people in the wilds ensured were found and destroyed. Attacks, both natural and ours, receded noticeably within two days, raising further questions about Nep’s and SoroSuub’s competence. Having the humanitarian efforts led by Major van Wagglehorn reinforced the positive impression of non-humans in the Empire, and the high quality supplies he brought with him almost sealed the deal for the workforce. They truly came over when he approached their chosen spokesperson - Bale Andros - and inspected the mines with him, making and receiving suggestions on safety and housing improvements.”

“Which will be a lot cheaper than fighting for the planet... correct? He didn’t promise them electrum-encrusted lavatories, did he?” Xen asked. Mune had his turn to smile and chuckle.

“No, Emperor. Personal emergency rebreathers for every worker in case of flooding - even with ten thousand of them, it won’t cost more than four million credits, including shipping. Further, we will cave flood bunkers into the tunnels, and establish a permanent security force of Stormtroopers to keep them clear of Stonespiders. The rest is a bit of color and lighting. All together... high seven digits, low eight, which will be financed through the planet’s exports.”

“I am pleased, Mune. It seems you have found your place within the Clan quickly. What are your projections for the future of Aesirus?”

“Eyar Nep has compiled evidence of SoroSuub’s neglect and sent them to the Republic authorities and his former superiors this morning, along with a note of secession, once he had your signed acceptance of Aesirus’ plea on his desk. The workers are allowed topside again, and the remaining guards have surrendered themselves to van Wagglehorn’s authority. Off-duty Imperials mingle with the locals and stoke their hopes and passions even further. I expect the Houses to be done with their sweeps and off planet within the week, and SoroSuub unable to reclaim the world due to scandal and resistance - if my guess is any good, our PR people are already at it to make the Empire morally invulnerable in this matter.”

“Indeed. Papa Di almost got his ears in a knot over the extra work,” Xen chuckled, then directed his gaze to a display which had just awakened on the wall.

“We will touch down in two minutes. Let’s get ready, shall we?”

The staff drones combed back the last strands of unruly hair, righted the collars one last time and smoothed out the slightest creases of the two men’s clothes, just to disappear seconds before the hatch went down.

Xen stepped down firmly, Mune one step behind and to the right, into the corridor through a cheering mass of people - Sullustans, Humans, a lot of different species sprinkled here and there, held at a respectful distance by Stormtroopers who, with holstered weapons and helmets under their arms, formed a double line of saluting signposts for their liege.

Xen bathed in their adoration. He smiled, he nodded to people, he went out of his way to welcome a Sullustan woman and her child - a rarity on this frontier world - into the arms of the Empire.

The big finale saw him and Eyar Nep signing Aesirus into the official Imperial Charta. And as they laid down the pen and shook hands, the shuttle activated its powerful custom holo-emitters, casting the Imperial Sigil fifty meters wide over the masses, claiming Aesirus once and for all.