**“Vae Victus”**

By Braecen Kaeth (4520)

*Always Two (Fiction Competition)*

**Present**

**Kuat Drive Yard**

**Kuat, System**

The alarm was abrasive. A high frequency wavelength that would arouse the dead. He knew that if he did not make it across the bridge, his world would cease to exist. Hellfire and damnation would burn down on him from above. *Again,* he thought bitterly. Derek Cinn had watched the throne world of the Cocytus System burn. Painfully, he watched as the orbital bombardment from the Iron Navy pummeled the surface of the planet and desolated the land. *And, perhaps, the heart of Scholae Palatinae.*

Xen’Mordin Palpatine, the Consul of the Clan, had moved to reassure each individual that the Empire – *their Empire –* lived on in each of them. The words sounded hollow to the upstart of House Excidium. He had heard similar empty promises from the one named Blade, too. She had promised them a direction of objective order – the ability to serve the Empire without becoming heinous war criminals. Her words had proved hollow, too. She was not even present when the System fell to the Grand Master’s War Leader, Dracaryis. Rumors abounded that she had abandoned them all. *To become a Jedi,* he nearly spat out loud.

 The errant thoughts and emotions proved nearly lethal. A salvo of emerald bolts of energy screamed over his shoulder. The Force beckoned him into a forward somersault that turned into a desperate leap for cover. The young man pulled the rest of his body into cover behind his momentum before he raised a hand to tussle his silky, brown hair. This day was not going as planned. He turned his comlink over in his hand to ensure it was on the correct channel, “I need backup. Sending coordinates now.”

 He was unsure if the message got through to their team’s ‘\*wild card\*’. The man whom had been assigned by the new Executor had a taciturn demeanor and was well known for working alone. All Derek knew about the Chiss male was that he had a scar down the left side of his face. Numerous other scares adorned the man, as well, but Derek had been fascinated by the veteran’s magnificent scar on his face. “Malodin,” Derek was beginning to get nervous, “did you copy my request for backup?”

 Two indistinct orbs threw through the air towards the foe in pursuit of the Knight Derek Cinn. ***Clank, clank, cla-BOOM!*** The world shattered. Fire loosed a deafening roar and the air unleashed a powerful volley of kinetic energy into the soldiers whom had been firing at Derek. Those least affected by the blast attempted an orderly retreat, but were chased by brilliant, ruby blaster bolts lancing through the distance in pairs. Onward, each step bringing two shots, came Malodin’Tater. Derek could not hear the steady ***thump-thump*** of the blasters due to the concussive blast still rattling his teeth and ears, but he saw the deadly bolts. Each one knifed through the air and found purchase in a target. Not every blast was lethal, but the rain of bolts pushed the tide back into retreat.

 Derek breathed a sigh of relief. He brought forth his lightsaber and thumbed the activation button – ***snap-hiss*** – the blade sprung to life and cast a terrible shadow in its pale, white fire. The Knight moved to flank his opponent, but could not find a direct route around their cover. The Equite, Malodin’Tater, was not perturbed by such dilemmas as corners or cover, though. He ejected the power packs to both blasters and slapped in fresh cartridges. He weighed the weapons in his hand for a brief moment then raised them in a calculating manner. The first shot pounded the wall and its trajectory died there. The next blast, though, rebounded off a thicker piece of metal several inches to the right and darted into their opponent’s formation.

 Startled, the men scattered into the awaiting silver blade of the Knight. Combined with the firepower of his ally, the duo made short work of the resistance. As Derek ran his blade from shoulder to hip of their last standing opponent, he kicked the man into a downward spiral and freed his blade. Absolute in his belief the enemy routed, he deactivated the blade. ***Pew-pew. Pew.*** The trio of bolts threaded around the form of the Knight and elicited a scream from the Journeyman of House Excidium. “Are you trying to kill me?!” He screamed incredulously.

 Malodin’Tater only nodded in the direction behind him. As Derek turned, he felt his face grow red hot with shame. He had not seen, or felt through the Force, the last individual approaching him from behind. As he eyed the handy work of his ally, he noted that the first blast had taken her in the leg. The blow had spun her down and to the right, moving her from behind Derek into the clear firing line of the grizzled veteran. He turned back towards his savior-twice-over, “Uh, thanks, I guess. We should head for the bridge. God only knows if the rest of the group made it safely.”

**12 Hours Ago**

**IMS Tipoca II**

**Deep Space**

Xen stood flanked by his most trusted advisors – Mune and Elincia – before his Imperator and his Executor. Behind them, fanned out in an array, were their most loyal lieutenants. Xen knew them all. The hulking mass of Archangel and his white, soulless eyes. The military bearing and demeanor of their oft aloof Elder, Kell Dante, his blue eyes burning with Imperial pride. The almost invisible outline of the StormRaven with her shoulder length hair pulled back. Her eyes nearly black from the anger teeming beneath the surface. In opposition, Dek Ironius stood outlined by his regal demeanor as a Military Director of Imperium. Xen let his eyes pass over each of them and several others in the room. This was a War Council and he needed his best and brightest minds available for what he had planned.

 “I have found us a suitable replacement for our lost Fleet.” He held his hands up, silencing the grousing rumbles that had erupted throughout the room. “While it will never be the *same* it will be enough. Enough to rebuild the Clan, an Empire, and a tradition worthy of our heritage as Disciples of Darth Sidious.” He turned towards his Proconsul and indicated she should begin the outline. She lacked any distinguishing scars, but her pale red skin tone adorned with a simple white skin pigmentation pattern and blazing emerald eyes stood out regardless. The power of the Dark Side coalesced about her – a constant veil to her true identity.

 The Togruta began outlining the mission parameters in a cold, scientific calculation of numbers and potential situations. It did not sound like a favorable mission in the wake of such a bitter defeat from the Grand Master. Yet, the resolve in the room was ironclad, they had not been able to fight for their homes. And this group loved a good fight. Now they were desperate to unleash their fury onto someone. Anyone. Xen had manipulated them into this situation. Normally, he would not be able to bring both Houses together in a single act short of a Great War within the Brotherhood. By forcing them to abstain from the battle for Judecca, he had saved their lives and primed them to be willing puppets for his next act. This was his moment. By his choosing.

 *Long live the Emperor,* he grinned as Elincia continued to progress through each Houses’ role in their forthcoming raid on the Kuat Drive Yards. The mission – in its simplest form – was a smash and grab. While there were many lucrative and enticing ships docked in the prestigious shipyard, they had identified a battlegroup coming out of routine repair. The ship was dated, but along with its complimentary forces would prove a valuable stepping stone in the restoration of their powerbase.

 As Elincia finished her briefing, the Grand Admiral, Mune Cinteroph, moved forward to lay out the battle plan. He would lead, along with the Senior Leadership of House Imperium, their remaining naval assets. Their objective was to create an opening for individuals from House Excidium to infiltrate the shipyard and *appropriate* their targets. As the new ships would be undermanned and running on skeleton crews, it would also be the responsibility of House Imperium to defend the outgoing vector until a jump to Lightspeed could be made.

 The staunchest defenses would be aboard the platforms defending against such raids. To ensure their success before a daring escape could begin, the Emperor had assigned his best warriors to lead assaults on these objectives: Natth, Braecen, Dakari, Eetherbiail, and Xan. They were also his most limited pilots and would prove least valuable aboard the stolen ships when the fighting was done. *Better to have them serve one purpose wholly then another half-competently,* the Emperor reasoned. They were also accomplished duelists and lacked the finesse he desired. They were as much a distraction as the Fleet would be in the initial steps of this dance.

 The real heroes would be the pilots of Imperium and the infiltrators of Excidium. He quickly started pairing individuals into tandems as he let the Force flow through him. He already knew that he would entrust their primary objective to Rasilvenaira and Archangel. They would be supported by Lucyeth and the young Derek Cinn. *Perhaps another,* he considered the puzzle before him. *Too few and I do not secure my most necessary prize. Too many, and I do not claim all of the smaller prizes.* He would need to commune with the Dark Side of the Force for his answers. He was sure the answer would be presented to him, an Elder of the Iron Throne.

**Present**

**Kuat Drive Yard**

**Kuat, System**

The bridge opened with a mechanical sterility that only silence could facilitate. Rushed, but not frantic, Rasilvenaira and Archangel poured over the antiquated systems before them in a bid to launch the flagship of the new fleet. Oft regarded a genius in the tactics of large warships, Archangel had been assigned to pilot the vessel to safety. His orders had been directly from the Consul to abandon all others and escape with this vessel should the need arise. To assist his entry, and dismissal of the ship’s security, the StormRaven had been assigned. Additionally, her affinity with droids proved useful in coaxing the automated systems online for their escape.

 Lucyeth watched from the far right – prepared to ambush would be defenders – as Malodin’Tater and Derek Cinn entered the bridge. “Officer on the bridge,” he mocked loudly. The Corsair did not miss the joke, but it was lost on the Journeyman at his side. He returned his weapon to his side and fell back into a trance – tendrils of the Force reaching outward in many directions as he became receptive to any lifeform moving in their direction.

 “What can we do to get this boat moving?” Malodin felt an internal timer screaming for their immediate departure.

 “It is *not* a *boat*,” Archangel reproached through his grinding teeth. “This is a Venator-class Destroyer. And while it may be an *antique* it is definitely not a boat.” His hands flew over the controls as he brought the final systems online and dialed up primary thrust from the engines. He watched as the system lethargically responded to his commands and the speed of the vessel began to creep slowly higher. He turned towards is companion, “How are we doing, Ras?”

 The Sith was halfway inside a terminal working diligently. A sturdy stream of curse words came from the device as she routed power from weapons to shields. Their only goal was to get the ship out of the shipyard. If they had to fight their way out, it would be a lost cause – they could not match the Imperial-class Star Destroyers for firepower or maneuverability.

 Derek stood before a sensor display and watched the battle unfold across the entire theater. Brilliantly, Mune had manipulated the enemy forces to over pursue his forces. It created a momentary window for the Venator to escape, but the hole was already collapsing. Malodin pointed towards Mune’s flagship once more and Derek noted that it was doubling back this way to interdict itself between the oncoming enemy and their newly acquired prize. “How?” he whispered.

 “I’ve heard that the Emperor can utilize a mix of telepathy and illusion to coordinate his force and deceive his opponents,” Malodin offered in response.

 “Wow,” Derek said blankly as he continued to watch their forces retreat from the space platforms towards the Victory-class Star Destroyer *Sidious.* The ships rushed across the distance, but did not have the elite speed of the Starfighters defending Kuat Drive Yards. Their demise seemed imminent until the moment Scholae Palatinae forces – led by Rhaub D’ar Aghasett and Jorm Na’trej – screened their retreat. Where enemies were once displayed on the screen, a wake of ‘kill confirmed’ icons began to appear as the pilots, assisted by the Force, decimated their rivals.

 The Journeyman nearly jumped out of his skin as a heavy hand fell on his shoulder. Xan Phraz-Etar nodded somberly at the display before them. “It is a proud day to belong to the Empire, Derek. While many will not consider this a great military victory, I believe it to be the cornerstone of a great chapter in the return of Sidious’ legacy.”

 Others Derek had not noticed, returned from the raids with Xan, nodded in agreement. He looked around with boyish wonder that only youth can provide. He drank in the details of their faces in an attempt to capture the monumental moment like a holo-vid. Their faces were burning with determination, pride, and satisfaction. What had once been a group defeated in the wake of tragedy, these servants of the Empire appeared to be ready for a fight.

 And a fight was exactly what the Grand Master and his Dark Council were going to receive.