

JORM NA'TREJ

EXCIDIVM



WALK LIKE A PIRATE

A FICTION FOR "ALWAYS TWO"

Lexiconus Qor, loyal servant to the Emperor, waited patiently for the airlock to open. He was well aware of the two people behind him, wrapped in official looking civilian garb instead of their usual dark robes. As was he.

Finally, the metal iris before him admitted the trio into a short tunnel. Just as soon as they had set foot into the tube, the iris shut and the sound of decoupling docking clamps thrummed through the structure. He flustered his tentacles in a Quarren sigh and went on.

Barring them from entry into the station proper were a half-dozen guards led by a Republic Corporal.

“Welcome to Tiranu Station,” the human greeted the group around Lex, “please state your name and the purpose of your visit.”

Lex passed a datachip to the man as he answered, which disappeared in a compblock to be checked against a register.

“Under-Factor Quol Vosh, Kiilimaar Chemicals. These are my aides, Mistress Haddov and Mister Dyne,” he introduced his companions, who also produced digital passes to be checked.

“Ah yes, you are expected for a meeting in four hours. You’re early, Under-Factor Vosh.” Lex’ tentacles imitated a shrug.

“I had to take a charter flight last-minute, and there was no option to start later since the line just squeezed us onto a pre-planned trip.”

The Corporal’s face settled on showing something between amusement and empathy.

“Ouch. Why would anyone do that?”

“Not my choice, I assure you. Some drunk idiot crashed a repulsor-loader into the shuttle reserved for this trip. His fumbling bent part of the landing gear into modern art.”

The Corporal nodded the story off and checked his compblock again.

“The schedule says that your taxi also brought a freight container?”

“That one belongs to the original customer, I think. A layover, as the pilot said”

“How long do you intend to stay?” the Corporal asked.

“Planned are eight hours, then our charter picks us up for the trip back,” Lex answered.

“Allright, Under-Factor. I advise you to stay away from Alpha and Gamma docks - security there is tight and itchy with those monster ships around. Otherwise, the non-restricted areas are free to you and your aides. Again, welcome to Tiranu Station.”

Handing back their credentials, he stepped aside and let the three visitors pass.

Well out of earshot, Lex checked his communicator, finding a short text: *Pickup as appointed, don’t dawdle.*

“We’ve got the go-ahead,” he told his companions.

The woman smiled.

“Good. You know where to find me. An hour from now?”

Lex nodded. “As agreed.”

Shadow Nighthunter waved lazily and went on her way. Rosh Nyine shrugged. "Catch you later," he told the Quarren and left.

"Yes, catch me...." Qor mumbled.

Then he picked a random electronic device in the corridor, and willed the seed of sparking corruption into it - the first of many. Unbidden, the memory of how he got here in the first place came to his mind.

The stark grey automatic doors hissed open to admit the summit's guest. The greetings exchanged were all silent, yet almost as diverse as the people occupying Sidious' war room. Grand Vizier Elinicia Rei, present as a two feet tall hologram next to the Emperor, gave the newcomer a curt nod, Grand Admiral Mune Cinteroph waved a lax salute and Aedile Alara Deathbane smiled broadly. Emperor Lexiconus Qor frowned, while Executor Braecen Kaeth bowed his head in the slightest way. The Emperor himself invited his guest to join the summit at the holo-table they had gathered around with a regal gesture of his hand.

Jorm Na'trej stepped into the room, letting the door slide shut behind his back. He made eye contact and smiled a little wider at each person in the room, with a hint of mockery for Lexiconus, hardness for Xen'mordin, and warmth for his partner Alara. No bows or gestures of submission were offered, neither were they demanded. Everybody in this room knew his or her place - and how fickle this social structure was after last years' crises and disasters.

"Thank you for coming, Jorm," Xen addressed his former apprentice, graciously overlooking the edge in the Kiffar's eyes.

"I've called you here because I want your input on our next step. I have hope that your... special experience provides us with an insight this circle lacks."

Jorm crossed his arms and looked down at the Emperor, sparing everybody else a quick glance too.

"So what'cha need, boss-man? Safecracker bombs? Smuggling routes? A slave, maybe two dozen? Or the current StarLine Luxury Cruises schedule and passenger list?"

"Close, but not quite," Xen'mordin replied. His fingers danced over a console inlaid into the holo-table's top next to his Grand Viziers' projected feet and roused the machine from its semi-slumber. Pre-compiled data danced through the air and formed into miniature starships and blocks of text.

Xen inspected the slowly rotating hologram and nodded his approval.

"These ships are potential candidates I want for our rebuilding fleet. However, acquisition of the Sidious has severely diminished Scholae's remaining funds. Hence, I authorize the Clan to steal a ship."

He looked Jorm dead in the eye.

“You will help us plan it.”

A low whistle escaped Jorm’s lips as he took in the odd dozen of options in front of him.

“Ambitious, by any standard. Already got a favorite?”

“Being the Emperor, I am quite fond of imperial designs, as you surely have noticed. Other than that, I want the biggest possible return on this investment.”

Jorm encompassed the whole room, and by extension the ship they were on with a twirl of his finger.

“Is Sidious an asset for this job?”

Xen’mordin exchanged a glance with both Elinicia and Mune. Then they shook their heads at Jorm in unison.

“No. We contemplated it, but weakened as the Clan is, our only Star Destroyer drawing notice in a raid for more ships would also draw every power within a hundred light years onto our track - the Republic, the Hutt Cartels, every regional power which maintains capital ships.”

Xen smiled sadly.

“As harsh as it is, this operation will have to happen without capital support.”

Jorm threw the Emperor’s lament out with a wave of his hand.

“More than one way to skin a Wookiee. Just gets more interesting the more alive he is.”

Then he moved to a console set opposite of Xen and started rifling through the available data.

A beaten-up ovoid freight container hung in space, weightless, motionless, in a grid of dissimilar containers. This was Tiranu Station’s layover yard, where tugs and freighters deposited cargo to be picked up by other ships after hours or days. It had hung in this place for more than an hour now, dropped off by a light freighter which had then briefly docked with the station before heading for the system’s sole habitable planet.

Suddenly, and without a sound that could carry further than its own hull, a panel on the container’s dark side folded inwards. Without the kiss of the distant sun, the opening was utterly invisible.

Five shapes slid from the container’s inner darkness into the void. Clad in black, they abandoned their vehicle and drifted over to the next. If there had been someone to observe them, he or she or maybe it would have beheld four persons in TIE flight gear without insignia, and a colossal humanoid in a hastily spraypainted suit befitting its stature.

Each of them carried a backpack, but no flames of combustion or jets of crystallizing gases could be spotted. Instead, they seemed to move exclusively by jumping off surfaces. A

hypothetical observer would also have seen that the group wasn't homogenous despite the matching attire; the colossus and one of the TIE-gear wearing figures were obviously skilled in the hostile void, while the other three were either of middling competence or outright catastrophic.

Yet, between the skilled voidsman at the front and the colossus bringing up the rear, they traversed the layover yard within minutes and took the leap towards Tiranu Station, a kilometer distant.

To any person, the view was incredible.

Tiranu Station was roughly six hundred meters across at the widest points of its symmetrical cross-shaped construction, with the beams themselves being about two hundred meters broad and thick. One of these beams was currently coupled to the spearhead-shaped bow of the *Iron Heart*, as the writing on her prow announced in glyphs a dozen meters high.

The station coupled to the warship three times its size would have looked like an abstract children's windmill made of steel if not for the other vessel docked opposite of the *Iron Heart*. Moored with her port flank towards the station, the *Swarm Lord* connected to the smaller structure through a docking tunnel attaching to her recessed docking hatch. Twice as long and only a hair thinner than the station, she was a sight to behold from above.

However, both the titanic vessels appeared oddly lifeless, yet undamaged. Closer examination only pointed out a lack of interior lighting coming from the viewports. It was enough for the five black figures drifting closer like pearls on a string to surmise the ships to be largely uncrewed and unpowered.

After what felt like an eternity, they touched down on the station's hull. Eschewing the use of their magnetized boots, they pulled themselves along antennae and other outcroppings, cautiously avoiding viewports and closing in on their target.

They did not care about the distant patrols of the Republic Navy. Neither did they care about any sensors, not since they had left their container. After all, they had allies dealing with that issue.

"Oh, for the love of any deity whom deigns to frakking listen, *not another one!*"

The technician's curse turned no heads. For the past half hour, The whole station had been on the fritz."

Doors opened and closed without anyone approaching them. Lights shorted out. Comblocks and even computer terminals overheated and started smoking, taxing the life support's ability to cycle and refresh the atmosphere.

Lexiconus smiled behind his tentacles and set the tech's diagnostic kit up to fail. The station was way too big for him to work his magic on, but over an hour of time without other issues demanding his attention had allowed him to corrupt dozens, maybe even over a hundred devices - many of them networked. His little kinks and hiccups had evidently spread just as planned, plaguing the station with a sparking cascade of electronic and mechanical failures.

At the other side of the lounge, Shadow took a long look at a Rodian technician who was working on a door. Suddenly the man cried out and jumped away from the mechanism. "We're all gonna die on this husk of a junkyard," he yelled and ran away. His colleagues and the few guests remaining in the room looked after him with consternation in their faces, then a guest exclaimed "He is right!" and followed suit.

"Under-Factor Vosh?" a voice behind Lex asked. The Quarren turned around and found a balding human, short and squat with a receding hairline.

"Lons Volker, Public Relations," he introduced himself. He glanced around the lounge, hesitating at every smoldering console and sparking door motor.

"It is our deepest regret that you find Tiranu Station in such an unprecedented state of disarray. The engineers are working like crazy, but they are concerned."

He looked at Lex with real regret.

"As much as it pains us, we must ask you to evacuate for safety's sake. Our negotiations will have to wait, I fear; until this problem is solved and prevented from ever occurring again, Tiranu won't be in any shape to reconfigure and refurbish your freighters."

Qor gave the man a baffled look.

"You are rather straightforward, Mister Volker. Other businesses would not have been so open."

Volker wrought his hands. "Tiranu Station has a reputation to uphold, and we refuse to dilute it with empty promises and shallow lies. We do hope you will return with your business, though. As a gesture of goodwill, so you don't feel booted off the station, we have recalled your charter craft to pick you up. The costs are on us, of course."

Shadow had left her corner of the lounge and joined the men in their conversation.

"What? You got that insufferable hard-head of a pilot to change his schedule? Just how much money did you offer him?!"

Volker smiled darkly.

"Standard fare, Mistress Haddov. And legal action barring his company from dealing in this system, plus an embargo by us and our closest partners, if he did not turn around and get you away from a potentially dangerous situation."

He cast another glance around while Shadow laughed and Lex imitated a smile.

"Where is Mister Dyine? Your ship will be here momentarily."

"Taking care of a biological need, I'm afraid. I will message him to meet us at the airlock. The same as we arrived on?"

Volker nodded and Lex sent a short text.

A few minutes later, they were joined by Rosh at the airlock, just in time for the docking clamps to drum their song and the iris to open. A few more meaningless pleasantries between the party and Volker later, *The Escape* separated from Tiranu Station and set course for Kiilimaar.

Aboard, still in the shipboard airlock, Lex turned to Shadow and Rosh.

“Report.”

After exchanging glances with Rosh, Shadow went first.

“I planted seeds of doubts and fears in at least fifty heads. You’ve seen the first freakouts, and I noticed a few more while we went for the airlock. The herd will soon follow as the malfunctions add up.”

Rosh rubbed his temple when it was his turn to answer. He looked tired.

“I’ve cloaked and snuck into the command center, where I remained hidden. I created illusions for the sensor officers; false contacts, ghosts, shifted coffee cups which led to caffeinated keyboards... the station is effectively blind because they are tearing apart their machinery right now, looking for the problems.”

He shrugged.

“As luck had it, the chief sensor technician asked the Republic patrols to back off the station, to reduce strain and workload on the system and better identify false echoes. The Commander backed him. The closest Republic ship is roughly ten clicks out.”

“Excellent. I believe the fruits of my own efforts have been self-evident,” Lex finished the impromptu meeting. He checked his communicator, finding no new messages - *A good sign.*

Satisfied, he opened the inner airlock and stepped into the ship proper, minding his step to not bump into the Stormtroopers and crewmen crammed inside like pillow stuffings.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, soldiers of the Empire,” he announced, “the operation continues as planned. Ready for action within the next thirty minutes!”

As the uncomfortable crowd around him shuffled through their final preparations, Lex’ mind drifted into the recent past once more.

Jorm meticulously read every holographic entry once without comment, then gave them all a second pass, occasionally checking them off against each other. Options that did not get his approval dimmed into ghostly transparent shapes and sunk down to the table’s surface where they rested, discarded but not yet forgotten. The others in the room watched quietly, speaking only in hushed whispers if at all.

With only four holographic ships left travelling the air in slow circles, Jorm hesitated. "Do you want fighters? And how many bodies can you throw at manning one of these?" he asked without looking at anyone.

Mune glanced at his sovereign, and after receiving his silent blessing, answered for the summit.

"We feel that starfighters are essential. As for crew, much can be arranged, but fewer numbers are easier."

"Gotcha," Jorm replied, and dropped a Dreadnaught-class cruiser from the remaining selection. Three ships remained arranged in two groups.

"Finalists: the Vindicator-class Arbalest in service of the Kiilimaar Home Defense Fleet and currently moored at Kuat Drive Yards for maintenance; as well as the Venator-class Swarm Lord and the Imperial-II-class Star Destroyer Iron Heart, both of the late Empire Errant."

Jorm took a drink from the water a servant had brought him earlier.

"It dissolved after the leadership went senile and their fellowship stopped believing. Nutters turned their ships over to the Republic. Peacefully, in exchange for repatriation and a chunk of money," the Kiffar summarized with acid in his voice.

"Both are moored at Tiranu Station, where they are to be disarmed and repurposed for civilian uses - or so the press says. Guess they're old, but maintained well enough. Never knew a shipwright to rebuild a ship without at least a decade of life left in the keel," he commented.

Xen's eyes caressed the miniature Iron Heart greedily.

"So you think there is a chance to get the Imperial-class...?" he let the question trail off.

"Nah," Jorm replied, "but that look on your face was priceless. We can, however," he continued before Xen could zap him for good measure, "make a play for the ImpStar and distract the guard forces of both the ships and the station, then grab the Venator. Classic Nar Shaddaa Shuffle."

He pointed at the last ship.

"Or we try that Vindicator. Intel says that one won't leave Kuat for another month though, And fwecc fweccing with fweccing Kuat. We'd need to hit it on a waystation."

Xen'mordin considered his options carefully, then he dimmed the holographic Arbalest down. She sunk to a limbo halfway between the discarded ghosts of ships and the Star Destroyers.

"Hypothetically, what do you need?" he finally asked.

Jorm shrugged. "Personal files, deck plans, schedules... a little help going through all of it. If there's a plan coming from this, a skeleton crew big enough to move the ship a few light years, and transports for it. Need a few hours to check all that stuff."

The image of Doctor Rei produced a compblock. A few moments and pressed buttons later, she looked up again.

“I have assigned you an office here on Sidious, along with access to the AI. You remember G14, don’t you?”

“Psychopathic temple computer? Yeah. Not enough booze in the galaxy to forget that one,” Jorm sneered.

“Yes, this one,” Elinicia smiled. “She has come around to our service. She will help you, better than a flesh and blood staff could.”

Xen’mordin wiped any further discussion away with a wave.

“Jorm, I expect you to use the AI. You may not like it, but time is a factor here.”

The Emperor looked at everybody in the room in turn.

“If nobody else has to say anything on the matter just discussed...,” he waited for the collected summit to decline, “You’re excused, Jorm. I expect you here tomorrow at noon, to finalize your plan.”

Jorm harrumphed something vaguely confirming, turned on his bootheel and left.

Braecen Kaeth watched the door slide shut behind his subordinate with a sour look, then turned to his Consul.

“I apologize for his tone. I knew he isn’t big on respect, but I did not expect him to outright tease you.”

Xen waved the Executor’s concerns away.

“Don’t think anything of it, Braecen. Jorm is one of my students, and one of my Dark Paladins. He wouldn’t be alive if his uses wouldn’t outweigh his manners. Besides,” Xen smiled eerily, “giving him a little leash or even a lot is the best way to keep him leashed.”

Wagglehorn shifted and shuffled in place as well as his vacuum suit allowed. It wasn’t as much the suit that bothered him, as it was the wait. Two of his comrades seemed to share his unease for one reason or another, while the other two seemed completely in control and absolutely relaxed, respectively. While their faces were obscured, their loadouts marked them for what they were.

The Forcies..., he thought.

Another minute of shuffling, eyeing the leader of the group. The man rested against the station’s outer hull like he was having a nap in the grass on an early summer day, at least how the holo-vids portrayed it. His head turned slowly and followed a light freighter which had just now undocked. Wagglehorn barely recognized its shape, just hinted at through its own position lights. It made him smile nonetheless.

The napper pushed off the station's metal skin, secured against drifting off only by a single magnetic boot. He clapped his hands, inaudible in the emptiness of space, yet he attracted the team's attention anyway. He unlocked boot's magnet and drifted over to the Lasat, grabbing the taller non-human by the shoulders and pressing his helmet against Wagglehorn's faceplate.

"As before. Ten second intervals," a faint, distorted voice buzzed through his helmet, transmitted through contact and vibration. It was the way the the leader had spoken to them since they had arrived in-system in the container, in total radio silence. The other man cast his glance 'up' and at the Venator-class destroyer hanging 'over' them. Standing on the side of the station shifted perspective in a funny way.

The leader crouched and pushed himself off the station's flank, gliding through the void as if he was born into it, aiming for the *Swarm Lord's* rear. The other men grouped up around Wagglehorn, their faces thankfully hidden behind their TIE helmets. He picked up the tallest one, took his bearings, and pushed him after the leading man after having counted to ten. He threw the other two men in the same fashion, the second Forcie going last.

Then he braced, cursed, and jumped. He came in good, with little deviation, although he had picked up an unnerving spin. Before long, he felt a gentle grasp arresting the twist, then slowing him down. *I don't know what I hate more, spinning out of control or being handled like a porcelain doll by somebody's mind!*

Finally, his feet touched metal again. He gladly engaged his magnets and took stock of the situation - and wished he hadn't. As it turned out, the group stood on the edge of a metal tube over twenty meters across - a secondary ion engine muzzle.

And then their fearless leader plunged right into the tube.

They followed, but Wagglehorn hated it. Illuminated only by a flashlight, the tube reminded him of a gun barrel during maintenance, with the distinct difference that he didn't just look, but float down its length. *Good thing I'm bringing up the rear again. Shouldn't let them see me almost wetting myself,* he thought to himself as he floated past countless coolant tubes and injector muzzles.

They went as deep as the engine would allow. Past the last circular set of injectors, set in a nest of various tubes and lines, a thick buckle of steel stood out in the flashlight's cone. It was about as tall as the Lasat.

The leader waved another man forward, one of Wagglehorn's fellow mundanes. A quick helmet-to-helmet talk set the man working on the buckle, where he found a heavily armored compblock access port. Producing fitting equipment from his leg pouches, he started slicing.

The non-human Privateer tried to calculate how he'd have to place his explosives if he was to open that thing, when the less intrusive method employed showed success. The buckle

snapped open, revealing itself to be a hatch to an airlock behind which lit up automatically. Taking a hint from a bright yellow arrow printed next to it, the slicer grabbed a handlebar at the hatch and swung inside. Artificial gravity tugged at him and straightened him out, then he was safe inside. The other men followed in quick succession.

The hatch closed and air shot into the room in a hissing Crescendo. Even before it was done, TIE helmets came off and the supporting chest pieces were discarded. Wagglehorn himself got rid of his own helmet and the clunky breathing apparatus mounted to his belt. When he looked up again, he could finally tell his comrades apart with certainty again.

Jorm's bronze skin and dark cornrows as well as Brandon's white mane were the first to catch his eye, then Reiden's blue eyes set in chiseled features with brown hair and stubble. Finally, the unkempt slicer's visage appeared behind his hands.

"Come the next Death Star, I will *not* do that *ever* again!" Chrome snarled at the Kiffar leader, who discarded the complaint with a smile and a shake of his head.

"You got us in all sneaky, right?" Jorm asked.

"Sure did," Chrome replied, "this maintenance airlock barely had any security to it. We're clear."

"Good. Everybody take five deep breaths, then we're on!"

Breaths were taken and equipment from the backpacks spread over pockets and bandoliers which had been inaccessible under the oxygen units, then the Forcies opened the inner airlock and took the lead.

Their point of entry had conveniently placed them in spitting distance to the machine bridge, nestled behind the main reactor. With the *Swarm Lord* sitting in dock at Tiranu, the reactor had been set in an idle standby mode. Two engineers and a guard kept watch over a game of Pazaak. They never finished their match between Jorm's reflexes and a few silenced bullets.

"Chrome, Brandon, your show," the Kiffar stated. While he shoved the corpses to one side, the addressed men took over two stations.

"Not much security here either. Looks like they scrubbed the imperial protocols. Idiots," Chrome reported without looking up from his console. Brandon turned his head and chimed in.

"Reactor's good to go, won't even need two minutes to go hot. Sublight engines are cool, but they can safely produce one quarter thrust by the specs - enough to get us clear."

Jorm acknowledged the quick report with a nod.

"What about comms and life support?"

In response, Chrome held up a flat hand and folded down fingers until only his erect thumb remained.

"Got it. Ship's wireless is down, and I got the docking bay's hard lines in in my hands. Ship intercom is good to go, got our commbeads in a private network. Ready when you are."

Wagglehorn took the events in quietly, keeping watch. The Forcies seemed utterly unconcerned to him. *Maybe they already know where all the guards are. Crazy magic stuff...*

The Kiffar pointed at Reiden. “Your stage, Karr.”

The human nodded calmly and joined Chrome, who pointed him to the microphone. As soon as he got the thumbs-up, Reiden started to speak.

“Tiranu, Tiranu, this is *Swarm Lord*, engine room. Do you read?”

A few seconds went by, then a crackle rose from the speaker.

“*Swarm Lord*, we read you, but it’s a really bad time. Can it wait?”

“Don’t think so, Tiranu,” Reiden replied, “what little is left of the computer’s security here just lit up like an imperial superweapon after a Rogue Squadron visit. Says that there’s a virus trying to come down the comm lines.”

The curses coming from the speaker would have made lesser men blush.

“*Swarm Lord*, that’s probably an offshoot. Something got into the station’s computer and hijacked a ride to the *Iron Heart*. It may be a prelude to something, we’re not sure.”

Reiden smiled at his companions.

“I hear you, Tiranu. We’re cutting the comm and data lines and hope for the best.”

A few more seconds of silence.

“I read you, *Swarm Lord*. The Commander agrees. Send a runner if there’s something new.”

“Copy, Tiranu. *Swarm Lord*, out.”

Chrome cut the call and subsequently the lines. He inspected his work on the screen for a moment, then he nodded.

“We’re isolated. Proceed?”

“Fwec yeah,” Jorm answered with a predatory grin.

“You know what to do. Shut the inner hatches and make dem people bounce!”

Chrome laughed and let his fingers dance over the keyboard. Wagglehorn held on to a handrail and activated his magnetic boots again, witnessing his colleagues to do the same. Chrome hesitated with his finger poised over a button and looked each of them in the eye. Then he hit it.

The world went upside down, or so it felt. The Lasat’s knuckles turned white on the handrail despite his boots giving him more than enough hold. The other mercenaries looked much like he felt, Reiden kept a stoic pazaak face, and Jorm... Jorm spun in the air, weightless, unsecured, yet obviously in control. *At least I take his laughter as a good sign.*

Chrome looked at the Kiffar with something approaching malice in his eyes and hit the button again. Gravity returned, taking its toll on everything which had floated loose. Jorm spun with catlike grace and landed on his feet. The Lasat had felt his returning weight assault his own knees and could only imagine what the sudden float and fall had done to any unprepared being, and yet there Jorm stood, completely unfazed.

“Whooooooooooooooooo! Again!”

Two more times the gravity went and returned. Two more times Jorm floated and landed safely and exhilarated. Then he brushed his errant braids back and got a grip on himself. “Right. Gotta do a job here. Chrome, Tarsus, you keep the computers under our control and the reactor ready, just as planned.”

His accent, the full vocals and rolled consonants of Huttese, was evident in full bloom, excited by his joy.

“Reiden, you have their backs. Any guard who can even still crawl down here, you off, got it? We don’t need them or the resident crew.”

The Warrior gave Jorm a short bow, while Chrome and Tarsus just gave a thumbs-up and a “Yeah, sure” respectively.

Jorm turned to the Lasat, who was rubbing his stomach.

“Waggs, we’re going for the ventral hangar. If you can hold it down that long, I promise you the second most scenic puke there is. Ain’t far.”

The Lasat cursed under his breath, but picked up his backpack anyway. As he followed the Marauder, he drew his sidearm and checked it over.

“No movement nearby. Guess the Rep’s only have mudfeet on this bucket,” Jorm commented with a glance at his partner’s weapon. ‘Waggs’ snorted derisively.

“Yeah no, that number would have screwed up even veterans. Dunno how you managed that stunt back there.”

Jorm grinned and struck a cartwheel.

“I’ve been trained as a zero-g acrobat. I was good. I never got bad.”

As he finished the sentence, they passed a cross-corridor with some persons sprawled prone. He had felt them from a long way off. A snap-hiss and three lazy swings of a yellow plasma blade later, the republican crewmen faded from his incorporeal perception.

When Jorm met Wagglehorn’s gaze, the Lasat looked startled.

“Didn’t even see them, dammit.”

Jorm pointed behind the Privateer.

“And those two?”

Lasani curses mixed with shots, ending more helpless lives.

As they continued their march, the mercenary scoffed.

“This is so damn easy.”

The Battlemaster smiled sadly.

“Yeah, a good sucker punch makes things a bit anticlimactic. On the other hand, it guarantees a payday. Oh look, here’s the hangar. Chrome, care to open the hatches?”

The distant slicer, listening over their private comm net, obliged.

“Here you go, and our guests are in position.”

When the massive steel doors protecting the hangar folded inward, the two men got a first row seat to a bottom full of stars. Yet there were two starless black voids right below them, growing as they watched. Within seconds, the hangar’s lights caught and illuminated the sleek, blackened shapes.

“There she is, and not a scratch!” Wagglehorn exclaimed proudly, pointing at an antique design. His *Escape* settled down next to Lexiconus Qor’s *Black Star*. Both ships started bleeding steam and Stormtroopers. Behind them, figures in robes and civilian garb as well as naval uniforms appeared.

“You are ready for the final phase,” Braecen Kaeth said to Jorm, not even caring to ask it as a question.

“Sure thing, boss. Bridge is that way.”

Fifteen more minutes of slaughter and plotting was all it took for the Empire’s strike team to clear out the key positions. There had been few able-bodied survivors spread throughout the ship, now completely isolated by Chrome’s lockdown and relentlessly pursued by Stormtroopers and those Palatinaeans.

Jorm stood on the command bridge crowning the starboard tower, observing the length of the ship stretching out before him when Braecen approached him.

“The course calculations are complete. Tarsus and the engineering staff we brought in have pre-heated the drives. They say we can be gone in under a minute. I have seen nothing to contradict that,” he told his subordinate.

Jorm nodded, his perpetual smile faintly reflected at him in the bridge viewport.

“You wanna give the call, boss?”

Braecen shook his head.

“This has been your show. It’s your privilege to finish it.”

Jorm grinned and clapped his hands.

“All right party people, listen up! We outta here, and *fast*. Comm, you got the disk I gave you?”

Jorm waited for the Ensign’s affirmative nod.

“Good. Blast it when we get hailed. You all know what to do, and if not, Lord Kaeth here will gladly remind you. *Cast off, and into the deep black!*”

Activity erupted. Voices chattered, buttons rattled, the reactor woke from his idle slumber and roared to life - never extinguished, but now burning like a young star again.

“We’re being hailed, sir! Replaying your message now,” the Ensign called over the commotion.

The Kiffar returned to the viewport and watched over the ship.

“Put it on the speakers.”

[Music started to blare over the bridge. Strings, drums, a longing voice.](#)

Jorm smiled almost painfully wide as the ship - for a few short hours, *his ship* - turned the stars into stripes and jumped into hyperspace.