

JORM NA'TREJ

EXCIDIVM



THUNDER AND FURY
EXCIDIVM: THE EMPTY CHALICE

Buckles snapped shut and belts pulled taut, blades sung against sheaths and energy cells clicked into sockets. A dozen hardy men and grizzled women readied for action, along with the same number of fresh-faced recruits who fought to appear calm.

Four more people sat in the lounge of *Vae Victus* and watched the hustle and bustle, an island of calm on the edge of a storm in the making. If all went well, these four would never have to break a sweat on this trip, and it showed in their lighter equipment.

A clock displayed over the table counted down the seconds and turned red.

“Jump in thirty,” one of the table’s occupants shouted into the room. The busy noise abated as the soldiers buckled down.

Those who sat closest to the transparisteel bubble making up one wall of the lounge peeked out. Twelve specks of light flickered and sped away, followed by something significantly bigger. The countdown went on with merciless, slow regularity. When it finally reached zero, the stars outside stretched into stripes and gave way for the mottled grey-blue tunnel of hyperspace travel for but a moment before returning and collapsing back into hard, white pinpoints.

Vae Victus returned to realspace at the edge of a battlefield. Before the backdrop of icy Balaeron and off the starboard bow, orange and green needles darted between grey hulls whom themselves danced in a chaotic choreography. To port, an Action-IV-class transport trimmed with red accents tried to get away from the commotion and the thick green bolts that the triangular *Excidium* spat at it from above, stripping away the shields. A single line of crystallizing gases shot from the Raider-II-class corvette and connected with the transport, ensnaring the ship in a spiderweb of lightning. A moment later, the intercom came to life.

“Ion pulse warhead successfully deployed. Target is immobile. Boarding is a go as soon as we dock. Good hunting, raiders!”

The voice belonging to *Vae Victus*’ commanding Lieutenant faded out, leaving place for the cheers and guffaws of its armed and armored passengers until their Sergeant, a veteran named Skinner, shut them up. Moments later, they had organized into three groups and took positions. The ship’s airlock connected to the *Pearl of Nardash* and off they went, guns blazing.

The four people at the table got up and followed the soldiers in their desecrated Stormtrooper gear at a more sedate speed. A Human with salt-and-pepper hair and an engineer’s toolbelt turned to his bronze-skinned companion.

“Doesn’t it irk you to go with them? With that ink, I’d have thought you at the forefront,” he commented the tattoo on the other man’s forearm.

Jorm Na’trej smiled a little wider at the comment.

“Gotta let the young birds learn to fly, or however that proverb goes. I’m just here in case the amateurs don’t get it right. Same as you, old greaser.”

The engineer chuckled.

“True enough, boss. I’ll go and have a look at the engine room then. Here’s hope they haven’t shot up something vital,” he said and went on his way. Jorm and the other two, an experienced pilot a navigator, set out to join the bridge team. A few corpses littered their path, but most of the bridge crew actually still lived - with their hands folded on their heads, carefully supervised under eight barrels and twice as many hard eyes.

“Smooth shipping,” Jorm not-quite-asked the Sergeant in command. The veteran nodded and continued to give one of the captured crewmen instructions.

“Now you will slowly enter the hyperspace coordinates I’m going to dictate you and...”

A spear of light pierced the star-spangled darkness before the *Pearl*, coming from the bright, white dot that was Caperion at this distance. Static crackled in the bridge’s speakers and drowned in three monotone, brazen blasts of thunder and fury. Jorm absently noted a record of real thunder playing under the blasts, then he recognized the new arrival - and everything else became secondary.

“Dreadnaught!”

The warning was all he got out before the mood on the *Pearl* shifted dramatically and drove warning signals up his spine.

The Meraxian closest to him suddenly lurched at Jorm, a blade appearing in his hand from seemingly nowhere.

“*For the Emperor,*” he shouted.

Jorm didn’t bother with his gun. A step, snapp, hiss, an angry hum, and the Meraxian fell to the floor in pieces. Other crewmen attacked their guards and where shot or clubbed down with extreme prejudice.

A moment of silence hit the bridge as the last crewman fell.

“Well,” Jorm broke it, “don’t think they meant *our* Emperor.”

Sergeant Skinner started to speak, but the navigator cleared his throat and interrupted. “Boss? I don’t think that’s good.” He pointed at a station labelled *Communications*. All the monitors where flashing red and displaying a targeting reticule.

“Fraaaa... *escape pods!*”

Jorm’s abbreviated order set the bridge moving. Skinner barked orders while Jorm grabbed the pilot by the arm and pointed at the Dreadnought, which whipped around and came their way.

“Pull up this wreck’s bow! Get the hull between the bailout bullets and those guns!”

Not waiting for confirmation, he cut into the operation’s general comm channel which he’d had no need for until now.

“This is Na’trej. Assuming direct control.”

He took a breath and let his message sink in for a moment. His people knew he was here mainly as observer, but that he could take over in a dire emergency. That he did it told them more than words.

“*Excidium*, come up behind the *Pearl* and ready the airlocks, we’ll come over in pods and use her hulk as cover. *Vae*, grab who you can and launch, you’ve got 15 seconds. No sitting around and getting shot. Raiders, the Sarge already told you the plan. Pickup at astern high. Go!”

He glanced out of the bridge’s viewport one last time. The Dreadnaught just slipped below the lower window frame, but massive pillars of hard light streaking towards and narrowly missing the *Pearl* bore witness of the warship’s continued presence. Jorm filed out with his soldiers, abandoning the transport to the Meraxian gunners.

The bridge escape pod was meant for six. Eleven crowded into it, chancing everything on the shortness of the trip. Jorm personally took the controls. He overrode the boost sequence and nudged the pod from its berth with a burst of its limited maneuvering thrusters, then pointed the small craft’s spherical nose at *Excidium*, half a kilometer distant. Satisfied with the course, he hit the boosters for a moment.

The pod shot away just as the *Pearl* began to tear apart.

She didn’t blow up in a singular explosion - she had too much inert mass between the Dreadnaught’s onslaught and her fuel tanks.

She disappeared the same way a log of wood disappears in an unshielded wood chipper - from end to end, in a splintering mess.

Only a quarter of a meter long and jagged, a piece of hull plating tumbled through space with the speed a localized explosion had imparted on it, as did a hundred others, both bigger and smaller. This specific fragment was special only in a single way. It hit something.

Glancing off the escape pod’s unarmored hull, the fragment left a cut half a meter long and a few fingers wide which immediately started venting a mixture of gases that up to this point had been busy sustaining life.

On the inside, orders were balked and half heard in the rush of rapidly thinning air. Jorm held his breath and shut it all out - the screams, the ruffling, the pop in his ears and the cold creeping in.

The Force was in him, keeping his body heat even and slowing the rate at which his cells started to swell and pop in the nascent vacuum. He half registered the soldiers trying to clog the tear with parts of their gear and armor, the hiss of the reserve tanks spilling atmosphere to replace the one vanishing. He forced it all into a dark corner of his mind, his pain and theirs, fear and despair, and slammed a mental door on it.

Unnaturally calm hands and otherworldly perception unified to flip, brake, and dock the pod to one of *Excidium's* forward airlocks. The hatches forced open, and the Kiffar tapped into his powers to pick up every body and shove them into the waiting arms of the corvette's crew with a wave of his hands. Jorm left last, still calm beyond reason, and jettisoned the damaged pod. "Take care of them" he tasked their rescuers, and sprinted off towards the command deck. He reached it just in time to see the stars turn into lines and yield to hyperspace again.

From all the eyes that caught his hasty entrance, only two pairs remained. They watched patiently while Jorm caught his breath and snorted out half-frozen blood. "Relinquishing direct control," he finally said, addressing the cloaked figure with ice blue eyes. The other pair, purple in a horned red face, turned away and busied themselves with the ship they oversaw.

Braecen Kaeth graced his subordinate with a slight nod. "You called it fast. We didn't even have the Dreadnaught's allegiance figured out when you sounded the retreat." Jorm's grin got incredibly skewed, an expression as close to a scoff as it ever got. "You don't grow my age in this line of work if you're not ready to beat it, y'know?"

"And that experience is exactly why the mission included an override option for you," the Quaestor replied. Jorm took a seat at the edge of the command deck to inspect his arms, completely covered in decompression bruises, and dabbed away a trickle of blood from his nose. A flicker of concentration set his body upon healing the extensive, yet light damage.

"How many made it?" The Devaronian Captain, a man who had taken the name 'Malice' to go with his new occupation, returned and answered for Braecen. "The engine room team made it out sound and whole. Their escape pod launched closest to us," he reported. "Three people from the freight team made it back to *Vae Victus* before she took off. She escaped safely. The rest got shot down in their pod." Not even Jorm could suppress a frown. "And your team... early triage gives them fifty-fifty odds. Vacuum exposure is hell. You must be hardened in some way to be so fit after that trip," the Captain concluded.

Jorm ignored the man's thinly veiled interest, seeking to understand the bigger picture instead. "What about that Dreadnaught? It bounced right on top of us. I guess the *Pearl's* crew got a signal out, but we didn't expect such a rapid reaction when we planned this." Braecen's eyes wandered towards the viewport, observing the stars return, shift, and disappear again as the *Excidium* maneuvered to break its track.

"It was the *Thunderstrike*, as expected. She just was a lot faster. Either the Meraxians always keep their hyperdrives spooled up and coordinates updated when they expect a somewhat

important delivery like the *Pearl's* purified ores, or they were tipped off,” he mused. “Both options will be thoroughly checked. What confuses me more is that they actually destroyed their own ship instead of risking our success. This kind of scorched earth approach is outright fanatical.”

“That’s the right word, boss,” Jorm supplied. “Those crewmen attacked us with little more’n bare hands as soon as they heard that warhorn. Guess Adoniram crews his ships only with folks he’s sure won’t quit.”

Braecen grimaced.

“It appears that way. We must adapt to the Meraxian practises as we must adapt to all others. Where they are thunder and fury, we will be lightning and guile,” he solemnly vowed.

“Yeah, I’m sold, boss,” Jorm replied, “but right now I’m sweat and pain.” He inspected his already fading bruises. “I’ll go get a shower and catch you later. Then we’ll scheme and plot so we don’t come out empty handed again.”

He took his leave. When he finally got to turn on the hot water and washed away the grime and aches, he left his mind to clear, his demons to fall quiet, until only one thought remained.

Fool me once, shame on me. Now I’ll be the one doing the fooling.