**“The Empty Chalice”**

By Braecen Kaeth (4520)

*Operation Sleeping Dragon: The Empty Chalice*

**Raider II-class Corvette *Excidium***

**The Outer Rim**

On the deck of the *Excidium*, flagship of the House fleet, acting commander Captain Kara Palafox responded to the hailing frequency coming from the VT-49 Decimator *Veritas.* “This is Captain Palafox,” she said into her comlink. “I await your orders, Lord Jorm.”

“Whoa! Easy with the Lordship-stuff,” he replied sheepishly. “It’s just Jorm.”

She hesitated for only a second before answering. Kara rarely communicated with the Force Users of House Excidium, but on occasion it did happen. And with the security encryption on the equipment, it was virtually impossible for anyone else to tap into the frequency. The message had to be coming from the Sith House, which meant she really was speaking to one of the Lords of the House.

“Forgive me, Just Jorm,” she apologized with a tone of amusement. “What are your orders?”

“Status Report.”

“Unchanged,” she replied, her voice sharp with military precision and efficiency. “The strike force is ready. We are awaiting your command to make the jump.”

“Engage.”

“Pardon?” she asked, so surprised that she momentarily forgot whom she was speaking to.

“You heard me, Captain,” the casual voice on the other end commanded. “It is go-time.”

The order made sense. She was just surprised that he had had the decency to ask if her fleet element was ready. It was very uncharacteristic of the Force Users she had previously worked with. Surprised or not, if a Lord of House Excidium was giving her a direct order, using official credentials, she was not about to run the risk of refusing the order over a change of policy.

“As you command, Lord Jorm,” she answered. “We will make the micro-jump to the hunting grounds now.”

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The vessels tumbled out of hyperspace into the designated zone called ‘the hunting grounds’ and began their maneuvers in accordance to the plan. The *Veritas* would signal the fleet to jump. Once they reverted to real space, the Maurauder-class Corvette would spill the X-wings from its hull. Specter Squadron would then disable the engines and defenses of their target while the Decimators of *Vanguard Flight* would support against anti-star fighter resistance. The largest ship of their fleet, *the Excidium*, would remain at the fringe of the combat to safeguard an ambush.

It worked perfectly, except that the jump had been calculated incorrectly. What should have been a precision jump into the hyperspace lane of the Medium-Freighter was nearly three kilometers behind the vessel. “Un-fwec-ing believable,” the Captain swore in disbelief. She rounded on the Navigation Officer with fire in her eyes. “What happened?”

“I-I-I’m not s-s-sure, M-m-ma’am,” he stuttered in response.

Captain Palafox drew her service revolver that hung from her right hip, lined up the barrel, and pulled the trigger. ***Bang!*** The slug thrower’s aim proved true and took the man in the temple. The proximity of the shot had enough force to throw him from his seat at his station. “You are relieved of duty, Lieutenant.”

The hailing frequency of the *Veritas* alerted Kara that Just Jorm was hailing her once again. She nodded to the Communications Officer, “Bring it up, Lieutenant. It’s time to pay the piper.” The holo-display at the front of the bridge came up to display Jorm Na’trej. “My apologies, Lord Jorm. We had a malfunction in Navigation, the faulty part has since been removed.”

“I see,” he lied coolly. “Perhaps the Executor should have me aboard *your* vessel for the next attempt.”

“Next, Sir?”

Kara had never seen the House resort to open piracy during the tenure of the previous Executor of House Excidium. She had hoped it was a misinformation campaign to hide their true target: a resource, a piece of lore, or a very important person. When Blade Ta’var had offered her the job, she had said they would *only* attack military targets – no civilians would be harmed in their actions.

“Is there going to be a problem, Captain?” A cold voice cooed from over her shoulder. The Mystic, Levi Zetta, approached from the edge of the bridge. Unlike other Kiffar, he had pale skin and messy, unkempt light brown hair. He cut an impressive figure in his black uniform with a grey overcoat as he stepped into the light.

“No, My Lord,” she quickly conceded. “I was just unaware that this sort of *business* had become common under new leadership.”

“With the destruction of Cocytus, we are surviving by doing *whatever* we have to do *whenever* we have to do it,” his voice carried a righteous tone. Levi had not joined the House until after the destruction of their previous home world, but he had taken to the cause in exchange for information about the Sith Warrior Kylex.

“W-what if I had a different suggestion?” Kara Palafox asked desperately. “A target that will be exactly where we want it, when we want… and that we have all the information for.”

Levi nodded. He liked lateral thinking. There were many ways to skin a nerf. No single way was considered the only way. “What do you have in mind, Captain?”

Jorm chuckled over the holo-transmission. “I know exactly what she has in mind. Quite the audacious thought, Captain.”

Levi looked from Jorm’s transmitted image to the Captain awaiting a response. “And that is?”

“We hit Imperium,” she said matter-of-factly.