

JORM NA'TREJ

EXCIDIVM



COLLECTIVE COLLECTED

Space. Infinite vastness. Harsh, uncaring, radiation-blasted cold vacuum sparsely littered by chunks of rock and ambitious gas clouds, on a scale that would be dismissible if not for the fact those were the only entities littering space in the first place. One of these chunks had been named Korum, unimportant even by the standards of its own kind, and yet it had attracted a cosmic partner of even lesser pedigree. This upstart asteroid masquerading as a moon was the destination of our heroes...

"I've been to the briefing same as you, so why the actual fwec are you narrating now?" Mica Vres underlined her exasperation with a punch to the back of her cousin's headrest.

"Killjoy," Jorm replied, his perpetual smile brightening to something genuine for a moment. His attention remained firmly on his ship's instruments, but Mica saw it in the faint reflection on the canopy.

"Okay, lights out," the Battlelord ordered. Mica's fingers danced over her console, shutting down nonessential systems and preparing essential ones for the same while the mottled greys and blues of hyperspace became the predominant lighting in *Blaze's* cockpit.

"Sixty seconds," her cousin announced, "everybody think quiet thoughts. Forty-five... thirty... twenty... ten... five, four, three, two, go time!"

Bright lines overtook the outside and collapsed into stars within a heartbeat. Prepared commands executed, machines shut down, and while *Blaze* cloaked herself in shadows and obscurity, the unequal cousins reached out with equally different senses.

"No tracking or targeting sensors homing in, no pings, no burst transmissions... looks clean," Mica reported the readings from the passive sensors.

"No hard feelings coming our way either," Jorm added. "There's some anxiety and apprehension, but that's likely backscatter from us and the crew. No alarmed or gleeful minds around," he concluded.

"So, not a trap?"

"Didn't say *that*. But we'll proceed."

Another countdown in the cockpit reached zero. Its three beeps heralded the arrival of almost thirty new ships. They dropped into reality like a salvo of arrows, sleek and deadly: House Excidium's Decimators of Vanguard Flight, escorted by their nameless X-Wing squadron and Vindictae Immortalis' Jailblazers.

"This is Na'trej, mission is *on*," Mica's cousin hailed the newcomers while she reawakened the ship.

"Follow the plan until it goes haywire, then call me," he ordered.

"Affirmative, Boss," someone answered on the same frequency. The Decimators formed up around Jorm's ship while the X-Wings broke up into pairs and sped ahead, seeking for resistance.

None was found. A few minutes later, the larger ships docked with various airlocks and began disgorging troops and engineers. That was the moment when the calls started.

"Squad Two, we're in. No resistance, but we have a corpse. Collective soldier, blaster marks and slash wounds, looks like."

"Squad Three. No resistance, but Zealot corpses full of holes. And they're basically naked."

"Squad Five, same here."

"Squad Two, addendum. Our corpse is almost naked too, essentially just briefs, boots, and body armor. Pardon my oversight, sir."

"Make sure they stay dead," Jorm ordered while he sat the *Blaze* down in the hangar along with the remaining Decimator and handed the controls to the backup crewmen. The scene that met Mica and him when they disembarked held up to the expectations built by the other teams.

A burly, bearded Sergeant came over to the two Kiffar. *Skinner*, Mica recognized him. *Jorm's favorite non-com*. His soldiers started to disperse, scanning corpses where they found them and delivering discreet stabs, as per Jorm's directions.

"We'll continue as ordered, Boss," he informed Jorm. "Any special orders?"

"Hold that thought," Jorm replied and touched a nearby crate.

Mica observed him withdraw into concentration. *Psychometry*, she deduced while she watched his eyes dance under half-closed lids.

Suddenly, Jorm broke out in laughter. Loud, booming, unashamed laughter completely unbecoming the situation.

"Damn, that's funny," he said to bewildered Mica and stoic Skinner once he caught his breath again.

“Sarge, keep going ahead. Collect all datapads, snatch any data storages including those bolted down, sweep them for traps and load them up. Gimme a call if something goes awry or Collie reinforcements arrive.”

He turned to his younger cousin.

“You and me will go on an adventure! A little investigation! Can’t let your police training go to waste, eh Guardian girl?”

Mica frowned at the jab. Yes, she had been a Kiffu Guardian and thus the polar opposite of what Jorm appeared to be. *Of what he really is outside of his ‘service.’* But she had torn the insignia from her armor months ago. Only stitch holes enclosing less scuffed patches of leather still hinted at their former presence.

Nonetheless, she went up to the crate to touch it as Jorm had before, and focused on the same innate ability.

“I’m no good at this,” she admitted after a minute.

“I get flashes of vague shapes and fighting, but nothing else. No colors, no faces...” she petered off and opened her eyes.

Jorm just smiled patiently, while Skinner had walked off.

“So, what does the physical evidence tell us,” she started thinking out loud.

“The corpses here in the hangar are all soldiers of Collective origin, clearly identifiable by their cybernetic and chemical modifications. Different states of augmentation suggest different rank or functions. My guess is, it’s both soldiers and Zealots, like the squads already reported,” she revisited prior observations.

“Wait. Something’s fishy.”

She slowly turned in place, taking in the whole scene, and felt her perception shift. Puzzle pieces made of corpses, blood stains, scorch marks and fallen weapons suddenly fell into place.

“They fought each other. Soldiers against Zealots. I thought that was impossible?!”

Mica directed her question at Jorm, who nodded.

“Sure shakes up some beliefs, but yeah, this was a mutiny. Now go and find the reason, coz!”

Even with the disquieting revelation of mutinous Collective assets, the way Jorm recognized her as family lured a smile onto Mica’s lips.

“Okay, let’s check around. Ideally at some place with a dataport.”

“That will not help you a lot, we’re already disassembling everything electronic,” the returning Sergeant Skinner interrupted. He presented a Collective dataslate.

“This appears to be the Commander’s log. Unencrypted.”

To Mica’s dismay, Jorm snatched it up and leafed through the entries.

“Heh. No word, Skinner, let Mica figure it out.”

“As you wish, Boss. But may I suggest checking out store room three? Looks like a last stand in there,” Skinner replied. The slightest of insolent smiles found its answer in Jorm’s mock frown.

“Also, we found these in waste disposal bins around the station,” he added and handed her a clear plastic bag. Within was a strip of fabric tarnished by a dark smear.

Mica looked closer. “That seems to be a strip of a Collective field uniform. Any analysis on the stain?”

“No, Ma’am, we don’t have that kind of equipment with us,” Skinner replied with the same smile. *I won’t get a straight answer from him*, the former Guardian thought to herself.

“Well then, let’s look at that store room,” Mica grumbled and let Skinner lead the way.

“This really was a last stand,” she concluded a few minutes later. A handful of now deceased Collective soldiers had rearranged supply crates into barricades. The floor between them and the door was littered with dead Zealots and people who might had been technicians in the past, but only stood out through their lack of augmentations now.

“Still, there’s no indication what this was about,” Mica stated.

Jorm shrugged and passes her the dataslate before wandering off to the back of the room. Confused, Mica started to read. Jorm had highlighted sections for her, titled ‘Emergency Log.’

[DAY 00]	Supply ship confirmed destroyed. Replacement shipment ordered, arrival uncertain. Standard supplies running low. Rationing in effect.
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[DAY 16]	Basic foods exhausted. Switching to emergency rations. These nutritious sludges will keep us alive and able. Resupply still uncertain.
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[DAY 23]	Basic toiletries exhausted. Ordered the repurposing of excess fabrics and materials like bedsheets. Resupply uncertain.
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[DAY 31]	Excess fabrics exhausted. Authorized the repurposing of uniforms. Resupply uncertain.
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- [DAY 33] Doctor informed me that our emergency rations have been beset by mold. Our enhanced bodies should be able to compensate, but slight chemical imbalances are possible. Resupply confirmed destroyed. Replacement uncertain.
- [DAY 36] The Zealots have created a black market for toiletries. Sent my soldiers to confiscate the materials. Resupply uncertain.
- [DAY 37] Zealots have attacked my soldiers throughout the station. Numbers disadvantageous. Will concentrate loyal forces. Resupply uncertain.
- [DAY 38] Here they come.

Mica looked up from the last entry, confusion distorting her forehead so hard the muscles there hurt while Jorm rummaged through a crate behind the dead soldiers.

“What in the hells? They mutinied, fought and died over *toiletries*?”

She shook her head in disbelief.

“Not just *any* toiletries,” her cousin replied and took her hand. In it, he placed a white, soft, cylindrical object.

“Toilet paper? *That* is what he wrote about? Then these scraps with the stains... ew!”

Mica cast the plastic bag with the soiled piece of uniform away.

“This is disgusting.”

“Sure is,” Jorm replied, “but it’s also a valuable lesson, coz.”

He pointed at the roll of toilet paper in her hand. The grin on his face was anything but pleasant.

“Civilization is four-ply.”

“But Jorm, this is two-ply...”

“Shows what we’re up against. Let’s get out of here.”

END

