Dek Rott **GONE IN 60 SECONDS**
6352

Dek Rott. He was a defeated man. He had attempted to get the artifact at any cost. He had sacrificed a ship to get it. What would the records show? He usually didn't leave a trail, but was this trail too much to decompose? And what about those who had died for this artifact? This tome of paper and fancy design would have been the death of him at some point. The thought of what he just did finally set in.

*I killed innocents for this. I...killed..innoc...*

The Duros bent onto one knee and threw up into the snow. Chunks of military rations and blue milk were almost indistinguishable from the vomit itself. Aexod, the Sadowan he had retrieved the artifact from, had stung him with his final words to him:

*You're weak. The Emperor should have killed you long ago.*It was this he had to accept. He *was* weak. And now he had placed himself in a situation of weakness. So he had a choice. Return the artifact or run away. Running would be easy. Just as he ran from his home, and his other jobs, he could run from the Emperor. It would most likely be short lived. Or he could fight and potentially die. Aexod had given him a second chance at existence. Would he squander it? The thing is, what existence is the one which squanders?

Would the Emperor sense these feelings? Or worse, would the Black Hand sense them? Dek had already thought about the scenario. In a battle for his life he feared the Black Hand more than he did the Emperor. He avoided Cyris Oscura as much as he could. The Grand Marshal was nothing to mess with. Neither was the Emperor, but something about the permanent resting ferocious, blistering face was more off putting.

In the end, Dek would do what he did best: wing it. He felt pain before, and almost never from the Emperor. If he really was a pawn then he hoped that he would not soon live out his usefulness. This artifact would show that. He lived with short term purpose now. *Give the artifact to the Emperor*.

In the distance, he saw explosions and metal flying into the air. The ship had crashed. Hopefully many of the people got out in time.

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The Duros fiddled with the sensors of the escape pod along with his cipher pad. Chances were that he wouldn't be able to call in direct help. But intercepting communications and scanning his surroundings would help. He kept outlined programs of them on the cipher pad for this exact type of situation. After around a half hour, the Mystic had set up a sensor/interceptor combination, but could only use each one separately.

He attempted a scan of his local region. A few escape pods had fallen. Safely or not, who knows? Anyways...

After a few minutes he switched to the signal interceptor. Reports of a fallen ship hit the airwaves, very little from anyone useful. Potential farmers, locals using the radio, a few unheard of languages. Dek set up an automatic receiver in this case as well. When someone would attempt to contact the signal, a binary signal would return to the user, signifying a droid response. A programmer *could* pick up on it being a false signal. Luckily with the fallen ship and the mass of escape pods the likelihood of it happening was small. *There could be 20-30 malfunctioning droids and systems coming out from that ship.* Dek had hoped that others would come to that conclusion.

Swapping between the sensors and the signal interceptor, Dek eventually came to something interesting.

"Captain....fighters...." Lots of static. He attempted to reconfigure the interception protocol.

"Staging...fighters...repeat, ov........"

Dek forwent the binary response and used the extra power to boost the interception.

"Staging area...Warhost fighters...incoming...Scholae Pala..."

Dek turned off the interceptor and immediately switched to the sensor. Scanning a bit further he saw many blips going in and out on the scanner, and they suddenly disappeared from the cipher pad map.

*Scanner block. They know someone is onto them. That is my ticket off this glorified snow dream.*

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The Duros strapped some of the cloth seating to his armor to make it look shabbier. He would use his cipher pad to send out an occasional scrambled signal when coming into contact with other signals. The storm was picking up as well. Scrambled signals would make perfect sense in this weather.

Approaching where the potential staging area was difficult. He had to occasionally avoid guards. They would be roaming differing positions. He couldn't count how many times he had to bury himself in the snow already. Lots of guards meant one thing; this was a serious area.

Upon crawling up a snow bank in the leviathaness blizzard, the Duros peered over the edge. Many squadrons of fighters and interceptors had landed here. They were guarding many of the transports before they fell. Chances are they were waiting for official orders before doing anything. Troops and pilots were scattered in a few spots, but make shift tents had been set up, probably to keep people warm and to do small time repairs and missions updates. There was also a small bathroom set up outside the tent. Dek had a few options now. Could he take out a guard and don the armor of the pilot? That might be too risky. Plus, Dek would rather avoid having half naked bodies be scene.

Were the Warhost only humans? And would all of the pilots know each other well? Maybe Dek could get by with simply being a Duros. He would have to get down there quickly enough to be considered a part of the operation. A few pilots started coming out of the tents.

*It was now or never.*

Dek got up and quickly traversed down the bank. A few pilots near had looked over. Dek had definitely hidden his lightsaber within his clothing. The pilots pulled out blasters and pointed them at Dek, "Who goes there," one of them shouted.

Dek responded, "Acolyte..." Dek looked over at the light blue tent, "...Lue. Acolyte Lue reporting for duty."

The pilot shared glances from under their helmets. One spoke up, "Neophyte Lue? We'll have to take you to our commander to prove who you are."

Dek quickly retorted, "I was told my master would be here, Master Long. If she isn't here I was told to take a fighter to the city to find her."

"Who gave you these orders?"

"Major Aexod Burgoo. We both were on the ship that fell."

"And you got out? What of the Scholaens on the ship?"

"Major Burgoo aided me every step of the way. He gave me this classified object to bring to my master."

The pilots looked at the tome casing. A person wearing a large cloak and some war medals came over, flanked on all sides by guards with large blaster rifles.

"Major," one of the pilots said. The pilots placed away their blasters and saluted. Dek Rott followed suit.

"Who is this," the Major asked inquiringly.

"Neophyte Lue from the downed ship."

"Neophyte Lue? I don't recall that name on the manifest that was given to me beforehand."

*Chances are he knows the manifest of all force users on most ships if he is that important.*One of the pilots spoke up for Dek, "He was with Major Burgoo and is the apprentice of one of the Longs."

"*Really?*" The major seemed unimpressed with this. "Someone as important as a Force user would have been known to me."

The pilots were reaching for their blasters again. Dek quickly responded, "I just need one of the fighters. My Master can explain everything when I get into contact with her."

"Which Long?" Inquired the major.

"Xia Long," Dek responded, without skipping a beat. "House Marka Ragnos."

"Well, Lue. This is your lucky day. The *Retribution* is on its way to give us back up support. You can take one of the fighters with one of our squadrons to the *Retribution* and then from their you can contact your Master."

"Major, sir," Dek pleaded, "I need to deliver this directly to her."

"You will, Lue. After we have confirmed your identity aboard the *Retribution*. You have your orders."

"Yes, sir!" The pilots spoke in unison, and Dek communicated the same.

Dek had been stuck in similar positions before. Without his cipher pad, Dek would be a lost cause. He used it a plethora of times to get him out of trouble. He would use it again. He was an excellent fighter pilot. So much that he would have to fake inexperience.

The pilots clamored through the deep snow to the Tie Interceptors. Dek went to one that looked slightly more damaged. Once inside, he heated up the engines and immediately placed the pad to a connection in the cockpit, using the same signal scrambling code as before. Except now he had delayed it to wait until they were well into the air.

The pilots started to take off, as did the Mystic.

When they reached a distant altitude just before the blizzard clouds, Dek opened some of the brank manifolds and let in some freezing air and snow, also setting off the signal breaker. Closing the manifolds he sped up again and started to veer off, attempting to show course corrections. "Lue, where are you going?" One of the pilots asked hesitantly.

"I...accidentally took in some frigid air...my steering is not working properly."

"You can't go to the city, Lue."

"I'm not trying. Besides, if I was, the city is the opposite way."

"Neophyte Lue, we are now surrounding your position with our fighters. If you don't go in the same direction, we'll shoot you down."

Dek was trapped. Sticky situation after sticky situation. He would carry on while faking the false inexperience.

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As they entered space, Dek thought about simply attempting to outfight the fighters. The *Retribution* was a Majestic-class heavy cruiser. It was now or never.

"Guys, my signal is losing out."

He almost chuckled at the fake slang he had made up.

"We're almost there, Duros."

Dek immediately pulled up on the controls and shot around full speed, firing a few shots at the ship behind him. The interceptor blew up and Dek flew through the resulting explosion. A few shots were fired at him, but his swirls and turns were too much for the fighters. *Their* inexperience was now showing.

"This is Captain Gregorius Videk of the Retribution. All fighters in formations! Destroy the enemy!"

The Scholaen knew he was probably in for it. So he ran back for the planet.

Fighters were scrambled from the *Retribution* and a ship appeared right in front of Dek from hyperspace.

*The Indomitable.*

Following it was the Third Flotilla from Clan Scholae Palatinae. Extraction team? The scrambling fighters followed Dek's ship, but Dek suddenly realized he was in a clearly marked Warhost ship on his way into battling his allies. Ships had dropped out of hyperspace behind the *Retribution*. No doubt Sadowan reinforcements.

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Dek went between dodging fire to firing down a few Warhost ships. The Imperials pilots hadn't caught on yet. Dek started into a barrel roll and at the same time ran a program on his cipher pad. It was a Cipher Agent program devised by Dek Rott for the agent program. Hopefully the signal would reach the Indomitable, if constructed properly, and the fighters could then differentiate more easily between the enemy and a friend.

*CASSSHHHHHHHH!!!!*One of the ion engines had been hit on the TIE Interceptor. Dek was struggling through the air. He pulled the cipher pad into his pocket and immediately went into full pilot mode. He grasped the controls of the ship and breathed *in....and out....in.....and out....*

*In...

Out...

In...

Out...*His mind raced. *Scholae fighter followed by Warhost. Shoot out of space. Destroyed. WH saw me. Dodge. Full around. Slight drag on the other engine. Difficult to steer left. Attempt multiple right...dodged missile...a few blasts gone.*This continued until he saw his opening. Through the in-ship communicator, "Warhost ships, on me for run to the Indomitable."

The Duros had taken the lead on a troop transport and a few fighters had followed behind him and in front of him. They were individually taking out differing ships that attempted to attack their ever growing formation. Dek set the autopilot to the hangar of the Indomitable. He got out of the seat and placed a small crack in the TIE window. He then went to the remaining ion engine and jammed a loose piece of metal he had taken from the lid from the tome holder into the reserve cell, letting some of the gas loose from the engine. The crack formed bigger and bigger.

Dek stood on the seat and leaned into it and calmed his body and his mind. He prepared for the action he was about to take and started to pulsate his blood faster. The quicker he sped it up, the better chance he would have of surviving. The crack was huge, and he was close to the hanger.

*CRASH!*The pilot window opened, and Dek shot himself out of the cockpit, the vacuum pulling him close to the hangar floor. As he came close to the breach he pulled out his blaster and fired upon the loose ion shell, and blew up the fighter in a giant explosion. The troop ship behind him flew out of control with surrounding ships doing the same. Dek could feel his blood chilling and his body quickly freezing over. His eyes becoming blurry, he reached for the force field that allowed ships but not blaster fire through the bay. He reached further and further, feeling himself dying.

Pulling through the field, his body fell a few meters to the ground. Broken on the ground of the bay he looked down to see the tome intact.

*SUCCESS...*