

Near Perigee of Orbit, Nancora Nancora System

The main targeting display exploded in a shower of sparks, smoke and broken glass. Ken's HUD was flickering with snippets of the battlefield blinking in and out of being outlined. His shields were gone, and his droid fried by a direct hit. The stabilizers gave out as the former Imperial activated the fire pull in his number four engine.

Keeps getting better and better, the old Ace thought to himself.

"Mayday, mayday, mayday, this is Commander Ken Iode with Sigma Squadron of the Odanite Expeditionary Force. I am going down, I repeat I am going."

The last line was cut short as a newer T-70 X-Wing smashed into the nose of the older T-65B X-Wing. Ken's restraints failed, his momentum carrying him into the forward panel. His head bounced off of the inside of his helmet. The former TIE pilot gave into the blackness that was calling to him.

Badlands Region, Nancora Thirty Minutes Later

Through heavy eyes, Ken could make out the interior of his helmet. Cool air being pumped by his suit's rebreather. As he agonizingly regained consciousness, he felt his whole body ache. Slowly he leaned back into his chair and swept for broken bones. It wasn't until he felt his ribs he noticed an issue. He ran his hands over the area again. They hurt, but didn't feel broken.

Thank the Force the armor caught most of that hit, the Ace mused. Hell of a landing.

He gently readjusted his helmet so his eyes lined up better. The bright mid-morning light of Nancora Major assaulted his groggy eyes; the helmet's lenses only provided so much protection. A quick seated survey revealed dunes of nearly infinite sand, patches of worn metal and pourcrete. Rocky hills in the distance and the tip of a spire just barely visible. Ken sighed and took his helmet off. The power supply for the HUD was still working, though without the ship's systems or his droid the HUD would be useless save for its compass.

Pulling the emergency manual release the canopy hissed free of its hinges and latch, sliding into the ground with a thud. Ken coughed as the dusty air assaulted his nose, mouth, and lungs. Slowly standing on his seat, his ankle throbbing, the Odanite surveyed the damage of his craft. The nose of the once-pristine X-Wing was now buried in the sand, about half a meter short of the cockpit. Both upper wings were bent up by the initial impact and it appeared that the lower wings had been sheared off as the craft skidded to its final resting place. Ken climbed over the back, looking down at his fried R2-series droid, R2-J8. Briefly the man traced his gloved hand over the dome, avoiding the frayed wires, before looking up and over the back of his useless

fighter. A single large skidmark with two alternating lines in the sand and various pieces of his craft littered on either side.

Lucky I got through that, the older man thought as he replaced his helmet, sealing it. Better try to get the transponder working.

Carefully lowering himself back into the cockpit past his old friend, he opened the access panel to the cargo compartment. Inside was a mess, supplies and tools litter the interior.

“Great,” Ken sighed.

**Field Commander’s Office
Capital Enterprises Planetary (Regional) Headquarters
Axio City, Nancora**

Ghafa Ordam studied the holodisplay carefully. An older style X-Wing had crashed into Emery Rose’s X-Wing. There had been no contact with the squadron leader or any sign of the craft’s emergency beacon. It had crashed in the Badlands, the harshest environment on Nancora. The Nautolan put her hands on the console and leaned forward when suddenly the door opened. Kendra Icasta, the leader of the *Shikari* elite hunters of the Techocratic Guild, entered. Her artificial red eye looked to the Mercenary.

“You wished to see me, Commander?”

The Capital Enterprises Commander changed the display to a Zabrak woman. “Emery Rose, have you ever met her?”

The Chiss woman’s red eye zoomed in on the holoimage. “Once or twice in passing. What is this about?”

Ordam changed the image to the previous display. “She was shot down over the Badlands. Looks like she took her opponent with her.”

Icasta took the controls and reviewed the footage transmitted from Rose’s craft. A small smile crept over the Nautolan’s face. After all those engagements, her notorious squadron that bore her name, Rose had slipped up.

Maybe this accident will teach that hot shot about proper planning, she thought.

Ordam took a breath and cleared her feelings as the leader of the *Shikari*’s gaze left the holodisplay.

“What are our orders, Commander?”

“You and your team’s orders are to extract Emery and, if possible, eliminate that Force-user that brought her down!”

The Chiss woman nodded. “For the Collective.”

Badlands Region, Nancora

It had been an hour since the crash and Ken was starting to remember why he hated dustball planets. The emergency transponder was gone, not just missing sheared off in space or in the landing, the pilot couldn’t be sure. His suit had kept him mostly comfortable, however dirt was managing to sneak into his gauntlets and was all over the items in the cargo compartment. So far through the tiny access hatch he had managed to grab a pack of twelve ration bars (chocolate flavored), a backup datapad, and an extra flare gun with flare all of which he put in his Engineer’s backpack. What he really needed was water; so far all the canteens he had found were crushed on impact or full of sand and more unfortunate was he only had limited access to the compartment.

Finally he found one more canteen, sitting perfectly upright and unmolested by the crash. Ken reached for it, but it was just out of reach. He tried again, but his chestbox blocked him from reaching any further. The Imperial sighed and took off his helmet and armor, reaching in his fingertips scraped the edge ever so slightly causing the bottle to wiggle.

Come on you son of a bantha, the pilot screamed internally.

He touched it again, lightly. The center of gravity shifted and the canteen fell right into his gauntleted hand. Victorious, the human extracted the water from the compartment and kissed it. Carefully he opened the top and took a small sip, replacing the lid immediately. The lukewarm water was like a waterfall coating his parched throat. Cautiously, he placed the re-sealed container upright in the backpack.

Turning towards the back of the cockpit, he pulled the manual droid release, springing R2-J8 from his tomb. The black and gold droid stood motionless, casting a tombstone shaped shadow over the pilot. With the gentleness of a pallbearer, Ken placed his droid friend on the dirt and followed his gear in tow. Checking the circuitry more closely, he realized there was no hope: the droid was dead. While the astromech was relatively new to him and its propensity for constantly firing statistics at him was annoying, Iode still felt a sense of loss. He had never lost a droid before; sure, he had rotated through several during his time with the New Republic, but him and -J8 had clicked in an odd way. Hoisting the droid back into the mangled cockpit, the Imperial placed the fallen canopy back over to create a mausoleum of sorts.

“I’ll come back, you annoying little droid,” Ken chuckled, “I always pull off the impossible.”

With that he placed his helmet and held up his datapad. Adjusting his heading toward Axio city, he set out.

Command Center, O.E.F.S. *Solari*
In orbit of Nancora, Nancora Major System

"I am sorry, Commander, that's all I know." The young comms tech for felt for the tall Chiss in front of her, but she had no news. Len lode had just arrived onboard after receiving word that his father was missing after some sort of collision.

"I understand, I just need to talk to the squadron commander."

The woman shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "They are conducting search and rescue operations in an active combat zone. You know they are under radio silence, Executor."

"Solari Command, this is Raava Leader." The comms system crackled.

Quickly the tech keyed the proper sequence to secure the link. "Go ahead, Raava Lead."

"We found two crashed X-Wings in the Badlands. Looks like one is lode's, the other appears to be Emery Rose's."

"This is Executor Len lode," the portly commander cut in, "Any sign of him surviving?"

"We just found the wrecks, sir, and we don't have any transports to extract him with when we do. It appears his comms are down as well."

Len mused at the situation, extracting his datapad from his pocket and started typing.

"Understood, Raava Leader. Attempt to locate lode by visual means. Transmit his coordinates to the *Solari* as soon as a secure link possible."

"Understood, sir, Raava Lead out."

The tech looked up to the Executor standing next to her, his thoughts now focused on the datapad. "Should I have the coordinates forwarded to your datapad, sir?"

Still lost in thought, the only thing Len could manage was an "Mhmm" in reply.

Never thought I would have to rescue my father, twice.

Badlands Region, Nancora

The *Shikari* had just finished their dusty trip to the first crash site. Coming upon the T-70's final resting place had been eerie for the women, but that was quickly calmed by the numerous implants meant to control mood and feelings.

One of the huntresses approached the cockpit and unlatched the canopy, the others providing cover in a circle around the craft. What greeted her inside would have made any normal soldier cringe and a rookie vomit. Emery Rose was dead. Very dead by the looks of the interior. She had been impaled by her own craft's control stick.

"Kendra," the semi-mechanical voice of the huntress called, "She did not survive."

The senior member nodded. "You and Josyna take her home. The rest of us will eliminate the Force-user responsible."

Carefully and quietly the two huntresses ordered to transport the former commander of Rose Squadron, lifted the body out, covered her and placed her respectfully on the back of their shared speeder bike. Kendra watched as the bike speed off, contemplating how she would take her revenge on the Force-user responsible for this disgrace.

Badlands Region, Nancora 25 kilometers southwest

Ken thought back to his days in the Empire during survival training. Contrary to what most thought, TIE Pilots, while considered expendable by some, were given enough training to at least survive a crash on a planet or eject into space.

They may face court martial for destruction of Imperial property and executed. Or worse, be relegated to gunner duty, the pilot chuckled at the last line, crossing another hill littered with scrap and sand. *But at least you'd be alive.*

At the top of this hill, the Imperial took his helmet off and set his pack down. Time for another bacta treatment for his bruised ribs and some water. Doffing his armor and unzipping his flight suit the early evening light of Nancora Major pelted his skin. He extracted the bluish-transparent fluid, slathering it over his upper body. It was cold, but took most of the dull ache away. Wiping the rest off on a rag, Ken quickly zipped up his suit, donned his armor, and placed his helmet back on, trying to keep sand out was the real battle. In the distance he heard an engine, a repulsor engine. Drawing his blaster, he quickly turned to his right just in time to see a speederbike scream past him. He tracked it, making sure the pilot wouldn't turn about. It just kept going towards Axio City. Though the Commander knew he was on borrowed time now; the enemy knew where he was.

LAAT/i Gunship Badlands Region, Nancora

In the short forty or so minutes that had passed, Len lode had assembled a strike team and changed into his combat gear. A squad from JTF Shan's drop company had volunteered to join the Executor on his partially-authorized expedition. Officially, the team and Len had been assigned to establish a listening outpost in the Badlands. Unofficially, after his father's ship had been located, they altered the drop location to Ken's crashed X-Wing. After all, it was technically in the Badlands.

As they approached the drop point, the squad leader made his way through the troop compartment to the Chiss. New information had come up.

"Sir," the middle aged sergeant stood at attention. Len nodded for the man to relax.

"Comscan detected traffic from the surface. Looks like a speeder transporting an HVT is bound for Axio City. They spotted someone on a hill top."

A look of grim determination swept over the blue features of Len's face. "Any word who the HVT is or who they were talking to?"

"Negative on the first, sir." The sergeant grabbed onto the hand hold as the craft hit some turbulence. "Though they did mention the observed was wearing an old Imperial pilot uniform. As for who they were talking to, Ghafa Ordam."

Len cracked a smile nodded, "Looks like the old man made it. Though if Ordam is coordinating an operation, he may not last much longer. Coordinates?"

"Only a partial string, but we should be able to track from above."

"*Thirty seconds to drop,*" the pilot called through the intercom.

Len prepared his rifle and keyed the intercom. "Lieutenant, we are redirecting to coordinates NA5621. Look for a TIE Pilot."

"*Sir?*"

"He's on our side." Turning to the sergeant the Chiss continued, "Have your men establish a perimeter quickly. I will get the scanner set-up."

The soldier nodded and turned to leave.

"One more thing, sergeant"

Turning back to the Executor the squad leader snapped to attention. “Tell your men to expect a fight.”

“Yes, sir.”

Badland Regions, Nancora

The former TIE pilot had tied his helmet to the engineer’s pack. The power had finally died in the display and the reduced vision was a liability as night started to fall. Since Ken’s encounter he kept his blaster drawn. It was only a matter of time now.

In the distance he heard a familiar sound, speederbike repulsors. Picking up the pace, the older human did the best run he could, but time was running out fast. As the sound grew closer, he spotted an opening into a wrecked ship still sitting on the surface. Taking cover, the Imperial placed his pack in front of him to offer cover. The repulsors died out and Ken felt a sense of dread creep in that he quickly pushed away.

Keep it together, the man thought loudly to himself.

At his back, the twisted steel of a completely scavenged and dark engineering compartment, complete with missing doors, offered a good place to fall back if it came to that. Ken had only been in a few ground engagements before. While he could hold his own, it was not the place he wanted to be. Especially alone.

Suddenly a lone bolt struck his backpack, quickly assessing the situation, Ken located its source and returned fire with a few quick blaster shots. No hits; the man cursed silently as a wave of bolts slammed into the already torn hull near the breach and his backpack now fried.

Kark, the human thought.

Knowing he would need to retreat to the dark depths of the wrecked ship soon, the pilot drew his flare gun and fired deeper into the engine room. Crimson bathed the interior as Ken quickly picked a good hiding place, grabbing his helmet and sprinted to it. As the red light faded, Ken could see five women, armed with bows, appear in the hole. The sixth walked up to the front middle.

“Come out, filthy Force-user, we have a score to settle.” A quick head tilt and the others moving confirmed Ken’s suspicion that this was the leader. “You speak of *honor*, yet you hide in the shadows like a coward! Hide from this, sisters activate night vision!”

The pilot’s mind raced—he would not be hidden for long in this environment with them. Quickly he reloaded the flare gun and aimed for the center of the room. He only had one shot left, so

Ken waited patiently for some of the others to return. A Huntress' voice broke the silence with its mechanically adjusted tone.

"There, behind the shelves!"

The Imperial squeezed the trigger as the first energy bolt flew from the bow. His flare struck the leader's boot, igniting the synthleather and blinding those with night vision. Screams of pain filled the engineering compartment, including Ken's. The pilot had been struck in the chest by the bolt which had missed his armor completely in a lucky strike. He felt darkness creep in once more, this time though a feeling of warmth enveloped the man, of happiness. Blaster fire ripped Ken back to reality. The huntresses were falling as they tried to recover from the improvised flash grenade. Fighting to stay conscious the pilot saw O.E.F. troops sweep in stunning several more of the huntresses and placing them in stun cuffs, including the leader. A bright light flashed in Ken's eyes.

"Executor, I have him. We need a medic!" the soldier kneeled down, covering Ken. "It's okay sir. We're here to get you."

The older man smiled under his helmet and the smile grew when the medic and his adopted son came around from the entrance.

"Dad!" Len moved next to the soldier covering and took his place while the medic got to work. "Get his helmet off."

"About time you got here, uh, sir," the senior lode chuckled. "I didn't think you would come personally."

"Well," Len looked over to the captured Kendra being hauled to the waiting LAAT/i "We were in the neighborhood, figured we would lend a hand."

"We need to get him out of here now," the medic interrupted. "The doctors on the *Solari* are better equipped for this."

The junior lode nodded. "Alright team, is our listening post set up?"

"Yes sir," came a shout from outside. "Transmitting to Commander of the First Regiment, confirmed."

Len put his off hand on his dad's chest armor. "Let's get off this rock."