

Twelve Years Lost

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32 ABY

“Twelve whole years? That’s a kriffing long time.”

Lieutenant Sinvere silently nodded in response, not taking his eyes off of the controls and readouts, even though they were all static. The MU-2 shuttle they were piloting sat idle on the floor of the ISDII *Warrior*’s main hangar.

“I wonder if contact was lost, or if the Empire just stopped listening.”

Sinvere rolled his eyes, the gesture disguised under his yellow-marked helmet. “Focus on getting ready to fly, Cantal, not questioning.”

Cantal acted as if he didn’t hear him. “Have you been down there before? This is my first run.”

Sinvere wanted to mute his communication device on his helmet and claim malfunction, but he figured that the flight couldn’t last much longer and he could muddle through. “Yup. I flew the first run down.”

Cantal’s helmet whipped to look at Sinvere, who could only imagine his mouth wide agape, letting a barrage of questions escape. “What did you see? Was it empty? Were there people? What happened?”

Sinvere regretted his concession instantly and sighed. “I never left the shuttle, Cantal, per procedure: the pilot stays with the ship. So during this run you’ll be staying here with me while everyone else on the ship gets to go and poke around in an old decrepit outpost.”

Cantal looked back at his controls, but his questioning was undaunted. “Did they bring back anything?”

Sinvere finally took his eyes off of his readouts to fix the side of Cantal’s green-decaled helmet with a glare. “Are you in the habit of examining cargo holds after a flight? After a six hour flight shift you want to spend another hour poking around? They will tell us anything interesting so we don’t get too bored, I promise you.”

Cantal was quiet. Sinvere grimaced, feeling a bit rude. “But,” he said, searching for a way to bolster spirits, “my ship was a lot heavier going back on that run I made.”

Cantal half-turned, his helmet rotating somehow conveying an expression of hope, the blinding hangar lights reflecting off it.

A voice cut through the quiet static. “MU-2 Shuttle *Oriana*, stand by for launch.”

The two stiffened. Sinvere replied, settling in his seat, but still maintaining his posture. “Copy that, Hangar Control.”

A silence pervaded for a few seconds, but with the announcing *click-hiss* of an open comm line, control gave the order. “*Oriana*, on your mark.”

Sinvere flicked a lever, twisted a dial, and pushed his controls forward. Their MU-2 shuttle raised and edged gently forward before diving over the edge of the in-atmosphere Star Destroyer. The outpost was immediately visible through the wisps of clouds that hung about the *Warrior*, the bottom layer of nebulous blanket above the planet. Cantal stared, transfixed and enthralled, and Sinvere pointedly ignored it. A circular tower, like an inverted spinner, stood tall, connected to a long horizontal building with a klick of straight and wide road. The two were both the standard Imperial gray, brutalistic, blocky, and, inevitably, an obtrusive interruption in the plains of the unnamed planet.

As they approached, the age of the two buildings became more visible. Side paneling was peeled and missing, turbolaser defense cannons were aimed dejectedly downwards, the road was overgrown with the intrusive plains grains that surrounded the bases and ran throughout the entire horizon, right up to the gray mountains in the far distance.

Working together, the two settled the shuttle beside the horizontal bunker, facing the building close enough to see the questionable stability.

“Definitely looks like it’s abandoned,” Cantal said, his voice betraying his failing hope.

“But who knows what they left behind,” Sinvere reminded him, hating his role as the encourager but adopting it nonetheless. “Maybe we’ll see what they bring out because we’re facing the building.”

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Captain Justup’s shuttle ride to the surface was brief but tortuous. In the hangar, his two pilots talked incessantly, their voices broadcasted over the communications system. They gabbed without pausing for air about every question surrounding the abandoned base. One of them sounded more involved in the conversation than the other, but the both were still hellishly annoying.

When the flight was mercifully over, Justup and his team of five stepped off the lowering ramp into the knee-height grass beside the building Justup’s team had designated as Aurek, their pants tucked smartly into their boots. Four of them carried in tandem large container boxes.

The planet had no name. The system was designated as XC-50391, and this planet labeled XC-50391 II, but it was referred to simply as *the planet*. The fleet had begun its pilgrimage into The Chaos, navigating with charts decades out of date, operating on hear-say and whispers, and proceeding one planet at a time – so each successive planet was *the planet*.

This one was perpetually semi-clouded, the light that was able to penetrate casting shadows that slid smoothly across the plains and the barren mountains. The Besh Tower, the second building in the complex, acted as a sundial of sorts, its shadow whipping elliptical circles daily as the planet orbited XC-50391. Seemingly endless swaths of plains backed up in one direction to shrouded mountains and in the other ran limitlessly, even from the Star Destroyer’s atmospheric point of view.

But none of this natural setting spoke to the Captain. He cared only about what lay inside the complex, not outside. And inside was all the wealth he had hoped for when he was first assigned to head the team a standard week ago.

The people were gone, all three thousand residents no longer residents. No bodies, just what they left behind. But what they left behind was plenty to entertain Justup for years – computers, datastations, journals, maps, they all laid out in the myriad of rooms and hallways, undamaged and intact.

Justup lead his team through the entrance, the old door barely repaired enough to jerkily slide open. They walked in line, guns holstered, down the empty hallways, past doors propped open revealing half-looted rooms, past long-broken data terminals and shattered windows. After turns into different hallways, through bulkheads and more doors stuck open, they arrived at their destination. The room Justup entered had a large metal dias in the middle and shelves on the wall holding datachips in an excessive quantity. The aurebesh above the door frame read ‘*Map Room.*’

Justup wasted no time. He ordered his men to open the coffers and pack all of the datachips in. He took one himself off of the wall and slid it into a port near the top of the dias. He pressed a few buttons, twisted a dial, and fiddled with a lever, but no lights turned on, and nothing happened. His face showed frustration, but he knew he shouldn’t have expected much from unmaintained twenty-year-old machines. He reached for the chip to recover it, but when he pulled he found it securely nestled, resisting any pressure. He hit the ‘eject’ button, mashing it repeatedly, but to no avail.

Muttering profanities at being bested by something so ancient, he turned back to the shelves and helped scoop datachips into the boxes.

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Cantal pointed out of the shuttle's viewport, as if it wasn't immediately obvious: "They're back," he said, his volume a considerable bit higher than what would be considered appropriate for being in such a contained environment with microphones at your lips.

Sinvere, wincing out the slight ringing in his ears, didn't reply.

"And," Cantal continued, "they didn't struggle to carry those boxes so much walking in there."

"For sure," Sinvere chuckled. "Our fine Captain seems to be struggling a ton." He was walking in front of his line, unburdened.

"What do you think it is?" Cantal questioned.

"Bodies. Lots and lots of bodies. That's the only answer."

Cantal looked sideways, unsure if Sinvere was joking or not. His sense of humor was so flat that his sarcasm sometimes flew meters above Cantal's head. Sinvere stared straight ahead, not outwardly betraying his amusement but smirking beneath his helmet.

Sinvere lowered the ramp for the troopers, and unlocked the cargo hold's automatic door, all with a switch of two knobs. They watched together as the troopers placed the bins down in the hold and strapped themselves into their seats, disappointingly never opening the tops of them.

The shuttle lifted off from the ground above rippling waves of long grass, and diagonally rocketed up to the *Warrior* hanging close above, and after a brief but bouncy flight edged over the hangar lip and settled on the metal plating.

Cantal chuckled, unbuckling his harness. "Time to spend an extra hour examining the cargo they brought." Sinvere rolled his eyes.

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"Let's get these coffers off of the ship before these pilots decide to be too nosy," Justup told his troops. They obligingly picked up the boxes with grunts, and waddled awkwardly down the ramp and out the hangar, off to deposit the plunder in some storage unit somewhere in the endless halls of the ship.

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Sinvere and Cantal pulled off their helmets in the *Oriana*'s hold.

Cantal chuckled again, and Sinvere shook his head. "I can't believe they took it. You know, Cantal, I actually did want to see what was in them."

"Should we follow them?"

"I'm tired, Cant. Let's just hit the cantina before our next run."

"Deal. Drinks on you, because you lost us our reward."

"How was it my fault?" Sinvere laughed.

"It just is, Sin. Because it's certainly not mine!" They turned out of the ship and down the ramp, all thought of the box and the planet out of their minds in favor of the incoming drink.

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