

**Atra Ventus #11708**  
*The Heart Of It All Entry*

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**Rescue the Past, Save the Future**



The steady hum of the shuttle's engines could be felt as faint vibrations working through the durasteel hull. As she sat at the helm Lux could feel the familiar sensations through her boots as if she were pressing her bare feet against the cold ground. It was a welcome feeling, something the pilot cherished. She worked her jaw back and forth as her green eyes scanned the flashing lights and screens of the dash in front of her, but those instruments weren't her actual focus just then. The pilot let out a quick breath, the blast of air wafting through her short bangs as she leaned back in the seat and placed her boots against the panel. She craned her neck back over the edge of the chair with her hands locked behind her head beneath the strands of her dirty blonde hair. "You didn't **have** to tell him, you know?" Lux stated in her usual quick way with the words seeming to almost trip over each other.

Standing with her back against the wall and her arms tightly crossed over her stomach, deeper into the cabin near the closed door leading to the main chambers, Adalinde opened her eyes and affixed Lux with a steely gaze. Her red velvet toned hair hung like a shroud over half her face, leaving only a single blue eye visible. "The message was intended for him," the Inquisitor replied, her silken accent thick on her tongue. "You know he would have found out regardless."

"Uh huh, sure, but the point is it could have happened away from us. As in not here, Ada," Lux exclaimed quickly while stretching out. "As in us not having to deal with Lord Doom'n'Gloom while trapped in — what you may not have noticed is — a rather tight and inescapable space."

Adalinde's head tilted in response to the pilot's line of reasoning. She pushed away from the wall and walked with carefully placed steps towards the other woman while a grin tugged at her lips. "Are you saying," she almost whispered, "that he might lose his cool? Attack us?" The Inquisitor leaned down over Lux's head, pushing her way into the pilot's comfort zone.

"Oh come off it. I don't need a kriffing saber strapped to my hip to feel the change of atmosphere in here! Damn near suffocating! That guy needs to get his hands on some spice or something before he becomes contagious," Lux exclaimed. "I happen to be a perfectly well adjusted, and I dare say happy, individual. You lot can take your crazy and keep it. Just don't stop paying me, mkay?"

The older woman made a shooping gesture with her hands as she sat upright once more, a wide grin across her face as she muttered something that sounded vaguely like: 'the credits must flow.' Meanwhile, Adalinde stood upright once more and stared out the viewport into the darkness of space. She could feel her heart pounding at even the idea of fighting the Praetor to the Voice, who was currently digesting the news in the back of the shuttle. It was enough to further ignite the ever present embers of her simmering rage. She couldn't help but lick her lips with anticipation. "Such fun," she murmured to herself.

A sharp hiss heralded the man's arrival in the cockpit as the door to the rear cabin slid open. His presence was felt even before he stepped through the opening. Clad in dark grey robes with a snowflake styled emblem on his hip and shoulder, his right arm exposed in stark contrast to his sleeved left arm and gloved hand save for the cloth wrappings on his forearm, Atra Ventus' gray-gold eyes passed over his companions. The genetically-altered Umbaran's dark hair and tight beard framed the deathly pallor of his pale skin while his expression remained apathetically frozen. Yet his aura of discontent was palpable to the two women who had spent so much time around him.

Adalinde offered a slightly bowed head in acknowledgement of the Praetor. Lux, on the other hand, simply hopped onto her knees and leaned over the back of her chair with a grin as she adjusted the boom on her headset. "So what's the word, Iceman?" Lux inquired.

Atra regarded her with barely a blink, having grown accustomed to her propensity to apply nicknames on a whim — and to change them just as often. "Naomi speaks the truth, from her perspective anyway," he stated with his softly lilting voice, like the words were dancing on his tongue despite its monotone nature. "There shouldn't be any activity in that region though."

Lux nodded as she twisted back around and sat down once more. Her fingers worked over the instrumentation without as much as a glance toward the controls from the experienced pilot. Both Adalinde and Lux had seen the initial message: Methyas L'eonheart had been taken by a group claiming to be Inquisitorius. Adalinde had filled in the gaps in Lux's knowledge with a quick recap on the man. Officially on record as having been assigned as the Praetor's former master, and presently associated with the Sons and Daughters of Sadow, Methyas had history with Atra. Beyond that the records were rather vague and conspicuously absent. Lux had chauffeured the Grand Inquisitor enough times to know when there was somewhere the man wanted to be, and this was one of those times.

"So, we're going after him I presume? Cavalry ridin' in all shiny and what not?" the pilot asked.

"Yes, but I wouldn't go so far as 'shiny'," Atra replied, "unless you've attained a fondness for scrubbing we somehow missed?"

Lux gasped in mock offence as her green eyes snapped towards her employer. "Are you insulting my ship, Snowy? She may be a little rough 'round the edges but she's got it where it counts."

"And what of these so-called Inquisitors?" Adalinde asked with a hopeful glint in her eye. Atra's answer was unspoken, he merely glanced towards her then back towards the main viewport as Lux prepared the jump to hyperspace. The Inquisitor's brow curled inward as a malicious, anger filled grin spread on her face. "I hope we find them then."

"From what she said, they didn't seem to be rushed," Lux remarked over her shoulder. "With luck they'll still be nearby."

"We'll find them," Atra said. "One way or another."

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"I can' believe 'ow easy this is," Zargo exclaimed as he tossed chip after chip of credits onto the makeshift table in front of him. The decrepit hangar didn't offer much in the way of furnishment, so the boys had pulled together mismatched boxes and threw a sheet over them to serve as a facsimile. It wasn't exactly comfortable but suited them just fine. "Best idea th' boss 'as ever 'ad!"

"Ya got tha' right, Zargo," another mercenary in full armor remarked, his voice heavily modulated by his helmet's vocoder. "Those rumors really got people shakin'. Watch out! It's them Inquisitors!" He proceeded to discharge several rounds from his rifle into a nearby target dummy.

Zargo scratched his scruffy chin and watched as several other members of their team went about their leisure in the wide open space. Age lines marred his face like deep ridges, a testament to the harsh conditions of his life. His eyes were sunken deep in his face and his hazel gaze had a raptor-like quality to it. Something didn't sit well deep in his gut. It was a sense of unease that he would normally toss up to his 'instincts'. Zargo always trusted his instincts.

"Wha' I don' get s'why he 'ad us pick up tha' blind guy," he muttered to no one in particular.

That didn't stop the nearby merc from adding his own opinion. "Way I 'eard it, tha' guy s'got an extensive infonet th' boss wants to worm 'is way into," the warbled voice stated. "'ate to be tha' guy. Boss gonna 'urt 'im good 'till he gets wha' 'e wants."

Of that there was little doubt, that much was certain, but Zargo couldn't shake that feeling. Perhaps they had gotten a little too comfortable in their presumed role... revealed themselves too readily. But this was the Outer Rim! There wasn't anything they needed to worry about, especially riding on the coattails of a rumor — and one they were helping to perpetuate. Perhaps his instincts were just indigestion for once. Zargo settled back against the box he was using as a chair and glanced over the growing pile of credit chips. That was something he could at least count on for certain. Currency was always good.

The sudden bang and accompanying pained cries of one of the mercs crashing through the main doorway, however, wasn't so good.

Outside the hangar, Adalinde's attention shifted from the man she had just sent tumbling through a telekinetic surge to the one trapped beneath her. She had one knee pressed to the ground on one side while steadying herself with a black boot planted on the other. Equally dark pants clung to her form, easily visible with the half-skirt of her robes pulled off to the side. The Inquisitor had the merc's head tilted back so that she could grip his throat tightly with her left hand. Clad in a black fingerless glove, her hand continued to tighten with each violent shift of the man's body. Her hair fell over her right shoulder, where the single sash of her robes crossed, leaving the pale flesh of her left side exposed. The flickering light of a nearby burning canister made the green snake tattooed across her chest and arm seem alive as the shadows

danced across it. Adalinde stared down at the man with a vicious gaze that looked past the helmet, beyond the man, and into something only she could see.

A surge of anger scorched through her body, carrying further power into her grip. Her muscles tightened with renewed vigor and strength beyond her natural capabilities and a sickening squelch was the reward for her efforts. The Inquisitor rose to her feet, ignoring the man now desperately clawing at his own throat in an attempt to draw air into his lungs — a feat that had become impossible with his windpipe crushed. Adalinde let out a disappointed sigh before glancing over her shoulder towards the patiently waiting Praetor behind her.

"They are children playing make believe." The red-haired woman's accent was even thicker than normal with the exhilaration of combat fresh in her system. Her tongue seemed to glide over the pronunciation of an 'h' as if it didn't exist, while 'th' merged into a much stronger sound. "How pathetic."

"As expected," Atra replied with a slight nod. "Shall we introduce ourselves?"

"Assuming there are plenty more of them in there," Adalinde said with a grin, "it will be a pleasure."

The Praetor turned towards the hangar and regarded it with an even gaze. He closed his eyes for a moment and let out a low breath that hissed softly between his barely parted lips. He could feel his power churning beneath the icy surface at his core. It was a constant presence that he consciously contained. Now he allowed himself to metaphorically punch through and let the frigid waters crash over him.

It was a shock to his system, as it always was, and almost produced a shudder as it managed to both freeze and burn him simultaneously from within. He allowed the Force to permeate his being freely once more and tapped into the currents of the Living Force around him. The Praetor began to stride purposefully forward while listening for the subtle shifts that would warn him of danger, ready to react.

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The one perk of their makeshift base of operations was that it offered up a remarkable amount of cover in the event of a bad day. Zargo suspected that this evening was most certainly about to qualify for that classification. The men had wasted precious little time in attaining cover and vantage points against whomever was assaulting them. They waited patiently for signs of movement through the broken entry with their rifles at the ready.

Silence hung heavily over the group like a suffocating shroud. He could hear the shaky breaths of the men closest to him, while his own breathing was a thundering roar that greeted the pounding of his blood through his veins. His finger rested lightly against the trigger of his weapon. He held it in a comfortable grip, not so soft as to be loose, but a confident hold born of experience. He began to count his breaths as he wondered just what was going on and when, if ever, they were going to reveal themselves.

Then he saw movement.

There was an almost audible collective inhale as the focus shifted towards the two shapes stepping through the broken opening. A black haired man clad in dark robes alongside a similarly garbed woman with rich red hair. The pair stood calmly as they assessed the room, no weapons at hand, but the hair on Zargo's neck all but jumped off his body as he looked them over. "Who th' kriff are ye?" he called from his cover on the opposite side of the chamber.

"A simple question with a complicated answer," the male replied. The man's voice was cold and even, yet managed to reach across the space without appearing to shout. At the same time, Zargo could make out the woman's visible eye shifting around the hangar. Her gaze fell on each of his men, even those who were completely hidden from sight. As soon as she had spotted the last of them, her grin transformed into a gleeful smile.

That was yet another bad sign.

"We," the man continued, "are Inquisitors."

"Frag'em!" Zargo exclaimed as realization dawned. There was only so long they could have kept up their scheme before the truth behind the rumor showed up, and that time came far earlier than even he expected. He squeezed the trigger and let loose a torrent of red plasma bolts that screeched towards their target while his men did much the same. The pair's movements were blurs that his eyes couldn't hope to follow with the man almost casually sidestepping the initial barrage before beginning a steady walk across the hangar's interior towards Zargo. The woman, on the other hand, let out an animalistic howl as she charged the largest group of mercs on the far right. A beam of red energy emerged from the cylinder grasped tightly in her hand before she launched into the air with an arc reaching a height that shouldn't have been possible for anything human. The fiery woman landed in the middle of the group behind their cover, and became a whirlwind of red light that brought cries of pain and fear from those converged around her.

Zargo didn't have time to focus on them though, the man who had spoken was the immediate problem. He levelled his sights and squeezed the trigger again. The male Inquisitor swayed once more before pulling something from his belt. A pale white glow crackled into being from the object in his hand, sparks surging along its length before the weapon streaked through the air and deflected another blaster bolt.

Zargo cursed under his breath. In any other situation he would have been entranced by those weapons, perhaps even elated to come across them. The amount of credits they represented when sold to the right buyers was astronomical. It made the credits he had counted earlier look meager in comparison. However, it was a deactivated lightsaber that would have elicited such a reaction for the merc. As a present threat, in the hands of individuals who had clearly trained in their use, they produced quite the opposite emotion. Zargo pulled a thermal detonator from his waistband and toggled the switch. After cooking the timer for several beats, the merc tossed the sphere over his cover and towards the oncoming man.

It seemed his plan wasn't meant to be as his eyes were greeted by his detonator bouncing with a metallic clack several meters away from him. Zargo turned and tried to scramble away as the device exploded and a shockwave crashed against him. Pain racked his

body while his ears felt like they were going to pop, a painful ringing deafening him to the world around him. He was only vaguely aware of the continued chaos around him through flashes of light and the faint sounds reaching him as the ringing began to subside. Zargo was having difficulty moving despite his pain, his right leg being particularly uncooperative. The man reached down to pull at it only to be greeted by a sudden searing pain, his fingers pushing into the bloody stump just past his knee as opposed to grabbing the shin he expected.

He let the pain escape him through his lungs, a cry escaping his throat while he shifted into a sitting position. Zargo's fingers were slick with the crimson liquid as his eyes and mind processed the missing limb. He allowed himself a groan as he fought to steady his breathing. Zargo could feel himself growing ever more lightheaded as the combination of pain and blood loss pressed in upon him. Panicking would do him no good, and for all he knew his men were still fighting for their lives. All he could do was sit there as unconsciousness claimed him.

The truth, however, was that only he remained.

Adalinde leaned back against a set of stacked boxes before letting out a genuine laugh. Her chest rose and fell notably as she took in deep breaths of air, sweat dripping down her neck and along her collar bone. She closed her eyes while fighting to swallow, the panting inhales of breath continued as she let her eyes close and just enjoy the high of the fight.

"I presume it was to your liking then?" Atra asked while placing his lightsaber back beneath his robes.

"Oh yes," the woman replied, "if only there were more toys to play with."

Atra said nothing, but a tinge of disappointment flickered across his usually passive façade. It was a subtle crack and one Adalinde would have failed to catch even if she had been paying attention. Killing was often necessary and he knew that fact better than most. It was a practical means to an end, but for the Umbaran it was nothing beyond that. For Adalinde, however, it was genuine pleasure.

The Praetor turned his attention away from the younger Inquisitor and reached out in the Force. He could sense his old master like a faint beacon in a thick fog. His senses weren't so attuned that he could pick out individuals with ease, but Methyas L'eonheart's presence within the Force was so familiar to Atra that he recognized it regardless. He walked deeper into the hangar to try and get a better perspective on the feeling. Like a wisp in the night, Atra could reach out to force the feeling into clarity but it would only slip through his fingers and become ever harder to find.

"Where are you?" Atra hissed under his breath. He knelt down and placed his gloved hand against the ground, closing his eyes and concentrating once more.

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"Yer gettin' on mah nerves," Higgen growled as he postured in front of his captive. The man had kept his full armor in place as a means of intimidation, as he usually would, but so far it had proven to be only a self-motivating factor given the fact that the other man was blind. The

Miraluka, as noted by the cloth wrappings around his 'eyes', lay restrained on an interrogation table. His red hair was pulled back into a tight bun while his full beard was kept neatly trimmed. The grooming was no doubt performed by his wife, Naomi.

Methyas cocked his head slightly, pointing his ear towards his captor before turning to 'look' in Higgen's general direction. "My apologies," he remarked with a surprisingly soft voice.

The leader of the mercenaries growled as he slammed a particularly vicious looking dagger onto the table next to Methyas. "Ye may be 'alf cyborg with all them replaced limbs o' yers," Higgen grinned wickedly, "but it's still gonna 'urt like 'ell."

The Miraluka merely offered a small smile and leaned his head back, getting more comfortable. Anger flashed for the merc as a mixture of confusion and indignation swelled within Higgen "'ow can ye be so calm, knowin' what's comin'?" he asked.

"Because I have something you don't, presently," Methyas stated.

"What's tha'?"

"Time."

Higgen was interrupted by a shower of sparks erupting from the sealed entry behind him, before he could even begin to process the meaning of the Jedi's words. White light and molten metal mingled together to form a vicious orange glow that traced a slow circle in the metal. As the shape completed itself, the sparks subsided and the light disappeared. The panel within the door, freshly carved, fell inward with a foreboding thud as it made way for the Praetor's arrival.

"Who the 'ell are you?" Higgen barked. "Where are my men?"

"I'm with him," Atra replied with a nod towards Methyas.

"And my men?"

"Hm," was the only reply Atra offered to Higgen. His lips scrunched in what could only be described as a shrug, without actually shrugging, before beginning his slow march towards the opposing man.

Higgen glanced around frantically to find his blaster, only to spy it behind the Praetor's dark and approaching form. An internal curse accompanied the realization that he was unarmed before the merc turned to retrieve his dagger. He pounded his chest plate several times to pump himself up into a fervor before charging at Atra. One step, two steps, then another. He brought his blade forward and aimed with a lunge at the robed man's center of mass.

Atra pivoted left, his calm expression still in place, and took hold of Higgen's wrist with one hand. The Praetor finished his movement and came to a rest side by side with the merc, facing the same direction. Higgen cried out as Atra twisted his wrist violently and his dagger clattered to the ground. The true Inquisitor spun about once more, pulling the pretender with him before kicking out his target's knee.

Higgen could do nothing but groan in pain before his leg gave out. He fell to one knee and turned his neck to face the Praetor. Atra's gray-gold eyes stared through the visor into the eyes of the man he knew to be within, and Higgen stared back. He felt himself being drawn into the darkness in those eyes. He looked deeper and deeper, past the gray fibers and flecks of gold. Higgen fell past all that into the black of Atra's pupils.

The darkness he found there clung to him, dimming the world around him. He needed space, he needed to breathe, but he couldn't move and he couldn't breathe. He was falling, suffocating, and drowning all at once as the endless terror of that darkness crept into his being. It was like a living thing with tendrils that pushed their way into his mind. It encircled him and pierced him in a way nothing else ever had. Atra's power seeped into the cracks of Higgen's mind and festered until reason had all but abandoned the mercenary.

It was then that Higgen screamed. Pure and unfiltered by conscious reasoning. The sound was the essence of terror and was punctuated by the man falling to the floor. Dry rasps replaced the sound of the scream, Higgen's throat no longer capable of producing a sound with its raw vocal chords.

"You didn't have to do that," Methyas said with a sigh.

"It was the efficient course of action," Atra replied as he set about freeing his former master.

"But it wasn't the right one."

The Praetor paused for a moment and looked at Methyas. Truly looked at him. It had been so long since they had seen one another. The Jedi had found him when no one in the galaxy had bothered to care. Not just the once, when Atra was first discovered by the Brotherhood, but a second time when grief had stripped the Umbaran of his very identity. There was much of his existence that was owed to Methyas, and yet...

"What ever is," he said quietly before continuing his work.

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The Praetor and the Son of Sadow hadn't spoken since returning to the shuttle. Methyas had given Lux the necessary coordinates to get him home and then the two men had moved into the lounge of the ship. Both sat opposite one another while Atra studied Methyas without blatantly staring. His mind was closed off from the man who, at one time as his master and friend, could have finished his sentences with ease.

So much had changed since that time. Life had a way of happening whether you wanted it to or not, and so it had for them. Most notably, it had taken them in very different directions. Yet in that time they had maintained their connection — at least as best as they could.

"What have you become?" Methyas asked, breaking the silence between them.



Atra leaned back and slid his arms across his chest. "What the galaxy needs me to be."

"I used to feel such Light within you, my friend. The potential to give so much of yourself to others."

"The Light is a good way to blind yourself," the Praetor retorted.

Methyas allowed himself a chuckle as he gestured towards the fabric over his eyes in response. "And yet the Dark will breed only more darkness in the hearts of others. No matter how many you strike down, your shadow will remain and the cycle will continue."

The Umbaran sighed softly, his hands clenching tightly to the point that his nails bit into the exposed palm of his hands. "The cycle will end. With me."

Methyas' mouth opened to say something, but he couldn't. The Miraluka let out a breath and turned away. "So that's it..."

"We are even now," Atra stated flatly. "There is nothing left I owe you." He rose to his feet and turned towards the cockpit. The Praetor raised his right palm and glanced down at the ruby droplets developing upon it. The Umbaran knew he couldn't sway from his path — it was far too late for that. Any uncertainty would only hinder him in his efforts. He needed to push forward to attain his goals. Atra needed to break free of the past.

"This will probably be the last time we meet," Atra spoke up from the doorway. "Try to enjoy the trip home."

With that, the Praetor keyed the control panel and stepped through the opening towards where Adalinde and Lux were waiting. The door shut behind him, leaving Methyas alone in the lounge while the others remained in the cockpit.

"We shall see," the Miraluka murmured.

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