**Aliso City, District Esk**

**1 kilometre from Arden’s position**

**35 ABY**

The rambunctious symphony emanating from Aliso City was a stark reminder of the power and might of the Plagueian industrial machine. Little over a year ago, the site of the thriving and expanding spaceport been a field with a few landing pads resting in the ominous shadow of The Pinnacle. Yet through sheer force of will - resting on the backs of thousands of slaves and shady associates - the bumbling spaceport sprouted into a thriving and quickly expanding city whose boundaries were pushed further every day. Some dug under the settlement, removing potential obstacles for potential foundations, while others focused on building above ground.

Knowing that many would be enticed by the unique opportunity of doing business in the Unknown Regions, the clandestine arms of the Ascendant Clan slowly reached across the stars, attracting those willing to risk their credits and their lives in pursuit of profit. Their efforts had been immensely successful. Every day, numerous settlers flooded the spaceports looking to settle on Aliso. They brought with them their pasts, their credits, and their intentions. In some sectors of the city crime seemed to flourish, passing under the noses or being entirely ignored by the local garrison. Their orders were to turn a blind eye when there was something to be gained, and the plethora of Sith who looked down upon the city had numerous plots and webs which could benefit from the unique expertise clustered in the city. From local gangs imported from the rest of the galaxy to corporate espionage specialists operating under the guise of a consultancy firm, Aliso City was welcome to all - for now.

Laren Uscot, an unlikely mercenary who found himself among the leadership of Clan Plagueis, had decided to explore the fruits of the Clan’s labour. The entirety of the Clan’s resources had been poured into insuring the city became a lively and important spaceport, and the plan had worked splendidly. The Pantoran had landed on one of the terminals located near the base of The Pinnacle and had begun slowly making his way deeper into the city, eager to see more. He wandered for hours, passing through various sectors and, surprisingly, neighborhoods. He found shops and cantinas of various styles and clientele sprouting up on street corners, and vendors lining alleys attempting to hawk their wares. The distinct rumble of distant blasting making way for future projects stirred the air, drowning out the distinct buzz of the city. In some indirect way he felt he had been a part of it - that he had helped make it happen. Whether through sheer chance of fate or the precious Force his Sith allies coveted, they had found their way to Aliso, captured the undesirables, and in turn had found a home. And yet the planet - the city - it didn’t *feel* like home.

“Don’t move, mister,” came a shrill voice of a child from behind him. Laren felt the distinct pressure of a blaster barrel pressed against the small of his back.

“All right, kid, what do you want? Credits?”

“Don’t call me kid!” came a sharp reply. An older child, perhaps a teenager, then.

“Listen, just keep your finger off the trigger.” Laren needed to keep the thief talking. He saw a potential way to escape the situation, but he needed the child take the bait he was about to present.

“The credits now, or I blow your guts out,” the thief growled.

Laren sighed, saying, “See my utility belt? Reach into the front-right pocket. There are my credits,” The mercenary spoke as softly as he could over the rumble of the distant blast charges. Though perhaps they weren’t so distant, judging by the noise.

A small hand crept into Laren’s periphery, and he took the opportunity to spring his trap. Using his right hand, he grabbed the wrist of the reaching thief. Laren managed to easily toss the thief forward, sending him tumbling towards a nearby building. As he turned he heard the clatter of the hand blaster on the duracrete road. The throw had managed to disarm and incapacitate his would-be-thief. When the dust settled, Laren looked down at the figure of a small human teenager. He was rail thin, perhaps a slave to someone, and dressed in raggedy garb. Judging by his cheap attempt to rob Laren, he also wasn’t used to life on the streets. *This damn kid* - *he’s like I was*, *back then*.

“Listen kid, I don’t know what rock you crawled out from, but I have some advice for you the next time you try to rob someone.” Laren quickly drew his hand blaster from its holster and fired, hitting a mark mere inches above the teenager’s head. Debris rained down upon the boy, but he stared blankly back at the Pantoran, waiting. “Shoot first, steal later, and stay alive.”

“Are you - are you going to kill me?” The fear in his words was almost palpable, each word spoken as if they were his last.

Another blasting charge went off, the familiar *boom* echoing through the city. Laren stood looking down upon the boy who was clearly trembling in fear. He barely even realized he was still pointing his blaster at him. He lowered his weapon to his left side, but he didn’t return the weapon to its holster. Memories of his own past, of days living off of scraps and fighting for money flooded his memory. For a moment he felt pity for the boy, his helplessness in the situation a direct mirror into Laren’s own past. Yet theft was also punishable by death. But just a boy, with so much potential.

“Scram, kid,” Laren finally said.

But he had no time. Blaster fire seemed to erupt out of nowhere. Laren turned and listened, searching for the source of the firefight. Within moments he saw activity coming from the street he had been wandering previous. A crowd of various sentients were running in his direction, a few armed but most completely unprepared to return fire. Red blaster bolts followed their escape, and moments after the crowd had been mowed down, Laren saw the source of the fighting. A squadron of B1 battle droids rounded the corner and opened fire. *Oh no, the boy*! Even as the crimson blaster bolts whizzed overhead, Laren turned to the human. His would-be-thief lay motionless, once bright green eyes staring lifelessly into the Alisian sky. A blaster bolt had pierced him through the chest, and the blood was slowly spilling onto the recently paved duracrete street.

The mercenary quickly tossed the sentimentality of losing the boy and began running, desperately looking for cover. He fired wildly behind him in sporadic bursts, managing to take out two of the numerous B1 droids ignorantly marching forward in formation. He identified a nearby wall that was enforced with durasteel and took cover, red blaster bolts flying by harmlessly and hitting buildings at the intersection.

“Any station, any station, this is Laren Uscot,” Laren spoke into his wrist-bound commlink, screaming over the torrent of enemy blaster fire. “Multiple B1 battle droids making contact in Aliso City. Grid Esk-3. Requesting immediate reinforcements.”

Laren listened intently to the communication traffic, and within moments he knew his transmission had been missed. He heard the distinct voice of the Rollmaster, Arden Karn, pass through at one point - his transmission must have taken priority.

“...*breach point in Grid Esk-6 near my position*,” Arden finished.

“Arden, this is Laren, come in!” Laren roared. He took a moment to peak over the wall, checking on the advance of the droids. They were closing in fast, easily overwhelming the unorganized resistance they faced.

“Arden, come in!” His efforts were fruitless. Communications traffic was a mess, with some messages flooding over others. The chance that Laren’s message would get through in time to be useful was negligible. He knew his best option was to escape the frontline to a safer position where he could focus on rallying a defense. He set his communicator to hopping mode, hoping the internal system could find him a frequency that would allow him some measure of contact with the garrison or other potential allies.

Looking up from his wrist, Laren now glanced from his hiding place, observing the battle unfold from his position. B1 battle droids lied in heaps on the ground, yet a seemingly endless wave of the clankers kept advancing. Laren guessed their exit point must have been nearby, considering the number of droids that kept advancing. The few soldiers and denizens of the city that had organized a makeshift defense continued the futile effort of holding back the droid onslaught. Their own numbers were dwindling quickly, and they would perish soon without assistance or retreat. Laren knew that something had to be done, and he was the lucky man who had to do it.

Gripping his hand blaster firmly, he readied himself for a frontal assault. Though he had left some of his gear at Supply Station Omega, the mercenary never traversed Aliso without his jetpack and his sidearm. Thankfully for his habits, he was planning to turn enough droids into scrap metal that the Plagueian loyalists could retreat and mount a proper defense - with Laren’s assistance.

“I’m going to bloody regret this,” he spoke softly to himself.

Moments later the jetpacks at his ankles activated, and he emerged from the cover of the wall. He quickly ascended as he reigned blaster bolts down on the enemy, hovering and adeptly moving from side to side. He caught the first B1 droid in the head, and the clanker fell to the ground in a smouldering heap. As he hovered eastward, he caught two more in the back that had nearly overrun a friendly position. He expertly strafed the stubborn droids, managing to damage and destroy a slew of clankers still marching in formation. The momentum took him upwards, and he managed to swing around one of the taller structures for cover. He continued the motion and found himself on the other side of the wide rectangular complex, and he reigned fire down upon the droids.

“Retreat to the intersection!” he screamed as he passed over, dodging incoming crimson bolts. “Get on that damn roof and mount a defense. Move!”

The assortment of garrison guards and other sentients complied, though Laren had the feeling they had already been considering the idea. As the mercenary landed on the roof he had pointed out, he could observe the Ascendant infanteers providing cover fire for the majority of the other sentients. A few were cut down by the sheer volume of blaster bolts charging down the street, provided by an ever increasing amount of B1 battle droids effortlessly stepping over piles of their fallen comrades. Those who were lucky enough managed to find a set of stairs around the corner that they climbed quickly, joining the cerulean weapon’s specialist on the roof. The rest of them managed to provide cover fire for the infanteers, and all but one were successful in the retreat.

“This is where we hold, people. Fire down upon those damn clankers until your blaster burns your hands. When your blaster runs out, you damn well better start throwing rocks. Legionnaires,” Laren turned to the soldiers, the three of whom were crouching nearby. “I need a runner. We need supplies, and we need reinforcements. Where’s the nearest supply depot?”

“About six hundred metres east of here, my Lord,” one of the soldiers responded, his voice mechanically distorted through his full helmet.

“One of you take one of the sentients. Get back here as soon as you can with ammo and anyone you can spare.” A ruby-red bolt that would have taken Laren in the chest whizzed by safely, with Laren and one of the Ascendant Legion soldiers lying on the ground. He had had the wind knocked out of him, but the soldier had saved his life.

“All right, get off me,” Laren grumbled, pushing the soldier off him. He was grateful that his life had been saved, but he knew not to show any sympathy or remorse for the garrison grunts, lest he potentially ruin their performance. Compassion sometimes ruined their unquestioning loyalty.

“Take that damn Twi’lek and get the hell out of here. It’s time to make our stand.”

The communicator that Laren had began beeping wildly. It was the signal that it had found a clear channel, and hopefully someone that could provide some help.

“*Laren, this is Kul’tak*,” spoke a deep voice through the communicator. Laren was half listening as he crouched behind the thick durcrete wall atop the roof. “*Come in.*”.

“Kul’tak, I never thought I would be glad to hear your voice,” Laren shouted over the blaster fire. “Listen, we have a situation here. Massive amounts of droids emanating from a nearby location. I’m trapped at an intersection in District Esk. I sent two people to the nearby arms depot for help. What’s your status?”

“I’m leading a platoon to your location, Laren. We’re approximately three hundred metres away. We’ve made contact with the clankers, but we’re pushing to you as fast as we can. Arden is also trapped about a kilometre to the north,” Kul’tak said, the volume of his voice dampened by the insistent fire overhead. “My orders are to extract you from the fight so we can reach his position.’

“And extract him next, I get it. Well get here soon. I would rather not see your face, but the clankers are almost on top of us.”

“Hold, Laren.” The communication ended abruptly, and Laren could almost envision the beastlike Zabrak engaging the droids.

From his vantage point on the roof he could see at least five separate engagements, all of which were happening within half a kilometre from his location. If the various forces could unite into a solid front, they might have the skill and numbers to begin an offensive. If Laren could he would have already started searching for the source of the droid invasion, but he had other lives to be responsible for. Most importantly, his own.

*Move, Kul’tak. We need you.*