

## **Mandrine Kessel Sector**

It had been a two days since the Sentinel Network had intercepted the Advanced Inquisitorius Network's transmission. Once decoded, the transmission had been presented to a closed session of the Council of Urr. The Councilor of the Roll, Len Iode volunteered to participate in the search.

By this point, Iode had changed transports three times, using the layovers to check customs databases for evidence of Ghaffa Ordam's passing through. So far, of the three planets he visited, none were hits. Not even a trail. The smuggler and ruffian's den of Mandrine was his last shot. The planet's large quantity of bars, brothels, and other places of ill repute made this a prime target for a second hand off, or at least a layover for the Capital Enterprises field commander.

*Anywhere where they can get in and out no questions asked*, Iode had thought when making the list of high priority planets to stop at.

A high pitched sound filled the cabin of the *Lambda*-class shuttle's ramp prepared to open. Len Iode woke from a short nap he had allowed himself. The few dozen passengers, including the Chiss, disembarked the Imperial relic which was now being operated by a private corporation. Stepping onto the rain soaked landing platform the commando pulled a small scanner, slightly larger than his palm, to survey the area. Unlike the other places he had been, checking the customs records would not be an option—this planet would require manual observation.

This spaceport was just a few steps above Tatooine's Mos Eisley. There was a full passenger terminal and cargo handling facilities directly before him, not quite like on Kiast, Solyiat, or Daleem but impressive for a waystation planet. Beyond the terminal were the numerous hotels and entertainment that made up the world's economy. To his left and right were more landing pads. Behind him was what remained of the Imperial base here. Overlooked by the Sector Admiral, the base looked even more dilapidated than it should have.

*Excellent*, the Lieutenant Colonel thought to himself.

As most of the spacers headed toward the shelter offered by the terminal, the Chiss doubled back and made his way towards the abandoned outpost.

As he approached the structure, Len took stock of good observation points on the upper and middle floors. At the door, the commando drew his blaster and pushed the sliding door just open enough to slip in. Cautiously, he set out clearing the lower floor of the building and ensuring there were no traps on his potential escape routes. Clearing the dark rooms was difficult, but after letting his eyes adjust along with the scanner in low light mode the Chiss spent twenty minutes clearing the stripped to the bones first and second floors. As he moved up to the third,

he noticed water was leaking in and that more of the building was intact. Most of the damage was not from scavengers, but from the weather. There were random flimsies strewn across the floor and propaganda posters barely clinging to walls. Curiosity got the better of Iode and he picked up a flimsi. The page was a Stormtrooper commander's service record cover sheet. Tucking it into his pocket, the Lieutenant Colonel resumed his sweep of the building. Only one ship landed during the time he finished sweeping the five story building. Iode had checked it as soon as he could get to a window: a spice shipment from Kessel to one of the bars or other businesses of ill repute.

Len decided to set up his observation post on the fourth floor by a broken window, using the office chairs and desks as a makeshift perch so he could lay down and observe the movements of the spaceport. After he set up the perch, from his backpack Iode withdrew a section of camouflage netting covering the window. Once all of his equipment was organized for a quick withdrawal, Len grabbed a nutrient pack and set to work with his quadnoculars and datapad.

Four shuttles and haulers landed in the first two hours, Len did his best to document everyone who disembarked. Their clothes, species, luggage (if any), rough physical description. So far, no one seemed out of place or behaving strangely. In the middle of the fourth hour a small CEC transport landed, a YT-1000 model it looked to the Chiss. Two men in all black disembarked, rifles at the low ready. They paused a moment, visually scanning the area. The commando zoomed in as tight as he could on each, snapping an image. The left one seemed to shout something, and down from the ramp emerged the Nautolan Iode had been waiting for along with six guards plus the two at the ramp. Iode keyed his communicator for a burst transmission. His voice was flat, but a slight edge of nervousness.

"Wide Ears this is Red Eye, I have located the prize. Will transmit again when safe. Out."

Checking his datapad's chrono, Iode went back to the quadnoculars, snapping more images of Ordam and her entourage. Though he noticed none of the guards were carrying the rumored artifact. As the party moved towards the terminal, only the first two guards remained by the ship. Len devised a plan. Packing up his hiding site save the netting, which he wrapped around himself, Iode back tracked out of the building. Once he reached the landing area he ditched his backpack moving lower and slower. The guards were chatting about a new model of Skyhopper that had just been introduced as the Odanite crawled to the back of the transport. Removing a small device from one of his pouches, Iode pressed it to the hull; a small antenna opened up and began to transmit encoded location data. As he did, he activated his scanner, collecting ship information and comms frequencies. One of the guards turned back looking towards the Chiss. His eyes had not adjusted yet as Len froze, moving only to turn off the scanner.

"I swear I..." The left guard said. "Must be the rain."

The Odanite backed away from the ship, and stopped at his backpack. His clothes soaked, he weighed his options. He still needed a look at the artifact, but there was no good way to get onboard.

*Guess we have to do this the hard way.*

Iode collected his equipment and set off towards the guards. He flipped a mental coin: he went left. As he approached, the guard turned, having seen something in the corner of his eye. The Chiss slammed the guard's hands with his backpack separating the man from his blaster. Quickly, Len lined up and fired two suppressed blaster shots with his scout pistol. When the attack was over, he lifted up the semi-conscious guard, a Liberation Front Partisan.

"Quiet or my next shot will be into you. Nod if you understand," the Odanite whispered and the partisan nodded. "Got anything valuable onboard? You may answer out loud."

"I don't know. Ghafa doesn't tell us anything," the defiant Partisan spat.

"I'm not convinced." The Chiss struck the man.

"I...I'm too new." The soldier was running out of answers.

The commando grabbed the Collective soldier's shirt. "Tell me something useful or you'll end up like him," Iode motioned to the dead guard.

The human's eyes were locked onto the Chiss. "Kill me."

Iode chuckled, "Not a chance. See you shot your friend, stole the artifact from Ulmatra, and ran away. Seems you couldn't handle being near something valuable."

The Partisan cracked. "She'd never believe that."

"Oh really?"

The man's resolve was cracking further. "I am loyal to the Collective! Until all of the chains are broken!"

"Perhaps, but once I send a message about a turncoat on Mandrine... how long will you last?" Len hated doing this, but it was his only shot. "I give you hours."

"They'll kill my whole family. They'll make me watch."

Iode backed off. "Don't force me to do it then, what is the artifact?"

Defeated, the man spoke. "It's an ancient tome, a Sith tome. It describes a ritual. I think it's called the 'Book of Invocation'."

"Show me."

The Partisan lead lode past the body and up the ramp into the YT-1000. Len took a breath and stepped in. The Chiss felt the impact and the cold embrace of the deck. He was glad the impact had not been near his transmitting wrist comm. As the blackness took over, he could hear the distorted voice of Ghafa Ordam.

"I want to know what he knows, then we sell his body back to the Odanites."

### **Listening Post Omicron Kessel Sector**

"Lieutenant Colonel lode's transmitter is still in place. We are actively tracking the YT-1000 now," the station chief told a projection of High Councilor Archenksova, who nodded.

"The audio transmission?" the image asked.

"We are sending to Daleem now for processing. Though we are not sure, something about a 'Book of Invocation'."

"Good work, Chief. The O.T.F. and Tython Squad will await your go."