**Entertainment District**

**Arx**

**36 ABY**

***2 days following the operation on Ulmatra***

 Deep in the heart of bustling entertainment district, Laren Uscot stood with his back to the wall of a nameless shop that had long since closed with the onset of twilight. The shop, some nameless thing that advertised wares of a second-hand nature was long since closed. With the setting of the sun came the rowdy Legion soldiers looking for a good time, or what sport they could find. Sport could easily evolve into suspicion or outright persecution, and shop owners suspected of illegal activities might face reprisal and feel the fist of citizen justice. Or, perhaps, it should be named Legion justice.

 The raging cacophony of civilization beyond the alley seemed subdued, but no less jarring to Laren. He tried to hide his discomfort, focusing instead on scanning the rooftops and the alley entrance with a soldier’s cold, practiced eye. Yet even so, the snippets of conversation, the whizzing of hovercraft, the blazing lights of every nook, sign and cranny coalesced into the relentless explosion of city life that washed over the Pantoran.

 In some ways he had missed the chaos of the modern galactic city since his quiet departure from the Brotherhood nearly a year ago. But Arx was no mere city, and he couldn’t allow himself to forget that. It was the insidious and rapidly expanding heart of the rising Sith order. Look one way and one could find a group of off-duty legionaries enjoying a drink at the cantina. But look at the shadowed corner of that same cantina, and one’s eyes will likely find a spy or greedy informant, ready and waiting to report and renounce the mere glimpse of treachery or blasphemy to the proper authorities. According to some of the rumours he had heard, many had disappeared for less. Everywhere one looked on Arx, secret police enforced the absolute dominion of the dark order. But on the surface, perhaps this entertainment district did seem favourable enough to those who didn’t know better.

 But returning to a civilized planet wasn’t the cause of his discomfort. Laren was a trained mercenary and a resilient man, and urban climatization after so long in the galactic outback was part and parcel of his profession. Instead, the concentration of dark forces on the planet had placed him on the edge of rage since his arrival a few hours earlier. The moment his boots had hit the ground of the spaceport, a roaring flood of hardened, compressed emotions began to swell to the surface. With these torrents of anger and anguish came memories he had tried to suppress, things he never wanted to remember. Images of Maeg, his one and only love, her limp corpse dropping to the floor of her family home in a heap after he had murdered her for Teylas. Teylas Ramar, his emerald face and beady eyes eyeing Laren, knowing he had found a new weapon to do his bidding. And then, through the scope of his blaster he could see her expression as the shot hit home – was it surprise? Morememories, each worse than the last piled on top of one another. Memories of Kessel, memories of breathing that putrid, toxic air. Memories of lashings and beatings and the terror of a childhood surrendered to slavery, ripped from the hands of a little boy whose parents lay drifting in space while his life had been consigned to a filthy rock. Too many memories at the heart of his hatred, and too many to face at once. Long ago, Laren would not have believed in the Force, or the Dark Side the Sith held so dear. Yet experiences like this had taught him the Force was all too real, and nothing to be trifled with.

 Shaking his head, Laren took a few deep breaths and focused inward, forming a mind palace with the strongest mental walls he could manage. It couldn’t hold off the dreadful feelings and sensations indefinitely, but as long as he re-focused his mental barriers every few hours, he could dull the pain.

 The light from the alley entrance faded somewhat due to the arrival of a cloaked, bipedal figure. Laren looked up, hiding his unease at being caught off guar. He had to keep himself from gripping the DC-17 blaster holstered on his waist with everything he was worth. His contact had told him initial contact would likely proceed like this, but no mercenary worth their salt appreciated being out-maneuvered with sly tactics. Swathed in deep black robes and a dark mask, Laren couldn’t even discern their gender, or even if they were humanoid, or something else.

 “Identity confirmation,” the figure said from the head of the alley with an all-too mechanical tone. It seemed their voice was masked.

 “Leth-aurek-resh-peth-leth-aurek-one-two-niner-six-four,” Laren responded smoothly.

 The figure nodded and took a few steps forward, out of the mouth of the alley. Laren eased himself from the wall and stood tall, taking a relaxed but commanding stance. He didn’t know who this operative was, but it was always good to remind potential hunters he was not to be trifled with. The cloaked one hesitated in their final step, though it was such a subtle movement he had almost missed it. It paid dividends to take just the right stance which made you seem like coiled death ready to strike. Or so his victims had said, anyway.

 Taking something from the pocket of their equally dark robes, the figure held in his hand a holocommunicator, and another circular device of similar make. Laren lacked the technical knowhow to determine its purpose outright, though he suspected it would secure the transmission he was about to receive.

 Clicking the communicator to life, the cerulean figure of a striking female Weequay stood before Laren in miniature. She stood with an unquestionable air of calm command and emanated authority. She was, simply, impressive, and made more so because Laren knew bits and pieces of her background.

 “Welcome back,” Ness’arin Ohnaka, Director of Inquisitorius Operations, said absently. Her gaze still focused on the datapad, she continued, “I’m going over the contents of your post-mission report. It went well?”

 Laren hadn’t expected any compliments from Ohnaka. She had larger fish to fry than making sure her agents felt that they mattered.

 “It’s all in the report,” he replied. Folding his arms, Laren continued, “To what do I owe the pleasure of taking your time? Why have I been recalled early?

 “Priorities evolve. Your operation provided results, and we thank you for it. But there’s more to do, I assure you.”

 “Such as?” Laren asked dryly.

 “Striking back. You have likely heard the whispers that the Collective is waging a rather effective clandestine war against us. Small hit and run strikes, turning our agents against us, capturing agents at the source –“

 “Spreading the herd thin,” Laren interrupted. “Yeah, I heard. But what does this have to do with striking back?” He kept his tone respectful, though conversational. A spymaster’s deputy could always find a spare agent to pay him a visit if he stepped a toe out of line.

 “As I said, priorities evolve. Some missions – some assets – they take precedence.”

 Laren cupped his chin in one hand, thoughts whirling through his head. “What need do you have of me?”

 “That *we* have need of you,” a second, masculine voice intoned.

 Though in miniature, a second cerulean form appeared from the holocommunicator. Taller than Ohnaka, broad shouldered and powerfully built, Laren knew the man the moment words had escaped his mouth.

 “Aah, Seraphol. Or should I call you my Lord?” Seraphol had been subordinate to Laren for the briefest moment in time during his assignment to the Shadow Academy. “Or perhaps simply Headmaster? You must enjoy hearing that.”

 “I’ll ignore your insolence this time,” Daniel “Seraphol” Stephens replied levelly. His eyes locked with Laren as he continued, “Allow me to get straight to the point. We have an agent missing named Vance Kordall. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, will be to retrieve him. Do you accept?”

 “Not yet,” Laren replied coldly. “No context? No intel? No way. But if you provide me that, a fair sum of credits, and perhaps it can be done.”

 “There will be an Inquisitorius datapad waiting for you in your starfighter,” Ohnaka cut in, appearing completely at her ease. She seemed to ignore the tension flaring between Laren and Seraphol. “You will have full access to all pertinent files, as well as dossiers on your team members for this mission.”

 “Team members?”

 Ohnaka nodded, and Laren groaned. He could work with a team, but the responsibility for keeping them alive made everything immensely more complex.

 “Two are familiar to you, after a fashion, and the other...”

 Ohnaka trailed off and she gestured to the alley entrance. For the second time that evening, Laren had to keep himself from gripping his hand blaster due to shock. A large, evidently Trandoshan individual closed the gap in a few paces and stood beside the hooded figure. Ohnaka had named him Grot, and he was a fearsome, bestial thing. Grot towered over Laren, and his brown, scaly figure glowed faintly in the twilight. A titian gaze hiding a barely tamed primal fervour bore augurs into Laren, and it was all he could do not to step back and draw his weapon. It was no surprise when Seraphol named him a bounty hunter, and a partner of the Brotherhood.

 “Time is of the essence,” Seraphol cut in after introductions were complete. “Vance slips further from our grasp, and the Dark Council is juggling multiple objectives at once. The success of your team – the success of all of our teams entering the field – the entire Brotherhood may depend on it.”

 “Well, Seraphol, it might help if you shut your mouth so we can be on our way. What say you, Grot?”

 The Trandoshan shrugged noncommittally. Laren was already beginning to like the beast. Without waiting for permission, Laren brushed past the hooded figure holding the holocommunicator and began to make his way to his starfighter. He heard padded feet following close behind, and knew Grot was following.

 “Do you have a ship, Grot? I doubt you’ll fit in mine.”

 Ohnaka and Seraphol were left alone in their holographic state, the hooded and faceless Inquisitorius agent obediently waiting for the command to cease the communication. Ohnaka did nothing to conceal her smile at the Headmaster’s rough treatment by the Pantoran man.

 “He better be worth the insult, Ohnaka,” Seraphol breathed, his broad chest heaving with deep breaths trying to calm his anger.

 “Laren comes highly recommended. And as you alluded, Seraphol, our resources are spread thin. But he can get the job done, if anyone can.”

**En route to Kessel System**

**Real Space**

**36 ABY**

***24 hours later…***

 It turned out that Grot did not have his own ship, but it was fortunate that one of their team members had. Zuser Whuloc owned a light freighter called the *Wraith*, and though he might have been an average looking man, he was most definitely an above average pilot.

 Assembling the team in secret and without alerting Plagueian authorities to his presence had been challenging, but ultimately successful. He had extracted the members he needed from Aliso half a day previous with Grot’s aid, and now they were nearing their destination.

 The team that Laren and Grot had assembled sat around a small table in the passenger compartment of the *Wraith*. A middle aged Zabrak woman with a handsome, hardened face garbed in dark Sith robes and armed only with a lightsaber sat straight-backed and cross-legged in the small, durasteel swivel chair attached to the floor. To her left towered a male of her kin, a Zabrak with a fierce expression and a heavy armament of blades, lightsaber, and more concealed about his sound suppressed assassin armour. Zuser himself opted to relax on a nearby bench rather than sit at the table, but Laren knew the man was listening. Besides, the *Wraith* was his ship. Zuser could do as he pleased, as long as he flew straight and kept them alive.

 “All right, folks. With your input, we finally have a plan. Whether it will coalesce into success remains to be seen.” Laren paused to nod at female Zabrak, Fyarin, in genuine thanks. She had turned out to be nothing short of a miracle in terms of her tactical and military acumen. Her insight into small scale, clandestine operations was invaluable.

 “Grot, take it away.”

 Grot nodded and stood. In his right hand he held a circular, compass-like device with smaller, emerald pips. Laren knew that the smaller pips were triangles, and one of them was their missing field agent, Vance Kordall. The other Laren didn’t want to think about. The Shikari huntress Grot had spoken of.

 “The mission is simple,” Grot began, his voice a deep, reptilian hiss. “I’ve been tracking Vance and the Shikari Huntresses since his capture and the loss of the artifact. The tracking beacon places them somewhere in the vicinity of the Kessel system. We don’t know what kind of ship they have, we don’t know their crew compliment besides the Shikari Huntresses, and we don’t know exactly where Vance and the artifact will be held. But,“ the Trandoshan paused, a feral grin split his face and showed broad, sharpened fangs. “That’s what makes the hunt so enticing.”

 “Wait, what artifact?” Zuser blurted. “There’s an artifact?”

 “Mister Whuloc, your job is to fly and not get us all killed,” Fyarin responded with stately poise and grace. “Focus on that.”

 Grot appeared to be unperturbed by the outburst and he continued his briefing.

 “Our job is to them both back or, if necessary, prevent the Collective from retaining these assets by any means necessary. And we kill everything else in our path, regardless.” Grot and Kul’tak locked eyes for a moment and nodded curtly to one another.

 “It should be important to note that Arx Capital Enterprises would sincerely enjoy the return of their agent. But now, Fyarin. The details, if you please.” Laren gestured to Fyarin and she nodded, standing to speak.

 Under Fyarin’s tactical wing, the group discussed the potential methods they could use to enter the ship. With so little information available, the best they could come up with was to drop out of hyperspace as close to the ship as possible, slip under their deflector shields and blast a hole they could drop an escape pod into. If it had been possible they would have preferred a more surgical approach, but Laren resigned himself to accepting the haphazard plan Fyarin put forth.

 He just hoped that the plan would come together.

 ***One hour later…***

 “ZUSER!”

 “I see it, I see it!”

 The *Wraith* had dropped out of hyperspace within a kilometre of the unknown Collective starship, which traveled in real space at sublight speeds. Fyarin and Zuser surmised that their stealth technology needed to vent some sort of energy, or perhaps their stealth technology only worked at sublight speeds. Though the freighter was equipped with some form of stealth technology, it was evident by the turbolaser bolts flying past the whirling, maneuvering ship they were had been noticed and tracked for some time.

 “Can you still get us under their guns?” Laren asked, gripping the back of Zuser’s seat as the human expertly weaved his ship between incoming enemy fire.

 “If you stop backseat driving, sure! Now get to your escape pod. T-minus thirty seconds to drop.”

 The freighter zipped, spun, whirled and ducked around concentrated blasts of malicious energy bolts intended to vapourize the lot of them. Somehow, through a combination of sheer luck and pure skill, Zuser maneuvered the *Wraith* incrementally closer to the long, retrofitted cargo vessel, as it was apparent now. Within thirty standard seconds, the freighter ducked low, passing through the invisible deflector shield barrier and used its single dual laser cannon to blast a hole in the hull.

 “*Now*!” Came Zuser’s voice over the comm. “*Go! Go! Go!*’

 The escape pod detached from the freighter, maneuvered its entrance toward the Collective vessel and, thrusters blazing at full power, lodged itself in the hole the lasers had made in the hull. Fyarin opened the pod and was the first out, ruby saber ignited. With surprisingly efficiency, the Sith Battlemaster quickly decapitated two guards. The headless cadavers dropped to the floor in a heap, and Fyarin shifted her attention elsewhere. They were Technocratic soldiers based on their cybernetics. The rest of the team followed quickly, weapons drawn and eyes open, looking this way and that, scanning their surrounding for enemies.

 “Okay, let’s get this done,” Laren said over the blaring emergency klaxons. The juncture they had punctured was bathed in a deep orange light. “Fyarin, hold position here as planned. Grot, Kul, let’s move out. Do you have the scanner?” he asked Kul’tak.

 “Got it.”

 “Going to get that sweet, sweet revenge, Grot?” Laren queried.

 “Revenge?” Grot mused, slugthrowers cocked and ready in his gargantuan hands. “Perhaps. But it’s the Hunt, soft-skin.” Grot paused and turned to Laren, reptilian eyes locked with gold. “We three, I can feel it. We crave the thrill of the chase.”

 Laren nodded, grinning maniacally. “Aye, Grot. That we do. Now let’s go crack some skulls, shall we? Is the way clear?”

 Kul’tak nodded, and they parted ways with Fyarin, who was busy fending off another pair of guards with apparent ease. Grot and Kul’tak, each a mighty hunter in their own way, had taken point. Grot lead with his bestial senses and Kul’tak drew deeply upon the Force, as well as scanner in his hand. Laren held the rear, though no guards had approached to stop them yet. Judging by the sound in the distance, Fyarin was not so lucky judging by the blaster fire in the distance.

 “How close are we?” Laren asked, breaking the silence as they came to a four-way corridor.

 “Within twenty metres. Vance is located on the port side,” Kul’tak responded, and Grot nodded his agreement.

 None of them had time to respond further. A group of heavily armed guards rounded the corridor and bolts of cerulean and emerald blaster fire forced the trio to engage. Grot fired his slugthrowers with fierce tenacity, taking two in the chest. Kul’tak had closed the gap between him and another pair, and before either could react he had severed the guards in two from the chest down. Laren took expert pot shots at the remainder, downing one, and then the sole remaining guard point blank in the head. In moments it was all over, the bodies of the Technocratic soldiers a sizzling heap, and the smell of charred flesh.

 “Any other guards?”

 Grot shook his head. “Not guards.” He closed his eyes and tasted the air. “The huntresses. They’re close.”

 “Close, eh?” Laren grinned and reached for his thermal detonator. “This’ll keep them away, I can assure you of that. Which way, Grot?”

 “Toss it behind us, I think. You best not kill them all, blue-skin. I have unfinished business with them.”

 “I doubt one thermal detonator will kill them. But it might give us the time we need to find Vance and the artifact.”

 Suddenly, Zuser’s voice came over the Inquisitorius commlink he carried.

 “*Laren! I managed to get a good reading of the ship before I had to take off again. Vance is in some sort of self-contained stasis pod in a larger area. If I can get close enough, I can blast the ship apart and pick up the pod with a tractor beam. All you need to do is find the artifact and get the hell out of there, stat*.”

 “Zuser, do it! Grot, Kul’tak, let’s –“

 “*No need*,” Fyarin said over the commlink. “*Seems they were trying to move the artifact to a secure location. Convenient for us it was near our drop point. Get yourselves back here or I’ll kill all the remaining guards before you can*.”

 Laren couldn’t help but smile as he tossed the thermal detonator down the corridor Grot designated.

 “I love it when a plan comes together.”

 Kendra Icasta, *Three*, and *Seven* were nearly upon the intruders, running single-file through debris ridden corridors and smoky passage ways. How had the Trandoshan found them so fast? But that was a question for another day, another time. Today, she had to defend the ship and save the artifact.

 Suddenly, *Three* and *Seven* stopped. They pointed to the centre of the corridor they had rounded. Somewhere near the middle of the walkway was a small, metallic, glowing ball otherwise referred to as –

 “A thermal detonator. Run. Run now! OUT! GET OUT!”

 And they ran for all they were worth.

 The team managed to escape on their escape pod with the artifact, and Zuser managed to blast another hole in the large, retrofitted ship and grabbed the pod containing Vance. Somehow, some way, a plan that had been destined to fail succeeded against all odds.

 The plan, it seemed, had come together.