

Part II: Teenage Years

Mateus Kelborn, #13358

Mandalore, 11 ABY Outskirts of Sundari

Inside a hastily-scrawled circle in the dirt of a farm, a thirteen-year-old boy wearing nothing but combat fatigues found himself surrounded by a group of men and women. Every single one was powerful and muscled - not to say that he, for his age, was not - but they were older and far more versed in the ways of war than he could have possibly been in his youth. Now they stood as judge, jury and executioner of his fate, of his life. His very future rest in the hands of the people that surrounded him, glowering down at him and judging his absolutely every movement.

They had struck him, thrown him to the ground, covered him in dust and grime as they smacked him around. He had been slapped. Kicked. Punched. The child had given some of it back - some of the adults were bearing bruises and cuts from his fists and feet, one nursing a shattered elbow as he'd pinned one to the ground and tore at the offending limb. They, however, had given it back tenfold as excruciating punishment for that affront. The physical pain had been turned up to eleven, only to make it so that he absolutely knew his place.

Had he been beaten? In body, yes. But *never* in spirit. No real Mandalorian could ever have their spirit broken in battle - this was the time it shone and sang above all else. Even in loss, there was glory to be had.

This battle circle was the *verd'goten*, the warrior's trial. At the age of thirteen every young man or woman went through the rite of initiation that would elevate them to adulthood in their culture's eyes - when many cultures considered eighteen or even twenty-one Galactic Standard years as a mature adult, the Mandalorians decreed that thirteen was sufficient time to develop the mind and body for battle, trained from the age of three to fight every enemy before them. The elders and rally masters of Clan Kelborn had gathered for their newest young adult to rise and take his rightful place as one of the *Mando'ade*.

Mateus Kelborn would not lose here.

"One more," shouted the man at the head of the circle, clan in ornate battle armour - Mateus' father, one of the clan rally masters. "Break him, if you can."

Mateus shifted his already broken left leg back into battle stance, hands raised to protect his bruised ribs. It was wise for him to put his left side back, given that he could barely see out of that eye with all the blood flooding through it from the gash on his forehead. A simple rule: protect what was already injured to prevent it from being destroyed. It was not a pretty sight, but

fighting was never a pretty thing to begin with, was it? Mat had to summon up his courage and fight on, despite injury. A vicious scream left the young man's lips, showing his judges that he was unafraid of anything they could possibly throw at him. There was no place left for weakness here, none for doubt. Fight or die, the true Mandalorian way. He *would* live through this trial.

"Come on!" shouted the boy, challenging the very essence of his life itself.

The sixth of his opponents stepped forward, Varys Kelborn, master-at-arms and renowned gunslinger of his clan - keen blue eyes surveyed the damaged form of the little warrior before him and noted every weakness with an inquisitive glance. His knees were collapsing in on themselves, he could no longer see with his face covered in sweat and blood and much and his hands were shaking with exhaustion.

In a flash, Varys lunged for the boy to seize his front hand and wrap him up. Mateus would have none of this, striking a jab cleanly under the hand to the third rib of his assailant followed by a savage uppercut to the throat under the exposed weakness.

To nobody's surprise, the child had - in the opening blows - bested his opponent. For now.

As Varys recoiled from the blow and succumbed to a coughing fit, Mateus stared deep into the eyes of his enemy, a primal roar resonating from his core. Despite the brutal opening moments, he couldn't stand this much longer. His knuckles were already grazed and despite his enemy coughing and struggling to breathe, he was too, rasping for air with every carefully measured breath. His youthful body just couldn't keep up with what everyone around him expected any longer.

The sage Mandalorian recovered his senses, eyes finally returning from their daze. Mateus suddenly found himself on the receiving end of a spear tackle, coming crashing to the ground as Varys held him down with one hand and shattered his cheek in a single unrelenting punch. The poor kid was one or two more hits away from total unconsciousness as his eyes rolled back into his head, feeling the next blow inch closer to his temple, arms barely functioning to guard as his opponent kept him down-

"Enough. He's fought well," came a feminine voice from the side. "He passes *verd'goten*."

As the master-at-arms stood up from the boy's battered form, there was the hint of a smile on Mateus' lips at those beautiful words - right before he passed out in the muck.

A quick dip in a bacta tank for a couple of hours and Mateus was right as rain to go out that night with the fellows of his clan. Mandalorians that had passed their coming of age trial were considered fully-grown adults as far as anyone else was concerned, even on this

Imperial-governed world; they were able to go out and drink with their clansmen and enjoy the merriments of the night. In the tightly-packed tapcafe in Sundari, almost the entirety of Clan Kelborn had turned out to celebrate with Mateus and his success in the *verd'goten*. Hundreds of people were there, mugs of ale raised in honour of the young man.

"*Kote!*" Victory! The cry of Mateus Kelborn as he, in a single go, downed his entire mug of ale and slammed it down on the counter to the rousing cheers of the crowd.

He cast a blue gaze around the room at those assembled, mostly grizzled, faces - and here he found his family. Like himself, many of them were humans, but amongst their numbers there were plenty of others - Twi'leks, Kel Dor, a Togruta. People that had been brought into the Mandalorian way and initiated the same way he had. Mandalorian by birth? No, but one could still be Mandalorian by the truest of belief. In Clan Kelborn, that made you *family*.

There was a sudden hand with a second mug in front of him, lowering it down to his face from over his head. Gratefully, Mat took the mug and cast his stare at the person who'd given it to him - and then grinned. "Thank you, Father."

"You fought well today. Very well. Varys is just a little sore that you beat him to the punch," he said, patting Mat on the shoulder.

"I wouldn't have beaten him in the first exchange if he didn't just want to take me apart like a common savage. I just couldn't keep up after that."

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure the master-at-arms will offer you more training if you ask. Just don't be surprised if he punches you in the face first."

Both of them shared a laugh as they drank together, father and son relishing the moment that they shared. Mateus' father could not be prouder, having witnessed his son become a man in the eyes of his four thousand year tradition. It was a good moment to be celebrating. Across the room, Mateus could spy the pretty form of two cute girls sitting at a table, whom the Kelborn lad assumed were talking about girly things like stripping down blasters and painting them silly colours. Or punching boys. Who knew. One of them threw a look his way. He raised his eyebrows and grinned beautifully before they both started giggling and talking to each other again.

Mateus got up out of his seat. "Now if you'll excuse me, Father, I have to go show off for the ladies. They'll want to check out my cool scars and ask me how I got them and I'm going to tell them that Varys ate it harder than he actually did."

"You little piece of bantha shit." Just like his dad.

Pushing past his stool, Mateus took a moment to revel in the scene - a party buzzing around him, two pretty girls to woo and the thrill of victory mixed with alcohol. The Mandalorian way to party, once someone started fighting. It wouldn't take too much for someone to do that, anyway, given that it was basically the way people resolved disputes, settled matters of honour or even just said hello.

He couldn't ask for anything better. This was life. Soon enough he'd have to make his own armour and *really* live the life of the Mandalorian way.

Being an adult was *awesome*.