

Goodbye.

A submission for the fiction Competition: **Winter Wonderland.**

Written and submitted by Mystic Appius Wight

Chapter 1

"I'm taking a leave of absence."

The words that came out of the Mandalorian's mouth didn't come as much of a surprise to the half-sephi Shadow. Especially after everything that occurred from Great Jedi War XIII, the Collective on their doorstep when he the Aedile was the Battleteam Leader of Deathwatch, all the way up to the war with Clan Plagueis. The mental toll it had taken on him must have been catastrophic.

"I don't recall you placing a request in for leave, Appius," The Quaestor of House Wren sat at his desk, barely making eye contact with his Aedile. "Need I remind you we have just ended a war with Clan Plagueis. House Wren has lost a lot of its personnel and we need to restore our strength before our enemies realize it can be capitalized on."

"I'm aware of our situation, Rulvak. But I'm not asking for a lot of time. I'm asking for twenty-four hours, that's all. One day. After that, I'll be here for as long as you need me."

"I fail to understand what is so important that you need to take a leave of absence so suddenly, and for only one day when you could simply take it at a later time."

Silence deafened the room between the two men, and even without the use of the Force, Rulvak could feel the hesitation through the human's body language alone. He shifted in place uncomfortably.

"It's... complicated."

Tapping into the Force, Rulvak Qurroc quickly scanned Appius' emotional state, finding him to be in a state of distress, more than likely due to earlier events and now this very conversation, he finally made eye contact with him, or at least as best he could with the humans helmet and visor in the way. Still, he observed as the Sorcerer's heart beat faster and faster as he awaited the Quaestor's response.

"Complicated could mean anything. I'll need a little bit more than that, Appius."

"Personal... It's a personal matter, Rulvak."

At that moment, it hit the Quaestor through the Force and the answer he was looking for was clear to him as he felt it in his Aedile's soul.

"Fine," answered the Shadow, it felt like the right thing to say, at least to make his Aedile content for the moment. The last thing he needed was for stupid mistakes to happen because Appius' head wasn't in the right place. "Twenty four hours, that's all. If you are not back by this time tomorrow I'll send a search party out, and when they drag you back here, believe me when I say that you'll be sorry."

The threat did not go unnoticed by Appius, but nonetheless, he felt relief wash over him as he was given permission to take the time off that he requested.

"Thank you, Rulvak. I'll be back by this time tomorrow morning."

As the Sorcerer turned to leave, he heard the Sith grunt ever so slightly under his breath. He closed the door, leaving Rulvak to fester his anger at the administration and paperwork he would now have to do on his own.

You know what? He can handle it for one day.

The tall human mused the thought to himself as he casually made his way down the narrow halls of Yuanming.

Or he'll just leave it for me to do once I get back.

Yep, that was probably more likely, but today was not a day he cared about that. As he left the front entrance of Yuanming, the bright sunlight beamed down on top of him and warmed him almost instantaneously.

Civilians and citizens under the care of Vizsla wandered around seemingly carefree. Du Kang Island was, after all, the only place on Zsoldos where the use of weapons was prohibited, leading to the local populace to relax, knowing that any wrongdoings in the area would personally be taken care of by the mercenary Clan.

The Sorcerer paused and let the mid afternoon sun soak onto his armor. He was going to need that bit of warmth, considering where he was going to leave for shortly.

He turned the corner around the massive hotel structure and made his way towards one of Clan Vizsla's private storage warehouses. He inputted the security code and the massive warehouse door opened into a dark, airy hangar. Despite the heat on the outside, the Mystic couldn't help but shiver in response to the cold shiver that dropped down his spine.

In the centre of the empty hangar stood his personal Mandalorian Patrol Speeder Bike, in mint condition, sparkling brilliantly and reflecting what little light invaded the hangar from the outside world.

It stood upright next to an R3 astromech unit, and thanks to its mostly dark grey coat of paint, it nearly blended in with the rest of the hangar. Upon detecting its owner, beeped happily. Behind his visor, Appius couldn't help but smile softly.

"Hey, Lawrence. How are you doing?"

Appius placed his right hand on top of Lawrence and the Astromech danced happily on the spot.

"Good. Did you have a good oil bath?"

The response he got wasn't one of joy or happiness, but sorrow. The droids binary inputs became low in frequency and pitch.

"I know, it's not going to be the same is it?"

Appius patted the metal dome gently with his hand, leaving it there for a few moments to comfort the little astromech. After a minute, he moved ahead of his mechanical companion to approach his bike. He quickly mounted the vehicle and the engine whirled to life, defying gravity and suspending Appius and the bike in the air.

"Keep an eye on things for me, Lawrence. I'll be back a little later."

The Astromech didn't have a chance to respond before the Patrol Speeder's ion afterburner sparked, causing his master to shoot off into the distance and disappear in the Zsoldos sunlight.

Chapter 2

The previous warmth of the planet was eliminated once Appius reached the southernmost of Zsoldos. Snow covered the terrain for mile after mile as far as the eye could see, like it was a blank canvas waiting for an artist to build their masterpiece.

It didn't take long before he would witness that blank canvas become stained and deformed. Appius adjusted his path and slowed down in order to avoid crashing into the myriad of fallen Plagueis vehicles dotting the land and making it a mechanical graveyard. He turned carefully around an AT-AT before sliding the bike around an AT-ST. Various landing craft of different makes and models still burned freshly, just like the battle that still lingered in the back of the Sorcerer's mind, weighing heavily like a crate of Beskar on his shoulders.

War never changes, but it certainly changes people.

He was seriously thankful he couldn't see the layer of bodies no doubt buried underneath the snow. The battle only took place yesterday, and yet, recent blizzards had formed a thin coating over the smaller vessels on the ground.

Eventually, he reached the front of the cascade of metal and was greeted by what remained of the Roark-Cole-Tresor research station. Just a shell of his former self. What once stood a massive durasteel structure, sixty-four metres in height, width, and length, now stood a barely recognisable wreckage that scattered across the landscape.

As Appius got closer, his eyes caught a glimpse of a T-16 Skyhopper that almost faded into the background due to the whiteness it shared with the snow. Stood in front of it was a Chiss woman, no taller than five foot seven, stood in bright red cold resistant clothing, gazing out into the distance where a battle between Vizsla and Plagueis took place.

He pulled up next to her Skyhopper and dismounted his Patrol Bike. He approached her, and his footsteps created a crunching sound, yet she never shifted her gaze towards him.

"Talia, what are you doing outside of the Skyhopper? You'll freeze."

She shrugged in response.

"I'm from Csilla, the temperatures there are far worse than what Vizsla has here. I'll be fine," replied Talia. She spoke softly, and smiled gently at the Mandalorian trying to reassure him. But Appius wasn't born yesterday. She was hurting, and he knew it.

Neither of them said anything to one another as the icy winds threatened to freeze them in place like statues. Appius was at least thankful the Comfort Body Glove in his armor kept the worst of the cold on the outside. But his concern grew as he noticed the young Chiss woman's hands pressed against her abdomen.

The Sorcerer's mouth opened but words didn't come out. He struggled to know what to say, or how to say it. Thankfully, he didn't have to.

"Thank you for coming, Appius. Drax always spoke very highly of you."

"Of course, it's the least I can do," Appius quietly voiced. He wanted to say more, but once again, couldn't form the words in his mouth.

"We were so excited. After joining Vizsla a fire lit inside him like I'd never seen. He was determined to find a way. A way for us to finally start a family..."

Her red eyes glanced downwards to her hands.

"And he did it. But you knew that, didn't you?"

"Yes..."

He had to force the word out of his throat. The last thing he wanted was for her to blame him for what happened. Even if he couldn't blame her for it.

"He told me almost as soon as he found out," calmly replied the Vizsla clansman. "In the entire time I'd known him, that was the happiest I ever saw him. He basically gave a giant middle finger to your illness."

Talia lightly nodded her head and smiled.

"Yes, he did. He truly believed joining Clan Vizsla, joining you, had changed our lives so much for the better," she paused, allowing a moment for her words to sink in. "So, thank you. Thank you for everything. Thank you for giving him hope. You sparked something in him I thought died when he found out I was sick. He became the man I fell in love with all over again. Even if it was only brief, it was good to have him back."

Appius fought back the trickles of water that were starting to form in his eyes. Thankfully, his visor prevented her from seeing them, but the sudden shift in his body language, the slight shaking of his hands and the sudden quick gasps of breaths, revealed all to her.

"I'm so sorry, it's all my fault," he spoke, barely as a whisper. "I should have been more careful. I should have gotten him out of there, but everything happened so fast..."

"There's nothing to forgive. We both knew the risks when he got involved with the Clan. But thank you for coming here with me, Appius. I just wanted to see it for myself. Where he died."

Everything went silent around them, with only the cold winds and battlefield wreckage around them as a stoic reminder of just where they were.

"We'd best get you out of here. It's getting colder and this is no place for a woman in your condition."

The Chiss woman turned her head and raised an eyebrow at the Sorcerer.

"Erm... sorry, I mean..." the Mandalorian's heart beat harder in his chest and he panicked as a nervous sweat formed on his brow, but to his surprise, she simply chuckled lightly at him.

"It's fine. It's probably best we leave, but there is one last thing I'd like to ask of you, Appius."

"Of course, anything."

"Will you be the godfather to mine and Drax's child?"

The words hit Appius harder than a Sith using Djem So. He felt himself becoming overwhelmed at the prospect.

"I..."

After everything he had done, everything that had happened, she was still willing to trust him with the life of someone else close to her. It spoke to Vizsla's first Knight a lot about the type of woman Talia was.

"I would be honoured."

Her face lit up and she smiled, like a heavy weight was removed from her shoulders.

"Thank you, Appius. Drax wanted to ask you himself. He said you were the best man for the job, the one he trusted most. He just never got the chance to ask you himself."

She turned and with slowed, crunchy footsteps in the snow, made her way back to her T-16 Skyhopper. Appius remained in place, still absorbing the information he was given just a few moments prior.

"Now look who's standing out there, catching their death from the cold. Are you coming, Appius?" Talia yelled as she halted herself from entering her transport vessel, her voice broke the Wren Aedile out of his stupor, forcing him to shake the feeling from his mind and body.

"Huh? Oh yeah, sorry."

Appius took a step towards his Mandalorian Patrol Bike and took a glance back towards the field of scrap metal and buried dead in the snow.

He knew there was no chance of it, but just for his own self-assurance he tapped into the Force and opened his senses to feeling the presence, proximity, and life energy of anyone that might still be out there.

Nothing.

He got no feedback. Anyone that was there during that battle now lay as one of many bodies scattered across the snow filled burial site.

Vizsla's first Knight was about to turn and leave, until he felt something at the back of his mind. A tingling sensation, but what surprised him most was how familiar it felt.

There's no way...

He thought the Force was playing tricks with his mind, but despite how faint it was, the signature was still there, though incredibly weak.

It can't be...

"Appius, what are you doing?" Talia called out to him.

Wasting no more time, Appius hurried back to his Bike and quickly mounted it, the attached Heating Blocks, thankfully, allowed it to reach full power instantly.

"Talia, I have something to take care of, I'll see you later."

Before she could inquire or argue with him further, the Mandalorian had already shot off into the distance and out of sight.

All he could do was follow his senses, as difficult as it was whilst trying to pilot his bike around and through the myriad of debris and harsh bitterness of the land around him. Daylight was fading, and being out in the freezing tundra in the dark was not how Appius planned to spend the rest of his day off.

But he felt, somehow he knew... just maybe...

He finally reached his destination, a place where the feeling granted from the Force guided him to go. A Clan Vizsla AT-TE slumped in the snow on its side.

The tall human dismounted and rushed to the side of the fallen vehicle, though any normal means of entry had become obscured by snow. He circled around it quickly, looking for any other means of getting inside. Not finding any, he resorted to plan B.

He grabbed his lightsabers from his waist and gripped a hilt tightly in each hand. With a distinct *snap-hiss*, emerald blades erupted out of the hilts and Appius plunged them into the solid durasteel like a syringe through soft flesh. Using both blades, he quickly cut a circular opening. Then, calling upon the Force, he ripped the opening out and tossed it aside in the snow.

The heat inside escaped quickly, replaced by the frozen airs of the outside. He stepped inside and what he saw filled his core with dread.

"Frack..."

The durasteel framing of the vehicle had collapsed, preventing easy access to the pilot area. To his right, however, was whom he was here to find.

"Drax!"

The Chiss male barely clung to life. The AT-TE served as a shell, protecting him from the cold, but some of the Durasteel that layered the side had come off and crushed his right arm and leg. It severed the nerves in his flesh from the rest of his body and without oxygen, the limbs underneath shaded purple, and small trickles of blood leaked underneath the steel, turning grey paneling red.

Appius reached out once again with the Force to lift Drax's obstructions from him, but as he did, a pool of blood leaked from the Scavenger's limbs and he gasped painfully. In response to this, the Wren Aedile dropped the metal back on top of the dead limbs.

Vizsla's first Knight searched for anything that could help stop the bleeding, and it was during his panicked scrambling that the fingertips of his left hand grazed the top of *Liberator*, the lightsaber attached to the left side of his hip. A spark of inspiration flashed through his mind, though it was not an idea he was fond of, and if Drax were aware of it, he would most certainly object too.

Then again, he didn't have any better ideas...

He gripped the hilt and the emerald blade ruptured out of the hilt again.

"Drax, I am really sorry about this."

The Sorcerer hesitated for a moment before taking several deep breaths to calm his nerves. His blood rushed to his head, his heart pounded in his chest, his hands felt numb and sweat dripped down his face. Nonetheless, he knew he had to do the best he could for his friend.

He swung the blade vertically through the first steel panel, severing it, and following his momentum, cut through Drax's right arm at the elbow and his leg right above his kneecap.

Once again, the only response Appius received were the pained gasps that voiced from the Chiss male.

"Sorry, Drax. But those limbs aren't going to be of any use to you now anyways."

He sheathed his weapon and placed it back on his waist and observed as the appendages slowly stopped trickling blood. It worked, the wounds successfully cauterized. The Sorcerer then focused his attention on opening communications with Battleteam Deathwatch.

"This is Appius Wight, I have a code orange at the sight of the Roark-Cole-Tresor research station. Requesting immediate evac at my location. I repeat, this is a code orange. Subject is fatally wounded and needs immediate help."

"Roger that, Aedile. Assistance is on the way."

Satisfied, Appius shut off communications and quickly dropped into his knees at Drax's side. He placed his hands just a few inches above his body and focused all his being on summoning forth a wave of soothing energy to his friend.

Whatever tension Drax was holding in his body released at that moment, and all Appius could do was pray that help arrived before his condition got worse.

Chapter 3

It burns!

That was the Scavenger's first thought as he finally regained consciousness and caught an eyeful of the bright light hanging above his head. He quickly turned his head to the side, blinking rapidly to give his eyes the moisture they so desperately craved.

As his vision came to, he managed to catch glimpses of the room he was in. Perfectly plain and basic, yet quite large for what it was. Tiled walls and a small table remained beside him in the bed he lay in. It dawned on the scavenger, that he was in Du Kang Islands medical facility.

Most importantly, however, he caught sight of someone he thought he'd never see again.

"Talía..." he said quietly.

Her arms were folded on the bed, with her head using them as a makeshift pillow.

He smiled softly and closed his eyes. The last thing he remembered was making internal repairs to an AT-TE and the next minute...

The memories flooded back all at once and he sighed deeply. He should be dead right now, but with his wife sleeping next to him, he was oddly at peace with it. He tried to move, but pain burned in his elbow and leg like he'd placed them on an open flame.

"Sithspit!" He exclaimed loudly.

"Drax?"

The gentle voice of his wife drew his attention. Clearly, his sudden cry of anguish woke her up. A fact he was feeling a little guilty for, but perhaps now he could get answers.

"Appius, he's awake!" Talía yelled, and instantly, the House Wren Aedile entered the room in his usual Mandalorian armor, except this time without the helmet, giving both Chiss a perfect view of his buzz cut brown hair and blue eyes.

"Hey Drac, how are you doing?" He asked calmly, standing beside the bed.

Drax didn't respond at first, he was still in a daze about the events of how he got here and how he was still alive.

"I'm... ok I think," he finally responded. "I'm a bit lightheaded."

"The doctor said that'll wear off in a couple of hours. It's just the anaesthetic playing hell with your body at the minute."

It took a moment for the Scavenger to register Appius' words but after a moment, it clicked.

"Anaesthetic?"

"Yeah, you were in pretty bad shape when I found you. Steel paneling crushed your arm and leg." The Sorcerer paused for a moment, the sudden weight in his heart made him not want to continue, but it was better that Drax find out from him.

"You were leaking blood from the wounds and to stop the bleeding I... removed them."

If pictures could speak, then Drax's face in that moment would have told a story. His eyes widened as he tried to feel for his missing appendages. But something didn't feel right, he expected to find nothing, yet he could feel himself moving fingers and toes. He grabbed the duvet that was covering him and tossed it aside, revealing what appeared to be a grey, skeletal arm and leg attached to the ligaments where Appius severed his flesh and bone.

He raised his right arm and fiddled with the robotic fingers, then glanced down to his leg and wiggled his new metal toes.

"Fascinating. I always wondered what this would feel like, and now I know."

The room suddenly thundered with Talia's laughter, followed by Appius' jaw becoming slack from sheer disbelief.

"Fascinating!? That's not the word I'd use if my limbs were replaced!" The Sorcerer exclaimed, failing to hide the surprise in his voice.

"That's Drax for you, Appius. The second he has something mechanical he can fiddle with, he's in a world of his own," responded Talia with a cheerful grin. It was clear to the Human that she was just happy her husband was still alive, mechanical limbs or not, and that filled him with a warmth in his heart.

"When will I be back in my duties?" Inquired Drax. Wondering how long he'd have to stay in his bed.

"Not for a while, I've already sorted your discharge papers so you don't need to go anywhere for a while," replied Appius.

"How did you even find me?"

"The Force." The Sorcerer's answer was blunt, but straight to the point. Drax possessed enough knowledge of the Force from Appius to not question the answer when he received it, but to just be thankful instead.

"But what if you need me?"

"If we need you, I'll call you myself, ok? Right now, what's most important is you spend time with your family." Appius then smiled to his friend. "I'll see you around, guys."

"Appius, wait! I have to ask you something."

The Aedile already left the room, deciding it was best that Talia catch Drax up with the day's events.

He smiled to himself, thankful that at least somehow, someday, a little bit of good came out of all the hatred and conflict.

For now though, he had to return to Yuanming, no doubt to an unending mountain of paperwork waiting at his desk.

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