

Temptations

An entry for the Fiction Competition: [GJW XIV Phase I] Fiction - Combat Writing

Written and submitted by Mystic Appius Wight of Clan Taldryan.

Chapter 1

Smoke as black as space filled the hallways and rooms of the Shadow Academy's Nesolat platform. It was toxic and nauseous, burning the eyes of those unlucky enough to be in the presence of its terrible fumes. The fires engulfed the durasteel platforms and walkways and made them difficult to navigate. Blast doors sealed shut the areas considered lost leaving anyone too slow to their fates on the other side.

The two TIE Fighter Squadrons that defended the Academy were already lost. After all, it was twenty-four fighters versus a surprise Collective invasion; They never stood a bleeding chance. They were unprepared, unequipped, and it hadn't even been a fracking year since the war in the Lyra System. What could have possibly happened that made them bold enough to attack in Brotherhood domain!?

Appius pushed those thoughts to the back of his consciousness as the blast doors to yet another of the platform's corridors closed behind him. Only a small handful of society members had made it through with him, the rest were trapped behind.

"NO!" He screamed through his visor, he slammed an open palm angrily into the steel as it ricocheted against him effortlessly. He held out his hands, fully intending to pry the door open by sheer *Force* if he had to save them. He couldn't let them die. Not again. So many had already been lost.

His better judgement got the better of him. He knew if he opened this door it wouldn't just put his life at risk, but those around him too. That part of the Nesolat Platform was now closed off for a reason, whether he liked it or not. His arms fell limp at his side like lead weights as his head became too heavy to hold upright.

"What do we do?"

"How do we get out?"

"My friend was in there! Do something!"

All three Shadow Academy Society members beside him spoke out at once into an almost inaudible ruckus of the alarms that blared around them.

"Everybody shut up!" The Sorcerer suddenly snapped, silencing the small group. Under normal circumstances, he was a much more tolerant individual. These were not normal circumstances.

Through his visor, he glanced at the fearful state of them. A young female Kiffar, a regular Human male, and even a male Zabrak couldn't shake the fear he felt in his heart. Appius felt himself sink internally as regret filled him through his body. He placed his hands on his helmet and squeezed slightly, releasing some pent up frustration building at the tips of his fingers before dropping them again.

"I'm sorry," he said while shaking his head remorsefully. "I didn't mean to snap. My job is to get as many of you to safety as I can, and get you to safety is exactly what I plan to do. There's nothing more we can do for them. Let's go."

His words formed a knot in his gut. He hated it. He hated *them*. The Collective, the ones responsible for all of this carnage and the ones responsible for the heat that currently burned in his heart, making the flames rise to the surface. The darkness inside him scratched the surface, waiting, begging to be released. But he kept it repressed, kept it hidden. Why? Because who knew what would happen if he let it all go? It wasn't a thought he cherished.

The Sorcerer did his best to ignore the cries and screams of the doomed souls from the other side of the blast door and pushed on. Cursing to himself infernally, he led the group into a nearby corridor and ran several feet before coming to a grinding halt at a rather plain and unassuming wall with a loose steel panel. It appeared to have come ajar during the myriad of explosions the platform was being bombarded with. Without so much as a second thought, he flicked his wrist and the panel flew off and behind them completely without a care, revealing in its place a secret panel. Appius input the code, and to the surprise of those beside him, a door slid open.

"This is a secret passage to the docking bay where there are ships waiting for you. Get on them and get out of here." Ordered the Ektrosis Aedile.

They were shocked; very few knew of the Nesolat Platform's secrets much less about the secret network of passageways and tunnels that linked one side to the other. The Shadow Academy was like a second home to Appius. It was where he, like many others, received their start in the Brotherhood so when the call for help came, he B-lined it from the Caelus System as fast as he could and was one of the first to arrive. Not to mention his master was Farrin Xies Tarantae. He'd been the Headmaster in-office when Grandmaster Pravus committed his purge of the undesirables. Farrin showed his apprentice every crook and nanny hiding within the walls of this platform.

The Academy members filed themselves one by one into the passageway as that was all the space would allow, though the Kiffar girl seemed to look him in the eyes through his visor as he moved past him.

"Thank you." That was all she said as she disappeared into the darkened tunnel.

The Mandalorian's heart lifted, if only for a moment. He couldn't save everyone, but if he could save some, maybe his efforts were worth it? His trail of thought was broken by a sudden unholy, ear destroying shriek that came down the hallway to his left. Reaching into the Force, his being went numb at the sensation of dread and despair that overtook him. Whomever he could feel, their life was suddenly ended like a lost flame on a candle. He knew he had to act, and he knew he had a job to do.

He quickly sealed the door to ensure no-one could follow the society members down to the docking bay and ran in the direction of the shriek. He readied himself for the inevitable conflict that was bound to come.

Chapter 2

With every running step he took, he felt his heart thunder and ring louder in his ears. *Thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump*. Each beat getting faster and faster, harder and more pronounced. Sweat dripped down his forehead, and the inescapable feeling of dread still tore at him. He didn't know why, but it seemed to get worse the closer he got to the source of the anguish.

He soon found his answer when he turned into one of the Nesolat Platform's main vaults. The alarm that had blared previously was now a quiet hum in the distance. Holocrons, artifacts and textbooks of many sizes, shapes, and varieties normally littered each wall. Columns and shelves had stood here majestically as a reminder of the history and fountain of knowledge contained within this very room. Now it lay in ruins, the shelves merely splinters and shards of their former selves. The textbooks ripped in pieces and any knowledge that they may have contained now lost to time. But perhaps the worst of it made Appius' skin crawl. It was the cause of his foreboding urgency: there were bodies of various races scattered across the room decorating it like a makeshift graveyard. They were littered with blaster holes, burn marks, and gashes caused by knives or blades of some sort.

At the very end of the trail of carnage, the Mandalorian was alarmed to see four completely identical individuals. Clad in completely identical Imperial Purge Trooper Armor, standing at exactly the same height with muscular builds, they were an intimidating force. That was before he realised each was armed to the teeth with blasters, explosives, and even a Vibrodagger. One of the four was restraining a professor by his arms whilst a second held a blood-stained dagger to his throat. The remaining two turned to observe him enter the room, but remained motionless.

"Wait, don't!" Appius' voice croaked the plea as his urgency returned to him. The two soldiers never moved, their blackened helmets never inches, simply keeping their gaze centred on him like birds watching prey. To Appius, they were clearly a cohesive unit. Deadly, efficient, looking for a challenge. He'd seen it before back in both the Lyra and Caelus Systems, and it gave him an idea.

"That person you have there? He's barely worth your time or effort. I'm the Aedile of House Ektrosis of Clan Taldryan. A Mystic, a *Force user*," he said, emphasising those last three words purposely to direct their ire towards him.

His fingers twitched at his side as he waited for their response. From the Force, he could feel a slight intrigue coming from them, but that was all. No malice, no inherent anger. It was almost like they were robotic. Like their humanity was almost non-existent.

"Why kill just one when we can kill both of you?"

The response was cold, lacked heart, emotion, and all Appius could do was watch as the sharp Vibrodagger sliced horizontally across the academic's flesh with a haphazard swing, blood leaked from the gash as his body was tossed to the side without a care.

"YOU MONSTERS!" The Sorcerer screamed with venom laced in his voice.

Appius thrust both arms forward and failed to hold back the darkness within as streaks of blue roared out of the tips of his fingers like an angry thunderstorm towards the group. Only for the to split up to either side of the impending attack.

In unison, all four grabbed their Death Watch Blaster Carbines and prepared to unleash hell upon the Sorcerer. Thinking quickly, Appius stretched out with the Force to grab a part of one of the many fallen durasteel shelving and moved it in front of him, just in time as accurately placed blaster fire clanged against it. The impenetrable defence seemed to be working for a moment. That was, until the Mandalorian's ear caught a *very* familiar sound beeping right next to his feet.

A Thermal Detonator.

He didn't even glance at it, instead, he released his grip on the steel protecting him and activated his jetpack to launch himself quickly into the air. His suspicions were confirmed when just seconds after he was airborne an explosion tore the ground apart where he stood fifteen feet below.

Unfortunately, he wasn't the only one who could fly, each soldier was equipped with a jetpack of their own and he was immediately intercepted by the closest Marine to him. He headbutted Appius in his gut and sent him crashing into some rubble with a hard thud. He Landed on his back and his jetpack, surprisingly, managed to cushion the majority of his fall. Though how much damage it sustained was something he couldn't be sure of.

The Sorcerer pushed past the pain in his abdomen and rose back to his feet. They were already back on him, like hungry nexu's that smelt blood in the air. Once again with their blaster rifles in their hands, Appius had to curse the irony they were using a weapon that *his* homeworld were known for. Hell, he'd founded a Battleteam in Clan Vizsla based on the group that used those weapons!

Nonetheless, it didn't make them any less deadly, and it was obvious to the Ektrosis Aedile that these were not ordinary soldiers. They were unique, highly trained, and far from the usual riff-raff the Collective liked to send at them. It was like they were one individual split into four people, and the only purpose to their existence was to kill. They were damn good at it too.

Appius knew he didn't have a choice. He was skilled in the Force, but that alone wasn't going to be enough for this battle. He was all alone, outclassed, outnumbered and he'd be leaving himself far too vulnerable if he tried. He gripped *Redeemer*, the steel hilt fit comfortably in the palms of his hands and an emerald blade ruptured out of the hilt with a powerful *snap-hiss* most commonly associated with the weapon of a Jedi or Sith.

Blaster bolts once again threatened to end his life if they hit. Instinctively, his blade moved to intercept them, colliding and sending them away from his body in a random direction.

The Force User's blade committed to a *Circle of Shelter* around him, intercepting each shot as they came close. His lightsaber moved like clockwork, only moving as much as it needed to in order to defend him. He was, after all, a master in the techniques of Soresu, the form specifically designed for blaster deflection.

He never moved his feet, and simply allowed himself to fall into the penumbra of the Force. It guided his actions and protected him from harm. The man that was known as Appius Wight simply allowed his instincts to take over. He closed his eyes and let the Force flow in and out of him as it needed to like a gentle river, opening himself to its will, only reacting when it directed him too. He moved his blade when it told him to move, kept it still when it told him to stay still as he fell into the standing meditation that was common of Soresu experts.

Deflecting this many blaster bolts coming at him at once was certainly difficult, bordering impossible. Every shot they fired was precise and aimed directly at his vitals and he would only be able to keep up this defence for a few moments more before he was completely overwhelmed. Thankfully, the Resilience Form was often a stall tactic, and they had fallen for it. Hook, line and sinker.

The stream of blaster bolts were aimed directly at different parts of his body. The head, the thigh, the abdomen and his right arm. He ducked underneath the shots aimed at his head and sidestepped to the right. Then, he timed a *Deflecting Slash*, sending deadly lasers back towards two of the Collective marines, forcing them to dodge out of the way together and drop their focus on shooting him.

Feeling the small lull in the blaster fire, Appius took his chance. The Force imbued his legs and muscles like a powerful stimulant. Making him faster and more agile as was his intention. He leapt out of the way, his sudden mobility catching them by surprise as he landed outside of the perimeter they had created around him. The moment his feet touched the ground he followed through with his momentum and threw his lightsaber at the closest

enemies to him. Or rather, where they were going to be. It whirled through the air like a floating guillotine and arched back into the Sorcerer's hand, but not before it separated two of the soldier's heads from their shoulders.

Two down, two to go.

As the thought entered his mind he couldn't help but notice his heavier breathing. Using the Force was taxing on him, and despite now having an advantage, he was going to have to be careful.

Yet the remaining Collective marines didn't attack him, not immediately. They clutched at their throats and screamed. Pained and tortured, it sounded like their flesh was on fire.

"What in the..." Appius said, his head tilted slightly and he recoiled back out of instinct. After a moment to compose himself from the shock, he stared at them, noticing they had their hands exactly where their team members head had been removed from moments prior.

There's no fracking way, is there?

The gears in the Sorcerer's head began turning. The way they fought together, saw things each other saw, moved like they were silently communicating.

That was a point, he hadn't seen them talk to each other. *At all.*

His ruminations were broken when one of the remaining Collective soldiers rose to his feet and pointed his right arm out towards him. Firing from a device attached to his wrist, a deadly projectile rocketed towards Appius at a speed the Sorcerer didn't have time to dodge.

"Sithspit!"

He threw him his left hand and called upon the Force to protect him from the impact like a shield. The projectile appeared to crash into an invisible wall, and exploded just inches away from his hand. Whilst it stopped it outright killing the Force user, the sudden impact sent him off his feet and onto his side as his lightsaber rolled out of his hand. His armour was scorched, and his helmet was now missing part of the front visor, revealing a single blue eye behind it.

He was in direct danger, he didn't need the Force to tell him that. Ignoring the slight twinge caused by the most recent attack he rose back to his feet, just in time for him to see one of the Marines lunge towards him with a Vibrodagger brandished in his right hand. The Force screamed it's warning to the back of Appius' mind as he ducked underneath the lethal horizontal swing. He reached out with the Force, gripping it around his fallen weapon and it flew back to his hand like it was a magnet attracting it to him. The emerald blade ruptured

once more out of the hilt, and before the soldier could follow through with another attack, his torso was split down the middle by the vertical retaliation. Killing him instantly.

Immediately the last remaining man clutched at their chest and fought back the agony that suddenly took over them. The Mandalorian's suspicions were confirmed.

"I knew it!" Appius suddenly yelled out. "You don't fight like one individual. You *are* one individual. You see what each other see, share your thoughts between yourselves, even share the same sense of touch."

They were like nothing else Appius had ever fought. He'd been in a war before of course. Two in fact, once against the Collective before in the Lyra System and once against Clan Plagueis as a member of Vizsla. But nothing he ever came up against was like them. It explained a lot, like how they were so deadly and efficient in these hallways, how not only did they kill Force users, they downright outclassed them and slaughtered them like simple cattle. They were Anti-Force user militia designed to eradicate them, consequences be damned.

"But there's a downside, isn't there?" He continued. "You share everything, don't you? Including pain. I've killed three of you now, and you are all that's left."

Appius paused, he had no idea how that must of felt for him to experience. Once was bad enough, but three times? He had to wonder if it was worth it.

But then, he glanced around the circular room and the destruction and debris that lied everywhere. The many bodies that lied motionless were a stoic reminder of the lengths the Collective were willing to go to kill them all.

"We knew what we were getting into when we signed up. The Hive Mind initiative was our way forward. We all had one thing in common, Force users made our lives miserable. Killed our families, ruined our future, disabled us. It was like having your heart ripped out of your body and held in front of you." The last remaining marine stood up, his carbine held lazily at his side as he turned to face the Sorcerer.

"Sparks gave us a way to even the playing field. She gave us AI enhancements. Made us faster, stronger, able to react within seconds with enough warning. We finally had, not only a way to fight Force using scum, we could outright beat and destroy them. We may have lost our individuality, but what you don't realise if your kind already took that away from us."

Appius remained motionless, listening to the man's ramblings whilst keeping his weapon close to his body. The Marine holstered his blaster and removed his helmet to reveal the most pale-faced complexion the Force user had ever laid eyes on. Truthfully, he looked like the worst jizz-wailer he'd ever seen rather than a hardened military-minded soldier.

"We had to keep it quiet. There are those, even in Collective space, that are foolish enough to reject these advancements. But the downsides are worth it. In my view, it's a necessity against your evil. An act of peace," the Marine held out his arms as a demonstrative expression. "Just look at what you've done to my team."

The darkness within the Sorcerer began to flare up in him. His two-handed grip on his lightsaber got tighter, his pupils dilated and his teeth gritted together harshly on instinct.

"What I've done? *WHAT I'VE DONE!?*" Appius bellowed out in response. "Look at what you've done here! All the bodies, all the destruction!"

He paused, exhaling a deep breath the tension in his body was keeping in. He hung his head low and deactivated *Redeemer*, placing the hilt back on his waist.

"I feel like sometimes I'm in a universe that's conspiring against me. I'm not the most logical person in the galaxy, and my emotions tend to get the better of me. I'm rash, often don't think before I act, but somewhere in the back of my mind there's always been something there stopping me from slipping, stopping me from going as far as I could, holding me back. But you?" The Aedile paused, slowly raising his arm to point it at the artificially enhanced human. "You can take it, can't you?"

Appius was interrupted when the Marine quickly drew upon his sidearm Blaster Pistol. He pulled the trigger and heavy blaster fire rang out from the barrel. It was only thanks to the warning that came from the Force that he was able to dodge out of the way in time just as the deadly laser scraped past what remained of his visor.

He grabbed hold of his lightsaber and once more the emerald blade hissed into existence in order to defend him once more.

Three more shots echoed through the room, each colliding with the green weapon in rapid succession before veering away from their intended target.

The Marine reached around to a device attached to his belt, a C-10 stun grenade. He pulled back his arm to throw it at the Force user. Unfortunately, he was met by a sudden, powerful gust of air that sent him careening back into a nearby wall. He crashed against it with a thud, but before he had any time to recuperate, his throat tightened and he found it incredibly difficult to breathe.

"You made a terrible mistake when you killed everyone in this room." The Mandalorian declared with an arm outstretched towards his target. "They were the only ones that would have held me back." The Marine's body lifted inches off the ground, his eyes began to roll into the back of his head as the Force's grip on his windpipes got tighter and tighter.

"So what we have here is a rare opportunity for me to cut loose, and show you how powerful I really am," Appius stated strongly.

With a flick of his wrist, the body of the Marine careened towards the ceiling. His back collided with steel twenty feet above the ground, which crushed his jetpack in the process. Leaving nothing to stop the Weapons Specialists fall back onto the ground.

Crack!

He landed chest first and his heavy armour only increased his descent back towards the ground. He broke several ribs and gasped for air.

Tap, Tap, Tap, Tap.

Appius stepped up to his broken for and deactivated his lightsaber. Considering how mighty they had been up to this point and how much trouble he'd had with them, he couldn't help but think the Marine looked pitiful.

The Collective member tried to raise his right arm to fire his own personal wrist rocket at his attacker and fought through the excruciating pain in his chest. Even if it took his life, he would die succeeding in killing another Force-sensitive *scum*.

He would never get the chance, with a decisive strike Appius severed his arm from his body before the AI in the Marines brain could fire the rocket. He wailed in agony, and went wide-eyed as a result of his missing appendage as the Ektrosis Aedile sheathed his lightsaber.

"Look at me." Ordered the Force user.

Reluctantly, the Marine locked eyes with the man standing above him. His silhouette oddly shadowed from the lights that illuminated him from above.

"I hope your Collective is watching, because I'm only going to say this once," The Sorcerer stated, his eyes flickered back and forth from their usual blue to frightening amber until finally settling on a dark orange hue.

"I told you I was going to show you how powerful I am. You called this an act of peace?" He asked, the rhetorical nature of the question completely obvious by his tone.

"Peace is a lie." The venom in Appius' voice was all too clear and cut through the air like a knife.

Before the Hive Mind Marine could react, streaks of blue and white covered his body like torturous little threads. It singed his flesh for seconds at a time every few, only stopping for moments before starting up again. Then again, and again. He writhed on the ground. It was agony, like a million angry hornets attacked him all at once. The electricity surged through his body and destroyed his internal organs. Bit by bit, his body shut down on him until finally, his heart couldn't take anymore.

Appius collapsed onto his knees. His breathing was ragged, sweat dripped down his face and he gasped for the air to enter his lungs like it was sweet nectar. His eyes returned to their usual blue, the pulsing feeling in his head stopped and after a couple of minutes to compose himself, the adrenaline in his body subsided and he finally began to make sense of the damage that he himself had caused.

Two decapitated, one sliced through his chest and one burned alive by a lightning storm made by the dark side within him. He expected to feel regret. He expected to feel remorse, and yet as he stared around the room he felt.

Nothing. If anything, for the first time in a long while, he felt free.

There was no emotional turmoil whatsoever. He still felt the physical pain and exhaustion through his body, but in his eyes, the Marines were the ones who deserved death. They'd slaughtered men, women and even children starting their studies so to Appius, there were now four less scum in the universe that he didn't have to deal with *personally*.

He rose to his feet and shakily made his way towards the entrance to the room where the distant sound of the klaxon that still continued to blare down the platform's hallways. He still had a job to do, after all. And whatever it took, light, dark, or otherwise, he refused to let anyone else die.

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