

The Unexpected

A submission for the fiction Competition: **GJW XIV [Phase II] Fiction and Audiobook - The Front Lines.**

Written and submitted by Mystic Appius Wight of Clan Taldryan.

Shadow Academy

Uskil

Arx

"They must be going for the tunnels. They lead straight to the Dark Ascent!"

He didn't need to be told twice, and as he ran, blaster fire echoed through the docking area of the Shadow Academy like angry hornets before it began to pierce through the many administration rooms and libraries the dark school laid claim too. The souls of those the deadly plasma hit vanished and became one with the Force. He'd managed to catch a glimpse of his ship, *Darkness V1*, in flames and burning to a cynder like a giant glorified campfire.

"The fraking nerve!" he muttered to himself between gritted teeth. That thing was brand new and someone owed him a kark tonne of credits for it, likely that traitorous bastard that called himself a Deputy!

That man was likely beginning to build up quite the bounty on himself if the debris of cruisers falling from the sky above like little meteorites was any indication, and the Mandalorian blood in him was seriously tempted to try and cash in on that prize. Alas, he was an Elder, a Master at that and Appius knew he didn't stand a chance on his own.

Once he heard they were likely heading for the *Dark Ascent*, he dropped the communication then and there and bolted for the so-called rumoured tunnels that existed below the Shadow Academy. Appius knew better, they were no mere rumours. They were very real, and it was more than likely these tunnels would be Evant and the Collective's main objective. He could hear the recurring sounds of screams all around him as he did his best to outspeed them towards the very bottom of the Academy.

As the ground shook around him, debris fell from the ceiling and littered the ground unevenly, slowing his progress in places. He pressed a few buttons on the comlink attached to his wrist and moved it close to his face.

"All available personnel, if you value your lives, report immediately to the bottom of the Central Spire. I don't care if it's forbidden, if you're a Force user, a Jedi, Sith, or a kriffing nerf herder with a blaster. Get your asses down there! this is not a drill!" He ordered directly into the device.

With the Force on his side, he pushed himself as hard as he could and he felt like a blur as he brushed past the mild air that was encompassed inside the Shadow Academy central spire. His forehead ran with sweat, and the further and further he descended the hotter it became like he was descending into the core of the planet itself. Eventually, he reached the bottom into a vast, old chamber, dimly lit by lights made decades ago. The area reeked off the foul marshes that surrounded the outskirts of the Academy.

It smells worse than a bantha's backside in here!

He gagged as the foul fumes entered his nostril and sent his stomach-churning. But truth be told, he'd been in worse places. He shuddered as memories of his previous Clan's homeworld flashed through the back of his mind. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and took deep breaths before wading into the unknown.

Appius knew the Shadow Academy like he practically lived there, meaning he knew it like it was the back of his hand. Yet, despite being the apprentice of a former Headmaster, being shown the ins, outs and every little secret that lied in-between the walls of this ancient place, he was never shown the very bottom of this spire. It was completely restricted to anyone other than members of the Dark Council. Even former members of the Council itself weren't allowed in and the punishment was death for anyone who dared to disobey.

Needless to say, not many were stupid enough to try, and those that did were never seen again. Appius preferred to remain in the land of the living, thank you very much. But given the choice between death via the Collective up above or down here for going where he shouldn't, he fancied his chances better with the latter.

It didn't take him long to find what he was looking for. A terminal at the side-wall of the chamber that looked like it had long been neglected. Covered in dust and soot, he began haphazardly pressing buttons until finally, lights flickered into existence. Revealing a once majestic network of pillars that stretched either side towards the other side of the room. Along the floor was an intricate set of symbols and hieroglyphs that Appius could not decipher. No amount of lectures in the Academy could have ever hoped to have taught him.

Yet, there was one thing at the very far end that caught the Dark Jedi's attention, and as he quickly paced himself towards it, his yellow eyes latched onto it, unmistakable from any other structure in the room.

"Farrin, you absolute legend. You were telling the truth!" He smirked to himself gleefully and rubbed the palms of his hands together as his spirits lifted at the sight before him.

There it was, an opening in the wall that led further underground, under the vast sea of Arx and led directly towards the *Dark Ascent*. It was massive, and could easily fit up to at least twenty individuals into it at any one time. He had to admire the feat of engineering that went into it, or the number of lives that were lost in its construction. Supposedly is stretched for mile after mile from Uskil all the way to Elos Vrai.

He was broken from his stupor when the sound of hurried footsteps from behind him. He quickly turned and placed his right hand on his lightsaber before releasing the sudden tension in his body. Several of the Academy's students and professors began to flock into the lower levels, some flabbergasted at the sights before them, some nauseated by the horrible aroma, whilst others seemed thankful to apparently have a temporary safe place to hide from the Collective up above. Many were not so fortunate.

But that was when he saw *her*, a tall, Sephi woman visibly scowling at him as she approached him with an unimpressed manner in the way she walked. It made what little hair he had on his head stand on end as many gave the right of way to the new Headmistress of the Shadow Academy. This woman was Warlord Ciara Tearnan Rothwell Tarentae. The longest named member of the Dark Council.

"Appius Wight," she said with a resonance to her voice that sent a shiver down his spine. "you have some explaining to do. You know it's forbidden to come down here, these tunnels are for restricted use only."

"Well in case you haven't noticed, Ciara, we don't really have much of a choice, " the Sorcerer retorted back. "The docking bay is on fire, there's Collective breaking into every room and corridor, and this is the only safe way out of here. So if you have any better ideas, please feel free Headmistress because I've got nothing!"

"Obviously." She responded back with a slight smirk on her face. To her, Appius' defensiveness was amusing. She'd only mentioned the restrictive nature of the tunnel to test him. His turn to the dark side was so recent and sudden, she had to wonder if it was possible to potentially push him even further.

"We need to get out of here, and this tunnel is our best bet," Appius said confidently.

"No."

The sudden negative response caught Appius off guard. Ciara had been aboard the Nesolat Platform, she'd seen the carnage and chaos the Collective were causing.

"No?" He responded back in a confused manner.

"No," Ciara repeated once again.

"And why not?" Appius inquired further, trying to get a reply out of the smirking woman.

"We are to hold this position as best we can and isolate Evant into the tunnel, because," Ciara paused, making sure the entire chamber's attention was clamped on her. Then, she uttered three simple words that changed everything.

"Mav is coming."

Shadow Academy

Uskil

Arx

The marching of the Collective sent small tremors throughout the Academy with each footstep they took. Every single corner they turned resulted in the deaths of anyone who wasn't a part of their ideal universe. They were more like droids than living beings, moving completely in sync as they continued to mow down any and all resistance to their purge. Some were foolish enough in their arrogance to challenge them directly, swinging their lightsabers in a pitiful display of defiance and refusal to accept their fate.

"Attack him now!" A hard voice echoed from a small room the former Deputy Grand Master of the Brotherhood had just entered.

Instantly he was assaulted from above and from the sides by three up and coming lightsaber combat specialists. The Deputy wasted no time in drawing his red blade upon them, effortlessly defending himself from all three strikes in one single swing. Green, blue and yellow crashed into crimson in an impressive display of colour.

The first, a Mirulakan with long blonde hair bound into a ponytail, proceeded to continue her wild assault without relent, not allowing the man's obvious superiority to get the better of them. She attempted to flip over the traitor only to be impaled in mid-air by a crimson blade as she failed to defend herself from a counterstrike. Her body dropped lifelessly to the ground as her saber rolled out of her fingers.

"Syla! NO!" Cried a Chiss male, he roared with a primal anger that boomed in the room.

He slammed his blade into Evant's with a powerful over-head strike with enough force that against lesser opponents would have shattered their defences. Yet, the former Regent and Voice of the Brotherhood was no ordinary fighter. In response to the strike, he shifted his feet ever so slightly as to avoid taking the full force of his bulkier opponent. Their blades clashed together, yet the Chiss let his fury get the better of him and he overextended, giving Evant all he needed to end his life with a reactive slash across the midsection.

"Harmon! Oh kark..." the third and last of Evant's attackers stepped back. A simple, human male, His knee's trembled and his jaw shivered from the sinking feeling that formed in his heart. His green eyes locked onto the Marauder's blue, and he himself was paralyzed by blatant fear.

"Pitiful, this is why the Brotherhood shall be destroyed," Evant spoke bluntly, his words cynical and almost ironic considering the positions he once held.

The human's eyes hardened, his fallen comrades dead on the floor, the Collective killing his friends all around him. He felt a darkness force itself through to the tips of his fingers through fear, hate, and a need to survive by whatever means necessary.

As Evant took a step towards him, the Human launched streams of blue and white electricity launched out of his right hand towards his advancing enemy.

In response, the Deputy held his crimson blade up in front of him and allowed the sparks of lightning to be grounded into his weapon. He approached his fellow human slowly, the tap of his footsteps every second calmly traversed the durasteel beneath them until he was just a single step away. The green-eyed human panted and huffed, exhaustion took over him and he could no longer maintain the attack. He dropped onto his hands and knees, his head lowered as he caught sight of a pair of black boots directly in front of him. He slowly summoned the strength to lift his head, the effort took all his willpower as he stared directly into the bearded Elder's face. Not so much as a shred of mercy evident in his features.

"Pathetic."

That would be the last word he would ever hear before his head was removed from the rest of his body.

Shadow Academy

Uskil

Arx

All she wanted was a little bit of peace and quiet away from literally every other being in the galaxy. A time to be alone with her thoughts and with herself. She cherished these moments, the little time she had free allowed her to reflect on the happenings in her life. Truthfully, she never expected to be a part of the Brotherhood. She was a Sephi street rat, the bottom of the barrel, and the type of scum most people wipe their shoes on when they enter a fine establishment, and in her mind, for good reason. She was a thief, a scavenger, a tinkerer that did all she had to do in order to survive.

What other choice did she have?

Her time in an orphanage had made her horribly distrustful of men in general, so much so that her nerves were usually shot and her anxiety rose at the mere sight of them.

Then there was her master.

She'd already had a run-in with Clan Taldryan before they met, and he managed to track her down and convince her to join the Clan *and* House Ektrosis at the same time. Considering he was a male it was something of a fraking miracle. Appius had then offered to become her master. *Her!?* And despite what might have been her better judgement, she happily accepted.

He was the first man to ever gain her trust. He was like family she never knew she had. He was a curiosity to her, like a parent figure she looked up to. A brother and sibling she could confide in, someone that did whatever they wanted in their own way. The one she could hide behind when she was in trouble with any other member of Taldryan.

Granted, when he told her to start learning to read she did give him her best pout and tried to look as adorable as possible, only for him to laugh and tell her...

"Nope, sorry. You aren't getting out of it this time!"

He helped her get started, then left her to it to go and deal with some House Ektrosis business. The moment he was out of sight she began plotting her revenge. A future for Appius filled with sparkles and glitter bombs sounded hilarious and she couldn't help but giggle to herself at the thought.

Several minutes later, her sensitive ears perked up and twitched when the Academy klaxons blared all over the building, followed by vibrations in the floor that got stronger and stronger with each passing second.

Now here she was, running for her life from the Collective, taking whatever twist and turn she could in order to stay ahead and give them the slip. No matter how hard she tried, they always seemed to be just one step behind her.

Death and destruction followed in her wake. Anyone unlucky enough to not get away quickly met their demise by expertly placed blaster fire. They didn't even talk to each other, like they were a single autonomous entity that split itself into multiple people. It disturbed her, rocked her core. She'd experienced death and destruction before, of course she had, but this was on a completely different scale, and like all the times before, she was afraid. Like the little frightened girl she thought she was. She had to find Appius, he always seemed to know what to do in these situations. Then, as if right on cue, her comm-link buzzed at her hip.

"All available personnel, if you value your lives, report immediately to the bottom of the Central Spire. I don't care if it's forbidden, if you're a Force user, a Jedi, Sith, or a kriffing nerf herder with a blaster. Get your asses down there! this is not a drill!"

She recognised his voice immediately. Though hurried and panicked it was, she turned and made her way towards the central spire.

She may not have been able to read, but she was a natural when it came to maps and symbols. She'd committed the entire layout of the Shadow Academy to the back of her mind and immediately proceeded towards the location her master ordered her, and the rest of the Shadow Academy to go.

She very quickly reached a crossroad within the Academy hallways. Gathered there were a bunch of docents and professors of various shapes and sizes, who appeared to have bumped into each other the same way Dasha had just found them. She kept back and clung to the walls. Her eyes locked onto a small air vent that her smaller frame could get into. She carefully squeezed into it before any of them noticed her presence and proceeded to listen in on the conversation.

"Is he insane!? I'm not going down there!" A deep voice protested.

"What choice do we have?" A young female replied back.

"We fight! Sith are not cowards!" A second male responded back.

They erupted into bickering, and unfortunately for the trio, this would prove to be their undoing. The discharge of a flash grenade directly in the middle of them all caught them off guard. Their eyes twinged with pain, and they groaned at the sudden shock to their retinas.

It didn't take long for the cause of the flashbang to make its appearance. Precise, expertly placed shots rang from all four sides of the crossroads. There were no sounds that came from the trio, except from the ones caused by the deadly plasma colliding into them. Ending their lives like so many others before them.

Dasha had managed to catch a glimpse of the Collective as they walked past to inspect their damage. They were near identical, wearing black purge trooper armour and never saying a word to each other. Like a cold machine working at full capacity, she observed as four sets of boots moved on further down the corridor away from her.

She released the breath she didn't know she was holding and climbed out of the air vent. Sweat dripped down her young face and she covered her mouth with her hands to stop herself from screaming. The bodies of the group were huddled on to the floor, their eyes open and devoid of all life. She shook her head and tried to ignore the terrified feeling around her as she proceeded into a full-on sprint towards the central spire.

It didn't take her long to find it, and a small smile made its way onto her face. She felt relieved, Appius was down below, she would be safe, he would know what to do. He always did.

A distinct *snap-hiss* penetrated the air behind her, destroying whatever sense of safety she may have cherished. She reluctantly turned around to find the cause of the noise. A Human male with a short, yet muscular build. Striking bloodshot cerulean eyes glared back at her, tearing into her very soul and making her weak at the knees. His amber coloured hair matched perfectly with his rugged beard, which so far had remained unshaven since his rescue from Collective hands. He wore a regal set of Regent Robes, though that was far from what caught Dasha's attention the most. In his hand, a crimson bladed lightsaber hung low at his side, flanked on either side by those black-armour wearing Collective soldiers she saw earlier.

Her heartbeat raced in her chest, and it was like all the air had been sucked out of her lungs. Goose-bumps appeared on her skin and her muscles tensed at the sight of him and she couldn't stop herself from trembling.

He began to approach her quickly, jumping her out of her frozen state. She scrambled towards the nearest console to her, tearing it open and yanking the front panel off it with all her strength. She pulled at the wires inside, hoping against hope that something would save the young Sephi from the frightening man's wrath.

Three layers of hard, solid durasteel closed just a couple of metres away from her and separated the two from each other. She panted heavily like she had just woken up from a nightmare. She approached the panels of steel and placed a hand gently upon it. It was cold to the touch, and she closed her eyes and tried to calm her nerves. She was safe, she had managed to save herself for the moment.

Suddenly, a red blade pierced through the central part of the blast door, missing Dasha's chest by millimetres and staggering the young woman back off her feet

and onto her buttocks. The steel in front of her began to melt under the intense pressure of the blade in its heart like it was being turned into hot lava.

Dasha was a Scavenger, and knew better than to just sit there and wait for her death. She pressed down hard on her hands and launched herself off the ground and into the central spire. She quickly made the descent as fast as she could, letting her adrenaline carry her in order to warn Appius of the incoming danger.

Shadow Academy

Uskil

Arx

"Mav is coming?" Appius repeated back, his tone of voice failed to hide any hint of surprise.

The entire chamber fell silent. Members of all seven Clans were scattered across, some listening in eagerly whilst others tried their best to ignore the friction between the two whilst finding comfort in their fellow clansmen. The more studious inclined found themselves mesmerized by the intricate patterns woven into the many forgotten pillars and walls of the Academy, whilst some huddled away into the corners near the tunnel in a futile attempt to avoid the worst of the stench that flooded the chamber.

There must have been at least over one hundred different people of various races, sizes and backgrounds. Everything from the average run of the mill in Human to Pantorans, Shistavanen and even a few Aleena.

Every single one looked towards Appius when he repeated those words back. If the Grand Master himself was on the way then it spoke volumes of how serious the situation really was. His amber eyes locked onto Ciara's, he nodded to her and gave her a small smile of his own.

"Ok... ok, this changes things," Appius said, finally processing the information. "Listen up everyone! Change of plans. We aren't running away in these tunnels like cowards anymore, we are going to stand here and fight!"

A ruckus broke out between those who wanted to fight and were looking forward to satisfying their blood lust, and those that would rather flee and run, either because of a stupid Jedi code, or because they were flat out cowards. It didn't take long before Appius had finally heard enough of the whining and complaining.

He summoned the Force into his legs and leapt on to the very top of the concrete tunnel. He placed two fingers into his mouth and whistled as hard as he could. The

high-pitched sound pierced over the chamber, echoing and silencing everyone immediately.

"Really? Is this what the Brotherhood has to offer now?" He shouted out to the chamber in a scolding manner.

"Then what do you suggest!?" Cried out a Nautolan Jedi within the crowd.

"What do you have to say?" A Vizsla Mandalorian continued.

"What do I have to say?" Appius asked rhetorically, taking a moment to gather his thoughts before releasing a deep sigh. "Honestly? I don't know what to say. We are about to enter the biggest battle of our lives. Right here, right now, the entire Brotherhood comes down to this and either we fight and claw our way out together or we fall one by one until there's not a scrap of us left. Believe me when I say that we can run into this tunnel right here, and get the ever-loving sithspit kicked out of us before we even get to the Dark Ascent. Or we can fight, stall the Collective until our Grand Master arrives and we prove together just why this Brotherhood is so damn powerful."

Down below him, several Brotherhood members began to perk up at what he was saying whilst others looked skeptical.

"I know I can't make any of you do it. I can already see some of you looking at each other and eyeing up the tunnel for a quick exit. But I ask that instead you look at the man or woman next to you, and see someone who is willing to sacrifice themselves. Not just for their House, not just for their Clan, but for the good of the entire Brotherhood *with you*. Because they see someone who is willing to go the distance with them. That is what the Brotherhood is. One giant whole split into seven parts that can come together when push comes to shove. Not as individuals, but as one big team. So I ask this, what are you all going to do?"

The room was silent for a moment, until the chamber burst into ruckus cheering and applause. It startled Appius a bit, he didn't know he had such a speech in him, but he was satisfied with the results. It seemed everyone was willing and ready to fight. Truthfully, it went better than he expected it too.

He jumped back down, landing next to Ciara, who stood with a slightly impressed smile on her face.

"I hope you have a plan, Ciara." The Sorcerer said to her.

"Appius, I always have a plan." She replied.

"**APPIUS!**"

A young woman screamed over the sound of all the cheering. Appius recognised her as she barged through the many members of the Brotherhood members now preparing for the initial conflict.

"Dasha?" He responded, relieved that even despite the Collective, she was still resourceful enough to escape and make her way down. She stopped next to him, hunched over and panted from a loss of air and breath in her lungs.

"Collective... Red... Upstairs!" She struggled to get each word out of her mouth between pained gasps. It took Appius a moment to realise what she was saying, but then his eyes suddenly went wide-eyed at the realisation.

"Everyone get ready!" He blurted out suddenly. "They will be here any minute! Ciara, I hope this plan of yours will work, we literally don't have much time to get it going."

"Oh it will," the Sephi woman replied. "It will."

Shadow Academy

Uskil

Arx

Three.

Two.

One.

An explosion could be heard from several kilometres away. It sent tremors through the ground that felt like an earthquake. The source of which came from the central spire, which now remained in rubble along with a large section of the bottom chambers ceiling, which allowed some of the noxious fumes to rise into the upper hallways of the Shadow Academy.

Evant was the first to leap down, in his sight at the far end of the chamber was his objective. The tunnel that led to the Dark Ascent. The very heart of the Brotherhood. In between him and it stood a small army consisting of Academy students and members of the seven Clans of the Brotherhood.

"OPEN FIRE!" Yelled a voice from within the crowd.

Suddenly, Evant found himself barraged by a small, organised cluster of blaster fire. With his crimson blade, he effortlessly parried and deflected each shot that threatened to hit him with ease. In between the pace of blaster fire, those gifted

with the Force and the dark side threw jets of electricity towards him, only for it to be grounded into his blade, protecting him from harm.

The fools. Evant thought to himself.

Smoke quickly filled the chamber, a consequence of specially made grenades launched down by the swarms of Hive-Mind Marines and Collective soldiers that quickly rappelled down beside Evant. Some got caught in the crossfire, whilst most touched ground safely and began to unleash hell upon the small Brotherhood force before them.

The battle for the Shadow Academy had officially begun.

Yet it was clear from the get-go just how outclassed the Brotherhood was. Those specialising in close combat found themselves immediately gunned down by a smorgasbord of plasma. Bit by bit Brotherhood forces fell to pieces, and the situation only worsened when Evant closed the distance between himself and his enemies.

He was like a calm savage. Cold and ruthless as his blade sliced through any attacker that came in-between him and his goal. The many pillars that covered the foul-smelling chamber began to fall and crush those unfortunate enough to be underneath and kicked up clouds of debris and dust. In a matter of minutes, the one hundred and fifty Brotherhood members had dropped by more than half.

"Everyone back into the tunnel!" A loud voice yelled over the chaos. Evant locked eyes with the man that spoke, a tall human in customised Dark Jedi Armor and with a green emerald blade. He thrust forward a palm, and even with the Force's warning at the back of his mind, Evant found himself pushed back by a powerful gust of air as what remained of Brotherhood forces scrambled back into the tunnel.

The Master Marauder landed on his feet with cat-like grace and observed as in the confined space, Force users, Loyalists and Mercenaries alike were getting mowed down like cattle to be slaughtered.

Evant charged towards the tunnel ahead of the Collective as the silhouette of the last enemy disappeared into the darkness. With the Force on his side, he increased the power in his muscles and launched himself straight in after them.

It didn't take long before darkness took over his vision, the previous scent of the chamber replaced by a moistness in the air. Yet the Force was his ally, and a powerful ally it was. He could sense what remained of them just up ahead. The stench of fear and sweat occupied the tunnel and he thrived in their fear. He was nothing if not efficient, and he would see his mission through to its conclusion.

It didn't take him long to reach a dimly lit circular room that stretched twenty feet either side. It smelt of mould and was offensive to the senses. It was dark green in colour with pipes hugging the wall maintaining the structure of the long structure itself.

But what caught his attention the most, what made him stop in his tracks, was the sight of a female Sephi woman he recognised very well as Ciara Tarentae. The Headmistress to the Academy he'd just invaded. She stood in the centre of the room, amber lightsaber humming ominously amongst the dim atmosphere. Stood next to her was the one he recognised as the being that pushed him back with the Force outside the tunnel.

"Now, Appius!" She commanded as both her and the Sorcerer raised their arms, creating a ripple in the room entrance above Evant, causing the Elder to leap out of the way before the entrance to the room caved in on him.

After the noise and dust settled, it became clear to Evant that he was now locked in with no reinforcements able to reach him. The tunnel behind him was caved in by several feet of debris and rubble that shut it off from the rest of the planet like a locked door.

"It's over, Evant." Appius declared smugly. "We've got you trapped."

"No." Replied the Elder, drawing upon his crimson blade once more. "It is you, who are trapped with me."

Tunnel to the Dark Ascent Arx

Thump, thump, thump.

Appius could feel the beat of his heart and a hard ringing in his ears. He'd been in combat plenty of times before and he was no stranger to the violence of battle. The clashing of sabers, and the thundering of blasters was an all too common occurrence for the young Mandalorian. Hell, Evant wasn't even the first Elder he'd ever fought. No, that particular honour went to the current Consul of Taldryan before he even joined the Clan itself. But there was something different about Evant, he held a calm, almost dead look in his eyes as he uttered those words. A bead of sweat dripped down the Sorcerer's face as he forced those worms down into the pit of his gut. He glanced to Ciara, who held firm with her lightsaber in her hand.

"You know you are trapped, Evant. You want to surrender." She spoke sweetly, never breaking eye contact with the Elder. To anyone who was unfortunate to not be

gifted with the Force, it would have looked like she was trying to avoid a potential fight. Yet, anyone who knew Ciara knew much better.

The Deputy shook his head violently, trying to shake the woman's intrusion into his mind. He could feel her trying to slip in past his mental defences like little spiders crawling across his brain.

"*You want to give up, it's so much easier.*" Ciara continued, only now it was becoming clear to the Warlord that Evant's mental fortitude was a lot stronger than she had given him credit for, he fought against the suggestions, continuously shaking his head, her previous gentle smile dissolved into a frown. This wasn't going to be as easy as she had hoped.

The Force alerted Appius to Ciara's dismay. Seeing Evant's distraction, he took his opportunity and poured the power of the dark side into the tips of fingers. Pulling it out of him like a well of hate as jets of pure anger and malice darted out of his fingers with a primal roar.

It was like Evant became a very different man in combat. His eyes darted open as he leapt out of the way of the electrical surge with a speed neither Appius or Ciara had anticipated. The lightning impacted into the wall where he stood seconds prior.

The Elder Marauder drew his crimson blade back into a one-handed grip, angled forwards and with the blade parallel to the other. His dominant foot was held back with his other arm was held out in a challenge to his would-be opponents.

"Sithspit!" Ciara spat as she placed herself into a ready stance, ready to allow herself to succumb to the Force and let it guide her actions. She bent her knees and raised her lightsaber into a high guard. Ready to relish the thrill of battle when it came.

Appius, however, recognised the stances of both combatants and went wide-eyed at the startling realisation at just *how* Evant had been so dominant up till now.

"Wait, Ciara!" He yelled out, but it was already too late. The Seeker pounced and unleashed a vicious onslaught. Appius watched as she moved faster than a garollian ghost viper, the sting of her blade crashed and collided against Evant's in a collection of different methods, angles and vectors of attack that created sparks of amazing amber and bloody red. She lived for the thrill of combat and she relished each moment every time she swung her deadly weapon.

It was indeed an impressive display, and Appius correctly deduced it as Vaapad, a variation of Form VII of Lightsaber combat and a technique that drew upon the opponent's use of the dark side of the Force to increase their own power. Considering Evant was a dark sider, in theory, this should have worked well against him, but there was one problem that the Headmistress was unaware of.

Despite Ciara battering into him with unrelenting speed and aggression, the Elder simply took it in his stride. There was none of the aggression or ferocity normally associated with the dark side. Instead, he remained serene, meditative, the eye of Ciara's storm. He refused to give her an inch and despite being pushed around the room, it was he who dictated the flow of battle. His feet shifted only minimally and he controlled the pacing of the battle without Ciara realising it. The superconductive loop that she was hoping to make to connect the two together through the Force? It was nonexistent.

The Headmistress, realising she was getting nowhere, decided to resort to more intricate methods to get what she wanted. She broke away from the engagement. And focused on doing what she did best.

Evant didn't engage her, instead stepping back and gaining some distance so he could keep an eye on both of his opponents. It didn't take long before the world around him began to twist and warp. Where once stood an empty circular room became an area that Evant was very familiar with. Especially over the last year.

It was dark, cold and isolated. He was alone with all his thoughts in the galaxy as he was regularly shocked and tortured via electrical devices strapped all over his body. He could feel it once again, his back pressed against the wall as he fought back the groan that formed in his throat. Experiments, operations, days, weeks and months on minimal food and water was just part of every day life for him. Yet where was his Brotherhood? Where were those he was supposedly looked after? Nowhere. He understood better there than anywhere else in the galaxy. The only thing that mattered was power.

They will know true power.

Sensing Evant's distraction, Ciara jumped at the chance to end this battle once and for all. She would do her duty as Headmistress, and save her Academy. She lunged at him with a powerful over-head strike meant to slice him in twain. Instead, he sidestepped the attack, and retaliated with a reactive slice across the Sephi Seeker's right thigh then spun around to slice at her left bicep. The sudden act knocked her off balance and brought her to the ground, right in the centre of the room.

She fought back the burning feeling in her leg, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of hearing her grunts of pain. Evant stood above her. His blood-coloured weapon hanging dangerously close to her body.

The pair locked eyes as the Marauder lifted his weapon above his head, intending to end her life with a merciless swing.

Crash!

His blade was intercepted by another that swung towards him. Emerald green in colour, it deflected the attack before spinning around him and returning to its owner.

"Did you forget I was here?" Appius asked, sarcasm completely intended.

"No, I just assumed you were too much of a coward to fight me," Replied Evant.

"To be fair, we all thought you were loyal to the Brotherhood. Yet here we are." Appius answered back, the emerald blade of *Redeemer* humming gently in his right hand as he stretched out his arms in an overdone gesture.

"You are one to talk of loyalty. Vizsla, Taldryan, Ektrosis. You abandoned all of them at one time or another and even left the Brotherhood entirely only to return in a lesser position as an Aedile. I think I know why. Because secretly, deep down, you understand your place in the universe as nothing more than a stain underneath the boots of those who are superior to you. I can feel it in you, a long, hard guilt. It burns in you at your very core and it's truly pathetic. No dark sider experiences guilt. No-one."

Appius hung his head low, looking down at his feet, before a devilish smirk graced his face.

"You know what? You're right. I do have guilt. But you know something, Evant?" The Sorcerer said, his gaze upon the Elder suddenly became hard, the pupils in his amber eyes dilated and his teeth came to bare like a wild predator. "You owe me a ship, *aruetii*. So to hell with it!"

With the Force at his side, he lunged towards the Marauder with as much speed as his legs could muster, but he didn't attack him directly. Instead, he leapt over the amber haired man spinning in the air before landing on the ground in-between both Evant and Ciara. He thrust forward with his spare hand as a strong pulse of energy erupted from it, staggering Evant back several feet. He then turned around and did exactly the same to the Headmistress, sending her rolling away from the center of the room as she crashed into the far wall with a hard thud. She grunted and gave Appius a displeased look.

At least now he didn't have to worry about her getting caught in the crossfire.

With his weapon in his hand, Appius took his own fighting stance. He held the blade back in a one-handed grip, blade angled forwards with his dominant foot held back. His other hand was held up in a challenge with two fingers pointed towards the Deputy.

Evant seemed undisturbed by the display of weaponry in the Equite's hands, and adopted his combat stance once more. The exact. Same. One. The two held firm in a

stalemate, neither willing to back away from their stances. Ciara watched from the corner of the room, slightly amused it was two Soresu users squaring off against each other.

Then, a small smile graced Appius' face, putting the Elder immediately on high alert. Suddenly, a bright light burst in front of his iris' and caused a burning agony to claw at his eye sockets.

Sensing his opportunity, Appius immediately lunged towards Evant with an unhindered charge, intending to strike Evant through an opening in his defences in one of his vital areas. Heart, lungs, brain, stomach, it didn't matter as long as it got the job done.

Ciara watched the display of fighting from where she lay. Appius moved impressively, and his skill with the defensive techniques of Soresu and Sokan was certainly considerable. Yet no matter how hard he tried, Evant was on a completely different level. It didn't matter what he did, whether with the Force or with his lightsaber, the Master simply parried and deflected each strike as they came, moving quickly when he needed to so Appius' offensive prowess in Force techniques meant very little against him. The skill between the two was evident, and Ciara knew Appius needed to push further if he was going to have a chance before he was worn down. It was clear that Evant thought that Appius' feeble attempt at breaking through his defences was laughable.

Thankfully, Appius was acutely aware of the gap between himself and Evant and decided to switch tactics. After a clumsy strike with his blade, he spun around Evant in order to land himself in a much better position. As the Elder turned to meet the impending blow, a powerful gust of wind pushed him back hard, sending him careening spine first into the pipework that layered the room. Nonetheless, despite the pained gasp that came from Evant's mouth, he landed on his feet with expert grace.

The Sorcerer realised it was now or never. He prepared to use his power in the Force to grip around Evant's body and immobilise him once and for all. Yet, he couldn't predict Evant suddenly moving towards him with the velocity of a landspeeder.

The Marauder was a lot more powerful than Appius gave him credit for and Evant's crimson blade collided once again into Appius' in a green and red display of lights and colour, stopping Evant's momentum dead. Then, the Elder seized his opportunity during Appius' surprise and quickly swiped at the hilt in the Sorcerer's hand, cutting the blade emitter cleanly and destroying the weapon.

Appius recoiled in shock, heavily panting, still holding the broken weapon in his hand. He internally swore and tossed what remained of his weapon to the side

without any care. Only now it was him that was on the back foot as Evant quickly approached him.

He hated this, he felt helpless, outmatched and outclassed. He drove those feelings through his core as lethal lightning darted out of the fingers of his hands like a violent storm.

The sparks of white and blue illuminated the room like strobe lighting at a Coruscant nightclub. Yet, no matter how powerful and how deadly the surge was, the Deputy simply held up his blade in front of him and allowed his lightsaber to absorb the incoming attack. The weapon became like the man himself, the calm eye of a hurricane.

After a few seconds, the streams of electricity stopped and the Master had closed the distance. In an effort to defend himself, Appius swung wildly with his right fist, hoping to take the Elder by surprise. Though his desperation and fatigue up to this point would lead to his downfall, as well as his distinct lack of martial arts training as an opening presented itself in his undisciplined attack. Evant struck at Appius' left calf, cutting it ever so slightly and bringing him down onto his knee before following his momentum through to the Sorcerer's wrist, grazing it and forcing him to halt his resistance immediately.

Appius bit hard on his tongue, fighting back the pain that resonated on his calf and wrist. He looked up towards the superior duelist, his amber eyes locked with man's blue. He'd lost, both he and Ciara had been immobilized and there was nothing more he could do. Mercy was, no doubt, going to be off the table.

Evant raised his lightsaber above his head ready to deal the definitive blow to Appius' life. The Aedile shut his eyes, lowered his head, and prepared himself for the afterlife and the inevitable hell that came with it.

But it never came.

he slowly opened his left eye and what he saw was not what he expected. Evant was frozen in place, his skin had gone pale as his gaze had turned back towards the tunnel which led towards the Dark Ascent. His features locked in a gesture of...

Fear?

That's when all three Force users in the room heard it. The heavy footsteps approaching from within the darkness.

Tap, tap, tap, tap.

It got closer and closer until finally, the silhouette of a tall, handsome middle-aged man with dusky brown hair and deep brown eyes appeared. It was him.

Grand Master Telaris Cantor.

He looked to his Deputy, barely a hint of emotion graced his features as he glanced around the room to Appius, then to the Headmistress of the Shadow Academy. Returning his gaze back to Evant, he allowed a small smile to show.

Tunnel to the Dark Ascent

Arx

Appius almost couldn't believe his eyes, he smirked as he glanced to Ciara. Turned out she was right all along. Who knew?

"You made a big mistake coming here, Evant." The Grand Master finally spoke. "Order Laqueum is in full effect, and your Collective will be destroyed."

The Elder's eyes widened at the declaration, before his face etched into an angered scowl. He wasn't usually the kind of man to show much emotion, but Mav's presence clearly had an impact on him.

"So that's your grand plan is it, Telaris? Run and hide? Destroy everything the Brotherhood has worked so hard for in the Arx System, only to abandon it like the coward you are?"

Mav chuckled to himself as he placed his arms behind his back.

"Oh no, we aren't running, and we aren't abandoning anything. Everything in the Arx System up to this point has led to one final order." Mav explained, glaring down to his apprentice.

"My order. A new Sith Order the likes of which hasn't been seen since the days of Exar Kun. Arx *will* be destroyed along with your Collective, and the Brotherhood will be reshaped into the greatest weapon this galaxy has ever seen. All that remains, is to deal with *you*." Mav said, as a golden hilt emerged out of his cloak directly into the palm of his hand. "Prepare yourself, my apprentice, this is your final lesson."

Suddenly, Evant found himself in a world full of pain and darkness. Tortured agony, his senses flared and burned. Memories of his tutorship under the Grand Master came full force, racing back to the surface. The numerous times his body and spirit were broken, only to be pieced back together just a little bit stronger each time until he was the perfect Deputy a Grand Master could ask for. It was nothing more to Evant now than a simple illusion, nothing more than a trick of the mind,

yet as he came to his senses, he quickly found himself backpedalling away from the downed Sorcerer as a golden-hued lightsaber swung wildly at his torso.

The strike nipped at Evant's armor and he used his mobility to try and move around Mav's acrobatic movements. Strike after strike, the two blitzed about the room, yet each strike the Grand Master wildly swung at him left Evant no room to do anything other than defend himself.

Appius and Ciara could do nothing but observe as the two moved about in a blur. To the Headmistress, this was nothing new. As a member of the Dark Council, she was fully aware of the power that these two men possessed at their fingertips. For Appius though, this was his first time witnessing a battle between Force users at their level, and it was truly enlightening.

From what he could tell, by the incredible speed the Grand Master moved, Appius deduced his fighting style had to be the highly kinetic Ataru. He had to blink at the speed they moved at and the power they exerted as they danced across the room in a flurry of movement faster than most lightning storms. The sounds of their blades clashing together refused the silence these tunnels normally ever saw and truthfully, it was hard for the low-level Equite to keep up. Was this the power of the dark side of the Force? The power of the Grand Master of the Brotherhood? The power of the Sith? He wanted it, he craved it. The power. The recognition. He would do whatever it took to take it for his own.

Mav continued to batter against Evant with a series of acrobatic attacks designed to get around the Marauder's impenetrable defence. But Mav was the Grand Master for a reason, and he knew better than a lot of Sith that brute power wasn't the only way to win a battle. His blade clashed once more against Evant's as the two locked eyes in a stalemate. Then, Mav uttered a single word that would prove to be Evant's undoing, a single word which would ebb into his consciousness and sway his actions much more than Ciara's ever did.

"Submit."

Evant felt his body give way to the suggestion, his limbs slowed just enough for the Grand Master to capitalise. He swung vertically through Evant's bicep, severing the arm from the body and sending the deadly weapon careening across the floor.

"Kneel."

The Grand Master's word echoed through the chamber. All of a sudden, it was like Evant no longer possessed free will of his own. He dropped to his knees and cradled his missing appendage with the only arm he had left. His breathing became nothing more than rasps as he remained at Mav's mercy.

"Your arm can be replaced, Evant. But what you have done to Arx, that cannot be replaced." Mav said, deactivating his weapon and placing it on his waist. He raised his right hand and snapped his fingers, the sound echoed throughout the tunnel as the sounds of several footsteps approached.

The Iron Legion military had arrived out of the shadows.

"See to it that the Headmistress and the Ektrosis Aedile are healed. Take Evant to my ship. I will see to his reconditioning *personally*. And seal of this tunnel, I want the Collective inside the Academy incinerated with no hope of escape." Mav ordered as the avalanche of footsteps descended into the room. A group approached Ciara and lifted her to her feet, immediately escorting her down the tunnel and out of sight. Though as she passed Appius, she gave the young Sorcerer a knowing glance. Feeling what he wanted to do, she gave him the encouragement he needed to do it.

"Grand Master Cantor," Appius said, gaining the leader of the Brotherhood's attention as he was helped to his feet.

"Yes?" Mav responded.

"I wish to learn the ways of the Sith."

Mav stared at him for a few seconds before he smiled at the young man before him.

"Then I have a very special assignment for you."

Undisclosed Location
Horuset System
Delta-class T-3c Shuttle

"When will you be back?"

The concerned voice of the young Sephi, Dasha Talus, rang through the centre console nervously. She was the type that was unaccustomed to long-distance communication, though Appius felt it was necessary to keep in contact with her after the two of them barely survived the recent conflict.

"Soon," said Appius with a smile. "Missing me already, Dasha?"

The young woman shifted uncomfortably on the spot. Truthfully, this was the first time the two had been separated like this since Appius left Ektrosis and Taldryan for a brief stint before the Collective attacked. It was natural to him that she would be nervous.

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding," he reassured. "Stay with the Taldryan Navy and assist Ektrosis where you can. You know where I am if you need me."

She smiled sweetly at him, a newfound sense of confidence brimming in her after their talk as her blue-hued image vanished from sight. Order Laqueum resulted in the immediate evacuation of all the Brotherhood's Clan's and forces immediately into unknown wild space. Why? Because Arx was so much more than just the Brotherhood's capital planet. It, itself, was a superweapon. Through the Dark Ascent, powerful surges of energy swept over the planet reducing everything to ash in its wake. Mountains were reduced to small hills, skyscrapers became nothing more than piles of rubble and any Brotherhood facility that once existed was wiped from the face of the planet.

This included everyone on the planet. From the Dark Ascent, the Iron Legion Headquarters, the Combat Centre and even the Shadow Academy. Everything vanished in a blinding flash of light. Anyone unfortunate to be on the planet immediately had their life force sapped to fuel the destructive force that swept over the terrain. Many of the Brotherhood's forces on the planet had long since evacuated, leaving the Collective to believe they had achieved victory and finally ended the reign of these Force using scumbags once and for all.

Oh, how wrong they were.

Wave after wave of Collective upon the planet perished, only to become fuel for the Dark Ascent. Powerful golden lasers broke through the atmosphere, colliding into Collective frigates, lancers and dreadnaughts with the power of a supernova, creating bright fireworks in space that Appius had to admit, probably would have looked spectacular to his eyes.

Alas, the Grand Master had something else in mind for him.

"Are you ready?" The voice of an elderly, bald man said, holding his trusty datapad by his side, he possessed a slight smirk on his face that the Sorcerer hadn't seen removed from his face. This man was James Lucius Entar, Seneschal of the Brotherhood.

"Yes, I am," replied Appius.

Upon reaching the Dark Ascent itself, the Grand Master issued an order for Appius to rendezvous with him immediately, he boarded the closest transport he could and immediately left the Arx System, meeting up with the Seneschal.

"Good," James responded, the same smirk still plastered on his face. "In that case you are going to need this."

He placed a red, pyramid-shaped object into Appius' hand before the ramp to the shuttle descended into red sand. A bloody sky remained above, and ahead of the two men stood a valley of temples that have remained forgotten and uncared for years. Tombs littered the area and monuments to the planet's greatest Dark Jedi and Sith to have ever existed.

This planet was Moraband, homeworld to the Sith. Legends such as Ajunta Pall, Exar Kun, Freedon Nadd and Naga Sadow all had tombs here in the Valley of the Dark Lords. Most of the planet's temples and archives were now long gone, a product of centuries of Jedi looking to seal dark knowledge away, or Scavengers looking to make some decent credits from ancient Sith artifacts. Regardless, somehow, deep inside him, he knew the power he sought would be here.

Appius looked to James with an uncertain look before the Seneschal beckoned him gently to go forward to his destiny. After a moment's hesitation, Appius steeled himself before taking his first steps onto the dusty ground of the planet. There was a fountain of knowledge on the horizon. It was up to him to seize it.

James watched as the Taldryanite traversed the terrain towards the Moraband Academy before his smirk became even wider. It was all going to plan. He followed after the young Sorcerer, the red light of the Korriban sky beaming down onto his robe.

The Holocron in his hand would get him inside, it was up to him to do the rest. Within the old Academy stood Mav's new sect of Sith apprentices. Only he and James knew of them, all trained in the ways of the dark side, all prepared to lead the Brotherhood into a new age dominated by darkness once more. Appius would learn from them and in doing so, cement his future into the dark side of the Force. Eventually, they will rise. A new era of powerful Sith the likes of which the galaxy hadn't seen in several millennia.

It's time to gather these old friends. We have a new recruit.

The Sith Empire would rise again.

---END---

