

Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained.

An entry for the fiction competition: **[Aggressive Expansion Phase 1] Multi-Objective Fiction Prompt**

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Elysia

Moon of Perune

38 ABY

The mist hung low over the frozen horizon as the sun began to set in the distance. An orange hue provided the last of the natural warmth the Chiss was going to experience today. The cold air and soft howl in the wind sent shivers down his spine, a familiar sensation that reminded him of home, of Csilla. He specifically chose this time of day due to the number of predators that potentially lurked among the ice, snow, or whatever foliage wasn't taken over by the permanent ice age that encompassed Elysia. The last thing Drax wanted was to have an encounter with a wampa, nexu, or *gods forbid*, jungle rancors. It didn't particularly bother him, his droid companion remained at his heels with its sensors scanning every nook and cranny around him. Still, the Infiltrator's hand remained firmly grasped on his blaster, just in case.

Most of the inhabitants were Human, though enough species were sprinkled in amongst them that the sight of Drax didn't seem to unnerve them much. They were simple people, hardly worth the time or effort and hardly intellectuals unlike himself. They seemed to keep to themselves for the most part which served Drax just fine. He was the type of man that preferred his own company, or the company of the artificial, like the droid with him for this endeavour. They were much more amicable and left him to his tinkering and habits whenever he simply uttered the word. The exception, of course, were those he held dear to his heart, the ones that added warmth to an otherwise robotic existence.

He could count them on the digits of one hand, which said a whole lot about his life when he stopped and thought about it. There was his wife, Talia, his son, Draynar and lastly, the current source of his irritation himself.

I swear, this is the last time I do Appius a favour. He's lucky I owe him one...

Drax owed him *more* than one, which was the whole reason he was doing this in the first place. Appius seemed possessed by the idea that there was something here that would help them against whatever unknown threat was attacking them, and

he asked the Infiltrator to go and retrieve it, and if possible, find out what happened to those he sent before him.

"And how will I know what I'm looking for?" the Chiss inquired with a raised brow.

"It's an artifact used by Emperor Palpatine, Drax. Trust me, you'll know it when you see it. Go ahead of me and I'll catch up to you."

That particular exchange was less than helpful, sometimes he wondered if Appius knew not everyone was a heavily armoured space wizard that could throw lightning out the tips of their fingers. Regardless, the Chiss soldiered on across the shoreline, the gentle winds brushed past his handsome features as he carefully observed the surrounding waterline. Condemning his Mandalorian friend seemed like the easiest thing to do at a time like this. The observatory loomed in the distance, the vast structure sat in the middle of the water as a testament to the power of the Galactic Empire and then subsequently, Clan Taldryan. It was an intimidating sight with no discernible way inside. Thankfully for the blue-skinned man, he had the means and know-how to do just that.

He reached a small clearing amidst the leaves and foliage of the nearby jungle. It was unassuming to most, and one could easily pass it by without knowing any different, but Drax was nothing if not well informed and he stopped by the little astromech at his side, offering him a simple sideways glance.

"Are we clear, Lawrence?"

It was more an order than a request, the antenna and scanner atop the little droid's head spun and gave off little beeps as it searched for nearby threats. It completed two rotations before retreating into the dome and Lawrence chirped positively at his findings.

The faintest curve of his lips threatened to show on the Chiss' face, but he had to remain focused, stern, and hell only knew what he was going to find when he entered the place. It appeared to be nothing more than a simple wall made of indigenous rock, covered in a collection of green shrubbery, vines and leaves. Drax carefully pulled his gloves further and tighter into his hands as they slapped against his skin before grabbing hold of a couple of the longer threads of greenery and then, with a deep breath, pulled as hard as he could. He needn't bother with the effort as the camouflage covering the tunnel behind it dropped like it was being held up by nothing more than the wind itself. After it fell into a clump, he kicked what he could to the side to create the clearing he needed to peer into the empty void that stood before him.

Retrieving a rectangular datapad from his backpack he flicked the light on, only to once again have sights on nothing more than pitch darkness.

This has to be it. He mused to himself. He rather hoped there would have been a terminal of some description he could use to turn on some lights. Unfortunately for him, that seldom seemed to be the case.

He was dragged away from his musings when he heard a howl in the distance. His head and body spun and he held his breath, his heart stomping against his ribs as he gripped hold of his blaster, holding it gingerly in both hands.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, I suppose...

"Lawrence, let's go."

He gave the order and quickly both the droid and the Chiss retreated into the tunnel. Drax silently hoped he didn't linger long enough to leave a scent for the creature to follow.

Elysia Observatory

Elysia

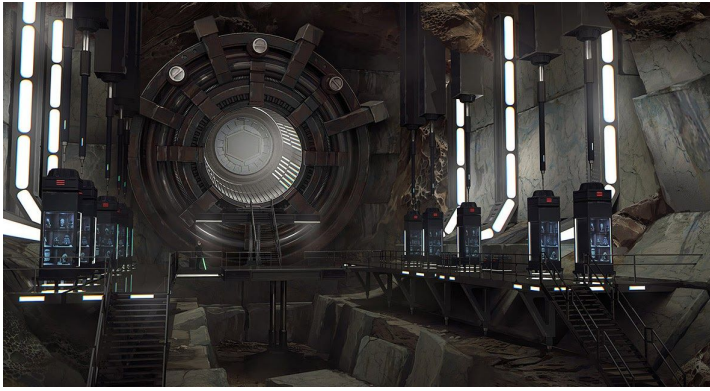
38 ABY

They always said there was a light at the end of the tunnel and in this scenario, it looked like that was the case.

Thirty-five minutes. Thirty-five long and silent minutes went by in the pitch darkness of the tunnel, with only the flashlight on his datapad providing visibility on all sides of the walkways. His blood-red iris' scouted everything along the way, praying that he'd find a terminal of some description that would brighten up his situation.

There wasn't.

But now that he was here, it didn't matter. The entrance to the observatory itself appeared before him in all its Imperial Glory. A massively oversized door covered the way in like a vault hiding a vast amount of treasure within. A series of lights clung to the walls, clearly neglected judging by the cracks in the stonework that appeared to deepen as his eyes traced across the rock.



Drax didn't know when the last time the Taldryan Lorekeeper was here, but to his curious mind it seemed like it had been quite some time. He carefully tread upwards across the stairway, inspecting the various terminals that remained on either side in all their electronic beauty. It seemed like the Infiltrator's kind of place. Isolated, vast, and enough technology to tinker with for days, it seemed utterly perfect!

Or at least it would have been if it wasn't for one, a small detail that made him freeze in place where he stood. The Vault itself was open, not enough to be noticeable from a distance, but now that he had a close up look at it, he could tell.

Someone had been here, or someone still was.

"Sithspit..." the Infiltrator cursed his luck. He did not sign up for anything like this. "Lawrence?"

Not needing to be told, the little astromech's antenna spun and emitted soft beeps. Drax waited patiently, fanning his arms, tapping his feet until finally, a few low toned chirps told him everything he needed to know, and it wasn't good news.

"Great... just fantastic."

The sarcasm dripped from his lips. He rubbed his temples with his fingers and took a deep breath. He was here in the thick of it now and part of him wanted to turn around, return to Ostara, and tell Appius to find some other idiotic stooge in his debt to do his dirty work for him. What did Drax look like to him exactly? Zxyl Taldrya?

Alas, he knew he shouldn't. If there was someone here he needed to relay that information to the Taldryan summit. Who or what they were would be important information in the grand scheme of things, especially if the Vornskyr Battalion and Tavros were to get involved.

"Come, Lawrence. Let's go see who our unwanted guests are."

The droid's little beeps halted him in his path. The tall red-eyed man turned to glance at the little mechanical being with and scrunched his face, his fingers of his left hand tapping against his thigh.

"No, Lawrence. I'm fairly sure this is not worth it in the slightest," Drax said as he casually approached one of the nearby terminals. With a clickety-clack of the computer keys, he retrieved a holographic map of the institute and upon a quick inspection, he at least had a good idea of where he needed to go.

"And maybe you'll get your oil bath. It depends on how you behave," the Infiltrator stated with the slight hint of a smirk, which faded almost as quickly as it appeared.

If we make it out...

Amidst the R3 units protests, Drax squeezed through and created a small opening in the entrance, allowing himself and the astromech adequate space to proceed further into the observatory.

Elysia Observatory
Inner Chamber
38 ABY

Drax Callian was not a Force User by any stretch of the definition, so imagine his surprise when he wandered into a room full of dark siders. He was often just a simple man, trying to make his way in the galaxy. Looking after his family was the number one priority. Talia always said he had enough flair to turn the heads of women whenever he walked past them. Draynar, she said, had his handsome features and Drax couldn't deny the resemblance was uncanny.

Right now, he had no idea if he would ever see them again.

Inside was an entirely different universe to the one outside. Neglected, yet vast. Natural light poured in from above and whether that was from cracks in the ceiling or it was working as intended was beyond him. That was far from his biggest concern at this moment, considering the lower the staircase went, the more a crimson, blood-red glow filled the surroundings. Drax was forced to turn and hush Lawrence as he tread and whirred behind him ominously.

As the newly minted Vornskyr member got closer and closer to the bottom, the sound of chanting got louder and louder as a black-robed figure appeared in

eyesight at the bottom, surrounding a small statuette like it hailed from the gods itself.

The air was suffocating, toxic even and burned the back of his throat like he was walking into the nauseous fumes of Dorin itself. It weighed on him like Beskar on his shoulders and he hadn't realised he'd slowed to a snail's pace until Lawrence bumped into the back of his leg, breaking him from his stupor.

The language below was unlike any he'd ever heard, choppy and rugged with stress placed on the first syllable of every word. He felt the hairs on his arms stand on end and a cold sweat broke out on his face. Even from up above, every figure below him appeared at least a foot taller than he was. He counted twelve... no fifteen? Yes, fifteen of them, circled around the little platform like it was the god of all things dark and evil and they were its loyal followers.

He knelt by the railing and motioned for Lawrence to join him at his side.

"Start the recording process," he whispered as the droid's internal processors began recording the chanting below. With the number of various species Taldryan boasted Drax deduced *someone* from the SRI at least would be able to decipher the strange connotations once they heard them.

The red glow only deepened, became more and more intense as the statue glowed a deep crimson. That was when Drax deduced the object in question he was after...

"You'll know it when you see it."

Appius' words echoed through his mind. This was it, the artifact in question right before his eyes, shaped like a bird with talons that stretched above its head. It radiated something malevolent, something vicious, something threatening to his core. It hummed menacingly in a high pitched screech, its sound reaching the far walls and ceilings of the chamber until...

Nothing.

Its sound ceased to exist and the room was met with a silence that sent chills through the Chiss' body. The only noise he could physically hear was his ragged breathing and the thumping of his heart in his ears.

The numerous bodies below him all rose, hoods still disguising their features from the universe and for a brief second Drax considered high-tailing it out of there before he was spotted, and then duly killed, or worse. Some fates were simply worse than death and weren't worth thinking about.

Yet he remained, not because his nerves suddenly steeled, or a fire lit in his gut, but because a large, cloaked figure entered the room and drew his attention. Their presence was overwhelmingly powerful as they took what appeared to be their rightful place upon the pedestal, a leading actor upon the stage.

"Brothers, sisters!" the figure proclaimed in a deep booming voice. He lowered his shoal and Drax had to swallow the lump in his throat as gazed upon the most decrepit, deformed Zabradi he ever laid eyes upon.

What appeared to be cuts and indents littered the man's face on every inch or corner, so much so it seemed to twist and contort his features. Whether the scarring was responsible, natural age or both was impossible to tell. Yellow-stained teeth grinned at the procession, whilst crimson eyes glared forward like a man possessed by a demon.

"Rejoice! Lady Krea is most pleased with your work, we will be perfectly concealed from the impure for a time longer," the Zabrad leader spoke, his voice littered with praise.

Lady Krea? Concealed?

The blue-skinned man turned his eyes to his droid companion to ensure he was still recording and satisfied, he returned his gaze beneath him.

"Darth Sidious was a very powerful man, a wise man, a man that knew his influence should spread as far and wide throughout the galaxy as possible. It's why we are here now. Lady Krea, your Master and I, your Overseer, will ensure our dominion will remain. Only the true Sith shall remain. Not these pretenders on *our* doorstep..."

The Overseer had nothing if not a flair for the dramatic. He raised a crooked hand and clicked his fingers, the cracking noise echoed around them as the emergence of two more hooded figures dragging some poor unfortunate soul across the floor like a sack of bantha dung drew his eye.

"This is the last of our Taldryan snoops!" the Overseer jeered jovially, lacking any sense and hint of compassion. The Zabrad tore the hood of his prisoner like a child unwrapping a present on his birthday, revealing a justifiably frightened and petrified young Human male with short black hair underneath.

"And tell me, what is your name, boy?"

The young Human's lips trembled, his body shivered and his blue eyes watered from sheer fear.

"Z-Zachary," the Human responded, his teeth jittering together.

"Well, Zachary... "

The larger Zabrak's grey and scaly hand rubbed against the Human's soft and pale cheek like he was a father consoling his son.

"I am Lord Trebin," the procession leader stated slowly, emphasising each and every syllable. "And coming here was the last mistake you will ever make."

The Human's eyes barely had time to widen as his body was jerked into the air like it was being lifted by an invisible tether. Panic stretched across Zachary's face as his arms and legs flailed helplessly in place.

Snap-hiss!

A blood-red crimson blade ruptured out of a cylindrical hilt that Trebin held in his grasp, and the Zabrak wasted no time in plunging the deadly weapon through the wannabe intruders abdomen, tearing straight through his stomach as the last gasps of life left his body forever.

Upon the stairway, Drax tensed and winced at the violent display. The body in question dropped to the ground, lifeless, the Human's eyes greyed over and rolled to the back of his head before his body was discarded like old tauntaun meat. It was clear to the Infiltrator even with his skills, there was no way in hell he was getting close to that artifact. He needed to retreat, go back to Ostara and collect reinforcements. He was way out of his depth, he knew that.

He signalled to the little astromech beside him as he slowly rose to a standing position, carefully moving so they didn't suddenly spot him from below. His heart pounded in his chest Unfortunately the very tip of his foot tapped against a horribly loose piece of tile and knocked it off the edge as it fell twenty feet down to the ground below.

Clang.

Drax stood still, time moved at a crawl as he slowly inched his face towards the scene below. His breathing stopped, a single bead of sweat trickled down his blue face and his heart stood still. Red eyes connected with corrupted ones, a scowl flared on the Zabrak's face as the Taldryan Commander's jaw dropped.

He'd been spotted.

"ACOLYTES! BRING THAT EAVESDROPPER TO ME AT ONCE!"

The Infiltrator took the roaring boom of the old Zabrak as his cue to get the hell out of there as fast as he could. He broke into a sprint, not even informing Lawrence as he stormed past the droid, his feet clanging against the steps as he quickly raced up them to get as far away from the approaching stampede as possible.

Unfortunately, Drax was far from the fastest being in the galaxy, and considering even the R3 unit was keeping up with him, things did not look good as the swarm of hate-filled Force user's ascended upon them like a hive of bees.

The Chiss' hand reached for a small spherical object in his belt and then gripped it in his artificial hand. He pressed the ignition on top as red lights began to strobe atop the device before he dropped it to the ground and continued running, not bothering to look back as the small device bounced down the steps.

Three, two, one.

A thunderous boom echoed from behind him and Drax found himself knocked off his feet and landed face-first on the stairway. He glanced at the sudden sound of shrieking coming from behind him as a smirk stretched across his face. The thermal detonator did its job and left a sizable gap in the stairway. A few had fallen into it and through it and those caught in the explosion were now nothing more than a pile of limbs.

The Chiss Commander was far from a stupid man. He knew his limitations and thanks to Appius, he knew very well what those gifted with the mystical power of the Force could do. Without hesitation he retrieved his trusty sidearm and turned it against the group, pulling the trigger as a bolt of crimson red slammed into an Acolyte mid-way as they leapt over the gap created by the explosion.

Two more jumped after him and he fired again, grazing the hood of one of the beings as they approached him in quick strides, almost gliding and ethereal. Drax dropped his blaster and grabbed a second device, a thermal imploder, ready to activate the device and blow them all to kingdom come if that's what it took. It wasn't his preferred method of escape but frakk it, he'd lost two limbs already, what was wrong with completing the set?

Besides the obvious risk of death, of course, but nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Apparently, the Acolytes didn't seem too fond of the idea after his little stunt from before and with a speed the Infiltrator didn't expect, his one remaining wrist was grabbed and raised above his head before being squeezed tightly by what felt like a

clamp on his flesh. The pain was unthinkable, and he couldn't focus on anything else except the agony that filled his held joint. The thermal imploder dropped pitifully to the ground with several clangs before rolling off the edge of the stairway, detonating in mid-air, out of proximity of everyone in the room.

The little astromech's shriek drew the robed monster's attention as well as Drax's.

Lawrence, no! What are you doing!?

It was too late, far too late. They had gotten so close to the entrance, the tunnel laid just behind that massive door they entered through and they couldn't get to it. So close, yet so far away. The red-eyed man's heart dropped like a sack of stones into his stomach when another Acolyte approached the R3 unit, sparks dancing ominously between black-gloved fingers.

He couldn't scream, shout, or say anything. Drax wanted to tell Lawrence to run, fly, do whatever! Save itself for kriff's sake! But it didn't matter, a small jolt of white flashed before Drax's eyes as Lawrence short-circuited before him. Bursting into flame and smoke, its circuits set alight in an orangey-yellow blaze.

Before the Commander could do anything else, he was yanked back downstairs and hurled over the gap he'd created. He was caught by a group of several other robed figures who restrained his hands and legs like he was a piece of meat ready for the open fire. He forced his own eyes shut, not knowing when he arrived at the very bottom until he was dropped onto his knees. He failed to control his breathing, a loud ringing echoing in his ears.

"Search the area and check the surveillance. Make sure he's alone. Two of you stand watch by the door."

The tall Chiss had listened long enough to recognise the shrill voice of the Overseer. His thoughts turned to Talia, his wife. His son Draynar. Would he ever see them again? Would they know how he died? He knew he wasn't getting out of this. Not now, his luck officially ran out. Where in the hell was Appius!?

"I must commend you for your bravery. Not many would have the courage to perform the stunt you just pulled. Snooping on us, listening to us, attacking us, killing us. Unfortunately, you will just be another example of what Lady Krea will do to that *accursed* Clan."

There it was, that name again.

"They will find you... and when they do..." Drax muttered with an act of courage he didn't know he possessed. The usual facades he could put up in front of him were of no use here.

"But they won't, not whilst we have *this*."

Drax's left eye peered open. The statuette, that inanimate winged creature was the difference between them being discovered and staying hidden.

"And even if they did..." the old Zabrak continued. "It wouldn't matter. Our lady will destroy you all, grind you all into dust and throw your ashes into the wind."

Sweat dripped from the Chiss' brow, nervousness wracking his soul.

"Speaking of which..."

The Infiltrator's eyes shot open when his body was lifted in the air like gravity ceased to exist. He writhed around like the other Taldryanite before him, and likely every other victim before that in a futile attempt to break Trebin's magical grasp of him.

Snap-hiss!

The same blood-red blade that the Zabrak possessed burst to life and he held it directly underneath the Chiss, a sickening smirk glistened the Overseer's old and decrepit face.

"Overseer!"

Salvation, at least for the moment. One of the remaining Acolytes rushed in and the Overseer moved to address them, dropping Drax out of the way of certain doom.

The Acolyte passed the aged Zabrak a datapad as leader of this procession cocked his head to the side curiously.

On the screen, in plain view of the surveillance camera in black, white and grey stood two individuals in Mandalorian armor, T-shaped visors completing the set. One was a woman, judging by her more lithe frame compared to her companion, who sported a... lightning bolt? Yes, a lightning bolt on his chest.

"How curious..." Trebin stated, not taking his eyes from the screen. The two Mandalorians stood outside the vault entrance, hardly enough space for them to squeeze through the small gap Drax created when he arrived.

That's when the male Mandalorian raised his hand to it and a sudden harsh, violent shrieking echoed loudly throughout the room like chalk down a blackboard. The large vault door sliding open against all expectations.

"The Force! He's Force-sensitive!" Trebin said with obvious panic to his Force. The old man closed his eyes and grunted, his suspicions confirmed as he reached his senses up above.

"Damn it! Acolytes! Do not..."

The sound of lasers silenced him as two bodies dropped from the stairway and crashed in front of him with a sickening thud.

Acolytes rushed the entrance as both Mandalorians stepped through with no resistance to stop them. The woman, the one in armor as white as snow brandished her dual blasters as bolts of molten red left the barrels and slammed into the first two unfortunate beings to try and stop them. That did nothing to deter the rest of the horde as they marched up the stairway to stop the would-be intruders from entering.

Without missing a step, the Force using Mandalorian took hold of a cylindrical object strapped to his side, gripping it firmly in his right hand. He pressed the ignition as not one, but two jade emerald blades ruptured and hissed out of both ends, approximately a metre and a half in length each.

The tall being then launched the weapon in his hands towards the group of attackers as it boomeranged through the group, ripping and cleaving through them like a hot knife through butter before returning to his hand, the group dropping one by one milliseconds from each other. The three robed figures that remained stood frozen for two seconds before crying out like a pack of frightened rodents, turning in their heels and sprinting back down the stairway.

Sparks dances between the Mandalorian's fingertips as he held his lightsaber staff in his hand, humming ominously. Bolts of white and blue lanced across the stairway and hit the first Acolyte. The woman screamed something fierce before the electricity danced from her into her comrades one by one, stunning them in place as they writhed on the stairs.

"Ankira."

The other Mandalorian didn't need to be told twice and unleashed a flurry of shots in their direction, putting them out of their misery. In just a few seconds, all the

Acolytes were dead, and all that remained was the final one at the bottom, the most powerful, their *leader*, if you could call him that.

"Lawrence..."

The crimson-clad Mandalorian took note of the singed mess that was the R3 astromech and placed a hand upon its blackened dome. His arm shook and his body tensed, a heat radiating within his body.

"Aylin can fix it," Ankira stated hopefully.

"Yeah... yeah I hope so," retorted her companion through gritted teeth.

"Go, Drax needs you, Appius. I'll keep watch here."

Appius did not need to be told twice as he quickly launched himself over the railing, the roaring of his jetpack slowed his fall somewhat, though he purposefully collided with the last of the Acolytes, bending his knees and digging them into the unfortunate man's neck which snapped sickeningly upon contact with the ground.

When he rose to his feet, Appius felt the familiar sensation of danger coarse through his mind and he instinctively sidestepped a lunge, a crimson blade came into his peripheral vision. He slapped the weapon aside with his own, green clashing with red in a vibrant display of sparkling colour.

The Overseer snarled as he kept a sideways stance, his blade held in one hand, held out towards the Sorcerer in a challenge. Satisfied that Drax was safe and relatively unharmed, the Taldryanite turned his attention to the other Force user in the room with him.

"Makashi, eh?" Appius stated as he gently spun his dual-bladed weapon in his hand, holding it out in front of him, not bothering with any of the usual pleasantries.

Trebin didn't respond with words, his usual confidence replaced with desperation smeared across his face. He stepped towards the Mandalorian, carefully sizing up the taller man before attempting a simple flick at the long hilt in a feeble attempt to destroy it. Appius spun the blades in response and with the power of the Dark Side coursing through his bloodstream, he slammed his green blade directly into the oncoming attack and forced it towards the ground, taking the disgruntled Overseer off balance with it. The Mandalorian spun the other end of the saber, sending the other blade careening towards the Zabrak's head, forcing the old man to retreat before his assault could even begin. A blast of air suddenly slammed Trebin in the chest, the source coming from the Sorcerer's outstretched hand as

the Sith crashed spine first into the pedestal behind him. He let out a gasp of pain, saliva spitting out of his mouth as his pupils dilated.

"Was that a *contentious opportunity*? If it was, it was a terrible attempt at it."

Appius' mocking tone set the yellow-toothed sneering at him, a bead of sweat dripping from his troubled brow.

"Come on, I'm using Niman. *Niman* for crying out loud. You should be dominating me here!" Appius continued with his derogatory tone. "Or are you not as powerful as you think you are?"

Drax watched on with a nervous gaze whilst biting his lip and shifting his eyes from one combatant to the other. If the Mandalorian was trying to make his opponent angry, he was succeeding. The corrupted eyes glared back at the armoured man, boiling like a volcano ready to burst. He hadn't said anything the entire time, not a word nor a syllable.

"Tell you what," the Taldryan summit member suddenly proclaimed, retracting the green blades of his weapon as they seemingly vanished into the hilt. "I'll give you one chance, one free shot at me."

If Drax's eyes could have popped out of his skull, they would have at that moment. Was Appius insane? Had promotion to the second rank of Equites gotten to his head? He was going to get himself killed!

"Be warned though, if you *don't* kill me now, this will be the end for you," Appius finished, his voice deepening as the threat was made inherently clear.

The Infiltrator inwardly cursed and pressed his fingers against his trusty blaster pistol, ready to intervene at the right moment though he failed to comprehend just how fast Trebin was, even in his old age. Like a blur in motion the Zabrak lunged forward once again with a stab directly at the Mandalorian's heart and true to his word, the Sorcerer stood there and simply took the blow.

NO!

Drax screamed in his mind, he lost the breath in his lungs but caught it back just as fast. Something wasn't right, Trebin should be smirking, triumphant, at least gloating in his victory. But instead, he appeared horror-struck, dumbfounded.

Terrified.

His crimson blade hadn't pierced through Appius' heart, nowhere near. It didn't even breach the surface of his armor and instead was being held back like it was an ordinary piece of durasteel against a rubber sword.

Mandalorian iron! Drax bemused to himself, his spirit suddenly soaring. *Appius, you frakking genius!*

He had no idea where the Ektrosis Quaestor managed to find a material as rare as that and nor did he care. If Drax knew Appius as well as he thought he did, and he believed he did, he was willing to bet his entire armor was made out of it.

Appius had played the game, and Trebin lost spectacularly.

"Wha... how...?" the Overseer stumbled his words, his soul-wrenching fear taking over as he slowly took steps away from the Mandalorian.

Trebin came to the same conclusion as Drax, not that it served him any good. Darkness suddenly surrounded the area around the three men, the air getting hotter, heavier, hard to breathe, the source of which came from the Mandalorian Sorcerer's fingertips. Without a word of warning, tendrils of white and ocean blue lanced across to the Zabrak, wrapping and enveloping around him like a torturous blanket. His screams only barely breached the sounds of the thunderstorm that consumed him until...

Nothing. Silence once again.

The Overseer's corpse dropped to the floor, he and his procession nothing more than a pile of bodies in a makeshift graveyard. The stench of burning flesh rose to the Chiss' nostrils and made a nauseous sensation curl through his stomach. Despite this, he carefully paced towards Appius.

"You took your sweet time," Drax said as the set man placed his hands behind his back.

"What? No thank you for saving your life?" The Mandalorian said, feigning hurt.

"If you were on time, I wouldn't have needed saving," the thin Chiss answered back as his eyes shifted to the artifact which still sat upon the pedestal.

"I was busy," Appius retorted, shifting his gaze to the artifact along with Drax, hoping to change the topic.

"Uh-huh. Sure you were, with Ankira probably."

"I... uh..."

Appius' stumbling for a response told the inquisitive Infiltrator everything he needed to know. Regardless, there was now repair work that needed to be done to Lawrence. That was the one thing on his mind now. His mission was complete, and he grabbed the artifact and threw it gently to Appius, who fumbled as he caught it. For the first time since he arrived, the tall blue-skinned man let out a sigh of relief as he glanced at the carnage around him.

That was a little too close for his comfort.

Taldryan Temple
Consul's Office
Ostara
38 ABY

"And that's what happened."

A pink-haired woman with carefully kept red hair furrowed her brow and gently rubbed the bridge of her nose with two fingers. She tentatively kept her bottle of Tsiraki close in her other hand. The winged artifact brought to her stood in the centre of her desk, looking more like a piece of decoration than some powerful artifact used by the feared Emperor of the Galactic Empire. Light poured in from the windows on either side of the room, giving a perfect view of the near untouched jungle landscape that surrounded them, though thankfully a cool breeze rolled in thanks to the newly installed central heating throughout the temple.

"An attack in the Caelus System by the Collective, a war in the Arx System, *Resurgent* destroyed, attack on Mattack Station and now Rogue Sith? I think your tenure as Consul has been quite eventful if I do say so myself, Erin."

"Gee, you think, Appius?"

The sarcasm dripped from her lips like the Tsiraki that dropped down her gullet. She took a swing of it like it somehow held all the answers to Taldryan's current problems before gently placing the bottle back on the desk.

"Doesn't look like much, does it?" Appius claimed, choosing to deflect the comment by changing the subject.

"In my experience they never are," the Zeltron Consul answered as she gave the mysterious object a once over, prodding it with a single finger. "But whoever was using this to keep themselves hidden didn't want to be found."

"And Darth Sidious used this? The most powerful man in the galaxy didn't want to be found?" Appius interjected.

"Possibly. Power creates paranoia, and Sidious had lots of enemies. However, I have to wonder if it could be reverse-engineered somehow..."

The Mandalorian raised an eyebrow at her statement, following Erinyes' train of thought.

"You mean use it against our enemies, use it to find them?"

"Exactly," the Zentron confirmed with a slight nod and a smile. "And hopefully we can put an end to this. Between the Caelus Government and whoever the hell this is, we have other priorities that require our attention."

Appius took a deep breath and grabbed the artifact from the desk and readied himself to leave.

"Then I'll get the Mystics right on it," the Quaestor commented with vigor. "Hopefully they will see something now the interference is out the way."

"Inform me at once of any changes. Oh, and Appius?"

The Quaestor turned to face the Taldryan Consul, a slight smirk gracing her delicate face.

"The next time you want to send a member of the Vornskyr Battalion on a little errand, consult with me first. Zentru'la gave me no end of headaches about that," Erinyes said, a hint of satisfaction in her tone of voice when she saw the Human squirm.

"I... erm... sure," Appius said, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly before making his exit. As soon as the door closed behind him, the Elder Marauder did not hesitate to take another swig of her liqueur, the burning sensation trickled down her throat and into her gut and brought the sweet relief she was looking for. She smirked to herself, wondering just how much of a challenge this *Lady Krea* would be.

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