

'Jasper Garmis'

An entry for the fiction competition: **Vornskr Battalion Contract November 2020: Recruit a Mercenary**

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Unknown Location Caelus System

Drax Callian is a very particular kind of man. On any given day you can find him tinkering with an assortment of gadgets, nick nacks, wires and only the Force knew what else he was doing since no-one else actually gave a damn, or at least that was the case until the alarms blared throughout the place. The strobing red was a constant distraction from his hobby and the outside invading Vizsla troops were unrelenting in the bombardments of their little hideout. Each time they broke further and further through the shields and barriers that held them safe and he dropped his spanner, screwdriver or whatever to the floor with a clang and offered whatever assistance he could.

Of course he did. After all, he was the one who let them in.

As was often the case whenever the Mercenary Clan attacked, all able-bodied men and women who had a pair of hands were told to hold their blasters towards the stronghold entrance, awaiting the moment the Vizslians attacked. His adrenaline carried him every time. Each time he viewed it as a challenge to his handiwork. Breaking into a Collective stronghold and earning their trust was one thing, but hacking and twisting their security system was a completely different kind of game.

Four times they'd failed. The ground vibrated beneath his feet, each time getting stronger as he believed this would be the last. The last time he had to hold a blaster up and he could end this charade once and for all, to be able to hold his wife and son again, that was all he wanted.

Alas, it seemed like this would be the fifth time. He internally scowled to himself though failed to show this to any of the Collective grunts around him. Each time he lowered the base's defenses he assumed it would be enough for them to get through. What was taking them so long? Was his work simply not good enough? Or were the fools not packing enough firepower? The vibrations finally ceased as the security measures rebooted and powered up once more. A collection of mechanical beeps and scrapes as the blaster turrets came back online.

"Alright folks, shows over. Everyone back to work."

Amidst the mumbling and constant fear of being attacked, the small task force retreated to their stations. He made his way back to the garage, or what they referred to as the 'droid storage room' since for the most part that's all that was here. The best thing was no-one frequented this room very often except for him. This was his job, to sit in here and make sure everything with a wire in it worked as intended and he was damn good at it too. As he entered the room itself he closed the blast door behind him to seclude himself away from the rest of the base.

"Oh well... another day, I suppose," he grabbed a red marker from the nearby table and made a small little indent on the wall in front of it, right next to thirty-four identical lines. He stared at them for a few moments before rubbing his forehead with his left hand, the hard metal provided a cool comfort amidst the humidity of the underground hell he was inhabiting. He sighed frustratedly, the sooner he was done with this the better he'd be. Spinning on the spot he turned to the pristine condition of his workshop. A tidy space made for a tidy mind, it was almost as important to Drax as being articulate.

Almost...

A small beeping captured his attention from the corner of the room as a small astromech approached him.

"Yes, Lawrence. I know they didn't get through. I was there, I saw the whole thing," Drax replied dismissively much to the little droids protest.

"Lawrence! For kriff's sake, use your manners or there will be no oil bath for you," the Chiss scolded which seemed to silence the little blue and yellow astromech.

After a moment, Lawrence let out a soft, low pitched beep which seemed to put a small smile on the Chiss' face.

"Much better," the Infiltrator praised. "Now then, where was that..."

His train of thought was interrupted when the blast door to the garage opened with a loud *shwoop* as a slightly bulky Togrutan man entered.

Drax immediately turned and raised his cybernetic arm into a salute.

"Colonel Landrunner, sir," he said with the tone of a seasoned soldier

"At ease," the Colonel responded to which Drax lowered his arm. "I wish to have a discussion with you... Jasper was it?"

"Yes, sir. Jasper Garmis, sir," The infiltrator stated.

"Well, Garmis. Vizsla forces have been attacking more and more frequently as of late," the Colonel said as he inspected a workbench. He ran his finger along it to try and find any speck of dirt and oil he could, though found none. "We've been trying to find the reason as to how our defences keep getting breached. Our mainframe has been tampered with. Do you know anything about it?"

"I can't say I do, sir. No," the blue-skinned man replied.

"Of course not," the Togrutan retorted. "Here's the thing, Garmis. We are looking for someone with a working knowledge of how to take our defence system apart. Unfortunately, that leaves you as one of our prime suspects. I'm going to ask you a few questions and I expect you to answer them honestly."

"Of course, sir," Drax spoke, his tone of voice ringing with confidence. "I have nothing to hide."

"Very well, how long have you served the Collective military?"

"Six years. I started in the Technocrat Guild as an engineer and mechanic before transferring to the Liberation Front."

"I see," Landrunner commented. "Where did you complete basic training?"

"Nancora, sir. In one of the many strongholds before the Brotherhood discovered their location."

"Who were your parents?"

"My mother worked on Csillia as a miner. My father was a horrid alcoholic and died when I was very young."

"Do you have a family waiting for you?"

"No sir, I do not," Drax replied solemnly. A complete and utter lie, just like everything else. Though judging by the Colonel's face contorting and then biting his lip, it seemed he believed every word of it.

"A shame. Life in the Liberation Front isn't worth much without someone back home to fight for. A lot of the boys here have family across the galaxy, the girls too."

"So I hear," replied the Infiltrator. The two fell into silence as the Chiss analyzed the Togrutan's expression and planned his next course of action.

"I do believe you, my boy, I do, I really really do. But you realise what kind of a predicament I'm in. I've run background checks on every man and woman in this place and there's certain... inconsistencies I found with you."

"I understand, sir. Like I said, I have nothing to hide," the Chiss responded with a warm smile that was full of reassurance. Though from behind his back, right in view of Lawrence, he pressed two of his fingers together and wiggled them and signalled the small astromech towards the blast door.

"Very well, I shall be on my way. I will, of course, inform you if I need anything further from you," the Colonel declared.

"Of course, sir. You know where to find me. It's not like I'll be going anywhere," Drax said, the smile on his face still beaming as he watched the Colonel glance at him suspiciously. The moment the Twi'lek turned to leave, the blast doors shut in front of him and barred any exit from the room with the little astromech having locked it from the inside.

"And neither will you..." Drax spoke coldly as a chill entered the room. The Colonel spun and drew upon his trusty sidearm. It was him all along! The Chiss! Jasper, if that was indeed his real name. Unfortunately for him, he would never get the chance to reveal that information to anyone else. As he spun and drew his blaster, the Infiltrator was already ready with his. A perfect bolt of red plasma soared across the short distance and landed in-between the Togrutan's eyes.

The Colonel's body dropped lifelessly to the ground and it didn't take long for cries and murmurs to break out down the nearby hallways. The sound of blaster fire served as an obvious alarm to the many soldiers in the base as they began to stampede towards the garage.

"Lawrence, lock those doors tight. Make sure no-one can get through," Drax commanded as the droid did as instructed. A few seconds later a series of banging clanged against the durasteel as orders to open the door barked through on the Comms system.

Drax pointed his blaster at said Comm's system and pulled the trigger. As the red Lazer hit it, it erupted into a series of sparks and electrical discharges.

"How painfully irritating," Drax commented as he sheathed his weapon. His cover was blown, he knew that. But it was going to be anyways when the Colonel ran a more thorough investigation into his background. The Infiltrator was an intelligent man, and he deduced that at least this way it was on his terms.

"Right then," he declared as he rubbed his hands together gleefully as a grin appeared on his face. "Plan B it is."

He quickly scavenged together the final pieces he needed for his latest projects. He picked up the two lazer trip mines and placed them by the blast door. Needless to say, they were in for a nasty surprise when they finally opened it. The Chiss carefully stepped over the Colonel's body and took cover at the back of the room with Lawrence following suit.

Unknown Location Caelus System

Why was he doing this? Only the Force knew how many times he'd asked that question to himself. Sure, he was the Quaestor of House Ektrosis of Clan Taldryan, but the Vornskyr Battalion was not part of his jurisdiction or authority. If anything they were a sub-branch of Battleteam Tavros which ironically was also run by General Chin himself, Zentru'la.

If Appius was perfectly honest, if it wasn't for Ankira he probably wouldn't be searching as hard as he was. She was a member of Tavros and anyone he could help increase the Vornskyr's strength would in turn help Tavros, and by extension, her as well.

He could already hear her voice at the back of his mind telling him to *stop fussing over her. Or we are strong enough already so he didn't need to bother. Or, more than likely... focus on Ektrosis.*

Well, he could bet if the roles were somehow reversed that she would be doing the same for him, so he was going to ignore those made up voices at the back of his mind and keep up with the search. Being Quaestor had its advantages after all, and he had the majority of the House doing their part in the recruitment project. Dasha was currently at whatever computer screen grabbing any information on any person of interest she could find. Crysenia and Shanree were doing hell knows what on some backwater world via the Consul's orders and as for Benevolent Taldrya? Well he'd taken a name from the list and was being the 'great detective' he believed he was, much to the behest of Raistline Majere, his fellow Son of Taldrya.

The Quaestor kept lackadaisically flipping from name to name on his datapad until he saw one he hadn't seen since his days in Vizsla.

Drax Callian.

He reread it twice, and then once more just for good measure. He looked for any kind of spelling mistake, grammar imperfection or anything that would tell him it wasn't the same person.

Six foot tall, thin build, male, Chiss, Infiltrator. Association: Clan Vizsla. Expert mechanic and saboteur.

There was no mistaking it. It was definitely him.

"That son of a nerd herder..." Appius declared from the cockpit of his Upsilon Command Shuttle, privately reserved for members of the Taldryan summit. By the looks of things, Vizsla had stumbled upon a secret Collective outpost on some Force forsaken asteroid right in the Caelus System itself. Vizsla were operating dangerously close to Taldryan space and as the Upsilon Class Shuttle slowly descended upon the abandoned industrial complex that was stationed upon the asteroid itself. It served as a manufacturing facility for the Military Prefecture and Iron Navy in times of conflict and strife. It was decommissioned when the Collective invaded the Caelus System and wreaked havoc on Chyron, though it seemed they decided to set up shop here right under their noses and Vizsla wanted the frakking credit for it all.

Anything to look good, Appius mused to himself. Credits not words... what a load of kark.

"Master Quaestor, sir. It appears unidentified craft have landed towards the building," Spinky, the Quaestor's personal pilot droid spoke in a painfully high pitched and shrill voice.

He, of course, was referring to the squadron of Kom'rk Class Fighters that were stationed just outside the makeshift base. A horrid knot formed inside the Quaestor's gut. He recognised those ships all too well as the ones of House Wren. If there were any Force users among them they could pick him out very easily. Appius was no fool, he was aware of the bounty on his head from the Mercenary Clan after he left his level of leadership over there for Taldryan and he had no doubt there were those among them who would be more than happy to try and cash in on it.

"Spinky, activate stealth mode and take her in nice and slow," Appius ordered as he kept his attention on the downed Kom'rk's before them. Whilst the droid happily activated the stealth systems as all lights in the ship dimmed into darkness, followed by the sound of whirring initiated as the droid pulled on the lever, there was a hint of hesitation in his actions.

"Oh dear, Master Quaestor, sir. It appears a strong forcefield is surrounding the facility and we can't... oh?"

Suddenly, that very forcefield appeared to weaken as it visibly appeared and dissipated from view. The moment it did, the Vizsla Kom'rk's open fired upon their target as the final fractured defences took the battering of their repeated blaster cannon fire.

"Now, Spinky!" Appius ordered. "There, the cargo bay, line us right up next to it, that's my way in."

The pure black Upsilon Shuttle drifted narrowly above the ground as they managed to slip through the Stronghold's defence network undetected as the forcefield re-emerged at full strength. If the Collective or Vizsla knew they were here, they weren't doing a good job of letting them know about it.

"Connecting to the cargo bay, Master Quaestor, sir," the painfully shrill droid informed as a distinct hissing sound echoed throughout the ship as it depressurised to meet inside the Stronghold. "It's ready for you now, sir. Please don't be too long. I don't like it here and asteroids are no good for my space map."

"Spinky, I don't give a sithspit about your damn star chart," Appius retorted authoritatively. "Keep the ship here and do not move it under any circumstances. Am I clear?"

The droid turned its mechanical head towards the Quaestor and raised its robotic arm into a hearty, overdramatic salute.

"Crystal clear, Master Quaestor, sir."

The Sorcerer rolled his eyes as he prepared to leave the ship, though the sudden roaring of engines in the distance caught his attention as the Vizsla Kom'rk's ascended into the air and left the asteroid all together.

"Well..." Appius stated. "That just happened."

Collective Stronghold Caelus System

If there was one thing Appius could give Drax credit for, it was that he knew how to make a grand exit. Getting into places was never a problem and no-one suspected a thing back on Zsoldos when the Chiss infiltrated the Vizsla hangar bay. He acted like just a normal, run-of-the-mill, unimportant, unassuming mechanic and repairman at the Saga spaceport. That was until he hacked the vehicle Appius was supposed to take to the Vizsla headquarters and made it crash land in the desert in the middle of the night. Not quite how he wanted to spend the evening but hey! It was an adventure.

The Sorcerer recalled how the Infiltrator tried to gun him down on a speeder bike before the Force user returned the favour and sliced it in half, sending it careening into a nearby sand dune and leaving him a hot and bloody mess. He could have left him to die, to rot for attacking him and you know what? It would have served him

right! But... Appius was still a *Jetii* at the time and his good nature won over. He healed the Chiss' wounds, the two bonded, became friends and after Drax ever so graciously fixed the ship, he was recruited into the Vizsla armed forces. He was damn lucky too. Anyone else on that dustball of a world would have just killed him on the spot for what he tried to pull and as it just so happened he attacked the one freaking person on the entire planet who wouldn't kill someone who attacked him.

Funny how times change...

As the sparks muttered above his head and the lights flickered along the battered corridor, Appius carefully and slowly tread over fallen beams and metal roofing that was partially holding the stronghold together. One wrong step and he risked tripping over, causing more damage, or alerting the Collective to his presence. He could feel the many signatures through the Force scattered across the makeshift base and he'd rather not be surrounded today, thank you very much. He, as well as many others in the Brotherhood were particularly sick of the Collective at this point.

One right turn later and it looked like he'd stumbled upon a demolitionist's euphoric wet dream. A doorway lay partially collapsed and singed into a black so dark it was like staring into space. Panels and electronics lay scattered and hung from the walls and with the stench of burning metal and lighter fluid assaulting his nostrils through his T-shaped visor like the unwelcome odour it was, he clung to the far wall and carefully raised his left arm and hand.

The giant durasteel door shook on the ground for a moment before magically lifting into the air like it was being winched up. Unfortunately, Appius failed to stop the debris on top of said door from falling off it as bits and pieces fell to the floor and made as loud a clang and clatter as it could make.

"Frakking typical..." Appius muttered under his breath. Of course one of the few times he needed to be quiet was one of the times he went and made as much noise as possible. He tossed the large metal obstruction aside in his usual haphazard fashion as it crashed, banged and created a loud echo throughout the hallway.

Screw it, they probably know I'm here anyways, the House Ektrosis leader mused to himself as he carefully stepped into what appeared to be the makeshift garage of the stronghold. Or at least it seemed that way from at the back. Near the entrance was a completely different story. It was burned to a cynder as little orange flames illuminated the way forward.

"Yep... definitely Drax's handiwork..." Appius commented to himself as he trudged his way in. Hopefully, he could find some clue as to where his old friend had disappeared too. At the back were an oddly arranged assortment of tools, equipment, nick nacks... a completely different story from the hallway just seconds

prior. Unfortunately, Appius was no great detective and even if there was some subtle clue he couldn't see it. Drax was nothing if not meticulous with his habits.

Suddenly a gentle knock alerted Appius of something in the room with him. He quickly spun and gripped his father's lightsaber in his hand but kept it unignited. A lonely R3 unit emerged from behind some fallen shelving, looking up and beeping before drawing upon an ominously sparking spanner from within its personal unit. Yet despite this, Appius lowered his weapon as his jaw slackened behind his helmet.

"Lawrence?" Appius said, his voice barely more than a whisper. The little black and white astromech chirped suspiciously as Appius gathered his weapon and quickly removed his helmet. "Hey, buddy! How've you been?"

The Sorcerer knelt onto one knee and gave Lawrence a quick once over, like a doting father looking after his child. The R3 unit beeped and whirred happily as it couldn't contain itself from seeing it's former master again.

"Lawrence, where is Drax. Can you find him?" Appius inquired slowly as the little astromech beeped in front of him and paced back and forth.

"Lawrence... you know I can't understand you."

The R3 unit ceased with its noises and let out a series of whirs which sounded horribly sarcastic, and just as Appius raised an eyebrow and was ready to retort, a small antenna popped out of Lawrence's dome and began turning on the spot.

The Sorcerer placed his helmet back on his head and followed the little astromech back out into the corridor, making sure to avoid the fallen Togrutan's body lest he trip again. It didn't take long before the echo of several stomping footsteps approached from around the corner as a small swarm of Collective enforcers met the pair through the darkness.

"The frakk is *that!*?" screamed the soldier at the front of the group of five. They all began to raise their blasters but unfortunately for them, Appius was quicker on the draw. With his right hand raised towards them and a torrent of dark energy swirling within him, several tendrils of blue and white darted out the tips of his fingers and right into the group. The jolt of lightning spread to all of them and forced them onto their hands and knees.

Appius summoned his lightsaber to his hand as his jetpack roared to life behind his back. His green blade hissed to life as his jetpack propelled him into the group as he twirled, hacked and slashed, leaving the Collective group nothing more than a pile of body parts and severed limbs.

The Quaestor twirled his lightsaber in his hand as he inspected his handiwork. He gave a slight nod and now satisfied with what he'd done, he turned the corner and

beckoned Lawrence to follow him as he immediately walked into yet more opposition.

Collective Stronghold Control Bridge

"I demand a report!"

The officers scrambled for whatever information they could get their hands on from the lower levels. Between the Vizsla attacks from outside seeming to cease followed by the explosions from within that shook the foundations of the stronghold, everything was in a mess hotter than the flowing rivers of Mustafar.

"I said I demand a report!"

Lieutenant Colonel Braxen was not a woman who accepted failure. For the sake of the Collective and the Liberation Front, the young, brown-haired woman took control of the situation. Considering that it seemed that Landrunner had disappeared out of thin air.

"Mam!"

One of the few officers in the control bridge itself handed her a communicator, the small circular device fit perfectly in the palm of her hand as a subtle static buzzed from it before turning into a clear voice.

"We are under attack! I repeat, we are under attack!" a panicked voice boomed through the device. The distinct sound of blaster fire rang out in the background, followed by what seemed to sound like electricity sparking around them.

"Calm down, soldier!" Braxen demanded. "Under attack by what? Vizsla?"

"I don't know! It's Mandalorian but it has a lightsaber. It doesn't look like it's with... OH FRAKK, NO!"

The Collection personnel on the bridge were then treated to a humming sound they were all taught to despise. It got louder as the swinging sound echoed through the communicator and tied knots in their guts.

Collective Stronghold Hallways

The antenna spun upon Lawrence's cranium as it sent pulse after pulse throughout the facility. It knew what it was looking for. Every individual had a slightly different signature and the little droid had been here long enough to know each one and how it differed from another.

Appius followed the little astromech trustingly and mused to himself how much the s amber must have been like using the Force, except for droids. He trusted Lawrence, the two of them had a history back in Vizsla as Lawrence guided him from mission to mission and in some subtle ways the Sorcerer missed the droids sarcastic quips.

As Lawrence turned, he connected to a nearby terminal as the hangar bay doors slowly opened. The harder durasteel layer was first followed by the added protection until it opened up completely. As Appius entered the wide hangar, his arm hairs stood on end as the cold air hit him and sent shivers down his spine. The stench of oil was unmistakable, and there were no vessels or crafts around giving the place an ominous feel to it. Yet, Appius could feel it. The presence of one other here with him. It seemed oddly familiar but it'd been so long he couldn't be sure.

As he inched past a durasteel crate... there he was. Six-foot tall, slim, Chiss... and aiming a blaster in his direction with his left hand whilst holding a small, spherical object in his right. The Infiltrator threw the round object as it bounced towards the Mandalorian and flashed red, beeping loudly as it did so.

Immediately Appius' senses went wild as the Force alarmed him of the immediate danger. Acting on instinct, he leapt back as fast as he could just as the thermal detonator exploded with a resounding boom that thundered throughout the hangar. The resulting shockwave was so sudden and strong that it forced the Sorcerer off his feet and sent him crashing into a pile of nearby crates. They toppled on top of him in a rather comical fashion and buried him out of sight.

"Ow..."

Appius forced the crates off of him as he slowly returned to his feet. His balance was still a bit wobbly as the ringing screeched in his ears. The Force blared through his subconscious again, warning him of imminent danger as he focused his sights back on the Chiss, who held out his sidearm in both hands directly at Appius.

One-shot crashed into the Sorcerer chest plate and ricocheted off to the side and then a second, and finally a third as the Quaestor just watched the feeble attempt at causing him harm with a slight pity.

"*Haar'chak*, Drax! Will you cut it out!" Appius cried out. With a flick of his wrist, he grabbed hold of the Infiltrator's wrist with the Force like a crane that winched onto

him, lifting him by the arm a couple of feet off the ground. "Why is it every time we meet you try to kill me!?"

Drax immediately stopped his struggling in mid-air as he stared at the crimson-armoured Mandalorian with wide eyes and a slack jaw.

"Appius?"

Oh, finally! The Human mused as he released his invisible grip on the Chiss arm. Drax landed and staggered back several paces as he rubbed that very arm tentatively.

"Sithspit, is that seriously you? What in all the Brotherhood are you wearing?"

Appius glanced down to his now scorched and marked armor before glancing back to his old friend.

"What's wrong with it?" the Taldryanite asked with fake hurt in his voice.

"You stand out like a sore thumb," Drax answered.

"Not all of us feel the need to hide, Drax," the crimson-armoured Mandalorian commented.

"Clearly," the red-eyed man said dismissively. "As much as I appreciate this reunion, Appius. What are you *actually* doing here?"

"Well, I heard you were in the neighbourhood checking out the scenery and I thought I'd come in and say hello," Appius said, his tone full of sarcasm.

"Very funny," Drax replied with mild irritation. "Well for what it's worth. The scenery is terrible and there are not enough shops along this blasted asteroid belt."

"In all fairness, we didn't expect Vizsla to operate this far into the Caelus System. Otherwise, we would have given you all a *much* warmer welcome."

Despite the obvious implication in what Appius said, Drax remained firm and hardly seemed fazed by it.

"Perhaps if Taldryan could look after themselves instead of getting invaded by the Collective perhaps we wouldn't need to clean up your mess?" Drax responded without missing a beat. "Besides, as soon as the Vizsla forces break through..."

"They can't," Appius interrupted.

"And why not?" Drax inquired stubbornly.

"Because they've left."

Those three little words stabbed Drax harder than any vibroknife ever could as he went wide-eyed.

"They... what?" Drax stammered as a bead of sweat formed on his brow.

"They've gone. Left you here. Credits, not words... I don't think you realise how serious that Clan is about that phrase. As soon as something isn't worth their time they stop caring about it. I'm guessing they decided this little venture just wasn't worth their money anymore," Appius informed him bluntly. If he was going to help him, he was going to give him the truth. At least from his experience.

"What... what do I do?" Drax asked himself as he brought his robotic arm to his forehead. "This was never part of the plan. They were supposed to wait for me, wait for the signal. What am I going to do!?" the Chiss passed on the spot as he carefully began calculating every course of action he could come up with. Yet every scenario ended up with him dead or seriously maimed, and he'd like to avoid that at all costs if possible. He quite liked living.

"You want to know why I'm here?" Appius inquired.

"Go ahead, enlighten me," the slightly older man prodded.

"To recruit you."

Drax blinked for a moment and tilted his head slightly to the side.

"What, again?" Drax said with a high inflection in his voice.

"Yes, again," Appius said to the Chiss with reassurance. "Taldryan has a group known as the Vornskyr Battalion under contract to us. They are a Mercenary group that are looking to recruit men and women with a very particular set of skills and your name popped up as a potential candidate."

"I'm flattered," the Infiltrator responded with a sarcastic tone. "And I assume this is my way out?"

"Correct," the Mandalorian answered. "I'm not going to lie to you, Drax. I'm going to help you out of this whatever you decide, just for old times sakes. But if you accept my invitation, I at least can give you somewhere to go. A place in Taldryan space."

"Because what's to stop Vizsla from doing something like this again..." Drax reasoned logically. As much as the betrayal stung, he knew it was possible that it

could happen again. Maybe not on this mission, but the next one could possibly be his grave.

"Exactly," Appius said resoundingly.

"I want Talia taken care of. I want her and Drayan transferred from Zsoldos to Chyron safely," the Infiltrator bargained.

"Drayan?" the Mandalorian asked. It was not a name he'd heard before.

"My son, your godson."

The hangar suddenly fell very silent as Appius turned away from the Chiss.

"*Haar'chak*... She was pregnant. I completely forgot..." Appius exclaimed under his breath. The last time he'd seen Drax's wife she was heavily pregnant. That baby must be... a few weeks old now?

"Indeed. Do that for me, and I will join the Vornskyr's," Drax said as he offered out his one organic hand. "I know you Mando's. I know you keep your word, or at least most of you do..."

The Quaestor stared at the open hand before heartedly taking it in his own.

"You have my word. I'll get it sorted," the Mandalorian swore. "This is the way."

Quite literally, this was the way. Both of them ran towards the cargo bay with no resistance in between them and it. Lawrence trailed behind them carefully to ensure it could avoid any confrontation should it inevitably occur. If there was one thing the little astromech was deadly certain of, it was that trouble often followed its two masters wherever they went.

"Right in here, I have a shuttle waiting for..." Appius started speaking but then halted and sighed deeply.

"Something wrong?" Drax inquired to the suddenly defeated body language the Sorcerer shifted too.

"We have company. They've surrounded my ship."

Drax peered round the entrance to the large cargo bay and caught glimpses on what exactly Appius had picked up on. He could see the shuttle The Force user was referring to, black in all its glory surrounded by a platoon of heavily armed Collective soldiers. Drax had to give them credit, they were nothing if not thorough.

"Ok," Appius declared as he cracked his knuckles. "Looks like things are about to get heated."

"Or maybe not," Drax claimed with confidence exuding from his voice. "I have an idea. Give me your lightsabers."

"Excuse me!?" Appius protested. He didn't know what the hell was going through his head but he didn't like the idea of being parted with his weapons. They were meant to be a part of him and all that kark that Farrin made sure was drilled into his brain.

"Trust me. I can get us through this," Drax stated as he held out the palm of his cybernetic hand towards him. Appius didn't know why, but he reluctantly placed both hilts in the Chiss' hand. Despite everything, he did trust him, and Drax was one of the smartest men he knew. No doubt he had some clever and intricate plan up his sleeves.

This plan was frakking terrible!

They were in the thick of it now, and with both hands firmly placed behind his head, there was nothing more the Sorcerer could do but bite his tongue and keep his opinions to himself as the little astromech followed a few feet behind them.

I swear if we get out of this...

"Faster, Mando."

Drax pressed his sidearm into Appius' hip, one of the few exposed areas on his armor and pressed him forward. Why the hell did he keep letting himself get talked into situations like this? Why was he always the prisoner!?

To Drax's credit though, it seemed to be working. He got the occasional glance in their direction but most of the Collective seemed to pay them no mind, at least until they got to the ramp of the shuttle itself.

"Halt," a senior Collective official ordered. "This is an unregistered vessel and is currently awaiting investigation."

"Well, of course it's unregistered. It's for me, I am escorting prisoner section code zero-two-three-eight out of the compound and into the Liberation Front for interrogation."

Appius had to admit, Drax was damn convincing.

"I didn't get any clearance," the officer stated as he glanced up and down the Mandalorian's armor. "What's your issue number?"

"Five-seven-nine. Jasper Garmis, mechanical and systems repair."

"Why the hell would a maintenance man be requested to escort a prisoner?" The officer challenged full of suspicion and an itchy trigger finger.

"Because in case you haven't noticed, we are a little bit short staffed here at the moment. High command just told me to take the guy and get him out of here before he causes any more trouble. If you want, you can take him. I don't want anything to do with this asshole, especially if Vizsla are still around."

That little statement, perfectly articulated among the cargo bay, had the surrounding Collective sweating. All of a sudden, their suspicions turned to ash as they turned away from the responsibility themselves.

"Fine," the official finally said. "Take him and get him out of here."

Without so much as a warning, Drax pushed Appius up the ramp and into the ship as the pair carefully made their way to the cockpit to the sight of a beige pilot droid, blissfully unaware of the dangers around them.

"Master Quaestor, sir..."

"*Firfiek*, Spinky! Shut the hell up and get us off this rock before they catch on and you get us killed!" the Quaestor demanded with a harsh inflection which forces the droid to do as commanded.

Both the Sorcerer and the Infiltrator took their respective seats in the cockpit as the roar of engines lifted the shuttle into the air and out of the Cargo Bay itself. They waited nervously for any kind of resistance. With each beat of their hearts, they expected something, *anything* to happen.

"Excellent," Drax declared as he learnt back into his seat.

"Gotta give you credit, Drax. I didn't think that would honestly work."

The Chiss glanced to the Mandalorian with a slightly irritated scowl on his face. Of course, the plan worked, it was *his* idea!

"Once we get back to Chyron I'll need to head straight to the Taldryan summit. Having the Collective on our doorstep... again... and Vizsla not too far behind them without us knowing is a cause for concern," Appius said.

"Well, I can't speak for Vizsla..." Drax started as he pulled an ignition switch out of his space black Collective uniform, with a distinct *flick* he revealed a bright red button which made the Force user stare at him through his visor. "What? I've been there for several weeks now, Appius, and I've always been a firm believer in a plan B. Do you think I was just sitting there waiting this whole time?"

With a sadistic smirk plastered on his face and without a moment's hesitation further, he pushed the button.

Collective Stronghold Control Bridge

She could do nothing but watch as everything crumbled around her. Everything she'd worked so hard to achieve, clawing her way up the ladder of success was going up in flames and smoke.

Fires ruptured and burst through every corridor and Galway. Debris flew apart as holes burst open into the airless vacuum of space. Bit by bit the compound shattered, splintered and fell. Screams and echoes drowned out every nook and cranny only to be swallowed whole by the fire and flames.

"We need your orders, mam!"

Braxen didn't answer, how could she? She failed. They failed.

"Mam!"

All she could do was stare into what remained of the security cameras as one by one they melted into scrap, as bit by bit the fires crept up to the control bridge.

"SITHSPIT!"

She would die along with the rest of her comrades, and as the room got hot, the hinges to the door melted and the flames engulfed them all, she would get her final wish.

Caelus System Chyron

Drax Callian is a very particular kind of man. On any given day you can find him tinkering with an assortment of gadgets, nick nacks, wires and only the Force knew what else he was doing since no-one else actually gave a damn, or at least that was

the case until he joined the Vornskyr Battalion and now suddenly, he had people inquiring. Especially the little green-skinned Nautolan, Aylin was it? The Tavros member, as well as Zentru'la, his new boss who led both units, were both curious as to his endeavours. Granted the latter was just learning the Chiss' skillset whilst the Nautolan seemed just excited to have someone around with a similar skillset as her own.

The one that constantly caught his attention however, was the white armoured Mandalorian that kept shooting glances at him. She thought he didn't notice but he did, stripes was what she went by in Tavros though Zentru'la kept calling her 'Irr'.

Three days, that's how long he's been a member of the Vornskyr's now, and as the Twi'lek General gave his analysis of their latest training drill Drax found his mind and eyes wandering. The Chyron Space station was nothing much to look at as the large airy hangar could barely keep a shred of heat within it but he didn't mind. Csillia was far from a tropical resort and at least as he drowned out Zentru'la's ramblings it gave him a chance to inspect his surroundings.

Aside from the Tavros and Vornskyr members themselves and the odd engineer passing by to do some repairs, the dull durasteel area was mostly uninhabited which wasn't too much of a surprise, this area was restricted for Taldryan and those hired by Taldryan only. Yet out of the corner of his eyes he spotted a red-plated Mandalorian standing against a large container, arms crossed whilst tapping his finger on his forearm.

Appius, that was the man he was waiting to see.

"You are all dismissed."

The General's final words allowed the large group to disperse to whatever it was they did in their spare time. He immediately rose from the stool he was sat on and turned to approach his old friend when out of the corner of his eye he saw the white-armoured Mandalorian storm past him. He slowed his pace and let her go ahead of him. If she did indeed have some kind of issue with him at least he could get away and avoid any unnecessary confrontation.

Still, he kept his eyes trained on her and he quickly noticed she was heading directly for Appius, just like he was. He didn't want to jump to conclusions, but if she had any issues with the Quaestor too, at least he could deal with it. Better him than me, right?

To his surprise, she wasn't aggressive, nor was she violent. What she did that made him raise his eyes was wrap her arms around the Force user's neck and touch her forehead against his, or at least as best as you could considering they were both wearing those Mandalorian tin cans over their heads. Appius had returned the

embrace and placed his arms around her back, a gesture that did not go unnoticed by the Infiltrator as he began to piece things together.

"Ahem," Drax imitated an obviously fake cough as he approached the pair. "Apologies for disrupting...this... but if you can pull yourselves apart for a moment, I wish to talk to you, Appius."

The white-armoured Mandalorian looked back to him and Drax felt a shiver shoot up and down his spine. He had a distinct feeling she was shooting him a soul piercing glare and part of him was glad he couldn't see for certain.

"Ah, Drax! I'm guessing you've gotten acquainted with Ankira?" Appius asked cheerfully.

"Yes I have, and it seems you told her about me, judging by the way she's been watching me today," Drax said with a hint of derision. "Funny that you didn't tell me about her, Appius."

"Of course, we thought it would be funnier this way," Ankira added further as she pulled herself from Appius' grasp.

"Have you done it?" Drax suddenly demanded as he brushed their little game with him aside and got straight to the point.

"Yes, Drax. Relax. I gave you my word I'd get it sorted and I meant it. She's on a shuttle and she's on her way here now."

Appius intertwined his fingers with Ankira's and beckoned the male Chiss to follow them out of the Taldryan restricted zone. Instantly a new life was breathed into the place as the roar of the crowds moving to and from transports drowned out any potential conversation they could have had for the moment. Drax let his hands in his pockets as people barged past him and tried to make himself as small a target as possible. If there was one thing the tall Chiss was good at, it was turning himself invisible in a crowd. It was nothing more than posture and body language, that's all it was. A simple shift of one's feet and a hunch of one's shoulders did wonders for people's perceptions.

Despite the struggle, the Infiltrator successfully followed the pair of Mandalorians and right into view of a transport shuttle. Green, greasy, grimey, and Drax thought it was a damn miracle the interior lights worked to begin with. The pilot looked about in as bad shape as the shuttle itself. The overweight Human looked like he hadn't showered a day in his life, but Drax didn't care, because when that shuttle door opened his heart skipped a beat with each passing passenger that brushed past him.

Until finally, he saw *her*. Short, blue skin, long black hair, sparkling red eyes with a rucksack attached to her back and a little bundle in her arms, literally. Without a moment's hesitation, Drax launched himself at the woman and embraced her in a tight hug. Suddenly, the weight of the universe itself lifted from his shoulders. She was safe, *they* were safe, they could start over, again.

"Well," Appius said as he squeezed Ankira's hand tighter. "I think that's my good deed for the day done."

"You aren't going to say hello?" the female Mandalorian asked. This was his godson, surely he'd want to take the opportunity to meet him. Yet to her surprise, the Sorcerer casually shook his head.

"They've been through a lot, best leave them to catch up."

That was the reason he gave, though deep down he was nervous about meeting his godson, Draynar. Did he deserve to be his godfather? After everything he'd done? He honestly didn't know, and hell only knew what Talia was going to think of everything.

Just as the pair turned to leave, an unholy loud voice boomed over towards them.

"Appius Wight, you son of a gundark!"

It was Talia herself, and she was storming right towards with determination and vigor in her steps whilst she dragged along her husband like he was an unwilling participant in the endeavour.

"Uh oh..." the Force user said.

"Where the hell have you been! You've had me worried sick! And you've had Drax worried sick too, he won't admit it, but he was!"

"Talia!"

Drax's protests were hushed by the woman as she held up a single finger to silence him.

"No messages, no nothing! So I have to ask you..."

Appius hung onto every word she said, wondering what kind of venom she was about to unleash upon him with a vicious lashing of words as he held on tightly to Ankira's hand for support.

"How have you been, sweetheart? We missed you. You had us worried."

Everyone released a nervous breath as the tension around the group evaporated like boiling water.

"Yes, Talia I'm fine," Appius answered though his eyes were drawn to the small blanketed child in her arm. He was tiny. Much tinier than Appius expected him to be. With deep blue skin, dark hair and sparkling red he looked at first glance like the other Chiss that surrounded him. But he knew better, the small boy looked exactly like a mini version of his father.

"Appius, this is Draynar, your godson. Would you like to hold him?"

He froze, like Hoth itself had taken over him. He couldn't, no, he *shouldn't*. Never in his twenty eight years of life had he ever held a baby, what if he did it wrong? What if he hurt him? Kriffing hell, he'd never forgive himself if he did something wrong with Draynar in his arms.

A sudden nudge in his arm pulled him back to his senses. He glanced towards the very source of the notion and saw Ankira still standing there, her fingers still entwined in his as she motioned for him to go ahead and do it.

He took a deep breath and did his best to ignore the thundering of his heart in his chest and ears. He reached out gingerly and carefully wrapped his arms around the tiny being, not moving an inch until he was completely sure he had hold of him. After that all he saw was red. Tiny, little red eyes that gazed up at him in a mix of bewilderment and curiosity. Appius swallowed the breath he was holding, the ability to speak almost completely lost to him as he stared at the little bundle of life he held in his arms.

"Hello there," Appius finally muttered as if he somehow expected the baby to answer back, much to the amusement of Drax, Ankira and Talia next to him.

-END-

