

Unlikely Alliances

A submission for the fiction competition:

The Unchained Malady: Champions of Evil.

Written and submitted by Appius "Zappius" Wight of Clan Taldryan.

Sepros
Temple of Sorrows
39 ABY

"So, let me get this straight. We have Unchained forces at our very doorstep. War raging across the Orian System. Taldryan and Sadowan forces suffering losses on both sides, and they decide to send only *you* to help us?"

"Is there a problem?" the Mandalorian Juggernaut inquired as he helped oversee the defences being put in place.

"Under normal circumstances, no. But one man an army does not make."

DarkHawk had every right to be concerned. The Unchained had come from out of nowhere to wreak havoc upon his home. They had declared Clan Naga Sadow as nothing more than heathens, disgraces to the ancient Sith Lord they revered so dearly. Attacks occurred all over the Orian System, most notably upon the homeworld's two moons, Sepros Minor and Sepros Major. The attack upon the former had left the many resources and facilities upon the small moon in Unchained hands, whilst the attack on the latter had put the secret underground cloning facilities out of commission.

Shame. They could have been really useful right about now. DarkHawk thought.

The Unchained had every advantage, as well as access to Sepros' forested surface. It not only unnerved, but angered the Sadowan Proconsul that Taldryan would send only *one* man to help. It didn't matter if the man in question was the Ektrosis Quaestor.

"Maybe it doesn't. But I've had a lot of experience fighting them up until now, so I'm the next best thing you've got," Appius' head turned to the left and then to the right as he admired the ancient architecture. For a place aptly named the Temple of Sorrows, he was pleasantly surprised to find the locale wasn't as depressive as a wet rag. The Sadowan palace was beautifully constructed, if not a perfect symbol of the time it was built. Marble arches and walls detailed every corner with the elegance of the ancient building that could be felt with every step. Ancient carvings written in the old Sith language marked every little crevice. It must have taken years and decades of painstaking effort to craft every detail.

Appius' presence in the Clan Naga Sadow headquarters certainly didn't help matters regarding the tension in the room. The Blackguard that clung closely to the Sadowan Proconsul's side were justifiably on edge, likely due to the lone Taldryanite being this close to one of their leaders on their homeworld.

It must have felt like a massive slap to the face. One that stung like a kriffing vornskr bite and did nothing to help interclan relations. Alas, there wasn't much else Clan Taldryan could do. Getting down to Sepros alone was a logistical nightmare. Between the raging battles in space above the planet and the attacks across the Orian System, it was nothing short of pure luck that the Taldryanite managed to touch down in one piece. That's why only Appius was here. Hopefully sending the sole Quaestor Taldryan had would show how serious they were about helping.

It didn't.

"Sir! Unchained forces are advancing on our position! We are in retreat! I repeat! We are retreating!"

The voice of one anonymous soldier blared through the comlink in DarkHawk's hand, which did nothing to ease the tension in the room.

"That doesn't sound good," Appius commented. DarkHawk, being the professional he was, ignored that little quip for the moment and focused on the task at hand.

"Compose yourself, soldier. Give me a sitrep. You know we can't let them get in here!" The Warhost soldiers began preparing their weapons.

"They are being led by a Sith! We...No... NO! AGH!"

Blaster fire sounded from the comlink, followed by the swift humming of a lightsaber. What followed afterwards was nothing more than static that buzzed ominously for all to hear.

DarkHawk gritted his teeth and turned to try and inspire his fellow clansmen.

"Everyone! We will not falter! We are Clan Naga Sadow! Heirs of his glorious Empire! We will not be deterred, and we will not be defeated!"

Mumblings began among the troops and Force users in the main chamber. The Mandalorian Taldryanite feigned a cough, forcing the demonic-looking Proconsul's attention on him.

"If I may make a suggestion?" Appius carefully interjected. "I know this is your operation and all, and that's perfectly fine, I'm just here to help. But I know you want to keep your clanmates safe and minimise losses. Especially when you've lost so many already. So, how about you leave the Sith to me and focus on clearing the rest?"

"I'm not happy with this idea. It sounds to me like you are trying to push us out from attaining glory," DarkHawk responded. Yet, the more he thought about it, the more he realised this could prove to be to their advantage, especially if Appius could prove to be a worthwhile

distraction. If the Taldryanite died, then DarkHawk would succeed where he failed and pick up the scraps.

Conquest is our destiny; we shall not fail.

"Fine. But your life is in your own hands," DarkHawk pointed out.

"I know," Appius responded bluntly. "Besides, if this Sith is anything like Flaq's apprentice, this will be a piece of cake. How bad could it be?"

Darkness fueled his every thought. With each step through the humid, damp, and forested terrain, Salomon Kerkis' need for success pushed him forward and forward.

Peace is a lie.

The monstrous mountain of a man cleaved through wave after wave of Clan Naga Sadowan troops like they were nothing more than insects under his boots.

There is only passion.

They were nothing compared to the might of the Unchained, and the might of his mistress, Lady Krea. The Chagrian would prove it.

Through passion, I gain strength.

Red-armoured Unchained stormtroopers emerged from within the dense forests to support the Sith in his attacks.

Through strength, I gain power.

The dark side coursed through him, making Salomon faster, stronger, and much more than the Sadowan Warhost could deal with on their own.

Through power, I gain victory.

They were dead in seconds. Crimson plasma soared amidst the trees. Shrieks of pain and agony fueled the Sith's senses like sweet music to his ears.

Through victory, my chains are broken.

The Chagrian holstered his weapon as the temple loomed in the distance, the spire ascending gloriously into the Sepros skyline. Contained within at the top was the artifact once owned by Sith Lord Naga Sadow himself. A holocron containing the knowledge of *his* Sith Empire, an artifact of particular importance to his mistress.

Salomon and his small army marched upon the temple entrance. Their footsteps echoed upon the marble stairway as the hulking Chagrian reached the main hall.

The Force shall free me.

The room appeared empty at first glance, but after serving the Unchained for over three decades, the Warlord knew better. His suspicions were confirmed when the Force sounded like a klaxon through his subconscious. Salomon gripped his conversion lightsaber in an outstretched hand, twin crimson-red blades rupturing out of the hilt with a distinct *snap-hiss*.

"OPEN FIRE!"

Blaster fire erupted throughout the Temple of Sorrows as soon as the Clan Naga Sadow Proconsul issued the order. The Juggernaut Warlord pressed a small switch located on the hilt of his lightsaber as the blades began to rotate on their own around the circular ring emitter. Each shot that threatened to hit the Unchained Warlord was either deflected away by the spinning blades, or outright dodged and evaded. Salomon walked at a steady, deliberate pace towards the group like a servant of *Bogan*. The Chagrian's eyes glowed a corrupted yellow, influenced by the dark side of the Force.

The Unchained Sith slowly closed the gap between himself and the Warhost Army. Salomon was ready to commence his slaughter until he felt the niggling of the Force once again warning him of danger, this time from above. The Warlord's eyes darted towards the ceiling as the silhouette of a heavily armoured Mandalorian wielding a saberstaff descending upon him. Kerkis raised his rotating weapon and intercepted the attack. Jade clashed with crimson as it halted the spinning blades in its path.

This would have presented the perfect opportunity for the Sadowan forces to gun the Unchained Sith down where he stood. However, Unchained troops swarmed through the entrance, covering Salomon before they could act. True to form as well as the deal both he and Appius struck, DarkHawk and the Warhost Army engaged with the enemy, leaving Appius and Salomon to their duel.

"So, shall I assume you are one of Flaq's apprentices?" the Mandalorian questioned. "Or shall I..."

The massive monolith of a man that was the Chagrian suddenly shoved Appius back into the path of incoming blaster fire. Thankfully, the Mandalorian's armor resisted the shots, ricocheting them away like pebbles until the Human Juggernaut received covering fire.

"Hey! I was talking!"

The Sith cared very little for Appius' protest. To demonstrate as much, the Chagrian launched his saber towards the Taldryanite arching through the air like a flying scythe. The Human Juggernaut narrowly avoided being decapitated as the deadly weapon flew past him, slicing through two others before returning to the Unchained Warlord's hands.

"That was just rude!" Appius exclaimed.

Salomon marched towards the Taldryanite with lethal purpose. The tendrils of the dark side of the Force poured into his body and Salomon felt power instantly course through him like an enhancing drug. A heartbeat later Kerkis sprinted at Appius with jagged horns leading the charge.

Sithspit!

The Mandalorian activated his jetpack and leapt over the Sith before he could try to impale him. Even with beskar, taking a charge from a raging bull-like sentient was never a good idea, but when has Appius ever been one for good ideas? The Human took the charge head-on to his chestplate, intending to match Salomon's strength with his. Appius' feet dragged across the floor, and he quickly realised how out of the Sith's league he was in terms of raw strength. The Mandalorian activated his jetpack to break Kerkis' hold over him and leapt into the air. Unfortunately, the Mandalorian suddenly felt a large, muscular hand wrap around his ankle before he could gain any distance.

"Oh, that's not good..." the Human worryingly muttered under his breath.

The Mandalorian was subsequently slammed down to the ground chest first with great force, his lightsaber rolling a few feet away from him and out of reach. The impact knocked the air from Appius' lungs, and allowed Soloman to eliminate his mobility. With one hand, the Chagrian yanked the jetpack from Appius' back and tossed it into a small gathering of Sadowan forces. Being as well trained as they were, the Unchained Sith troopers shot the moving target.

BOOM!

The jetpack exploded amidst the Sadowan forces. Shrapnel spread over a small area and lacerated luckless troopers. The fuel ignited in a furious fireball, causing horrid, flaky burns to those caught in the way. Salomon grabbed Appius by his forearm and forced the Mandalorian onto his back. He reached down and removed the Human's helmet, tossing it aside without a care. The Warlord raised his saber above his head and plunged it down with all his strength towards his vulnerable enemy.

The Taldryan Juggernaut went wide-eyed and shifted his head before the lightsaber could leave a hole in his skull. The crimson blade seared into the concrete beside him like it was made of soft dirt, sparking and hissing in the Mandalorian's ear.

Before Appius had his head cleaved off, the Human raised his right hand towards the Chagrian's chest and summoned the power of the dark side to channel it through the tips of his fingers. Sparks of white and blue hate erupted from Appius' hand, striking Salomon from point-blank range. Lightning surged and coursed around the Unchained Sith's body as he recoiled away from the Taldryanite. Every nerve in his body felt like it was on fire, as if thousands of needles repeatedly stabbed every part of him. When the agony ceased a few moments later, that pain became the source of the Chagrian Sith's hate.

Appius rose to his feet and summoned his saber *Ner Ara* back to his hand. He activated the twin blades as sweat dripped from his forehead. That exchange had been too close, and now that he'd lost his jetpack, he was going to have to be much more cautious in his approach.

"So, what now?" Appius declared triumphantly.

Salomon winced, but realised how close he was to one of the troopers under his command. The Chagrian reached out with the Force like a tether, pulling the trooper close to him. The soldier wailed as Salomon wrapped his hand around the man's neck and restrained him on the ground. The Sith focused his entire being on his wounds and burns, several of which healed slowly in front of Appius' eyes.

Cries of death and pain echoed throughout the main hall of the temple. Bodies dropped as both sides suffered losses. Yet, no matter how many Unchained the Sadowans killed, it seemed more just kept coming. Ash and dust kicked up as cracks and dents appeared in the pillars that held the temple's ceilings.

"Congratulations! You had your one chance and you just blew it," Appius declared boldly. "Between all that bulging muscle is nothing more than a weakling feeding on the lives of others for power."

"And hiding in that armor is nothing more than a dead man," Salomon's coarse and gritty voice penetrated through the nearby blaster fire, whilst some of his troopers recoiled in disgust and terror at the Sith's actions.

"You lead through fear, not by example. That's why you won't succeed. That's why you will die right here, right now, by my hands!"

Appius held his saberstaff back in a one-handed grip with his right foot to the rear. the Mandalorian's spare arm was held out in a challenge, and he wiggled his fingers, beckoning the charred Sith to attack him. The Chagrian wasted no more time on small talk and did just that. Salomon closed the gap between them and struck vertically with a powerful, club-like blow. The Human was able to deflect the blow and shift his feet, though had to parry the follow-up attack aimed at his shin. Green and red danced together, and whilst Salomon's sheer strength gave him a physical advantage, Appius kept mobile, shifting the crimson to the sides and deflecting the conversion lightsaber away from him each time Salomon attacked him. The Taldryanite kept his twin blades close to his body to create an impenetrable defence that the Warlord couldn't break through.

However, as well as the Human Juggernaut could defend himself, exploiting any openings was proving problematic. Salomon didn't seem to tire or slow. If anything, Appius was the one being worn down instead. The Taldryanite's heart pounded in his chest and his breathing became harder and more ragged. The Mandalorian needed a different approach, and quickly.

"What's the matter? You started out so well!" Appius taunted, as he narrowly avoided a powerful swing from the Sith's weapon. Salomon didn't respond with words, though the

Warlord increased the pace of his attacks. He brought his weapon down hard upon the Taldryanite, who stepped back out of the way and slapped the blade aside with his own.

"Was that supposed to be a *Falling Avalanche*? It was so bad I almost couldn't tell," Appius mocked Salomon, having recognised the Sith's use of Djem So up to this point.

"You talk too much," Salomon stated bluntly.

With the Unchained Warlord seemingly distracted, Appius used the opportunity to empower himself in the Force. The Mandalorian felt the power of the dark side course through him, increasing the speed at which he moved. Salomon felt the difference instantly and increased the strength in his attacks with his use of the Force to overpower the other Juggernaut.

Unfortunately, Appius was just that little bit faster and parried a horizontal strike aimed at his neck. Salomon overextended, and the Human used this moment to leap over the Sith with sudden mobility most wouldn't expect. However, the Unchained Sith was a man with many years of experience in the art of battle. Salomon focused his power over the Force into the palm of his hand and formed a tight coil of power. Then, when Appius' boots clanged behind the Sith, Salomon slammed his hand into the concrete below. A powerful wave of energy exploded with the Unchained Warlord at the epicenter. The Mandalorian was unable to react and was immediately knocked off his feet. Appius crashed to the floor on his back, completely surprised by the sudden outburst of power.

With hate and anger seething from him, Salomon pounced like a sand panther that smelt blood in the air. Appius raised his saberstaff to defend himself, though Salomon was ready for it, and promptly kicked the hilt out of the Human's hand before he could gain any composure.

"Now you die."

The Sith readied himself to stab the other Juggernaut through his skull, although Salomon hesitated when he felt a familiar ringing at the back of his mind. The silhouette of a winged creature overshadowed both Juggernauts, and the Unchained Sith spun to answer the incoming threat. A pair of large boots planted into the Chagrian Juggernaut's chest, courtesy of DarkHawk himself.

The Sadowan Proconsul swooped in at an opportune moment amidst the chaos. Unfortunately, it didn't have the desired effect. Salomon's body became as hard as durasteel. Unflinching, strong, and sturdy. An iron wall against a feather. It astonished the Sadowan forces around them, considering how strong the Proconsul was in his own right!

DarkHawk recoiled from his attack, gritted his teeth, and brandished his own conversion lightsaber. Red sparks sputtered out of both sides of the hilt as the Shadow raised the hilt above his head and bent his knees. The Sadowan Warlord's eyes pierced through the battlefield and gazed upon the Chagrian.

Usually, Salomon would have been more than happy to accept the challenge. However, Appius used the momentary distraction to pull himself back to his feet, and the Unchained

Sith swung with all his strength towards the Taldryanite. Winded, and with fatigue beginning to set in, the Human Juggernaut felt the Force warn him of the impending strike, but with no lightsaber to defend himself, Appius had no choice but to dig his feet in and bring up his forearms to block the strike.

Most opponents Salomon faced buckled under the sheer might of his physical strength. However, Appius was more alike his opponent than expected. Just like the Chagrian had seconds prior, the Taldryanite called upon the Force to harden himself against the impact. Red clanged against beskar, and Salomon was taken aback by how little impact his attack had against the Mandalorian.

This was the moment DarkHawk was looking for. The Naga Sadow Shadow used the bulking Chagrian's momentary lapse of concentration to attack. DarkHawk risked it all for one swift, ferociously *assured strike*. Salomon spun to face the threat far too late as the Sadowan's lightsaber cleaved through the Chagrian's neck with a violent hiss. Salomon's head dropped to the floor with a heavy thud, followed quickly by the rest of him that fell into a clump.

"STOP!" A thunderous voice boomed over the swarms of blaster fire around them. A single Sith trooper, clad in red stepped out into the middle of the temple of Sorrows hall with his hands raised high above his head. Whatever remained of both the Sadowan Warhost and the Unchained Sith troopers stopped fighting instantly. With the death of their leader, one who cared very little for their well-being, they saw no reason to keep fighting. The lone Sith trooper carefully lowered his weapon to the ground and raised his arms back into the air with all eyes trained on him.

One by one, what remained of Salomon's attack force filed into the temple and threw away their weapons. Appius couldn't help but smile. The Mandalorian was right after all. The Unchained Sith led by fear and with him now dead, the Unchained army's will to fight on withered into dust. The Taldryanite took a deep breath to calm his beating heart and carefully retrieved his lightsaber and helmet.

"Erm... thanks," Appius said sheepishly, stepping next to DarkHawk who either didn't hear the Taldryanite, or simply didn't care. No, the Sadowan Proconsul was more preoccupied with the Unchained force now at his mercy.

"So, what's the plan now? Take them in for interrogation? Learn how their military operates? Discover their strengths and weaknesses?" The Mandalorian asked as he placed his helmet back on his head.

Appius' reasoning was sound, but DarkHawk had a different idea in mind.

"Kill them all."

The Shadow barely finished his sentence before the Warhost Army let rip with a cacophony of blaster fire. Screams erupted among the Unchained as they were quickly executed. A pile of corpses built up in an instant, and the slaughter was all over in moments.

Appius could do nothing but stand there, mouth slightly agape and wide-eyed. DarkHawk then turned to him with a slightly curved smile.

"There. The Unchained are defeated, the holocron is safe. Perhaps I was wrong about you, Taldryanite. You proved more useful than I expected."

They surrendered...

DarkHawk left Appius to stew in his thoughts, and the Mandalorian had to wonder if an alliance with someone so devoid of moral understanding was really in Taldryan's best interest.

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