

## The Bad Man

A fiction submission written by Appius "Zappius" Wight.

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### **Expansionist Outpost**

#### **Dandoran**

#### **39 ABY**

You'd never find a more motley crew of misfits gathered in one place. Members from across the Brotherhood swarmed to either the Principate or the Revenants like a collection of little worker bee's ready to fight and defend their hives. The Mandalorian Force User stood at the back of the tightly cramped room with his arms folded across his chest, trying to remain as inconspicuous as one man could be in a set of bright red Mandalorian armor.

*Frakking hell...* the Taldryan Proconsul thought as he gazed upon the sets of mismatched armors and species from six different clans of the Brotherhood. Zyft Yadar had created quite the following from like-minded individuals. Time would tell if it would be enough.

Arcona, Taldryan, Naga Sadow, Odan-Urr, Scholae Palatinae, and a kark tonne of Vizsla members all squeezed into the room, the latter of which paying very close attention to Appius which uneased the Taldryan Proconsul in a way he went to great lengths not to show. The Mandalorian Force User held firm, very aware of the tense feelings between himself and his former clanmates after he left them so suddenly just over a year ago.

The group co-existed begrudgingly as Essik Lyccane and Von Ricmore went over the intricate details of the plan quickly. In reality, it'd been mostly ten minutes, and the room was captivated by the Gand in particular as he spoke.

After all, Essik Lyccane was a rare breed. The type who fought in the Clone Wars, the Galactic Civil War, served under the New Republic and somehow lived to tell the tale, which was more than could be said for other members of their species. Point is, when the man spoke, people listened, which was the perfect distraction for Appius.

"So in conclusion," Essik stated as he waved his fingers through the blue-hued holoprojection of a ship the Taldryan Proconsul didn't recognize. It was a massive Nebulus-B frigate used to shuttle forces to and from Dandoran itself. "Essik believes the correct course of action is to slice their systems and capture the crew. Failing that, you may have no choice but to kill them. Regardless, that ship must *not* return to Dandoran if we are to be successful in this endeavour. Essik requests volunteers for a strike squad and landing party. Any takers?"

Several hands raised in the air, the brave, and more likely foolhardy pilots and infiltrators amongst the group rose to meet the challenge head-on.

"Wonderful," Essik said. "In that case, all of you follow Essik. He will go over the final details of the plan and you can get ready for departure."

Despite the unusual third-person self-references common to Gand culture, bodies from six separate clans rose and followed the Essik out of the room. Clanging boots faded as a third of the room vanished behind durasteel blast doors.

"And that brings us onto objective number two," Von suddenly interjected. The Skakoan Jedi eagerly tapped the datapad in his hands like it was suddenly his time to shine. The image of a lithe, middle-aged Umbaran appeared from the central holoprojector. She was pale, sporting a mystifying set of cerulean eyes on an otherwise hairless head.

"This is Kalee Reecchi. A high ranking Reaver among the Principate and the leader of their troops on the surface. This right here..." the Skakoan Jedi swiped on his datapad as a heavily fortified Imperial complex burst into view. "Is where the Principate is believed to be setting up their base of operations. From what little intel we could gather from the Bothans, it seems to be mostly those pledged to the *Restorers* that are looking for a fight."

*Why is it always Bothans?* Appius thought to himself.

"With that in mind, we are going to be taking the fight to them," Von finished as members of the Tenexir Expansionists began to murmur between themselves.

"I know, I know. I'm not a fan of that either. In an ideal galaxy, I'd like to do this without excess bloodshed," Von offered a glance in Appius' direction, rubbing his new cybernetic arm tentatively. "*However*, with the Restorers already here and looking for a fight, peaceful negotiations are likely off the table. With that in mind, if we *have* to fight, we might as well turn this to our advantage."

"What's the plan?" inquired Kenath Zoron Ad Vizsla, the newly minted Proconsul of the Mercenary clan spoke up with confidence likely inspired by his position, and the fact he was Vizsla's first Clan titleholder.

"I'm glad you asked!" Von said. "The plan is twofold. First, we have a main attack group attack the Principate facility. They likely have superior numbers, so the surrounding forest must be used to protect us and slowly pick them apart. Secondly..."

The image of Kalee Reecchi reappeared in all its blue-hued glory.

"A small strike force will have to get in behind enemy lines, infiltrate the facility and capture her alive. Given how important she is, we can use her as leverage to stop the fighting and initiate peace talks with the Principate. Appius has already very kindly volunteered to lead that group."

The room went eerily silent. The kind of quiet where a credit being dropped sounded like thunder booming in everyone's ears. One Vizsla Mandalorian shot to his feet, hurled a series of foul words and expletives in *Mando'a* only half the room could understand before pointing at the crimson armoured man.

"What in the hell are you thinking letting *him* be in charge!?" the Vizsla Mando finally blurted out for all to hear. "He's nothing but a traitor! I heard he pledged to the Restorers before he turned and came here!"

"And?" Appius answered the retort calmly, much more calmly than anyone would have expected from him, mostly because he knew that reaction would irritate his fellow Mandalorian the most. "I made my first choice, realized it wasn't the right one and left. I'm here now aren't I?"

"Here to turn your back on us just like you did to Vizsla! You are nothing but traitorous scum!" Kanal called back as all eyes shifted between the two men.

"His choices were his to make and aren't for you to judge," Rian Taldrya, the former Consul of Taldryan interjected on Appius' behalf.

"Easy for you to say, Taldryan were the ones who benefitted from his transfer," this time, it was former Vizsla Proconsul Val Cole who spoke up with a mischievous smirk on his face, clearly looking to add fuel to the fire.

"Enough!"

The loud, commanding voice of a muscularly built Rattataki boomed over the proceedings before they became too heated. His name was Korvis, the new Consul of Clan Vizsla.

"We have been hired to do a job, and do the job we will. If the plan involves Appius going in one direction and us in another, then so be it. Put your personal grievances aside and do what you've been paid to do, what the creed demands you do. Credits, not words. This is the way."

"This is the way," a handful of Mandalorians repeated back as members of the other five clans in the room glanced back at one another. Kanal gingerly returned to his seat after being scolded and defeated, much to the relief of Von who finally released the breath he didn't realize he was holding.

"Good. Now that's settled we can begin preparations. We will strike in approximately two hours from now and get the jump on the Principate before they discover our presence. Be ready everyone, and may the Force be with you," the Skakoan Jedi finished as the various discounts, Clan members and loyalties split into different sections of the outpost to prepare for the upcoming fight.

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**Private Quarters**  
**Expansionist Outpost**  
**39 ABY**

"I don't like it. Why should you be fighting for something outside of Taldryan? Especially when it takes you so far out of the Caelus System and away from us."

A woman with red eyes, blue skin and short, dark hair spoke to Appius from the holoprojector in the room, which thankfully, was secluded away from every other part of the outpost. The Chiss woman wore a long fitting shirt and basic, baggy clothing and quite frankly, it looked like she hadn't been clothes shopping once in her entire life. It didn't matter to Appius. The Mandalorian Force user was just happy to see her face again, despite it being the tenth time he'd heard this particular lecture from her.

"I know, Ankira, I know. I'm just going to treat this like any other contract. Go in, do the job, get out and come home. I'll be back before long. I promise," Appius reassured as he went over the electronics in his helmet as he held it in his hands. "Do me a favour? Say something in *Mando'a*."

"I've got a better idea," Ankira said with a cheeky smile before she vanished out of view. The Taldryan Proconsul waited eagerly, not able to stop the smile that appeared on his face. When the Chiss Mandalorian returned moments later, she was holding a small Pantoran girl in her arms. She was no older than three years old and sported short, lavender hair which stretched down to her neck.

"Daddy!" the small girl exclaimed with an excitement that made Appius' heart skip a beat in the best way possible. The small girl's little yellow eyes sparkled in a way that reminded the Juggernaut of twin stars that shone in the distance.

"Hey, sweetie! How are you? Are you being a good girl for your *buir*?" the Mandalorian Force User asked.

"She has. Haven't you, Shi'Kar?" Ankira answered for the little girl as the Pantoran excitedly nodded her head.

"I miss you, daddy."

Those were four little words that melted the Taldryan Proconsul at his core. Appius' eyes softened and he let out an involuntary sigh. He didn't want to be away from them. In fact, it was the very last thing he wanted to do. The Mandalorian's heart twisted into a knot in his chest as Appius swallowed the lump that formed in his throat.

*Frakking blast it all. Why is there always someone that needs a foot up their ass?* Appius cursed to himself. His life felt like an endless cycle of fight, survive, and get paid, but now he had a reason to be something better, something more with his life and now he had to be away from them? Every second the Mandalorian was apart from his new family hurt like his insides were being clawed by a krayt dragon. Yet, he did this for them. That's what he had to keep telling himself. Frakk everyone else, this was for Ankira and Shi'Kar.

"I miss you too, sweetheart," the Force Disciple answered back to his daughter. *Their* daughter. Their Foundling daughter. Words he never thought would enter his mind.

*When did I become so responsible?* The Proconsul mused with a warm smile.

"Do you want to help daddy?" Appius asked excitedly.

"Yeah!" the young girl confirmed with as much enthusiasm as her little body could muster. The Mandalorian Force User placed the helmet on his head and activated the electronics within.

"Show daddy how much *Mando'a* you've learned," the Force Disciple encouraged.

"*S-su'cuy... wooba...*"

"*Wooba soosa*," Ankira reminded her gently.

"*Su'cuy, wooba soosa... Shi'Kar!*"

The young girl stretched her arms out wide like it was the greatest triumph ever in the galaxy. It was a gesture that made the two adults chuckle, though Appius was distracted by the translation that appeared on his H.U.D.

*Hello, my name is yellow-star.*

"Perfect! Well done, Shi'Kar. You are so clever!" Appius praised, causing the young girl to beam with pride at his words. As soon as the young Pantoran became their Foundling, they began teaching her the way of their culture and people, which included *Mando'a*.

"Ok, mummy needs help with tidying up. Say goodbye to daddy," the Chiss Mandalorian instructed.

"Bye daddy," Shi'Kar waved, a gesture Appius repeated back at her. "You get the bad man?"

"Daddy will get the bad man," Appius reassured. Explaining to a three-year-old what they did was unbelievably difficult. How else were they going to explain to a three-year-old that what they did upon occasion was hunt scum down across the galaxy? Potentially killing them in the process? No, this was just easier. Shi'Kar had been through enough already. The young Pantoran could find out more when she was old enough to choose for herself to stay a Mandalorian or not.

Ankira lowered the Foundling out of sight of the holoprojector. Tiny little footsteps were heard stomping out of the room, and when Appius was sure they were alone, he spoke again.

"You did that just to make me feel guilty, didn't you?"

Ankira answered this accusation with a faint smile and a single wink. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other sheepishly which made Appius take special notice of her abdomen. You wouldn't know it was there if you didn't know what to look for. The slightest bump outlined her stomach, just over two months and he still reeled from when they found out they were having a baby. Imagine that, Appius, a father of all things. A mixture of feelings

rushed through him like a podracer on a racetrack. Fear, excitement, joy, fear, love, fear again, but above all else, a need to protect what he now had, what he had suffered through. The loss, misery and self-loathing he had endured in order to rebuild a sense of worth.

Hell only knew what his now extinct Mandalorian Clan would think of it, and the Force User was hell-bent on making sure it never happen again, especially from some wannabe Imperial scum that wanted to call themselves a Principate. Appius almost made a big mistake joining them, and he was glad he came to his senses at the last possible moment. Even if it took Ankira to do it.

The Taldryan Mandalorian placed his gloved hand over the Chiss' gut, trying to feel her and the bump, but failing miserably when his hand slipped through the projection. Disappointed, Appius' shoulders sagged as his head hung low. He was about to move his hand when Ankira placed both of hers on top of his, or at least, that would have been the case if they were there in person. The Chiss' ruby eyes latched onto the Mandalorian's Force User's visor like she could see the longing face lingering behind it.

*"Ni kar'taylir darasuum gar. Oya."*

The holoprojection faded from view as the call ended. Appius understood what she had said, but the message displayed itself in his H.U.D, clear as day for the Proconsul to see.

*I love you. Stay alive.*

The words vanished and Appius was left alone and cold. A familiar companion, but not a welcome one. The Mandalorian took a deep breath and steeled himself, sensing a presence in the Force he recognised so very well on the other side of the door. The Taldryanite slammed the palm of his hand on the terminal, causing the door to open with a quick and sudden swoosh.

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## **Expansionist Outpost**

### **Dandoran**

#### **39 ABY**

"Von," Appius said to the towering Skakoan on the other side of the doorway.

"Appius," the Jedi responded as he looked down upon him.

An awkward silence formed between the two men with the Mandalorian focusing on the cybernetic left arm that Von folded in front of his chest.

"Nice arm," Appius off-handedly commented. "Good to see you got it replaced. High-five?"

The Mandalorian's attempt to ease the situation between the two men was met with a blank stare not just from the Skakoan, but from nearby Expansionist members as they passed in the hallway.

"Thanks," Von retorted, ignoring that particular gesture as Appius lowered his hand. "It's not quite the same as the original, but you'd know about that, wouldn't you?"

"What happened on Crait was your own fault," Appius answered back, though he couldn't stop the guilt from rising in him like a numbing chill. "So, is that what this is? You are after revenge? I don't sense the dark side in you."

The last time both Von and Appius stood face to face, the Skakoan attempted to capture Appius in an ironic twist of fate which resulted in the Jedi losing his arm.

"It figures you could sense the change, Appius. Yes, change. That is what this is. You see, after you crippled me and left me for dead in a pit of salt I was alone and afraid. I thought the dark side brought me power and it only brought me more pain. I was given a prosthetic, became the new leader of Battleteam Deathwatch and seethed in rage. Day after day I hoped the pain would disappear, but it didn't. It *didn't* Appius. Every day I closed my eyes all I could see was our fight playing in my head over and over again like a holoreel that played my worst memories. The searing pain you caused me, the loss of my arm... it haunted me when I slept. I couldn't take it anymore. No pain was worth it and... and I let go. All of it. The darkness vanished. I hated you, Appius. I wanted nothing more than revenge and to make you suffer, but in a way, I suppose I should thank you. Yes, I lost my arm, but in the process, I overcame the dark for the first time and finally saw the light. I moved past my pain, and I learned to forgive."

Appius stood stunned, perplexed, and confused like a porg staring into a ship's headlights. The Proconsul answered the only way he could think of.

"You're... welcome?"

The Skakoan smiled behind his pressure suit, secretly bemused at his old friend's reaction. Who knows? Maybe they could both move past what happened if they put the effort into it. Appius certainly wanted to, though it would be much easier said than done.

"Your team is ready for you if you'd like to follow me," Von said as he began to pace down the hallway. The Taldryanite followed suit, silently thinking this was going to be one of another one of *those* days.

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**Expansionist Outpost**  
**Outdoor Prep Space**  
**39 ABY**

Pirates.

That's what they were, or at least, that's what most conceived them to be. The truth of the matter was they were just a group of men and women that wanted to create a better life for

themselves. Sure, some of them were legit criminals. Thieves, smugglers and even murderers existed among their ranks, but it wasn't something that many members of the Brotherhood hadn't done before. Some were even encouraged.

*Those skillsets are going to be very useful right now.* Appius thought as he observed the Expansionists forces prep themselves for battle.

Many could be forgiven for thinking the area was just thrown together at the last possible second without a thought to organisation or practicality, and to be fair, they'd be right. Crate upon crate was stacked and scattered around haphazardly with little care. What military the Expansionist faction managed to collect together handed out weapons to those who didn't have any of their own. A soft breeze rolled through the forest as the stench of burning oils, electronics and plasma lingered in the air. Sparks hissed from old worn power cables like threatening fireflies as Von cautiously led the way around them. Eventually, the pair of Force User's came across a stretch of dirt that was hand carved for Expansionist use. It was abandoned and oddly silent besides the thirty-eight-metre long Imperial landing craft taken from one of the Severian Principate's many fleets.

Outside stood a small group of three. Each a different species, size and origin from the other. The first was a young, lithe and short Human female who sported a mess of brown hair tied into a pixie bob. The second was a literal giant compared to her. A Zeltron stood beside her, over seven feet tall wearing an exotic outfit that exposed his bare midriff. The last was one that Appius recognized. She was a Nautolan with green coloured skin and big, bright red eyes, and as soon as she saw Appius approach, a big, beady mischievous, open-mouthed smile curved onto her face.

"Zappy!!!" the Nautolan exclaimed joyfully as she threw herself at Appius with as much momentum as she could muster, wrapping her arms around his heavily armored frame. She slammed into him like a runaway tauntaun, and the Juggernaut staggered back a couple of paces to stop himself from falling over.

"Hi, Aylin!" Appius responded, returning the hug with a tight squeeze before letting her go. "Didn't know you were here."

"Yeah, I joined at the last second," Aylin explained. "Someone's got to keep an eye on you. Ankira will go mad if it isn't me."

Aylin shot the Mandalorian her trademark cheeky smile. Somehow, having a familiar presence on the team made the Taldryan Proconsul feel better about this current situation.

"Seems you two already know each other!" the young Human female stepped forward, smiling brightly and containing enough energy that she looked like she could contend with Aylin for the 'Galaxy's most bubbly person' award. "What's up! I'm Zuzza from Arcona, and I'm really, really, really, really, REALLY looking forward to working with you guys."

By some miracle, the smile on the Arconan's mouth became wider, exposing her teeth behind it. A bead of sweat formed on Appius' brow, which was thankfully concealed by his helmet.



"I like her," Aylin commented, giving Zuza a playful smirk.

*Oh great.* Appius thought sarcastically. *Now there's two of them.*

"And what about you?" The Taldryanite changed the subject and pointed to the lavishly dressed Zeltron.

"Name's Sage. Maybe you've heard of me?" the towering being said with an overly cocky tone to his voice as he flexed the muscles in his arms.

"I have indeed," Appius replied. Sage "The Boss" Cormac was a wanted man in several systems for the deaths of many innocents. Appius' heart beat hard in his chest as his fingers twitched at his sides. The prospect of easy credits for his family was certainly a tempting one.

*Time and a place, Appius. You have a job to do.* The Mandalorian reminded himself. He was hired to help the Expansionists first, so that's what he was going to do.

Though the fact that the *Mandalorian* of all things had heard of the Zeltron didn't seem to deter the Sage from speaking any further it encouraged him.

"Good. I once beat four men blindfolded with one arm tied behind my back. I'm not just a boss, I'm *the* boss," Sage stopped his gloating for a moment and glanced up and down at Appius armor. "I like the red, but if ya ask me, Mandalorians ain't nothing but cowards."

The air around the group suddenly got heavy. Aylin observed Appius and took a step back. Von, who had remained silent at this point, shuddered when he felt the dark energy surge from Appius.

"What did you just say?" The Mandalorian spoke quietly, but the anger was palpable.

"Mando's ain't nothing but cowards," Sage repeated confidently. "The Boss needs no armor to look good or hit things really hard."

"That won't make much of a difference when I'm choking the life out of you," Appius responded, heat rising within his soul to the surface like a fire being stoked.

"Oh really?" the Zeltron said, puffing out his chest and standing over the Mandalorian. Sage pointed a finger at himself before egging the Mandalorian on.

"Go ahead, take the first swing. I dare you, but just remember... you swing on 'The Boss'... You better not miss," Sage challenged arrogantly.

That's when Von felt it, a shift in his fellow Force user that made him cry out before the Juggernaut could answer the challenge.

"Appius, don't!"

Yet, the Taldryan Proconsul was about to reach out with the Force and execute Sage right then and there in the most excruciatingly painful way he could think of. Thankfully, Appius stopped himself when Zuza stepped in between himself and the Zeltron.

"Guys, seriously. That's enough, ok?" the young woman stated calmly. She grabbed hold of Sage's hand and squeezed into the tall man's palm, causing the Zeltron to release a long, hard sigh.

"Sorry, Zuza. Didn't mean to... ya know, I got carried away," Sage apologized sheepishly and rubbed the back of his head, getting a warm, comforting smile from Zuza in return.

"I *really* like her," Aylin repeated as she stood by Appius' side again. The Jedi Skakoan swallowed the lump in his throat and thanked the Force things didn't escalate much further.

"So, do we have a plan?" Appius asked, changing the subject.

"Why, yes! Yes we do!" Von declared. "And here's what it is..."

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**Dandoran Forest**  
**Principate Outpost Outskirts**  
**39 ABY**

The wind waved through the trees with a gentle flapping of leaves and foliage. Plants and twigs crunched under their boots as they continued their evening patrol. It was routine, and oh so frightfully dull.

The young Principate soldier couldn't help but release her sixth sigh in the last five minutes. When the Restorer Block called out for able-bodied men and women to bring peace, order, and justice to the citizens of the Principate.

*Pirate scum, the lot of them.*

Kalee Reecchi was right. She always was. Damn it all to kriffing hell, she was lucky to be serving under such a competent leader. The young woman just expected there to be a lot more pirate slaying in the name of the Principate.

"Amber, Keep up. You're dawdling again."

The Kiffar woman snapped to attention and quickly paced to keep up with the rest of her platoon. A patrol was a standard part of their duties, but that didn't mean it was an enjoyable one.

*Mom, dad. I'll make you proud.* Amber Stone made the oath to herself. Damn it all, she missed them so much. Her parents were just two of many who became victims of pirate raids in Principate space following the prison break at Tenexir. She missed them. Not a day

went by when she didn't think of them. Their warm smiles, their loving embraces, and the blood on her hands when she held their lifeless, motionless bodies in her arms.

*Expansionist, Retributionist, it doesn't matter. They are all the same.*

The platoon ground to a halt when the Commander heard a twig snap close by. His fist raised into the air as the group prepped their rifles for any sign of danger.

*Thud, thud, thud, thud.*

Amber's heart beat like drums in her ears. The Kiffar gripped her BlasTech rifle as her finger tentatively hovered over the trigger. Nothing happened for a few seconds until the young woman released the breath she was holding.

A near-invisible grappling line shot out from between a couple of trees and wrapped itself around the Commander's legs, pulling him onto his back and dragging him screaming out of sight.

"Commander!" Amber called out. The moment her voice was heard, blaster fire erupted from every direction around them. Out of the corner of her eye, she made out the distinct marks of the Tenexir Revenants, as well as members of the Brotherhood. Using her advanced training with the Principate, Amber and a couple of her squadmates leapt behind a set of large stone boulders that covered them for the moment.

"We are under attack! I repeat! We are under attack! The Revenants are here! Requesting immediate backup!"

Amber barked the order into her communicator and only received mumblings back, which she couldn't hear over the blaster fire that soared above her head. Her comrades, seeing no other alternative, began to shoot back in random directions. One lifted his head above the rock only to be hit like a womp rat on Tatooine. The body curled over in a slump on the ground beside her, whilst the horrified image of her last teammate freaked out.

"To hell with this!" He screamed. Amber was about to scream at him to not do it, but it was already too late. The Principate soldier made it a few metres before being gunned down in his prime.

"Sithspit!" Amber cried, tears streaming down her face. She was all alone again. Everyone was dead around her again, just like when her parents were massacred. Out of desperation, the young woman threw a smoke grenade on the ground below her which ruptured into a cloud of dark, thick fog. Amber launched herself off the ground and ran. She didn't know where, and it honestly didn't matter. She just wanted to be anywhere but here. Unfortunately, all sights locked onto her when she emerged from the smoke. The Kiffar successfully dodged two blaster bolts before a third collided into her thigh. Amber crashed into the forest dirt, clutching at her leg and spitting a string of obscenities in a language not many would understand. Not that it mattered, she was silenced when the boot of a heavily armoured Vizsla Mandalorian pressed down on her chest. A Westar 35 blaster pointed between her eyes, and Amber silently whimpered as she prepared to meet her maker.

## ***Snap-Hiss!***

A red light swooshed over her and sliced through the Mandalorian's head at his neck. The body dropped to the ground with a hard thud as Amber observed a barely dressed, but domineering woman stood above her.

Selikhah Roh, former Herald of the Brotherhood and current Consul of Clan Plagueis had arrived on the scene. She wasn't alone either. Men and women from various Clan's across the Brotherhood flooded the area, pledged to the Restorer's and determined to slaughter every damn pirate in a ten-mile radius.

"Form a retreat!" Korvis, the Vizsla Consul declared as the Expansionist's forces began to withdraw further into the forest, forcing the Restorer's, their troops, and those pledged to them chased after them, drawing them further and further away from their makeshift headquarters.

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## **Expansionist Outpost Dandoran 39 ABY**

"That's our signal, let's go!"

Appius gave the order and tapped Aylin gently on her shoulder. The Nautolan gave a hearty salute back as the Imperial landing craft shuddered harshly. The engines roared and lifted the vessel into the air, kicking up a myriad of dirt and forest in its wake.

The shuttle soared over the trees, and the five living beings within the shuttle got a bird's eye view of the carnage below.

"I hope they will be ok..." Zuza said, her usual, cheery smile replaced with a solemn, almost heartbroken look.

"They will," Sage reassured positively, if only to make her feel better.

"They are trained fighters and warriors. They know what they are doing," this time it was Appius' who chimed in.

"This is the most effective strategy to maximize our success. The sooner we can capture Kalee Reecchi, the sooner we can negotiate a stalemate from this battle and escape Dandoran."

Von's reasoning was sound, but that didn't make the situation any easier on Zuza's psyche. The idea of using the Expansionists forces as a distraction did not sit well in their stomachs, but the Skakoan was confident this was the most efficient course of action. The faster the

Umbaran was captured, the faster safety could be assured. Zuza just had to keep reminding herself that.

The rest of the journey was made in silence save for the battle that raged below them amongst the forest. As they approached the old, previously abandoned Imperial depot, Aylin brought the ship to a slow descent in a makeshift, outdoor hangar. As soon as the ship touched ground, a small group of Principate soldiers prepped their blasters by the shuttle's ramp as it lowered.

Suddenly, the group of soldiers were perplexed by the sight of an overly large Zeltron that begrudgingly paced down the ramp. A set of handcuffs in front tied his hands together, indicating the pink-skinned man's status as a prisoner. What followed after was a heavily armored Mandalorian, a Human female with a blaster rifle strapped to her side, and what appeared to be a Skakoan Jedi of all things. A lithe, green-skinned Nautolan followed at the rear, staying clear out of potential danger should it occur.

"Move faster!" the Mandalorian ordered, kicking the Zeltron in his spine and forcing him forward. Sage glanced back with visible anger in his eyes.

"Alright, state your name and... oh, it's you, Appius."

An auburn-haired woman stepped forward, blaster rifle firmly gripped in her hands. Yet, her bloodshot eyes were a sign of the lack of sleep the Captain had been subjected to in recent times.

"Hello, Crysenia. Good to see you as always," Appius responded to his fellow Taldryanite.

"What the hell is *this*?" Crysenia questioned as she pointed to the Zeltron kneeling in front of her.

"This one right here is pledged to the Retributionists," Appius explained, lying through his teeth and hoping the Captain bought it. "I'm sure Kalee would be more than happy to probe his mind."

"Uh-huh," Crysenia said. She may have been exhausted, fatigued, and craving more caff-stim than a regular Human being should normally consume, but she wasn't stupid.

She most certainly wasn't blind either.

"And them?" the auburn-haired woman questioned as he pointed to the gang of various species behind the Mandalorian.

"My crew," Appius answered.

"Since when did you have a crew!?" Crysenia retorted.

"Since... since this mission?"

Appius stammered his words, and the Mandalorian could sense the trepidation in his companions. Especially Von, who held his hand over his lightsaber, ready to defend them if the need arose.

"Ugh, whatever. I'll take you to Kalee, just make sure they don't cause any trouble."

The group released the breaths they didn't realize they were holding and followed Crysenia into the Imperial depot. The plan seemed to be working. The place was nearly abandoned save for the odd handful of Restorer troops that patrolled the grey durasteel hallways. It didn't take much time before the group reached the command centre at the heart of the complex.

"Wait here," Crysenia instructed outside a set of heavy blast doors. She stepped forward, placed the palm of her right hand on the scanner as it analyzed her unique signature. The light turned green as four layers of thick steel opened into a near-empty control room.

"Follow me," the Captain ordered. Appius gave a hard kick to Sage's spine to prompt him forward. The Zeltron begrudgingly entered first, a world of technology belonging to the Principate flashed in a series of lights that nearly all the group were perplexed at what they did.

Nearly...

Aylin glanced around the room and whistled to herself, admiring the setup.

"Nice," Aylin commented nonchalantly, but quietly, garnering the attention of Appius who gave her a nod. The Nautolan responded with a thumbs up before lagging behind the group and using the opportunity to slip away and take a *closer* look.

The rest of the group arrived in the centre of the room, where she stood flanked by seven heavily armed mercenaries was the woman they were searching for.

She was short, and with a complexion so pale it looked like she barely ever felt natural sunlight. Her hairless head wore a headset comlink which she used to communicate with Restorer forces across all of Dandoran. The Umbaran wore a distinct security officer armor, sans helmet, which displayed her bland face, yet beautifully mystically eyes perfectly.

"Kalee," Appius greeted cautiously.

"Hello, my dear bounty hunter. To what do I owe the pleasure?" Kalee returned the greeting with a soft tone to her voice, yet it failed to mask the intellectual glint behind them. The Umbaran was already five steps ahead in a game of sabacc no one else realized they were playing.

Appius forced Sage in front of her, causing the Umbaran to trace the Zeltron's finely sculpted body with her eyes from the top of his blue-shaded hair to the tips of his toes. Zuza's fingers on her blaster traced over the trigger, biting her lip nervously and ready to defend her friend in a heartbeat if she needed to.

"This one here is allied with the Retributionists. Caught him with a patrol out in the forests here on Dandoran."

The lie was finely scripted by Von himself, and given to the Force Disciple like he was an actor speaking his lines. Appius thanked the Force he was wearing his visor as he spoke each word. A bead of sweat formed on the Mandalorian's brow. The Taldryan Proconsul was many things, but a good liar was not one of them.

"I have a question I want to ask," Kalee demanded in a soft tone.

"Of course," Appius responded confidently despite his heart thundering in his chest as fast as a runaway landspeeder.

"Do you think I'm that stupid?"

Suddenly, that feeling in the pit of the Mandalorian's chest dropped like a sack of credits into his gut. A chill went up and down Appius' spine, as well as the rest of his comrades. A collection of blaster weaponry pointed at them in an instant without the look on Kalee's face changing even slightly.

"Lower your weapons or the Zeltron dies," the Umbaran ordered without a shred of mercy or remorse. Zuza dropped her blaster rifle to the ground without a second thought. Von lowered his lightsabers and Appius, begrudgingly, handed over his saberstaff to Kalee personally, who clipped it to her waist. Aylin was caught in the act of trying to slice into the computer terminal and was currently pinned against said terminal by two troopers that pressed their blasters into her spine. Before Appius could try to protest, Kalee clicked her fingers together as the speakers in the room buzzed to life.

*"Good. Now that's settled we can begin preparations. We will strike in approximately two hours from now and get the jump on the Principate before they discover our presence. Be ready everyone, and may the Force be with you."*

Von's voice echoed throughout the room.

"Wait... isn't that?" Zuza asked.

"From our plan meeting, yes," Von answered, clenching his fists at his sides.

*"I don't like it. Why should you be fighting for something outside of Taldryan? Especially when it takes you so far out of the Caelus System and away from us."*

Ankira's voice boomed throughout the room, causing Appius to shudder involuntarily.

*"Bye daddy. You get the bad man?"*

A small girl's voice resonated and bounced off of every wall.

*"Daddy will get the bad man."*

Then finally, Appius' voice resonated off each wall.

"Going to get the bad man, are you?" Kalee questioned confidently.

"You leave them out of this," The Mandalorian growled lowly.

"Or what?" Kalee threatened. "In case you haven't already realized, your armor has a bug planted in it. Captain Orainn informed me you've had a habit of switching allegiances in the past, so I made sure to capitalise if you did it again. For a Mandalorian, loyalty doesn't mean very much to you. Does it, Appius?" The Umbaran twisted her words, playing the Taldryan Proconsul's emotions like he was a marionette and she the puppet master. "Soon the Tenexir Revenants will be exterminated. The attack on the Liparus will fail, the Expansionists will be no more, and we will be one step closer to peace, security, and justice in the galaxy. Rid of slaver and pirate scum."

"You're wrong!" Zuza exclaimed in protest, drawing all eyes onto her. "The Expansionists want nothing more than to create a space for themselves! They want peace with the Principate!"

Kalee didn't respond with words, but approached Zuza as her boots tapped lightly against the durasteel floor. She stood face to face with the younger woman before she struck the Human as hard as she could with the back of her right hand. Zuza recoiled, the stinging sensation caused water to form in her eyes as her cheek reddened.

"Peace by capturing me and using me as a bargaining chip? I don't think so. I'd rather die," the Director seethed. "Captain Orainn, what do we think is the best course of action for traitors?"

Sage stared wide-eyed at Zuza as a single tear began to stream down her cheek. The Zeltron's pupils dilated as his muscles tensed. Anger filled his veins, he gritted his teeth and quickly rose to his feet before unleashing a roar that could split open hell itself. Every soul in the room watched as Sage ripped himself out of his cufflinks with nothing more than his bare strength. 'The Boss' launched himself in Kalee's direction just as the troopers beside her raised their blasters, ready to gun him down like the bantha fodder they believed him to be.

Darkness, hate, rage, and pain. These were just a few of the feelings that inhabited Appius' core. He drove those emotions to the tips of his fingers as streaks of white and blue hissed towards the very troopers about to shoot Sage. The tendrils of dark side energy struck the first trooper in his chest before it split and struck the second a few feet away. They crumpled to the ground a few seconds later a charred, smoking mess. This gave Sage a clean runway straight towards Kalee.

Meanwhile, Von took the opportunity amidst the chaos to summon his lightsabers to his hands with the Force. The Jedi countered the series of red plasma that was shot at him, redirecting it back to his assailants and ending their lives before they could threaten himself



or his team. The Jedi then launched himself at the troopers that surrounded Aylin and sliced cleanly through their midsections, saving the green-skinned woman before they could pull the trigger. Now free, Aylin grasped hold of a cylindrical object in her hand and lobbed it towards the last three Principate soldiers in the room. The object bounced towards them and ruptured in an explosion that wrecked the nearby terminals and destroyed the soldiers' legs. Sparks jittered out of the computers as a fire began to engulf the electronics.

Crysenia primed her sidearm, and with the Zeltron inches away from his target, the Loyalist was ready to do whatever it took for law and order.

***PEW!***

A bolt of plasma rang out, not from the Captain's weapon, but Zuza's. The Arconan retrieved her weapon and saved her friend before it was too late. The shot crashed into Crysenia's kneecap, causing the Ace to keel over, clutching her leg in pain.

Sage grasped hold of Kalee by her throat, lifting the woman off her feet whilst she choked for air. The Zeltron couldn't let go, he *refused* to let her go until every ounce of life was squeezed out of her. The Umbaran struggled in his grasp, kicking at his chest in futility before she lost the strength to any more.

"Sage, drop her. We need her alive," Appius ordered now that the fighting had ceased.

The hate-filled Zeltron ignored him.

"Sage, I said drop her!" Appius said as he prepared to intervene. Electricity danced between his fingertips as he readied to shock the blue-haired man like he was an animal that needed to be tamed. Thankfully, he didn't need to.

"Sage," Zuza voiced gently, placing one hand on his bicep. "Please, it's ok. I'm ok. You can stop now."

Kalee's eyes drifted into the back of her skull as Sage dropped the unconscious woman to the ground. The back of the Umbaran's head hit the floor, but luckily, she lived. The giant Zeltron wrapped his arms around Zuza and held her tight for fear she would fly away if he let go.

"We need to get out of here, they may know we are here. I... wrecked their communication systems..." Aylin explained sheepishly as she pointed over to the burning wreckage behind them.

"They'll know something's up. We better move," Von agreed.

The Taldryan Proconsul stretched his right hand out towards the prone Umbaran's body. The Juggernaut's saberstaff wobbled on her hip before it flew through the air. Appius clutched it and placed it back on his waist before giving the Umbaran a sideways glance. Sage was about to pick up Kalee's body until it suddenly began to levitate in the air and moved right onto Appius' shoulder.

"You've done enough damage," the Mandalorian scolded as he wrapped his arms around the Umbaran's body to secure her on his shoulder.

"Oh yeah!?" Sage threatened as he squared up to Appius. "And what are you going to do about it?"

"Guys, please," Zuza pleaded, but the group was drawn to a shuffling that could be heard behind them.

"Y-you," Crysenia gasped and wheezed. "You won't get away with this. None of you will! Especially you, Appius!"

"What should we do with her?" The Skakoan asked. It took Appius a moment to answer, but when it did, it was not the answer the Jedi expected to hear.

"Sage. You want to carry someone? There you go. We are bringing her with us," the Force Disciple said. Aylin, the one who knew him best out of the group, knew the intent behind the order. Despite what she may have pledged, and despite being on opposite sides, Crysenia was still a Taldryanite. That meant no matter what, Appius had a sense of duty to her well-being, whether he liked it or not.

"Appius..." the Nautolan said softly. Compared to how the Mandalorian was a year ago, he'd changed for the better in Aylin's eyes. Ankira was more of a positive influence than the Chiss realised, and even Von spotted shades of the old Appius.

"She'll get medical attention when we escape and she can be interrogated for further information. Right now, we need to complete our mission and get out of here," Appius reasoned.

"Go to hell!" Crysenia cried out as the Zeltron scooped up the auburn-haired woman in his arms. She tried to resist, though Sage was much too powerful, and the Captain was far too injured.

"We will if we don't get out of here right now!" Von urged. The group wasted no more time and ran towards the ship. Thankfully, the conflict between the Restorers and Expansionists outside the Principate base kept the majority of the opposition away from their position. They loaded into the ship and Aylin jumped into the cockpit and immediately fired up the engines.

The Imperial landing craft jittered and shook as it lifted into the air. Upon glancing back, the group noticed the platoons of stormtroopers that descended upon their location. They had escaped, with only moments to spare.

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**Lancer-class Tenixir r10 Frigate**  
**Unknown Location**  
**Doran System**

"So that's what happened? You aren't coming home anytime soon?" Asked the blue-hued figure of Ankira Irr to a fully armored Mandalorian, sans helmet, standing opposite her in an empty room. The Chiss' red eyes held a hopeful look, but somehow, deep down, she knew what the answer was going to be.

"It doesn't look like it," Appius confirmed apologetically, slightly hanging his head shamefully.

"What the hell!?! I thought capturing Kalee Reecchi was supposed to put an end to this for a while!?! What happened?" Ankira was usually well-composed. Normally she'd simply take the time to vent her frustrations on the nearest training dummy that was around. Or Appius, that worked too. But he was out in the middle of frakking nowhere as far as she was concerned and with no sign of coming home in the foreseeable future, keeping control of her emotions was becoming a more difficult task by the day.

"It did for a short while!" Appius raised his hands defensively. "We were able to come to a ceasefire over the fighting and used the opportunity to evacuate the Expansionists off Dandoran itself, but we gravely underestimated how quickly the Restorers would find a replacement for Kalee. The attack on the Liparus failed and we weren't able to escape the system entirely. Not that we wanted to, Zyft seems obsessed with some damn crystal that's being auctioned off by the Hutt's. Plus with Crysenia and Kalee as prisoners, they potentially have all the information they need on Principate operations if they can pry it out of them."

"Tch. Typical," the pregnant woman muttered as she folded her arms. "Who took over?"

"Apparently some soldier called Amber Stone. She survived the battle on the surface and earned herself quite the promotion," Appius answered.

Silence dawned on both Mandalorians before Ankira suddenly burst into laughter that reached every corner of the room.

"Amber Stone? What kind of name is that?" The Chiss Mandalorian jabbed.

"I know right!?" Appius agreed as he joined in. Ankira's laughter was infectious. After a minute or two, the pair calmed down, staring lovingly into each other's eyes.

"I miss you, *ner cyare*," Appius proclaimed softly.

"I miss you too," Ankira replied with a gentle, soothing tone to her voice. "What shall I tell Shi'Kar when she wakes up?"

The Mandalorian Juggernaut pondered for a moment. It was late, and no doubt Shi'Kar was going to want to know what daddy said. The small girl was incredibly inquisitive, as all three-year-olds tended to be.

"Tell her... tell her daddy got the bad man, and he'll be home very soon."

Appius was pretty happy with that answer, he stood up straight as he readied to go perform the duties he was being paid to do. Was it the most money he could be earning? No, the Restorers offered more bags of credits, but joining the Expansionists was the right thing to do. Frakk the Imperials, frakk them for what they did to Mandalore, and frakk them for what they did to the galaxy as a whole.

Ankira kissed the tip of her finger as her blue-hued hand reached for Appius' lips. The projection faded through him, but the meaning was not lost on the Human. Ankira vanished from view as the Mandalorian Force User let out a deep, heavy sigh.

*"All personnel report to battle stations immediately. We are engaged with a Principate cruiser. I repeat, we are engaged with a Principate cruiser. A boarding party has landed in the hangar bay, prepare for combat."*

The warning echoed down the many durasteel hallways. The Revenant frigate rocked as blaster fire descended upon the shields of the ship. Klaxons flashed red in every direction as soldiers and members of the Brotherhood ran in every direction.

*Funny. You'd think pirates would be the ones committing to a boarding party.* Appius mused to himself. He placed his helmet on his head and sped off down the hallway, ready to join the fray. Who knows? Maybe the Mandalorian would find Sage along the way. Cashing in on that bounty sounded like a fun idea.

**-THE END-**

