

Chains Unbound

Chapter 1: Peace is a lie, there is only passion.

Blood-curdling screams offended his ears as he was dragged down, up, and around every direction possible across a myriad of stairs, corridors, hallways, and only the Force knew what else. He didn't dare ask, though he couldn't help but wince every time his knees scraped against something hard. Shivers ran down his spine every time the noises started, and then just as quickly as they started, they were silenced. Each breath was harder to take, the temperature seemed to drop and chilled him to the bone as the shackles on his wrists kept him from breaking free.

"It is okay, Avitus. You are home amongst your family where you belong," a melodic, almost angelic voice seemed to shush him, but did nothing to stop the ever-rising pit of despair from growing in his gut. It took hold of Avitus, making his legs grow numb with each step that tapped across the wet, stone floor.

A gentle peck of lips against his cheek forced Avitus to turn towards the woman. Even blindfolded, he could somehow tell the woman was smirking. The Force was weird like that. Some, like Avitus' brother, wanted it destroyed. They simply didn't understand, and what they didn't understand, they feared, and what they feared, had to be destroyed.

Though the Oligard would be lying if he said he wasn't scared himself.

The clanging and creaking of large doors was the next major event for Avitus as he was dragged by the scruff of his arms inside, and the immediate cold took his breath away. His body shook before he was forced down onto his knees.

"Remove his restraints," a deep, booming voice sounded, bouncing off the walls.

At last, his blindfold was removed. Avitus blinked a few times, the sudden light offending his iris'. After a quick look, he could tell he was in a vast, open chamber. At the far end was a throne surrounded by a collection of bones, big and small. The Oligard didn't want to think about where they came from, but somehow, he knew. He just *knew* where those bones had come from. Right on cue, another scream, this time male, flooded the chamber. It didn't help that the chamber had the foulest stench of rotting flesh that Avitus had ever experienced. Not even the bloodbath on Dandoran had been this intense, and it made his stomach churn in ways that were not pleasant.

It was like a procession had come to witness his humiliation. Men and women of varying ages, races, and sizes stood on either side of the chamber. The one thing they all shared in common was their eyes. Those damnable eyes... Avitus had never forgotten them. Crusted yellow stared back at him like a collection of creepy children dolls. All wide-eyed, all

unblinking. Red streaks led out of the pupils, a sign of anger, pain, rage, hate, and suffering. They were all the monstrosities that the Oligard remembered from Dandoran. Sentient living beings with blood-red crystals piercing their skin, eye sockets, and any other part of their anatomy that Avitus didn't want to think about. They served as an example of *The Father's* might and genius, their power unmatched by the common riff-raff of the galaxy.

None of them averted their gaze. Avitus wasn't sure if they even could. Through all this, the Miraluka simply known as *The Seer* remained at his side, a crooked smile plastered on his face. The Oligard did not doubt that she was finding the whole thing wonderful.

From atop the stone throne, a towering figure rose to his feet. Giant footsteps echoed down several steps until he stood in front of Avitus, who swallowed the lump that formed in his throat as he forced himself to look at the large creature in his eyes.

The Father was a Neti, and easily stood over seven-feet tall, but instead of the usual light or green skin tones that most Neti possessed, *The Father's* was pigmented black, like he was a tree that had been set alight and burned. His eyes glowed a crimson colour, and he wore an elegant set of golden-trimmed robes. All in all, he was truly an Intimidating sight to behold. Legends amongst *The Children* stated that he has lived for thousands of years. The truth of this was unknown, but what was certain was his presence and his power, especially as Avitus found himself unable to speak.

The Neti's palm descended to the cufflinks that bound the Oligard's hands in place. A quick flick of the ash-coloured index finger released the cufflinks, bringing a small sense of relief as Avitus rubbed his wrists tentatively.

"Rejoice, my children, for the *First Son* has returned to us," *The Father* declared, spreading his arms wide in an angelic fashion. Deafening applause thundered throughout the chamber from all of the disciples that still had a voice to use. That was until the Neti raised his right hand. Immediately, silence returned, *The Father* acting like a conductor of some twisted, insane choir.

"I assume the crystals are in the hands of the Brotherhood?" the Neti continued.

"Yes, Father," this time it was *The Seer* who answered as she slightly lowered her head in a courteous bow. "The crystals have been scattered amongst the Brotherhood's seven Clan's and they are experimenting with them as we speak."

"Excellent..." *The Father* answered. **"Curious minds will always be unable to help themselves. The crystals are a humongous source of power, as was *my* design. The more attuned to the dark side one is, the more powerful one will become. It will not be long now until one of them taps into their frequency and find this place. It is exactly as I have foreseen."**

"Then what do you wish of us?" *The Seer* asked.

"It is not what I want of *you*, it is what I want of *him*," the Neti extended a crooked finger towards Avitus. **"I took you in as one of us, Avitus. I trained you, nurtured you, and**

fostered your love for *The Seer* so that one day she would bring you back to us. You thought you could escape, but destiny had other ideas. You are gifted with the dark side, and you will be the strongest among my children. You will represent us when they arrive. Are you ready for your chains to be unbound, my son?"

"NO!" Avitus suddenly roared and rose to his feet. He spun and pressed his palms against his captors, sending a powerful shock wave that sent the Oligard's guards careening far off into the chamber. Avitus turned his attention back to *The Father*, but was stopped when he felt a harsh tightening on his throat. The Neti had a single finger extended towards Avitus and lifted him onto the tip of his toes. The Oligard's eyes bulged, the light beginning to dim as harsh ringing sounded in his ears.

The Father held out his spare hand, gesturing to a crystal in *The Seer's* hand. The blindfolded woman plunged the sharp object into Avitus' heart, blood pouring out of the freshly opened wound and out of Oligard's mouth. *The Father* released his hold of Avitus, but the Human didn't collapse to the ground. Instead, he remained upright as crystals began to sprout out of every ligament and joint. More blood splattered from Avitus' body, the transformation covering him in a solid exoskeleton of crimson red.

"**Be free, my son,**" *The Father* decreed.

Avitus let out a primal scream, the very last one he would ever do.

Chapter 2: Through passion, I gain strength. Through strength, power...

**Taldryan Citadel
Ostara
Caelus System
40 ABY**

'Happy frakking New Year to me...'

The Taldryan Consul sat at his newly refurbished mahogany desk, carefully inspecting the ever building mountain of paperwork that threatened to steal all of his free time for the day, yet again. Between everything from the Port Kasiya invasion to the Orth prison break, Appius just didn't seem to catch a break. Once again, he was procrastinating, staring at XYZ report about rebuilding ABC in DEF location that he didn't even know needed fixing, rebuilding, or something else he didn't expect and quite frankly, didn't care about. It never seemed to end, and the Mandalorian felt the ever-increasing pressure of a migraine forming in his temple.

'No wonder Erinyes drank on the job so much.' Appius mused as he briefly considered doing the same. The only thing that kept him somewhat sane was the picture of Ankira and their children that stood at the end of the desk. They were smiling, happy, and full of life, but

Appius couldn't help but smirk at how Ankira tried to keep the visage of a proud Mandalorian warrior and utterly fell apart when holding their newborn son. Shi'kar, the little cheeky Pantoran Foundling that she was, stuck her tongue out at the camera.

It was perfect, and Appius wouldn't have changed it for the universe.

The door to the Consul's office burst open, and in came riding on a BB-8 droid an Ewok just barely over a metre in size. His status as Proconsul of Taldryan carried him taller than his natural height ever would, but he was someone Appius respected as both a friend and confidant.

"Oh thank kriff you are here, Teebu" the Consul greeted his Proconsul with relief evident in his voice. "I could use some help dealing with this infernal pile of bantha fodder if you don't mind?"

Teebu eyed the pile of paperwork on the desk, even from his vantage point, he could see the extent of how much of the blasted stuff there was.

"Eh, no thanks. I'm good," Teebu answered, making Appius raise his arms in defeat.

"Seriously! What the hell is the point in having a Proconsul, two Quaestors, and an Aedile if I can't get you all to do my paperwork for me?" the Mandalorian protested.

"We make you look good?" Teebu responded with a nonchalant shrug.

"Thanks," Appius said indignantly, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Regardless, I'm not here for a casual chat. They've found something," the Ewok informed the Consul.

"They've found something..." Appius repeated.

"Yes," Teebu confirmed.

A brief silence descended on the Consul and Proconsul.

"You are going to have to be a bit more specific than that," Appius finally said, eliciting a deep sigh from Teebu.

"The crystal."

That was all the Ewok needed to say to get Appius' full attention. Dandoran had been like fighting in a nightmare he couldn't wake from, and the visage of those crystalline monsters always reappeared in the Consul's mind whenever he closed his eyes. Appius had barely escaped Dandoran with his life after fighting just one of them. *Manda* only knew what would happen if they had to fight a whole army of them.

Taldryan's recent wars had kept the Clan preoccupied, but it was time to get back on track. Chancellor Ky'Lian could kriffing wait for all Appius cared. Relations between the Caelus Government and Clan Taldryan were at an all-time low anyways, and she'd likely use anything as an excuse to grind Taldryan's name into the dirt. At least this way, he was the one in control.

"What did they find?" Appius questioned.

"From what the Mystics tell me, the crystals seem highly attuned to the dark side of the Force. Those who have prolonged exposure to them see an increase in their power, Stamina, speed, and strength in the Force," Teebu began his explanation, though a small frown appeared on Appius' face.

"I could have told you that," the Consul responded.

"Yes, but could you tell me how it's turning people into those monsters we fought on Dandoran?"

Now *that* got Appius' attention.

"Go on," the Mandalorian encouraged.

"It seems to have something to do with blood. The moment the crystal makes contact with the bloodstream, something seems to spread throughout the body at an alarming rate like a parasite until..."

"Until they transform into one of those monsters," Appius interjected.

"Precisely," Teebu confirmed.

"Do I dare ask how we found all this out?"

Teebu shifted uncomfortably atop his BB-8 droid, unable to meet Appius' gaze for the moment. That told the Consul everything.

"I take it that the threat has been neutralised?" Appius inquired.

"Yes, before it got out of hand," Teebu answered. "Our researchers want to try and weaponise it next to see what kind of destructive potential it has."

"Absolutely not," Appius spoke defiantly. "Nobody is to be allowed access to that crystal unless they have our permission, or until we learn more about it. This is to remain an S Class secret for the immediate future. No one is to know about it."

The Consul could only imagine the reaction from the Caelus Government if they discovered what they were experimenting with was *this* close to them.

"Of course," the Proconsul agreed. "Though, I do have to wonder since it acts so much like a parasite, if there could perhaps be a cure of some description? Or maybe it can be reversed, or halted entirely?"

"I doubt it's that simple. The Force adds a whole other level of complexity that is going to make figuring this thing out a lot more complicated." the Mandalorian explained. "Still, this gives us something to tell the Grand Master when he next inquires about it. If it's a form of alchemy or something more scientific, then maybe Ciara's new Collegium can figure it out."

"There is one other thing," Teebu pointed out.

"Of course there is, isn't there always?" Appius half-joked.

"The crystals emit a sort of frequency. We've been able to track locations of several crystals to Zsoldos, Selen..."

"Those are Vizsla and Arcona territories, and I'm guessing the other crystals are with the other Clans too?" Appius asked, getting a nod from Teebu.

"There is one other, actually," Teebu informed, pulling a small device from the jacket pocket of his Grand Admiral uniform. Carefully placing it upon the desk, it suddenly let out a beam of light that illuminated parts of the known galaxy.

"Do you mind?" Teebu asked.

Appius raised two fingers before slowly lowering them. The lights in the room began to dim, illuminating the planets and stars that surrounded the office in all their blue-hued glory, except for the few red lights pulsing at several spots on the map.

"Thank you. As you can see, there are eight red lights scattered across the galaxy. The first seven are the crystals in Brotherhood Clan territories, so nothing unusual there. However, when you get to *this* one..."

Teebu made a pinching motion with a couple of his furry fingers as a dark planet came into view. Upon it, the red beacon became brighter after homing in on one particular location.

"Is the anomaly," the Proconsul continued. "From our records, there is no reason for any crystals to be located here, which means..."

"That's where they are hiding," Appius finished, failing to hide the small smirk gracing his face. "What planet is that?"

"Malachor V."

"Really? They are inhabiting old Sith temples? I suppose that makes sense," Appius concluded, suddenly rising from his desk and clasping his hands together eagerly. "Very well, then! I'll go and pay them a visit. Teebu, you are in charge whilst I'm gone."

The newly-minted Proconsul of Clan Taldryan looked taken aback by that sudden order.

"Are... are you sure?" the Ewok questioned. "I suppose we could spare a small task force to go with you, maybe the Cohors? But with the Caelus Government breathing down our necks, I just don't think it's wise to send anything bigger."

"You won't have to. I'll go alone. If and when the Grand Master calls, you can explain the situation to him."

Teebu looked visibly concerned as he placed a paw under his chin.

"Look," Appius continued. "We both can't go. One of us has to be here to hold the fort down if the Chancellor tries anything funny, and out of the two of us, it makes more sense if I go."

The Proconsul couldn't argue with that. Out of the two of them, Appius was easily the most combat Proficient. Teebu was a strategist, a thinker behind the front lines giving orders. Diving in headfirst was not the Ewok's idea of a game plan.

"Still, I'd feel more comfortable about this if at least *someone* went with you. Raistline? Tracinya? Maybe even Crysenia or Ankira?" Teebu suggested.

"No," Appius answered. "As I said, this is to remain an S Class secret. No one except us is to know about this."

"There must be *somebody* you can take with you! Somebody you can fight with if things turn dire?"

Silence descended on the pair as Appius' eyes wandered around his office. Evidence of a recent scuffle lingered along the almost pristine walls, whilst the window behind his seat had only just recently been replaced. The Consul's thoughts turned to the one responsible as an idea flickered in his mind.

"There... might be someone," the Mandalorian finally answered. "But you're not going to like it."

Chapter 3: Through Power, Victory.

Kasiya
Ektrosis Tower
Underground Level
40 ABY

"You're right. I *don't* like this."

The Ewok Proconsul had made his protests adamantly clear throughout their trip to the House Ektrosis Headquarters. Over and over again Teebu had asked Appius to reconsider, calling the idea foolish, brazen, and downright suicidal.

The Mandalorian was almost tempted to make good on old jokes and punt the Ewok out of the nearest airlock. Alas, that would mean searching for another Proconsul, and that was less than ideal.

For now.

Regardless, the Consul and Proconsul arrived at their destination, a prison cell designed to keep the most wanted of criminals away from the prying eyes of the public, as well as the rest of Clan Taldryan. It was one of Appius' best-kept secrets, and only he, the House Ektrosis summit, his Proconsul, and a few hand-picked personnel would ever know about it. From behind locked doors, the Mandalorian Force user could determine what to do with those he deemed an ultimate threat to the Clan that he led as Head of State.

Right now, this very prison cell they stood in front of held within it Appius' best friend, and the man who only four days prior had tried to kill him.

The Zabrak locked behind the forcefield had seen better days. What once was a proud and noble Jedi, a guardian of peace and defender of the innocent was now a disgraced wannabe murderer and fiend, slumped against the wall, unshaven and with heavy bags under his eyes. Slowly, the Zabrak lifted his head, his bloodshot eyes becoming visible in the dim light of his cell. The Jedi glanced to the red-clad Mandalorian and then did a double-take of the small creature beside him, sitting atop a BB-8 droid with its arms crossed over its chest.

"Lower the forcefield and leave us."

The guards and security personnel obeyed the Consul's orders without question, lowering the barrier between the Taldryanites and their prisoner before leaving them alone.

"I must have been in here longer than I thought," the Jedi muttered with a dry croak in his throat. "I could have sworn that thing was an Aleena a couple of days ago."

"I'm the new Taldryan Proconsul, Justinios' replacement," Teebu answered with a hint of pride in his voice.

The Jedi couldn't help but raise a brow at the fact that an *Ewok* of all kriffing things was now Proconsul of one of the Brotherhood's seven mighty Clans, and the fact it could speak sentences other than 'Yub-Nub'.

"How're things been treating you, Ria'd?" Appius interjected. "Is the Clan Taldryan holiday resort treating you as well as you hoped it would?"

If looks could kill, Appius would have dropped dead at the glare the Zabrak sent him.

"Cracking jokes? If our history together means anything, Appius, you'll just kill me and get it over with. At least have some shred of mercy."

"Mercy!?" Teebu exclaimed in shock. "You tried to kill the Consul in his office! You don't deserve any mercy!"

"I was simply doing what needed to be done," the Jedi responded calmly. "The dark side, and those who use it, are parasites that need to be cleansed from this galaxy if it is to know true peace."

"Peace?" the Ewok questioned. "Trying to kill a man in cold blood is pretty hypocritical for a Jedi, don't you think?"

"You wouldn't understand. Those not gifted with the Force need protecting, even if it from those they consider their closest friends and allies."

"Alright, that's enough," Appius interjected before Teebu could respond. "Ria'd, the only reason you aren't dead yet is that I don't want to kill you."

"Don't want to, or simply can't?"

Appius fell silent, getting a heavy sigh from the Jedi.

"It's a weakness of yours, Appius. You are far too emotionally attached to people. A wise leader willing to do whatever it took to keep their people safe would have had me executed for the greater good, but you? You can't bring yourself to kill your best friend, can you?" Ria'd stated like it was a common fact.

"Neither could you."

The Consul's statement caught Ria'd by surprise.

"I felt it when we fought," Appius continued. "The hesitation, the doubt in your mind was as clear as any swing from your lightsaber. This mindset of yours is not the Ria'd I once knew, and you know it too, don't you? Deep down, you know what you are doing is wrong and you are lying to yourself to deal with the guilt."

The right words at the right time could do more damage than any blaster or lightsaber wound. The heart was as mighty as it was fragile, especially when one refused to face the truth of their morality.

"What do you want, Appius?" the Jedi known as Ria'd asked. "I doubt you are here to discuss ideologies."

"No, you're right. I have an offer for you," the Mandalorian answered. "How much do you value your freedom?"

Now *that* caught the Zabrak's attention.

"You remember Dandoran, yes?" Appius asked, getting a light nod from Ria'd. "Well, we think we may have found where those Crystalline... *things* disappeared of too. You are going to come with me and investigate. In return, once we are back, you will be freed."

"And you expect me to believe that?" Ria'd questioned skeptically, but Appius? He just shrugged.

"The way I see it, you don't have much of a choice. You either come and do this with me, or you stay in here, never to see the light of day again until the next Consul takes over and has you executed for the attempted murder of the previous Head of State. The only reason you aren't dead right now is because of me. My eventual successor might not see things my way."

"I certainly don't," Teebu chimed in. "Regardless, this is to remain an S Class secret amongst the Taldryanites. Nobody is to know anything about this and if they do, I'll have you executed myself."

"Which is why you came to me. I'm expendable," Ria'd said, unperturbed by the little Ewok's threat.

"You aren't expendable, Ria'd," Appius claimed.

"Yes, he is," Teebu corrected, getting the kind of look from Appius that told him to shut the hell up before he really did get punted.

"I just..." Appius said with a sigh. "I just want my best friend back. The friend I used to confide in, trust with my life above all else. This man you've become isn't you. I could really use Ria'd Stesca, the Jedi and friend. Not Ria'd Stesca, the murderer and extremist. What do you say? Do we have a deal?"

Appius finally entered the prison cell and extended his right hand towards the Zabrak. Ria'd stared at it for a moment before clasping both hands around it.

Chapter 4: Through victory, my chains are broken.

How can you trust a man who tried to kill you? Regardless of past friendships and comradery, what would it take for someone to lose faith in those they cared for completely?

Appius pondered the question in silence within the cabin of the Kom'rk class fighter as it descended upon the dark world of Malachor V. The planet was steeped in the dark side of the Force, a fact that Ria'd no doubt felt as he fidgeted ever so slightly in his seat. The planet itself was no stranger to war, death and destruction. Which was likely why the Sith built their temples upon it, and why this new enemy was hiding here. It was the most obvious, yet most hidden place at the same time as the dark side concealed their presence. Merely sensing their enemy was going to be out of the question.

"We won't be able to sense anyone inside, assuming they are even there to begin with," Ria'd suddenly stated, following the same line of thinking as Appius.

"This is just like old times. You, me, Zugat, Krinna, and Mudstain. We made quite the force. Then again, I'm not the same person I was back then, and neither are you," the Mandalorian glanced to his Zabrak comrade for this endeavour. Ria'd never met his gaze, simply staring out onto the Malachor planet below them. If there was one thing Appius learned about his old Jedi comrade today, it was that he cleaned up surprisingly well. It was amazing what some proper equipment, food, and water could get you after spending several days in a damp cell. Considering how Ria'd looked not a few hours earlier, you'd think it was a modern-day miracle.

'The Force works in weird ways...'

"So, what's your plan?" The Zabrak suddenly asked.

"Plan?"

"Yes. I assume you have some sort of plan in place for getting in and out in one piece?"

Appius fell silent, telling Ria'd everything he already knew. There was no plan.

"Brilliant, it's you. Of course there's no plan," the Jedi said.

"Hey, it's always worked out for us before!" the Mandalorian cheered positively.

"Yes. Like that time you fell off a speeder bike and crashed into a gang of Trandosha hunters looking for a fight," Ria'd answered, and if Appius didn't know any better, he could have sworn he saw the faintest hint of a smile form on the Jedi's face.

"Hey, my bike was tampered with and you know it!" the Mandalorian protested. "Besides, it all worked out. I convinced them to help us free the village from a pirate blockade," the Mandalorian reasoned.

"Yes. I still remember the initiation ritual you had to go through to be a part of their gang," Ria'd responded.

"Ugh... don't remind me. It took me weeks to get that smell off my armor. Krinna won't go anywhere near me, and Zugat just laughed every time I walked past him," Appius said as he relived the old memories in his past.

Suddenly, they both broke out into a small chuckle. They weren't the most cohesive unit, the five of them, but they were all they had in the galaxy at one point in time. They were there for each other when it counted most, doing good deeds from one planet to another in exchange for some food, fuel, and a lite pocket worth of credits, they were a little makeshift family that probably looked like the strangest group in the cosmos. At the time, they wouldn't have traded anything for it in the galaxy. They would have jumped on a thermal detonator for each other, *that* was how close they were.

"I've missed this..." Appius solemnly said. "Not just us being able to talk. You, me, Krinna, Zugat... even that kark-sucker Mudstain sometimes. The laughter, the bond between us all. It was really special. I missed you guys when we got separated."

Ria'd did not answer him, but couldn't look his old friend in the eyes.

"I've got a partner now, you know? I proposed to her a little while ago and we are expecting a baby. Kriffing hell, Ria'd. Can you imagine a little me running around? There's going to be lightsabers, blasters, armor pieces frakking everywhere! We already have a Foundling, a little Pantoran girl and beige me when I say she's already a handful, though you already knew all that. You saw me speaking to them when you attacked me."

That last sentence sent a tremble through the Jedi that Appius picked up on through the Force.

"I'd... like you to come to the ceremony. You know, when it happens. I'd like to have you there," Appius finally said. After a few moments of silence, the Consul wondered if he'd taken a step too far.

"I don't deserve your forgiveness," Ria'd finally answered, and Appius almost didn't hear him from how quiet he was.

"So you *do* feel guilty," the statement didn't get any reaction out of Ria'd, who remained silently staring into nothingness. "Nobody is irredeemable, Ria'd. I'm a perfect example of that. I turned to the dark side when my home was destroyed on Mandalore. Everything was burnt to Ash, and everyone I ever knew or cared for was dead. Have you ever seen a sea of charred corpses, Ria'd? I have, and I never want to see that happen to anyone I care for again. That's why I'm a Consul now. I want to look out for them as best I can, and I'll give my life doing it if the people I love most stay safe. I owe them that much at least for pulling me out of pure darkness."

Silence briefly descended on them again, and Appius decided to drop the subject for now as the Kom'rk descended onto the ground. A whirlwind of soil and dust kicked up around the ship, creating a thick fog as the ramp lowered. The Mandalorian left the ship first with the Jedi following closely behind. The two walked in relative silence on the way to the Sith Temple. The dirt crunched beneath their feet with each passing step. It ground on Appius' nerves. He wanted to say *something*, anything to get Ria'd to open up to him again.

Focus on the task at hand. Failure to do so can result in death. Of both you, and those with you.

Farrin's words echoed in the Consul's mind, just a few of many that the Taldryanite's Master had drilled into his head during his apprenticeship, the same words he still tried to live and learn by every day.

The temple appeared into sight, dark and eerie as the atmosphere that surrounded them. It was like a time capsule to a period long since forgotten. Where the rest of Malachor V's

temples were crumbling, crooked, and collapsed messes of rubble and dirt, picked apart by would-be thieves and scoundrels. This temple, however, was pristine, almost immaculate, and reeked of the dark side of the Force. Outside stood two robed figures wearing grey, leather masks with small eye slots. They barred the way inside from those who would seek entry to their domain. Both beings noticed the Consul's presence immediately and drew upon a pair of cylindrical hilts. Two blood-red blades ruptured out of the hilt like a violent storm as they began to approach the Mandalorian.

"Ok. Looks like we have company. I'll take the one on the left, you take the one on the right," Appius spoke, but then quickly realised he was talking to thin air. "Ria'd?"

'That frakker left me alone!' Appius cursed in his mind as he readied himself for a two on one fight.

Then, suddenly, out of the darkness, a white lightsaber blade hissed and pierced through the chest of the first of the two guards. None of them, not even Appius, had seen it coming. It was cold, calculated, and without remorse. It sent a chill through the Consul that he'd never felt before. The Mandalorian was no stranger to death. It was almost a daily occurrence for him in his line of work, but to see his old friend, a proclaimed pacifist who never could harm a fly kill in cold blood was something Appius was not prepared for.

The second guard rounded on Ria'd as the Jedi's sense for danger flared. The guard attempted an overhead swing only to miss its target. Ria'd spun to the side, wrapped one arm around the guard's throat and forced him to the ground with one swift movement. Then, just like with the first, Ria'd plunged his white blade through the second guard's torso as the being took his last breath. It was all over in seconds.

'Haar'chak, Ria'd. What happened to you?' Appius thought as he watched the man who swore never to kill do so like he'd been doing so all his life.

The Jedi's white blade retracted back into its hilt as he placed it back on his waist. Ria'd looked to Appius, who hadn't moved since the Zabrak began his decimation of the enemy.

"Something wrong, Appius?" the Jedi asked, snapping the Consul from his train of thought.

"No. No... let's head inside before more of them come," the Mandalorian suggested as he marched towards the temple entrance.

"And do we know what we are looking for?" Ria'd asked back, unconvinced by Appius' lack of plan going forward.

The Consul didn't have an answer for his old Jedi comrade immediately, at least until he noticed small crystals that protruded out of the guards' armor. They shone a bright red, and looked eerily like the same crystals that were used on Dandoran, which was enough to confirm the Consul's suspicions. They were here, and there was likely more of them inside.

Appius needed to confirm his theory so dropped to one knee and took off the glove on one of his hands.

"What are you doing?" the Jedi inquired.

"Shush. I need a moment."

Appius reached out and grasped one of the crystals with his fingertips whilst Ria'd remained stoic and carefully neutral behind him. Creating a connection via the Force was something Appius had become a big fan of in recent times, and after a few moments, translucent images of a dark figure loomed in his mind. Eyes as corrupt as a Sith Lord glared back at him like an angry predator. Searching with his senses, Appius manifested a sympathetic link and anchored the image of the dark figure to its location. Sure enough, a thin, blue streak created from the Force led directly inside the temple.

"Got it," Appius declared as he rose to his feet. "Let's go."

Chapter 5: The Force shall set me free.

Darkness was more than just a side of the Force. It lived in *The Father*, was molded by him and consequently, through his children. Avitus was one such success. *The Father* had manipulated the man's mind, allowing his hate, fear, insecurities, love, and basic primal needs to grow and grow until he became the perfect catalyst for the new era of Sith. One led by him. For the more consumed by darkness the galaxy was, the more powerful *The Father* would become. Nobody was immortal, not even a Neti, and *The Father* needed power if he was to become truly eternal.

Avitus Oligard was little more than a shell of his former self. What once stood the brother to the leader of the Collective was now covered head to toe in an exoskeleton of red crystals. Those very same crystals jutted out of the man's eye sockets, giving him a ghastly appearance. He stood next to the Father on his left like a pet on his leash, breathed heavily, like he'd been breathing in soot and ash. By the rasp in his voice, it sounded like his lungs were permanently damaged, yet, somehow, he refused to die. He was monstrous, and he was an abomination.

Yet, to *The Father*, he was perfect.

The Seer stood to the right, with a smile that by all amounts could have been permanently etched on her face. That look hadn't left her features since Avitus' transformation, and it likely wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

"FATHER!!!" A panicked voice boomed throughout the chamber and echoed off the walls, stirring the Neti from his revelry. A male voice ran towards him, one of the few that had yet to have the sweet power bestowed upon him by *The Father's* crystals. "INTRUDERS! THERE ARE-AGGHHH!"

The male, a Human, or at least it seemed it, was suddenly pulled back violently like a tether had wrapped around him and pulled. He disappeared into the darkness, with only the *swish* and *hum* of a lightsaber blade as clues to his fate.

Moments later, a Mandalorian in red armor, sporting an ostentatious lightning bolt as the centrepiece of the chest plate, entered the chamber. He held in his hand an emerald-bladed lightsaber, and was no doubt the source of *The Father's* servant's most recent demise.

Despite this, the Neti smirked from atop his throne, and graciously rose to meet the newcomer.

"Consul of Taldryan, I have been expecting you," the Neti announced like a king awaiting his gladiator. At the sides of the chamber, various crystalline beings lined up like an audience awaiting their favourite sport. Those who could, jeered, but they all kept their distance from the Mandalorian out of fear and respect for their *Father*.

"You have a lousy way of greeting your guests," the Consul retorted quickly with a snip of sarcasm. "Only a handful of minions from the entrance to here, no greetings, no offer of food or drinks, no offer to take my coat, and then you just let me barge on in here without a care in the world. You have a terrible way of making a first impression."

The Neti's sinister smile stretched further across his face.

"I like you. It will be fun to watch you take your last breath," *The Father* stated confidently.

"So, let's cut to the chase, shall we? I'm on a mission to find out more about you. So, Who are you, and what is this place?" the Taldryanite exclaimed as he took a few steps into the chamber, being mindful of the horde of Ascended that littered the sides. Looking behind him, the Taldryan Consul took note that several crystalline bodies now blocked the entrance to the chamber, blocking his way out.

He was like a rat trapped in a den of wampas.

"This is an ancient Sith temple, one I have been using as a testing ground for my powers, though we are scattered across the cosmos. I am known as *The Father*, but you may simply call me Mortis," the Neti happily answered before opening his arms in a wide gesture. **"These are my children."**

"The Children of Mortis?" the Taldryanite joked.

"Why yes, actually. You are correct."

Deciding to ignore that blunt answer for the moment, the Mandalorian continued.

"Why did you attack Dandoran?"

"Straight to the point, I see," *The Father* commented. **"Dandoran was merely a test. I wished to see the capabilities of my crystals and the extent to which we can control those under their influence. Needless to say, I was very pleased with the results."**

"What are you even trying to do with them?" the Consul questioned further. "Galactic domination? Eradication of the universe? You want to be the one true Sith? Am I getting close, you're going to have to help me here."

"We do not seek domination of your *primitive* kind," *The Father* spoke the words like they filled him with disgust. "What is the point of domination if you cannot live to see the galaxy evolve under your thumb? No, I seek something far greater, something more... permanent."

It only took a moment for the Consul to piece together what *The Father* was implying.

"Immortality..." the Human responded.

"Precisely," the Neti confirmed. "But in order to achieve my goal, I require more power. The dark side of the Force is a gateway to powers mere Jedi could only dream of wielding, and the more consumed the galaxy is with the dark side of the Force, the more powerful it becomes. The Children of Mortis act as my will as the bringers of death, destruction, and darkness. Only once I am freed from my mortal coil can I become the true Emperor of this galaxy."

"Oh, sure, because that's worked out so well for Sith before you. On a totally unrelated note, Darth Sidious called. He says he wants his whole shtick back."

The smile on the Neti's face vanished instantly.

"Darth Sidious had great ambition, though he misplaced his priorities which led to his eventual death on Exegol. I will make no such mistake."

An eeriness fell between the two beings. The Mandalorian shifted uncomfortably on the spot, glancing from one side to the other to keep aware of his surroundings.

"You're being awfully compliant with my questions," the Consul noted with distinct apprehension.

"Of course. I am more than happy to answer the final questions of a dead man," *The Father* replied with derision. "Though I do have a question of my own..."

Suddenly, the sickening smirk appeared on the Neti's old and corrupt face.

"How close does the Jedi expect to get to me before I notice him?"

The Mandalorian visibly tensed. Suddenly, from the shadows of the Force emerged Ria'd just a few feet away from the Neti. With his cover blown, the Zabrak retrieved his trusty lightsaber from his waist, the aptly named, *Sithslayer*, and lunged towards the Neti's head. Tree or not, nothing could survive being impaled through the skull.

"RIA'D! LOOK OUT!"

The Children of Mortis leader stretched out with his right hand as a strong torrent of energy slammed into the Jedi's chest right before the Zabrak could make contact. Ria'd careened back into the middle of the chamber and only stopped when Appius grabbed hold of him.

"A clever idea woefully executed," the Neti taunted as he turned to his right. **"It is time we brought forth this new era, starting with your demise. Avitus, my son, kill them both."**

A thunderous roar boomed throughout the chamber as the man formerly known as Avitus Oligard stepped forward. Hard, crystal wings sprouted from the man's shoulder blades and lifted him into the air. The crystalline monster moved towards the two intruders at great speed, and descended towards them both even faster.

"Appius!" the Jedi called out as both men leapt out of the way. Avitus collided with the ground like a wrecking ball, leaving cracks in the duracrete floor. The monstrous entity stood to his full height which easily towered over both Appius and Ria'd at eight feet. Avitus was incredibly bulky, and looked like he could destroy a stone pillar with just his arm if he wanted to. Crystal claws extended out of his fingertips, whilst trickles of blood fell from every orifice.

Ria'd didn't waste any time and pressed forward towards the crystal monster. It didn't matter how big an opponent was, they all fell when pierced through the heart. A lesson the Jedi had learned from recent personal experience.

"Ria'd, don't!" Appius tried to warn. "Those crystals are lightsaber..."

The Jedi thrust his lightsaber blade forward with pinpoint accuracy towards the point where he estimated Avitus' heart should be. Yet, to Ria'd's horror, the white blade bounced off of the crystals without so much as leaving a scratch. Avitus swiped with one giant arm, which caught Ria'd like a runaway landspeeder. The Jedi was knocked several feet into the air from Avitus' raw power, and crashed unceremoniously to the floor, rolling to a stop seconds later.

"Resistant..." Appius finished, recalling his fights on Dandoran as part of the Expansionists whilst the *First Son* rounded on him to claim his next victim. "Alright, you big ugly freak! My turn!"

The Mandalorian ran towards Avitus with as much gusto as he could muster as the latter pulled back his arm in an attempt to decapitate the Consul. Appius felt the distinct warning of danger coming from the Force, and used it as his sign to pour that mystical power through his body. Adrenaline pumped through the Mandalorian's body with every beat of his heart as he bent his body backwards to avoid the lariat intended for his head. The crystallised arm narrowly avoided Appius' helmet, and once he was clear, he straightened his body and spun to face his opponent. Lightning began to dance between the Arcanist's fingertips as he held both hands, fingers stretched out, towards Avitus.

"This ends now!" the Taldryan Consul exclaimed as tendrils of blue and purple lightning enveloped Avitus like hissing vipers.

For the briefest of moments, Appius thought the fight was over. It was rare anyone could withstand a blast of *Force Lightning* from point-blank range without sustaining serious

damage. The power had the potential to burn flesh, convulse internal organs, and even cause seizures, brain damage, and death. Not to mention the searing agony was near-unbearable.

Not that anyone would be able to tell, judging by how the Oligard had shrugged it off like it was nothing. There was no scarring, no smell of burning flesh, no screams of pain, and Appius was perplexed that one of his greatest weapons, one that he was jokingly known for in some circles, was suddenly rendered ineffective. Avitus then swiped towards the Mandalorian and, just like Ria'd, Appius was sent flying to the other side of the chamber.

Cheering, jeering, and general loud noise was being created by those spectators who could do so. They were like a pack of wolves that demanded blood, threatening to jump in if their need for violence wasn't satiated.

Avitus was far from done. His own lust for blood grew as the fight continued. He took flight, his wings kicking up a torrent of dirt as the crystal-infused Oligard propelled himself towards his target. Yet, before he reached Appius, the Mandalorian was yanked out of the way by what seemed like an invisible rope. The Consul rolled to a stop right next to Ria'd, who aided the Mandalorian back to his feet.

"Thanks," Appius said, though Ria'd seemed to ignore that for the moment.

"You've fought something like this before, right? How do you beat it?" Ria'd inquired.

"I don't know. The ones on Dandoran were nowhere near as advanced as this one."

That did nothing to appease the Zabrak, especially as Avitus turned on the pair again.

"I don't suppose you have anything useful reserved for a time like this, do you?" Ria'd asked with a hint of urgency in his voice. It certainly didn't help when Appius nervously chuckled back at him.

"Nope. Back on Dandoran, these things had a gap in their armor that you could exploit but..."

The Consul was taken out of his musings when Avitus halted in his advance. The crystallised Oligard raised his giant boot before slamming it into the duracrete below. The stone instantly broke apart as Avitus' clawed hands stretched towards one particular large slab. It levitated in the air, and Appius and Ria'd didn't need the Force to be alarmed at the giant stone projectile heading towards them.

Instinctively, the Zabrak and the Mandalorian raised both their hands and channeled the Force through them. The stone slowed before coming to a stop inches before it hit them. Both Force User's then launched it back at Avitus, who instead of dodging, or stopping it with the Force himself, clenched one clawed hand and punched straight through the stone like it was made of sand.

"*Haar'chak!*" Appius cursed loudly. "There *has* to be a weakness!"

"There is none," *The Father* suddenly interjected. "My children are perfect, and Avitus Oligard is the perfect example of that."

"You call losing your free will perfect?" Ria'd retorted.

"To hell with this!" Appius suddenly snapped. "We'll attack him together, there has to be a way through those crystals!"

Suddenly, flames spewed out of the thrusters of the Mandalorian's jetpack and quickly launched him skyward. Once Appius was sixteen feet high, he cut the power to the device on his back, allowing him to descend towards Avitus. The Taldryan Consul, however, had a plan. One he hoped the man formerly known as Avitus Oligard wouldn't see coming. The Mandalorian Force User coiled his power in the Force and directed it into the palm of his hand. When Appius' hand collided with the ground, that built up energy detonated like a thermal detonator, creating a powerful shockwave that staggered the *First Son* back a few paces.

The Taldryanite capitalised by drawing upon his twin lightsabers. Green blades ruptured out of the hilt and created a sound akin to an angry krayt dragon. With two haphazard swings, Appius took advantage of his training in both Niman and Jar'Kai and diagonally struck the crystal exoskeleton. Naturally, the blades bounced off, but the Mandalorian followed up by thrusting one hand forward, summoning the Force to push Avitus back.

It was Niman's *pushing slash* manoeuvre, only with an added twist. The push that Appius sent forward was akin to a punch to the face. It was made evident when a distinct *ping* sound echoed throughout the chamber.

Not to be outdone, Ria'd leapt into the fray. The crystalline beast seemed staggered, dazed, and confused. Now was the time for the Jedi to find its weak spot. With quick, elegant, precise jabs befitting a Makashi specialist. He moved in and out, stabbing then retreating and evading, moving back and forth in a straight line much like a fencer would do. Their teamwork was almost impeccable and spoke volumes about their history of working together. When one made a mistake, the other was there to cover their backs and pull them out of danger. They were like a tag-team taking turns against the monster.

Yet, even with their combined efforts, all it did was make Avitus mad. The Oligard bent his knees, spread his wings out wide, and let out a mighty, ear-shattering scream. Both Appius and Ria'd dropped their weapons and tried to cover their ears to protect themselves. The noise was extreme enough to force both men to lose their sense of balance and fall to their knees. Mortis observed from above, safely protected by the barrier he had erected to protect himself and *The Seer* from the noise. The Children of Mortis, however, were also unaffected. It only seemed to rally them further, like some sort of intense battle cry.

The Force rang out in Appius' mind as he was on the receiving end of a stiff kick to his sternum. It knocked the wind out of the Mandalorian's lungs as he rolled several feet away, much to the merriment of the crowd. Avitus turned to Ria'd next, who was still recovering from the harsh ringing sound in his ears, and the need to vomit.

"Ria'd!" the Taldryan Consul gasped for air as he tried to warn his old friend. The words fell on deaf ears, however, as the crystal-infused monster stretched out its claws, and pierced them through the Jedi's back, impaling the Zabrak's hearts.

"NO!" Appius cried out in anguish. No sooner had he started to mend the relationship with his best friend had he just been taken away from him.

"**Excellent...**" Mortis delighted at the physical and emotional pain inflicted by his creation. Yet, it was not over yet, no, the fun had only just begun.

When Avitus retracted his claws, Appius fully expected Ria'd's body to slump to the ground, lifeless and dead. Instead, he rose as crystals began to sprout out of the opened wound in his back. The Taldryan Consul had witnessed a lot in his thirty years of life, but never before had he witnessed such a horrifying transformation. Red crystals sprouted out of Ria'd's ligaments and joints before spreading across his entire body. The final touch was the one large crystal that emerged out of his throat and mouth. Any ability to scream was likely ended at that moment.

The man formerly known as Ria'd stesca turned towards Appius. He was bloodied, his face contorted with pain and anger. There was no telling if the Jedi was still alive, or if his body had simply been taken over by the parasitic crystals. Regardless, a cold, dark feeling came over the Taldryanite as he witnessed what his friend had become. Goosebumps emerged across the Mandalorian's arms as he staggered back to his feet.

"As you can see, your fate is sealed in the darkness," Mortis decided to address the lone survivor. **"Join us, and accept your fate. Become one with the darkness."**

Appius' life flashed before his eyes. Ankira, Shi'Kar, Dasha, Lenoka, Aylin, Vrakit, Zxyl... all these people meant something to him. The Mandalorian had to walk through hell to rebuild his life after his home and family on Mandalore was destroyed, and he came out of it a stronger man. A man willing to do whatever it took to protect the ones he loved most. He was the Consul of Clan Taldryan of the Brotherhood, and he would look after them all, as was his sworn duty.

A Mandalorian never goes back on their word.

Appius knew he had to get away and warn the Brotherhood. He'd seen firsthand what the Children of Mortis could do leaf by *The Father* and their *Seer*. The Arcanist's eyes scanned for any conceivable exit. The way they came was a no go since the Children now blocked it, and every other corner of the chamber. That's when Appius noticed the little streams of light that poured into the chamber from up above. There was an exit up above, he just needed to get to it.

That was going to be easier said than done. Especially with both Avitus and now Ria'd looking to rip his head from his shoulders. However, Appius specialised in doing the impossible. In a move that Mortis did not foresee, the Mandalorian launched himself at both enemies with seemingly renewed gusto. His ribs hurt, his breathing was hard and felt like his

lungs could explode at any second, but if all went to plan, it wouldn't matter in a few moments.

The Consul threw the first of his lightsabers towards the crystal duo. It arched through the air like a flying scythe and clipped the crystals on both Avitus and Ria'd before hitting the ground a few feet away. It didn't do any damage, though Appius took their momentary distraction to activate his jetpack and soar above them.

"And where do you think you are going?"

The Taldryan Consul glanced downwards towards the throne where Mortis sat. The Neti had his hand outstretched towards the Mandalorian to stop his escape. Appius had one saber left, and he needed to make it count. The mid-air Mandalorian threw the second Darksaber-inspired lightsaber towards the Neti. It spun in the air, ready to take Mortis' head clean off his shoulders. The Neti's eyes widened in momentary shock until a crimson-coloured lightsaber intercepted the attack and saved his life. *The Seer* stood there holding said weapon in both hands, her usual smug smile turned upside down into a frown.

The distraction did as it was intended. Sure, Appius would have liked it to kill, but he would take whatever he could get at this moment in time. The distraction allowed him to soar through the gap at the very top of the Malachor temple and back into the outside world.

"DO NOT LET HIM ESCAPE!"

The Taldryan Consul could hear the ruckus of a stampede below him as Mortis' children stormed through the temple.

"At least I have a head start..." Appius said to himself. The temple began to fade in the distance as he flew towards his designated ship. He gave one glance back with a heavy heart wracked with grief, anger, and sadness.

"Ria'd... I'm so sorry."

The Kom'rk came into view, and thankfully it was left untouched since he and Ria'd had gone to investigate the Malachor temple. Appius landed on the ramp with a hard thud and ran deep into the ship. Echoes could be heard in the distance, which meant the Children weren't too far behind him. The Mandalorian entered the cockpit of the ship and began to press a series of buttons to whir the engines to life.

"Come on, come on, COME ON!"

the voices got louder with each passing second, and mercifully, the Kom'rk began to ascend into the sky. The ship's AI took over, propelling the ship into the atmosphere. When Appius glanced down, he saw he'd only beaten them by seconds as a mountainous herd of crystalline monsters swarmed the landscape below.

The Mandalorian released a heavy sigh and let go of the breath he didn't realise he was holding. His heart thundered in his chest as he steadied himself in the pilot's seat. Thoughts

entered his mind about how the hell he was going to explain all of this when he got back to The Caelus System. The mission was a success. He had learned more about this new enemy and the madman leading them, but was it worth Ria'd's life? Was it potentially worth the Jedi suffering a fate worse than death, being trapped in a cocoon of crystals with seemingly no way out? Appius didn't think so, and it made his heart heavy with grief and regret. This was his idea, and now someone close to him was paying the price of his actions.

Unable to take the mental strain any longer, Appius' eyes drifted until they closed. He wouldn't wake up until hours later when he arrived back in the Caelus System.

Chapter 5: The Force shall set me free.

Caelus System
Ostara Temple
Meeting Chamber
Four Hours Later

"And that's what happened," Appius exclaimed. The room was dark, and surrounded by a myriad of blue-hued images of the Brotherhood's best and most powerful.

In one seat, taking centre stage, was Darth Nehalem, Grand Master of the Brotherhood himself. The blonde-haired man sat with a thoughtful expression on his face as he mused over the Taldryan Consul's findings. To his right was Dacian Victae who held a similar expression. The Dark Council was spread across the room in various seats. Some displayed visible shock, such as the Scion of Taldrya and Herald of the Brotherhood, Rian Aslar Taldrya. Others such as fellow Taldrya and Regent of the Brotherhood, Zxyl Bes'uliik Taldrya, remained almost passive in contemplation.

"That's quite the tale," spoke Thane Skotos, the Justicar, in his usual monotone.

"It's no tale," Appius responded. "With all due respect, I lost someone very important to me today, and I don't particularly feel like wasting the time of this council by calling an emergency meeting just to tell a bedtime story."

"Regardless, what you say you've discovered is quite intriguing," the Headmistress said. She held a small smile on her face towards Appius, the latter of whom had served as her Magistrate before. "I don't suppose we can organise an investigation into the temple to validate these claims?"

"I can have scouts deployed to investigate," Dracaryis answered, being the Fist of the Brotherhood and commander of the Iron Navy, this was his domain.

"Any crystals found can be relocated to the Aurora Collegium for research purposes," the Deputy interjected.

"And if these '*Children of Mortis*' are still gathering there?" Idris asked, making speech bubbles with his fingers over the name they had given to their new enemy.

"Destroy them all on sight. We can save ourselves a headache down the line," the Grand Master ordered. "Assuming he, of course, speaks the truth."

Appius felt a clawing sensation tense within his body at the accusation, but considering this was the Grand Master speaking, silence was his best friend in this scenario.

"This meeting is adjourned. We will investigate the temple on Malachor and proceed from there. Yourselves and the rest of the Clans are to continue researching the crystals until you receive further orders. Understood?" Darth Nehalem directed at Appius.

"Yes, sir," the Taldryan Consul obeyed like the good little Consul he was.

The communications ended and light returned to the room. Appius had barely had a moment to catch his breath before the doors slid open and the sound of a BB-8 unit rolled in.

"So, how did it go?"

The Consul turned to the Ewok who held a pensive look on his face. The Proconsul's little, stubby arms were folded over his chest as he sat upon his droid.

"Honestly? Better than I thought. They didn't laugh at me, and they are sending a team to investigate."

Teebu nodded in confirmation. Upon Appius' arrival, he had informed the Ewok of everything that went down on Malachor V in excruciating detail before making the call to the Dark Council.

"And how are you holding up?"

The question took Appius by surprise.

"Fine... I guess," the Mandalorian answered, receiving a raised brow from Teebu. "I think I'm still processing everything that happened. Especially to Ria'd. I just... haven't accepted he's gone yet. He was my best friend, I finally had him back in my life and he died right in front of my eyes. It just feels like everyone I get close to just goes away in the end..."

"It is a cruel galaxy we live in," Teebu commented, choosing not to bring up the fact that Ria'd had tried to kill the Consul previously. "But you can't let something like this beat you, Appius. From what I know of your life, you've come back from much worse. You have people here who love and care for you, and who knows? Maybe Ria'd isn't dead yet? Maybe those crystals will keep him alive?"

"I somehow doubt that," the Consul responded with a sad tone of voice.

"Listen, you are clearly in shock. I know you are no stranger to battles and wars, but I think you need to take the rest of the day off," the Proconsul suggested. "Spend some time with

Ankira and Shi'Kar. You have wedding preparations to make, right? I can hold the fort for a day or two if you need it."

Normally, Appius is a fairly stubborn individual, and would try anything to appear strong in front of those he was supposed to lead. Yet, he was tired, beaten down, and a couple of days with the woman he loved and their Foundling sounded damn near perfect right now. It was exactly what he needed. He could then come back and be the Consul he needed to be after some rest.

"Yeah... I think I'll do that," the Mandalorian said as he headed for the door, he turned around to face the Ewok, who held a small smile on his face. "Thanks, Teebu."

"Anytime, Appius," the Ewok responded as the Consul left the room. "Anytime."

END