

THE FATHER PART 3

A fiction written by Appius Taldrya Wight.

Option 2.

Chapter 1: Appius Wight

The Asteroid
Port Kasiya
40 ABY

Appius woke up, and he blinked to adjust to the light in the room. His head was hung low, and his neck ached like it had been stretched for several hours. He tried to move, but his wrists and ankles were bound in place and refused to budge, no matter how much he struggled. The room itself was barren, but stained red and reeked of bodily fluids. It made him nauseous, and his heart thundered in his chest as panic set in. He struggled harder and harder to break himself free to no avail. He closed his eyes, trying to recall what happened that led him to be imprisoned here.

Dad...

Appius remembered. He remembered Eastbrook, he remembered fighting his dad who fought against him with lethal intent. He remembered the shield gate crumbling to pieces as the Children of Mortis invaded his home. He remembered evacuating citizens as the Arroyo District burned. The screams echoed in his mind as his eyes shut. He was a Consul, and Taldryan needed him. He struggled again, but got no closer to freedom. He needed to find his father. He needed answers.

"Don't bother. You are wasting your energy."

The light voice pierced through the darkness, taking Appius by surprise. Footsteps tapped along the duracrete floor as the figure revealed himself, a man with ghostly white skin, black wavy hair, and hateful crimson eyes. Something in the back of Appius' mind recognised him, but from where, he couldn't say.

"Who are..." Appius screamed in pain as electricity coarse through his body. He twitched and convulsed uncontrollably until the agony stopped a few seconds later.

He went limp, sweat forming on his brow. The black-haired man said as he stepped closer.

"I have been waiting for this for a long time."

Appius watched his captor struggle to maintain his neutral expression. The man's fingers twitched at his sides as he glared daggers. If looks could kill, Appius would have dropped dead there and then.

Appius gasped and wheezed as he lifted his head. "I bet you have."

The man pressed on a device in his hand, and Appius' body writhed in anguish. The suffering was almost unbearable, his body felt like he'd fallen into an electrical storm. A few seconds later, it stopped, and he coughed saliva onto the floor. He lifted his head again, and grit his teeth.

"Do you hate me, Appius?" The man asked.

Appius wanted nothing more than to give his captor a taste of his own medicine. Yet, the Force would not answer his call. He tried again to bring his inner darkness to the front, but something blocked him.

"This is a Geonosian Containment Field, the same type that once held Jedi Master Obi-Wan-Kenobi, if the stories are to be believed. Both yourself, and your use of the Force, have been effectively neutralised. "

"You can torture me as much as you want, I won't tell you anything..." Appius said between hard breaths. "They tried on Pendroh-I, you won't do any better here."

"You misunderstand my intentions, Appius. I'm not after information, I simply wish to make you suffer."

The man held up the button in his hand and pressed it again. Shockwaves enveloped Appius again. He grit his teeth, bit his tongue, grunted, and refused to scream. He wouldn't give his captor the satisfaction. He dropped limply again after a few seconds.

"Do you not recognise me, Appius?" The man asked.

Appius panted as he weakly lifted his head. "Should I?"

"Of course you don't. The original me you killed looked much older than I do now."

Appius looked at the man. Had the two met before? Something about the way he walked and talked continued to bother him. "Who are you?"

The man leaned in closer and spoke in a volume barely above a whisper. "Severin Gar."

Appius visibly recoiled. "It can't be... that bastard is supposed to be dead!"

His outburst was repaid once again by violent shocks that wracked his body. Appius' eyes began to roll into the back of his head until finally, the pain stopped a few seconds later.

"He is, or at least, that version of him," Severin began to pace back and forth in front of Appius. "Your actions on Rekkaid ensured the deformation of the Sith Monarchy. I was created as a failsafe to enact revenge on those who were responsible for its downfall."

"You're a Clone," Appius said.

"Correct."

"Then why are you doing this?"

Severin raised a brow. "Excuse me?"

"You are your own person. You could do anything you want. Why are you following the instructions of a dead man?"

"I was created for a purpose," Severin said.

"Then maybe find a new purpose for yourself, one that wasn't decided for you while you were still in a test tube."

Severin looked away from Appius.

"I can help you with that. I can give you a fresh start, a new beginning. I- AGH!"

Severin pressed the button, and Appius let out a tortured scream.

"I have already made my choice," Severin said.

Appius panted and heaved for air, sweat dropped onto the ground from his head, which had gone red and flustered. He could hear his heartbeat in his ears.

"No you haven't..." he said, straining to speak his words. "If you had, you would have killed me by now..."

"Don't flatter yourself," Severin said. "Before long you will be dead. I will be initiated into the Shadowseers by the Seer, and I will begin rebuilding the Sith Monarchy in my image."

"Do you really think they will just let you?" Appius asked. "I'd bet good credits that they'll throw you away like trash the second you stop being useful to them."

"I've been nothing but dutiful."

"Then why haven't you killed me already?"

"Because you are only half of my plan for revenge, only one piece of the puzzle. You were not alone when you killed the original Severin."

Appius went wide-eyed, but his face turned feral, like a switch had been flipped inside his head. He pulled against his restraints like he was trying to reach out and grab Severin. "You leave Ankira out of this! I'm the one who killed him, it's me you want!"

"Yes, but she had a hand in his demise, did she not?"

Appius continued to pull on his restraints. "Don't you dare touch a hair on her-ACK!"

Severin pressed the button again, and Appius felt the pain immediately coarse through him like hot lava was being poured over his body. He dropped limply again and tried to force his head up to look Severin in the eyes, but the agony was too much.

"I have no intention of laying a hand on her myself. I have *other* means of getting what I want."

As if on command, the durasteel blast doors to the room opened. Hard footsteps tapped across the floor, and Appius lost the breath he had in his lungs when he saw who it was. An older, grey-haired, yet still physically fit Human in Jedi attire.

"Dad..." he said, staring into a set of near-identical blue eyes to his own.

"Sterion has been a valuable asset," Severin said, standing at his side.

"Dad, please. What are you doing!?"

"My purpose is to fulfill the will of *The Father*. You are a threat to that goal," Sterion spoke in such a way that it felt like daggers were being driven into Appius' heart.

"Dad..."

"As you can see," Severin revealed a glowing red crystal from within his robe. It hummed and shone brightly in his hand. Sterion's eyes glowed red beside him. "I can be very persuasive."

"I knew it!" Appius exclaimed. "I knew something was wrong, I sensed it back in Eastbrook! My father would never turn against me like this!"

Severin pushed the button, and Appius howled in pain again. Sterion watched the torture with a blank expression on his face, passive and uncaring until Appius fell limp again.

"Father... please..." Appius forced out the words through choked gasps.

"He will not answer you. His mind belongs to the Children of Mortis, and he will serve dutifully until his last dying gasp," Severin said. "I do have one question for you, Appius. Will she come for you?"

"What?" Appius asked through grit teeth.

"You heard me perfectly well," there was a snap in Severin's voice. "Will she come for you?"

"I'm not telling you anything," Appius spat at him.

"Your lack of denial tells me everything I need to know," Severin then retrieved a familiar weapon to Appius from within his robe, his Darksaber-inspired lightsaber. He inspected it, finding a small button on the hilt.

"That button... doesn't do anything," Appius said.

Sterion glanced at him, a look that said *'really?'* "Your weapon has remarkable craftsmanship, if a little unoriginal," Severin then pressed the button on the hilt, and Appius went wide-eyed. "Do not insult my intelligence, I know exactly what that button is for. The Emergency Call Beacon has been activated and when they are in range, they will know where to find you. Sterion, take the weapon and wait here. When she comes, kill her and any allies she brings with her."

"Of course. My chains are unbound. I will make swift work of them," Sterion said.

"No!" Appius tried to pull himself from his restraints.

Severin locked eyes with him. "You have no choice in the matter. You will watch helplessly as those you love most kill each other in front of your eyes. Then, and only when your spirit is broken, will I grant you your death."

Appius glared at him. "Your overconfidence is your weakness."

"Your arrogance is yours," Severin pressed the button again, this time keeping it held down. "At least we have some time before they arrive. I'm going to enjoy this."

Appius twitched and writhed in agony as veins appeared on his skin. "Dad... please... help me..."

He could take no more, and his vision blurred before fading into darkness.

Chapter 2: Darrio Klars

Mandalore

Clan Klars Compound

25 ABY

The heat from the midday sun blasted Darrio in the face as he emerged from the central building. It gave him much-needed relief as he inhaled a deep breath and let it out again. He'd been nervous, of course he had. This was his future, and the future of Clan Klars going forward on the line. He told himself he was ready, his closest friends and family told him he was ready, and now he knew. Clan Klars wasn't a big Clan by most standards, only having two hundred within its settlement, but it was his home, and he wanted to do as best he could for the people waving to him as they passed him by. Movement to his right then caught his attention.

"Well?"

The voice of his overly-excited little brother put a sly smile on Darrio's face. "Well what, Appius?"

"Come on, Darrio! You know what I'm talking about! Did you get it or not!?"

Darrio made a confused look on his face and shrugged. "I don't know what you are talking about."

Appius glared daggers at Darrio, making the older brother laugh heartily.

"How long have you been standing out here?" Darrio asked.

"Long enough that I deserve an answer!"

"Okay!" Darrio hushed him, looking around to make sure no one was watching them. Thankfully, there was not. "Just keep it down."

He took a deep sigh as Appius tapped his feet on the ground and crossed his arms. "Well?"

"I got it."

The next thing Darrio knew, he was tackled in a big hug by Appius. His younger brother might have been fifteen years old, but he had a surprising amount of physical strength to him.

"I knew it! I knew you would get it! You were the best choice for the position! You're now the youngest Alor in the Clan's history!"

"Appius! No one else is supposed to know yet. Calm down!"

Appius let go of Darrio and clasped his hands over his mouth. He went wide-eyed, and sheepishly looked around like he'd been caught in the act of something he shouldn't have been doing. Luckily for him, no one had caught him.

"I'm so excited for you!" he said with a smile that warmed Darrio's heart. "Dad is going to be so proud of you!"

Just like that, Darrio's mood soured. He looked away and slightly hung his head.

"Did I say something wrong?" Appius asked, taking note of the sudden change.

"I'm not sure our father is really interested in what I'm doing. He's too busy with your training," Darrio observed Appius turn downhearted hearing that. "How is that going?"

"Don't change the subject," Appius said. "You know dad cares about you."

"I know," Darrio said. "He just feels really distant sometimes. He's so focused on you, as he should be. It's not your fault, but..."

"But?"

"I find it hard to talk to him."

Appius opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. He shuffled on the spot and kicked a stone by his boot when his face suddenly lit up.

"What is it?" Darrio asked.

Appius looked at his brother, shooting him a knowing smile. "Follow me."

"Wha- wait, Appius!"

Darrio didn't have a chance to inquire further before Appius shot off towards another area of the compound. Even in Mandalorian armor, he was surprisingly quick, no doubt in part thanks to his Jedi training. Darrio kept pace with him until he stopped a couple of minutes later in front of a metal, durasteel bench. His heart raced in his chest, and then stopped when he saw who was sitting there. A physically fit-looking man in Jedi robes rose from his seat and smiled at him. His name was Sterion Wight.

"Hello, Darrio. I trust it went well?"

He spoke in a smooth, calm, and reassuring tone. Yet, Darrio felt anything but.

"Yes, sir. I-"

"Sir!?" Appius blurted out. "Darrio, he's our dad. Talk to him like he is!"

"Appius, that's enough," Sterion said. "I set you a task for training, did I not? Perhaps you should be doing that and I can spend some time with your brother."

"Oh, right..." Appius said, looking slightly rejected. "I'll see you both later, I guess."

Darrio and Sterion watched Appius skulk off until he was no longer in sight.

"That was a bit harsh," Darrio said.

"He'll get over it. He's incredibly stubborn. Nothing keeps him down for long. You know, he keeps going on about wanting to be the next Tarre Vizsla."

Darrio couldn't help but laugh. "That old story? He's still obsessed with it, isn't he?"

Sterion shrugged. "It gives him hope and something to strive towards. There are those among us who are still... uncomfortable with what he is."

"What he is, is a member of this Clan and my little brother. Jedi or not, he's still a Mandalorian and I won't accept anything else."

Sterion smiled. "And that is why you will be a great leader, Darrio."

Darrio blinked. "You know?"

"No, but that just confirmed it for me," Sterion gave him a knowing look. The kind of look only a father could give to their son because they knew them best. "Is something wrong, Darrio?"

"I... erm..."

"Walk with me."

The Father and son left the central courtyard and left for a more secluded area of the compound. They travelled in silence until they reached a set of stairs within one of the outside buildings. Once they reached the top, they were treated to the view overlooking the Mandalorian landscape. A sea of beige with little to no life upon it after the Empire wrecked the planet, but it was what it stood for that mattered most. Resilience, defiance, and a giant middle finger in the face of almost assured destruction. Mandalorians were a proud people, and they were proud of their home no matter what happened to it.

"Your mother first brought me up here whilst I was recovering," Sterion leaned against the railing and stared out into the horizon. "I crash-landed and needed time to recover. It was sunset, not too warm, not too cold, but she lit up like amber in the ocean when I looked at her. Somehow, I knew then that we were meant to be together. She had a kindness and warmth I had needed more than anything."

"I miss her," Darrio said. "I barely remember her, and Appius never had a chance to get to know her."

"I miss her too, but we can't spend life lost in the past, otherwise we will miss what is important and right in front of us," Sterion turned to face Darrio. "Speaking of which, how are you feeling about everything?"

Darrio couldn't look his father in the eye. He stared out into the distance like it somehow held the answers he was looking for. "I'm fine."

"Have you tried looking me in the eye when you say that?"

Darrio clenched his hands tightly on the railing. "I just find it hard to talk to you. I'm nervous about leading the Clan, and I wish I could speak to you about it. You always seem to know what to say..."

He'd almost expected his father to retort immediately, or show signs of hurt, but Sterion remained passive, brow raised with a curious expression.

"Go on."

"I never get to see you anymore, and you are always with Appius. I get why, of course I do, but..."

"It feels like I don't care," Sterion finished for him, getting a nod in return. Sterion placed a hand on Darrio's shoulder. "Darrio, I want you to listen to me. I am proud of you, and I am proud of the man you have become. Tell me, why do you want to lead the Clan?"

The question took Darrio by surprise. "Because I want to make a difference. I want to help everyone here, to make Klars an even better Clan to be a part of. I don't care about my own needs, but I want to make sure the Clan moves into the future."

"And how do you plan to do that?" Sterion asked.

"By caring for everyone's needs."

"You can't please everyone, Darrio. There's always going to be someone that you upset."

"I have to try," Darrio crossed his arms and stood up proud, tall, and filled with determination.

Sterion smiled. "And that is why you will be a great leader. You are nervous because you care, and you want what is best for those you lead. You are young, and still have much to learn, but you will have me at your side, and the next Tarre Vizsla too, if Appius has anything to say about it."

Darrio looked at him, deadpan. "We're doomed."

Sterion burst out into laughter. It was infectious, and Darrio chuckled alongside his father. It was rare to have moments like this with him, and he treasured every second whilst he could. Hell only knew how little time Darrio would have when he became Alor.

"I do have one request of the next Clan Klars Alor, If I may?" Sterion asked.

"Of course! Anything for you."

"Look after each other. You and Appius need each other more than you realise."

Darrio was resolute. He gave his father a determined smile, one filled with confidence. "I swear by the creed, I will look after him."

Chapter 3: Darrio Klars

Vista Del Rey **Port Kasiya** **40 ABY**

"You furry little sithspit!" Darrio bellowed at the blue-hued image of the Taldryan Proconsul, Teebu Nyrrire, in his hand. "You said we could go after Appius!"

To his credit, Teebu remained composed against Darrio's uproar. "This is war, Darrio. Circumstances change, and thus, so must we. Their forces have revealed heavy siege weaponry they are using to attempt to batter our forces and destroy Port Kasiya one district at a time. You are hereby ordered to eliminate them as soon as possible."

"Ordered!? You think you can order me!?"

"Yes, I do," Teebu said matter of factly. "As of right now, you are part of Taldryan's military, as assigned by Appius himself. Therefore, you are under my command."

Darrio began rummaging in his pockets for something. He looked away from Teebu, muttering under his breath.

"What are you doing?" Teebu asked.

"Looking for the frakks I give about your command. Unfortunately, I think I left them all back at *The Playground*."

Teebu glared daggers at Darrio. "I am not joking, *Mandalorian*."

"Neither am I, and neither are they," Darrio gestured to the small group behind him which consisted of Ankira, Aylin, Dasha, Shanree, Zakai, and General Zentru'la. "We said we were going to retrieve Appius, with or without your blessing, you got that!?"

Teebu gave a heavy sigh, and pinched the bridge of his button nose. "I knew you'd do this, so I had a backup plan prepared just in case. You have two hours."

"Excuse me?" Darrio asked.

"You have two hours before I order the Axios to destroy the siege weapons, the asteroid, and all of you inside of it if you aren't fast enough to get out in time."

Darrio's body went ice-cold. His eyes widened behind his visor. "You wouldn't... Appius would never do something like that!"

"And I'd call him a damn fool because of it," Teebu was unusually calm for someone who had practically sentenced them to death. "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. I'm sorry, but I'm thinking of Taldryan's survival, not that of just one man."

Darrio's cybernetic hand balled into a fist at his side. "You are making a big mistake..."

"One hour, fifty-eight minutes and forty-eight seconds left. I would highly suggest getting a move on if I were you."

Teebu cut communications, his blue-hued image disappearing from the device in Darrio's hand. He clenched it, his hand gripping it so tightly that his arm started shaking. Darrio then let out a hellacious roar, and threw the device as hard as he could to the ground. He grabbed one of his Westar blasters and shot the infernal piece of technology as if Teebu was standing in front of him.

"I'm going to skin that little bastard alive and mount his head on a wall!"

Aylin appeared at Darrio's side, rubbing her arm tentatively. "So, what do we do now?"

"What do we do!? We go after Appius," Darrio said like it was the most obvious thing in the galaxy.

"I agree," Ankira stepped forward, arms folded and fists clenched. "I don't care what Teebu says. He's my husband, and I won't leave him to those monsters."

"If Dasha is in, then so am I," Zakai said, sounding as confident as a teenager feasibly could.

Dasha nodded. "I am."

Shanree sighed. "I wouldn't be a very good Master if I let my student walk into danger. *Someone* needs to set an example."

"What about you, General?" Darrio asked Zentru'la, the Twi'lek with perhaps the mightiest chin in the known universe. "Taldryan is a priority client, do you want to risk that?"

Zentru'la looked Darrio dead in his visor like his eyes could pierce through and see the man wearing it. "Wight and I have an understanding. He's a priority client, and he will pay us good credits when all this is said and done."

"We still need a plan," Shanree said. "And the clock is ticking. Do we at least know where Appius is?"

"I might have a way of finding him?" Dasha offered. She looked around the group, and Darrio gestured for her to continue.

She retrieved a rectangular-shaped datapad. The girl was practically attached to the damn thing, and Darrio couldn't remember a time when he hadn't seen her without it. She tapped her fingers furiously upon the screen. To Darrio, it looked like she was performing magic the way codes and symbols appeared on the screen. Somehow, she knew what to do with them.

"That's it! I don't believe it!" Dasha jumped up and down on her feet. The datapad in her hands vibrated in short bursts before a short *blip* sound was heard. "It's him! It's really him!"

Aylin peered over Dasha's shoulders, sharing in the excitement as she beamed from ear to ear. "It is! It has to be!"

Ankira grabbed hold of Dasha by the shoulders. "What is!? Is he communicating with you!?"

"Sort of!" Dasha turned the datapad around to reveal a map of Port Kasiya. At the edge of the Arroyo District where the asteroid had crash-landed was a tiny red dot that pulsed like a radar. "Right there! That's where he is, or at least, where his lightsaber is!"

"Wait, his lightsaber?" Darrio asked.

"Uh-huh," Aylin nodded. "We had an emergency beacon placed inside it when it was made. When activated, it sends a distress signal. I know exactly where it is, the latitude and longitude, everything so long as it's in range!"

"There's no guaranteeing that's him," Zentru'la pointed out, years of experience had proved that if something looked too good to be true, it more than likely was. "This could be a trap created by the enemy."

"Still, it's all we've got right now, and it's better than nothing," Shanree said. "Do we have a plan to get into the asteroid?"

"I have Masakado scouting the asteroid for intel as we speak. He should be back any moment now," Zentru'la said.

"Darrio?"

He looked to the one who spoke to him. Dasha looked up meekly at him.

"What?" he asked?

"Why are you doing this? For Appius, I mean."

The question was a simple one, but the answer was complicated. He remembered the promise he made to their father to look out for each other. He remembered Clan Klars burning around him, the fires and soot blackening the skies as he lay helplessly in the Mandalorian dirt. He remembered Sulla, the young Twi'lek toddler whose soft smiles gave him a ray of hope in a galaxy hell-bent on screwing him over at any opportunity. He remembered losing her in this war, and how his heart broke.

"I have my reasons," Darrio said. "That's all you need to know."

Then, falling from the rooftop landed a cybernetically enhanced Shistavenen. It put the majority of the group on edge, but Zentru'la approached him.

"Masakado, report."

"The majority of enemy forces are moving into Vista Del Rey. The asteroid is heavily fortified, but there are small openings in the rock that a group could squeeze through with enough of a distraction. They have cannons firing upon the city..."

"The siege weapons, we know," Darrio said, getting a glare from Masakado.

"Then that's what we will do. The Vornskr Battalion and..." Zentru'la looked at the golden cylinder attached to his hip and sighed. "The Cohors Praetor will create a distraction. We will engage with their forces outside the asteroid and create a distraction for the rest of you to slip inside and retrieve Appius."

"Do I get to kill something?" Masakado asked.

"If the General's plan works, you can kill as many as you like," Darrio said.

A twisted look appeared on Masakado's face. "Good."

Chapter 4: Darrio Klars

The Asteroid

Port Kasiya

40 ABY

The asteroid itself was a monumental structure. The closer Darrio and the group got to it, the heavier the atmosphere became. Large, blood-red crystal towers had sprouted out of the ground around it, making a short maze to navigate around to find the opening they were looking for. Just as Masakado had said, it was heavily fortified. Truthwarden speederbikes and soldiers littered the area with Shadowseer abominations acting like the big muscle of their army.

"What the frakk *are* those things?" Zakai pointed to one in particular that had its jaw dislocated with jagged crystals adorning its body.

Dasha pressed a finger to her lips. "Shhhh!"

"And that one, and that one, and that one..."

"Zakai, we get the point," Shanree said.

"I'm not kidding! Look! There's one there, and there, and-"

Zakai was silenced when Darrio brandished his blaster and pointed it at the young man's head. "Either shut up, or I'll shut you up myself."

Shanree's hands grazed over the lightsaber hilts attached to his waist. "Put your weapon down. That's *my* apprentice you are talking to."

"Guys, please." Aylin got in the middle of them before a potential fight broke out. "We're supposed to wait for the signal. We can do that, right? For Appius?"

And Sulla...

Reluctantly, Darrio put his blaster away. As much as he hated to admit it, Aylin was right. Fighting amongst themselves wasn't going to get them anywhere. If he was going to work with them, he needed to be more hospitable.

Explosions burst from the ground as blaster fire soared from one side to the other. Screams, roars, and battle cries were heard amongst the carnage. Darrio could make out the visage of Masakado driving what looked like a katana through the skull of a poor unsuspecting enemy. General Zentru'la held his blaster rifle in both hands, spraying plasma into the enemy, backed up by his local soldiers that fought by his side. Alongside them, were the Cohors Preator Taldryae, following every order Zentru'la barked to the letter.

"That's the signal!" Darrio beckoned the group to follow him. "Let's move!"

Amidst the chaos, the small group slipped through undetected until they reached the asteroid's entrance.

"Hey you!" a Children of Mortis soldier called out, taking notice of the group. "Chains Unbo-"

Darrio promptly kicked him between his legs and pushed him over. Ankira then pulled out her blaster and shot him in the face, leaving a small trail of smoke rising from his head as the group entered the asteroid.

"Good shot," Darrio said, though Ankira ignored him and pressed forward.

The Asteroid
Port Kasiya
40 ABY

"Aylin, Dasha, how long do we have?" Darrio asked.

The hallway seemed never-ending, and it glowed the same ominous blood-red as the crystals that adorned the monsters that patrolled Port Kasiya's streets. He couldn't shake the bad feeling that formed in his body. His heart beat faster, harder, and his breathing quickened.

"Erm..." Dasha inspected her datapad. "Just under an hour?"

"Damn it! We wasted too much time planning!" Darrio slammed his fist against a steel beam as they passed it by. "We need to hurry up and -"

"Intruders!" Children of Mortis Acolytes appeared before them. Blood-red lightsabers snapped out of the hilts in their hands. "Chains Unbound!"

Shanree leapt forward, twin hilts in his hand. Silver ignited out of them, and with the Force flowing through him, he engaged the enemy, quickly cutting one down before clashing sabers with the other. "Zakai!"

Zakai responded to his master's command, leaping into the fray, emerald-bladed lightsaber in hand. The Acolyte attempted to intercept him, but his blade was pincered by Shanree, who held it in place with his weapons. Zakai cleaved through the Acolyte before they had a chance to respond further.

"Yeah! That's how it's done!" Zakai said, looking at Dasha.

"Do not get overconfident," Shanree said, placing his weapons back on his waist. "This feels too easy."

"I agree," Darrio said. "There's been hardly any resistance, and what we have been up against has been pitiful at best."

"We might need an escape plan," Ankira said.

Shanree stepped forward "Leave that to Zakai and I. We can secure one of their speeders outside."

"What!?" Zakai bellowed. "Master, I want to stay in here and help!"

"And you will be by ensuring everyone's escape. Stay focused on the task at hand, Zakai. Rather than trying to impress a girl," Shanree's head turned slightly towards Dasha, whose ears pinned back at the comment.

Zakai opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again, he looked at Dasha, then his Master, then sighed. "Fine."

"Are you sure about this?" Darrio asked.

"Shanree gave him a nod. "We'll be waiting. Once you are out, we'll come pick you up."

Zakai took Dasha's hand, giving it a light squeeze. "Stay safe."

"Zakai, let's go!" Shanree ran back in the opposite direction, and Zakai reluctantly followed.

"You too..." Dasha said.

What remained of the group pressed forward using the signal on Dasha's datapad as a guide through the maze of hallways, corridors and stairs. Time was not on their side, something that Darrio was acutely aware of, and he wasn't the only one.

"What do you think our chances are of getting out before the asteroid is destroyed?" Ankira asked the all-important question.

"About the same chance of me getting to meet your kids," Darrio said. He couldn't help himself. Old grudges still died hard.

Ankira stopped in the middle of the hallway, then Aylin, and then Dasha with mortified expressions on their faces.

"What did you just say?" Ankira asked. Yet, there was something ice-cold in her words, a feeling like daggers poking skin.

"You heard me."

Ankira squared up to him. "You leave my kids out of this!"

"Your kids?" Darrio crossed his arms. "Last time I checked those kids were yours *and* Appius', but I guess you're the one who makes all the decisions, right? Appius is nothing more than the breadwinner for you so you can have the family you wanted, a family *you* won't let me see."

"For good reason!" Ankira's hands balled into fists. "Appius seems to think you can change, that you can be better, but I know what you are like. I've seen scum like you before, thinking that their actions don't have consequences so they do what they want and *hurt* who they want without care, like you hurt Appius and everyone else with your drinking."

Aylin tried to get in between them both. "Ankira, Darrio, please. This is not the time for this..."

"Do you know why I drink, Ankira? I drink to forget. To forget my Clan burning in front of my eyes. I drink to forget hearing my father died only to see him years later associated with the enemy. I drink to forget the fact my little brother disappeared for thirteen years only to find out he, like our father, had been alive all along and didn't bother to get in contact with me."

"He had his reasons! He-"

"I'm. Not. Finished!" Darrio hit the wall with each word he said. "I don't care what reason he had. I'm his older brother, damn it! Every Time something, or *someone* good comes into my life, they get taken away from me. So yes, I drink, but I think I have a damn good reason too!"

"Guys, come on! Seriously!" Aylin said, but against Ankira and Darrio, she might as well had been talking to broken droids with the way they were behaving.

"Technically, you're family, right? Maybe just hug it out?"

"I would rather be swallowed by a sarlacc than hug him," Ankira said.

Darrio took deep breaths, trying to fight back the hot feeling coursing through his body. He was like a ticking time bomb waiting to explode. "You don't understand. None of you do, I've been through Hell."

"That is no excuse," Ankira said. "What happened to you was awful, but you forget most of that happened to Appius too. He managed to move forward with his life, so why can't you?"

"Um... guys?" Dasha said standing outside a durasteel blast doors. The beeping coming from her datapad was loud, quick, and consistent. "I think he's in here."

All arguments ceased. Darrio and Ankira refused to look at one another as Aylin messed with the control panel by the side of the door.

"Just a little bit here... a little bit there..." she said, sticking her tongue out at the side of her mouth whilst she worked her magic. "And there we go!"

The durasteel blast doors slip open, and Ankira immediately went inside without a word.

"Hey, wait!" Aylin said, following after her, and so did Dasha. Darrio took a deep breath, fighting back the temptation to turn and leave, yet followed after them.

Chapter 6: Darrio Klars

The Asteroid

Port Kasiya

40 ABY

"Oh my god..." Aylin pressed her hands against her mouth.

"Appius..." Ankira said. "What have they done to you?"

Dasha stood at her side, tears in her eyes, ears pinned back, sharing the same shocked and horrified expression as Aylin.

"And I thought Pendroh-I was bad..." Darrio had to look away and inspect what he could see around him.

The room was dimly light, seemingly like it was the only room within the asteroid that was spared from the colour of the blood-red crystals. It was difficult to see a few feet in front of them, but Appius was lit up in the Containment Field which provided the only source of light in the room. Behind it was a control table with various buttons and dials, likely controlling the prison holding Appius in place.

Speaking of Appius, he hung suspended in the air, sans armor, wearing his black undershirt and trousers. Blue lights wrapped around his wrists and ankles like he was a caged animal. Blood trickled from his face and dripped onto the floor, leaving a small puddle of red. What could be seen of his flesh was marred with bruises.

Aylin and Dasha rushed over to the control panel, tapping away furiously at the buttons and inputs. Then, the blue light holding Appius in place dissipated from the Containment Field and he dropped to the floor. Ankira caught him on his way down, softening his landing.

She laid him down on the ground and supported his head with her hands. She then pressed her fingers on his wrist. "He's still alive, his pulse is good, if a little weak."

Appius moved his head and opened his eyes. "Ankira..."

"Shush, it's OK. I'm here," she took off her helmet and nestled her head against his.

"You got yourself into hell this time," Darrio said. "Don't worry, we are getting you out of here."

"No, it's a..." Appius choked and coughed.

"It's OK, save your strength," Ankira urged him, stroking his cheek tentatively.

"Trap..." That single word from Appius sent the room ice-cold.

Snap-Hiss!

A blue lightsaber blade pierced through the darkness a few feet away from Darrio, Ankira and Appius.

Darrio was taken aback by the wielder of the weapon. "Father!?"

"Father!?" Ankira shouted, shocked.

"Look out!" Aylin screeched as the lightsaber was raised above Ankira's head. She had no time to react, but she shielded Appius with her body as best she could.

The lightsaber descended upon her, but Darrio leapt in the way, taking the full force of the attack as it struck against his armor. Lucky, the beskar plating shielded him, and the lightsaber bounced off of him.

"What do you think you are doing, Darrio?" Sterion asked.

"What you asked me to do!"

Darrio threw a punch at Sterion, but Sterion held out his hand, and Darrio immediately froze in place.

Sterion slowly shook his head. "You always were a disappointment."

He flicked his wrist, and Darrio soared over to the other side of the room. He crashed against the durasteel wall spine first, gasped in pain, and slid to the ground.

"Darrio!" Aylin shouted.

She and Dasha ran forward to help him, but Sterion held out his hand, blasting them with telekinetic energy, sending them flying over to the corner of the room.

"Now, where was I?" Sterion asked.

He turned back to Ankira, only to be punched in the jaw. She had risen to her feet, and Sterion staggered back, holding his blade close to his body. She was unrelenting in her strikes, and she refused to give Sterion any leeway. He tried to strike her with his weapons, but she grabbed his wrist and kicked him in his gut. Sterion stumbled back a few paces, giving Ankira the time to grab her blasters and point them at him.

"Ankira, don't!" Darrio had returned to his feet.

"And why shouldn't I?" she asked, her fingers caressing the triggers of her blasters, just begging to press them. "Because he's your father?"

"Yes," Darrio said.

Appius held out a hand towards her. "Ankira... please.. "

Ankira hesitated, but relented with a heavy sigh, placing her Blasters back in her holsters.

"Big mistake."

Sterion held out his hand, and Ankira grasped at her throat. She was slowly lifted into the air, gasping for what little breaths she could take. Darrio grabbed his blasters and shot at Sterion, forcing him to release her. Sterion deflected each shot, keeping his lightsaber close to him. Each gentle flick of his wrist moved the blade quickly to intercept each shot. Then, with a gap in the blaster's rate of fire, Sterion pulled Darrio towards him with the Force and knocked him down with his forearm. He placed his boot down on Darrio's chest to hold him in place.

The durasteel blast doors opened, and light footsteps entered the room. Slow, methodical clapping broke the silence as Severin came into view under the dim light.

"Very good, Sterion. *The Father* will be most pleased with your efforts," he said.

Sterion remained in place, holding his eldest son in place with his boot. When Darrio tried to struggle, Sterion placed his lightsaber dangerously close to an unprotected area near Darrio's neck.

Severin then addressed Ankira, "Hello, my dear. A pleasure to meet you at last."

Ankira looked at him, having the same reaction Appius had when he first saw Severin. His pale skin and hate-driven eyes seemed familiar, but from where, she couldn't say.

"Who-AAAGGGHHH!"

Severin blasted her with tendrils of lightning. Ankira writhed in pain on the ground before, mercifully, it stopped seconds later.

"You will speak when spoken to," Severin walked around her body like a hungry predator. "To answer the question I assume you were going to ask, I'm afraid you already know who I am, or at least, a different version of me."

Ankira glared at him. If looks could kill, Severin would have dropped dead.

"Perhaps a reminder is in order. Rekkaid, you and Appius, and the original me. The Sith Monarch himself, Severin Gar."

Ankira paled upon hearing the name. "It can't be... he's dead!"

"Indeed he is, I am but a humble Clone, my dear. Alas, I have already explained this once today, and I do not feel like explaining myself again to the likes of *you*. Sterion, kill her. In fact, kill them all except *him*," Severin pointed at Appius. "Let him witness this first with his own eyes."

Sterion's hands twitched, but his lightsaber did not move.

"Did you not hear me?" Severin asked. "I order you to kill them!"

Sterion went wide-eyed, and Darrio could see sweat forming on his brow. It looked like he was fighting against himself.

"Fine," Severin revealed the blood-red crystals from within his robes, the same kind that covered the crystal monsters that attacked Port Kasiya. "Defy me all you want. You *will* obey."

The crystal began to glow and hum. Sterion howled in pain as his eyes glowed red. Because of his pain, Sterion had removed his boot from Darrio's chest and had started thrashing about. Aylin and Dasha came too just in time to see what was happening.

"What the hell!?" Aylin exclaimed.

Darrio grabbed his blasters, hoping against everything his idea would work. He shot at Severin, yet, the blaster bolts didn't hit him, but instead struck the crystal in his hand. It exploded into thousands of fragments, falling to the ground like glittery rainfall.

"No!" Severin screamed.

Sterion instantly stopped thrashing about. He blinked, and took in deep breaths like he'd just woken from a nightmare. Lightning began to cackle in Severin's hands.

"I will not let you escape here alive!"

Before Severin could attack, he was pulled towards Sterion like he was on a tether. The blue lightsaber then impaled Severin through the gut. He gasped, and looked into Sterion's steely, cerulean blue eyes.

Sterion removed the lightsaber blade from Severin's abdomen, and he fell to the ground clutching his stomach.

Darrio stepped forward first. He was cautious, his fingers grazing the trigger of his blasters just in case. "Father?"

Sterion looked at Darrio before deactivating his lightsaber. "Darrio, I'm so sorry... I..."

Darrio grabbed his father and pulled him into a hug. He didn't care about what Sterion had done under their control. Right here, right now, he had his father back. "It's OK, it's not your fault."

Sterion pulled himself away from Darrio and knelt down next to Ankira. Naturally, she recoiled and held onto her weapons for dear life.

"Are you OK?" Sterion asked, unperturbed. "Can you stand?"

Ankira slowly rose to her feet. "I'm fine."

"Good. You are Appius' wife, yes?" Sterion smiled at her. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you. I just wish the circumstances were better."

"Likewise," she said, keeping her eyes on him.

Sterion then approached Appius. "I'm so sorry, Appius. I meant *nothing* of what I said, please forgive me..."

Appius grasped his father's hand and squeezed it tightly. "We have... got to stop meeting... like this..."

Even when moving physically hurt every part of his body, Appius managed to crack a small smile. Darrio smiled behind his visor. That was his little brother through and through. No matter the situation, he could always crack a terrible joke in the most inappropriate moments.

Dasha stepped forward, clutching her datapad in her hands. "Guys? I don't mean to ruin the tender moment, but..."

She turned the datapad around so they could see the timer. It was quickly approaching ten minutes left.

"What does that mean?" Sterion asked.

"It's the countdown before this place gets blown to high hell, which means we better get out of here. *Now.*"

Darrio picked up Appius, not taking any consideration for the pain his younger brother was in. Appius shut his eyes and took deep breaths through his nose. Ankira supported him on his other arm. They left, hoping they'd have enough time to get out.

Chapter 7: Severin Gar

The Asteroid Port Kasiya 40 ABY

Severin clawed at the floor, pulling himself along the cold durasteel as it scraped against his body. He kept one hand on his stomach, the pain burning like it was the molten core of a planet ready to explode. It *hurt*. It hurt so much, but that pain gave

him strength. That pain made him hate, and it was that hate that refused to let him die.

The durasteel blast doors opened, and several footsteps entered the room. Severin slowly turned his head and paled. This was not what he wanted to see. There were two Ascendant Troopers, standing over six feet tall with crystals sprouting out of every appendage, but it was who they were escorting that had Severin sweating blaster bolts. A small, lithe Human woman with a red bandage across her eyes. She was Rose Telsniw, Seer and leader of the Shadowseers.

Severin let out a pained whimper "M-Mistress..."

Rose began to tut. "Dear, oh dear. Your plan didn't work out, did it?"

"I-I haven't failed yet, I can still..."

"You *have* failed, the Taldryan Consul has escaped because *you* were so preoccupied with revenge that you didn't kill him or his allies immediately. You are weak, and you are worthless."

Severin's jaw trembled. "P-Please, I can make this right. I still wish to join the Shadowseers, I-"

Rose let out an ear-piercing laugh. "You!?! Joining the Shadowseers!?! That was never the plan, my dear. You were a tool, a weapon to use for our own ends. Unfortunately, it seems that the weapon has dulled and lost its shine."

"N-No. I can-"

Severin gasped in agony when his body was lifted off the floor against his will. Rose held out a hand, holding him in place, giving no care to his current condition.

"You have outlived your usefulness, Severin," she pulled him closer until he was an inch away from her face. "You are not worthy of *ascension*. You aren't even worth killing. You can rot on the streets of the city. If you die, it's no loss to me."

Severin gasped for air. "I can... deal with Sterion... he's a traitor..."

"There is no need," Rose used her spare hand to reveal eyeless sockets. "*The Father* wishes to deal with him personally."

Bright red lights burst into existence where her eyes should have been. She flicked her wrist, and Severin soared over to the nearest Ascendant Trooper, who caught him and flung Severin over its shoulder. When Rose spoke, it was in a voice that

was not her own. It was deep, masculine, commanding, and *terrifying*. Like it was otherworldly and not of this universe.

"Throw him out onto the street and leave him to die. I don't care where, so long as I never have to see or hear about this failure again."

Severin squirmed and protested on the Ascendant Troopers' arm, but was powerless to stop it. His screams echoed down the corridors until they could be heard no more.

Chapter 8: Sterion Wight

The Asteroid

Port Kasiya

40 ABY

The escape had gone to plan thus far. Appius was slow, rather predictably so given what had happened to him. The fact he was moving at all was nothing short of a miracle. Sterion couldn't help but think how much had changed in a decade and a half. Clan Klars was gone, but his sons had grown, even if they hadn't realised it. Appius in particular now had a wife that loved him and children. He had friends that would come to his aid when he was in trouble, what more could a father ask for of his children?

Children. Sterion remembered Appius telling him on Pendroh-I. He had grandkids, and a part of his heart lifted upon the thought of meeting them. He'd been a terrible father, having been absent for so long, but perhaps now he could make up for lost time and they could all be a family again.

"Come on, Appius. Move faster!" Darrio dragged Appius as hard as he could along with Ankira. "Dasha, how much longer do we have?"

Dasha tapped her fingers across the screen of her datapad. "About seven minutes."

Darrio cursed. "You need to move faster than this! You are going to get us all killed!"

Appius grumbled. "I'd like to see you do better..."

"I will kick your ass out of this asteroid if I frakking have to. Hurry up!"

Aylin moaned and tilted her head back slightly. "Can you two stop arguing for like, six minutes until we get out of here!?"

"Yes, I agree," Ankira said. "And I will kick *your* ass if you hurt him, Darrio."

Darrio turned his head and looked at her. "Is that a threat?"

"No," she said. "A promise."

"Guys, seriously!?" Aylin waved her arms in the air.

Sterion couldn't help but chuckle at the display in front of him. Even if the circumstances looked bleak, there were always silver linings in every situation. He had hope. The exit wasn't too far away, and he could start his life anew, again.

Then, he froze. A cold shiver like a winter breeze shot down his spine, and he subconsciously held his breath. It wasn't just him that felt it, either. Appius had turned his head around to look back in the direction they came from. Sterion hung his head low, he knew that feeling, that feeling of all-dominating power in the Force. He looked at his sons, and everything he thought came crashing down within him.

"What's wrong? Why have we stopped?" Darrio asked.

"You felt it too, didn't you, Appius?" Sterion asked, getting a nod from his youngest son.

"Wait, felt what?" Aylin asked.

"Father, I swear to kriff, if this is some kind of Space Wizard Kark..." Darrio said.

"Go. I'll buy you as much time as I can, get out whilst you still can."

This took the group aback.

"What!?" He'll no!" Darrio exclaimed. "Whatever this is, we can take it together!"

"We... won't lose you again!" Appius tried to stand on his own power, but failed miserably and was caught by Ankira and Darrio.

"Maybe we could fight together, but if we did, none of us would get out alive," Sterion closed his eyes. "I am a tired, old man now. I should have died fifteen years ago instead of becoming part of this monstrous organisation. I can make things right by ensuring the next generations live on."

"Father..." Darrio said.

"Before I go, I'd like to have the chance to say goodbye properly. I think you both deserve that at the very least."

Sterion removed Darrio's helmet, looking into his eyes again for the first time since Pendroh-I. He placed a hand on his cheek. "Darrio, you are stronger than you think. Do not let yourself be consumed by your grief. Find a reason to keep living. There always is one."

Darrio fought back the tears in his eyes before putting his helmet back on. "I will try..."

"Appius, nothing is more important than those you care for most. *Nothing*. I wish I could see your children, but I know you will raise them better than I raised you. Look after your family better than I looked after the two of you," Sterion pulled both his sons into a hug. "I'm so proud of you both. I love you so much."

"Dad..." Appius said. "Please don't go..."

Sterion pulled away, taking in the image of his two sons together one last time. "Go, the Force be with you, always."

Ankira, Aylin, and Dasha prompted Appius and Darrio to leave. Reluctantly, with heavy hearts, they obeyed, with Appius still having to be carried. Sterion took a deep breath. He'd made his choice, and it was time to deal with the consequences.

Lithe footsteps approached from behind him. Sterion spun to face the new arrival. He knew better than most who, or rather, what that was. The image of *The Seer* did not fool him. He could sense who was in control. Sterion grabbed his lightsaber and ignited the blue blade within the hilt.

"You lied to me," Sterion said with hardened eyes.

"I did no such thing," *The Father* answered. "What I told you was the truth, from a certain point of view. It is for the greater good."

"The greater good!?" Sterion held out his arms. "What could be good about all of the death and destruction going on outside!?"

"I told you I sought balance in the Force. I will achieve that by wiping out every faction that is not my own, starting with the Brotherhood."

"And my sons? They were never part of the deal."

The feminine head of *The Seer* smiled, displaying *The Father's* will. **"A necessary sacrifice for my cause."**

Sterion pulled his weapon back in a one-handed grip, and pointed toward his opponent. He turned his body sideways and held out his spare arm in a challenge.

"Are you going to try and fight me, Sterion?" *The Father* asked.

"I will not let you harm my sons anymore," Sterion said, defiance written across his face.

"Then you will perish here, my friend."

Sterion launched himself forward, gripping his lightsaber with both hands as he attacked with a vertical swing. *The Father*, using *The Seer's* body, held out a single hand and stopped it before it could hit. Sterion pulled back and struck again, and again, and again. Yet, each time he did, he was stopped and swatted away.

"You once held great strength, but you have grown weak in your old age, Sterion."

With the flick of a wrist, Sterion careered down the hallway. He backflipped, and rolled to a stop.

"Whereas I am immortal. My life is eternal, my will is unquestionable, and my power is unlimited!"

Sterion felt the pull against his body and soared back towards him. He stopped mid-air a couple of feet from his enemy. *The Father* snatched Sterion's lightsaber out of his hand with the Force, it levitating in the air beside him, pointing at his heart.

The Father chuckled lightly. **"What will you do now, Sterion?"**

"What will I do now? I think the better question you need to ask yourself is what have I done?" Sterion said, getting a confused look. "I have ensured my sons will escape. I may not be able to defeat you, but somehow, *they* will. I just know it. You may strike me down, but what I leave behind will ultimately be your undoing. I will make sure of it."

"We will see about that."

With a final command of the Force from *The Father*, Sterion's lightsaber struck him through his heart. The telekinetic grip hiding him in the air subsided, and he collapsed to the ground with a hard thud.

"Foolish Jedi. Even in the face of death, you prattle your... what?"

Sterion's body began to fade from view until it disappeared completely.

"What is this?"

The Father used *The Seer's* foot to stomp on the remains of the clothes that were left behind. There was no body to be found. That's when he felt it. He had to leave. This battle was lost, for now. *The Father* willed *The Seer's* body to the nearest shuttle.

Chapter 9: Appius Wight

The Asteroid

Port Kasiya

40 ABY

Outside air felt like a luxury when the group broke outside into Port Kasiya. Those without helmets were smacked in the face by the chill in the air, and even then, they felt it under their bodysuits. It was a shock to the system for Appius, and he couldn't stop himself from shivering.

"Where the hell are Shanree and Zakai!?" Darrio cursed. They were nowhere to be seen.

"Calm down. They said they'll be here," Ankira said. She placed her arms around Appius as best she could to keep him warm, a gesture he appreciated, but ultimately did little.

"We only have two minutes!" Dasha went wide-eyed. "What do we do!?"

Shanree and Zakai appeared like they were there to answer the question, the latter piloting the X-34 Landspeeder they were in.

"Come on!" Shanree shouted to them.

"About time!" Darrio shouted back.

The group were about to reach them when Appius keeled over and broke into a cold sweat. It was like he'd been sucker-punched in the gut. He went wide-eyed and pale.

"Zappy!?" Aylin helped Darrio and Ankira prop him up. "Are you OK?"

Appius shook his head. He knew what it was. For the second time in his life, his dad was gone. This time, though, he was certain of it.

"What's wrong?" Aylin tried to get him to speak.

Darrio tried to drag him, but Appius was like a lead weight. "Come on! We don't have time for this!"

Appius, run!

Appius heard his father's voice, urging him to move. It was painfully clear, as if he was standing beside him. With what little strength he had left, he forced himself to move as fast as he could. He fell over into the back of the landspeeder as everyone jumped in around him.

"Ow..." he said as Ankira sat on his stomach.

"Go, Shanree!" Darrio called out, and the speeder bolted in whatever direction would get them as far away from the asteroid as possible.

Dasha checked her datapad. "Three... two... one..."

A flash of light erupted from the sky above, striking the asteroid with the power of a warhead. A thunderous explosion tore it apart, creating tremors in the ground. Zakai had to swerve to avoid the falling debris. When they were finally clear of immediate danger, they stopped and saw the carnage they had left behind.

"Oh my god," Aylin said. "Teebu wasn't kidding."

A large, crimson mushroom cloud had formed from where the asteroid was. It towered over the Port Kasiya skyscrapers, looming over them. Appius was going to have words with Teebu about this when he next saw him.

"Well... we did it?" Dasha said with a small smile.

"Yeah, kid," Darrio said. "We did it."

Chapter 10: Darrio Klars

Arroyo District

Port Kasiya

40 ABY

Darrio had lost count of how many people had come in and out. Many different faces from many different races came and went, looking for the kind of help only the Taldryan Medical Corps could provide. Many came to have their injuries tended to, others came hoping to reconnect with loved ones that went missing during the fighting. Many didn't, though the few that did brought rays of hope to those who needed it most. Darrio was one of those people.

He'd lost count of how many children, in particular, had come through without their parents. All he could do was move them over to a designated waiting area where they could be looked after until more permanent care could be provided for them. The sad truth was most of them were destined for the orphanages around the city. All he could do was wait and hope they got their happy ending. *Manda* knew everyone here needed it right now.

Another citizen tried to push through into the tents, seemingly not understanding what '*wait for your turn*' meant. Darrio stood in front of him, blocking his path.

"Can't push in. You need to wait for your turn."

The man, a Trandoshan that didn't seem to speak a sentence of basic, garbled some angry-sounding sentences at Darrio. He threw a tantrum and got right in Darrio's face. When the Trandoshan raised his middle finger, Darrio promptly grabbed hold of it and snapped it back.

The Trandoshan wailed when it cracked, and Darrio promptly grabbed his head and raised his knee, smashing it into his jaw. The Trandoshan collapsed in an unconscious heap on the ground. All onlookers for the brief scuffle returned to what they were doing, acting like nothing had happened when Violet emerged from within the main medical tent. She placed her gloved hands on her hips and stretched her back. She gave a slight nod of her head towards him, and he returned the gesture.

"On a break?" he asked.

Violet shook her head. "Just getting some fresh air." She then took note of the unconscious Trandoshan at Darrio's feet. "Another one?"

"Yep."

Violet sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "I wish they would stop doing that. We are trying our best to see everyone. A little patience is all we ask."

She snapped her fingers, and Medical Corps personnel appeared with a stretcher to carry the Trandoshan away.

"You are doing a good job, Violet," Darrio said, shocking Violet.

"Did you just... compliment me?"

Darrio groaned. "Don't get used to it."

Violet allowed herself a small chuckle. "Since you are in a good mood, do you mind if I ask a favour?"

"Another one?" Darrio asked. "I'm gonna have to start making notes of all these."

"Very funny."

Violet beckoned for him to follow her into the medical tent. He followed her through the waves of patients receiving treatment and Medical Corp staff doing their job. Even for what was essentially a pop-up hospital, the scent of antibacterial sprays and chemicals lingered in the air. The white fabrics of the tent added to the hospital feel, even if they were dirty and stained.

"There's someone in particular that needs looking after. She lost her parents during the fighting, and I thought you might be a good candidate for taking care of her."

"So she's a child?" Darrio asked.

"Yes, she is."

Darrio sighed, painful memories returning to the surface. "Violet, I'm not a babysitter. I don't want to do this again."

Violet simply turned to him and smiled. "Trust me, I think you'll be very interested in taking care of her."

Violet pulled back the tarp, and Darrio couldn't believe his eyes. There, sitting upon an examination table like how they first met was a small Twi'lek toddler with green

skin and big, beady eyes. One of her lekku was bandaged top to bottom, and one of her arms was covered in burn gel. Her face was marred with scars, cuts, and bruises, but it was definitely her, and she was *alive*.

"Sulla!" Darrio took off his helmet and threw it to the ground without a care in the galaxy as he wrapped the young girl in as gentle a hug as he could. "I thought you were dead... I'm so glad you're OK."

Sulla sobbed quietly into Darrio's shoulder. He could feel his undershirt slowly getting wet from her tears, but he didn't care. He shut his eyes and tried to fight back his tears, holding onto Sulla tighter.

"I need to fill out the paperwork for her to be placed within..." Violet bit her lip, looking for the right word. "Her new home."

"New home?" Darrio looked at her. "You mean an orphanage, don't you?"

Violet scowled at Darrio's lack of tact, seeing the disheartened look on Sulla's face. "Yes. She as well as many others lost their parents. Many can be assigned to other family members. Aunties, uncles, grandparents, but Sulla doesn't have any, or at least doesn't have any on record. She will be assigned to an orphanage until she becomes of age, or she's lucky enough that someone adopts her."

"What do you need me for?" Darrio asked.

"It will be a while before she can be assigned a spot. Most of the children will be placed under military care until they can be housed, but I was hoping you'd be willing to take care of Sulla, just for the time being until she can be assigned a location."

Darrio placed a hand on Sulla's cheek. He looked into her eyes, that begging, pleading face that asked for someone to take care of her and tell her everything will be OK. That's all she wanted.

"It's OK, everything will be OK," Darrio spun around. "I can do you one better."

"Oh?" Violet raised a brow.

"Frakk putting her in an orphanage, I'll take care of her myself."

That caught Violet by surprise. "E-Excuse me!?"

"You heard me. I'll take care of her," Darrio stood up straight, arms crossed across his chest.

"Darrio, whilst the gesture is really nice, and I'm glad to hear you want to help her, taking care of a child is not easy."

"I'm aware," Darrio placed a hand on Sulla's shoulder. "But she deserves better."

Violet couldn't help the warm smile that stretched across her face. "For what it's worth, you two have a really strong bond. I think she will do great with you."

Darrio rubbed the back of his head sheepishly and grumbled a barely audible "Thanks..."

"Do you have any permanent residence? A house, or maybe an apartment?" Violet asked.

"Not really, no..." truth be told, Darrio had been staying at *The Playground*, which had to be Port Kasiya's speediest bar. Like hell Darrio was going to tell her that.

"What about employment?"

"I'm working with you..." Darrio said, deadpan.

"Only temporarily, and only because the Consul said so. What about more permanent forms of employment?"

Darrio thought for a moment. "I'm a Mandalorian."

Violet sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "That doesn't help."

She had a point. Being a bounty hunter wasn't the safest profession in the galaxy for a child to be exposed to.

"Look, there aren't a lot of people with decent homes or jobs right now, so I can't say what the higher-ups will say in regards to the rules in place. The standards are there for a reason," Violet said.

"The higher-ups?"

"The Governess, Quaestor Orainn."

Darrio rolled his eyes. "Frakk the Governess. I'll go straight to Appius. He owes me a big favour, and he wanted to see me anyway."

"Then I suggest you go and talk to him," Violet turned to leave. "Oh, and just a suggestion, Darrio? Try and curb the swearing in front of her if you can. It's bad manners."

She left Darrio alone with Sulla. He scooped the young girl up in his arms, letting her wrap her tiny arms around his neck.

"Come on, kid. Let's go."

Chapter 11: Appius Wight

Taldryan Tower 70th Floor

Port Kasiya

40 ABY

Appius had a lot to think about. With the asteroid gone, and subsequently, their siege weapons that battered the city, a major source of power for the Children of Mortis had been snuffed out. Unsure of what to do, they fell prey to the combined forces of the Taldryan Army, the Vornskr Battalion, and the Cohors Praetor Taldrya. Two of the three were led by Zentru'la, and Appius had made sure to pay him extra for the help he provided defending Port Kasiya, and the part he played in his rescue.

That last part bothered him significantly. Here he was, a Consul of one of the seven Clans of the Brotherhood, a cherished position coveted by many, a position of respect, honour, and duty, and he let himself become captured. He was useless in the end. On top of that, his friends, his brother, and his wife had risked their lives to save him. If he were honest, he wasn't sure if he was worth the effort. His body was still sore, even after time in a bacta tank.

Ankira had reassured him over and over again that it wasn't a fault, that circumstances out of his control played a factor. She said they should be happy they got to see tomorrow with each other. He could take the physical pain, but the feeling of failure in his heart tore at him from the inside out.

What he needed was some time to himself to process everything that happened and think. It was a lot to take in. The attack on Port Kasiya, the death of his father, and his torture for the *second* time at the hands of the Children of Mortis. Severin was found dead in the streets, which did little to help find the answers he was looking for. He cooped himself up in his office and remained there, overseeing the reconstruction of the Arroyo District. Unfortunately for him, there was someone

who refused to let him wallow in his misery. There was also Teebu, who had remained upon the Axios. Appius couldn't blame him, of course. He was doing his job looking out for the Clan. Yet, something bothered him about how easy it was for him to condemn him to death.

Then there was that *voice*. He heard it as clear as day, and part of him thought he was going crazy, but he couldn't stop thinking about it. The old tales of Luke Skywalker talking with the deceased spirits of Obi-Wan-Kenobi and Yoda came to his mind. He had to wonder if such stories were true.

The side doors to his office opened, and Ankira stepped in, sans helmet, but wearing the rest of her armor. "Rausu is asleep, and Shi'Kar is playing by herself."

He smiled at her. "Good. Thanks, Ankira."

She approached him, standing at his side, arms folded across his chest, staring into him with her piercing red eyes.

Appius sighed. "I'll have a set of new armor soon. Aylin and Dasha are working on it, but you know what beskar is like."

"That's not the problem and you know it."

Appius tensed, cursing how well she knew him. He looked away from her and bit his lip.

"I hate seeing you like this," she said a lot softer.

"I'm fine," Appius said.

"No you are not."

Appius couldn't help but chuckle.

"I'm being serious," Ankira said, looking offended. She took one of his hands and held it with both of hers. "Talk to me."

Love was an incredible thing. On the one hand, it strengthened the bond between two people like nothing else in the galaxy, making them more sturdy than durasteel. On the other, it broke down walls and made the most stubborn of men weak in the knees. Right here, Appius fell into the latter.

"I failed," he choked the words out barely louder than a whisper.

"What do you mean?" Ankira asked.

"I failed. I failed you, I failed Darrio, I failed Taldryan. We were attacked and I was useless."

"Appius..." Ankira caressed his hand in hers. "We've been over this."

"I know, I know," he said. "Sorry, I don't want to keep bothering you with-"

Ankira reached up and kissed him on the cheek. It was a light touch, but that gentle contact comforted him in an indescribable way.

"What did we say to each other when we got married?" she asked.

"That we would never let Shi'Kar near a large supply of sugar ever again?"

Ankira laughed. "Well, yes, but I meant the other thing."

Appius took a deep breath and recited the words in Mando'a. "*We are one when together, we are one when parted, we will share all, we will raise warriors.*"

"*We will share all,*" Ankira repeated back. "That includes the good and the bad, even right now. What happened, happened. You can't take it back. All you can do is strive to be better. I know you better than anyone, and you will do what is best. You've never failed me, and you never will, OK?"

"Thanks, Ankira."

He leaned in and pressed his lips against hers. They were only there for a moment before they heard crying from the other room.

Ankira sighed and hung her head. "I swear, he *just* went to sleep."

She was about to go and check on him, but before she could, Appius grabbed her and pulled her into one more kiss.

"I love you," he said.

Ankira smiled sweetly. "I love you too."

She disappeared to check on Rausu, and Appius stared out into the Port Kasiya skyline. It wasn't long before the main doors to his office slid open. Appius didn't need to guess who it was.

"Darrio, we've been over this, can you at least knock before you enter?" Appius asked. What he saw when he turned around, however, took him by surprise.

Darrio had shaved. Gone was the unkempt beard that looked like it housed a flock of tiny birds. He was cleanly shaven for the first time in years. He'd cut his hair, keeping it short, and Appius went slack-jawed at how much he looked like their father.

However, what surprised him most, was the little green-skinned Twi'Lek girl in his arms. Appius blinked and rubbed his eyes to make sure he wasn't seeing things.

"Hello," Appius waved to her, and she responded by nuzzling into Darrio's chest.

"She's shy," Darrio said.

"I can tell. So, go on. Who's the mother? She looks nothing like you."

Darrio was less than amused with Appius' attempt at a joke. "Very funny, Appius."

Appius held up his hands. "I'm kidding, I'm kidding. Seriously, though. Who is she and why are you holding her?"

Darrio took a deep breath. "This is Sulla."

"*That's Sulla!?*" Appius went wide-eyed.

"Yes, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't point at her. You're making her feel uneasy."

Appius relented, putting his arms down.

"She's... kinda the reason I'm here. You wanted to see me, and I need a favour," Darrio said.

"Another one?" Appius asked with a coy smile. "I'm going to have to start writing down all these favors you owe me."

Darrio rolled his eyes. "Considering I helped save your sorry-" he paused for a moment and looked at Sulla. Violet's advice resonated in his head. "Your sorry hide, I figure you owe me big."

"Fair point," Appius shrugged. "What do you need?"

"I need a place to live."

Appius raised a brow. "Why? Is *The Playground* finally done putting up with you?"

"I need an official address. One that preferably isn't a bar that hosts... exotic entertainment."

Appius noted that Darrio was being careful with his choice of words in front of Sulla, which was certainly different from what he was used to.

"That doesn't answer my question," Appius said. He grabbed the drink from his desk.

"I want to adopt Sulla."

Appius nearly spat his drink out. He choked and coughed, pounding his chest to help clear his throat. "Excuse me!?"

"I want to adopt Sulla, and I need an official Port Kasiya address for that damn application form."

"That form is there for a reason, Darrio. Standards need to be met."

"I know that," Darrio said. "I need a job too, one that doesn't say '*Mercenary for Hire under the thumb of his younger brother*'," Darrio said, like it was the most obvious answer in the galaxy.

Appius rubbed the side of his head. "Darrio, you do realise what being a parent entails, right? It's a huge commitment, one that is for life."

"I am aware of that, yes."

"And you want to do this?" Appius asked. "It wasn't that long ago you told me you wanted to get away from Port Kasiya, from Taldryan, and from me."

"Yeah, well..." This time, it was Darrio's turn to shrug. "Things change."

"Yeah. I guess they do." Appius smiled at Darrio, looking out to the city that was being reconstructed in front of them. "I'll work something out for you."

"Thanks. I appreciate it," Darrio said.

"Of course, anything for my brother and soon-to-be niece," Appius waved at Sulla, and this time he got a wave back. It seemed that getting them somewhere to live

had won him some points in her favor. "Got any ideas about what you want as a job? You've been working with the Taldryan Army. I can just... make that official?"

"Works for me," Darrio said. "Mind if I ask one more thing?"

Appius rolled his eyes. "Sure, I get the feeling you are going to anyway."

"How are you doing?"

The question took Appius by surprise. "What do you mean?"

"You haven't been yourself since we rescued you," Darrio said. "Somethings up."

Appius could have ignored the question, told him everything was fine. Yet, just like after his last rescue, he didn't want to. "You'll think I'm crazy."

Darrio scoffed at him. "Try me."

Appius took a deep breath. "I thought I heard Dad's voice telling me to run when we were out of the asteroid. I know he's gone, but it feels like he's still here somehow, you know?"

Darrio slowly nodded his head. The loss of their father still weighed on both of them heavily. It was still hard to talk about it. "You went through a lot. Are you sure your head is OK?"

"Not really, no," the brothers burst into laughter at Appius' response. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I was just hearing things."

The side door to the office opened, drawing Appius and Darrio's eyes. Ankira stepped through, holding a blue-skinned baby boy in her arms. It was Rausu, hers and Appius' son. Little feet could be heard tapping behind her as Shi'Kar appeared at her side, the little violet-haired Pantoran girl ran ahead when she saw Appius.

"Daddy! Rausu is not going to sleep! He's being naughty!" Shi'Kar said with the gusto of a typical energetic three-year-old girl.

"It's fine, Shi'Kar," Ankira told her. "He probably won't go back to slee-"

She paused when she saw Darrio. Ankira too, seemed taken aback by his appearance, not used to seeing him without the grotesquely long beard and heavy bags under his eyes. Then, she had the same questioning and curious look Appius had when she saw Sulla in his arms.

Darrio was transfixed on Shi'Kar and Rausu for a moment, this being the first time he'd ever seen them. He coughed and cleared his throat. "Don't worry, I was just leaving."

Appius watched as he turned to leave. He was about to stop Darrio, but someone beat him to it.

"Wait."

To Appius' surprise, it was Ankira.

"Do you want to meet them?" she asked.

Darrio lit up at the question. "I do."

He walked over to Shi'Kar first, kneeling and placing Sulla on her feet next to him.

"Hello," Shi'Kar waved at him.

"Hi there," Darrio said. "I've been wanting to meet you for a long time. This is Sulla, she's your new cousin."

"New cousin?" Ankira looked at Appius for answers.

He smiled and chuckled. "It's a long story."

He joined them, and for the first time, they were all together as one big family united. Were they perfect? No, of course not, but for the first time since their Clan burned, Appius believed he could mend his broken relationship with his brother, and maybe, just maybe, rebuild together.

Unbeknownst to all of them, little Rausu was focused on something to the side of the group, something, for now, only he could see. The blue-hued veil of Sterion in Jedi robes smiled back at the baby. He watched the scene unfold before him with pride in his heart. He reached out and touched Rausu's cheek gently with two fingers.

"Appius, Darrio..." Sterion said. "Well done. I'm proud of you both."

-END-

