

Core

Mandalore

25 ABY

Clan Klars Compound

Appius hunched over, placing his hands on his knees as he gasped for breath. He could feel the sweat dripping from his brow, though did nothing as it fell from his face. What was the point? The air was so humid that it would make no difference if he wiped it or not. He could feel his undersuit *sticking* to him. He was going to be in desperate need of a shower when they got back to their dwelling.

He managed to turn his head up towards the man in front of him, the silhouette of the beaming sun hiding some of his features. Yet, Appius could see the confident, smug smirk on his face.

"Come on, Appius. Is that really the best you've got?"

Appius *hated* the overconfident, arrogant look his older brother held. Yet, what he despised more was just how outmatched he really was. Yes, Darrio was four years older than him, and Appius could understand that he wouldn't be as proficient as he was, but for the gap to be as wide as it was? It wasn't just degrading, it was *humiliating*.

Darrio's smile seemed to falter when he didn't get a response. He approached Appius

"Perhaps we should call it a day?"

Appius launched a right hook at Darrio's nose when he was close enough. Fortunately for the older brother, his reflexes allowed him to back away before the fist could meet bone. As Appius' arm passed him, Darrio grabbed hold of it, bending it back over his younger brother's head. Darrio placed his spare arm on Appius' shoulder and applied pressure, forcing his younger brother onto his knees.

Appius had seldom felt pain like it. It felt like his arm was being torn from the rest of his body. In fact, that might have been preferable. He bit down on his bottom lip, trying to resist the urge to gasp or scream in pain.

"Do you yield?" Darrio asked. Gone was the playful tone he'd carried up until now. It was replaced with the stern words of a warrior.

Appius tried to summon the Force to take his brother by surprise, but found it unwilling to answer him. The pain was far too intense, his focus wavering with every second. The fire in his arm seemed to burn more and more with each passing moment.

"Alright, alright, I yield! I yield!" Appius said. Yet, Darrio did not let him go. "Agh! I said let me go!"

Finally, Darrio did just that, and Appius staggered forward, nursing the injury on his arm as well as his wounded pride.

"What the hell was that for!?" Appius protested.

Darrio folded his arms across his chest, his eyes hardening. "*That* was for attacking me when I gave no sign we were still fighting. I don't care if you are my *vod*. Step out of line, and I'll force you back on it."

Even through the pain, Appius managed a small smile. "Didn't you always say to take every advantage I could?"

"Is that what this is about?" Darrio asked.

Appius looked towards the ground, staring at nothing in particular.

"Come with me. Now."

Darrio gave no room for argument as he left the training court, taking sanctuary on a durasteel bench that was mercifully under the shade. Appius followed him like a dog on a leash waiting to be scolded. He eventually sat next to his brother, though was surprised when a group of clansmen took to their court for practice.

"They all saw me do that, didn't they?" Appius asked, his tone of voice low.

"Yep," was the answer Darrio gave.

Appius put his head in his hands. "That is so embarrassing..."

"You have no-one to blame but yourself," Darrio said. Appius knew he was right, but that didn't stop the defeated feeling rising from the pit of his stomach. "If it makes you feel any better, you *are* improving."

It was like Darrio could read his mind, or maybe he just knew Appius really well that he could tell what he was thinking just by looking at him.

Appius grumbled. "Doesn't feel like it..."

"You are," Darrio said. "When you started, I had put no effort into defending myself. Fighting you was as easy as breathing. Now I have to put a *little* effort into it."

There it was again, that same confident grin that said '*I'm better than you, deal with it.*'

"Thanks, Darrio. That makes me feel so much better," Appius deadpanned him, sarcasm dripping with each word.

"You understand the basic katas and movements, and I'd say you are ready for more advanced techniques. Your biggest problem is you get frustrated when things don't go your way and you go rogue. Which is fine in one regard, but against opponents vastly better than you, you are begging for something to go wrong."

Appius absorbed the words like a sponge, giving Darrio a small nod in response.

"Now, are you going to tell me what's wrong?" Darrio asked.

Appius wanted to remain tight-lipped, but ultimately decided against it. "It just feels like I'm failing. Father teaches me everything I need to know about the Force and being a *Jetii* but..."

"Let me stop you right there, Appius," Darrio said. "Have you stopped to think that maybe the reason you are struggling with Mandalorian Core is because you are relying too much on the Force?"

Appius opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out.

"I'm not going to pretend to understand the first thing about what our father teaches you about *Jetii* stuff. I don't have the first clue, but you can't treat Mandalorian Core the same way. Look at them out there."

Appius' eyes wandered over to the group of fellow young Mandalorians practicing their hand to hand techniques. Some fared better than others, but at no point were they discouraged by their failures. They kept getting up and trying.

That was the way.

"Do you sense the Force in them?" Darrio asked. "They don't have what you have, but they have a different mindset because of it, and that's the key. You're thinking about it in the wrong way. You gotta learn to block everything else out, and focus on what you are doing."

"I think I get it," Appius said. Darrio smiled at him. "Then why don't you put it to practice?"

Appius looked at the group, the sudden pang of nervousness hit him like a landspeeder, paralysing him for a moment. Finally, he steeled himself, standing to his feet and marching over towards the group with newfound resolve. He would get good at Mandalorian Core, and he would prove himself to Darrio, one way or another.