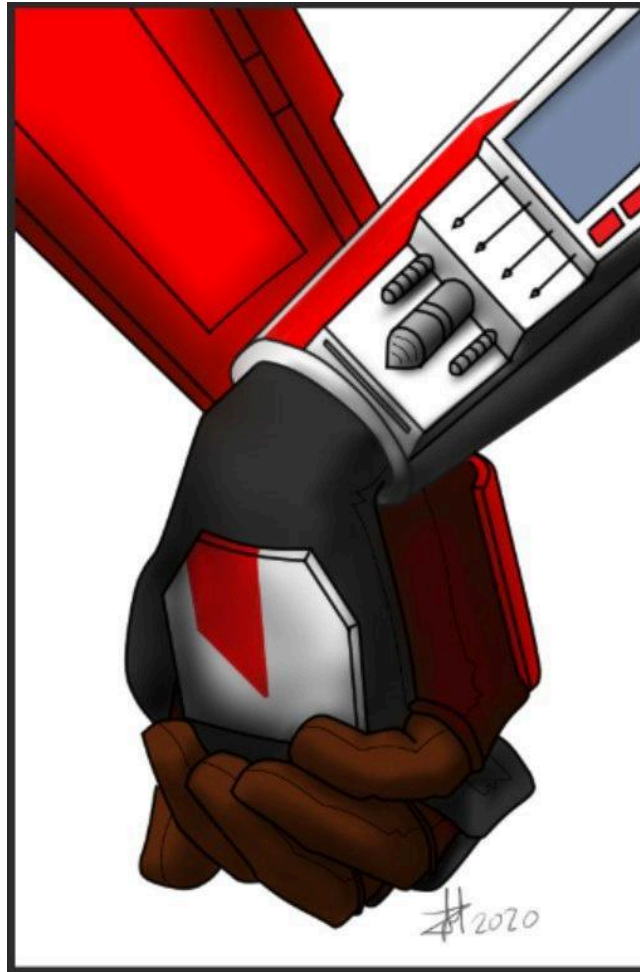




Undisclosed Location Wild Space

Severin Gar was not an ordinary kind of man. An old man with a bald head and long grey beard, sure. But he was more than just that, he was a man with *power*, and that kind of power demanded respect and results which were hard to come by given the state of the galaxy in recent times. Between the First Order, the Resistance, the Brotherhood and the Collective, he knew clawing his way up the ladder of strength and might was going to be a monumental task and there were bound to be failures along the way. As long as he discarded them as they came, he would be in a stronger position. The Monarchy of the Sith would rise again with him as its leader.

The galaxy will soon know the name Severin Gar. He mused to himself as he sat in his private chamber, crossed legged, eyes closed, a cylindrical object floating in front of him in total darkness. The large hexagonal room was barren except for the central platform he inhabited. His thoughts were a whirlwind of fury and chaos. That was the key difference between the meditation of a Sith and Jedi. Whilst a Jedi's was peaceful, cleansing and

otherwise gentle, a Sith's meditation was like a wildfire. Raw, passionate, and full of rage. Everything the Dark Side craved.

The doors to the chamber shuddered open with a *swoosh* as two male officers dressed in black uniform entered the room. They approached the central platform post-haste with the footsteps of someone with purpose and determination as the lights flickered on to illuminate their way.

"My lord we... agh!"

The pair of humans found themselves on the tips of their toes and clutched at their throats. The world around them began to fade as harsh ringing thundered in their ears.

"How many times have I informed this ship to not interrupt my meditation?" the Sith questioned coolly as he rose to his feet. He placed his hands behind his back and spun to face them. They dropped onto their knees before coughing and sputtering.

"What is so important you had to interrupt me? Tarrin? Vespa?" Severin inquired.

"M-my lord, we have received news regarding Zsirion's operation," the first officer, Tarrin, replied fearfully.

"Oh?" the old Sith responded. It was important for their economy that they kept operations running within the outer and inner rims of the galaxy out of the watchful eyes of others. "And pray do tell me how that slave trade is going?"

"My lord," this time it was Vespa who spoke. "Zsirion is dead, and his operation has been destroyed."

They both waited nervously for a reaction out of their leader, but much to their surprise, he barely gave any hint of a reaction.

"This does not surprise me. Zsirion was always full of himself. His pride was always bigger than his head, his ego larger than his ambitions. It was only a matter of time before someone got to him."

The two officers let out a sigh of relief as they released the breaths they didn't realize they were holding.

"I trust Antilus has been dispatched to deal with whoever killed Zsirion?"

Suddenly, the two officer's nerves returned as they shifted glances to one another. Sweat dripping down their foreheads.

"Yes, my lord. Antilus said it was a personal matter but..." Vespa said fearfully.

"But?" Severin repeated back.

"Antilus and his team were killed on Mandalore," Vespa finished and this? This got to Severin.

The Sith's eyes went wide open, the corrupted amber shone brightly amidst the dull grey of the room. He gritted his teeth and growled furiously under his breath. It felt like the room was shaking. Pipes bent and twisted, electronics sparked and steam hissed as his anger tore the room apart. Finally, it all stopped and the Sith Monarch's face returned to its passive glance, much to the horror of the two officers before him who were slack-jawed and wide-eyed themselves.

"And who is responsible for this act of defiance?" Severin asked calmly.

"We have surveillance footage from Utapau! Of Zsirion's operation, my lord!" Tarrin exclaimed as he drew a remote from his suit. Immediately a large holographic screen emerged against the far wall and revealed an image of within the slave traders base. It showed a Chiss woman with short dark hair in almost pure white Mandalorian armor.

"A Chiss Mandalorian? How ridiculous," Severin commented dismissively.

"We have footage from Mandalore as well, my lord," Vespa continued as the screen changed to show a red-plated Mandalorian male, who seemed to be shooting lightning out of his fingers.

"A Mandalorian Force User? How horribly hypocritical," Severin chastised.

"We don't know anything about the man, other than Antilus wiped out his Clan on Mandalore," Tarrin said. "But the woman, we have analyzed her armor, my lord. She appears to be of Clan Jendri. A Mandalorian Clan from Rekkaid."

"Rekkaid, eh?" the Sith bemused. "Typical that they would hide on some backwater planet like a pile of womp rats. Set course for Rekkaid at once and as for those two," he pointed at the screen before them. "Send our best hunter to deal with them."

The officers saluted and quickly left the room to follow their orders.

Soon, the galaxy will see the emergence of the Sith Monarchy. All who defy it shall be destroyed.

He grinned, his yellow stained teeth showing as his flagship set course for the Outer Rim.

Chyron

Caelus System

He panted as he ran for dear life. He didn't dare look back, how could he? One moment of hesitation could lead to his capture. He twisted and turned down the underdeveloped alleyways, his adrenaline carrying him until his body couldn't carry him any further. He keeled over. His chest compressing as he gasped for air. The Zeltron turned and shrieked in terror.

"GAH! Stop chasing me, you freak!" he exclaimed to a Mandalorian that stood at the end of the alley with his arms folded across his chest. "Why are you doing this!?"

"Oh, I don't know. Do the words *arson* and *orphanage* mean anything to you?" the Mandalorian asked whilst forming quotation marks in the air. "Not to mention the ten-thousand credit price tag attached to you."

The Zeltron gritted his teeth, his long black hair covered part of his face, yet he grinned as he quickly drew his blaster from his side. He placed his finger on the trigger, but as he was about to shoot he arm was forced upwards as the plasma bolt fired helplessly into the air.

"What the frakk!?" The Zeltron shouted. The Mandalorian held out his right arm towards him, and it seemed like he was holding his arm above him via some mysterious power. The Zeltron writhed, trying to free himself from the Mando's grasp.

"Honestly, I'm not the one you should be worried about," the Mandalorian stated as he pointed to something behind the Zeltron.

The pink-skinned man turned his head only to be clocked in his jaw by a hard fist that cracked the bone in his face as it hit him. The Zeltron fell unconscious as his body hit the floor.

"Nice, Ankira," the Mandalorian approved.

"*Vor entye*, Appius," responded a woman in white Mandalorian armor with red stripes down one side. The man now identified as Appius withdrew his tracking fob as it beeped rapidly right in front of him.

"Yonan Uspa, set fire to an orphanage to make a political statement. Frakking *hut'uun*," Appius stated as Ankira wrapped him up in a thin tether.

"At least that's one less to deal with. It's a shame he's worth more alive than dead. He doesn't deserve it," Ankira strongly declared.

Appius flicked his wrist as the Zeltron's body lifted into the air. He carefully paced back to the patrol speeder bike the two Mandalorians arrived on and quickly strapped their bounty to the back of it.

Ankira quickly approached her fellow Mandalorian and wrapped her arms around him, putting the forehead of her helmet against his.

"What's this for?" The Sorcerer inquired as Ankira shrugged.

"No reason. I just... *Kar'taylir gar*," she responded softly.

"I love you too," the red-plated man replied. She let him go to mount the bike and he beckoned for her to take her seat behind him. Yet as he did, something felt... off. Like the Force was telling him he was being watched.

On the nearby rooftop, a lone Trandoshan hunter locked onto the bike with his wrist rocket. The targeting reticule guaranteed a one hundred percent chance at a direct hit. He grinned as he launched the deadly explosive towards it.

The Force rang like a klaxon at the back of Appius' mind. The threat of incoming danger in his trained senses was unmistakable. He quickly held out his arm as a powerful energy pushed Ankira away from him. She was so unaware that it took her by surprise as she rolled to a stop as the rocket collided with its target in a mighty explosion.

The explosion still rang in her ears when she got up and looked towards the damaged area. She saw only thick smoke clouds and beginnings of fires.

"Appius? Appius!" Ankira yelled as she moved towards the wreck, "APPIUS!"

As she ran a shot just missed her, which made her stop in her tracks and look around and draw her Westars.

"Show yourself! You coward!"

Her taunt only resulted in a barrage of shots, which she narrowly evaded and returned fire too. She now had a clear idea where the shots were coming from and the bastard was going to pay for it.

Running towards the building she used the various balconies, ledges and ladders to get up to the roof with boosts from her jet boots.

Jumping onto the roof she looked down the barrel of a rifle that the Trandoshan was pointing at her.

"I didn't think it would be this easy to take out two Mando's," the Trandoshan said in broken Basic.

Ankira was glaring at him and replied coldly, "we aren't done yet, *or'dinii*."

The Trandoshan let out a chuckle and that was all Ankira needed. With a quick move she rammed the rifle up out of her way and her other fist connected with his chest, making him stumble away and lose grip on his rifle.

Ankira followed after him and kicked his feet from underneath him, but this time he was ready and rolled away back onto his feet as soon as he landed on his back.

"Little fake mando wants to fight, bring it." The Trando said with what passed for a grin.

If the attack on her *burc'ya* wasn't enough, this really pissed her off now. She attacked him, some connected others got blocked. They both traded kicks and fists with each other.

It didn't take long for the Trandoshan to find his error in taunting her when he felt a blade in his guts and Ankira holding onto him in a painful hold.

"Who sent you," Ankira hissed at his bloodied face.

The Trandoshan sputtered and gasped as small trickles of red flowed from the open wound. With his scaly hands, he tried to grab the Mandalorian's wrist and free himself from her grasp, but as he did so, Ankira twisted her wrist knife into him and forced an involuntary squeal to escape from his jaw.

"Who sent you!?" Ankira repeated, this time more forcefully.

"Wait! You're Mandalorian, right? Your code... it demands honour. I'll tell you everything you want to know, just please don't kill me! Deal?" the Trandoshan pitifully pleaded. Ankira didn't say anything at first, truthfully she wanted nothing more than to end him right here right now. His cowardice disgusted her.

"Fine, deal," she finally answered as she pulled the knife out of the lizard man's gut with so much momentum it caused the Hunter to stagger back a few paces. Immediately afterwards, Ankira fired the grappling line as the nearly invisible tether wrapped around the Hunter like he was cattle ready for the slaughter. She yanked hard, and the Trandoshan quickly found himself on his back after landing on his butt with a hard thud. Ankira cut the tether and tied it to a nearby post before quickly closing the distance between them.

"What are you... AAAAAGGGHHH!"

She booted the Hunter as hard as she could with her left foot as his body rolled off the edge of the building they were standing on. Their attacker dropped several floors until coming to a sudden stop just a few feet from his head hitting the concrete. He bounced back up briefly, the tether acting like a bungee before he dropped back down to a stop, upside down, a few feet from the ground.

Ankira kept her part of the bargain. He wasn't dead, but she sure as hell wasn't going to let him get away that easily. She would deal with him momentarily but right now, she had someone else on her mind. Her heart pounded in her chest as she raced back down the steps of the building as she used her jet boots to propel her over the gaps the Hunter and her covered in their fight. She quickly made it back to the smoke and ruins of the bike. The flames still flickered as the heat reached through her *beskar'gam*. The stench of smoke and burning oil was nauseating but she pushed on and slowly made her way around the wreckage.

"Appius?" She asked, her voice barely louder than a whisper. The lump in her throat stopped her from speaking any further. The feeling of dread took over her. Her arms, chest and legs went numb as she expected the worst. Her breathing became more and more ragged until finally, she saw the man she was looking for and let out a gasp.

There, standing against the nearby wall was her *burc'ya*. His armor was torn to shreds. The chestplate itself torn in two. His undershirt and trousers had several rips and he's in them, covered up by a myriad of light bruises and cuts. His helmet's visor was smashed and revealed just a single blue eye behind it, yet he stood there, clutching his right shoulder.

Appius looked to Ankira, then the flaming bike, then finally the sorry state of his armor before glancing back to the Chiss Mandalorian.

"Aylin's going to frakking kill me..." he declared to her, trying to hide the twinges of pain he was in behind an obvious attempt at humour.

"Not if I do that first... You scared the hell out of me," she said with a mixture of worry and relief that he was still in one piece.

"*N'eparavu takisit*" Appius said as he pushed himself from the wall.

Ankira quickly moved up to him as she saw the slight wobble in his balance and held him close, "Don't force yourself too much."

"Don't worry, I will be fine."

Ankira frowned at him but said nothing, instead she walked with him towards the Trandoshan. He hung there, upside down squirming as a fish trying to get free.

"What?!" The Trandoshan yelled in surprise, "Impossible!"

"I see we have a little lizard," Appius said menacingly as he stepped closer and wiggled his fingers. "Do you know what lizards do if you zap them?" He said as he glanced towards Ankira, the grin visible in his eye.

"No! Wait!" Squirmed the Trandoshan, "she promised to spare me."

"For information," Ankira nodded and added, "We made the deal though. So I suggest you start talking and I'll keep my *burc'ya* calm."

He looked nervously at Appius and gulped, "Ok, I... I will tell you what I know, but don't shock me!"

Appius stood there, holding his hand up where arcs of electricity were dancing. He stopped when he saw Ankira glance at him and crossed his arms in front of his chest, trying to hide a wince of pain.

"Now, speak up," Ankira told him.

The Trandoshan glanced back and forth between the two Mandalorians. His wound hurt more than he could say, but the adrenaline within him kept it at bay as fear for his own life took over.

"My name is Travdon Ijgo. I was hired by the Sith Monarch to hunt you down and kill you," the Trandoshan, now identified as Travdon, spoke quickly.

"What the hell is a Sith Monarch and why is he after us?" Ankira inquired as she looked to Appius. If anyone had any idea what a Sith Monarch was, it was a Force user. However, the Sorcerer simply shrugged. He had no idea about it himself. The closest he could think of was Grand Master Cantor himself, leader of the Brotherhood. But then why would he have any quarrel with two lone Taldryanites? It didn't add up.

"Do the names, **Zsirion** and **Antilus** ring any bells to either of you?"

Suddenly, the area around the two Mandalorians seemed to freeze as everything went ice cold.

"They worked for the Sith Monarch. He's a very powerful man and he's *not* very happy with either of you," Travdon stated in a mocking tone, a visceral grin plastered on his face. "He's a secretive man, a resourceful man too, and he knows who you are, where you live, knows how to run a secret empire and..." he paused as his eyes glossed to Ankira. "he knows where you are from."

Ankira went wide-eyed behind her helmet as Appius dropped his arms by his side as he clenched his fists and gritted his teeth through the twinging in his shoulders and ribs.

"You don't mean..." the Sorcerer stated through gritted teeth.

"Clan Jendri of Rekkaid," the Trandoshan spat and sputtered between gasps of pain. "I imagine they will see the Monarch very soon."

Ankira's jaw went slack. No-one should have known about their location. How did they find out!?

"How long until he arrives on Rekkaid?" Appius demanded.

"He's on the other side of the galaxy right now... I'd say it will be a few days."

"Then that gives us time," Appius declared. "And as for you..." he finished as sparks of electricity jettied between his fingertips.

"Wait! She said she'd spare me!" Travdon protested wildly.

"*She* said she'd spare you. I, on the other hand, made no such deal. Sorry, Travdon. But this is the way," the Sorcerer stated boldly as tendrils of white and blue enveloped the lizard man as the agony forced him to breathe his last.

When Appius turned around he saw that Ankira was at the end of the alley typing away at her vambrace, hoping to send out a message towards her *aliit*, but the signal wasn't strong enough. He walked up to her, trying to hide the pain in his body and saw her sigh in defeat.

"Ankira?"

She spared him a glance before looking back onto her vambrace, trying again to send the message, but failing again.

"We need to warn them, we need to make sure they have a chance, we need..." The panic was painfully noticeable on her voice. She didn't want to lose her *aliit* because of this, they had nothing to do with her actions.

"Ankira," Appius said softly as he wrapped his arms around her, "Focus. We are going to get these bastards and keep your *aliit* safe."

"But... we don't have much time. You don't have any spare armour. Appius, we need to get back to base."

Appius looked into the street. There were only a few small speeders about that couldn't carry both of them.

"We will get back to base. We just have to confiscate those," he said as he walked towards them. Fiddling a bit with the controls he was able to start them.

"There! Now hop on and let's get back."

He didn't have to tell her that twice. Both of them jumped onto the speeders and bolted off towards base. They had a lot to arrange and not a lot of time.

Along the way Appius tried to connect his wrist communicator to his personal-use shuttle. He barely expected anything. His armor was in tatters so it stood to reason that his equipment would be far from usable too.

He tried the first time but got nothing. Yet, Appius was nothing if not persistent. He tried a second, a third and finally fourth until a painfully high pitched and shrill voice answered back.

"Master Quaestor, sir. To what do I owe the pleasure today?"

"Spinky, I don't think I've ever been so happy to hear your voice!" Appius called out. "Get the ship ready for immediate launch. Myself and Ankira will be there shortly."

"Y-yes sir. Right away, Master Quaestor, sir."

The droid immediately cut communications. The nervous tone indicated that Appius' *companion* still sent a chill through his circuits.

The pair of speeders quickly arrived at the Chyron Space station, a usual venue for Taldryanites coming and going from the moon of Perune as well as Civilians on their travels. The moment the speeders entered the large, airy venue the stench of oil and electrics entered their nostrils immediately, the bright lights making their retinas shrink for half a second. It was a place they were used to. The buzzing of machinery, the clanging of metal upon metal was all background noise to them now.

They reached the area privately reserved for members of Taldryan as a pitch black Upsilon Class Shuttle came into view. Both Mandalorians ground their speeders to a halt and ditched them out in the open. Whoever tended to the space could deal with it themselves and if they couldn't? Well, damn them to hell! They had more important things to worry about right now.

Appius and Ankira quickly ran up the ramp, of which a beige pilot droid was waiting for them.

"Ah, Master Quaestor, sir. To where do I owe the pleasure of..."

"The Rekkaid system, Spinky. And no detours, *or else*," Appius interrupted, making it perfectly clear to the droid that he wasn't tolerating any of his usual nonsense today.

"But Master Quaestor, sir. I do love the path along the way, and Rekkaid is so beautiful I... *eeep!*"

The droid halted his speech at once when Ankira drew one of her Westar's upon him.

"Rekkaid, now, *beskar'ad*," Ankira ordered successfully as Spinky retreated back into the ship. The Mandalorians followed suit and it didn't take long for the whirl of the engines to come to life and lifted the ship off the ground as the craft ascended out of the Chyron atmosphere.

A short time later.

Ankira sat in the living quarters of the ship. They'd used it so often now that Appius made a habit of keeping supplies and equipment on board, including spare sets of his armor. Naturally, she fondly called it their *base* of operations.

Despite this, she was nervous, fidgety and unable to sit still for long periods of time. Even her usual game of Dejarik she used to distract herself was no use. She kept trying to reach Rekkaid but time and time again she got nothing but static.

"Come on..." she muttered under her breath as for the fifth time she failed to get through.

"*Haar'chak!*" She declared as she threw the damn device against the wall and put her head in her hands. Her stomach turned and twisted as her heart pounded. She forced herself to take deep breaths. It was unlike her to be in this kind of state. She was supposed to be *all work, no play. Not all worry, no steel.*

Appius had a bigger effect on her than she realised. She turned as the nearby door opened as the man in question entered the room. He still looked like an absolute mess and the lingering smell of the explosion from earlier still clung to him.

"I spoke to Spinky, we should arrive on Rekkaid in the next twenty four hours. I've contacted Ektrosis and Tavros and told them where we are. I'm sure they will be fine without us for a

few days," he informed her, but she didn't respond with words, but with a gentle nod of her head.

"Right, well... I'm going to shower and get changed into my spare *beskar'gam*. You ok?" he asked.

"I'm fine," Ankira answered quietly to which the Force User raised a brow. He knew something was up and he knew exactly what it was. It was the exact same feeling he had when he was on his way back to his own *aliit* following their destruction. Regardless, he decided to leave her for the time being, confident that she would open up in her own time.

30 minutes later

Appius was taking longer than she expected. She expected it to be a quick shower and change into his armor. No more than five, maybe ten minutes tops. She didn't want to be alone right now and she ran out of distractions to keep her mind occupied. She'd tried to contact her *aliit* time after time but each failed attempt made her feel worse and worse until eventually she stopped, unable to take it anymore.

She made her way to check on him. Maybe his injuries were worse than he let on. She knocked on the door with gentle taps from her knuckles.

"Appius?" She called out from the other side. She gave him a few moments to answer but when nothing came, she pressed the release on the door and saw exactly what was taking him so long.

Her suspicions were correct. He sat on a makeshift bed, his lower half dressed in his *beskar'gam* whilst his upper half was topless, and whilst normally this might have caused the Chiss Mandalorian to break out into a blush brighter than the twin suns of Tatooine, she instead caught sight of his shoulder. The skin was ripped clean from it, almost down to the muscle and it looked horrifying. Red, marred and mangled.

"*N'eparavu takisit*... this is taking... a lot longer... than I thought it would," the Human commented between pained gasps. He'd clearly showered, though sweat ran down his face. He placed his hand on the wound and closed his eyes before taking deeper breaths. Right in front of the Chiss' eyes it seemed as if some of the skin grew back like an act of magic. Yet as soon as it started, it stopped again just as quickly.

"*Haar'chak*," Appius swore. "I'm not as... good at that as I used to be."

Ankira remained, watching him for a moment before quickly leaving the room. When she returned, she was holding a small medical balm in her hands.

"Ankira, you don't have too..."

"Shut up," the Chiss interrupted in a scolding manner. She put some of the soothing cream into her hands and gently placed them on the wound. Appius recoiled and grunted slightly from the burning sensation it created but held firm and let Ankira continue.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked with a hint of hurt in the way she spoke.

"You have enough on your mind," Appius responded bluntly. The two fell into silence again. Appius looked to the woman he loved, her helmet discarded when the ship left and made it so he could gaze into her shining red eyes. To him, they sparkled brighter than any crystal in the galaxy. She gently rubbed his shoulder and made sure not to apply too much pressure.

"Don't ever keep something like this from me again," Ankira finally said as she finished with the cream.

"Ankira..."

"Not. Ever," she said as she looked back at him. He could see it now. The water beginning to form in her eyes threatened to fall down her face. He smiled at her and nodded his head as she sat down beside him.

"How did you do it?" She suddenly asked.

"Get blown up?" Appius inquired. "This is nothing, you should see what Dasha did when I first met her. I counted seventeen before..."

"That's not what I meant," Ankira interrupted. "How did you... your *aliiit*... when..."

"I didn't," Appius stated bluntly. He could see now where she was going with this.

"I just... What if we are too late? I can't..."

"We aren't too late. At least I don't think so," the Force using Mandalorian reassured gently.

"How do you know?" Ankira asked. She needed something, anything more than just words to feel better. Appius sighed as he thought about how to explain it.

"It's hard to put into words but... When I was on my way to Mandalore, I could feel it through the Force like it was warning me of what was to come. The pain, the suffering, the death as one by one my *aliiit* were slaughtered like cattle. It was like a scream at the back of my mind that wouldn't end. We are on the way to Rekkaid now and I don't feel anything like that, at least not yet, everything is quiet and nothing more than a whisper in the galaxy. That's how I know."

Ankira stared at him for a moment before nodding slightly and looking at her hands.

"I don't know what I would do if I lost them," she said softly, "It's my fault they are after them now."

Appius shook his head slowly, "It isn't." He wanted to say more, but couldn't. He had asked her help on the first mission and it all led to this. He sighed and that made him wince. Ankira glanced at him, worry was painted on her face.

"We will get through this, just like before and in the future," Appius said with a smile and ran his fingers over her cheek. "We got this."

Ankira held his hand and nodded, "We will."

It didn't take her worries away, but he was right. She couldn't let the worry overtake her judgement and vigor. She would do anything to make her *aliit* proud and protect them as everyone has been brought up to do.

"I guess I should tell you a few things about my *aliit*." Ankira began softly and took out a small holodisk. When she activated it, it showed a picture of two people in full beskar'gam in nearly the same design as she wore. There was a big moose-like creature behind them, fully packed with a variety of boxes, weapons and tarps.

"These are my *buir*," She said as she held out the holodisk towards him, "Mirta and Reeza Irr."

Appius took the holodisk and looked at the picture, "looks like they are about to leave."

She nodded, "The early *aliit* Jendri lived in one place, but over time they found out it was better to live as nomads. There are a few places they return to each time that are important to us."

Appius listened to her and nodded to let her know he was listening.

She smiled softly as she looked back at the picture, "My *buir* taught me everything and the *aliit* trained us for everything that might come at us. Even though we are only with twenty five *Mando'ade* we have been successful in surviving the harsh lands of Rekkaid and the fools that tried to attack us when they wanted rare minerals." She chuckled softly. "*A/or* Irk'aidis showed them each time that they shouldn't mess with *aliit* Jendri. But... now that there is a *darjetii* on the way towards them..." she shook her head slowly and sighed, "There was a group of jetii on Rekkaid a few years ago. They were adamant that we were hiding something from them. A fight broke out and that is when I got cut down by one of them. He thought he had won, but I had enough power left that I could shoot him before passing out."

She remained silent for a moment. "When they are in one of the bigger locations they travel too I still have contact with them, but now I can't, which is a bit worrying."

"When you say *cut down*, do you mean..." Appius started talking but couldn't finish the sentence. Thankfully, he didn't need to. Ankira clarified for him by grabbing his hand and tracing his finger along her abdomen up to her left breast. He knew what that scar was and how large it was as suddenly, a hard knot formed in his gut.

"Why and how in the hell did you fall in love with me, then?" he gave a nervous chuckle, though the question had sincerity behind it.

She smiled softly, "because you are a Mandalorian and nothing alike to those *jetii*... and we," she shrugged slightly, "*Burc'ya vaal burk'yc, burc'ya veman.*"

"A friend during danger is a true friend..." Appius repeated back to her in basic. "I think we are very much past the friend stage, though," Appius said sweetly as he took her hand in his own. His fingers wrapped around hers and he gently massaged the back of her hand with them. Ankira rested her head against his good shoulder and let out a deep sigh to let go of the tension she didn't realize she was holding.

"I should keep the Force to a minimum, shouldn't I?" Appius asked quietly. Ankira didn't answer at first, how could she? Her *aliiit* weren't the biggest fans of those who wielded the Force. *Jetii*, *Darjetii* or otherwise. Her *buir* especially despised them after what they did to Ankira herself. *Manda* only knew how they were going to react to him, to them together. Granted they had bigger things to worry about, but it still made them both skittish at the thought.

No, Ankira told herself internally. He was hers and she was his. Regardless of their reaction, it didn't change anything. *She* knew he was different, and that was all that mattered. If her *aliiit* didn't accept it then that was their problem.

"I'd say just at the start. Just until they get to know you like I do. You'll see. They'll come around," she said as she squeezed his hand. She grabbed the back of his neck with her spare hand and pulled his head towards hers until their lips locked together. As they pulled away they looked into each other's eyes, blue and red met together and they smiled at each other. Regardless of what was to come, for this one moment they had each other.

Suddenly, the pair were startled when Ankira's communicator started up making a series of static noises ranging from high pitched to shiny and finally...

"*Su cuy'gar?*"

Ankira couldn't believe it, her eyes went wide. And she mentally pinched herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming. Contact, they'd made contact with her *aliiit!*

Undisclosed Location Outer Rim

Severin Gar was a patient man, but even his patience had its limits. Too long had the Sith Monarchy lived in the shadows. Too long had they run like prey from the larger factions of the galaxy and it made his blood boil and burn. It wouldn't be long now until they could finally reveal themselves to the galaxy. Everyone would kneel, or be destroyed, just like these Mandalorian Clan's that defied him. He would make an example out of them.

"My lord." A Twi'lek woman approached the Sith on the bridge of his command ship and presented him a hearty salute.

"Yes, Captain?" The Monarch coldly asked.

"We are ahead of schedule, my lord. We expect to arrive at Rekkaid in the next forty-eight hours," she replied with the tone of a true Loyalist.

"Very good, Captain. As you were."

The Twi'lek gave one last salute before disappearing back to her station. Severin smirked to himself, his old amber eyes flared like fire, as soon they would know the might of the Sith Monarchy.

Ankira sighed in relief when she heard the greeting. So far they were alright.

"Su cuy'gar, Mirta. I'm so glad to hear your voice."

"Ankira? Something wrong?" Mirta asked.

"Yes, we got a problem and they are heading for the *aliiit*. You need to warn them that an attack force is on the way and they are out to kill *aliiit* Jendri. There may even be a *darjetii* among them."

"What?!" The woman exclaimed, "Are you sure about this?"

"Yes, *buir*, we got the information first hand," Ankira said, trying to hide the worry from her voice.

"I will warn the *alor*. Stay safe, Ankira."

"You too, Mirta. This is the way."

They broke the connection and only the humm of the engines was left around them. It was now up to her *aliit* to prepare themselves against the incoming attack. At least now they had been warned and they might stand a chance.

She looked up at Appius who nodded at her, "They have one step ahead now."

"I hope we get there before they do so we can help them."

"I'm sure we will, Spinky is taking a straight route and they were at the other side of the galaxy."

She nodded slightly and then looked at the rest of his armour, "I think you will need more layers if you want to stay warm there."

"But I got you to stay warm," Appius said with a smirk.

Ankira chuckled and shook her head, "You are warmer than I am. I hope you have some cold weather outfits here."

"There should be in the storage room," Appius said with a nod.

"I guess... there is not much else we can do now..." Ankira said and a silence fell between them.

Outer Rim

Rekkaid

The Following Morning

If there was one thing Clan Jendri of Mandalore were, it was efficient. Being the small Clan that they were, it didn't take long for the entirety of Jendri to unite together. Though they were a small group, they were still Mandalorian and Mandalorians were, after all, notoriously difficult to kill.

The moment communication with Ankira ceased, her *buir* quickly informed *Alor* Irk'aidis who readied the group towards the nearby mountain pass. If there was one advantage to being a nomadic group, it was that they knew the lay of the land better than any native creature on this planet. The *Alor* was a smart and experienced man. As a younger Mandalorian he fought with the Rebellion against the Galactic Empire, his bravery granted him the right to

form his own Clan. A Clan to set an example of family and honour, not one that depended on blood.

Aliit ori'shya tal'din.

Family is more than blood. He took that to heart, as did the rest of the Jendri. That's why they were unique, and perhaps why there were only so few of them still. A small boy dropped into the snow beside the white bantha's the Clan kept with them at all times. They were versatile animals, and well suited to the labour and harsh terrain the planet presented to them. All their supplies were carried by them, they provided warmth with their fur and food with their meat, and a source of credits that could be sourced to the rest of the galaxy. It was a niche market, but it was one Clan Jendri thrived in.

"There you go," the *Alor* said reassuringly as he lifted the small boy up and by his arm and placed him gently back on his feet. He knelt down in front of the small Mandalorian, his own *beskar'gam* shining against the snow in a sparkling, near perfect white.

"Are you ok?" The older man asked.

"Yes, *Alor*," the boy answered back.

"Good. Keep going, *adiik*. The mountain pass is not too far away now."

The boy nodded and smiled warmly at the old man before running off to find his *buir*. The child was only one of two that Jendri had, and it was paramount they were protected at all costs.

"Mirta, Reeza. A word, *gedet'ye*," Irk'aidis requested as he beckoned the two Mandalorians towards him. Their *beskar'gam* glistened the classic Jendri white with red stripes, only slightly covered by the bantha fur coat they covered themselves with for warmth.

"Yes, *Alor*?" The man spoke on their behalf.

"Knowing Ankira as well as you do, how much danger are we actually in?"

Ankira's *buir* glanced at each other. Six years. Six long years is how long it had been since they last saw her. They spoke regularly of course as tales of her escapades across the galaxy continued to make them proud and bring honour to their clan.

But six years is an awfully long time...

"I trust her, *Alor*," Mirta then declared brazenly. "If this wasn't serious she wouldn't have contacted us. I've sent her our coordinates, she should be here with us soon and you can ask her for yourself. "

Irk'aidis shuffled his feet in the snow and turned to the side. He glanced skyward before giving his answer.

"I hope what we have is enough, for all our sakes," the Clan leader spoke ominously.

"*Alor!*" Cried one of the Jendri Clansmen. "Up there! On the hill!"

The Mandalorian Clan remained on edge. Was this it? Was this who was coming after them? They readied their weapons as blasters, explosives and slugthrowers alike were brandished in quick succession.

To their surprise, it was not an enemy that had come before them. What descended down towards them was a woman wearing white Mandalorian armor with red stripes down the side of it, the mark of the Jendri. She was one of their own, wearing a wren inspired helmet to complete the set. Alongside her was a man that stood out like a sore thumb against the snowy, mountain terrain. With a red *beskar'gam* with a lightning bolt upon his chest, he looked like a giant target out in the open, especially with the brown cloak covering him, no doubt keeping him warm.

"Ankira..." Reeza asked, stunned to see her again after so long. He knew it was her, somehow. He just knew.

The woman in question wanted to respond back, to say hello to her *aliit* again after so long. But you know what? She threw the formalities right out the window as she broke into a sprint, or as good a one as she could muster in the snow and tackle-hugged her *buir* before they had a chance to say anything else.

It took a moment for Reeza to react, but he then folded her in a tight hug. There was laughter between the two of them. Mirta walked up to them and held out her hand to help them up.

"Ankira, *su cuy'gar*," Mirta said as they got up and hugged her tightly.

Su cuy'gar, Mirta," said Ankira and returned the hug.

Alor Irk'aidis stepped forward and greeted her with a nod, "*Su cuy'gar*, Ankira." He glanced over towards Appius who had been standing a short distance away. "Who is your Mandalorian friend?"

Ankira waved Appius over, "That is Appius Wight. Together we found out that they are planning an attack here."

Appius walked up to them and stood next to Ankira and nodded a greeting towards Irk'aidis. Mirta gave a curious glance between the two of them and smiled.

"Appius, this is *Alor* Irk'aidis and these are my *buir*, Mirta and Reeza."

They all returned a greeting towards him.

"Ankira, we need to get to work, if we want to stand a chance against the attack." Irk'aidis opted.

She nodded and they all set off to walk back to their makeshift camp. As if on cue the others of her *aliiit* went back to work to prepare themselves. Irk'aidis motioned them to follow him towards one of the tents they had set up. Once inside, Appius was surprised how much warmer it was in there. Inside he saw a makeshift table and some places to sit, but no real source of heat.

Irk'aidis faced them, "What do you know about the attacker?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," Ankira said, "We didn't even know of him until yesterday. We hunted down two bounties, Zsirion and Antilus. They worked for the Sith Monarch. His henchman told us that he's a very powerful man and that he was not very happy with us killing off his men. He's a secretive man, a resourceful man too. He knew by my armour alone where I'm from and now he is on his way here to finish us..." She repeated from what the Thandosans had told them.

Irk'aidis pondered for a moment, if he could figure out by armour alone where she was from, the man might be dangerous indeed, especially since not many from Jendri traveled that far from their home planet.

"We must create a cunning plan to ward off his attack," he looked up towards Appius, "What about you?"

"Me?" Appius inquired. He'd adopted the approach of 'speak only when you are spoken to' up to this point and so far it had kept him out of trouble.

"Yes, you," Irk'aidis insisted. "How long are you going to hide the fact you are a *Jetii* from us?"

If Rekkaid wasn't already frozen over, it certainly would have in that exact moment. Appius tensed his body and spine, with even Ankira shuffling nervously at the *Alor's* statement.

"I... don't know what you are talking about," Appius answered back, trying to hide the lie but failing hopelessly to do so.

"My boy," Irk'aidis began. "You wear the *beskar'gam*, but do not carry the traditional weapons of a *Mando'a*. No vambraces on your arms," he continued, pointing to Appius' exposed wrists that he withdrew out of the cloak when they entered the tent. "No blasters at your side and instead there's a pair of lightsabers. You are either incredibly stupid, confident, perhaps both. Or you are hiding something from us."

"I...I..." Appius stuttered and then finally sighed in defeat. "You're right. But for the record, I'm not a *Jetii* anymore."

"It was my idea, *Alor*," Ankira intervened before things got heated. "But he's not like those *Jetii*, he's *Mando'ade* just like us and..."

She was interrupted by Irk'aidis when he raised his fist up in the air to silence them both. He placed his hands onto his helmet before slowly lifting it off his head. What was presented before them was a well scarred and grizzled man. White hair and beard with green eyes that displayed a depth of knowledge and experience gained throughout his life.

"Normally I would be highly suspicious of you, perhaps have you shot on the spot. We've had bad run-ins with your kind before and some of our own have been hurt or even killed because of what you are," the *Alor* explained with just a hint of anger in his voice. "But... I'm not a foolish man. Right now, if we are in as much danger as you say we are, I'll take whatever help I can get. *Jetii*, *Dar'jetii*... Hell! *Manda* itself could open up and swallow our enemies whole and I won't bat an eye. I. Don't. Care," Irk'aidis continued, banging his fist on the table to emphasize his point.

"What I *do* care about is the safety of my *aliiit*, and if you are here to help us as you say you are then you need to be open and honest with us. If we are going to be allies then I expect you to come clean. Do not insult our intelligence or our understanding. Tell them who you are, especially if we are going to work together because... *Burc'ya vaal burk'yc, burc'ya veman*."

The Clan leader finished his speech and Appius remained silent.

"Well?" the *Alor* questioned the Force user. He was surprised when instead of a verbal answer, Appius removed his helmet and gently gave a smile and a nod of his head.

"Good, now... what do we do about a plan?"

Clan Jendri Campsite
Nightfall
Mountain Pass

Ankira and Appius emerged from the tent, the bitter cold hit Appius' face immediately as he held his helmet in his hands. Mist formed from his breath as he took a few seconds to compose himself.

"Well, that was interesting," the red-plated Mandalorian stated.

"He's just trying to protect everyone," Ankira responded gently.

"I know," Appius reassured as he stared towards the orange campfire the Jendri *aliit* surrounded themselves by. He could overhear them laughing, telling stories of their Clan's history to the two children that soaked up every word with wide eyes and wonder on their faces. He missed that with his own *aliit*...

"Alright, let's get this over with," he said reluctantly as he took a couple of steps forward in the snow. A freezing sensation dropped down his spine and he shivered because of it. He didn't know if it was his nerves, or the cold that was the cause, perhaps it was a bit of both.

Ankira quickly caught up to him and grabbed his hand in hers and pulled his head down to her forehead. He needed that.

"I'm right here," she comforted as she let go of him to go tell her *aliit* the truth of what he was.

As he walked closer to the campfire some of them looked up and looked a little warily towards him.

"Come to join the fire, *get'al sol*?" One of them asked.

"Something like that. There is something that I got to get out of the way first." Appius said slowly.

Ankira walked up to them as well and stood besides Appius. She looked at the group and smiled at the many familiar faces and was happy to see the young ones were doing great too.

"Alright, speak up," the man said.

Appius hesitated but the touch of Ankira's hand in his made him gather his courage. "I am a Mandalorian Force user, and before you all panic, no, I'm not a *jetii*."

A gasp of surprise ran through the group and some reached for their weapons and aimed it at him. He watched them, hoping they would see he posed no threat to them.

"Ankira? How could you? He is one of those that nearly cost you your life," Reeza said.

"Because he is a Mandalorian, *buir*, he still follows the *Resol'nare*."

"You are being foolish, *ad'ika*, he must be tricking you," Reesa said as he motioned to his head, "They can't be trusted."

Ankira glanced at Appius and shook her head. "He isn't like that..." she said with sadness in her voice, "if he was, I wouldn't be standing here."

Mirta tugged the sleeve of Reeza and nodded to their hands, whispering something to him which made his eyes go wide. He got up and stormed over towards them.

"Ankira, come with me." Reeza said with a stern voice.

"But..."

"Now." He said as he grabbed her hand and pulled her away.

All Ankira could do was follow him and look helplessly at Appius. He in turn didn't know what to do. He had expected some reaction, but not something like this.

Mirta had slowly walked up to Appius and smiled softly, "Don't worry, my *riduur* is a little protective."

Appius glanced for a moment to where they disappeared and then looked at Mirta, "Not the meeting her *aliiit* the way I planned..."

"Paths often don't flow the way we want them," she said as she motioned him to follow her.

She sat down on a log a short distance away from the fire where the others slowly went back to their usual chatter. Sometimes they glanced towards Appius to make sure he wasn't doing anything suspiciously.

"I'm sure Ankira and *a/or* Irk'aidis have told you the trouble we have had with Force users." Mirta started.

Appius nodded in return.

"When we heard the news from Ankira the distrust of them has resurfaced, as you can see." She smiled slightly, "but Ankira must see something in you, she trusts you, which is something special."

"She does and she is special to me," Appius said softly, "She showed me the way again."

Mirta looked curiously at him for a moment, looking into his eyes, "you are the first one she opened up too, and I guess there is a little more to it." She chuckled softly which made Appius raise an eyebrow.

"I saw her taking your hand to give you the courage to speak up. I had a hunch when I first saw you and that only confirmed it," she said with a smile, "Take good care of my *ad'ika*, Appius."

"Don't worry, I will. And thank you for accepting me."

Mirta quickly waved off the thank you and in her typical motherly fashion made it seem like no big deal. At least *someone* in Ankira's *aliit* accepted him and he was glad at least it was one of her *buir*. The other one on the other hand, was going to take some extra convincing.

Ankira's *buir* glanced back towards the group at the campfire and, with them still watching, she placed her hands on her helmet and removed it from her head. What Appius saw was a beautiful middle-aged Human woman with her black hair tied up into a ponytail, a pale, slightly wrinkled skin complexion and shining brown eyes. She looked back to the group at the campfire, who shifted glances nervously as they watched the exchange between the two.

"I see where Ankira gets her good looks from," Appius commented light heartedly which caused Ankira's *buir* to laugh and slap him on the thigh.

"You know she's a foundling!" Mirta chuckled.

"I know, I know," the Force user retorted. "Just making light conversation."

Suddenly, he noticed Mirta clench her teeth and shiver slightly. The distant warmth from the campfire was almost nonexistent where they were.

"You should go sit with the rest of your *aliit*," the male Mandalorian suggested. Mirta rose to her feet and placed her helmet back on her head.

"You should come join us," the woman Mandalorian said. Appius glanced towards the campfire and could see several of the Jendri shift nervously at the thought of him joining them.

"No, it's fine. I'll be ok," Appius replied with a reassuring smile on his face. Mirta shrugged before reluctantly trudging through the snow back to the warmth of the fire.

"Oh, Mirta?" the Sorcerer called out which made the woman turn to face him. "*Vor entye*."

Mirta gave a gentle nod of her head before rejoining the rest of the Jendri by the fire.

With Ankira and Reeza

"*Buir*, will you let me go!" Ankira protested now that they were a sufficient distance away from the group. Finally, her resistance showed results as Reeza let go of her wrist.

"Ankira... what in the hell!?" Reeza suddenly exclaimed.

"I don't see what your problem is," Ankira stated back to him.

"My problem!?" Reeza retorted back. "My problem is that each time there's a *Jetii* on Rekkaid something bad happens! You were nine years old when they nearly killed you. I held you in my arms as life slowly faded away from your eyes and we thought... I thought..."

Reeza clenched his fists as his head turned away from his foundling daughter.

"Why did you bring him here?" the Human Mandalorian asked.

"He wants to help," Ankira answered gently.

"So he says..." Reeza suddenly stated, his suspicions evident through his tone of voice.

"*Buir*..." Ankira said as she placed her hands on her helmet and removed it from her head. Her red eyes brightened the darkness around them. Six years, that's how long it's been since Reeza had seen her face and in his eyes she'd barely changed, though she looked more mature, more grounded in her features.

"Do I look like I'm being controlled?" Ankira asked as she pointed to the side of her head. It took Reeza a few seconds to analyse her as he looked for any kind of influence the Force may have had on her. There were usually telltale signs. Droopy eyes, a drop in speech but to his surprise, as he stared into her determined eyes. He saw nothing.

"No," Reeza answered honestly. "But that doesn't answer why he wants to help us. Why can't he help his own *aliit* instead? No doubt they will be targeted too."

"He can't," Ankira answered solemnly.

"And why not?" the Jendri Mandalorian inquired.

"Because they are all dead."

The two fell silent as Reeza realised he might have just overstepped some sort of boundary. Especially judging by the stern expression on Ankira's face.

"They attacked his *aliit* when he moved to Clan Taldryan and he left the Brotherhood to try and save them. When he got to Mandalore they were already dead. It changed him after that. He entered a state of *Dar'manda* and honestly? I don't blame him. I can't imagine what I would do if I lost the *aliit* here, if I lost you and Mirta."

Reeza remained silent as he hung on to her every word.

"We actually worked together to take down a slaver by the name of Zsirion Tyre. One of the Sith Monarch's men. During that mission he saw me without my helmet and he saw me for who and what I am, a Chiss *Mando'ade*. I thought he was going to chastise me, make fun of me like everyone used to when I went on missions with you and Mirta, but he didn't."

The *Buir* remained transfixed on Ankira as he watched her face light up as she spoke about their story.

"He didn't care. Because he was different too. He knows that pain as much as I do, *Mando'ade* using the Force are rare too after all. Still, I at least managed to set him back on the way, he got some new *Beskar'gam*. A friend of ours designed it for him," Ankira continued as she chuckled at her last comment before her smile turned into a slight frown. "Can you imagine what he's feeling right now? That rejection, that prejudice all over again. He was scared to come here because of what everyone would think."

Deciding to continue her story, Ankira pressed on.

"I found out about a trap that was set up for him by the Monarch's men on Mandalore and... I had to go with him."

"Why?" Reeza inquired. "You didn't have too."

"Yes I did. Because I love him."

The cold winds of Rekkaid blew past the older man's body as he absorbed that information. He couldn't believe what he'd just heard and it made him numb to his core.

"He loves, understands and accepts me, all of me, for who I am and I feel the same for him. I know you'd love him too if you just gave him a chance. Just think about it, ok?"

Ankira quickly wrapped Reeza in a tight hug before she made her way back to the campfire, leaving the Human Mandalorian with his own thoughts.

As she returned the sight of the Jendri telling stories by the fire looked inviting to her, like her childhood reborn in this very moment. Though upon quick inspection she noticed Appius was absent, all alone on a large log just outside the radius of the camp. Ignoring the calls of her Clansmen to come join them, she instead paced over towards Appius, grabbing a large white bantha fur blanket before she dropped her helmet right in front of him.

"What are you doing? I thought you'd want to sit with your *aliit*?" Appius asked with misty breaths.

"I am sitting with my *aliit*."

That was the only answer Ankira gave him as she sat right next to him and wrapped the blanket over them. He was cold, icy and freezing inside and out judging by the shivering and yet, he couldn't help the small smile that came onto his face.

It didn't take long for her *buir* to walk back towards the camp, when he glanced over towards them he gave them a nod. When he got at the campfire he motioned for two men to follow him and they walked off towards the supplies and other tents.

Ankira smiled when he nodded at them, "Seems he has somewhat agreed with us being together. Though trust will take a little longer."

"One step at a time, I guess. Mirta is very different from your *buir*. She is a nice person."

"You spoke to her?"

Appius nodded, "She walked over after he pulled you away. She was happy you opened up to someone."

"She always hoped I would find someone to melt my heart," Ankira said with a chuckle, "I joked it wouldn't happen, because of what I was. Guess I was wrong, but I'm happy I was wrong."

"I hope the rest of your *aliit* would see me for what I am and not some boogeyman," said Appius sadly and he looked longingly towards the warmth of the fire.

"Actions speak louder than words, they will change, I'm sure."

They sat a moment in silence together, resting against each other and enjoying the warmth the hide was providing them. Slowly one by one the people of Jendri retired towards their tents for the night.

"Maybe we should..." Appius started but was interrupted by Reeza who finished the sentence for him, "stay here."

Appius looked curiously up at the man who nodded at him. "If you are staying with my *ad*, I should at least make sure you don't freeze. She doesn't mind the cold, but I'm sure you do."

He motioned over towards the tents, "We set one up for you to stay in."

Appius was surprised by the gesture and wasn't really sure how to respond, Ankira on the other hand grinned and hugged her *buir*, "*Vor entye!*"

"It's the least I could do for now," Reeza said with a soft chuckle, "You know how your *buir* gets otherwise."

Ankira nodded and together they walked back towards the camp. Her *buir* pointed towards their small tent and they each wished each other a good night before retiring as well.

Next morning

When Appius turned over in the bed he felt no warm body next to him and he startled awake.

"Ankira?" he questioned the air around him, but there was no answer.

Putting his armour back on he wondered where she had gone off too. When he emerged from the tent he squinted against the glare of the fresh snow. The tents blended perfectly into the background now. He saw a few of the other Jendri walk around, but he didn't see Ankira.

From the side he heard some soft giggles and whispers before there was a soft crushing of snow. Shrugging slightly Appius continued on, but before he could take two steps he had a snowball thrown his way. Sensing this he ducked and the snowball missed.

"You missed!" came a squeal from behind one of the tents.

"No way! I never miss," came as an answer from behind another tent.

Appius heard a few whistles and before he knew he had to dodge snowballs from both sides as the kids tried to land one onto him.

"Hey!" Appius said with a chuckle and started to grab snow and throw snowballs back at them. In his play with the children he didn't notice that people had started to watch and chuckle. Ankira was amongst them and held a basket in her hands, smiling as he played on.

"*Ge'tal ade*," Ankira called out towards them, which made Appius look back towards her and got pelted by snowballs.

"Woo! We got him!" the children cheered and ran off.

Appius shook the snow off him as he walked over towards her and smiled, "Seems the *ade* like me."

She nodded and walked towards their tent, "They haven't seen what problems *jetii* can bring, only heard the stories."

As he followed her he smelled the food that she was hiding in the basket, "Is that *yai'yai*?"

"It is." she said with a nod, "But a bit different than how it's made on Mandalore."

She sat down on a makeshift snow bench and took one out her basket and handed it over to him. As he sat down next to her, he took a bite and immediately tasted the sweet and spicy flavours.

"Scouts haven't found any signs of them yet," Ankira began before taking a bite herself and smiled at the taste she fondly remembered.

"I see. Sadly we do not know a more accurate time of when they will arrive."

Rekkaid Atmosphere

Outer Rim

He could feel it. His anger, his rage and his fury. The closer he got the more his skin turned hot and his heart pounded with sickeningly hard thuds against his ribs. Severin refused to show it to anyone, simply tapping the fingers of his right hand against his hip.

That was the difference between him and any other leader of any other faction in the galaxy. He was a man that took action. When the Force decreed he take revenge against a lowly clan of Mandalorians, he answered the call. Truth be told, he was looking forward to stretching his legs. Things had gotten frightfully dull living in the shadows as long as he did.

"My lord," a Male Rattataki Major said as he approached Severin. Followed very swiftly by his female Twi'lek Captain. "We have arrived at Rekkaid."

"Excellent news, Zirrato," the Sith praised. "I trust the Scout Droids have been dispatched?"

"Yes, my lord," the Captain then answered. "We hope to have their location very shortly."

"Very good," the Monarch said. "Have my shuttle prepared along with four squadrons of troopers. I wish to deal with this *personally*."

"My lord, if I may be so bold. Once we have their location would it simply not be more efficient to bomb them from above with our...ACK!"

The Major's airways tightened, he clutched at his throat and his yellow-cruled eyes bulged from the pressure being applied to his esophagus.

"No, Major. You may *not* be so bold. Unfortunately for you, it appears your usefulness has been outlived," with a flick of his fingers, the Sith Monarch crushed the Rattataki's wind-pipe as the pale man's body slumped to the floor. "I have no use for those who question me and my orders. Now then... Major. Congratulations on your promotion."

The newly promoted Twi-lik Major shook nervously before swallowing the lump in her throat.

"M-my lord, I will have your shuttle ready at once," she declared fearfully.

"Very good, see to it that it is done. Oh, and have someone remove this *trash* from my sight," Severin stated dismissively as the Major got the hell out of there as fast as she could with as much dignity intact as possible.

Very soon, all shall know the might of the Sith Monarchy, and all who resist it shall perish.
The Monarch thought to himself.

After all... **Peace is a lie.**

Rekkaid
Mountain Pass
Clan Jendri Campsite

Preparations continued on. The expectation of the Sith Monarch's attack lingered at the back of every Mandalorian's mind yet despite their spirits were high. At least for the moment.

The *ade* made it their personal mission to cover Appius in as much snow as humanly possible until his armor was the same colour as those of Clan Jendri. Of course, the House Ektrosis Quaestor was an attuned Force user so this was much easier said than done. Much to the bemusement of the rest of the Clan when he managed to swerve some of the snowballs with the Force and launch them back at the children. Ankira watched with a happy smile and soft eyes each and every time. Only on this occasion, Mirta was with her and gave her a gentle nudge.

"So, he's a keeper, is he?" the *Buir* asked with a cheeky tone.

"Mirta!" Ankira whined like she was the foundling they found her as again which caused the older woman to break into a laugh as she patted the Chiss on the back.

The *Alor* oversaw all proceedings and like a man ready for battle he was nothing if not meticulous. Despite potentially facing overwhelming odds, they at least had a plan and that gave him a degree of confidence.

"*Alor!*" one of the small children cried out as he stopped pelting the Force user to point out a metallic looking object hovering above them. It was almost spider-like in nature as thin, long legs dangled below it as it stared down at them. Irk'aidis immediately drew his Westar 35 from his side as a perfect bolt of red plasma left the barrel and hit the Viper Droid in its cranium. It burst into a small explosion mid-air as bits and pieces dropped into the snow.

Ankira shot up to her feet and went towards the destroyed droid. Kneeling next to it she poked its remains. Working with Aylin thought her a thing of two.

"This is a scout droid, more of those will be around here and will alert the owner."

The Alor nodded and looked around, "This is it. Prepare yourselves and get ready for action. Our enemy will soon arrive and we best give him a warm welcome."

With that he walked away and the camp got into action. Appius had walked up to her and looked around at the action.

"Seems we will face him soon."

Ankira nodded and looked up towards the sky, "he will not get away with it."

Appius held her hand and nodded.

Rekkaid Atmosphere Outer Rim

"Sir? We have lost contact with one of our scouts, sir." One of the deck officers said to the Monarch.

"Good," he said with a grin, "send the coordinates to my ship."

"At once sir," the officer said as he started sending the coordinates.

The Sith turned around and walked away, a triumphant smile plastered on his face. It was time he would show them he was not to be messed with.

Hangars

With big strides he walked towards his ship where he saw the first officer waiting for him at the entrance.

"Coordinates have been received and we plotted a course, my lord."

"Good, we leave at once," the Sith said as he walked onboard, closely followed by the officer.

Once inside and the hatch securely closed the engines fired up and the ship with the squadron left for Rekkaid's surface.

He sensed it immediately like a blaster being fired right next to his ear. Something horrible, something dark and ominous descending on their location.

"They're here!" Appius exclaimed as several large troop transports appeared up above and lowered down to the bottom of the mountain pass. "Well... at least we have the high ground, that's something, right?" the Sorcerer commented to the Jendri Clansmen.

At the bottom of the mountain pass lined a row of four Lambda Class shuttles with one in brilliant, shining white taking the lead ahead of them all. As the ramps lowered, battalion

after battalion of well armed, black clad infantry stormed out and formed perfect formations in front of their respective ships.

With his binoculars, Appius got a closer look at what was unfolding beneath them. As the ramp to the leading vessel lowered an aged and pale skinned being walked down onto the snow with a direct authority in his stride. With corrupted yellow eyes, veins that showed all over his face and a long, grey, ominous beard that literally screamed 'i'm pure evil', there was no doubt in Appius' mind that this was him. This was the man responsible for everything.

As the Sorcerer watched the Monarch it appeared like his eyes shifted towards Appius as a devilish smirk appeared on his face. The Sith slowly and methodically placed a thumb to his throat as he dragged it across in a menacing fashion.

The gesture sent a horrible chill down Appius' spine as he dropped the binoculars from his grasp as they landed in the snow with a crunch.

"There's got to be hundreds of them!" yelled a Jendri Clansmen.

"I'd say at least one thousand! What are we going to do?" retorted a second Jendri Clansmen.

"Everyone!" *Alor Irk'aidis* voiced loudly, grabbing everyone's attention. "Trust in the plan. Though there are few of us, we have faced adversity time and time again and this is no different! We shall prevail! This is the way!"

All members of the Jendri *aliiit* repeated those infamous words back to their leader as it steeled their resolve. They immediately began preparation for the incoming swarm that was about to ascend upon them.

Bottom of the Mountain Pass

"My lord," a young Human saluted the Monarch and bowed submissively. "Our forces are ready."

"Good," Severin claimed with a chill colder than the Rekkaid surface. "Commence with the attack at once."

"Here they come!" Reeza called out as swarms of blaster fire rose up to try and hit them from the very top.

"Mirta, Ubigo, stay with the children. Keep them safe. Everyone else, get into position and await the signal!" *Irk'aidis* commanded with authority as the twenty five Jendri Clansmen

took their positions under cover. Appius and Ankira remained by each other's side, quickly holding each other's hand and squeezing tightly to give each other reassurance and comfort.

"Wait for it..." the *Alor* spoke as the Monarch's men climbed up the steep and snowy mountain pass. "Wait for it..."

Red plasma fired upward from below, their battle cries and yells from below getting louder, more fierce, like hungry charging predators on their location until...

"NOW, REEZA!"

Ankira's *buir* flicked an ignition switch in his hand and pressed the small red button held within. All around the mountain pass thunderous booms echoed and could be heard for miles around as layer upon layer of snow began to race down the mountain in a wild, ferocious and untamed landslide.

"AVALANCHE!"

That was all that could be heard from the Monarch's men as they scrambled back down the mountain to try and avoid being swallowed up by the freezing, heavy disaster. Not all were successful as about half of the Sith's forces disappeared under the ice, never to be seen again.

The avalanche reached the bottom of the Mountain, right where Severin was beginning his climb up the mountain pass himself.

"Let's see you get out of this one, *hut'uun*," Appius muttered under his breath. Yet as the snow closed in on the Elder Sith, the Monarch held out a single arm in front of him as an invisible wall seemed to form around him and the remainder of his soldiers. Snow crashed into nothingness and sputtered and twisted, the Sith's magical protection shielded them from harm until the landslide ceased falling any further whilst the Mandalorians up above watched in nothing more than pure astonishment.

"At least the fight is more fair this way," someone dared to say as the snow settled down.

"Be very careful of that man," the *Alor* warned, "he knows his ways around the Force."

The man nodded and held his weapon ready. More of his fellow clan people did so and watched closely what the man and his soldiers would do.

"Men! Be ready for anything now!" The *alor* yelled and was followed by a series of whistles. Some of the group advanced to second location, moving swiftly through the snow.

Down below the Sith started his advancement again, seemingly unimpressed by the avalanche created moments before. His soldiers on the other hand were a bit more warily, but followed his move in fear of facing his wrath.

A new series of whistles could be heard. The echo made it hard to pinpoint the locations, but the *A/or*'s trained ears knew exactly where they were and nodded. He motioned to the others and they moved into action too.

Appius glanced towards Ankira who was looking at the Monarch with a frown before putting her helmet on and moving towards their dedicated location dragging Appius half after her through the fresh snow. He was surprised she could so easily navigate through the snow. To him everything looked the same the moment they disappeared into the forest.

He could still sense the darkness from the Sith and he was almost sure he would be able to sense him too. It worried him, more because of Ankira being here with him than that he had to eventually have to face him.

Ankira whistled when they were in position. As she whistled more whistles rose up with her. Everyone was in position now and she nodded towards Appius to let him know. All they had to do now was wait for the signal.

The darkside was strong up here, the Force told him as such. It whispered to him like a harsh, screeching voice in his ears, yet he didn't care. He knew danger was coming. He knew what Mandalorians were capable of. But this to him was a simple test of his might and Severin happily took the place they wanted him too right inside their forest, right into the open with nowhere to hide. A small handful of his men followed him up into the space whilst the majority clung to the mountain side and awaited further orders.

"NOW!" the *A/or* Mandalorian commanded with a deep, booming voice as the Jendri Clansmen unleashed a smorgasbord of blaster fire upon the Monarch and his men. The black clad soldiers didn't know what was hitting them until it hit them square in the face as several fell to the first wave. As they began to fire back, small invisible tethers wrapped around some of their arms and legs and yanked them up into the tree's and left them hopelessly to the mercy of incoming blaster fire. Small poison darts impacted in their necks and sent the mortal men into crazed hallucinations as they fired upon one another in their crazed delusions.

Despite the chaos being wrought upon his men, the Sith Monarch grinned to himself like a man possessed by a demon. His weapon floated in front of him as he clutched it in one hand. The blood-red blade emerged from the hilt with a distinct *snap-hiss* that bounced off

the tree's and grabbed the attention of everyone there. Including Appius, who up to this point had remained by Ankira's side overseeing the conflict.

"I know you're there. I can feel it..." Severin stated ominously. With a single wave of his hands snow kicked up from all around him as trees uprooted with a hard crunch and fell all around them. Their cover was fading and it wouldn't be long until they were at the mercy of the Monarch's small army.

Despite this, the Jendri remained unperturbed, like true Mandalorians they held firm in the face of adversity. Though the Sith's actions had managed to divide them up further, weakening their combined strength.

"Fight me... prove *your way*," the Monarch challenged as the Mandalorians unleashed volley after volley upon him only for the Monarch to deflect each bolt of plasma as it came inches to ending his life. He seemed calm, almost meditative as his blade moved about him in a crimson sphere.

"Soresu..." Appius muttered, instantly recognising the style of lightsaber combat the Sith was utilizing. "Stop shooting him! You're wasting your time!"

"Then what do you suggest!?" Irk'aidis questioned through gritted teeth. Even Ankira was confused by what Appius was saying.

"Flamethrowers! Use your flamethrowers!" Appius answered.

"Amongst the trees? Appius, that doesn't seem..." Ankira started to say before he looked towards her.

"Trust me."

Ankira absorbed those two words into her very being. She trusted him more than anything and she had no doubt in her mind he had some kind of plan in mind.

"Do what he says!" She exclaimed as Irk'aidis grunted under his breath.

"Flamethrowers at the ready! Let's light this place up!" the Alor ordered as jetpacks flared to life. They kept up the pressure as Reeza and two other Jendri clansmen surrounded Severin with their arms held outright towards him.

Unfortunately, this was what the Monarch had intended. The Dark Side poured into his body as he dug his legs and feet into the snow before back-flipping out of the way of the cones of fire as they ignited the fallen wood around them. Severin landed a few feet away with a hard thud, his cape blowing behind him in the smoke and wind. Divide and conquer, that was his plan. With one hand raised the two Jendri Clansmen clutched their throats as their airways tightened and just as they fell lifeless he tossed them aside as their bodies rolled to a stop in the snow.

"NO!" Irk'aidis screamed, but the Monarch was far from done. "REEZA! GET OUT OF THERE!"

"*BUIR*, WATCH OUT!" Ankira cried out, hoping her father would hear her but Severin moved too fast and Reeza could barely raise his blaster before the Monarch closed the distance.

Time seemed to stand still for the Jendri as one of their oldest and most respected members was about to be cut down.

Suddenly, a sharp, green blade hissed to life right beside Ankira and before she could blink, her *riduur* launched himself into the fray, right in-between Reeza and Severin before the Mandalorian could be cut down. Green clashed red and remained locked in place as the Sith registered what just happened. Appius thrust his left arm behind him as an invisible energy pushed Reeza away from the conflict and right beside Ankira.

"Your fight is with me, now. The others are of no concern to you, Sith. You got that!?" the Sorcerer challenged amidst the flickering fires and flames that illuminated the two Force users in an orange glow.

"Finally," was all the Sith responded with as he smirked confidently.

Ankira caught her *buir* and stopped him from rolling further. She glanced towards Appius for a moment and frowned.

"*Buir*, go to the others and tell them to get the electric zips ready."

"But we don't have enough power for that."

"We do, trust me. Tell them to get ready to shoot in web formation."

Her *buir* hesitated for a moment, but then nodded and ran off, whistling the orders as he went.

Ankira watched the fight unfold and paid careful attention to how the Sith was fighting. She hoped it would give her the edge she needed to help Appius out if needed.

"The Force Mandalorian, the one who has been killing off my agents," the Monarch said as he kept pushing against the locked sabers.

Appius narrowed his eyes and broke the lock and quickly followed with an attack. The Sith expected this and quickly blocked the attack and reversed the attack.

In quick succession they traded attacks, repulses and blocks. It looked as if neither would be gaining the upper hand. Until they switched to the use of Force powers, the battle field turned into a chaos as everything was used as projectiles.

Ankira heard the whistles and smiled, they had done as she asked and were ready to strike. She had to plan carefully and hope Appius would have enough strength left to power the electric zips.

Both of them ended in a lock of sabers and she could see Appius was breathing heavily but the Monarch hardly seemed to be winded. She began to worry if they could even survive this fight.

"Your will is mighty, though you clearly lack significant technique adequate enough to finish the job," the Monarch taunted with a slight smirk on his face.

"Oh yeah?" Appius retorted. "Well, your highness, here's a lesson about never underestimating your opponent!"

Out of seemingly nowhere, Appius' second lightsaber launched from his waist directly into his left hand as a second jade coloured blade hissed to life and attacked with a basic, downwards slash.

Despite the Monarch's surprise, he was undeterred and simply kept his blade as close to himself as possible to weather the incoming storm and flurries of blows that crashed into his impenetrable defence. It was only after a quick exchange of basic strikes that the Monarch decided to turn his defence into offence. As Appius' fatigue carried him forward and forced him to overextend, the Sith carefully sliced through the hilt of the Taldryanites second lightsaber and left it little more use than broken scrap. Staggered and with his heart thumping against his rib cage, the Quaestor cursed under his breath in a language the Monarch didn't understand nor cared to before taking a basic two handed neutral guard stance.

Severin was like a shark that smelt blood in the water as he allowed the thrill of battle to take over him. He laughed maniacally and let go of the impenetrable defence that had kept him safe up to this point. He raised his crimson blade above his head and bent his knees as the well of Dark Side energy within him exploded as launched him towards his enemy with a horrifying scream.

The Crimson-armoured Mandalorian barely had time to react as he thrust his now spare arm forward and forced a torrent of energy to strike the Sith point blank and sent him flying back from whence he came. Though as he landed back on his feet, he dug his boots

in as his lust for battle and domination only empowered him even further. It made him faster, stronger, more lethal as he launched himself once again.

This time there was little more Appius could do except narrowly block the incoming rage by raising his lightsaber up to protect his head from being cut clean off. Severin continued like a madman possessed, his strikes told of a man immersed by the darkness with little care for his own safety as he battered his way into and through the Mandalorian's defences. Appius recognised the style. Juyo, the ferocity form. He'd encountered it once or twice before but never like this. This was on a completely different level and as the snow kicked up around them, fire and smoke burned making the terrain hot and unforgiving whilst trees ended up in the crossfire, splintering amidst their battle. Appius continued to defend himself with nothing more than high and low guard blocks and it was clear to those watching, including Ankira, that he was severely outmatched and outclassed.

Finally the two locked blades again as green and red sparked against each other. The fires roared as Appius struggled for the air his body needed.

"You are a fool," Severin suddenly declared. "Defending them, it is not who you are, it is not what you can become!"

"You know nothing of me!" the Sorcerer sneered back at the old man through gritted teeth.

"I know more than you think. Tell me, when you arrived here, did they welcome you with open arms?" Severin inquired, and the question had the desired effect on the younger Force user as he delved into his memories. The moment the Jendri discovered he was a Force user, a former *Jetii*... he recalled the resentment, the isolation, the fear and the *hate*. Reeza pulled Ankira away from him because of it...

"I sense it in you, I knew it all along," the Monarch said confidently. "You are a fool for trying to be one of them, they don't accept you for what you are and they never will. I can sense it in you, the Dark Side is strong with you, a power lay within waiting to be harnessed. I can bring it out. Make you strong, make you the most powerful Sith this galaxy has ever seen! All you need to do is kneel."

Appius felt his heart sink into his gut as his body began to feel numb. His knees trembled slightly and felt weak under his own weight. Was Severin right? Was he just kidding himself? Yet as he glanced over to the trees he saw Ankira watching him and he felt himself steel and harden his resolve. Memories of their time together flashed through his mind. Everything on Utapau, their first kiss on Mandalore, their first meal together on Chyron and not to mention everything here on Rekkaid! Sure, not all the Jendri Clansmen accepted him. But Mirta spoke to him when no-one else would and not to mention the two children, the *ade*, and the snowball fights they had. *They* accepted him and most importantly, Ankira did, more than anyone ever had and he loved her for it.

"You think you have me all figured out, don't you?" Appius strongly retorted much to the Monarch's wide eyed surprise. "I don't need to be accepted by everyone because some see

past that surface!" the Force using Mandalorian exclaimed as the Jendri watched and listened from a distance. "Sure, I'm a Mandalorian Force user, you destroyed my home, my *aliit*, left me alone in a galaxy that despised one side of me or the other. But someone brought me back to the way, someone sees past the surface and accepts me for who and what I am! So you know what? You are wrong, your majesty. I will defend them all until my last dying breath if that's what it takes. Because THIS IS THE WAY!"

Appius broke the lock on their sabers and lunged at his opponent with a quick thrust though Severin easily sidestepped the attack, the Force warning him of Appius' intention before he even did it.

"Then you will die like the rest!" Severin declared furiously as he slashed at the hilt in the Brotherhood members hand and cleaved it in two, leaving Appius without a weapon, but that didn't mean the Sorcerer was defenceless. The Force was indeed a powerful ally to those who knew how to wield it and as he summoned the darkness within him to the tips of his fingers, the Mystic unleashed a volley of electric tendrils that screeched through the air with lethal intent. Severin though, simply raised an arm as the lightning appeared to fade into it, much to the shock of everyone else around.

Severin responded by taking that energy and flinging it right back at the Sorcerer. Lightning engulfed Appius like little tendrils of agony as the Quaestor screamed in pain and dropped to the floor. He twitched as the currents coursed through his body and burned him from the inside out. The Monarch however wasn't done. As more lightning danced between his fingertips, he approached the downed man with a sick smile on his face and shocked him once again. Appius writhed on the ground for a few seconds until the lights faded in front of him. The lightning ceased as Severin smirked above him.

"And this is how it ends for you; face down in the snow," the Sith declared triumphantly as he twirled his lightsaber in his hand. "Any last words?"

There weren't any, yet to Severin's surprise Appius turned onto his front and began to slowly lift himself up onto his feet. He trembled as he did so with tortured and gasping breaths, the pain was excruciating throughout his being as his armor singed and smoked from him. But he finally stood, defiant to the end.

"Typical defiance," Severin stated, and just as he was about to strike the Mandalorian down, he felt danger approach him from the side. He turned just in time to see a pair of jetboots dropkick him straight in his jawline. He went rolling into the snow and stopped to a standstill as he rubbed the fresh wound on his face and glared at the one responsible for it. A woman Mandalorian, the other one responsible for the blows against his forces.

"STAY AWAY FROM HIM!" Ankira bellowed loudly.

"Ankira we are ready and in position!" Exclaimed Reeza as the Jendri Mandalorians emerged from the burning forest.

"NOW, APPIUS!" Ankira shouted, hoping he still had enough energy left to summon what they needed.

"The fraud tried to save you, but it all ends here now!"

The Monarch had enough of it and held out a hand towards Ankira. Her eyes went wide as he lifted her up and felt her air being cut off.

As the Jendri saw her struggle they fired off their electric zips. To an untrained eye it looked like a mess of wires, but the Jendri knew exactly what they were doing.

"Appius... do it," Ankira struggled to say.

Appius glared at the man in front of him and a rage welled up inside of him. He channeled all that power towards the man and unleashed a hell of lightning at him.

The Monarch held up his other hand and grinned viciously at him, "the same trick? I..." He was cut short as the zips around him started to work and made the arcs of lightning coil around him.

The monarch screamed out in agony and dropped Ankira to the ground as he tried to escape his torture.

"Oh no you don't!" Appius hissed and added more to the lightning storm.

Finally the screams died out and the Monarch toppled over lifelessly.

Appius fell to his knees and panted heavily, pulling the helmet off his head to catch some air.

"Ankira?" He managed to say after a few moments, but he got no response.

"Ankira!" Appius shouted as he struggled to get to his feet.

A few of the clansmen ran over to him to help him to his feet and walked with him towards her. Reeza was already with her and glanced up towards Appius as he was checking her pulse.

As he knelt next to her, he noticed blackened lines over her armour. The trap had worked, but it had struck her too. She was too close, but still told him to do it.

"She is still with us," he said with a faint smile, trying to hide his tears as he had feared the worst.

"She's hurt, pretty badly," Reeza commented as he shifted his position and carefully removed her helmet to give her more air to breathe and rested her head on his knees.

"Not... for... long," Appius declared as he shrugged the two Jendri Clansmen keeping him upright off of him. Without them supporting him, he dropped to his knees right beside her and placed his hands on her chest and abdomen, right over the blackened lines where the electric zips had struck her.

Reeza tensed and was about to intervene until Irk'aidis placed a hand on his shoulder and shook his head. With the *A/or* himself telling him not to, there was nothing Reeza could do but sit and watch.

Appius closed his eyes, taking as deep breaths as he could under his exhaustion and fatigue. He focused the power of the Force into the palms of his hands but instead of raw, destructive energy being summoned as was normally the case. They were soothing, healing waves that washed over Ankira's body that stopped and started as Appius struggled to keep focus. Regardless, the singed and burned flesh began to cool, the rips in her skin began to mend and her breathing slowly became more and more relaxed as the minutes passed.

The Force user however, was learning first hand why one never went past their limits when it came to their Force power usage. Every student that went through the Shadow Academy that showed even a shred of Force sensitivity was given the same warning. Never. Go. Past. Your. Limit. Not only was it nearly impossible, the consequences were more often than not, hardly worth it unless you were an Arcanist and could rejuvenate your reserves. Seriously, they had it easy.

But right now, Appius didn't give a damn. As his face paled and ribs tightened he could feel his use of the Force take its toll on him, but he pushed forward as his eyes became bloodshot and his face as white as the snow. He carried on, to hell with it all, he didn't care! He was single minded in his drive to help her. To hell with the consequences!

Suddenly, as Appius gasped and wheezed for air, Ankira's ruby red eyes opened as she inhaled her first conscious breath since the battle ended, just as Appius collapsed beside her.

"What happened?" she asked as the worried faces turned into smiling ones.

"He... did something to help you, but..." Reeza started and pointed towards Appius.

Ankira followed his hand and saw Appius' pale face as the two clansmen helped him. One of them wrapped a thermo blanket around him.

"Is he..." Ankira started as she felt tears well up in her eyes.

"No. He is weak though. Whatever he did to help you cost a lot of energy." The clansman said.

Ankira nodded slightly and crawled towards him, taking his face gently, "you stay with us, you hear me?"

She felt more than saw a faint smile on his face and she sighed in relief. If he could react he was mentally still with them.

"We need to get him out of here," Ankira said as she looked up.

The *alor* nodded at her and started to bark orders to get them going. The two clansmen hoisted Appius up and started to march off towards the camp. The others gathered their items. Ankira took her helmet and looked towards the downed Sith.

"Are you coming, Ankira?" her *alor* asked as he started to walk after them.

"I will catch up in a moment... Just need to make sure of something," she replied as she walked towards the Sith.

Her *alor* nodded and walked with the rest of the clan towards their makeshift camp while Ankira stayed with the body. She knelt down besides it and pushed him over onto his back. Looking the man over she frowned. His face looked old, while the rest didn't really suggest that he was really old. She wondered if that had to do with the Force or the darkness of it. She searched for clues, anything that could help find out more about him, but all she found were toasted electronics. Pocketing the items, she was sure that Aylin could still do something with them.

When she got up, she noticed the lightsaber of the Monarch and the destroyed ones from Appius. Picking up what she could find from his sabers she brought it along with the Sith's saber and walked back towards their camp.

Mountain Pass

Rekkaid

The technology locked inside his helmet was incredible, as was to be expected of the leader of a Mandalorian Clan. The inside of his visor beeped to life and informed him of the remaining half of the Monarch's troops clinging for dear life to the mountain side. It was time to test their loyalty.

As he stood at the end of the ridge and peered down he was joined by several of his aliit, their silhouettes almost god-like in the blazing sunlight that beamed down on them from above.

"Your Monarch is dead," Irk'aidis called out as his voice echoed and boomed down the mountain. "Anyone who wishes to share his fate can follow him up the mountain. Otherwise... leave, before we change our minds."

The mountain was silent for a moment with only the howl of the wind to break the ominous quiet. Then, as suddenly as the silence came, a cavalcade of bodies roared down the mountain pass. The Monarchy crumbled and without their leader to instill fear and service into them they fled like a pack of frightened Loth Wolves.

The ship's at the bottom filled up with what remained of the black armoured soldiers and escaped into the atmosphere. Many had families, lives back home, mouths to feed, wives and husbands to hug and kiss. This? This was not worth it.

Smirking to himself, Irk'aidis led a cheer amongst his Clan as the last vessel disappeared into orbit. At long last the ordeal was over. They had won. Against overwhelming odds, they had won. Amidst the celebrations, Mirta reemerged with the children and Irk'aidis knew this would make a great, inspiring story for them over the campfire and a delicious stew of some kind. His mouth watered just thinking about it.

"MIRTA!"

As soon as the thought came it vanished as soon as a large scream overtook all the banter and playful celebrating at the top of the pass. The Jendri turned to see Ankira clutching hold of Appius' head with a look of panic in her eyes that none of them had ever witnessed before as he lay motionless in the snow.

Mirta was nothing if not resourceful as she removed some of the armor plating around Appius' wrist and pressed two fingers against his now exposed flesh. Among the Jendri she was highly respected in their ranks, not just for her ability in combat, that was something they all shared together, something Ankira herself learned from her and Reeza when she was just a young girl. No, the thing that set Mirta apart was her skills as a medic. Living on an ice cold, snowy wasteland of a world with a Clan that lived as hermits often led to many a horrendous accident occurring. It was inevitable, just like the harsh blizzards and storms that often threatened to swallow them whole but she was always there. Always ready with a

smile and a bowl of hi dumpling soup. This was why Irk'aidis kept her with the children, to help the wounded.

Though in this case, the only wounded wasn't even one of them.

"He's not responding, he smiled earlier but he's not responding to anything I say now," Ankira informed quickly. Glancing down to the Force user, Mirta could see the cause for concern. He was pale, white as the snow itself as his eyes glossed over and greyed. His breathing, whilst shallow, was at the very least regular and consistent.

"It's faint, but it's there," Mirta reassured. "He's overtired. He just needs time to rest. He'll wake up when he's ready."

"Is he ok?" One of the children blurted out as they saw their favourite playfriend laying there unconscious.

"Yes, he's fine, *adik*," Irk'aidis said as he ruffled the small boys hair. "Set up a tent. Keep him warm and comfortable until he wakes up. He is in your care, Mirta and I expect you to treat him like one of our own."

"Of course, this is the way," Mirta said.

She didn't leave his side. Not once, not ever. For hour after hour she stayed by his side only to move to replace the warm flannel over his forehead or to relieve herself for a couple of minutes. Not even the offer of food could tempt her. She didn't have an appetite anyways. *You need to eat something*, Mirta would say. *You will rot away just sitting there*, Reeza would add but she didn't care. She wanted to be there when he woke up, so she could slap him herself for what he did and then cuddle and kiss him afterwards. He had her worried sick. To think, Ankira Irr, the all work no play Mandalorian with a reputation for nothing more than the job at hand was nestled to the side of a Force user waiting for him to wake up like a small girl expecting a miracle. Damn it, when did everything get so complicated? Why did it have to be so complicated? But she couldn't help it. Everytime she thought of leaving to get some food, the thought of him waking up without her being there tore at her soul and brought a bitter taste to her mouth. There was so much more to her than that, *he* knew there was so much more to her than that and it hurt. Hurt that the one she opened up to most was in pain, eyes closed whilst she could do nothing but sit and wait like a useless pile of kark. Hell, she only turned her head towards the tent entrance when it opened to her *buir* coming in to do her routinely check.

"Still nothing?" Mirta asked for the third, maybe fourth time that hour, Ankira had honestly lost track though the shake of her head told the older Mandalorian everything. "Ankira, you really need to eat something. You were hurt yourself."

"I don't care," Ankira stated defiantly like she was a teenager all over again. "He didn't, so I don't either."

Mirta chuckled. "You two remind me so much of myself and Reeza. Stubborn to a fault."

Ankira didn't say anything, what could she say? Yes I'm stubborn, deal with it? A bit rude but it would have gotten the point across but no, she was so damn more respectful than that so she just sat there, arms crossed and quiet.

"It's dark out now, fires going. Reeza's asking for you. They all are."

Mirta did her usual and grabbed the Sorcerer's wrist as it dropped lifelessly in her hand, she pressed her fingers to feel the pulse as she usually did.

"No change."

Those two words were becoming a habit, and as Ankira traced along the blackened lines of her armor she felt her breathing getting heavier. She was really starting to hate those two words.

"Have you tried talking to him?"

The question caught Ankira by surprise as her ruby eyes met the visor of her buir and slowly but surely she shook her head.

"They say they can hear you, you know. Try talking to him. You never know."

Mirta left the tent, leaving Ankira lost in a world of her own thoughts.

Ankira stared at Appius. She wasn't sure what she would do, let alone say. Instead she decided to softly sing a song that her *buir* used to sing for her when she felt bad. She sang the song softly next to his ear as she held him protectively. But as she sang she felt the tiredness take over and as hard as she fought she eventually couldn't keep her eyes open any longer and fell asleep next to him.

When Mirta came to check on them again she saw her sleeping and draped a blanket over her and kissed her lightly on her head as she used to when she was little and left the tent.

"How is he?" asked Reeza.

"Still the same," Mirta said softly, "Ankira has fallen asleep next to him. I will keep an eye on them to see if his status changes, but for now I think the best medicine is rest for the both of them."

Reeza nodded and took her hands as he rested his helmet against hers, "Sounds familiar, doesn't it?"

Mirta chuckled softly and nodded, "It does. Come, let's join the others."

With that they left for the campfire and the stories being told there.

The Next Morning

Ankira slowly opened her eyes when she smelled fresh baked bread and glanced around. On a small table there was a plate with food covered by a thin fabric. She smiled and wanted to move a little, but as soon as she wanted to move her hand from his chest she felt resistance. His hand was now resting on hers. She blinked twice to make sure she wasn't dreaming and smiled brightly. He had moved during the night.

"Appius? Can you hear me?" she asked hopefully.

He stirred slightly, but was too deep asleep to give an actual reaction.

"Don't worry, we are safe, we all are," Ankira said softly, "We will get through this too."

The smell of fresh made food made her belly rumble and was tempting her to get something. She hadn't eaten since yesterday. Slowly she slipped out of bed, careful not to disturb Appius and went over to the plate of food. Smiling she picked one out and started to eat, glancing towards him to see if he was still alright.

"Ankira?" Mirta said as she peeked inside, "How are you feeling?"

"A bit hungry and still worried about Appius, but he had moved during the night. So I guess that is a good sign."

Mirta nodded and walked over towards Appius, checking his pulse again and started to smile, "He is getting better, it is much stronger than yesterday. Hopefully he will wake up soon."

"That is good news," Ankira said with a smile.

"It is indeed. I will be around if you need something," said Mirta as she left the tent again.

Ankira looked hopefully towards Appius as she ate the rest of her bun.

They always said there was a bright light, but they never said it would be so peaceful. That was what it was like, wading through a soft river stream that gently brushed past your body. There was nothing, other than that gentle caress and complete and utter silence. Normally, he didn't mind the silence, it left him alone with his thoughts, let him think, but as he closed his eyes his body refused to let them open again. He could have panicked, perhaps gone towards that very bright light in the distance. Perhaps it gave more comfort, more relief. Yet as that instinct came to him it was halted just as fast by a soothing melody that played by his ears. He didn't know where it came from, nor did he particularly care. He was at peace, and as a warm feeling came across his chest and hand he was at peace. Even as the singing stopped, he was at peace. That warm feeling stayed and he relaxed. As peacefully as when he arrived here. Perhaps he could try again? Just a little bit? For her? After all... this was a marathon not a sprint, and Coruscant wasn't built in a day...

Everything hurt. He certainly wasn't expecting that. His breathing was hard and it felt like his lungs were filled with ash as he took his first conscious breaths in... how long had it been? He had absolutely no idea. He slowly opened one eye and the bright light made him shut it tight just as fast. He tried to move his arm to cover his eyes but they hurt, like the muscles had been torn out of them. He slowly opened his eye again, blinking rapidly as he did so, hoping that would do the trick.

It sort of did, it was still painfully bright, but it was much more tolerable. He tried to speak, but all that came out were gasped wheezes. His throat was dry and just trying to talk was scratching it. His stomach howled at him like it hadn't seen food in a lifetime. Damn it, he was so hungry!

He turned his head and that alone took a lot of effort for him to do. He opened both eyes and stared up at the roof of the... tent? Was that where he was? It certainly looked like it.

Come on, Appius. You are better than this!

He forced his arms onto the bed and slowly lifted himself up. Despite the slight tremble in his limbs and the pounding migraine right between his eyes, he persisted.

Holy frakk, that hurts like hell...

Despite the throbbing in his forehead, he could feel strength slowly returning to him like he was sipping energy through a small straw. He didn't know if it was something to do with the Force, or the fact he was finally moving again after who knew how long, but he was slowly starting to feel better.

That still didn't do anything to help his throat, which felt coarser than sand. Thankfully, someone left a decanter of water next to the bed and without a second thought. He brought it to his cracked and dried lips and the relief was instant.

"Ah, so much better..."

Appius had finally uttered the first words he'd said since he fell unconscious and now that his thirst was quenched he could focus on his hunger. The aroma from outside the tent was intoxicating and his mouth salivated at the very thought at what could be outside. Honestly? He didn't care, it was food and his stomach demanded nourishment!

He looked to either side of him for his *beskar'gam* which unfortunately for him was nowhere in sight. That was a problem he could deal with in a minute, thankfully he was still clothed in his brown undershirt and trousers, though that wasn't all. At his side lay a blue-skinned woman in white Mandalorian armor with the most beautiful face he could ever wake up to. Despite everything, he smiled and his heart beat faster in his chest.

She stayed with me?

"Ankira?" he said as he gently rubbed her shoulders. She slowly stirred as her eyes fluttered open and looked up at him.

"Appius?"

When she saw him sitting she flew up and hugged him tightly, "Appius! Don't you do something like that ever again!"

He winced at her sudden hug and despite the pain he tried to smile at her.

"Hello to you too," he managed to say softly.

Ankira held him by the shoulders and looked him over, "You had me worried sick... I thought I would never see you awake again at one moment." Tears started to flow down her cheeks.

"Ankira... You had me worried too, at the battlefield."

"I had to save the aliit... save you," she said softly as she wiped her tears away.

"And I saved you..."

Mirta walked into the tent with a bowl full of spicy smelling soup and slices of meat. "Glad to see you finally awake, Appius. I brought you something as I'm sure you must be hungry by now."

Appius nodded, but quickly regretted doing so and held his head. Ankira took the tray from Mirta and sat down next to him.

"Headache, huh?" Mirta said as she watched him.

"A pretty bad one," Appius answered.

"I will be back in a moment with something for that. Try to eat something."

"*Vor entye.*"

Ankira giggled softly, "You are lucky, it's the alor's best soup you are getting."

Appius tilted his head slightly and tried some of the soup. It was very rich in taste, but everything was perfectly in balance. Just enough spice to give your mouth that tingle, but not enough to give you a coughing fit.

"That... is really good," Appius commented and continued to eat.

Ankira chuckled softly as she saw him eat. She was glad he was up and moving again and that his hunger was strong. Hopefully a good meal would make him feel better too.

Mirta reappeared and held a cup of liquid, "this will help you with your headache. May not taste the best, but it works."

Appius took the cup and hesitated slightly, he enjoyed the taste of the soup and hated to have it spoiled. He drank it anyway and pulled a face as if it was bitter and sour at the same time.

"I really hope that works..." he said after a moment as a shiver ran down his body.

Mirta smiled and chuckled softly, "It will, *buir* Mirta knows."

This made Appius look curiously at her as he quickly ate more of the soup. Luckily it quickly washed the bad aftertaste away from the drink. He sighed softly in relief and glanced at Ankira who was looking at him with a soft smile. He felt really lucky to have found her and all that she had done for him. Never in the galaxy did he want to lose the love of his life.

The relief was almost instantaneous, despite the beverage tasting like a terrible cup of caff-stim at the Taldryan Citadel, the migraine began to vanish more and more each passing minute until finally, it was gone. Like it went in a puff of smoke.

What didn't go away was the Human male's insatiable appetite. He gobbled up the soup in minutes and left little to be desired in regards to table manners. Granted, he was eating in bed and not at a table, but a little bit of dignity wouldn't have gone amiss, now would it?

"Hungry are we?"

Appius couldn't look Mirta in the eyes as he felt the blood rush to his cheeks. Ankira giggled as he suddenly went all timid in front of her *buir*.

"Sorry..." Appius said sheepishly.

"Oh tish, my dear. You did us all a big help when you came here. The least I can do for my future son in law is make sure he's fed and rested," the older woman said as she gave a sly wink in Appius' direction which needless to say, did not go unnoticed.

"Mirta!" Ankira protested as her cheeks turned a beautiful shade of purple alongside Appius who looked very much like a tomato right this second, much to the *buir's* amusement as she dismissively waved off Ankira's comment.

"Give the bowl here, dear. I'll see what I can do to get you some more."

Appius held out the bowl in front of him and Mirta took the bowl while he mouthed a thank you under his breath.

"I'll leave you two lovebirds alone, don't go doing anything now, I'll only be a few minutes."

"Mirta!"

This time the older Mandalorian winked to Ankira and laughed as she quickly left the tent and sealed it shut behind her.

Now it was just Ankira and Appius. Alone together for the first time after the battle ended and despite the blushes the pair had on their faces at Mirta's comment, Appius took the chance and raised one hand to the blue-skinned Mandalorian's cheek to wipe away what remained of her tears.

"I don't like seeing you cry," the Human said as he smiled at her, but got a gentle slap to the chest as a response.

"Then stop making me worry," Ankira replied.

"But that's what I do best!" Appius said with a hearty smile on his face. She really missed that, and despite the joking nature of his words, she didn't laugh. Instead, she threw her arms around him and rested her head on his shoulder and held him tight out of fear that if she let go of him he would fall back to sleep and never wake up again.

"*Di'kut...*" she muttered under her breath as she began to lightly shake and make light whimpers in his ears. Appius wrapped his arms around her and gently swayed on the bed with her in his arms. They stayed like that in each other's company. Enjoying it, the warmth it brought amongst all the hell they'd gone through. It was their one comfort, the one thing they could always look too and find relief in. They had each other, and the galaxies worst couldn't change that. Everything from Utapau to Mandalore and now Rekkaid proved that.

Their hearts beat together and Appius ran his fingers up and down her back, gently caressing her through her *beskar'gam*. Ankira could barely feel it, but it was there and she focused on it, by the universe itself how she focused on it like if she lost it for a second she'd never find it again.

That's when she heard it, a familiar tune hummed right into her ear. It was so familiar she didn't believe she was hearing it at first, the tune she herself had sung to him before. He hummed it back to her and she pulled herself away from him and looked him straight in his ocean blue eyes. She could get lost in them, and often did.

"You heard..."

"Yeah, I did."

Her heart fluttered in her chest and she couldn't stop herself from moving her face closer to his and locking their lips in a gentle kiss. And then another, and another. She missed this, they both did.

Finally they pulled away from each other and smiled, their faces blushing as they touched foreheads with each other.

"*Vor entye*," Ankira suddenly whispered.

"What for?" the Sorcerer asked.

"Everything."

He looked at her and every part of him wanted to say she shouldn't thank him, that it was his fault this all happened in the first place, that he felt like he was the cause of all this...

But he couldn't, because at this moment in time, the only thing that mattered was her, across from him and right here, right now, he wouldn't have it any other way.

Ankira moved slightly and captured his lips with hers before slowly getting up. Appius looked curiously at her and wanted to stop her from leaving. She glanced back at him with a smile

and gathered his beskar'gam from a box.

"They made sure everything is working," Ankira said as she returned towards him.

Appius smiled and took his armour back, "That is nice of them, but they didn't need to do that."

"Of course they did, you saved them," Ankira protested.

"It was your plan though..."

"Doesn't matter, you defeated the Monarch."

Appius wanted to add more, but shook his head in defeat and started to dress himself into his beskar'gam again. Ankira helped him and looked a bit worried when she saw his face turn a bit sour.

"It is alright, Appius, we both got through it in one piece."

He nodded and smiled, "You are right."

When he was all dressed again they both took their helmets and moved towards the exit. That was when Mirta opened it and they both blinked against the bright daylight.

"Where do you think you are going?"

"I... thought," Ankira started, "I thought it would be nice to sit with the others... He can eat his soup there too."

Mirta looked Appius over and frowned slightly, "Only to the campfire and no detours."

They both nodded like obedient child, which made Mirta laugh. She walked with them towards the campfire and sat Appius down near the fire, handing him his new bowl of soup.

As soon as the children saw Appius' red armour appear at the campfire they both cheered and ran towards him.

"Ge'tal Orar!"

Appius looked curiously at Ankira, who shrugged helplessly back at him. Both had no idea why they were calling him red thunder.

"They heard the story of your fight and gave you that nickname," Mirta explained when she saw their expressions.

Appius chuckled, "I have had worse nicknames, but I kind of like this one."

"It suits you, Zappy," Ankira said as she playfully nudged him.

Both the children were standing before him with big eyes. "Did you really zap him?" one of them asked and before he could finish the question the other followed, "Can you show us?"

"*Adiik*, let the man eat his soup in peace," Irk'aidis ordered as he forced down the small chuckle that formed in his chest.

"Aww... but... but..."

The two children formed the best puppy eyed look that they could muster, first to the Jendri leader and then to Appius which earned some laughter out of the surrounding clansmen. Unfortunately for them, the *Alor* had seen this sort of thing many times over his many years and had grown accustomed to dealing with it. The Force user on the other hand had suffered its effects from his apprentice.

"Sorry, kids. Maybe later. Ok?" The crimson-armoured Mandalorian stated with a slight wink.

"Oh no you don't, mister! No waving your hands around and making stuff happen on my watch, do you hear me!?" Mirta protested in the tone a mother would use on their child.

"But... but..." Appius stammered.

"No buts. Sit there, eat your soup and behave! Or else..."

The threat in Mirta's words were well noted, especially by the chill that ran down the Sorcerer's spine.

"Yes, m'am..." the Force user conceded, getting a slight giggle from Ankira who sat beside him.

"See! it's not just me!" Reeza suddenly exclaimed loudly, causing an uproar of laughter to emerge across the group.

"Now I know where Ankira gets it from," Appius commented with a sly grin. Immediately afterwards a distinct *slap* sound was heard coming from his arm, followed by a smug and very satisfied Ankira innocently eating her soup like nothing happened.

"You deserved that and you know it," the Chiss claimed as laughter continued among the *aliiit*, and for the first time since he arrived on Rekkaid, Appius felt welcomed among Jendri arms.

A few hours later

"Are you sure you won't stay longer?" Mirta asked hopefully.

The black Upsilon Shuttle awaited them both. The ramp lowered with an unmistakably beige pilot droid stood at the top waiting for them. The sun began to set on the horizon and basked the planet in an orange hue that made everyone glow beneath it.

"I'm sure, *buir*. Appius is a Quaestor and I'm a member of a Battleteam. We have our duties."

Ankira knew that was the right answer, but that didn't make it any easier for her. Six years. Six long and hard years since she saw the two Mandalorians that took her in and made her their own. They'd finally reconnected and leaving so soon left a bad taste in her mouth. The rest of the Jendri waited by the ship, the white bantha's held all their gear as they prepared to do what they always did and move from place to place.

"Of course, this is the way," Reeza added, though his daughter couldn't help it anymore. She immediately grabbed her *buir* together and held them in a tight hug.

"I love you..." Ankira whispered as she closed her eyes and held on like she would never see them again.

After a moment Mirta let her go and took her shoulders, "Go, before we decide to keep you here."

"Take care, Ankira. Remember you are always welcome here." Reeza added.

Ankira nodded and walked back towards Appius who was waiting near the ramp of the ship. They both waved a goodbye and disappeared into the ship. The ramp closed up behind them and the Jendri moved away from the ship to give it enough space to fly up safely.

"Where too, Quastor sir?" the droid asked.

"Home, Spinky, we are going home." Appius told him.

"Right away sir."

Appius sat down in the living quarters and rested his head against the back of the couch. Ankira had followed him and watched him, he looked a bit pale again.

"Are you alright?" Ankira asked with a bit of worry in her voice. Appius waved her question away, "Just need a bit of rest."

She frowned slightly, "Wouldn't it be better to use one of the beds?"

Appius shrugged and closed his eyes. She shook her head slowly and walked further, grabbing a blanket for him. When she returned to Appius, he was already sleeping, so she placed the blanket over him and smiled softly.

"Jate'ca," she said softly and walked away.

- Hours later -

Appius woke up again, having fallen over and resting on the couch, he pushed himself back into a sitting position. He looked around as he rubbed his eyes, having expected to have Ankira next to him. He frowned when he didn't see her and slowly got up from the couch.

"Ankira? Where are you?"

He didn't get an answer and started to search the ship. He finally found her sitting against a crate with a blanket over herself as she had fallen asleep. At her feet there were small cans of paint and a pencil. Wondering what she had been up to he gently woke her up.

"Ankira?"

She slowly opened her eyes and looked up at him, "Appius?"

She quickly pulled the blanket against herself and blushed slightly. This made Appius look curiously at her.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"No, not at all... I just need a little time. Could you wait for me in the living quarters?"

"Uh... yeah, sure," he said as he started back towards the living area, "You sure you are alright?"

Ankira nodded and smiled, "Yes, don't worry."

Appius left the cargo bay and Ankira looked at the breastplate of her beskar'gam that laid next to her behind a cover. Pulling the cover away, she smiled at her work, the paint had dried now and she picked it up. Getting up she placed the plate back on her chest.

"Now I hope he likes it," she said as she covered it with a blanket.

Moments later she arrived in the living area and saw Appius sitting at the table with a drink between his hands. He looked up at her when he heard her footsteps.

"I wanted to show you something," she said softly when she stood at the other side of the table.

Slowly she dropped the blanket that covered her chest and there he could see it. A phoenix in blue and bright orange accents painted over the red markings of her clan. It was located right over her heart. She didn't dare to say something and felt nervous all over, which only got worse when he didn't respond.

"Appius?"

X

Still nothing.

Why wasn't he responding?

The question repeated itself at the forefront of her thoughts over and over again, getting louder and louder as she began to fidget uncomfortably on the spot. Ankira bit her lip and lost eye contact with him. Hell only knew what he was thinking, but if he was being this quiet then she must have royally frakked up somehow, somehow.

Haar'chak, Ankira!

She scolded herself as she quickly bent down to retrieve the blanket that covered her up only moments ago.

"I'm sorry, I didn't think..."

She began to cover up her paintwork until Appius moved with speed she didn't expect him too given his physical state. He grabbed the blanket before it could cover her breastplate entirely and carefully tossed it to the side.

"Appius?"

He gently placed his right hand upon the orange and blue bird, and gently traced it with his fingers. His eyes never moved from it, like he was transfixed or hypnotised by it. Ankira began to feel the blood rush to her cheeks. He was gentle, and if she wasn't watching with her own eyes she'd never know he was touching her to begin with.

"I said on Rekkaid, you are my *aliit* now," Ankira commented as he finished his second lap of the marking on her armor.

"You could have stayed with them, you know," Appius said softly.

"I'm a member of Tavros."

"I know that," the Force user retorted. "But the Resol'nare states we look after our..."

"You are my clan now, Appius." Ankira interrupted him before he went any further. "You are my *aliit*, my *riduur*, and I want to be with you, at your side, come hell, Sith Monarch's, or whatever else this galaxy decides to throw at us."

"But..."

"No buts!" Ankira reacted stronger than the Sorcerer had expected her too. "I want you to promise me something, Appius."

"Anything."

"I want you to promise that we will do everything together. No matter what. If all of this has taught me anything, from Utapau to Mandalore and Rekkaid, it's that we are stronger together."

"Ankira..."

"Promise me!"

Two pairs of eyes locked onto each other, one set shone a vibrant ruby red whilst the other glistened a gentle blue. He wanted to tell her they were in two different units. He was in Ektrosis and she in Tavros, it was unlikely they'd be on the same missions and jobs, it was inevitable and yet he couldn't, because deep down he just wanted to tell her.

"I promise," Appius finally said as the two lovers embraced each other in a hug. That was exactly what she needed to hear and Ankira let go of a tension in a body that she had held onto for the longest time. She wasn't alone anymore, not in this big wide ol' galaxy. No matter where they went or where they went, they wouldn't be alone any longer. "And for the record..."

Appius placed his hand back over the phoenix.

"I love it."

"Master Quaestor, sir," a painfully shrill voice boomed through the intercom and ruined the moment between the two Mandalorians.

"Yes, Spinky. This better be good," the Human Mandalorian commented with a slight irritation.

"We are approaching Chyron, sir. Expected landing is in fifteen minutes."

"Well," Appius said as he rubbed Ankira's shoulders with his hands. "We best get ready, then."

The Sorcerer immediately left for the cockpit, leaving Ankira biting her lip. She gazed at a small container by the bench which held the lightsaber of their enemy and wondered... should she tell him she had it?

X

Picking up the container she put it in a bag with other items she got from her buir and picked up her helmet. She would find something for it as well as for the other pieces she found. Her eyes glazed over for a moment when memories of the fight returned to her and a shiver ran over her back. Of course they always ran the risk it would be their last, but getting this close again. She shook her head to free her mind from it, she needed to stay strong and focused.

Taking the bag with her she walked towards the hatch as she waited for the ship to land and placed the helmet onto her head. Soon after she got there she felt the ship come to a halt and the thud when it landed on the platform.

She heard Appius walk back towards her as she opened the hatch and nodded towards him. She wanted to go with him, especially after what happened, but she needed to find something first.

"I can't directly go with you, but you go home without detours, ok?"

"Guess I'll see you later?" Appius said with sadness.

Ankira nodded, "Yes, I need to take care of some things, but I will get back to you in an hour."

With that she hurried down the ramp, holding the bag close and ran over the platform, quickly disappearing from view, leaving Appius alone with his ship and thoughts.

X

Chyron
Taldryan Apartment Complex
38 ABY

"Ankira?"

Sure enough, she wasn't here, and upon checking the communicator in their living room he could see there were twenty-one missed messages just for him. He nonchalantly tossed the device to the side. Out of sight and out of mind as they always say. He *did* say they would be

gone a few days so you know what? Whatever it was could wait until tomorrow. Both of them had been through a lot, so frakking sod it all, they deserved the day off!

Everything was the same as when they left to hunt that bounty. Ankira insisted on keeping things tidy and whilst Appius wasn't a slob by any means, he followed the train of thought of 'hey, as long as I know where it is!'

Which is exactly what he did with his armor. He stripped down to his brown undershirt and trousers and haphazardly discarded his armor over by the nearby couch. It felt weird without his lightsabers. Farrin always said his weapon was his life. It was a teaching passed down from the Jedi, and that was when a sudden brainwave passed through the Sorcerer's mind. Maybe he wasn't as entirely weaponless as he thought he was.

"Father..."

Appius muttered the word before taking note of an object on display in the far corner of the room. It was like something called out to him, commanded him to take hold of it. He refused to move from the spot in which he stood, that weapon held a lot of memories for him, and most recently, guilt. Guilt that he couldn't live up to what his father wanted him to be, guilt that he failed to stay in the light and turned to the dark. Guilt that no matter what, he couldn't look that weapon in the eye without experiencing these feelings.

Now though, something was different, something had changed. Maybe it was the fact his father's murderers were dead, the man ultimately responsible for it all buried under several feet of ash and snow on Rekkaid, but Appius felt something from that weapon he hadn't felt in a very long time.

Pride and determination.

He held out his right hand and the hilt flew to his hand with gusto. He caught it and held the cylindrical object up right. He carefully placed his fingers on the ignition switch, and finally.

Snap-hiss!

A brilliant blue blade emerged from the weapon. It was his father's, and now it belonged to the son.

X

When Ankira arrived at Aylin's workshop she quickly went over to the pile of items Aylin had laying in the corner. She was sure she wouldn't mind if she took something from the pile and grabbed the old display stand she had seen there before. It was dinged and dirty, but she was sure she could fix it up a bit and started to clean it.

It didn't take long for Aylin to hear the sounds coming from the workshop and showed up to check out who it was.

"Ankira?"

"Oh, hi Aylin. I hope you don't mind me taking this," she said as she held up the display.

"Not at all. What is it for?" she questioned.

"We found the one that attacked Appius' aliit and made sure he wouldn't come back. I wanted to make a little display as a memory to this achievement."

"Ooooh... You got to tell me the full story some time, but I think I can help you if you tell me what you want."

"Sounds like a plan," Ankira said with a nod.

- an hour later -

Ankira walked back towards his apartment and used the card she had gotten from him to open the door. Even though they have been together for a while now, it still felt a bit special to her to have her own place to call home.

When she stepped inside she heard the shower and a light blush appeared on her face. She quickly moved into the living room and set the stand down on the little closet. Making sure the saber and the two crystals were in place she set off to get his father's lightsaber.

She frowned when it wasn't in his usual place and continued to search for it. She was surprised when she found it laying on top of a set of fresh clothes from Appius. Picking it up she walked back towards the stand and placed it into its slot. Taking a step back she smiled at the work Aylin and her did on it. It displayed the same phoenix she painted on her breastplate and on either side of it were the saber hilts held up in little clamps. In front of it were little noddies that held the crystals of Appius' old sabers.

She hoped he would like it, as to her it showed the start and end of struggles he had in his past and the phoenix signified a new start together.

It was always good to freshen up. It helped clear his head and process and there was a lot of it that needed to be done. It was all over, all the struggling, all the pain and torment. The Monarch was dead, his *aliit* and his father were avenged and he could finally move on with his life. He could finally move forward with Ankira at his side, that didn't sound like a bad idea at all.

He couldn't stop smiling when he got out the shower, like he just washed away all the weight on his shoulders at last. He felt as light as a feather and he could have glided back into the living area if he wanted to. He couldn't wait to see Ankira again, just to tell her how much he loved her, to thank her for everything she'd done for him because hell only knew where he'd be or what he'd be doing without her. Probably six feet under the ground somewhere on some Force forsaken speck of land. Thankfully, he would get the opportunity to do just that as he felt Ankira's presence in the living room.

As he put on a fresh set of clothes he inspected his shoulder, the bacta cream worked wonders and it was as good as new for the battle with Severin. A good thing too, he could have been killed if it slowed him down even a second and a sudden shudder dropped down him at the mere thought. The rest of him seemed... relatively fine. A few bruises and burn marks from when he was zapped from his own lightning, but it was nothing that wouldn't heal on his own.

He stepped out of the bathroom fully clothed and whistling, wiping the damp out of his head with his towel as best he could. He mentally prepared a small speech in his head for her and readied to shower her with affection. Yet as he entered the room, all thought was lost to him.

"Surprise!"

It was. It really, *really* was. Not much made Appius speechless though lately that seemed to be happening more and more thanks to his Chiss girlfriend. This was just another example. He could see the ornament, bright and fiery with the two lightsabers clamped to it. His old saber crystals too, he hadn't expected it and each new part he looked at was like it told a different story from his life. From his time with his father and his *aliiit*, to the Monarch himself. It was on display for him to see, and finally gave him somewhere to leave it all.

"It looked like you were going to use your father's lightsaber... but I just wanted to surprise you," Ankira said as she blushed. She awaited a response, anything. He had a nasty habit of just going quiet whenever she surprised him like this and it did nothing to help her nerves.

"No, I like it better like this," Appius declared with soft eyes and a wide smile. Anything he was going to say had escaped him as he became lost in the moment. "*Vor entye*," he finally whispered back to her.

"I'm glad you like it, I was worried for a bit that it was too much..." Ankira said softly.

"No it is perfect. It shows off our adventures we had till now," he said with a smile as he looked at the display again.

Ankira stepped closer to him and held his hand, "And hopefully many more will follow."

He nodded and squeezed her hand before pulling her close in a tight embrace. As he looked down into her red eyes he found hers looking up back at his blue eyes full of hope. He leaned down and captured her lips with his in a loving kiss.

“Too many more to follow.”

Ankara nodded and kissed him again, hoping they indeed would stay together through their future adventures.