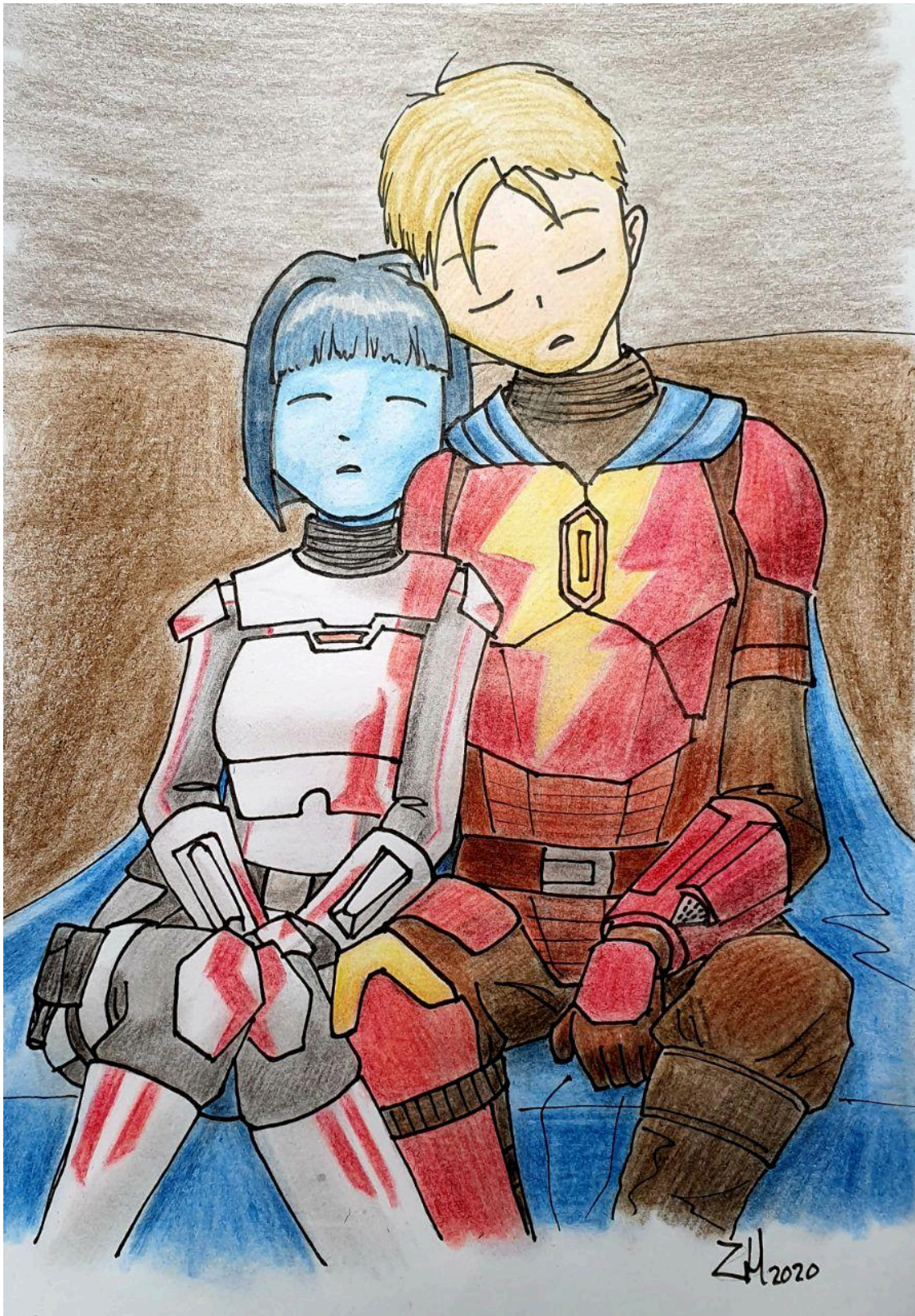


'From Ashes, We Rise.'

A co-op fiction written by Appius "Zappius" Wight and Aylin Sajark/Ankira Irr of Clan Taldryan.



The stench of sizzling oil and burning electronics was unmistakable to her now. She'd stayed on Chyron longer than she had planned too and the constant clanging and banging of steel upon durasteel had become nothing more than background noise to her now, and yes, it didn't bother her anymore. She didn't know why she stuck around for so long, truth be told she never was the type to stay in one place for elongated periods of time. She was always working, always on the move from dusk till dawn until she was done with the task at hand or she collapsed from exhaustion, only to then rinse and repeat when the sun rose in the morning. Her friends constantly informed her of this fact. *Ankira! You never have any fun! Or, Ankira! You need to relax sometimes! Loosen up!*

But that was just who she was. Her *buir* instilled that into her at a young age. Her *aliit* back on Rekkaid were some of the hardest working people on that side of the Outer Rim, which was all the more impressive considering a lot of the planet itself was little more than a frozen wasteland. The *Mando'a* woman had to remind herself of this fact after handing over the sixth or seventh spanner to her Nautolan friend after being asked again for the eighth or ninth time. She honestly lost track at this point, and she had to remind herself that making bets with Aylin Sajark was like making yourself putty in her hands, and she swore to herself this would be the very last time she ever fell for any of her tricks in a game of Dejarik.

Regardless, as per the terms of the bet, she was now Aylin's assistant for the day. Which was perfectly fine considering she didn't mind the Scavenger's company. The early morning hours meant most civilian life remained in slumber whilst the workforce tirelessly did what they did best. Ankira didn't mind the early start, though judging by the twisted scowl on Aylin's face, she was not having such a pleasurable time.

"GAH! Frakking thing!" the Nautolan suddenly screamed at the top of her lungs. She shot up to her feet and kicked the downed speeder bike with as much force as she could muster into her slim frame. The metal clanged hard against her foot as she let out a string of curses in Nautila that would make her mother go red in the face. "The next time Zappy needs a favour, he can forget it! He can fix his own kriffing bike!" She continued to exclaim as she threw a spanner haphazardly across the floor, out of sight and out of mind. "How the hell did it even end up like this!?"

Ankira shrugged and just let her continue with her ramblings. The bike itself was Mandalorian by design, a patrol speeder no less which did nothing to quench her interest. Though the sorry state of it left much to be desired. Some parts were separated, some that were hacked and slashed clean off and some covered in a black, burned coating. No matter what way you looked at it, there was no way it was operational in this condition.

"Give it a try," Aylin said, casually pointing to the blasted contraption with fatigue in her voice. The Chiss hopped into the seat and was careful to not dirty her near pure-white *beskar'gam* on the muck and grime. She hit the ignition and for a brief, fleeting moment it seemed it was going to work. The bike levitated an inch of the ground before any spark of life vanished in a puff of smoke and it slammed back to the concrete

Ankira stepped away from the fallen vehicle and recoiled slightly at the seething look now present in her friend's facial features. Eyes wide, fists clenched and teeth shown to bare, Aylin was not in a good mood.

"I. Will. DEFEAT. YOU!" She growled furiously through her teeth before snatching a small handful of trinkets and other equipment and jumping right back in. Fiddling, tinkering and who the hell knew what else. Thirty seconds passed with the Nautolan muttering profanities under her breath without giving the Mandalorian anything to do. The station itself was starting to pick up in business and personnel. So with a glance and some casual steps, Ankira decided to sneak off for a little walk to clear her head, confident that the T-shaped visor on her head would cover up who, or rather *what* she was.

Prejudice was a natural part of her life though at this point and she was used to it. A Chiss Mandalorian was incredibly uncommon and she faced an awful lot of judgement because of it. She did her best to drown out the noise and ignore the words behind her, to the side of her and even in front of her, but sometimes they hurt like her heart was trapped in a vice. It was rare to find someone who accepted her for who she was.

She turned the corner to witness a large, black Upsilon Class Shuttle being loaded with three large and empty containers. Overseeing the loading was someone she recognised all too well. She shuffled nervously before hiding herself behind a nearby metal storage unit.

It was *him*. Tall and clad in red *beskar'gam* with a golden lightning bolt upon the chest plate, it was unmistakable as he carefully inspected a datapad. He casually swiped his finger across the screen with little care as he finalized whatever checks he was doing. He was flanked by a small Sephi girl, who seemed to be barraging him with a series of questions that he answered as best he could as his shoulders slumped against the constant onslaught.

It had been days since they'd seen each other. Three exactly since the mission to Utapau. The very last time they were together they'd drank way too much and fallen asleep on each other, gotten close and...

Her heart beat faster, her breathing quickened and the tips of her fingers felt numb under the weight of her thoughts. Nothing happened... but she'd avoided him successfully for the following days until now. She was about to turn and go back to Aylin, hopefully before he saw her.

Too late.

His visor turned to meet hers, just like it was drawn to her, no doubt he'd felt her presence nearby. Yet right here, right now, unsure of what to do next, she froze in place.

"Ankira? I was almost beginning to think you were avoiding me," Appius said as he hurried over to her.

"Not at all," she lied quickly, "I've been busy."

When she turned around she felt a hand on her shoulder. "We both know that isn't true."

She glanced away, she had to find a way out of this. Any other situation wouldn't have been any problem for her, but this was a turf she rarely trod. She normally didn't have time to socialise and this scared her.

Appius felt her turmoil, he wasn't sure about the situation either, but that was more because he didn't know what to say.

"Ankira," he finally said, "about what happened..."

"Nothing happened!" Ankira blurted out, "We drank... too much, fell asleep and nothing."

Startled slightly by her reaction Appius tried to continue, "I know, but..."

Ankira shook her head, "there was... nothing," she started to walk away, "Aylin needs my help," with that, she quickly disappeared.

Appius stared at her as she disappeared, the hesitation in her answer made him wonder. He knew her reputation of all work and no fun, but she did take her time to celebrate with him that he was wearing his *beskar'gam* again. Secretly he wondered if she would dare to go on another mission sometime as he walked back to the spaceship.

Aylin looked up from her work with a frown on her face, "I thought you would be helping me."

"I am, I just gave you a little space to avoid getting things thrown at my head again."

Aylin let out a chuckle and rubbed her head, "Yeah, sometimes I get a little overboard. But! I got it to work again... though it will only go straight..."

"That doesn't really make it useful, yet, but it is a start."

Aylin nodded, "You need to tell Appius I need more parts for this speeder if he wants to get it running again."

"I will tell him, when I see him," Ankira said slowly.

"He is in the next hangar...Something wrong?" Aylin asked quizzically. "I thought you two did well on your last mission going by your stories."

"The mission went fine and there is nothing wrong. Don't worry about it."

Aylin tilted her head a little and a little grin appeared on her lips, "Go find him then."

Turning around she walked back and shook her head slowly, she wasn't going to do another bet with her and she didn't like that grin of hers either. Sighing, she was back at the hangar Appius was standing in. She didn't see the apprentice this time and wondered where she had gone too as she walked towards him. Trying hard to get her business mind fully working again.

He was inside the ship itself, checking over an assortment of crates and boxes and trying to create some sort of order to things. Though if Ankira was perfectly honest, it was more like an organised mess. A box over here, a crate over there. He wasn't usually like this and she had a good feeling as to *why* he was being like this right now. She slowly walked up the ramp as her heart beat in time with her steps. She bit her bottom lip, thankful that no-one could see her face behind her visor. She rubbed her arm though the comfort it brought was almost nonexistent.

Di'kutla! What is wrong with you? She scolded herself internally. Under most circumstances, she had the will and resolve of some of the best in the galaxy. Drop her into a warzone, give her a blaster and a target to shoot at and she'll take its damn head off, no problems and no questions asked. Ask her to talk about her feelings and she becomes a broken mess, her *aliit* back on Rekkaid would have a field day with her if they could see her now.

At the top of the ramp, his back was turned to her, though it only took him a second to recognise her presence. He spun in the place and suddenly the two were only separated by a couple of metres. They were quiet, neither knowing what exactly to say to the other. It was a silence that bothered Ankira and she cleared her throat to speak.

"Aylin said she needs some parts for the bike," she uttered a lot more quietly than she usually did.

"I know, I sent Dasha to get them," Appius responded bluntly. Suddenly the pair were in yet another awkward silence before Appius shook his head and got back to work. He waved his hand in front of a small container as it levitated in front of him before he carefully placed it in a storage unit.

"So..." Ankira said, summoning forth the courage to say something. "Going somewhere?"

"No, Ankira. I just woke up this morning and thought to myself..." Appius placed his hands on his hips and gazed slightly upward. "Gee, you know what I feel like doing? Loading an empty ship just for the fun of it."

Ankira scowled slightly behind her visor.

"Sorry I asked," she responded as she turned to leave.

"Wait, Ankira!" Appius suddenly blurted out. She turned back towards him as he hung his head low and put his arms down by his side. He then placed a hand on his visor before signing deeply. "I'm sorry. I'm just... I don't know."

She watched him struggle with himself and the urge to speak became too much for the young Chiss.

"You just what?" she asked gently.

"I..." Appius hesitated before he swallowed the lump in his throat and decided to take a chance. "Like... you?"

Ankira's heart could have leapt out of her chest. Her mouth went slack and her body felt numb all over. Did he just say *that*? To her? Why could he possibly like *her*? *What* could he possibly like about *her*?

"I have to go!" the Chiss woman suddenly blurted out as she retreated out of the ship and back in the general direction of Aylin. She didn't pay too much attention to where she was going as she constantly bumped into both people and objects along the way. The gears in her head turned at a thousand miles an hour and her heart beat just as fast. One burning question kept repeating itself at the back of her mind. Why her?

Sure she was Mandalorian, but she had a reputation of all work and no play. The two were very different and yet... there were similarities at the same time, and she couldn't deny the fact they worked very well together on their last mission together. There was certainly chemistry there. Could she possibly feel the same for him? *Did* she feel the same way about him?

Olaror bat, Ankira! Pull yourself together! She sighed deeply and wondered how she got herself into this mess in the first place. Though her train of thought was cut short as she returned to Aylin, who seemed to be talking to the young Sephi girl she saw earlier. Dasha was it? Yes, that was it. By the looks of things, she'd delivered the parts they needed. The sooner they could be done with this the better.

"Ah, Ankira! I thought you'd gotten lost," Aylin said with a mischievous grin on her face, which all of a sudden turned into an expression of seething rage almost out of nowhere. "**YOU!**" the Nautolan roared and launched a screwdriver in Ankira's general direction. It soared past her and clanged against Appius' chest plate, who was only a few feet behind her.

"Hey!" the Mystic protested. "What did I do!?"

"That's exactly what I'd like to know, Zappy! What *did* you do? This is the sorriest state I've ever seen a bike like this in!" Aylin responded.

"Clan Plagueis shot it during the war with Vizsla," Appius stated matter of factly. "And then I shot it with lightning."

"Of course they did... and of course *you* did too. I'm not even going to bother asking why, just know that right now you are the source of all my frustrations!" The Scavenger retorted as she immediately got back to work on the vehicle itself.

"Well..." Appius said cautiously. "If it helps, I'm leaving Dasha here to assist you."

"What!?" the young Sephi protested. "But, but, but..."

"No buts, you are staying here to help Aylin and that's final," the Mandalorian Force User retorted authoritatively.

"But you are going to Mandalore!" Dasha blurted out, which immediately caught Ankira's attention. "I've been there with you before! I can help! I can..."

"Dasha!" Appius interrupted strongly. "It's a simple mission. I'm going to go there, pick up some beskar, and fly right back. It's not that hard, I'm sure I can manage."

"But what if you don't come back..." the apprentice spoke timidly and averted her eyes away from Appius'. The Sorcerer sighed heavily and grabbed a cylindrical object from his waist. He beckoned the young girl to open her hands and as she did so, he dropped it into her hands.

"There, now you know I'm coming back. You have one of my lightsabers," the Sorcerer gently responded and though they couldn't see it, he held a small smile on his face. The Sephi girl held it close to her and gave a slight nod though concern still clung to her. "Aylin, I trust this is ok with you?"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Get out of here before I throw something else at you," Aylin responded, waving him off as Appius held up his hands in a defensive fashion. He turned to leave and he glanced to Ankira who froze at his gaze. He slightly shook his head before leaving the group to their task.

"Guys, I need to talk to you about something," Dasha suddenly said in a panicked voice. "I don't think that mission is what it looks like."

"What do you mean?" Inquired Aylin suspiciously.

"The mission briefing stated that a rich vein of beskar has been discovered on Mandalore, they want to sell it to Taldryan and they specifically asked for Appius to retrieve it. Thing is... I've been to Mandalore with him, that planet has been bled dry at least three times over and

you'd think if it was there, they would have already found it by now and why the hell does *he* need to go get it? It doesn't make sense."

The Chiss Mandalorian let the young girl finish as her eyes widened and her breathing quickened in pace. At least it explained all the empty crates that were being loaded into the ship earlier.

"He hasn't been himself the last couple of days," Dasha continued. "I don't know what's wrong with him. He's refusing to listen to me and I'm scared, I don't know what to do."

Ankira cursed in her mind as the same realisation dawned on her as it did with the apprentice.

This was a trap, and he was falling right into it.

"I need to go. Keep working on the bike, I'll make sure he comes back," Ankira stated.

"But, it's a trap," Dasha protested.

"I know it is, but they expect one Mando, not two. I... have to try and keep him safe."

Dasha frowned at her hesitation, "I hope you can, I want him to return."

Aylin poked up from the bike and pointed over to Siky, "Take Siky with you. I got the idea you might need his help."

Ankira hesitated, "but he is your pet droid."

"Don't worry, I can build a new one if something happens, his memory is saved," Aylin said with a smile.

Ankira nodded and picked up the insect-like droid, who chirped happily and hurried after Appius. She wasn't sure what she would say to get him to take her along, but she would be getting on that ship.

She saw Appius standing at the top of the ramp looking at his datapad. Slowing down a little she walked up to the ship. She looked at him and tried to think of a reason to go with him. Appius sensed her behind him and turned around. When he looked at her she felt her heart race again.

"I am coming with you," Ankira said, trying to hide her emotions.

Appius gave a slight nod, "I knew you would as soon as you heard where I was going."

"Your apprentice said it was a trap. I can't let you go alone," her heart raced as she said that and she shifted slightly on her feet.

Appius watched her, noting her shift and smiled slightly. 'Perhaps she does have some feelings.'

"Help me with these last crates and we will be ready to leave."

Ankira nodded and picked up some of the crates, secretly glad she could do something instead of talking about emotional things.

When they were done, Appius told Spinky that they were ready to leave. Soon after departure, an awkward silence fell between them again.

This time Appius dared to speak first, "I meant what I said."

A slight shift in her helmet told him that she had heard them. He wondered what she was thinking. He was sure there was something, why else would she go on this mission with her.

"Appius..." Ankira began and fidgeted with her gloves, "I don't know how... to say this," she sighed and hanged her head. "I'm not good at these things... these feelings."

Appius looked curiously at her, he had not expected this from her, but it did sort of explain the all work no play attitude.

"Ankira..." Appius began softly but was silenced by her raised hand.

"Before being asked here by Aylin, I just went from job to job. I never had to bother with these things. Of course, I cared about my family, but that was... different?" She shook her head slowly, "but then Aylin asked to stay a bit longer because of the war that was coming. It promised loads of action and helping people. People that became friends, comrades in battle. Things started to change for me..." She looked at him "it scared me, but I showed nobody my struggle. And then I ran into you... the rest you know."

She sighed again, not sure if she did good in telling him this. It felt like a weakness to her, she was supposed to be strong and fearless, but her greatest fear was herself. Sighing again she hanged her head, more in shame than anything else and remained silent.

Usually, the Human Mandalorian had a slight idea of what to do and he always acted on his first instinct and hoped for the best. Perhaps it was just part of the way he grew up, the way

he was taught by Farin Xies Tarantae. His master once said to him that that line of thinking would get him into trouble one day. He highly doubted this was what Farrin meant, but Appius liked to think it applied.

Still, he could see she was struggling and it hurt him to see her like that. He wanted to tell her 'it was ok', she could 'open up to him' and that he was 'here for her'. But if Appius learned one thing throughout his life, it was that actions often spoke louder than words. He carefully placed his hands onto his helmet and slowly lifted it off his head. He gently placed it down on a closed container beside him and smiled at her.

She could see him again, light brown hair, blue eyes and a tiny bit of stubble across his chin and face with a smile that just made her heart flutter. He was exactly as she remembered him which wasn't all that surprising considering the last time she saw him was only three days ago. What *did* surprise her was that he removed his helmet in front of her. Mandalorians were always supposed to wear their armor. The *Resol'nare* demanded it. Though when Appius did it, Ankira couldn't help but follow suit. She removed her own helmet and placed it next to his.

He could now see her. Blue skin, red eyes and dark hair. To him, she was the most beautiful woman in the galaxy and no-one could tell him otherwise. The two stood looking into each other's eyes for a moment before Appius beckoned her to follow him into the next room away from all the crates. She recognised it as the exact same room she managed to convince him to wear his *beskar'gam* again and she took her usual seat by the Dejarik table.

"It was Utapau," she suddenly said. "That's when... I think I saw you differently."

"Really? Why?" Appius asked.

"You saw me for who I was. When we were locked up you saw a Chiss Mandalorian and didn't even question it. You just accepted me for who I am. Do you know how hard that is? To find someone like that who understands what it's like to be Mandalorian and... different?"

Appius gave her a slight nod.

"Yeah, I do," he said as Ankira dropped her head and let it hang low.

"You must think I'm *Di'kutla*," the Chiss said quietly, though it was loud enough for the Sorcerer to hear. "Why do you even like me?"

"Because..." Appius replied as he took a seat next to her. "It's hard to explain but... before I met you I lost everything. My *aliit*, the respect of my peers in Taldryan. I turned to the Dark Side before the last war and stopped wearing my *beskar'gam*. I was a wreck taking out his frustrations on whatever pathetic little bounty I could get my hands on. I'd lost myself and I'd lost my *way*. I was in a pit of my own creation that I couldn't pull myself out of no matter how hard I tried. But *you* pulled me out. You did something for me that I haven't seen in a very long time, Ankira. You made me rediscover who I am. You didn't have to, you could have just

left me to rot in my own self-loathing but you didn't. Even with your own fights and prejudices you still took the time for me. Frakk! I don't care if you are a Chiss, Ankira. Just like you didn't care that I'm a Force User. I don't mind that you struggle to talk about feelings or whatever! I admire you and I don't think you realise just how incredible you truly are."

Ankira stared at him, if she wasn't sure how she would react before she was lost now. Nobody ever said anything like that to her. She was now lost for words, she wanted to say something but feared it would sound silly.

"That... is the nicest thing anyone ever said to me," she said after a moment of thinking.

Appius smiled, "I meant every word of it, Ankira."

She nodded slightly, "I couldn't leave a fellow Mandalorian in a state of *Dar'manda* and I'm happy that I could show you the way again."

With a slight hesitation, he rested a hand on her arm, "You are a true friend, Ankira."

"*Burc'ya vaal burk'yc, burc'ya veman,*" she answered softly.

Appius' smile turned into a grin, "I am glad you think so."

Ankira smiled softly and looked at his hand resting on her arm. Her mind was still a jumble with no begin or end, but somewhere in a far corner, she felt glad she could have said these things without being judged. It would take her time to figure everything out, but she got the idea he was willing to give her that time.

"*Vor entye,*" she said with more confidence as she looked at him.

"Of course," he said and chuckled softly, "it is refreshing to hear *mando'a* again."

"Part of the *Resol'nare*, remember?"

He nodded, "I haven't forgotten the *Resol'nare*, I just got disconnected."

Ankira nodded in understanding, "It must have been really rough."

Appius' eyes grew dim and nodded, "It was indeed..., but you showed the way back."

Looking up towards a notification sound Ankira nodded, "seems we are close to our destination."

There it was, the sun-dried atmosphere of Mandalore itself. Despite how utterly barren it was, Appius still called it home as did many Mandalorians. One look upon the sandy surface and you could see the centuries of conflicts of strife from fights with various factions around the galaxy. The Republic, the Confederacy of Independent Systems, the Galactic Empire... hell, even infighting and civil war. Mandalore, despite what some tried to change, was a planet drenched in blood and war.

"This is your first time to Mandalore, right?" the Human asked.

"Yes, it's..."

He waited for her response with bated breath. This was no doubt a big moment for her. To see where her own family came from, her *aliiit*, the history of their people. It was damn special, that was for sure.

"Beautiful," she finally said to which Appius smiled. Only a real Mandalorian could see the beauty of the planet now, and he was glad she could see it too. The two sat in silence as Appius watched Ankira staring out of the pilot's window like a child seeing something new for the first time. He found it amusing in all honesty. Spinky, the pilot droid, never said a word to either of them out of sheer terror of Ankira after she threatened it on their mission to Utapau. A couple of minutes flew by and as Appius gazed out of the window, he had a peculiar feeling that he somehow recognised the layout of the land. Hills this way, ditches that way, piles of stone and rubble that began to become slightly more frequent... Most of Mandalore was little more than uninhabitable wasteland, but somehow... he recognised this.

"Spinky," Appius said to the droid. "What are the coordinates for this meeting?"

"57.65535° North, 1.7732° West, Master Aedile sir."

Ankira turned to see that her fellow Mandalorian had suddenly gone very pale in the face. His eyes had gone wide and visible concern was highly present on his face.

"Appius? What's wrong?" Inquired the Weapons Specialist.

"Dasha said she thought this was a trap, right?"

Ankira slowly nodded her head.

"I think she might be right," Appius declared as he shot to his feet and made his way to the back of the ship. Surprised by his sudden burst of energy, Ankira followed and observed him quickly put his helmet back on his head. She made her way through the narrow gap between the crates until she was right beside him.

"Appius?" She repeated, she gently placed her hand on his right arm to find he was... trembling? What was wrong?

"It's them..." Appius stated like he somehow heard the question in her mind. "The ones who killed my *aliit*, it has to be. No-one else knows that location..."

"Can't we just turn the ship around?" Ankira suggested to which Appius solemnly shook his head.

"No, if it's them, they will have locked onto the ship. If we turn around now, they'll blow us to high hell before we know what's hit us... HAAR'CHAK!"

Appius bellowed loudly and slammed his fist into one of the many empty storage units that surrounded them. The two of them were so preoccupied with their emotional states that they became blissfully unaware of what the threat might have been that they were heading towards and Appius cursed that he didn't at least think of a plan. Because now it wasn't just him in danger, it was Ankira too.

"This was a huge mistake," the Mystic said. "You shouldn't have come with me. If something happens to you, I..."

Ankira decided to ignore him for the moment and placed her hands on her own Clan Wren inspired helmet. She carefully placed it on her head which immediately caught the attention of Appius.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"What does it look like?" the Chiss retorted.

"Ankira..."

"Do you really think I'm going to let you go out there alone?" retorted the blue-skinned woman strongly. It took a moment for Appius to respond, but he knew what the answer was.

"No," Appius finally replied.

"Good," Ankira said. "So, where *are* we going, anyways?"

Clan Clars Compound Ruins

As the ramp lowered to the ship and she made her first steps on Mandalorian soil and sunlight, Ankira got to witness first hand what happened to Appius' *aliit*. Clan's of Mandalore

always had a distinctive pride and merit to them. Her own *aliit* back on Rekkaid was no exception to the rule but this? She had no words for it.

What once stood a proud and mighty group of people was now nothing more than dust and rubble as far as the eye could see. Structures collapsed and were left to the mercy of the Mandalorian sun and winds. The colossal compound was barely a shell of its former self, especially judging by the charred and flame scorched debris no matter where she looked. It looked like something of a different era entirely, but she knew this was more recent. Was this what Appius saw all by himself when he got here? How would she have felt if it was her own *aliit*?

This was more than just a trap. This was an attempt at genocide of a Mandalorian Clan. They were surrounded by a trained militia carrying a mix of rocket launchers, blaster rifles and explosives. They were more than just grunts. They were armed, dangerous and trained to handle anything that came their way. One man came forward in front of them. A middle-aged human dressed in military gear with curly black hair and wide toothy grin. He approached them slowly clapping his hands.

"Appius Wight! I knew it! I knew you *somehow* survived," he declared, clearly proud of himself. "How are you doing, Appius? Well, I hope?"

Appius didn't even respond.

"Oh? What's that? You don't recognize me? Of course, you don't... why would you? Sterion, your father, he never was the biggest fan of me. I told him not to mingle with Mandalorians because you never know what kind of abomination they'll create. And here you are!" The militia leader held out his hands in a dramatic fashion and an uproar of laughter emerged from his men. Holding up his hand, they immediately hushed, allowing him to continue.

"Why did Sterion have to defy me? Me!? Antilus! His oldest friend for so long and why did *you* have to defy me? Like father like son I suppose. I told him to listen and I wouldn't have to kill him. Old friends and all that, but nope! He had to go off and be the noble Jedi he was. Fall in love, and then fight us off. Every. Single. Damn. Time! It got worse when you got involved because then there were TWO OF YOU!!!!"

Appius remained deadly silent whilst the Chiss listened to the man's ramblings.

"Our employer, he decided he'd seen enough. Two Force User's was becoming a problem and we decided to... make you both *not* a problem. Though it seemed you escaped and have been playing Mando ever since, but not today. We *finally* got you where we want you. You, your father, your brother, and the rest of your kriffing Clan, you all die here," he finished smirking and proceeded to point directly at Ankira, who held Siky tentatively in her hands.

"You, Mando," he shouted. "I don't know what he's paying you, but I doubt it's worth the life of this imposter."

"Says the one who has no business here," answered Ankira coldly.

This seemed to strike a nerve with the man as he narrowed his eyes at her.

"You realize we ended a whole clan here, Mando, the two of you will be a breeze."

Ankira looked around at the men around him and shrugged, "You can certainly try."

"What are you doing?" Hissed Appius softly.

The man laughed, "Try? Look around you, it would be foolish to even think so."

As they were speaking nobody noticed the little insect droid skittering between the rubble towards the ship behind them. The droid secretly snuck into the ship and searched for an access point.

Ankira shook her head, "I changed my mind, I know for sure that it will end here."

The man pulled his weapon out and aimed it at her and with him the rest of his group. Ankira did the same and held her two Westar aimed at him. A step behind her Appius drew his lightsaber and stood ready, he could feel something was going to happen and he hoped Ankira knew what she was doing.

If you would have blinked you would have missed it. The whole field exploded as the ship behind them roared into action and let out a barrage of plasma shots at the militia. In the chaos it created, Ankira and Appius sprang into action and took out people left and right.

Appius took out all his hatred on a group of people, zapping them to crisps before slicing through others. Ankira made well-placed shot after well-placed shot, felling her foes like trees. It didn't take them long before the ground was littered with bodies.

They heard a grunt of pain and looked towards the sound, it was Antilus. He was badly wounded and tried to crawl away. Ankira stepped in his path and stomped down on his hand.

"Where do you think you are going?" She hissed coldly at him.

"You bunch of monsters!" Antilus spat at her.

"Monsters? What do you think you are? Slaughtering a whole *aliiit*, innocent people died at your hands!"

She kicked him across the ground towards Appius. The man could only grunt in pain and curled up.

"You killed his *aliit* out of spite!"

She kicked him again and it brought him at the feet of Appius. She looked up at Appius and nodded at him that it was his choice how the murderer of his *aliit* would die.

Antilus had seen a lot in his fifty-two years of life. For thirty years he fought, bled, sweat and trained as part of a trained militia. He rose through the ranks and became part of one of the most feared Mercenary groups on this side of the galaxy, but today was a hard lesson in never taking your opponent's for granted. He'd gotten complacent, they all had, and now as he stared up at Appius, his silhouette blazing red in the Mandalorian sunlight, all he could hope for was a shred of mercy.

He would get none.

With a flick of the Sorcerer's wrist, Antilus' body lifted in front of the Mandalorian until he was at eye level. His airways tightened under the Force User's invisible grip and he desperately tried to get the oxygen his body craved.

"*Teh wi'nr, mhi atyaor,*" Appius declared. "Do you know what that means, Antilus? It's my *aliit's* saying. It means 'from ashes, we rise'. You may have burned us to ashes and dust, but from the blood-stained ruins we will rise again. As long as I live and breathe, my *aliit* will live on through me!"

Antilus coughed and sputtered a small laugh that made the Sorcerer's head cock to the side. It was almost disturbing, here this fiend was on the brink of death and he was... laughing at him?

"Without your father... without your Clan... you are nothing... you will always be alone..." Antilus struggled to get his words out yet as he spoke his last sentence he forced a defiant smirk on his face.

Appius had heard enough, he released his grip on the older man and just as Antilus' feet touched the ground, the Sorcerer swelled the Dark Side from within him as tendrils of energy jetted out of his fingers and into the Imperial's body. They surrounded him like a net and within seconds his internal organs ceased to function, his heart stopped beating and his eyes rolled into the back of his head. Antilus was no more. His lifeless body dropped to the ground as Appius deactivated his emerald bladed lightsaber and placed it on his waist.

"Appius?" Ankira asked softly. "Are you ok?"

"Yeah..." replied the Force User as he slowly removed his helmet from his head and dropped it to the floor. With the militia now dead, it was just the two of them in the Mandalorian desert. Appius' breath was a little ragged, perhaps from the heat, perhaps from the recent battle, or maybe because a weight was suddenly lifted from his shoulders? Though as the Chiss Mandalorian looked at him he seemed very distant.

"I... need a minute," he said quietly as he took a few steps into the Clan Clar ruins. He placed his hand upon a giant stone, one of many that lay among a sea of rubble.

Ankira didn't move. She wanted to approach him but had no idea what to say. What *could* she say? Her hand instinctively rubbed against something she always kept on her holster and carried with her, though no-one knew about because it always blended into her armor. A flash of inspiration blitzed through her mind and she quickly removed her helmet and dropped it to the ground in pretty much the same fashion that Appius did. She retrieved the instrument from her side, sharp on one side and blunt on the other, it was a traditional Mandalorian *bes'bev*. A flute used for both combat and ritual purposes.

She took a few steps forward towards him before sitting upon a small mound that was nearby. She placed the flute to her lips, the sound that came from it was sweet and melodic and Appius immediately turned around to face her, his mouth slightly slack from surprise though he made no effort to stop it. He found it quite soothing, and he closed his eyes to solely focus on the sounds Ankira was creating. That was it, just him, Ankira and the sound of sweet music.

The song continued for a couple of minutes longer until the conclusion. Ankira slowly lowered the *bes'bev* from her face and returned the smile that Appius was now giving her. She liked it when he smiled. It made her feel... warm...

"*Ni su'cuyi, gar kyr'adyc, ni partayli, gar darasuum, aliit,*" the Human finally said softly to which the Chiss nodded her head. Silence fell upon them again, neither turning their gaze away from the other, she looked up to him and he looked down at her. Their hearts beat faster and faster. She walked up to him and placed her hand onto his as he responded by wrapping his fingers around hers until they were joined together.

"Appius... I know what Antilus said is bothering you, don't listen to that *ge'hutuun*. You aren't alone, not anymore. You have your apprentice. You have Taldryan, and you have... me..." she spoke quietly. Their faces were dangerously close together, neither stopping the movements of the other until their lips touched one another's in a small and gentle kiss.

After a couple of seconds, the pair separated and a bead of sweat dripped down Appius' face. He went wide-eyed as he realised *exactly* what he'd just done, the soft, tingly feeling upon his lips was a testament to that fact.

"I... erm...urm..." he stammered. It was rare Appius was ever speechless but this? This was one of those times. His thoughts ran through his mind at breakneck speed as he waited for

her to do something. Hit him, scold him, he wasn't sure what to expect. He simply continued to fail to speak in front of her until he went silent, his nerves suddenly getting the better of him.

Ankira stared at him, unable to do anything. He kissed her, no one had ever done that. She felt her face turn purple and a second later she ran. She fled from the feeling it gave her. He kissed her! No one ever dared to do that. A moment later she stopped and her fingers gently touched her lips. It was all true... and she felt weird because of it.

Appius blinked at her reaction and immediately regretted it even more. He didn't want to scare her away like this and he scolded at himself because of it. Slowly he picked up both their helmets and looked back towards her. Part of him wanted to go after her, but he knew it was probably best to leave her alone for a while.

She still stood there with her fingers against her lips and began to giggle. He kissed her and she couldn't believe it. Her mind was going in all directions at once, what would it mean, where would it go... what would it mean for them? She dared a glance back towards him and saw him standing with both their helmets. She wanted to go back to him, but what would she do or say. She sighed softly and looked at the landscape around her as if hoping to find her answer there. Behind her she heard slow footsteps, the ground crunching beneath his feet until he was a few steps behind her.

"Ankira?" he asked softly.

"Yes, Appius?" she answered, but didn't dare to turn around just yet.

"I... uh... I don't know what came over me..." he said hesitatingly.

Ankira felt her cheeks turn purple again. 'What if he sees me like this?' raced through her mind. She was sure she would look silly now.

Appius waited for her to give him an answer, he was sure she wouldn't dare to get close to him again. After a moment Ankira turned around to face him and stepped closer. Had she made up her mind? He watched her and startled when she took his face in her hands and kissed him.

The world around him became nonexistent. It didn't matter, nothing did. All that mattered to him right now was the woman right in front of him, kissing him. Ankira slowly pulled her head

away from his and smiled. Her cheeks were tinted a beautiful lavender and for the first time despite her nerves, she faced her fears head-on.

"I don't understa..." Appius said before being interrupted by Ankira placing her index finger on his mouth. She shook her head to silence him but it was impossible to stop the smile that appeared on the Sorcerer's face.

"I'm... still not very good at expressing my feelings... but..."

This time, it was Appius who interrupted her. He dropped both helmets to the sand and placed a hand under her chin, gently lifting her head so her eyes met his.

"I'm not asking you too," he said tenderly. "We can just take this a day at a time. There's no rush."

"I know," she replied as she rested her head against his chest. Appius wrapped his arms around her and swayed slowly. The two of them remained like that for what felt like a small eternity. For the Mystic, this was the first time since before his *aliit* was destroyed that he truly felt at peace within himself. Serenity washed over him as all his worries and stresses simply melted away.

For Ankira? This was a first for her. She'd always held a mental barrier against such things to protect her. Her work was always her life but now? For the first time, that wall had been climbed over and crossed by someone else. Was she scared? Yes, but in his arms, she didn't care as the soothing feeling caressed over her. It didn't matter if she was a Chiss Mandalorian. It didn't matter that she couldn't talk about her feelings as well as others. *He* didn't care, he accepted her and to Ankira, that meant more than any job or credits ever would.

"One day at a time..." she repeated back to him. "*Teh wi'nr, mhi atyaor?*"

"*Teh wi'nr, mhi atyaor,*" Appius said back to her, his voice barely more than a whisper. They stayed like that for a few moments longer until the Force User let out a deep sigh.

"What's wrong?" Ankira asked as she looked up at him.

"We have to head back to Chyron," Appius stated, failing to hide the disappointment in his words. "If we are away too much longer they'll send a search party. I've got to tell the summit there's no beskar too... that will be a fun conversation."

"And we don't want to make them worry," the Chiss said as she reluctantly pried herself away from him. But not before reaching in and giving him one more kiss. Making the Human's cheeks turn slightly red.

"Dasha will lose her mind," Appius said as he let out a small chuckle. "I'm sorry about all this... mess. I'm sure you weren't expecting your first time on Mandalore to be anything like this."

The Mandalorian woman gave a slight shrug.

"It happens. *This is the way*, after all" she declared as she turned around and made her way back towards the Upsilon Class Shuttle. Siky stood on the top of the ramp, the little insect droid beeping happily and seemingly very proud of itself. Ankira turned around after she realised Appius wasn't following her.

"Are you coming?"

Appius looked to the ruins of his former home and then glanced towards the sky like somehow his *aliiit* were looking down on him before a small smirk graced his face.

"Yeah," he said, and with the Force, he summoned both their helmets to his hands and followed after her.

Ankira scooped Siky up as she walked up the ramp and entered the ship. She indeed didn't expect things to turn out like this. She only expected the trap. Navigating the crates back to the table she sighed softly. If Aylin found out, she would never hear the end of it and glanced towards Siky. She wondered what it had seen.

Appius placed the helmets onto the table and nodded slightly at her, "I will tell Spinky to fly us back, he is still very scared of you."

"I think he will have to get used to it, me being around more often," Ankira said with a soft chuckle, which surprised even herself.

Appius chuckled and walked further towards the cockpit.

She picked up her helmet and started to clean the dust from it and heard Siky chirp next to her and tilt its little head.

"I'm sorry, Siky, I have no idea what you are trying to say," she said as she carefully wiped the dust from her visor.

Siky chirped again and ran a little circle before climbing onto her vambrace. Ankira looked curiously at him and was about to scoot it off as she saw a short message appear. 'Going home?' it said.

"Yes, we are going home. I'm sure Aylin will be happy to see you again," she answered.

The next message surprised her. 'Are you happy?' Now she got a little worried, what did the droid see and what was Aylin going to do with the information. She shot into a panic.

"Siky, what did you see?" she whispered to it.

Siky tilted its head and made a new message appear, 'You smiled' It was not helping her and shook her head. The droid didn't understand her or it didn't have the capacity to answer her. Looking up at Appius as he returned he could clearly see the panic in her eyes

"What's wrong?"

"Siky saw..." Ankira said as she buried her face in her hands, "If it tells Aylin... I'm not ready for this."

Appius glanced at the little droid, "can you forget what you saw?"

Siky beeped and chirped as it skittered over towards Appius who looked curiously at it, he couldn't understand the droid either. It shook its little head, making its antenna wiggle.

"I guess that is a no...", Sighed Appius.

"Can you keep it secret," Ankira asked Siky hopefully, "I don't want Aylin to find out."

"Knowing Aylin, she will find out in no time."

Ankira dropped her head on the table, "I'm dead... perhaps I should just disappear."

The Sorcerer approached the nervous woman and rubbed his hand along her back.

"Hey, it will be ok," he said with as much comfort in his tone of voice as he could muster. "As for you..."

He stretched out his right hand as an invisible grip took hold of the little insect droid and lifted him into the air. Its little legs comically scurried for freedom though it had nowhere to run. The Sorcerer carefully placed the tiny droid on the table as it quickly glanced at Ankira, then to Appius, then back to Ankira again. Still wagging its antenna blissfully without a care in the universe.

"Ok, so you can't forget what you say, but you don't need to tell anyone, right?" Appius said with a huge smile, hoping he could somehow win the droid over onto their side. A message appeared once again, 'why?'

"Because... we asked you too?" the Human continued to which the droid tilted its head quizzically. "You know, I could just... zap it?" Appius then suggested as he shrugged his shoulders.

"No," Ankira retorted. "He's Aylin's special project. She'd be really upset if he's destroyed. Plus, he helped save us, remember?"

"Yeah..." the Sorcerer replied. He couldn't deny that she had a good point, without Siky or Ankira he would have walked right into certain doom with the rest of his *aliit*. Plus Aylin had done a lot for him recently. She designed his *beskar'gam*, she's fixing his speeder... getting on her bad side was probably not the smartest thing to do.

But then... what could they do?

Chyron Space Station

Early hours of the morning

The Upsilon's engines slowed to a halt as the vessel went eerily quiet. Thankfully, it was the middle of the night and there were barely any signs of civilians to be seen, though the station's night staff drudged on through the monotony of their labour.

Getting back to Chyron had taken longer than expected. Appius gave Spinky permission to use whatever little 'detours' he liked just so they had more time to convince Aylin's little spider droid not to reveal what it saw them do on Mandalore. Sadly for them, even with the extended time granted to them, they couldn't make any progress. Frustrated and defeated, the pair of Mandalorians stood waiting for the ramp to lower. Appius didn't need the Force to see that Ankira was horribly nervous, perhaps even scared judging by how ragged her breathing was and how she fidgeted on the spot. Siky was held delicately in her arms and made no effort to escape from her grasp. *It* seemed comfortable at least.

"Hey," Appius said as he stood beside her and took her left hand in his right. "We'll get through this, ok?"

He leaned forwards towards her and touched his forehead against hers, or at least as best as he could considering the helmets they were wearing. Regardless, it brought a small bit of comfort to the young woman as she swallowed the lump in her throat.

"Thank you..." she just managed to say as the ship's ramp lowered. The immediate cold hit them, even through their *beskar'gam*, and the artificial lighting would have nearly blinded them if it weren't for their visors. At the bottom of the ramp were two individuals waiting for

them, one with delicate pink skin and flowing red hair with her arms folded across her chest, tapping a finger impatiently against her robes. The other, much to Ankira's surprise, appeared to be a Zabrak Mandalorian judging by the *beskar'gam* with a horned helmet. Either that or it was for intimidation.

"Oh, kark..." Appius said as he realised who was waiting for them. "Well, let's get this over with," he declared as he moved forward with Ankira following carefully behind him.

"You're late," the Zabrak spoke. "I take it there was no beskar?"

"You'd be correct on that one, Zxyl," Appius responded. "Turns out it was a trap set up just for me. I do appreciate you both coming out to meet me though, It's not often I get a warm welcome back."

The sarcasm was highly evident as he spoke, though the pair seemingly decided to ignore it.

"Tch, of course it was," the red haired woman spat as she sighed deeply. "Oh well. What's done is done and at least that's one less headache to deal with. Frankly, I'm amazed to see you're alive," she said with a sly smile.

"Oh, thanks for the vote of confidence, Seraine," the Sorcerer retorted with fake hurt in his voice. "I would be dead right now but... I had help," he said as he motioned to Ankira behind him.

"Well, would you look at that! The *Mandaboo* made a friend," Zxyl commented.

"Or..." Seraine interrupted as she carefully inspected the pair of Mandalorians in front of her. "A girlfriend?"

She received her answer when both Appius and Ankira tensed on the spot. The Chiss Mandalorian dropped the insect droid she was holding out of sheer shock and the second it hit the floor it scurried away determined to find it's master. That little reaction from the two Mandalorians on the ramp told Seraine everything.

"Seraine..." Appius growled through his teeth.

"Thought so," the Taldryan Consul responded triumphantly. "We'll leave you two alone, then. I expect a report on my desk in the morning, Appius. Have fun!" She said as she turned and left with Zxyl following behind her.

"THAT'S IF YOU BOTHER TO READ IT!" Appius bellowed after them. He turned to see Ankira frozen in place, still tense and looking like she could run at any moment.

"Ankira, are you ok?" He asked gently. Until he noticed the absence of a certain little mechanical being. "Where's Siky?"

Ankira bolted. She ran blindly in the direction that Siky had run off too to return to Aylin. They knew and she didn't like that one bit. Everyone she passed she eyed now with suspicion, in fear they knew as well. As she chased Siky she saw it run around the corner and skidded after it, nearly bumping full force into someone of the night shift. Muttering a few excuses she ran after Siky again and jumped after it, catching it as she landed on the floor.

"You can't return just yet, Siky," she said between pants for breath.

Siky squirmed a little in her hand as Ankira sat up on the floor. As she sat there, catching her breath she remembered Aylin say something about a memory chip.

"Siky... I need your chip."

It chirped and tilted its head.

"Please Siky, give me your memory chip... I will keep it safe for you," Ankira pleaded.

Siky chirped and opened its mouth, a small memory chip ejected from it and it's little body went silent. Carefully Ankira took the chip from him and tucked it away in her beskar'gam. Letting out a small sigh of relief she got up and held the little lifeless droid close as she walked back. It didn't take long before Appius had caught up to her and looked at Siky.

"What did you do to it?" he asked as he nodded towards the droid.

"I asked for his memory and it gave it to me... Apparently, it shut him down as well." Ankira said as she looked at it.

"What will you do now?" Appius asked slowly.

"How did they know there was something? How could they? Do they know what I am as well? Will they tell others?" Ankira asked with panic in her voice as she suddenly remembered what happened when they landed and barraged Appius with questions. In her mind she was thinking on escape routes, she could just leave this place. But then... what about Appius? She shook her head and rested against the wall, almost fearing the answers Appius would give her.

Appius had to act carefully. He could sense the fear in her and it hurt him to see her in this state. Was it his fault? It certainly felt like it and he just wished he knew what to do or what to

say to make her feel at ease. He never was the type to think through his actions. He *always* acted by his gut, and right now, he knew what his gut was telling him. He took in a deep breath through his nose and forced himself to speak.

"They knew because... we were terrible at hiding it," he said. It was the truth, and as much as it might have sucked, Ankira knew it was too. "I don't think they know about you being a Chiss, and even if they did, I doubt they actually care. Seraine just likes to get under people's skin and Zxyl is a Mandalorian Zabrak. As for whether or not they'll tell others... I don't honestly know."

He could feel her tense under his answers. Her fists clenched and if they could, her toes would have dug into the concrete beneath them.

"Do you want me to leave you alone?" Appius asked gingerly. Truthfully? She didn't know what she wanted.

"aren't you worried?" she whispered back at him.

"About what?" he asked, tilting his head.

"Being seen with... me..."

Appius approached her and rubbed his fingers along her arm. She didn't move from her position and kept her head against the wall.

"I'm not, no. Like I said back on the ship, I don't care that your Chiss. You're a fighter and day by day you prove everyone wrong. I was in Vizsla, I've known a *lot* of *mando'a*, and you are more *mando'a* than most. Would I be worried? No. I'd be proud, honoured and most of all... happy and lucky to have you. Through your kindness and strength, you make me a better man, you make me a better Mandalorian and nothing anyone could say or do would change that. I've seen you at your best and I've seen you at your worst and even if no-one else does, I understand you and I love you. All of you."

She didn't move, not even a flinch. The deactivated droid still held tightly in her hands.

"But, yeah. I'll give you some space."

Appius turned to move away. His footsteps echoed as he got further and further away from her.

With every step he took she felt alone, but it felt different now. Normally she didn't care one bit about it, but now it felt wrong. Did that really mean she felt something for him, that there

was a connection between them? Perhaps those two did see something they hadn't seen themselves or dared to admit. She looked at the droid in her hands and sighed softly. Appius had admitted it, he had told her he loved her. But she? She remained silent, unable to say anything, unable to bring her feelings to words.

She pushed herself from the wall and hurried after him.

"Appius! Wait."

It took Appius a moment to realize that she had come after him and as he stopped, he turned around to watch her approach. She stopped a few steps from him. He could see she was nervous still, by her little shifting from foot to foot.

"I..." Ankira began and gulped, closing her eyes tightly as if she feared the world would cease to exist, "I love you too."

"Y-you do?"

Ankira nodded as she opened her eyes again, looking at him.

"I... how... Why?" Appius stammered.

"Because you are you... you see me for who I am, a Mandalorian, just like you." Ankira said and fell silent looking for more words. "It is... how you make me... feel?"

A grin appeared on Appius' face, though it was hidden under his helmet. He couldn't remember the last time he felt this happy and took a step closer towards her. Gently he held her arms and rested his head against hers. As he held her, he could feel some of the tension ebb away.

Ankira smiled as they rested their helmets against each other, it was close enough for her to still feel this warmth without having to feel awkward too much standing here where everybody could see them.

After a moment she took a small step back. "Perhaps we should activate Siky again... Aylin will find out anyway..." she said with a little hesitation.

Appius nodded and looked at the droid, "If you feel that is best, go ahead."

Getting the chip from her pocket, she carefully inserted it back into Siky's mouth. After a moment the droid's antenna began to move and Siky chirped again. It tilted his head at Ankira and bleeped happily.

"Welcome back, Siky," Ankira said and looked up to Appius. "How... do we continue now?"

"Honestly? I'm not sure. This is all new for me too," Appius declared as he took her hand in his. "But I guess... we figure it out together. One day at a time."

"One day at a time," she repeated back to him. She let her hold of Siky go as the little multi-legged droid scurried home to its master.

"Do you think Aylin is still here?" Ankira asked quietly.

Appius didn't respond at first and lifted his head up slightly. If his helmet had been off, Ankira could have sworn he would have had a faraway look on him.

"Yeah, she's still here, Dasha too by the looks of it," the Sorcerer responded.

"How do you... oh,"

For a brief second, she almost forgot he could use the Force. *That* was going to take some getting used too. But it made him a different kind of Mando, just like her and she loved that about him.

Love... at one point that concept was alien to her. She was shut down by the mere thought of friendship but now? She held strong, almost like she was a different person now. He made her feel unbeatable, untouchable, and not to mention indestructible. Was she scared? Absolutely. The fear ran through her and made her numb just thinking about what was to come. But she would face it. Just like she did everything else now with Appius at her side.

It didn't take them long to find Aylin and Dasha and by the looks of things they hadn't stopped working in the long hours since they'd been gone. Aylin was covered in a mixture of oil, grease, grime, cuts, bruises, scabs, and hell only knew what else. What was certain was that she was in a complete and utter state.

The young Sephi Scavenger was barely any better. Appius almost didn't recognize her under the muck that covered parts of her body and got stuck in her hair. Though the minute she heard footsteps approach and she saw her master, she dropped whatever kriffing tool she was holding and ran to him and tackled him into a hug as best she could with her much smaller arms. Hell be damned about dirtying his armor!

"Hey, Dasha..." Appius said comfortingly.

"It was a trap, wasn't it?" the young girl asked.

"Yeah, it was," the Force User confirmed. "I'm sorry, I should have listened to you. But I'm ok, everything worked out. Do you still have my lightsaber?"

The young girl pried herself from her master and smiled before realising Ankira was standing there, right beside them. She timidly reached for the steel hilt at her waist and handed it back to its owner. The Weapons Specialist watched the exchange between the two with a small smile on her face. It reminded her of her childhood on Rekkaid with her *aliit*. It was strangely cute to see.

"YES! I WIN!"

The sudden exclamation caught all of them off guard and sounded like a crazed woman possessed. Aylin Sajark hit the ignition to the speeder bike as it levitated off the ground without any struggle or sign of failure.

"You fixed it!?" Appius said in absolute astonishment. If he wasn't here to see it himself, he wouldn't have believed it.

"You *doubted* me!?" Aylin retorted with a faint hurt in her voice.

"No!" the Mystic responded strongly. "But... that thing was *beyond* repair. I thought I was going to have to fork out for a new one."

The Nautolan went slack-jawed at that statement.

"You mean to tell me that you had the money to buy a new one this entire time and you asked me to try to fix a possibly irreparable wreck anyway!?" Aylin questioned.

"I... ugh..."

The green-skinned Scavenger let out a small chuckle.

"Honestly, Zappy. It's fine. This was a lot of fun and..."

Suddenly, she was interrupted by Siky as it climbed up her leg and onto her left shoulder.

"Hello, Siky. Did you have a nice adventure?"

Siky chirped and rubbed its little head against her cheek. Aylin chuckled and looked to the others.

"Seems it enjoyed its adventure," Aylin said with a grin.

"He got to shoot from a spaceship," said Ankira who had remained silent until now, "He did a really good job."

Siky beeped and chirped happily when he heard that and that made Aylin giggle.

"So, you saved the two Mando's didn't you?"

Siky began to chirp again, but both of the Mandalorians began to protest even though they couldn't understand the little droid.

Suddenly Aylin squealed, "You saw what?!"

Both of them fell silent. Ankira shifted nervously and Appius glanced at her to see if she was doing alright.

Aylin busted out in laughter, "I knew it!"

Dasha tilted her head, "you knew what? I want to know too."

"Ankira can smile and be happy," Aylin said happily as she bounced around them.

Ankira let out a breath of air she didn't know she was holding and she heard Appius laugh softly. Aylin then grabbed them both around their waists and grinned, glancing up at both of them.

"Aylin, stop that," Ankira said as she tried to free herself from her grip.

"Siky also saw something else, he..." Aylin started but got interrupted by Ankira who covered her mouth and only mumbles could be heard.

"Aww, I want to hear the rest too," said Dasha, who looked hopefully towards her master.

Aylin kept struggling, trying to break free.

"Aylin, I'll let you go, if you tone it down... I don't want the whole station to know."

Nodding as much as the hold allowed, she was finally released.

"They kissed!" Squealed Aylin softly.

Dasha's eyes went wide and looked at both of them before her gaze stopped at Appius, "You... kissed her?"

Ankira glanced a little nervously at Appius and nodded slightly, which earned them another squeal from Aylin.

"Aylin, please..." Ankira pleaded.

"Alright, alright. Sorry," she said waving them down though with a huge grin still on her face. It was impossible to hide her excitement in her body and to Appius and Ankira it looked like she was going to explode into a bubbly ball of green energy any second.

"I knew it!" the Nautolan suddenly burst out. "I knew something was going on. The way you spoke about your mission to Utapau... that wasn't just an ordinary mission! Then you tried everything to avoid him. I just knew it! I knew it! I knew it! I knew it! I knew it!"

The green-skinned woman danced around them again, her excitement barely contained as the young Sephi watched with her mouth slightly ajar.

"AYLIN!" protested the two Mandalorians which caused the makeshift mechanic to stop in her tracks.

"Ok, sorry. I mean it this time! Promise!" Aylin said, trying to ease their worries. "But...you normally move from job to job, Ankira. Does this mean you will be staying here a bit longer?"

Ankira hadn't thought about that. It was true that for the last six years that was her life. Moving from one bounty or job to another. Rinse and repeat. She'd done this for so long that the idea of staying in one place for any kind of time was foreign to her. She glanced at Appius who remained silent and though he couldn't see it through his helmet, she smiled at him. It would be nice to have somewhere to go back too or *someone*. So why not here? Why not now? For frakk's sake she was always told to *loosen up* wasn't she!? Besides, it's not like he was going to ask her to stop doing her jobs, to stop being her. She knew he wasn't like that and for the first time since she left Rekkaid she could have somewhere she could call home around friends... and the one she loved.

"Yes," she answered with a nod of her head. "I think I will."

Aylin squealed and leapt like a nexu at her and wrapped her in the biggest tightest hug she could muster.

"Dasha," said Appius who had been quiet up to this point. "I'm willing to bet you have a lot of questions or concerns. I know this is quite new to you, it is for us too. Are you ok?"

Dasha Talus was many things. A thief, Scavenger, incredibly creative and good on her feet. But one thing she was *not* was stupid. She knew Appius before he left Taldryan as well as the Brotherhood and she knew him before his turn to the Dark Side of the Force. When he came back he was a different man. Sure, he had the same outer shell but it felt like he carried the weight of the galaxy on him after the death of his Clan, that event itself was what turned him. She went to Mandalore with him before and saw the devastation first-hand. But here and now, for the first time in months, she could see a glimmer of the old him in there.

That same kind, gentle being she met here on Chyron when she was living off scraps, the same man that she thought was being repressed and crushed by his scars and trauma was now resurfacing again. Maybe it was the way he stood or spoke right now? Maybe no-one else could see it, but *she* could. She knew him better than he thought she did.

She gave the Mandalorian Force User a great big, happy smile. To Dasha, it was about frakking time something good happened to him for once. Or rather *someone*.

"Come on, Dasha. Let's leave these two lovebirds alone, bye, Ankira! Bye, Zappy!" Aylin said with a teasing tone as she dragged the young girl away before she could ask any questions. After a few moments, there was only the bike and the two Mandalorians with not another soul in sight other than each other.

When they were both gone Ankira looked at Appius, "The Clan will know within an hour... won't they?"

Appius shrugged helplessly, "If Aylin doesn't calm down, they will."

Ankira sighed. She knew this would happen sooner or later, but she rather wished it was later. It all happened a bit too fast for her. She now suddenly had a boyfriend or *burc'ya*. It still felt all really strange to her and she feared the reactions of the others, but she knew she wouldn't have to face it alone.

Appius took her hand in his and pulled her close, resting his helmet against hers, "Whatever their reaction and if they like it or not, we stand in this together."

Ankira reached up and slowly lifted Appius' helmet. Noting what she did, he did the same with hers. Soon they saw each other again and smiled at each other. Standing slightly on her toes she kissed him. This made Appius grin and returned the kiss.

They both stared at each other for a moment, both lost in their own thoughts. Slowly a grin appeared on Ankira's lips, which made Appius look curiously at her.

Ankira glanced towards the waiting bike, "Aylin was so nice to fix it for you. I think we should try it out."

"That is a great idea," said Appius with a chuckle and placed his helmet back on his head.

Stepping onto the bike, Ankira quickly followed and put her helmet on as well. Holding onto Appius as he kicked the speeder into action.

"Hold on tightly!" Appius yelled and bolted off before he finished speaking.

All Ankira could do was hold on tightly onto him. As they sped away she rested herself against his back and laughed. For the first time, she really laughed because she was happy.

-END-