

All Hurt, No Comfort

Chapter 1

Enemy Stronghold

Outer Rim

41 ABY

Draca *ran*. The bundle in his arms became more like a ragdoll than a child. His head bobbed up and down with every step he took. Draca's legs *burned*, but he poured the Force through every fibre of his being, willing himself to keep going, to not stop. *Never stop*. He didn't realise how light in weight the five-year-old boy had become. It was like he was somehow fading away in his grasp. His skin had paled. His eyes had become lifeless.

"No... please don't..." Draca muttered the words under his breath. Hoping, *praying* that they somehow brought with them the strength to make the boy live.

In the distance, he saw salvation in ship form. The ramp of the *Astral Drake* lowered into the dirt. Anders stood at the top, arm reaching out to them.

"Hurry, Draca!" He called out, his voice muffled slightly by the sound of blaster fire coming from behind Draca.

The young Zabrak pushed himself harder than he ever had in his life. He leapt from the ground, going airborne as he landed at the top of the ramp. Anders grabbed Draca by the sleeve of his robe and pulled him inside. The ramp closed behind them, blaster fire pinging against the exterior of the ship.

"Buddy, launch the ship!" Anders ordered.

A droid's incessant beeping sounded over the intercom. The *Astral Drake* shook as it jettisoned from the ground and ascended into the air.

"Anders!" Draca gasped between hoarse breaths, clutching the small boy to his chest. "The Collective!"

"I'm aware," Anders gave a small nod before turning towards a door at the rear of the ship. "Meshita!"

The door slid open, revealing a slender woman in full Mandalorian armour.

"You don't need to shout so loud, I... kriffing hell, Draca! What happened!?"

Meshita shoved Anders out of the way and knelt beside Draca. She pressed the back of her hand to the child's forehead and grasped their wrist. She took a deep breath and shook her head.

"Give him here," she didn't give Draca a chance to argue before she snatched the boy out of his arms.

"Hey, wait!" Draca reached out but his wrist was caught by Anders.

"Let her do her job," the Chiss said.

"But..."

Draca caught the look in Anders' eyes. Damn it all. If only he'd been faster...

"Enough of that," Anders relinquished his hold on him, placing his hands behind his back. "All we can do is wait. Meshita needs to concentrate."

He was right. Draca loathed to admit it, but all he could do was watch as the durasteel door hissed shut in front of him.

Chapter 2

The Astral Drake

Outer Rim

41 ABY

Anders tapped his fingers on his knee. For twenty minutes he sat there, watching Draca torture himself by pacing back and forth, muttering, begging for miracles under his breath. BUDD-E stood on the table in-between them, glancing up at Draca whilst tilting its head. An effort to look as cute as possible to make the young man feel better.

It wasn't working, but Anders had to give BUDD-E props for trying.

"You are going to leave an indent in the floor if you don't stop pacing," Anders commented. "You need to calm down."

"I can't calm down. They *experimented* on him, Anders. Just because he had the Force. He didn't even know how to use it! And now he's in there, and I don't understand how you are so calm about all of this!"

Anders shrugged. "I'm simply better at hiding it than you are."

Draca glared at him, causing Anders to sigh.

"You did everything you could to help. You found him. You couldn't predict what state he would be in, but you found him alive. You could have lost your life in your escape, but you didn't. He could have died before you got him to Meshita and yet, he didn't. Remember, Draca. The Force works in mysterious ways."

The door slid open, turning their attention to Meshita as she entered the room. Her shoulders slumped. She leaned upright against the wall for support, her helmet pointing towards the floor.

Anders felt a cold chill descend down his spine. He reached out with the Force and couldn't feel anything from the room. Meshita didn't have to say anything. He already knew. His suspicions were confirmed.

"Meshita, please tell me he's OK," Draca pleaded. He sounded like a desperate man.

Meshita slowly shook her head. When she spoke, her voice was quiet and barely audible.

"I'm so sorry."

The room went silent, barring the hum of the ship's engines. It was like a heavy weight had come crashing down on top of them. The atmosphere felt thicker, each breath a difficult task to complete.

Draca finally walked away, storming off to his room at the back of the ship. Meshita reached out to him, intending to follow after him until Anders' voice cut through the silence.

"Leave him be. He needs to process what has happened."

Meshita hesitated, but relented. "What do we do now?"

Anders pinched the bridge of his nose as he pondered for a moment. "Clean up the boy's body as best as you can. Have him prepared to be received by his parents once we arrive on Coruscant. Do an analysis and see if you can find anything unusual or out of place. Anything you find might be a clue as to what the Collective are planning."

Meshita gave a curt nod before vanishing back into what she had made her makeshift procedure room. Once he was alone, Anders let out a low groan and shook his head. The Collective were getting bold, desperate, or both. Taking a child, a *Human* child no less, right from the heart of the galaxy's nobility was a feat of sheer audacity. What were they planning? They were hunting Force-sensitive children but for what end?

Why did it have to be children who died?

Anders' thoughts were interrupted by the presence of a sudden weight on his right shoulder, BUDD-E beeped gently into his ear as it nestled its cranium into Anders' neck.

"Yes, Buddy. I think everything will be fine," Anders gave the droid a small smile, patting it on the head.

This was nothing but cruelty and pain. Not just for those close to the child, but for those around him at the time of his death. Meshita had to live with the knowledge she failed to save him, and Draca would no doubt blame himself for the weeks, maybe even months to come.

Anders entered the lift to the cockpit of the ship. If today taught him anything, it was that the enemies of the Brotherhood needed to be destroyed at all costs.

No exceptions. No mercy.

Peace is a lie.

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