

Ritual

Chapter 1

The Astral Drake

Wild Space

33 ABY

The room was silent, save for the humming of the ship's engines in his ears. Unlike most pre-teens in the galaxy, Draca actually enjoyed the peace and quiet. He found something about it rather peaceful. He could just close his eyes, focus on himself, and forget about the rest of the galaxy for at the very least a good few minutes. The young Zabrak was also fond of this room in particular. It was nicely decorated with a bed adorned with what looked like tapestry sheets, a desk and a chair made out of wroshyr wood, which he was putting to good use of right now, as well as all the little trinkets one would need for extended travel across the stars. It smelt homely, and the dim lights brought with it a sense of ease.

None of that was why Draca liked the room. It was nice, sure, and the luxury certainly had its own appeal, but none of that mattered, not to him. He found the room oddly comforting simply because of the man it belonged to. It had that extra layer of warmth that no other room in the ship had, not even his own. Anders could be strict, even at the best of times, but in the three years since Draca had been rescued by him, the adult Chiss had always been fair and honest with him.

It made Draca smile at the irony sometimes. Weren't Sith and Jedi meant to be mortal enemies? All the texts, tomes, scrolls and holocrons of ages past that had been held by his fingers suggested as such. Yet, here he was, a young, training Jedi being raised by a Sith. No corruption or attempts to turn him to the dark side in sight. This one Sith had been there for him at all times whenever he needed anything and, at least to him, Anders had been as good as his word. There was a definite bond there that the young Zabrak appreciated above all else.

Right now, however, was one of those periods in the day where Draca could do... well... whatever he wanted, really. He had podracer hologames and a whole collection of reading material that he could use to get ahead in his studies, if he wanted to. Which he did. It always made Anders happy, which in turn, made Draca happy. However, today was a bit different.

The young Jedi placed the hexagonal holocron onto the desk in front of him, studying it for a moment like it held the answer to all the galaxy's greatest mysteries. As far as Draca was concerned, it might as well have. Every time he inspected it, there seemed to be some small detail he had missed the previous time. A small marking here, an iridescent symbol there. Not that it mattered, but as Anders always said;

'Small details can paint a clearer picture.'

The young boy activated the holocron, the blue, familiar flashing lights illuminating the space in front of him. Thankfully, so long as Draca used his own room for sleep and left Anders' room the way he'd found it, there were no issues. Somehow, he got the feeling if he was spotted with *this* holocron *again*, that would change.

The doors to the room suddenly hissed open like the Force itself was playing a cruel joke on him. A cold chill shot up his spine like a bolt of lightning, his hearts thumped faster in his chest as he fumbled for the holocron. He nearly knocked the infernal thing off of the table, but thankfully managed to switch it off and make some poor, pitiful attempt at hiding it in his tunic.

"What is the meaning of this?" Anders entered the room, hands behind his back. His face and tone suggested he was unimpressed.

As he should be. Draca winced as the words cut through him like he'd been struck by a lightsaber. He didn't dare say anything. He knew better than to answer when Anders was unimpressed. It was best to wait out the scolding he was about to receive. He silently begged the Force to be with him at this moment.

The Chiss approached Draca, standing beside the chair the Zabrak was sitting in with his one hand in an open gesture beside him. So much for the Force being with him. The unspoken command was obvious, and Draca couldn't stop himself releasing a deflated sigh as he placed the holocron into Anders' palm.

"The *Holocron of Rituals* again?" Anders slowly shook his head, sending more pangs of guilt rocketing through the boy. "Must I repeat myself every time I allow you access to the vast knowledge of the Shadow Academy?"

"I'm sorry, sir..." Draca almost shuddered at how weak and pitiful his own voice sounded to him.

"You are clearly not, otherwise this defiance would not keep occurring," the blue-skinned man raised his voice, not by a lot, but enough for Draca to notice. "You have a room full to the brim with reading material available to you, as well as

a myriad of amenities to take up your time. Yet, you keep insisting on *this* holocron. Why?”

That was a good question. He didn't honestly have a good answer, though he knew better than to say ‘*I don't know.*’ To the Inquisitor stood beside him, there was *always* a reason.

“I find it interesting,” again, Draca's tone was lighter than he wished it to be, but why *wouldn't* he find it interesting? The rituals inside it contained abilities and powers that Draca never thought could exist. Application of the Force that could bend reality and correct it. It could hurt and heal, create and destroy. It was frightening. It sent shivers down his spine. It made the hairs on his arms stand on end and yet, the possibilities and the good it could do were exciting to him!

But when he saw the look on his mentor's face, there was a small part of him that begged to melt into the seat he was sitting on. He hated making Anders mad. It was like a kick to the gut that made him queasy and refused to go away. He hated seeing the look of disappointment on the face of the man that had essentially taken over as his guardian, teacher, mentor...

And Parent.

Draca braced himself for the verbal lashing he was about to receive. Yet, to his surprise, Anders sighed.

“The knowledge inside this holocron is indeed powerful. It is worthy of study, but not to someone who is still practising the basics of the Force. The knowledge contained within this holocron is of both Jedi *and* Sith origin, a collection of alchemy and rituals both good and evil, light and dark. I should know, I have studied it myself. In unpracticed hands, to someone with a mind with more curiosity than sense, the results can be disastrous.”

The Chiss spoke much more gently than Draca had expected, which of course, only made the disappointment feel worse.

The young boy slightly lowered his head. “I'm sorry, sir. If it bothers you, I won't look at the holocron again whilst I am under your care. I promise.”

Anders raised a brow. “Which means you will look at it the second you are not.”

Draca couldn't deny that, though, he knew better than to admit it out loud.

A long pause occurred between them. Anders fiddled lightly with the holocron in his hand, not unlike what Draca had done before his mentor had entered the room. Then, much to his surprise, the holocron was placed on the table in front of him.

“After a moment of consideration, it occurs to me that if you are going to study this holocron regardless of what I think, then you might as well do so under the correct supervision.”

Draca's hearts skipped a beat as his eyes widened. “Wait, do you mean?”

Anders answered by activating the holocron, the familiar blue lights filling the space in front of him. The Chiss made a slight gesture with his wrist, pulling a second seat to the desk with the Force.

“Indeed. We shall venture into this holocron together,” Anders confirmed as he took the seat next to his young protégé. “Come, there is much to learn. However, you are not to attempt anything you learn from this holocron without my instruction. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir!”

No matter how hard he tried, there was absolutely nothing Draca could do to stop the grin from appearing on his face.

Chapter 2

Selen

Southwest Region

42 ABY

The air was practically toxic. He tried to ignore it, by the Force how he really, *really* tried. The dust irritated his eyes in such a way they stung like they'd been stabbed with thousands of tiny needles. Primal roars and screams came from every direction with no way of telling who was friend or foe. He'd lost count of how many cuts and bruises he had accumulated. His robes were torn and shredded in such ways that it was almost impossible to tell they belonged to one of the most powerful young Jedi the galaxy had ever produced.

Not that it mattered here in the slightest. Even the most powerful beings in the universe were subject to the mercy of their own inadequacies. They'd barely made

it to the Selenian village to conduct the evacuation when the caxquettes attacked yet again. There was no pattern, just pure, unadulterated bloodshed. Draca was just one man. Even with the Force, he couldn't be everywhere at once and it didn't take long for him to get separated from the rest of the team.

“Bril!?” He called out for his fellow Zabrak in the vain hope he could be heard. There was no response.

“Evelyn!? Archian!?” More futile attempts.

Draca was getting desperate, his sudden panic had severed his ability to feel the presence of those around him. He felt his twin hearts thump in time with the sound of blaster fire soaring in every direction around him. Shades of blue, red, and green narrowly missed his head whilst explosions made the fog of dust so dense that it was nearly impossible to see a few feet in front of him. He felt the cold-numbing sensation of doom surrounding him. He froze in place, unable to move.

Because he was scared stiff.

He had to be honest with himself and it made his stomach churn. Draca had been in life or death situations before, of course he had. One did not spend every day of their youth being raised by an Inquisitor without experiencing the danger that came with that line of work, but he had always had some familiarity with him, whether it was Anders, Ruka, Melissa, or otherwise. He'd always felt supported and now, he didn't have any for the first time. Even within the Ethereal Realm and Children of Mortis he had never felt so alone.

What kind of Jedi allowed themselves to be crippled by their fear? Not a good one, that was for sure. Draca couldn't blame anyone if they were disgusted with him. He was, after all, disgusted with himself. The ancient Jedi of old would be rolling in their graves as they looked down on him. These people deserved so much better than him. Maybe Anders was right all along? Maybe Draca simply wasn't ready for a battlefield like this.

A pang in his subconscious broke him from his revelry. It seemed the Force *hadn't* abandoned him entirely, though the warning of impending danger was far from the comfort he desperately needed. Draca's eyes widened when out of the fog, a pair of claws lunged for him. A snarling, fierce wolf's mouth emerged, fangs bared and covered with blood and drool. It possessed a pair of amber eyes so fierce they looked like an omen of death.

The Jedi gasped as sharp claws dug into his tunic and pushed him to the ground. It was only thanks to years of training that Draca's instincts kicked in, using the

beast's momentum to turn it over, though the marks had cut his chest. He quickly staggered to his feet and what he saw made his blood run cold.

'Cythraul?'

Melissa had told him about them before. They were the prized companion of many in Arcona. Bigger than an Arx wolf and more loyal to boot, though this one had clearly seen better days. Its flesh had sagged, its blood-soaked fur had fallen clean off exposing bare flesh beneath. It was also perilously skinny, and insatiably hungry if the snarls coming from it was anything to go by. Red streaks adorned its back, protruding from its spine as a result of the amalgamation done to it.

Draca staggered back to his feet. He grabbed his lightsaber hilt, activating the weapon as rainbow blades hissed out of each side of the hilt.

'OK. At least there's only one...'

The cythraul-looking monster howled, and Draca only watched as more giant shadows formed out of the dust fog. Two more caxquettes, each more hideous and malformed than the next. All his hopes were dashed when his back was pressed against one of the village's duracrete buildings. The Force had all but abandoned him, he was all alone to face these monsters. People were dying around him and... and...

A boiling fury coiled within him, a darkness unfurled and pumped through every vein and artery in his body. Where did it come from? Draca didn't know, and right now, he didn't care. It overtook every other sense in his body. The injustice of every spiteful situation he had been subjected to covered his soul and brought it up to the surface. Everything from his uselessness here and now to learning Anders was the one that destroyed his old conclave added fuel to the pure, dark side infused power that ruptured from him. It was too easy to give in, to surrender to the power this *rage* gave him. The song in the winds encouraged him. Take it, give in and it could be his! He can put an end to all this madness!

The bandages on his wrists burned warm, not unpleasantly, but enough to let him know it was there. He quickly undid the one side, and then the other, hands shaking as words in ancient Coremaic, words once spoken by the Guardians of the Whills.

"I am one with the Force, and the Force is with me..." Draca sealed his eyes shut and clutched the straps in his hands. A contingency, one he was glad he brought with him. "I am one with the Force, and the Force is with me. I am Jedi."

It was like a soothing wind on a hot day had wafted through him, cleansing him of all his rage and fury. He took one breath, then two. He felt a serene calm overcome him as he centred himself in the mythical energy that surrounded him. To anyone watching, he might have appeared like he was glowing.

“I am one with the Force, and the Force is with me. I am Jedi. I accept the light as my truth. By the powers of the ancients, cleanse me of this wonton darkness.”

A pulse of warm, light-side energy exploded from within the young Zabrak, prompting the caxquettes to attack him. He fell into a trance-like state. There was no panic. Not now.

There was only the Force.

The Jedi allowed it to guide his body, feed into his every action, not to control it, but be taken along the gentle river of its currents. Draca leaned back and dropped to the ground, extending his leg and sending the first caxquette careening over him.

It was the same for the following two that leapt at him with fangs bared and talons clawing at him. He allowed the Force to guide him, moving to evade, dodge, roll, and whatever else he needed to do to get away. He kicked one, somersaulted over another. The Jedi moved his saberstaff in twirling motions so fast it looked like a circular rainbow in motion. Each strike connected from one to the next, each attack flowing one into the other with such seamless expertise. The entire time, Draca had his eyes *closed*. His enemy was lightsaber resistant, not immune. Each time his weapon touched their flesh, they wailed.

He never reacted. Not once. He maintained his meditative fighting trance with every step, every strike, every jump, and every dodge.

“Draca!”

That voice was definitely familiar to him, whether that was a good thing or not? Well, only time would tell. The sudden thud upon the ground next to him prompted the young Jedi to open his eyes. Sure enough, standing right there beside him, a saberstaff with pure white blades in hand, was Dr. Bril Teg Arga, fellow Zabrak Force User and leader of the Dajorran Marshalls.

“The tower!”

Draca turned his gaze to where Bril was pointing and saw what appeared to be an old, derelict and abandoned watchtower of some description. It had seldom been in use, sealed away from the public, and was likely used in the days before Clan Arcona had a presence on Selen. It had seldom seen activity since and was likely

just a landmark of some description. On their own, they would not be able to move it, but together?

Now *that* was different.

They acted in unison, reaching out with a hand and wrapping their telekinetic grips around the foundations of the old building. A large shadow loomed over them as it fell, getting larger and larger until it covered the caxquettes. The beasts barely had time to look up to see what was approaching before the tower crashed atop of them, thundering upon the ground. The earth beneath their feet shook from the impact as *more* dust and dirt kicked up into their faces.

After a moment, when the worst of the fog cleared, Bril took a cautious step forward to inspect the rubble. His eyes quickly darted from one side to the other before he gave a small nod.

“They're dead. We need to go!”

Bril broke into a sprint before Draca had a chance to speak. The young Jedi deactivated his saberstaff and placed it on his belt before giving chase.

Thankfully for Draca, he found it easier to navigate the debris and chaos of the battlefield than his fellow Zabrak did and managed to catch up relatively quickly. A quick glance around the death and destruction told the Jedi everything he needed to know. Hell, he could practically *feel* it in the Force, even from this distance.

“Ruka is not going to like this,” he said.

Bril's head snapped back to him, an intense, unamused look on his face. “You think? Ruka has more to worry about than some desolate old buildings right now, Draca!”

“That's not what I...”

Draca fell silent. Why, oh why did the universe *insist* on having them cross each other!? Their paths intertwined so frequently that they must have been connected in some mystical way. Either that, or the Force had a particularly twisted sense of humour.

Bril must have sensed it too, at least in some capacity. Even if he was trying to ignore it, he at least tolerated Draca's presence long enough for him to provide the help he wanted to, well, *provide*. That, or he just didn't care right now. Between his responsibility in leadership and searching for Minnow, the man beside him was understandably stressed.

The young Jedi could only imagine how he'd have reacted if Melissa was taken. His hearts ached. He didn't envy Bril. Not in the slightest.

In fact, he felt sorry for him.

“Look, I'm sorry. It's a lot to take right now. Doesn't mean I should take it out on you.”

Draca blinked, almost not believing what he'd heard with his own ears. Though, he decidedly kept his mouth shut. It was not in his nature to rub salt in wounds.

“What now?” The Jedi asked.

“Now? Now we get the hell out of here,” the words left Bril's mouth like he'd taken a bite out of something particularly sour. The Arconan Zabrak found a relatively safe spot under an archway for them, grabbing his datapad to survey the information on it.

At a quick glance, it was all a bunch of numbers, co-ordinates, and tactical jargon that the non-Arconan couldn't understand, nor wanted to. Another reason why he didn't envy Bril. Draca was a smart man, of course. He just always preferred it simple. A life in any form of leadership or military was not for him.

Which was probably why he'd been so caught off-guard here.

“This was an absolute clusterfrakk,” Bril grimaced and shook his head. “Caxquettes attacking from every direction and then most of our forces started shooting at each other. I called for an immediate evacuation to try and salvage what we have left. I called for reinforcements. Evelyn will be returning with them as soon as she can...”

“It's not your fault,” Draca placed a hand on Bril's shoulder as a gesture of reassurance. The other Zabrak tensed for a split second, then forced himself to relax. “There's something else at play here. I felt the dark side try to force an intense anger in me.”

“How did you break free?” Bril asked. Perhaps he was trying to occupy his mind with something other than their dire circumstances.

‘I used an ancient Jedi ritual to cleanse myself of the dark side.’

That was what Draca was *going* to say until the Arconan snapped to attention, cutting him off by holding out a hand to him. Truth be told, the Jedi silently

wondered how Bril had done the same. Was it a ritual of his own? Maybe, but Draca hadn't sensed anything big in the Force. It had to be something else! Granted, a few minutes ago, he was barely able to feel anything at all.

“Doesn't matter. Time to move!”

Bril stepped into the light outside, Draca following in hot pursuit. Whatever it was, it would have to wait. There were more pressing matters to...

His eyes widened, the hairs on his arms standing on end like he'd just been struck by a bolt of lightning. Draca felt it first, the crushing sensation of pure, focused darkness that pressed against him with the weight of a mountain. His eyes peered to his fellow Zabrak, who had seemingly felt it too and had paled.

Then, the Force told him to *move*.

Draca lunged for Bril without so much as a second thought in his brain. Andrrs had always taught him to trust his precognitive sense. Why should he doubt it now?

He wrapped an arm around his fellow Zabrak's shoulder and pulled him to the ground as a *swoosh* was felt above their heads. The axe had narrowly avoided cutting through their necks, and that alone was far too close for Draca's liking.

“Jedi!”

A dark, gruff voice turned Draca's head towards the source which loomed over them like a Coruscant skyscraper. It was a Cathar unlike any other he'd ever seen before. A monolith of a man, he possessed the corrupted crimson-amber eyes of a typical Sith, but they were filled with a bloodlust powerful enough to shred asunder the resolve of most seasoned warriors. He adorned a chain mail that made his hulking, bulky figure look like a living nightmare incarnate, the kind of being that tales were told about to young Jedi as a warning about the dark side.

The stories didn't do him justice. He was worse. So much worse.

“Chicyiot!” the name came out of Bril's mouth with a startling alarm.

Twin axes, bigger than both Zabrak heads, came swinging down. It was a blessing of the Force that Bril was able to roll out of the way in the nick of time. Draca *felt* the axes dig into the earth like the ground beneath their feet was made of paper. A sudden feeling of dread came over him, but was broken when the Force screamed at him through his subconscious.

Chicyiot dragged his axes across the floor and kicked dirt into Draca's face. The immediate burning in his irises staggered the young Zabrak back. He raised his saberstaff to block the attempted attack from Chicyiot. To his shock, his lightsaber didn't tear through the metal of the Cathar's weapon. The sheer might of the impact sent harsh vibrations up his arms and he nearly lost his grip on his weapon.

'Alchemy!' Draca realised. Anders had done something similar to his curved hilt. This just made the situation go from bad to worse.

Bril charged at Chicyiot with the power of the Force amplifying his agility. He made his way across the distance between them with the grace and speed of a varactyl, white-bladed saberstaff twirling in his hand. He brought it down with a mighty swing against the Sith's spine. For the briefest of moments, Draca was hopeful that the fight was over just as it had begun. To his dismay, the Arconan's lightsaber bounced off of the Cathar's chairman as if it was made of beskar.

"It's alchemy!" Draca exclaimed.

"No sithspit!" Bril retorted.

Chicyiot spun with a sweeping motion backed with unprecedented physical strength intending to cut both Zabrak down where they stood. Thankfully, Draca was faster than the Sith had given him credit for and managed to weave his way out of the way with a zigzag before he was struck.

Bril was not so lucky. He wasn't as fast as Draca, and received a few minor lacerations on his chest and arms that stung like he'd been cut with glass. The Dajorran Marshall leader backed away quickly, joining the Jedi at his side.

"You're hurt," Draca said with concern evident in his voice.

"I'm fine," the Arconan took a deep breath to centre himself. "It's just a scratch."

"The first of many. That, I can promise," Chicyiot raised his axes to his face, a wretched, toothy smile stretching across his face as he inspected the small amount of blood he'd managed to draw from Bril. "Come, Zabrats! Let us stain this battlefield with both your entrails!"

"Delightful..." the Jedi couldn't stop the shudder that came over him. He turned to Bril and asked; "What do you know about him?"

"I know that Ruka said we had to flee if we encountered him," Bril never took his eyes off of the Sith in front of them, likely in case he made a move. "He said he's not to be fought alone."

“Well... you aren't alone,” Draca said, instinctively tightening the grip on his weapon.

‘Not this time.’

The Arconan's eyes maintained an intensity that seemed to be indomitable, like the gravitational pull of a black hole. He simulated Draca's own movements, tightening the grip around his saberstaff as he bent his knees. This bastard might have Minnow somewhere. Like hell he was letting the Sith get away that easily.

“Exactly,” Bril said.

In unison, both Zabraks shot forward, side-by-side at first until Draca pulled ahead. Chicyiot braced himself, leant back, and swung towards the Jedi with both axes in hand, intent on cleaving him in twain.

What the Sith had in raw, physical might, he lacked in speed. Draca listened to the Force like it was a sixth sense and somersaulted over Chicyiot's head.

The Cathar suddenly had to deal with two very Force-sensitive Zabrak charging at him from either direction. He swung out with both of his weapons, self-preservation be damned. The ripple in the Force felt pulsed from Chicyiot felt like he was hell-bent on slaughtering them both if it was the last thing he ever did.

Both Zabraks dodged the bladed weapons by the narrowest of margins, the torrent of air swishing past their faces. They both angled their bodies at the same time, ascended from the ground, twisted in mid-air, and planted a hard boot into Chicyiot's chest at the same time.

Their unspoken connection in the Force pressed them forward in unison, forcing the Cathar onto the backfoot. Where Bril was unpredictable and ferocious like the creature from which Vaapad, his lightsaber form, was named after, Draca was swift and tenacious like a podracer at full pelt. If there were any spectators, they would have looked like a flash of lightning blurring across the battlefield, a torrent of blazing fire and speed that scorched the earth one second and was gone the next.

The Jedi descended back into his meditative state, allowing the Force to guide his actions in tandem with his fellow Zabrak, who formed a superconductivity loop to funnel the Sith's own dark side energy back at him like a mirror. It certainly explained how Bril had avoided being taken over by Chicyiot's rage. He had used it as a conduit to make himself stronger without surrendering to it.

Draca would have been impressed if he had the time for it. Unfortunately, the Cathar unleashed a mighty, blood-curdling roar that erased any coherent thought he had in his mind and snapped him back to reality.

“ENOUGH!”

Chicyiot's rage reached a new, unprecedented level, one that Bril couldn't keep up with. The Sith became enveloped in a cloak of the dark side so intense that it felt like it was choking them. He had become far too strong, far too quickly, as the Arconan quickly found out when an axe dug itself into his shoulder.

The guttural scream of anguish that left Bril's lips was something Draca would never forget as long as he lived. When the Sith removed the axe, red liquid spurted from the wound like a fountain before leaking down the Zabrak's robe. A stiff kick to Bril's torso sent him tumbling to the ground several feet away. Chicyiot cackled manically when he saw the blood spill.

“Bril!” Draca acted quickly. With Force amplified speed, he leapt up high, split his saberstaff in two and attempted to cleave the Cathar through his head.

Chicyiot dropped one axe and caught Draca by his throat before the rainbow blades could make contact with their target. The Sith pried the Jedi's weapons from his grasp and tossed them aside as he writhed in his grip. He dropped his second axe on the ground beside him and grabbed the Jedi by the temple of his skull. He squeezed tightly, and no amount of squirming, scratching, clawing, and kicking could free him from Chicyiot's grasp.

“You will submit. You will *feel* my RAGE!”

Chicyiot poured the dark side into Draca through the contact of his flesh. The Jedi clenched his eyes shut, trying desperately to fight the incoming wave of anger that poured into his soul like coals on a fire. The pain was unlike anything he had ever experienced as he felt the light dying within him. No doubt the Cathar was taking some twisted delight in turning a Jedi to the dark side before he killed him.

Then came the burning. Not inside, but on his wrists. The bandages that contained the words of the ancients passed down from generations etched into the forefront of Draca's consciousness. Knowledge taught to him through the years by Anders, the power of the ancient Jedi, the ability to save himself.

“I am one with the Force, and the Force is with me...”

Chicyiot's hands began to burn, searing as the Cathar ground his teeth.

“I accept the light as my truth...”

The Sith's hands began to tremble, the touch of the light like poison to his fingers.

“By the power of the ancients, cleanse me of this wanton darkness!”

Chicyiot roared in pain as pure light side energy erupted from Draca. His fingertips burnt, though it didn't prevent him from snarling as he reached for his axes.

“Draca!” Bril yelled and with his one good arm, tossed his fellow Zabrak his saberstaff.

The Jedi caught it in his hands, activating the white blades of the weapon. Chicyiot raised his axes as Draca struck out at the one area the Cathar was unprotected.

His face.

The Sith attempted to lean out of the way of the perilous lightsaber blade, but was not fast enough. It cut through his jaw, severing it and his chin from the rest of his body.

At once, he let out a hellacious, pained roar that sent vibrations through the air and shook both Zabrak spines. Chicyiot dropped Draca, the Jedi slumping on the ground, more exhausted than he'd ever been in his whole life.

‘Bril...’ he thought to himself. He had to help Bril. Even if the Jedi died here, he knew he'd die helping a friend.

That was good enough for him.

The Sith was about to retaliate, but stopped when he heard more shouting in the distance. Familiar voices to Bril, and some even to Draca began to appear in his peripheral vision.

‘Ruka?’

By some miracle of the Force, Arconan reinforcements had finally arrived, prompting Chicyiot to retreat. Draca had never been so relieved to see so many unfamiliar faces in his life. They could get to Bril and tend to his wounds.

“Draca!”

He heard his name, but he couldn't respond, his eyes beginning to close.

“DRACA!”

Then, everything went silent.

Chapter 3

Estle City Medical Ward

Selen

42 ABY

The very moment Draca opened his eyes, the most ear-splitting headache shot through his head like he'd been hit by a runaway freighter. With what little energy he managed to muster, he managed to hiss and grimace at the offending brightness above his head. Whose brilliant idea was it to leave a light on anyways?

Done with his internal complaining for the moment, the young Jedi decided to take stock of what he could hear in his surroundings. Anders did always say that there were more to the senses than just sight. The others were important too. When he listened, he could hear the manic chattering in the hallway, the sound of equipment being wheeled from room to room, and the incessant beeping of twin hearts monitors right next to him. The room he was in had a distinct chemically smell, like the kind you'd find in a hospital.

Was that where he was?

The young Zabrak decided to make an attempt, if at least a slow one, at sitting himself to better gauge his suspicions, but when he tried to move, he felt a distinct weight on his right arm.

‘What in the...’

His hearts nearly skipped a beat when his eyes peered over, further accentuated by the increased beating from the monitors. A tuft of silver hair belonging to the most beautiful Echani woman in his life covered his bandaged appendage. She was sleeping peacefully, the tiniest amount of drool falling from her lips.

‘That can't be comfortable.’

Then again, Melissa had slept in worse. Much worse. As far as Draca was concerned, anything was an upgrade from living out in the open by herself, no matter how much she might have said otherwise. She wasn't alone anymore.

With his spare hand, he brushed some of her aside so that he could get a better look at her face. Yet, even at the lightest touch, she snuggled herself deeper into his arm and tightened her grip on him. There was a light mumbling that came from her which made Draca chuckle.

It hurt to laugh.

It was when an average, yet lithely built Pantoran male with light pink hair entered the room. He was holding a tray in his hands which had two steaming cups of cafstim on it. Even from his bed, Draca could smell the bitter aroma.

The Pantoran stopped when he saw the Zabrak awake, a momentary expression of surprise gracing his elegant features. He relaxed when Draca pressed a finger to his lips and pointed to his right arm, asking silently not to make any sudden or loud noises. The last thing he wanted was to wake Melissa up when she was asleep. She looked too damn adorable.

A small smile graced the pink-haired man's head as he gave a slight nod. He placed the tray carefully down on the nearby table and took one of the cups of cafstim for himself, made his way over to the seat on the opposite side of the bed to Melissa and sat down.

“If I knew you were awake, I would have brought you a cup,” the Pantoran lamented, crossing one leg over the other to make himself comfortable.

“Oh, no. That's OK, Mr. Cora, sir. I'm not much of a cafstim drinker. Water is usually fine.”

“Oh, please,” the Pantoran waved off Draca's comment as if it was somehow unnecessary. “Call me Cora. You're practically part of the family now.”

A warm, welcoming feeling welled within Draca. Somehow, Cora always seemed to know what to say to make someone feel better, even if he didn't mean to. The two Jedi always seemed to have pleasant conversations, or at least they did the few times they'd managed to converse.

“How long have I been out?” Draca asked.

“Not too long. About twelve hours, give or take a few minutes. Luckily, with you, it was a simple matter of Force exhaustion. Nothing a little rest won't help,” Cora

then glanced at Melissa. “She hasn't left your side, you know. The moment she found out you were checked in here, she ran out of the house and never looked back.”

“No doubt without her shoes,” Draca smiled at her, gently rubbing her hand with the back of his fingers gently.

“Yes,” Cora sighed. “We've tried to teach her the various benefits of footwear, though I do fear it's a losing battle at this point.”

They both chuckled at that. It was the smallest of details, yet it was one that made Melissa who she was. Draca wouldn't change that for the universe.

After a moment, the Pantoran cleared his throat. “Speaking of battle, how much do you remember?”

“I remember... the chaos. The carnage. The death. I remember Bril and I...” Draca's eyes widened so suddenly as if he had just been prodded by an electrostaff. “Bril!”

“Is *fine*,” Cora held out a hand to stop Draca before he panicked. “His wound was bad, but nothing the Force and our best healers couldn't fix. He's already joined Ruka in search of Minnow, much to my husband's insistence and mine that he rest.”

Yep. That sounded like Bril alright. Stubborn right down to the mallow in his bones. When he had his mind set on something, there was barely anything in the galaxy that would change it.

“Mhhmmm...” Melissa squirmed on Draca before opening her eyes, blinking.

“Hi,” the Zabrak said with a smile.

Immediately, the Echani woman gasped and tackled Draca in his bed with an intensity that nearly shook the bed. She clasped her arms around him tightly, like she was afraid if she let go he would somehow turn to dust. She mumbled something incoherent in his ear, but he couldn't for the life of him make out what she was saying outside of the odd word or two.

Cora released a light laugh. “Meli, let the poor boy breathe!”

Melissa's cheeks flushed red. Even so, she begrudgingly did as instructed and returned to her seat just as Cora left his.

“I don't wish to intrude, so I'll let you both catch up. Mr. Anderson requested he be informed immediately once you were awake, Draca. I must say, he seemed awfully concerned. Melissa, dear, there's a cup of cafstim on the table there for you,” Cora gestured towards the cup. “Draca. No doubt you will want to rejoin Bril when you are ready, but please make sure you are better first before you do. Do not rush yourself.”

“I won't, I promise. Thank you, Cora,” Draca said. Of course he wasn't going to rush. He had Melissa here.

The Pantoran lowered his head gently in a sort of mini-bow, then left them alone. The moment he was out of earshot, Melissa moved her closer to Draca and pressed her lips against his before he could so much as blink.

“I missed you...” she said, clasping her hand around his. “What are you *doing* here?”

“Helping,” he answered. “Or, at least trying too. I'm not doing a good job of it right now.”

The Echani shook your head. “This isn't your fight. You could have been hurt, you could have died...”

By the Force, how Draca hated seeing Melissa without a smile on her face. He clasped his hand around hers.

“Meli?”

She didn't respond initially. He could feel the pain in her heart, the worry over what could have been and what could *still* happen. The fear of losing someone close to her, again, was very real to her.

“Meli, look at me. Please?” Draca cupped her chin gently with his hand and raised her head. “I'm here.”

He pressed his forehead against hers, sending whatever soothing energy he could through the Force from himself to her, letting her know, without words, that he was there, and nothing was taking him away.

Nothing.

-END-

