

The transport stinks of sweat and oil. Kaste stands among them, fingers curled around the ceiling straps, balanced easily as repulsorlifts rock beneath her feet. Outside the narrow viewports, Koros Major grows larger with each breath. A world smothered in ash and debris. It's beautiful. Not the world itself, stars no. But the moment. The promise of it. Finally.

"You're smiling," a voice beside her chastises. Master Vadrin doesn't look up. Four arms folded across his chest, long Codru-Ji fingers drumming against his vambrace in a slow, measured rhythm. He's wedged between two cargo containers like the bulkhead is a backrest. He speaks softly, as always. "That worries me." Kaste smiles wider.

"I'm ready, Master." She means it. Every aching breath of it. He sighs through his nose. The sound is subtle, but she's trained alongside him long enough to hear the weight in it. "You said the Order needs defenders," she presses.

"I said the Republic needs defenders." His eyes flicker toward her now, pale silver in the dim cabin light. "The Order needs servants. There's a difference." This lecture again. Always the same lines, as though repetition can smooth her edges.

"Glory isn't a sin, Master. Not when it serves the right cause."

"Glory serves itself, Padawan." The words should hit like a reprimand. They don't. Vadrin never raises his voice, never snaps. Not in the chambers, not in the ring. Not even when Kaste baits him. His patience is a stone wall she's spent years trying to crack. She shifts her grip on the overhead strap, leans into the sway of the transport as it dips. Koros Major looms larger now, the atmosphere curling like smoke around broken skin.

This is what she was meant for. The Jedi said otherwise, once. When Vadrin chose her.

"Too wild," the Council had advised him. "Too eager. She seeks battle, not balance. You need a healer Vadrin. A scholar. Not a blade looking for a hand to swing it." And yet, he'd chosen her. Standing in the temple with four arms folded, voice soft as water on moss, he'd said, "Blades learn best from whetstones." She'd thought it a compliment.

Their fights were legend among the other Padawans. Vadrin and his four blades, moving like a tide against Kaste's sharp and unrelenting backhanded form. Every spar was an argument, every clash a conversation neither would concede.

"You're faster this time," he says, catching her first strike with a third-hand parry while his fourth arm pressed her guard back.

"You're older this time," she'd snap back, twisting through his defense. They spoke the same language: blade, breath, precision, but never agreed on the words. Off the mats, they barely spoke at all.

The pilot's voice crackles overhead. "Entering atmosphere. Deployment in five." The hum of anticipation thickens. Fingers tighten on rifles. Armor straps are checked and rechecked. The smell of sweat sharpens. Kaste's heart beats steady.

She's been waiting for this. For the moment when her blade means more than training scores and hypothetical peace. Where every strike will carve back the dark. Where she can stand not as a student, but as a Knight. Even now, Vadrin watches her with that same quiet resignation. He didn't want this. Not really. For years, he forced them into assignments that skimmed the edges of war: supply runs, refugee routes, aid stations. They fought, yes, but never anything more than local gangs stealing scraps.

"You fought in the Third Schism," she had accused him once, a year ago, while they worked on a mining colony reconstruction. Republic banners snaped limp in the wind while Vadrin loaded ration crates. "Why do you hesitate now?" His reply had been simple.

"Because I know now what it costs." She hadn't listened, not really.

When the Koros Major orders came, he didn't argue. Just handed her a rebreather, checked his saber harness, and said, "Stay close. Survival is not surrender." Part of her wished he'd declare her unfit.

The transport shudders. The drop is coming.

"You're smiling," Vadrin says again, glancing at her now. Really looking.

"You're brooding," she fires back, but her voice is softer. Her grin falters as the tremor of re-entry rattles her bones. For a breath, they stand together, the press of soldiers around them. She wonders, briefly, what he sees when he looks at her. Outside, Koros Major opens its jaws.

The landing zone is cleaner than Kaste expected. She had pictured trenches, shellfire, the scorched bone of a world choking on war. But as the troop transport settles with a hydraulic hiss, Koros Major greets her with something unexpected: order. Cranes unload supplies in swift, methodical arcs. Republic walkers trudge through muddy but intact causeways. Gun emplacements gleam under field repairs. Soldiers, tired but smiling, move with purpose.

"See?" Kaste mutters, adjusting the fall of her cloak as she steps down the ramp. "Told you we'd be useful here." Master Vadrin follows slower, four hands moving with habitual precision as he checks his sabers. He says nothing, not with words. But the weight of his gaze says enough.

*Victories celebrated too early stain the field red.*

"Master Vadrin! Padawan Sokarre!" A voice calls out over the din. A tall Mirialan approaches them, armored in Republic plate cut for ease of movement, black tattoos marking her cheeks in symmetrical arcs. Her hand rests easily on the hilt of a curved saber.

“Knight Sira Vonn,” she introduces herself, offering a hand in a soldier’s grip, not a Jedi’s bow. Kaste likes her. “We’re gathering all new arrivals for briefing,” Sira continues, nodding toward a series of reinforced bunkers beyond the pad. “Your reputation precedes you, Master Vadrin. It’ll be good to have you on the line.” Vadrin’s fingers flex across his vambrace.

“It’ll be better when you can hold the line without me.” Sira chuckles.

“All due respect, sir, I think you’ll find our friends across the hill less accommodating.”

Kaste keeps pace beside them as they weave through the camp. She can feel the tension. Worn. Proud. A front that had tasted blood and believes itself ready for more. Good. She’s ready.

The command bunker is quiet. No shouting, no chaos, just the hum of generators and low crackle of holo-projectors. Master Vadrin’s boots echo as he steps through the threshold, Kaste a pace behind. She can feel eyes flicker their way. Curious. Weighing. Around the table, six Jedi assemble. Republic officers flank the table, silent and still. A map of Koros Major flickers in hazy blue relief above them. Trenches, forward bunkers, Sith artillery emplacements marked in angry red.

“Master Vadrin,” a broad-shouldered Zabrak says. He towers over the rest of the room, built like a battering ram. His horns are filed blunt from too many years wearing a helmet. His arms fold across his chest. “You’re a welcome sight. We’ll be glad to have your sabers tomorrow.”

“Master Reth,” Vadrin returns with a nod. “Still leading with your head, I see.” A grin splits Reth’s face.

“Only when it works.”

Kaste takes her place beside Vadrin, hands clasped behind her back. Formal. Still. Her heart is already pacing the room.

“Let’s get to business, then,” an officer near the holomap says. A captain, by his bars. “The front’s stable for now, but command wants this trench line cleared by week’s end. Jedi support is critical to that timetable.” He gestures to the assembly. Names click into place as he speaks.

“Assignments are as follows: Master Reth, First Company assault lead.” The Zabrak inclines his head. No smile. No comment.

“Knight Kallis, reconnaissance.” A simple nod from the human woman. Hands folded, expression neutral.

“Knight Vonn, airspace control.” Sira’s posture is straight as a durasteel beam. Her acknowledgement is minimal, a shift of the shoulders. Nothing more.

“Knight Vesh, Medical Triage.” A Nautolan bows his head, tendrils still.

“Master Vadrin, Third Platoon. Counter-offensive support.” Vadrin’s response is a simple, “Understood.”

“Deployment commences at first light. All units are to be in position for phase one assault by 0500. This operation is a high priority target under direct Republic oversight. We cannot afford to fail.” The hologram flickers as the officer turns slightly. “Any questions may be addressed through proper channels. Dismissed.”

The barracks aren’t much to look at. Plasteel walls, half-repaired consoles, the lingering scent of field rations clinging to recycled air. But there’s a warmth here. Voices. The low murmur of soldiers trading stories. Boots clatter against durasteel. Laughter sparks up now and then, quiet and sharp, like flint against steel. A long table near the far wall has been claimed by the Jedi contingent. Kaste follows Vadrin’s lead, stepping past knots of troopers toward the table. The others are already seated. Rath leans back in his chair, one leg hooked over the other, a half-finished mug of caf steaming in his hand.

“Told you Vadrin would show up eventually,” he rumbles to no one in particular. “He always arrives when there’s just enough glory to make him uncomfortable.”

“I like to think I’m here to balance your recklessness,” Vadrin replies, settling across from Rath with the deliberate grace of a man sheathing a blade. Kallis sits sideways on the bench, elbow propped on the table, lazily flipping a vibroblade between her fingers. She barely spares Kaste a gaze.

“I thought you swore off Padawans.” Vadrin’s lips curve, not quite a smile.

“I relapsed.” Kaste folds into the space beside him, back straight, hands flat on the table. Waiting. Watching. Sira sits opposite her, methodically disassembling a ration pack as if it’s a detonator. She spares Kaste a quick look.

“First deployment?”

“Yes,” Kaste answers evenly.

“Good front to learn on. You’ll get your fights.” A ghost of a smile tugs at Sira’s mouth. “Not too clean but not suicidal. Perfect harmony.” Kallis snorts.

“That’s what she says now. Wait until we’re patching up what’s left of the Fifth Battalion.”

“Optimism, Deryn,” Vesh interjects, sliding into the seat calmly. His bracers clink as he sets down a portable ration warmer. “The Republic paid good credits for this trench. We might as well enjoy it before someone shells it again.” He looks at Kaste, studying her with the detached, clinical assessment of a man who’s reattached too many limbs to be impressed by nerves alone. “You get hit, don’t wait. I’d rather mend a bruised ego than pull you from the mud.”

“Understood,” Kaste replies.

The conversation drifts into familiar channels. Tactical assessments, idle bets on which unit will break first, stories laced with dry humor. They don’t brag. They’re not fresh recruits. Kaste watches, listens, files away every quirk.

“You’re quiet, Padawan,” Reth says, leaning forward. “Don’t worry. You’ll be cursing like the rest of us once you’ve seen the trenches.”

“I’m here to fight, not to curse,” Kaste answers. Kallis’ grin is razor sharp.

“Give it a week. You’ll do both.” A ripple of laughter, low but real.

The barracks quiet slowly like dimming fire. Laughter dulls, stories soften to murmurs. Even Reth’s booming voice sinks into a rumble as the soldiers peel away, seeking sleep in narrow cots. Outside, the wind drags dust across the landing pads. Distant artillery thuds, rhythmic as a heartbeat, far enough not to shake the walls but close enough to remind them of the Sith over the ridge. Kaste lingers by the window, arms folded, watching the sky.

“Trying to glare the Sith off the planet?” Reth’s voice rumbles behind her. Heavy steps, slower now, each one deliberate. His armor’s half unbuckled, caf steaming in a dented mug. He carries himself like the war owes him respect. Kaste doesn’t turn.

“Better than waiting.” He chuckles, stopping beside her, broad arms crossing.

“You’ve got that Iridonian edge all right. Stand strong, scowl hard, pretend you don’t feel the ground shaking.”

“We don’t pretend.”

“Sure we do,” he smirks, flicking his horns. “First thing they teach you back home. When the storms hit, you don’t run. You stand there like you meant for it to happen. Makes the wind think twice.” She huffs, not quite a laugh. He takes a sip of his caf. “Fighting the wind, fighting the war. Same thing really. Lots of noise. Lots of idiots forgetting it’ll skin you raw if you don’t pay attention.” Kaste looks at him fully now. His grin is lopsided. Tired but sharp. “You itching for a speech?” he asks. “Because I don’t do speeches. Vadrin’s the philosopher. Me, I hit things ‘til they stop being problems.”

“That’s the idea,” she says.

“That’s an idea,” he allows. “Won’t stop the problems coming back, though. They always do. So get good at hitting ‘em, or die. Simple.”

“You think I’m not ready.” Her voice is low. Reth barks a laugh.

“Kid, you’re more ready than half the Knights on this damn planet. Probably more ready than you should be. That’s the problem.” He tips his mug toward her. “You’ll get your fight

tomorrow. No doubt. But just between us Iridonians? Don't be in such a damn rush to prove you're made of iron. The galaxy's got a real knack for testing that theory harder than you want." Kaste's mouth twitches slightly.

"Sounds suspiciously like a speech."

"Nah." He gives a shrug, grin widening. "Just saying, if you start trying to fight the artillery with your teeth, Vesh'll be real annoyed stitching you up. He's not gentle." That earns a real smirk from her.

"Noted." Reth gives her a solid clap on the shoulder. Heavy. Grounding.

"Good. Now get some sleep, Padawan. You'll need it. Trenches don't care how good your form is." He starts to turn, then pauses. "Oh, and Sokarre?" She meets his gaze. "When it all goes to hell – and it will – just remember: the pointy end goes in the Sith. Everything else is optional." With that, he staggers off, grumbling about the quality of caf and stupidity of war. Kaste stays by the window a moment longer. She hopes the galaxy is ready for her.

Koros Major's air is heavier in the trenches. Not with smoke, but the weight of waiting. Kaste feels it in the tension of every soldier crouched along the embankment. The Sith are close, but not yet pressing. The front ripples with the kind of stillness that comes before teeth sink in.

"Get your head down, kid. You don't want to be picking shell casing out of your eyes, do you?" The voice comes from her right, where a trooper crouches. His head is shaved to gleaming steel, a patchwork of old scar tissue mapping his scalp. His shoulder plates look like they'd been salvaged from a walker. Kaste ducks lower, feeling the vibration in the trench beneath her palms. "You're with us today, then?" he asks, not unkindly. His voice grounds through her bones like gravel.

"Under Master Vadrin's command," she has to shout to be heard over the hub. He gives her a mock salute.

"Captain Andros – I'm the one in charge of these shitheads, Master Jedi." He adjusts his rifle. "Keep your eyes open. Sith don't fight fair." Ahead, a sharp whistle blows. Not Republic, it's too shrill. A bolt of red blasterfire sizzles through the space above where Kaste had been standing. She ducks, pressed into the embankment, heart pounding. Dirt sprays her cheek. A figure slides down the embankment with the easy grace of someone born in the mud.

"You hear the one about the Sith sniper who couldn't hit a bantha?" The newcomer is a lean, orange-haired human with a grin that could cut durasteel. "Me neither!"

"Kydien," Andros rumbles. "Is there a reason for your tardiness?"

“Just making sure the Third remembers how to duck for cover,” Kydien taps a datapad against her palm, eyes flicking across the display. “Artillery’s shifting. Fifth is corraling them right into our lap. We’re gonna have spillover.” Kaste studies her as she passes. Younger than Andros, but her focus doesn’t waver. She holds the datapad, but her gaze skims each detail of the trench like a sabacc player counting cards. “First push should be coming soon,” she adds, half to herself. “Try not to get sentimental about the dirt, Jedi.” Before Kaste can respond, a new voice cuts in.

“Sentiment’s for planets that aren’t actively trying to kill you.” A woman approaches Andros, her armor a mismatched riot of scavenged durasteel and old corporate security plating. Bright streaks of crimson paint her pauldrons, offset by the deep amethyst flush of her skin. A Zeltron. She hands Andros a datapad and then turns her attention to Kaste and Kydien.

“Reza,” she says, offering Kaste a hand wrapped in fingerless gloves. “Local resistance. I’m the one supposed to show these assholes where to go.” Kaste shakes her hand. Her grip is stronger than expected.

“Padawan Kaste Sokarre. Jedi vanguard.”

“Good. You look the part.” Reza winks, releasing her grip. “Stick close when things get loud.” A rumble of artillery thuds the ground, punctuating her words. “See? That’s your cue.” She gestures to the ridge in the distance. “First trench sweep. We go in fast, we come out faster. You Jedi do your lightshow thing, we’ll handle the messy bits.” Before Kaste can find her retort, Vadrin’s voice slices through the din.

“Positions!” Calm. Clipped. Unusually authoritative. “Third Platoon, hold. We wait for the breach team to collapse their flank.” He doesn’t need to raise his voice. The platoon listens. He glances to Kaste. “You’re on my left. Stay there.” It wasn’t a suggestion. “Militia holds the right. We keep the trenchline intact. No glory, no charges. Hold the line.”

“Quite the poet, Master Jedi,” Reza says as she strides to meet her squad across the trench. “We’ll keep your flank honest.” Kaste watches her master’s fingers flex once, twice. Then it comes.

The sky lights up in brief, brutal flashes. The ground thuds beneath their feet. Sith positions crack open, sending soldiers spilling into the trenches like a breach in the hull. Shock troopers leap over the trench lip with sabers wide, blasters screaming behind them. Dirt sprays up in lethal sheets. For a heartbeat, Kaste’s body wants to move. To leap forward, engage, lead the charge. But Vadrin’s orders hold her still. She drops into stance, blades igniting with a snap-hiss that shreds through the dust. The first trooper to clear the embankment never touches down. Her saber cuts a clean upward arc, sending him sprawling back over the trench lip. Around her, the line holds.

“Brace!” Andros’ voice cuts through the chaos, gravel hard. Blasters bark in disciplined volleys. A trooper stumbles, caught in the shoulder by a Sith bolt. Andros is there before he hits the ground, dragging him back, slamming another rifle into his hands. Kaste moves with them. The Sith strike with power, but she answers with precision. She parries, sends sabers wide, steps through to disarm, disable, end. It’s not the elegant duels of the Temple. She loves it.

To her right, Vadrin anchors the platoon’s center. His sabers weave a perimeter, turning every Sith assault back with clinical, crushing blows. He doesn’t advance. He corrals the enemy to where the troopers can blow them down. A Sith duelist breaks through the right flank, saber raised high.

“Reza, right!” Kaste calls. The Zeltron is already moving, but Kaste’s step is quicker. Her blades meet the Sith’s. Reza kicks his knee, and Kaste drives him back with a sharp overhead cut.

“Not bad, Jedi,” Reza says, grinning through the dust. “Told ya to stick close.” Another Sith charges. Kaste meets him clean, their blades locking with a teeth-rattling screech. His strength is raw, wild. She lets him push, waits for the overcommit, then steps aside. His own weight sends him sprawling into Andros’ firing line.

“Hold position!” Andros roars, voice ragged but unyielding. Kaste turns back to the line. The Sith press. They falter. They bleed. The line holds.

The Sith don’t retreat – they’ve been blocked in. They fight until there’s no one left standing. When the last body slumps into the trench mud, the air feels thick. Smoke curls in lazy arcs above the embankments, stinging Kaste’s throat. Her hands ache from the grip of her sabers. She deactivates them with a hiss that feels louder than the battle had been. There’s no cheers, no triumphs. Just Andros barking casualty reports. Reza laughing, sharp and breathless, as she hauls a wounded militia fighter back to his feet. And Vadrin, standing at the trench’s heart, sabers quiet, watching the sky.

They spend weeks in that rhythm. Holding the trenchline. Pushing the front. Inch by inch. Meter by meter. Every morning, Kaste wakes to the same grey sky, the same stale air thick with mud and ozone. Every night, she goes to sleep with her sabers close and hands shaking from impact. They don’t see the other Jedi – the front is too wide. It’s just her and Vadrin.

Her master doesn’t offer her lectures here. No speeches. He just silently anchors the line and runs drills during downtime. Kaste’s life becomes the Third Platoon. Andros with his scoured armor and voice like collapsing bunker, runs the line like a grizzled god of mud. He doesn’t ask, he commands. Swears like it’s punctuation. When a supply line fails, he’s there, wrench in hand, cursing the bolts loose. When a trooper goes down, he hauls them out of the dirt himself.

“Trenches don’t give a damn how shiny your saber is, Sokarre. You bleed here same as the rest of us. Don’t forget it.” Kaste doesn’t.

The war becomes a blur of noise, sweat, and repetition. Patrols blend into skirmishes. Skirmishes blend into defenses. Each day is the same. They lose ground. Take it back. The Sith push hard. Sloppy. They overcommit one day, leaving the Third a free trench for the taking. Well, not free exactly. But they don’t bleed themselves dry, they flee. Scatter under the weight of Republic fire. After they secure the trench, Kaste leans against the wall of the reclaimed position, sabers deactivated, mud caked up to her knees. Her arms are heavy, her breath slow, but she’s upright.

Andros settles onto a broken crate nearby, grumbling as his knees pop. His armor is streaked with gore, half of it his. He pulls off one gauntlet, flexing thick fingers as though the fight left something stuck in his joints.

“You swing your glowstick any closer to my head tomorrow, Sokarre, I’m calling friendly fire.”

“Eh, your helmet got the worst of it,” she fires back, dropping into the dirt beside him. “Consider it polished. Courtesy of the Jedi Order.”

“Polished?” Kydien’s voice cuts in, bright and insufferably pleased. She drops a squat beside them, still catching her breath. She’s covered in mud and looking far too smug for someone who nearly got flattened earlier today by a collapsing barricade. “If anything, you just shaved an inch or so off his ego. Be grateful.” Kaste grins. She’s been told Andros isn’t the kind to really care for his Jedi overseers, but she’s fairly sure if the Republic had an official adoption process, he’d have filed the paperwork by now.

“She’s earned the right,” Andros admits, grudgingly but not unkind. He pulls out a rag and starts swiping gore off his gauntlets. “Holds her weight. Doesn’t whine.”

“High praise, coming from our commanding sergeant,” Kydien says, nudging Kaste’s boot with her own. “You’re practically family now. Just need a good war injury to commemorate it. I’m thinking a dramatic scar. Maybe across the eye.”

“Get yourself shot first, Kydien,” Kaste retorts. “I’ll copy your style later.”

“Bold of you to assume I haven’t been shot today.” She pats her side. “Probably somewhere vital. I’ll check later.” Andros rolls his eyes. The three of them lapse into companionable quiet. Above, the sky is a bruised smear of grey and rust. The trench feels less like a grave and more like a home. Filthy, cramped, but hers. Andros pulls out his flask, hands it to Kaste first. She drinks it without flinching.

“Still tastes like solvent,” she remarks, wiping her mouth.

“That’s how you know it’s working,” he grunts. Kydien gestures for it next, flopping down so her back hits the trench wall.

“Here’s to taking Sith trenches the old-fashioned way. Blood, sweat, and dumb luck!” She throws back the alcohol.

The weeks bleed into months. The front barely moves. When it does, it’s by meters, clawed from the Sith inch by inch. Somewhere in that slow grind, Kaste stops being Padawan Sokarre and starts being just Sokarre. She barely noticed when Andros’ grumbling became familiar, not background noise but rhythm. He doesn’t stop fixing things: rifles, barricades, people. Once, during a rare lull, she finds him elbow-deep in a wrecked turret, cursing its ancestors in three languages.

“Republic ships get all the funding,” he mutters, knuckles scraped raw. “Out here, we gotta make do. Trench wisdom, Sokarre. You’ll get it eventually.” An hour later, Kydien vaults into the trench under a hail of Sith gunfire, landing with her usual lack of ceremony in a pile of displaced sandbags.

“Third’s still the prettiest damn squad on this front,” she announces, brushing dust from her sleeves. “Confirmed by me. Which makes it official.” Kaste doesn’t look up from cleaning one of her emitters.

“How many times have you been nearly shot today?”

“Define nearly.”

“She means shot again,” Andros calls from down the line. Kydien grins.

“A mere flesh wound of the ego. No reports necessary!” She stays longer this time, perched on the edge of a half-buried crate, regaling Kaste with half-true stories of comm mixups and the latest gossip about the Fifth Battalion’s embarrassing retreat. The way Kydien tells it, war is less a meat grinder and more an elaborate comedy.

Somewhere in the chaos, Reza’s men find the time to set up a dinner line, if you could call it that. It is more a battered stove unit set up behind a half-collapsed barricade, churning out protein slop and overboiled caf. But it’s warm food. That’s more than enough. Reza watches over the line, boots kicked up on a crate, gnawing at a ration bar like it owes her credits.

“Look at you lot,” she says as Kaste and Kydien approach, still mud-caked, still breathing. “Fresh off a trench brawl and still pretty enough to ruin my appetite.” Kydien gives a grandiose bow, almost slipping on a slick patch of ground.

“Third’s finest, reporting for dinner and inspection.” Reza tosses her an extra ration without looking.

“Here’s your medal, jackass.” Kaste accepts her portion with a nod, fingers still stiff from saber recoil. The warmth of the tray seeps into her palms. She’s missed hot foot.

Andros arrives after everyone’s been served, stomping over with the deliberate pace of a man whose knees protest each step.

“Didn’t think you’d make it, Sergeant,” Reza says, mock-serious. “Thought you’d have married that turret by now.”

“She’s a fickle mistress,” Andros grunts, lowering himself onto a crate with a wince. “But she lets me curse her out loud. Better than some company.” Kydien hands him a cup of caf.

“For your other true love.” He accepts it with a snort. The corners of his mouth twitch. Kaste takes her place among them, tucking her legs beneath her, ration tray balanced on her knees. The glow of portable lamps paint everything in soft gold, muting the sharp lines of armor and grime. For a moment, it’s almost peaceful.

“So,” Reza says, kicking back. “We’re officially the best trench rats this side of the ridge. Got word from Command this afternoon. Sith are pulling back from Sector Six. Probably hoping to breathe before we bleed them out.”

“Which means we get the joy of holding this mudhole longer,” Andros mutters.

“I’ll drink to that,” Kydien says, raising her caf. Cups clink. Kaste raises hers a beat after. She finds herself smiling.

Vadrin lingers on the outskirts as always. Watching, not intruding. But tonight, when Kaste gestures, he crosses the space and settles into the circle without a word. His presence is a lull in the Force.

“Didn’t think we’d tempt you with this slop, Master Jedi,” Reza says, amused.

“I’ve had worse,” Vadrin replies, tone mild. His glance toward Kaste is sharper. “Though it’s the company that’s harder to come by.” Andros huffs something close to a laugh. Reza offers a slow, mocking applause.

They eat like that. Quiet between bites, louder between sips. Kydien tells a half-true story about a Sith ambush that ended with her accidentally setting off their own mines. Andros calls it “creative sabotage.” Reza calls it “idiocy rewarded.” Vadrin just listens, storing every word like data. Somewhere near the end of the meal, Reza nudges Kaste’s boot.

“You’re not bad, Sokarre,” she says. “Most of you types stay floaty. Don’t get in the mud. You bleed with us. That counts.”

When the lamps burn low and rations finished, no one rushes to disperse. The air is too calm. The war can wait until morning, Kaste thinks.

They don't get many visitors on this stretch of the front. So when Kallis shows up, it's strange to see a familiar face not caked in their particular shade of trench mud. She arrives without ceremony, wearing her collection of vibroknives alongside her lightsaber.

"Evening, Third," she says, voice dry as salt. "Command says you're the most boring piece of dirt on this front. Lucky me." Kydien gives her a lazy salute as she passes through the trench, off to stars knows where.

"Welcome to paradise, Master Jedi. Hope you brought a good shovel." Kallis rolls her eyes and places a hand over one of her knives. Her blue eyes dart to Kaste.

"Padawan Sokarre. Still standing, I see."

"Barely." Kaste's smirk comes easy. Andros grunts beside her, saluting quickly before he settles onto a crate nearby.

"News from base?"

"Blockade rumors," Kallis replies dismissively. "Sith posturing. Naval's twitchy about orbital control, but nothing that'll touch us probably. Same song, different chorus." Andros snorts.

"If the Sith do box us in, the better bring some decent caf."

Kydien and Kallis become inseparable almost immediately, which means the jokes start fast. By night two, she's telling an exaggerated tale of how they 'accidentally' infiltrated a Sith command post, and how Kallis broke them through with sheer force of how unimpressed she was.

"She glared them into thinking she belonged," Kydien insists, winking at Kaste. "Serious! Deadly weapon, that look." Reza wagers two credits that Kallis could disarm Andros with a stare. The sergeant grumbles but doesn't outright deny it.

Vadrin doesn't weigh in. He watches Kallis with the same unreadable gaze he gives everyone, but Kaste can feel it. The tension. His reminder that these aren't the kind of people he wants Kaste to mirror. But she's too far gone for that now, too embedded in the rhythm of the line. He finds her after their next push, when the camp settles and silence creeps in. He stands beside her, hands folded, gaze even.

"You don't like it here," she says before he can start up a lecture. He doesn't answer immediately. His fingers move slowly across his arms.

"I don't like what it's made of you." Kaste frowns.

"I'm doing my job, Master. I'm holding the line. That's what I'm supposed to do." He shakes his head.

“That’s what soldiers are meant to do.”

“We’re in a war, Master.”

“And what will you be when it’s over?” That gives her pause. She’s not sure she has an answer. Or if she wants one. This is the happiest she’s been in years. And Vadrin sees it. He places a hand on her shoulder.

“Be mindful, Kaste. Wars end. It’s what comes after that decides you.” She watches him walk away.

The blockade happens two days later. No alarms, no sudden panic, just a shift in tone. Supply runs slow to a crawl. The comm chatter changes to a quieter, clipped tone. By the time Command sends word, everyone on the ground already knows.

“Sith fleet’s holding orbit,” Kallis reports that night, crouched over a tactical slate with Kydien peering over her shoulder. “No transports in, no transports out. Naval’s boxed in. We’re on our own for a while.”

“Good,” Andros says without missing a beat. He’s working on another busted turret, scowling at a jammed coolant line. “Fewer newbies to get in the way.” Reza snorts.

“Not like they’re resupplying us on time anyway.” Kaste listens, watches them fall into the rhythm of adapting. There’s no dread, no fear. Just another obstacle to chew through. She relishes it.

With the blockade in place, the fights get closer. The Sith press harder, trying to capitalize, but the Third knows their dirt. They hold, because that’s what they do. Kaste moves among them like a blade that finally understands its purpose. She drills the green troops herself. Runs the lines. Stays until her muscles burn. She loves it. There’s no room for doctrine or philosophy here, just the line. Just the people holding it. Vadrin watches. He doesn’t try to stop her.

Supplies get thinner. Ammunition is rationed tighter. But their morale doesn’t crack. If anything, it sharpens. Reza organizes a ‘scav run’ – a polite way of saying theft – from a half-abandoned Republic depot nearby. Kydien, Kallis, and Kaste volunteer. They come back bruised, grinning, dragging crates of outdated but functional ordinance. Andros calls it “resource acquisition.” Reza calls it “tax collection.” That night, the dinner line feels less like necessity and more like a victory party.

“Sith want to choke us out?” Reza toasts, raising a dented canteen. “Let ‘em try. Third’s not done yet.” Cups clink. Grins flash in the lamplight. Kaste sits among them, feels the weight of the moment settle. She doesn’t think about what’ll happen when the blockade lifts. Or what Vadrin sees when he looks at her now.

The blockade suffocates them slowly. Not dramatically, not all at once. Just...less. Less rations. Less ammunition. Less medkits. Harsher fights. When the next push comes, it takes longer to clear the trench. Blaster packs don't cycle fast enough. The scav runs get riskier. Reza's militia works miracles with scrap. Andros' squad starts rationing power cells like water. Then the news hits. Kallis brings it, face like stone.

"Fifth's in trouble. Bad. Sith punched through their line. Sira's been holding the flank herself for six hours. Command says she's got enough left to hold a few more. Maybe."

The words drop into the trench like a shell. Kydien's the first to break the silence.

"So what's the plan? We moving to support?" Andros shakes his head immediately.

"No chance. We're barely holding our own sector. Pull anyone off this line, we hand it back to the Sith."

"Vonn's not some green cadet," Reza cuts in, voice sharp. "We let Fifth collapse, we're next. Might as well save time and start digging the graves here."

"Command hasn't called for redeployment," Andros snaps at her. "Means we're to hold here. Fifth's problem is Fifth's problem."

"That's rich coming from the man who'd chew out a trooper for not backing a squadmate," Reza fires back.

"That's different. That's our squad." Kaste watches them clash, feeling heat rise. She understands Andros, this line is their life. But Reza's not wrong. The Sith don't care about their sector boundaries: Fifth falls, pressure doubles here.

"Kallis?" she asks, voice cutting through Reza and Andros' sideswiped insults. "What's command really saying?" Kallis exhales.

"Command's stalling. They're waiting to see if Sira pulls off a miracle. They're not sending support until they're sure it won't just be throwing bodies on the pyre." Kallis' words hang in the trench air, heavy and bitter. Reza's jaw tightens.

"Command's watching a bloodbath and calling it patience." Andros doesn't flinch.

"Command's not wrong. You throw us into Fifth's collapse, we weaken the entire sector. Sith know that. They'll hit us next."

"They'll hit us anyway," Reza snaps. "Difference is whether we brace or bleed first."

"I don't gamble with what's not mine to lose," Andros says, low and solid.

"You do it every damn time you send a squad past that ridge!" Reza spreads her hands. "Don't feed me that sanctimonious—"

“Enough.” Vadrin’s voice slices through the rising growl, softer than Andros’, thinner than Reza’s. Final in its weight. Both fall silent. “We are all responsible for this line,” he says evenly. “If the fifth platoon falls, it becomes our problem. But if we compromise this sector now, we’re solving nothing.” He takes a breath. “We should not redeploy the Third, but we can spare a strike unit. Flank the Sith, force them to redirect.” Andros exhales through his nose.

“It’s a big risk. You thin the line, you invite teeth.”

“We already feel them chewing,” Reza snaps.

“A surgical hit may buy the Fifth space to stand.” Vadrin looks to Andros and Reza in turn. “We commit a strike team. One squad. They act quickly, then return. If they fail, we fall back. But we give the Fifth the chance they’ve earned.” Andros’ mouth twitches.

“You’re taking Kydien,” he says to Vadrin. “And Sokarre, since she’s too damn eager anyway. Reza—”

“My best five,” Reza confirms before he can finish. “We know the terrain. Sith won’t see us coming.”

“Knight Kallis, stay with the sergeant. If Padawan Sokarre and I fail to return, you know what to do.” Vadrin’s fingers drum on his hilts. Kaste’s blood thrums in her ears. Andros clasps her forearm as she passes.

“Be sharp, Sokarre. We’re too tired to avenge you.”

Kydien falls in line with her usual grin. Reza’s militia slips into formation without a word. They move as one.

The air changes as they reach Fifth’s sector. It’s not the smoke or rot – Koros Major stinks everywhere. But this stretch of trench, where Fifth is bleeding out, feels thinner. Brittle. Like glass about crack. Kaste can feel it through her bones.

Fifth is holding out by grit alone. Their line is a patchwork of sandbags, collapsed barricades, and bodies. The Sith press them hard, shock troopers, sabers cutting lose, blaster volleys chewing through cover. Vadrin’s squad settles into position beyond the ridge, breath syncing with the pulse of distant fire. Reza crouches beside Kaste, rifle cradled loosely, eyes sharp.

“We hit the rear. Hard. No finesse. Fifth needs breathing room, not poetry.”

“I’m not here to write sonnets,” Kaste says, thumb brushing the ignition plate of her shoto. Vadrin stands a few meters off, focus razor-edged. When he speaks, it is low. Direct.

“Engage. Do not pursue. We are not here to win, we are here to relieve.” Kydien grins as she slings a thermal charge over her shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Master Jedi. We’ll keep it quick.” Reza’s five are already spreading out, moving like water through the jagged terrain. They don’t need orders to know where to hit. Reza gives a quick flick of the fingers. They move.

Kaste is first over the ridge, sabers igniting in a flash of yellow glory. She’s a streak of gold through the grey, slicing into the exposed flank of the Sith line. No warning. No mercy. The first trooper doesn’t have time to react. Her blade carves through the joints of his armor and sends him careening south. The second spins to fire, too slowly. Reza’s bolt finds his throat. The Sith recoil. They weren’t expecting teeth at their back.

Kydien follows Kaste’s shoulder, blaster barking precise shots that pin Sith into cover they thought was safe. It isn’t. Reza’s squad peels them apart methodically.

Kaste doesn’t think about the Temple now. Or the Code. She thinks only of the press of battle, the clarity of motion. Strike. Pivot. Disable. She moves like she’d been born here. Vadrin enters the fray with the calm precision of inevitability. His sabers don’t flash, they flow. Each movement a calculation. He doesn’t chase, he redirects. Sith strikes veer off-course, momentum turned back on their wielders. The line fractures.

Fifth’s remaining troopers surge forward, emboldened. Kaste catches a glimpse of Sira Vonn, armor half slagged, blue saber in a low guard, blood streaking her temple. She fights with one leg dragging.

“Sira’s on the line,” Kaste shouts over the comms. “Push to her!” Reza’s men pivot instantly, Kydien behind them. Kaste leads the wedge, sabers carving a path. Blasterfire sparks past her cheeks. She doesn’t flinch.

Sira falters, a blade scoring a shallow cut across her ribs. She doesn’t cry out, just grits her teeth and keeps moving. Kaste reaches her in time to intercept the next blow, locking sabers with the Sith duelist. She twists low, disarms the Sith with a flick of her wrists, catches his throat on the recoil.

“Fall back, Sira,” she orders, not caring if protocol would balk.

“I’m okay,” Sira rasps, but even that sounds like a lie. “Not until my squad’s accounted for.” Around her, Fifth’s remaining soldiers stagger through barely-functioning cover. The Sith don’t flinch. They’re already regrouping, turning to swallow the new thorn in their flank. Kaste shifts into guard, sabers flaring in twin arcs. She spits at Sira’s damn altruism.

“Kydien!” she calls into the comm. “Flank right. We need to cut off their fire corridor!”

“On it!” the runner calls back, diving behind a shattered barricade. Reza’s men fan out, filling the gaps in the Fifth. They hit hard and fast, grenades tossed underhand into enemy clusters, sharp cracks of rifle fire cutting through the haze. But the Sith keep coming.

It's not a matter of skill anymore. It's mass. Pressure. Kaste can feel it in the way her footing starts to slip, mud sucking at her boots with each pivot. For every trooper she fells, two more press forward. Vadrin plants himself on the lip of the trench, sabers waving an unbroken line. He doesn't retreat, doesn't crouch. He draws fire, turning aside bolts meant for Fifth's line.

Sira refuses to fall back. She's everywhere, dragging wounded into cover, barking orders into comms that barely respond, cutting down Sith who get too close. The fight devolves into a churn of bodies. No neat perimeters, no textbook formations. Every inch is contested. They use corpses as cover. Reza's people throw explosives into the mud. Kydien cycles through power cells with grim efficiency, quips lost beneath the roar of battle. Fifth's survivors rally, but they're running on fumes. Armor slagged. Ammo low.

Kaste's lungs burn. Her shoulders ache with each deflection. But she refuses to cede ground. Vadrin anchors the high point, sabers never slowing. They hold. A Sith transport buzzes overhead, low and slow, cannons raking the field. Mud erupts in violent sprays. One of Reza's men takes a direct hit. He's gone before he hits the floor. Reza doesn't flinch. She shifts position, rifle spitting precise bruises, face set in a mask of cold fury.

"We're not gonna get clear, Sokarre," she grits out over comms. "We dig, or we die." Kaste knows it. She can feel it in her bones. They can't just part ways with Fifth and skip off back to Third. She looks to Sira. Still standing. Bleeding. Holding.

"Then we dig," she says.

The hours pass into a blur of blood and grit. The trench becomes a graveyard. Fifth's numbers dwindle, but so do the Sith's. Kaste and Vadrin remain on the lip, intercepting every push, every bolt, absorbing the wrath of an enemy that won't stop pressing. Kydien's left arm is scorched to hell, but she keeps firing. At some point, the Sith waver. Not a rout, not even a retreat. Just...hesitation. Enough for Reza's remaining men to press. Enough for Fifth's survivors to take a breath. Enough for Kaste to feel the pressure ease. Barely.

The Sith pull back to regroup. The trenches fall quiet in the worst way. No celebration, no relief. Just the sick smell of blood seeping into churned earth. Sira's still upright, but barely. She leans against the jagged remains of a barricade, breath sawing through clenched teeth. Her armor's slagged across her side, plates melted into flesh beneath. Blood soaks her hip, running in slow, stubborn rivulets down her leg. Pooling at her boots in a dark, glistening slick. Beneath the slag of her armor, her ribs are exposed. Bone gleams slick beneath ruined flesh.

"Sira." Kaste's voice is steady, but it's a thin veneer. "Sit down."

"Can't." Sira sways, forcing herself upright. "If I sit down, I stay down. Fifth needs—"

"What Fifth needs is for you to stay alive." Vadrin's there before she falls. One moment he's on the trench lip, watching the Sith retreat with that cold, distant focus. The next, one hand is steadying Sira's elbow, another bracing her opposite shoulder. Doesn't let her crumple.

“Master Vadrin—” Kaste starts.

“I know,” he says. His voice is unusually sharp. “Knight Vonn, you will sit. You will breathe. Your squad holds because they see you standing. That does not require you to die here.” Sira’s jaw tightens. Blood beads at the corner of her mouth. But she listens. He lowers her carefully to a patch of relative cover. Not clean, not safe, but shielded.

“Kaste. Medkit.” Reza tosses a scorched medkit down. Kaste’s fingers fumble as she yanks it open, pulling gauze, sealant, whatever’s left. Her hands want to shake. She forces them still. Vadrin kneels beside Sira. Peels a gauntlet free, fingers bare as he assess the ruin of her side. He speaks calmly, but there’s tension coiled in his jaw.

“We need Knight Vesh. Now.” Kydien’s voice crackles over the comm.

“No dice. He’s pinned with First. Command says there’s no medevac window. Blockade’s too thick.” Vadrin’s lips press thin. His hand presses against Sira’s wound, stemming the worst of the bleeding, but it’s a stopgap. He knows it. Kaste knows it.

“She’s septic,” he says to no one in particular. “The tissue’s dead. Field kits won’t hold her.”

“Then we get her out,” Kaste insists.

“There’s nowhere to go,” Reza cuts in. “We’re stuck, Sokarre. Vesh can’t come. We can’t leave.” Sira coughs a wet, rattling sound. When she speaks, it’s through gritted teeth.

“Don’t waste your time on me. Fifth needs—”

“You are Fifth,” Vadrin snaps. The rare edge in his voice startles Kaste more than the blood. “You need to stay alive for them.” He peels back another section of armor. The flesh beneath is worse. Necrotic, sloughing away in patches, strings of muscle parting under his touch. Where it’s fused to the armor has to be cut free. Vadrin draws one of his sabers. Kaste watches as he adjusts the blade’s output, dropping the hum to a scalpel-fine wine. His hands never waver, but Kaste can see the weight in his shoulders.

The stink of burnt meat rises sharp and choking as he carves away the bonded plating. Flesh comes with it, some of it charred, some of it live, tearing in long, sticky strands. Blood pours freely now, sluggish but persistent. The bone beneath glistens pale through the ruin. Sira screams.

Kaste kneels opposite Vadrin, pressing what little gauze remains against the open wound. Her fingers are slick with Sira’s blood. She feels it seeping through the fabric, warm and relentless.

“Her blood volume’s dropping,” Vadrin mutters. “She needs a transfusion.” Kydien drags what left of the medkit to their side. Tourniquets. Coag strips. Not enough. Reza crouches sidelong, eyes narrow, jaw tight.

“We need to cut the infection. Physically. Bacta’s a luxury we don’t have.”

“Debride more, then cauterize,” Vadrin says, already moving. The words are clinical, detached. But Kaste knows better. She can see the scowl of his brow, the melancholic crinkle in his eyes.

The next half-hour is a blur of blood and burnt flesh. Kaste holds Sira down as Vadrin works. The air reeks of copper and char. Every hiss of the saber, every ragged scream from Sira, carves the moment deeper into Kaste’s bones. When it’s over, Sira’s side is a ruin of cauterized muscle, blackened and puckered. The bleeding’s slowed, but the damage is done. Infection still simmers beneath the surface.

“Stable,” Vadrin says quietly. “For now.” Kaste wipes blood from her hands, but it smears more than it cleans. She feels raw. Vadrin cleans his saber hilt with his robes, eyes on Sira’s shallow, shuddering breaths.

The first week grinds by under constant pressure. The Sith hammer the trench with methodical cruelty, probing for weakness, testing how much more the Fifth and their battered reinforcements can endure. Every assault is bloodier than the last. Every lull feels like holding breath underwater.

Vadrin’s hands are never clean. He shifts from command to combat to triage without pause. His sabers aren’t weapons anymore. They’re scalpels, barriers, beacons. He takes a blaster bolt through the shoulder on the fourth day, burning a deep hole that chars muscle to bone. He doesn’t flinch. Kaste notices the tightness in his jaw, the stiffness in his guard, but he doesn’t retreat. She herself takes a glancing saber slash across the ribs. Not deep, but enough to scar. Enough to slow her, briefly. She compensates. Her stance shifts subtly; attacks more economical. Less flourish, more survival.

Sira refuses to stay down. Even with her side a ruin, with sepsis curling through her blood, she drags herself to the trench lip when the Sith push hard. Vadrin and Kaste have to physically pull her back twice. By the third time, she collapses before they can stop her. Fever blisters her skin. She doesn’t complain.

Things don’t improve. The blockade doesn’t lift. The Republic isn’t coming. Orders come down from Command: regroup closer to base. Abandon forward gains. Consolidate. It’s not phrased as retreat. But it is. Reza spits on the ground when she hears it. No one disagrees.

The march back is slow. Bloody. They don’t have transports. They carry their wounded on improvised stretchers, Sira chief among them. Every step feels like surrender. But it’s the only path left.

At the base, Vesh is waiting. He does what he can for Sira, but the damage is done. He doesn't sugarcoat it.

"She'll live. Hopefully. But she'll wont fight again. Not like before." The words hit harder than Sith sabers.

Reunions at base are grim. Andros is alive, grumbling as always. Kallis looks like she hasn't slept in days. Reth's armor is scored, grin intact, but it's thinner now. They gather that night after dinner. The Jedi and a few officers, Andros, Kydien, and Reza among them.

"The Sith will take this sector," Vadrin says, tone flat. "It's only a matter of when." The words fall heavy among the circle.

"So we dig graves now?" Andros snaps, leaning against a support strut, arms crossed. His tone is bitter, but his posture says he already knows the answer.

"No," Reza says. "We make sure when they done, they take nothing we're not ready to lose." She's not looking at the Jedi, she's looking at the militia huddled at the edge of the circle. Her people. Families who've fought and bled, who'll be the first to fall if the Sith break through. Reth leans against a crate, arms folded. His armor is a ruin but somehow still standing.

"Holding the line is fine rhetoric," he rumbles. "But lines are drawn on maps. People don't live on maps. They live here." He taps a gauntlet to the floor beneath his boots. "We hold them. Not the dirt." Kallis crouches beside a ration crate, sharpening one of her knives with short, precise strokes. She hasn't looked up once.

"Command'll want us to fall back. Save the ships. The cities."

"We've always known we're expendable," Vesh's assistant, an overworked grey-skinned Twi'lek says from the back. "But the civvies didn't sign up for this." Her voice is raw. "They can't run. We have to buy them time." Kydien, seated cross-legged on the dirt floor, flips a ration tin idly.

"T'was only a week ago we were talking like the Republic was just running a bit late." She grins, sharp and bitter. "Optimism didn't age well, huh?" Kaste listens. Feels the weight settle in her chest.

She used to dream of returning to Ossus a war hero. Returning in triumph. Leading the next fronts. Her name, her record carved into Republic stone. She used to think this war was a stepping stone to something greater. But looking around at the group of soldiers, she knows. This is it. She's not going to leave Koros Major.

"I'd rather dig my grave knowing I kept these people breathing," she says. Vadrin's gaze is steady on her. Not disapproving, just present.

“It is the Jedi’s charge,” he says softly. “To stand where others fall. To hold, even if the galaxy forgets the ground we bleed for.” Andros snorts.

“Never thought I’d agree with Jedi philosophy. But here we are.” Reza leans forward, elbows on her knees.

“We can’t hold the sector. That’s the truth. But we can hold this. The refugees. The locals. My people. We fortify. Dig. Make the Sith choke on every inch.” Rath cracks his knuckles.

“We’ll make sure when the Sith write their reports, they write our names in blood.” Vadrin nods once.

“Then let us prepare.” The meeting breaks, but no one leaves quickly. They sit for a while longer, the silence companionable in the grim resolve. Kaste feels it deep in her bones. She will die on Koros Major. She will die a Padawan. She smiles, despite it all.

The days that follow blur into a rhythm of desperation. They fortify what they can. The base was never meant to be a fortress, just a staging point, half-dug into the rock. They reinforce walls with scavenged durasteel, turn every corridor into a fallback point. Reza’s militia teaches the farmers how to lay traps. Andros runs drills until his voice gives out. Vadrin watches the children.

Kaste finds herself leading more than she expected. Directing patrol, managing logistics. Not because she was ordered to, but because someone has to. The war doesn’t wait for permission. Command, far removed behind the blockade, keeps issuing orders. Useless ones.

“They want a probing assault on the western ridge,” Kallis reports one morning, tone flat. “Diversionary push. Minimal resources, high visibility.” Andros’ response is measured as ever.

“They want a suicide mission with good optics.”

“Pretty words to call us dead weight,” Reth adds, sharpening a bayonet across his knee.

“They will keep throwing us orders,” Vadrin says, voice calm, two sets of finger steeples before him. “We will keep refusing.” Reza leans against a wall, arms crossed.

“Not much of a war if all we can do is tell Command to go fuck themselves.”

“No,” Vadrin agrees, “But it is the only war left for us.” Kaste doesn’t argue. She knows they’re right. Every order from above feels less like strategy and more like paperwork. A clean way to write “failed campaign” above their headstones. So they ignore them. They build defenses. They dig in. They protect what little they can.

Fights start coming. Small probes, skirmishes. Enough to remind them the Sith haven't forgotten. Enough to thin their numbers. Kydien takes a hit to her left leg. Deep, ugly, but she manages on it.

Kaste turns seventeen with little fanfare. She almost forgot the day herself. But Kydien doesn't. Of course she doesn't. That evening, after the drills die down and the last patrol takes off, she's dragged to the mess hall, where everyone is gathered.

“What's this?” Kaste asks warily.

“An ambush,” Andros says gruffly. “Don't embarrass yourself.” Reth slaps a dented canteen onto the table.

“It's your birthday, Sokarre, remember? Congratulations on not dying yet!” Reza drops a scrap of ration bread in front of her. It's been carved, badly, into the shape of a cake wedge. Someone's etched '17' into the crust with a vibroblade tip. Kallis flicks her knife at it, slicing the number perfectly in half.

“Make a wish.”

“I wish for better cake,” Kaste says, smiling despite herself. The laughter that follows is soft. Tired. Vadrin sits quietly at the edge of the group. When she meets his gaze, he inclines his head.

“The Force brought you through this year, Kaste. It will bring you through the next.” Kydien raises her canteen.

“To Sokarre. To seventeen, and to surviving long enough to get sick of this war.”

“To surviving,” they echo. The toast is hollow. Kaste takes a bite of the rock-hard ration bread. It tastes like sawdust. It's perfect.

The first Sith assault comes that night, just before dawn. There's no warning, just the soft, sick sound of mortars thudding into their outer lines. Explosions ripple through hastily-reinforced barriers. Walls buckle. The outer trenchlines, barely more than dirt and wishful thinking, fold within the hour. They fall back. It's not a rout, it's controlled. Vadrin's orders cut through the chaos like a blade: “No charges, no pursuit. Fall back. Reform. Hold.”

Kaste is everywhere. Directing civilians to fallback shelters. Reinforcing checkpoints. She doesn't flinch as Sith sabers bite into the lines. She doesn't pause when her ribs protest each parry.

By the time they stabilize, they've lost a third of the compound. Two days later, the Sith push again. Precision strikes aimed at their remaining medbays, their water reserves. They hold. Barely. Vesh works through the madness with quiet determination. Sira's condition worsens.

Sepsis blooms through her bloodstream. They've run out of bacta. The field antiseptics are long gone.

"I can keep her breathing," he tells Kaste and Vadrin one night, rubbing sweat off his brow. "But not walking. Not fighting. Every hour's a gamble."

Sira knows it. But she doesn't stop giving orders. Even from a cot, pale and sweating, she drills her voice into the comms.

The third push breaches. The Sith hit the north barricade, collapsing it with precision explosives. Dust and debris chokes the air. For a breathless moment, the front line fractures. The Sith surge in. Kaste's sabers ignite in tandem. The hum feels distant beneath the roar of blasters and screams. She's already moving, carving through the first wave, pivoting into the narrow killzone they've spent weeks preparing. Beside her, Kallis moves with the same ruthless precision she always has. No wasted motion. No theatrics. Just cut, parry, finish. A scalpel in the chaos.

"Shift left," Kaste mutters to Kallis as she notices the left flank start to sag. It's a narrow corridor. Exposed. A direct line to the civilian shelter. Kallis doesn't move.

"Someone's gotta mind the door, Sokarre," she says. "Can't have the Sithies getting through." A shock trooper lunges. Kallis meets him mid strike, sidesteps, buries her saber through the gap in his armor. He collapses. She's already pivoting to meet the next. Behind them, Kydien's voice crackles through the comm.

"Breach point's folding. Reza's squad's on it."

A crack in the line. A trooper, flanking through the collapsed wall. Kallis turns, blades intercepting the first blow, but the second is faster. A vibroblade, serrated and wicked, slips beneath her guard and punches up through her ribs. Deep. Kaste feels the world slow.

"Kallis!" She doesn't stumble back. Doesn't cry out. She sways, steadies herself against the wall, blades still in hand. Blood wells between the seams of her armor, slick and red against black plasteel.

"That'll teach me to bet against Reza," she mutters, breath hitching. "Owe her five credits. Told her I'd outlive the lot of you." Her lips curl into something sharp. Almost amused. "Guess she wins."

"Stay with me," Kaste moves to close the gap, sabers weaving to block incoming fire. The corridor narrows, turns into a bottleneck of bodies and mud. Kallis' footing shifts.

"No time, Sokarre. You know it. So do I." She hooks her lightsaber on Kaste's belt. "Get the line. That's an order." She doesn't fall like in the holos. No slow collapse. No gasping final words. She sinks. Controlled. Resting back against the wall as if she's just tired. As if she's choosing to sit this one out. Her vibroblade slides free of her grasp. Clatters to the floor. Kaste

moves to intercept another Sith, fury sharpening her strikes. Every blow is precision honed by rage. But the line holds.

When the push breaks, when the Sith retreat to regroup, the dust settles over Kallis' body. Kydien arrives breathless, crouching beside her. She doesn't speak, just closes Kallis' eyes with a trembling hand. They carry her body to the main courtyard. Build her a modest pyre of scrap wood, ration crates, and broken barricade planks. Reza stands off to the side, arms folded, head bowed. Kydien sits on a broken crate, wounded leg stretched out, silent for once. Vadrin watches from the shadows, hands clasped behind his back, face carved from stone. Reth steps forward when no one else does.

"She hated speeches," he says, voice like gravel. "But she deserves better than silence." He looks down at the body. They'd wrapped her in what little cloth they had. Left her face exposed. Cleaned, but not enough to hide the blood beneath her nails. "She was a brave warrior. And a good friend." Kaste steps forward, unhooks the lightsaber off her belt. It feels heavier than it should. The metal's scarred from battle, smeared with dust and blood, but beneath it, Kaste's thumb finds the familiar notch where Kallis used to rest her grip. It doesn't feel right to keep it.

She kneels, flames casting her in flickering gold, and places the saber on the edge of the pyre. Close enough that when the fire spreads, it'll take it. Let it burn with the woman who wielded it. Before her hand can leave the hilt, a calloused hand clamps down on her shoulder. Reth. His grip is solid. Heavy.

"Don't." Kaste looks up at him. Confused. Angry.

"It's hers."

"It was," Reth says, voice low. "But she gave it to you. You think she didn't know what that meant?" The fire crackles. "She didn't hand it off to go in the dirt with her. She handed it off because she knew you'd be standing where she can't. You think that's something you get to give back?" Kaste's fingers curl tighter around the hilt.

"She would've wanted—"

"What she wanted," Reth interrupts, "was for someone to hold the damn line." He squeezes her shoulder then lets go. "Carry it, Sokarre. Make it mean something." The words are simple. They hurt more than they should. Kaste straightens, withdrawing the saber from the pyre's edge. As the fire consumes what's left of Kallis, Kaste stands with the others. Watching. Her thumb rubs along the emitter's edge. She hopes they'll burn it when they burn her.

The days after Kallis' death pass slowly. No one talks about the next attack. They all know it's coming. In the meantime, there's work. There's always work. The medbay is down to scraps. Ration packs are repurposed as bandages. Power packs dismantled for scrap metal. And, somewhere, amidst the quiet ruin, life grinds on.

Kaste finds Reza bent over a field table, sleeves rolled up, stained with blood that's too old to matter anymore. Her husband, Theren, a broad shouldered man with the quiet patience of someone long resigned to surviving disaster, is beside her, deftly stitching torn fabric, knotting threads with fingers calloused from farmwork, not war.

"Didn't know the Jedi knew how to patch ration bags," Reza says without looking up as Kaste approaches.

"Learned it in the Temple," she replies dryly. "Right between lessons on battlefield decapitations and moral detachment." That earns her a sharp grin.

"Practical skills," Theren murmurs, not looking up. His voice is soft, the kind that could lull you into thinking the galaxy isn't falling apart. "Good to know they teach useful things." Kaste sits on the edge of the table, reaching for a torn pack. Her hands move without thought. Cut. Fold. Stitch. It feels wrong. Too normal.

"Funny," Reza says after a beat, fingers working through a mess of frayed fabric. "You always think dying in war'll be loud. Glorious. Last charge, blasters blazing, some grand gesture." Theren hums.

"Always figured it'd be like this. Quiet. Slow. No speeches." Reza looks at Kaste. Sharp. Measuring.

"What about you, Sokarre? Still hoping for the hero's exit?" Kaste's fingers still. The question stings, but not because it's cruel.

"I used to think surviving this would mean I'd earn something. A command. A name in Republic records. Now?" She threads the needle. Tugs it tight. "Now I just want to make sure the people behind me can tell my story." Reza nods.

"Right answer. Took you long enough."

Across the courtyard, Vadrin watches them. He's not hovering, just present. He approaches only when the conversation dips into quiet, folding himself into the fringe of their circle with the same grave presence as always.

"You're adapting," he says to Kaste.

"Is that approval I hear, Master?"

"An observation," he says. But the corner of his mouth twitches. "You are no longer chasing victory. You are choosing to endure." Reza snorts.

"Not much of a choice," she huffs. Vadrin lifts up some frayed fabric and begins working it into shape.

"No," he agrees, fingers deft, "But it is all we have."

Things continue to go south. Reza's militia gets sent to hold a supply corridor, a guard post to keep the Sith from cutting their access to some of the water tanks and scrap. Same job they've done a dozen times. The Sith figured that out, apparently. Collapsed the exits, rigged explosives into the walls. Turned Reza's forward position into a meat grinder. When the report comes back, it's Reth speaking. Kaste listens while stripping a busted power cell. She doesn't stop working.

"Damn ambush. They had positions in the access tunnels, don't know how. Reza's people didn't see 'em until they were inside the perimeter. I got who I could out. Wasn't much."

"How many?" Vadrin asks.

"Three." Reth's voice is flat. "Reza and two others. That's it." No further details. They don't need them.

The next time Kaste sees Reza, she's sitting on a crate outside the base's south wall. Her armor's melted on the left side. Her rifle's wrecked. Blood stains her collarbone, seeped through the cracks in the plating. Might be hers. Might not. Theren is with her. He's cleaning her gear like it matters. Quietly. Kaste stands in front of them. Tries to find something to say. Reza beats her to it.

"So that went to shit."

"Yeah."

"I told those idiots not to use the same patrol path. Complacency kills." She gestures to the wreckage of her rifle. "Turns out explosives do, too." Kaste watches her.

"You're hurt."

"Not enough to stop working." She jerks her chin toward a pile of scrap. "We've got civvies who don't know the barrel from stock. That's my new militia. We'll make do." There's no fire in her voice, just tired fact. Theren doesn't speak. He keeps working, hands moving in that slow, deliberate rhythm Kaste has grown accustomed to. He was never a soldier, he never planned to be. But he's here regardless.

"Reth got you out," Kaste says. Reza spits at the ground.

"Damn Jedi's too stubborn to die. Pissed me off the whole way," she adjusts the wrap on her shoulder, wincing. "Sith didn't even chase. They got what they wanted. Didn't need to finish the job."

"They will."

"Yeah. They will." Silence. They can't even spare lies to comfort each other. "Militia's done," Reza says. "But the locals aren't. You want them standing when the next push hits, you

need someone who knows what's left of this base." She looks at Kaste, yellow eyes tired but stern. "I'm still breathing. So I'm still working." Kaste nods.

"Good."

The next push is quick. Small force. Sith probing for another weakness. They find it. An explosive charge rips through the northeast barricade mid-battle. Kaste doesn't see the tripwire. No warning. Just the deafening crack of the blast and the sudden, searing punch of heat across her left side. The shock throws her back. Her armor holds, mostly, but her arm is wrong. Heavy. Numb, but not enough. The blast shredded the outer plates, slagged the flesh beneath. Blood slicks her glove. Nerves scream in staccato bursts. She gets back up anyway. Holds the line.

Later, Vesh finds her in what's left of the mess hall stripping the ruined plating from her arm with a field knife.

"Hold still," he says, digging into his patch kit. What's left isn't much. Coag gel. Burn foam. No proper stims. Bacta's been gone for weeks.

"I can do it myself."

"You can't even feel your damn fingers, Sokarre," Vesh signs. "Let me do my job, please."

He cleans the wound with the precision of a man who's long past giving a shit about pain thresholds. The flesh is raw, blistered, muscle torn in shallow layers. Not a crippling wound, thank the stars. But it won't heal clean.

"Ligament damage," he mutters to himself. "No way to repair it here. You'll lose some strength. You push this too hard, you're losing the arm."

"I need the arm."

"You need to stop thinking you're invincible." Kaste doesn't argue. She just watches as Vesh binds the joint, tight and functional. "You're done swinging that arm like you used to," he says. "Manage it, or it'll manage you." Kaste nods slowly, right hand finding her shoto. She'll have to work without it for now.

It's late when Kaste heads back to the barracks. Not that time means much anymore. The sky's been the same dirt grey for weeks. But her body feels the hours. The burn in her wrecked arm, the ache in her ribs, the constant pull of exhaustion behind her eyes. Another patrol rotation logged. Another ration unit patched. No victories, just tasks.

The corridor is quiet. Too quiet.

Most nights, Sira's cot by the infirmary hums with life. She issues orders, corrects loadouts, drills the few able-bodied fighters left with that clipped, sharp-edged voice. She's been bedridden for weeks, but never silent. Tonight, it's silent. Kaste doesn't think much of it at first.

She rounds the corner toward the medbay. The glow hits her first. Blue. Lightsaber blue. Static. She stops cold.

Sira's sitting upright on her cot. Back straight. Shoulders square. The same military posture she'd drilled into everyone else. Her right hand holds her saber still, arm extended. The blade hums through her eye socket, searing through her brain. There's no blood spray. The plasma cauterized it instantly. But the smell of cooked flesh, hair, bone, turns Kaste's stomach.

For a moment, she just stands there. Then she steps forward. Closer. Sira's grip is slack now, but deliberate. Like she'd braced herself for the strike. Thumb poised over the ignition. Her body is still warm when Kaste pries the saber from her fingers. The hum dies as the blade retracts.

Vesh arrives a few minutes later, drawn by the same gut-sense everyone has honed. He takes one look and nods.

“Figures.”

“We could've—” Kaste starts but Vesh cuts her off with a glance.

“Could've what? Summoned a bacta tank? Supplies are gone, Sokarre. Sepsis was too far. She saved us space. Saved us from dragging this out.” It's said without malice, without comfort. Just facts. Kaste's fingers dig into the saber hilt. Her good hand trembles.

She sits beside the cot while Vesh covers the body. Watches the sheet fall over Sira's face, still so perfectly poised. They pass her lightsaber off to Reth. Don't bother with a funeral. Her body is cremated in the same scrap pit as the rest. No speeches, no rites. Just another name folded into the ash pile. Another space cleared in the infirmary. After that, everything gets smaller.

The days blur. Patrol. Patch. Defend. Repeat. Reza keeps training civilians. Andros oversees fortifications. Reth covers the outer perimeter. Kydien, limping but still moving, drills with the able-bodied. Kaste takes over the southern defenses entirely. No one says it aloud, but the command's already shifted. Vadrin doesn't stop her. Neither does anyone else.

Three months after Sira's death, the sky lights up. A fleet battle. Massive. Visible from the surface. Kaste's on the upper gantries when the first flashes catch her eye. Bright streaks across the dull Koros Major clouds. Explosions so far away they're silent. A symphony of light with no sound.

“That's our boys up there,” Andros mutters, watching the sky through a field scope. “About time they showed teeth.” Kaste doesn't say anything. She tracks the streaks of Republic ships as they twist and spiral, smaller and fewer with each pass. It's not a battle. It's a slaughter. They watch as the Republic fleet gets torn apart. Slowly. Methodically. The blockade doesn't

break. By nightfall, the sky's quiet again. A message arrives the next morning, a short burst transmission from command glitching through the static.

*To remaining assets on Koros Major. Republic resources have been reassigned to higher priority fronts. Reinforcements delayed indefinitely. Maintain defensive posture. Containment remains critical. Hold positions until further instruction.*

Andros throws the comm into a wall. Kaste stands next to him, staring at the broken unit, hands resting on the sabers at her hips. Hers, Kallis'.

“We’re not their priority anymore,” she says, voice flat.

“Never were.” Andros says.

“It doesn’t matter,” Reza adds. “We don’t hold for the Republic anymore. We hold for the people behind these walls.” No one argues. The transmission echoes in Kaste’s ears.

*Reinforcements delayed indefinitely.*

No ones coming. Not now. Not ever.

The weeks after the Republic pulls out are worse than any assault. Not because of Sith blades, but because of numbers. Food runs out first. The rations were stretched thin before, but now there’s no pretending. Kaste watches Reth cut portions by weight, then by volume, until he’s issuing half-meals with a forced smile. Protein paste gets watered down. Dried fungus, barely edible, becomes the main staple. Kydien jokes they should start eating the walls. No one laughs.

Munitions fail next. Blaster packs overheat. Plasma coils misfire. Kaste watches a new civilian recruit’s rifle explode in his hands. Too many field repairs, not enough replacement parts. He loses three fingers. Every recovered cell gets stripped for scraps. Charge packs are rationed. They start cycling through ancient slugthrowers. Recoil’s a bitch, but metal still kills. Their gear breaks down, too. Boots wear through. Armor plates crack and are patched with scrap durasteel, scavenged from whatever wreckage is left. Kaste’s own gauntlet is held together with wiring from a broken comm panel. Reth’s shoulder plate is barely more than welded plates of refuse, but it holds.

The fights never stop. Small raids, probing attacks. The Sith test their defenses like a blade on whetstone. Every skirmish feels bigger than it is. A handful of Sith troopers can gut their defenses for a week. There’s no victory here, just survival. Every meter they hold is another night the civilians behind the walls take breath. Reza starts conscripting them. Kaste and Reth back her, running drills until their throats are raw. Farmers, merchants, medics. People who’d never held a blaster are taught to shoot center-mass, to brace for recoil, to stab low and twist. Kaste doesn’t teach form. There’s no point. Every lesson is kill-or-be-killed. Theren, quiet as ever, leads repair crews. He teaches kids how to strip power cells for usable charge.

Kaste feels it all pile up. The sleep deprivation. The constant ache of her bad arm. The quiet weight of being the one they're all looking at now. Vadrin still watches. Still guides, but he's not leading the defense anymore. That's her job.

It's late when they gather by the southern barricade. The air stinks of ozone and damp rot. Another skirmish had passed earlier, a small push. More a probing than a real attack, but Kaste had lost one of her best lieutenants. His phantom grip seizes around her good hand, even now.

She sits on a crate, arms resting heavy across her knees. The bracers on her bad arm are fused into place now. Barely functional. She should get Vesh to check it. Later. Reza's perched on a stack of scrap, elbow on her thigh, cradling a flask. She tips it toward Kaste without looking. The liquid sloshes like sludge.

"Think we're making a dent?" Reza asks.

"We're still breathing," Kaste replies. Her voice is hoarse from earlier.

"Low bar."

"It's all we got." They sit in silence, the sky pressing low over their heads like it's trying to bury them alive. Kydien finds them, drops into the dirt with a grunt, injured leg stretched out stiffly in front of her. She rolls her shoulders, grimacing.

"Well," she says, tone light but not quite reaching her blue eyes. "What's a death trap without some good company?" Reza snorts.

"Good company's dead. You're stuck with us." Kydien grins, sharp and tired.

"Guess I'll have to settle." She reaches into her flak vest and pulls out a crumpled pack of tabac sticks. Ancient. Half smashed. Probably useless. "Found these stuffed in the bottom of my locker," she says, shaking the pack. "Saved 'em for when we won. Figure this is close enough."

Andros appears from behind them. He's gotten quieter the last year, like the weight's settled in his bones. He crouches beside them without a word, jaw clenched.

"About time you stopped pretending this shithole's worth the effort," he says, voice like gravel. "We should've bum rushed six months ago. Would've been a cleaner death." Reza glances at him.

"Didn't realize you signed up for a clean death, Sergeant."

"Didn't sign up for corpse-watching either." Andros snags a stick and lights it with a spark from his gauntlet. The end glows dull orange, casting his face in harsh lines. "But here we are." He takes a huff, passes it to Kydien. She passes it to Reza. Passes it to Kaste. She hesitates. She's never smoked. The Jedi Code has a lot to say about vices. But the Code feels far away now. She takes a breath. It tastes like shit, but it's warm. She passes it back to Kydien.

“Never thought I’d be sitting in a hole, puffing recycled tar, watching my life’s poor decisions go up in smoke.” Andros grunts.

“This’s all we got, Kydien. Get used to it.” There’s no anger in his voice, just exhaustion. Kaste leans her head back against the crate, closing her eyes for a moment. The smoke curls around them. A small, bitter comfort.

“We’re still breathing,” she says.

“Barely,” Andros mutters. Kydien nudges Kaste’s boot with her own.

“Hey, Sokarre. You still planning that big Jedi promotion when this is over?” Kaste takes a hit, exhales smoke, slow and steady.

“If there’s a Jedi left, they better name a fucking flagship after me.” Kydien laughs. It’s short. The moment stretches. The war feels distant for just a breath. The thud of artillery reminds them it’s not. Andros takes one last puff and passes the tabac off to Kydien.

“Back to it.” He pushes himself up, joints cracking, and limps off toward the next repair shift without another word. Kydien stays seated, offering a two-finger salute as he goes.

“Sunshine, that one.” Reza flicks ash into the dirt.

“He’s tired. We all are.” Kaste watches the smoke curl up into the grey sky. They’re all tired.

Their smoke breaks become ritual. Not every night – supplies won’t allow it. But often enough to matter. The rationed stash of tabac gets doled out with military precision. Kydien declares herself “Master of Vices” and no one argues. She keeps the pack tucked in her boot, pulls it out when the mood dips too low. When the walls start pressing too close. It starts the same way every time – she fishes out the pack, grins like she’s offering the galaxy’s last treasure.

“Who’s in?” No one ever says no. They share one stick, pass it around, careful not to waste a single drag. The glow passes hand to hand. One night, Vesh shows up. He lingers at the edge, arms crossed, watching the smoke curl into the stale air.

“You realize you’re only hurting yourself by smoking?” he says, deadpan. Kydien waves the tabac at him.

“Doc, if you’ve got anything better to offer, I’m all ears.”

“I used to lecture patients for less,” Vesh mutters. But when the tabac circles back, he takes it. Holds it between two fingers like it’s a surgical tool. Doesn’t inhale, just lets the ember glow before passing it on.

“That’s the best medicine we’ve got left,” Reza says, arching a brow.

“Worrying, isn’t it?” Vesh replies. No one argues.

Theren's always quiet when he joins their circles. He settles in beside Reza, takes the tabac without ceremony. His hands are calloused, stained with dirt and oil from the endless repairs, but they're gentle with the fragile thing. He doesn't say much. Sometimes, he'll tell stories. Short things. About weather patterns on their old farm. Their son, who went to live with an aunt on Alderaan before all this started.

"You would've hated him," he tells Kaste once, passing the smoke back. "Little bastard can't sit still for nothing." Kaste huffs.

"I don't mind kids. Just don't like the noise." Theren smiles. Just a little.

"Then you'd have hated him even more."

Reth also joins from time to time. He never announces himself, just lumbers in, takes the tabac when it comes his way, drags deep, exhales slow.

"You're wasting your lungs," Kydien teases him one night. Reth grins.

"Haven't had use for 'em in years." He doesn't stay long, but when he does, the circle feels heavier. Grounded. Like the walls can't close in quite as much.

Three months after the Republic's message, Reza starts leading scav runs into the ravines. The mountains south of the base were once a minor detail on their holomaps. Now, they're vital. Narrow gullies, rock formations, collapsed mining shafts, places the Sith scanners can't track well. Places where scraps of old supply depots, abandoned relay stations, and forgotten caches might still exist. Might. Reza takes who she can. Small teams. Anyone fit to move fast and carry weight. She turns Kaste down each time she tries to offer herself for the job.

"Civvies need you watching over them, Sokarre. You're the best chance they've got," she says once, while she and Reth double check their gear. Reth places a hand on Kaste's shoulder.

"Sit this out with pride, Padawan. You're valuable enough to rot in here."

Every time they leave, it's a gamble. And every time they return, they bring just enough. A few ration packs scavenged from depot ruins. Water purification tabs pried from emergency lockers. Medical scraps: pain suppressants past expiration, brittle but usable field bandages. They're gone for days. Once, they're out nearly two weeks. Each time they return thinner, dirtier, more battered. But alive.

Kaste starts marking the days they're gone on a wall near the supply cache. Just scratches. Lines in the durasteel. The gaps between returns grow longer.

"I swear, she likes making us sweat," Reth jokes once, unloading a backpack of newly scavenged rations onto the table. Reza comes back with cracked lips, bloodied knuckles, fewer people than she left with.

“You’re gonna wear those mountains down at this rate,” Kaste says once evening, when Reza drops a crate of water filters with a grunt. She gives her a thin smile.

“Not soon enough.”

Theren’s always the first to meet her at the gate. He doesn’t fuss, just helps her unload, patches what needs patching, keeps the machinery breathing. He’s the only one who can get her to rest, but he can’t stop her decline. Kaste notices it in the small things. Reza moves slower after each run. Her jokes get shorter. Her hands shake holding the tabac. But she keeps going. They need her to. The base relies on those scav runs more than anyone says. The war’s no longer about firefights. It’s about who can stretch a canister of water, who can make one powercell last through ten skirmishes. Reza’s runs makes that possible.

It’s during one of the runs that the orbital strikes begin. No warning, no alarms. Just the sudden, skin-crawling hum of Sith bombardment cannons cutting through atmosphere. The first barrage hits the northern sector. A slab of earth lifts and folds in on itself, taking the perimeter gun emplacements with it. The second strike drops directly onto the base’s heart.

The infirmary.

Kaste’s halfway across the compound when the shockwave knocks her down. For a few seconds, there’s no sound at all. Then the screaming starts. She shoves herself upright. Her ribs protest, so does her bad arm. But there’s no time for pain. She’s moving before she knows it, boots skidding on loose stone and debris. By the time she reaches the infirmary, it’s already rubble. Walls are gone – not collapsed – gone. Turned to slag and vapor. The ground is glassed smooth in places, jagged with molten shards in others. Smoke pours from the crater, thick and choking. Bodies litter the fringe. Most aren’t whole. Civilians. Kaste spots the corner of a familiar medpack, half-melted into the rubble. The twisted remains of a field cot. Vesh was here. He’s still here, somewhere. The ground shakes again.

Above them, the cruisers pivot. Kaste can see it through the haze. The telltale glow of charging cannons. Another strike. Closer. Heavier. This time, aimed at the civilian quarters. She feels it coming. The oppressive weight crashing down. The Force itself shuddering under the sheer mass of destruction hurling toward them.

Vadrin steps past Kaste toward the center of the base’s courtyard. His sabers remain unlit. All four hands rise, slow and steady. Fingers splayed, palms skyward. Kaste feels the shift before she sees it. The Force snaps to him. The air itself folds inward, obeying a command too large to hear. Dust cyclones collapse. Debris lifts, then freezes midair. The pressure of the incoming strike slams into an invisible wall. A ripple forms, visible only in the warping of space around his outstretched hands.

The orbital barrage barrels down. Stops. Not gently, not deflected. The energy shudders against Vadrin’s air, crushing into it, battering it, trying to collapse the line. It doesn’t. For a

heartbeat, Kaste can't breathe. The ground wants to cave. The air feels like it's being crushed in a fist. But Vadrin holds. His feet grind into the fractured earth, boots sinking as the pressure builds. His robes snap like flags in a hurricane. His face doesn't change. Calm. Focused. Every line carved from control. Kaste can feel the Force pouring through him, anchored deep. Immovable. He meets her eyes.

"Go," he says. Quiet. Steady.

Kaste moves.

The Sith's ground forces are already on them, sweeping through the fractured barricades. Precision teams, moving fast, assuming the bombardment cleared the way. They don't expect Kaste. She hits their flank, sabers alive, carving through the first squad with brutal efficiency. No flourishes, no wasted motion. Every strike is economy, every parry a redirection into kill zones Andros and Kydien set. She moves through them like Vesh's scalpel. Her wrecked arm screams with every block. She ignores it. Vesh can't chastise her for overusing it anymore.

The Sith regroup. Press harder. They're funneled into bottlenecks Kaste controls. Recycled debris become choke points. Traps explode beneath their feet. Kydien's pistols bark from above, picking off stragglers with calm precision. Andros keeps the retreat line clear, dragging wounded back into cover, shouting over the roar. Behind Kaste, Vadrin holds. The orbital strike pushes. He doesn't falter.

The air burns red. A wall of molten light, rippling in furious waves. The sky itself seems to bleed, crimson glow painting every jagged edge of the ruined base in bloody reflection. The rubble gleams. Each pulse of red slams against his will, spreading in wide arcs of refracted energy.

Two of Vadrin's hands are raised, fingers spread wide, palms facing the oncoming storm. The other two are in motion. Slowly. Deliberately. They weave through the air in measured arcs, not to block, but to shape. The Force coils around him. Anchors him. Energy flares against his outstretched hands, flattening into a rippling curtain of light. The impact shudders through the air, through the earth, but he holds. Shifts his lower arms. Fingers, curl, then flick outward in sharp, precise motions. The energy fractures, pulled apart along invisible fault lines. Ribbons of plasma shear off in spirals, lethal cohesion unraveling mid-air. What was a certain guillotine becomes scattered embers, harmless as dust. Kaste feels it even as she fights.

Every time her blade meets a Sith saber, she feels the echo of Vadrin's control rippling through the ground beneath her boots. The sky bleeds. Vadrin unravels it. The ground beneath him fractures, stone giving way beneath the relentless pressure. His feet sink into the cracked earth, but he does not waver. His lower hands blur, twisting, slicing through air, weaving energy into embers. He holds the sky above them.

Slowly, the Sith pull back. The barrage ceases. The last streaks of red scatter harmlessly as Vadrin's lower hands flick outward in a final, dismissive gesture. The air stills. He lowers his arms, shoulders tight. Breath controlled but labored.

Kaste stands there for a minute, sabers low, breath ragged. For the first time in months – years maybe – she doesn't see the doddering old Master who lectured her about patience. Doesn't see the Codru-Ji who preferred diplomacy, who infuriated her with his caution, his slowness, his damnable refusal to strike first. She sees this. A Jedi. A man who held the sky in his bare hands.

Vadrin isn't made of steel. He's not unbreakable. She can see it: the fine tremor in his fingers as he flexes them back into stillness. But he held. Kaste's throat is dry. There's no words for the weight in her chest. Vadrin's always been this, hasn't he? She's just been too blind to see it.

He turns his head slightly, not quite facing her, but knowing exactly where she stands. He nods once. Nothing more. Retrieves his sabers from the dirt, clips them back into place with the same deliberate care as folding robes. No pride. No flourish.

"Let's count our dead," he says, hobbling off.

The base is unrecognizable. Walls gone. Tunnels collapsed. Half the main building is a crater filled with smoke and silence. Kaste moves because stopping isn't an option. She picks her way through the wreckage, boots grinding over slagged durasteel and splintered concrete. Every breath burns. Every muscle protests. But she moves. The infirmary is gone, replaced with a crater that glows faintly with lingering heat. The medbay's outer wall is half-buried under rubble. That's where they find Vesh. Or what's left of him.

He's pinned underneath what used to be a structural support beam, body twisted at an unnatural angle. Half of him is crushed, the other half burnt beyond recognition. But his tentacles give him away. The medkit on his belt is a charred lump of plastic, but when Andros pries it free there's still a handful of usable supplies inside. Gauze. A stim injector. A few sealed coag vials. They strip it without hesitation. Vesh would've done the same.

His lightsaber's fused to his hip, casing warped, activation plate slagged but not beyond repair. Kaste crouches beside what's left of him, fingers careful as she works it free. The hilt's hot to the touch, but she doesn't care. When she clips it to her belt, it feels heavy against Kallis'. Andros, Kydien, and two lieutenants gather what then can. Anything useful. Anything that might give the rest of them another hour of breath.

Vadrin oversees the cremation. They use broken plasteel for fuel. The flames burn low, smoke curling black against the grey sky. It's quiet for a moment.

“Contact! Southern ridge!” A lookout calls from one of the remaining functional watchtowers. For a heartbeat, Kaste’s muscles tense. Then she sees them. Reza. Reth. Moving fast, skimming the wreckage. Reza’s face is sharp with purpose, Reth right behind her.

“What the fuck happened?” she demands, voice raw. Kaste gestures with a tilt of her chin toward the smoldering craters.

“Sith wanted to finish it,” Kaste says, voice flat. Reza’s eyes sweep the base, or what’s left of it. The craters, the slagged walls, the twisted bones of the infirmary still steaming. Her jaw tightens. She’s filthy. Mud streaked up to her thighs, gauntlet plates cracked. For a heartbeat, Kaste watches her take in in, eyes wild with fear. Then Theren appears, covered in grime but alive.

“Fuck, Theren,” she breathes. It’s not loud. She doesn’t sprint to him, doesn’t collapse in his arms, but her rifle lowers. Theren closes the distance. Doesn’t say anything, just reaches for her hand. They press foreheads together, grip white-knuckled. Reth scans the perimeter, jaw tight.

“They’ll hit us again. You know that.”

“We’re down to half the base,” Kaste says. “But we’re not gone.” Reza straightens, sharpness settling back into her bones. She gestures at the ruin.

“What’s left of us won’t hold if they come in force.”

“That’s never stopped us before,” Kydien calls from above, dragging herself down from a collapsed ledge, limp worse than ever. She drops beside them with a grunt, rifle slung, still grinning that fox’s grin. Reza laughs a bitter tired thing.

“Fine,” she says. “Let’s see how long we can make them regret it.”

The base doesn’t get time to breathe after the bombardment. Three days later the supply tally comes up thin. Too thin. Water filters are failing. Ration stockpiles cut to crumbs. Kaste’s attempt at a makeshift infirmary is running on scavenged scraps. Reza is already gearing up before anyone finishes the report.

“You shouldn’t go,” Kaste says, stepping into her path.

“I shouldn’t be doing a lot of things,” Reza replies, tightening the straps on her ruined pauldron. Her hands are shaking.

“You’ve barely slept since the strike.”

“You think starving here’s gonna fix that?” Reth joins them, expression carved as ever. He adjusts his lightsaber, calm. Controlled.

“Better chance with two of us,” he says like it’s obvious. Kaste bites the inside of her cheek. No point in arguing against Reth. Theren’s there to see them off. He doesn’t say much, just stands with Reza as she checks her gear one last time. His hand brushes hers.

Reza gives Kaste a sharp grin as she passes.

“Hold the door for me, Sokarre.” Kaste huffs.

“Hold that damn mountain.”

The storm hits on the second night. One minute, the wind’s just noise against the fractured walls. The next, it’s alive. Teeth and claws scraping through every crack in the base. Koros Major doesn’t do soft weather. It doesn’t do mercy. Comms cut within the hour. Kaste is left with the static crackle of ruined systems and the cold breath of Koros Major sinking into the bones of what used to be their base. She cycles frequencies with white knuckles. Doesn’t hear anything. She doesn’t look up when Kydien drops into the dirt beside her.

She moves slower these days. Her limp’s worse. The last push did something to her hip that Vesh never got the chance to look at. But she keeps moving. They all do.

“Figured you’d be down here,” Kydien says, voice scratchy. Kaste doesn’t answer. She keeps flicking through frequencies, praying for a catch. Kydien pulls the battered tabac pack from her boot. They have about half the pack left.

“I’m supposed to ration these, but what the hell.” She pulls one free, lights it with a flint spark. The ember glows, dull and orange in the grey light. She takes a slow drag, then offers it to Kaste. She takes it between her fingers, breathes in. The taste is sharp. Bitter. Recycled ash and chemical burn. But it cuts through the taste of dust and blood in her throat.

“She’s not coming back,” Kaste says. It’s not a question. Kydien’s mouth pulls into something adjacent to a smile.

“Nope.” Another drag. Another flick of ash. “But she’d be pissed if we didn’t hold the door for her anyway.” Kaste huffs, not quite a laugh. Not quite anything. “Reth’ll make it,” Kydien adds. “Swear to god, that fucker could tank anything.”

The hours drag. Theren stands by the southern barricade the whole night. Doesn’t move. Doesn’t speak. Just stares out into the storm like he can will her back. She doesn’t come back.

When Reth returns, there’s no fanfare. No rush of noise. Just a slow, heavy column of movement. Theren meets him first. Takes the tarp from his hands. Kaste doesn’t let herself look away. The tarp’s soaked through. Caked in mud, frozen to the shape beneath. Reza’s shape.

Reth lost her less than two klicks from base. She’d made it halfway back with a blaster to the chest. Hypothermia. She’d held on too long. Kaste kneels beside the body as they lay it out.

Reza's face is grey, slack, but still lined. The smirk that always tugged at the edge of her mouth, the sharp set of her jaw. Even in death, she looks like she's got one more quip to give.

"Dumb bastard," Kaste mutters, throat tight. Theren doesn't cry. He presses his hand to Reza's shoulder, thumb tracing the cracked edge of her old militia pauldron.

"She'd tell you it was worth it," he says.

"I know," Kaste's hands curl into fists. "Doesn't mean it was."

The fire they use to cremate her is smaller than it should be. There's no spare fuel. They burn her gear with her to feed the flames. Old plates of scavenged armor. That battered rifle she never replaced. All gone. Kaste watches it burn. Vadrin stands a few paces back. Reth further still. No one tries to speak comfort.

This is different from Kallis. Different from Sira. Different from Vesh. Reza wasn't a Jedi. She wasn't trained for this. She fought because it was her home. Became the backbone of their survival. And now she's gone.

For almost six months, she and Kaste had built this crumbling defense together. Rationing. Scouting. Turning farmers into soldiers. Laughing in the cracks between bombings. Shoulder to shoulder in the dirt. Now Kaste stands over her pyre. The weight hits lower than she expects.

She stays by the ashes long after the others leave. Theren's hand squeezes her shoulder once before he walks away.

The next day, she takes Reza's duty roster without being asked. Oversees civilian rotations. Organizes patrols. Updates supply counts. The base doesn't stop. Neither can she.

They barely have time to adjust to Reza's absence before the Sith press again. Another assault. Less probing, more final. It's not a direct breach. They come from the west this time, using the debris field and collapsed sectors as cover. Pushing hard toward the civilian shelters. Not to hold ground. To clear it. Wipe the last of them out.

Andros takes his team to hold the south evac route. He doesn't even let Kaste try to debate him. She's tied up at the central barricades when the push starts. She doesn't see Andros go.

"Third's covering evac corridor three," Reth says, voice flat over the comms. That's Andros and six others, if her memory holds. She doesn't get any updates. Comms cut shortly after.

Kaste works through the barricades, clearing out the last of a Sith assault group with practiced fury. Her shoto blurs in her off-hand, snapping between parries while her main blade carves downward through armor. There's too many bodies. Not enough ground.

Reth's at the west barricade, halfway between her and corridor three. She catches a glimpse of him through the haze, two sabers alive in his hands. His own green, and Sira's blue, flickering faintly in the half-light. He wields them both like extensions of the same breath. Not elegant. Not perfectly spaced. Just efficient.

Kaste watches him slam both blades into a charging marauder and step through the corpse before it hits dirt. Another saber comes down at him, and he blocks with Sira's, redirects, then drives his own blade clean into the attacker's mouth. Sira's saber hums low as he spins it through a tight parry, dragging the edge down another trooper's forearm. Her blade was always cleaner than this. But she's dead now. So her saber moves his way.

Kaste moves to cover the retreat flank. The evac shelter's door is jammed. Civilians pile in anyway, scrambling over debris, smoke thick in the air. A Sith duelist lunges from the right. Kaste turns into the strike. Her photo flicks up in a textbook guard but the blade cuts slightly too far to the left. Straight through it. The saber dies in her hand. A burst of sparks. A scream of crystal and metal and energy. She stumbles back, stunned. The hilt clatters into the mud, hissing as it dies.

The Sith comes at her hard, trying to press the break. Kaste pivots, shoulder slamming into the attacker's chest, driving him back with sheer force. Her main saber slashes up through his sternum. Drops him. But she's exposed now. One blade when she's built for two. The fight doesn't pause to care. Kaste doesn't stop to think. Her hand snaps to her belt. Fingers close around a hilt she's carried for almost a year. Kallis' hilt.

It's heavier in her hand than her photo, its blade almost twice as long, but it's better than nothing. She pivots on her feet, drawing both sabers into a backhand grip to compensate for the unfamiliarity. The Sith surge again, she meets them with both. Her gold. Kallis' blue. She holds the line. Close, ugly fighting. Kydien calls shots from what's left of the east scaffolding. Reth cycles through fireteams like a bulldozer. But the real fight's by the evac point. Andros is there, holding it long after it should've been overrun.

By the time the Sith finally break and fall back, the air's thick with blood and heat. Kaste finds Reth again near the back of the shelter. He's standing over two corpses. One headless, the other still twitching. Both sabers hang loose in his grip. Sira's blade sits like a guillotine in his hand.

They move toward corridor three together, sabers still lit, trying to catch any stragglers. The civilians are alive. Shaken, dirty, wide-eyed, but alive. Clutching each other in the narrow shelter between collapsed infrastructure. She gives them an all-clear. It should feel like a victory, but as Kaste picks her way through the ruins of corridor three, stepping over twisted support beams and slagged durasteel, it doesn't.

Andros is slumped against the corner strut, rifle still in his lap like he's resting. Half his chest armor's slagged, flesh beneath that burnt and torn. The burns crawl up his throat, creeping

into his jawline. His team's laid out around him, scattered in positions that tell the story without words. They never left the line. Kaste stops in front of them. Stares.

It's odd, how her mind refuses to admit he's gone. She hears his voice in her ears still, barking orders and huffing away jokes. The phantom weight of his hand clapping her shoulder after every half-win. The arid tang of the cheap tabac. It should be quiet now, but her mind fills the silence.

She crouches beside him. Her fingers find the battered edge of his rifle stock, tracing the same gouges she's seen a hundred times over. The half-melted rank insignia on his pauldron. The familiar cracks in his armor.

"You're gonna hate when you see how bad we let the walls get," she mutters, voice far too steady. "Should've kept to fixing your damn turrets." He doesn't answer, but part of her still expects him to. She imagines him snorting, muttering some bitter quip about the civvies, the Republic, this whole damn war. But there's only the hum of Reth's lightsabers behind her and the hiss of settling rubble. Kaste's hand slips to his belt. It feels wrong. Like theft. But they need the supplies.

She unclasps his utility pouches, tugs free his field blade, the last intact charge packs. Strips him with the same brutal efficiency he taught her.

"Gear's no good to corpses, Sokarre. Don't waste it," he seems to say behind her, huffing a tabac. Her throat tightens. A datapad shifts loose from beneath his hip. She pulls it free. It's open to a blank notepad. A single line.

*Keep them alive, Sokarre. Hold the line.*

Kaste stares at the words. They don't move. They don't change. The glow of the datapad paints her gloves in pale blue light. She can't breathe for a moment. The air's still thick with smoke. The sting in her eyes is sharp. Her thumb brushes the screen.

*Hold the line.*

It echoes in her chest. In her pulse. In the hollow part of her ribs where his voice used to settle. She wants to hear him bark it at her. Wants the weight of his hand slamming into her shoulder, shaking the breath out of her lungs with another gruff "That's how you do it, Sokarre." But the world is quiet now. And she is very much alone. She tucks the datapad into her belt. It feels heavier than any weapon she's ever carried.

When she stands, her fingers linger on his pauldron. A small, precise motion. The way she'd tap her saber hilt after a clean finish. Acknowledgement. That's all she gives him. That's all she can give him.

They burn Andros first. Kaste oversees it personally. No ceremony. No speeches. Just work. The way he'd have wanted. His body, along with the rest of Third Platoon, laid out with

the same precision they'd held the line with. Rifles decommissioned, power cells stripped, plates of armor welded into barricades. Nothing wasted. Nothing spared.

The flames are low. The smoke thick and choking. It burns her throat and eyes. Let it.

Vadrin finds her stripping power cells afterwards, near the southern barricade, sleeves rolled up, grime smeared across her jaw, wounded arm still clumsy as she works. There's a thin sheen of sweat across her brow. She hasn't eaten since the pyres.

"You're exhausting yourself," Vadrin says. Kaste doesn't look up.

"There's work to do."

"You are not the only one capable of doing it."

"Yes, I am." She whirs on him, faster than she means to. The words come sharp. "Everyone else is fucking dead." Vadrin's face doesn't change. "Reza. Kallis. Vesh. Andros." Her voice sharpens with each name. "All of them. Gone. You think I have time to breathe? To rest?" His hands stay at his side. Open.

"I think you are bleeding out, Padawan." That cracks something. She steps in, closer than she should, fingers stabbing into his chestplate. Her breath hitches.

"You're still standing. You held the sky, Master. Stopped the fucking sky from falling on us. And now you just watch while we patch holes with corpses." Her voice fractures. "I'm sick of watching you do nothing."

It's not fair. She knows it. Vadrin's done more than his share. She'd be dead a hundred times over if not for him. He doesn't flinch. His voice stays low, gentle in a way that makes her want to scream.

"You do not mean that."

"I do." Her throat burns. "I mean every goddamn word." Her fists clench so hard her nails cut into her palms. He sees it. Of course he does.

"Kaste." Her name is soft on his tongue. Solid. "You are hurting. I understand." She can't remember the last time someone's used it. Her fists tremble.

"I don't know how to stop," she grits out. The words scrape raw. Vadrin's response is quiet. Steady.

"You do not need to stop. But breathe." Her jaw locks. Her chest tightens. But she breathes. One breath. It hurts. He doesn't push further, just stands there breathing with her.

Time bleeds. The days blur into the same grey smear of ash, blood, and attrition. No one's counting anymore. Not really. But somewhere in the back of Kaste's mind, she knows she turns eighteen. Not that it matters. No one mentions it. No one celebrates. There's no cake. No song. Just ration bars and cold air. Kydien tosses her the last fully-intact tabac without a word that night. Kaste lights it. It's enough.

The Sith don't press them hard again for a long time. They don't have to. The base is crumbling on its own. Supplies are ghosts. Ammo gets rationed in half-bursts. Civilians double as lookouts, as medics, as gravediggers. They hold the line.

When the next push comes, it's aimed at the south quarters, where the last major cluster of civilians is holed up. Vadrin holds it.

When Kaste finds him later, he's propped against the half-collapsed shelter wall, breath shallow. His lower left arm hangs limp, scorched along the joint. Deep burns crawl across his ribs. The smell of charred flesh lingers. But he's alive. So they don't complain. Reth drags him back to the command shelter. They give him their last remaining stim while they try to pop the shoulder joint back in place. He tries to refuse it. Reth forces it into his system.

That night, she sits by the ruined southern barricade, looking out at the dark. The tabac Kydien gave her is burned down to the filter. She's too tired to stand.

Eighteen.

She hopes she doesn't make it to nineteen.

The next push comes a week later. It's bad. Not the biggest force the Sith have throw at them, but clever. A flanking team through the collapsed east sector. A dead sector they thought was safe. Rubble paths no one has the men to watch. Kaste sees it late, the shimmer of movement slicing through smoke. Too clean to be debris. A flanking team. Five, maybe six. Leading them is a grenadier.

She clocks him instantly. Heavily armored, left hand cradling a satchel of plasma charges. Right arm already winding up. She curses under her breath. He's aiming for the breach. The civvies are there. The last cluster they haven't relocated, huddled under makeshift cover. Kydien's over them, barking orders, limping through the defense rotation with stubborn precision. Kaste's too far.

She shifts into a sprint, sabers alive, cutting through the first two Sith who lunge to intercept. Blades meet armor. Bodies fall. She doesn't slow.

The grenadier moves like he's done this a hundred times. Winds. Releases. The charge arcs through the air. A bright, lazy curve of red against the grey sky. Kydien turns at the wrong second.

It's not a direct hit, but close enough. It folds her sideways. The concussive force slams her into a broken support strut. The sound is sharp. Final. Kaste feels her breath rip from her chest as she closes the distance. The grenadier's already lifting another up to throw when Reth barrels into him from the flank, driving him into the rubble with a force that snaps bone.

Kydien's sprawled in the dirt. Her left arm's gone. Not shredded, gone. Ripped from the shoulder. Flesh peeled back in molten ribbons. Blood pours in heavy, sluggish waves, mixing with the soot-blackened ground. Kaste drops to her knees beside her.

"Stay with me." She barely hears her own voice. Kydien's breathing, Shallow. Mouth open like she wants to curse, but the sound doesn't come. Reth's there an instant later.

"Hold her," he says. Kaste braces Kydien's shoulders, feeling the weak hitch of her breath against her palms. Reth ignites his saber. Green light bathes the wound. For a second, Kaste feels Sira there too. Her saber, clipped at Reth's hip, hums low. Reth sets his jaw. His hands are steady. He brings the saber down.

Kydien convulses, a strangled gasp wrenching out of her throat. Her body arches against Kaste's grip. But she doesn't scream. The smell burrows itself into the back of Kaste's throat.

When it's done, Reth deactivates the blade. The stump smokes. The bleeding slows. Kydien slumps down, half-conscious. They drag her back behind the lines. Kaste stays with her until the civvies are secure. She doesn't come to until the next day. Kaste sits by her cot through the worst of it. Watches the rise and fall of her checks. She avoids thoughts of Sira like the plague.

When she does wake, her voice is a rasp. More air than sound. Kaste has to lean in to hear her.

"Still here, huh."

"Yeah," Kaste says. "Still here." Kydien's lips twitch into something adjacent to a smile.

That night, Kaste finds her propped against the southern barricade. Half dressed in scavenged robes, her arm stump bandaged tight with dirty fabric. She shouldn't be up. Like that'd stop her. She's got a tabac in her mouth. Kaste drops beside her.

"You're an idiot," she says.

"Damn right," Kydien mutters around the tabac.

They sit like that for a while. The smoke curls through the rot in the air. Familiar. Bitter. Kydien takes a drag, passes it over. The burn feels good. Real.

"You ever think about it?" Kydien asks, eyes fixed on the dark beyond the walls. Kaste flicks ash off the end of the tabac.

“About what?”

“This.” Kydien gestures with her chin. “The way we cling to the edge. The way we pretend it’s a line worth holding.” Kaste doesn’t answer. She can’t bring herself to. Kydien shifts. Winces. “I used to think, maybe, if I made it through this, there’d be something on the other side. Not peace, not medals, just...a reason.” She huffs a bitter breath. “Thought maybe you’d be a part of that.”

It’s said casually, like it doesn’t cost Kydien anything. But Kaste feels the weight. The redhead doesn’t look at her.

“I’m not asking for anything. I’m not that stupid.” She grins, sharp and tired. “But I figured you should know anyway.”

“Thanks for telling me,” Kaste says. It’s meant to be respectful. Kydien barks a laugh.

“Stars, Sokarre. You’re dense.”

Before Kaste can ask what that’s supposed to mean, Kydien leans in. Fast. Sharp. She grabs Kaste’s collar with her good hand and pulls her in. Kisses her. Quick. Blunt. Kaste freezes.

Kydien pulls back like nothing happened. Like she didn’t just shatter the wall between them in a single movement.

“Now you get it?” she mutters, voice flat. Kaste’s brain catches up a second too late. She stares. Kydien doesn’t blush, doesn’t apologize, she just smirks. Tired. Bitter.

“Relax, Sokarre. I’m not asking for a fairy tale. You’re Jedi. I know how that goes. I’m just not dying with regrets. That’s all.”

Kaste takes a breath. The tabac’s sill between her fingers. The ember flares. She passes it back.

The days grind on. Kydien doesn’t mention the kiss again. Neither does Kaste. It sits between them, quiet and understood. No time for fairy tales. But she still shows up every night to the southern barricade. They share what’s left of the tabac until it’s gone. Then they share the silence.

Kaste picks up the rest. The patrols. The logistics. The wall schedules. She doesn’t wait for Vadrin or Reth to sign off.

Her master watches. Says nothing. He’s slowed. The burns took more than muscle. His breathing’s tighter. He moves like his bones weigh twice what they used to.

Reth holds the perimeter. He doesn’t ask for orders. He takes them. Kaste draws the lines. Every shift. Every ration. Every repair. When the comms crackle, they call for her. When the civilians panic, they call for her. The walls hold because she wills it to. Barely.

The Sith push. Not daily, but enough. Kaste plugs the holes herself. Teaches the farmers how to shoot, how to lay charges. Spends hours in the rubble pulling workable scrap for shields, for barricades. Every day is spent carving time from a planet that wants them dead. Kydien tries to help. Tries. But her stump's too fresh. The fever comes in waves. Some days she can sit up. Some days she can't. She doesn't complain. Kaste doesn't offer pity. When the work slows, they share a smoke. When it doesn't, they keep moving. One step at a time. They hold the line.

They run out of filters. Not water, air. The main shelter's scrubbers get burnt out in the last shelling. The patch jobs are steel and spit. If they want the civilians to breathe in the shelters, they need replacements. Which means a scav run. Kaste goes. Vadrin can't. Kydien can't. Reth volunteers before she asks.

“I’m not letting you brave those mountains alone.” He says it like it’s a fact, not an argument. They leave Vadrin the duty logs, the patrols, the ration portions. He takes them without comment.

The ravines are quiet. The cliffs swallow sound. The air’s thinner here, even before the storms. Kaste keeps her sabers in hand. Feels the pulse of her bad arm, dull and angry. She ignores it. Reth walks at her side. He doesn’t talk much, just moves.

They reach the relay station at dusk. It’s worse than the maps showed. Collapsed beams. Half-melted durasteel ribs sticking out of the ground like broken teeth. The Sith already picked it once. But not clean. Too remote. Too buried.

They find the first corpse in the comms pit. Republic uniform. Old. Frozen stiff with his helmet still on. Reth strips the ID tag and tosses it in the dirt.

“See?” he says dryly. “Could always be worse.” Kaste grunts.

They find air filters in the storage annex. Along with something better. Medical crates. Intact. Real supplies. Ration-grade bacta. Stims. Field tourniquets. It’s more than they had dreamed of. Enough to keep Kydien from getting sepsis. Enough to keep the wounded from dying outright. Maybe for weeks. They pack what they can. It’s heavy. Reth takes the weight. Kaste’s bad arm’s locking up again, and she doesn’t have the energy to lie about it.

She finds a pack of tabac sticks in one of the lockers, below a printed photograph of two Bothans grinning over a pint. She pockets the tabac, says a silent prayer for the Bothans. Hopefully they’re family, unaware of the fate that befell their friend.

They hunker down that night in the shell of an old transport bay. No fire. No lights. Just ration bars and the bitter taste of the cold. Kaste props herself up on a collapsed strut, rolling her shoulder against the ache in her bad arm. It’s worse tonight. She doesn’t bother hiding it. Reth

sits across from her, silhouette dark against the wreckage. He doesn't speak, just watches the dark like he's waiting for it to entertain him. His sabers hang easy at his hips.

"You trained together, didn't you?" Kaste asks after a while. It comes out rougher than she intended, more accusation than question. Reth huffs.

"Me and Vadrin? Saw each other once or twice at the Temple. Served on Coruscant half a century ago together. Different battalions. Same meat grinder." He leans back against a girder, arms crossed. "He was always the patient one. The thinker. Used to piss me off something fierce. We'd be hitting Dark Jedi and he'd take the time to postulate on the essence of water or some shit." Kaste smirks.

"Sounds about right."

"He was good, though." Reth's face softens, just a hair. "Damn good. Still is, even if he hasn't aged as gracefully as yours truly." He grins. Kaste picks at the cracked edge of her glove.

"He's slower."

"We all are."

Silence stretches. Reth gets tired of watching the darkness and glances toward Kaste, expression unreadable in the dark.

"Do you ever miss Iridonia?" Kaste snorts.

"Don't have much to miss. Left young."

"Lucky." Reth's voice is flat. No nostalgia there. "Place doesn't get soft. Doesn't forgive. You don't bleed; you die." He flicks something off his boot. "Probably why we're still here." Kaste looks at him through a survivor's eyes.

"Maybe."

They sit like that for a while. The wind whistles through the broken beams overhead. Reth shifts, slowly, like every motion costs him more these days.

"You know, if you'd lived there, you'd have fit right in," he says. "Iridonia." Kaste huffs.

"Not much of a compliment."

"Wasn't meant to be." He passes her his flask without asking. The liquor burns. She lets it. He leans his head back against the steel, eyes closing for a breath.

"Do you ever wish you'd been assigned someone else?" she asks. "For the vanguard. Someone aside from Vadrin." Reth opens an eye.

"No." His assuredness surprises Kaste more than it should.

“He’s not easy to work with.”

“Good leaders aren’t.” Reth smirks, but it’s thin. “You think I made it this long because I followed people like me? Fuck no. I made it because people like him keep idiots like me from dying young.” Kaste swallows. The liquor feels heavy now.

“Do you know what he sees when he looks at you, Sokarre?” She shakes her head. Reth doesn’t let her off the hook. “He sees himself. The version of him that didn’t stop. The one that burned out instead of slowing down.” She opens her mouth to rebuttal, but the words fall short.

“You don’t have to like him. But don’t lie to yourself. He’s the only reason this hole’s still breathing.” They sit in quiet a little longer. Kaste watches him in the dark. Reth fights like she does. Dirty. Efficient. Direct. She hates how easy it would’ve been to be his Padawan. How much simpler things would have been.

She wonders what kind of person she would have become. If she’d have still ended up surviving this long, or if she’d have been blessed with an early death like Kallis.

“Do you ever think,” she says, “that maybe Vadrin got it right?” Reth huffs, low and sharp.

“Yeah. I think ‘bout it too much.” He takes a swig of his flask, spits half of it onto the ground with a tidbit of blood. “After the Schism, he figured it out.”

“Figured what out?”

“That the Order was never supposed to be this.” He gestures vaguely at the trench, the broken walls, the burning sky. “We were never meant to fight wars. We’re meant to save the people caught in ‘em.”

“You don’t believe that?” He huffs.

“Doesn’t matter if I do. I couldn’t see past the front line. Still can’t.” She exhales through her nose. It’s a bitter feeling.

“Guess we’re the same, then.” Reth laughs. Flat. Mean.

“No, Sokarre.” He leans forward, elbows on his knees. His face is shadows, but his brown eyes catch the light. “We’re not.”

“Sure as hell feels like it.”

“I’m nothing but a walking corpse, Sokarre. There’s nothing for me past Koros Major. But you?” He jabs a finger toward her chest. “You can still be better than me.” She shakes her head, laughing a bit.

“That’s not how this works.”

“Could be.”

“You really think the war cares who I could be?” He spits again.

“War doesn’t give a shit. But you should.” Silence falls again. He drains the flask. Doesn’t offer her the last swig. “I’m not telling you how to live, Sokarre. That’s Vadrin’s job. But I’ll tell ya this: if you end up like me in fifty years, we both died for nothing.”

They make it back to the base the next noon. The med crates weigh heavier than the air filters did. The civilian’s faces light up when they’re met at the gates. It’s enough to buy them time. To stabilize the worst of them.

Kydien gets the first hit. Vadrin oversees it – the two civilian medics are too exhausted to care. He works slowly. Methodically. His hands aren’t as steady as they used to be, but they’re still precise. When the work’s done, Kaste digs into the scav pack and pulls out the battered tin of tabac sticks. The tosses it to Kydien.

“For our Master of Vices.” Kydien’s grin sharpens.

They sit by the southern barricade, the last one still holding together. The ash sky presses down. The cold cuts deep. But the ember glows. Kaste takes the first hit. The burn’s sharper than she remembers. Or maybe she’s just been breathing shit too long. She passes it to Kydien without a word. Her hand trembles when she takes her turn. She hides it by flipping the stick between her fingers, slowly. Kaste lets her have it.

“Bet this is the last decent smoke in the whole sector,” she exhales.

“Then we’re going out in style,” Reth says, coming to sit next to her. Vadrin’s beside him, hands wound behind his back. Reth’s mouth pulls into something adjacent to a grin as he takes the tabac from Kydien and gives it a long suck. Vadrin takes it next. He doesn’t smoke, but he holds it longer than usual, then passes it to his padawan. Kaste watches the ember flare as she drags again.

“You know, “Kydien says after a second round. “I used to hate this place.” Kaste huffs.

“Couldn’t tell.”

“I grew on me,” she smirks. “Like fungus.”

“You’d have hated Irironia, then,” Reth snorts.

“Pffft. That frozen shithole? Please,” Kydien leans back. Her stump’s propped on a makeshift sling. She adjusts it like she’s trying to get comfortable. “I’m too delicate.”

“That’s one word for it,” Kaste mutters. Reth chuckles.

“You ever think about what you’d done if this war didn’t happen?” Kydien asks, softer. Reth grunts.

“Think I’d died of boredom.”

“Tracks.”

“What about you, Padawan?” Kaste chews on it.

“Some backwater Jedi outpost, probably. Peacekeeping. Also died of boredom.”

“You would have been good at it,” Vadrin says. Kaste shifts. Shrugs like it doesn’t stick.

“Guess we all ended up where we were supposed to,” Kydien says. Reth shakes his head.

“Nah. Ended up where we deserved.”

They don’t say anything after that. The ember burns low. Kydien passes it back. Her hand brushes Kaste’s, lingering longer than it needs to. Vadrin holds the stick like it’s sacred. Kaste watches the smoke curl. It smells like home. Like war. Like everything they’ve lost. When the ember’s down to nothing, Kydien crushes it flat against the steel. Tucks the butt into her boot, like it’s worth keeping. Leans into Kaste’s side. Her body’s light now. Too light. Like the weight’s been burned out of her bones. They sit like that long after the smoke’s gone.

The next morning comes bitter and cold. Kaste’s barely slept when her comm crackles to life. The static’s been dead for weeks. She doesn’t move at first. Just stares at the unit, waiting for it to fade back into silence. It doesn’t.

Reth’s on his feet, grimacing as he wrestles the jury-rigged controls. His thick fingers fumble over the scorched panel like he’s not ready to believe it’s real. But it is. The voice cuts through the static like a blade.

“This is Master Sunrider to Master Reth. We received your signal. Standby for extraction plans. Hold your ground.” Reth doesn’t answer right away. His hand clenches around the receiver. When he finally speaks, his voice is cracked gravel.

“Took you long enough, Nomi.”

“I’m sorry, old friend,” Sunrider’s voice cuts through. “We’re coming to get you.” The transmission cuts. Kydien’s laugh breaks the silence. Dry. Bitter.

“Forgot there were other Jedi out there.” Kaste lets herself smile. Then she sees the lights still blinking on the console. Open bands. Static pings. Wide open. Kydien notices it too. Her grin fades.

“Hey, Reth? That old comm jammer? That piece of shit broke years ago.” Kaste swears.

“So, we were wide open?”

“We always were,” Kydien admits, voice flat now. “We just stopped caring.” Reth doesn’t say anything. Vadrin’s already opening fallback shelter plans.

“We move the civilians now,” he says. No one argues. Kaste’s voice is sharp.

“We’ve only got enough supplies for two weeks. Three maybe.”

“Long enough,” Reth mutters. “Nomi says she’s coming. She won’t quit ‘til she breaks atmosphere.” They map the corridors. Kaste traces each turn with her finger, committing it to memory. Getting all two hundred civilians into the shelter won’t be possible unless they can buy time to make it happen. Time they’re quickly running out of.

“It’ll hold,” Vadrin says, though his voice lacks conviction. Reth leans over the plans, elbows planted, eyes narrowed.

“I’ll draw them off.” He speaks like he’s talking about running an errand. Vadrin freezes.

“No, you will not.” Kydien looks away.

“You need a distraction,” Reth says.

“We will go together,” Vadrin snaps. “We will hold the front while Kaste leads the civilians down.”

“That’s suicide,” Kydien mutters.

“You think Reth going alone isn’t?” Kaste backs her Master.

“I’m not asking for votes,” Reth cuts in. “It’s gotta be me.”

“You think you’re the only one worth dying?” Kaste snaps. “That’s it? You get to go out the martyr?” Reth turns to her, face still.

“I want you alive. And that means someone has to buy you the seconds to get below.” Kaste’s throat tightens. She shakes her head.

“You can’t—”

“I can,” he says. “As your commanding officer, I can.” His tone softens. “I’m not coming back from this anyway, Sokarre. We both know that.” She opens her mouth. He raises his hand. “Don’t waste your breath.” He looks at Vadrin. Old eyes. Older than anything Koros Major’s thrown at them. “You said it yourself,” he murmurs. “We hold the line so they can live.”

Vadrin swallows, then nods. Just once. Kaste turns her back on them before they can see the shake in her shoulders. Kydien’s jaw is locked. Her hand clenches tight around the sling of her arm.

No one says goodbye. No one ever does.

Kaste catches him before he makes it to the line. Finds him in the half-collapsed yard, laying triplines.

“Master Reth.” He stops. Turns. She holds out her lightsaber. Not Kallis’ heavy hilt. Not Vesh’s black-dusted mess. Hers. It’s a plain weapon, scarred along the emitter. The grip’s wrapped in what used to be white leather, now stained dark from blood, oil, and ash. The activation switch sticks sometimes. She’d meant to fix it. Never did. He looks at it. Doesn’t move to take it.

“You’ll need it more than me, Sokarre.” She shakes her head.

“No.” He huffs. Starts to turn away. She steps in close. Shoves it into his chest. “Take it.” For a breath, he just stares at her. The glow of the burning sky catches the lines in his face, the cracks of old and new scars.

“You got the civvies,” he mutters. “You can’t hold both lines.”

“I’ve got Kallis’,” she snaps. “I’ll manage.”

“You’re not giving me your blade.”

“Damn right I am.” She tries to make it sound like it is practical. Like she’s thinking tactically. It’s not. They both know it. Reth’s lips twitch. Not quite a smile, something sadder. Softer.

“You were always stubborn,” he mutters, taking the hilt. “Guess you learned that from me.”

“Guess I did.”

They stand there a moment longer. Kaste wants to say something else, but she can’t find the words. Reth breaks the silence. He places his hand on her shoulder. It’s heavy. Warm. Comforting.

“You keep them breathing, Sokarre.” Her throat tightens. “Be better than I was.” He clips her saber to his belt. His silhouette’s sharp against the sky. She stands there a moment longer, burning his image into her mind. Then, she turns. Doesn’t look back. She can’t.

They move at dusk. Two hundred civilians. Most empty handed, clutching each other, wide-eyed, waiting for orders. Kaste gives them. Vadrin leads the first column, Kydien and Kaste cover the rear.

The old north tunnels gape open like a wound in the hillside. The fallback shelter. The one they’d hope they’d never have to use. Without help to pull them out, they’ll be cornered. But they only need to hold for a few days. Hopefully.

The first shells hit as they start moving. Ground fire. Sith infantry, pressing fast and brutal. They don't notice the thin line of civilians ducking under cover. They notice Reth.

Kaste catches flashes of green and blue slicing through the smoke. She can hear him grunting and calling piss-poor insults at the Sith. Once they turn, she doesn't allow herself to look back. She forces the civilians forward, through the dust-choked streets. Past the skeletons of what used to be homes, medbays, mess halls. The line wavers when the second barrage hits the upper barricades. Kaste feels the blast rattle through her ribs. Feels the thud in her bad arm. They keep moving.

Vadrin is a silent shadow ahead of them, sabers unlit, guiding civilians with soft words. If they ignite blades now, they give away the fallback route. It will all be for naught.

They make it to the shelter entrance, one by one herding civilians down the narrow, rust-stained stairwells. Theren's the last one through. He doesn't say anything, just nods to Kaste as he disappears into the dark. Vadrin stands by the control panel. Kydien slumps against the wall behind him. Kaste pauses. Listens. She can hear the fight above. She can feel Reth. She turns, finds her Master's silver eyes.

He hits the seal. The hatch grinds shut. Locks with a hydraulic hiss. Kaste stills for a minute, staring at the seams in the metal, listening to the echoes roll back on themselves. The noise outside dims fast, smothered by meters of earth and durasteel, but the fight is still happening above. She can feel it in her bones, in the vibration running through the walls. The faint shudder in the floor. She takes a breath, then turns to double check the air filters.

The Force tenses around her, then snaps. The world falls still. Kaste stumbles a step without meaning to. The air goes thin in her lungs.

Reth doesn't scream through the Force. Doesn't leave a signature of rage or fear or pain. He just disappears.

Vadrin notices it, too. He closes his eyes, expression stone. No outward crack. But Kaste can feel the loss rip through him like shrapnel. No one says anything.

Silence settles in the air around them. Thick. Heavy. Suffocating. The kind that crushes more than noise ever could. Kaste forces her legs to move, joints stiff, lungs tight. Her boots scrape against the steel as she follows Vadrin down into the dark. The tunnels feel small. Crowded. The lights flicker dimly overhead like they know what's coming, too.

Her sabers feel heavy at her side, like dead weight. She can feel the empty space where her old sabers used to hang. She can see it clipped to Reth's belt the moment he turned away.

The days blur. One. Maybe two. It's hard to count underground. The air's thick. Stale. Every breath tastes like rust and fear and sweat. Civilians huddle in clumps, speaking in whispers that scratch at her nerves more than screaming would.

She hates it. Hates how close the walls feel, how the lights flicker and buzz like dying insects. Hates the way waiting claws at her skin, makes her feel like she's suffocating from the inside out.

Kydien's the only one who doesn't seem to care. She finds a quiet corner near the secondary bulkhead, a little alcove behind some old storage crates. Smokes the last of the tabac Kaste gave her. They pass it back and forth. One stick between them, same as always. It burns fast in the damp air. Kaste sucks the smoke down deep. Feels it coil in her chest. It doesn't make her feel better, doesn't calm her panic, but it cuts the edge off the ache behind her eyes.

When the first thuds hit the outer blast door, it's almost a relief. Kaste snaps upright before the vibrations even finish echoing down the tunnels. Heavy ordinance. Sith.

Vadrin's already moving. Kaste meets him at the first junction, where the civilians are clustered too close to the fallback point. She doesn't wait for orders, just starts pushing them deeper into the tunnels. Screams at them to move. To run. They listen. They always listen to her.

When the last of them is inside the final fallback chamber, she turns to Vadrin. They lock eyes. His sabers hiss to life. Their blue glows spills across the cracked tunnel floor, cold and sharp. Kaste draws Kallis' hilt, places Vesh's in her offhand. They stand side by side, facing the blast door as the thudding grows louder. The metal groans under the pounding weight of the Sith outside. Vadrin flexes his wrists, spinning the sabers in graceful arches.

“Padawan Sokarre.” His voice is soft. Soild. Like it was when he first selected her from the masses of younglings. A reckless duelist in a sea of peacekeepers. She swallows.

“Master Vadrin.” He doesn't look her way but keeps his silver eyes on the steel before them.

“Hold the line until the civilians are safe. Nothing else matters.”

“Yes, Master.” He finally turns to face her. For the first time in months, maybe years, he smiles. Small. Worn. Proud.

“You have already done more than I ever taught you, Kaste. You are a far better Jedi than I ever was.” Kaste's throat tightens.

“Don't say that,” she rasps. He chuckles under his breath.

“Oh, let me be an old man, Kaste. Just this once.”

Her fingers tighten on the hilts. When the next blast rattles the door off its hinges, they brace.

The doors slide open. Blinding lights fracture in through dust. For a second, Kaste freezes. The sky above them is open, clear enough to see the stars. It's lit up with green and red blasts that paint the land below in color. Master Sunrider's flagship hangs in outer atmosphere, blazing like the sun.

Vadrin steps forward without hesitation. The blue glow against the dust makes him look angelic. Kaste moves beside him, falls into stance. They wait for the Sith to come to them.

The first wave is infantry. Sabers and blasters. Predictable. Kaste cuts through the first two before they can cross the threshold. Her blades move fast, sharp, no room for flourish. Vadrin takes the center. He doesn't spin his blades for show, doesn't waste motion. Each saber hums at different pitches, staggered and syncopated like a symphony. Two stay high: shoulders and throat. One waves low, and the last guards his back, sweeping in slow, silent arcs that make flanking him a death sentence.

Kaste remembers, lifetimes ago, sparring with him in the Temple training rooms. How other Padawans would gather to watch them in their flurries of blue and gold. She's forgotten what the Temple looked like, she realizes. Forgotten the gold lights of the training rooms, forgotten the ivy walls, the stretching gardens. It all feels so far away.

There's a shift in the tunnel. Small at first. A moment of hesitation in the forward push. The troopers don't fall back, but they stop pressing. Weapons lower by fractions. Blasters cool. Footsteps still.

Kaste feels the change before she sees it. The Force draws in, tight and cold. Not like breath. Like a blade being pulled back before it drives through bone. The smoke curls harder. The air tastes like blood. A Sith Lord steps through the line. The troopers part for him like smoke.

Obsidian armor polished to a mirror sheen, untouched by the mud and rot of Koros Major. Red cloth drapes over one shoulder, scorched and ceremonial. A bone-white mask gleams against the dark; hairline cracks spiderweb across its smooth face. Behind the blank visage, heat. Pressure. Hatred. It rolls off him in waves. Kaste's mouth goes dry. A double-blade sits unlit at his hip.

"I have hunted you three long years," he says. His basic is perfect but empty. "I have burned your city. Shattered your lines. Broken your command." He unhooks his saber and holds it outstretched in his palm. "And still you rot beneath my boots." It ignites in his palm. Red, but not the red of fury. Controlled. Focused. A scalpel's edge, not a torch. Vadrin steps forward. Kaste moves to follow, but he stops her with a glance.

"Hold the line, Padawan," he says.

His sabers fan outward, four blades converging like jaws around a throat. The Lord lets his saber spin free in his hand, then splits it. The hilt comes apart at the center with a hiss of

magnetic disengagement. Twin blades, now separate, flick outward like claws. He meets Vadrin in a flurry of movement.

Kaste doesn't have time to watch. Sith infantry crash into her position like a wave of steel. She ducks under a blade, sweeps legs, drives her sabers through chestplates before they can even register the movement. Her bad arm flares but she grits her teeth, lets the Force carry the weight. Behind her, she can hear the duel. It sounds like thunder.

Vadrin's sabers shriek through the smoke, colliding with the twin red blades in bursts of light. Sparks carve streaks into the walls and the floor. The Lord isn't attacking wildly, he's adapting. He fights with one long saber, then splits it. Pulls Vadrin into tight quarters, then extends the weapon mid-strike to force a retreat. One saber strikes low, the other spins high. Vadrin intercepts both. Sometimes with two blades, sometimes with three. The Lord slashes wide, Vadrin splits his upper arms, catches the blow with a crossblock, spins, and drives a lower saber toward the Lord's knee. He leaps, connects sabers midair, drives the staff down toward Vadrin's head. Caught. Twisted. Deflected. Kaste stabs a trooper in the throat and catches a glance. She sees the glow of blue sabers spinning like gears. The Sith's double-blade carving lights in great arcs, red reflecting off Vadrin's skin like warpaint.

It's killing her not to be part of it. But the troopers won't let up. They keep piling, each one more reckless than the last. Kaste moves through them like she's part of the building. Blades flashing. Boots scraping. Blood soaking into her gloves. She guts a trooper and barely registers the motion. Step left, twist low, drive the blade in and wrench it out before the next one barrels in. She's panting now. Her bad arm barely responds. Her saber feels heavier than it did ten minutes ago. Maybe ten years. She risks a glance, just one.

The Lord has changed tempo again. He's split the saber, one in each hand, and he's stopped pressing. His footwork tightens. He drops his center of gravity just a hair. Kaste's eyes go wide. She's seen this before. She's done this before. That long arc on the right, slow. Lazy. Obvious. The real strike's on the left. Inside Vadrin's elbow. It's the same fakeout she's used against Vadrin. The one that almost disarmed him during their first duel in the training rooms on Ossus. The one that made him nod to her and say, "You learn fast."

She opens her mouth, but the warning dies in her throat. The strike lands. Clean. Red energy rips across Vadrin's side, carving a deep gash into his ribs. His breath punches out of him. One of his sabers flickers, stutters in his grip. He staggers, just enough to make her blood run cold. She screams, but it's drowned in the crash of blasterfire behind her. She tears her attention away, swinging wildly into the next trooper. Her heart is pounding so hard she thinks she might collapse.

The Lord lifts a hand.

The troopers freeze. Blasters lower. The world stills. The Lord turns to face her. His mask tilts slightly. Vadrin's on the ground below him, breath ragged, drawn through clenched teeth.

Smoke curls from the edges of the burn across his chest. But he's alive. That's good enough for Kaste.

"Padawan Kaste Sokarre." Her name is too lean on the Lord's mouth. He deactivates one half of his saber, clips it to his belt. Keeps the other lit in his right hand. An invitation.

Kaste doesn't wait. She charges. Two sabers light her silhouette, neither hers. The Lord meets her mid-tunnel. Kallis' blade snaps against his with a sharp grind of plasma on plasma. Vesh's swings wide, trying to draw his guard low. But he doesn't follow, he pivots hard. Drives her into the wall. She rolls off, springs back, catches herself on instinct. Again. Her blade slashes high, then sweeps across. He blocks both. Twists. Vesh's saber sputters mid strike. The emitter shorts. She feels the burn in her palm. Fuck. Too late to fix it, now. She tosses the hilt aside and shifts her stance, both hands on Kallis' blade.

The Lord doesn't press. He studies her. His saber hums at his side, still lit, not even raised in a guard. Smoke hisses off the walls. The Force coils around him, thick and cold.

"You would make a fine apprentice," he says at last. Kaste tightens her grip on Kallis' hilt. Her hands shake, wrists already burning. She says nothing. Takes a deep breath. Moves. A forward lunge, left foot pivot. Her blade comes high and fast, a feint toward his neck, meant to draw his guard up. He meets her mid strike. Their sabers shriek together, a high grind of plasma. She shifts left. He pivots low. They circle. She ducks under a spinning blow, presses in close, and he lifts his hand. Snaps his wrist. Lightning arcs.

It crashes into her chest before she can scream. She flies backward, smashes into the tunnel wall hard enough to crack stone. Her ribs creak. Kallis' blade skitters from her hand, spinning out into the dust. She drops to one knee. Everything screams. Her bones feel waterlogged. Her lungs won't expand. The Lord watches her. Waiting. She moves. Slow. Staggered. She gets up anyway. Her armor steams. Her braid's half-burned. Her muscles twitch involuntarily, but she picks up Kallis' saber again. The blade ignites with a trembling hiss. He tilts his head, amused.

She charges. A final swing. Fast. Desperate. Familiar. He parries with ease. Twists. Closes the distance. His free palm flashes out mid step, inside her guard, and grabs her wrist before the strike lands. He spins her just slightly, enough to unbalance the stance, enough to drag her bad arm forward. He meets her skin. Just for a second.

The lightning doesn't fire across space this time. It crawls directly into her body. Straight from his fingertips into the raw muscle of her forearm, up her shoulder, down her spine. It punches through her sternum like a hammer. She seizes. Her legs buckle. Her jaw locks. Her blade drops helplessly to her feet. Nerve endings snap like tense wires. Every memory of every injury she's ever taken flares white hot, all at once. He lifts her up, lets her feel every second of it, then drops her to the floor. Smoke trails from the seams of her armor. Her body doesn't work. Her arms twitch. Her fingers spasm against the floor. She can see her limbs, can feel the phantom

shape of them, but the commands don't follow through. Everything is fire and static. Her lungs pull shallow, broken breaths. Her heart hammers in her throat, both of them, fluttering too fast, too wrong. Her vision doubles. Then triples.

Kallis' saber lies inches away. She can't close her fist around it. Her body shakes uncontrollably. Her nerves misfire in staccato bursts. Muscles lock. Release. Lock again. The Lord clicks his teeth behind the mask.

"You Zabrak really are hard to keep down," he says. He raises his saber.

Light. Blue. Blinding. Vadrin crashes between them, all four sabers in his hands. He moves, body already failing, one arm hanging limp, but the others still function. Two blades intercept the killing strike. One drives the Lord back. The last guards Kaste, sweeping low across her body like a promise.

The Lord growls. Vadrin lunges again. It isn't clean. It's raw, an untamed side of him she's never seen before. The way he plants his feet, the way he shoves the Force into every swing. The way he gives all of it away just to keep the Lord from reaching her. Kaste watches through blurred vision. She feels her hearts skip. Then drop. Then burn. The Lord adjusts, steps wide. Cuts high. A red blade crashes through Vadrin's upper chest. He gasps. Slams both lower saber forward as he falls, forces the Lord to retreat two more steps. Buys Kaste seconds more.

Then he collapses. Hard. Face-first. The sabers extinguish as they hit the ground. The silence hits Kaste. Louder than the Lord's humming saber. Louder than her heartbeat stuttering against her ribs. The light leaves the tunnel. She stares at her Master's back. At the torn robes, the burned flesh, the sabers now cold beside him. She wants to move. Wants to scream. Her arms won't work. Her finger twitch but won't close. She presses her forehead to the dirt. Her vision blurs. Her mouth moves, but no sound comes out. Something inside her cracks. And the Force rushes in through the gaps. Softly at first, like breath draw in slow. Then deeper. Wider. Like pressure behind her ribs, like a second spine straightening inside her broken one.

Through the static, through the tremors, through the weight of her body failing, she hears it. At first she thinks it's in her head. A leftover echo from Vadrin's final strike. A burn sizzling across her skull. But it's not that. It's music. Distant. Crystalline. High-pitched at first. Almost too soft to notice. Then deeper tones. Layered. Resonant. Like glass humming. Like water striking stone. It's not Vadrin. It's his crystals.

The song builds in her bones. Familiar. The sound that calls youngling through Ilum, the sound that draws them into the dark and tells them where to go, when they're ready. It sings to her now. She feels the echo in her ribs. The way the ground resonates. Vadrin's sabers lie scattered in the dirt where he fell. Hilts scorched and darkened by blood and ash. The song gets louder. Richer.

Her jaw clenches. Her teeth grind. She focuses. Reaches. Not with her hands, not with her arms, with her will. Her breath catches. The sabers begin to rise.

They're slow at first. Heavy. As if even the Force mourns what it's about to ask of her. As if the crystals, singing their long, mournful song, remember the man they once followed. They hover just above the blood-slick stone.

She breathes. Her chest feels like it's been stapled shut. Her spine is a live wire. Her hands won't answer. Her knees are locked. Her will surges like gravity. Reaches up through her core, through the cracks in her nerves, through every wound the Sith ever gave her. It grabs the sabers.

They don't just hover. They answer her. She feels them. The pitch of Vadrin's calm. The depth of his restraint. The weight of his faith. Not in the Order. In her.

They orbit her. Faster now. Tighter. A four-point spiral around her ruined frame. Her left knee drags across the floor. Right foot curls against the dirt. Her muscles scream. White sparks threaten her vision. But she stands. One inch, then another. Her legs almost buckle. She forces them to still. She absorbs every tremor of her limbs into the orbit of those blades. They adjust around her as she rises, like breath.

Her arms don't move. The sabers don't care. They orbit tighter, the Force holding them steady. She doesn't look at the Lord, not until she's fully upright. Not until the last of the four blades curves in behind her, forming a ring of light at her back. She raises her chin, mouth cracked with dried blood. Her eyes burn. When she speaks, her voice is wrecked but steady.

“Try again.”

The Lord strikes first. He lunges, not a test, a kill. His saber comes in high, fast, diagonal. A cut meant to split her shoulder to hip. Kaste doesn't raise her hands. She can't. But the blades move anyway. One of Vadrin's sabers screams in from her right flank and intercepts the blow mid-air, redirecting it upward in a burst of sparks. A second blade sweeps in low and slashes for his thigh. He blackflips back, lands light. She advances, slow and deliberate. The blades orbit her like a storm kept barely in check. He splits his saber and presses from both sides. Heigh feint, low real strike. Classic.

The first saber deflects the left, the second parries the right, the third comes from behind her, spinning, and nearly takes his wrists. He has to retreat. She doesn't follow him. Her sabers whirl tight now. Their orbit shrinks, becomes a shifting shield of death. An eye of calm inside a storm of spinning light. Kaste takes one step forward. Just one. Her legs are jelly. Her heart pounds sideways. But the sabers know. They move when she thinks. They strike when she sees an opening.

The Lord roars now. Hurls a blast of telekinetic force. Kaste stumbles, knees buckling, but the blades hold. They spin faster, absorbing the brunt. Two arch wide, slam into the ground to anchor her. The others curl inward, protecting her chest. She doesn't fall. He tries lightning. This time she's ready. She tilts her head slightly. The sabers rotate. The arcs catch the storm midair. Break it. Dissolve it in sparks. The crystals sing louder now. The hum rises. Harmonizes. Kaste can barely breathe. But she steps forward again. This time, all four sabers launch at once, like a scream. They spiral into the Lord's guard. Not precise. Not elegant. Relentless. One catches his shoulder, scoring armor. Another clips his knee. The third he blocks. The fourth drives him back five full steps.

She advances again. Her foot drags. Blood stains the floor behind her. The sabers tighten the noose. He snarls behind his mask, charges again. Faster now. His blows are wild but not clumsy. Hungry. His armor is scorched, his mask cracked down the left cheek. His breathing, too controlled to show fatigue, now staggers under the rhythm of his fury.

Kaste's sabers catch him mid step. One blade shaves the edge of his pauldron. The other one circles behind him and slams into his saber's spine. Not enough to disarm. Enough to stagger. She takes a step forward. Her knees nearly buckle. Blood slides down her temple. Her body's on fire. The Force holds her up now, not bones. Not muscle.

She pushes in. One saber crashes, he knocks it away. Another comes from the flank. The third pierces his foot. Drives down through his boot into the metal floor. He screams. Kaste channels the last of her will and sends the fourth straight through his chest. Right below the sternum, it rams through armor, pierces out his back, and hangs there. Vibrating. Sizzling. He gasps. Tries to raise a hand. She lifts her chin. All four sabers converge.

They carve him apart in a blinding blue light. His body hits the ground in pieces. The hum of his blade dies. Screams echo from the mouth of the tunnel. A Sith commander barking orders. Footsteps slamming into the dirt. Armor scraping durasteel. Blades igniting. Kaste lifts her head. Turns to meet them. Her legs hold. Barely. But the Force is with her now, every footstep planted with a strength not her own. Every shift in her weight cradled by something ancient and luminous. The four sabers orbit her, slow and lethal, as the first wave crashes against her.

They break. She turns their momentum into ruin. The sabers wheel through the air, not in flourishes, but lines of finality. There are no wasted moves, no exhaustion, only motion. The tunnel runs red and white with smoke. A second wave. Then a third. Each blade moves as though memory has taken hold of it. As though Vadrin's hands still guide them.

She holds that corridor for hours. The sun above must've shifted to the horizon line. She doesn't know. She doesn't care. Her boots slide through blood. Her armor is cracked in seven places. Her throat is raw from breathing in heat and vapor and ash. But she stands. When the fourth wave hits, the bodies are ankle-deep. The Sith try to climb them. They fall faster. She carves through flame and fury until a voice rings from her comm.

“Fall back.” Kydien’s voice. Kaste doesn’t respond. Her sabers shriek past her face.

“Kaste. Fall back. Now.” The blast door hangs open behind her. Kydien’s on the lever. Kaste doesn’t turn around, but she moves. A single long step backward. Then another. The sabers return to her side, buzzing with strain. Crystal screaming with Force. She limps through the threshold. Kydien slams the lever. The door groans, then crashes shut.

The silence is instant. No more screams. No more sabers. Just Kaste and Kydien. The stench of burnt hair and armor and blood. Kaste exhales. Her knees give. She slumps against the nearest wall, metal biting into her spine. Her muscles twitch without rhythm. Her hands don’t stop shaking. Smoke rises off her skin where the armor’s melted to flesh. She can’t feel her fingers.

Kydien slides down beside her. She’s dragging her bad leg. Her bandages are soaked, but she’s grinning like she just stole fire. She reaches into her coat, pulls out the last tabac stick. Lights it with shaking fingers. The ember flares orange in the dark. She takes a drag. Places it gently in Kaste’s mouth. The first breath burns. The second soothes. Her heartbeat slows.

They sit in silence for a while. The hum of Kaste’s sabers spin around them. The hiss of plasma against the outer wall. The quiet flick of ash.

“You did it, you know.” Kydien’s voice is soft. Kaste doesn’t respond. “I got word while you were on the line. Sunrider’s in orbit. She’s punching a hole in the blockade. Jedi task force. Big one, too. Took ‘em three fucking years, but they’re here. Just a few more hours.” Kaste closes her eyes. The relief is sharp enough to hurt. She takes another drag. Her nerves are still frayed. Her hand’s useless. The Force is quiet now, steady. Present. Kydien bumps her shoulder, gently.

“Stay awake, Sokarre. You did it.” Kaste doesn’t answer. Kydien takes the smoke back. When the next impact hits the door, neither of them flinch. It shudders, then buckles. The top corner warps inward, molten metal dripping like candlewax. A hiss of plasma cuts through, blinding white. Sparks scatter. Kydien draws in the last drag of smoke. Crushes it under her boot, then braces herself against the wall and pushes upright.

“Ready?” she asks. Kaste doesn’t answer. She tries to rise. Fails. Her legs are lead. Kydien steps in close, wraps her arm under Kaste’s shoulder. Her grip is weaker than it used to be, but it holds.

“Come on, Jedi,” she mutters, voice hoarse. “One more round.” They get her to her feet. The sabers rise with her. Their blades brighten, just a little, as if they, too, know this is the last mile.

The breach explodes inward. Kaste and Kydien don’t wait. They meet the charge. It’s close combat now, metal, fists, teeth. Kydien holds a pistol single-handed. Kaste doesn’t use her body at all. The sabers fly. They form a wheel of death around her. Parrying. Striking. Slicing

with speed. The Force moves faster than her ruined limbs ever could. She barely has to think. A soldier lunges, she drives one through his chest. Another fires point-blank. A saber lifts, deflects it into the wall. Kaste walks forward.

Kydien hurls a thermal. It cooks three at once. She laughs, short. Breathless. A sniper catches her in the side. She jerks. Gasps. Stumbles. Kaste turns just in time to see blood blooming through her ribs. Bright, arterial red.

“Kydien—”

“I’m good,” she gasps, stumbling forward. “I’m – fuck – keep going.” She sags. One knee hits the ground. Kaste moves to catch her, but the Sith press in harder. She pivots. The sabers wheel. One cuts low, another guards high. A third flies wide, severs a wrist before the blade can reach her throat. Kydien’s on the ground behind her, just out of reach. She’s coughing. Short. Tight. Wet. Kaste’s knees threaten to fold. She doesn’t let them.

Sky cracks. Clouds overhead rip open in thin lines of fire. Jedi ships arc overhead like angels. Green blasts slam into the ridge above the tunnel. The Sith backline falters. Then breaks. Kaste cuts down the squad in front of her, and suddenly, there’s no one to continue. No second or third or fifth wave to press down. The hum of her sabers grows louder without the noise of blasterfire.

She breathes. Her vision steadies. She turns.

Kydien’s on the ground. Still. Back half-curled, arm clutched to her ribs. A pool of red spreads beneath her, dark and wide. Kaste stumbles forward. The sabers orbit tightly now. Drawn in. Defensive. Protective. She falls to her knees, one hand on the floor, the other on Kydien’s shoulder.

“Kydien.” Her voice is raw. It barely comes out. No answer. “Kydien, it’s over.”

Kydien’s eyes open. Barely. She smiles. Crooked. Tired.

“Took ‘em long enough.” Kaste tries to speak. She can’t. She pulls Kydien into her arms, gentle as she can be with hands that won’t stop shaking.

“I’m here,” she manages.

“I know.”

Jedi starfighters scream through the clouds in formation, sharp arcs of light carving open the smoke. One breaks low, dips beneath the stormline. Its silhouette flashes gold and white and chrome, the crest of the Jedi Order stenciled beneath its cockpit. Kaste watches it cut across the sky like a line of poetry drawn in flame. Another follows. Then another. Dozens. A whole fleet descends through the atmosphere. Jedi boots hit the ground near the ridge. Armor glistens. Blaster turrets swivel overhead. A long, low signal blast echoes across the canyon.

Kaste should feel something. Relief. Joy. But all she feels is Kydien's body in her lap. Too light. Too still. Kaste's hands are still cradling her, one behind her shoulders, the other flat against her sternum. The rise and fall of her chest is gone. The blood has stopped pooling. Her eyes are half-lidded, mouth still curved in that crooked smirk. Like she was halfway through a joke when the pain finally stopped. Kaste shakes her once.

"Come on." Her voice breaks. She presses her forehead to Kydien's. It's still warm. "Come on. You're not... this isn't..." She can't finish. Her hands curl into fists, one gripping the edge of Kydien's bloody poncho, the other sinking into her own robes as the sob starts to build behind her ribs. It rises too fast to contain.

By the time the next fighter passes overhead, streaking light across the low ceiling, her vision has blurred. The first sob hits her like a punch. Then another. She can't stop. She buries her face against Kydien's bloody collar, fingers clenched into the fabric like they can keep her from slipping away. Her body shakes with the weight of it, muscles locking and giving in strange rhythms, nerves misfiring under the wreckage of her skin. She kisses Kydien's forehead lightly. She smells like sweat, ash. Tabac. Familiar. Awful. Kaste breathes it in.

She doesn't remember leaning back. Doesn't remember dragging Kydien closer, curling her own legs up beneath them, arms locking around her waste. Doesn't remember the sabers finally falling still, settling around them like scattered bones.

Footsteps pound into the dirt somewhere behind her. Shouting. Familiar voices. She doesn't turn. Someone calls her name. She doesn't move. Her face is pressed into Kydien's shoulder. Her fingers curl in blood-soaked fabric. The skin under her hands has gone cold. She can't let go.

A hand rests on her back. She doesn't flinch. The voice that follows is calm. Solid. Something like sunlight on moss.

"Padawan Kaste Sokarre." Kaste lifts her head. Barely. The light behind Grandmaster Sunrider is almost too bright. Battlefield flares, low atmosphere glare, streaks of fire still cut through the sky as Jedi reinforcements land all around them. Civilians pour from the shelter behind her. More Jedi than she's ever seen in one place are directing the evac, lightsabers dimmed, hands guiding the terrified and wounded into transports. A thousand voices. Kaste can't hear any of them. Sunrider kneels. She doesn't try to move Kaste, doesn't pull or speak soft platitudes. Just kneels. Places a hand on Kydien's amputated shoulder. Kaste's voice is a whisper when it comes.

"...I don't want to go." The words hang between them like smoke. Sunrider says nothing, just shifts closer. Slowly, deliberately, she opens her arms.

Kaste doesn't fall into them. Not at first. She just stares, eyes glassed, shoulders trembling. Her mouth opens like she might say something else, then shuts again. She sways.

Folds. Her body collapses into the Grandmaster's chest like the strings holding her up have been cut. Sunrider's arms come around her without hesitation. Strong. Warm. Like a mother. She doesn't hush Kaste as she sobs, raw and gasping. She holds her. Intwines careful fingers with Kaste's matted hair. Finds her Padawan braid somewhere in the mess and rubs the blood from it. Kaste shakes.

"I shouldn't be the one—" she starts, but the words collapse. She sucks in a breath that tears her throat raw. "They're dead. They're all dead." She presses her forehead into Sunrider's shoulder. "I don't want to leave them behind."

Sunrider's silent a minute. She doesn't try to correct Kaste, to offer doctrine or forgiveness.

"Then we'll carry them out together," she says quietly.

Eventually, when her sobs dull to tremors, Sunrider shifts. Helps Kaste sit back. Holds her elbows.

"You're safe, Kaste."

Safe. It doesn't sound real. But she nods. Sniffles. Sunrider rises first, then bends slightly to take her hand. Kaste lets her this time. Her legs protest. Her back screams. Her arms are all but useless. But she stands. Vadrin's sabers rise with her. They hover around her like moons caught in orbit. Sunrider helps her catch them one by one and clips them to her belt. Each motion is slow, reverent. They don't feel like weapons anymore.

Sunrider helps her limp to the ramp of the waiting transport. Step by step. The ship is gleaning against the rising sun. It's the same class of transport that brought her here. She'd stepped off it head high, shoulders squared. Ready to prove something. She doesn't remember what.

She doesn't look back. She doesn't need to. Koros Major will live in her bones until they burn.

Coruscant is too clean. That's the first thing Kaste notices. The air doesn't taste like ash. The halls don't reek of tabac and antiseptic. There's no rot. No blood. No grime caught in the folds of her boots. The light feels artificial. The silence is too soft. It makes her stomach churn.

She doesn't remember the flight. Not really. There was a cot. A blanket. Voices. The hum of a medbay she couldn't care less about. And Sunrider sitting in a quiet chair by the viewport.

She's given a private room in the dormitory of the new Temple. If it can be called that. Sleek. Functional. Grey walls and floor-to-ceiling windows with automated dimmers. Too much light. Too much space.

Her days pass in measures of silence. One soft meal. One stim treatment. One polite conversation with a counselor she doesn't answer. Sunrider brings her tea. It goes cold in her lap. Nomi doesn't ask questions she doesn't need answered. She visits without knocking. Sits without speaking. Leaves without waiting for thanks. Kaste doesn't mind. It's the only kind of company she can stand.

Her arm still trembles. The medics say the neural damage isn't total, that her hand will respond again with time and therapy. But she'll never wield a blade with it again. Not the way she used to. They don't say it like that, of course. They talk about "functional recovery," and "alternate paths to combat proficiency." She nods. Smiles. Doesn't listen. A Knight tells her she was inspiring. She has to excuse herself to vomit in the bathrooms.

They remove her eye a week in. Too much damage. Retinal nerves too burned. The new one comes in a sterile case with a Republic seal. It hums faintly with calibrating sensors. She throws it away. Cuts off part of her robe and uses it as an eyepatch. Sunrider shows up a few days later with a nicer, leather one.

The Force still hums in her. Low. Steady. It's the only part of her that doesn't feel broken.

One morning, she turns to Sunrider as she sits beside her bed.

"When can I go back?" Sunrider looks up from her datapad.

"Go back?"

"To Ossus." Sunrider sets the pad down. She doesn't lie.

"You can't, Kaste." Kaste blinks. She stares at the edge of her blanket. There's a stain there. Blood. The Grandmaster's voice is careful. "The Sith bombed the planet last year. We pulled out what we could, but... I'm sorry, Kaste. You can't go back."

Kaste looks down at her hands. One of them curls tight, knuckles white. The other rests limp in her lap, fingers slack and half-curled. Like they forgot how to make a fist. She doesn't cry. She's beyond that, now. She just sits in silence with the Grandmaster of the Jedi Order for a long time, tea cold in her lap.

They tell her about her knighting a day in advance. The room is bright. Too bright. Columns rise like bones. The Council speaks in measured tones. They name her deeds. Koros Major. Her leadership, her survival, her sacrifice. They speak of bravery. Strength. Clarity. She doesn't hear it. Sunrider knights her. Hovers her green lightsaber over Kaste's trembling shoulder.

It's done in ten minutes. The Council dismisses her. A few Masters offer her words of praise. No one touches her. She walks back to her room alone. Sits at the edge of the bed. Unclips Vadrin's sabers from her belt. Lays them out, one by one, and stares at them like they're the only part of her that remembers where she came from.

The next day Sunrider delivers her a datapad with records of the Koros Major recovery. She reads the note tucked at the top. It's dated to two and a half years ago. Filed by Republic command.

*Outpost 4-7B. Presumed Lost. Total Casualty Estimate: Complete*

She reads it again. And again. A line of fire works its way up her throat. She wants to scream. To break the datapad. To throw something. But all she does is whisper.

“They knew.” Sunrider leans against the door. “They knew we were alive.”

“No,” Sunrider says. “They thought you weren’t. But they didn’t check.”

“They left us to die.”

The Grandmaster doesn’t deny it. Kaste lowers the datapad. Three years. Three fucking years they fought, bled, starved, died. Because someone wanted a line on a map cleaned up with a shrug. Kaste sets the datapad down. Thanks Nomi for showing her.

She finds an unused training room late that night. Beneath the Temple’s new archives, half-forgotten and underlit. The floor is scuffed. She stands in the middle, arms loose at her sides, her shadow cast uneven by the low, flickering light. She holds in the silence for a moment. Draws Vadrin’s sabers one by one. Lays them down in front of her.

She stares at them for a long time. Then breathes.

“I’m not going back,” she says, voice barely above a whisper. “I know what I’d become if I did.”

No one answers. She imagines Reth standing in the corner, arms crossed, watching her like he used to. Like he saw through her fire and never held it against her. She imagines Vadrin seated beside her. Silent. Still. Waiting for her to come to the truth on her own. She looks down at her ruined arm. It’ll never wield a saber again. She kneels. Closes her eyes. Expects a vision, some kind of clarity. She sees only Kydien’s dead smirk. Hears the hum of lights overhead. The weight of decision settling into her chest.

“I won’t be their weapon.”

A week later, she gets cleared for deployment. No frontlines. No combat. A requisition in the Outer Rim. A ruined farming world, hit hard by the Sith two years ago. A small colony, forgotten by the Republic that was supposed to protect it. She says yes before the assignment is finished being read aloud.

That afternoon, she stops by the medic's wing to collect her final discharge clearance. The exam is routine: vitals, mobility, ocular calibration. They ask her to raise her arms. Grip a bar. Walk a line. She does everything they ask.

They leave her alone to change. She passes the corner mirror, half-buried behind a sterilization screen. She doesn't mean to look, but her reflection catches her anyway. She stops. Does a double take. She doesn't recognize the woman who stares back at her.

Her hair's longer now. Down past her collarbone. Uneven, tangled at the ends, heavy with a kind of wildness that doesn't belong in the Temple. Her eyepatch cuts a dark line across her face. And the skin beneath it, what's left of her cheek and temple, is rough with scar tissue. Burnt and pink, pulled tight in some places, ridged and raw in others. A map of what she endured.

Her body's thinner than what it used to be. Corroded. Marked. Wounds along her ribs and throat. Across the back of her shoulder. Jagged white from cauterization. Deep grey bruises that never faded. She raises her bad arm. Watches it tremble. Stares at the mirror. At the Knight who made it home, and the girl who didn't.

The shuttle touches down in the red dust of the colony three days later. There's no crowd, just a few tired farmers and a woman with a datapad who waves her toward a broken irrigation line. She works quietly. No uniform. No saber on her hips, just four hilts in a canvas pack, tucked beside ration kits and water filters.

Weeks pass. She mends pipelines. Teaches kids how to spot fungal rot in the grain silos. Sleeps in a canvas cot beside the repurposed grain tower. Shares meals with refugees who never ask for her rank.

One evening, she sits outside the hut with a girl named Era. Thirteen. She lost both her parents when the Sith took the planet. She holds a stick. Swings it like a lightsaber.

"Have you ever fought a Sith?" she asks. Kaste doesn't answer at first. She looks out toward the ridge, where the sun sinks behind shattered cliffs.

"Yeah. I have," she says. The girl studies her.

"Did you win?" Kaste breathes out. Chuckles, barely.

"Yeah." Era nods like that's the only answer that matters.

Later that night, Kaste unrolls her bedroll beside the tower. The stars are sharp above her. She doesn't reach for the sabers; she knows where they are. And for the first time in years, she sleeps through the night.

She stays longer than planned. One month becomes three. Three becomes a year. The villagers stop calling her “Master Jedi” after the first harvest. Just “Kaste.” She doesn’t mind.

She fixes things, teaches where she can. Meditates often. Sees patterns in how people plant, in how they rebuild, in how they grieve. She learns more from their silence than she ever did the Temple’s lectures. When the Jedi ask her to return to the front, she says no. They don’t press again.

Eventually she starts to move again. Visits planets the Sith ravaged. Worlds too broken for clean war records, too quiet for headlines. She holds a hand over a dying farmer and hums the Code beneath her breath. Helps burn pyres. Digs graves.

She starts using the sabers again around year five. Not for battle, just for practice. In the early mornings, before the village stirs, she lays three of Vadrin’s hilts on a flat stone by the river. Watches the water curl past. Feels the hum of each crystal. They don’t sing like they did on Koros Major. Not anymore. But they resonate softly. Patiently. She lifts one with the Force. Just one. A slow arc through the morning light. Her hand never rises. Her arm never moves. But the saber floats. Pivots. Flashes once. Then again.

She adds the second a week later. Then the third. They orbit her like memory. Like gravity. She still can’t feel her left thumb. The tremor in her wrist is worse most mornings. But it doesn’t matter. She doesn’t fight with her body anymore. She listens, and the sabers follow.

When the Temple reaches out again, she answers. Not to take a post. Not to sit in the council chamber. To take a student.

“He’s been difficult,” one instructor says over comms. “Emotionally reactive. Volatile. He was on Ossus when the Temple fell.”

“I’ll come,” Kaste replies. “Don’t assign anyone else.”

His name’s Telan. Fourteen. Build like a reed. Clipped dark hair. A scar runs down his left hand. They tell her he doesn’t like talking. Doesn’t like meditating. He hates being pitied. She meets him outside the sparring yard.

“You’re the one from Koros Major.” She doesn’t answer. He tries again. “The other Masters say you killed a Sith Lord with your mind.” She meets his gaze.

“And I will spend the rest of my life atoning for it.”

He watches her like he doesn’t believe her. She doesn’t try to convince him. Instead, she tosses him a wooden training staff.

He's clumsy. Too much emotion in his feet. Too much force in his wrists. He overreaches. Leaves his back exposed. She doesn't exploit it. When he falls, he curses. Kicks dirt. Hurls the staff. She lets him. When he's done, she kneels beside him.

"You don't want to fight," she says, "you want to defend yourself." He looks at her like she's pierced him. Then she says, gently, "so did I."

He doesn't answer. But the next morning, he's waiting outside her Temple dorm before dawn.

He builds his lightsaber at sixteen. Silver blade. Short hilt. Balanced weight. She helps him calibrate the focusing lens. He asks, once, what hers were like. She hands him Vadrin's hilts without a word. He ignites them one by one, tests their balance, then hands them back.

He's knighted at twenty-two. He returns from his Trials with a cracked shoulder plate, a burn along his calf, and a smirk she didn't notice he'd inherited from her. Reth's smirk. He bows to her only once, after the Council delivers his title.

He dies four years later on Malvaris, trying to hold the line for evac transports. Outnumbered. Outgunned. She feels it through the Force like a falling stone. Heavy. Irrevocable. She cries that night, in the privacy of her room.

They make her a Master a year later. She doesn't ask for the title, doesn't want it. But she accepts it regardless.

One year, she realizes she can't remember the exact pitch of Reza's laugh, or whether Reth's hair had one silver streak or two. She panics. For a whole week, she can't meditate, can't eat. She stares at the corner of her quarters like the ghosts should be there.

She buys a pack of tabac sticks from a Coruscanti vendor on a whim. Smokes one in the garden. It's awful. Bitter. Acrid. She doesn't care. It burns her throat, chokes her lungs, brings tears to her eyes. And for a moment, she's back by the barricade, Kydien beside her, ash in the wind, the war held off for one more hour.

She doesn't keep smoking. But she doesn't stop, either. She switches to a small hookah. Tells the Council it eases her tremors. It does. A little. The smell reminds her of everything she doesn't want to forget.

She's offered a Council seat when she's fifty-three. She declines. It isn't until they ask again, until her Padawan, a bright-eyed Gungan, tells her the Council needs more pacifists, that she accepts. She sits in the far left chair. Becomes known for her Padawans.

She only trains the hard ones. The overlooked, the angry, the ones who punch walls instead of meditating. She walks with them. Teaches them how to breathe when the war is inside their chest. She trains half a dozen over the next twenty years. Most of them troubled. Some make it to knighthood. Some don't. Of those that do, half die in service. One falls on Ardet Nine

holding a shield wall for a refugee column. One goes missing in the Reach; she learns months later they found his saber in a warlord's vault.

A few turn on her. She kills them cleanly. Mourns all of them. Never regrets it. She carries their names without shame. Lights candles, incense, bowls of smoke. Sits alone in her quarters at night, the city's hum a low lullaby. Vadrin's sabers rest on the table before her. Silent. Steady. She closes her eyes. Breathes.

Just once. Just long enough to remember Koros Major. And to feel for a moment, like none of it was wasted. Not the war. Not the loss. Not her life. It was held, like a flame cupped in her palms.