

Taia isn't supposed to be here. The intel she was given was simple. Small recon mission: confirm rumors of a black-market auction and pull back. Simple. Clean. No need for combat. Her first real assignment without Master Juhani beside her. She had a way of making things complicated.

She presses her back into the crumbling wall, chest heaving. Her lightsaber thrums in her grip, blue blade casting fractured light against the alley's rust-streaked walls. Somewhere behind her, footsteps echo. Six? Maybe seven. More than she can handle.

They flank her into the courtyard, four with shock staves, one with a net gun, three with those weird ass whips. She cuts the net gun in half before it reaches her, but it doesn't matter. The stunbolts come in bright and sharp, painting her vision white. She moves like she trained to. Low. Precise. Blade tucked to her core. But they close in too fast, too many hands reaching for her. Her mind floods with drills, techniques, echoes of her master's voice reminding her gently not to overcommit. But it's too late.

She fells three before one kicks her saber from her hand. Another blow slams her ribs and takes her to the ground. The concrete scrapes her cheek raw. When she tries to rise, a boot drives into her shoulder. The world cracks sideways. One of them leans in, grabs her chin.

"Too pretty for a corpse," he mutters, turning her head in his hands. "Too proud to be a good slave."

She spits blood in his face. They knock her out for that.

She wakes cuffed to a bench, ribs screaming. The room is clean in the way medlabs are clean. Sanitized. Cold. Bright enough to burn. A faint antiseptic sting curls in her nose. Her robe's been cut open along one side. Her wrists are red where the binders bite too deep. There's a droid in the corner. Needles and datapads. Two Zygerrians behind her, stunrod ready. A man standing over her with a stylus in his hand, muttering assessments like she's a datapad that won't boot.

"Mid-puberty. Limb growth incomplete. Coordinate above expected average. Attitude...elevated." She tries to sit up. She doesn't make it. The stunrod finds her spine. She doesn't scream, she can't. Her throat locks mid breath.

"Don't damage her," the man tells the guard. "Just enough to shape."

The days that follow, if they are days, bleed together. She's moved from chamber to chamber. Sometimes by foot. Sometimes unconscious. She wakes on different floors with no pattern, no context. Time becomes soft. Forgettable.

They prepare her for sale. She's tested like cargo. Scans. Muscle testing. Pressure thresholds. They take her saliva, blood, retinal readings. Her weight. Her height. Her caloric burn

rate. They scrub her arms. Clip her fingernails. Measure her. Photograph her in profile. Feed her just enough to survive. Watery broth. Chalky ration bars that sit like stone in her stomach. She eats with her hands, sometimes on the floor, while guards talk over her like she's not there. When she refuses to kneel during posture evaluations, they shock her shins until she drops. When she spits at one of them, they lock her in a blackout cell. There's no sound in the dark.

She hums. Old Alderaanian songs she doesn't remember the words to. She recites the Code. Tries to imagine advice her master would give her. The darkness stretches so long she forgets where her limbs lay. When light returns, she retches from the shock of it.

At some point, they begin softening her. That's what the guards call it, at least. It means less pain, more compliance. It means she gets a blanket. A metal cup. New robes, thinner, without the Temple insignia. They talk to her in calm tones now. Offer her broth like it's a gift. One guard brushes her hair back when she doesn't flinch.

"See?" he says gently. "Doesn't that feel better?" She doesn't answer. She looks away. He laughs. "You'll make someone very happy."

When they finally move her to a holding cell, it isn't with violence. It's quiet. Clinical. She's given a clean robe, thinner than the last, a dull gray, and marched barefoot down a corridor that smells like antiseptic and static discharge. The lights flicker. The guards don't speak. She doesn't ask where they're taking her. She doesn't care. She's too tired.

They key the door open, shove her inside, and leave without a word. The lock hisses closed behind her. This room is darker. No overhead panels, just recessed strips along the floor and ceiling. The chill sinks straight through the fabric of her robe. Her knees hit metal. Her palms catch her weight, skidding over grime and dried rust. The air is thick with old sweat. Something sharp twangs in the corner. The Force, faint but coiled tight. She barely registers it.

Her ribs throb. Her head pulses.

"Let me guess," a tired voice drawls behind her. Dry. Disinterested. "You told them slavery was against the Jedi Code and now you're here?" Her stomach tightens. She doesn't let it show. She groans, pushes herself upright, slowly, one arm trembling under the weight of her own body. Her vision swims, but she finds the source of the noise: a figure across the cell. Lean lines and sharp cheekbones. Red skin, yellow half-lidded eyes. Sith. Just her luck.

"No," she rasps. "I told them to choke on a furball." A surprised laugh, sharp and low. It startles her.

"Even better."

She sits up straighter. Slowly. Deliberately. Like she's fine. Like her ribs don't feel like shattered glass every time she moves. Her hand presses to the floor, steadyng herself, and tries not to show how badly she needs the stability. Across the room, the Sith closes his eyes and leans

back. Relaxing. Or pretending to. She tries to mirror it. She doesn't know why. Maybe she wants to look unbothered. Unbreakable. She can feel the Force rippling around him, watchful. Like a hawk-bat circling its perch. She considers meditating next to him, reaching for the clarity her instructors insisted she'd find in stillness, but the quiet scares her. Reminds her of the dark room.

"You're Sith," she says, letting the words hang there like a dare. He doesn't open his eyes.

"Points for observation." What a jackass. She rolls her shoulders or at least tries to. The motion sends a hot bolt through her side. She doesn't react, not visibly. She won't give him the satisfaction.

"I thought Sith traveled in pairs."

"I thought Jedi didn't get caught." That stings. But her laugh, if it can be called that, comes regardless. Just a breath, cracked and shallow. She leans back against the wall beside him, just close enough to feel the chill of his presence in the Force. It isn't really cold, it's more compressed. Volatile. Air before a storm breaks. Her fingers trace a gouge in the floor beside her.

"What's your name?" She asks. He tilts his head toward her, giving her a front-row seat to those fiery yellow eyes.

"Why?"

"Something to call you. Might as well, if we're stuck here." A pause. She feels the Force shift around him. Testing the air between them. Measuring her.

"Zhaka." She nods, slowly, turning the name over in her mouth. It tastes foreign. Sharp.

"Taia." She keeps her voice level. She's practiced this tone: neutral and controlled. There's a discipline to how he sits. Spine straight. Hands loose. Legs crossed. His robes are scuffed but elegant. His hands are calloused. The kind of hands that have gripped hilts in too many fights. He doesn't look older than her, not really. Maybe a year. But there's a weight in his eyes she's only seen in war survivors and knights who gave up the Code. She watches him breathe, steady and slow. No tension. No fear. Like he's not waiting for rescue. Like he knows they're not coming. It unsettles her more than she wants to admit.

"What's a Jedi doing this far into Sith territory? Unless you're one of those Knights with a martyr complex." She doesn't take his bait.

"Mission," she says curtly. "Didn't go well."

"Clearly." She looks his way, an eye narrowed.

"And you?"

“...Also a mission. Also didn’t go well.” She lets her head fall back against the wall again. The ceiling above them was painted blue once, she thinks. Probably to soothe new prisoners. It is peeling now, strips hanging down like shedding skin.

“So we’re both stupid,” she says.

“Speak for yourself.” He smirks again. She doesn’t bother to hide her eyeroll.

The silence that follows isn’t as thick. Isn’t as hostile. She can feel his presence clearer now, tuned to hers. Sith aren’t taught to be still. They’re taught to press, to twist, to weaponize the cracks they find. She knows that. Knows what the Temple warned her about them. How they make you doubt. Poke you until what you believe turns hollow.

And yet here he is, sitting cross legged, not gloating, not pressing. Just watching.

She reaches for her braid gently. Runs fingers through the tangles, combing dried blood from the strands. Her hands shake, from pain or fear she can’t tell. If he notices, he doesn’t say anything.

No, he notices. She knows he notices. Just like she notices he hasn’t taken his eyes off her since she spoke.

She doesn’t sleep that night. The ache in her ribs won’t let her, but that’s not the full reason. It is him. Zhaka. Sitting there like a flame waiting for kindling. She’s supposed to be above this. Detached. Centered. But she’s not, not here. Not with the smell of blood on her robe and her saber stolen and her bones humming.

He doesn’t sleep much either. His posture doesn’t change, but she can feel his awareness. His attention grazing over her now and then through the Force. Soft. Prying. Never intrusive.

The cell’s light cycle makes no sense, but meals arrive twice a day like clockwork. Thin broth. Beige protein paste that smells like plastene and tastes like recycled air. She stops eating it. Zhaka doesn’t. He eats like he’s done this before. Like dignity isn’t something he’s trying to uphold. She watches the way his fingers break apart the mash, how methodical he is. She hates how it makes her feel comforted.

The second morning – if it even is morning – she tries to stand too fast. The nausea hits first, then the pain. Her knees buckle. She drops back to the floor, biting off a yelp. Her palm slams the floor before her ribs can. Barely.

“You’ll break something worse if you keep moving like that.” His voice is dry. Amused, maybe. That or resigned.

“I can’t just sit here,” she bites out. She doesn’t like how weak her voice sounds.

“Then limp in circles like a good little prisoner. Slowly.” She glares at him over her shoulder, but he’s right. She’s not so proud she can’t admit it. So she limps in slow, stubborn laps

around the cell. Stretching her legs and steadyng her breathing. Her Master must've noticed she's missing by now. It'll be a matter of days before Juhani busts through the cell door, lightsaber glowing, determination in her catlike eyes. Taia will just have to walk in circles until then.

It's during a late-night circle walking session that she hears it. Two guards, one bored, the other overeager. Their boots clack just outside the cell block. Loud against the durasteel. Louder still in her head. She doesn't stop walking. Just listens. Something about buyers. A tight schedule. Pressure from the auction house. Force-sensitives fetch more than double. One of them laughs.

"The red one's a pureblood Sith. The bitch's a Jedi. If the buyer doesn't want them paired, we run the risk of them—" She doesn't catch the rest. Doesn't need to. Her blood rushes in her ears like water breaking over stone. Her hands curl into fists.

She doesn't tell Zhaka right away. Part of her wants to believe it's a bluff, or at least exaggeration. But by the next morning, she can't keep it in. He's fiddling with the lock, working with a bent piece of metal he must've pulled free while she slept. His hands are steady. Mechanical. Like he's done this before. She watches him for a while from her spot against the wall, knees pulled tight to her chest.

"They're going to sell us." Her voice barely escapes her throat. It's the truth – he should know.

"No kidding," he mutters. She crinkles her nose. Pushes back the urge to snap at him.

"They want Force-sensitives. For an off-world buyer." Now he looks up. Not with alarm, but a different kind of focus. Cold. Clinical.

"You heard that?" She nods.

"They didn't realize I was awake." He doesn't answer at first. Just spins the metal between his fingers. His eyes flick back to the lock.

"Not your first prison, is it?"

"First this sloppy." She chuckles under her breath. Leans back against the wall, ribcage catching again. Watches him work. How calm he is. There's no posturing, no snarling contempt. He doesn't reach for dominance the way Sith are supposed to. If she squinted hard enough, stripped away the red skin and clipped words, he could almost pass for one her fellow padawans. She imagines him at the Temple. Sitting cross-legged in some high-windowed chamber, eyes half lidded, reciting the precepts like scripture. Waiting.

"You're lucky I'm not a righteous Jedi," she mutters. "They would've tried converting you by now."

“Lucky me.” He rolls his eyes. She almost smiles.

The hours shift. They talk more now. Not full conversations, just fragments. Enough to keep the silence from eating her. She stretches when she can, walks laps when she can’t. Sometimes, halfway through a lap, her body gives out and she ends up curled near him. Close enough to feel the way his presence folds inward, like a star just barely holding off collapse. He doesn’t comment. Doesn’t shift away. She wakes once with her head against his hip and finds him sketching patterns in the dirt. Not patterns, actually. She blinks. A map.

“You think we’re near the surface?” she asks, pulling herself upright, hands already reaching to cradle her side.

“I think we’re underground. Two floors, maybe three. You hear the coolant fans?” She listens, really listens. There it is – that low drone. Breath through a vent. She nods. “Industrial. Not mining. They’re storing us for auction, not labor.” She stares at him.

“You’re disturbingly good at this.” He averts his eyes at her complement.

“My master has a real talent for assignments like this. Real character-building stuff. Or, you know, wishful thinking.” He says it like it’s a joke, but there’s something under the surface. A bitterness he doesn’t seem to notice anymore. She wonders what kind of master builds an apprentice for capture.

Later, when the silence creeps back in, she starts humming under her breath. Quiet. Something small. A song her mother used to sing on the veranda. The melody is crooked in places – she was never the best singer, but the rhythm settles her nerves. Her fingers tap against her knee.

“What’s that?” Zhaka asks without looking up.

“A lullaby. From Alderaan.”

“Didn’t know the Jedi got lullabies.”

“I wasn’t born one.” That gets his attention.

“What were you before?” She smiles, sharp around the edges.

“A baby.” She hears the laugh he tries not to give. The tension in her chest eases. She still doesn’t trust him, not really. He’s Sith. But he’s not cruel, not in the ways she expected. He doesn’t push. Doesn’t posture. Doesn’t pry. He watches and listens. Quietly builds a plan on a floor smeared with old blood. Taia isn’t sure what that makes him. But whatever he is, she’s starting to think he’s not her enemy. Not here. Not yet.

That night, Taia wakes up from her uneasy sleep against the wall to a scream. It startles her, jolts her just enough to send spikes of pain up her ribs. A girl, young by the sound of it. Taia doesn't move at first. Her ribs throb with the memory of a stunrod. Her skin buzzes with the hum of electricity. Her instinct scream at her: hide, run, dry. She doesn't. Instead, she closes her eyes. Takes a deep breath. Recites the Code once in her head. Reaches out. She can feel the woman, three cells over. Water on her cheeks. Hot blood streaking down her temple. Hands on cold durasteel.

"They're running tests," she murmurs to Zhaka. "Figuring out who's strong enough to survive." He's stiffer than usual, fingers curled around his palms into tight fists. Another scream. A sharp pain at the base of her skull. She opens her eyes. "We can't wait to be rescued."

"Agreed," he says, low and unusually serious. He rolls his neck. A long breath leaves his mouth like it's costing him something. "I have an idea. I can't do it alone." His fiery eyes find hers. She'd never really seen a Sith in person before him, and she can't shake the voice in the back of her head telling her he should run. But his eyes, gold-laced and bloodshot, still look kind. They see her, really see her. She hesitates. She shouldn't trust him. She's not supposed to trust him. But she does.

"Tell me."

His plan is stupid. So stupid. She doesn't have a better idea, but she does refuse to put the ration bar in her mouth. So he ends up being the one faking a seizure. He takes a ration bar and foams it in his mouth. Gives her a wink before he drops to the ground, twitching. It's disturbingly convincing. She steadies herself by the wall, already bracing for what she has to do next. Her hands are damp with sweat as they wrap around his little lockpick. She adjusts her grip and screams.

"Help! He's seizing up! Hey! We need help here!" The door doesn't hiss open right away, like she was planning for it to. There's a minute delay, a flicker of doubt in the Force. Then the telltale shift in pressure. Someone steps inside. Just one. Perfect.

He doesn't even look her way at first, just starts to crouch down beside Zhaka, murmuring something about "stupid inbred Sith." Taia moves. Her body resists. She overcorrects. The angle's off, but she pushes through. The metal bites into her skin as she drives it up, fast and sharp, straight beneath the Zygerrian's chin. A horrible sound follows. Wet. Choking. Zhaka lurches from the floor. In one smooth motion, he grabs the sunrod off the idiot's belt and jams it into the base of his spine. The slaver twitches. Seizes. Drops.

Silence. Taia's hand shakes. The makeshift blade clatters to the floor. She picks it up. Wipes it on her robe. Slow. Mechanical. Zhaka's already checking the Zygerrian's pockets.

"You're surprisingly good at that," he says, tone returned to his usual dryness. She doesn't answer right away. Her throat tightens.

“I wasn’t trained for peace.” It should’ve come out cocky. Sharp. Instead, it lands heavy. He doesn’t push, just nods. Grabs the slaver’s keycard from his belt and gestures to the door.

“Shall we?”

The hallway is too bright. Too open. Her legs feel wrong. Too short. Too long. Her balance is off. Her eyes move too fast.

Zhaka moves like water. She stumbles like a broken machine trying to mimic him. They pass cells. Faces behind transparisteel. Screams behind them. She wants to stop. Open them, save someone. But she knows she can’t. She feels the Force trying to grab her by the collar and yank her in every direction. She keeps pushing anyways. They stop outside a small door, one that barely looks different from the other cells, but there’s no one in it. Just twin presences. Soft humming. Two guards stand on either side. Zhaka shoots her a grin.

“Ready?” She isn’t. Her hand aches. Her ribs are screaming. But she nods, forces a smile. That’s all he needs. Zhaka strikes first, summoning the Force to slam into the first guard’s chest with a crack. He flies backwards. Taia ducks under a swinging baton and drives her elbow into the other man’s throat. Her ribs scream at the motion, but they can’t stop her from executing it in full. He stumbles and she sweeps his legs. Kicks under his jaw to send him to dreamland.

Inside, it’s cold. Clean. Like a shrine. Across the room, a display case glows under a low spotlight. Two sabers rest inside. One is sleek. Obsidian-hilted. Heavy in its elegance. Zhaka steps forward, reaches the case before her, and lifts it. Grabs hers next. It’s smaller. Scuffed. A bit crooked at the emitter. There’s still a faint nick on the casing from the time she dropped it down a ravine on Iridonia and had to fish it out with the Force and a broken cable. The pommel is marked with a tiny scratch, one she etched during a lecture last year when she was bored out of her mind. It looks ridiculous next to his. Childish. Like a toy beside a weapon. He holds it longer than he should.

Her breath catches. He holds both now. For a second, her instincts scream at her. This is where it ends. Not because he’s gloating, he isn’t, but because this is what she was warned about. Cruelty. He used her to get to his saber, and now he’s going to dispose of her. Her hands hover in an unarmed stance. His expression is unreadable, eyes on the saber in his hand. Her saber. The glow of the display case throws shadows across his face, sharpening every edge. He steps forward. Holds it out to her. Just...offers it. Palm up. Hilt balanced across his fingers.

Her fingers brush his when she takes it. She lets out a breath she didn’t realize she was holding. Her fear, that had been coiling against her calves, dissipates. Her hand closes around the hilt. Familiar weight. Scuffed metal. The sound it makes when she ignites it is the same as it’s always been. Zhaka’s saber ignites beside hers. His blade is thin and dainty. It floods the hallway in a purple light. A line from the Code comes to her head.

It feels like harmony.

They move like a system. Not rehearsed. Reactive. Something in her matches him. Her body finds the rhythm of his strikes like she's been training for this moment without knowing it. He breaks openings with quick flicks of his wrist and she slips through them. Drops low when he strikes high. He steps forward when she overextends, watches her guard. They don't speak, they don't need to. Their blades do the talking. The Force hums between them, in something close to harmony but not exactly.

When the compound falls behind them, when the air stops tasting of burnt flesh, they finally relax. She doesn't realize how fast she's breathing until they stop moving. How much her ribs ache with each inhale. Her vision tunnels. She spits some blood. Zhaka huffs next to her, placing his lightsaber haphazardly on his belt before he stretches and examines the landscape.

They walk a few hours in silence through the shrubland. Taia's body is on autopilot. Everything is too loud. Every step she takes feels like it's pulling her farther away from the cage, but that doesn't relax her. Her anxiety is stitched into her skin.

Taia thinks of her master while they move. She's likely somewhere in the sector – Taia's just got to get into orbit. She glances at the Sith walking next to her. Her master would kill her if she knew. She thinks.

Eventually, they reach a ridge. Below it, nestled in a river valley, is a small town. A spaceport. Modest and industrial. She takes a deep breath. Crouches near her half-crushed field pack. The seams are fraying. The clasp sticks. She opens it anyway, fingers finding the emergency comm tucked deep in the lining. The power cell is nearly dead. One message, maybe two. She runs diagnostics with practiced hands. Adjusts the signal array, rerouting it to the Jedi deep-field emergency channel. It was drilled into her back at the Temple: never use this line unless it's life or death. She presses the call key. The screen flickers, then dies out. She doesn't curse, doesn't sigh, just clicks her teeth softly. Her hand lowers to her knee, comm dark in her palm. It's fine. Juhani will come. She'll get the signal.

Behind her, Zhaka stands just outside her peripheral vision. Close enough to feel, not close enough to lean on. She hasn't said anything since the fight. Since he handed her saber back like it wasn't even a question. She stares down at the dead comm in her hand. The silence presses in on her. She could walk away right now. Pretend he never happened. Chalk this all up to necessity, to survival. But she doesn't want to.

The truth settles inside her like a slow exhale. She reaches into her belt, pulls out a small holochip. Flat. Silver. The kind you use for encoded messages or field reports. She stares at it for a beat, thumb brushing over the edge. Turns toward him. He watches her, unreadable. Quiet as ever.

"We'll probably end up trying to kill each other someday," she says. Her voice is softer than she expected. He bites the inside of his cheek.

“Probably,” he replies. The space between the hums with something that isn’t quite tension. Understanding. She steps forward and offers him the chip. Not flippantly. Deliberately.

“In case,” she says, voice low, “You ever feel like being insufferable to an audience.” It’s a joke. A shield. A gift. He takes it. Doesn’t look down, just closes his fingers around it. He reaches into his sleeve, produces a chip of his own. Smooth. Unlabeled. Silent. He slips it into her palm. Their hands brush.

“In case,” he says. She smiles, genuinely. Nods. Steps back. Slips the chip into her coat like it’s always been there. Then, she shoulders her pack. Turns toward the valley. She doesn’t look back, but she knows he’s still standing there, soft, bloodshot eyes watching her until she’s beyond the ridge. She hopes he calls her.

The spaceport is almost deserted. Cargo crates stacked haphazardly. A flickering security droid half-awake near the main pad. A loading crew argues in low, tired voices near bay 7. She leans against a pillar and stops to think. Her saber is still clipped to her belt. Her ribs burn with every movement. Her coat is damp with sweat and blood, some hers, some not. She closes her eyes a moment and slides down the column.

*Come on, Master, she thinks, please tell me you got the signal.*

The wind tugs at the edge of her robes. She lets the minutes string into hours.

She doesn’t hear the ship at first, not over the buzz of the port’s power relays, but she feels it. A subtle vibration in the ground beneath her boots. She opens her eyes. A sleek Jedi ship crests low over the southern wall, coming in too fast, wings pitched aggressively. The ramp is down before the struts even lock. Juhani hits the pad at a run.

She looks wretched. Robes half-fastened, boots muddy, braids frayed. Her saber is clipped tight, her hands open, palms twitching with anxious energy. Her golden eyes flash beneath a dark cowl. She sees Taia leaning against the pillar and freezes for a moment. Moves faster after. Taia doesn’t stand to greet her master; her body won’t let her move. Juhani drops to her knees in front of Taia and grabs her hands.

“Stars,” her master breathes. “You’re alive.” Her voice is low and deliberate. Taia manages a tired smile.

“Almost.” Her master lets out a sharp breath, something that might be a laugh.

“Don’t joke like that, Taia. I thought you were dead.” Taia says nothing, just rests her hands over her master’s. Juhani draws a sharp breath and leans back, still crouched, still holding Taia’s hands like she might vanish if she let go completely.

“What happened?” she asks. Taia hesitates, not because she doesn’t have the words, but because she doesn’t know which ones to say.

“I got caught. Held underground, escaped when I saw the chance.” Juhani narrows her eyes. *Really?* They seem to say, but she doesn’t press.

“You got your saber back?”

“Found the weapons locker on the way out.”

“Alone?”

“Yeah.” A beat. Juhani exhales again and slides herself around Taia in a soft hug, careful of her injuries.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” she murmurs. “You don’t have to talk to the Council yet, unless you’re ready to report.” Taia nods against her shoulder.

“Thanks.” When she’s ready to stand, Juhani slips her arm under Taia’s to steady her. They walk to the ship in silence. As they clear the spaceport, Taia glances to the ridge. There’s no sign of him, just a soft breeze where he stood. She doesn’t say a word.

The ship hums around them. Not loud, sleek. Taia doesn’t remember sitting. One moment she’s boarding with Juhani’s hand at her elbow, the next she’s stretched across a padded cot, fingers curling and uncurling as the medical droid begins scanning her injuries. Her ribs flare when it applies a brace, tight bands of pressure locking her chest. She hisses through her teeth. Juhani sits beside her, silent and unmoving, like she’s guarding the room itself.

“Multiple transverse fractures along the seventh and eighth posterior ribs,” the droid chirps, voice metallic and far too calm. “Pulmonary bruising. Multiple lacerations. Low-grade malnourishment. Muscle trauma consistent with electrical shock. Bacta recommended.”

“No kolto?” Taia mutters, eyelids heavy.

“It is not strong enough,” the droid replies. She grunts. Tracks. Juhani hasn’t taken her eyes off of Taia.

“You really got your saber back alone?” her master asks, more softly now. Taia meets her gaze. Holds it.

“Yeah, why?” Juhani leans back, exhaling slowly. Her expression changes. Not relief, not quite. Something more internal. Like the pressure in her chest is letting go, molecule by molecule.

“You weren’t ready,” she says, voice low and rough. “The Council told me that when I chose you. They said you were too emotional. That you’d break under pressure.” Taia closes her eyes, waits for a reprimand. “They were wrong.” She opens her eyes again. Juhani’s watching her like she’s seeing her for the first time. “You got out. You got to me. You survived.”

She doesn't say "I'm proud of you" but it's in her voice. The way her clawed fingers settle on Taia's shoulder. Gentle. Present. Taia swallows the lump her throat and shifts slightly on the cot, trying to get comfortable.

"For what it's worth," she mutters, "I did kind of break under pressure. Just...not permanently." Juhani huffs, more exhale than laugh. Her golden eyes narrow affectionately.

"I'll let you know when I start expecting perfection."

"Thanks. You'll be stuck waiting a while." Juhani glances at the fresh dressings across Taia's ribs, her expression soft.

"You're lucky you don't have a punctured lung."

"I'm lucky the stun baton didn't melt my spine."

"I'm lucky I didn't find you dead." The quiet that follows is thicker. Not uncomfortable, just honest. Juhani's hand lingers near her elbow. "You really did this all alone?"

"Yeah. Just me, bad food, and worse instincts." Juhani exhales through her nose. Her lips twitch slightly.

"You're definitely my Padawan."

"You mean stubborn and questionably alive?"

"I mean I never had to teach you how to run toward disaster." A beat of silence.

"Do you ever regret picking me?" Taia's voice is soft. Juhani doesn't hesitate to answer.

"Not even once." She says it simply. No ceremony. No caveats. Taia smiles.

"I don't have to talk to the Council right away, right?" Juhani smirks. Her fangs peek out just slightly.

"No."

"I can sleep for a week and pretend I don't have injuries?"

"Two weeks. I'll lie for you."

"You're the best." Juhani shakes her head slightly and pats Taia's shoulder.

"Rest, Padawan. I'll stay until you're cleared." A pause. "You're safe." Taia nods. Closes her eyes. She can still see Zhaka's smirk in the darkness. Can feel his fingers brushing against hers. Rough. Calloused. Her fingers brush the inside of her coat. His holochip is still there. She doesn't move to take it out, not yet, but she smiles. Just a little.

She doesn't reach out to him the first month. At first, it's because Juhani barely leaves her side. She follows Taia to debriefings, meditation sessions, field assessments. Taia doesn't think she's lost her master's trust, but Juhani definitely is concerned for her. And not without reason.

The Temple healers don't use the word trauma, not outright at least, but she notices it in their polite phrasing. Nightmares. Hypervigilance. Taia still flinches at the sound of the door hissing. Doesn't like being touched without warning. Sometimes she jolts awake, unsure where she is, and has to count the seams in the stone ceiling just to steady her breath. She doesn't tell anyone about the screams she hears when she meditates, but Juhani notices her unsteadiness. She doesn't name it, just keeps Taia close.

Taia doesn't blame her. She's her first Padawan, it's natural for her to be a little antsy about the process. But it doesn't make the constant care any less suffocating.

The chip sits in the pocket of Taia's coat like a dare. Every few days, she takes it out. Stares at it. Tells herself she's waiting for the right moment. For Juhani to ease up. For the Council to stop watching her like she might disappear again. And then...the moment comes. A night alone. She hesitates.

It's been too long, hasn't it? He hasn't called her. Maybe he threw the chip out. Maybe that was just survival talking, not real trust. Maybe it didn't mean the same thing to him. Maybe she imagined the whole connection. She starts telling herself she'll throw the chip out, too. She doesn't.

She's sitting on the old stone bench tucked behind the archives when he calls. It's her favorite place to disappear from Juhani's watchful gaze. Quiet. Dusty. Overlooked by the architects of meditation schedules. Her datapad rests on her lap, screen dim, a set of reports open but long since forgotten. Then it buzzes. Not a vibration she recognizes. Not Temple protocol. Not Republic standard. She frowns. Flips it over. A frequency pings across the display. Unlisted. Masked. External. Her heart stops. The datapad hums again, louder. The signal begins to stabilize.

She bolts upright. Her cloak snags on the bench as she moves, yanking it free with one hand while she gathers the datapad in the other and starts running, fast. She skirts the outer edge of the garden, dodges behind a crumbling irrigation terminal, and slips through the rear maintenance access tunnel. It's barely used, just wide enough to sit in, lit by flickering strips of old amber light. Her boots slap too loudly against the stone. Her breath catches, just once and she has to stop to remind herself this isn't a cell. It's a hallway. She's safe.

She kneels beside a junction box and sets the datapad on the floor. Pulls a fiber cable from her belt pouch. Connects it to the panel. Her fingers fly. Redirect the signal. Mask location. Bounce the trace across three satellites. The holo buzzes again, one final flicker, then it stabilizes.

There he is. Zhaka. Cross armed, lean and unreadable as ever. Cloak slung half over his shoulder like he couldn't be bothered to fasten it. His expression is neutral, but his eyes flicker just slightly when he sees her. She sits back on her heels, suddenly hyper-aware of the way her braid is half-undone, the way the glow of the projector makes her look like a ghost.

“Wow,” she says, blinking at him. “You survived.” His eyebrows lift like she’s personally insulted him.

“Don’t act so impressed. I had to override three firewalls, piggyback a cargo signal and hotwire my own datapad to make this work.” She huffs out a breath, half-impressed despite herself.

“Sounds like you’ve been busy not contacting me for what, four months?”

“I like to build suspense,” he replies. “Keeps people interested.” She groans and scrubs a hand down her face, doing very little to mask her eyeroll.

“Suspense? We shared a piss bucket, Zhaka. That ship has sailed.” The words hang in the space between them longer than she intends. She swallows, hears the hum of the holoprojector steady in the quiet.

“I missed talking to you,” she says quietly, hands finding her braid for comfort. He blinks.

“Huh?” Her blood betrays her, rushing to her cheeks in a fury. She drops the braid.

“That’s it?” she demands, ““Huh’?” He runs a hand across the base of his neck.

“I just wasn’t expecting sentimentality this early,” he admits. “Do you want me to light a candle for you?” She huffs.

“I’ll send you one.” she leans forward slightly, the holo catching the shadow in her collarbone. “With a note: to my favorite Sith pen pal.”

“Touching.” He says it dryly, but she sees the slight twitch at the corner of his mouth. The thing that isn’t quite a smile. The silence that follows isn’t uncomfortable, but it’s charged. She watches him pick at the corner of something offscreen. She fidgets with the frayed edge of her sleeve, pretending not to care. She tells herself not to ask, not to want anything.

“You look...” she starts, trying to fill the silence, “exactly the same. Do Sith ever age, or do you just slowly get greyer.” He doesn’t hesitate in his reply.

“We only age each blood mon. Gotta keep up the evil flare.” She snorts.

“Explains the permanent scowl.” He raises a brow.

“That’s rich coming from someone dressed like a beige funeral.”

“Hey! Beige is in this cycle. Jedi High Fashion.” She’s stalling. She knows it. Her heart races. She should end the call. Tell him she appreciates the check-in, but to not contact her again. But she can’t bring herself to. “So...” she sighs. “This talking thing. Are we going to keep doing it?” His eyes narrow, not cruelly. Cautious.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Might be dangerous.” She nods once, words already springing to mind.

“Yeah. Real risky. We might accidentally be civil.” There’s a long silence. A breath too many. She can feel her pulse in her fingertips. “Look,” she says, forcing her voice to stay casual, “there’s a supply drop I’m supposed to help with on Nar Shaddaa next cycle. If you happen to be passing through the sector...” She leaves the sentence hanging. His eyes study her, she prays he can’t see her blush.

“My coincidence, of course,” he replies. She smiles, leans in to turn off the signal.

“Wait!” her hand freezes mid-motion. She raises an eyebrow. He hesitates, only for a second. “Don’t die before then.” It’s not a command, not a joke. A flicker of something real. She studies him, this boy who handed her a saber, who shared blood and silence and gave her something she couldn’t name but desperately needed. Her voice is quiet when she answers.

“Yean. Same to you, Mr. Dark Side.” She ends the call, sits back, blinking against the afterglow of the holo. The tunnel is dim, empty. The shadows seem gentler now. Her datapad rests on her knee. She doesn’t move. She thinks of Nar Shaddaa, how loud it is. How easy it would be to get lost there for an hour. A day. A night.

*It doesn’t have to mean anything*, she tells herself. But her pulse says otherwise.

The days after the holocall pass slowly. Like time moves around Taia, not with her. She doesn’t mention it. Not to Juhani. Not to anyone. The chip stays tucked in her coat lining. Every now and then, she rubs the edge of it like a worry stone. She doesn’t use it. Doesn’t look at it. But she keeps it there.

Ossus becomes routine again, if only on the surface. She moves through the motions: sparring, breathwork, tactical simulations. She heals. Fully, but not cleanly. The first time she disarms a training droid, her heart spikes with the wrong kind of adrenaline. The first time someone charges her in a duel, her hands shake on her hilt.

“You’re not broken,” Juhani tells her, fangs half-bared in a soft smile. “You’re recovering. These things take time.” It’s meant as comfort. Taia stores it like a weapon, anyways.

Two weeks later, her master presents her with a leave order. Personal reconnection. Two weeks. Alderaan.

“Your parents requested it through the Temple’s diplomatic channel,” she says without fanfare. “I approved it.” Taia eyes her suspiciously.

“You’re coming along, aren’t you?”

“You’re my padawan.”

“That’s not a no.” Juhani just lifts a striped brow and walks away.

The shuttle lands on Alderaan mid-morning. Even from orbit, the planet looks too perfect. Green curves. White cities. Pale sunlight draped like silk across the hills. It’s almost aggressive in its gentleness. Taia’s parents wait for them on the landing pad. She sees them before the ramp finishes lowering. Her father stands tall, still broad-shouldered, though his hair’s gone fully silver now. His arms are open, and when she steps into them, he pulls her in like she might dissipate between his arms.

“Thank the stars,” he breathes into her hair. “You came back whole.” Her mother joins them a second later. Her kiss lands on Taia’s forehead like a political gesture.

“You’ve grown,” she murmurs.

“Nice to see you too, Mom.” Juhani stands behind them, in full robe and armorweave tabard, ears prickled forward, golden Cathar eyes wary but calm. Taia’s parents turn to greet her. It’s awkward at first. Taia’s father tries too hard, bows too formally, thanks her too profusely. Her mother doesn’t quite know what to do with the lightsabers on their belts.

“I am...grateful for your hospitality,” Juhani says, voice low, accent thicker here. Sharper.

“You’ve protected our daughter,” her mother says with a polite smile. “This is the least we can do.” Taia watches the exchange and fights the urge to butt in.

The estate hasn’t changed. White stone halls. Quiet servants. The same floral arrangements in the foyer that used to trigger her allergies. Taia doesn’t sleep in her own room, much to her parents’ dismay. She takes a guest suite with a window facing the western terrace. Juhani stays nearby, in an annex two doors down. Attends dinners. Politely. Says little. But every time Taia glances across the table, she finds Juhani watching her, eyes sharp beneath her lashes. As if she’s tracking every breath.

The visit is unusual, strange in a way Taia wasn’t prepared for. Dinner is quieter than she remembers. Her father tries to start conversations – asks about ship routes and archival duties, about the weather on Coruscant and the climate of Ossus. Her mother listens more than she speaks, though she occasionally reaches for Taia’s hand. They’re careful with her, like she’s precious. Fragile. A sculpture with new edges they haven’t realized yet. Juhani eats silently. Drinks the wine. Answers when addressed. Blends into the background seamlessly.

Taia walks the garden paths alone. The grass has grown over the old steppingstones. She follows them barefoot, robe brushing her ankles, and ends by the small pond near the east wall. She sits. Breathes. Thinks of the way her mother looked at her hands like they belonged to someone else. She used to play out here, pretend to be someone else. Jedi Knight Taia Nox. Champion of the Republic. That dream feels so distant now.

Her mother finds her on the terrace after dinner one night, curled up on the low seat, knees hugged to her chest, braid loose and trailing over one shoulder. She sits beside Taia, close but not touching.

“You remind me of my sister,” she says softly. “She joined the medical corps when I was twelve. When she came home, I didn’t recognize her either.” Taia glances over.

“How long did it take to feel normal again?” Her mother’s eyes crinkle faintly.

“It didn’t. But something better grew in its place.”

When they leave, her father embraces her again, arms tight around her shoulders. Her mother lingers with a hand against Taia’s cheek.

“You can always come home,” she says. “Even if you’re different. We’ll learn who you are now.”

The shuttle hums softly. Outside the viewport, stars trail into streaks. The jump to hyperspace always makes Taia feel untethered. Like she’s caught between versions of herself. One on Alderaan, braid loose and cheeks kissed by moonlight. One on Nar Shadda, boots dusty and saber on her hip, waiting for something she can’t name. Juhani hasn’t spoken since they left orbit. She sits across from Taia, legs folded beneath her, eyes fixed forward. Her arms are loose across her lap, her ears angled just slightly. Listening.

“Thank you,” Taia says softly. Juhani looks over.

“For what?”

“For letting me go.” Juhani’s ears flick slightly.

“You don’t need permission.” Taia huffs faintly.

“Most Jedi don’t get to see their families. Not like that.” A beat. “I didn’t expect it to hurt.”

“They’re learning. So are you.”

“It’s like they don’t know what to do with the person I actually am. All they can see is who I was, and who I might become.”

“With time, they’ll adjust. Being a Jedi is hard, yes, but I sometimes feel we don’t properly understand how hard it can be for those closest to us.” Taia looks up at her master.

“How do we do this, then? Care about people and still... distance ourselves from them?” Juhani leans forward slightly, voice calm but curious.

“That’s the Jedi’s paradox, isn’t it? We are taught to care deeply, without clinging. To love the galaxy without needing it to love us back.” Taia frowns.

“I don’t know if I can do that.”

“You can. It takes time. Patience. Stillness.” She pauses. “Love is not the danger, Taia. Fear is. When we love someone so much, we fear losing them, that’s when we start to bend the Force around our own desire. That’s where the Code guides us. Not away from love, but away from fear.”

“So we’re allowed to love...as long as we’re ready to let go?” Juhani nods.

“We are. And if we’re lucky, we’ll never have to.” Taia doesn’t speak. She stares out at the stars and imagines Zhaka’s smirk. Dry. Curious. Like he was testing the shape of a joke on his tongue to ensure it’d land right.

“What if I’m not ready to let go?” she asks quietly. Juhani’s voice is soft.

“Then hold it gently,” she says, “And know what it’s becoming.” Taia exhales slowly. The stars stretch and blur outside the window.

She files her mission requisition that afternoon. A mid-cycle supply drop. Medical aid distribution. A transport escort through Nar Shaddaa’s lower sectors. She adds a transmission ping quietly into the route manifest. Disguised as a nav beacon checkup. Just in case.

No one flags it. No one asks. She pulls the chip from her coat and tucks it into the compartment of her belt. Closer. Easier to reach. She doesn’t pretend it’s just in case anymore. Juhani’s words echo in her ear: “Hold it gently and know what it’s becoming.” She isn’t rushing to claim anything. Not demanding permeance, just showing up.

Nar Shaddaa stinks. Even from the landing pad, Taia can taste the metallic sharpness of ozone tangled with spice smoke, fried stimleaf, and exhaust fumes. Lights bleed neon across every surface. Puddles, people, starship hulls. The sound never stops. It thrums under her skin, a constant low pressure.

She keeps her hood low as she walks, boots splashing through ankle-deep puddles. She should be on a Temple transport right now, overseeing a med drop to the outer rim of the refugee zone. She should be in uniform. Instead, she’s following the ping she buried in the manifest. She rounds a corner and feels him. Not consciously, but in her chest. Like her heartbeat is echoing back from somewhere else. A ripple, low and warm.

Zhaka stands like the planet grew around him, leaning against a rusted railing, cloak drawn low, rain glistening across his shoulders. He's not hiding, not exactly. But he blends in: brooding posture, hood-shadowed eyes. She slows before she reaches him, suddenly aware of everything. Her curls are damp, her pulse is climbing, her mind racing.

"You're late," he says. His voice is rougher than she remembers. Like gravel under silk.

"You're early," she fires back. "Didn't know Sith were so punctual."

"Gotta keep up the brooding image." She snorts. Steps closer. For a moment, they don't speak, they just look at each other. She takes a breath, sharp and fast. She's shaking, she realizes. Just a little. Residual nerves from the alley. From the city. From the simple, terrifying fact she's really doing this.

"You look different," she says finally. It's not what she means, not really, but it's what comes out.

"I got a haircut," he replies, almost too casually. She smiles a small, unpolished smile. "You still look like you pick fights you shouldn't." He means it as a compliment, but she can't help but laugh. It startles her. Startles him too, by the looks of it. But it feels good. Like a weight slipping free from somewhere just behind her ribs.

"I missed you," he says. Just like that, her breath is gone again. Her heart stutters. Her hands twitch. She looks down, smile faltering under the pressure.

"Yeah," she says. "Me too." They don't move for a long time. Her fingers play with the hem of her jacket. She's so used to hiding them behind saber callouses. Keeping still. Being composed. She's not composed now.

"Are you in a rush, or..."

"Or?" he echoes. She meets his eyes.

"Or maybe we pretend, just for tonight, that we're not Jedi and Sith." He looks at her for a long second, like he's searching for something in her face. Then he smiles. Holds out his hand. An offering. She stares at it like it holds her lightsaber, then takes it.

The cantina they find is tucked into a crooked little alley that smells like fried oil and spilled synth-cider. The sign is half lit, the "A" blinking like a heartbeat. Inside, it's mercifully dark. The air is thick with smoke and static. No one looks twice at them. Perfect. They find a booth. Taia sets her hands down on the sticky table.

"Rule one," she says, "no bringing up our day jobs." He raises his eyebrows at her, amused.

“We’re making rules now?” Her fingers drum on the table. She thinks up justification she could tell him: structure, safety, avoiding overcomplications. But it’s more than that. She needs to know where to stop before she falls in. To avoid the fear her master warned her about.

“Do you want to do this or no?” He lists his hands in surrender.

“Fine, fine, rulemaking it is. Lay ‘em on me.” She narrows her eyes, but her mouth betrays her with the ghost of a smile.

“Thank you. Rule two: no Force tricks. No reading each other. We keep our thoughts to ourselves.”

“What is one of us is in danger?” he asks, drumming his fingers lightly. She hesitates. The noise of the city sweeps through the walls. Her mind flinches to Zygerria. Her ribs. The cell. His body pressed to the wall beside her. “Like if you’re with a Jedi Master and I need to know if you’re okay without revealing I know you?”

“Okay,” she concedes softly, “Exception for life-or-death situations. But otherwise?”

“Otherwise,” he nods, “you’re a closed door. I won’t peek.”

“Anything else to add?” He thinks for a second.

“No real names in messages. No titles, no ranks. We keep communication clean.” She nods.

“I’ll buy myself a secondary holo. Keep the conversations with you off the Temple-issued one.”

“Yeah that’d be good. You don’t have a personal comm?” She rolls her eyes.

“No, Zhaka. Jedi like to trust each other, believe it or not.” She taps her glass. “Okay. Rule four. If one of us says stop, we stop. No arguments.” His expression shifts, just slightly. Darkens. He nods.

“Yeah.” A pause. “One more. No promises. No somedays. I don’t want to give you something I can’t keep.” She looks down. Her hands curl around the edges of the table.

“That’s a good one,” she says. It lands heavier than she expected. Not in a bad way, just true. They sit in silence until the server droid rolls over.

The food is terrible. Which is to say it’s perfect. They talk about junk vendors and cargo droids with badly translated signs. He tells her about a Hutt who tried to buy his lightsaber. She tells him about the droid in the Ossus archives who thinks it’s a Jedi Master. For a few hours, she’s not Padawan Nox. Not the girl who survived Zygerria. Not the daughter of a noble house. Just a person. Eating fast food and laughing with someone who really sees her.

When she notices the Pazaak table, she grins. Not politely, not carefully, not the half-smile she gives Temple staff or the smooth press of lips her mother taught her to wear at diplomatic dinners. A grin. Sharp, eager, almost feral in how much she wants this one stupid thing. It startles her, how easily it comes.

The table is tucked into a shadowy alcove, flickering like it's had the same wiring for a decade too long. The seats are lopsided. One of the legs is propped up with a wad of credits someone jammed under it. The surface hums, alive but clearly neglected. It smells like spilled cider and a dozen old arguments.

"Do you play?" she asks, eyebrow arched as she leans toward the table.

"Badly," he says, scratching the back of his neck.

"Perfect," she grins. She drags him over before he can think twice. They slide into seats across from each other. The screen chirps softly, flickers once, then stabilizes. Taia takes the first hand like it's a test of reflexes. Fast, aggressive, all forward momentum. She doesn't even wait for him to place his side deck; she throws her first card with a sharp flick. He groans.

"We're not even pretending to warm up?"

"This is the warm-up," she says. She plays sharp angles. Doesn't even realize she's leaning forward until her chin is nearly over her cards. Her hands are sure, quick, unrelenting. She cheats. Once. A flicker in the Force, just enough to tip a draw. He doesn't notice.

She lets him win the next round. Doesn't make it obvious, just overextends, hits a 23, huffs a sigh, and folds her arms. He smirks.

"Told you I'd lull you into a false sense of security."

"You're mistaking luck for strategy," she shoots back. But she's smiling. And so is he. And the air between them vibrates with something looser than it was an hour ago. They drink something sugary and terrible. She knocks her glass over during a too-dramatic declaration of victory. He reaches across the table to pick up her cards and keep them from the liquid.

The warmth of his fingers brushing hers makes her forget what game they're playing.

It's not the Pazaak that matters, as much as she enjoys it. It's the rhythm. The way her shoulders have stopped tensing every time someone walks past. The way her laugh rings just a little too loud in the alcove, and the fact that she doesn't care.

"Is that really the best you've got?" she teases as he busts over twenty for the tenth time.

"I'm playing the long con," he replies, grinning. "I lose tonight, I win in three years when you think I'm harmless."

“You’re right, I do think you’re harmless,” she snorts. And she does. She really, really does.

When her comm buzzes, it’s like gravity crashing back down on her. Her hand shakes as she reaches for it. She checks the ID. Sees the name. Her stomach drops.

“Yes, Master?” Juhani’s voice is clipped, but not angry. Concerned

“You missed your check-ins. Are you okay?”

“Apologies. Street gridlock,” Taia lies. “I should be back soon.” There’s a pause. She imagines Juhani somewhere quiet, maybe overlooking the med zone, one clawed hand on her hip, yellow eyes narrowed in the dark.

“Are you safe?” Taia swallows. Her heart aches at how gently the words land.

“Yes, Master.”

“Good.” A beat. “We’ll debrief in the morning.” The line clicks out. She tucks the comm away. Stands.

“Duty calls.” He rises too. Doesn’t reach for her. She wants to throw her comm out the window and stay here, playing Pazaak until her legs give out. Instead, she hugs him. Quick, fierce. Her arms around his waist, her forehead resting for half a second against his collarbone.

“Thank you for tonight,” she murmurs.

The rain hits her like memory. Her boots splash through neon puddles as she walks fast – fast enough to stay ahead of her own feelings, but not so fast that she doesn’t hope he’s watching her go.

The Temple training room is well lit. Glowing yellow. Taia stands in the center of the sparring ring, saber humming at her side. Her stance is solid. Her blade steady. Her pulse...not so much. Across from her, Juhani watches. Arms folded. Ears tilted back slightly.

“Try again,” she says. Taia nods. Her limbs are heavy. Her breath is tight. She steps into form. Opens her sequence, and freezes. Just for a heartbeat, but long enough. Her saber stutters mid-arc.

“Again,” Juhani repeats, voice firmer now. Taia tries, she really does. She gets through the form this time, but it’s clumsy. Rushed. Her pivot lands half a beat too late. Her strikes lack clarity. Her follow-through drags. Her body knows what to do but refuses to do it.

“You’re still holding fear in your hands,” Juhani says, walking up to her padawan. Taia grits her teeth.

“I’m trying.”

“Stop bracing yourself for pain. You’ve already survived it.” Taia doesn’t answer.

She doesn’t improve for weeks. She drills until her muscles ache, until the training droid shorts out from repeated contact. She meditates until her knees go numb, until sweat drips down her back and soaks her sleeves. Despite all that, her saber still wavers.

She flinches at sudden movements. Her grip locks up. Some nights she wakes on the floor, not remembering how she got there. She doesn’t tell Juhani, she doesn’t have to. Her master watches her with those yellow eyes.

One night, after collapsing halfway through a saber form and limping back to her room, she finds a holopulse blinking on her secondary device. It’s Zhaka. A holomessage.

*If you’re ever caught by the Sith, find a way to tell me. I’ll get you out.*

She stares at it a long time. Her hand hovers over the keyboard. Then she types:

*Not sure that’s a promise you can keep, but thanks. Everything okay?*

He doesn’t reply. She doesn’t press. She tries not to think about why he sent it. A few days later, he sends another message.

*A Jedi slave escaped a Sith estate a night ago. Killed her keeper and ran. Thought you’d want to know.*

Taia reads it after evening drills, muscles trembling, saber burns still raw on her arm. She puts the device down. Doesn’t open it for a few days.

The Temple grows quiet the day the ship arrives. No announcement. No ceremony. Just a patrol escort and a single battered vessel docking under a Treaty clause most of the Temple’s initiates had never heard invoked in their lifetime. No one speaks openly about what’s inside, not at first. But they all feel it. Something frayed at the edge of the Force.

The med bay locks down two wings. Posts guards. Councilmembers travel from Coruscant. No one is briefed. Nothing’s explained. Rumors swirl faster than reason. They start small: curious murmurs about a Jedi returning half-dead with no name, but they pick up speed fast. Some say she refused treatment. Others claim she wouldn’t speak, or that her saber was dead in her hand. There’s talk she might be a plant, a Sith infiltrator, a weapon left on the Temple’s doorstep. Taia doesn’t entertain them, but she can’t ignore them either.

She finally responds to Zhaka’s message. She doesn’t check for a reply.

Juhani joins the ranks of those permitted to see the Jedi on the second day. Taia only finds out because she sees her return from the wing. Quiet. Tired in a way that doesn’t come from sparring. That evening, they train again. Taia struggles. Her movements are slow, brittle. She

drops her saber halfway through a sequence and doesn't even react. Afterward, Juhani takes her into the gardens.

"Sit," she says. Taia does. Her thighs ache. There's a split across her lower lip she hasn't healed. Her saber rests across her knees, still warm. Juhani watches the sky through the trees.

"You're angry with yourself," she says softly. "Because your body won't obey the way it did before." Taia exhales through her nose.

"Because I'm weak," she mutters.

"No," her master says gently. "Because you're grieving." Taia clenches her jaw.

"I don't want to grieve. I want to fight." Juhani doesn't argue. Not at first.

"Why can't you do both?" Taia says nothing. The wind rustles the branches overhead.

"You saw her," she says finally, without looking up. Juhani doesn't answer right away. Her gaze stays fixed on the horizon.

"Yes."

"Is she awake?"

"Sometimes," Juhani says softly. "Not for long." Taia swallows. Her thumb rolls over the edge of her saber's emitter.

"Is she talking?"

"A little." Juhani folds her hands in her lap. "When she can."

"What's she like?" There's something too eager in the question, and Taia feels it as soon as it leaves her mouth. Like she's asking about a war hero, not a woman pulled half-dead from a Sith ship. Juhani doesn't scold her, but she does take a breath before answering.

"She's...quiet. Tired. But lucid. Stronger than anyone had any right to expect." A pause. "She made it to the temple alive," she says softly, "how, I do not know." Taia doesn't press. She pictures the med bay. Cold. White. Humming with machines. She imagines the Jedi strapped to a gurney, flinching under the lights.

"Is she staying?" Juhani shakes her head.

"A few of the Council have suggested she be transferred to Coruscant when she's stable. They have better facilities there."

"Do you agree?" Juhani's brow furrows slightly. Not in anger, in thought.

"Coruscant has better physical infrastructure. Specialists. Long-term trauma support."

"But?" Her master gives her a knowing smile.

“But healing isn’t always a matter of infrastructure.” Taia looks up from her emitter. Her hands still on the saber in her lap.

“So you don’t think they should send her away?”

“I think they’re doing what they think is best.”

“That’s not what I asked.” Juhani exhales through her nose. Her voice stays even.

“No. It isn’t.” Taia returns her gaze to her saber.

“If it were me,” she says quietly, “would they send me away, too?”

“If you needed it, yes.”

“Even if I didn’t want to go?”

“Especially then.” The response comes with no sharpness, just truth. Taia feels it settle like a stone in her stomach. Juhani turns slightly toward her. “Do you think less of her?”

“What?” Taia straightens. “No!”

“For being hurt. For being moved. For needing help.”

“Of course not!”

“Then why do you hold yourself to a standard you wouldn’t ask of her?”

Taia doesn’t answer. She looks down at her hands, still pressed to the curved metal in her lap. Her palms are raw where the hilt bit into them during drills. She hasn’t let the medics seal the blisters.

“I’m not her,” she says, quieter still. “I didn’t go through what she did.”

“No,” Juhani says. “You survived something else.” Taia’s hands curl into fists.

“It’s been almost a year. I should be over it.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m alive. Because it’s over.”

“Is it?” Taia blinks. Juhani’s voice doesn’t rise, but it presses. “Is it over, Padawan?” Taia looks away. The garden feels colder now.

“I’m trying.”

“I know.”

“I don’t want to be broken.”

“You’re not. You just need to learn to move on.” Taia turns to her master.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to do!” She doesn’t mean to raise her voice, but it still comes out too loud.

“No,” Juhani says, shaking her head. “I think you’re trying not to move at all. You’re trying to pretend it doesn’t get to you.” The words cut deeper than they should. Because Juhani’s right. Because Taia’s been bracing since Zygerria. Because she’s been pretending. And she’s tired. So tired.

“I haven’t asked for help,” she says, so quietly it barely registers.

“No,” Juhani agrees.

“Because if I ask...it feels like admitting something’s wrong.”

“There is something wrong.” Taia flinches. “You were captured,” Juhani says, firm but not unkind. “Tortured. Caged. You survived something that would’ve broken Knights twice your age.” Taia closes her eyes. The tears don’t come, but they almost do.

“I thought if I could just keep training...”

“You could pretend it didn’t happen,” Juhani finishes for her. Taia nods, barely. Her master leans back slightly, letting her voice soften again.

“We are not defined by what breaks us, Padawan, but how we recover. The Jedi is not weak for needing time. Neither are you.” Taia opens her eyes, although she refuses to meet her master’s.

“Do you think she’ll be okay?”

“I think she’s trying. Which means she’s already on the way.” Taia nods once. Her voice barely rises above a whisper.

“I should try, too.” And for the first time in almost a year, she doesn’t mean try harder.

The Jedi stays on Ossus for almost a month. Taia never sees her, not directly, but she starts noticing the traces. Medical staff keeping longer hours. One hallway in the south wing kept sealed for days at a time. Her name – Vashari – filters through hushed meetings and closed-door medbriefs. Taia learns who she was in pieces: a Knight. A gifted field agent. She was outspoken in her youth. Assigned dangerous missions on the outskirts of Republic control. She’d been missing the better part of a decade. Presumed dead. Taia doesn’t hear the word ‘enslaved’ aloud, but it hangs in the air whenever Juhani speaks of her. In the way the archivists update her records with soft hands. In the way healers whisper about scar tissue wrapped around neural ports, about cybernetic feedback loops that shouldn’t be possible.

The rumors spread from the medbay. That she refused sedation. One medical aide claims she doesn't sleep unless her room is left lit. Another says she asked the droids not to speak in Basic. A whisper makes it to the cafeteria that she once asked, flatly, what name she'd been admitted under. The gossip coils back into itself. Grows darker. Some whisper she's not recovering but waiting. That she could still be turned. That she's dangerous.

When she's moved to Coruscant, it happens without fanfare. A medship arrives at dawn, silent as snowfall. Taia watches it leave from a meditation chamber. She silently prays Vashari heals easier than her. Then, she gets up slowly. Stretches her ribs. Readies herself.

That night, she gets a message from Zhaka.

*My master's been watching me a lot more lately. I think he wants me to disappear again.*

She stares at the message for a while, then types a response. Deletes it. Tries again. Nothing fits. Instead, she sends him a picture of a scruffy tooka kitten pawing at her saber's emitter on her desk.

*He thinks he's a Jedi.*

Zhaka doesn't reply. She imagines the way he probably huffed through his nose at it. Just enough not to frown.

The war waits on the horizon. Rumors shift around the Temple like weather. Veterans cycle back into rotation. Scouts disappear. Juhani starts introducing heavier drills. Team-based combat. Evacuation simulations. She says it's just in case. Taia knows that's not true.

She struggles. Some days are worse than her early attempts. She forgets moves she's known since she was ten. Panics when sparring partners change mid-rotation. She thinks about quitting. Turning in her saber, moving back in with her parents. She doesn't. She comes back each morning, exhausted and embarrassed, but present.

By the end of the year, she can't say she's better. She still doesn't sleep through the night. Still wakes up reaching for her saber. Still has a scar on her inner wrist from when her hand spasmed during a jump and caught her own blade. But her grip no longer falters. Her strikes land where they're supposed to. Her focus holds, even under pressure. She teaches sparring techniques to initiates half her size.

One morning, she's called to the council chamber, trailing a half-step behind her master. Juhani doesn't explain as they walk. Inside, there's a message already waiting. Republic seal. Jedi Council sigil. High-priority transmission. The subject line makes her blink.

*Treaty Renewal Delegation – Jedi Presence on Tython Requested*

Taia reads. Juhani watches her quietly.

“They want you?” Taia asks, still trying to wrap her head around the message. Juhani nods once.

“Apparently it’s considered good optics to bring a war hero to a peace summit.” There’s no pride in her tone, just fact. Juhani never asks for recognition. She rarely accepts it when it’s offered. Taia glances down at the bottom of the message.

“It says you requested I accompany you.”

“It does.” Taia narrows her eyes.

“Why?” Juhani folds her hands behind her back.

“Because I want them to see the kind of Jedi we’re raising now. And because I trust you.” Taia doesn’t answer right away. Her heart is thudding harder than she likes. Tython. The cradle of Jedi thought. The heart of the Order. And now, the site of a fragile treaty renewal with the Sith.

“Is this...safe?”

“Nothing is safe right now,” Juhani says. “That’s why we go. That’s why we stand where people can see us. So they know what the future looks like.” Taia nods slowly.

That night, she settles in with a datapad and a pot of spiced tea she knows she won’t finish. Juhani’s already asleep, or in deep meditation. The Temple is silent in the way only midnight makes it. Like it’s holding its breath. She opens the packet marked for junior observers. It’s dense: profiles of diplomatic envoys, recent Senate commentary, key talking points, cultural courtesy protocols. She sifts through it. She wants to be ready.

The Sith representative is listed at the top of the Imperial docket. Darth Vieron. Dark Councilmember: Sphere of Expansion and Diplomacy. Official Imperial signatory to the Treaty of Coruscant.

She remembers the name vaguely, mentioned once in a tactics seminar. Something about neutralizing borders with subtext. She pulls up the profile.

The holos show a tall, silver-robed Sith with a diplomat’s smile and a predator’s stillness. Public addresses. State visits. No outright threats, just soft-spoken phrases about transition, rebalancing, and future Imperial footholds. Taia scrolls absently through press photos from a peace conference on Balmorra. It’s all so staged. Dignitaries shaking hands. Rows of officers. One Sith in the background, nearly out of frame.

Red skin. Gold eyes. Clean robes. Standing just behind Vieron, head slightly bowed. She stops. Zooms in. No fucking way.

It’s Zhaka. Unmistakably so. His expression is neutral, composed. But something in the posture – the subtle tension in his shoulders, the way his hands disappear behind his back like they don’t belong to him – gives him away.

She stares at the image.

*Zhaka is Vieron's apprentice.*

The realization lands with more weight than she expects. She'd assumed what? That he was just another Imperial orphan funneled into a uniform? That he was scraping by in some Sith military wing, bouncing between overseers and blood-soaked drills? Of course he's someone important, he's a pureblooded Sith.

She reads Vieron's dossier again with new eyes. Sees a man who signs systems away with words, who chairs negotiation tables like they're thrones. Who orders "soft invasions" and calls it policy. A monster with good posture. There are more images, other summits. Zhaka's never foregrounded. He stands behind Vieron, like a shadow. Like furniture. Never named. Never acknowledged.

She remembers the rule. *No names. No titles.* It was Zhaka who suggested it. Now she really knows why. Vieron isn't just a Sith diplomat. He's the one who'll try to kill the treaty. And Zhaka...is his student. The apprentice of a man who drafts expansion campaigns between polite negotiations and probably thinks of kindness as a design flaw.

She thinks of the message Zhaka sent her a while ago.

*My master's been watching me a lot more lately. I think he wants me to disappear again.*

She hadn't fully understood. But if Vieron thinks Zhaka's gone soft, if he thinks he's broken protocol...

She stares at the photo again. Zhaka's face is unreadable. Not cold, not proud, just quiet. Like someone who knows he's being measured and can't afford to shift his weight the wrong way. She closes the file. Closes her eyes.

"Of course he never said," she murmurs to herself. Then, softer: "Your master's a dick."

Python feels sacred. The stone is pale, smooth, kissed by time. The gardens are too green. The fountains too quiet. It's curated, like the Temple's serenity has been pressed into place and varnished for guests. Taia walks beside Juhani, hands clasped in the formal Jedi position. Not relaxed. Not rigid. Poised. She hates how much it feels like a performance.

They arrive as part of the Jedi diplomatic ring, flanking the Council's appointed envoys. Juhani wears her old robes, from the war. Not armor, but close. She doesn't smile. Doesn't need to. She's not here to charm, she's here to be recognized. Taia does her best to mirror her master. Keeps her chin level, presence steady. She tries not to look like she's searching. She fails.

The Imperial delegation arrives the next morning. She hasn't seen Zhaka since Nar Shaddaa. He walks a step behind his master. Back straight. Robes formal. Hands hidden behind

him. He doesn't glance her way, not once. But she feels him. The Force ripples when he steps onto the terrace. His presence brushes her like a half-forgotten memory. Wild. Precise. Familiar in a way that almost hurts. Taia breathes through it. Composes herself.

She doesn't stare at him, not with the Council present. Not with Vieron's head turning slightly, tracking expressions like currency. But she feels Zhaka hold still when she passes. A slight hitch. A whisper of awareness shared across the current of the Force.

The ceremony itself is equal parts pageant and game. Speeches stretched across polished stone. Platitudes disguised as policy. Imperial officers deliver practical lines with pleasant grimaces. The Jedi speak of peace like they're protecting a legacy they don't trust to survive. And Vieron. He speaks with soft gravity. He doesn't sneer, doesn't posture. Just folds future territorial ambitions into phrases like "regional balance" and "peaceful influence". The way a venomous creature hides its fangs behind a flick of silk. Zhaka stands behind him the entire time. A shadow with too much mind. He never shifts. Never breaks. Taia watches him out of the corner of her eye.

That night, she slips into the lower garden. She doesn't know why she goes. Not really. Part of her tells herself she just wants air. Quiet. A break from all the posturing and soft-spoken threats. Another part knows he'll come. And when he steps out from the shadowed arch, soft-footed, she doesn't startle.

"You're late," she says, not turning. He answers exactly as she expects.

"Didn't know the Jedi were so timely." She turns to face him. Arms crossed. Lips tight to hide the almost-smile that threatens. Her heart's louder than she wants it to be. She takes him in: the way his cloak hangs heavier than it used to, how the lines under his eyes are deeper now, how much he looks like someone who's been rehearsing detachment for so long it's almost real.

"You shouldn't be here."

"I'm aware."

"How'd you get past the sentries?" He lifts a brow. The same dry amusement. The same crooked edge of a smile that never quite reaches his mouth.

"Do you really want to know?" She shakes her head, but she's already smiling. Barely, but it's there. A flash of the girl she was on Nar Shaddaa.

"You're a lunatic."

"I could say the same about you." He steps closer, just enough that she can smell the cold rain still clinging to his robes. She searches his face. The weight in it. The things he's not saying.

"So you're here with Darth Vieron?" He nods. His expression doesn't change.

“Yeah. He’s just here for the cameras. To give his fun speeches about peace and diplomacy. But he’s already decided to kill the treaty. He just wants it to look like the Jedi were the ones to pull the trigger.” She suspected as such, but hearing it said aloud still makes her chest tighten.

“I figured.” He looks tired. She wonders if she does, too.

“It’s getting harder,” he says, voice low. “Keeping this hidden. I keep worrying someone knows.” She looks out over the edge of the terrace. The garden dips into shadows carved by white stone pathways. She can feel how exposed they are. The weight of the Temple above them.

“They might. But if they did, we’d know. One of us wouldn’t be here.”

“That’s optimistic.” She glances back at him. The corner of her mouth lifts.

“It’s realistic. I’ve seen how the Council handles ‘attachments’.” She makes air quotes with her fingers. It’s ridiculous. She’s always hated that word. Attachment. As though love is some accident you’re supposed to outgrow. He watches her quietly.

“What would you do, if they found out?” The question lands heavier than she expects. Not because she hadn’t imagined it. She has dozens of times. In corridors and classrooms, in the pause between saber drills, in the hush of meditation chambers she can never quite settle in. She’s imagined being called in front of the Council. Imagined their voices, disappointed but still calm. Imagined Juhani’s silence. She’s imagined Zhaka turning away, just in case she blinked too long and he vanished first.

What would she do?

Her first instinct is to deflect. Make a joke. But she doesn’t. She thinks it through. Would she deny it? Pretend he was just another mission contact, another casualty in the war she hasn’t started fighting yet? She thinks of his hand in hers. Thinks of the cell on Zygerria. The burn of the stun rod. The moment he handed her saber back without hesitation.

If she left the Temple, she’d lose Juhani. Lose her training. Lose the thing that gave her purpose after Alderaan and after the Order pulled her out of childhood and asked her to be steel. But if she didn’t leave, and the Council gave her that choice: him or the Code, what then?

She looks at Zhaka. At the weight he carries and the way he refuses to admit it. At the edge of his posture that never relaxes. She thinks of how the Temple keeps telling her that compassion is a strength, and the answer comes. Simple. Clear. She takes his hand. His fingers are cold. Steady. They close around hers slowly, like he doesn’t quite believe she’s real.

“I’d leave the Temple. Not the cause. Not you.” The words taste simple. Like something she’s always known. The wind stirs. Her robe flutters at the hem. They’re standing close now, close enough that she can see the small scar at the edge of his jaw. The place where his mask of calm doesn’t quite hold. He says nothing for a while.

“We keep going,” he says finally, voice low. “We find a way. No matter how hard it gets.” She nods. The quiet stretches between them. Almost comfortable. He’s still holding her hand. They stand close. Closer than they should in a place like this. The soft rustle of leaves above them barely masks the thrum in her chest. She can’t stop looking at him. At the set of his jaw. The steady line of his shoulders. The way he’s still but warm. Controlled, never cruel. Everything about him is careful.

He’s not like Vieron, not like them. She’s known that a while now, but something about the way he traces the scars along her palm like he wishes to learn the story behind each one makes it click into place. Zhaka doesn’t talk about power. Doesn’t revel in control. Doesn’t hate. Not like they do. He’s a Sith in name only.

The more she thinks about it, the more she reaches back over their holocalls, their time on Zygerria. The way he spoke in the cell when he thought no one was listening, the more she realizes she can picture him as a Jedi easier than she can picture half the Order’s Knights.

Not as he is now. Not all at once. But someday. She can see him teaching initiates how to build their sabers. Sitting cross-legged in a field on Dantooine, guiding breath through stillness. She can picture him saying the Code. Not because someone made him, but because he chose it. Because he believes in restraint the way his people believe in victory.

It scares her. She holds his hand tighter. It’s warm. Grounding.

“Zhaka,” she says, quietly. Carefully. “Do you want to be Sith?” The question isn’t designed to corner him. She just wants to understand. He huffs a dry laugh. Looks sideways, like the questions a stone tossed in still water.

“Well, Sith’s my blood. The title’s just for paperwork.” She watches him closely. Doesn’t smile.

“Come on, Zhaka. If you were allowed to be anything, what would you be?” He opens his mouth. Closes it. Looks out into the night like it might have the answer tucked under a leaf somewhere.

“I don’t know,” he says at last. “I’ve never thought about that. This...this is all I’ve ever been allowed to be.” She waits. He breathes out, shoulders shifting like he’s sloughing off armor. “Maybe a pilot,” he says. “Or a merchant. Something with motion. Stars out the viewport. No expectations. No masks.” She turns his hand in hers.

“I think you’d make a wonderful merchant.” He shakes his head.

“I don’t even know what that version of me would look like.”

“I get it,” she says. Her voice dips. “Dreams feel like a luxury right now, don’t they?” He nods.

“Yeah.” They stand together in the hush of the garden, fingers still laced. For a few heartbeats, the war doesn’t exist. Their titles don’t exist. The silence stretches, soft-edged. “I should go,” he murmurs. She leans in. Touches her forehead to his.

“Be careful getting back.”

“You too.”

“Message me when you’re safe. No names. No titles.”

“I remember the rules.”

When he disappears into the shadows again, her hand stays warm a long time after.

The summit drags on, slow and ceremonial, for weeks, unspooling across the terraces of Tython. Each morning, the delegates gather in the Council chambers or the high lecture halls. Resolutions are drafted, reforms proposed, territories debated in circular language. Sith and Jedi speak across carved stone tables as if their hands haven’t drawn sabers against each other’s students.

Zhaka attends each session behind his master’s shoulder like a ghost. Taia learns quickly not to look at him. She catches glimpses anyways. The edge of a cloak in the corridor. A reflection in the temple’s mirrored glass. Once, she feels him on the other side of a meditation chamber wall. She doesn’t breathe until the feeling passes.

They don’t speak again, not for the rest of the summit. Not even when her diplomatic cohort brushes directly past his. Not even when he lingers just a breath too long in the library hall, eyes flickering toward her briefly before he vanishes behind a column.

It’s worse, in some ways, than not seeing him at all. The way her chest tightens in every shared space. The way her mind replays that night in the garden like a secret she’s afraid someone will hear through the Force. When the summit finally winds to a close, Taia boards the Ossus transport with her robes perfectly pressed, saber sharp at her hip, and her heart too loud in her ears. Juhani doesn’t comment on her silence.

The galaxy doesn’t wait for the summit, it keeps spinning. The request for aid comes in less than a day after they return to Ossus. A quiet summons. Juhani reads it once and nods.

“We’ll go,” she says. There’s no question about Taia staying behind.

Anobis was supposed to be a stabilizing mission. That’s what the brief said. A support initiative – civic reinforcement. They were requested to oversee aid distribution and medevac coordination. But by the time they break atmosphere, any illusion of stability is long gone.

The civil war hadn't spared the capital. Collapsed spires, barricaded streets, gang sigils layered over Republic banners. They hit the ground running. No staged welcomes, no waiting delegations. Just mud-slick streets and the churn of evac transports ferrying wounded from the frontlines. The gutted shells of city hospitals. Taia's elbow-deep in triage rotations and tactical briefs before she's even made her camp. One hour, she's reinforcing perimeter shields. The next, she's rationing medkits by priority class.

The violence isn't constant, which makes it worse. It ebbs and surges without pattern. Militia raids. Sniper nests flaring to life in what had been safe zones the day before. Juhani calls it "death by attrition". Taia calls it suffocating. Despite that, they make room.

The refugee encampments become Taia's primary battlefield. Collapsed residential districts repurposed into crude shelters. Tarps slung over rubble. Power grids jerry-rigged. Most of the refugees hadn't ever seen Jedi up close. Most only knew them by stories: sabers that could cut through starships, monks who could stop entire armies with a gesture. Taia doesn't feel like that. Not when her muscles lock before every ignition. Not when she double-checks her grip, terrified of overextending. But when she braces tent supports with the Force, when she lifts rubble bare-handed, when she helps children find their families in the chaos, she sees the awe in their eyes.

For them, she is Jedi enough.

The first actual battle catches them mid-evacuation. A merc company descends on Sector Four. The Republic has forces on the ground, but they're thin. Stretched. They need the Jedi to anchor the defense. Juhani leads the front. Taia holds the flank. She waits to ignite her saber until the breach is inevitable. When she does, it feels like every breath she'd held since Zygerria is trying to escape her chest at once. She meets the first charge with stiff shoulders and a traitorous pulse. Her blocks are sharp but shallow. The feedback through her hilt stings her palms.

It isn't pretty. Isn't Temple-graceful. But she holds the line. By the time the dust settles, Taia's breath saws through her teeth. Her arms shake. But she's still standing. Juhani clasps her shoulder, proud.

Anobis grinds onward. Skirmishes blur into relief runs. Days bleed into weeks. And somewhere within that relentless rhythm, Taia changes. Not by grand revelation, but by repetition. Rebuilding water lines. Holding flanks. Repairing floodlights. Small things.

Skirmishes blur into relief effort. One day bleeds into the next. Somewhere within the relentless rhythm of the planet, Taia changes. Not by grand revelation, but by repetition. Rebuilding water lines. Holding flanks. Repairing floodlights. Small things.

In Sector Seven, refugees form patrols of their own. A retired weaver stitches cloaks for anyone who needs them. When power is restored to a refugee clinic, the locals throw an impromptu celebration. No speeches, just music, ration scraps, and laughter. Taia learns to dance

badly. She helps fix a generator with a repurposed hydrospanner. The Force flows through her fingers like water. An elderly woman approaches her while she's handing out dinner rations, presses a woven charm into her hands.

"For your courage, Jedi." Taia's throat locks. She's not sure she's earned the title, but she accepts the gift regardless.

Between deployments, she finds quiet moments to breathe. That's when she opens her datapad and finds messages waiting from Zhaka. He sends her pointless updates, rants about his master, complaints about the strength of alcohol on Dromund Kaas. One night, she opens the holo to see a grimy old speeder in a durasteel garage.

*Needed something to keep my hands busy. Any idea how to fix busted battery lines?*

She grins. Types back instructions without thinking. Sends the message, then follows it up.

*Just don't name it after yourself. Your ego's already a hazard.*

His reply is near-instantaneous

*Too late. Meet the Zhakastrophe.*

Her laugh startles the medics.

The mission grinds on. Skirmishes. Humanitarian runs. Night cycles blend into each other. Reinforce evac corridors. Secure supply lines. Mend. Protect. Repeat. Juhani calls it the long grind. Sector by sector, they push back militia holdouts, secure medical corridors, reinforce what they've got. The battlefields are never clean. One day, Taia leads convoys through rubble-choked streets, lightsaber blazing ungodly in her hands. Later, she braces plasma welders with the Force as engineers patch shield generators. Every corner of the city feels like it's still breathing. Still fighting to exist.

The days blur. Skirmishes flare up. Supplies run thin. Field medics run thinner. But the rhythm of life on Anobis doesn't stop. When the new year comes around, there's no formal celebration, no grand Republic ceremony. But someone produces a battered string instrument. Someone else brings out a cache of spice-root tea. The gathering starts small: refugees, medics, engineers resting on crates and broken concrete, but it grows. Laughter stitches throughout the courtyard. More instruments join the mix. Juhani sits with her back against a pillar, half-lidded eyes watching. Listening. A small girl clammers into her lap without asking. Juhani doesn't move her.

Taia gets pulled into a dance she doesn't know the steps to. The locals don't care. They cheer her on anyway. For a moment, she's not a Padawan, but a teenager, moving badly, laughing louder than she should. It's then, while she spins, that a thought bubbles up in her mind: *I wish Zhaka was here.* She imagines his dry sarcasm at first. The way he'd complain about being

dragged into civilian festivities. But she knows he'd dance anyway. Probably badly. But he'd do it for her.

The thought makes her chest ache. A deep, slow pull. Like gravity. She wishes she could see him in a place like this, not lurking in shadows or flanking some dark-robed diplomat. Just standing beside her under string lights, off-balance and out of place. Not a Sith. Just him.

The music fades. The night winds down. But her wish lingers. Before she goes to bed, she perches up outside the relief station, arms draped over her knees. The sky above the ruins is cloud-choked. Starless. Her datapad hums against her thigh. A pulse. A familiar frequency.

*I hope you're doing well. I miss you.*

It's simple. Unadorned. It lands heavier than it should. Taia's thumb hovers over the message. She's seen Zhaka dance around truths before; dry, evasive, clever in the way only a diplomat can be. But this is different. Quiet. Raw. Something happened.

He wouldn't say what. Can't. The rules they set are as much for protection as they are for secrecy. But she knows how to read between the lines. Her thoughts turn to Vieron. She's pieced together enough from the way Zhaka talks about his training like survival, the way he catalogues scars in silence, the way his fingers always hover before they settle. His message feels like aftermath, like something cracked. Maybe it's the same old cycle. Maybe it's worse. She doesn't know the details, doesn't need them. Her chest tightens anyways.

She doesn't ask. That's not how this works. But her fingers move.

*Still breathing. Hope you are too.*

She pauses. Then adds:

*You've always been better at surviving than you think.*

She sends it before she can second guess herself. Above her, the night stays blank. She imagines Zhaka out there, on some balcony, some cold estate far from this cratered world, reading her words. Holding them the way he holds everything: carefully.

The wind on Anobis tastes differently by the time the Republic orders their rotation out. The mission is finished, it never truly is, but the worst of it has passed. Republic reinforcements hold the line. Infrastructure specialists replace Jedi presence. The war moves elsewhere.

Taia watches that the new relief teams disembark. Engineers with fresh supplies, medics with still hands, soldiers with steady eyes. Juhani signs off the final handover with a nod that's more relief than ceremony. Their part is done.

Coruscant feels unreal compared to Anobis. The air's too clean, the sky too high. Traffic moves in neat, sterile lanes above polished durasteel. The Temple's halls gleam as though untouched by war. Initiates pass in quiet clusters, robes uncreased, steps measured. Taia feels

alien. Her boots track invisible dirt across the marble floors. Her saber hangs heavier at her hip. Juhani guides her back into rhythm. Meals, sparring sessions, meditation. Her master doesn't hover like she did before, but her presence anchors around Taia.

"It'll get easier," Juhani tells her one evening after a sparring match. "Returning from deployment is always a shock."

Her master doesn't lie to her. It takes a few weeks, but the rhythm of Coruscant finds Taia just like Anobis did. And she starts noticing things. The way younger initiates flinch when training sabers crack too close. The way their stances leave gaps she used to overlook. How they stumble when asked to lead a squad sim, unsure how to move real people through imagined war zones. They're good. Talented. But naïve.

She remembers Zygerria. How lost she'd been, terrified of failing the ideals drilled into her since childhood. How small she felt. She's not that girl anymore. The thought doesn't ache like she expected. Instead, it fits. Like armor sliding into place.

A quiet pride settles in her chest. Hard-earned. Solid. For the first time, she feels in her bones: she belongs here.

Her datapad chimes that evening, tucked under her robes during report filing. She recognizing the encryption key before she even looks.

*I'll be on Corellia in a few days. I don't know if you're available. I'd love to see you.*

Her lips twitch. Smooth, Zhaka. Subtle as a vibroaxe.

Juhani's still reviewing exit reports when Taia asks her.

"I had a contact reach out. An old friend from Ossus. They're stationed on Corellia. I thought I might catch up while we're between deployments." Juhani doesn't look up immediately. When she does, her gaze is soft. Not sharp. Not suspicious. Just knowing, in that gently aggravating way.

"Just be mindful, Padawan."

That's all she says. No lectures, no warnings, just trust. Taia can work with that. Later, after dinner, she sends her reply.

*I'll be there.*

Corellia greets Taia with the stink of oil and hot metal. The landing pad stretches wide and open, exposed to sky, nothing but the hum of distant freighters and the sharp tang of exhaust in the air. High above Coronet City, there's nowhere to hide. No crumbling walls, no narrow

alleys to shrink into. The city's bones are bare steel and glass, glinting sharp beneath the thinning light. Of course he'd pick a place like this.

Taia pulls her hood lower. Her breath drags slow and steady as she steps forward, boots striking durasteel in measured rhythm. Each step feels deliberate. Zhaka stands near the edge, exposed to the sky. His cloak tugs in the breeze, the sharp lines of his figure cutting against the hazy sky. He's in full view, as if daring the galaxy to notice.

Her heart picks up speed as she approaches. She knows the weight of it already. The familiarity. The closeness she feels in the Force. The way his presence clings to hers. But there's something else, too. Something colder. Like a divide between them growing.

"You picked a public dock," she says, trying to sound casual. Trying to find her footing.

"No one's watching." His lips curve faintly. "I scramble the sensors." Of course he did. She stops a few feet away, arms loose at her sides. Her gaze drops to his saber hilt. Sleek. Unfamiliar. Red casing. Not the one she remembers from Zygerria.

"What happened to your lightsaber?" she asks.

"I forged a new one. After." The word lands heavy. She knows what it means. That something happened.

"After what?"

"I'm not an apprentice anymore." There it is. She exhales slowly, old fears rising in her chest. The ones that tell her she'll never get to have a Jedi's heart and a Sith's love.

"Why?" His jaw tightens. For a moment, she thinks he won't answer. That old reflex of his: to shut down, retreat inward, hide behind jokes.

"My master found out. About you. About us." Her breath catches. Her stomach clenches. She knew this was a possibility. She knew the danger. But his words bring reality crashing down like a landslide.

"You let him find out?" she says, sharper than intended. "Zhaka." He bristles. His shoulders tense.

"I didn't let anything happen," he snaps back. "He was already suspicious. He'd been watching me for months."

"And you didn't notice?" His scowl darkens.

"I thought I covered my tracks."

"Not well enough." She doesn't mean it cruel, but it lands heavy. Her arms cross over her chest to hold her ribs steady. "Do you realize what would've happened if he told someone? If word reached the Council?"

A freighter roars overhead. They don't flinch. She wants to scream at him, to demand why he didn't notice, why he didn't think of the consequences before it went to far.

"I took care of it," he says. "He's gone." Her chest tightens at the finality in his voice. The cold way he says it.

"You shouldn't have had to."

"I did what I had to do." His voice hardens. "I protected us."

"You're different," she says softly.

"I have to be."

"You're dangerous."

"I was always dangerous." He steps closer, closing that breath of space between them. She doesn't step back. She can't bring herself to.

"You think you'll protect me? You barely protected yourself!" That stings. It stings more than she meant it to. But it's true. She sighs. "I didn't come here to hurt you," she says, voice softening. "But I don't know if I can risk this, Zhaka." The words scrape out of her throat. She feels it in the ache behind her ribs, the weight of years spent clawing her way into being enough. On Anobis, she'd felt it. Certainty. She belonged. And yet here she is, standing on the edge of a Sith's shadow. Tangled in a bond that could undo everything.

If the Council found out...if Juhani looked at her with betrayal in her eyes...if she lost everything she fought so hard for because of a slip like this...

Her throat tightens. She doesn't want to let him go, but she's terrified she won't have a choice. Across from her, Zhaka doesn't flinch. Doesn't push.

"I understand," he says quietly. "Just stay. For tonight."

The wind tugs at her cloak. It shouldn't be this simple. She reaches, fingers brushing the unfamiliar saber at his hip. The metal is cold. Wrong. Beneath it, she feels him. The same fire. The same fracture.

"Promise me you won't change," she whispers. "That you're still the boy I knew on Zygerria."

"I'm trying to be." He means it. She knows he does. Her exhale is slow, deliberate. She feels the weight of the choice settle into her bones. She could leave. She should. But she remembers his hands when he gave her back her lightsaber. His voice, dry and brittle, laughing in the cantina. The way his presence pulls around her like gravity. He says he's trying. So is she.

The docks fall quiet as the sun sinks low. The city below softens into gold and ember, its glow washing over the durasteel like firelight. Speeders weave between towers, their lights streaking past like shooting stars. Distant. Taia doesn't look at them. She sits beside Zhaka, close but not touching, arms folded loosely in her lap. Her fingers trace the edge of her sleeve. Slow. Focused. The wind pulls at her braid, tugs her cloak, but she stays still.

He doesn't say anything, but his presence coils around her in the Force. Heavy. Familiar. She feels the storm of his emotions, the sharpness of anger, weight of grief. Like a current trying to pull her under. And still, she stays. Her throat is tight. The words that matter most are always the hardest to say.

"What was he like?" she asks, voice low and careful. "Your master, I mean." For a moment, she thinks he might not answer. His breath leaves him in a slow exhale.

"He was cold," Zhaka says, voice brittle. "Rigid. Everything had to be by the book. No room for anything else."

She listens quietly. His words are sharp, but beneath them she hears what he won't say. That he was a child trying to survive under a weight no child should bear. A boy forced to mold himself into something sharp enough not to be broken.

"He thought I was reckless," he continues. "That I wouldn't be able to handle the discipline of the Sith. He tried to keep me under his thumb, keep me from stepping out of line."

Her gaze stays on his profile. She remembers the way he held himself on Zygerria. Tense. Watchful. The way he'd paced that tiny cell like a predator too large for its cage.

"We didn't get along. Not really." A bitter curl touches her lips. "He was obsessed with control and I, well... I was never any good at being controlled." A huff escapes her, not quite a laugh but something close. Her hand reaches without thinking, brushing his back lightly.

"I can tell." His answering smile is faint. Shadowed.

"I hated him for it. For thinking he could control me." His fingers curl into fists on his lap. "It's what got him killed. He thought he knew everything about me. Had me figured out. He didn't. He thought I would hesitate. Thought I'd be weak like him." The words hit hard. Taia's heart aches, not for the Lord he speaks of, but for Zhaka. For the way he carries his weight like he's meant to be grateful for it.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that," she says quietly. He stiffens beside her, breath catching. She can feel the guilt radiating off him, sharp and bitter. Her fingers find his knuckles, brushing gently.

"I'm not an innocent victim," he says, tone hardening. "I killed him because he was weak. Simple as that."

But it's not simple. She knows that. She knows he's lying to himself as much as to her. She turns toward him, expression steady.

"The galaxy has made you cruel, Zhaka. But I know you're not. Not really."

His breath falters. His whole body seems to tighten, as if her words reached deeper than she wanted. She sees it in his eyes: the boy who had sat beside her in a dark cell. He's still there, beneath the sharp edges.

"I..." His voice breaks, swallowed by the weight of things he can't say. He swallows hard. "I don't want to be like him. I don't want to become someone who hides behind blows." She leans in, breath mingling with his.

"You're not," she says firmly. "You're still Zhaka. Even if the galaxy has tried to shape you into something else." She means it. Every word.

For a heartbeat, the air between them hums with the weight of all they are. All they've endured. All they could still be. His hand rises, slow and uncertain, until his fingers brush her cheek. His thumb strokes over her tattoos softly, like he's afraid she'll vanish if he presses too hard. When he leans in, she meets him halfway.

The kiss is slow at first, tentative. When his breath stutters, she feels the storm inside of him break. His hand slides into her hair, anchoring her closer. Her fingers curl into his sleeve, holding tight. There's nothing gentle about the way they fit. It's messy. Fierce. Real. When they pull apart, her breath is shallow. His forehead rests against hers, their closeness steadyng the spin of the galaxy around them.

"I..." his voice is raw, stripped bare. "I don't want to lose you, Taia." The vulnerability in his words seizes her heart. She doesn't answer right away. Her hand lifts, settling over his chest, right above the frantic beat of his heart. It feels like the only real thing left in the galaxy. The same heartbeat that had steadied her in that Zygerrian cell, when they were both just scared, defiant kids clinging to the wrong person for the right reasons.

They'd agreed on Nar Shaddaa not to make promises. Not to illusion each other with safety. Not because they didn't want each other, but because they know better. The galaxy has no use for a broken Jedi and a soft Sith. But here, now, she doesn't care about the rules. Not the Council's. Not Juhani's. Not hers.

"You won't," she whispers, pressing her fingers firmer against his chest. The word that follows comes easier than the thought it would. "Promise."

The words settle in her chest as she says them. Promise. It should scare her. It doesn't. Her fingers are warm against his chest. Each heartbeat tethers her in place.

For years, she called this something else. Curiosity. Affection. A bond born of circumstance. Easy words to dull the edge of what she's always known to be true. Here, with his

pulse thrumming beneath her fingers, with the city spinning out beneath them, she stops pretending.

She loves him.

Not in the quiet, balanced way she was taught. Not at a distance. Not with caution. She loves him close; where it hurts. Where she can feel the sharp edges and hold them anyway.

The Order taught her love was meant to be selfless. Detached. A gentle, universal goodwill that doesn't cling, doesn't ask, doesn't demand. But this: this is selfish. She wants him. Wants to stay. Wants to be his, in a way she isn't supposed to. Fuck the Order. She's tired of pretending that makes her weak. The Jedi can have their perfect, distant compassion. She'll keep this; just this one thing.

Her thumb brushes slowly against his chest, memorizing the shape of his collarbone. The way he breathes, like he doesn't believe she's still there. She shifts closer, until her shoulder presses against his, until her nose brushes the edge of his jaw. Until the world narrows to the warmth of his skin, the steady tremor of his breath. She leans in. Finds his lips again.

The night stretches long and quiet around them. Taia doesn't know how long they sit like that, pressed side by side, his arm slung loose over her shoulders, her hand curled in his. It doesn't matter. The galaxy feels farther away with every breath. The cold of the durasteel seeps through her thighs, but it can't reach her chest. Above them, the sky fades from soot to violet. Corellia's smog-streaked dawn creeps up behind the city spires. Zhaka's thumb traces slow, absent patterns over her knuckles. She turns into his shoulder, lets her eyes drift closed, memorizing the weight of him beside her. The way his breath slows when she leans in. The way the Force feels between them now. She'll need to leave soon. But not quite yet. She'll give herself this one pleasure.

By the time Taia makes it back to Coruscant, the weight in her chest Zhaka helped alleviate has returned. She adjusts her robes as she steps into the main hall, the weight of her saber a familiar anchor at her side. From a distance, she knows she looks exactly as she should. Polished. Measured. Whole. But Juhani sees through that faster than anyone.

Her master stands near the base of a towering arch, speaking quietly with another Knight. As the conversation ends, Juhani's gaze flicks up. The subtle twitch of her ears is the only warning before she crosses the hall toward Taia.

"Back from Corellia," Juhani says, voice even, eyes sharp. "I trust everything went well?" Taia nods, keeping her pace even. Her master joins her in stride.

"It did. Coronet City's louder than I remember, but... it was nice to get away." Juhani's eyes narrow slightly.

“And how is this old friend of yours?” Her tone is mild. Taia’s answer is practiced.

“He’s well.”

“Good.” Juhani’s ear flicks, thoughtfully. “It must’ve been nice, reconnecting.”

“It was.” Taia keeps her words precise. Safe. A beat passes. Juhani hums softly. A low, knowing sound. They walk in tandem beneath the high-arched corridors. The Temple feels too quiet today, too pristine. The kind of quiet that reminds Taia of Zygerria.

“You’ve changed,” Juhani says, casually, as if remarking on the weather. Taia’s heart skips a beat.

“What do you mean?” Juhani’s golden eyes flick sideways.

“When you left, you were tense. Guarded. Now you seem steadier.” Taia’s fingers brush the hilt at her hip.

“I suppose I learned a few things.” Juhani hums again.

“I’m glad. Walk with me.” They turn down a quiet corridor, one of the older wings, where the stone walls narrow and the air smells faintly of incense. There’s no one here. Just filtered light and the soft hush of their footsteps. At the far end, Juhani stops by a small meditation chamber. Simple. Unadorned. Private. She keys the door closed behind them. Says nothing for a long moment while Taia sits herself down on a stool.

“I won’t press you, Taia.” Juhani’s voice is quiet but firm. “But I know when a secret’s weight grows too heavy to bear alone.” Her golden eyes hold no accusation, only patience. Taia feels her throat tighten.

“I’m fine, Master.” The response is smooth, automatic. “Really.” Juhani’s smile is faint, but it cuts through Taia like a blade.

“You’ve never been a good liar, Padawan.”

“I’m not lying.”

“Not intentionally.” Juhani leans back slightly, folding her hands in her lap. “You’ve spent so long convincing yourself you can do this alone. I imagine you believe it’s still true.” Taia’s pulse stirs, curling into the fabric of her robes.

“I’m not—”

“Taia.” Her name lands softly. No anger, no accusation. Silence stretches between them. For a moment, Taia honestly thinks she can ride it out. But Juhani is watching her, her gaze a door held open.

“Who is he?” her master asks, voice soft as her smile. “This friend.” Taia closes her eyes for a breath, fingers flexing against her knees.

“I met him on Zygerria.” The words slip out like pulling teeth. “We were locked in the same cell. A Sith.” She doesn’t name Zhaka, partly for his safety, partly to keep it from feeling too real. “I wouldn’t have escaped without his help.” Juhani nods once, listing. Encouraging. “We started talking after. It was harmless, I swear. I was just curious.” Taia swallows at her master’s silence. “It stopped being harmless a long time ago.”

“He sees me.” The words feel raw, fragile. “Not the Jedi. Not the Knight-in-training. Just...me. And I can breathe when I’m with him.”

“Do you think that makes you weaker?” Juhani’s voice is soft, but it lands.

“I think the Council thinks that.” Taia’s gaze flicks up. “But no. Not anymore.” Juhani watches her for a breath, studying her face with that infuriatingly gentle precision.

“I loved someone,” her master says plainly. “Long ago.” Taia’s breath stills.

“Who?” The question slips out before she can weigh it down. Her master’s expression doesn’t shift, but her claws curl slightly into the folds of her robe. A tell Taia knows all too well.

“It was quiet,” Juhani says. “Not hidden but not spoken either. I was younger. More afraid. She was brave in ways I wasn’t yet.” There’s a softness in her voice that Taia rarely hears. She waits. Lets the silence hold. Juhani’s lips curve faintly. “Her name doesn’t matter now. Only that I loved her. And when the time came to let her go, I did. Without bitterness. Without regret.” She looks back at Taia. The weight of her gaze feels like steady hands.

“That love didn’t make me weaker. It taught me what strength looks like when you don’t try to keep something that was never yours to hold.” Taia looks down, hands curling in her lap.

“It didn’t break you?” The words come out small but steady.

“No.” Juhani’s answer is soft, immediate. “It made me.” The simplicity of it lands harder than any lecture. Juhani lets the quiet settle between them, not pushing, not filling the space. Just there. Taia exhales slowly. Her fingers unclench.

“I’ve been careful,” she says, almost to herself, “so careful not to want this too much. Not to let it get real. But it is. And I’m tired of pretending it’s not.” Juhani pulls out a sly grin.

“You’ve never been very good at pretending, my padawan.” The jab is gentle. Familiar. Her master leans forward slightly, golden eyes steady. “Listen to me. You should never be afraid of loving someone. You should never be ashamed of it. Not here, not with me. But love is not possession. We are taught to let go, not because we are cold, but because the galaxy is change. Nothing we hold will remain the same. The danger comes not from loving, but from clinging so tightly we cannot see the path forward.” Taia swallows. Her master tilts her head slightly.

“You’re not alone in this, Taia.”

She breathes easier as they leave the meditation chamber. Her secret is safe. The sky didn’t fall, her master didn’t flinch. If anything, they walk side by side with a new kind of ease.

Within days, Juhani approaches Taia with another deployment acceptance. A Republic outpost in the Moddell sector. It’s not glamorous, but it’s important. The kind of work Juhani excels at. The days blur into routine. Briefings. Convoy escorts. Fragile negotiations with local leaders who don’t trust Jedi but can’t afford to refuse their help. Juhani’s patience is a scalpel. Taia learns to wield hers like a blade. But it’s the quiet moments that change between them.

The edges of formality between Padawan and Master dull. Juhani’s humor comes back into their conversation. She talks more. Tales of past campaigns, of Revan’s infuriating stubbornness.

“You’d think he’d learned subtlety after Malachor,” Juhani says dryly, sipping her canteen.

“My Sith’s convinced brute-forcing a repulsorlift will eventually become a viable solution,” Taia replies. Juhani arches a brow.

“A spiritual successor, then.”

They fall into the rhythm of exchange. Battlefield tactics blend into stories of old friends, into glimpses of Juhani’s past that feel less like distant history and more like shared lineage. Taia learns about the Council during the Jedi Civil War. How the Order used to bend more than it broke. How, sometimes, love didn’t ruin Jedi. And in turn, Juhani learns about Zhaka. His stubbornness, his dry humor, the way Taia can’t help but smile when they talk.

After a long afternoon spent mediating between rival patrol captains, they take their meals outside. The outpost’s edge looks over a sea of jagged stone and wind-beaten plains. The air is thick. A storm’s on the horizon. Taia scrolls idly through her datapad, half-listening to the gusts of wind tugging at the prefabs. Zhaka’s latest holomessage pings onto the screen. It’s a photo of him crouched beside that damn speeder. His hair’s pulled back, face smudged with grease. He’s holding a coil of fried circuitry like it personally offended him.

*I’m winning this fight. The speeder disagrees. It’s wrong.*

Taia huffs a laugh.

“Your old friend, again?” Juhani asks without looking up from her own datapad, ears flicking with feigned disinterest. Taia smirks.

“He’s on his sixth round of war with a repulsor coil. He’s losing.”

“I’d imagine he’s calling it a strategic victory.”

“He keeps coming up with stupider names for the speeder. He thinks it’s clever.” Juhani hums shortly.

“Revan once named his personal starfighter *Reckless Hope*. Bastila was livid.” Taia smiles. Sends Zhaka a quick message.

*I'll send the Republic your surrender papers when the speeder wins. Again.*

Another ping. Zhaka’s response is instant.

*I'll have you know the Zhakapocalypse is a proud vessel. Its lineage will endure.*

“You two are insufferable,” Juhani remarks, leaning over Taia’s shoulder. There’s no distaste in her voice, just fondness. “I expect holos of this proud vessel when it inevitably falls apart.” Taia laughs.

“I’ll save you front-row seats to the disaster.”

For a moment, they fall into comfortable quiet. Then, with that infuriating subtly, Juhani adds, “Bastila tells me Revan’s been poking at some forgotten Sith archive beyond the Outer Rim. Says it’s ‘preparation’. She calls it distraction.” Taia glances sideways.

“What do you call it?”

“Unfinished business. He doesn’t believe in resting easy.” Juhani’s gaze drifts to the storm on the horizon. “He thinks something’s coming. I think he’s right.” There’s a weight in her words that Taia doesn’t miss.

“He’s going to ask for backup, isn’t he?”

“When the time comes,” her master says softly. “Yes.” The breeze picks up, rattling the outpost’s flagpoles.

The deployment wears on. It should be tedious. Repetitive, even. But it feels different. Not because the mission’s changed. But the space between it does. Juhani’s patience, once so frustrating, becomes familiar. Calming, even. Taia finds herself mirroring it. She holds silence longer. Lets the gaps between words do the work. Juhani loosens in ways Taia never expected.

After one particularly long convoy escort, they spend the evening repairing a faulty shield generator. Juhani recounts with dry humor the time Revan tried to reprogram a defense grind and ended up locking himself out of his own flagship.

“Bastila didn’t speak to him for two days,” she says, lips twitching. “He told me it was a valuable lesson in humility.” Taia laughs, elbow-deep in exposed circuitry.

“I think my Sith would get along with him.”

“Stars help us if they ever met.”

That night, they share a simple meal in the barracks. Juhani has abandoned the corner of the room she once claimed and now sits across from Taia, trading stories between bites. Bastila's son, Vaner, comes up often. His mischief. His endless questions. The way he challenges both his parents with the same audacity Revan once aimed at the galaxy.

"Legacy isn't always what the Order expects it to be," Juhani says. "Sometimes, it's as simple as choosing who you care for, and how you stand by them." Taia doesn't reply. She doesn't need to.

The barracks hum quietly as they prep for lights out. Outside, the wind whistles through the outpost's towers. Inside, it's soft lamplight and the quiet rustle of gear being packed away for the night. Taia lounges on her bunk, datapad in hand. Zhaka's latest message thread scrolls past in typical fashion, but it's his newest message that makes her pause.

*Passing through Ossus in a few months. Would love a temple tour. There's something I want to give you.*

It's simple. Reckless. So very him. Her thumb hovers over the reply. She looks up, across the room.

"Master," she says carefully. "I'd like to request leave in a few months, to see an old friend on Ossus." Juhani sets aside her datapad with deliberate slowness. Her golden eyes lift, meeting Taia's without surprise.

"I won't pretend the Council would approve," she says. "But I am not the Council." She leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees, claws steepled. "I can give you my blessing to walk it if you are careful. If you are honest with yourself about what you're risking."

"I am."

"Then you have my permission." Juhani's smile is small, but it reaches her eyes. "Take a few days. See what it is you're choosing." She picks up her datapad again. "I expect you to be diplomatic," she says, mouth curving. "If you give him a temple tour, do try to avoid the archives. Or the vaults. Or the Council wing." Taia laughs under her breath.

"I'll give him the scenic route. Strictly public access."

"That would be wise." She turns back to her datapad, fingers gliding over the keys.

*Only if you promise not to critique the architecture.*

A few days later, the deployment shifts. The Moddell sector remains a slow grind of negotiations and patrols, but the tempo lightens. The outpost no longer needs both of them. Orders filter in from Coruscant. A brief window for reassignment. A chance to catch their breath. Taia receives her leave approval with little fanfare.

“Time for your temple tour, Padawan,” Juhani says as they review the deployment schedule. Her tone is dry, but the corner of her mouth tilts up. “I imagine it will be educational.” Taia snorts.

“For both of us.” They stand together by the outpost’s landing pad as her transport preps for departure. The wind tugs at her cloak. Dust circles low across the durasteel.

“I won’t be gone long,” Taia says. Juhani inclines her head.

“Nor will I stay still. Once you’ve finished on Ossus, meet me on Coruscant.”

“You’re not getting rid of me that easily, Master.”

“Good.” Juhani’s smile is faint but real. “The Order has too few who understand the value of listening first.”

Taia boards the transport without looking back. For now, Ossus waits. So does he.

Ossus breathes differently than she remembers. The jungle hums with life, thick vines draping from towering trees, shafts of sunlight cutting through the canopy in sharp, golden beams. The air feels heavy here. Not oppressive, just... full. Every leaf, every stone, every shift in the wind hums with the Force. Taia lets herself feel it. It’s different, coming back like this. Not as a recovering Padawan trying to fit back into the Order’s expectations.

She navigates the winding path beyond the temple proper, boots skimming over moss-slick stone. The deeper ruins are half-swallowed by time, overtaken by creeping ivy and gnarled roots. The Council doesn’t bother to patrol this far out. Too much history, too many rotten memories. It suits her just fine.

Zhaka’s presence ripples through the Force like a familiar chord. Discordant to some, but grounding to her. He walks through the underbrush, black coat snagged on low branches, every inch of him out of place in the green-gold quiet of Ossus. She leans against a crumbled arch, lets the sun catch her hair, and waits.

“You’re late,” she says, lips tugging into a smile. He huffs, swiping leaves from his shoulder.

“I took the scenic route. Got chased by some sort of vine creature. Pretty sure it hissed at me.” Her snort is more fondness than amusement.

“Probably a temple guardian. They don’t like trespassers.”

“Yeah, I noticed.” When he reaches her, they fall into step easily, wordlessly, winding their way toward the heart of the ruins. Her hand laces into his as they walk. She leads him to a

mossy foundation, where they settle next to each other. The wild sounds of the jungle fill the space between them.

“So,” she says, resting her elbows on her knees, “how’s the life of an Inquisitor treating you?”

“Honestly? Boring. Too much paperwork. Not enough time for dramatic monologues.”

“Tragic.” His hands splay against the stone, leaning back into the support.

“What about you? Jedi life still full of morally righteous bureaucracy?”

“Always. They won’t even let me leave the Mid Rim without two forms of clearance and a chaperone.” His lips quirk into that sharp, familiar shape.

“That’s adorable.”

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.” She laughs under her breath. Her knee bumps against his, and she doesn’t bother pretending it was accidental. Zhaka shifts, reaching into his cloak. The fabric rustles softly. From the inner folds, he produces a small crystal. Deep crimson. It glows dimly, pulsing like a slowed heartbeat.

“I brought you something.” The weight of it settles in his palm as he holds it out. “It was mine. Before I took my master’s saber. I don’t need it anymore, but I didn’t want to throw it away.” He doesn’t elaborate on what his master’s saber cost him. He doesn’t need to. She takes the crystal with both hands, fingers brushing his. It hums against her skin. Not loud, a low resonant thrum that feels like distant thunder beneath her bones.

“It’s still strong,” she murmurs, turning it carefully. “Wounded, but strong.”

“Just like me.” She rolls her eyes.

“You’re impossible.” He shrugs, unbothered.

“It’s yours, if you want it.”

“I do.” She tucks it into a pouch on her belt, the warmth of it lingering against her hip. In response, she unclips her own saber. The silver hilt gleams dully in the shade, carved with clouds. A small smile pulls at her lips as the thumbs open the casing. The blue glow of her Kyber spills out, painting their hands in soft light.

With deft fingers, she uses a slender tool to flake off a small shard. It catches the dappled sunlight, glinting as she holds it between her fingers.

“That part’s always felt a little unstable. Maybe it was waiting for this.” She presses the shard into his palm. Their fingers linger.

“A piece of your crystal?” he asks, voice quieter.

“A piece of me.” He holds it carefully. Reverently. “You gave me something old. Here’s something still growing.” The Force sings around the sliver, a melody just beneath hearing. It fits in his hand like it was always meant to. Without thinking, without urgency, she leans in and kisses him. It’s not grand, not desperate, just...right. The heat of the jungle, the weight of the ruins, the pulse of the Force, all narrows into this. Her hand cups his jaw, thumb brushing the edge of a scar. His free hand settles on her hip.

“You know,” he exhales slowly, “for a Jedi, you’re awfully good at attachment.” She smiles, small but certain.

“For a Sith, you’re terrible at cruelty.” Her fingers trace the lines of his scars. Scars the Sith gave him. “You’re supposed to be all fire and fury,” she says softly. “But you’re soft, Zhaka. You just hide it better than most.” His mouth tilts, not quite a smile, but close. They don’t kiss again. They don’t need to. Instead, they sit in the dappled shade of the ruins, Ossus breathing quietly around them. The Force hums. Steady. Balanced. She lets herself hum with it.

For years, she thought loving Zhaka made her a contradiction. That it meant standing in defiance of the Code. The Code speaks of Harmony – she’d been taught that meant peace. Stillness. A kind of enforced quiet where nothing disrupts the Order’s carefully cultivated serenity. Love, passion, connection – they were distractions. Chaos.

But sitting here, in the sun-kissed ruins, the Force humming low around them, the truth feels...different. Zhaka isn’t chaos. He’s not a storm in her path. He’s gravity. The steady pull of something real, something that refuses to yield. They’re not two forces in opposition. They are Harmony. Not the static kind the Council reveres. The living, breathing kind. The balance of breath, of heartbeat, of opposites that do not erase but hold each other in place.

Their love isn’t a failure of Jedi ideals; it’s the living proof of them. Zhaka’s hand wrapped around the silver of her crystal. Her fingers resting lightly over his scars. The Force between them like a heartbeat. She breathes in the wild scent of moss, of sun-warmed stone, of the jungle pressing in around them.

For the first time, she doesn’t feel like she’s caught between two worlds. She feels like she’s standing at their intersection, not as defiant Jedi or as Sith’s shadow. As herself. She leans into his shoulder. They sit, beneath moss-draped arches for a while, in the old heart of the Jedi Order.

The shuttle ride back to Coruscant feels longer than it should. Taia spends the journey in a quiet reflection, watching the starfields blur past. Ossus lingers with her. Zhaka’s crystal is secure at her side, it’s quiet hum a reminder of the choice she’s no longer afraid to name. Juhani

greets her with her usual understated welcome. No lectures, no questions. Just a nod and a flicker of satisfaction in her golden eyes.

“All’s well?” Taia grins.

“All’s well.”

Their rhythm returns with ease. The next few weeks blur into structured days: training rotations, Temple patrols, quiet diplomatic briefings with Juhani that never go quite as planned. Juhani still tells her stories.

It’s late when it happens. The training halls are near empty, lights dimmed, casting long shadows against the marble floor. Juhani stands by the high windows, arms folded, watching the city’s lights bleed into the horizon.

“Walk with me, Padawan.” That tone means more than a patrol route. They move through the Temple’s quieter wings, the familiar hush of ancient stone beneath their boots. Taia feels the shape of the conversation before Juhani speaks.

“Revan’s called,” her master says, breaking the quiet. “He’s found something. Something he needs help with.” Taia’s breath stills. She’s been waiting for this.

“Then we go.” Juhani’s steps do not falter.

“No. I will go alone.” The words land hard. Taia stops.

“We’ve done every deployment together. You think I’m not ready for this?”

“That is not why,” her master says softly, turning to face her. “Revan’s not...well. He hasn’t been for some time. Bastila can’t leave Vaner, so she asked me to go. And I—” She exhales slowly. “This will not be a campaign of weeks, Taia. Or months. It will be years. Maybe longer.” Taia’s jaw tightens.

“Then we go. Like always.” Juhani shakes her head slowly.

“You’re ready to lead your own path. I will not strip you of a future at the behest of an old friend.”

“That’s not your choice to make.” Her golden gaze sharpens.

“It is,” she says quietly. “As your Master, it is.” The words shouldn’t sting as much as they do. But they hit bone. For years, Taia has followed Juhani into every fire, every impossible task. They’ve walked side by side. The Order’s rules felt distant when it was just them. And now, Juhani is choosing to leave that, for her sake.

“You’re doing exactly what they do,” Taia says, voice low. “You’re deciding for me.”

“I’m protecting you.”

“I didn’t ask you to.” Her master’s expression softens but doesn’t waver.

“No, you didn’t. But sometimes we protect the people we love without asking permission.” The words land heavy. Taia hates how much they land.

“I’ve earned the right to stand at your side.” Juhani breathes in slowly.

“You have. You always have. But standing at my side isn’t the same as standing in my shadow.” Taia’s throat tightens. “I know it feels like I’m cutting you loose. Like I’m taking something from you.” Her master’s eyes are soft as she continues. “I’m taking away the path you thought was certain. And I’m giving you back the choice of what comes next.” Taia exhales, sharp and bitter.

“I didn’t think it would hurt this much.” Juhani smiles. Small. Real.

“That’s because it mattered.” For a moment, the only sound is the soft hum of the city beyond the temple walls. Taia closes her eyes. Feels the weight of what she’s being asked to do: let go. She’s not being abandoned, she’s being trusted.

“This sucks,” she mutters.

“It does.” Taia’s lips twitch despite herself. The winding in her chest slows.

“I’ll hold you to your promise, you know,” Taia says. “You’ll come back.”

“I will.” Juhani dips her head. “And when I do, I expect to see what you’ve built. Your path, not mine.”

“I’ll show you,” she says, softer now. “You’ll see.”

“I never doubted you.”

The next day, they meet in one of the Temple’s lesser-used briefing rooms. The table between them glows with softly-projected holos of Jedi Knights who are, for one reason or another, without a Padawan. Juhani sits beside Taia, arms folded, ears tilted forward in the way that means she’s pretending not to watch as carefully as she is.

“Interim master,” Taia mutters, scrolling across projected faces. “Temporary babysitter. Mentor-for-hire. Take your pick.” Juhani’s lips quirk.

“Consider it an opportunity to learn from someone who isn’t me. It will...broaden your perspective.” Taia gives her a flat look.

“You mean it’ll stop me from going rogue while you’re off chasing ancient Sith with Revan.”

“Precisely.” They return to the list.

“Veris,” Juhani says as a stately, silver-haired Mirialan rotates into view. “I trained alongside him. He’s a decorated field commander. Spearheaded relief efforts on Manaan.”

“He’d write me up for insubordination by day three,” Taia mutters. “Pass.” Her master doesn’t argue. Another name scrolls by.

“Wiw Siralai. Temple born. Popular with the Council.”

“She’d have me writing essay on the Code by week two.” Taia doesn’t even glance up. “Hard pass.” Juhani hums.

“You could use the structure.”

“I could use a Master who doesn’t think attachment’s a disease.”

“That narrows the list considerably.” Taia huffs through her nose, scrolling further. Another archivist. Another political liaison. All pristine records and perfect postures.

“I don’t need a minder,” she says. “I need someone who’s okay with me being...” she gestures vaguely. “Me.” Juhani raises an eyebrow.

“You want someone who won’t tattle.” Taia shrugs.

“Is that too much to ask?” She swipes again, passing up a placid Mikkian. The next profile loads. Knight Far’co Aakri. Zabraki. A senate bodyguard, standing awkwardly straight in formal garb. He looks like he’d rather be anywhere else. Taia’s finger hovers. “What’s his deal?” Juhani leans forward slightly.

“I met him a year ago, before Moddell. Freshly Knighted. Asked me to get him the Senate post.” Taia raises a brow.

“He volunteered for the bodyguard gig? That’s...bold.”

“My guess: he wants neutral ground,” Juhani says simply “He’s one of Sokarre’s”

Taia reads the dossier notes. “Seventeen when he entered. Took him sixteen years to make Knight.”

“Faster than most.” She scrolls through Master Sokarre’s personal notes. *Combat reliable. Emotionally uncertain.*

“Sokarre’s, huh?” she mutters. Her master’s mouth tightens, not quite a scowl but close.

“Yes. Master Sokarre is... interesting. She takes the padawans the Council doesn’t want to deal with themselves.” A pause. “I’ve crossed her a few times,” Juhani continues, “She’s not a big fan of Revan. We’ve had some lively disagreements.” Taia tilts her head toward her master.

“Sounds delightful.” Juhani’s lips curve into a half-smile.

“Never let me off the hook for daring to save the galaxy with someone she disagrees with.” Taia studies Far’co’s profile again. There’s something honest about his discomfort. Like he doesn’t care to fit in.

“He’s not you.”

“No,” Juhani agrees quietly. “But he’s lived with the same scrutiny you have.” She purses her lips.

“You think he’d be…chill?”

“I think he’d mind his own business.”

“Which is better than the rest of this list.”

“It’s not a guarantee, Taia.”

“No,” she exhales, “But I’ll take my chances.” Juhani watches her a moment longer. Then she leans back.

“I’ll message Knight Aakri tomorrow.”

By the time Juhani sends the comm with Far’co’s name attached, the choice feels heavier than it should. It’s not a grand appointment, not an apprenticeship. No Council ceremony, just a line of text in a schedule. An assignment shuffled into place. Taia tells herself it’s temporary. A stopgap. A practical solution to a practical problem. And yet, as the days crawl forward, she can’t shake the feeling that the earth is falling out beneath her feet.

Juhani doesn’t hover. Doesn’t revisit the decision. But in the quiet hours between patrols and sparring rotations, Taia feels her master’s attention in small ways. A few words of advice that skirt around the coming separation. A lingering presence in meditation that says more than any lecture.

The night before the meeting, Taia finds herself walking the outer rings of the Temple gardens. The stone paths curve beneath her feet, familiar and steady. Tonight, they feel thin. Like the spaces she’s always known are no longer shaped for her. It sucks.

The next morning arrives with too much sunlight and too little time. The ride from the Temple to the Senate complex feels shorter than it should. Coruscant’s traffic veils the sky in endless lines of light that ripple off Juhani’s profile. Her master is composed as ever, but Taia can feel it. The undercurrent.

“You’re quiet,” she says, finally.

“You’re brooding,” Juhani replies, which is fair. They lapse back into silence. It should be easier than this. After all, they’ve never needed words to fill space. But this isn’t a deployment. Not a patrol route. Taia exhales, shifts in her seat.

“You could’ve stayed at the temple, you know. You didn’t have to drop me off.”

“I know.” Juhani’s tone is soft. Measured. “I hope you don’t mind. I’d like to see you off.” The speeder banks, bringing the towering dome of the Senate building into view. All polished stone and gleaming durasteel.

“I thought we’d have more time,” Taia admits. Juhani’s ears flick, the faintest smile touching her lips.

“You always think that.” Taia hates how right her master is. The speeder slows, settling near the entrance plaza. A heartbeat of quiet lingers between them as the engines hum down. “You never needed my permission to be yourself,” Juhani says as they disembark. “Don’t start looking for it in others.” Taia swallows.

“This isn’t the same thing,” she mutters.

“No, it isn’t.” Her master tilts her head, a soft gesture. “But you’re ready. I know you are.” The door hisses open. As they step into the plaza, Taia keeps her pace steady. Juhani walks beside her, not ahead. At the steps leading to the atrium, they pause.

“You’ll be fine, Taia.” She huffs a breath.

“I’m still pissed at you.” Juhani’s smile sharpens.

“You can beat Revan’s ass for this when we get back.” For a moment, Taia considers saying more. But it catches in her teeth. Her master places a hand, brief and steady, on Taia’s shoulder. No grand gesture. Just presence.

“Let’s go meet your Knight.” Taia squares her shoulders.

“Lead the way, Master.” The words come naturally on her tongue, but she already knows this is the last time she’ll say them.

The Senate annex is buzzing with the low hum of recess. A steady stream of aides, senatorial staff, and off-duty guards mill through the polished halls, their conversations layered in soft, practiced diplomacy. It’s a far cry from the training fields and battle meditations Taia knows.

Juhani seems perfectly at ease here. Of course she does. They pause near a support pillar, waiting. The current of movement flows around them. When Taia feels the nudge in the Force, it’s familiar in a way that surprises her.

Far’co Aakri is...sturdy. There’s no other word for it. Build like he was born for hauling goats rather than flanking Senators. He stands a few paces off from them, adjusting his belt like it’s misbehaving. He notices them and glides off to meet them, clearing his throat.

“Juhani,” he greets, dipping his chin.

“Far’co,” Juhani returns, smooth as ever. “Thank you so much for agreeing to this on such short notice. This is my Padawan: Taia Nox.”

“Don’t worry about it, Master Juhani.” He gestures vaguely at the Senate around them. “Though I’ll admit I wasn’t expecting this. Babysitting’s not usually in a Senate Guard’s rotation.” Taia folds her arms, raising a brow.

“Babysitting, huh?” Far’co purses his lips.

“To be honest, you’re the one doing me a favor,” he says. “Senate recesses are kind of mind-numbing. I could use the company.” Juhani’s lips twitch.

“I should be going. Best of luck to both of you. I’ll be in touch when I return, Master Aakri,” she says, stepping back. Her hand settles briefly on Taia’s shoulder. Solid. Steady. Enough. Taia meets her gaze. There’s too much in it and not enough time to unpack. Maybe there never will be.

Juhani doesn’t linger. She turns and merges with the flow of the room, disappearing into the crowd. Far’co clears his throat.

“Since we’ve got some time before the Senators get back to it,” he says, glancing sideways, “you want the tour?” Taia raises a brow.

“Of the senate?” He nods casually.

“You’ll be here a while. Least I can do is show you the bathrooms.” Taia considers. It’d be easy to brush him off, keep her walls up. But they didn’t pick him for no reason.

“Alright,” she says. “Lead the way.” She falls into his step as they make their way around the gigantic building. He points out things most would overlook. The best routes to avoid midday traffic, where the guards actually post up during recess, which corridors have acoustics perfect for overhearing private conversations.

“I mean we’re technically not supposed to listen in,” he says, shrugging. “But if people are going to shout, it feels like fair game.” Taia snorts.

They wind through the upper levels, far from the rotunda’s grand chambers. The air feels thinner, conversations hushed behind closed doors. Far’co keeps it light. Points out shortcuts, all the little ways the building bends to function beneath the polished façade. Taia finds herself relaxing. A little.

That’s when it hits. A ripple beneath her skin. The air pulled taunt. She slows. Far’co’s steps falter, too.

“You feel that?” he asks, voice lower now. Taia nods.

“Yeah.” He scans the hall, hand drifting to his lightsaber.

“Senate’s still in recess,” he mutters. “Keep your eyes peeled.” The Force screams around them. Then, it snaps.

A crack rattles the room. Sharp. Precise. Deafening. A human senator wearing extravagant robes crumples. One moment he’s walking, gesturing animatedly at some aide, the next he’s down. His robes bloom dark across the chest, staining crimson as he hits the polished floor. The aide screams. The room erupts, shouts, staff scattering, guards scrambling for bearings. Far’co curses under his breath, lightsaber lit. They’re already moving. Taia drops to her knees beside the man. The shot was good, but not to the head. Chest. Deep. Bleeding fast – too fast.

“Hold him steady,” she snaps. Far’co is already pressing hands to the wound, forearm bracing the senator’s side, holding pressure as best he can. Taia reaches through the Force, searching, but all she finds is noise. Panicked senators and rushing guards.

“I can’t find them,” she says, frustrated. Far’co doesn’t look up. His focus stays on the man beneath their hands.

“That doesn’t matter right now.” The senator gurgles. His eyes flutter. Taia can feel his life bleeding out with each pulse.

“Stay with me,” she says, trying to infuse calm into her words, into the Force. But it’s slipping. Medics arrive seconds later, but even Taia knows it’s too late. The wound’s lethal. By design. Far’co steps back as they arrive, jaw tight, posture stiff. His hands are stained red.

They don’t find the sniper. Not through the Force. Not through the sweep of Senate security. Whoever pulled the trigger knew the architecture too well and had already slipped away by the time the medics pronounced the Senator dead.

In the hours that follow, Coruscant tightens like a clenched fist. Lockdown sweeps the upper levels. Airspace restrictions fall into place with surgical precision. Guards triple at every entry point. Jedi liaisons are summoned. Officially, for counsel. Unofficially, for blame control.

Far’co files his report with quiet competence. Taia follows his lead, though the tension sits in her chest. This wasn’t a random act. It was calculated. Meant to be seen. The wheels are already turning. The Senate chambers, once full of noise and posturing, grow sharp in their urgency. Within days, the floor sessions turn public. They watch from the upper galleries as the Sith are named. Not with evidence, but with certainty. Each senator’s voice is louder than the last as they hammer words like “cowardice,” “provocation,” “war.” The assassination becomes a rallying cry. A wound to be answered. Avenged. Taia feels it in the Force. The storm building. The inevitability. A declaration of war is drafted before the week’s end. The vote is scheduled. The result, a forgone conclusion.

Taia keeps moving. Patrols. Briefings. More guards. More eyes. Far'co holds steady beside her. A constant. But even his presence doesn't ease the pressure building beneath her skin. That's when her comm pings. Simple. Direct.

*You okay? Taris is lonely without you :(*

Zhaka. They'd made the plan a few weeks ago. Back when "next month" didn't feel like the galaxy would be on fire. Taris. Imperial ground. Her turn to be the one out of place. She knows the answer, even before she keys the comm open, she knows. She tells Far'co she needs a moment to meditate. Slips back to the Temple. Finds an old meditation room. Small. Unadorned. A window slit lets in a thin shaft of Coruscant's smog-filtered sunlight. The hum of the city is distant here, muffled by thick stone. She exhales. Taps the comm. The line connects.

Zhaka's image resolves out of static. He looks...rough. His hair is longer than she remembers, pushed back in that half-done way of his. His shoulders are hunched beneath a damp cloak, the weight of rain and too many sleepless nights dragging him down. His jaw is set sharp. The lines beneath his eyes aren't new, but they've deepened.

"Zhaka," she breathes. His head snaps up. His face doesn't soften. "I'm sorry," she says before he can. "I'm stuck on Coruscant. They've locked down the planet. I—"

"Can't leave," he finishes, voice clipped. "I get it." She flinches, not from the words, but the weight of them. Her eyes catch his. Sharp. Tired.

"Yeah," she exhales. "They've shut everything down. No one in, no one out." He turns away from the holo, pacing to the edge of whatever rundown place he's holed up in. The rain on his end hisses softly, punctuating the quiet.

"Figures," he mutters. "Nothing like a good old-fashioned political assassination to reignite full-blown war." She watches him carefully. He hasn't asked yet, but she knows what's coming next. "You saw it, didn't you?" he says, voice low. She nods.

"Yeah. It was fast. Clean. Professional." The words taste bitter. Her hands curl into fists in her lap. "The Senate's already drafting a war declaration. They blame the Sith." He laughs, sharp and humorless.

"Of course. It's always the Sith." Her patience thins. She crosses her arms.

"A senator *died*, Zhaka. They're not going to stop until Dromund Kaas is rubble."

"I know," he says. There's a far-off look in his eyes, like he's already seen the aftermath. "Doesn't matter, though. The Republic wants someone to blame. We're convenient." She leans forward.

"It's not convenience. We're your enemies." His jaw clenches. She can feel the heat simmering behind it. "Zhaka... I don't want this. I don't want to face you across a battlefield."

“You think I do?” His voice cracks sharp, angling sharper than she meant to provoke. “You think I want to carve my way through the Core with half the Empire cheering while I pray I don’t recognize your damn lightsaber across the field?” Her lips press thin.

“Then don’t.” There’s a long silence. The rain fills it. “Don’t be a part of it. You don’t have to be Sith.”

“I am Sith.” The words drop like stone. “It’s my blood. That’s not something you walk away from. It’s not a job. It’s not a club you quit when it stops being fun.”

“Then what is it?” she spreads her hands. The tightness has returned to her throat now, too loud in the quiet. “Because I don’t see you in any of this! I see someone trying to be something he’s not.” He doesn’t answer immediately. His hands curl into fists at his side.

“I’m not you,” he says at last. “I can’t just decide to change sides and have people cheer for me. If I leave, I die. And it won’t be pretty.” The admission punches through her frustration. She gets it. Of course she does.

“I hate this,” she whispers. “The war. The system. All of it.”

“Yeah,” he breathes. “Me too.” They sit in that quiet. The meditation room feels too small. Too quiet. This call was supposed to be something else. A promise made before the galaxy cracked open. She remembers why they decided against making promises.

“We can’t keep meeting like this,” she says. “Not anymore. Not if they’re watching us both.”

“I figured.”

“But I’d like to keep talking.” She smiles a thin, stubborn thing. “Check in. Be each other’s break from this.” He leans back against the wall, and, for a moment, he looks younger. Not softer. But tired in a way that feels honest.

“Break from the war. You make it sound so romantic.”

“We’re a couple of forbidden lovers,” she tries to continue her grin. “I have to do my part.” That gets him. The laugh is real. Brief, sure, but it cracks through the tension like sunlight.

“Yeah, alright. We’ll keep talking. No matter what.”

“No matter what.” She leans forward to cut the frequency.

“Hey, Taia,” his voice draws her back up softly. “Just...don’t get yourself killed. Please.” Her throat tightens, but she smiles.

“Same to you, Mr. Dark Side.” She cuts the line before she can say more. Exhales slowly. The meditation room is still. Silent. She straightens, pushing herself up from the mat. The chime at the door is soft.

“Taia,” Far’co’s voice, muffled through the durasteel. “I don’t mean to interrupt but the Senate’s called us.” She scrubs her face with both hands, drags herself upright, and keys the door open. Far’co leans against the frame, stance awkward but solid. A herder’s patience. His horns gleam under the Temple’s pale light.

“They’re moving fast,” he says as they fall into step. “Faster than the Order’s comfortable with.”

“They’re not interested in comfort.” Her voice is hoarse. “They want blood.” Far’co shrugs. Her fingers brush the saber at her hip. She’s tired of fighting ghosts, of watching politicians turn grief into weapons. But what else can she do?

The Senate chambers are a furnace of sound. From the upper galleries, Taia watches the ripple of bodies, the tidal pull of rhetoric and fury. The war declaration passes. No hesitations. No dissent. The summons come the next morning. Not to the front lines, not yet. There are loose ends to tie up before the grand offensive begins. They’re assigned to track the assassin. Taia receives her orders with a grin kind of resolve. She’s not the girl who stumbled through the Ossus archives, searching for clarity in the Code. She’s not the shattered captive of Zygerria, clutching a battered lightsaber with trembling hands. She’s bent, yes. Broken, maybe. But she’s rebuilt herself.

Juhani’s absence aches but doesn’t unmoor her. Zhaka’s stings sharper, but she knows better now than to mistake longing for weakness. She meets Far’co on the Senate steps. He’s got his field pack slung over one shoulder, boots scuffed from rounds on the floor. He grins when he sees her. Crooked. Steady.

“Ready to go hunting?” Taia exhales slowly. The air smells of rain and durasteel. The storm’s broken.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” she says. And for the first time in a long time, she’s sure she means it.