

Zhaka's cell stinks of blood and sweat. Not his, of course. He isn't used to sharing space. Not with rodents, not with rust, not with equals. He sits back against the peeling wall, legs folded, eyes half-lidded as if meditating. He isn't. Meditation is for the order-obsessed or truly desperate. He is waiting. For an opening. A weakness. Something to break in his favor. He is good at that.

The binders around his wrist had been removed an hour ago, but the weight lingers, mostly metaphorically. The Zygerrians don't need them. They know exactly what to do with a Sith Apprentice who talks a little too much and travels a little too alone. He exhales slowly, jaw tight. This whole thing is absurd.

Zygerrians are supposed to allies of the Empire. Sympathizers, at the very least. Apparently, not all the cats got the memo. Or maybe it was because he was Sith that they saw an opportunity. He thinks back to the moment it turned. One of them recognized his face. Not his name. Not his rank. His face. That was dangerous. He hadn't asked how. He doesn't like the way the slaver had smiled, recognition clean on his sharp teeth.

He'd tried frying them. They'd collared him before the first spark could fly. And now here he is. Robes torn. Lightsaber gone. Ego bruised worse than ribs.

The door hisses open. Zhaka lifts his head, expecting another slaver, another beating, or maybe a stale meal. Instead, they toss someone inside. She hits the durasteel floor with a grunt, small, slight. Not dead. The door seals with a cold rush. He doesn't move. Just watches the girl slowly stir. Jedi. Obviously. She wears the remnants of a robe, torn and scuffed from resistance. Her face catches his attention more than he expected it to.

Her skin is rich with warmth and scattered freckles, dulled under grime and bruises. A dark curl, thick with dust and blood, spills from a messy braid partly torn loose. One eye is soft as brown, wet soil. The other, bright blue, almost silver. Ice cracking under pressure. Under both eyes sit tattoos, dark streaks like stylized wings, drawn in sharp contrast against her skin. Not standard Jedi flare. Not something you forget.

She looked... like someone who didn't belong in chains. Which made two of them. He raises a brow.

When he speaks, his voice is dry, just short of theatrical. "Let me guess. You told them slavery was against the Jedi Code and now you're here?" She blinks at him, then winces, stretching an arm.

"No. I told them to choke on a furball." He lets out a short, surprised laugh.

"Even better."

He expected her to stay down. Jedi are soft, at least the ones he's encountered. Full of noble ideals and quiet suffering. But she sits up. Not with grace, with effort. Like every movement hurts. But she sits anyways. They both sit for a while. Not talking.

Zhaka closes his eyes again, still not meditating. Thinking. Calculating. Watching her through the Force, feeling her presence ripple like a wild current just out of sync with his own. Eventually, she breaks the silence.

"You're Sith," she says. He doesn't open his eyes.

"Points for observation."

"I thought Sith traveled in pairs."

"I thought Jedi didn't get caught."

That earns him a soft exhale. A breath that might have been a laugh if it wasn't through cracked ribs. She leans back against the wall, not far from where he's sitting.

"What's your name?" she asks. He tilts his head toward her.

"Why?" She shrugs with one shoulder.

"Something to call you. Might as well, if we're stuck here." He considers lying. Something easy. Something nondescript. Whatever.

"Zhaka." She nods.

"Taia."

Another pause. Zhaka's voice cuts through the silence, low and skeptical. "What's a Jedi doing this far into Sith territory? Unless you're one of those Knights with a martyr complex."

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

"Clearly." She looks at him sidelong.

"And you?"

"Also a mission. Also didn't go well." Taia leans her head back, eyes on the ceiling. The blue paint is peeling, revealing durasteel grey.

"So we're both stupid."

Zhaka smirks. "Speak for yourself." The quiet returns, but not as heavy. Taia lifts a hand to her braid, starts to finger-comb the blood out of it. Her hands shake when she thinks he isn't looking. But he notices. He just doesn't say anything.

They don't speak much the rest of the day. Zhaka sleeps. Or pretends to. Taia doesn't. He notices that, too.

The cell's light cycle is unpredictable, but the meals come twice a day at standard time. A thin broth and some kind of protein mash that tastes like recycled air. Taia doesn't touch hers the second time. Zhaka eats like he's not above it.

The second morning, he hears her groan softly as she stands. Too fast. She slides down the wall again, breathing hard, hand clutched to her ribs. Zhaka watches her for a long time before speaking.

“You'll break something worse if you keep moving like that.”

“I can't just sit here,” she mutters. Her voice is alive with defiance.

“Then limp in circles like a good prisoner. Slowly.” She glares at him but listens.

They speak again later, after the next feeding cycle. Zhaka is poking at the locking mechanism on the door with a bent piece of metal he pried from the bench. He doesn't think he'll open it, not yet at least, but it gives him something to do.

Taia's voice is quiet this time. “They're going to sell us.” Zhaka doesn't look up.

“No kidding.”

“They want Force-sensitives. For an off-world buyer.” He does glance at her now. Her expression is hollow.

“You heard that?” She nods.

“They didn't realize I was awake.” He leans back, fingers still holding the scrap of metal. He twirls it once, thinking.

“Not your first prison, is it?” she asks.

“First this sloppy.”

Taia scoffs softly. “You're luck I'm not a righteous Jedi. They would've tried converting you by now.” He rolls his eyes.

“Lucky me.”

By the third day, something shifts. They talk more. Quietly. Rarely directly, but Zhaka lets her rest her head near his side when her body gives out mid-stretch. He doesn't comment on it. When she wakes up, he's carving a map on the floor with his metal, something he's pieced together from the way the slavers walk. Timing. Distance. The sound of other cells.

“You think we’re near the surface?” she asks, sitting up beside him, hand on her abdomen.

“I think we’re underground. Two floors, maybe three. You hear the coolant fans?” She nods. “Industrial. Not mining. They’re storing us for auction, not labor.”

She stares at him. “You’re disturbingly good at this.” He smirks.

“My master has a real talent for assignments like this. Real character-building stuff. Or, you know, wishful thinking.”

Later, she hums under her breath, some soft broken tune. Her fingers tap rhythm against her knee. He can’t place her melody.

“What’s that?” he asks. She shrugs.

“A lullaby. From Alderaan.”

“Didn’t know Jedi got lullabies.”

“I wasn’t born one.” He tilts his head, curious.

“What were you before?”

She grins. “A baby.”

That night, something finally breaks. They hear screaming down the corridor. Sharp, human, young. Zhaka stiffens. Taia closes her eyes.

“They’re running tests,” she whispers. “Figuring out who’s strong enough to survive.” Zhaka’s hands curl into fists. After a moment, she looks at him, voice low. “We can’t wait to be rescued.

“Agreed.” He cracks his neck. “I have an idea. I can’t do it alone.” He meets her eyes. Dark brown and silver blue. A pause. She nods.

“Tell me.”

The plan isn’t his usual brilliance. It’s desperate. But desperate works. He bites into the ration bar and chews until the paste clots in his mouth, thick and red like blood. Not his best look. Clearly not dignified. But if there’s one thing he has learned from his time on Korriban, it’s that pride makes a piss-poor shield in a real fight.

He drops to the floor, twitching like a downed power cable. Taia calls out to help from the slavers. The door opens, he can feel it before it hisses. Sour breath. Dull curiosity. A slaver steps in. Alone. Fool. Zhaka times it by heartbeat. One. Two. Taia moves.

She's quicker than he expected. The bit of rusted metal he'd palmed goes right under the Zygerrian's chin. Not graceful. Not Jedi-like. Effective.

Zhaka lurches up from the floor, grabs the stun rod from the idiot's belt, jams it into the base of his spine. The slaver seizes once. Twice. Drops. He steps back, chest heaving. His mouth still tastes like copper and chemicals. Taia wipes her makeshift blade on her already ruined robe. Her eyes meet his, one soft, one sharp.

"You're surprisingly good at that," he says, tone dry. She doesn't look amused.

"I wasn't trained for peace." He doesn't laugh, but it's a close thing.

He remembers the way. Each hallway he was dragged through, kicking and screaming, each door slammed in his face. Rage makes an excellent map. She follows him without question. That surprises him more than it should. The compound is worse than he thought. Longer. Louder. More suffering humming under the surface like static. He pushes it down. Later. Maybe.

The weapons locker is just where he hoped it'd be, behind two guards, smug and undertrained. Zhaka lets the Force curl around his fingers, a familiar charge under his skin.

"Ready?" he asks, though he already knows the answer. She doesn't dignify it with words.

They hit hard. He sends the first guard flying with a push that cracks something wet inside his head. She ducks under a swing and uses her elbow like a hammer. Inside, the room is colder. Clean. Almost reverent. A single display case hums in the center. He sees it. His lightsaber. Elegant, obsidian hilted. Dark like the space between stars. He lifts it like he's greeting an old lover.

Next to it is her saber. He picks it up. Weighs it. Smaller. Marked. Alive. He hesitates. In this situation, most Sith would jump at the opportunity to take a Jedi's lightsaber. He can hear his father's voice in his ear, egging him on. It'd be so easy to strike her down. His fist closes. He hates his dad.

He holds it out to her. Taia's fingers brush his as she takes it. Neither of them mention the spark. The flicker. The thing. He ignites his, then she hers. It glows blue, lighting the hallway in hues of purple.

It should feel wrong. But it doesn't. It feels more natural than the blood that flows through his veins.

The rest is a blur. Blood, smoke, broken glass. They are a storm, wild as the skies of Dromund Kaas. Not Sith. Not Jedi. Weapons. Freedom doesn't come with fanfare, but with trees. A break in the wall. The taste of unfiltered air. Zhaka doesn't even know what planet they're on. He doesn't care.

He's not sure how long they walk. Hours, maybe. Long enough for the adrenaline to drain and the silence to feel heavier. Not uncomfortable. Full. Eventually they find a ridge. Below it, a spaceport.

Taia crouches near her pack, checking the charges on her comm. Her face is unreadable. The girl from the cell is still in there somewhere, but she's pulled the walls back up. He doesn't blame her.

"We'll probably end up trying to kill each other someday," she says without looking up.

"Probably." She stands and offers him a small holochip. He takes it with a brow raised.

"In case..." she shrugs, "you feel like being insufferable to an audience."

He smiles. Slides his own chip into her hand. She nods once, then turns, walking down toward the spaceport. He doesn't watch her go. Not really. But he doesn't move for a long time after she's gone. Eventually, he looks down at the chip in his hand. He doesn't crush it. Not today.

The holo buzzes, flickers once, then stabilizes. A flickering blue images forms. Taia, cross-legged, cloak draped over her shoulders. Wind tugs at her hair. She blinks at him.

"Wow. You survived." He raises an eyebrow.

"Don't act so impressed. I had to override three firewalls, piggyback a cargo signal, and hotwire my own datapad to make this work."

"Sounds like you've been busy not contacting me for what, four months?"

"I like to build suspense. Keeps people interested."

She groans and leans back, rubbing her face. "Suspense? We shared a piss bucket, Zhaka. That ship has sailed." A beat passes. The hum of the Holo fills the silence. Then, softer. "I missed talking to you." Zhaka blinks.

"Huh?"

"That's it? 'Huh'?"

"I just wasn't expecting sentimentality this early. You want me to light a candle for you?"

"I'll send you one," she leans forward. "With a note. 'To my favorite Sith pen pal.'"

“Touching.” Another pause, this one longer. She fidgets with her robe sleeve. He picks at the edge of his desk.

“You look...exactly the same. Do Sith ever age or do you just slowly get greyer?” He doesn’t blink.

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

“Explains the permanent scowl.” He raises an eyebrow.

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

“Hey! Beige is in this cycle. Jedi High Fashion.” A pause. “So,” she says eventually. “This... talking thing. Are we going to keep doing it?”

“I don’t know,” Zhaka says, leaning back. “Might be dangerous.” She nods.

“Yeah, real risky. We might accidentally be civil.” They both let the words sit in the air for too long. Taia looks at something offscreen.

“Look, 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.”

“By coincidence, of course.” The signal flickers as Taia turns to shut it off.

“Wait!” he says, before he can think better of it. She raises an eyebrow. He hesitates for a beat. “Don’t die before then.” Her face softens a little. She nods.

“Yeah. Same to you, Mr. Dark Side.” Then she disappears. He stares at the empty blue glow for a moment longer before switching it off and leaning back in his chair.

“Mr. Dark Side,” he mutters. But he can’t stop his smile.

His master’s dueling chamber is built for humiliation. Circular, sunken, lined with black stone scarred by old saber burns. The air is dry, stifling. Torchlight flickers from high sconces, casting elongated shadows across the dueling ring. Zhaka rolls his shoulders, trying to ease the tension along his spine. He wears simple training robes. His saber hangs at his hip, untouched. Across the room, Lord Serith Kav’i sits like she’s floating. She always does. Her gown is ceremonial red silk pattered with Sith glyphs. High collar. Bare shoulders. Everything about her is curated, from montral to toe. She doesn’t command through fear, not directly at least. She commands with artifice, with indulgence. With control so complete it feels like kindness.

Her Blood, Seritok, stands across from him. She is barefoot, bare chested beneath the cross-crossed black of a tightly bound training wrap. Her posture is perfect. Inhuman. Her saber sits in a servant’s hands, waiting for Serith’s nod. Restraints wrap her wrists, glowing with Sith alchemy. Zhaka’s seen her fight before. Watched he cut down beasts, slaves, apprentices. Always

with the same grim silence. She used to be a Jedi. He can see it in her footwork. In her hesitation when a fight drags too long. She's too clean a killer. Too quiet to be free.

Seated above them, cloaked in shadow, is Vieron. Zhaka's master. Not so much a man as a monument to severity. He is broad-shouldered, powerfully built, skin a deep, saturated red lined with the cracks of age. His yellow eyes burn like coals beneath a carved brow. His face is all scowl and scar. His armor is functional. Brutalist. Black durasteel layered like old bones. His voice, when it comes, is smoke caught in glass.

"Shall I assume the restraints stay on?" Zhaka asks dryly, already knowing the answer.

"She doesn't need the Force," Serith murmurs, waiving a hand. The servant sets down the saber in front of Seritok. She takes it. "Just her blade." From his seat above them, Vieron speaks like smoke caught in glass.

"No Force from you either, Apprentice. No strategy. No caution. Today, you bleed. Adapt or fail." Zhaka steps forward without complaint. His saber ignites with a snap-hiss. Seritok's is already lit. Green, double-bladed, bright as a wound across the dark floor.

"Begin."

The first round ends quickly. Zhaka's form is perfect, textbook Makashi. But Seritok doesn't care about his form. She blitzes him. Her saber moves in twin arcs, meant not for beauty but brutality. She closes the gap faster than he expects and slams her hilt into his ribs. His parry is too high. Her foot catches the side of his leg. He hits the ground with a grunt.

"Again," Vieron calls. "Stop performing." Zhaka grits his teeth.

The second round is worse. He lasts longer, keeps his distance, uses footwork and angles, but Seritok is relentless. She doesn't let up. A half spin forces him to block high, she drives the rear blade into his thigh. Another exchange, and she kicks his saber hand so hard his grip nearly buckles. He overextends. She knocks him flat. Vieron's voice cuts the air like a lash.

"You're waiting for the Force to save you. It won't." Zhaka wipes the blood from his mouth and stands.

The third time he fights differently. He gets inside her guard. Takes a hit to the forearm to land a strike to the ribs. It doesn't stop her but slows her. He throws his weight behind his blows now. She tags him on the shoulder again. He tags her across the hip. By the end of the round, both are panting. Sweat drips from Zhaka's jaw. Seritok's knuckles are split. Her expression remains flat.

"Better," Vieron says, unimpressed. "Again."

Hours pass like wounds. Zhaka stops relying on form. He stops pulling back. His blade work gets messier, tighter. He uses the hilt as often as the plasma. Grapples. Slams. Elbows.

Breaks open his knuckles on her jaw. She knocks the wind from his lungs with the back of her fist. Vieron gives no compliments. No rest. At one point, he shouts down, “If you step back again, I’ll throw you out myself.”

Zhaka doesn’t step back again. They go twelve rounds before Seritok finally stumbles. Her leg gives on a pivot, and Zhaka takes her down with a brutal sweep and a boot to the chest. He doesn’t gloat. Just breathes hard, blade angled at her throat.

Serith watches with a hand curled near her lip, half smiling. Vieron is still stone.

“Again.”

They begin before Zhaka can catch his breath. Seritok rises with fluid grace, double blade spinning into position. He meets her with a snarl. They fight until the floor is spattered with sweat and flaked skin. Until every breath burns. Until Zhaka stops thinking and just moves. He disarms Seritok with a hitched breath and a twist of her wrist. Vieron rises at last.

“You still flinch when it gets ugly,” he says to Zhaka. “I expect better tomorrow.” Zhaka doesn’t answer. His chest heaves. One arm cradles his ribs. A bruise blooms across his jaw like spilled ink. Serith crouches beside Seritok and brushes sweat from her brow.

“How lovely,” she murmurs, “You will eat well tonight, ‘Itok.’” Zhaka watches her. His saber hums faintly in his hand.

He returns to the training hall after dinner. The torches burn low, casting long shadows across the durasteel walls. The air smells like blood. He strips off his outer robes. His body aches. His left shoulder throbs with each movement. He faces the old sparring dummy – humanoid-shaped durasteel wrapped in impact foam, set into the ground by a fixed pole. He breathes through his nose. Out through his mouth. Then he hits it. Once. Twice. His strikes start clean. A proper jab. A cross. A body blow. Then another. Another. He abandons form entirely, throws a wild right, then a left hook so hard his wrist screams. He slams his palm into the dummy’s chest plate, teeth clenched. Every impact echoes in the chamber. He grits his jaw as blood slicks his knuckles. Pain. Real, honest pain.

*I flinch when it gets ugly.* He remembers Vieron’s words. The disgust behind them. The way Serith had smiled like the bruises belonged to her.

*I’m waiting for the Force to save me.* He punches again. Harder. His knuckles split wider. He doesn’t stop. He thinks of Seritok, how she fights without hesitation, without power, without a single burst of the Force. Pure, trained violence. He hates how she beats him. How she wins against the lie he’d built for himself. That power was enough, that elegance would save him.

He gasps. Another strike. Another. His breath is ragged. His vision blurs. There’s a smear of blood on the dummy’s chest. He sags forward, one arm draped over the training post. His fists throb. His head aches. He presses his forehead to the cool metal, eyes closing.

“I need to be better,” he whispers. Not stronger. Not faster. Better. Not because Vieron demands it, not because Serith is watching. Because one day, he might not have a blade. Or the Force. Or time to think. And he’ll need to be ready.

The next morning comes slowly. He rests, barely. When he wakes, it’s with the same weight pressing down on his chest. The same ache in his shoulders. A coil of something sour and raw twisting beneath his ribs. He doesn’t bother summoning a steward for breakfast. He dresses in silence. Training robes again, already darkened with dried sweat and old blood at the cuffs. His knuckles sting as he wraps them in cloth.

The halls are quiet as he makes his way down. The estate is always quiet before first meal, before the ritual and vanity begins. He prefers it that way. The dueling chamber greets him like a grave. Cold. Shadowed. He steps into the center. Doesn’t bother activating the dummies. Just moves. A jab. Cross. Elbow. Step. His body screams in protest. His ribs don’t like the turns. His hip clicks when he pivots. But he keeps going. Again. And again. He reopens the cuts across his knuckles when he drives a punch into the padded durasteel. Blood soaks his cloth. He doesn’t flinch.

Faster. He repeats the sequence. Then another. Then switches hands. He drills until the rhythm feels like punishment. Until it hurts to think. Until each breath reminds him he’s alive.

He doesn’t stop. He doesn’t want stillness. He wants to be emptied.

The sound of the chamber doors opening cuts through the silence. Zhaka doesn’t turn. He hears the familiar grace in the footfalls. The light sweep of Serith’s gown. The slower steps behind her. He exhales and steadies himself.

Serith wears a new gown, black with red thread that crawls like veins down the silk. Her smile is soft and lazy. Seritok follows at her heel, silent and collared. Barefoot again. Her saber is carried by a servant, who kneels as they pass. Her skin glistens faintly, freshly oiled for presentation. Her mechanical leg clicks softly as she walks. Her arms are wrapped to the elbow, restraints glowing like jewelry. Zhaka watches her move into the ring and feels it twist in him again. Admiration. Revulsion. Something else he cannot name.

Vieron enters a beat later, presence slicing the room like saber across flesh. His robes are high-collared, armor layered. No ornament, just weight and command. His gaze doesn’t find Zhaka, just Serith.

“Thank you for your patience, Lord Kav’i. My apprentice still needs to find his form.” She waves a hand his way, settling herself down on a seat.

“She’s yours for the day, Lord Vieron,” she says like she’s offering him a fine vintage. “I am honored to help.”

Seritok takes her place across the ring from Zhaka. With a wave from Serith, she snatches the saber from the servant and ignites it. Zhaka plucks his saber from his hip. Vieron's voice cuts across the chambers.

"Begin."

They move. Seritok spins the double blade wide, using the outer edge to test his reach. He ducks the first pass, angles in close. He's sharper now. Tighter. Less elegant, more vicious. Their blades collide in quick success – four hits, five, six – until Zhaka slams the hilt of his saber against her wrist. She twists free. Drops. Spins. Her rear blade cuts a low arc at his knees. He hops back.

"You're slow on the recoil, 'Itok,'" Serith says idly from her seat. "Control your hips." Zhaka doesn't let the moment pass. He drives forward with a hammering crosscut. Seritok redirects the blow just enough to stagger him and rises in a burst of speed. Her footwork falters slightly, metal leg dragging a fraction, but her spin carries weight. She pushes him back and they reset, sabers humming in their shared breath. Zhaka can feel the burn in his calves. His body aches. But he's holding his ground.

"You only make ground when she stumbles. You know how pathetic that makes you?" Vieron's voice echoes. Zhaka's jaw tightens. They go again.

This time, she surprises him, goes high, then knees him in the ribs. He buckles. She doesn't press, she resets. Emotionless. He charges her. Their sabers lock near the hilt. Zhaka snarls, throws his elbow into her shoulder. She flinches, barely. He presses forward, shoving her back, and throws a wild downward strike. She parries. Redirects. Kicks his shin. He doesn't fall, but the pain snaps down to the bone.

"I trained you better than this," Vieron says, voice a stone grinding glass. "You still hold your saber like a student. Like a coward with something to lose." Zhaka doesn't answer him. Seritok circles him. Her breathing is audible now, her movements more clipped. But she doesn't hesitate. They clash again, a sharp volley: strike, counter, strike, duck, riposte. Zhaka lands a hit to her ribs that makes her stagger. They reset. And duel. And duel. And duel.

They go for hours. By the fifth round, Zhaka's arms burn. His mouth tastes of metal. His hair sticks to the back of his neck with sweat. Seritok limps, but still stands composed.

"Again," Vieron barks. "Your posture is disintegrating. Shall I call in a child with a stick to test you?" Zhaka lunges, more rage in his movements this time. It throws off his precision. He overreaches. Seritok taps the blade, flips his arm, drops him hard.

"Again," Vieron says before he can rise. Zhaka's fingers throb as he scrapes up his saber. They go again. At one point, he knocks her back, follows with a strike to the side. She absorbs it with her shoulder and spins through the pain. Her mechanical leg stutters – he can hear the grind of the servos – but she rides the movement and throws him off balance.

“Excellent improvisation, ‘Itok,’ Serith purrs. Zhaka sees red. He fights harder, grabs her saber shaft mid spin. Elbows her jaw. It lands hard – her head snaps back. He presses forward. Knocks the saber from her hand. His saber’s tip hovers near her chest. She breathes heavily.

“You’re finally capable of beating a crippled Jedi who isn’t allowed to use the Force. Congratulations.” Vieron’s voice echoes. Zhaka’s mind swims. “You think that makes you a swordsman?” Vieron stands now. “You’ve spent weeks learning how to stop falling on your own blade. Well done. Perhaps next time I’ll dress a slave in rags and you can perform for the crowd.” Zhaka’s breath is ragged. “You have more potential than this,” Vieron snaps. “And instead you deliver mediocrity. What am I meant to do with that? Mount you on a wall with the others?”

It’s nearly dusk. The chamber reeks of sweat and burnt skin. Zhaka doesn’t remember the last time he ate. His vision swims, he blinks hard. Just one more round. They circle.

She strikes first, he blocks. Again. He counters. Strikes her across the shoulder. Presses the attack. Another blow. Another. He takes one to the ribs. Doesn’t register it.

“You’ll never be more than your father’s echo,” Vieron hisses.

Zhaka sees red. His saber drives him forward. Her staff catches it, twists. He steps inside her guard, slams his hand against her chest. The Force pulses like a scream. A shockwave flattens the air between them. Her saber flies from her hand. Seritok staggers, gasping. Her knees bend, but she doesn’t fall. She grips her ribs, shuddering. The green glow of her saber sputters out on the floor below her.

Silence.

Serith is already moving. She’s at Seritok’s side in seconds, fingers delicate as she steadies the slave’s shoulders.

“There, there, ‘Itok,’ she murmurs, voice velvet-sweet. “You did well. Just breathe.” Zhaka’s hand is still raised. His chest heaves. Sweat drips down his chin. He feels everything at once. His limbs shake. His vision tunnels. His stomach is hollow.

Vieron rises from his seat. Serith cradles Seritok close, whispers something Zhaka can’t hear. He watches them through blood-rimmed eyes. As Serith leads her slave out, the Jedi turns her head slightly, just enough for Zhaka to see her face. Her mouth does not move, but her gaze meets his. She gives him a nod. The chamber is silent, save for his breath. Vieron is in front of him. Zhaka doesn’t even lift his hands to block the first strike.

He doesn’t remember how long it lasts. Vieron’s words blend together into a familiar drawl of “your father would be ashamed” and “you are a failure.” The floor tastes of dust and copper. His vision swims. His ribs scream anew. His jaw clicks strangely when he tries to breathe. He doesn’t cry out. Doesn’t fight back. Just folds into it. Lets it happen.

When it's over, the chamber is still. He hears Vieron's boots retreat, the rasp of the doors sliding shut behind him. Silence settles on his skin like ash. For the longest time, he doesn't move. Eventually, he finds the strength within himself. He wipes the blood from his mouth with the edge of his sleeve. One of his fingers doesn't bend right. He ignores it. Limps down the hall, trailing red and sweat. His saber drags with him like dead weight. He remembers how proud he was when he held it for the first time.

He doesn't go to the infirmary. Doesn't call a medic. Doesn't summon a steward. He retreats to his quarters. The lights are low, silence absolute. He sheds his robes without ceremony, the cloth clinging where blood has dried. In the refresher, he runs cold water. The pain makes itself known in layers: bruised ribs, torn skin on his knuckles, cracks along his cheekbone, swelling under one eye. He cleans them all with quiet, methodical movements. He doesn't flinch when the water hits the broken places.

He stares at himself in the mirror a long time after. Watches the way blood spiders through the water in the basin. Sees the places where his posture slouches. Where weakness etches itself into his skin. Where Vieron left his fingerprints. By nightfall, he's dressed again, a black cloak over a soft tunic. His face is marked but presentable. His saber rests comfortably on his hip.

He makes the slow walk to Serith's estate alone. Doesn't announce himself, doesn't have to. Her servants recognize him and usher him through marble corridors with perfumed silence and bowed heads. The interior smells of spice and incense, the air is heavy with curated beauty. The same grace he's come to loathe. Serith waits for him in the inner atrium, reclining like a serpent coiled across a velvet divan. Her gown is a river of dark amethyst, embroidered with thorns. The lighting flatters her montrals. Her nails are stained the color of dried roses. She regards him without standing.

“Back so soon, apprentice?” she drawls.

“I came to apologize,” Zhaka says evenly. His voice is hoarse from damage he hasn’t let heal. “My conduct earlier was inexcusable.” Serith studies him. Something in her expression tugs toward delight, but she tucks it back into restraint.

“Did Lord Vieron send you? Or is this your own penance?”

“My own.” A pause.

“Interesting.” He lowers his gaze.

“I lost control. I’m aware of the damage done. I’d like the chance to speak with her.” Serith lifts a single brow.

“To my Blood?”

“If you would be so kind.” Another pause. She seems to savor it, lets the silence hang just long enough to make him second-guess. Then, she rises with fluid grace, crossing to him on feet that make no sound against the carpet.

“I’ve never been fond of apologies,” she murmurs, brushing a finger under his bruised jaw. “But you’re not here to please me, are you?” He doesn’t answer. She smiles.

“She’s resting. You may speak with her, briefly.” Zhaka bows his head.

“Thank you.” She lifts her hand and gestures to a nearby attendant.

“Escort Apprentice Tenab to ‘Itok’s cell.’” Zhaka follows without another word, the throb in his ribs echoing the rhythm of his steps. The corridor grows colder as they near the holding cells. Zhaka’s boots click against polished stone. The warm glow of torchlight fades into the red wall sconces that pulsing dully. The hum of containment fields murmur in the air like a breath through clenched teeth. They stop at the last door.

The cell glows with soft blue light. At the center, kneels Seritok. Not slumped, not resting, kneeling. Back straight. Head bowed. Her posture is too perfect to be natural, too rigid to be proud. Her legs are folded neatly beneath her, thighs pressed to calves in the kind of stillness that can only be born of pain. A forcefield glimmers around her like a museum case; transparent walls barely visible but humming softly. A field designed for display. Zhaka doesn’t have to ask. He knows Serith built this.

She doesn’t look up at him. Her earthy skin is still flush from exertion, a faint sheen of sweat catching the base of her lekku. Her mouth is neutral, controlled. It reminds him of Ire’s still scowl. Dark bruises blossom along her ribs, visible across her bare chest. One shoulder is mottled where he caught her with his hilt. The cloth at her midsection sits wrong, slightly crooked. He wonders if it hides broken skin, or worse. The hollow space beneath her collarbone is red and tender, the spot where he drove the Force into her. She clutches nothing, but her fingers twitch in her lap. At her hip, he spots her saber.

It hangs there like a mockery, familiar and useless. Zhaka’s gut twists. It takes a second to realize what’s wrong. There’s no hum to it. No presence. Just a hilt. A shell. She must feel it, too. The absence. He steps closer to the edge of the field. Doesn’t speak yet. She’s so quiet. So still. Sculpted into silence.

He stands there a moment, just watching her. Then he clears his throat softly.

“I owe you an apology,” he says, voice practiced. “I lost control in the ring. That was... beneath me.” She doesn’t move or lift her head. But he notices her fingers tightening. “I’ve already been disciplined,” he adds, a bit sharper than he intends. Still no response. He waits, then turns toward the servant standing near the door.

“Leave us.” The servant hesitates, just a second, then bows and exists. The door hisses shut behind them. He takes a deep breath.

“I lost control. That wasn’t your fault, it was mine.”

“Then don’t make it about you.” Her tone is flat. Not cruel. Honest. He exhales, almost a laugh.

“Right.” He slides down the wall until he’s on his knees in front of her. His jaw flexes. “I’m trying to be better,” he says. That gets a small tilt of her head. Her eyes narrow. Assessing him.

“Then don’t let him teach you.” Zhaka doesn’t ask who. He doesn’t have to.

“You think he’s holding me back?”

“I think he wants to own you,” she replies, calm and sharp. “And the only way to own someone like you is to make you predictable. Make you scared to improvise.” He shifts under the words.

“He demands perfection.”

“He demands control,” she says. “You fight like someone who’s been told there’s only one right answer. That hesitation you have, he put that in you. It’ll get you killed.”

Silence.

“You’re good,” she says, matter-of-factly. “You have structure, timing, judgement. But you stop yourself. You want to be perfect.” Zhaka breathes in, deeply. The Force stirs in his chest like a tide. He nods.

“I thought I was getting better.”

“You are,” she says. “Just not at the thing he’s trying to make you into.” Their eyes meet. Her green eyes are calm. Focused. He realizes how uncomfortable he feels without demand or agenda to hide behind. He doesn’t know what to say.

“He wants a weapon, not a warrior,” she says simply. “If you let him shape you, you’ll forget the difference.” He looks down. His knuckles ache beneath the wrappings.

“Thank you,” he says, voice rougher than before. She says nothing in return, but she doesn’t look away.

The silence lingers between them like a held breath. Zhaka rises slowly, every bruise reminding him of its presence. He doesn’t speak again. There’s nothing left to say. She’s already given him more than he asked for. He casts one final look toward her, kneeling in the glow of the containment field like a half-forgotten saint. She watches him, shoulder square, spine straight. He gives her a low bow and leaves the room without summoning the servant. The doors hiss open

and seal behind him. The halls of Serith's estate are quiet at this hour. He passes the guards without a word, leaves without giving Serith proper thanks.

Outside, the air is colder than he recalls. A thin mist hangs low over the jungle walkways, lights strung between trees cast pools of gold across the stone path. The estate behind him glows like a wound. He doesn't look back. His ribs ache with every breath. His lip still stings where the skin split open earlier. But the walk helps. The rhythm of footfall. The tension unwinding, ever so slightly, from his shoulders. He thinks of her words.

"He wants a weapon. Not a warrior." He's heard similar things before. From instructors, overseers, rivals. But not like that. Not without scorn. Not as truth stripped bare of contempt. Not from someone who had nothing to gain by telling him that.

The idea burrows deep. That he fights like someone waiting for permission. That he hesitates not out of doubt, but out of conditioning. He can still feel the moment her saber dropped, the way her body refused to fall, even when her breath was stolen from her lungs. He remembers the nod she gave him. Not out of fear. Not submission, either. Respect.

He slows near the outer gate of his master's compound. The guards here don't bow. They glance up, assess him, and return to silence. He's expected. Always is. The stars above are dull against the storm clouds. Thunder rolls somewhere in the distance. Zhaka pauses past the gates, his hand brushing the pommel of his saber. Not gripping it, just feeling the shape. He thought it was everything, once. Proof of his worth. But now... he remembers the silence in her cell. The absence of the kyber's hum.

*What am I without it?*

The question hovers. He doesn't answer it. He steps forward. The doors open. Tomorrow, he'll push himself again. Not for Vieron. Not for Seritok. Because if he doesn't carve something new out of what he's becoming, he'll end up just like them. And that, he realizes, is what he fears most.

The neon lights of Nar Shaddaa smear across puddles like oil slicks. Zhaka leans against a rusted railing, cloak pulled low over his face. The stench of oil, spice and ozone clings to the air, but he doesn't mind. The chaos of the Smuggler's Moon has its advantages. It's loud. Dirty. No one cares who you are.

He feels Taia before he sees her. A ripple in the Force, light and wild, brushing against the edges of his awareness. He stiffens, heart thudding in his chest a bit faster than usual. Boots splash against wet durasteel. She rounds the corner, hood pushed back enough for him to catch a glimpse of those captivating eyes.

“You’re late,” he says, voice a bit rougher than intended. She lifts a brow, rainwater dripping from her curls.

“You’re early. Didn’t know Sith were so punctual.” He huffs, a breath that might have been a laugh if he wasn’t so tense.

“Gotta keep up the brooding image, y’know?”

“Sure,” she quips, stepping closer. For a moment, neither of them speak. They just stand there, studying each other. Last time they were this close, they were bruised and adrenaline rushed. But now? It’s different. Harder. There isn’t blood to excuse the way his gaze drops to her mouth. There’s no battle to explain why her hand twitches like she wants to reach out.

“You look different,” she says finally. He shrugs, trying to play casual.

“I got a haircut.” She smiles. Small, real. It punches a hole through his chest. “You still look like you pick fights you shouldn’t.” She laughs, bright and sharp. It startles them both. For a heartbeat, the noise of the city-planet fades under it.

“I missed you,” he blurts out before he can stop himself. The words hang between them. Taia ducks her head, cheeks coloring despite the rain.

“Yeah,” she says, voice softer. “Me too.” A long, aching silence. Zhaka shifts his weight from one foot to another. His emotions buzz under his skin like static.

“We probably should leave,” he says, voice low. “Stop talking.”

“Probably,” she agrees. Neither of them move. Taia fiddles with the edge of her jacket. “Are you in a rush, or...” she trails off.

“Or?” he prompts, one brow raising. She hesitates, then steps closer. Close enough for Zhaka to see the rain glinting off her eyelashes.

“Or maybe,” she says, almost a whisper, “we pretend, for one night, that we’re not Jedi and Sith.” He searches her face, looking for deceit, a trap, a speck of Dromund Kaas. He finds nothing. Only hope. Desire. He holds out his hand. She stares at it for a second like it’s a knife, then takes it. Their fingers intertwine, tentative at first. Then tighter.

They don’t go far, just down a few back alleys toward a part of the city even the spice runners forget. A cantina hums low against the night, sign flickering with half-dead letters. Inside, it’s all creaky booths, sticky tables, and a band of off-key Neimoidians butchering some classical ballads. Perfect.

They find a booth tucked away in a dark corner. No one looks twice at them. Taia slides into the seat across from him.

“Rule one,” she says, “no bringing up our...day jobs.” He raises a brow, smile gliding across his cheeks easily.

“We’re making rules now?” She leans forward, deadpan.

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

“Fine, fine. Rulemaking it is. Lay ‘em on me.” She narrows her eyes, but there’s the ghost of a smile playing on her lips.

“Thank you. Rule two: no Force tricks. No reading each other. We keep our thoughts to ourselves.” He tilts his head, fingers drumming lightly on the table.

“What if one of us is in danger?” She considers his response, expression tightening just slightly. “Like if you’re with a Jedi Master and I need to know if you’re okay without revealing I know you?”

“Okay, exception for life-or-death situations. But otherwise?”

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

“Anything else to add?” She tilts her head at him. He thinks a second, weighing risk.

“No real names in messages. No titles. No ranks,” he says. “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 your own personal comm?” She rolls her eyes at his question.

“No, Zhaka. Jedi like to trust each other, believe it or not.” Taia taps the edge of her glass. “Okay. Rule four. If one of us says stop, we stop. No arguments.” He nods, smile sinking for a second. He thinks about Vieron, waiting for him on Dromund Kaas. Of his father’s tense hands.

“Yeah,” he takes a breath. “One more. No promises. No somedays. I don’t want to give you something I can’t keep.” Taia looks down, fingers curling slightly around the table.

“That’s a good one,” she says softly. They sit in silence a moment longer, before the server droid rolls up to the booth. They order something cheap and greasy. The kind of food you regret the second you eat it. And, while they eat, they talk. About stupid things. The worst movies they’ve seen. The weirdest vendors in the city. The cantina’s karaoke contest. After they finish their food, Taia’s gaze catches something over Zhaka’s shoulder. She grins.

“Oh no,” she says, standing up and tugging his sleeve.

“Oh no, what?” he asks, but lets her pull him to his feet. In a shadowy alcove sits a battered Pazaak table. It hums quietly – still operational.

“Do you play?” she asks, eyebrow arched. He breathes through his teeth, ruffling the hair on the base of his neck.

“Badly.”

“Perfect!” She drags him over. They settle at opposite sides of the table. The screen flickers erratically, the alcove smells of spilled drinks.

“The rules apply here, too,” she says, grinning wickedly. “No Force cheating.”

“You wound me,” he says, faking offence as he places his first card. She plays aggressively, while he tries to wrap his head around her strategy, shaking dust off his memory.

“Is that really the best you’ve got?” she taunts him after he busts over 20, again.

“I’m lulling you into a false sense of security,” he retorts, smirking. She laughs, that crisp, genuine laugh that holds his ear.

“It’s working. I feel very secure.” Hours blur past without much thought. They order synth-cider that tastes like burnt sugar. Taia nearly knocks the table down once, while declaring her winning hand. As the cantina quiets down, Zhaka leans back, stretching his arms over his head with a groan.

“My dignity is in ruins,” he complains.

“You didn’t have any to begin with,” she teases, kicking him lightly under the table. Their laughter fades into a softer silence. He watches her across the table, neon reflections playing across her face. She meets his gaze, smile pulling her dimples up and squeezing her eyes. He clears his throat.

“Rematch?” Her smile grows. Just as she reaches for the deck to shuffle, her comm buzzes loudly against her belt. Just like that, the smile vanishes. She glances at the ID. Her hand shakes just a little as she answers.

“Yes, Master?” she says, voice a practiced calm. Zhaka sits back, closing his eyes and trying to give her space.

“Where are you?” the clipped voice demands. It’s feminine. As soon as he thinks that he reprimands himself. Barely a night and he’s already trying to figure out who her master is. “You were supposed to check in an hour ago.”

“Apologies, Master,” Taia replies smoothly. “Street gridlock. I should be back soon.” A curt reprimand follows. Zhaka doesn’t open his eyes until he hears the beep of the comm. She tucks it away and stands abruptly, pushing her chair back with a screech against the floor.

“Duty calls,” she says, forcing a crooked smile. He rises with her. He wants to grab her hand again, but stops himself.

“Stay safe, Taia.” She hesitates, then leans in. For a second, she pulls him into a fierce hug. Her forehead presses against his collarbone. His hands hover over her back.

“Thank you for tonight,” she murmurs, then pulls away, slipping into the rain-washed night without looking back. Zhaka watches her go, standing motionless in the cantina’s dying neon glow. His usual bitterness doesn’t rise up in him like it usually does when he’s left alone. Instead, he feels something new, almost alien to him. Gratitude. It bubbles inside his chest like boiling sugar. He’s grateful for Taia. For her stubborn, reckless hope. He smiles, just a little, and makes his way into the neon haze.

Taia’s holomessages weasel their way into Zhaka’s daily life. He doesn’t mean for them to, but they do. Like moss in the cracks of stone, like sunlight bleeding through blackout curtains. They arrive randomly, without reason. Sometimes it’s her voice, hushed and amused, sometimes it’s her face, grainy in the low signal. Sometimes, it’s just letters on the blue screen. He doesn’t always answer her, but he reads them.

He finds himself checking his comm more than usual. In council chambers, on shuttle rides. Once in the middle of a duel, a flicker of her name and he loses half a second of focus. Enough to add another scar to his registry. His opponent laughed. Zhaka didn’t.

The months fold into each other, blurring with bureaucratic grind and ritualized cruelty. He attends executions staged for discipline. He stops watching. One night, he realizes the screams no longer seem to reach past his ears. Taia sends him a holomessage that night.

*Today, I caught a youngling trying to smuggle a tooka into the Temple kitchen. He told me it was his Padawan. I didn’t have the heart to correct him.*

He sleeps easier after that.

A week after, he receives an invitation from another Dark Councilmember, bearing the seal of the Kav’i family. Another old, noble, lineage. It reads:

*You are cordially invited to celebrate the continued supremacy of Lord Palide: ten years of service to the Dark Council and fifty cycles of life and legacy. Formal entertainment will include combat exhibitions, fine dining, and an auction of Lady Serith Kav’i’s finest slaves. The event will not be held at Palide’s estate, but instead at his family’s estate, under the stewardship of Lady Serith Kav’i. Attendance is expected.*

Zhaka scoffs. Attendance is expected. As if they’d ever ask. His master reads over his shoulder, a raised brow the only hint he’s understood the words, then passes the message to their

travel coordinator with a simple, “We will leave tomorrow morning.” Zhaka offers no objections. He sends Taia a message the next day, a voice clip.

*I just got ‘cordially invited’ to something where attendance is expected. Nothing says celebration like mandatory fun.*

He receives a response the next morning, on the shuttle to Serith’s estate.

*Sounds awful. My master always tells me to keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. You’ll be fine.*

He smiles before he can stop himself.

Lord Palide’s birthday draws a particular kind of crowd: wealthy and theatrical. Power brokers. Dark Lords. Generals in polished armor. Zhaka fits in here like muscle memory. He wears long black robes trimmed with gold, formal armor beneath the folds. A ceremonial chain around his throat. Clean lines. Precise folds. Every thread a promise of power.

He chats with a Moff’s son about the durability of Mandalorian alloys. Trades idle observations with a bored archivist who brought his newest pet: a blind Changeling sculpted into a chair. He clinks glasses with one of Palide’s servants, who insists on speaking in verse. The estate’s halls are dressed in crimson, giant braziers dotting the space between each pillar. Suspended cages hang draped in veils. Servants pass around trays of meat carved from beasts Zhaka suspects were hunted for theater, not taste.

The centerpiece of the estate isn’t its luxurious parlors or languid halls, but the colosseum, carved into the earth under the building. Guests take their seats leisurely, sipping wine while slaves scream and guards bark orders under the benches. The arena floor glows from within; pale gold light shining through black obsidian glass. Veined like a furnace.

Zhaka finds his place in the upper ring beside his master, who watches with the same placid detachment he gives to executions and council summons. A servant offers Zhaka honeyed meat and spiced wine. He takes the wine. Below, the first opponent is dragged out. A slave with burns across his arms. He’s given a blade. The gate across the arena opens and *she* enters. Uluwi M’Seritok. Blood of Serith. Barefoot. Collared. Bare-chested. Draped in ceremonial black robes stitched with red thread. Her skin gleams – sweat? Oil? Both? Her saber is carried behind her by a servant like sacrament on a tray of mirrored steel. She kneels at the center of the arena, eyes half-lidded. Her voice rings out in flawless Sith. Smooth. Dead.

“I stand bound and ready. May this flesh obey the will of its master.” A ripple of delight moves through the crowd. Across the way, Lord Palide chuckles like someone admiring a painting. Serith, lounging next to him, raises her wineglass with a single, deliberate motion.

“Begin.”

The blood comes in stages. The first man dies unable to lift his blade in time. The second is a young apprentice. Eager. Desperate. He lasts almost two minutes, his red blade bouncing off Seritok's green like a forest fire. Then come the beasts. A horned cat from Dxun. A multi-limbed mutant from the deep sewers of Nar Shaddaa. Seritok doesn't flinch. She moves like a whisper caught in class. Always one step ahead. Always one breath too calm. Each time she disarms an opponent, she kneels before Serith.

“May I spill what resists?”

Each time, Serith raises her glass and grants permission in Sith.

“This blood is for the pyre. This silence is for She Who Holds my Mind in her Palm.”

The crowd barely gives response each time an execution ends. They're drinking, eating, indulging in casual conversation. Zhaka hears one lord speculate how many more fights Seritok could endure before she collapses from pure exhaustion. Another offers a wager. Zhaka drinks once, then sets his glass down. He crosses one leg and adjusts his cloak.

Seritok moves like a blade in water. Her opponent, a thick-limbed mercenary in iron restraints, rushes her with a vibrospear. She drops him in three moves. Beside Zhaka, Vieron exhales faintly.

“She's still performing that tired liturgy,” his master complains, not bothering to hide his disinterest. “I've seen sharper recitations from temple novices.” Zhaka doesn't smile, but debates picking up his drink.

“It's not for us, Master.”

“No,” Vieron says, swirling his wine. “it's all theatrics. Lord Kav'i likes her pets trained in ceremony. It makes their obedience look like art.” Below them, Seritok kneels beside the corpse, her voice cold and composed.

“This blood for the pyre. This silence for She Who Holds my Mind in her Palm.” The applause is scattered. Lazy.

“She's good at what she does,” Zhaka says.

“She's repetitive,” Vieron counters. “A tool can be sharp but dulled in use.” He turns his head, studying Zhaka with narrowed eyes.

“You've been absent,” he says, simply. “Vanishing between assignments. Missing your check-ins. And you've acquired the unfortunate habit of returning with grease on your boots.” Zhaka keeps his voice level.

“I've been laying groundwork.”

“On Nar Shaddaa?” Vieron asks, brows lifted. Zhaka turns toward him, offering the calm poise of someone used to being interrogated.

“There’s a Hutt-run salvage ring smuggling Republic supplies through neutral corridors. I found a backdoor market below the Crimson Spires. No surveillance. No Republic tags.” Vieron tilts his head. Zhaka’s heartbeat flies through his chest. “I infiltrated one. Made contact with an Umbaran merc attached to the ring. She worked for the Senate six months ago. Surveillance, classified work. She’s useful.”

“Useful how?”

“She’s disillusioned. Doesn’t work for the Republic anymore. She can draw out the real handlers.” Vieron is silent for a beat. Zhaka prays he doesn’t press further. Finally, he nods slowly.

“That’s better. You should have led with that. Lies work best when wrapped in detail.” Zhaka inclines his head.

“Duly noted.” A moment passes. Zhaka feels it, faintly: a brush of Force at the edge of his thoughts. His master prodding gently, looking for weakness like a hound sniffing blood. He locks his mind down, doesn’t resist outright, but lets the surface go cold. A practiced neutrality. Eventually, Vieron leans back.

“If you’re using her, use her thoroughly. If you’re attached to her, kill her.” Zhaka lets out a soft exhale, forcing Taia from his mind.

“She’s a tool. I know the difference.” Lie or not, he speaks confidently. Before his master can answer, a velvet voice unfurls behind them.

“My lords.” Serith’s voice is a polished whisper. She steps onto the terrace with the unhurried ease of someone accustomed to being waited for. Her gown is deep red, cut to drape like water across her form, lined with black silk and bone-colored embroidery in curling Sith script. Her eyes are lined with kohl, her montrals supporting silver jewelry that catches the colosseum’s low light. Vieron does not rise but inclines his head to Serith.

“Lord Kav’i,” he says flatly. “Still finding time to play hostess, I see.”

“Only when the guest list amuses me,” she replies, smile practiced. She turns toward the railing and glances down at the pit below, where servants drag a body from the obsidian floor. “I must say, she continues, “the turnout exceeded my expectations. My dear uncle’s name still has pull in these circles, it seems, though I imagine most came for the entertainment.”

“And the wine,” Vieron says. “The weak come for both.” She gives him a soft hum of amusement.

“How is your estate, Lord Vieron? I hear the archives have doubled in size since the last cycle.”

“Tripled,” he says. “My new acquisitions were tedious to classify, but worth the delay.”

“And your staff?”

“Efficient.” She nods, sipping from her glass.

“That’s more than I can say for my current archivist. He catalogued a Jedi relic under ‘art objects’ last week. I’m considering removing a few fingers for emphasis.”

“I find they work better with just their first finger,” Vieron says dryly. Zhaka maintains his silence as he listens to their rhythm. It is always like this with nobles. Barbed civility. Serith tilts her head toward him.

“And you, Zhaka? I imagine you’ve been busy. You’ve grown into your armor.”

“I wear it when it’s required,” he answers, keeping his tone neutral. “This seemed like a fitting occasion.” She lets that hang, then looks back to Vieron.

“How goes the diplomatic talks? I always admire how you walk the tightrope between peace and war.” He smirks and takes a sip of wine.

“The line grows thinner each year.”

“And thinner still, I hear,” she says. “Tython, isn’t it? For the treaty renewal?” Zhaka’s gaze flickers toward his master. This is the first time he’s heard this.

“Yes,” Vieron says, barely reacting. “The Republic insisted. I have the unfortunate pleasure of renewing it.” Serith’s brows lift, just slightly.

“You’ll be visiting Tython?”

“I will be attending, as will Apprentice Tenab.” Zhaka’s spine straightens a fraction.

“Of course, Master.”

“Tython’s changed,” Serith says, swirling her wine. “They say the trees grow smaller and the temple bigger.” Vieron makes a hum. “I imagine it will be... educational,” she adds, eyes moving to Zhaka. Vieron doesn’t respond, which is answer enough. Serith lets the silence breathe for a moment before she breaks it again; her tone light and casual.

“After the main festivities conclude, I’ll be hosting something smaller. Just a few close friends. Blood will be there, of course. I thought perhaps you’d enjoy the company.”

“You honor me,” Vieron says, tone un-honored, “I am afraid I have other things to attend to.” There’s a pause.

“I’ll stay, Lord Kav’i. If your invitation extends to me alone,” Zhaka says. Serith smiles, warm but edged.

“Lovely. I’ll have a seat prepared.” She inclines her head to them once more, then turns and makes her way across the arena. Her scent lingers in her wake. Sweet. Spiced. Cold. Vieron sips his wine.

“She wants something,” he mutters.

“She always does,” Zhaka says.

“Just don’t let her think she already has it, boy.”

The dinner chamber is long and elliptical, framed by tall pillars veiled in red fabric. A faint breeze moves through the room, pulling the scent of spiced oils and candlewax through the air. Guests are seated in a careful curve around a narrow table. Minor lords, acolytes, dignitaries from lesser systems. No one of consequence. They laugh too loudly, raise their glasses too often, cling to Serith’s toast with the hungry delight of pets waiting to be patted. Just how Serith likes. Zhaka sits closer to the head, placed carefully at Serith’s left. Close enough to the host to honor him. To speak with her without being drawn into the constant murmur of idle conversation.

Serith lounges at the center of the curve, elegant and languid in her high-backed chair. Her gown shimmers like serpent skin in the candlelight. To her right, as always, kneels Seritok. Still collared, now saberless. Her skin is sleek with sweat, and her breathing is consciously metered. She must be exhausted from the colosseum. Despite that, her posture is perfectly straight. Her hands fold in her lap. She hasn’t moved since entering the room.

The food is as ornate as the company. Bowls of bone broth laced with crimson oil. Braised roots cut into spirals. At the center of the meal, a thick, blood-dark stew served in iron dishes and embossed with the crest of House Kav’i. Zhaka eats with care. Not indulgently, just enough to be polite. And he listens. Across the table, a jeweled countess describes the finer points of flame-silk to a pair of retired inquisitors. Beside her, a tattooed man in gold-plated armor recounts a naval massacre like a love story. Serith swirls her wine.

“It’s strange,” she says without looking Zhaka’s way, “how rarely we speak outside of stages and spectacles.” Zhaka doesn’t glance up from his stew.

“We speak enough.” Her smile twitches.

“Do we?” She watches him a moment, then adds, like a ritual, “How is your father?” Zhaka does blink.

“Well, as always,” he replies. A practiced phrase. A shared ritual. Serith gives him a soft, knowing smile.

“You always answer with such certainty.” He sets his spoon down, gently.

“I see him so rarely that I cannot change my answer.” She studies him a heartbeat longer, not with malice but catlike curiosity.

“I wonder,” she says lightly, “if you ever take after him without realizing it.”

“I don’t.” A pause.

“That’s a shame,” she murmurs, taking a sip of her wine. “Some legacies have their uses, after all.”

The conversation drifts away after that, absorbed by the hum of other guests. Zhaka listens to the shape of the room. After a minute, Serith sets down her wine with a click that rings just faintly across the silver.

“Tell me,” she says, tone measured, “does Lord Vieron keep you shackled to paperwork, or have you earned something more interesting these days?” Zhaka lifts his glass but doesn’t drink yet.

“Depends on your definition of interesting,” he says. Serith’s smile curves faintly.

“That sounds like a yes.” He gives a half-shrug.

“He uses me for fieldwork. Hutt space. Places where diplomacy is more often a punch to the jaw than a treatise.”

“Mmm. Bleeding does make things clearer,” she murmurs. “And does he let you speak yet, when there are treatises to be signed? Or does he prefer you silent and useful?” He takes a sip, glancing her way.

“He prefers me when I’m efficient.”

“How noble of him,” she says dryly. “Palide’s the same. He thinks influence grants ownership. That stewardship of my family estate means the estate is his. That I am his.” Zhaka watches her. She speaks like someone commenting on weather patterns, but there’s something tight in her jaw. Insult.

“Has he said that?” he asks. She lifts a brow, amused.

“He doesn’t need to. Men like him believe it by birthright.” She swirls the wine in her glass but doesn’t drink it. “I let him parade around here every few cycles. Throw his name around, host his little games. It keeps his pride bloated and his hands off my neck.”

“And the auctions?” She looks at him sidelong.

“Decoration,” she says. “To keep the court entertained. Remind them whose aesthetic they serve.” Zhaka doesn’t answer that. He doesn’t need to. Her smile tells him she notices. After a moment, she shifts her tone. “We’ll be joined shortly, you know. Lord Venras and her little shadow. I believe you trained with him, did you not? On Korriban.” Zhaka’s gaze stills.

“Yes. I remember.”

“They were delayed, I believe. But they’ll be arriving within the hour.” She lifts her glass, finally taking a sip. “You’ll stay?”

“I will.”

“Good,” she says, low and satisfied. “I suspect it will be an enlightening evening.” Zhaka glances across the table. The last of the guests are finishing their wine. A steward begins to clear plates. The aroma of spiced broth still lingers, but the bowls are already cooling. Serith doesn’t rise yet, instead she glances lazily at the silent figure kneeling beside her. She gestures with two fingers to the nearest servant.

“Have someone save a bowl for Blood,” she says lightly, like someone making an idle note about leftovers. “Something from the middle. She’s earned the good meat tonight.” The servant bows and moves without a word. Serith leans back in her chair for a few minutes, letting the stillness fill the space. Then, she stands, and, with a few words, the rest of the guests rise and begin to file out the door.

The parlor is colder than the dining hall. One wall is all dark glass, overlooking the colosseum far below, now empty. It is lavishly decorated, candlelight and the steady flicker of braziers across silk drapery. Serith sits herself on a curved chaise upholstered in deep red. Zhaka is offered a settee of his own next to her. Seritok kneels again beside Serith’s seat, positioned like an accent to the furniture. Her collar gleams faintly in the low light. A steward enters silently and places a bowl of stew on the table in front of them. The scent fills the space. Serith doesn’t look at the bowl, just at Zhaka.

“For all the spectacle, I do enjoy the quiet after,” she says softly. “When the rest have gone and you can hear your own thoughts again.” Zhaka leans back, resting one hand on the arm of the sofa.

“She fought well tonight,” he says. Serith smiles.

“Thank you,” she replies, as if he had complimented her directly. “It has taken years to strip the waste from her movements. And longer still to smooth the edges of her voice.” Zhaka’s gaze slides briefly to Seritok, then back.

“May I ask her something?” Serith turns her head slightly. The candles catch on the jeweled chains woven around her montrals.

“You may.” Then to Seritok, “You may speak.” A pause, just a half second, then Seritok answers without raising her head.

“Yes, my lady.” Zhaka looks down at her. Her voice is flat. Deliberate.

“You used a move during your second beast match,” he says, voice low. “When it lunged. You didn’t block. You turned, spun the saber. The shape of it...” he stops, searching for the right word. “It wasn’t Sith. It reminded me of something else.”

“A Form IV variation. Jedi training. For use against larger predators.”

“Not part of your Sith instruction, then.”

“No, my lord.”

“You kept it?”

“I was told not to forget it.” Zhaka’s gaze lingers.

“And the disarm you used on the first apprentice. That was Jedi, too. Not precise enough to be Makashi.”

“A hybrid form. Rooted in Ataru. My Lady says it has aesthetic potential.”

“Efficient,” Zhaka says. Then, after a beat, “my compliments.” She doesn’t react, but Serith smiles, running her fingers around Seritok’s montrals like a throat.

“She remembers what’s useful,” she says, tone silken, “and forgets the rest. That’s the virtue of obedience.” Zhaka doesn’t reply at first. He watches the stew steam on the table, untouched. Watches Seritok’s stillness. Something turns behind his eyes. Not pity – not exactly. Curiosity shaped like a wound. He sees Taia knelt down beside Serith, voice reduced to nothing but words.

“You were field-trained,” he says eventually. “Assigned offworld?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Where?”

“Hutt space. Outside Republic jurisdiction.” He raises a brow.

“The Republic let you operate that far out?”

“I was given special designation.”

“Bounty work?” he asks, though he already can assume the answer.

“Peacekeeping,” she replies. The answer is even, automatic. But just beneath it... the echo of a smirk. Serith chuckles behind her wine.

“She was a wildcard back then. All grit and flair and creative vocabulary. It was endearing for about a week.” Zhaka tilts his head slightly, ignoring Serith’s comments.

“You followed the Code.” A measured pause. Seritok refuses to meet his eyes.

“I interpreted it.” Serith watches the exchange, wine gliding between her lips.

“Do you miss it?” Zhaka asks softly. “Your work for them?” There is no hesitation in her answer.

“No, my lord.” Something in her mouth twitches. Her hands tighten a tiny amount. Serith sees it, too.

“She lies beautifully now,” she says, almost purring. “Isn’t it adorable?” Zhaka doesn’t answer.

“You remembered the forms. Do you remember your name?” A long pause. Zhaka glances toward Serith. “May she answer?” Serith watches him with dark amusement, then nods. Seritok’s voice is quieter this time. Not shaken, but smaller.

“Yes, my lord.”

“But you won’t say it.”

“No, my lord.”

“Why?”

“It is no longer mine.” Zhaka’s throat tightens before he can stop it. He glances away. Serith leans back with satisfaction.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” she murmurs. The silence between them is viscous. The steam from the stew curls around the table like a ghost over a grave. Zhaka watches Seritok’s hands, how still and tight they sit in her lap. He looks away, unsettled by his own curiosity. A soft chime interrupts the quiet. A servant glides through the far curtain and bows at the threshold.

“Lord Venras has arrived, my lady.” The corners of Serith’s mouth rise in satisfaction. She sets her wine down and stands. Zhaka doesn’t follow her to the foyer, but instead stands at the entrance to the parlor, waiting for Serith to welcome the guests.

They enter together, Ilya first, flint and ivy. Her dark robes make her white skin look vibrant. Behind her, Ire. It’d been months since he’d seen him in person. The changes were subtle, but there. Bulk in his shoulder, tiredness around his eyes, tension in his jaw. His piercings catch the firelight as he moves, like someone who had learned to be silent before he learned to be safe. Zhaka sees it then, with sudden clarity. The straightness of Ire’s spine, the controlled pace, the way his hands hover but never clench. The way his eyes find Seritok, not with curiosity or assessment. With recognition.

Zhaka crosses the room, greets Ilya with the appropriate pleasantries, then turns to Ire.

“You look half-ready to bolt,” he murmurs, just low enough for no one else to catch. “Relax. The furniture only bites if you sit too fast.” It is a stupid joke, but Ire’s shoulders dip, just slightly, the way they used to after a training match when Zhaka said something meaningless.

He gestures to the settee behind him. Ire sits, Zhaka leans back beside him. For a moment, just a moment, it almost felt like old times. Then Serith calls Seritok forward. She moves like machinery. Her hands clench and unclench at her side like a system running diagnostics. She doesn’t flinch when Serith grabs her. Doesn’t cry out when she twists lekku in mock affection. Zhaka doesn’t blink. He watches. Measures. Compares. She reminds him of Ire. Makes him worry about Taia. For some reason, that makes it unbearable to watch.

Ire, his rival, his brother, sits beside him radiating that same kind of silence. One that was learned through survival. Zhaka has seen Seritok fight – has crossed sabers with her in sparring matches. She was clinical then. Precise. Cold. But here, on her knees, allowing her body to be abused while Serith crowns victory, she is someone else. Not a warrior or executioner. A warning.

“And you, Zhaka? Surely you find it amusing? Watching them break under the simplest pressure? The Jedi claim to be invincible. I know better.” Serith’s eyes find him. His voice remains smooth.

“It’s almost disappointing. They put up so little fight.” Another well disguised lie. He sees Seritok fight, not in her movements, but the pauses before she obeys. In the fact she does obey. He glances toward Ire, sees disgust carefully folded beneath his friend’s skin. He wonders what would become of Taia, if she was ever captured. He sends her a message on his way home that night.

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

She replies an hour later.

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

He wakes the next morning to silence. The heavy kind. No servants moving. No messages. No morning debrief. The silence you learn to recognize in noble households: the kind that means something is wrong and no one wants to admit it yet. He dresses without rushing. A formal tunic, no armor. Just enough silk to make him look busy. When he enters the corridor outside his rooms, a slave waiting nearby startles so hard he drops the datapad in his hands.

“Report,” Zhaka says. Calm. Crisp. The slave stammers, fumbling the words.

“There’s news from the Kav’i estate. Lady Serith and Apprentice Vitro have been...injured. Lord Venras is dead. And the Blood –”

“Escaped?” The slave nods.

“Yes, my lord.” Zhaka closes his eyes for just a moment. The hall is still. His heartbeat grows. He finds his master in the inner solar, speaking into a holocomm, voice cold as melted steel.

“I do not care about the interior losses. Lord Kav’i’s pride is not my problem. The question is how far the Jedi got and whether Lord Palide wants the matter buried. If he does, you find me political justification. If he doesn’t, you find me her head.” He ends the call and turns, barely acknowledging Zhaka.

“Get dressed. Full regalia.” Zhaka doesn’t move.

“What happened?” His master’s gaze sharpens.

“Lord Kav’i’s Jedi slipped the leash. Slaughtered Lord Venras in front of her apprentice, left Kav’i half-conscious in her bedroom. The apprentice survived, claims he hit the Jedi good. Guards say she smuggled in her lightsaber. No one thought to search her thoroughly.” His tone carries disdain. “Amateurs.” Zhaka doesn’t react outwardly, but he feels something cold gripping his spine.

“Where is the Jedi now?”

“Ran into the jungle. She won’t last long out there.

“She survived Serith,” Zhaka says quietly. “She’ll survive the jungle.” Vieron lifts a brow.

“You sound confident.”

“I’m being practical.” A beat of silence.

“And your friend?” Vieron asks. “The Nightbrother. Is he loyal?”

“He is injured.”

“That’s not what I asked.” Zhaka meets his master’s gaze, voice flat.

“He watched his master die at the hands of a Jedi. He’ll behave.”

“That’s also not an answer.” Zhaka doesn’t respond. That’s answer enough. He changes, then stands beside Vieron while the council postulates on the dangers of letting the Jedi roam the jungles for the foreseeable future. While his master eats lunch, he speaks to an attendant. Zhaka feels unusually numb.

“...Her holdings on Dromund Proper have been sealed. I’ve requested a list of named heirs. There’s likely no direct designation, but Lord Kav’i will argue she has claim through vengeance, not blood. She’ll likely win, too. Lord Venras named no direct heirs.”

Zhaka looks up from his meal. “What about Ire?” Vieron doesn’t meet his eyes.

“What about him?”

“He was Lord Venras’ apprentice.” Vieron glances at him now, yellow eyes flat.

“He was her property. She didn’t name an heir, and his clan doesn’t support inheritance rights. Nightsisters barely acknowledge male legacies, let alone offer legal reinforcement. The Council will laugh a claim like that out of the chamber.”

“He served her for years. Handled her records, her security, her negotiations.”

“And now she’s ash,” Vieron snaps. “Which makes his service moot.” Zhaka’s jaw tightens.

“So he gets nothing.” Vieron sighs.

“He’s lucky Lord Kav’i doesn’t chain him up and demand ceremonial blood-rights. The boy should be grateful.” Zhaka stares at his master with that quiet, biting stillness he’s been perfecting since he was a child. Something moves behind his eyes. Heat.

“Ire isn’t property,” he says evenly. Vieron looks at him a moment too long, then smiles thinly.

“You get sentimental every time someone bleeds near you. Don’t make it a pattern.” Zhaka doesn’t answer. Not aloud. But he tries to speak up when the Council brings Ire in to declare his fate. To be left an apprentice without a master. Stuck between titles. The Council declares their verdict final. Zhaka files a petition anyways. Sends coded inquiries to two archivists in Kaas City. They return the same result: no interest.

Ire disappears into seclusion. Zhaka doesn’t see him for two days. Serith releases a statement claiming grief that her Blood has turned rabid.

“A reminder,” she writes, “that even art must be contained.” Zhaka sends Taia another message.

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

He waits. Watches the holofeeds. Tries not to think of Ire’s face when they watched Seritok on her knees, or the way her voice sounded when she refused to speak her own name. A few days later, he receives a message from Taia.

*A Nightbrother arrived on Ossus today. Dropped off an injured Jedi and left without incident. She’s in critical condition. I don’t know her name yet. A Togruta, missing a lekku. The one who escaped? I thought you might want to know.*

He tracks down Ire the next day, chases him to Korriban. They stand over the dunes, sand covering their boots.

“I heard a Jedi showed up on Ossus,” he says. His voice is flat but not cold. “Dropped off by a Nightbrother.” A pause. Ire’s expression is steel.

“Is that so?” he asks, voice low. The sand picks it up and snuffs it. Zhaka turns, slowly.

“They didn’t name you, of course. Would’ve been a breach of peace if they had.”

“Sounds like you’ve got a good source,” Ire says.

“Sounds like you’re dodging my question.” Another pause. The winds pick up between them. Tighter. Sharper.

“I won’t name names,” Zhaka adds. “I just want to know if it was you.” Ire’s jaw tenses, then relaxes. He looks past Zhaka to the distant spires of the Academy.

“Why do you care?” he says finally.

“Because you could’ve left her. Killed her. If you’d done that, the estate would’ve been yours. You’d be free.” Luz leans back on his heels, crossing his arms.

“She would’ve died if I didn’t help.” Zhaka doesn’t respond, he knows that isn’t the real reason. He lets the silence pressure the answer out of Ire. “I could’ve dragged her to the Council, tossed her at Palide’s feet. Maybe I’d get a title. A house.” He looks up at the suns. “But that felt like stepping on my own throat just to stand taller.” Zhaka studies his friend. His eyes look less harsh, more peaceful. Like a weight’s been lifted.

“You gave up everything.”

“No,” Ire says. “I traded it.”

“For what?”

“The knowledge I didn’t become what they want me to be. The knowledge that I didn’t sell someone else’s soul for a seat at the table.” Zhaka exhales.

“That’s a shitty bargain.” Ire nods, not disagreeing.

“Yeah. But it’s mine.” There’s a silence. The wind carries it around them.

“Is that why your clan exiled you?” Zhaka asks finally. “For disobedience?”

“For weakness,” Ire mutters. “The High Mother said I was supposed to die in the fire or return with her spine.” He shrugs. “Instead, I walk out with my hands empty. She named me Luz.” Zhaka repeats the name in his head.

“Luz,” he says. “What does it mean?” His friend meets his eyes.

“It means I don’t belong to them anymore. I get to decide what I become, even if it costs me everything.”

“You know if she’s caught, they’ll trace it back to you.”

“I know.”

“They’ll drag you in chains and parade you thorough the same colosseum she stood in.”

“I know.” Zhaka studies his friend. There’s something coiled and sharp in Luz’s stillness. Not pride, not defiance. Resolve.

“You’re an idiot.” He mutters. Luz offers the faintest smile.

“Takes one to know one.”

The sun burns low over the temple spires of Tython, casting long shadows across marbled terraces. Everything has been arranged with a kind of reverent precision. The gardens are too green. The stone is too white. An invitation extended not out of trust, but performance. The Jedi hosts wear their serenity like armor. They say little, smile just enough. The Temple is spotless. Curated. Meant to awe.

Zhaka walks a half-step behind his master. Vieron glides across the marble like he owns it. He does not bow in response to the Jedi. He doesn’t comment on the beauty of the grounds. He observes and lets himself be observed. A diplomat by title only. When they were asked to disarm, he complied with a smile that didn’t reach his yellow eyes. To think their lightsabers are their only weapon.

Zhaka and Vieron are the only Sith present – the rest of the Imperial delegation follows them in polished silence. Moffs with gleaming insignias and practiced nods. They move like they’ve rehearsed this a dozen times. Zhaka says nothing. He knows better. No one here believes in peace, least of all his master. Vieron would sooner throw himself into a sarlacc pit than extend the treaty another few cycles. The Lord’s voice is syrup smooth as he offers platitudes about “mutual interest”. He says just enough to keep the blame off his back when the treaty falls through.

Zhaka explores Tython with his eyes. Feels the life of the planet, the vibrant Force energy that could only be matched by the tombs of Korriban or the Imperial Citadel. He feels an unmistakable flicker in the Force that makes his heart jump in his chest. Soft and wild. Taia. He buries the feeling deep, forces his heartrate into compliance. Not here. Not while Vieron is watching. Not with the Jedi Council members on all sides. He walks a half-step behind.

The day drags on like a Hutt marathon. Vieron shakes hands, smiles for cameras, delivers speeches that mean nothing. Zhaka remains quiet, unobtrusive. The ideal shadow of an

apprentice. That night, when the corridors of the Temple grow quiet and the Council members have retreated to their meditation chambers, or whatever Jedi do instead of sleeping, Zhaka slips away. He watches patrol routes. Times past cameras. Cloaks himself in shadows. Every step away from his assigned chamber is calculated.

He finds Taia in one of the lower gardens. Shrouded in soft moonlight. Waiting. Like she knew he'd come.

“You’re late,” she says without looking his way. Her voice is soft in the still air.

“Didn’t know the Jedi were so timely.” She turns to face him, arms crossed.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

“I’m aware.”

“How’d you get past the sentries?” He lifts a brow.

“Do you really want to know?” She shakes her head, but the corner of her mouth twitches into a smile.

“You’re a lunatic.”

“I could say the same about you.” A pause. Her eyes search his face, quick and cautions.

“So you’re here with Darth Vieron?” He nods.

“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 exhales through her nose.

“I figured.” Another beat of silence. He studies her face, lines carved by stress, by training, by the tightrope they’ve decided to walk. A cycle isn’t much in the grand scope of the galaxy, but it feels like a lifetime since he’s seen those eyes.

“It’s getting harder,” he admits. “Keeping this hidden. I keep worrying someone knows.” Taia looks out across the garden, expression unreadable.

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

“That’s optimistic.” She glances at him, this time with a flicker of mischief.

“It’s realistic. I’ve seen how the Council handles ‘attachments.’” She makes air quotes with her fingers. He pauses.

“What would you do, if they found out?” Taia doesn’t answer right away. Instead, she reaches out and takes his hand. Holds it gently. He gives silent thanks to his Sith ancestors for their help concealing his blush.

“I’d leave the Temple. Not the cause. Not you.” The wind picks up, blowing leaves across the shining marble. Zhaka says nothing for a while. He doesn’t know if he can promise the same. He isn’t a latecomer to the Temple, like Taia. He doesn’t have a way out, family to welcome him home after he deserts. His master is already growing suspicious. He turns her hand over, traces the scar across her palm with his thumb.

“We keep going,” he finally says, voice low. “We find a way. No matter how hard it gets.” The marble wall brushes his back. She nods. The silence hangs heavy. After a second, she meets his eyes.

“Zhaka,” her voice is soft, careful. “Do you want to be Sith?” The question isn’t lined with judgement, only quiet curiosity. Regardless, it catches him off guard. He huffs out a dry laugh, glancing at her sideways.

“Well, Sith’s my blood. The title’s just for paperwork.” She watches him with that steely blue eye. Doesn’t smile.

“Come, on Zhaka. If you were allowed to be anything, what would you be?” He opens his mouth. Closes it. Looks past her, toward the garden walls bathed in moonlight. The question knocks something loose inside of him. He feels his father’s hand on his shoulder, tight and harsh. Fingers digging into his shoulder blades.

“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.” Taia doesn’t say anything at first. She lets the silence stretch. Not to pressure him, but to make space. He lets out a breath, slow and uneven. “Maybe a pilot,” he says. “Or a merchant. Something with motion. Stars out the viewport, no expectations. No masks.” She turns her hand in his.

“I think you’d make a wonderful merchant.” He shakes his head, not in disagreement, but disbelief.

“I don’t even know what that version of me would look like.” She squeezes his hand gently.

“I get it. Dreams feel like a luxury right now, don’t they?” He breathes out shakily. The silence stretches between them.

“Yeah.” He holds her hand. Feels the warmth of her fingers wrapped around his. Wind moves through the leaves around them, soft as her breath. “I should go,” he murmurs, leaning in. She places her forehead on his.

“Be careful getting back,” she says finally.

“You too.”

“Message me when you’re safe. No names. No titles.” He cracks a crooked smile.

“I remember the rules.”

Zhaka makes his way back to the guest chambers with deliberate caution, retracing his memorized path. When he finally slips back into his room, the door hissing shut behind him, he still doesn’t breathe easy. He turns to face the mirror above the dresser.

His reflection stares back, wild obsidian curls, skin the lacquered red of clay, restless amber eyes. There’s a rawness to his features, a tension he can’t smooth out no matter how still he stands. It’s not fatigue or paranoia, it’s blood. Muscle memory passed through his lineage like a curse. The longer he looks, the more the edges of his own face echo something unspoken. There’s something in his jawline, in the stillness, the way the mirror holds a scowl without him realizing. A ghost trying to take shape in his reflection. A shadow he’s terrified of becoming.

He adjusts his stance. Tries to ease the tension in his shoulders. Fails. The weight is still there. The silence. The scowl. The mold he never meant to fit.

His breath fogs the glass. This is the part he usually shuts down. The ache. The questions. The weight of Taia’s voice clings to him like smoke. He leans in. Touches the glass. Watches himself with his father’s eyes.

“I’m going to be better than you,” he whispers. It’s a promise he’s made thousands of times before, but this time it’s different. It’s not a vow of complacency, a promise he’ll become everything his father wants him to be and more. It’s not for him. Not for his father. It’s for her.

He closes his eyes. For a breath, he allows the thought to take form: a quiet life. Far from Dromund Kaas and Coruscant. A ship. A kitchen. A child’s hands tracing the outlines of the galaxy from the window.

It’s stupid. Dangerous. But clear. It terrifies him.

He undresses with care. Pulls off his cloak and folds it. Unbuckles ceremonial armor. Sets aside the weight of who he’s expected to be. Washes his face. Runs his fingers through his hair. The room is silent; it holds the echo of his heartbeat like a second pulse.

He slips into bed, eyes fixed on the ceiling above him. He told Taia they shouldn’t make promises. But this one, he’ll keep. He has to.

They return from Tython under thick cloud cover. Zhaka keeps his posture straight on the descent ramp, cloak snapped tight at the collar, saber heavy on his hip. The city glints ahead like a scabbed jewel. Familiar. Suffocating. Beside him, Vieron walks without speaking, robes dark and armor heavier than usual. A projection of power. Zhaka keeps a half-step behind him. As always.

The summit was a success, if measured only by the weight of speeches and veiled threats. Sith and Jedi reciting doctrine like actors forced to share a stage. Zhaka spoke once. He wasn't there to speak. He was there to be seen. Vieron made sure of that.

"You are what they envy," his master had said the second day there, after a round of dueling displays on the terrace. "That's why they smile at you like cowards. That's why you must stay sharp. A single crack, and they will bury you." Zhaka remembers the words. And the bruise Vieron left on his ribs while he spoke them. Remembers the way he couldn't breathe right for two minutes afterward.

Back on Dromund Kaas, the days slip into each other like blood in water. The estate is quiet. Too quiet. Zhaka walks its halls like a shadow, always aware of Vieron eyes. There is no peace, not even in his solitude. Vieron doesn't shout, doesn't punish in obvious ways. But his presence has weight. A predator's stillness. Zhaka feels it in the pause outside his door. In the second cup of tea that arrives, untouched. In the feeling he's being watched, even in his sleep. He starts checking his locks again. Re-reading old mission logs. Keeps burner comms in untraceable loops. Trains harder. Longer. Enough to reopen the old scars across his knuckles. Anything to keep his hands moving. To stay ahead of the feeling in his chest. He knows it's coming. Vieron's attention never lingers without purpose.

The summons come late one night. Not an order, just a message on Zhaka's private channel. A clipped and familiar phrase.

*Training chamber. Now.*

Zhaka doesn't need to ask why. He's been waiting for this.

He dresses slowly. No armor, just his training blacks. The saber at his hip feels lighter than it should. His mouth tastes like iron. His body is tired from drilling, his spine aches, and yet he feels steadier than he has in weeks. Maybe it's because the waiting is over. Maybe its because something deeper inside him already knows what this is.

The estate is silent as he walks the halls. He finds Vieron in the lower dueling chamber. The walls are stripped bare. No servants. No witnesses. Just polished stone, still slick from recent cleaning. His master stands in the center, arms clasped behind his back, spine as rigid as the architecture. The torchlight is gone, replaced by sterile overhead glowpanels. Their flicker paints long black shadows across the floor. Zhaka stops at the threshold, cloak training behind him like a wound.

"You summoned me, Master."

"I did," Vieron says. His voice is velvet over razors. "You've been busy, apprentice." Zhaka doesn't answer. Vieron steps forward. "Discreet meetings. Coded travel logs. An unusual frequency of unauthorized excursions to Hutt space. Did you really think I wouldn't notice?" Zhaka shifts his weight.

“I’ve been laying groundwork.” His voice is careful. Too careful.

“Have you?” Vieron smiles thinly. “Because it seems to me you’ve been laying something else. Something soft. Something...” he draws the word out like venom, “...sweet. A Jedi.” Zhaka’s throat tightens.

“That’s not—”

“Don’t lie to me,” Vieron cuts him off, voice like broken glass. “I taught you better than that.” Zhaka’s fists clench at his sides.

“You taught me to survive.”

“I taught you everything,” Vieron snaps. “Your stance, your breath, your grip. You would have died in that academy before you ever lit your saber if it wasn’t for me. Don’t pretend you’ve grown teeth on your own.”

“I’m not pretending.”

“No,” Vieron says, circling now. “You’re rebelling. Playing at autonomy like a child. Do you think she loves you, this Jedi? You think she sees the blood on your hands and chooses it?” Zhaka doesn’t answer. His throat closes in on itself. Vieron stops in front of him, yellow eyes staring him down. “She’d kill you without flinching if she saw you for what you really are.”

“Shut up,” Zhaka mutters. Vieron leans in, voice a rasp.

“She’d hate you.” Zhaka flinches, despite himself. His hands shake. His nails bite into his palms. Vieron leans back. “You think she’d kiss you knowing how many you’ve killed? Knowing what you’ve done in my name?” He scoffs. “No. You hide that from her. Just like you hide your nature. You’re ashamed.” Zhaka’s voice breaks.

“I don’t owe you an explanation.” Vieron laughs.

“You owe me everything. The body that moves when you tell it. The hands that know how to kill. Even your fear, Zhaka, I taught you that. I gave you that.” Zhaka grits his teeth.

“I’m not afraid of you.”

“You should be.” Vieron’s smile turns feral, his yellow eyes wide and cruel. “I’ve broken better than you.” He circles Zhaka again. “You’re just like him, you know. Your father. But you don’t have his ambition – at least he had the spine to be proud of his cruelty. You? You pretend it’s not there. Noble blood and still you wine like an orphan. A prince who wants to cry over the people he guts. Pathetic.” Zhaka’s heart pounds in his throat.

“Don’t talk about him.”

“He doesn’t claim you,” Vieron hisses. “And I don’t blame him. You’re a wasted effort. All that potential and no direction. I spent years crafting a weapon—”

“You tortured a boy,” Zhaka growls.

“I crafted a masterpiece!” Vieron roars. “And now it wants to bite the hand that feeds it.”

Zhaka’s saber ignites with a hiss. He doesn’t remember unclipping it from his belt. Vieron’s expression darkens.

“I see how it is. You really think you’re ready, Zhaka?”

“I’ve been ready,” Zhaka spits. “You just never thought I’d be willing.” Silence. Vieron’s saber screams to life. The air crackles between them.

Vieron comes in fast, sweeping low, blade twisting with raw aggression. Zhaka parries and feels the old rhythm crash back like a memory. His stance shifts on instinct. Tight. Defensive. The way Vieron taught him.

He counters with an overhead strike. Vieron sidesteps, slams a boot into Zhaka’s hip. He staggers. Recovers. His muscles know this pattern. This punishment. This is what Vieron wants: a fight on his terms.

Zhaka holds his ground, but his master presses like a storm. Heavy blows, irregular steps. Dirty tricks disguised as disciplined moves. Zhaka absorbs a strike to the shoulder, redirects a low sweep. Tries to meet force with force. It’s not enough. His saber grazes Vieron’s side. A shallow wound. Vieron laughs.

*“This is what you bring me?”* His master doesn’t speak, but Zhaka can hear the words in his head. *“My own student, still trying to beat me with the tools I gave him.”* Zhaka’s jaw clenches. His chest heaves. Every block starts to feel like a wall closing in on him.

*You fight like someone else.*

He sees Vieron’s sadistic grin. The same one from every bruised lesson, every scar justified with silence.

*You fight like the weapon he made you into.*

A flicker. He hears Seritok’s voice, now escaped back to the Jedi. The words she gave him: “He wants to own you. And the only way to own someone like you is to make you predictable.”

Vieron lunges again. Zhaka catches the blade. Redirects. It costs him, the edge slices down his arm. But the move works. Makashi. His style. Before the scars. He adjusts. Shifts low, pivots tight on the ball of his foot. The next swing is clean. Precise. Controlled. Vieron’s eyes narrow. Zhaka doesn’t stop. He lets the rhythm carry him, back to the Academy. To late nights training with Ire. The blade becomes extension, not obligation. The Force answer him, a current under his skin. He pull from it without thinking. Uses it to brace his feet, to add weight to his blows. To sense the feint before it comes.

He cuts through Vieron's guard with a flick of the wrist. Drives the saber high, then low, then steps aside. Elegant. Efficient. Not brutal. Not panicked. Him.

Vieron grunts as Zhaka slices his leg. Then again across his side. He tries to counter with the same dirty elbow he taught Zhaka. He doesn't fall for it. He ducks, slips past the blow. Brings the saber across Vieron's back in a fluid Shiim. Vieron stumbles.

"Your form is sloppy," the old Sith snarls, voice ragged. "Your father—"

Zhaka doesn't let him finish. He feints left, steps right, drives the saber through Vieron's abdomen. Clean. Final. The blade hums. The light fades. Vieron crumples. Zhaka doesn't look away. He watches the man fall. Not with triumph or hate, but with clarity. His fear is gone. His obedience stripped. What remains is silence. He kneels slowly. Lifts up his master's lightsaber. Holds it in his hand for the first time. It feels odd. Weighted. But he takes it anyway.

He takes a breath. Then another. Then he turns.

The halls of the estate open to him like a graveyard. Familiar. The walls feel too tall. The lights too cold. Every surface was once something Vieron passed his fingers across. And now, it's Zhaka's. He walks them like a stranger. No cloak. Just sweat-stained blacks and a few cauterized wounds. The place feels heavier than it used to. He passes through the training rooms. The armory. The study where Vieron once struck him for asking the wrong question. He knows this place, every hallway. Every weak step in the floorboards. Every silence that used to hide cruelty.

He climbs the stairs slowly. The estate feels quiet now. Maybe it always was. Muffled under the sound of his obedience. He reaches the terrace. The wind is cool, heavy with Dromund Kaas' familiar wet rot. Storms brew out past the skyline. He watches the clouds over the spires of Kaas City, dark as bruises. A low rumble echoes in the distance. He thinks of Taia.

He hasn't reached out since Tython. Vieron was watching him too closely. But now... now there's no one to stop him. He takes a burner comm from his sleeve. Flicks it on. Types slowly. Carefully.

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

He hesitates. Then sends it. Stays on the terrace a moment longer in silence. Wind claws at the hem of his shirt. The saber hilts weigh heavy at his belt. His gaze drifts back to the city. Somewhere out there, his father breathes. Watches. Judges. Zhaka can't remember his face. Just the weight he carried. The shadow it cast. He wonders if his father ever checked in on him. If he knew what Vieron was doing.

Of course he did. He gave Zhaka to Vieron.

Zhaka's hands tighten on the railing. If that's the kind of company his father kept, if Vieron was the best he had to offer his son, then so be it. Let him stay a ghost.

Zhaka doesn't belong to him. Not anymore. He's no weapon. No legacy. No prince-in-training. He's his own. He takes a deep breath. He'll just have to hope that's enough.

Corellia smells of oil. Zhaka waits at the edge of an unused landing pad, high above Coronet City's orbital docks. Cargo haulers rumble in the distance, the orange haze of the sun glints off the polished hulls of outbound ships. A cool wind tugs at his cloak. He stands in full view. No shadows this time, no slums or fog. Just him. Exposed to the sky.

Taia comes from a side access ramp, hood low. She looks sharper than the last time they met. More precise. Her cloak is plain.

"You picked a public dock," she says, voice even.

"No one's watching," he replies. "I scrambled the sensors." She stops a few feet away. Her eyes scan the landing pad, then settle on his lightsaber. Vieron's old casing.

"What happened to your lightsaber?"

"I forged a new one," he says. "After." A pause. Her expression doesn't change, but he feels her focus shift.

"After what?" she asks.

"I'm not an apprentice anymore." She blinks once.

"Why?" He exhales through his nose, jaw tense.

"My master found out. About you. About us." That makes her look away, eyes narrowing at nothing in particular. A slow, internal burn. "He confronted me," Zhaka continues. "Said I was compromised. Said the Sith don't tolerate—"

"You let him find out?" her voice cuts in like a blade. "Zhaka." He freezes. She isn't angry, like he prepared for. She's frustrated.

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

"And you didn't notice?"

"I thought I covered my tracks."

"Not well enough." There it was. The simple, undeniable truth he'd slipped. He'd almost brought her crashing down with him. She won't meet his eyes. Her arms are crossed, cradling herself.

"Do you realize what would've happened if he told someone?" she says quietly. "If word reached the Council?" A Corellian freighter roars overhead. Neither of them look up.

“I took care of it. He’s gone.”

“You shouldn’t have had to.”

“I did what I had to do,” he says, firmer now. “I protected us.” She pauses. The wind howls.

“You’re different,” she says finally.

“I have to be.”

“You’re dangerous.”

“I was always dangerous.” She steps closer. Two slow steps, boots ringing against the metal platform.

“You think you’ll protect me? You barely protected yourself.” That stung. He doesn’t finch, but she knows it lands. “I didn’t come here to hurt you,” she says. Her voice cracks a little. “I don’t know if I can risk this, Zhaka.” He closes the distance between them, just one step. Just close enough to feel her presence in the Force. Familiar. Warm. Still there.

“I understand,” he says. “Just stay, for tonight.” Taia looks up at him. The city moves around them. She brushes the new lightsaber hilt with the edge of her fingers.

“Please promise me you won’t change,” she whispers. “That you’ll still be the boy I knew on Zygerria.”

“I’m trying to be.”

The docks grow quiet as the sun sets. Only the occasional drone or distant clang of durasteel fills the air. She sits beside him quietly. The city below is lit like stars settled into the cosmos. Speeders weave between towers. Reflected light shimmers across Taia’s boots. Her hands fold in her lap. Zhaka watches the horizon. Taia stares at her fingers. Eventually, she leans slightly, head lying on his shoulder. He feels the tension that had been coiled in his chest since Korriban begin to ease. Not from forgiveness... she hasn’t offered it. But from her presence. The fact she is still here.

Minutes pass. Maybe hours. Time feels soft between them. Eventually, Taia breaks the silence.

“What was he like?” she asks quietly. Her voice is careful but curious. “Your master, I mean.” Zhaka exhales through his nose, gaze fixed on the skyline.

“He was...cold,” he says, voice tight. “Rigid. Everything had to be by the book. No room for anything else.” He pauses, fingers curling into fists. “He thought I was reckless. 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.” Taia’s gaze doesn’t waver. She doesn’t speak, either, just waits for him to continue. “We didn’t get along. Not really. He was obsessed with control and I, well...” His mouth curls into a bitter smile. “I was never any good at being controlled.”

“I can tell,” she replies with a smile, hand brushing his back.

“Yeah,” he mutters. “I hated him for it. For thinking he could control me.” He shakes his head, letting the bitterness seep through him. “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.” There is silence for a long moment. Taia doesn’t pull away from him, she just sits there, presence steady. Then she speaks softly.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

Zhaka’s chest tightens. He is surprised at the stab of guilt her words bring. He shouldn’t feel this way, not for someone like his master. Her fingers brush his knuckles, gentle and reassuring, grounding him. He looks at her, eyes searching that mismatched pair for some kind of judgement, some indication she thinks less of him. He cannot find any.

“You shouldn’t be sorry, Taia,” he says, voice quiet but firm. “I’m not an innocent victim. I killed him because he was weak. Simple as that.” She turns to face him, eyes steady and thoughtful.

“The galaxy has made you cruel, Zhaka. But I know you’re not, deep down.” Zhaka’s breath catches in his throat. Her words drive through his chest, piercing ribcage, seizing his heart.

“I...” he swallows, worlds halted. Takes a deep breath. “I don’t want to be like him. I don’t want to be someone who hides behind blows.”

“You’re not,” she says, leaning in slightly, voice quiet but firm in reassurance. “You’re still Zhaka, even if the galaxy has tried to shape you into something else.” Her face is close to his now, breath mingling with his. The weight of her words settle into him like an anchor. His eyes lock onto hers. His heart pounds in his chest. For a moment, everything falls away. His past. His struggles. His future. It’s all gone.

His hand moves slowly, almost as if on its own accord, to touch her cheek. His thumb brushes her skin, soft and steady. She doesn’t pull away. She looks at him, and in that moment, he knows she feels it too.

Then, without thinking, without the weight of consequences or hesitation, he leans in. His lips find hers with a hunger that’s been building since he first laid eyes upon her. Slow at first, tentative. But, when she leans in, his breath catches. His chest tightens. His hand slides into her hair, pulling her even closer, feeling the warmth of her skin against him, the fierceness of her lips.

When they finally pull back, Zhaka's heart is racing, his mind swirling. His forehead rests against hers.

"I..." he whispers, voice raw. "I don't want to lose you, Taia."

She doesn't say anything at first, her hand rests on his chest. She feels the beat of his heart beneath her fingertips. Slowly she smiles, her lips caress his as she whispers.

"You won't. Promise."

The sky over Corellia burns into Zhaka's memory, rich with lights. Distant enough to feel unreal. He can't stop replaying it. Not the stars, not the chaos. The kiss. Her hand on his chest. The weight of her promise. He didn't realize how much he needed that. Not until he returns to Dromund Kaas and finds the silence of Vieron's old estate waiting for him. It no longer feels like his master's, not really. But it doesn't feel like his, either. Not yet. He hasn't changed the furniture. The rooms are cold. The staff bow deeper. No more clipped commands, no sharp footsteps outside his door. Just quiet. An emptiness that echoes.

He trains. It's the only thing that makes sense. He returns to Makashi – Form II had once been his pride. Vieron called it arrogant. Forced him to abandon it in favor of more brutal forms. Zhaka obeyed, he had to. Let himself be broken into something useful. But now, in the quiet training halls beneath the estate, he moves with grace again. With purpose. His own stance. No barked corrections. No strikes for hesitation. Just the smooth rhythm of parry, pivot, thrust. A blade dancing like it remembers who it belongs to. For a moment, it feels like clarity.

Then the message arrives. It comes like all Sith reports. Empty. Lines on a datapad, mugshots under it.

*Retrieval Mission.*

*Location: Lothal.*

*Deployed: Apprentices Luz Aliz, Zir Hadrek, Daram Mirel, Hakam Naves, Zire Senth, Rikan Tal, Serem Tirrax, Sari Vale, Sivla Verin, Revril Viskal, Avlis Vonn, Tevran Vosk.*

*Returned: Vale and Naves.*

*Target recovered.*

*Dead: Tal, Verin, Mirel, Tirrax, Hadrek, Senth, Vosk*

*Missing In Action: Aliz, Vonn, Viskal*

Missing in Action. Zhaka stares at those words longer than he should've. The datapad in his hands feels heavier with each passing second. No body. No details. No closure. Just a name among the unclaimed.

That night, he doesn't return to the estate. He walks. The streets of the capital are glass and shadow, polished walkways that cast warped reflections of his cloak. He doesn't look at them.

It isn't until the next day, after the report has faded from the Empire's attention, that Zhaka finds the two survivors on Korriban. Drinking outside a medic's ward, hunched in silence over ration booze. He doesn't announce himself. He doesn't have to. The moment they see him, both apprentices straighten like snapped cords. The taller one swallows hard. The other won't meet his eyes.

"What happened on Lothal?" Zhaka asks, voice unreadable. The silence between them is long enough to rot.

"We found the relic," the taller one says. "But it was guarded. Not by people or droids...something else." Zhaka doesn't blink.

"What kind of something?" The apprentice hesitates.

"A shadow. Fast. It moved through ground like it wasn't there. We couldn't keep track of it. Three down before we even realized it was a fight." Zhaka steps closer, arms crossed.

"And Luz Aliz?"

"He didn't hesitate," the shorter one offers. "Went straight for it. Took the brunt. Got the thing off us long enough to make it outside." Zhaka's breath catches.

"He was already gone," the tall one adds quickly. "Half his side, just...gone. We got him on the back of my speeder. He was out. But still breathing. He slid off the bike. We didn't see him until—"

"Why didn't you go back?"

"We couldn't!" the apprentice snaps, eyes wide. "It was right behind us. You think we wanted to leave him?" Zhaka does answer. He storms off before they can offer apologies.

He doesn't return to his estate immediately. He walks the halls of the academy until it's dark. Red lights spill from the stonework sconces. He finds his way to the training wing without thought. The same one he and Luz used to sneak into after curfew. When they were bruised and angry and full of restless energy. They'd duel for hours. No instructors. No rules. Just grit and instinct and something similar to understanding.

He activates a sparring dummy. Then another. They surround him, slowly rotating. He draws his saber and moves. Makashi form, the way he's been relearning it. Each step is

measured. Elegant. Controlled. The strikes land. The dummies reset. It's clean. Empty. He stops. His chest is heaving, but not from exhaustion. Something else. Something deeper. His thoughts drift, not to form, but to a voice.

"You lead too early," Luz had said one, all rough Dathomiri cadence and plainspoken correction. "Let the attack come to you. Force them to overreach." Zhaka hears it in his head like it's fresh. He sees Luz spinning his double blade like a storm made of rhythm and flame. It had been more than style – it was momentum. Pressure. Beauty in a way only the fiercest things could be beautiful. He deactivates his saber. Stands in the center of the room, sweat caressing his back. He stares at his master's hilt. It's heavy. Angry. He closes his eyes, sees Luz's form. The way he'd step in on a pivot, blades whirling. The way he'd end a duel by shifting his grip. Snap. Lock. Drive. He doesn't want to forget that. He wants to etch it into muscle and reflex. Save it from fading memory.

Zhaka opens his eyes. His heart drums behind his ribs. He speaks aloud, voice low.

"I want a double-blade." He knows his intentions as he speaks them. Not a replacement for his saber. A monument.

He sends the commission out the next day. His own kyber crystal, split across a double-bladed hilt. Designed less for fighting and more for ceremony. The builder doesn't ask questions. Zhaka pays extra for silence.

In the weeks that follow, he trains. Not every night, some nights he just sits in silence instead. Just breathes. Aches. Some nights he lights the saber and lets it hum beside him. Others, he works through Luz's old footwork. Left-hand grip. Reverse transitions. Counter rotations. It's clumsy at first – he has no teacher. Only his memory. But some nights, he imagines Luz correcting him. Steady hands on his elbows. A shake of the head. A rare smile.

One night, the grief hits harder than it has in a while. He doesn't light the blade. Doesn't move at all. Just sits cross-legged in the ring. Hunched. Small. Alone. He activates a burner comm. Doesn't say anything, just lets it pulse a minute. Sends it to Taia. He doesn't expect her to respond, but part of him hopes she does anyway. He stares at the beeping light on the comm. The silence afterward feels worse than the noise. He sits with it until the pain in his legs becomes louder than his thoughts. Then he stands. Walks. The halls are dim now, the sconces cycling into low-power mode. The durasteel and stone give off cold reflections as he passes. The estate stretches around him like a mausoleum. He passes old rooms – Vieron's study, the east wing parlor, the servant's quarters. All silent. All his, now.

He eats by his desk every day. Doesn't speak to the stewards unless he has to. He's gotten good at pretending it doesn't bother him. At letting the silence look like control. But every night, after the estate dims and the last lights flicker off, Zhaka finds himself searching for noise. A sparring dummy. A burner comm. A voice that isn't there. He tries not to think about the way Luz

used to sit with him in silence and somehow make it feel less hollow. The way he didn't ask questions, didn't demand explanations. He was just...there.

Taia is too far away for him to reach her. She answers when she can; a pulse here, a coded message there, but that's all they agreed to. No names. No confessions. Just enough to know the other is okay. It should be enough. It isn't.

He doesn't tell her about the quiet. About the nights he lies in Vieron's bed, staring at the ceiling, wondering where he'd be if Luz had made it out. If they'd gotten to grow together.

Instead, he trains. Some days it helps. Others, it doesn't. But the repetition anchors him. When the loneliness creeps in, he presses harder. Draws sweat instead of tears. Each strike another breath. Each sequence another excuse not to speak.

The double-blade hilt rests on the rack beside his old lightsaber. He doesn't use it often, only when it feels the silence might crush him. When he needs to remember something kind. On those nights, he doesn't fight the ghosts, he lets them come. Watches Luz's form again in his head. Wild. Beautiful. Free. And trains until he can barely lift his arms. Until grief becomes movement. Until the memory aches less. But it always comes back. So does the quiet.

One night, after drills, he kneels beside the rack. The hilt of his first saber catches the light. It's lighter than Vieron's. Quieter. He built it back when he still thought power would make him feel like less of a weapon. He stares at it for a long time. Turns it in his hands. He hasn't ignited it in months.

Luz didn't leave anything behind. No comms, no blade. Just memories: slippery things that vanish when you want them most. Zhaka thinks about how he tried to mimic Luz's form the other night and couldn't remember the placement of a step. How it felt like he lost a bit of him. He doesn't want that to happen to Taia. If he dies, she'll have nothing. No trace, no shape, just the knowledge that he once existed. That he once held her hand beneath a Corellian sky. He clenches the saber in his palm. Breathes slow.

Eventually, he pulls the burner comm from his belt. Activates it. The pulse goes out, a silent frequency meant for one person only. A breath in the dark. He waits. There's no answer, but that's not the point. She'll get to it when she can. He types a message. Deletes it. Types again. This time, he keeps it short.

*Passing through Ossus in a few months. Would love a temple tour.*

He hesitates. Then adds another line.

*There's something I want to give you.*

He doesn't press send right away. He stares at the words a long time. Remembers her breath against his cheek. The promise she made. They agreed they wouldn't promise anything. His thumb hovers. Then presses. The comm clicks off. He sets his old saber down beside the

double-blade on the rack. They rest there together, humming quiet in the silence. One memory. One monument. He doesn't sleep that night. But when he closes his eyes, he dreams of sunlight through thick canopy.

The jungle hums with life on Ossus. Thick vines hang from towering trees, golden beams of sunlight cut through the canopy like blaster bolts. The ruins of ancient Jedi temples, half swallowed by moss and time, dot the clearing like bones. Birds call in strange patterns. Wind brushes through the leaves. The Force feels thick here. Old.

Zhaka steps carefully through the underbrush, brushing leaves off his shoulders. Even in this secluded part of the galaxy, Ossus makes his skin crawl. It's too peaceful. Too serene. Too... Jedi. But he came anyway because she's here.

Taia leans against a crumbled stone arch, hair catching sunlight like fire. Her expression lifts when she sees him, a half-smile prying at her lips.

"You're late," she says, voice dry. He huffs, boots crunching against leaves.

"I took the scenic route. Got chased by some sort of vine-creature. Pretty sure it hissed at me." She snorts.

"Probably a temple guardian. They don't like trespassers."

"Yeah, I noticed." She chuckles and pushes herself off the arch to meet him. They fall into step without needing to speak, heading toward the ruins where the underbrush thins out. An old stone base makes a good seat, moss covered. Comfortable. They sit side by side, the wild noises of the jungle fills the silence.

"So," Taia says after a beat. "How's the life of an Inquisitor treating you?" He smirks.

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

"Tragic." He leans back, fingers meeting the damp moss.

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

"Always. They won't even let me go to the Mid Rim without two forms of clearance and a chaperone."

"That's adorable."

"I hate you."

"No, you don't." She chuckles under her breath, bumping her knee lightly against his. It's familiar now, their banter. Their rhythm. The way they slip into each other's orbits. He glances sideways at her, then reaches into his cloak.

“I brought you something.” He pulls his crystal. It glows faintly, deep crimson. The light pulses once in his hand like a fading heartbeat. “It was mine,” he says. “Before I took my master’s saber. I don’t need it anymore, but I didn’t want to throw it away.”

Taia’s playful smile fades into something more careful. She takes the crystal from his hand and cradles it between her palms.

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

“Just like me.” She rolls her eyes, but the faint blush betrays her.

“You’re impossible.” He shrugs.

“It’s yours, if you want it.”

“I do.” She slips it into a pouch on her belt, then unclips her own saber and settles it across her lap. It’s silver, carved with dainty cloud designs. She takes her time opening it, careful with the tool she carries on her belt. Inside the bright blue glow of her Kyber crystal shines with a steady light. She lifts it gently, and, with a practiced flick of her wrist, uses her tool to flake off a small shard from the base.

“That part’s always felt a little unstable,” she says, holding the flake up to the yellow sunlight. “Maybe it was waiting for this.”

She presses it into his hand. Their fingers brush.

“A piece of your crystal?” he asks.

“A piece of me,” she says simply. “You gave me something old. Here’s something still growing.” He doesn’t say anything, just holds it reverently. It feels balanced in his hand. He can hear a far-off song from it, just beyond his ears.

Taia leans forward and kisses him. Light. Easy. Like it’s something they’ve done a dozen times before, which they have not. Her hand rests against his jaw, her thumb brushes his cheek. His free hand moves to her hip, grounding himself.

“You know,” he murmurs, “for a Jedi, you’re awfully good at attachment.” She raises a brow, smirking.

“For a Sith, you’re terrible at cruelty.” She says it with a quiet smile, fingertips tracing the scars he earned on Korriban. “You’re supposed to be all fire and fury, remember? But you’re soft, Zhaka. You just hide it better than most.”

They don’t kiss again. They don’t need to. Instead, they sit there in the yellow shade of the temple. It’s enough for Zhaka. More than enough.

The sky is grey the day Zhaka decides he needs to find a friend. He tells himself it's about duty first. About finding allies, making connections. That's what Sith do, isn't it? Strategize. Position themselves. But the truth settles under his skin like silt in water. He's tired of training in silence. Tired of speaking to ghosts. Luz is gone. It'll be a few months minimum until Taia can hold him again. All he has here and now are the cold halls and the echo of his own breath.

That's why he shows up to Macarius' estate. Unannounced, uninvited, cloak still dusted from Kaas City's upper terraces. He tells himself he's scoping out another Inquisitor. A courtesy visit. Political instinct, not loneliness. He doesn't really believe himself.

Calling Macarius' land an estate would be a stretch. It's a mess of half-built structures laid out across a clearing. No Sith architecture. No guards. Just grass, tools, the smell of sawdust. He finds Macarius hammering planks together with the kind of patience Zhaka associates with monks or madmen. The Gran looks up at him with all three eyes and says nothing for a long while. Zhaka waits. Asks something about the construction: what is this place? A training hall? A retreat?

Macarius shrugs and gives an answer that doesn't quite make sense. Something about building a home for everyone. A haven. A half-joke about a cult. He uses the word commune like he's still figuring out whether it means what he wants it to. He talks like someone narrating a book he hasn't finished writing. Philosophical. Loose around the edges. No grand doctrine, just a lot of half-finished ideas about freedom, dignity, unlearning everything the Empire teaches. Zhaka listens more than he speaks.

Macarius doesn't ask about his title. Doesn't mention his blood. He doesn't seem impressed by Zhaka's young age or rank. If anything, he seems wary. Like he's waiting for the punchline. A pureblood kid with a Dark Council inheritance showing up on his doorstep with no warning? Zhaka doesn't blame him for being suspicious. But Macarius lets him stay. Offers him a hammer.

They don't talk much after that. Not directly. Zhaka follows the man's instructions, clumsy but careful with the tools. The work feels stupid at first. Then strange. Then steady. It doesn't ask anything from Zhaka but presence. He likes that.

He doesn't mention the slaves still working his halls back home. He doesn't mention Luz. But that night, when he returns to the cold sprawl of Vieron's estate, something itches at him. Some part of him sees the stillness, the polish, the way the stewards bow without looking him in the eyes, and repulses. It doesn't feel like legacy. It feels like rot.

He lies awake in his room, staring at the ceiling, trying to remember the way Macarius explained slavery. How no sentient should own another. And for the first time in his life, Zhaka wonders why he does.

He doesn't rush himself. He spends a month walking the estate at dusk. Talks to each of his staff, each slave. Stewards, Vieron called them. He asks them about their futures. Listens. Returns freedom to those who want it. Offers wages to those who decline.

He stops hosting banquets. Seals off the east wing. Tears down the barracks, lays down soil. Dromund Kaas doesn't grow much, but he finds a contact for a farmer who knows how to make things work here. He hires him. His cousins, too. Real people. Locals. He doesn't ask their loyalty, just their time. Their hands. Payment in full.

The servants watch him like he's lost his mind. Maybe he has. Maybe he's finally finding it.

The estate shifts over the course of a year. The wine cellars empty and are replaced with tea. Not imported from off-world, but local blends. Bitter. It burns the tongue. Zhaka finds solace in the pain. He stops inviting Sith to visit. Stops answering summons. Those who come looking for him expecting the usual games of posture and excess find only farmland and silence. The marble halls are less hollow now. There's noise. Hammers. Conversations. Rain on tilled earth.

The silence doesn't choke him anymore. The estate feels like his, almost.

He has Vieron's hilt reforged. Slimmed. Adjusted. A new emitter, a new grip design. It no longer bites at his fingers when he moves. The crystal inside still hums with memory, but the weapon is different now. Reclaimed.

His next matter is the archives. He's avoided them until now. Vieron was obsessed with recordkeeping. Not just ledgers, but archives. Entire wings of the estate carved into data chambers. Tall, sealed stacks of holodisks, schematics, transaction histories dating back decades. Some rooms are kept chilled. Others are magnetically shielded. Zhaka used to think they were for research or blackmail. Now? He's not sure. He wanders in because he's looking for an old saber schematic. Something for his new grip. What he finds instead is a window into his late master's mind.

The systems recognize his biosignature. Grant him seamless access. He finds ledgers. Charts. Personal notes. Maps marked with black market routes. Acquisitions. There are lists of names – thousands of them – traced through slave exchanges, security firms, off-the-books military research. Some are labeled by function. Some by potential. Some by price. One console displays a portfolio of contracts: property deeds across the Mid Rim. Spice harvest shares. Gladiator stockpools. Entire systems tied into a quiet network of wealth extraction. Everything anonymized behind layers of shell companies, until you trace it back far enough to find his master's personal authorization.

Zhaka combs through them all night. It's no surprise what his master did. It's what Sith do. What they are. Vieron was never shy about his reach. Zhaka grew up in it. Bathed in it. Was shaped beneath it. This isn't new.

And yet... his stomach twists.

He thinks of Macarius. Of calloused hands and dirt-streaked clothes. The way the Gran builds with clumsy faith and little façade. No guards. No archive. Just hope stitched together with awkward phrasing and the word *commune* said like a question.

And Luz. The stories his friend used to tell about Dathomir. About shared baths in the river. Simple huts. Food cooked over an open fire. Sun on his skin. Luz never pretended it was paradise, but he smiled when he spoke of it. The pleasure of scarcity. Zhaka didn't understand back then. Now, he thinks he does. He imagines Taia. The warmth of her hand on his. The steadiness of her gaze. The way she looked at him when he said he didn't want to become what made him. She would hate these records, would ache for the names buried here. He can feel her voice already, curling behind his ribs, fierce and quiet.

*You know this isn't right.*

His throat tightens. His fingers twitch above the console.

He doesn't destroy the archives. Not yet. But he severs the chords. Contacts the slave brokers through burner channels. Shuts down their contracts. Deletes rights to his inherited holdings. Cancels accounts tied to spice farms, illegal mining colonies, flesh markets. Collapses the shell companies. When he's done, he logs out of the system without ceremony. The data spins into stasis. He stands up and leaves.

Upstairs, the air feels different. Not clean, but lighter. He doesn't call a servant for tea. He walks to the kitchens. Brews it himself. Bitter and strong. Hot enough to scald. Steeped enough to sting.

Outside, the barracks are gone. Flattened. The soil churns fresh under the boots of his workers. He watches a young farmer scatter seeds into the wind. Watches it float across the fields. He doesn't feel proud. Not exactly. But he breathes easier.

He thinks of Luz, how he'd scoff at the fancy tea set but still help Zhaka build fences. How he'd correct his double-bladed form without words. He thinks of Taia, how her eyes would soften at the greenhouse blueprint he's going to place over the prisons. He hopes they'd be proud.

He lifts the tea to his lips. A thought caresses the back of his mind, and he smiles. A slow, private smile. He can almost hear Vieron screaming. Hear his father's disembodied voice, snarling about bloodlines and weakness and legacy. About control. Obedience.

Zhaka drinks hot tea in the ruins of their empire and dares to be better than they were.

It tastes far better than any victory.

The rain taps softly against the tin roof, steady and cold. Zhaka stands in the shadow of the watchtower, arms crossed, cloak damp at the shoulders. The sound of distant speeders echoes through the humid air. The whole place reeks of mildew, abandonment, irony. This is where they'd agreed to meet. He's been waiting for three days.

She's not usually this late.

The holo-emitter sits on the warped table behind him, flickering. It blinks sometimes, taunting, like it's about to spark to life only to die again. He's stopped getting up when it happens. He just paces, slow and quiet, one hand tugging at his gloves, the other brushing hair from his face. He's been growing it out. It doesn't sit right on his head.

The emitter clicks. A real flicker. A hum. The glow sharpens. He moves faster than he means to, rushing to switch it on. And there she is. Taia shimmers into view. Grainy. Blue. Tired. Her hood is down, hair pulled back. She looks tired.

"Zhaka," she says, voice a low crackle as it pushes through the static. "I'm sorry. I'm stuck on Coruscant. They've locked down the planet. I —"

"—Can't leave," he finished for her, voice strained with impatience. "I get it." Her mismatched eyes flicker.

"Yeah. They've shut everything down. No one in, no one out." He lets out a sharp breath, pacing toward the edge of the tower.

"Figures. Nothing like a good old-fashioned political assassination to reignite full blown war." He didn't need to hear more about the senator's death. Taia's pause brings his eyes back to her face. It is melancholic, more so than usual.

"You saw it, didn't you?" he says, "the assassination." Her face tightens slightly.

"Yeah. It was fast. Clean. Professional." She looks down, taking a breath before she meets his gaze again. "The Senate's already drafting a war declaration. They blame the Sith." Zhaka snorts.

"Of course, it's always the Sith."

"A senator *died*, Zhaka," she says, frustration creeping into her voice. "They won't stop until Dromund Kaas is reduced to rubble."

"I know," he mutters, gaze distant. His mind is already turning over the inevitable consequences. "Doesn't matter, though. The Republic wants someone to blame. We're convenient." Taia's eyes lock onto his.

"It's not convenience. We're your enemies." He clenches his jaw. "Zhaka... I don't want this. I don't want to have to face you across a battlefield."

“You think I do?” he snaps, voice sharper than he intended. “You think I want to carve my way through the Core with half the Empire cheering all the while I pray I don’t recognize your damn lightsaber across the field?” Her mouth sets into a thin line.

“Then don’t.” she says. “Don’t be a part of it. You don’t have to be a Sith.” A long silence.

“I am Sith.” The words land 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 asks. “Because I don’t see you in any of this! I see someone trying to be something he’s not!” He stares past the holoprojector’s glow, fingers curling into fists.

“I’m not you. 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.” Her face falls, understanding blooming in her expression. Then silence. The gentle hiss of rain, the soft flicker of blue light between them.

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

“Yeah,” he says, voice softer now. “Me too.”

“We can’t keep meeting like this. Not anymore. Not if they’re watching both of us.” He picks at his fingernails.

“I figured.”

“But… I’d like to keep talking,” she adds, small smile tugging at her lips. “Check in, you know. Be each other’s break from this.” He gives her a long look, then leans back against the wall and cracks a crooked, tired smile.

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

“We’re a couple of forbidden lovers. I need to do my part.” He laughs. Quietly. Short. Real.

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

“No matter what.” The image flickers.

“Hey, Taia,” he says, voice catching slightly. “Just… don’t get yourself killed. Please.” She smiles, a sad kind of warmth in her expression.

“Same to you, Mr. Dark Side.” The call cuts out. He wonders, as rain pounds down on the roof, if that is the last time he’ll see her. He hopes not.

Zhaka turns seventeen beneath a storm-lit sky. He stopped marking the day years ago. There's no ceremony. No candles. The only gift he receives is an official summons from the Dark Council. They want him to take Vieron's seat.

It's a quiet offer. No pageantry, no announcement. Just a single datapad slid across a polished table in a private hall deep beneath the Imperial Citadel. A gesture more than a command. The wording is clever: recognition of inheritance, consolidation of legacy, strengthening of the Council's younger ranks. It smells like bait. A muzzle.

He doesn't answer immediately.

Instead, he returns home. Walks the fields. Watches the farmers turn soil with gloved hands. He drinks bitter tea, counts the names his master buried in data vaults. Thinks of the boy he used to be. Obedient. Angry. Alone.

He goes to Macarius later that week. Doesn't say much, just helps frame the wall of a new dormitory. At one point, the Gran mentions the Council in passing. Some cryptic dig about 'old men in new robes' and Zhaka doesn't correct him. He just nods. Keeps hammering.

The next morning, he returns the datapad unsigned. No speech. No direct refusal. Just silence. Let them think what they want.

The war unfolds around him. Lords abandon their estates for warfront barracks and sparkling cruisers. He tries to avoid it, at first. Trains in his estate, helps Macarius build his commune. Locks the war outside his frame. But it finds him. Catches him in its sly grasp. He's sent another summons from the Council. Then another. Vieron oversaw the Sphere of Expansion and Diplomacy, and the Council is desperate for a diplomat right about now.

He doesn't accept their summons, but he takes jobs. Heads to neutral space with gifts and sly words. Delves through his master's archives, reads reports on senators and local leaders. When he steps back into the public sphere, he starts getting invitations again. Galas. Speeches. Birthdays. He attends a few. Keeps to himself. Avoids lords he recognizes. Starts idle conversation with apprentices hiding in their master's shadows. He wonders if it's time to take an apprentice of his own – it's been three years since he became a Lord. The idea unsettles him. He doesn't know where he'd even start, how he'd teach someone without falling into the hole his master created.

Macarius' commune grows from a measly few to almost a hundred. They build faster, make room, turn the desolate clearing into a peaceful village. After three years building it, Macarius leaves for the front. Someone has to hold the line. The Gran doesn't say goodbye directly, just leaves behind a couple of blueprints and supply contacts. A few months later, the first child is born on the grounds. She's small. Tight fists. Fierce lungs. The parents name her Jaesa. The whole village gathers outside the nursery room, laughing over tea and boiled grain.

Someone makes a crown of ivy and sets it atop the mother's head. Another one for the child. Zhaka holds her for a moment. She doesn't cry, just stares up at him with wide, unblinking eyes.

He wonders, sometimes, if he would make a good father. The thought comes in quiet moments. On the edge of a diplomatic mission. While watching one of the commune children chase a ball through soft mud. He imagines what it would be like to shape someone without breaking them. To teach through care. To build. He thinks of Seritok.

She had only offered him advice a handful of times. Short words. Subtle corrections. One of them saved his life. He remembers her voice. Still. Short. "He wants to own you. And the only way to own someone like you is to make you predictable." He hadn't fully understood their conversation then, but he does now. He feels it every time he catches himself raising his voice. Every time his own echo makes him flinch. She had been kind to him. Not soft, not weak. Kind. Even with restraints on her wrists, even under Serith's hand, she kept that intact. He wants to be like that.

There's a Codru-Ji boy on the commune. Nine, maybe ten years old. Zhaka watches him play with a few of the other kids, sparring with sticks. He fights like Luz used to. Reckless. Bold. Never still. Zhaka finds himself smiling as he watches. One morning, when the boy tumbles from a spin, Zhaka steps forward without thinking. Adjusts his elbow. Repositions his stance. Doesn't say much, just a quiet, "Try again."

The boy listens. This time, the strike lands clean. Zhaka feels something strange in his chest. Not pride in the move, something quieter. The boy looks up at him, waiting. Zhaka nods once. He grins and sprints off. Zhaka stays a while longer, thinking of Luz. Of Taia. Of Seritok's voice in a dark corridor. He doesn't know if he'll ever be a good teacher. But he knows he'll never be the kind that breaks.

He returns to the estate alone that evening. Rain gathers thick on the windowpanes. He moves through the halls by memory, past shuttered rooms and quiet machinery. There's dust on the old council chamber, the one Vieron used to keep reserved for private audiences. Zhaka hasn't stepped inside since he killed him.

He does now.

The room is exactly as it was. Nothing touched, not even the faint bloodstains on the floor. The windows stretch wide, overlooking the fields. For a moment, Zhaka stands where his master once stood. At the head of the table. The center of his empire.

He thinks of the datapad, unsigned. Of Macarius, gone to war. Of Taia's last words whispered through static. Of Seritok's voice in the dark. The Codru-Ji boy's wild grin. Luz's finesse footwork. The weight of a newborn girl in his arms.

He thinks of Vieron. Of gloved hands. Bruises that taught him silence. Obedience. Fear.

He stands there a long time, staring down the corridor where his master used to summon him. When he finally turns, he doesn't look back. He won't fill this room. Won't build a legacy that begins with submission. When he does take an apprentice, they won't flinch at his footsteps. They won't wait to be struck. They'll know freedom. They'll know choice.

Outside, the storm breaks. Rain beads against the window glass. Somewhere in the fields, a worker starts singing as he tills soil. Zhaka closes the door behind him. Leaves it shut. Walks forward. Quiet. Steady. Free.