

The Breaking Point

No one had spoken a word since they sat down for dinner. Lonae's concentration on her food remained unbroken. Eilen had never looked more disinterested in her own. Her melancholic gaze stared through the plate, the table, the floor, to whatever space beyond that contained her runaway thoughts. Eiro's attention had long since shifted away from eating. He'd never seen his mother and sister like this for so long, but the power to say so continued to elude him. There wasn't a fourth chair to acknowledge.

When Lonae's plate was nearly emptied, she finally spoke up. "Your food's gonna get cold if you two don't eat."

Eiro looked at his twin. Her ear didn't even twitch like she'd heard it. He turned back to their mother, but still couldn't find anything to say.

Lonae leaned over to view her daughter more directly. "...Eilen, you're gonna starve, at this rate. Your brother's eaten a bit, but... aren't you even hungry?"

There was a long pause, and her mother nearly gave up on an answer before Eilen let out a weak, "No."

"...I think I'm done, too," Eiro added after a moment.

Lonae sighed. The silence quickly began to eat at her. "What did you guys learn from Baro today?"

Eiro looked to Eilen first, and when she didn't respond, he cleared his throat. Even for an eleven-year-old, it sounded forced. "We just did some telekinetics."

His mother's head tilted. "What happened to your farsight exercises?"

He grimaced lightly. "Didn't feel up to it."

Lonae leaned over again. "...Eilen?"

Eiro nearly spoke for her, but Eilen confessed before he could try to cover for her, "I didn't go today."

Lonae flipped a hand. "Why not?" After her daughter failed to answer, she shook her head. "Well, what were you doing all day instead?"

Eilen's fingertips twisted her silverware, gaze still stuck on the void of space beyond her food. "I, uh... I was... just..." She sighed as it became evident she couldn't worm her way out with a good excuse. "...Nothing."

"*Nothing*, nothing?"

No response, again.

Lonae leaned back in her chair and rolled her head. "...Eilen, I know it's hard to stay focused, right now," she started in a carefully measured tone, "but this *has* to stop. You and your brother have a very special gift. No matter what kind of punches life throws at you, you *can't* just let your powers go to waste because you don't *feel* like going to practice with them."

Eilen sank. Her insides wanted to jump for safety, but her body was growing heavier by the moment. "I... I-I'm sorry..."

"Well, I'm not the one you should be apologizing to. You know, Baro goes pretty far out of his way to come teach the two of you. And... damn it, Eilen, it's downright disrespectful to go playing

hookie on him as much as you do, and it's not fair to your brother to be going by himself, especially now."

The world felt hot and cold all at once from where Eilen was sitting as the guilt settled deeper. Her mother was right; not even her brother could rely on her. The anxiety of what could have happened to him alone seemed to amplify gravity in her chest. "I'm sorry," she let out with a tremble.

"Mom—" Eiro didn't get more than a word out.

"I mean, I don't know how long I've been telling you to get your act together," Lonae interrupted, "but if you just *listened* to what you were supposed to be doing instead of wandering off to blow out your ears and count starships, your father might—"

She froze, wide-eyed. Her jaw clenched so fast against her tongue, it nearly bled. For a moment, she was sure her heart had stopped, but it was pounding like nothing else, now. Lonae wanted to tell herself that had come out wrong, but she meant what she'd nearly said, and both her kids knew it. They would all have to live with that damage.

Eiro had never looked so tense. Eilen's vision blurred as she sank further.

"Kriff," Lonae muttered. "Wait, Eilen—"

Her daughter knocked her chair back as she stumbled away and ran out of the room. Before Lonae could recover from the sudden void in her gut, Eiro stood as well. Her son's face was a mixed enigma, but his eyes swelled in front of her. He lifted a hand as if to say something, but clenched his fingers without a word and hurried after Eilen. Lonae planted her head in a hand as all the air in her lungs left with a hard shudder.

Fourteen years passed before the three of them sat altogether at the same table for dinner, again.