

Arajj's transport is as sterile as it is suffocating. An empty vessel. A box. She sits still, hands folded neatly in her lap, velvet bands on her wrists a reminder that the outside world is a luxury she cannot afford. She feels the soft hum of the ship beneath her, the low thrum of engines that barely disturb the silence of her compartment. The walls are lined with a dull, reflective metal. The air tastes mildly of antiseptic and indifference.

She had been striped, bathed, and dressed in silk before her journey, a thin metal collar placed around her neck. A med droid had smoothed over the worst of her bruises. Another had inserted a thin compliance chip at the base of her skull – a temporary one, she was told. For transport only. She never asked where she was going. That wasn't the important part.

When the crate opened, she was in the docking sector of Dromund Kaas' upper citadel. A sterile, militarized corridor of polished durasteel, red lights, and sharp Sith banners flutter in the wind. The loading area is guarded by Kaas City security; they barely look up to see her. A droid signs her delivery, scans her chip. They enter her designation into a datapad: Gifted property. Status: ornamental." The only words spoken to her come from a black-cloaked courier.

"Smile when you see her. She gets bored easily."

The rain on Dromund Kaas doesn't fall lightly. It pounds the rooftops like drums, cold and relentless. It soaks the black stone walkways with an oily sheen. Lightning carves brief, jagged scars across the sky. Arajj's feet drag through the puddles, the binders across her ankles only metaphorically dragging her down. She's soaked – neither of her escorts offer her a cloak. One walks behind her with a shock-staff. Another with a datapad.

"Lord Kav'i wasn't expecting the delivery until next week," one of the escorts mutters into a commlink. "Tell her it's from Lord Palide. That should speed things up."

Before her, the estate looms like a wound in the jungle. It is extravagant, sharp towers and spiraling spires. Lights flicker red like blood. Inside, everything is velvet, obsidian, silence. Servants in muted uniforms move like ghosts. One of them approaches and takes Arajj's arm.

"This way. The lady will see you now. Briefly." They usher her through the marble halls, carpeted red floors that match the light bathing the estate. The walls are decorated in portraits of Togruta, regal faces frozen in time.

The Sith Lord doesn't rise from her seat as Arajj is led into the parlor. Her robes are black, luxurious, lined with glints of silver. Her pale face is framed with montrals and lekku, they rise up above her like a crown and descend like ivy. There is something unsettling to her stillness, like a predator deciding whether to pounce. Her yellow gaze flickers to Arajj. Assessing. Weighing. Then, slowly, she leans forward and rests her chin on clawed hand. Her voice is smooth, dripping with disappointment.

“So... this is the plaything my dear uncle thought would amuse me?” Her tone is casual, like she is commenting on one of the paintings in the hall and not a person. It doesn’t surprise Araj. The servant behind her bows low.

“Lord Palide’s gift.” Lord Kav’i’s smile lights up, a jagged shard of glass.

“A toy from Nar Shaddaa,” she scoffs, standing and brushing her hands together. Her lekku sway softly as she moves. “Hardly what I had in mind, but I suppose even novelty has its appeal.” She raises her hand and beckons the servant forward. “Take her to the prison on Korriban. I’ll find something to do with her later.”

The words hang in the air. Korriban. Araj’s heart sinks. The servant leads her away, their footsteps echo down the dark halls. She can feel the heat of Korriban wrapping around her even before the transport takes off.

The second transport is as brutal as the first. It arrives at the estate in the early hours of the morning, a glint of light against the dark curtain of Dromund Kaas. Araj is once again confined to a small, window-less crate. This time, the ship hums with a deeper vibration. There is no luxury this time. No soothing sterile cleanliness. Just the sharp, biting edge of discomfort. Her body, bound in velvet. Her collar is tighter. The lights flicker overhead in an erratic pattern. The faint hum of the ship’s engines vibrate through her bones.

When the ship finally lands, she barely notices. The Sith Temple of Korriban rises before her, towering and ancient among the desert sands. Its towers claw at sky, reaching upward like talons. The air is thick with dust and the residue of old power. She keeps her head down as she is led through the temple, guards prodding her with stun batons each time she missteps.

Lord Kav’i’s vault is cavernous, jagged stone walls look as though they’d been carved out of a mountain. The recycled air is thick with the smell of incense and blood. Above her head, the ceiling rises high and open. The walls are lined with torture instruments, twisted grotesque devices that sit silently in the shadows, waiting. Anticipating. She is strapped into a vertical slab, wrists above head, ankles bound. The metal is cold, unforgiving.

Her captors leave her there, heart pounding in the oppressive silence. She yearns for the neon lights of Nar Shaddaa. The smell of spice. Fuck, the unfamiliar hands sliding down her hips would be a welcome change. Anything familiar.

She isn’t alone for long. A figure enters from behind her. He needs no introduction. A Sith. He circles her slowly, surveying his catch.

“Bet you haven’t really screamed before, have you?” he murmurs, a finger tracing the edge of her jaw. “It’s a shame, really. Pretty voice like yours, and all its ever done is entertain the dregs of Nar Shaddaa.” He doesn’t wait for a reply. The back of his hand strikes her across her face with a loud crack, sharp enough to knock her head sideways. Her skin burns where his knuckles split it. The sting blooms across her cheek like fire. She gasps; more reflex than sound.

He doesn't use droids. Doesn't use drugs. He uses hands. Implements. Devices that dig and tear. Hooks and clamps and small needles that seem designed to define the concept of humiliation. At first, she holds out. She grits her teeth. She says nothing. Her whole body shakes, not from pain but confusion. What has she done to deserve this? When her knees finally collapse under her, he lifts her chin with two fingers and says, almost kindly, "Sweet songbird. It'll be over before you know it."

Hours pass. Maybe longer. Her screams echo into the stone, her voice cracks until it is raw, hoarse. She begs. She sobs. She says whatever she thinks might make it stop. "Please, I'll be good. I'll obey. I don't understand what I did, please, please, please," It doesn't matter.

She starts to hallucinate halfway through it. She sees fire in the corners of her vision, hears voices whisper languages she doesn't know. Her mother's lullabies blend with the whip's crack. Somewhere, distantly, she vomits. She doesn't remember it happening. When he finally leaves her alone, she slumps in her bonds, legs too weak to support her. Her arms burn from suspension. Her red hair is matted, soaked in blood and sweat. She stares at the wall, bare stone, scratched and scorched from countless victims before her. She wonders if she's going to die here. She wants to.

Days blend. The red glowstones in the vaulted ceiling never dim. She measures time by the stretches of silence when her tormentor has vanished. She comes to despise him. His human skin, yellow eyes, tattooed body. He is meticulous. He documents her responses. Records vocal pitches. Charts tremors in her muscles and dilation of her pupils.

She forgets things, a few weeks in. The lights of Nar Shaddaa, the songs she had committed to memory, the soft lullabies of her childhood. It all gets buried beneath the endless weight of pain. She learns to recite the same phrases in a thousand different ways.

Her arms are kept whole, but often bound behind her, hung in positions that pull muscles too long, too far. Her spine learns to ache as naturally as breathing. Her hair grows long, tangled, and is shorn off for cleanliness or punishment. The devices in the vault are exotic, ancient Sith designs meant not just to hurt but to evoke awe. Metal chairs that reshape the spine, helmets that tighten until all light disappears. Some sing when activated. Some feed off fear. One, she suspects, feeds off her memory. After a few hours in it, she no longer remembered the sound of her own voice. Occasionally, her tormentor talks to her. He sings to her about enlightenment. Understanding. Arajj begins to believe him.

One day, Lord Kav'i returns. It is sudden, unscheduled. The vault doors boom open. Arajj's tormentor steps back, confused for the first time. She strides in like a sandstorm. Her robes glint with sand, her yellow eyes are cold with fury. She does not look at Arajj at first, she looks at the man.

"I told you to condition her," she says, voice sharp as one of the many blades around Arajj, "Not to gut her like a nerf." He bows, too late, too deeply.

“My lady, she is nearly ready –” Lord Kav’i raises one hand. The air sizzles. Arajj has never seen the Force used like this, the air feels electric with her motions. His body lifts in the air, an invisible grip around his throat. His limbs shake. His eyes bulge. Blood spills from his nose, his ears. Lord Kav’i doesn’t spare him a glance as he collapses, dead. Arajj can’t stop staring into his glossy eyes.

She crosses the vault slowly, heels echoing off the stone. Arajj doesn’t know whether to scream or sob. She can barely lift her head. She shakes like a leaf. When Lord Kav’i stops before her, she studies Arajj the way one might examine an old, destroyed sculpture. Ruined, yes, but beautiful despite that. Then she kneels before Arajj. She places a single hand beneath her chin and lifts it, with gentle, soft touch. Something inside Arajj breaks.

“I’m sorry,” Arajj whispers, once beautiful voice hoarse. “I tried to be good.”

“You lasted longer than most,” she murmurs. “Do you remember your name?” Arajj tries to nod, but her muscles refuse to cooperate. A pause. Lord Kav’i leans in. Her breath is warm, voice low. Tender.

“I gave you away once. I won’t do that again.” She releases the manacles herself. Arajj collapses into her arms like a ragdoll. Her head spins. Her eyes lock on her tormentor’s cold, still, pupils. Lord Kav’i lifts Arajj with one arm, effortlessly. Wraps her cloak around Arajj’s torn and matted silk. Arajj presses her face into the crook of her rescuer’s shoulder. There’s warmth there. A heartbeat. Home.

The years fly by. Not like leaves on the wind, they tear past. They rip skin, carve lines into memory, drag her forward whether she’s ready or not. At first, Arajj counts the days. Then, she counts gestures. A flick of Lord Kav’i’s fingers. The subtle tilt in her voice before punishment. The narrowing of those sulfurous eyes when something delights or bores her. Arajj learns the terrain of Lord Kav’i’s moods the way she once learned soft intertwining melodies.

The estate on Dromund Kaas is a place of contradictions. Fragrant candles burn beside cadaverous statues. Velvet curtains drape over iron bindings. Music drifts from distant chambers where no one plays. Arajj comes to know each hallway by the way the floor groans, each room by the weight of the air. She adapts. She learns not to scream. Not unless Lord Kav’i wants her to.

Some days, she’s dressed in hand-beaded silk, told to serve wine on glass platters while standing on plates that send shocks if she spills a single drop. Other days, she’s blindfolded and ordered to sing to corpses, fresh ones. Real ones. Lord Kav’i brings guests to these performances sometimes. They never clap.

Her second year, Lord Kav’i starts the sparring matches. She straps Arajj into ceremonial gowns, delicate enough to shred from a breeze, and throws her into duels against training droids.

She learns to dodge, to feint, to make the destruction entertaining. If she bleeds beautiful patterns, Lord Kav'i rewards her.

It becomes a pattern. A rhythm. A dance. Arajj learns to walk the tightrope between pain and spectacle. She flinches when expected. She sings when told. She folds herself into the image Lord Kav'i had carved for her.

By year three, Arajj thinks she has finally won Lord Kav'i's favor. She touches her more often now, not in lust but in ownership. A hand beneath her chin. Fingers through her long hair. Gentle, then cruel, then gentle again. She teaches Arajj Sith aphorisms while binding her wounds. She recites lines from books aloud while Arajj scrubs her own blood off the walls.

"Discipline is love," she says once, tightening the strap around Arajj's wrist. "Devotion must be cultivated."

Arajj whispers. "Yes, my lady." And realized something. She means none of it. But says it well.

One night, after a particularly brutal session – Lord Kav'i had ordered her to mimic the movements of a Sith duel while a chain of electricity wound through her bones – the lord stood in the center of the parlor, watching Arajj shake. She sighed. Low. Long. Almost affectionate.

"You're very difficult to break, canary," she murmurs. "I admire that." Arajj doesn't reply. She doesn't think she can. Lord Kav'i approaches her slowly, circling like a serpent. She stops by Arajj's side and looks down at the bruises, fractured hand, raw fingertips. And then, so softly it almost didn't sound like cruelty at all, she says, "Perhaps it's time you have something of mine." Arajj looks up. Her lord's smile is thin.

"You'll need to be fitted. We'll begin with the left arm. A clean replacement. Fully integrated. Beautiful, of course. You'll be the first. I need to see if it will work." Arajj's breath catches, not out of fear, but of victory. Like Lord Kav'i had looked at her and seen not a toy, but something worth refining. She bows low.

"Thank you, my lady."

The operating table they press her to seems more like a butcher's slab. Her restraints are tight. Not clinical, brutal. Her wrists twisted back; ankles forced apart. There is a drain beside her. It trickles with a drip-drip-drip sound.

"You'll want to be quiet," the doctor says as he prepares the saw. There is no sedative. Not even a numbing agent. Just cold steel pressed against living flesh, and a scream that didn't sound like hers. It rises out of her lungs like steam from a boil, ragged and disbelieving. Her body thrashes, reflexive and wild. They have to bring in a second droid to hold her still. It

clamps onto her skull like a vice, mechanical limbs pressing down until her jaw dislocates with a pop.

She begs. She screams. She begs. No one responds.

The arm comes off slowly. Cleanly. With surgical curiosity. The Arkanian doctor mutters notes as he goes, pale blue eyes cataloguing the way her nerves twitch and muscles seize.

“She has strong resistance in the deltoid. We’ll have to burn that out.” Burn that out. Like it is rust. Like she is rust.

By the end, she isn’t really conscious. Just twitching. Her arm, the one that once held silk, the one that had learned to dance, to sing, to cling to warmth, is sealed in a vacuum tube and set beside her cage. Metal bars. Cracked concrete. Bloodstains like paint across the floor. No bedding. Just cold, gritty stone. Her arm, what remains, is wrapped in bloody synthcloth that does nothing to stifle the agony. The stump pulses with infection, already swollen and hot. They give her water only after she passes out. A droid sprays it from a hose, catching her in the face like she is livestock. She chokes on it. Coughs. Curles against the pain.

Her fingers, phantom ones, twitch. She sobs. Quietly. Then louder. Then not at all. The next day, the Arkanian doctor returns to install the cybernetic arm. It slides into her like fire. The socket drills directly into her shoulder, wiring snaking down her spin like parasitic roots, feeding her nerves, muscles, thoughts. And the pain, it wasn’t just her body, as she was adjusted to. It was in her mind. Her heartbeat.

The moment it clicks into place, she feels it. Not just a machine, a system. A will. It burns deep into her. She tries to speak. Her mouth makes the shape of a word. The Arkanian’s pale eyes meet hers.

“Don’t,” he says, not unkindly. “You’ll regret it.” He adjusts something out of her line of sight. A faint click. A tightening. Her nerves light up like wires dripped in water. She convulses. Her breath hitches.

“Good,” he murmurs. “You’re receiving feedback. That means the interface is active.” The restraints across her chest loosen slightly as he stands above her. She can see him clearly now.

“Do you know what it does?” he asks, tilting his head like a parent check a fever. “This arm of yours?” She shakes her head. Barely. Anything more would hurt. He doesn’t smile, but he sounds pleased.

“It is attuned to you. Your sound. Your breath. Your range of motion. It learns through repetition. Through consequence.” He reaches up and runs a gloved finger along the base of her collarbone, where the wires vanish beneath her skin. “The pain, I’m afraid, is not optional.” A flick of his wrist. A new jolt. White-hot. She screams. Reflexively. Desperately.

Her whole body locks. The metal clenches at the joint, and something inside it twists, like a blade turning inward. Her scream warps into a broken gasp. Her lungs seize. He lets it pass, cold eyes darting between her and his datapad.

“It’s a feedback loop,” he explains. “Vocal strain triggers correction. Correction begets more vocal strain. You see the shape of it.” She doesn’t see anything. She only feels. Raw. Burnt. He continues anyway. “In time, the system will learn how to differentiate. Eventually, it will only punish incorrect inputs. Missed notes, fractured breath, improper cadence. But it is still young. So everything will hurt.” He walks to a screen on the wall. “This is your calibration window,” he says, tapping it. “Three days.” She twitches. He watches.

“The longer you scream, the longer it takes. So I would suggest you adapt. Quickly.” The lights dim. The door closes. The hum returns.

At first, Arajj tries silence. Breath held in, throat tight, recently relocated jaw locked. But each breath is a gamble. The machine watches everything. The way her ribs expand. The tremble of her vocal cords. The moment her restraint slips, it punishes her. She groans in her sleep. It punishes. She sobs through her teeth. It punishes. She prays, quietly, to something unnamed, just to feel less alone. It punishes her for that too. By the third night, she learns to perform her silence. No hitches. No gasps. No cracked lips. Just stillness. Perfect, pretty, hollow stillness.

The Arkanian returns each day for a short time to type into his datapad and check her reflexes. Each time he does, the machine punishes her, forcing her to control her breath before the loop begins. On the third day, when her calibration window is done, he brings in a couple of droids.

“You’re going to vocalize,” he says, tapping on his datapad. “Sing, speak, whisper, whatever passes for natural vocal range in your species. I will adjust the arm accordingly.” He places a small recorder and tone analyzer on the ground before her cage.

“I’d recommend starting with scales,” he continues, as if she is a student. She doesn’t answer. Her lips press together. He looks at her. Sighs.

“Noncompliance will delay adaptation. Delayed adaptation means continued punishment.” She still holds her tongue. He sets down the datapad, then, without ceremony, raises a hand and slaps her across her face. Hard. She recoils, a quiet gasp escaping her lips before she can stop it. The arm clamps down. White hot spikes shoot down her spine. Her entire body shudders. The pain is immediate and unrelenting, like her nerves are being peeled and boiled. She screams. The scream triggers the arm again. A new jolt. Her vision flickers. Another scream. Another spike. Another jolt.

It becomes a spiral, each sound feeding the next. She sobs, gasps, wails, each one punished, each breath met with more agony. Her body convulses. The cage shakes beneath her. Through it all, the Arkanian watches. Data streams across his screens. Vocal patterns, pressure

responses, neurofeedback loops. The corner of his mouth twitches. Satisfaction. After an eternity, he manually cuts the power. The arm relaxes.

Araj crumples, drooling, shaking, throat bleeding from the inside out. Every breath is a rasp. Every muscle trembles. He crouches beside her again.

“You see now,” he murmurs, “the system must learn your voice as an instrument. If you shriek, sob, you break, and you’ll teach it the wrong notes.” His fingers gently brush a strand of hair from her cheek. “You must be perfect for your lady.” She sobs quietly. No punishment this time.

“It doesn’t care how you feel,” he says, standing. “Only how you sound.” He rises, enters a few commands into the panel. The arm begins to clamp down again. Resynching. Resetting.

“I’ll return tomorrow. Practice. Start with vowels. Something pretty. If you sound like an animal again, it will punish you.” The doors seal behind him. She lies there for hours, each breath like walking on knives. Eventually, she tries a single note. Soft. Fragile. A vowel sound she barely remembers from a lullaby. The pain buzzes but doesn’t strike. She tries again. Another note. Her breath holds steady.

The next day arrives without fanfare. She wakes raw-throated, breath shallow. But the pain hasn’t come. That alone is a victory. She sits up slowly. Tests her voice. She spends the morning whispering vowels like prayers, her voice careful, measured. Every break, every stray vibrato is punished, but less than before.

The door opens again, the Arkanian steps in. He carries a small black device. Sleek. Round. A recorder. She straightens in her cage.

“You’ve been practicing,” he observes, eyes drifting across the screen in her panel. “43% decrease in synaptic resistance.” She doesn’t respond. Her jaw is tight.

“That is good,” he says, as though she’s a promising student. “Today, we’ll record something more complex.” He opens the recorder, activates a holopad. A line of lyrics glow faintly blue before her. An old Sith canticle, all long vowels and impossible harmonies. One of Lord Kav’i’s favorites.

“You’ll perform this,” he says. “And the arm will measure pitch precision, tonal variance, breath control, the like. Any deviation...” he doesn’t finish. He doesn’t need to. Araj looks down at the text. She doesn’t recognize most of the words, but she knows how they should sound. He gestures.

“Begin.” She takes a breath. Closes her eyes. Starts on the third line, humming through the shape of vowels. The arm twitches. Her voice flattens. Pain bites up her spine. She holds the note steady, eyes crinkling in focus. Another line. Smoother. Fuller. Her throat burns, but she doesn’t break. Even as the canticle’s range spirals higher, into registers most sentients cannot



reach, she threads her voice through the pain, satin-wrapped razor vines. By the second verse, her shoulders shake with effort. Sweat beads down her neck. Her legs tremble. But she doesn't scream. She doesn't cry. She sings. When she finishes, she doesn't collapse. She holds her breath, waiting for some feedback, some flicker of hot white pain.

The doctor claps. Once. Twice. Slow, clinical.

"Impressive," he says. "You've begun to understand the system." She doesn't answer. "You're ready to return to your lady," he says, turning off the recorder. "She will be impressed with your resilience." He tosses a cloak into her cage.

"You will be returned tomorrow. Keep practicing now, before it is too late for me to correct errors in the machine." He leaves.

She watches the ceiling. Dull metal. Lets her voice rise in a whisper of song. Soft. Controlled. Perfect.

Arajj returns to the Kav'i estate not as a girl, not even a slave. As a thing repurposed. Polished. Returned. The transport is quieter this time. No bindings. No escort with shock-staff. Just her. The pulse of the mechanical arm tucked against her ribs.

The estate breathes in rhythm now, and Arajj with it. Rain still laces the stone walls in waves. Heavy. Soft. Heavy again. Time moves differently. Months don't feel like days, they feel like repetitions. Scenes that replay – variations on the same cruel theme. Arajj learns her part.

At first, she walks with the left shoulder always tilted inward, the weight of her new limb pulling the spine slightly askew. The pain is constant. Deep. Mechanical. But she adapts. She hums under her breath as she moves. Not melodies, just tones. Sound. It calms the arm. It calms her.

Lord Kav'i doesn't address her return directly. She doesn't ask what the Arkanian did. She doesn't comment on the tremor that dances at the edge of Arajj's voice or the scars that climb like ghostly fingerprints up her ribs.

Instead, she observes. She watches from balconies as Arajj trains with droids in silken gowns, fabric ripping as she learns how to balance power with grace. She corrects her posture once, maybe twice. Let Arajj find the answers herself and punishes her when she fails.

The beatings stop. The late nights in the basement. Lord Kav'i's cruelty refines. She orchestrates the estate like an opera, every little detail choreographed for her pleasure. Arajj, who once sang in low-lit lounges on Nar Shaddaa, becomes the centerpiece.

She sings not in concerts, but in rituals. For Sith acolytes, for nobles, for gatherings laced with blood and politics. Sometimes her voice is the only thing in the room that doesn't shake.

Sometimes, she sings to corpses strung from the rafters. Sometimes, to Lord Kav'i alone. She performs for visitors. Weapons merchants. Bored inquisitors. High-ranking Sith who do not care for her name, only how cleanly her notes cut. The arm pulses if she stutters. It jerks if she speaks too low. But when she threads the note, when she channels it through her spine with control, it hums along in harmony. So she does. She makes her voice perfect. And she counts. Inquisitors that visit. Name, rank, estate. She listens. Catalogues. All under the beautiful siren of her voice.

Arajj is never praised for her work. Not outright. But she is given clothing tailored to her new posture. Rooms closer to the heart of the estate, away from the basement. Droids that obey her voice without question. The slaves who once walked past her with trained indifference now glance with something else in their eyes. Not pity. Not envy. Recognition. She moves with more confidence. She eats without trembling. Dresses herself without help. She sleeps in silence, not because her dreams don't disturb her, but because she's trained herself not to make a sound when they come.

The Jedi's arrival is a shock to all of them. Lord Kav'i had dressed Arajj in fine velvet, she was to perform for some Sith inquisitors. She stands before a newly-installed mirror in her room. It is full length, obsidian backed, edges glinting with Sith gold. Her lord had placed it in her quarters a day before. A gift, apparently. A test, more likely.

Arajj stands in silence. Hands rest gently at her sides. Her gown is woven from deep violet silks, dark as bruises, trimmed with a fan of sharp black lace that juts from her shoulders like wings. The fabric hugs her form, each stitch designed to draw the eye. It exposes the slope of her collarbone. The long curve of her spine. Her jewelry is brutal, jagged gold set into the skin of her neck like it had been grown there over time. Her hair is coiled in tight, elaborate twists, blood red strands pinned back with onyx clasps.

She tilts her head slightly, studying the woman in her reflection. The curve of the lips, dark. Sharp. The earrings. The eyes. They should be familiar. They are hers. But they blink too slowly. They move like a droid.

She raises her left arm. It moves slowly, cybernetics hidden between layers of gold and silk, though a clicking noise betrays the subtlety. It responds to her intention with inhuman precision. For a moment, she almost lifts her hand to her face, to touch the jawline, lip, to trace what has been altered, grown, hardened. The movement dies before it begins.

She remembers what she used to look like. The soft-lipped, wild haired girl in smoke filled lounges on Nar Shaddaa. Cheap makeup, secondhand dress. Voice like velvet and nerves. There's a flash of it now, just barely, in the arch of her brow. A ghost trapped in her skin.

A knock interrupts her silence. Soft. Hesitant. Not Lord Kav'i's. The door opens before she can speak. One of the younger slaves, a girl with downcast eyes and a tremor in her jaw stands behind it. She doesn't step into Arajj's room, just speaks loud enough for her voice to carry.

“Your presence is requested. Lord Kav’i’s orders.” A pause. “She’s got a Jedi,” she adds, quietly. Eyes glancing across the hallways.

Arajj doesn’t reply at first. The mirror still stands. Her reflection waits. A Jedi. She isn’t sure what exactly it is that stirs in her when she hears that word. Curiosity? Pity? The vaguest flicker of some long buried belief? It doesn’t matter. The lady has requested her. That’s all that matters. She turns slowly from the mirror. She smooths the front of her dress with her organic hand, then checks the fit of her collar, the lacquer of her nails. Her cybernetic fingers twitch once, then they still.

“I am presentable,” she says, voice clear, melodic, robotic. The girl bows, then retreats, door sliding shut behind her. Arajj lingers only a moment longer, enough to glance back at the mirror. Her reflection seems to stay behind for a second before leaving view.

The chamber is warm with braziers, filtered red crystal sconces drip the color of blood onto each polished surface. It shimmers across the Lady’s pale skin as she moves, gliding like a serpent around the dais where the Jedi kneels. Shackled and silent.

Arajj clings to the edge of the room, veiled in violet. The gold on her prosthetic catches light as she moves. Lord Kav’i doesn’t glance back when she speaks.

“Sing.” Arajj’s breath catches in her throat. Just for a beat. Then: a note, soft and crystalline, spills from her lips. It’s not a performance song. Not the kind she used to sing on Nar Shaddaa to catch a Hutt’s ear or distract a drunk from his credit chips. This is different. A wordless song, minor and low, braided with sorrow. Her lady moves through the verses like a dancer, fingers trailing gently beneath the Jedi’s chin.

The girl bleeds quietly. Her shoulders strain against the cuffs. Her eyes, green and fierce, flare when Lord Kav’i put pressure to burned skin. But she does not cry out. Not once. Arajj’s voice cracks on a high note, and she gasps quickly, adjusting her tone. The pain that follows is one she has learned to sing through. Her lady pauses to glance back at her.

“She sings better now,” she says, addressing no one. “Ever since her new voice box started punishing dissonance.” The Jedi doesn’t speak. But her bright, furious gaze shifts to Arajj. Not to blame. Not in pity. In recognition. Arajj turns her head. The next note trembles in her throat.

Lord Kav’i moved like a sculptor, not a butcher. She paces her cruelty. Studies the girl’s breath patterns, the tension in her neck. There is a kind of admiration in her. The way she looks at the Jedi. Arajj’s song dips lower, richer. She closes her eyes, lets the sound carry her. Her voice wraps the Jedi like a shroud. When she finishes, her Lord turns toward her. Her yellow eyes are bright, cheeks flushed with exertion or amusement.

“You’ve been watching so closely,” she says, tilting her head. “Listening so well. Why don’t you come show us what you’ve learned?” Arajj freezes. The song trembles faintly in her throat. Her gaze flickers to the Jedi, who meets it without fear. Without mercy. Her lady holds out a slender, blood dappled tool. Delicate. Precise. Not a blade, something far worse. A device meant for pressure. For control. Arajj remembers its sting from Korriban. She steps forward. Her hand refuses to close around the tool. Something inside her recoils. Her fingers curl inward, not around the handle. She can feel music on her tongue.

The arm flares up. Searing, bright, just for a second. A punishing jolt from shoulder to ribs, down her spine. Her body twists. Her breath hitches. Her lady’s smile thins.

“Tch.” She turns her back on Arajj and gives a little sigh, a feigned pout. “I give you a voice. A home. A body that sings without flaw. And still you refuse.” Arajj lowers her head.

“I am sorry, Lady.”

“No,” Lord Kav’i says, voice suddenly sharp and cold. “You’re ungrateful.” She steps forward and flicks along Arajj’s collarbone, where metal meets skin. The pain sears up again, causing her to curl inward. Then she looks past her toward the guards at the door.

“Take her downstairs,” she says. “Let her think about the privilege she’s squandered.” The guards move. Arajj doesn’t resist. As she’s led to the basement, she doesn’t look back at the Jedi. She doesn’t need to. The weight of that gaze burns between her shoulder blades.

Arajj’s cell is cold. Familiar. It is dimly lit with red sconces that clash with the blue of the containment field. Lady Kav’i’s cruelty shows itself in full force down here; a thin, metal collar placed around her neck. It grips her skin in cold protest to each and every motion she makes. It doesn’t allow her to sleep, waking her with hot electric spikes each time her heartrate settles. Only once the Lady falls asleep will the device relax and allow Arajj rest. Until then, she sits. The cell is bland, dark metal and thin bedsheets along a rotted mattress. Coming from Korriban, it was a luxury. Now, a rotting mess.

She hums to herself, running her organic arm along the ridges and grooves of her prosthetic. It feels alive under her touch, responding with nerve sensations that mimic her old arm so well. There’s a hiss of hydraulics. The containment field flickers to life beside her. The lady’s heels clack against durasteel. Arajj doesn’t move.

A shape crashes to the floor in a heap of torn fabric and blood. Lord Kav’i’s silhouette follows, leisurely. She descends the stairs like she owns the darkness.

“Still warm,” she drawls. “A little bruised. Nothing time won’t fix.” She pauses at Arajj’s cell. A flicker of a smile passes her thin lips. “I expect better from you next time, canary.” Then she turns, robes gliding behind her, and climbs back up the stairs. Her laugh fades, sharp and

distant. The Jedi coughs. She's around Arajj's age. Montrals battered, face scraped and bruised. Blood clings to the curve of her lip, trickles down her legs. She drags herself upright. Her right eye is swollen shut.

"Are you okay?" Arajj doesn't answer. The girl inches toward the front of her cell, using the back of her palm to wipe blood from her cheeks. "You're a slave here? For how long?" Arajj shrugs.

"A long time."

"I'm sorry," the girl breathes, pressing a hand to her ribs. "My name's Vashari. I'm looking for someone. A Weequay. Younger than me by a few years." Still, no answer.

"I'll get out. I'll get you out too." Arajj exhales through her nose.

"No." Vashari leans forward, frowning. "Don't give yourself false hope."

"You don't know what I'm capable of."

"Doesn't matter."

"You haven't seen me fight."

"Don't care." Silence. Vashari's mouth opens, then closes. Arajj feels the weight of the instrument in her hand.

"You're still acting like a Jedi," she mutters after a beat. "Don't do that." Vashari scowls.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Arajj's metal fingers shift against her thigh.

"It means hope is weakness here. She'll rip you apart slower, 'cause she knows it'll hurt more." The Jedi stares at her. "Refuse her or don't," she continues, voice low. "Won't matter if she knows how to hurt you." Vashari raises an eyebrow. Her jaw works, but no sound comes out.

"You want to live?" Arajj mutters, "To see that Weequay again? Don't let her get deep."

Vashari leans back against the wall of her cell, blood still dripping from her lip. "She'll learn that I bite back."

The years bleed together. Arajj watches from the shadows. At first, it's small things. A change in tone. A moment of stillness where there shouldn't be. Vashari stops flinching when the lady enters the room. Her hands twitch. Her jaw stops tightening each time an order is given. The silence takes them.

As their lady ascends, they dive deeper. The estate grows colder, velvet interior lined with trophies and bone. Lord Kav'i walks the halls in silence, anger reserved for special occasions.

They learn to spot the difference between moods, glances. To know when the lady is hungry, when she is cruel, when she is bored. That is worst.

Vashari becomes a spectacle. A weapon. At first, she resists. The lady makes her kill a slave. A slow, public execution under the glow of crimson braziers. Then another. Another. Arajj is made to sing during the executions. Songs Vashari would have despised. Now, she listens in silence. Moves like a blade already drawn. Stops hesitating before blows. Arajj stops looking away. As Vashari forgets, she realizes how important it is that someone remembers. Someone who knew her before.

They grow close. Their bond is less friendship, more chains rusted together. Serith begins to call Arajj her Voice. She demands Arajj stop calling her Lady, and instead, gives her a far more ritual name: Zeon Kuris Galia Nuyak Burna Vosti. The Lady Who Holds my Mouth Closed. She calls Arajj her voice, Vashari her blood.

“Burna and Uluwi M’Seritok,” she purrs when the two stand beside her couch, one in crimson, the other in gold. Vashari’s eyes are the worst part. They are calm now. Not serene. Still. Like the center of a storm. Her expressions are dull. Her fire burns low. The girl who once vowed to escape is gone. Buried under obedience. Sometimes, Arajj wonders about the Weequay Vashari was searching for. What became of him?

There are moments Arajj catches the shadow of Vashari from under Uluwi. Rare. Soft. Disjointed. The way her fingers twitch before a match, the way she lingers after Arajj is dismissed, gaze flickering toward her as if she means to speak. She never does.

Arajj learns. She learns how to move like Serith. How to spot weakness. She learns to spar. At first, Uluwi refuses to raise her blade against Arajj, but Serith corrects that quickly. The first time Arajj draws blood, she stares at her trembling hand for a long time afterward. The second time, she wipes it off. Their matches become routine. Training spectacles for the lady’s guests. Uluwi always wins, never with pride. Arajj’s body learns pain in new languages. Her cybernetic is upgraded, adjusted. It punishes her voice less, her body more. She starts to fight well.

There is no freedom left between them, only the thick bars of their cells. In the narrow space, they become something like kin. Sculpted. Beauty and brutality. Painted red and gold. Symbols of devotion to a woman who destroyed them and makes them worship her for the privilege. Sometimes, in the quiet moments at night, Arajj sings something different. Not the Sith hymn Serith gives her, but older lullabies, soft and wordless. Melodies from home. From a time before the metal. Before the pain. And Vashari listens. She never speaks. But she listens.

By Vashari’s third year, the estate feels less a prison more a cathedral. The Lady rules it like a goddess, they are her chosen. No one else is allowed such closeness. Arajj has seen her weep. Vashari has held her hand. They aren’t her slaves, they’re relics. Curated. Beloved in the way wild beasts are. Beautiful. Dangerous. Wholly owned.

Lord Kav'i speaks to them differently. Gives Vashari orders like blessing. Passes verses to Araj. Her voice softens when they are alone with her, full of strange tenderness. She praises Araj only after she sings. Calls Vashari her fire. They learn to move around her moods. When to kneel. When to bare teeth. They stop competing, become complement. Blood and Voice. One softens, the other bites. The lady removes all the mirrors from the estate. They only have each other to look to, twisted into something she finds beautiful. When she wanders the halls at night, muttering to herself, she calls to them. They always come.

Vashari's fourth year is when the Arkanian returns. He takes her with him, disappears her for seven days. When she returns, her movements are controlled. Perfect. A prosthetic arm glints under the dim lights, she walks with a forced limp – one leg shorter, shining durasteel. Araj watches from a distance. Her chest aches. She finds Vashari that night in the training room. She traces the contours of Vashari's new form, sharp lines of her prosthetic. She doesn't have to ask how it feels.

"It grows softer," she says quietly, voice almost a whisper. "Every time you use it. It will dim." Vashari flinches slightly but doesn't pull away. Her eyes are a hard flicker of fire buried beneath a stoic mask.

"I'm fine." Araj's gaze sharpens, but she says nothing. She knows the lie. She feels it in the tense way Vashari holds herself. She's experienced it.

"It's not fine," she murmurs, fingers tracing the edge of the prosthetic. Her touch is gentle, but she knows it is a mistake. She feels Vashari's breath freeze when she presses a little too hard and the prosthetic responds. Her jaw clenches, but she doesn't pull away. She lets Araj inspect the harness. Lets her feel the weight of it.

Her fingers flex in the air, testing the limits of her new arm. The movement is precise, the wince that follows telling. Araj remembers the first few months, when the prosthetics were raw and new.

"I've become a monster," Vashari whispers, voice strained. She doesn't meet Araj's eyes, but there is a quiet desperation there. A need for reassurance. Araj doesn't answer right away.

"If you need to be a monster to see tomorrow's sunrise, so be it." Vashari exhales sharply, breath caught between pain and frustration. "You are still you, below all that. Serith cannot take that from you, no matter how many limbs she replaces." The two of them stand in silence, the weight of their bonds hang thick between them. Their arms are silent, for now. Lingering threats.

"Blood," Araj finally says quietly, "Don't push it too hard. Not yet." Vashari doesn't respond, but the way her eyes flicker toward Araj tells her everything she needs to know. One step at a time. They keep moving forward.

Arajj's words turn out true. Vashari adjusts to the arm and leg, learns how to move around them. They spar in private, under Serith's watchful gaze. Arajj has a few days of assured victory before Vashari adapts. Then, the parties begin.

Her parlor is hushed opulence, polished and curated to Serith's taste. Crimson velvet drapes bleed in the firelight. Braziers crackle. Strings hum from an unseen quartet, slow and ceremonial. Serith no longer asks Arajj to sing. Instead, she and Vashari stand, still, behind her dais. Arajj's dress is sheer and gold-slicked, molded to the slope of her spine. Her cybernetic arm twitches. Vashari wears deep reds, designed to show the ridges of her shoulder muscles, her thighs. They stand behind their lady as she greets guests and lounges on her couch.

Lord Palide enters. His presence stretches across the chamber like a shadow from another sun. Arajj has met the man who bought her from Nar Shaddaa only a few times, each the more revolting than the last. He moves with deliberate authority, each step punctuated. Serith stands and offers him a short bow.

"You've done well, dear niece," he says at last, gesturing to the hall. "You've a lovely court. Lavish. Commanding." His tone is laced with something sweet and sour.

"You taught me well, uncle." Palide's mouth twitches.

"I gave you Dromund Kaas. I gave you a seat at my table," he says. "You were a child when I brought you from Shili. Now you dress yourself in my colors and call yourself sovereign." Serith's expression doesn't change. The muscles in Arajj's jaw tighten.

"You gave me power," Serith says, softly. "I only learned how to use it." Palide steps closer.

"You speak like you earned it."

"I've maintained the estate. Delivered tribute. Educated acolytes. I've grown what you gave me."

"You've warped it. You've surrounded yourself with pets," he sneers. "You build shrines to yourself and call them courts. You've grown arrogant. Disobedient." Arajj's cybernetic fingers twitch.

"I asked you for an offering seven years ago, uncle. You sent me a singer."

His voice lowers, teeth barely sheathed behind his words.

"You forget who made you."

"You forget what I've become." He raises a ringed hand and strikes her. Open palm across her face. The sound echoes like thunder. Serith stumbles. Her cheek blossoms red. Blood on her lip.



Time fractures. Arajj feels her body move. She doesn't remember deciding to. Her lungs are tight. Her skin buzzes with static. Her mind says nothing, absolutely nothing. But her legs are moving. She launches forward, bare feet hitting the marble like fire. Her voice lets out something strangled and wrong, halfway between a scream and a cry. Her cybernetic arm reacts faster than the rest of her. She doesn't know what she's doing. The sight of her lady's blood burns behind her eyes like lightning.

She crashes into Palide with all the force of metal and fury, slamming her shoulder into his chest. Her prosthetic hand punches forward, driven by instinct. It strikes his ribs with a crack like a snapped beam. He grunts. Not in pain. Offense.

Arajj tries to move again, but the Force slams into her like a mountain. She's lifted and hurled across the chamber. Her body crashes into a banquet table. Goblets and glassware shatter around her as she slides across the floor, limbs twisted, hair tangled. Pain pulses through her like molten wire. She tastes blood. Maybe hers. She doesn't care.

She stumbles to her feet. Her arm is shaking, spasming. The metal flares with heat, sparks hiss from joints. The pain digs inward, not cleanly, but with teeth. It winds through her chest, her spine.

"You HIT her!" she shrieks, blood on her lip and silk torn across her hip. The moment she does, the arm tightens, sending a bolt of white-hot agony screaming up her nerves. She screams. It punishes her. "You disgusting, withered—" The arm clamps down mid word. The elbow locks. Her fingers twitch, curling violently in on themselves. She screams again. Writhes like something possessed, every motion feeding her agony. She slams the fist of her prosthetic against the wall, again and again, trying to override it, to break it, to kill the thing punishing her for defending her lady. Palide watches, bruise swelling upon his cheek. Unmoved.

"Animal," he says. Serith descends the dais, one slow step at a time. Vashari moves in tandem, eyes on Palide. Serith walks past shattered glass, bloody marble, to the twisted, fire-hissing frame of Arajj's body. She kneels.

Beneath the screaming, Arajj gasps, good hand trembling toward Serith like a child. Her voice cracks.

"I was – my lady – I was protecting you. I had to. I saw him touch – he –" Another jolt cuts her off. Her spine arches. Her fingers claw at air. Serith's hand moves with elegance. She slaps Arajj across the face.

The scream dies. Shock silences her. The cybernetic flickers. Serith speaks quietly.

"Enough." Arajj stares up at her, lip trembling, blood in her mouth, breath hitched like something wild cornered. Her nose drenches her throat in mucus. She knows the punishment for such insubordination; it hovers over her like Serith's gaze. Dark. Unforgiving.

“Blood.” Vashari is already moving. Her face betrays the smallest crack, a tremble in her jaw. But it’s there. Her hands flex once before she steps forward, each movement taunt with something unspoken. Arajj stumbles backward, arm still spasming. Her heel catches on shattered crystal. Blood sticks to her leg.

“No, please—” her voice cracks, raw, ruined. Her arm is a mess of pain that doesn’t seem to fully reach her. “Please, my lady—” She backs into a pillar, then folds. Her legs give. Her mind reels. Vashari doesn’t speak. Her arms wrap around Arajj like iron. She lifts with effortless strength, one arm under the knee, one across her back. Arajj doesn’t fight. Her head lolls against Vashari’s collarbone. Her breath is hot and shallow. She smells blood. Smoke. Perfume. Her tears don’t fall. Her eyes are too dry for that.

Vashari ascends the dais slowly. Arajj’s body sags in her arms, too ruined to resist. She drops Arajj at the top. Arajj lands on polished stone with a soft sound, hair fanned out, metal still sparking. Vashari’s eyes glisten. With slow, reverent hands, she unclasps the sword from her side. It sings when she draws it. Long. Curved. Ancient. She raises it overhead. Her arms do not shake. But the tears fall freely now, twin streams down her cheeks, catching on the corner of her mouth. Her white lips are parted, breath shallow, expression hollowed out to something inhuman. A mourner. A machine. Arajj breathes out slowly.

Serith raises a hand. Vashari stops mid-swing. She turns to Palide. Her voice returns to careful, cool cadence.

“She acted without instruction,” Serith says, “She believes she is protecting me, poor thing.” Palide dabs at the bruise on his cheek with a black-gloved hand.

“You have made her too bold, niece.” Serith inclines her head.

“Then perhaps it is only fitting you remind her of her place.” Palide’s smile is a slow thing.

“As you wish.”

The walls are cold. Arajj lies curled on the ground, skin dappled with deep purple bruises. The cybernetic is disabled, its weight a lead chain dragging her shoulder down. A cruel restraint cinches across her back. Her breath comes in shallow gasps.

Palide had been methodical. No rage. No chaos. Just pain, administered with the same deliberation with which he’d dressed for court. No questions. Just correction. He never struck her cybernetic side. Only her flesh. He called her “defective”. A “dog without a leash”. And then left.

It’s dark now. She doesn’t know how long it’s been. The pain pulses in her ribs. Her mouth tastes like copper. She doesn’t cry. When the door opens, she twitches. Soft footsteps.

Serith's perfume. Violet and smoke. She kneels beside Araj. Her robes brush the stone softly. Araj doesn't lift her head. Her voice is raw, strangled.

"I'm sorry, lady."

"I know," Serith says. "You served me well. You made a beautiful mess of him." Araj lets out a breath that sounds like a sob. She wants to press her face into Serith's palm. To be held. There is a long silence. The weight of the moment falls upon them. Palide's injured pride will not be mended with a single torture session. There is a greater price that floats heavily in the air around them. After a minute, Serith kisses Araj's forehead and stands. She leaves her in her cell, stone sleek with blood. Araj's heart sinks. She feels the stone under her fingertips. She savors her last night at the estate.

The days blur. Araj forgets the shape of morning. She is moved from estate to stronghold to bunker. No windows. No velvet. The scent of sterilized steel. Her body aches in new ways. Bruises in the shape of Palide's gloves. The new pain is quieter. Functional. It doesn't hum. It bites.

Palide doesn't dress her. Doesn't praise her. Doesn't look at her unless something needs fixing. She is not a thing of beauty anymore, a relic to be paraded and adored. She's a tool.

Her arm is fitted with a new protocol. It listens when she speaks his name. Sends pulses through her nerves when she hesitates. He does not punish her for screaming. It punishes her for failing.

Palide sends her out of the bunker. Sets her on dissenters. Debtors. People he wants gone, quietly. The shift is clumsy at first. Araj fights like she's on stage. Too elegant. Too rehearsed. The first time she fails, she hesitates, expecting the target to fall on cue. He doesn't. He shoots her. After that, she adjusts. She always does. Her movements tighten. The grace drains away, replaced by precision. She stops killing like a dancer and starts killing like a weapon. Her cybernetic is upgraded. Heavier. He allows her to walk the city alone between kills. No chaperones, no handlers.

She doesn't know what to do with the silence. Her freedom feels like open air in a vacuum. He gives her no affection. Only results.

She starts to think about Serith. The mask peels back slowly. Not in violence, not in betrayal. In absence. There is no one to stroke her hair when she sings correctly. No one to whisper false love while wiring her spine into obedience. Without the performance, the haze of pain, the shape of what Serith was begins to emerge. Not a goddess. Not even a monster. A woman who wanted to be worshiped so badly she carved devotion out of someone else's bones.

Arajj turns the memories over like old coins. Worn at the edges. Familiar. She tells herself she's analyzing them. Reclaiming her story. One day, she forgets the color of Serith's voice when she was pleased. Another, she forgets how it felt to kneel. The scent fades. Then the feeling of silk against skin. She stops playing old orders back in her head. Stops practicing how she'd reply if Serith summoned her. Stops imagining Serith's face in the silence between kills.

She doesn't realize she hasn't thought about Serith for months until she hears the name spoken aloud and doesn't flinch. A junior inquisitor mutters it over a datapad. Casually. Lord Kav'i. As though she is just another noble with an estate. She nods along as if she is.

Palide's room is cold, suffused with the scent of metal and incense. The shadows are heavy. Arajj stands before him, posture rigid, expression blank. His eyes gleam with a hunger that cuts through silence.

"Serith has outlived her usefulness. It's time to put her down," he says, his gaze still upon Arajj. "You'll enter her estate. Steal the Jedi's crystal. Deliver it to her." He watches her closely, gauging her reaction.

"And then, my lord?"

"Let the Jedi loose on the estate. She'll do the rest." The words settle in the air, like dust in the rays of light that cut through the room. Arajj feels a pulse of something deep within her, something almost forgotten. The estate. The halls she once knew. The place where Serith's shadow stretches across everything. Where she was remade.

"Yes, Sir," she responds. Voice quiet but assured. Palide nods.

"Get it done. No mistakes." She turns, feet carrying her toward the door.

The estate is quiet, sprawling halls filled only with the faint whisper of the wind and the distant hum of machinery. Arajj moves like a shadow, each step calculated, each breath measured. The scent of aged wood and burning coal clings to the air. Familiar. Unsettling. She reaches the door, a massive piece of reinforced durasteel adorned with intricate designs. The lock mechanism is old but still functional, and Arajj knows how to bypass it. Her fingers move with practiced ease. She can hear the faintest click as the mechanism disengages. Her hand presses against the cool surface of the vault door. It swings open with barely a sound.

Inside, the vault is a temple of luxury. High shelves tower over her with treasure, relics, weapons, artifacts. Yet, in the dim light, the true prize sits in a small pouch. The Kyber crystal. Its green glow is soft but undeniable. She takes the crystal into her hands. No alarm. No sirens. Just the steady hum of the crystal in her palm. The halls stretch out before her, dark and empty, she steps into the shadows again.

Vashari's cell is quiet, the buzz of the energy field and constant hum of the estate's unseen machine. She can feel the weight of the sound settle on her like a cloak. Vashari is kneeling in the center of her containment field, a perfect image of restraint and discipline. The sight of her, rigid posture, downcast eyes strike something in Araj. Something old and unspoken. The girl she once knew, buried beneath layers of twisted training and broken obedience.

For a moment, Araj just watches her. The restraints. The cold cell. Serith's custom prison. She knows it all too well, better than she wants to admit. What they have both been given. Her fingers curl slightly, the sound of metal on metal is a familiar, unwanted comfort. She's here to do a job. Nothing more. The crystal sits in her pocket, a weight that feels both comforting and strange.

"Well, well," she steps into the doorway, feet clicking softly on stone floor. Vashari's green eyes snap to her, devoid of surprise, hesitation. As if she expected this moment. Araj allows herself a moment to study Vashari, features, markings, eyes. Time has worn them both differently, but she can still see the same fire within her. It hasn't been extinguished. Not entirely.

"You've changed," she says, voice a low rasp. The words feel odd on her tongue. Like something that belongs to someone else. Vashari's chuckle is rough, too. Unfamiliar.

"As have you," Vashari replies, her voice coarse, strained. Araj can hear the years in it. Years of silence. Of broken training. Araj's hand slips into her pocket, metal scraping faintly against her skin.

"Not enough," she mutters, her voice distant. Her eyes flicker behind her to check she isn't being watched. She feels the weight of the crystal in her palm. "Listen. We're even, okay? Don't come looking for me." She tosses the pouch onto the floor between them with a deliberate motion, letting it land with a soft thud. Vashari doesn't move, only watches as the pouch settles into the soft light. Araj can feel her focus shift, feel the way her energy ebbs towards it. Araj doesn't need to see her face to know what it means. Her mouth tightens. Her gaze hardens.

"Make her pay," she says, words falling from her mouth like a promise. She gives Vashari a mock courtesy, one that barely holds weight, and before she can think better, turns on her heels and walks away.

She doesn't run until she's blocks away. Past the estate walls. Past the alleys. Past the guards who didn't see her. She slips into a narrow culvert between tramlines. Its damp with leaking coolant and tangled power cables. She drops to her knees. The air stinks of ozone and blood. Somewhere in the distance, she hears Serith scream.

She sobs. Not the quiet kind, not the kind slipping from her throat like mist. No. Full bodied, bone wracking kind. The kind that drags her soul up by the ribs and cracks it over her knee. Her shoulders hitch. Her breath staggers. Her forehead presses hard against the metal wall like she can press the grief back into her skull. She mourns Serith. Her god of silk and blood. The

woman who carved her name into Araj's psyche with gloved hands and pretty words. She loves her. She hates her. Even now, part of her wants to run back into the estate and die over her. And Vashari. The only one who ever looked at her with something like understanding. She sees the crystal glow in her hands. The fury rising from her ashes. The blood she'll spill. The price she'll pay. The Sith won't rest until she's dead.

She opens her mouth and screams into the air. Her arm twitches, but the pain can't stop her. She remembers Nar Shaddaa. The girl she was. Scrappy. Greedy. Loud. Not yet broken. She remembers the rhythm of her mother's voice from the porch. The weight of her brother's arms wrapped around her shoulders on cold nights. She feels the wind howl through fields.

They probably think she's dead. She hopes they do. She hopes they never see her like this. Scarred. Warped. Weaponized. Her arm a machine, her eyes half lifeless.

"Please," she whispers, eyes clenched shut. "Let me be dead to you."

She sobs until her throat burns. Until her body goes still. Until the silence is all that's left, curling soft around her like smoke.

She stands. Wipes her face. Walks out beneath clear skies. Takes one step forward. Then another. And another. She takes a deep breath. Keeps moving. She doesn't look back.