

Korriban breathes like a dying beast. The wind howls low across the valley, stirring red dust into the air like flaking dried blood. Broken statues loom through the haze; colossal, faceless things half-swallowed by time. Their presence is expectant, like they're waiting for something to happen again. Ire stands still, breath heavy. The heat presses close in a familiar way. The lightsaber at his hip hangs like a nose around his neck.

His eyes drift shut. His breathing slows. Incense. Fire. The smell of scorched earth. Trees trembling under the crack of lightning. Stone rings slick with blood and rain. Boys screaming. Some too far away to help, some too close to forget. He doesn't know how many he killed, not really. The memory slips sideways when he tries to count. A rock in his palm. A splash of red on his face. Someone choking, then stillness.

The wind snaps across the sands and pulls him back to the present. His breath blows sand around in fog clouds, the beads of sweat across his back evaporate with still-unfamiliar quickness. The sun beats down harder still.

"Ire! You said you'd only be a minute!" The icy voice of his Master echoes from the ship atop the cliffside above him. She hangs off the ramp, one arm wrapped around the pole, the other hand cradling a holopad. Her sleek, gray hair has been tied back into a low bun; neat and out of the way. Perfect for a warrior. Her face is pale, marked with ritual sigils, softer than the ones across his own. He sighs and hefts the crate onto his back, it nearly gives out from the weight. His muscles have grown since he began training, but his Master seems to take pleasure giving him heavier and heavier jobs; never light enough to comfortably carry.

"Apologies, Master." He adjusts the straps – they dig into his shoulder blades with each movement – and begins to scale the cliffside, hands grasping for hold across the sandstone. The climb is harsh, sand slipping under his weight, dissolving between his sweaty fingers, but he manages. He always has.

He is panting by the time he reaches the top of the cliff, broad chest heaving in the sandy air. He rolls his neck, vertebrae popping one by one, and drops the crate at his feet. His Master doesn't even attempt to carry it – she couldn't. The Force hums through her palm, undetectable. The heavy crate shudders, then rises, obedient as a beast broken to leash. It floats into the hold, settling with a muted thud. She always had a way of hiding her signature from other Force users, something that unsettles most, Ire included.

"What took you so long?" She taunts, making her way to the bridge of the ship. He flexes his shoulder, rubbing calloused fingers over the bruises the straps left. He stumbles up the ramp, slamming his fist into the operation button to close it behind him. Her question doesn't warrant a response, so he silently takes his seat in the co-pilot's chair.

"To the capitol," she leans back in her chair next to him, fingers stretching before they make their way to the control console, "the sweaty armpit of the galaxy." She raises an eyebrow his way. "Speaking of which... you better clean yourself up before then. I don't want my

apprentice stinking up bantha shit.” He remains silent to her negging, wordlessly punching in hyperspace coordinates and landing permits. It isn’t until they have exited Korriban’s atmosphere that he stands.

“If you will excuse me to go bathe, Master.” She doesn’t bother to respond, absent-mindedly waving her hand his way as she pulls out her holo. He bows and makes his way to the sonic. The refresher pulses to life with a quiet whirr, mist swirling around Ire like the air itself is trying to scrub him raw. He stands still, barely flinching as the sonic waves ripple over him, peeling away the dust and sweat across his labored body. It doesn’t feel like a shower. He closes his eyes. The hum of the sonic fades, the sound of rushing water fills his mind.

The cool touch of Dathomir’s river is soft on his skin. He stands with a few other Nightbrothers, their bodies slick with river mud, faces relaxed. The heat of the sun is heavy on their backs, but the water is cool, soothing. Ire remembers the way the earth smelled, thick with the scent of wet stone and wild herbs.

He leans against a large stone, letting the water lap at his feet, his mind wandering. They’ll be back to work soon, to the harsh demands of the clan. But for now, there’s only the water, the warmth of the sun, the brief illusion of freedom.

A sudden, cold rush of memory hits him, like a cascade. The echo of screams, the thud of bodies hitting the ground. He remembers his brother’s faces, eyes wide in surprise and pain. He hadn’t wanted to see them die, hadn’t wanted to be the last one left standing, bloodied and broken while the others fell. But they did. And he was.

The beep of the sonic finishing snaps him back to the present. The images of river, jungle, sun fade, replaced by the sterile wall of his ship’s refresher. The faint smell of sweat and antiseptic cling to the air like dust. He dresses quickly; his hands linger a second over his lightsaber before he clips it to his belt. It would’ve fit his brother’s hand much better.

The mirror’s surface is streaked with condensation, humming faintly. Harsh white light cast jagged shadows across his face as he examines it. His golden-ochre skin is marked with bold, angular tattoos, their lines sharp as they climb from collarbone to brow. Like a language etched into his flesh. The horns that jut out from his skull are raw at the base, a reminder that he’s growing into them. Changing. Hardening. His deep orange eyes seem to catch the artificial light and hold it. Silver rings line his ears, nose, brows, recent piercings still red around the edges. Each tells a story. Each had a cost.

New muscle has taken shape since Dathomir, his shoulders are broader, neck thicker, arms corded with definition. He catches the shift in his own silhouette, the way he stands is new. Stronger. Sharper. His scars, too, thin pale lines the tattoos cannot hide. A fresh one under his rib, another down the length of his forearm. His Master’s work – lessons that didn’t come easy. Wounds delivered not out of anger, but precision. Correction. Expectation.

Quick steam coils around his shoulders, blurring the edges of his reflection, but the figure staring back at him remains sharp, silent. It looks older than fifteen.

The jungles of Dromund Kaas breathe like a dying beast, wet, dark, watching. Every step through the tangled undergrowth feels as though it is being measured. Lightning cracks the sky in pulses, igniting the ozone-stained mist that never fully dissipates. There's a weight to this world, and ancient pressure that sinks into Ire's lungs and refuses to let go. But it's not home.

The jungle here is violent, yes. Hungry. But it's wild in a different way. Impersonal. The trees don't whisper his name here, the shadows are empty. On Dathomir, they listen. The roots remember each drop of blood spilled, the wind carries the songs of the dead, the soil is black with memory. Here, the darkness is raw, untamed. But Dathomir is... aware. A living echo of every chant spoken; every life taken beneath the red moons.

His Master always tells him to find strength in the unfamiliar, that Dromund Kaas tests him in ways Dathomir never could – that the silence is a gift, one that forces him to hear only his own fear. But Ire still dreams of the crimson canopy above the swamps of home, of twisted vines that remember his touch. He wonders if they miss him as much as he misses them.

There will be time for sweat stained trials in the damp jungle later. For now, Ire follows his Master as they hike from a jungle clearing turned landing pad to the lavish estate of the Kav'i family. This isn't his first time on the decorated grounds; his Master is sure to visit at least once a cycle. She moves with her usual grace, steps soundless despite the weight of the jungle mud still clinging to her boots. He follows in her shadow, mind already ahead of them, at the memory of what waits beyond the doors. He should be prepared. He isn't. You can't get used to someone like Serith Kav'i. He cannot grow accustomed to the way she looks at him. Like she's watching a wound form before it even breaks the skin, like she tastes his fear.

She stands at the end of the hall, draped in blood red fabric and burnished gold. Her montrals frame her like blades, her expression is... too much. Too joyful, too angry. She's not the kind of Sith who hides behind indifference, like his Master.

He's seen her laugh during executions, seen her cry mid-sentence from the sheer intensity of her own mind. Pain. Power. Passion. She doesn't regulate emotion, she is her emotion, unfiltered and weaponized. She doesn't acknowledge Ire. She doesn't need to. The weight of her presence is enough to peel skin. Instead, she brings his Master into a hug, lekku swinging with her skirt as she moves.

"Ilya! There's my favorite Nightsister!" Luz has already moved beyond his Master's petty conversation, to the figure behind Serith. Uluwi M'Seritok. Blood of Serith. Still. Masked. She stands behind Serith's left shoulder like a relic too sacred to touch. He catches her gaze, although it's hard to tell through the faceless visor. But something beneath it stirs, like

recognition flickering behind a wall of conditioning. Her skin is a pale earthen hue, marked with white tattoos that mimic Serith's. Her lekku hang loose around her neck, one cut short enough that it dangles by her jaw. Her armor – if it can even be called that – leaves her chest bare. Deliberately. Cruelly. A marker of ownership.

Her mask covers her eyes and the bridge of her face, carved from some dark metal, scorched with runes. It doesn't hide the obedient void of her form. He thought she was a statue the first time he saw her, regal even in her stillness. She doesn't speak, not unless Serith commands it. Even then, it is like the words are being dragged from a place far beneath the surface. He's watched her take lives with the precision of a droid, the grace of a dancer. Mechanical, beautiful. Controlled. Her every action filtered through Serith's will, the invisible leash pulled taut beneath her skin.

She wasn't always like this. She was a Jedi, a warrior of light, once. But no longer. He can see the conditioning in the way her body tenses when Serith raises her voice, the twitch of her fingers when she enters the room, the stillness that is less peace and more paralysis. There's something programmed into her, through years of pain and reinforcement. Breaking and rebuilding. Her soul unraveled and rewoven, until even petty defiance forgot her name. She's not just a slave; she's a crafted thing. A weapon built and buried under layers of red and black.

Ire cannot shake her gaze even as Serith mentions his name and he is drawn into conversation. She walks circles around him, eyes surveying each and every inch of his body like a predator to a weakened, old animal. Easy to track, easier to kill. She flicks one of his ear piercings, one he got barely a week before, sending shrieks of pain up through his veins. He tries to hide his flinch best he can.

"His training has gone well?" She speaks not to Ire, but to his Master. Typical. He avoids her yellow eyes, instead averting his gaze to the floor. He despises the way Serith makes him feel like meat on a hook, like fine art in a museum.

"Well as it can." Ilya shrugs, hands already reaching for her holo. "I always told High Mother that a Nightbrother could never make a proper apprentice. But no! Here I am, stuck training one. It's a joke, really." She taps a finger against her holo, voice thick with frustration. "But what can you do?"

"Unfortunate." Serith is behind Ire now, finger caressing the tattoos that run down his back. He never minded the traditional robes of his people, how they left his chest bare and displayed his tattoos, but now he longs for a shirt or cloak, anything to keep Serith off him. "Well, if you ever need to get rid of him, I could use another executioner." Their attention turns to Seritok, silent where she stands. Serith steps away from Ire and guides them into the parlor. Seritok follows, wordless under her mask. Obedient. Ire cannot help but glance at her as they walk through halls, the way her mechanical leg hovers a few inches shorter than her organic one; she must limp to walk on it. Serith's torture is so...deliberate. Organized to make even the

simplest tasks painstaking. A reminder of her power in each step. He wonders if Serith would take his limbs, the body he cradles so dearly, if his Master had her way. If she would sand down his horns, tear out his piercings, flay the tattoos from his skin. He tries to push the thought from his mind. The High Mother declared his Master must take a Nightbrother, she wouldn't pass him off to Serith without her permission...right?

The parlor is as opulent as the estate, an imposing display of the Kav'i family's decadence. Dark, crimson walls stretch high into the intricate gold filigree that catches the lights mounted on the walls. The air is thick with the scent of exotic incense, rich and heavy. At the far end, a wide bay window overlooks the rain-stained landscape, offering a view of Dromund Kaas' storm-choked sky, the silhouette of Kaas City in the horizon.

The floor beneath their feet is covered in plush, deep red rugs, each one carefully placed to ensure the warmth and comfort of every step. Luxurious chairs and velvet settees are scattered throughout the room, cushions lavishly embroidered with Togruta tribal patterns. The centerpiece of the room is a long, dark wooden table, polished into a mirror-like sheen, where wine glasses and steaming bowls of food sit untouched. The dim lighting casts long shadows, making the space feel even more cavernous, as if the parlor itself is an extension of the vast, brooding estate. It's a room meant to intimidate and indulge in equal measure, to reassure the elite and offput the commoner.

Sitting on one of the settees, as if he belongs there, is Zhaka. He is taller than Ire remembers, not much, but enough. His robes are finer now, black trimmed with old Sith script in red thread that shimmers when he moves. A small token from a master who loves to show off, perhaps. It's the little things about him that catch Ire's attention, the way his curls have thickened and grown longer, bound in places by thin gold rings. The new piercings, a line of tiny studs tracing one brow delicately. The way his fire-bright eyes flick across the room, not to assess danger, but with mild intrigue. When they meet Ire's eyes, his face lights up like ember catching wind.

He doesn't rush – Zhaka never rushed – but he makes his way across the parlor like it is nothing, like he and Ire weren't kept apart by rank and distance for months. There is bow, no stiffness to his movement, just that crooked smile, like they're back in the Academy dorms whispering over broken holos instead of standing in the lacquered jaw of Serith's trap-house. He kisses Ilya twice on each cheek, nods to Serith, and invites Ire to sit next to him.

"You look half-ready to bolt," he says under his breath, his voice pitched just for Ire to hear. "Relax. The furniture only bites if you sit too fast."

It's a stupid joke. But, for some reason, Ire's shoulders ease in response. For all his gold and silk and prestige, for all the power stitched into the folds of his robes and the way the slaves flinch as he passes, Zhaka looks at Ire like a person. And in this place? It feels like the warmth of Dathomir's sun on his skin after days of shadow.

Conversation passes slowly, the only reprise from Serith and his Master's droning are Zhaka's awkwardly placed jokes. Eventually, the discussion shifts from inconsequential pleasantries towards what is to be expected of women like Serith and Ilya: dominion. Her gaze turns towards her captive, now standing obediently behind her.

"Come here, 'Itok" Serith orders, her voice a sweet command. Seritok moves towards the center of the room, fingers twitching slightly as she keeps her head low. With a languid stretch, Serith rises from her seat, movement smooth and deliberate. "I thought it would be... enlightening," she purrs, "to show my esteemed guests the true art of domination."

Her gaze turns to Ire's Master and Zhaka, the tension palpable. Zhaka leans against his sofa, arms folded, expression unreadable as his sharp eyes flick to Ire for a brief moment before returning to Serith. Ilya lounges on her settee, her face its usual mask of cold disinterest.

Serith continues, her voice filled with a sick sweetness. "Ilya, Zhaka, do you see this?" She gestures toward Seritok, who kneels obediently before her. "This is how I sculpt Jedi. They are so certain of their righteousness, but they are weak. They break so easily." She leans down to get closer to Seritok, her fingers like claws as she grabs a tight hold of the Togruta's remaining lekku. Seritok flinches but remains silent, her body trembling slightly under the pressure.

"The Jedi are nothing but a bundle of frailties," Serith coos, looking over her shoulder to Ilya and Zhaka. "A whisper of control here, a pinch of cruelty there, and voila!" She jerks Seritok's head, making the girl gasp softly. "I've turned this one into my pet!" Serith's eyes glint with cruelty as she forces Seritok's head to the side, her tone turning sharper. "Tell me, Ilya, do you ever tire of hearing the weakness in their voices when they beg?"

Ilya's lips curl into a faint, approving smile, but she says nothing. Ire's heart pounds in his chest, but he doesn't dare avert his eyes. He's seen this before, felt it before in the way the Nightsisters shape their slaves, force their wills upon them until they break. His throat tightens as his gaze flicker between Serith's cruel smile and Seritok's trembling form. He knows the rules, but it's hard not to feel the weight of his Master's cold presence on his back, her eyes sharp as any blade.

Serith turns to Zhaka, boasting a proud smile. "And you, Zhaka? Surely you find it amusing? Watching them break under the simplest pressure? The Jedi claim to be invincible. I know better."

Zhaka tilts his head, gaze lingering on Seritok for a moment. He says nothing at first, watching the Togruta slave with an expression that's almost...bored. His voice, when he speaks, is lazy, laced with an underlying edge. "It's almost disappointing. They put up so little fight." Serith chuckles at his words.

Ire clenches his fists, his gaze momentarily darkening. He's seen it, felt it. The steady crushing power of a master breaking their own into nothing, shaping them like clay, forcing them

to kneel, to beg. He knows better than to show his disgust, but it churns in his gut. It's the same with all of them, isn't it? The Nightsister's cruelty, their endless, suffocating power games. He's seen the bodies, the empty eyes, the ruined minds. One day, it'll be his turn.

"Oh yes, but they are not meant to struggle. They are meant to break. And once they do, there's nothing left by my will. And what better pet than one who will never, ever leave your side?"

Her hand tightens around Seritok's neck, forcing the Togruta's head up. Her breath is shallow, body trembling beneath her master's touch. The room grows thick with tension, the silence is suffocating. Serith leans in closer, her voice a low whispering hiss.

"This one, like all the Jedi, will obey. They'll never learn, Zhaka, unless we teach them. All it takes is one master, one who knows how to strip away their illusions, and the so-called heroes of the galaxy are reduced to nothing more than animals begging for scraps."

Ire's stomach twists, eyes fixed on Seritok's broken form. He can't help but wonder if he would have been different, had he not been chosen for the Rite of Selection? Would he be kneeling before someone, forced to swallow his pride, eat the scraps of his dignity?

In one fluid motion, Serith knocks over a bowl of food from the polished table, sending its contents spilling across the floor. The aroma of spilled stew fills the room, hot and heavy. Her eyes flick towards Seritok, now crumpled in front of her. Her voice is cold. "Eat." She commands, pointing to the mess at her feet. "Go on! Clean it up. Show everyone just how far a Jedi will fall when they're at the mercy of someone who truly understands power."

Seritok's body trembles as she hesitates, her pride flickering for a moment before it's crushed beneath the weight of Serith's gaze. Slowly, painfully, she lowers her head and begins to gather the food from the floor, her movements raw as she forces herself to comply. Ire can't take his eyes off her, the way she contorts herself, the way her spirit has been so thoroughly broken. His breath hitches in his chest. He can feel the sickening weight of it, the knowledge that his own fate might one day mirror hers. There's nothing he can do about it, not now. Not yet. Not when he's just another puppet in the Sith's twisted little theater. Serith watches with satisfaction, her gaze flickering between Zhaka and Ilya, daring them to speak, but they remain silent.

The silence liners, thick with the smell of spilled stew. Seritok is still on her knees, now wiping the last remnants of food from the floor, her movements stiff and mechanical. Serith smiles, eyes narrowing as the Togruta finishes cleaning the mess.

"Good," she says, voice dripping with false sweetness. "You may keep your hilt tonight, 'Itok." She trails a finger across the cold metal of the lightsaber hilt hanging at Seritok's belt, her gaze sharp as she glances towards the Kyber crystal in the pouch at her side. They can all feel its presence in the container, bright with the Jedi's light. Ire shifts uncomfortably on his palms. Serith turns to Ilya and Zhaka, voice shifting from a cruel play tone to a more languid one. "Well,

it's late, isn't it? I think our guest," she flicks a finger in Seritok's direction, "deserves some rest. She's been quite the show, hasn't she?"

Zhaka merely hums in approval, uninterested in the conversation. Ilya's expression remains distant as ever, though her lips spread into a slight smile. She stands slowly, stretching her arms above her head. Serith eyes her slave one last time, then glances at the door. "Take her to her room," she says, her voice now a disinterested command. "I want her locked up before I'm ready to retire for the night. You," she addresses Seritok, "Tomorrow you fight again. I expect you to be prepared."

Seritok stands shakily, skin pale. She doesn't argue. She follows the instruction, her shoulders slumped as she exits the room with a servant. The sound of her footsteps echoes faintly in the hallway. Ire watches her go, stomach churning as his gaze lingers on the cracked door, now shutting softly behind her. The hum of the building's lights feels louder now, as if caught in suffocating pause. He can almost feel the weight of the night closing in on him.

Serith stretches lazily, looking at Zhaka and Ilya. "I think it's time to rest. The Jedi will always be there in the morning, after all." The words settle in the room, and, with a final glance at Ire, Serith leaves, movements fluid and predatory. "Sleep tight!" she says with a mock cheer. Ilya wishes their host a good night, following her lead as they move towards the guest rooms. Zhaka remains a moment longer, he raises his eyebrows when his eyes meet Ire's.

"It was nice seeing you, at least. We need to arrange a meeting away from...them, sometime." Ire smiles, cheeks still fighting to dissipate the anxiety.

"I will see if I can get time away from my master. Enjoy your night, Zhaka. Safe travel back to the city." Zhaka raises a hand in farewell as he makes his way to the foyer. Ire is left standing in the center of the room, stew stains still visible on the crimson carpet. His thoughts swirl, visions of Seritok dance across his mind. He knows better than to linger too long with such thoughts, but it is hard not to feel the weight of them like the humidity in the air. He forces his body to move, taking the last steps towards his own quarters. Sleep will come eventually, but it will be a restless one. A troubled one. It always is.



Vashari's cell is quiet, sealed in blue light and humming energy. She kneels in the center of her containment field, head bowed, legs folded beneath her with aching precision. The field crackles faintly with static, forms a soft-edged hammock just large enough for her to sit without slumping. Its transparent walls buzz with repulsorlift hums and power surges, the sound is constant. Inescapable. Serith had the field custom-built for her. A display case masquerading as a prison cell.

Around her wrists and neck, the Force restraints press into Vashari's skin, deceptively delicate bands of polished silver laced with Sith alchemy. They gleam faintly in the darkness, humming with a low vibration she can feel through her teeth. The collar tightens whenever she moves too quickly, whenever she focuses too long. A reminder. They don't just bind her body, they anchor her in the Force, suppressing the natural flow that once surged through her like breath.

She can't lie down. The field will constrict. She learned that her first night.

Her cell is beyond lavish by Sith standards. Rich drapery hangs on the far wall, there's a basin for washing and a narrow shelf for folded linen she's never allowed to use. The light is always dim, filtered through red-tinted sconces. Even now, long past midnight, she doesn't get full darkness. There is no escape from the soft surveillance glow that paints her features in sickly blue.

Against her side, she feels her lightsaber's weight. Foreign. Familiar. Hollow. The Kyber crystal is gone, removed and locked away in Serith's private vault. It's a skeleton, a lifeless shell. There's nothing inside the hilt, no hum, no pulse of the Force, no light. It's just a reminder. An ornament.

She adjusts slightly, feeling the cold of the floor seep through her knees, thighs already numb beneath the rigid posture the field demands. Her breath is slow, each inhale a quiet discipline. Her back remains straight, her head bowed. If she slouches, the field narrows. If she sleeps without permission, the collar shocks. It is training, Serith says. Conditioning.

The Force is distant, muffled, unreachable beneath the binders, like breathing underwater. Her lekku still ache from earlier, the taste of floor-slicked stew lingers like rust in her mouth. Her hilt presses into her side. She wonders if Serith will take it away tomorrow, after the arena. She closes her eyes, not to sleep, but to imagine the crystal. She remembers its glow, its soft song.

But there is no light here. Only the buzz of the field. Only the cold. Only the numbness in her knees.

"Well, well." Vashari stirs as the voice echoes across her cell. Her eyes open to the dim blue glow of the field's hum, and there, framed in the cell's ajar door, is Araj.

She's not supposed to be here. Not legally, not by clearance, not by chain of command. Yet she stands regardless, arms crossed like she belongs, violet eyes glowing faintly beneath the

tangle of her loose scarlet hair. Her silhouette is sharp against the low corridor lights, mechanical limbs gleaming dully in the dark. Those awful, familiar prosthetics that bare Serith's craftsmanship in every cruel contour. They click faintly as she shifts her weight, metal fingers flexing with involuntary precision.

Arajj had always been striking, with those telltale Theelin facial markings painted across green skin like smudged artistry. Her horns, small and set back along her scalp, are chipped in places, old battle damage, or more likely punishments. She wears no armor tonight, only her underlayers: tight, dark fabric that shows the jagged seams of metal fused into her arm. Her eyes meet Vashari's. She looks tired. Hollow.

They haven't spoken in years, not since Arajj was given to Serith's uncle, torn from Serith's cells and reshaped into something more useful. But in this quiet moment, while Vashari sits inside her containment field, the hilt of her lightsaber resting cold against her thigh, they are just two children. Slaves pretending to be warriors. Vashari watches her, says nothing. Even now, there is danger in breaking silence. Arajj lingers in the doorway like a ghost, then finally speaks. Her voice is low, ragged.

"You've changed." Vashari allows herself a labored chuckle, unused vocal cords refusing to cooperate.

"As have you." She barely recognizes her voice; it is rough and hoarse. Unnatural. Her master had once told her she would make an excellent singer. *Oh, Master*; she cannot control her own thoughts, *I am so sorry. For you, I would have become the best singer in the galaxy.*

"Not enough." Arajj shrugs, hair jangling loosely around her shoulders. She places a hand in her pocket, the sound of cracking metal is enough to make Vashari's amputated stumps sting with remembered pain. "Listen. We're even, okay? Don't come looking for me." She glances behind her, then tosses a small pouch onto the floor between them. She doesn't need to say what sits in it. Even with the Force-repressing binders, Vashari can sense her Kyber crystal.

"Make her pay." Arajj gives Vashari a mock courtesy and vanishes down the hall, her footsteps barely louder than a whisper.

The cell hums in silence. Vashari's breath slows. Her eyes lock on the crystal. Her limbs tremble, not from fear, but the ache of the Sith restraints that suppress her connection, punishing every flicker of resistance with raw feedback. Her head swims, nerves raw from years of suppression. She inches forward. The field crackles. *Not enough.* Her master's voice echoes in her mind. Gruff. Familiar. Calm.

She is standing on the training grounds of Dantooine, her master kneeling beside her. "A Jedi's strength is only half their power. The rest, we keep up here." She taps Vashari's forehead

with a wry smile. She can feel the heat of the sun, the weight of her brand-new lightsaber in her hands, the sting of failure raw on her palms.

Her fingers twitch, and the cuffs respond with a burst of voltage. White hot agony sears down her arm. Jaw clenched; she hisses through her teeth. It throws her for but a second, then her gaze sharpens.

That pain. It's energy. It's electricity.

She slams her prosthetic hand against the floor, pressing it into the containment field. The cuffs were designed to punish disobedience, to funnel pain inward. But that pain is energy – raw and powerful. She reaches, not with the Force, but with thought, instinct, muscle. She tightens the servos. Overclocks the arm's motor core. Her vision doubles as voltage tears through her shoulder, shorting circuits and nerve endings. Sparks crawl along her arm, breath hitching with each pulse. Her whole body seizes. The floor beneath her hand fizzles. The containment field ripples, confused by the unfiltered discharge bouncing between the cybernetics and the suppression grid. Her whole body convulses as she drives the limb deeper into the field, pushing it past the point of no return. Metal groans. Skin blisters. The grid begins to fracture, the resonance loop overloading. She tastes blood in her mouth.

The emitter detonates with a hot flash. The containment field collapses, Vashari with it, coughing smoke, chest heaving. The scent of scorched metal and flesh fills the air. Her fingers, half numb, half burning, grasp the pouch. She opens it.

The crystal pulses once in her palm. Recognition. Reunion. For a heartbeat, the world shrinks into that single sliver of radiant power in her hands. It flows faintly with memory. The same crystal she bled in the caves of Ilum over. The same one she focused on during trials, mediated with in darkness, laughed with clutched hands on the high balconies of the Jedi Temple.

She lifts her hilt slowly, fingers brushing over the cold grooves etched into it. Then, reverently, she aligns crystal with core. *Click*.

For a moment, there is silence. Then the chamber fills with a rising hum, swelling like a breath held too long. It pulses once, then thrums as it settles into the hilt, locking in place with a sound that sings like a tuning fork. She tightens her grip. It ignites with a thunderous hiss, a blade of green light that floods the room, shattering the red gloom. The energy crackles out in a wave, licking at the walls, casting wild shadows that dance like spirits.

Vashari rises, legs trembling. Smoke curls from her back. She turns the blade inward. With two clean strikes, she severs the cuff from one wrist, then the next. The collar sparks as she slices through it. Each piece clatters to the floor, still humming faintly. And then, it hits her.

The Force rushes through her like a floodgate torn open. She gasps, knees buckling. It surges through every nerve, every fracture, every broken piece of her. Light, memory, life crash

into her at once, replacing the static, filling the silence. She staggers, gasping, then straightens. Her grip tightens on her hilt. Her eyes shine with reflected green. Araj's words echo in her mind.

“Make her pay.”

Vashari storms through the manor, bare feet louder than thunder along the quiet carpet. She grabs tapestry in her hand as she passes it, tearing down Imperial banners that glisten red and white, knocking over decorative braziers that spray hot coal across the floor. Her limp cuts into her stride, cybernetics clicking and shocking with each step. Her arm still singes and smokes from the containment field, the feedback loop fried. It doesn't let off, even when she rests the arm, the shocks still make their way up her nerves. She grits her teeth as she reaches the door to Serith's wing. She briefly debates cutting the arm loose, anything to spare her the pain. She'll need it, though, even though the agony cursing through her veins tempts her with thoughts of freedom, of still nerves. She cannot give up, not yet.

She rolls the shoulder, flexing her arm. The movement singes the servos, they creak as charred metal grinds against itself. The door doesn't open for her – Serith is far too paranoid. The control panel blinks at her, password prompt glowing empty. Behind her, the tipped coals have burned away most of the carpet, although it has not caught fire yet. Instead, it moves like a wave, like wind pulling grass, towards her. She takes a deep breath. This is it. She can do this.

She drives her lightsaber's blade into the door, it slides through with limited resistance, enough still that she nearly bites her tongue off grimacing. She sighs, her desire to cut the arm loose once again coming to the forefront of her mind.

The door melts away slowly. She tries to cut it down into a circle, using her mechanical arm not to get a double grip on the lightsaber, but as a prop to lean against, placing the weight almost entirely on her organic arm. Her muscles ache, but it is far nicer a sensation than the tripped feedback loop. As soon as the door is weak enough to creak under her weight, she steps back and wills it to break. The Force moves through her in waves, rough and rocky, tearing through with each tide. The metal door protests, groaning in sharp squeals, before it gives out, flying across the hall, where it hits the wall above Serith's bedroom door with a thud, crashing to the floor. It takes a large painting of her uncle, in his pristine glory, with it, collapsing above his large forehead. It's not Vashari's place to critique large foreheads – she has gone seven years now without her Akul teeth to decorate her own – but she does anyways. He doesn't deserve her mercy.

She steps across the threshold into Serith's wing, breath shaky but strong. She can hear Serith and the Nightsister, likely far from asleep, scrambling on the other side of the door. She opens her palm to the giant piece of metal between her and the door, and it slides out of the way for her. Serith's door opens before she can reach it, however, placing her face to face with her goddess. Her tormentor.

Serith wears a loose silk robe that barely conceals her underwear. Beside her, Ilya wears her traditional Nightsister robes, still dressed. Serith's face changes as she recognizes Vashari in front of her, from an angry scowl to something walking the line between annoyance and fear.

"Itok," she purrs, voice quiet and cautious, "what did I tell you about being up after hours?" Vashari doesn't answer, although a part of her races forward to offer excuse. She holds her lightsaber; its heat is steady against her side. Comforting. It urges her forward, each and every muscle twitching with eagerness. Serith stares down the green double-blade, brow furrowing until the annoyance has been replaced almost entirely by anger.

"I see how it is," she hisses. Her lightwhip springs to life, coiling around her feet. The carpet burns where it touches, but it does not cut through metal. Vashari can finally put her fried arm to use. She steps back, hoping to lure Serith into the hallway. Ilya ignites her own saber. Its red blade barely passes her knee, only a foot or so long. Her offhand spins a bone dagger, glinting like the first glimpses of sunrise.

They don't hesitate. Vashari can't afford to, either. The Force flows through her freely now, unrestricted. It guides her body, taking the load off her leg as she sprints forward. She dives beneath Serith's first strike. The whip scorches the air above her, and she lands heavy on her bad leg. Pain shoots up her spine, a white-hot crack, but it focuses her senses. As designed.

She remembers the operating table. The cold grasp of the restraints. The way the Arkanian's gloved fingers pressed her exposed sockets like testing the ripeness of fruit. Wires sliding into nerves, tiny metal hooks threading pain into her spine. Each spike turned her body into a cage. Used her reflexes to punish movement. To sting at even a flicker of Force. She remembers the way her leg twitched on its own when the final wire sank into her spine. She remembers Serith's voice, low and sweet. "You don't understand it yet, but you will."

As the pain flares behind her knee. She does. She lets the agony ground her, uses the burn to sharpen her next move. She rolls, springs off the floor. Her saber flashes in one smooth motion. It hurts like hell. But it makes her faster. She's been trained, built, to suffer well. The pain keeps her focused.

Ilya closes in before Serith, blade humming, bone knife sharp. Her main hand comes in high, Vashari intercepts. She sees the flash of the bone knife and moves to intercept it with her offhand. Her mechanical arm locks for a half-second, metal screeching to a halt. *She's faster than you*, her master whispers in her head. *But not nearly as strong*. Vashari doesn't think as the knife draws nearer, blade glinting. The Force roars through her, casting Ilya back with a violent push. The energy crackles through her body, untamed. Hungry. Something broken that never quite healed. Ilya twists midair, landing on her feet, both blades held gracefully by her side.

Vashari doesn't waste time. The Force ripples outward from her fingers, wild, casting sparks through air like shattering glass. She throws up a hand and shoves energy. Serith staggers back as the weight crashes into her chest, robes flaring, whip lashing out reflexively in a jagged

arc. It curls through the air like a serpent, hungry, but finds only heat and air. Vashari redirects it with a flick of her blade, dancing the green saber over her head in a protective arc.

Ilya moves again, fast as wildfire. Vashari catches the rhythm of her approach the microsecond before it happens. Her shoulders dip low. Her hip shifts. Her foot twists. Vashari pivots, catching the small saber on her own with a sizzling hiss. Sparks flare between them, teeth bared. They trade blows with staccato precision, each one a strike of lightning. Ilya spins the bone dagger in her offhand with a dancer's grace, slashing low. Vashari blocks with her metal offhand. The dagger spins back, this time aimed for her throat. She ducks under, backpedaling fast enough to feel the burn in her knee.

Serith's whip lashes through the air again, close enough to blow hot air across Vashari's montrals. She sends a sharp telekinetic blast sideways, Serith's shoulder jerks under the impact, enough to send the whip off target. It slams into a column with a loud crack, wrapping around it and shearing a deep, molten groove down the stone. Ilya presses again, relentless. Her saber and dagger strike in tandem, like twin fangs. Vashari parries one, then two, then ducks low and slides under the third. Her footing slips on soot or sweat – she doesn't know anymore, and she spins. Her heel clips Ilya's jaw, enough to knock her backward.

But the Nightsister's hand is already moving. Already hurling the bone knife. Vashari is too late to stop her. The cool blade digs through her side. She hisses, choking back a scream. Her saber slashes wide, colliding with Ilya's arm. Not deep. Not enough. She should fall back, breathe a second, but her vision is red now. Red like the silk drapery across the walls. Red like the burning carpet behind her. Red like the pain she used to pray for, just so she'd know who she was.

She snarls, eyes searching anywhere for an advantage. The brazier behind Ilya. She flings it with the Force. Burning coals sail through the air, pelting Ilya's chest. The Nightsister screams, the cotton sashes that adorn her dress catching fire. Her eyes flicker with fear. She stumbles. Vashari doesn't let up. With a twist of her saber, she knocks Ilya's saber from her hand, sending it clattering across the floor. Ilya bares her teeth, hands flying to her side to grab another dagger, but Vashari is already upon her. She should stop. But she doesn't. She lifts the brazier, Force tendrils wrapping their way around it, and slams it down upon the Nightsister's chest. The remaining coals spill out across her face, searing. Smoldering. She screams, tossing the brazier off of her with her mind and grabbing for her lightsaber, fingers outstretched. Vashari's foot comes down on her throat.

A sickening crunch. Ilya's hands claw at the durasteel prosthetic pinning her windpipe. Her eyes go wide, lips parting in a silent plea. Vashari watches as she goes still. Her eyes remain open, frozen in shock. For a moment, Vashari's eyes go cold, too. *Mercy is an art*, her master whispers. *We must strive to be more than those who think they can control us*. Her heart falls. The Force hums. Her hand shakes. Her chest is tight. *Are you capable of restraining yourself when Serith isn't pulling your leash taut?*

Serith's scream tears through the room as she rushes forward, hand flinging out. The Force answers her rage. Ilya's lightsaber jerks from the floor and snaps into Serith's palm with a hiss of power. She ignites it mid-swing, red blade flaring back to life as it crashes into Vashari, but she is already moving, already prepared. She is a machine, each movement brutal and efficient.

Serith twirls the saber in vicious arcs, her off-hand already unfurling her whip again with a snap. She fights like a storm barely held together; movements frenzied. The crack of her whip heats the air as it lashes toward Vashari's legs. She leaps back, just out of reach, pivoting off her aching prosthetic with a grunt. She deflects another saber strike with a spinning parry, metal grinding as her servos strain. Pain thrums up her limbs. It does not stop her. Serith lunges again, now striking in tandem: saber high, whip low. Vashari deflects one, dodges the other. The whip coils around her forearm for half a second before she yanks it loose, the fibers searing into her synthetic flesh. She snarls, turning with the motion, and slashes low, forcing Serith to backstep. They spiral, saber against saber, whip cracking through smoke and light. Serith fights like a madman, but she is sloppy. Untrained. Vashari reads every desperate move, every overreach, every missed beat.

Serith flicks her whip again, aiming for Vashari's throat. She ducks under it and surges forward with a roar, locking sabers, then driving her elbow into Serith's jaw. The Togruta stumbles back, dazed. That's all the opening Vashari needs.

Her saber hooks low, not to kill. In a clean stroke, she slices through the loop of Serith's grip and wrenches the whip from her hand. It spirals across the floor, hissing with smoke. Serith stares, stunned for a heartbeat. Now she fights only with Ilya's lightsaber. Unfamiliar. Short. She falters. She swings high and wild. Vashari catches the strikes and redirects them with relentless precision.

They clash, faces inches apart. Vashari knows each curve, each marking. Her slaver's eyes crinkle with desperation. She eyes the hallway behind them. For a second, Vashari worries the Zabrak apprentice has arrived to the fight, but Serith's eyes don't reach anything she recognizes.

"You can't kill me," she snarls, looking back into Vashari's eyes. "You love me. Always have." Vashari stumbles. Her mind screams, fights her. Because it's true. Somewhere in the wreckage of her psyche, she wants to protect Serith. To guard her. From herself. She knows how Serith thinks before Serith does. How she moves. How she lies. How she holds her breath before a killing blow. She knows Serith better than she knows her own broken limbs. She falters. Every instinct screams to pounce to Serith's defense. Every reflex begs she kneels. Serith pushes down on her lightsaber, yellow-red eyes fiery and frenzied. Her arm pops. She feels the dead weight of her cybernetics. Her leg, a cage. Her arm, twitching in constant pain. Her side bleeds hot and syrupy. She remembers Tarek's fearful black eyes. Her master's smile. She screams, rage, grief, and guilt all braided together. The Force collects around her agony in a whirlwind. It

explodes out, slamming Serith back against the wall. She collides with her uncle's portrait, falling on the floor before her bedroom.

Ilya's lightsaber rolls across the hallway into Vashari's open palm. Serith is clamoring to her feet, but Vashari reaches her before she can make it past her knees. She kneels, arms down, head high. The two blades in Vashari's hands cut at Serith's throat. Her arm trembles from exertion, half from the pain crackling up her ruined prosthetic, half from her own mind. Conditioning claws at her spine. *You need her.* Her master's voice, buried deep, dares to speak. Vashari doesn't let herself blink. She can't. Not with Serith smiling up at her like that. Like she knows Vashari won't do it.

She presses forward and stops. The tip of her sabers catch on flesh, not her neck. The lekku. Serith's head-tails curl slightly with each ragged breath. They keep Vashari from reaching her throat. A simple biological fact – Vashari's function exactly the same – but it feels deliberate. Another defense. Another chain. So Vashari cuts them off.

The blades hiss as they pass through the lekku. Flesh scorches and spits. Serith jerks violently. The scream that follows is unlike anything Vashari has heard from her before. Raw. Animalistic. She collapses backward, twitching, hands scrambling at the air as if trying to catch something that's already gone. Vashari examines her. She is no master. No tormentor. No god. Just a woman. Broken. Writhing.

Motion behind her. Another presence. She drops Ilya's saber and reaches for Serith's. She cannot afford to give Serith back her weapon of choice. Behind her, stepping over the broken door, is the Zabrak. Ire. Pale yellow skin and scared red eyes. His hands hover over his lightsaber.

She doesn't know what he sees when he looks at her. She doesn't know what she is. A weapon. A monster. A toy Serith made.



Ire never sleeps well. Even in the rare moments when silence settles upon him, his body refuses peace. The cold bites at his feet. The hum of energy grids gnaw at the edge of his senses. Sleep never lasts. When the scream comes, it doesn't pull him from his rest. It shatters his half-dream, ripping the thin veil of unconsciousness apart like tearing flesh.

It's Serith. Raw, unfiltered agony. A sound he's never heard from her before.

He doesn't think. He's already moving, bare feet slapping against durasteel floors, sore body protesting with every motion as he bolts down the hallway. Alarms haven't been triggered yet. No guards. No security droids. He rounds a corner, lungs burning, and the corridor opens wide ahead of him, Serith's room to his left.

Her door is mangled, steel warped outward, slag still glowing at the edges. Smoke drifts away from it in lazy spirals. The heavy scent of scorched flesh and ozone crawls down the hallway like a warning. Ire steps over the threshold, heart hammering, hand hovering over his lightsaber.

Serith is on the floor, her lekku laying disconnected at her feet, writhing independently as she chokes on her own breath, fingers twitching in useless spasms. Her body curls around the pain, half-conscious, proud poise shattered. Near her, crumpled like a broken toy, is his Master. Unmoving. Her throat is crushed in, eyes glassy, mouth twisted in a half-snarl. Dead. Standing above Serith, is the Togruta slave. Uluwi M'Seritok.

She stands tall, shoulders heaving, green lightsaber burning in her grip like a living thing. Her bare-chested tunic hangs in scorched ribbons, half melted around her skin. Smoke coils off her, rising from skin and fabric alike.

The Force howls around her like untampered wildfire. Wrath and clarity braided into one, too immense to be held. She doesn't move towards him. Her presence presses down on the room like a stormfront, every breath laced with something older than vengeance. Something like Dathomir.

Ire has felt this before, in the rivers of home, when the night sang with spirits and waters turned black with rage. When the witches raised their hands and the world listened. That's what Seritok is now. Not a Jedi. Not a prisoner. Not even a person. A force of nature. He tries to speak, but his mouth won't form the words. She turns toward him slowly, like a blade being drawn.

Seritok launches at him like a missile, second blade igniting mid strike into a bar of molten green crashing down toward his head. He whirls his double-blade into motion, catching the blow on one side and spinning with the momentum. Sparks shower the corridor. She doesn't wait. Her foot comes up, mechanical prosthetic slamming into his ribs. Pain blooms white hot in his side.

He stumbles back but plants his stance, flipping his saber into reverse grip. She's already on him again, both blades hissing to life as a familiar double-blade in one hand, and in the other,

the serpentine crack of Serith's lightwhip. It lashes through the air with a predator's hunger. He barely dodges as the whip scorches past his shoulder, searing through fabric and skin. He grits his teeth and counters, spinning his saber like a cyclone. His movements are tight, efficient, meant to control space, create distance. But each time he does, she closes it.

Every strike she lands is reckless, but precise, trained violence molded into instinct. Years of slaughtering prisoners at Serith's command made her into this. A sword sharpened not by sparring drills but by killing. But she's not whole. Her breath is ragged, he can hear it in the gaps. The twitch in her left knee. The way her cybernetic arm hangs stiff between strikes. Blood smears her side where one of his Master's knives found flesh before this all began. She hides it well, but he can see the fracture points. He shifts his focus. Finds his rhythm. Forces her back.

The whip lashes wide, he ducks under it, pivots, and sweeps low. His saber skims her leg. She hisses, stumbling back. He follows up with a brutal overhead slam. She catches it, barely, the strength in her arms buckling as she drops to one knee. Their blades lock, faces inches apart. He sees her face for the first time, green eyes fearful and frenzied. White tattoos over earthen skin, curled lip.

She breaks the lock with a surge of Force energy, driving him back. She spins, whip lashing, but it's wild now. Desperate. She overextends; he slips past her guard. A pivot, a flash of red. His saber hisses across her ribs. A clean, deep cut. She screams. The whip in her left hand clatters to the floor. She falls back, holding her now quiet hilt like a poor lost animal. And for a moment, Ire stops.

He sees her, trembling. Breathing hard, face bloodied, slick with sweat. He sees the scarred restraints still half melted onto her neck. The way her mechanical hand is still twitching from the feedback shocks. She looks like a lost boy holding a weapon not out of anger, but desperation. She looks like him.

He hesitates. Just for a breath. But long enough for her. Her blades scream to life, spiraling toward him in a blazing arc. He jerks back, but it flashes down his chest, melting cloth and searing flesh. Pain knocks the wind from him. Before he can recover, her mechanical foot catches his gut, and he slams into the wall behind him. His saber skids from his hand, smoking at each end. But she doesn't kill him. Her green eyes meet his, and she's gone, all that remains the scorch of her passage down the corridor, the blood smearing across the floor. Ire doesn't move for the longest time, he just stares at the empty hallway, the echo of his own hesitation ringing louder than any of her blades. He could have killed her. He should have killed her. Why didn't he?

The Dark Council chamber sits like a cave etched into the heart of the Sith Citadel, high above the city. Each of the twelve thrones loom over Ire on a raised dais, carved from blackstone and inscribed with ancient runes that pulse faintly with red light, like veins beneath skin.

The air is thick as the council members stare down at him. The silence in the room is not stillness, but pressure, like a blade held against his neck. Cold wind occasionally hisses through the open arches, carrying with it the scent of ozone. Each council member's seat is subtly shaped to reflect their domain, but there is one specifically that draws Ire's attention.

Darth Palide cuts a striking figure beneath the red light. His skin, dark crimson like dried blood, is almost reflective under the chamber's glow. His face is carved with a permanent sneer, as if the very act of being looked upon is an insult to his station. His golden eyes gleam with cunning, predatory like his niece.

Two, thick lekku frame his angular face, adorned with Sith-crafted armor clasps that seem more decorative than functional. An indulgence of nobility. His ornate crown-like headpiece glints with obsidian inlays, symbolizing both his heritage and entitlement. He wears armor not designed for battle but for ceremony. Sleek. Embroidered with sharp red filigree and Sith glyphs etched along the collar and gauntlets.

His presence oozes entitlement, the kind born not of power earned, but of legacy claimed. There is a softness to his figure that suggests luxury. Behind him, Serith stands, promptly-amputated lekku stubs dangle around her neck. They are bandaged, still bloody and raw at the ends. His own chest and shoulder ache from the burns, each movement painful.

Across from Palide, Darth Vireon leans forward in his seat, clawed fingers steepled, crimson skin bathed in shadow. Behind him stands Zhaka, his apprentice, arms folded over his chest in quiet attention. The councilroom's suffocating silence weighs heavily on Ire's shoulders, but Zhaka's expression remains a silver lining, his kind yellow eyes reminding Ire that at the very least, he is not alone.

Standing in the shadows, her barely illuminated silhouette blue through the hologram, is his High Mother, pale skin and grey tattoos visible even through the azure hue. Her clothing is extravagant even compared to Palide, flowing red robes that defy the gravity of Dathomir, that stand by themselves in crimson tendrils. She sneers down at Ire, anger and disappointment weaving lines across her aged face. He cannot meet her eyes.

"We have decided." Palide glances across the council chamber, barely pausing a second to meet Ire's eyes. "As for the estate of Ilya Venras, it will be inherited to Serith Kav'i, as it was her slave who delt the killing blow." The words sink deep in Ire's bruised guts like chains around his ankles. Palide glances towards the High Mother, who nods her approval.

"As for Ire Vitro, he shall remain named an Apprentice until he may take the life of his Master or be otherwise ascended." Serith's sly smile is echoed across Palide's face. Triumphant. At least she will have Ilya's estate as reparations for her slave's breakout. The High Mother's grin presses down on Ire's shoulders, cruel vengeance visible in her black eyes. "He shall be unable to return to Dathomir until such a day that he is named a Warrior."

“With all due respect, this ruling neglects the greater weight of the outcome, sir.” All eyes shift from Palide. Zhaka has stepped forward from Vireon’s shadow, arms still crossed, posture calm. Palide lifts an eyebrow, more amused than angry.

“Do enlighten us, Apprentice Tenab.” Zhaka’s eyes meet Ire’s for a heartbeat, steady. Grounding. Then he turns back to the Council.

“The right to inherit is bound to the one who commands the allegiance of the estate’s resources, not the tool that was used to carry out a deed. Warrior Kav’i’s claim is hollow – you cannot allow a slave’s mere actions to transfer power. Serith’s acquisition of this estate, through a servant’s hand, undermines the very foundation of power. It is not a question of retribution or justice, but of legacy. A legacy must be claimed through strength, through cunning, not the actions of an underling.” The room falls silent, Zhaka’s words like a careful strike. Palide’s amusement remains, but there’s a flicker of something deeper beneath his gaze. He watches Zhaka, tapping his fingers thoughtfully on the throne’s arm.

“You speak with conviction,” he says after a moment, voice dripping with amusement and challenge. “But your argument is flawed.”

Vireon leans forward, crimson skin shining across the room. “While your argument carries reason, it fails to grasp the broader truth of our ways, Apprentice. Power is sized, not simply inherited,” Vireon intones, voice gravely, “Serith has claimed her prize through the strength of her will and the work of her slave. That is the only truth that matters here.” Palide’s eyes gleam with cruel, golden satisfaction. The council murmurs in agreement, their voices a low, unified hum.

“Ire Vitro remains a tool,” Palide continues, voice dark and mocking. “Until he proves himself worthy of more or is consumed by his failure.”

Zhaka stands silent for a moment, his face unreadable, though there is a flash of frustration in his yellow eyes. He bows his head in submission.

“Then I am but a servant, like Apprentice Vitro.” He slinks back into Vireon’s shadow, posture straighter, resolve hardened like steel.

“You can’t let them talk about you like that!” Zhaka hisses, flicking his wrist with a sharp snap, sending discarded refuse tumbling across the pavement in a scattered storm of paper and broken plastic. Ire shrugs.

“I am not very good at making my opinion known,” he admits. His shoulder aches, the wound Seritok left flashing white hot when he moves. His stomach is still churning knots. He’s forbidden to return to Dathomir. To return home.

“It’s just not fair!” Zhaka kicks another piece of trash, the Force propelling it with a violent crash that echoes across the street like a thunderclap. Ire flinches, despite himself. “Serith

shouldn't have left her slave so unprotected! This whole thing is her fault, and she gets to walk away with your estate?" Ire places an aching hand on his friend's shoulder, spinning him around so they stand face to face.

"I appreciate that you were willing to stand up for me. Truly. But it is alright, okay? You are pureblood, and I am a Nightbrother. I was never meant to inherit anything." Zhaka scrunches his brow, lip spreading into a growl.

"Says who?!" He spreads his hands. A couple of passersby, slick with rain, shoot them glances as they cross the street. "You're an apprentice. That gives you enough status to claim an inheritance. Fuck whatever Dathomirian ritual keeps you enslaved!" Ire grabs Zhaka's wrist, anger flowing through his worn muscles.

"You think I am a slave because of them?" he spits, voice low. "It is the way of my people. It is an honor, Zhaka. My fate may not be my own, but I carry it with pride. The ritual binds us, keeps us in servitude, but it keeps us strong. I am more than a slave; I am a warrior. It is my blood. My tradition." Zhaka squirms free of Ire's grasp, red features scowling in cool defense.

"Okay, jeez." He glances around, tone shifting. "Look, I get it. Whatever, Dathomir, honor, all that shit. You're bound to that ritual, fine. But that's not going to change what has to be done, right?" His lips curl into a half-smirk.

"Seritok is still out there. You want your inheritance? Your honor? Then we find her. Make her pay for what she did, take what you're owed." He raises an eyebrow, taunting Ire into disagreement. "She couldn't have gone far. Kaas City is on lockdown, and you said you got her square across the chest. She's got to have found a cave somewhere, holed herself up. We just have to find her." He places a hand on Ire's shoulder – he has to stand on his toes to reach. "Track her down. This time, don't hesitate."

The rain is a soft misty drizzle, the thick jungle canopy above catches the worst of it. Beneath the tangled web of ancient branches and knotted roots, Ire kneels in the mud. His knees sink into the damp soil. The weight of the planet presses in from all sides, stormclouds above, sidecurrents below. The air clings to his skin like oil, thick with rot and decay. He exhales slowly, breath fogging in the cold, fetid air. Around him, the jungle whispers with life, insects chitter in low places. There's a distant howl of some unseen predator. The ever-present hum of Sith technology pulsing through the roots of the world like tainted blood.

He closes his eyes and reaches inward.

The Force here is loud. Too loud. It screams with rage, ambition, bloodlust. Every tree branch and rock hums with residual malice. But Ire is practiced. He grew up in a place just as

hostile. Dathomir taught him the Force was a river with depths beneath the violence, a still current under the chaos. He just needs to hold his breath long enough to dive beneath it.

He inhales again, slower this time. Deeper. He thinks of rivers, clear ones. He thinks of the smell of wet stone and the taste of iron in the water. He thinks of washing blood off his hands in the stream beneath the cliffs of the Singing Crag. The memories ground him, thinning the oily black film of the dark side that clings to his senses. His body relaxes. His heartbeat slows. He reaches outwards.

At first, all he can feel is the noise. The Sith. The storms. A thousand ambitions of a thousand inquisitors clawing for recognition in nearby citadels. He pushes past them. He isn't looking for wrath, pride, or conquest. He searches for stillness. Fear. Not the kind that sparks panic or chaos, but the low gnawing anxiety of prey surrounded by predators. The careful suppression of breath. The practiced stillness of someone masking themselves with the Force, not to strike, but to disappear.

He moves through the jungle in his mind, brushing past phantoms, specters of Sith lords whispering from stone tombs. He ducks beneath the howling wind of some distant duel, crosses a scorched field where the Force screams from the corpses of slaughtered beasts, and keeps going. Deeper. Quieter.

Then he catches it. Faint. Almost nothing. The scent of ash long after the fire's gone out. A signature. Fragile. Hidden. Disciplined. A Jedi. His eyes snap open.

He staggers forward, catching himself on a tree root slick with moss. His breath comes in hard gasps, his temples beaded with sweat. But his eyes are focused now, cutting through the fog. She's here. His muscles ache, the wound in his shoulder flares up again. He doesn't care. She's east of here. Still and afraid. Trying to disappear. His lips curl into a grim smile. It's like hunting Nydaks.

The thought comes to him as he steps around a low root. Not the young ones, of course. The alphas. The old ones that know when to fight and when to vanish. Ire once tracked a Nydak with a few brothers for three days without ever seeing it. He'd smelled it in the air, found pawprints half-washed by the river, seen where it had clawed bark from a tree just to let them know it knew they were on it.

Seritok was doing the same now. The way she moves, pulling her presence tight when he gets close, radiating decoys when he lags behind. That same kind of animalistic caution. The same quiet arrogance.

Lightning forks through the sky, casting brief, sickly yellow light over the canopy. Ire doesn't flinch. He dips under branches slick with wet moss. The air temperatures changes, cools. The landscape shifts into a ravine. That's where she'd go. Somewhere with cover and an escape route. A Nydak would sleep with its back to a wall and one eye open.

Ire drops to a crouch as he reaches the ridge. He scans the forest floor below. The Force signature pulses again, stronger now. Clearer. A heartbeat. A camp. He smells smoke, faint and woodsy. Something is cooking. She thinks she is safe.

His fingers twitch at his side, but he does not draw his blade. Not yet. The kill doesn't come until the silence breaks. Until the Nydak stops pretending it isn't cornered.

He feels Seritok moments before he sees her, but still too late to act. She is behind him – how did she get behind him? Her lightsaber is ignited, blade hovering daintily under his chin. Its heat sends beads of sweat running down his neck.

Her chest is heaving, teeth bared in twisted defiance. Her robes are soaked through with blood and rain, clinging to her like a second, tattered skin. A raw, cauterized line burns diagonally across her chest – his lightsaber's mark. It hadn't been deep enough to kill, but the pain must be constant. Infection is setting in, like algae clinging to the edges of wet river stones. Her leg is worse, though. His lightsaber had nearly torn through bone, it is too mangled for her to walk cleanly. She must have been dragging herself for days. Still, she stands over him.

The earthen hue of her skin is dulled with filth and sweat. Her remaining lekku twitch with residual tension, striped like the jungle cats of Dathomir he used to stalk. She doesn't seem like a Jedi now. Her expression is animalistic: wide-eyed pupils constricted, lips curled halfway between a snarl and scream. Ire doesn't grab his hilt, though his fingers yearn to feel its weight.

"You could have killed me," her voice is a hiss, melodic but hoarse. It is wrapped with emotion. Taut. Trembling. When he heard her speak in Serith's estate, it was far more monotone. A drone befitting a droid. "Why didn't you?" He glances down at the glowing green blade, raising a lip in a sneer at it.

"You could kill me now. Why aren't you?" he says, unable to draw his eyes away from her feral green gaze. For a long moment, the only sound is the whine of distant fauna and drip of water from the canopy. Then she lets out a breath like she's been holding it for hours.

"I don't want to," she answers. Ire narrows his eyes but doesn't press her. Her saber still hums softly, casting flickering green shadows across the vines and bark. It looks wrong here, too bright against the jungle's darkness. He studies her wounds, each one of them. His work. He'd tracked her through the chaos of Dromund Kaas because that was what was expected. What was owed. A Nightbrother does not leave a hunt unfinished. A Sith does not show mercy.

Who was this hunt for? The Dark Council? They would never respect him. A Nightbrother, carved from magic and cruelty. They'd offer him his Masters' scraps, then look away the moment Serith would march on his newly won estate. The High Mother? She had turned her back on him. Forbidden him from returning to his home. There was no honor in this.

He looks at Seritok again. Her chest shakes with effort, but she stands strong. Defiant. Alive. He lets his shaking hands lift his lightsaber hilt long enough to unlatch it from his belt and

place it on the ground below him. He raises both palms to face Seritok. She watches him, blade still tight against his throat. When the glow vanishes with a hiss, silence falls between them, thick as the jungle heat.

“I should take you back,” he mutters “drag you back in chains.”

“But you won’t.” She says, evenly.

“No.”

“Why not?” He looks up to her, lips curled in a slight smile.

“There’s no honor hunting a wounded creature for a clan that won’t speak my name. The Dark Council won’t hear me out. My clan has declared me an exile. Like you.” His jaw tenses. That word burns more than it should. Exile. He stands. She doesn’t stop him. From his belt, he unhooks a ration pack and a battered field medkit, placing them gently on the moss between them.

“For your wounds.” He keeps his eyes low. “And the hunger.” She stares down the supplies like they’re bait. Her fingers twitch, then curl back.

“I don’t need your pity.”

“You see pity. I see respect. A warrior acknowledges his equal.” His voice seems to finally land heavy on her. She crouches with a slow, breathless groan, and takes the kit gingerly under her arm. He watches, wordless, as she peels away the scorched leather of her top, fully exposing the half-searing wound across her torso. It weeps beneath the rain.

She doesn’t wince when she touches it, only mutters, “You’re sloppy with a saber.” He snorts.

“You move like a Nydak.” That earns the ghost of a grin from her. Bloodied, bitter, but genuine. She begins to clean the burn with practiced hands.

“Ire,” she says, without looking up. “If you try to turn me in, I will kill you.” He nods.

“I won’t stop you.”

The cave Seritok found herself is larger, more open than Ire expected. Nestled at the bottom of the ravine, he can hear the sound of flowing water somewhere nearby. The smell of wet river stones. She has set up a shaky campfire towards the back of the cave, the logs are fresh with scorch marks. The fires lick the cave floor, staining it black around the edges. Seritok makes her way to the fire and sits down carefully. Painfully. Her organic leg can no longer fully support her weight – her cybernetic leg creaks as she leans onto it, pain evident in her dirty face. He’s



heard Serith explain her mad cybernetics a thousand times before, he can hear her voice now in his memory.

“It’s rigged with a feedback grid, so each movement sends a little jolt through the nerves. Keeps the pain fresh, keeps her obedient. I modeled it after those old pain harnesses, but it’s more portable. More stylish, too.”

His skin crawls. It aches for the river nearby. He wants to wash himself in the cool water, to feel Dathomir’s sun on his face. He looks at the Jedi, she has set the ration he gave her aside and is now gingerly picking through the laceration across her thigh. He picks up a small stone from the ground. It’s rough, shattered flat on one side. Riverstone. He throws it across the cave, where it hits the wall with a *clack!* Seritok flinches, glancing up long enough to watch with Ire as the stone falls pathetically to the floor. He opens his palm towards it and curls tendrils of Force around it, sending it flying back. She looks back to her wounds.

His mind cannot help but drift to Dathomir. The ravines. The riverstones. He despises the near-constant rain on Dromund Kaas. He misses the sun. He imagines dragging Seritok back to the High Mother, to the Dark Council, gritty and sweat-stained. She’d give him injury, most definitely. He’d be relying on only one leg, like she. He can hear their voices assigning him another petty excuse. He cannot inherit his Master’s position because the Sith laws prevent him from doing so, or from some legal loophole Serith abuses, no. He cannot inherit her estate because he is a Nightbrother, and she a Sister. He does not deserve her position. He deserves the hard labor under the sun, the aching thrill of hunts, the smooth red river water. But the High Mother does not want him back. Why?

He throws the stone again, harder this time. He does not give it time to clatter to the floor, instead catching it mid-fall with his mind, intertwining it in his will, launching it into his hands. The High Mother does not want him back because he has changed. That must be it. Because she fears he had a hand in Ilya’s death. She fears he will break the chains he has dedicated his whole life to venerating. He stares at the stone. His tosses have chipped another side clean; it glistens dimly under the firelight. It hovers over his palm, dust and fractured pieces dainty orbiting it like the 4 Sister moons.

The truth splits clean through him: it was never his power that brought him here. It was how he used it. No screams through gritted teeth. No angry outbursts. Just thought and motion. Just control, silent and powerful. That’s what the High Mother fears. Not his weakness, not his failure to save his Master. She fears what he might become if no one is there to chain him down. Dathomir does not want him anymore. Not because he left, but because he did not break without her.

Tears form on his under eye, and he takes a second to feel them across his first finger. The water glistens like blood as it condenses and forms a droplet. *Plink!* He cannot remember the last time he cried, the last time his eyes reddened out of sorrow, desperation, pain. He snuffles.

The Jedi looks up. He sees her eyes, sees the Nydak sense his weakness, his dissolution. He can feel the way she will grab her lightsaber, feel the burning hole in his chest as she drives her blade as deep as it will go. She does not capitalize on his display of humanity, instead she raises a painted eyebrow and looks him up and down.

“Your wounds need tending?” she speaks matter-of-factly. He chuckles a bit and runs the back of his hand under his nose, already desperately trying to blink the tears away.

“They are fine.” He glances at her side, where his master left a chunk of flesh hanging loose. “You will need to clean yourself.” She nods, absent-mindedly, still suturing up her leg. He rubs his shoulder, then stands. His ribs ache with movement, the bruises she gave him groaning with dull pain.

“Are you a hunter?” The question surprises him even as it leaves his mouth. She does not look up from her leg.

“My people are. We do ritual hunts. I hunted an Akul, but my prize is gone.” She taps where her montrals meet her forehead. “Most Torguta wear the teeth along their forehead.” A pause. “I used to hunt people.” Those forest green eyes find his again, gaze steady. “No longer.” He nods.

“My people are also hunters.” He glances down his chest, at the tattoos that mark his skin. “We take great pride in our hunts. Beasts, mostly. Occasionally other clans.”

She pulls her suture tight and bites the string, razor sharp teeth severing medical thread like meat. He stands over her now, offers her a hand up. She takes it and tests her weight on the leg, inhaling sharply as she places it down flat, but it holds.

“Uluwi M’Seritok is not your name,” he says softly. Not a question, but it hangs like one. She meets his gaze, furrowed brow carefully disguising a grimace as she stretches her leg. “What did they call you before her?” A long pause. She stares at him, furrowed brow unreadable. Then she looks down at their joined hands.

“That name is gone,” she says. Quiet. Without sorrow. Just a fact. “And you are not the one I’d give it to.” She lifts her hand off of his, standing on her own. He watches her for a moment. Then, slowly, he breathes in through his nose and presses his fingers against the cave wall behind him, sharp claw digging through riverstone like flesh.

“I know what it is like,” he says. “To lose the name you were given. To know you cannot take it back.” She doesn’t respond. She’s already limping toward the mouth of the cave, testing her step and wincing when her prosthetic clicks in disapproval. He lowers his head.

“I don’t deserve mine,” he adds, a little louder now. “Not anymore. My clan cast me out. I was marked for exile by the High Mother herself.” That gives her pause. She looks over her shoulder. He doesn’t meet her eyes.

“Then what shall I call you?”

“You may call me Apprentice. It is all I am, now.” She studies him. A beat passes.

“That is not a name.” He shrugs.

“Then we are the same.”

She doesn’t challenge him. Just nods, once, and continues toward the river. He stays behind a minute, watching the flicker of firelight on the cave walls. He’ll need to find a new name, eventually. Before he next sees Zhaka.

The river is cold. Clear. Not like the red, slow waters of Dathomir, thick with sediment and memory. Ire crouches by the shallows, cupping water in his hands. He lets it slip through his fingers before looking to Seritok.

She is already halfway in, remnants of her robes clinging in burnt strips to her body. Most of the fabric is gone, what’s left is barely more than ash and thread. Her montrals dip slightly as she exhales, steady but labored. The wound on her side bleeds again, not much, but enough to cloud the water near her hip. Ire steps into the river beside her.

When he was young, bathing meant the entire brotherhood at once. Laughter echoing off the canyon walls. Mud between toes. Hands slapping cold water onto backs. He doesn’t remember gentle touch. Now, he works in silence. His hand hovers for a moment above the wound, then presses carefully at its edge with a cloth. She does not flinch. He is grateful for that.

“Hold your breath.” She does, and he pours a slow stream of water over the gash, flushing out the dirt and dried blood. The river takes it. This should feel like a rite. A communion. But it doesn’t. It’s just work. She is not his kin. Dathomir is too far behind him to echo now. He glances at her chest, at the wound beneath her collarbone, then her leg. Those she treats herself. The side wound she cannot reach.

He could say something. About strength. About survival. About how his brothers used to sing while scrubbing blood from their skin. But he doesn’t.

“This will scar.” She nods.

“I will get you a cloak to wear.”

“I am sorry.”

Seritok sits near the fire, huddled in the oversized cloak he gave her. It hangs off her emaciated frame like a child playing warrior. The shoulders slip low. The hem pools around her

like a spilled shadow. Her chest rises and falls beneath the weight of it. Slow. Shallow. Bandages peek out where the fabric parts, but she does not pull the cloak tighter. Her hands are busy.

She holds her lightsaber in her lap, both hands curled around it like it might vanish if she lets go. It's scorched in places, grime smudged over the hilt, but intact. Hers. She runs her thumb across the metal casing, over the grooves etched into the side. It's not lit, but it weighs in her palms like a promise.

The fire pops beside her, orange light casting her face in deep lines, hollowed by exhaustion but not empty. Her eyes do not stray far from the fire. When she eats, it is one-handed, slowly. Working through the rations he had given her with mechanical focus. Between each bite, her fingers return to the saber. She doesn't speak. Doesn't ask him to sit closer, but she doesn't avoid his gaze either.

He sits across from her, cross-legged, arms resting on his knees. He watches her. "You won't be safe here," he says finally, voice low and even. "Serith has put out a bounty on you. A big one. Every scum-sucker from here to Coruscant will be combing these jungles soon." She doesn't look at him. Her hand tightens around the saber. "I have a ship," he continues. "My master never liked to set down in the spaceports, it's only a few kilometers from here. It has clearance." She looks at him. Not surprised. Skeptical.

"You wish to leave?" she asks.

"No," he says, too quickly. He softens his tone. "That's not an option for me." She tilts her head, frowning faintly. "This is my life. I burned the bridges I needed to. The rest I never had." She studies him in silence, like she's trying to figure out what kind of trap he must have ready to spring, like a Tooka Cat, too curious to walk away.

"Then why help me?" Ire doesn't answer immediately. He shifts slightly, gaze dropping to the dirt between them.

"Call it a favor," he says finally. "Or guilt. Or maybe I'm just tired of watching Serith chew people up and spit them out." He looks up at her again, eyes tired but focused. "You still have time. A way out." She watches him, expression unreadable. The fire crackles between them. "I don't care where you go. I'll drop you somewhere neutral. Republic space, if that's what you want. I won't follow you past the loading ramp." She considers this, long and slow.

"You pity me," she says at last, not a question. Ire's gaze hardens. He shakes his head.

"No. I don't pity you." His voice is sharp, as though the words taste sour. He pauses, leans forward slightly. "I think you deserve a fighting chance. Serith... what she did to you was cruel. Unwarranted. Unearned." He leans back, voice softening under her pressuring gaze. "I know what it is like to be shaped into something to serve another. To be treated as executioner. Used as a tool." His eyes flicker momentarily, the shadow of something fleeting in them, but he quickly looks away. "You deserve more than that."

There's a long silence between them, filled only by the crackle of fire. Finally, Ire lowers his gaze to the ground. His fingers idly trace designs in the dirt.

"You don't deserve to end up like me. Stuck in an unfamiliar world. Used as a pawn in another's game. You're better than that." He lets out a quiet breath, shifts his weight. "I don't ask anything in return. The choice is yours."

Ire's ship is unassuming. Small. Efficient. Nothing like the grand polished ships of Sith Lords or sleek, militarized Republic vessels. It's practical, designed for quick travel and quiet landings in places like this, away from prying eyes and sensors. The hull is matte black, faded in spots from years of use. The cockpit is small, cramped. Just enough room for two pilots. It smells faintly of old leather, sweat, and herb. It is barely decorated, the walls are lined with dark, lacquered wood that has been carved with intricate spiraling patterns, deep green and violet markings that twist like vines. A far cry from the usual design of the Sith Empire. A tattered banner hangs loosely in one corner, worn and frayed but still displaying the proud symbol of their clan. Beneath it, resting on a table are the remnants of Ilya's tools: a few wooden talismans wrapped in soft red cloth. One of the wall panels holds a small, polished bone dagger, hilt carved to resemble twisting ulna and radius.

There are few comforts here. No extraneous luxuries. The seats are simple, worn, the leather cracked from years of use. Despite this, there is a strange kind of peace in the ship's quietude. The hum of its engines feels almost like a heartbeat. As Ire walks through the narrow hallways, he passes the cargo hold, where a few crates sit stacked, covered in dust. Had his Master survived the night, they would have been popped open, the Sith artifacts inside given to some high-up lord as a token of appreciation. They lay abandoned now.

Seritok limps behind Ire. He had offered to carry her to the ship, but she gave him a look he recognized from his Master. One that told him if he ever offended her honor in such a way again, she would not simply flay his skin, she'd take his head. She examines the ship, shaky hands gliding across the wood paneling, before she settles herself in the co-pilot's chair.

His hands fly across the controls, and the ship rumbles to life. Rain pelts the viewport in heavy sheets, the clearing in the jungle glowing faintly from the firelight they'd left behind. He spares it a glance, just for a second, before focusing forward.

"Atmosphere control, this is Veilshade, ID nine-seven-three-zero," he says into the comm, voice level. "Requesting departure clearance. Route filed for Ossus, via Mandalorian pass." A pause crackles over the comm before a clipped, soldierly voice answers.

"Veilshade, you are not registered to a spaceport. State launch point."

"Jungle grid six-beta," he replies. "Independent clearance authorized by Lord Kav'i, Level Three override." Another pause, longer this time. Ire drums his fingers on the throttle.

“Veilshade, flight path received. Clearance granted. Proceed to orbit and maintain course. Deviations will be tracked.”

“Copy.” He cannot hide the smile across his face, the drum of his rapid heartbeat. He lifts the ship through the jungle canopy, branches snapping beneath the force of its repulsors. Trees blur past then disappear entirely as they claw their way into the thunderous skies above. He adjusts the heading. Reaches for the hyperdrive controls. “Course confirmed,” he murmurs, mostly to himself. A final toggle, a deep whine of power surging to life, and the stars stretch into long white lines. With a violent lurch and thrum of momentum, the Veilshade vanishes into hyperspace, Dromund Kaas nothing but a memory behind them.

Seritok sits beside him, cloak tight around her shoulders, hands still cradling her lightsaber. He doesn’t turn to her when he speaks.

“Ossus is the best I can do,” his voice is low, measured. “There’s a Jedi Temple there, I believe. You’ll be safe.” She nods slowly, looking out the viewport at the swirling stars.

“You could come with me,” she says, voice careful but clear. “You don’t have to return to the Sith.” He turns now, just enough to meet her eyes. His smile is faint, almost wistful.

“I do,” he says, voice quiet but unshakable. “I was born for the hunt. There’s no path that doesn’t lead me to it.” He leans back slightly, gaze distantly focusing on some control panel above him. “I’m not a lost beast. I’m not looking for a way out. I’ve known who I was since the first time I bled something bigger than me.” He glances at her face, each and every line. His tattoos seem to mimic her facial markings. “But...” his voice trails off for a second. Her green eyes hold his. “In another life I think I would have liked to be a Jedi. To fight alongside you.” Silence stretches between them like a bridge, half built. She leans closer to him, reaches out with her offhand, lightly brushes the tattoos across his chest. The firelight of hyperspace dances across her face, softening the hard lines etched into it.

“Thank you,” she says, quietly. “For giving me a chance.” He looks away, jaw tight. Gratitude sits strangely in his chest, like a knife turned backward.

“You earned that chance yourself,” he says. “You survived her.” She tilts her head, green eyes surprisingly soft. Her voice drops, almost thoughtful. Her finger traces the bruises along his shoulderblades, from hauling crates for Ilya.

“As did you.”

Ire doesn’t reply. She isn’t wrong, but he cannot place that word in his mind. “You still carry light,” she says, certain. “Even if you don’t know it.” He breathes out in a huff, unsure what to make of her cryptic response. Before he can pull his thoughts together, she adds more firmly. “I’ll call you Luz.”

He blinks. “What?”

“It means light,” she smiles. “You have returned it to me.” For a long moment, he says nothing, just looks at her. His throat tightens around itself. Then he nods once, solemnly.

“Thank you,” he says. “Perhaps one day we can meet again as allies.” She chuckles softly. It is a new sound, soft and melodic. A fleeting note of something human. Something delicate. He passes her another ration, grabbed from Ilya’s stache under the wheel. They eat in silence, the soft hum of the ship the only noise between them. Eventually, the tracker beeps, informing them they have 10 minutes before they arrive. Seritok shifts under her cloak. Discomfort, perhaps. Excitement. Anxiety. He considers her form. She’s nude under there, the last of her clothes peeled off in the river on Dromund Kaas. He stands suddenly, voice quick and low. “I’ll be back.” She grips her lightsaber close.

His Master’s old quarters are exactly as he remembers them, save a fresh layer of dust. He doesn’t linger here, instead making his way straight to a pile of her discarded belongings. His fingers brush through old items, until he finds a stashed set of ceremonial robes. She always kept an extra, just in case.

He returns with the robes bundled in his arms. She doesn’t ask where he found them, only watches him with those eyes, and accepts them without a word, limping into the bathroom to change. The tracker chirps again, and he has to manually descend. As soon as he enters atmosphere, the comm installed by the centerpiece springs to life.

“Unidentified vessel, this is Ossus Orbital Control. You are entering restricted Republic airspace. Transmit clearance codes immediately or prepare to be intercepted.” He takes a deep breath, then turns on his comm.

“Ossus Orbital Control, this is Veilshadow. Transmitting clearance codes, Sith Imperial registry, patrol class. I am acting under the Treaty of Coruscant. I request emergency landing clearance, medical priority.” There is a long pause as he transmits his codes, and the Orbital Control reads it. His breath hangs loose in the air.

“Repeat that? Did you say Sith vessel?” The controller’s voice is tense, suddenly far more formal.

“You heard me.” His voice lingers over the static.

“You are aware you are requesting landing on Ossus. This is not a neutral zone.”

“I am.” He flips through the treaty hardwired into the ship’s controls. “I am invoking clause 14C. I have a Jedi onboard. She’s injured.” There’s another long pause. He feels Seritok moving behind him.

“Veilshadow, you are cleared for descent to Pad Seven. Eastern Temple Spire. You will be met by four gunships and a full security escort. You will power down all weapons and

navigational systems on approach. Any deviation will be interpreted as hostile, and in violation of clause 17B” A smile passes across his lips, relief hidden in his eyes.

“Copy.”

“You are being watched, Sith. Step one foot wrong, your treaty won’t protect you.” The comm clicks off with a beep. Seritok breathes out, a long, peaceful breath. He turns around to face her.

For a moment, he forgets to breathe.

She stands like a statue carved from Dathomir’s own spine. The robes fit her like a prophecy, crimson cloth spills from her shoulder like a blood-oath unfurling. It pools at her feet like the riverbeds that run red during the Night of Falling Stars. The leather is taunt across her chest, shaped as if it remembers every Sister who ever wore it. The sash at her waist is wound with warrior’s precision, the black ring that clasps it glints like obsidian under torchlight. Her lekku curls down from her crown like a coiled root. Her fingers rest deftly on the hilt of her saber. Though she does not move, does not speak, Luz can feel the power humming off of her like steam rising from the swamp at dusk.

She is still, but not in peace. It is the hush before the ritual begins. The silence before the witch speaks the first word. In that moment, he does not see the stranger who bathed in the river of Dromund Kaas. He does not see the slave who licked stew off the crimson carpet. He sees home. The ghost of a Sister long buried. A prayer in flesh. Though the room is cold and metal, far from the jungles he once loved, Luz swears the air smells faintly of ashroot and dust.

“You would have made a wonderful Nightsister,” he says, words slipping out before he can stop them. “I would have been honored to serve you.” For a long moment, Seritok doesn’t answer. She examines the robes, the dark fabric a sharp contrast to the paleness of her skin. When she finally speaks, her voice is quiet, almost thoughtful.

“Perhaps,” she mutters, hooking her lightsaber to her belt. It hangs there with purpose, bouncing loosely off her injured thigh. “I do not think your servitude could be earned by even the most perfect of Nightsisters, though.”

The Veilshade breaks through Ossus’ atmosphere with a low rumble, clouds steaking across the cockpit as the towering stone temples rise from the mountainous terrain. Gunships flank the ship, silent and heavy. Luz follows the landing coordinates to Pad Seven, slowing the ship’s descent as spotlights from the Republic Base track his every move. The moment the repulsors kick in and the ship sets down with a soft hiss of steam, his comm crackles to life.

“Occupants of the Veilshade. Exit the vessel with hands visible. The Sith is to be disarmed immediately. Power down.” He obeys, hands off the controls. The systems go quiet one



by one. Shields down. Weapons down. The ship rests like a hunter holding its breath. He moves to the ramp, pausing by the threshold. Seritok steps beside him, robes still radiant. He looks at her, one last time.

The ramp lowers with a hydraulic sigh. The light blinds him for half a second. The heat of Ossus sinks into his robes. Four Republic soldiers stand in a tight line ahead, rifles raised, armor shining. A Jedi Knight, a tall Mirialan with half a dozen rank stripes, stands in pale robes, face wary and focused.

“You there. Sith!” he calls, “Hands where we can see them. Kneel.” Luz makes no move. His jaw flexes, but before he can speak, Seritok takes her place next to him, hand on his shoulder.

“He is under my protection,” she says. “He brought me here. I owe him my life.” The soldiers hesitate. The Mirialan’s brow furrows.

“And you are?” Seritok steps forward, calm and steady. The Force shifts, unmistakably so. The Jedi senses it, recognition dawns upon his face. He doesn’t press the question.

“The Sith” he begins, “He will be-”

“No,” Seritok interrupts him. “He leaves untouched. No questioning. No nothing.” A beat passes. The air seems to still around them.

“You’re asking a lot,” the Jedi replies, tone even.

“I am not asking,” she says. “I am stating the terms of my release.” The Knight holds her gaze. A long silence stretches between them before he finally gives a slow nod. The soldiers lower their rifles, unsure but obedient. She turns to Luz, halfway down the ramp. She meets his eyes, those glowing green ones so full of newfound life.

“Vashari Vex,” she says. Voice low. Flat. “You wanted my name.” There’s a look in her eyes that changes, like he’s seeing her for the first time.

“You would have made a wonderful Jedi. I hope some day the Force will bring you home.” She doesn’t wait for an answer from him. Her robes ripple behind her as she limps down the ramp, towards the line of soldiers parting like reeds before her. The Mirialan gives him one final glance before turning to help her walk. Luz watches her go, until she has disappeared into the spaceport, doors sealed behind her like caves collapsing. And then he turns. Raises the ramp. Walks back to the cockpit.

The ship’s engines power back to life with the low whine of repulsors engaging. The quiet of his mind is far louder than any hum. Home. Dathomir. That name used to mean something. It was a place of pride, bloodlines and history. Now, it is a memory. A place he’s not welcome, even if he could find his way back. There’s no one left to call him brother. No place left for him to go.

He presses his hands against the console, staring out into the empty expanse of space before him. The galaxy seems a little smaller now. He punches in coordinates. He cannot go home. Not now. Not ever. He'll just have to find the next best thing.

The stars stretch out before him. Cold. Countless. He stares at them for a long time. Waiting for something to rise in him. A change. A direction. A purpose. But the galaxy offers him little. In the reflection of the viewport, he sees himself. He is weary, sporting the same haunted look he carried off of Dathomir. A ghost clinging to the past. The navicomputer beeps, locking in his course. It doesn't matter. It never really has. He sits back his Master's pilot's chair. The hum of the ship wraps around him like a second skin. Familiar. Reliable. Constant.

He doesn't believe in destiny. Not anymore. But in quiet moments like this, he wonders if the Force has some buried thread for him after all. Maybe it isn't about finding home. Maybe it's about learning to live without one.

He exhales slowly. His hands are steady on the controls. He'll have to fight for each step he takes. But he has seen the worst the galaxy offers, and he has come out breathing.

He is ready.