

The courtyard smells of ozone and wet stone, the sky still restless from the last storm. Apprentices gather in their lines, silently, as Setigh is dragged forward. Another Kaleesh. He had been Nalise's friend, once, a companion in the dormitories, quick with a joke and always eager to whisper half-formed theories after lecture. But eagerness is not brilliance. His questions wander. His arguments collapse under scrutiny. He is not sharp enough to survive here.

The overseer reads the charges: hesitation in debate, sloppy reasoning, failures unbecoming of philosophy's heirs. As the words drone on, the Setigh twists against his captors, teeth bared, wrists straining against the chords.

"I can do better, please! Give me another test!"

The guards shove him to his knees, one forcing his head down until his scales scrape stone. His voice cracks with desperation.

"I understand now! I swear it!"

Nalise's jaw tightens. This display is pathetic. To beg is to prove the overseer's point: that he had never understood. Philosophy requires precision, clarity. The boy's failing is confirmation of weakness, not an argument against it.

The blade falls. A clean stroke. Quick. Merciful. The body slumps forward, silence rushing in behind it. None of the apprentices flinch. Nalise's chest tightens. A part of him recoils at the suddenness, the sight of blood on stone. His mind rationalizes, however, that this is necessity. Setigh was incompetent. His failure is no injustice, only the natural order revealed. As Darth Emmenas says, a weak mind, left unchecked, rots the whole.

And yet, as the body is dragged away, Nalise finds himself pressing his palms against the fabric of his robes, willing the tension out of his fingers. He tells himself the lesson is clear. Setigh's end is deserved. Still, the silence afterward clings to him like damp air. It's only a matter of time before he's declared incompetent, too.

He claims a headache after the execution and does not join the others when they file toward the lecture halls. A forged note waits in his sleeve, its script neat and exact in Phanius' clever forged hand. The overseer glances at it, snuffles, and waves him along without comment. Nalise bows his head respectfully, tucking the parchment away with a silent promise to repay the Umbaran later. Phanius never gives without expecting something in return.

The corridors of Emmenas' estate stretch long and shadowed, their walls polished black stone that reflects torchlight in wavering bands. Murals of Sith triumphs loom in recesses overhead: Pureblood figures frozen mid-speech or mid-slaughter, always victorious, always certain. Slaves move silently along the halls, heads lowered, slipping between apprentices like ghosts. From the upper balconies comes the murmur of starting debates, punctuated by sharp bursts of laughter or the dry cough of an overseer correcting some misstep. Nalise passes a courtyard where the storm has left the flagstones slick, the scent of ozone still sharp in the air.

Beyond it, the library's high windows glow faintly, a dozen apprentices bent over texts within, their silhouettes like insects pinned under glass. He doesn't stop. His path curves inward, toward the dormitory wing, quieter than the rest of the estate.

Inside, the dormitories are spartan: rows of cots, neatly folded robes, the faint metallic tang of oil from the ever-dripping lamps overhead. He crosses to his bed, sits, and eases onto his back with a sigh. The silence is different here than the courtyard. Less oppressive, more brittle. Like the walls themselves wait to hear his thoughts.

Nalise closes his eyes, centering his breath. Meditation comes easily in stillness, and he welcomes it. The present bleeds away: the air, the cot beneath him, the rhythm of his own breath. What remains, inevitably, is the past. He remembers little of Kalee. The truth strikes him every time he thinks it, sharper than he expects. The world of his birth lies behind a veil so thick he cannot pierce it, no matter how long he sits in silence. What rises instead are impressions. Humid air clinging to his scales, heavy and wet. The steady sound of the ocean, visible from the roof of his home, wild and blue, stretched endlessly toward a far-away horizon. He clings to the image, but it's like holding smoke. The longer he stares, the more it unravels.

Faces never come to him, nor do voices. If he had a mother's touch, a father's laugh, a sibling's hand pulling him to safety, they are gone now, cut away by the years. What he remembers instead is the break: the way shadows fell across his village when the Sith came. The way the ship blotted out the sky, black shapes against the blue. The taste of ocean salt on his tongue.

He breathes. Lets the fragments come and fade again, as they always do. Meditation teaches him that the past is not gone, only carved into new shapes. But when the images dissolve and he opens his eyes, he is still shocked to find no ocean waiting before him. Only the endless storms of Kaas.

The mess hall is its usual cacophony of sound: trays clattering onto stone tables, apprentices calling for space, the occasional bark from an overseer cutting through the noise. The air smells of steam and broth, heavy with the tang of boiled greens. Nalise carries his tray toward the far corner, already spotting the pale shock of Aurin's hair. She and her twin Phanius are seated side by side, as always, bent over their meals like two halves of the same coin. Aurin notices him first; she always does. Her grin splits wide, eyes glinting silver in the lamplight.

"You're late," she says, as though he'd kept them waiting. She flicks a spoonful of stew at him with exaggerated offense. "And you missed the fuck-up of the week."

Phanius doesn't look up right away. He has a measured way about him: deliberate like every movement has already been rehearsed. Only when Aurin nudges him with her elbow does he glance and Nalise, smirking.

“Saro tried to quote Emmenas during recitation. Got the entire line backwards.”

Nalise sets his tray down with a thud, brow lifting.

“Backwards?”

“Completely,” Aurin says with relish. “‘Form precedes thought.’ Can you imagine? I thought Overseer Vett was going to faint.”

“Not faint,” Phanius corrects, tearing his bread into halves. “Strangle her. I was counting the seconds.” Nalise can’t help the short laugh that breaks through.

“I’d have paid to see it.”

“Too bad I didn’t get a recording,” Aurin says. She has an energy that fills whatever space she is in: sharp and restless, like she is forever one step away from leaping onto the table just to see what would happen. She smirks, tossing her hair back. “Phanius was already sketching wagers under the table. He’s got a whole list going.”

Her brother doesn’t deny it. He just sips calmly from his cup, eyes faintly amused.

“Arken’s odds are shortening by the day,” he says. “Clumsy tongue, slower thoughts. He won’t last the season.”

“Arken’s not that bad,” Nalise says, digging into his food. “He just has a stutter.”

“Sucks to be him, then,” Aurin says, pointing her spoon like a dagger. “If you can’t keep up, you’re done. Better he’s gone before he drags the rest of us down.” Phanius gives a small, measured nod, as though he’s already signed Arken’s death warrant.

“The overseers are patient, but Emmenas isn’t. It’s only a matter of time.”

Nalise shakes his head, but there is no bitterness in it. This is how the twins are: Aurin loud and mocking, Phanius quiet and cutting. They play off each other like a script, one pushing, the other pulling. To most, they are unsettling. Classic Umbarans, clever enough to twist a knife without ever needing to touch the blade, but Nalise grew up alongside them. He knows the kindness in their words, even when they try to root it out.

Overseers prowl the edge of the hall, their eyes sweeping like hawks, but the twins never lower their voices. They don’t need to. For Umbarans, cunning is expected, even celebrated. Emmenas praises manipulation in them the same way he praises Nalise’s tonality. It makes them untouchable.

Phanius finishes his bread in silence, brushing the crumbs carefully into a neat pile on the tray. Only once Aurin is distracted stealing another apprentice’s roll from across the table does he lean toward Nalise.

“You owe me,” he says, so quietly it’s almost lost under the din.

“I know,” Nalise admits carefully. “What do you want?” Aurin’s grin widens, sharp as a blade.

“Here it comes.” Phanius leans back, measured as ever.

“There’s a text I need. A forbidden one, dangerous enough the overseers called it heretical.” His tone is casual but his eyes gleam. “I want you to bring it in.” Nalise’s spoon freezes halfway to his mouth.

“Bring it in? From where?”

“Outside the estate.” Phanius tears his new roll into halves again, as though the matter is already settled. “I have a contact who can supply it. I just need an errand boy.”

“If the overseers catch me with something like that—”

“They won’t,” Phanius cuts in smoothly. “You’ll be careful. You always are.”

“You’re asking me,” Nalise says, jaw tight, “because you can’t leave. But I can’t just come and go like a lord. I’m watched, Phanius. Every step. If they even suspect—”

“That’s the beauty,” Phanius says, leaning in, voice calm and persuasive. “When you’re sent out, it’s for errands, trivial things. They expect obedience, not initiative. Which means no one will be looking for initiative. You’re invisible. I’m not.”

Aurin laughs, loud enough to draw a glance from a nearby table. She doesn’t lower her voice.

“Besides, don’t you want to see what all the fuss is about? A text they don’t dare to let us read? Imagine what could be inside!”

Nalise’s stomach knots. He’d expected to pay back his debt with something small: lecture notes, a trade of rations, even another forged signature. Not this. Not smuggling heresy under the overseers’ noses. Phanius doesn’t press further. Not yet. He studies Nalise, calm as ever, like a Dejarik master who’s already seen the board ten moves ahead.

“One errand,” he says softly. “One text. Then we’re even.”

Nalise can’t sleep. He rolls over and over in his cot, mind tangled into restless fragments of thought. Phanius’ words. Debts. Heresy. After a few hours, he gives up and abandons the bunk to the snoring Umbarans across the way from him.

The library is hushed, lamps guttering low so shadows pool across the flagstones. Nalise drifts through the aisles, fingers gliding across book and slate spines. He doesn’t think he is of the mind to read, but habit brings him there regardless, to the familiar scent of ink and the cool stone benches.

In the far corner, another Kaleesh sits. Arken. He's bent over a slate, lips moving soundlessly as he traces lines with his finger. His brow furrows in concentration, though his posture is loose, almost dreamy. He looks up as Nalise approaches, relief softening his angular features.

"Nalise," he says softly. "You weren't at recitation. Are you well?"

"A headache," Nalise says simply. Arken nods, easing against the bench.

"You missed nothing but Vett's temper. I faltered again... got too caught up in my own words. By the time I reached my point, I had lost it." He smiles wryly. "Dressing thought in too many robes, as Emmenas would say." Nalise sits across from him, folding his hands neatly.

"Clarity is survival. Without it, the words are nothing."

"Perhaps," Arken says, eyes glinting in the lamplight. "But sometimes the robe is beauty. Why must thought be broth when it could be spiced?" Nalise frowns slightly.

"Because Emmenas doesn't care for spice. Only truth."

Arken lets the matter fall away, though his gaze lingers on the slate in front of him. After a moment, his voice drops lower.

"Setigh's end was quick." Nalise's jaw tightens.

"He wasn't strong enough. His failure proved itself." Arken's lips press together, then curve into something like a wistful smile.

"Maybe so. Still, I'll miss him." His voice softens, almost fond. "No one could recite poetry like he did."

"His only indulgence," Nalise agrees. "Though it was quite a parlor trick. Words without weight." Arken shakes his head.

"Not without weight, brother. They carried us. Don't you remember? When we were younger, he recited before lights-out. Even the Umbarans hushed to listen." His smile flickers faintly. "He made us feel like we mattered." Nalise shifts, uncomfortable.

"It didn't save him."

"No," Arken admits, tone heavy. "But perhaps it should have."

The silence lingers, heavier now. Both of them know what it means: Setigh is gone. Their kind dwindled. Four Kaleesh remain: Nalise, Arken, and two others scattered in separate cohorts. Each season thins them further.

Arken's eyes lower back to his slate. His voice is almost a whisper.

“Our people are becoming ghosts here. Shadows stretched thin across stormlight. One by one, we vanish, until no one will remember we were ever here.” Nalise’s chest burns but he buries the pang quickly.

“Then don’t vanish,” he says simply, as though will alone is enough. Arken gives him a tired smile, faint and bitter.

“Easier said than lived.”

Nalise sits back, arms folded, and watches Arken return to his work, hands gliding over the slate. Phanius’ words over supper sting in Nalise’s mind. Arken won’t last the season. It had been said with that effortless Umbaran certainty, the kind Phanius always wields like a blade. Dismissive. Final. Nalise hates how easily it sticks. After a while, he exhales through his nose.

“Show me.” Arken blinks.

“Show you?”

“Your recitation. The one you botched today.”

For a moment, Arken looks as though he might refuse. But he straightens, rolling his shoulders like a man preparing for a duel. He clears his throat, and the words come in a cadence more suited for song than for philosophy:

“The mind is a lantern, but only when fed with oil. Starve it of clarity, and the flame gutters, leaving shadows to dance where light should reign...”

Nalise raises a hand, sharp and dismissive.

“Stop. You lost the point before you even began.” Arken frowns.

“I thought it strong—”

“It is indulgent,” Nalise interrupts, not unkindly but firm. He leans forward, tapping the slate with two fingers. “Clarity is the measure. ‘Clarity feeds thought. Without it, reason dies.’ That’s all you have to say.” Arken studies him, lips twitching at the corners.

“You say it so simply.”

“Simple is best,” Nalise answers. Arken chuckles softly, the sound bitter but fond.

“You’re too smart for a Kaleesh, you know that?” The words catch something in Nalise’s chest. He shifts slightly, brushing the comment aside.

“Don’t flatter me.”

“You think faster than I do,” Arken goes on, voice gentler. “Cleaner. If they didn’t know better, they’d say you were... one of them.”

“I’m not. And neither are you.” Arken tilts his head.

“Do you believe that? That we’re less than sentient?” Nalise meets his eyes.

“I think I am sentient. I think I can think. As does everyone. That’s not proof enough. Sentience isn’t something claimed by oneself, it is something recognized in you by others. They don’t recognize us, so we aren’t.” His tone is firm, unshaken, as though quoting a theorem. Arken frowns.

“Quite a cruel circle, no?”

“It’s the right one,” Nalise replies, almost sharply. “And if you want to last, you better learn to walk inside it without tripping.”

Arken falls silent, studying him. For a moment, his expression holds something like grief. Then he looks back to his slate, repeating the corrected line. Nalise gives a nod. The words ring as they should. Silence settles between them, broken only by the faint scrape of slate. After a time, Nalise leans back, voice quieter.

“What do you remember of Kalee?”

The question hangs there, surprising even him. He tells himself it’s practical, that he ought to know how another Kaleesh frames memory, how Arken might fold it into philosophy. But beneath the surface, there is something else there: a faint, unspoken hunger to anchor the fragments he carries. Arken looks up again, startled. His yellow eyes linger on Nalise, curious, then soften with something akin to understanding. Slowly, a smile tugs at his lips.

“More than I can tell you tonight,” he says. “But I’ll make you a trade. You keep tutoring me, and I’ll give you stories. Piece by piece.” Nalise’s mouth twitches into something close to a smile.

“Stories for clarity.”

“Clarity for stories,” Arken agrees, voice nearly a whisper. He lowers his gaze to the slate again, but the faint curve of his mouth lingers. The lamps sputter low, shadows stretching long across the stone. By the time he’s remembered he has to return to his cot, Nalise is lifting his tired head from the bench and gazing up at the morning sunlight.

The next few days pass with the same rhythm as always: lectures, recitations, the endless grind of symposiums where apprentices bare their thoughts like blades. And beneath that order, Phanius whispers. Plans. Favors. Steps laid out like a Dejarik board.

“I’ve spoken with the contact,” he murmurs one evening in the dormitory, tone low and deliberate. Aurin lounges on a nearby bunk, feigning disinterest with a game of tiles, though her silver eyes flick up now and then. “The book is waiting. All we need now is for you to be chosen

to leave the estate. You'll pick it up from him, bring it back, and it disappears into my hands." Nalise stiffens.

"It's not that simple. They watch everything I carry." Phanius' smirk is faint, unbothered.

"Then you'll find a way to hide it within what you carry. The right words, the right manners, that's all it takes. You're good with words, Nalise. Better than most." His gaze sharpens, cutting. "Just this one thing, then we're even."

Nalise carries on as though the conversation had never happened. Morning lectures, lunch in the hall, the endless rhythm of study that presses each day into the next. By the afternoon, he is seated in the symposium chamber, slate balanced on his knee, flanked by Aurin and Phanius as always. Across the aisle sits Sado, hunched over her notes, green lips moving silently as though rehearsing. Her dark eyes stay fixed on the text, but her restless fingers betray her. Aurin leans sideways, her whisper warm against Nalise's ear.

"Still muttering. Bet she gets it wrong again." Phanius' mouth barely moves when he speaks.

"She will, just wait. She always does. Emmenas' patience runs thin. Better to be invisible than a stumbling tongue." Aurin stifles a laugh.

"Failure tastes the same, either way."

Nalise's gaze lingers on Sado, her lips moving like a priest before an altar flame. She has the look of someone better suited for temple devotion than philosophy; a spirit for worship, not logic. Typical Mirialan. He shakes his head slightly.

"She should've been left to chant in the dark. At least there, she might've lasted."

The symposium hall stills as a tall figure enters. Apprentices bend their heads, overseers straighten like hounds at their master's leash.

Emmenas is a strange figure, even among Sith Lords. His skin bears the deep crimson of his lineage, but where most purebloods carry the tentacular whiskers that mark their species, his cheeks are smooth. Instead, he wears a sharply cropped beard, black streaked faintly with iron. It marks him in ways he does not acknowledge, a trait most Sith would take as a shameful touch of humanity.

"Today," he says, voice low and deliberate. "you will strip thought of ornament. Truth has no need of decoration."

Ilari, one of the Umbaran cohort, is summoned first. She steps into the circle with the natural grace of her kind, words flowing smooth as silk.

"Form, my lord, is the guardian of thought. Structure alone allows meaning. A vessel gives shape to water; so too form gives thought survival." Apprentices shift at her words, some

nodding. Overseers glance to one another with approval. Emmenas' golden eyes skim the crowd before landing on Nalise.

"Refute her."

Nalise rises, the weight of the chamber pressing down on him. His voice, when it comes, is calm, honed.

"Form does not precede thought; thought precedes form. A vessel without water is useless. Structure without reason is an empty frame. Clarity feeds thought; without it, reason dies." Ilari's lips tighten, silver eyes flashing.

"Without form, clarity dissipates. Water without a vessel is a puddle. A sea without shore drowns everything."

"A sea without a shore remains a sea," Nalise counters. "Shore proves its existence, but does not create it. To claim otherwise is to mistake witness for creator."

A murmur ripples across the tiers. Overseers shift as though to intervene, but Emmenas lifts one finger, arresting them at once. His gaze does not leave Nalise. Ilari falters, caught in her own weave. For a heartbeat, she seeks another path and finds none. Nalise presses forward, stripping the line to its essence until her silence admits defeat.

"Fascinating," Emmenas murmurs, boots whispering against the stone as he steps closer. His eyes gleam with curiosity and cruelty mixed together. "A Kaleesh who can reason beyond the rote. I did not expect such capacity. Perhaps your blood carries a strain of mimicry I had overlooked." His smile is slight and cold. "Meet me in my office after the evening bell," he says, tone flat, imperious, as if the order requires no context.

Without another word, he turns and sweeps from the hall.

The silence he leaves behind is heavier than before. Overseer Vett clears his throat, visibly unsettled, but says nothing. Apprentices shift uneasily in their seats, trading furtive glances. Aurin smirks faintly. Phanius wears his usual unreadable calm. Arken's eyes flicker once to Nalise, nervous, then away to his slate. Nalise bows low, chest tight. He can feel Emmenas' eyes lingering, as though he is already dissected and laid bare.

The apprentices file out of the symposium chamber in tight, murmuring knots, overseers barking stragglers back into order. Nalise lingers at the edge of the stream, his slate tucked under his arm, as Aurin's pale hand snags his sleeve.

"You were brutal," she says with a grin, silver eyes flashing. "Ilari's face – oh I thought she'd choke on her own tongue." She mimics the expression, mouth opening in mock horror, and

laughs bright enough to turn heads. Phanius adjusts his cuffs as he falls into step behind Nalise as they trail toward the refectory.

“It was clean work,” he says, tone mild. “Precise. Too precise.” Nalise raises a brow.

“Too precise?”

“That’s what I said,” Phanius says, smooth as oil. “You spoke like a Sith, not a Kaleesh. And Emmenas noticed. That’s why he’s summoned you.” Aurin leans in, elbow jabbing Nalise’s side.

“He’s right, for once. You made Ilari look like a child. Entertaining for us, dangerous for you. Emmenas doesn’t like surprises.”

“A Kaleesh who thinks beyond his station undermines Emmenas’ entire philosophy. If you prove him wrong, you don’t prove yourself right, you threaten his foundation. And he wants to protect it at all costs.” Aurin clicks her tongue.

“Phanius isn’t saying to stop being clever. He’s just saying that when you go to his office, don’t flaunt it. Bow. Smile. Let him keep the cage neat. You’re not here to teach him anything he doesn’t already know.” Nalise’s eyes narrow.

“So what, I should dull myself?” Phanius shrugs, the motion effortless.

“Not dull, just...placating. Give him the answers he wants to hear, not the ones that make him doubt himself.” For once, Aurin’s grin dims into something sharper.

“We’re warning you because we care about you, Nalise. Ilari can afford to be smart, she’s an Umbaran. You can’t. Emmenas will not let a Kaleesh climb higher than the rung he’s set for you.”

The office is colder than the symposium chamber, a still, suffocating cold that seems to leech the warmth from the air. The walls are paneled in basalt-black stone, etched with faint glyphs that shimmer in the lamplight like veins under skin. The brazier in the corner gives off little heat, its smoke rising in bitter, acrid coils that cling to Nalise’s throat. He steps inside and bows low, the heavy door shutting behind him with a thud that sounds far too final.

At the far side of the desk sits Darth Emmenas. Even seated, he carries the weight of the room, his crimson skin cast darker in the dim glow. Beside him, half-hidden in the shadow of the wall, stands a scribe. Grey robes, rigid posture, stylus already hovering over a slate.

“Sit.” The word is quiet, but it falls like iron. Nalise obeys, lowering himself onto the straight-backed chair opposite the desk. Its carved edges press against his shoulder blades, too small for comfort, too upright for rest.

Emmenas does not speak for a minute. His amber eyes simply move across Nalise's frame, the way one might study a piece of art. The silence stretches, filled only by the crackle of the brazier and the scratch of the scribe's hand. Finally, Emmenas leans forward, fingers steeped.

"You debated with clarity today." Nalise bows his head quickly, seizing on humility.

"You honor me, my lord. I spoke as I was taught." A flicker of amusement tugs at Emmenas' mouth.

"No. You spoke better than you were taught." His tone is sharp, analytical. "You reasoned with a structure I would not expect from your kind. The Kaleesh tongue is better suited for war cries and hunting chants than dialectics. And yet..." His eyes narrow. "You cut down that Umbaran with precision uncommon even among their kind."

The scribe's stylus hisses softly as it races across the slate. Nalise's fingers curl tightly in his lap. His chest burns with the effort of stillness.

"I... I listen, my lord. That is all." Emmenas tilts his head, gaze boring into him.

"It is not all, child. A Kaleesh does not simply listen his way into clarity. That is impossible." Nalise's mouth goes dry. He bows his head slowly.

"Perhaps... I am only echoing what I have been told, my lord. I spend my time among the Umbarans over my own kind. It is their clarity, not mine." Emmenas tilts his head. The faintest smile touches his lips, humorlessly.

"Mimicry."

"Yes, my lord. A shadow, not the flame."

The silence that follows is heavier than any reprimand. Emmenas' gaze lingers on him, too sharp, too knowing. He does not speak, but the weight of it says plainly: *You are lying. Poorly.* At last, he leans back, beard catching the light.

"Perhaps proximity accounts for some of it. But not all." His tone cools further. "There is more in you than should be there. Which makes you an anomaly. Something worth measuring."

Nalise swallows hard.

"You and your cohort race against time," Emmenas continues, voice smooth but merciless. "One misstep, and your neck is cut. But what remains when you are removed from the scholarly halls and brought back to your nature? What happens when the scholar fights not with riddles, but with blade?"

The stylus hisses. Emmenas leans forward a bit.

“Two weeks of the month, you will go to Darth Kovar of the Sphere of Laws and Justice. He will teach you what it means to be a Sith apprentice in body as well as mind. If you prove you can be shaped into more than mimicry, you will be set apart from your kind. If you fail...” His lips curl slightly. “Then you return to the race, and the knife finds you in time.”

The words freeze Nalise’s blood. He bends forward, forehead touching the desk.

“I am honored, my lord.” Emmenas’ expression does not change.

“Good. You are dismissed.”

Nalise rises, bows deeply, then retreats. The door seals shut behind him, the cold of the office still clinging to his bones. Alone in the corridor, he lets the breath hiss from between his teeth, triumph and terror twisted into one. He could be saved. A Kaleesh. He could be saved.

He doesn’t linger in the corridor. He walks quickly, to the courtyard outside the library, where the Umbaran twins linger, pale faces catching the glow of the lamps like two mirrored moons. Phanius is perched on the lip of a fountain, knees drawn up, sketching lazy lines into his slate. Aurin lounges beside him, tossing crumbs from her roll at a cluster of carrion crows. They look up as Nalise approaches.

“You’re alive,” Aurin says with a sharp grin. “Better than I wagered.” Phanius doesn’t smile, though his eyes gleam faintly.

“Well?”

Nalise folds his arms, the words heavy on his tongue.

“He’s... sending me to Dark Lord Kovar. Two weeks a month. Lightsaber training.” That makes them both sit straighter. Aurin blinks, her expression flickering between surprise and a strange, wary amusement.

“So he thinks you’re a proper Sith now?”

“I doubt it,” Nalise muses. “I mean, I’m still under him.”

“Of course you are,” Phanius says softly, slate tapping against his knee. His voice is cool, precise. “Emmenas doesn’t give gifts. If he’s setting you apart, it’s not because he thinks you’re capable. It’s because he wants to see what breaks first.” Aurin laughs, sharp and careless.

“Maybe he’s hoping you trip on your own blade. Imagine the paperwork.”

Nalise grimaces but doesn’t argue. The weight of the office still clings to him. Phanius slides the slate aside and leans forward, tone lowering.

“Whatever his game, it changes things. You’ll be leaving the estate now. To another Councilor’s, no less. That’s an opportunity.” His eyes sharpen. Nalise’s stomach knots.

“Phanius...”

“Come on, Nalise,” Phanius cuts smoothly. “The contact is ready. All that remains is timing. You’ll be escorted, yes, but not every eye will be on you every second. You’ll find a way to carry it back, forgotten among your things.” Aurin smirks, flicking another crumb at the birds.

“See? Your promotion is already paying off.” Nalise’s jaw tightens.

“If I’m caught—”

“You won’t be,” Phanius says with the unshakable certainty of an Umbaran. “You’re careful. And besides,” he leans back, folding his hands neatly in his lap, “we’ll be even after this.”

Nalise looks away, heart thudding. Sometimes he despises how reasonable Phanius can sound.

“You said you wanted purpose,” the boy murmurs, almost kindly. “This is your purpose. You’ll carry philosophy the overseers would never allow, and you’ll be free of me after.” Aurin snorts, half-laughing.

“As if anyone’s ever free of you.” Nalise presses his palms flat against his knees. He tells himself he should refuse. He tells himself the risk is too great. But, already, he can hear the certainty in Phanius’ voice, that sharp edge that makes refusal feel like failure.

“...Fine,” he says at last. “Then we’re done.” Phanius’ smile is slight but victorious. He picks his slate back up.

“Good.”

“Good?” Aurin echoes, leaning back on her hands. “It’s brilliant! Imagine the look on Vett’s face when he realizes contraband was sitting under his nose the whole time—”

“—and imagine how quick I’ll be executed if they find it,” Nalise mutters. Aurin opens her mouth to retort, but the sound of footsteps in the courtyard makes her snap her jaw shut. Arken emerges from the shadows of the colonnade, a slate tucked under one arm. His long face looks even more gaunt in the dusk, but his eyes soften when they find Nalise.

“There you are,” he says, voice low. “I was looking for you. Thought you might need... after the summons.” His gaze flickers toward the sealed door of Emmenas’ office and back again. “Are you alright?” The twins share a glance, something sharp and private and scathing. Aurin’s grin returns but thinner now, all edge.

“How thoughtful,” she says. “Checking in like a nursemaid.” Phanius shifts slightly on the fountain.

“We were having a private conversation.”

Nalise feels the old reflex rise: to keep the twins placated, to follow their rhythm. But Arken's stiff shoulders move something inside him. He exhales and gestures to the space beside him.

"Sit," he says simply. "We were just talking." Arken's eyes flicker with something like gratitude. He moves closer, ignoring the twin's silent rebuke, and lowers himself onto the bench opposite Nalise. Aurin clicks her tongue.

"Charming. Should I get some candles and spice?" Nalise shoots her a warning look.

"Shut up." She rolls her eyes but falls back against the stone lip, tossing her last crumb toward the crows. Phanius watches, face unreadable save for the faintest curve of disapproval at the corner of his mouth. For a moment, the silence presses close. The crows finish their scraps and flap off into the night, leaving only the fountain's trickle of water.

"So," Arken says, adjusting the slate on his knees. "Emmenas didn't skin you alive. That's... something." His eyes search Nalise's face with genuine concern.

"He gave me an assignment," Nalise says carefully. "I'm to train under Darth Kovar. Two weeks a month." Arken's brows rise.

"Kovar? That's..." he trails off, blinking. "That's a chance, Nalise. A real one."

"Or a trap," Aurin mutters under her breath. She tosses a pebble into the fountain, water plinking against stone. Phanius says nothing, but his expression speaks enough: cool and detached, like Arken's excitement is a child's mistake. Nalise ignores them.

"It's not freedom, Emmenas was clear about that. But yes... it's different." Arken's lips curve faintly, though the smile is tired.

"Different is more than most of us will ever get." He pauses, then tilts his head, voice lowering. "You'll have to fight, though. That doesn't worry you?"

"No," Nalise says simply. "I'm a child of Kalee. The blade is my birthright."

"That's one way to put it," Arken chuckles softly. "I'd have dressed it better. 'Steel sings and silence answers.' But then, you'd tell me I've lost the point again."

"Because you would have," Nalise says, though the corner of his mouth twitches upward. His eyes flicker from Arken to the twins, who both wait; Phanius with his stillness, Aurin with her restless tapping fingers.

"There's something you should know," Nalise says at last, his voice steady. Phanius sits up instantly, eyes sharp.

"Careful, Nalise." Nalise ignores him.

“Phanius has a plan. A text, from outside the estate. I’m bringing it back when I leave for Kovar’s.”

The air goes taut. Arken blinks, confusion flashing into disbelief.

“A forbidden text? You mean... contraband?” Aurin shoots to her feet, pacing a sharp line across the stones.

“Brilliant, Nalise! Why don’t you shout it to the overseers while you’re at it?” Phanius doesn’t move, but the anger in his silence is louder than Aurin’s fury. His jaw works once, teeth clenched. Nalise doesn’t flinch. He leans forward slightly, eyes steady on Phanius.

“I trust him. Setigh’s gone. We’re four now, and only barely. We need each other.” Aurin whirls back, throwing up her hands.

“Unbelievable! He’s sentimental now.” Phanius speaks, finally, voice lower.

“You don’t understand the danger, Nalise. Loose mouths kill faster than blades.” His gaze cuts to Arken like a scalpel. “And his is already prone to wandering.”

“You need him,” Nalise says, leaning forward. Phanius raises an eyebrow. “You and Aurin are searched more than anyone. Overseers expect it of you. Manipulators. Liars. Contraband is the first thing they look for in your cots.” His eyes flick to Arken. “No one checks us the same way. We’re Kaleesh. Barely worth the suspicion.” Aurin rounds on him, fire in her pale eyes.

“So your solution is to hand contraband to the weakest link?”

“No,” Nalise shoots back. “To hand it to the one no one sees. Arken vanishes into the margins of very hall, every roll call. You two would get caught before it reaches your pillows.” Arken’s mouth opens, shuts, then opens again. His voice is shaky but firm.

“I’ll do it.” His tone is taut with both fear and determination. “I’m not a fool. You think I’d risk dragging Nalise down with me?” Aurin snorts.

“Yes.” Phanius, after a long pause, lets out a slow breath and sits back against the fountain.

“If you fail—”

“I won’t,” Arken cuts in. Aurin groans, throwing up her hands.

“Stars, this is lunacy. But fine. Let the Kaleesh play custodian. If he cracks, at least we’ll have someone to point fingers at.” Nalise gives a small nod.

“Then it’s decided. Arken holds the book.”

The twins look anything but pleased, but they say nothing more. Aurin kicks a pebble into the fountain and flops back down with a groan. Nalise can't help but smirk at how irritated she seems. Whatever. Arken wrings his fingers around his slate.

"So, what is the book?" he ventures. Phanius takes a deep breath and stands, gathering his slate under his arm.

"I'm going to bed." His voice is clipped, final. Aurin pushes herself up with a huff, brushing dust from her robes.

"Enjoy your bedtime stories," she mutters, shooting Nalise a look halfway between warning and disdain. He sticks his tongue out at her as she falls into step behind her brother.

Silence settles over the courtyard again. Nalise exhales, running a hand through his dreadlocks.

"Truth is," he admits, "I don't know. Some text Emmenas doesn't want in our hands. That's reason enough." Arken studies him for a long moment, then nods slowly. His grip on the slate eases. Nalise shifts, almost awkward, before letting the question slip out.

"Can you tell me something though? About Kalee? Anything you remember?"

Arken blinks, caught off guard. Then, a faint, wistful smile creeps onto his face.

"What do you want to know?"

The first memory Arken shares is of firelight. Not the cold lamps of the estate, but a living flame that crackled against night air. He remembers sitting cross-legged in the dirt beside his mother, her hand on his shoulder as voices rose and fell around them. His clan had gathered in a wide circle, masks glinting in the light, tusks throwing shadows against painted hides stretched into tents.

"She told me stories," Arken murmurs, his gaze turned inward. "Not about Emmenas' logic, not about truth and clarity, but about hunts and warriors. About the first Kaleesh who walked the red plains with nothing but bone knives. I don't remember all her words, just the rhythm. Her voice was strong. Proud."

Nalise listens, chin tilted down, feeling the faint stirrings of something too distant to name. Arken's smile is soft, almost fragile.

"My father was quieter. He carved. Masks, mostly. He gave me one. Said I would grow into it." He huffs a faint laugh. "I wonder what became of it."

Nalise watches him carefully. Arken's fingers drift over the edge of his slate.

“When the slavers came, it was night. I remember the shouting. My mother shoved me behind her. My father had his blade in hand. Then...” His voice falters. He shrugs. “Then the estate. The rest is you, and the overseers.”

He looks up at Nalise and gives him a small, rueful grin. “Sometimes I wonder if I dreamed it all. But no dream lingers this long.”

Nalise is quiet for a long time. The fountain gurgles faintly between them, its rhythm the only sound. Finally, he exhales, low and sharp, like a confession dragged out of him.

“I envy you,” he says. Arken tilts his head, brow furrowing.

“Envy?”

“You remember,” Nalise’s voice tightens. “Not perfectly, but... enough. Faces. Words. Firelight. I don’t even remember my parents’ voices. I don’t know what my clan looked like, what they believed. Just... salt air and rooftops. Shadows of things I can’t grasp.” His jaw clenches. “It feels like something was carved out of me before I had a chance to hold it.” Arken studies him, eyes steady, kind in a way that makes Nalise’s chest ache.

“You were younger than me. That’s not your fault.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Nalise mutters. “It still feels like a hollow. Like there should be something there, but there isn’t.”

For a moment, Arken doesn’t reply. Then he sets his slate aside, leaning forward on his knees. His voice is quiet, deliberate.

“Well, I’ve no problem lending you mine. My memories, that is. Until you can build your own.” Nalise looks at him, startled by the earnestness in his tone. For a heartbeat, something raw flickers across his face before he buries it again, straightening in his seat.

“You’d better remember well, then,” he says, voice almost teasing. “If I’m to live on your scraps, I’ll need them sharp.” Arken chuckles faintly.

“I’ll polish them off for you, then, like silver on my shelf.”

A pause. Nalise exhales through his nose and leans forward, palms pressed to his knees.

“Come on,” he says. “If you’re going to last, you’ll need to be sharper at the next symposium.” Arken tilts his head, surprised.

“You mean tonight?” Nalise smirks faintly.

“Why waste the hours? Recite what you’ve got, and I’ll tell you where you stumble. We’ll make it clean enough that Vett will hail you the next Emmenas.”

For the first time in a while, Arken laughs, quiet but genuine. He slides his slate between them, eyes bright with something akin to gratitude.

“Then I’ll try not to waste your time, tutor.”

Nalise shakes his head, but there’s a rare warmth in his expression as he gestures for him to begin. The fountain’s trickle fades beneath Arken’s voice, words winding once more into the dim-lit library, this time clearer, sharper, guided by Nalise’s hand.

The training hall reeks of sweat and ozone, a haze of breath and effort clinging to its stone arches. The line of apprentices stand with sabers in hands, visors gleaming, armor dented from countless drills. Nalise is pushed into their midst, the practice blade humming nervously in his grip.

“Pair him,” Kovar says, voice low and resonant. A trainee steps forward, a boy with a scar splitting his cheek. He doesn’t waste time. The moment Nalise raises his blade, the boy slams into him, every strike fast, decisive. Nalise staggers, scrambling to catch the rhythm. He manages to block one blow, then freezes when the opening presents itself: a simple counter to the ribs. His hesitation costs him. The return strike catches him in the shoulder, sends him sprawling to the floor.

“Again.” Kovar doesn’t glance up from his folded arms.

Another round. Then another. Each time he falls quicker than the last. The circle of trainees watch with detached interest, some sneering, some whispering bets. Nalise tries to learn, to hold his guard tighter, to move his feet, but every time the moment comes to strike back, his body balks. The thought of landing a blow, of hurting someone, freezes him cold. And each time, the result is the same: pain, bruises, the floor rushing up to meet him.

At last, after his fifth fall, as he lay flat on the mat, chest heaving, vision blurred from sweat, Kovar steps forward. His boots strike against the stone with a final clarity. He looks down at Nalise with judgement in his mismatched eyes.

“Your hesitation will kill you, philosopher.”

Nalise forces himself upright, swaying, every muscle screaming. He clutches the saber, knuckles white, and says nothing. A smile splits Kovar’s lips.

“Good,” he says, turning away. “Better you bleed here than die nameless.”

The chamber empties in uneven waves, boots scuffing and laughter echoing faintly as the Mandalorian trainees drift out. Nalise sits cross-legged on the mat, trying to breath through the dull ache in his ribs. His saber hilt presses cool against his thigh. He lets it fall.

From the doorway, two boys linger in low conversation. One leaves with a shake of his head, the other peels away and crosses the floor with an easy, rolling stride. His armor is battered, paint scuffed, messy blond hair damp with sweat. He is broad-shouldered in a way that makes the training hall seem smaller around him. His taupe eyes, when they fix on Nalise, are sharp but not unkind.

“You fight like a scholar,” he says. His voice is rough, low, almost amused. “Head full of ideas, hands too careful to land a blow.” Nalise blinks, trying to marshal a reply. His mouth goes dry.

“I—” He coughs, wincing at the pain in his ribs. “I’ve never fought before.” The boy smirks, tilting his head.

“Really? Almost couldn’t tell.” He extends a gloved hand. “Coyate. Most here call me Coy.”

Nalise stares at it a second too long, thoughts tangling. Coy’s smile is crooked, easy, and the curve of it makes Nalise’s chest feel unsteady. He scrambles to his feet, nearly stumbling, and takes the hand.

“Nalise,” he blurts, too quickly. He takes a breath. “I don’t have a nickname.”

Coy’s grip is firm, steady, heat radiating against Nalise’s palm. He looks him over, not with contempt, but like he is measuring something unseen.

“We drill outside lessons. Proper practices, not just Kovar’s theatrics. South yard, after nightfall. Come, if you don’t want to stay useless.” Nalise opens his mouth, then closes it again. He should say something sharp, something clever, but all that comes out is a stammer.

“Yes. I’ll be there.” Coy gives the barest chuckle, releasing his hand.

“Good.” He turns, striding away without looking back, like the matter is settled. Nalise stands frozen, staring at the door long after it shuts. His palm tingles where Coy’s had been. His chest feels strange. Tight, not from the bruises.

Attractive. The word bubbles up, alien and unsettling. He doesn’t know what to do with it. Doesn’t know what to do with the way Coy’s smile sticks in his mind, brighter than the pain of losing, sharper than the sting of humiliation. He rubs his hand against his tunic, as though he can chase the warmth off his skin, but it lingers anyway.

The south yard is lit by braziers sunk into the stone, flames snapping in the night air. Beyond the estate walls, Kaas City’s towers loom like black spears against the storm-churned sky. The clang of practice weapons rings across the open yard, sharp over the low hum of chatter.

Nalise hesitates in the archway, watching the group of trainees in various states of sparring. They move with an ease he can't fathom, like the rhythm of fighting is as natural as breathing.

Coyate spots him first. He barks something in Mando'a, and a couple heads turn. Laughter follows, low and rough.

"The philosopher came," one of the boys jeers, twirling his practice blade. "Careful, Coy, he'll lecture you to death before he swings."

"Maybe he'll write us a poem," another adds, earning more snickers. Nalise's jaw tightens, heat curling into his cheeks. He keeps his eyes down, fingers twitching toward the training saber at his belt. Coy steps forward, brushing the comments aside with a grin.

"You be careful, too. He might bore you into dropping your guard. That's a kill in a real fight." The laughter turns on itself, the edge softening. Nalise risks a glance up; Coy's smile is easy, disarming, as though he'd deflected the mockery without effort. He waves him over.

"Come on. If you just stand there, they'll come up with more jokes."

Nalise crosses the yard, every step heavy, self-conscious under the watching eyes. Coy presses a practice staff into his hands. The weight of it is strange: solid, but unwieldy.

"First things first," Coy says, circling him once, sharp eyes scanning his posture. "Your stance. You stand like you're presenting – back straight, head up. Good for words, bad for blades." He steps closer, boots nudging Nalise's foot outward. His hand brushes Nalise's shoulder, pressing it down. The contact is brief but makes Nalise's pulse stutter.

"Bend your knees. Lower your center. Feel the ground under you. That ground, that's yours. You don't own words here, you own space."

Nalise tries to adjust, the staff wobbling in his grip. Coy's hands catch his, rough and steady, guiding his fingers into the right hold.

"Better," he mutters. His breath stirs the hair at Nalise's temple before he steps back. "Now, try not to look like the staff weighs more than you do." Nalise swallows, tightening his grip.

"I... it doesn't." Coy smirks.

"I see." He taps his own staff against Nalise's with a clack, stance sliding effortlessly into readiness. "When you're ready, swing. No one's keeping score here but you."

The nights in the south yard become a rhythm. Dinner ends, the trainees drift to the braziers, and Nalise finds himself pulled along in their current. Always towards Coy.

At first, it's humiliating. His staff trembles in his hands, his arms ache after only a few strikes, and more than once Coy has to catch him by the wrist to stop the weapon from flying loose. The others laugh, sometimes cruel, sometimes good-natured, but Coy never does. His corrections are steady, patient, cutting through Nalise's self-consciousness like a whetstone to dull metal.

"Lower. You'll topple over standing on your tippy toes. Do Kaleesh have tippy toes?"
"Breathe with the swing. Don't fight the weight, flow with it."
"Eyes up. You can't kill what you won't look at."

The days are bruises. His shins ache from strikes, his ribs throb where the staff catches him wrong. But each night, he comes back. Each night, Coy meets him at the braziers with that half-smile, and each night something shifts: a swing truer, a block that doesn't shudder through his arms, a step that flows instead of stumbles. By the end of the first week, Nalise can hold his own for a few exchanges before Coy knocks the staff from his grip. By the second, he lasts full rounds. He still loses, but slower. Cleaner. Each defeat a stone added to a foundation. The other trainees stop laughing so much. Some offer him tips, though always in Coy's shadow, as if his approval matters more than theirs.

Three days before he is set to return to Emmenas' estate, Nalise steps out into the rain-slicked courtyard at dawn, satchel slung across his shoulder. A cloaked figure waits at the edge of the estate's steps, half-hidden by the stone arch. He doesn't look at him, only mutters as Nalise passes.

"For Phanius. Keep it hidden."

Something slides into the satchel: an oilskin-wrapped bundle. Nalise's pulse spikes. He forces himself to keep walking, every instinct screaming to look back and check. By the time he reaches the far gate, the figure is gone, swallowed by Kaas City's rain. The weight is small but impossible to ignore. A book. The book. He presses the satchel close to his side and carries on, trying not to show the tremor in his steps.

That night, he doesn't go to the south yard. The rain hammers against the shutters of his narrow room, and Nalise sits hunched on the edge of the bed, oilskin parcel spread across his knees. His fingers work the bindings loose with nervous care until the cover reveals itself: new leather with glowing characters across the cover. *On the Genealogy of Power*, authored by a Darth Macarius.

The name means nothing to him. A ghost, perhaps, long erased from the Academy's record. Still, the sight of it tightens something in his chest. His thumb traces the title as though it might sear meaning into his skin. He cracks the cover, the smell of ink filling the room, but before he can begin the first line, a knock rasps sharp against the doorframe. Coy leans there, damp from the storm, hair sticking in pale strands to his brow. His grin is smaller than usual.

“You skipped,” he says simply. “Thought you’d gone and quit already.” Nalise snaps the book shut, fumbling to shove it under the blanket at his side. His heart pounds.

“I – uh – was tired.” Coy raises an eyebrow, unconvinced, but doesn’t push. Instead, he steps inside and drops heavily onto the cot, the frame groaning under his weight.

“You looked like you were about to shed your skin when I walked in. What’s that about?” Nalise hesitates, then exhales.

“I was reading.” Coy tilts his head.

“You really do like all that word-work, huh?”

“It’s not just word-work,” Nalise answers before he can stop himself. Coy smirks.

“No?” Nalise hesitates, fingers curling tight against the blanket.

“It’s a structure. Like sparring, but with ideas. You test them against each other until one breaks, or until both bend and change. It’s a fight without blood.” Coy tilts his head, watching Nalise, lips quirking.

“Never thought of it like that. Always figured it was just... talking in circles ‘til everyone forgot the question.”

“Sometimes it is,” Nalise admits, a faint smile pulling at his mouth. “But when it isn’t, it changes the way you see everything. Yourself. Your enemy. Even the ground you stand on.”

For a moment, Coy says nothing, just studying Nalise, rain tapping at the walls around them. Finally, he huffs a laugh.

“Never cared for that kind of thing. But... the way you put it, I could almost believe it matters.” His mouth quirks a grin. “You think you’d be a good teacher?”

The words land heavier than they should. Nalise swallows, caught between relief and something warmer, stranger. He nods once, too quickly.

“I tutor the others sometimes, when they struggle.” Coy’s grin deepens, easy and sure.

“Good. Don’t bore me, scholar. That’d be worse than losing to you in the yard.”

On the last night, the storm clouds over Kaas City open, rain spattering across the yard and hissing against the braziers. Nalise stands soaked to the bone, breath ragged, staff quivering in his grip. Coy swings twice, and Nalise parries them both. The third blow disarms him as always, but when the staff clatters to the stones, Coy grins.

“You’re not useless anymore,” he says, teeth flashing in the lamplight. The rain drips across Coy’s bleached hair as he leans down and picks up the staff. He holds it out to Nalise.

“Take it with you when you go back to your conservatory. Practice when you can. I expect you sharper next time.”

Nalise takes the staff, fingers curling around its weight like it is more than wood.

“Thanks,” he says, voice quieter than he means. Coy claps him on the shoulder, hard enough to sting.

“Don’t thank me. Just don’t waste it.”

And just like that, Nalise is gone, carried back toward Emmenas’ estate with rain still clinging to his cloak and the book heavy in his satchel.

The shuttle’s ramp groans open into the storm, and Nalise steps down, staff across his shoulders, satchel tugging at his side. The courtyard torches hiss in the rain, overseers already waiting.

“Your things,” one barks. Nalise holds out the staff first. The overseer scowls, hefting it. “This isn’t from the armory.”

“A training staff,” Nalise says carefully. “To practice with.” The man turns it over, jaw tightening.

“Weapons aren’t permitted beyond sanctioned drills. You’ll surrender it to the quartermaster.”

“No,” Nalise answers before he can stop himself. “Excuse me, sir. But I am to practice with it.” The words hang like a blade over his neck.

It’s enough to summon trouble. Another overseer slips inside, returning moments later with Darth Emmenas himself. The hall stills as he crosses the stone, robes trailing wet behind him.

“What is this interruption?” His voice is low, sharp. The overseer snaps to attention.

“The Kaleesh returned with a weapon, my lord. Against regulation.”

Emmenas’ yellow gaze shifts to Nalise, then to the wooden staff in the overseers’ hands. A pause, the weight of judgement settles heavy. At last, he raises his eyebrows.

“I sent him to Kovar for martial training, Atrih. Did you think he would return with nothing but bruises?” He gestures, dismissively. “Return it. If the boy is to learn to be useful, he’ll need to practice.”

The overseer hesitates, then thrusts the staff back into Nalise’s grip with thinly veiled irritation.

“As you command, my lord.”

Emmenas doesn't spare Nalise another glance. He turns on his heel and sweeps back to his office, muttering something to himself. The overseers wave him through, their eyes still flickering toward the wood in his hands. It isn't until after the doors seal behind him, muffling the storm outside, that Nalise allows his shoulders to ease. The book presses hard against his ribs inside the satchel, unremarked. In all the noise over the staff, it had slipped past the gate like a shadow.

He doesn't go to his bunk. He goes to Arken. The boy is, as always, tucked into his corner of the library, slate balanced across his knees, lips moving faintly as though he can coax clarity from air. He looks up at Nalise's shadow, eyes widening when he sees the satchel pressed to his chest.

"Come," Nalise says. Arken hesitates, confusion flickering across his face.

"Now?"

"Now."

The twins are in the mess hall, Aurin flicking crumbs at Phanius' sleeve while her brother pretends to be absorbed in a book. Both their eyes go first to the staff on Nalise's shoulder, then to the satchel at his side.

"Well, well," Phanius drawls, lips quirking faintly. "You brought back souvenirs." Aurin arches her brow.

"Nice stick."

"It's nothing," Nalise mutters. "Follow me." Their expressions shift: curiosity, then realization. Aurin glances at her brother, then rises without another word. Phanius follows, slower, adjusting his cloak casually.

Nalise leads them to the empty colonnade near the library, the rain outside thrumming faint against the stone. The four of them cluster together beneath the archways. Nalise kneels and undoes the clasp on his satchel. The book's cover is clean and new, leather bright and unscathed. The title burns across it: *On the Genealogy of Power*. Phanius' sharp features flicker with satisfaction. Aurin lets out a low whistle, shaking her head.

"You actually did it," she murmurs. Nalise sets it down between them.

"I said I would."

They lay the book open across Arken's knees, pages brittle but alive with forbidden ink. They lean close over the text, the lamplight catching on the edges like fire. Phanius reads aloud softly, as they all lean over Arken's shoulders.

"The self-preserving drive, or *conatus*, is characteristic of all beings. Sapient beings are unique, however, in the acuity with which they understand that they will someday die."

A beat of silence. Nalise bites his lip.

“That’s incomplete. Sentience is not just the awareness of death, it is recognition. If I believe I am sentient, that belief is meaningless until another recognizes it in me. Thought without recognition is no more than a shadow on the wall. True sentience can only exist between equals.” Phanius’ mouth curves, amused.

“Why should recognition matter at all? A beast flees the hunter without needing witness to confirm its fear. Macarius is pointing to the only truth that matters: we all die, and the ones who know it are sentient. If you think yourself sentient, then you are. No audience required.”

“You confuse solitude with proof. To claim sentience without recognition is to speak into the void. It means nothing if no one hears you. Recognition is what binds thought to reality.” Aurin glances between them.

“But is death not the truest recognition of all?” she asks, pale eyes glinting. “The end doesn’t care who acknowledges it.”

“You draw on a fallacy,” Nalise answers flatly. “If one dies unrecognized, they vanish. If they are remembered, they endure.”

“Then, by that rule, we have always been nothing,” Arken says, shifting on his knees. “No one here recognizes us, no one here will remember us. Doesn’t that trouble you?”

“Sentience is not self-claimed, Arken.” His voice is sharp suddenly. “Wishing otherwise doesn’t make it true.” Phanius’ eyes glint, the smile gone now, replaced with something keener.

“Or perhaps Macarius is right. Recognition is a crutch. It doesn’t matter if Emmenas or the overseers name us sentient. If we know we will die, we already are. Recognition is irrelevant. It is noise. The only thing that defines us is the clarity with which we see our own ending.”

“You may think yourself sentient, but until others recognize it, you are only whispering to yourself. Macarius mistakes solitude for absolutism.” Aurin presses her lips, then nods faintly toward Phanius.

“Maybe,” she says. “Or maybe he’s uncovering what Emmenas wants hidden: that the whole framework of recognition is just control dressed up as natural law.” Nalise’s jaw tightens. He leans down and closes the book.

“No. Emmenas built a framework that can’t be so easily broken. Recognition is not noise, it is the only permanence we have. Macarius is dangerous because he pretends silence is acknowledgement.” Phanius leans back, a satisfied grin spread across his thin lips.

“Or perhaps it’s dangerous because he’s right.”

That night, lanterns gutter low in the dormitories, voices muffled to murmurs. Rows of cots line the walls, blankets folded tight, everything ordered and sparse as always. The air carries the smell of iron and sweat.

Nalise lays rigid on his bunk, staring at the metal above. Phanius' words cling like burns. Recognition is irrelevant. The phrase gnaws at him until he finally swings his legs down and slips soundlessly into the aisle.

Arken's bunk is three rows over, near the far corner. The boy is propped up on one elbow, a book balanced loosely in his hand. He hasn't yet fallen asleep. Good. His eyes flick up at the sound of Nalise's steps.

"You're restless," he murmurs, voice kept low enough to not stir the others. Nalise hesitates, then nods toward the bunk.

"I need to see it again. Just for a few hours." Arken's brow furrows.

"It unsettled you."

"It unsettled everyone," Nalise says quickly. Too quickly. "I only want to read for myself. To make the words... clear."

For a long moment, Arken studies him. Then he sits up and hands the book across. His voice softens, almost reluctantly.

"Nalise... do you ever think maybe we don't need their recognition? That if you know you're sentient – truly know – that that's enough?" Nalise's fingers tighten on the cover.

"It can't be enough. Recognition is permanence. Without it, we're headless birds." Arken smiles faintly, but not with mockery. It is gentle, tinged with something like pity.

"You sound like you're repeating lessons. Like they've drilled it into you so deep you can't hear yourself anymore. But I know I'm sentient. I don't need anyone else to tell me. Not Emmenas, not Phanius. Not even you."

Nalise looks away, throat working. He wants to argue, to press back with all the words he'd been taught, but nothing comes. He holds the book as though it might steady him.

"You think I've been... brainwashed," he says at last, the word tasting bitter.

"I think," Arken says softly, "you've been made to believe doubt is weakness. But it isn't. Sometimes, it's the only way to tell you're still your own."

The barrack lamps flicker, signaling lights-out. Nalise clutches the book to his chest, nodding stiffly.

"I'll bring it back at dawn." Arken shrugs, settling back onto his cot.

“Keep it if you need to. I hope you find what you’re looking for in it.”

Nalise says nothing. He retreats to his bunk with the book hidden against his ribs, the silence around him heavy and pressing. He lays in the dark long after the lamps die, staring at the page that glows faintly in his mind. *Sentience needs no witness but death itself.*

The courtyard is bright with the morning sun, heat already radiating from the stone. The four of them spill out after lecture, the rest of the apprentices dispersing to their own corners. The fountain at the center trickles faintly. Phanius and Aurin sit on the ledge of it, close enough for their reflections to warp together in the rippling water. Arken stretches out beside them, legs splayed, idly tossing pebbles into the basin.

Nalise doesn’t sit. He stands off to the side, practice staff in hand, running through the drills Coy showed him. His footwork scrapes lightly on the paving stones, staff snapping sharp arcs in the air.

“You’re going to wear yourself out before lunch,” Aurin calls, shielding her eyes from the sun.

“I’m fine,” Nalise replies without breaking rhythm. Phanius smirks.

“Is this your way of avoiding questions?” Nalise doesn’t break stride.

“Distracting myself has never stopped you before.” The stick hisses in another quick parry. Aurin smirks at that, elbowing her brother.

“He’s right. And speaking of questions, you haven’t told us about Kovar’s estate yet.” That makes Nalise falter, the point of his staff dipping a fraction lower.

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“Nothing?” Phanius echoes, feigning disbelief. “A councilor who fought in the Mandalorian wars, who’s estate dates to the earliest cities on Kaas, and nothing to tell?” Aurin sits up, leaning forward on her elbows.

“He’s dodging the question. Which means there’s something.”

Nalise exhales through his nose, trying to bury himself in the rhythm of the drill again.

“He made me spar. That’s all. I lost. Over and over.” Arken tilts his head.

“And?”

“And...” Nalise hesitates. “I made a friend. Another trainee.”

“A lover!” Aurin chimes up, silver eyes shining with something Nalise can’t name. He stumbles.

“I didn’t—” he starts, but the staff falls from his grip, betraying him.

“Oh, he definitely did,” Arken says, eyes suddenly alight. “Who is it?”

Nalise exhales, resigned, and lowers the staff.

“Coyate. He trains there. He... helped me. After drills.”

“Helped,” Phanius echoes, amusement curling in his voice. “That’s a soft word for someone you can’t stop thinking about.”

“I don’t—” Aurin leans forward, grin spreading.

“You do! Look at you! We mention him and suddenly you’re tripping over your own stick.”

Heat creeps up Nalise’s neck. He busies himself with adjusting his stance, but his voice cracks traitorously low.

“He’s just... different. He didn’t laugh at me like the others.”

Arken’s smile softens, though still teasing.

“That’s not just ‘different,’ Nalise. That’s someone who matters to you.” Aurin claps her hand together lightly.

“Oh, stars, he’s blushing. Nalise the philosopher, undone by a Mandalorian with nice shoulders.” Phanius chuckles, rare and genuine.

“The mighty scholar felled by sins of the flesh. I almost respect it.”

Nalise turns on them, staff braced like a shield.

“You’re insufferable, all of you.” But his protest lacks venom. His lips tug against his will, a half-smile breaking through. Aurin leans back, satisfied.

“Coyate, huh? We’ll remember the name.”

A pause. For a minute, the only sound is the splash of the fountain and the quiet scrape of Arken’s pebble against stone. Then Phanius clears his throat, slipping a hand into his satchel.

“Speaking of names worth remembering...” He draws out the book, the leather cover glinting faintly in the sun. “Our friend here.” Arken straightens.

“You brought it?” Phanius nods, setting it carefully across his lap.

“It’s not the sort of thing you leave gathering dust. Besides...” his smile quirks. “It deserves to be tested aloud.” Nalise stiffens, pulse tightening at the sight of the cover. He should look away, should pretend it doesn’t claw at him the way it does, but he can’t. Phanius opens with deliberate care.

“Listen: ‘The Master is ultimately dissatisfied, for his recognition is no longer recognition by an equal but an inferior. The Slave meanwhile is filled with resentment, begrudgingly serving the Master until it realizes that the Master depends on it for recognition (and often, survival). This realization, this consciousness on the part of the Slave, makes the Master's downfall inevitable.’” Aurin whistles low.

“Sounds merciful. Sith don’t write mercy.”

“Not mercy,” Arken says, reaching to take the book from Phanius’ hands. He skims the page with furrowed brow. “Practicality. If one side rots, the whole structure collapses. Macarius isn’t weeping for slaves, he’s warning tyrants.”

Nalise falters, staff lowering inch by inch. His throat feels dry. Arken notices, smirks, and offers the book across the stones.

“Go on. You want to wrestle with it.”

Nalise hesitates, then comes closer and takes it. The leather is warm, heavier than it should be. He flips until he finds the line burned into his mind. *Sapient beings are unique, however, in the acuity with which they understand that they will someday die.* The words scrape raw. He closes it.

“It’s nonsense.”

“Is it?” Arken’s tone is gentle. Nalise shakes his head.

“If I could just... declare myself sentient, then why have I spent years clawing for proof? Why would Emmenas teach us recognition is everything? It doesn’t fit.”

“That’s the point,” Phanius says evenly. “They want you to believe you need their permission.”

“That’s wishful thinking,” Nalise insists, voice taut. “It doesn’t mean anything.” Aurin’s gaze lingers on him, harsh and gutting.

“Sounds to me like it means everything. Sounds to me like it scares you.”

Silence pools between them. The fountain bubbles. The sunlight glints. Arken reaches out, gently easing the book from Nalise’s grip. He sets it across his knees, running a finger along its edge as though tracing the theorems itself.

“It doesn’t matter if you believe it,” he says. “Just think about it, brother.”

The air at Kovar’s estate is heavier than at Emmenas’, thick with the resin-scent of the practice yard and the low thunder of clashing blades. Nalise falls back into its rhythm almost

without thinking: the sound of boots on packed dirt, the rasp of training sabers locking, Coy's steady instructions cutting through the haze.

He had grown in the weeks between visits. His stances hold firmer, his breath steadier; where once he had faltered after only a few exchanges, he now presses on, exertion hot on his cheeks but his grip unbroken. Coy's blade clips his shoulder and Nalise hisses, but instead of stumbling back, he flows into the next block, teeth gritted, eyes locked forward. The match ends with Coy disarming him with a smooth twist of the wrist, the saber clattering to the dust. Nalise bends to retrieve it, chest heaving.

"You've been practicing," Coy says, voice even but with a glint in his eyes. Nalise massages his temple with his fingers.

"I... tried. Between lectures."

"Tried, he says," one of the other trainees mutters with a grin. "You lasted twice as long this time." Nalise flushes but doesn't answer. He had lasted longer. But even now, with Coy standing before him, open for a strike, he had faltered. The final blow had never come. His body refused to cross that last threshold, the one that separated defense from harm. Coy doesn't call it out. He only claps Nalise lightly on the shoulder, a brief weight that speaks more than words.

"Good work. Keep at it."

That night, the estate is hushed, shadows stretching long against the training yard. The others have long since retired. Nalise lingers outside, seated on a low wall, staff across his knees. He startles when Coy appears, carrying no weapon or armor, only a half-smile.

"Don't think I forgot," he says, dropping onto the wall beside Nalise. He blinks.

"Forgot what?" Coy tips his head toward him.

"You promised to teach me philosophy, remember?" Nalise hesitates.

"Philosophy isn't like drills. It doesn't... tell you what to do." Coy grins faintly.

"Good. I already have enough people telling me what to do." He spreads a hand. "Go on. Give me the basics. And forgive me if I make you explain it over again." Nalise takes a deep breath. He'll need to bring books next time he comes.

"Emmenas teaches us that sentience isn't equal," he begins. "It is stratified. Layered. Humans are your baseline, they hold the floorplan of thought. Others rise above it in certain ways: Pureblood Sith with their will, Arkanian logic, Umbaran cunning. And others..." he hesitates, "like Kaleesh, are bound to myth and mimicry. Brilliant at copying forms, not at authorship."

Coy leans on his elbow, watching him with a faint smile.

“Okay, so basically, you’re saying there’s a chart somewhere with humans at the bottom and Sith patting themselves on the back at the top?” Nalise’s jaw tightens.

“Not quite. It’s a structure, to keep communication and relationships clean. If you mistake training for true thought, you confuse instrument with author. That’s what he warns against.” Coy lets out a low whistle, shaking his head.

“Sounds to me like a tidy way to call half the galaxy instruments.”

“That’s what they are,” Nalise says, voice almost too quick. “What I am.” His gaze drops to his hands. “I can perform the gestures, mimic the signs, but can’t originate. Not independently.”

For a beat, Coy is silent. Then he laughs, warm and disbelieving.

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Nalise’s head snaps up, eyes narrowing.

“What?” Coy grins wider, unfazed.

“If anyone here is ‘sentient’ it’s you! You sit here breaking your skull open over words, trying to make sense of them. Me? I swing sticks until my arms give out. You think more in an hour than I do in a week.”

Nalise swallows, familiar doctrines clashing uneasily with the quiet conviction in Coy’s tone. He wants to argue, but the words don’t come. Instead, he sits rigid, letting the silence stretch, the lantern flickering between them.

“I’m content to think what’s already been thought. I can study, memorize, repeat. But I couldn’t write. Not truly. I lack the spark. That’s the mark of sentience: the ability to generate, not just recite. Emmenas is clear on that.”

Coy tilts his head, studying him. Then, slowly, his eyes soften.

“So prove it.” Nalise frowns.

“Prove what?”

“Write your own,” Coy says simply. “Lay it out the way those old philosophers do. If it’s nonsense, fine, I’ll tell you. Or your masters at Emmenas’ compound will. But if it makes sense?” His grin widens, boyish and sharp at once. “Then you’re sentient after all, aren’t you?”

Nalise’s breath catches. The challenge feels at once childish and impossibly heavy, like a weight dropped in his lap.

“I...” he falters, then closes his mouth, fingers curling on his knee. His gaze slips away, the lanternlight catching hard angles in his face. Coy nudges him, lighter this time, almost coaxing.

“Come on. Write something. Worst case, you waste an evening. Best case...” His grin softens into something steadier. “you find out your master is wrong.”

The south yard is alive the next night with clashing staffs and sharp voices. Dust curls in the heat as pairs break off in loose, harsh rhythms. Nalise faces a girl, Xica, short and broad-shouldered, a fighter’s grin stretched across her scarred face. She spins her staff lazily, as though daring him to try. Coy leans against a pillar nearby, arms folded, watching with a few others clustered around him.

They circle. She lunges, leaving her side open: obvious and deliberate. Nalise slides into the space and taps her, feather-light. Her grin snaps into a snarl. She rains blows against his guard, wood cracking hard against wood, every strike rattling his bones. Again, she leaves herself open. Again, he only touches her shoulder, a careful sting.

“Are you shitting me?” she barks, voice cutting across the courtyard. She slams his staff out of his grip, sending it clattering across the stone, then shoves him hard in the chest.

“You’re Kaleesh. A war-blood, same as me. So fucking fight like it.”

The staff is shoved back into his hands. Trainees are watching now, smirks and murmurs circling. Coy tilts his head, eyes sharp. Nalise’s jaw sets. He raises the staff again. She lunges, reckless and wide, daring him.

“Hit me, Kalee!”

His body moves without thinking. The staff cracks across her jaw with a brutal snap. She reels back, stumbling, blood bright against her lip. A hush falls over the yard. The staff is suddenly heavy in Nalise’s hand in a way it wasn’t before. Blood glints off the edge of it.

Coy claps once, sharp and loud. Others follow, a ripple of chuckles and voices taking up the new name: Kalee. Xica spits blood into the dirt, wipes her mouth with the back of her hand, and grins though the split lip.

“About time.” She cuffs his shoulder hard enough to make him stumble, then turns away as though the matter is settled.

That night in the mess hall, Coy slides onto the bench beside him before Nalise can find his usual place along the edge. Others press in close, passing bread down the line, nudging him when he doesn’t reach fast enough. Xica raises her cup from across the bench and gives him a wink before drinking. Coy leans in, voice pitched low so only Nalise can hear.

“They just wanted to know if you’d fight back. You did.” He grins faintly, elbow brushing Nalise’s. “You belong here now.”

After dinner, the courtyard is alive again, staffs and fists clattering in the warm night air. A handful of trainees pair off in the center of the yard, the rest lounge sprawled on the flagstones, watching, talking, passing skins of watered wine from hand to hand. Nalise sits against a pillar, Coy to his right. The boy’s head rests on Nalise’s shoulder.

The war creeps into conversation as it always does. A broad-shouldered human boy, Seev, shakes his head as he watches the fighters circle each other.

“Ten years of blood, and for what? Mandalore’s scattered. The Republic’s breathing. Nothing changes.” Mektra, a Twi’lek, snorts.

“Everything changes. You think the Republic fights the same way it did a decade ago? They’ve been forced to adapt. That’s what victory looks like: forcing an enemy to bend.”

“Victory is when they’re broken, not adapting,” Seev shoots back. “Every year they endure just makes us weaker.”

Others chime in, voices low but sharp. Some argue that endless war hardens them, others say it drains worlds dry, turning victories hollow. Coy sits up, smirking faintly as the talk grows more heated. He turns toward Nalise, voice loud enough to carry across the group.

“Settle it, Kalee. You’re the philosopher here.”

The circle quiets, eyes sliding his way. Nalise sits straighter, staff across his knees. His gaze flickers between the debaters, then to the sparring match still cracking in the ring.

“You fight like you argue,” he says at last, voice steady. “Both of you strike to win, not to understand. Like a duel, war isn’t about breaking or bending, it’s about testing.”

A few frown. Mektra leans forward.

“Think about it! When you spar, every strike is a question, every parry an answer. If the answer holds, you’ve learned your strength. If it breaks, you’ve learned your enemy’s. That’s the purpose: not victory itself, but knowledge. Endurance.”

He sets the staff upright against the stone, like a teacher’s lectern.

“Morality works the same way. You don’t know if a law, a truth, or even a war is just until it’s been tested. The Republic endures because it keeps answering. The Empire endures because it keeps asking harder questions. One day, a side’s answer will fail. That’s when the war ends.”

Silence hangs in the torchlit air. Then Mektra exhales slowly.

“So you’re saying it’s a good thing no one’s won yet?”

“I’m saying,” Nalise replies, “that when the time comes for a side to win, it won’t be because they’re stronger. It’ll be because they answered quicker.”

There’s a beat of thought, then a ripple of chuckles, nods, and half-hearted jeers. Seev elbows Nalise, muttering something about “not broken yet,” and the conversation rolls on. Coy catches Nalise’s eye, the smirk tempered now into something more thoughtful.

“Who’s reasoning did you mimic there, Kalee?”

Emmenas’ library is silent save for the scrape of chalk on slate, broken by the occasional curse under Nalise’s breath. Chalk dust and sheets of paper litter his desk, each one marred with half-finished arguments or lines so heavily crossed out they’re unreadable. He presses harder with the chalk, dust spreading until the nib crumbles. With a growl, he hurls it aside. Coy was wrong. He can’t do this. He wasn’t ever meant to.

“If you’re going to throw a tantrum, you could stand to be quieter.”

Phanius leans casually against one of the bookshelves, his smirk cutting deep. Nalise scowls.

“I’m not throwing a tantrum.”

“No?” Phanius strolls up to Nalise and plucks one of the ruined sheets from his desk. His eyes skim the mess. “Recognition, stratification, equality among equals. You’re regurgitating Emmenas like a dog.” He drops the page back onto the pile with a flick. “If that’s philosophy, then I’m the Emperor’s bastard son.” Nalise bristles.

“What else am I supposed to do? Every thought I’ve had belongs to someone else. I don’t build, I don’t originate, I... survive. That isn’t philosophy. It isn’t even sentience.” Phanius barks a laugh, cruel in its amusement.

“Sure, it’s not. You’re so deep in a pity party you can’t even recognize when you’re thinking.” Nalise’s jaw tightens.

“I’m telling you the truth. I choose between thoughts others have made because I can’t make my own. If I pick wrong, I die. If I repeat badly, I die. So I move between them: Emmenas, Xaun, Stradd, and I adapt. Nothing more.”

Phanius’ expression shifts, sharp with recognition.

“Say that again.” Nalise glares.

“I said I adapt.”

“No, you jackass, all of it.” Phanius leans forward, white eyes glittering. “You survive by navigating thought. You don’t author; you maneuver. That’s not Emmenas. That’s not anyone. That’s you.”

Nalise blinks, thrown off balance.

“That’s not creation. That’s—”

“—philosophy,” Phanius cuts in, voice like a blade. “You just forged one while whining that you can’t.”

Nalise’s breath hitches. His mind scrambles to retreat, to deny, but the words are already there, undeniable. He whispers them as though admitting a crime: “Situated sentience.” Phanius sits back, satisfied.

“Finally. An original thought.”

Nalise swallows.

“It’s not... it wouldn’t stand against Emmenas.”

“It doesn’t need to.” Phanius’ gaze pins him. “It can live alongside it. Adaptation as proof of sentience: stratification in motion. You’ve made something neither of us has read before. And you’re too stupid to realize it until I shove it in your face.”

Nalise doesn’t argue. His hand shakes as he picks up a new piece of chalk, scrawling the words across his slate:

Preliminary Notes Toward a Theory of Situated Sentience

The letters stare back at him, stark in the lamplight. He exhales, equal parts dread and awe.

“This is mine.”

Phanius smirks, satisfaction in every line of his face. He drops the book down next to Nalise’s slate and pats his friend on the shoulder.

“In case you need a reference.” His boots click as he disappears down the corridor. Silence reclaims the library. Nalise sits staring at the slate before him, the words heavy and real. His chest is tight, as though it might crumble if he dares to breathe too deeply.

His gaze slides to the book. His hand hovers, not with hesitation, but with a strange steadiness. He pulls it close and cracks it open. He reads the opening passage, then the first chapter, then picks up his chalk again.

Survival as universal. Knowledge of death as distinguishing mark of sentience.

The lines no longer float above him like heresy. They root. They speak. Almost without thinking, Nalise rises and goes to the shelves, pulling volumes like a man gathering weapons. *The Order of Intellect* by Emmenas, *Strata of Consciousness* by Xaun, Stradd's fragmented *On Recognition*. He returns to the desk and cracks them open, laying passages side by side with Macarius.

Emmenas' words argue recognition is the mother of sentience – without it the lesser mirrors the greater without ever becoming equal. Macarius counters by saying it is self-consciousness that marks the lesser and greater equal. Nalise copies them down in parallel columns, then adds a line of his own:

If Emmenas = recognition, Macarius = introspection, where do I stand?

His slate still bears the words *Situated Sentience*. Slowly, he writes beneath it. *To survive is to adapt. To adapt is to choose. Choice itself, even if bounded, is sentience.*

For the first time, he doesn't feel like a puppet performing on strings. He feels alive.

He flips open Xaun. "*Sentience is tiered, flowing from creator to inheritor, from inheritor to mimic.*" He scrawls beneath it:

Emmenas → recognition (gift)

Xaun → stratification (tiered)

Macarius → introspection (inevitable)

Me → navigation (situational)

The framework emerges in layers, scaffolding of borrowed truths where his own thoughts begin to settle like stones. Hours vanish. Ink smudges his fingers, chalk dust powders the desk. Books sprawl open in disarray: Emmenas rebuked, Xaun contrasted, Stradd half-discarded. But threaded among them is something that belongs to Nalise. Each page of notes carries not only reference, but response.

When dawn breaks pale through the shutters, Nalise sits slumped yet alight, eyes rimmed red but burning still. Before him, scattered across several sheets, is the first true shape of a philosophy: Emmenas' name written less, Macarius' more, and between them, his own script, fragile but insistent.

The mess hall is loud as always: trays clattering, voices rising over the din, but Nalise barely hears it. His satchel feels impossibly heavy at his side, weighed down not by food but the sheets of slate and paper he'd filled through the night. When he reaches the table where the twins and Arken sit, he doesn't wait for their greetings. He sets the bundle down with a thud. Aurin raises a pale brow.

"What's this? Don't tell me you finally cracked and brought us your final declaration?"

“Not a manifesto,” Nalise says, voice rough with exhaustion but lit with something steadier. “Proof.”

That catches Phanius’ attention. He sets down his cup, eyes glinting. Arken leans forward first, curiosity plain in his yellow eyes. Nalise unties the cord and spreads the pages wide.

“Situated Sentence,” he says, the words tasting unfamiliar but real. “I wrote it. Last night.” Aurin whistles low.

“Our little mimic wrote something new? Miracles really do happen.”

“Read it,” Nalise insists, sliding the top sheet toward them. His hands shake. Arken takes it first. His lips move silently over the words, then he glances up, eyes bright.

“You built this from Macarius and Emmenas both.” He turns the page, slower now, more referent. “But this is... yours. Clearer than either. Brother, this is brilliant!”

Heat creeps up Nalise’s neck despite himself. Aurin plucks the sheet from Arken’s hand, scanning quickly. She snorts once, but her grin is more pleased than cruel.

“To survive is to adapt. To adapt is to choose. Choice itself, even if bounded, is sentence.” She flicks the page. “Sounds like something I’d quote just to annoy Vett.”

“Almost,” Phanius mutters, eyes flicking over his sister’s shoulder. “It’s clever, yes, but scattered. You’re still leaning too heavily on Macarius. Too much scaffold, not enough foundation. But...” he pauses, taking the sheet and folding it neatly. “I’ll admit, it’s more than proof you’re capable of greater than mimicry.”

Aurin elbows him lightly.

“Careful, brother. You almost sounded proud.”

“Don’t mistake accuracy for sentiment,” Phanius replies crisply.

Arken ignores them both, still tracing the notes with careful fingers.

“No,” he says, quietly but firm. “It isn’t just clever. It’s alive. You’ve written something that belongs to us.” His eyes flick up, warm and steady. “You’ve written yourself.”

The words root deeper than praise. Nalise can’t speak. He only nods once, jaw tight, chest rising quick. Aurin’s grin widens as she leans back, stretching.

“Look at you two, eyes all misty. Shall I give you a moment?” She tosses the sheet back onto the pile, and, with exaggerated drama, drapes her arm around Arken’s shoulders. He stiffens for half a second, then, hesitating, lets her. Phanius groans, dragging a hand down his face.

“Stars above, not this. As if listening to one Kaleesh pine wasn’t enough, now I have to third wheel my own twin.” Aurin smirks, tugging Arken closer.

“Maybe if you smiled more, someone would let you practice seminar on them.”

“Philosophy is not foreplay,” Phanius snaps.

“Could’ve fooled me,” Aurin fires back, silver eyes dancing. Arken chuckles softly, shaking his head, though he doesn’t shrug her arm away.

The months that follow blur into rhythm. Nalise rises early, splitting his months between Emmenas’ estate and Kovar’s yards, his satchel always heavy with half-scribbled sheets and chalk-stained slates. The library becomes his second home. Phanius begins to haunt it too, less out of love for the dusty texts than from a growing need to escape the constant laughter and lingering touches between Aurin and Arken. The two grow near inseparable, exchanging glances sharp as blades, softening only in each other’s presence. Any time they grow too affectionate, Phanius drops himself in the chair opposite Nalise with a sharp sigh.

“Better your company than their cooing,” he mutters once, and so it remains.

They settle into a pattern. Nalise scribbles feverishly while Phanius dissects arguments, paring Nalise’s drafts down to leaner, harder lines. The piles of notes begin to slowly look less like scattered thoughts and more like a proper treatise.

At Kovar’s estate, another rhythm rules. Coy trains alongside him in the cohort, always with a word of encouragement or a laugh sharp enough to carry across the ring. When Nalise wins his first spar, slipping past a taller trainee’s guard and striking clean, Coy is the first to cheer, slapping him hard on the shoulder.

“First win, Kalee. That’s the start of something,” he says, grinning wide.

Nalise carries the praise like fire in his chest.

What began as quiet exchanges between Nalise and Coy grows into something larger. Coy starts dragging others with him when he comes looking for philosophical lessons, and Nalise finds himself standing before clusters of trainees in the courtyard, books under his arm, chalk in hand, speaking not as a student but a teacher.

He had given Coy Emmenas before, dutifully recited, but now he gives them Macarius.

“Emmenas would have you believe the Sith are ordained! Pureblood rulers, Mandalorians unworthy to wield their power,” he declares one night, voice carrying to the edge of the yard. “But Macarius shows us the ruler cannot subjugate without dooming himself! To bleed and endure and recognize your enemy’s suffering as your own is the way to true power. The rest is nothing but chains dressed as law!”

Murmurs turn to shouts, approval breaking like storm surf. Coy grins openly in the crowd, arms folded.

When the crowd disperses, Coy lingers, hanging back while the others return to the barracks. Nalise gathers his books, trying to shake the flush in his chest from the speech, and the Mandalorian falls into step beside him like it's the most natural thing in the galaxy.

"You had them tonight," he says, tone casual. "Not just listening. They were with you, all the way."

"They were listening to Macarius," Nalise mutters, brushing chalk dust from his fingers. "Anyone can parrot what's already written." Coy laughs, short and easy.

"Plenty of people parrot. You gave it fire. You made them care."

They reach the edge of the yard, torches casting long shadows across the sand. Nalise sets his satchel down on the railing, fingers drumming against it.

"You've been saying things like that since the first day I came here. Pushing me forward, dragging others to listen, celebrating every little thing I manage. Why?" Coy cocks his head, bemused.

"Why what?"

"Why me?" Nalise turns to face him fully now, voice sharper than he means. "You've never asked anything of me. Never told me I had to fight a certain way or think a certain thing. Not once. You just... give. And I don't understand it. Everyone wants something, Coy. So what's your game?"

Coy doesn't bristle. He doesn't even look offended. He leans back against the railing, folding his arms across his chest, and considers the question as though it deserves patience.

"You think I've been playing a game with you?"

"I don't know," Nalise admits. "Maybe."

For a moment, the boy just watches him. Then he exhales through his nose, shaking his head with something like amusement.

"I don't want anything from you, Nalise. Not like that. Up until recently, I only had one want in my life, and that's to make my clan proud. Kovar took me in when I had no one to care for me. Every bruise, every fight, every dawn I get up, it's for them." Nalise's eyes narrow.

"And now?" Coy meets his gaze directly, brown eyes steady as planets.

"Now I've got two."

"Two?"

"Yeah," Coy says, quieter now, though not unsure. "I still want to make them proud. But I want you, too."

The air between them tightens. Nalise's chest feels caught between disbelief and the pull of something he had only ever imagined. He searches Coy's face, looking for jest, a hidden blade of mockery, and finds nothing but calm: earnest and maddeningly steady.

"You—" Nalise starts, but his throat closes around the word. He shakes his head, half a laugh, half a protest. "You don't even know what you're saying."

"I do." Coy's voice is low but sure. "I've known for a while."

Nalise grips the railing to steady himself. The world feels like it's tilting, as though the yard itself is sliding from under his feet. Coy, still leaning against the rail, is immovable. He doesn't advance, doesn't press, just waits with that infuriating patience of his.

"You shouldn't want me," Nalise mutters almost to himself. "I'm not—"

"You are," Coy cuts in gently. "More than you think."

Silence. The torches snap in the night air. Nalise's chest tightens until the only thing left is the thundering in his ribs. He takes half a step forward before he realizes he's moving. Coy straightens, eyes fixed on him.

Nalise hesitates just long enough to prove to himself he still can, then closes the distance. Their mouths meet in a sudden, unpracticed kiss, all heat and urgency. Coy's hand finds the base of Nalise's neck, steadying him, and the railing under Nalise's grip is the only thing keeping his knees from giving way. When they break apart, Coy is smiling faintly, that same unshakable certainty in his eyes.

"Guess that's two things I've gotten, then."

Nalise lets out a breathless, incredulous laugh, forehead resting against Coy's.

"You're impossible."

"And you love it, don't you?"

"... I do."

Nalise returns to Emmenas' estate with high spirits, the ink still fresh on his fingers, Coy's kiss lingering in his chest like a sunrise. The overseers waiting at the gates do not share in his mood.

The search is different this time. No lazy glances or perfunctory prods. Rough hands rip his satchel open, scattering notes and slates across the ground. They rifle through every seam, crack wax seals, scrape chalk dust from the slate edges. And when they pull free the thick stack of *Situated Sentience*, their jeering laughter tells Nalise all he needs to know.

He's dragged by the collar into the courtyard and thrown down on the stone. Pain blooms throw his ribs. He tries to rise, but a boot presses him flat. When his vision clears, Emmenas stands above him. The Sith Lord holds his writing between two fingers the way one might pinch a soiled rag. His eyes glow with something between triumph and disdain.

"So this is the work that fills your nights," Emmenas says, his voice carrying easily across the courtyard. "Not study, not loyalty, not labor for your house, but rebellion. Macarius." He spits the name. "A bastard philosopher's drivel, scrawled out in your hand."

Nalise tries to speak, but the first kick caves into his ribs, hard enough to crack, the second drives into his stomach, forcing bile and blood up his throat. Emmenas doesn't stop to jeer, he speaks as he strikes, each word punctuated by another blow.

"You stand before Mandalorians and speak against me? Against Korriban's blood? You call them fit for Sith power?" A fist slams into Nalise's jaw, bursting stars behind his eyes. "You say I would keep them lesser for my own gain? That I am afraid of their strength?" Another strike, this time with a boot to his kidney. "You dare use my name as a curse in *my* city?!"

The crowd thickens as slaves and apprentices gather, murmuring. Emmenas makes no move to quiet them.

"You are nothing but a beast who learned his letters," he snarks. He seizes Nalise by the hair, wrenching his head up so the crowd can see his bloodied face. "You mistake my generosity for recognition. Tolerance for equality."

He slams Nalise's head into the stone. Blood splatters, hot and metallic.

"You are not sentient," he hisses low, close enough that only Nalise can hear. "You are a tool. A clever animal who forgot his leash. And I will remind you of it until your bones remember what your mind refuses."

"It was mine!"

The words silence the courtyard like a flood. Aurin steps from the edge of the crowd, pale and steady, a slim book clutched in her hands. Her voice carries with deliberate calm.

"He didn't know what he was saying," she declares. "I bent the words into his ear. I gave him this." She raises the battered volume for all to see. "Macarius's words are mine. Nalise only repeats what I declare."

Emmenas' gaze lingers on her for a long, silent moment. Then he chuckles. The sound is cold, sharp as glass.

"Clever." His hand gestures faintly toward Nalise's broken form below him. "So the little beast wasn't defiant after all. Just a mouthpiece. Just a fool whose pretty girlfriend has to stand here and speak for him."

He crouches low, eyes boring into Nalise's bloodied face.

"Tell me, does it sting? To be so pathetic that even she believe you cannot stand on your own? That the only way your words have meaning is when someone else claims them?"

Nalise tries to speak, but blood bubbles at his lips. Emmenas rises to his full height.

"Well then," he says, tone mocking theater now, meant for the crowd as much as for Nalise. "We'll let the girl take the punishment. Such loyalty deserves an ending worthy of history."

Before Nalise can move, Emmenas' hand closes around Aurin's throat, lifting her from the stones as though she weighed nothing at all. The sound comes a heartbeat later. A sharp, wet crack that tears through the courtyard like a whip.

The world ruptures. Sound drains away, replaced by a high, ringing hum. Nalise's vision tunnels, every detail thrown into merciless clarity: the way Aurin's eyes widen, the pale flash of her teeth as her lips part, not to scream, but for the breath stolen before she could take it. The way her body jerks once, twice, then goes utterly slack, head lolling at an angle no living being could hold. The book slips from her hand as though falling through water. Pages burst open, caught in the air, scattering like frightened birds. Each sheet turns slowly, impossibly slow, their black ink burning into meaningless spirals.

Nalise's chest seizes. He wants to cry out, but the sound sticks somewhere in his chest. His body trembles against the stones, broken ribs screaming, yet none of it touches the frozen, shattering silence inside him.

Aurin hits the ground with a muted thud. Her hair fans across the dirt, pale cheek pressed against the stone in a grotesque mimicry of sleep. Her chest doesn't rise. Her lips don't part again. She is still.

And the world, which had slowed to show him every detail of her death, now rushes back in a surge of noise: Emmenas' laughter, the crunch of boot grinding pages into pulp.

"This," Emmenas thunders, voice booming across the courtyard, "is what comes of defiance and deceit. Any who dare repeat it will share her fate."

Nalise scarcely hears. His mind clings desperately to the last image of Aurin alive: eyes bright, voice cutting with wit, only to watch it dissolve, again and again, into the memory of her body dropping lifeless to the stones.

They drag him away like refuse, boots scraping across stone. His head swims, the world turning too fast, too loud, until the crack of a door slamming shut cuts it off. Darkness closes in, thick and sour with iron.

The overseers waste no time. Chains clatter as they haul him upright, binding his arms overhead so his ribs scream. A rod strikes his back, again, again, until the air bursts from his lungs in raw, strangled gasps.

“Recite,” one of them barks. His throat works, but no sound comes. The lash answers. Pain sings up his spine, white and blinding.

“Recite!”

He croaks a word, a fragment of Emmenas’ doctrine, half-remembered. The strike comes again. The words tumble, broken, bleeding, forced out between sobs.

“To recognize is... to elevate...without...corruption.”

Another blow.

“Say it loud enough to mean it.”

He chokes it out, louder this time, each syllable cracking under his own weight. They strike him anyway. Over and over, until his voice is nothing but hoarse shrieks and the words blur together with the blood in his mind. His body sags, raw scales splitting at every movement. The teaching comes without thought, spilling from his lips in frantic rushes: *The Force does not recognize all minds equally. Neither should its inheritors.*

When at last the lash stops, he is no longer upright. His head lolls against his chest, drool and tears streaking down his face, his voice a rasp.

“Say what you are,” they demand. His tongue is thick, heavy, but the words claw their way out.

“Inferior... I am inferior. I am nothing.”

“Who do you owe your being to?”

“Emmenas.” His voice cracks on the name. “Emmenas owns me. Please. Please forgive me.”

The chains rattle as they unhook him, his body crumpling like wet paper onto the stones. He curls in on himself, still mumbling, half-prayer, half-begging: the words of a doctrine to replace his own.

They throw Nalise down like a husk onto the dormitory floor. He doesn’t rise, instead curling into himself, breath hitching, words spilling in a thin, cracked loop: “Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me.”

Arken drops from his bunk with a sharp thud, face stricken. For a moment, he just stands over Nalise, hands half-raised, as though afraid to touch him. Then he crouches, awkwardly trying to pull him upright.

“Nalise—hey—look at me. Come on.” His voice shakes despite his effort to steady it.

He manages to drag him onto a cot, but once Nalise is there he freezes, staring at the raw welts stripping his skin, the blood caked in his hair. His mouth opens, then shuts. He fumbles for a rag, dunks it in the basin with too much force, and presents it clumsily to Nalise’s back. Nalise flinches, gasps out another apology.

“Stop saying that,” Arken stammers. He presses the cloth again, too hard at first, then jerks back like he’d burned himself. “Sorry—I don’t—” His breath came fast, uneven, panic leaking through the cracks. “You didn’t kill her. If anyone... if anyone’s to blame—” His voice cracks. For a beat he just stands, frozen, before forcing himself back into motion. He grabs the rag again, gentler this time, though his hands still tremble.

The days bleed together in a haze of pain and whispers. Nalise scarcely leaves his cot. He lays curled, eyes fixed on nothing, lips moving in silent apologies. Arken tries: clumsy hands with water, bread Nalise barely touches, words that trail into silence. He keeps vigil more than he cares for himself. By the second day, Nalise could sit up, though his body aches and his throat cracks at the effort. By the third, he forces himself to stand, trembling under his own weight. Arken steadies him without a word, face pale, jaw tight. Neither speaks of Aurin, but the absence hovers, a shadow at the edge of every breath.

When the summons come for the next symposium, Nalise dresses in silence. His fingers fumble with the fabric. The walk to the hall feels endless, each step a grinding reminder.

The room is already full when he enters. The low murmur of apprentices and overseers falter, then stills. The scrape of his boots against the stone floor echoes too loudly. No one looks directly at him, but he feels their stares anyway, their sharp curiosity and whispered contempt prickling against his skin. He lowers himself onto a bench, breath shallow. The pain of sitting stiffens his jaw, but he keeps his back straight.

At the dais, overseer Vett, a severe man with sunken cheeks and a voice like cracking ice, opens a slate. His words carry flat across the chamber.

“Defend the assertion that hierarchy is the natural architecture of consciousness. Tur.”

The demand hangs there. A silence follows, suffocating. Nalise swallows. His tongue feels heavy, his lips crack as he forces words through them.

“Consciousness... is structured. It—it does not emerge equal. There is order, a... a stair of being. To deny that is to deny the world.” His voice rasps, halting, stripped of polish. The flow of

rhetoric he once wielded with precision is gone, leaving only the harsh rhythm of Kaleesh war chants. He pauses, panting softly, then presses on. "The greater cannot recognize the lesser. That recognition... is what corrupts sentience. Without it, we are nothing."

The words land bluntly, iron rather than silver. His chest burns with the effort, each syllable tasting like ash. The silence that follows is deeper than before, thick and hostile. Around him, apprentices shift in their seats, eyes lowered, lips tight. No one speaks, no one nods, no one even sneers. The weight of their refusal presses harder than open mockery ever could.

At the edge of the circle, Phanius sits rigid, gaze on the floor, jaw clenched, hands curled white-knuckled in his lap. He refuses to meet Nalise's eyes. Nalise's breath shakes, body aching from more than wounds. Vett gives no comments, no corrections, simply marks a note on his slate and calls the next apprentice forward.

The months that follow blur into sameness. Wounds knit slowly under coarse bandages, leaving Nalise's back a map of ridges and scar tissue, but at least they stop splitting open when he lays down. The fever dreams lessen; his hands no longer shake when he lifts his cup. The body heals, as it always does. The mind lingers behind.

Life settles into something that resembles before, though hollowed out. Nalise is not allowed out of the estate anymore, his staff is stripped from his quarters, his access revoked. It's clear enough there will be no second chances. He obeys without protest. Rises when called, recites lectures, copies texts, returns to his cot when dismissed. The shape of discipline returns easily, but his spark is gone.

Phanius passes him sometimes in the courtyard or the library. Always at a distance. Always with eyes elsewhere, as if Nalise is nothing more than a wall or shadow. The silence between them grows into something heavier than words, a constant reminder that he is untouchable. In his place, Arken is all Nalise has left. The older boy never speaks of Aurin, but her absence presses into every corner of their nights. Nalise wakes occasionally to find Arken sitting up on his bunk, eyes red, staring into nothing. Her presence lingers over them: the sound of her laugh, the lazy spark of her wit. She'd shielded him. Died for him. That fact hangs like smoke that won't clear, heavy in Nalise's lungs, catching him off guard in the simplest gestures. A turn of phrase that echoes her. The shape of an empty seat. The small, cruel relief of forgetting for half an hour, only to remember again.

The library is silent, except for the whisper of Nalise's voice as he rehearses his lines. He speaks low, hunched over the table, the cadence rougher than he had hoped for, the words weighted down by an irrevocable Kaleesh cadence. He doesn't hear Phanius until a stack of papers strike the wood in front of him with a sharp slap. He flinches, gaze darting upward.

Phanius stands over him, thinner, hollow-eyed. He looks like someone carved out the brightness he once carried in him and left only bone and shadow.

“Don’t say a word,” he mutters before Nalise can open his mouth. “I don’t want your apologies. I don’t want to hear your voice.”

Nalise’s throat closes around the reflexive apology forming in his mouth. He sits, still as stone, eyes flicking down to the bundle.

“Your writing,” Phanius says, flat and clipped. “I copied what I could before Emmenas burned it. It’s not perfect, but that hasn’t stopped you before.”

Nalise’s fingers hover, trembling, then curl back against his knees.

“And this.” Another object slides onto the table. A folded strip of stamped paper and metal. A pass. “It’ll get you out. One time. Doctor’s visit. Don’t waste it.”

Nalise’s eyes widen.

“Why—”

“Because,” Phanius snaps, cutting him off. “I won’t be the one to recognize you. I won’t look at you and pretend you didn’t get her killed.” His jaw works, eyes glass-bright for half a second before the shutter to stone again. “But you deserve better. You need a philosopher to see it and stars knows Emmenas will kill you if he does again.”

The words hang in the air like a verdict. Phanius leans in, voice low, each word sharp.

“You want absolution? You want to be seen? Find Macarius. If he tells you you’re nothing, then at least you’ll have the truth.”

He straightens, withdrawing into himself, a brittle shell where a friend once stood.

“You don’t owe me anything,” he says, the dismissal final and jagged. “And don’t speak to me again.”

Just like that, he’s gone, footsteps fading between the shelves, leaving Nalise with his heart pounding, the contraband papers under his hands, and a single pass burning against the wood like a lifeline.

He sits frozen for a long while. His hands shake as he draws the papers nearer, smoothing their edges as though gentling a wound. The words are his. His rhythms. His voice. And they’re here, rescued from ruin. Proof that he hadn’t imagined them. Proof that Aurin’s death hadn’t been for nothing.

The pass lays beside them, a thin promise of air beyond the walls. He stares at it until his chest hurts, until his mind conjures Coy’s crooked grin, the way he looked at him without judgement, without measure. He had never asked anything of him and yet Nalise wanted to, no,

needed to be someone who could give something back. And Aurin. Stars, Aurin. Her voice, her fire, she had stood in front of Emmenas' cruelty so he might still have breath. If he does nothing, then she died for nothing.

His fingers tighten on the stack of pages. He breathes deep, once, twice, the words of his thesis echoing faintly in the back of his mind. Recognition. Survival. Sentience. If no one else will grant it, then he will force it into being. He will make Macarius see him. He will not vanish into the silence Emmenas demands.

For the first time in years, a sliver of steadiness anchors him. He slips the papers close to his chest; the pass tucked beneath them and lets his eyes close. If it kills him, so be it. He will not leave this world unseen.