

Rekha hasn't seen a jungle since he was five. Korriban had burned Devaron out of him; years of red stone, dust, and the endless shriek of wind across canyons. He'd almost forgotten what grass smelled like. But Dromund Kaas hits him the second the shuttle doors open. Wet air, thick and heavy, the breath of a planet weaseling its way inside his lungs. It reminds him of home but only if in a drug-induced stupor. Devaron's jungles had hummed with life. Kaas' reeks of ozone and old storms. The vines strangle the stone. The rain feels sharp, not clean.

His new master doesn't pause to let him take it in. Lord Scurr strides ahead in functional durasteel, a man built like the statues in the Academy halls: broad-shouldered, square-jawed, every line screaming discipline. He'd spent only two weeks on Korriban, just long enough to test a handful of acolytes. Rekha had fought, bled, and won. That was enough.

"You'll learn discipline here," Scurr says without looking back. His voice is the clipped baritone of a man in his fifties, someone delivering truths he expects to be taken as gospel. "You think surviving the Academy makes you something? It doesn't. You've earned the right to be shaped. Nothing more."

The jungle air presses down on him, hot and damp. Rekha remembers Devaron's rain, how it tasted clean on his tongue. This rain tastes like ash.

Scurr stops, eyes on his apprentice.

"Behave yourself, apprentice." His hand clamps down on Rekha's shoulder, heavy and unyielding. "Stand straighter. Shoulders back. You'll carry my name now, boy, you best look the part. Stop slouching like a child. Be a man."

The words hit harder than Scurr's grip. Rekha forces a nod. He's learned already that nodding is safer than speaking. His master releases him and moves on, cloak swinging in the storm-lit air. Rekha follows, boots echoing on slick stone, trying not to think of how much the air of Dromund Kaas feels so much like home and yet nothing like it at all.

The years build themselves into Rekha's body, whether he wants them or not. Scurr is never cruel in the way the Overseers had been, but his voice presses down with the weight of inevitability. "Stand straighter. Broader. A man's frame must look like it means something." Each command loges somewhere under Rekha's ribs and stays there, buzzing. His body obeys even when he doesn't. Muscle comes first, shoulders filling out, chest hardening, arms thickening around growing bone. Scurr claps him on the back after spars, proud of the way his apprentice's strikes no longer look like a boy's. Rekha only feels heavier, like he is being buried under stone that set wrong and could never be chipped away.

Then come his horns. They were small when he was younger, but they curl higher each season until they are the size of his hand. Scurr calls them impressive. Rekha looks at them in

mirrors and feels cornered. Each morning they seem larger, crowding his reflection, impossible to hide. After a while, he starts avoiding mirrors altogether.

It's supposed to be good. Proof of strength. Proof he is becoming what he should be. And yet, with each new inch, each new layer, he feels more estranged from the skin he wears. His own frame betrays his daily, insistently. He wants to be alone. He wants to sit in the dark, unable to see his own hands in front of him.

He learns to give Scurr the bare minimum. A sharp enough strike to prove discipline, a kill clean enough to silence doubts, but never more. He doesn't crave victory. He just wants to be left alone.

Eventually, he finds his solitude in the one place Scurr avoids: the archive. It's lined with war manuals, conquest treatises, bloody codices of long-dead Sith. Rekha's hand drifts to the thin spines at the edges: histories, translations, fragments of philosophy. He reads them by lamplight, slow and deliberate, stealing each word. Most of it is dry observations on law, half-baked political morality, fragments of cultures long gone. But one evening, with horns heavy on his head, he finds something different. A slim codex bound in worn hide, title faded into the leather: *On Identity and Form*, by Vas of Zolan. A Clawdite. Vas writes with a cool precision about bodies as instruments, as flowing rivers. A canvas, mutable, expressions of self rather than cages around it. A line catches in Rekha's chest like a hook:

*When I resist shifting for too long, my skin begins to itch; a crawl under the surface, as though I'm being forced into poorly tanned leather. I wonder how rigid species endure such a sensation, or if their minds have evolved around such a thing.*

Rekha freezes with his thumb pressed hard to the margin. The word itch sticks in his head. He knows that feeling, the restless, crawling discomfort that has haunted him since his voice cracked and his horns began to overtake his reflection. He never thought to name it. He had assumed it was simply how everyone felt, that to be alive is to feel wrong inside your own body.

He reads the line again. And again. Until the words blur.

Over the next months, the thought festers. His body keeps building itself in directions he cannot stop: more muscle carved across his shoulders, his jaw hardening into angles that feel foreign when he touches them. In the sparring halls, Scurr nods in satisfaction. A man's shape. A man's power. Rekha nods back, hollow, every compliment hammering the nails deeper into a coffin he never asked for.

He begins to notice the women in Scurr's household differently. Not with a hunger, but envy. Their faces are smooth, delicate ridges trace their brows. Their frames are light, their steps

soft. They move like songs he can't remember the words to, and he watches them as if through a dream.

Among Devaronians, the difference between male and female is absolute. He could never pass among them, and he knows it. His horns have already grown long and curved, impossible to ignore, proof stamped into his skull of what he is not. He thought gnaws at him like rot: that no matter how fiercely he wishes, no matter how desperately he aches, his reflection would always betray him. His own people would know before he could even speak. The horror coils tighter each year, every horn-length, every new ridge of muscle a reminder that his body is racing away from him.

He tells himself it doesn't matter. He is Sith now, not Devaronian. He has no people anyways. But the truth presses harder each time he catches his reflection in a window or fountain. And, when he closes himself in the dark, a thought waits for him as he traces his outline with his hands.

*If I could change, I would.*

So he begins to change in the only ways available to him. Quietly. He starts wearing looser robes when Scurr doesn't dictate dress code, hems that blur his form. Meals, too, he learns to avoid. A little less each day. He tells Scurr he is meditating, that hunger sharpens him. In truth, he is starving away the muscle Scurr praises. The broadness across his chest, the thickness of his arms, he pares them down into slimmer angles. His stomach knots, his shoulders ache, but when the lines of his body soften, he feels a flicker of victory.

It cannot last. Scurr notices. He always notices.

"You're thinner," his master says one evening, eyes narrowing as Rekha sets his plate aside untouched. "Weakening yourself." Rekha lowers his gaze.

"The Force sustains me."

"The Force sustains nothing without a vessel." Scurr rises from the table, his shadow swallowing Rekha whole. "I told you once: scars and strength. Not...this." His hand cuts vaguely at the robes, the loose folds hiding Rekha's body. "You shame my name."

Rekha doesn't respond. His eyes trace the edge of his plate. Silence has always been safer than speaking.

"Look at me when I address you, boy."

The word snaps something in Rekha's chest. He looks up because he cannot stop himself, and the hatred in his eyes is naked. Scurr sees it. That is enough.

The lightsaber is in his hand before Rekha can blink. Red light paints the chamber, humming with practiced authority.

“You’ve grown contempt in place of muscle,” Scurr says flatly. “If you won’t stand like a man, then fall like a child.”

Rekha’s blade leaps to his palm. His arms feel thin, his stomach hollow, but he raises it anyways.

Scurr presses forward like a landslide, heavy and unyielding. Rekha stumbles, parries late, retreats across the chamber floor. Each blow rattles up his arms. He is outmatched in every measure. A downward strike sends him crashing to his knees. Sparks spray as his blade catches only at the last instant. His wrists ache. His lungs burn. He tastes copper. Scurr sneers.

“Pathetic.” His saber wheels back for a final strike. Rekha lunges without thought, a clumsy thrust upward more born of panic than skill. The blade glides past Scurr’s guard, though the seam in his armor beneath the ribs.

The blade falters. Scurr staggers, shock widening his yellow eyes as the hum in his chest sputters out. For the first time, he looks small. Rekha pulls his blade free, both hands shaking. His master collapses at his feet.

The silence afterward is unbearable. The lights gutter out, leaving only the stink of ozone and the sight of Scurr’s body cooling on the floor. Rekha sinks against the wall, gasping, unable to believe his own survival. He hadn’t meant it. Not like this. He hadn’t even really deserved to win. And yet, the body lies there. A Pureblood Lord of the Sith, felled by his apprentice.

A thought slams into him with sudden clarity: he could claim it. He could drag Scurr’s body to the Dark Council and claim his victory. The estate, the archives, the slaves, the wealth, all of it would become his. He would be Lord of the house. It curdles in his throat before reaching his mouth. Inheriting Scurr’s estate would mean inheriting Scurr’s expectations forever. It would mean being Rekha until he dies.

He looks at Scurr’s saber cooling on the floor, the walls that smell of him, the chair where he ate his joyless meals. He could leave it all behind. Burn it. Step into the storm and vanish. No one would know where Apprentice Rekha Vurgun went. No one would care to remember him.

Slowly, deliberately, Rekha lays his own weapon beside Scurr. Then, trembling, he steps back. No one will look for him. They’ll find the blades and call it mutual destruction. Apprentice and Master, consumed by violence, lost together. Rekha Vurgun will die alongside Scurr, under a storm lit sky.

And what leaves the estate that night is someone else entirely.

Kaas City does not notice her. It never notices anyone who doesn’t stride into its spires with power dripping from their sleeves. Two years pass, though most days it hardly feels like it.

She haunts the edge of the capital, sleeping in ruined tenements, under skybridges where the rain never stops dripping. The gutters stink of rust. No one looks too close.

Her horns mark her at a glance: long and curved, the size of her own hands. Everyone knows what she is. Male. Devaronian. Another failure from abroad. And yet her robes are cut loose, dyed with cheap pigments meant to resemble silk, a wig of coarse black hair pulled down to her shoulders. Makeup, smeared with rain, clings faintly to her eyes.

People stare. Sometimes they laugh. Sometimes they spit. Children point as she walks by, whispering under their breath, emboldened by the fact their parents don't correct them. She ignores them, or tries to at least. She doesn't wear the wig for them anyways, or the dresses that cling wrong against her frame. She wears them for the way it makes her shoulders feel less suffocating, for the flicker of relief when her reflection blurs just enough in a rain-slick window.

But survival is harder than expression. She scavenges scraps, trades trinkets for old cloth. Her hunger follows her like a leashed Akul, growling with the storms that rattle the roof. Days, she drifts through markets, tolerated as long as she doesn't draw attention.

In the alleys, the abandoned lots, the corners where Kaas City forgets itself, she finds something unexpected: people like her. Failed apprentices, soldiers broken on the front, mothers with children too thin to beg properly. They don't look twice at her horns, or the wig slipping sideways, or the way her robes hang loose over her frame. They're too busy keeping themselves alive. Their silence is a kind of mercy.

A Mirialan woman passes her a strip of dried fish without asking her name. A boy with no shoes offers her a tabac stick and laughs when she coughs on the smoke. Once, when the rain comes too hard and she has nowhere to hide, a Nikto with a split lip wordlessly lifts the edge of his tarp and lets her crawl inside. Among the gutters, she stops being a spectacle, and becomes just another body in the storm, another face around the fire.

Weeks stretch into months, and the rhythms of street-life become her own. She learns which shops toss out bruised fruit, which warehouses leave their doors unlocked, which alleys flood ankle-deep when the rain comes. She learns who to sit near if she wants quiet, and who trades scraps of food for a few hours of company.

Her wig frays. Her dresses fade. She patches them with whatever cloth she can scavenge, sitting by the fire drum with a bent needle, stitching until her fingers cramp. No one asks her why she bothers, why she clings to paint and pigment and fabric when survival is hard enough. They just let her. It is enough. More than enough.

The dumpsters behind the opera house are always better than the market refuse. Costumers throw out bolts of fabric once the edges fray, gowns cut apart when they no longer fit a patron's whim. She's learned to come by after rehearsals, when the stagehands tip their load

into the alley, silk and thread among the spoiled food. She digs through the pile, fingers black with rot, searching for something salvageable.

The door opens behind her with a clatter. She stiffens, half-expecting a shout, a kick, the usual. Instead, a voice, polished and bored.

“Do you have a tabac?”

She turns. A Pureblood woman leans in the doorway, framed by the spill of warm light from within. Her gown is loose around the shoulders; sleeves rolled to her elbows. Sweat shines along her temples, laugh lines tugging up faintly as though every look is a private joke. Another Pureblood. Another Scurr, though softer. Prettier. She drops the fabric back into the bin and begins to step away. The woman tilts her head, unbothered.

“Don’t look at me like that. I only asked if you had a tabac.”

The Devaronian hesitates, then fishes one from the crumpled packet in her pocket. She strikes a match against the bin and holds it out. Their hands brush as the woman leans in.

“Thanks,” she says, exhaling smoke in a long, indulgent sigh. “You’re a saint.” The Devaronian snorts.

“I’m no one’s saint.” The woman laughs, unrestrained and rich. She leans back against the stage door, taking in the alley, the dumpsters, the rain-slick durasteel like it is some novelty tavern she’d wandered into for fun.

“What’s your name?” Her stomach tightens. She shrugs, drawing on her own tabac, letting the smoke cover her silence. The woman doesn’t press. Her eyes roll upward towards the cloudy sky.

“My cousins were in the box tonight. All of them whispering about my technique, I’m sure. I just want to live, you know? Study, travel, sing, but no. I’m the ornament of my House. I’m to marry when I’m told, smile when I’m told, waste my life singing arias at men who don’t listen.” Her words tumble out without pause, heavy with the cadence of someone used to being heard. The Devaronian listens quietly, smoke curling from her own lips. She’s not sure why she speaks, but when the Pureblood’s rant slows, she finds an opening in the silence.

“What do you want to study?” The woman pauses.

“I study philosophy. Have since I was young.”

“What philosophers?”

The woman’s eyes light up as if she’s been waiting years for someone to ask her that. She stands up straighter, flicking the tabac enough to scatter sparks across the durasteel.

“You read? Who do you read?” She hesitates.

“Whatever I can find. I used to like Vas.”

The Pureblood laughs suddenly, delighted. “Stars, you’re wasted out here.” She steps closer, gaze flicking over her wig, her paint, the scrap of silk tucked under her arm. Then, she extends her hand, tabac balanced between her fingers.

“Baelari,” she says simply. The Devaronian looks at the hand, uncertain.

“...I don’t have a name.” Baelari tilts her head, considering.

“Then we’ll have to find you one.” Her eyes trace the woman again, slower this time. Instead of withdrawing her hanging hand, she shifts it upward, brushing the back of her knuckles gently along the Devaronian’s cheekbone. Her hand is warm in the rain.

“You’re beautiful,” Baelari murmurs, her voice low, her eyes catching the glow of the alley lamps. Before she can react, the Pureblood leans in, pushing her gently but firmly against the wet durasteel wall, lips crashing against hers in a kiss that smells of smoke and rain. The Devaronian freezes in shock, heart hammering. But the heat of Baelari’s mouth and the press of her body cuts through the panic in her chest and she leans in, trembling but eager. Her wig slips crooked, the scrap of silk tumbling from her hands into the puddled street.

When they part, Baelari grins like she’s stolen something precious.

“Come with me.”

The Devaronian doesn’t argue. She follows Baelari through the rain, through speeder-lit streets and into the tall durasteel gates of a house that smells of polished wood and rich incense. She assumes the end of it: the same thing men always want when they look at her too long. A night, a body, then the door.

In her chambers, clothes fall carelessly to the floor, silks pooling on carpets too fine to step on barefoot. Before Baelari can pull her into bed, she stammers, hands tight on her own wrists.

“You should know,” she blurts. Her throat burns. “I’m not—” She can’t force the rest out. The word *woman* feels like a curse. “I have a—” Baelari silences her with a finger pressed to her lips, eyes glinting with amusement.

“You think I don’t know?” she murmurs. “I’ve sung enough opera to recognize men in women’s clothes.”

The words land like a silken knife; insult and compliment bound together. She’d seen through her from the start, never fooled by the wig or paint. Not a real woman. Never a real woman. And yet, Baelari’s smile doesn’t waver as she leans closer.

“I still want you.”

It knocks the breath from her. Her shame burns, sharp and raw, but tangled with something else. She knew. She saw. And instead of spitting or laughing, she still wants her.

Morning leaks pale through the shutters, cutting gold bars across the chamber. The Devaronian sits at the edge of the bed, pulling the sheets up around her shoulders, already bracing for the rain. There's paint smeared into Baelari's pillow, the woman stretched languidly across the linens. She watches her with lazy amusement, as though her own private stage.

"Well, she says with a grin, "that's the first time I've bedded a homeless man."

The Devaronian's stomach clenches. The words are teasing, careless, but they burn sharp like tabac on skin. Before she can think better of it, the truth cracks out:

"I'm not a man."

The room goes still. Baelari tilts her head, considering her with sudden focus. The grin fades into something sharper, curious.

"No," she says slowly, "I don't suppose you are." She rolls onto her side, propping her head in her hand. "A woman, then?"

She hesitates.

"Yes." Baelari leans back against the pillows, taking a deep breath.

"Well then," she says, "that's the first time I've bedded a homeless woman." Her grin widens. "The first time I've bedded a woman at all." The Devaronian's throat tightens.

"Do you regret it?"

Baelari sits up finally, studying her with an amused seriousness.

"Regret? Hardly. But I'll need to try it again to decide if I like it." Her voice drops to a teasing tone. "Maybe a couple of times."

The woman blinks, stunned. She expected dismissal, not an invitation. Baelari reaches across the bed and brushes a thumb across her knuckles.

"You said last night you didn't have a name."

"...I don't need one," the Devaronian says quickly, eyes dropping to the sheets. Baelari tilts her head, lips curling.

"Nonsense. Everyone needs a name." She considers, humming softly, then her eyes brighten. "Raxiu," she murmurs "from *The Fall of Kessaari*. A woman who dressed in men's armor to fight the Jedi but was killed when she refused treatment for her wounds."

Raxiu shakes her head. “I don’t need–” She stops, breath catching. She does. She’s always needed. The name hums against her chest, sharp and unfamiliar. “Raxiu,” she repeats, tasting it. She exhales slowly. “All right. Raxiu.”

Silence stretches between them, heavy but not uncomfortable. Baelari watches her, eyes softened, a satisfied smile tugging at her mouth.

“Stay,” she says finally. “Don’t go back to the gutters. Stay here. With me.”

And, just like that, Raxiu isn’t homeless anymore.

She spends the first few days in a daze, drifting in and out of the Bwu’kail estate at Baelari’s side, never certain if she’s welcome or simply tolerated. But the gates don’t close on her. The servants don’t turn her away. Whenever she tries to excuse herself, Baelari only laughs and tugs her back inside, as though the very idea is absurd.

The estate is a palace compared to the gutters she’s known; vaulted ceilings painted with gilded constellations, silk curtains that drink up the stormlight, tables carved from wood so fine she’s afraid to breathe near them. Even the air smells different, perfumed with incense and flowers brought fresh each day. She can’t look anywhere without feeling small, out of place, like she’ll be discovered at any moment.

Baelari never seems to notice her discomfort. Or, if she does, she ignores it. She drapes herself across lounges in velvet gowns, speaking as though Raxiu belongs beside her. She plucks ribbons from her own wardrobe and knots them into Raxiu’s wig, then laughs when the girl blushes.

Meals are harder. Starvation had been her constant companion on the streets, but even here, at tables laid with fruits and meals and sweets she can barely name, she struggles. She eats sparingly, taking only enough to survive. She can’t hide her compulsions behind the veil of scarcity anymore. And Baelari notices that, of course. One evening she catches Raxiu passing half her plate to a servant and reaches across the table, tone unusually firm.

“Eat,” she says, sliding her own dish toward her. “You’ve been starving yourself half to death, and I won’t have it.”

Raxiu flinches, then obeys, not because she’s commanded, but because Baelari’s eyes soften as she watches, pride flickering there like a candle.

Nights are stranger still. Baelari smokes by the window, the storm casting violet light across her bare shoulders, and tells stories about her family, about her cousins and the expectations weighing on her. Raxiu listens, says little. Sometime Baelari interrupts herself mid-sentence to kiss her, sudden and impulsive, as if she can’t help herself.

One night, with smoke curling through the dark, Baelari groans aloud and says, “You don’t know my mother. She thinks the entire galaxy spins on appearances. If she could carve me into marble and set me on a pedestal, she would. Sometimes I think she already has.”

Raxiu tilts her head, unsure what to say. Baelari smiles crookedly, exhaling through her teeth.

“You’ll see for yourself soon enough. She’s been away for a few days, but she’ll be back soon enough. And when she does...” She drags her thumb across her throat, half-joking, half-not. Raxiu remembers that warning the next evening, when she finds herself seated across a table that glitters with crystal and polished silver, Baelari at her side and a Pureblood matron sharp-eyed at the head. She keeps her eyes low, hands folded tight in her lap, as though she might vanish if she stays still enough. It doesn’t work.

“Baelari,” her mother’s voice cuts through the clatter of dishes, sharp as glass. “Would you like to explain why there is a gutter rat at my table?”

Raxiu freezes.

“She’s not a rat,” Baelari snaps instantly, fork clattering onto her plate. “She’s my guest.”

“Your guest?” Her mother’s laugh is brittle, almost elegant. “You drag some alley-dweller into my house, paint her up in your gowns, and call her a guest? Have you lost your mind?”

Raxiu’s throat burns. She wants to speak, to apologize for the disturbance and excuse herself, but Baelari’s hand presses firm against her thigh under the table.

“I haven’t lost anything,” she fires back. “She’s with me. And she stays.”

“Not in my house, she doesn’t,” her mother snaps. “Do you not understand how this looks? To the staff, to your cousins, to *your father*—”

“Father’s not even here!” Baelari’s voice cracks into a near-shout, the petulant, desperate edge of someone who’s never learned to lose an argument quietly. “And when he is, he never notices anyways! What difference does it make if I bring home someone who actually makes me happy?”

“Happy?” Her mother spits the word like it is poison. “You think dragging scrap from the streets will make you happy? What matters is family! And you’re squandering it for some mixed-blooded gutter-rat who you seem intent on pretending is your equal.”

“She is!” Baelari shoots back, half-rising from her chair, hair tumbling from its pins. “She’s worth more than any of those dull-eyed courtiers your force me to smile at!”

Silence pulses between the two, broken only by the drip of rain against the windows. Her mother’s nostrils flare, lips pressed into a thin line. Finally, she waves her hand, dismissively.

“Fine. Stars help me, fine. Keep her, if you insist. But at least clean her up. Your father will be home from Korriban next week, and I won’t have him seeing her like this.”

Baelari’s face drains of color.

“Next week?” she demands. “I thought he wasn’t to be home for months.” Her mother’s eyes cut to her, sharp and cold.

“Yes. He finished his work early. He’ll be here by supper.”

The words drop like a stone into water. Baelari sits rigid, fists clenched against the tablecloth. For a moment, she looks younger than Raxiu had ever seen her, stripped of her usual theatrical confidence. Her mother rises, skirt rustling, and sweeps from the room without another word.

Baelari’s breath comes sharp through her nose, almost a laugh, almost a sob. She slams her palms flat against the table, rattling the cutlery.

“Fuck,” she mutters. “Next week. I thought we had months.” Raxiu swallows, throat dry.

“I’ll go. It’s all right.” She pushes her chair back, voice quiet but steady. “I don’t mind.” Baelari’s head snaps toward her.

“No.”

“It’s safer. You said it yourself. If he sees me—”

“No.” Baelari rises so sharply her chair topples, eyes wild. “Don’t you dare.”

Raxiu freezes. Baelari grabs the back of her chair, knuckles white, trembling with fury or fear. “You don’t understand. I’ve never had someone like you before. Someone who listens, who isn’t just waiting for me to fail. If you leave now, you’ll vanish into the gutters and I’ll never see you again.”

The admission hangs raw between them.

“I can’t lose you,” Baelari whispers. Raxiu exhales, the storm outside hammering louder against the glass.

“...Then what do we do?”

Baelari paces, words spilling out too fast to control.

“We could hide you in the servant’s wing. No, that’s the first place he’d look. Maybe I could say you’re a seamstress. Or a maid. No, your horns. He’d never—” She whirls back to face Raxiu, eyes fever-bright. “We have to make him see you as someone respectable. Someone he won’t question.” Raxiu watches her pace, eyebrows raised in disbelief.

“...Baelari, that’s insane.”

But Baelari's already in motion, hands fluttering as she talks. "Your skin. He won't notice the shade, not if I dress you properly. If we shave the horns down, cover them with a wig... you could pass. Not as a noblewoman, maybe, but as a Pureblood of a lesser line. Someone I'd be expected to keep company with." Raxiu blinks.

"A Pureblood."

"Yes," Baelari says fiercely. "You'd be safe. He wouldn't dare." Raxiu lets out a breathless laugh, shaking her head.

"You're crazy. You really are."

"Come on, Raxiu." Baelari leans in, eyes burning. "It's the only way."

The words land like a weight. Raxiu's pulse hammers in her ears. If she's found out, she'll die. But the thought of passing without question brings flutters to her chest. She closes her eyes and exhales.

"...Alright. Let's do it."

They start in Baelari's room, doors locked, storm muffling the sound of their panic. First comes the wigs. Baelari drags half a dozen from the costume trunks she hoards from the opera house: black curls, powdered coils, even a ridiculous blonde cascade meant for some tragic heroine. She tugs each one onto Raxiu's head, frowning critically, muttering under her breath about lines and balance and presence. None sit right. They are always just that: wigs. Costumes.

"It won't work," Raxiu says flatly, staring at her reflection with a hollow ache. "He'll see through it." Baelari bites her lip, pacing the length of the chamber, then spins back.

"Then it won't be a wig. We'll make it real."

Within a day, she's fangled a solution. An absurd amount of money sent to a cousin in the medical corps, a few forged letters, and Raxiu returns to the estate with stitches along her scalp, a pounding headache, and a head full of thick, dark hair beginning to take root.

"You'll need hormones, too," Baelari says matter-of-factly, as though they are no more scandalous than perfume. "If anyone asks, they're tonics. I'll see to it." Raxiu stares at her, stunned.

"You don't have to—"

"I want to." Baelari's eyes burn with a strange, spoiled certainty. "You'll be safe. And you'll be here. That's what matters."

The horns come next. They steal pliers and a file from the servant's workshop, sneaking them into the bedroom under cloaks. Raxiu sits rigid in a chair, sweat slick on her palms, while Baelari braces herself at her side.

The first crack of horn under metal rings like lightning through her skull. Pain explodes white behind her eyes; blood welling instantly, hot and thick. She gasps, fingers clawing into the arms of the chair. Baelari curses under her breath but doesn't stop, working quickly, breaking them down to the smallest stubs she dares.

"Any more and I'll hit the bone," she says, voice tight. "The base's too close to your braincase. This is all we can take." Raxiu nods, half-blind with pain. Blood runs down her temples, dripping to the floor in steady taps. Baelari presses cloth to her head, wiping the worst of it away, then sets to work with the file, grinding the edges until they smooth into little ridges hidden under the new hair.

When it's done, Raxiu staggers to the mirror. The woman staring back is almost unrecognizable. Thick hair falls in damp locks where horns had once jutted like accusations. Her jaw is still strong, her frame still broader than she wishes, but the blur of herself is there, realer than it has ever been. The wrongness is not gone, but for the first time, she feels the outline of herself. She lifts trembling fingers to her reflection, half-afraid it will dissolve. Behind her, Baelari slips arms around her waist and rests her chin on Raxiu's shoulder. Their eyes meet in the glass.

"You're beautiful," Baelari whispers. "Just as you were the night I found you in the rain."

Raxiu closes her eyes, breathing slow. For the first time, she almost believes it.

They work through the night, Baelari pacing the room with a tabac in one hand and a datapad in the other, scrawling notes as she walks. Raxiu sits on the edge of the bed, head throbbing from the horn-shaving, hair falling into her face, trying to follow the flood of names and connections Baelari spills into the air.

"All right," she says, typing into the datapad. "You can't just be anyone. Father won't let some gutter stranger sit at the table. So you're a noble. Minor noble. Obscure, just enough to sound respectable."

"Baelari—"

"Don't interrupt! It's like a play," Baelari shoots back, using the datapad as a fan to wave smoke away from the alarm. "Every singer needs a role, and every role has a history. Without it, there's nothing." She scribbles another note.

"You're from House Hiroi. They exist, somewhere offworld. Ziost, maybe? Perfect. You're not a daughter, not a niece, no—a third cousin. Too distant to inherit anything, too poor to matter, but blood is blood." Raxiu rubs her temples.

“A third cousin,” she repeats, skeptical. Baelari grins.

“Exactly! Distant enough no one will check too closely, but noble enough they can’t sneer outright. You’ve come here to serve as my lady-in-waiting. To ‘gain polish’ or however they like to say it. No one will argue with that.”

She plops down beside Raxiu and shoves the datapad into her hands. The scrawl reads: *Raxiu Hiroi: third cousin. Lady-in-waiting.* Beneath it, a pair of invented names: *Lord Calen Hiroi & Lady Veress Hiroi.*

“Your parents,” Baelari says, smirking. “Never left their little estate. Too provincial for court life, but dutiful enough to send their poor daughter to the capital to learn refinement.” She flings her arm dramatically, tabac trailing smoke. “Tragic, really. Abandoned to the storms with only me to guide you.” Raxiu stares at the pad, then at Baelari.

“This is ridiculous.”

“Of course it’s ridiculous,” Baelari says, “That’s the point. Nobility is theater, Raxiu. The trick is to perform with confidence. If you look like you belong, no one will question you.” She taps the list again.

“Now: important people. My mother, Soria Bwu’kail. She’ll hate you no matter what, so we don’t need to waste energy. My Father,” her voice falters, sharp again. “we’ll pray he doesn’t look to hard. You will call him ‘my lord’ and nothing else. My cousins, you’ll meet soon, dull as gravestones but they gossip, so you must smile at them. Keep your chin high and your back straight.” Raxiu’s stomach knots, but Baelari only leans back, smiling like she’s solved everything.

“There,” she says. “Now you’re not nameless anymore. You’re Raxiu Hiroi. And tomorrow, you walk into this house as if you’ve always been here.”

The storm is at its height when DARTH ACRES returns to the estate. The gates swing open to a procession of guards in blackened armor, their blasters bobbing in the rain. At the center strides a broad-shouldered figure in deep black robes, the hood thrown back so the stormlight catches the ridges of his face. His eyes burn gold, sharp even in the downpour, as though he can see through the walls themselves.

Baelari’s mother is waiting with them in the entry hall, jewels glittering as she sweeps into a bow. “Uwrâzwil,” she says, voice tight with reverence.

“Soria.” His reply is flat, more acknowledgement than affection. His gaze has already slid past her, roaming the room, pausing for the briefest instant on Baelari and the figure at her side.

“Father,” Baelari says, dropping her eyes in a practiced bow. He returns her nod, then gestures to his side. Behind him, a boy steps in from the storm. Fifteen, sixteen, maybe, with red skin marred by hair popping along his jawline: the mark of a mixed bloodline. His robes are new but ill-fitting, sleeves hanging loose on thin arms. He bows too deeply, almost clumsily, and when he rises, he keeps his gaze locked on the floor.

“This,” Acres says, gesturing to him without looking, “is Nollow. My apprentice.”

He moves without pause, striding into the dining hall. Servants scramble to light more lamps, shadows fleeing up the high walls. The rest of the family follows like planets orbiting a sun.

Dinner begins in silence, the kind alight with tension. Acres sits at the head of the table, his presence filling the space more than the storm outside. When he finally speaks, it is to Nollow.

“You eat like a servant,” Acres says, voice low and dangerous. “Sit straight.”

“Yes, Master,” Nollow stammers, fumbling to adjust. The correction comes swift and merciless: Acres’ hand slaps out, backhanding the boy across the jaw. Blood wells at the corner of Nollow’s mouth. He doesn’t cry out but instead bows lower. Raxiu’s stomach knots. She keeps her head down, eyes fixed on the silverware, praying his gaze won’t turn her way. But it does eventually.

“You,” Acres says, golden eyes narrowing as they fix on her. “You’re new to this table.” Baelari’s hand brushes Raxiu’s under the table, the smallest warning. Raxiu lifts her chin, as Baelari had drilled her to do, and inclines her head.

“Raxiu Hiroi, my lord. Here as a lady-in-waiting to your daughter.” Silence stretches. Acres’ stare is a weight pressing down on her skull. Finally, he snorts.

“Hiroi. Hmph. I’d almost forgotten that family still existed.” His lips curl into something mimicking a smile. “Fitting company for Baelari, I suppose.” Baelari’s jaw tightens, but she doesn’t speak. Acres’ eyes linger on Raxiu a moment longer, measuring, before he turns back to his plate.

“Eat,” he says, and the room exhales in relief.

The lamps burn low, storm still rattling the shutters when they fall back into Baelari’s chambers. The weight of supper lingers, the smell of rich food, the crack of Acres’ hand against Nollow’s jaw, the way his burning eyes had pinned Raxiu until her heart nearly stopped. Baelari strips out of her gown with furious hands, tossing silk and jewels into careless heaps across the floor.

“Damn him,” she hisses, tabac already lit between her lips. “Darth Acres, Councilmember, great patriarch of the Bwu’kail line. He’s nothing but a tyrant with good grammar. Every word out of his mouth is a curse.” Raxiu sits carefully on the bed, the new weight of her hair falling around her face. Baelari climbs after her, smoke curling between them, tugging at the laces of Raxiu’s dress.

“Forget him. I want you.” Her lips are at Raxiu’s throat, biting, urgent, trying to pull the night back into something warm. Raxiu lets out a shaky breath.

“He...reminds me of my old master.” Baelari freezes.

“Master?” Raxiu nods, eyes fixed on the floor.

“I was an apprentice, before all this. I was given to Lord Scurr when I was fourteen. Served him for five years.”

Silence fills the chamber, thicker than the storm outside. Baelari sits back on her heels, tabac forgotten between her fingers. Her eyes search Raxiu’s face as if seeing her for the first time. “You—” she shakes her head, incredulous. “You were an apprentice? You could have been a Lord?”

“I could have,” Raxiu admits. Her hands twist in the sheets. “But I didn’t want to. I killed him and left it all behind. I’d rather starve in the alleys than live as... as who I was.” Baelari lets out a low, stunned laugh.

“All this time I thought you were gutter-born. Just some poor girl who wandered into my life. And instead you’re a Sith runaway.” Her eyes gleam, half in awe, half in disbelief. “Fuck, Raxiu, you gave up everything.” Raxiu looks at her finally, voice trembling.

“I gave up nothing I wanted.”

For a long moment, Baelari just stares. The tabac burns down between her fingers, ash scattering across the floor. Whatever heat she’d tried to summon has bled out of her, replaced with a sharper hunger.

“Tell me everything,” she says at last, voice low.

Baelari listens to every word of Raxiu’s story as though it is an aria written for her alone. She makes her repeat certain details: what Korriban was like, what Scurr demanded, how she killed him, eyes shining brighter the darker the tale grows. When Raxiu finishes, Baelari only leans in close, lips curling into a grin.

“You’re wasted as a lady-in-waiting,” she says. “Train me.” Raxiu blinks.

“Train you?”

“Why not? You said yourself you learned from a Sith Lord. Show me! A little, at least.”

Raxiu shakes her head, but Baelari is restless. By the third night she has worn her down, tugging her by the wrist through the estate halls under the cover of storm and smoke, down into the practice ring where guards drill in daylight hours. The torches are guttered, the sand stained from the day's sparring. Baelari hands her a stick, grinning.

"No sabers, I promise. Just teach me." Raxiu hesitates, then takes it. Their first strikes are clumsy, more laughter than technique. Baelari yelps each time she's hit as if she'd been cut through. But the rhythm settles quickly. Raxiu slips back into the stances Scurr had drilled into her bones, feet light, eyes focused. Baelari swings wild but bold, hair flying, teeth bared in delight every time she lands a blow against Raxiu's guard.

"You're enjoying this too much," Raxiu mutters, parrying a blow.

"Of course I am," Baelari laughs, lunging again. "You're finally showing me who you are."

The clash of wood echoes in the empty ring until a new sound cuts through it: a deliberate cough.

They freeze.

At the edge of the sand stands Nolow, Acres' apprentice. He's skin and bones, all angles and nerves, but his smirk is sharp enough to pass for confidence. He leans on the railing, arms folded.

"Your father would want to know why his daughter and her stray are out here pretending to be Sith." Baelari's face flushes with fury.

"You little—"

Raxiu lifts her hand, quieting her. She turns toward Nolow, meeting his gaze without flinching.

"You could tell him, yes. But when he comes, I'll tell him you only ran to him because you can't beat me. How do you think that will end?" Nolow falters, just for a moment. His eyes flick over her stance, the easy way she holds her stick.

"You fight well," he admits grudgingly.

"I was an apprentice once," Raxiu says, voice steady. "Five years under a Sith Lord. I killed him, turned down the title, and walked away. So yes, I fight well."

Nolow straightens a little, interest pricking through his sneer. Raxiu steps closer, stick balanced against her shoulder like a blade.

“I’ll offer you a trade. You don’t tell Lord Acres about what you saw tonight. In return, I’ll teach you. Not the scraps your master throws you between beatings. Real training. Something you can use to survive him.”

Baelari’s grin spreads, wicked and encouraging. Nolow hesitates, the stormlight catching the bruise still faint on his jaw from Acres’ backhand at dinner. He looks from Raxiu to Baelari, both of them taller, older, more sure of themselves than he’d ever been. The admiration flickers plain on his face before he forces it down.

“...Deal,” he says at last, his voice low. “But only if you actually make me better.” Raxiu smirks faintly.

“I don’t waste my time.” Nolow nods once, curt, then slips back into the shadows. Baelari exhales hard, lowering her stick.

“Well, that went better than expected.” She bumps her shoulder into Raxiu’s. “Look at you, turning blackmail into a contract.” Raxiu lets out the smallest laugh.

“That’s what Sith do best.”

The next day, the training ring smells of sand and metal, the lights throwing long shadows across the walls. This time Nolow is waiting when they arrive, stick in hand, a hint of pride in his stance.

“All right,” Raxiu says, circling him slowly. “Show me.”

Nolow lunges. His footwork is sharp, quick steps that bite into the sand, but his swing is wild, shoulders too high, arms overextended. Raxiu parries easily, though the jolt up her arms surprises her more than she lets on. Two and a half years since she’d last held a saber, and her muscles remind her of it. The reflexes are there, buried deep, but dulled by hunger and disuse.

“Good feet,” she says, pushing through the strain. “Bad form.” He scowls, resetting.

“I was taught—”

“You were taught wrong.” She steps in, seizes his wrists, and pushes them lower. The effort burns in her forearms. “Keep your guard tight. No one survives with their arms hanging in the air.”

Nolow flushes under her touch, jaw working as he nods. He tries again, closer this time, more controlled, though still raw. Baelari leans against the railing, grinning like it is a private show.

“He’s not hopeless,” she says, smoke curling from her lips. “But, shit, he looks like a newborn.”

“Better a newborn than a corpse,” Raxiu mutters, rolling her sore shoulders. “Again.” Nolow exhales hard, then smirks faintly as he raises his stick.

“You two aren’t quiet at night, you know. Hard to sleep with the walls that thin.”

Raxiu freezes, heat rushing to her face. She hasn’t realized how close their chambers must be. Baelari only laughs, loud and shameless.

“You’ve been up listening to us, little apprentice?” she flicks her ash to the sand. “Careful, or I’ll tell Father you’re eavesdropping.”

Nolow’s smirk falters, and Raxiu pounces, taking out his knees and sending him to his ass. He yelps, then curses her out. She shrugs and readies her stance again as he clambers to his feet.

A year slips past like storm rain, sometimes heavy, sometimes unnoticed until the gutters overflow. Raxiu becomes a fixture at Baelari’s side. She sits alone in the cavernous opera house, her presence hidden among velvet seats while Baelari rehearses scales that shake the rafters. On performance nights, she occupies the family box, dressed in gowns that Baelari’s cousins whisper about, sitting with her chin up, the perfect lady-in-waiting.

The nights belong to them. Behind closed doors they shed their roles, collapsing into each other’s arms with kisses as impulsive as the first one in the rain. In the quiet after, Baelari sprawls across her like a spoiled cat and declares that no one has ever understood her so well. Raxiu never argues.

Bit by bit, she grows more comfortable in her own skin. The hormones work slowly, subtly: her body softens, her chest fills under Baelari’s greedy hands, her face takes on a new contour that makes her reflection less unbearable. Each change steadies her, even as a part of her longs for the raw simplicity of the streets, that freedom from expectation. But whenever the thought takes hold, Baelari reels her back in; another gown to try on, another feast to sit through, another secret kiss stolen in the opera wings.

They study, too, sneaking into Acres’ archives when he is away. Dusty shelves lined with forbidden texts become their own private academy. Baelari reads with theatrical relish, always quick to turn philosophy into argument. “The Code has been twisted,” she insists, tabac in hand, words rolling out like a speech from the stage. “It is meant to declare freedom: liberation from the chains of false order, the right of every being to define themselves. Instead, they’ve made it a mandate for tyranny, for subjugation. That was never its purpose.”

Nolow slips in with them often, quieter but no less eager. At first, he listens, wide-eyed, but soon he begins to speak. “Recognition,” he says once, seated cross-legged on the floor between them, “is what the Sith crave most. To be seen. But recognition between a master and

apprentice isn't real. Not unless both are equals. Otherwise, it's just approval, and approval is hollow." Baelari rolls her eyes, fond but dismissive.

"You're too young to brood over equality."

But Raxiu goes still, watching the boy closely. She understands, in a way Baelari can't. She was him, at one point, the apprentice kneeling under a master's shadow, starving for a recognition that never came.

"You're right," she tells him. "Recognition only matters if it's earned both ways. Anything else is just another chain."

The boy's face lights up at that, a quick, shy smile he tries to bury in his collar. From then on, he talks more freely, sketching his ideas in the margins of old Sith treaties, always glancing to Raxiu for her reaction.

The training ring becomes theirs, too. What begins as clumsy lessons grows into a rivalry; Nolow is quick and hungry, desperate to prove himself. He absorbs her instructions like dry earth taking rain, and before long he is matching her blow for blow. When he beats her, his grin is sheepish, not cruel.

But always, Acres' shadow stretches over them. They avoid him when they can, bow their heads in silence at dinners when they cannot. His presence is a weight in every room, a reminder that their little world exists only in the cracks he hasn't yet stamped out. Nolow bears the brunt of it. He never speaks of the bruises, but they show on his jaw, his wrists, the way he flinches sometimes when Acres raises his voice. And always, always, he goes back when summoned.

It's late, later than late, when the three of them end up sprawled across Baelari's music room, the storm muffled by thick velvet curtains. The lamps are dimmed, the ashtray overflowed, and three empty bottles sit on the table, one tipped over entirely.

Baelari perches on the piano bench, barefoot in a crumpled silk gown, tabac wagging in her hand as she belts out the opening aria she's been rehearsing for weeks. Her voice fills the room even drunk, steady and powerful.

"Now you," she says, pointing the tabac at Nolow. The boy nearly chokes on his drink.

"Me?"

"Yes, you," Baelari insists, spinning to grab a sheet of music. She plunks it down in his lap where he sits cross-legged on the rug. "This is the counterpart. The soldier's verse. It's not hard. Just follow along." Raxiu snorts from her seat against the wall, knees drawn up under her nightgown.

"He's seventeen. You'll break his voice."

“Better broken than wasted,” Baelari shoots back. Then, with a flourish, she counts him in.

Nolow starts tentatively, his voice thin and wobbling, notes slipping sharp and flat in equal measure. Baelari cuts in, louder, dragging him along until he is at least singing in rhythm. By the second stanza, he’s loosened, maybe from the wine, maybe from Baelari’s relentless grin. His voice cracks, but he continues regardless.

“See?” Baelari crows, clapping her hands. “Not hopeless!”

“Not good either,” Raxiu teases, raising her glass.

“Shut up,” Nolow mutters, but he’s laughing, cheeks flushed. “You’re only saying that because you’re drunk.”

“I’m saying it because it’s true,” Raxiu continues, but her smiles softens.

They try again, louder this time, Baelari and Nolow’s voices tumbling over each other, out of tune but earnest. Raxiu watches them through a haze of alcohol, her chest aching with something she hasn’t felt in years: a warmth that has nothing to do with fire or hunger.

When they finally collapse into laughter, Baelari sprawling across Nolow’s shoulders and nearly knocking the bottle out of his hand, Raxiu shakes her head, grinning despite herself.

“You two are insufferable,” she says.

“You’re insufferable!” Baelari points her tabac at Raxiu, smile sloppy across her chin. “Sitting there judging us like some ancient philosopher. Let’s see if you’re still so smug in the ring!” Nolow perks up immediately, cheeks still flushed from drink.

“Yeah,” he says, emboldened. “Why don’t we spar? You and me.” Raxiu arches her brow.

“Now?”

“Why not now?” Baelari goads, laughing. “The night is young and the storm is loud. Perfect backdrop for a duel!” She nudges Nolow with her elbow. “Show her you’re not just a cracked voice and clumsy footwork.” Nolow straightens, grinning eagerly but nervously.

“Unless you’re afraid I’ll beat you.” Raxiu rolls her eyes, forcing her smile from her lips.

“Fine. If only to shut you both up.”

They circle each other in the sand, both sweating, both grinning despite the bruises that already paint their arms. Baelari sits on the railing with feet swinging, tabac balanced lazily between her fingers, calling out bad advice like a referee who has no idea how the game is played.

“Hit her harder, Nolow! She’s old, she’ll break easier!”

“Don’t listen to her,” Raxiu puffs, ducking under a swing. “She just likes watching me get bruised.” Nolow laughs, a strange sound across the arena.

The door slams. All three of them freeze.

Darth Acres stands in the threshold, rain steaming from the shoulders of his cloak, golden eyes catching the torchlight. The storm outside seems to hush at his presence.

For a second, no one moves. Then, he steps forward, slow and deliberate, boots grinding against the sand. His gaze fixes first on Raxiu, then on Nolow.

“What,” he says, voice like iron dragged across stone, “is this?” Baelari slides off the railing, her usual bravado faltering.

“Father—” He raises his hand to silence her, eyes narrowing on Nolow. The boy clutches his stick, breathing hard, sweat running down his stubbled jaw.

“So. My apprentice,” he says coldly, “teaching parlor tricks to the pet.” Nolow’s face drains of color.

“No, Master, I—” Acres’ hand cracks across his cheek before the word finishes. Nolow crumples sideways into the sand. Raxiu surges forward instinctively, but Acres’ glare pins her in place like a nail through the chest.

“You.” His finger stabs toward her. “Drop that pathetic excuse for a weapon.”

She obeys. The wood clatters to the floor. Acres stalks to Nolow, yanking him upright by the collar and throwing him across the room. The boy coughs, blood staining the sand. Acres’ gaze turns briefly back to the women, a sneer tugging his mouth.

“You will leave. Now.” Raxiu opens her mouth, but Baelari’s hand closes around her wrist, squeezing hard. Any protest will only make it worse. They back toward the door under Acres’ searing stare. Behind them, Nolow is dragged to his feet by two armored guards who slip in at Acres’ signal. His wide eyes meet Raxiu’s, just for a heartbeat, pleading and afraid. Then, the door shuts between them, leaving only the sound of the rain.

And, just as quickly as he had appeared in their lives, Nolow disappears. Where he once lingered in doorways to trade a joke or crept into the archives to argue over philosophy, he now keeps his distance. At dinners and events, he answers Baelari and Raxiu with the barest politeness, no more, no less. His laugh, once awkward but genuine, vanishes. Instead, he hovers in Acres’ shadow, fetching wine, carrying datapads, reciting philosophy like a servant. He absorbs backhands and sharp words with the silence of someone who has stopped imagining any other way of living. Whatever bond he might have shared with Baelari and Raxiu is lost under obedience and bruises.

Baelari rages about it at first, cursing her father, calling Nalow a coward, storming through her chambers in frustration. But Raxiu can't bring herself to join her. Because the truth is plain: she should've taken the fall. She had been the one teaching him, drilling his stance, sharpening his form. Acres had assumed Nalow was the instructor, and Raxiu had let him. She had dropped her stick and kept her silence while Nalow was dragged away.

That choice gnaws at her. Every time she sees the boy standing stiff beside his master, eyes dull, it is there, the weight of her guilt, pressing heavier than any horn or scar. She could have spoken. She should have spoken. But fear had kept her still, and now Nalow bears the punishment alone.

She tells herself there is nothing she can do. That any attempt to intervene would've doomed them both. That surviving is reason enough. But still, in the quiet hours, she sees his wide eyes meeting hers as the guards hauled him away. Pleading. Afraid. And she knows she failed him.

As the years stretch, the distance calcifies. Nalow stops looking like a boy altogether. The awkwardness that once made him endearing hardens into something sharper, crueler. He learns to speak in Acres' voice: cold and clipped, a vocabulary of subjugation. Where he once argued recognition befits equals, he starts echoing Acres' creed that it can only be seized through force. He stops flinching at his master's blows, starts anticipating them, accepting them like punctuation in a lesson. By twenty, he carries himself like a miniature tyrant, already parroting the philosophy of the Dark Council, already bending others low just to feel the weight of his own shadow.

Baelari's defiance only grows louder in contrast. She reads Acres' archives with a vengeance, turning every line of her father's doctrine inside out until it is barely recognizable. Her conviction sharpens into radical certainty: that the Code is meant to free, not enslave, that the Empire's rot comes from mistaking cruelty for strength. She speaks this philosophy in salons, over wine, in rehearsals with the same fervor as an aria, and laughs at the scandalized whispers that follow.

"Let them talk," she tells Raxiu once, tabac glowing like an ember in the dark. "At least it means they listened."

Raxiu drifts around her uneasily. She grows accustomed to the lavishness of the estate, but the walls press tighter with each passing season. She watches Nalow vanish into Acres' mold, sees Baelari gamble with philosophy like it is theater, and feels the itch rising again, the one that whispers of alleys, stormwater, and freedom. Some nights, she dreams of slipping out the gates with nothing but the clothes on her back, disappearing into the gutters again where nothing is expected of her but survival. But every time she thinks of leaving, Baelari reels her back with a kiss, or Nalow's shadow crosses her path and reminds her that if she has any agency left in her life, it should be offered to him as apology. And so she stays, year after year.

The opera house glitters like a jewel in the rain. Lanterns burn bright against the storm outside, chandeliers throwing gold across polished durasteel. Every noble family in Kaas City seems pressed into the balconies, gowns and cloaks shining like spilled paint in the dim. The hum of anticipation fills the air, punctuated by the shuffling of programs and the whisper of servants carrying trays of wine.

Raxiu sits in the Bwu'kail box, draped in crimson silk that feels too fine for her shoulders, hands folded tightly in her lap. She always attends Baelari's performances, quietly, faithfully. But tonight the air is different, heavier. Because, seated beside Darth Acres, is the Eternal Emperor himself.

Tenebrae's presence seems to warp the space around him. Cloaked in black that absorbs the light, his vibrant face carved with calm, his eyes glinting like stars gone cold. The audience below whispers his name like it might summon him closer, though no one dares speak above a breath. Acres is at ease beside him, his broad frame relaxed in a way Raxiu has never seen at home. They speak in low tones, their heads inclined toward one another like old friends sharing confidences. When Acres laughs softly at something Tenebrae says, Raxiu's stomach turns. It's the first time she's seen the man laugh at all.

Nolow hovers at his master's side, stiff as a statue, chin lifted high but eyes lowered. The perfect shadow. Raxiu keeps her gaze on the stage, but she can feel Tenebrae's presence like a weight pressing against her spine. She wants to disappear into her gown, to vanish back into the alleys of Kaas City where no one notices her. Instead, she sits frozen, every muscle taut, knowing the wrong glance could end her.

The curtain rises. Baelari enters with a sweep of skirts, voice rising to fill the hall in a way that makes even Tenebrae's head tilt. She is radiant, every note precise, every gesture bold, commanding the room like it is hers alone. Raxiu feels the knot in her chest ease as it always does when Baelari sings. But when she risks a glance sideways, her blood goes cold.

The Emperor is watching Baelari with interest. Not idle attention, not the vague distraction of nobility forced to endure art, but something sharper. His gaze lingers on her with the quiet patience of a man accustomed to claiming whatever draws his eye. Acres notices. He smiles faintly, pride mingling with calculation, and leans toward Tenebrae as if to say: *Yes. She is mine to offer.*

Raxiu forces her eyes back to the stage, pulse hammering in her ears. Baelari sings, radiant and oblivious to the weight of the two golden gazes fixed upon her.

Two days later, the estate is in an uproar. Servants scrub the marble floors until they gleam, fresh flowers are hauled in from the gardens, the dining hall is set with crystal that hasn't seen daylight in years. Acres calls for Baelari and Raxiu at dusk, voice clipped with command.

“Dress in your best gowns. The Emperor dines here tonight.”

Raxiu’s stomach turns. She laces herself into a gown of deep scarlet, jewelry heavy at her throat, hair pinned high to hide the tender stubs of her horns. Baelari emerges in gold silk, shoulders bare, face pale despite the rouge dabbed across her lips.

They enter the hall to find Acres and Soria already waiting at the head of the table. Nolow stands behind his master, silent as stone. The storm outside rattles the shutters when Tenebrae arrives.

The Eternal Emperor steps into the room with a presence that eclipses the torches themselves. His cloak trails across the polished floor, his red face calm, eyes like still water that hide fathoms beneath. He greets Acres with the smallest incline of his head, then takes his place at the table.

Dinner passes with quiet ceremony: the scrape of silver, the low murmur of polite conversation. Tenebrae asks after the estate’s holdings, Acres answers with ease, and all the while Soria sits stiff, hands folded too tightly in her lap.

When the plates are cleared, Acres rises.

“My Lord,” he says, bowing deeply. “It is my honor to announce what we discussed. My daughter, Baelari, is to be Empress at your side.”

The words strike the hall like thunder. Raxiu’s breath catches. Baelari freezes. Tenebrae turns his gaze toward Baelari, expression something that could be called gentle.

“Do you accept, child?”

Baelari’s lips part. For the barest instant, Raxiu thinks she might refuse, consequences be damned. But the Emperor’s eyes hold her, steady and unblinking. Her throat works.

“...Of course, my Lord,” she says at last, the words quiet but clear. Tenebrae inclines his head, as though her consent is freely given.

“Then it is settled.” He turns next to Soria, tone almost tender. “I regret taking your daughter from you, Lady Bwu’kail. She will be treated with all honor in my household.” Baelari’s mother bows her head, though Raxiu sees the pride glitter in her eyes like gold. Then, the Emperor’s gaze flickers to Raxiu.

“And you, Lady Hiroi. You have been Baelari’s companion for many years. If you wish, you may continue to serve her as Empress.” Raxiu bends her head low, hiding the storm raging behind her eyes.

“As my lady commands.”

Baelari makes it through the rest of dinner with a glassy smile and a half-empty goblet of wine, her voice cutting in at all the right moments, her laugh perfectly timed. To anyone else she looks dazzling, her gown gleaming, her rouge unshaken. Only Raxiu sees the tremor in her hand each time she lifts her glass. When the Emperor finally departs, when the servants melt away, when the last door shuts behind them, Baelari breaks. She tears the pins from her hair so hard strands come loose with them, hurls the jewels across the marble until they clatter like bones. She rips the golden silk from her shoulder, seams tearing, fabric shredding in her fists. And then, she collapses, knees buckling, onto her bed.

The sobs that tear out of her don't sound real. They rack her frame, shake her bones, leave her gasping like she is drowning.

"I hate him," she chokes, clawing at the sheets until they rip under her nails. "He'll kill me. He'll drink me dry. He'll make me his trophy until there's nothing left."

Raxiu drops to the bed beside her, arms going around her, though she shakes so hard she can barely hold on.

"Baelari—" But Baelari clutches at her side like she is the only solid thing left, sobbing into her shoulder.

"I don't want to disappear. I want to live." Her voice cracks into a scream. "I want to be mine."

Raxiu holds her tighter, rage clawing at her ribs. She wants to kill Acres. She wants to drag Tenebrae down herself. But she has no army, no power, no path forward. Only the sound of Baelari breaking in her arms.

Later that night, when the girl finally collapses into exhausted sleep, Raxiu slips out. Her legs shake as she walks the cold corridors.

Nolow stands outside the archives, alone, a silhouette in torchlight. He's grown taller, sharper, his boyish edges worn down into something harder. He watches her approach with suspicion, his chin tilted high like Acres, but his eyes are restless. Raxiu stops in front of him, and before she can lose the nerve, she falls to her knees.

"Please," she whispers, voice raw and trembling. "Help me. Help her. I'll do anything."

Nolow blinks, startled. For a moment, he says nothing, only staring down at her. Then he steps closer, the faintest curl of satisfaction tugging at his mouth.

"Anything?" His voice is soft, dangerous. Raxiu's throat aches. The image of Baelari's sobs burn behind her eyes.

"Anything."

He lets the silence stretch, savoring it. When he finally speaks, his words are measured, deliberate.

“When I have a court of my own, you’ll leave her side and serve me instead.”

The words cut deep. The thought of leaving Baelari is unthinkable. But the memory of her screams, her face twisted with terror, crushes her chest until she can hardly breathe. She lowers her head.

“...All right.” Nalow’s smile is sharp and small, not cruel, but hungry.

“Then I’ll do what I can.”

It happens so suddenly the estate never recovers its breath. One night, the storm is louder than usual, winds rattling the shutters until the whole manor seems to groan. Raxiu is awake when the shouting starts; muffled at first, then sharper, edged with the unmistakable hum of sabers. She reaches Baelari’s door just as guards come sprinting past, faces pale. In a matter of minutes, it’s over.

Darth Acres lies dead in his own training ring, blood soaking into the sand he once used to break apprentices. And standing over him, cloak torn, face alit with fury and triumph, is Nalow.

The boy no longer looks like a boy. His saber hums with fury, his chest heaves, and his voice carries across the courtyard when he declares, “The master is dead. His strength is mine.”

The estate erupts into chaos. Servants flee, cousins whisper of exile, Baelari’s mother locks herself in her chambers. For weeks, the household limps under Nalow new, unsteady authority. He paces the halls with his saber strapped openly to his hip, snapping orders at stewards who barely listen, sitting in his master’s chair as though it might swallow him whole.

For a time, it seems like the marriage is undone. The patriarch who offered Baelari is dead, the arrangement unratified. Baelari’s sobs give way to fragile laughter, her hands clinging to Raxiu’s like chains cast off. But the Eternal Emperor returns to the estate in his black cloak, and speaks the words with the same calm certainty as before: “Baelari will be Emperess. That has not changed.”

No one at the table dares oppose him.

Afterward, in the low-lit halls, Nalow finds Raxiu and Baelari together. His face is flushed but steady, hands stained faintly with ink.

“I cannot protect you from him,” he says bluntly. “Not here. You have to leave.” Baelari stares.

“Leave Kaas?”

“Leave the Empire if you must. I have family on Ziost. You can live there quietly until I can place you elsewhere. Either that, or the Citadel.”

Her hands tremble, but she nods, tears brimming.

The night they prepare her departure, the household is tense, every servant on edge. Baelari stands cloaked in traveling silks, eyes red from crying but chin high. Nolow waits at her side, already directing the guards as if they are his own.

“Come on,” Baelari says softly, reaching for Raxiu’s hand. Raxiu pulls it out of reach. Her throat burns.

“No.”

Baelari blinks, stunned. “...What?”

“I’m sorry,” Raxiu whispers. She looks at Nolow, then away. “I’m staying with him.”

For a heartbeat, Baelari just stares, wide-eyed, uncomprehending. Then the words seem to hit all at once. Her face falls.

“You—” Her voice cracks. “You bastard. You filthy, lying—” The sobs burst out of her before she can finish, raw and wrenching. She shoves at Raxiu’s chest with both hands, not to hurt but to push her away. “All this time. All this—” She collapses to the floor, skirts pooling, fists tangled in her own hair. She screams, wordless, a sound raw enough to hollow the hall. Servants linger at the edges, horrified, but none dare to move.

“I loved you!” she sobs, curling in on herself, shaking with each word. “I thought – you were mine, I thought you chose me—” Her voice breaks into gasps. Raxiu crouches, hands trembling, aching to reach for her, but Baelari shrieks and bats her away. “Don’t touch me!”

Nolow moves, hand heavy on Raxiu’s shoulder, steadying and claiming all at once. His gaze is cold, almost triumphant, the crinkles of a smile at the edges of his yellow eyes.

“Enough,” he says.

Baelari lifts her tear-streaked face, eyes wild, voice hoarse. “I hope you rot here,” she spits at Raxiu. Then she breaks down again, wracked with sobs as Nolow signals the guards to lead her out.

Months pass in silence. The estate is quieter without Baelari’s voice fillings the halls, without her laughter spilling through the rafters of the music room. Raxiu feels the absence everywhere: in the echo of the empty opera box, in the cold meals where Nolow presides with chilling composure, in the aching stillness of her own chambers.

The news comes one gray morning, carried on the whispers of servants: Baelari is dragged back to Kaas City by the Imperial Guard. Tenebrae claims her at last. Within a week, she is wed in a private ceremony at the Citadel.

Raxiu never sees it, but she doesn't need to. She can picture Baelari in a gown of imperial gold, her throat stiff, her smile brittle, her voice silenced.

Baelari doesn't return to the estate. Raxiu tries. She sends messages that get ignored. She writes letters, pleading, apologizing, begging to see her. She bribes guards to deliver them by hand. She even slips into the Citadel gates once, cloak pulled low, praying to catch a glimpse. Each time she is turned away. Some of her letters come back unopened. Most don't return at all.

She thinks of running then, of vanishing back into Kaas City's alleys where no one will notice her. The itch of freedom crawls under her skin again, whispering of storms and gutter fires, of being no one and being free.

But Nolow has grown into Lord Emmenas now. His ascension is swift, brutal, and absolute. He carries himself with Acres' voice, Acres' manners, Acres' philosophy, sharpened into something colder still. And he has plans for Raxiu.

He summons her to the great hall, where banners of crimson silk hang bearing his crest. She stands before him as she once had before Acres, heart pounding, the taste of ash in her mouth.

"You will not waste away in shadows," he says, voice smooth and measured, not the boy's voice she remembers. "I've arranged an alliance. You will marry Darth Vorkhall, the Councilor of Biotic Sciences, in two days."

The words fall like chains across her shoulders. Her mouth opens, but no sound comes. She thinks of Baelari, bound to Tenebrae in the Citadel. She thinks of herself, bartered like cargo by the boy she once called brother. Lord Emmenas only smiles faintly, satisfied, turning away.

"Consider it your purpose. You agreed to serve. Now you will."

The wedding is small, perfunctory, more transaction than celebration. Still, the halls of the estate glitter with firelight and polished stone, and the gathered nobles whisper like carrion birds as Raxiu is led in on Emmenas' arm.

She wears crimson silk heavy with gold thread, her hair pinned high to conceal her horns. The paint on her lips is perfect, her posture flawless. From a distance, she looks every inch the Pureblooded bride she is supposed to be.

Darth Vorkhall waits at the altar, barely twenty, with the smooth face and hungry eyes of a man who has risen too quickly. His white skin is unmarred, his robes cut to flaunt his station,

and the smirk on his mouth never touches his eyes. When he takes her hand, his grip is tight, possessive.

“Lady Hiroi,” he says, voice pitched low, as though tasting the name. “I must admit, I hadn’t expected Emmenas to find such... unspoiled company. It’s refreshing. So many of your bloodlines are already fouled by alien mixtures. To have a bride as pure as you...”

Raxiu smiles faintly, bowing her head to hide the bile rising in her throat. “I am honored, my lord.”

Their signatures are inked, their vows spoken. There’s no music, no laughter, just formality, the beep of datapads, and the murmur of their witnesses. When it ends, Vorkhall kisses her hand as though she is a prize acquired, eyes sliding past her already toward Emmenas, as if to say: *You’ve chosen well.*

That night, in their new chambers, he pours himself wine and looks her over with open hunger.

“It’s fitting,” he says, smug. “The Dark Council will be stronger with you at my side. A wife of pure blood, untarnished.” Raxiu sits across from him, back straight, face calm. She lets him talk, lets him revel in his own delusion. But beneath the mask, her chest tightens. Because under the silks, the curves of her hormones, she has a man’s sex. No womb. No vagina. Nothing he expects in the body of his “pureblood bride.” If he ever found out, he’d kill her, surely. The thought coils sharp in her gut, but she keeps her face still, her voice steady. He reaches his hand toward her, and she recoils.

“I want my own chambers,” she says suddenly. He blinks as if he didn’t hear her.

“What?”

“I’m not sharing a bed with you. Ever,” she continues. Her voice doesn’t waver. “I don’t sleep with men. That will not change.”

For the first time, his composure cracks. His mouth twitches, his eyes narrow.

“You presume—”

“I presume,” Raxiu cuts in. “You will have me as a wife. Nothing more. If you expect heirs, find a mistress. If you expect obedience, find a slave. If you want the appearance of legitimacy, the illusion of a dutiful Pureblood bride, then I am yours. That is all.”

Silence stretches, taut as a blade. Vorkhall’s jaw works. Rage flickers in his eyes, but ambition curdles it. He needs her presence, her mask, far more than he needs her body. Finally, he leans back in his chair and drinks instead of striking her.

“Fine,” he says at last, voice cold. “We’ll see how long that resolve lasts.”

Her resolve lasts. The weeks that follow are a blur of relocation. Vorkhall's estate is smaller than Acres', but colder, all sharp marble floors and iron fixtures, the walls hung not with tapestries but anatomical charts. The air smells faintly of disinfectant and smoke.

Raxiu settles into her role as his wife the way she has every mask before: head high, steps careful, voice measured. She half expects to hear whispers of mistresses, or see servants slipping unfamiliar women out of Vorkhall's chambers at dawn, but none come. If he takes lovers, he keeps them well hidden. If he doesn't... she wonders what he does with the hunger that had burned so plainly in his eyes that first night.

At events, she stands by his side, the picture of composure in crimson silk and heavy jewels. But each gathering peels another layer from his mask, revealing the depths of what he is.

Darth Vorkhall is not merely ambitious. He is obsessed. She watches him hold court among other lords, gesturing with precise hands as he speaks of cranial ridges and cortical volume, his words laced with the certainty of someone who has long thought himself a prophet.

"Human breeds," he declares once at a gala, "represent the pinnacle of sentient evolution. The galaxy's proof. Others may mimic power, but their brains betray them; weaker structures, slower synapses. Nature itself has set us apart."

Nobles nod along, half in awe, half in fear. Raxiu's stomach turns as he speaks of dissections, of measuring the folds of alien brains against Sith, of cataloging the differences like trophies. She sees him return from his laboratories with blood still drying under his nails, and she smiles, even as fear and nausea curl in her gut.

She tries for months to reach Baelari. Her new seal, one bearing the Sphere of Biotic Sciences, gets her a couple floors higher in the Citadel, but not close enough. The longing hollows her. She dreams of Baelari's laugh, of her fingers in her hair, of the smoke curling between them as they sparred philosophies. Every morning, she wakes in her cold chamber beside Vorkhall's, and every morning, she tells herself she will try again. But the truth becomes clear: the only way to see Baelari again is to bring Tenebrae himself into reach.

It's a reckless idea. But desperation has always made Raxiu braver than she is.

So one night, after a banquet where Vorkhall held forth about cranial ridges until the guests looked faint, she pours his goblet full and leans over his ear, eyes lowered just enough to look deferential.

"My lord," she murmurs, voice as smooth as she can muster. "Your work deserves greater recognition. You speak of it to the Council, yes, but imagine presenting it directly to the Emperor. To have him sit at your table, to hear your theories in your own hall. It would raise your name above the others in a way no symposium ever could."

Vorkhall snorts, swirling his wine. “The Emperor dines with whom he chooses. He is not summoned like a whore.”

Raxiu smiles faintly. “Of course. But he has attended other houses, has he not? He enjoys being courted. You have the standing, my lord. Why not extend the invitation? If he declines, nothing is lost. If he accepts...” She lets the words hang, bait shimmering on the hook. Vorkhall narrows his eyes, studying her.

“Why are you so eager to have him under our roof? Do you crave an audience with greatness, wife?” Her heart leaps, but she forces her face into the same faint, indulgent smile.

“I crave to see you honored as you deserve. The Sphere of Biotic Science should be whispered in the same breath as the Sphere of Expansion. Let the Emperor himself be the one to say so.”

For a long moment, Vorkhall is silent. He taps a finger against the rim of his goblet, considering. At last, he gives a short, sharp laugh.

“You would make a wonderful courtier, Raxiu. Manipulative enough to flatter, bold enough to risk. Very well. I will extend the invitation.”

Raxiu bows her head, hiding the quick tremor in her hands.

The Emperor accepts. The response arrives a few days later, language perfunctory: the Eternal Emperor of the Sith will attend a private supper at Darth Vorkhall’s estate on the appointed date, accompanied by his retinue. Vorkhall struts for weeks, snapping at servants to polish floors that already gleam, rehearsing his speeches in the mirror until his voice goes hoarse. Raxiu says nothing. She wears her mask and waits, heart pounding harder with each day that passes.

When the night comes, the estate is ablaze with light. Sterile lights burn along the walkway, banners unfurl in crimson and black, the air is thick with incense. The Eternal Emperor arrives cloaked in shadow, the storm outside hushing as he steps inside. His presence fills the hall like a tide; heavy, inevitable, ancient. And beside him walks Baelari.

Raxiu almost forgets to breathe.

Baelari is draped in imperial gold, her hair pinned high, jewels glittering at her throat. But the fire that once sparked in her eyes is gone. Her posture is perfect, her smile glassy, but her movements are too controlled, too practiced. She looks like a statue carved of herself, shape intact but lifeless. When her gaze sweeps the hall and lands on Raxiu, the masks cracks for just an instant. Surprise flickers on her cheeks, raw, before she smooths it away again.

Dinner is a blur. Vorkhall holds forth about his research, boasting of synaptic chains and cortical supremacy. Tenebrae listens with serene patience, nodding occasionally, asking quiet questions that make the younger Lord swell with pride. Raxiu sits silent, smile fixed, stomach

twisting with every word. When the meal ends, the company moves to the parlor: a grand chamber lined with books and artifacts, slaves circulating with wine. The Emperor takes his seat by the fire, and Vorkhall launches into another monologue, eager to impress.

It is in that noise and movement that Raxiu slips away. She drifts toward the edge of the room where Baelari stands, flanked by two silent guards.

“Your Majesty,” Raxiu murmurs, bowing just enough to the guards to be dismissed. Then, quieter: “Baelari.”

Baelari stiffens. Her eyes dart to the guards, then back to Raxiu. For a moment she says nothing, face cold and unreadable.

“I’m sorry,” Raxiu whispers. The words break out of her like something long buried. “I should have told you the truth. I stayed because I promised Emmenas my loyalty for his aid. I thought it was the only way to save you.”

Baelari’s breath hitches, the faintest crack. Her eyes glisten, but her voice is flat when she speaks.

“You left me.”

“I love you,” Raxiu says, throat tight. “And I cannot stop myself from missing you.”

Her words hang between them, fragile as spun glass. For a moment Baelari says nothing, lips pressed thin, gaze fixed somewhere over Raxiu’s shoulder. Then, she exhales slowly, the tension loosening just barely.

“I was cruel to you,” she murmurs. “I thought—” her voice falters, then steadies. “I thought you owed me because I had pulled you off the streets. As if that made you mine. But I owed you for what you gave up.”

Raxiu swallows hard, eyes burning. “You never owed me anything. I only ever wanted—” she shakes her head. “I only ever wanted to see you smile.”

For the first time in almost a year, Baelari’s hand brushes against hers, fleeting but real.

“And I wanted the same for you.”

They stand there for a long minute, the noise of the parlor fading into a distant hum. Then, tentatively, Baelari asks, “What happened to you?” Raxiu’s laugh is bitter, quiet.

“I was given away. Emmenas thought it a clever alliance, so now I play wife to Vorkhall. He’s Emmenas’ age, but twice as arrogant. He talks about brains more than people.”

Baelari’s smile is faint, rueful. “Sounds like Emmenas’ sort of game. As for me...I’m pregnant.”

Raxiu's breath catches. The words hit like stone in water, rippling through her chest. She tries to keep her face steady, but the ache in her throat makes it hard to swallow.

"With his child?" she asks softly. Baelari gives the smallest nod, smile brittle.

"Of course. It will be his heir. That's all anyone cares to talk about now." Her gaze darts toward the Emperor, then back, as if the admission itself might be overheard. For a long moment, they say nothing. The storm outside rattles faintly against the high windows.

"And you?" Baelari's eyes flicker with something raw. "Does Vorkhall... touch you?" Raxiu almost laughs at the absurdity of it, but the sound would have broken too easily into sobs.

"No," she says. "We have separate rooms, at my request. He was furious, but he agreed."

Something in Baelari's face eases, not joy, but a quiet relief. A reminder of the woman Raxiu had known.

"Good," she whispers.

Years blur past, the rhythm of court life tightening around them like a noose. Against Raxiu's deepest fears, Baelari finds her way back into her life. It begins with small invitations: a summons to dine at the Citadel, Baelari's name written carefully at the base of the message. Vorkhall, preening at the honor, never questions it, and Raxiu slips into the halls of the Emperor's palace at his side.

Baelari is different, and yet the same. Her gowns glitter brighter, her eyes bear heavier shadows, her laughter is quieter, but the spark still flickers. She sits across the table, speaking in measured tones, but when her gaze meets Raxiu's it lingers a heartbeat longer than propriety allows.

And, as the months pass, her body changes. She grows heavier with pregnancy, the imperial gold straining around her swelling belly. At first, she covers herself in shawls, ashamed of how her body betrays the sharp image she'd cultivated. But Raxiu is there, every time, smiling softly, hands brushing over taut fabric as though to remind her it is something beautiful. Something alive.

The day comes when Baelari brings the child into the world. A red, wailing Pureblood boy, pudgy and strong, tiny fists curling like claws. She names him Zhaka.

From then on, the visits to the Citadel shift. Baelari sits with the child cradled against her breast, exhaustion and devotion written across her face. Raxiu bends in close, cooing the boy, tickling his cheeks, marveling at the way his fingers clutch hers. They laugh together at his snuffling cries, at the way he smacks his lips when dreaming.

The men hardly notice. Vorkhall and the Emperor nod at the child, remarking only, "He'll be a strong heir one day," before returning to discussions of power, bloodlines, and philosophy.

Their words drift over the women like smoke, irrelevant against the warmth of a tiny body nestled between them.

For Raxiu, the years bring something she hadn't expected: a slow, steady sense of control. She wears the mask, lives as a wife to a man she will never love, walks the edge of a blade with her secret pressed tight between her legs. But she finds a space, small but real. Baelari still reaches for her. The child curls in her arms.

One night, after a dinner at the Citadel, while the five of them lounge in a parlor somewhere, the two slip into the washroom, soiled child clutched to Baelari's chest. She lays Zhaka on the marble counter and dabs at him with a towel as he giggles, oblivious. Raxiu helps, deftly stripping the soiled cloth away, wiping his tiny legs, pressing a kiss to his soft cheek until he squeals.

Their hands brush as they work. Their eyes meet. Without words, Raxiu leans in, mouth finding Baelari's. It is clumsy at first, desperate, years of longing crashing into a single kiss. Baelari gasps against her, then seizes her jaw, pulling her closer. The child squeals again, as if in approval.

They break apart, breathless, foreheads touching.

"Fuck," Baelari whispers, smiling against her mouth. "If we had more time, I'd kill to remember what it's like to fuck someone who actually knows what they're doing." Raxiu laughs, a sound half-broken, half-relieved.

"I've missed this," she admits, voice raw. "I've missed fucking you, too."

Baelari kisses her again, slower this time, softer, until Zhaka squirms loudly between them. They pull back, both laughing quietly, tucking him back into Baelari's arms.

"Later," Baelari promises under her breath, though they both know later might never come.

Three more years slip by in the rhythm of the estate: banquets and councils, visits to the Citadel, stolen moments in corridors and washrooms where the guards turn a blind eye. Through it all, Zhaka grows. By five, he is a whirlwind of noise and curiosity. A tiny emperor in the making, darting through halls with a carved wooden sword, demanding stories at bedtime, climbing into laps he isn't invited to. His laugh is bright and unrestrained, his questions endless.

"Why does the rain make noise like that? Why do the guards follow me? Why can't I have a real sword?"

Baelari spoils him shamelessly, just as her father once spoiled her. When he demands another sweet, she gives him two. When he tires of his lessons, she shoos the tutors away and reads to him herself. He learns quickly that his mother's heart is a kingdom, and he rules it without resistance.

Raxiu loves him too, she can't help it. His chubby fingers tugging at her hair, his eager grin when she crouches to his height, his habit of curling against her skirts as if she is another safe harbor. Yet, sometimes, when she watches Baelari cradle him, jealousy gnaws at her chest. The kind she can never voice: that Baelari's body had born life, while hers never could. She presses her hands against her flat belly in quiet moments and feels the ache bloom sharp and bitter.

But then, in the same breath, reality steadies her. If she had the facilities, if she carried a child into this world, it would not be Baelari's. It would be Vorkhall's. She imagines his proud smirk, his speeches of evolutionary destiny wrapped around the existence of a child that would only reveal her secrets. And the jealousy dissolves into relief that she had been spared that kind of prison.

So she kisses Zhaka's cheeks when he throws himself into her arms, she laughs at his endless questions, she coos when he demands to show her his latest drawing of soldiers and Sith. And she lets herself be "Auntie Raxiu," the safe place just beyond his mother's shadow. But he was never theirs to keep.

Tenebrae speaks of it first, in that calm, measured way of his, over supper in the Citadel's private dining chamber.

"The boy shows promise," he says, as though discussing a weather report. "It is time he goes to the Academy on Korriban. Let him be shaped properly."

Baelari freezes, her spoon poised midair. "He's too young."

"He is exactly the right age," Tenebrae corrects, his tone mild and final. "Five years is when they begin. He will learn discipline, strength. He will be no more a pampered child."

"He's still a baby. He still sleeps with a night lamp, he still—" Her voice breaks, then rises sharper. "You can't take him from me."

Tenebrae's gaze slides toward her, not angry, but indifferent. He reaches for his goblet, then pauses. In a movement so sudden it shocks the air, he hurls the cup across the room. It smashes into the wall beside Baelari's head, wine streaking down like blood. Raxiu flinches, heart hammering, but Baelari doesn't move. She sits there, eyes wide, breath sharp in her chest, as though she'd been braced for this.

"Do not mistake indulgence for love," Tenebrae says softly. "He is not yours to keep. He is the future of the Sith, and he will serve that purpose."

The hall goes silent but for the drip of wine off the stone.

Two weeks later, Zhaka is gone. The boy clings to Baelari's skirts, sobbing, as the guards pry him off. His cries echo down the Citadel halls long after the shuttle takes off. Baelari stands in the doorway, gown wrinkled, face pale, hands shaking.

After that, the light fades from her again. She stops laughing. Stops singing. Even her conversations with Raxiu grow thin, stripped down to fragments. She moves through the Citadel like a ghost in silk, body present but spirit elsewhere. Her eyes look always toward the door, as if waiting for a child who will never come back. Raxiu tries to lift her. To coax her with touch, with whispers, with reminders of freedom and love. But Baelari only smiles faintly, a hollow curve of her mouth, and turns away.

Six years pass in the Citadel's shadow. By then, Zhaka is little more than an echo in Baelari's halls, a memory of laughter that no longer rings in the chambers, a child's drawings folded away in dressers Raxiu sometimes finds her staring at. Baelari speaks his name less and less, until it vanishes altogether from her lips. When she bears another child, the change is barely a ripple in the Citadel. The boy is smaller, quieter than Zhaka had been, with bright eyes that watch everything. Baelari names him Evath.

Raxiu is there, as she had been with Zhaka, cooing over the tiny red-skinned infant, marveling at his delicate fingers, his soft sighs. She expects Baelari to glow again, to seize this second chance with the same fierce devotion she'd given her firstborn. But she only holds him close, face pale, eyes hollow with exhaustion and something heavier. Desperation clings to her like a shroud, deeper, unshaken by the cries of a newborn.

When the boy is barely weaned, Baelari tells Raxiu her plan. They sit together in her chambers, the child asleep in her arms, moonlight silvering her hair.

"I'm sending him away," she whispers, not looking up. Raxiu's stomach lurches.

"Away? To where?"

"My cousin at the family estate. She still has some spine. She'll keep him from the Emperor's prying eyes." Baelari brushes her lips against Evath's crown, arms tightening. "He doesn't deserve this one." Raxiu stares at her, torn between relief and fear.

"If he finds out—"

"Then it will be my punishment," Baelari says flatly. "But at least one of my children will live without his shadow hanging over him." Her voice breaks on the last word. She presses her face into his barely-grown hair, shoulders shaking, though no tears come. Raxiu reaches out, resting a hand on her arm, but Baelari doesn't look at her. The closeness they once shared, the stolen kisses and whispers, feel far away now. There's a distance between them no words can close, a gulf carved by a world that had ground Baelari hollow. Raxiu withdraws her hand, heart aching.

A year after Evath's birth, Baelari vanishes. At first, it's subtle. Her seat left empty at a council dinner, her absence excused with murmurs of fatigue. Then her voice is missing from the opera house, her name missing from invitations, her laughter missing from the quiet corners of

the Citadel. Raxiu sends messages. They're never received. Her heart begins to thunder with panic. Days turn to weeks. Baelari is simply...gone.

At last, broken by silence, Raxiu goes to Vorkhall. She finds him in his study, bent over anatomical charts, ink smudging his hands. She falls to her knees, voice trembling.

"Please," she begs. "Tell me where she is." Vorkhall doesn't look up. His pen scratches paper, steady and uncaring.

"She was executed."

The words strike like a blade. He shakes his pen, calm as ever.

"The Emperor's command. That news is not to leave these walls, if you value your life." He finally looks at her, golden eyes sharp. "Do you understand me, wife?"

Raxiu can't answer. She stumbles back to her chambers, body trembling as though the words had cut her open. When the door shuts behind her, she collapses to the floor.

The sobs come raw, tearing, wracking her chest until her ribs ache. She presses her fists to her face, smearing her paint, pulling at her hair, choking on the sound of her own grief. She weeps until her voice is gone, until her body curls in on itself, until the only thought left in her mind is a hollow truth: the only person who had ever loved her is gone.

And the galaxy is emptier than it had ever been.

The year after Baelari's death is a void. Raxiu moves through it half-dead, her silks loose on her frame, her makeup forgotten, her hair unkempt. She spends nights curled on her floor, or at her mirror, whispering apologies to a face that can no longer answer.

But grief dulls eventually, as it always does. Her tears run out. Her voice returns. And slowly, she is reborn. Not as the woman Baelari had loved, but something harder. Stranger. Stripped down to hunger and survival. She starts sleeping around. Servants at first, then guards, sometimes commoners from the city who recognize her only as a noblewoman and care little for anything else. In those dark, hurried encounters, she finds relief. The thrill of being wanted. When one of them gasps at her body and doesn't recoil, it is enough. Vorkhall notices, of course. He comes to her chambers one evening with the smug curl of a man certain he'd cornered her.

"You're reckless," he says. "Your dalliances are no secret." Raxiu looks him in the eye, unflinching.

"Neither would yours. Take them, if you want. I already say I do not bed men."

For a moment, he seems poised to rage. But ambition dulls his temper, as always. He snorts, turns on his heel, and leaves her to bed. She doesn't hear any mistresses coming and going from his room.

Nearly a decade later, at a gathering in the Citadel's grand hall, Raxiu sees Zhaka again. He's tall now, broad shouldered, red skin gleaming in the firelight. A man, not the giggling child she had once cooed over. Just over twenty, he had been granted a seat on the Dark Council: Sphere of Expansion and Diplomacy, his master's legacy passed down. He carries himself with quiet authority, voice calm and measured when he greets Vorkhall. Raxiu stands nearby, silent in her silks, heart hammering. He reminds her so sharply of Baelari it makes her chest ache: the angle of his jaw, the curve of his smile, the fire in his eyes. For a moment, she worries he might recognize her. But his gaze passes over her without a flicker.

No one seems to know. The other Councilors greet him as they would any young ascendant, with guarded respect. None whisper of the Emperor's son. He bears no boast of it, either, no word of lineage, and none seem aware that Baelari's blood has slipped among them. Raxiu says nothing. She keeps her head bowed, her smile polite, and when the boy moves on, she lets him slip past without a word.

But her hands tremble. Because in him, she sees Baelari. And in him, she sees her chance. For the first time in years, Raxiu feels a purpose beyond survival stir in her chest. A plan. A dream of vengeance. Through Zhaka, she can strike at the Emperor who had stolen Baelari, who had destroyed the only love she'd ever known.

She will make Tenebrae pay.