

The ship groans through its frame as a bolt scrapes the hull plating, flaring orange-white across the viewport. Something in the ventral array blows, brief and sharp, too close to be the reactor. Tarek doesn't look up from the gunnery harness. His fingers are already correcting the targeting arc.

"That was the secondary," he mutters to his comm. "We lose one more and we're venting atmosphere."

He fires two shots. One glances off the skiff's tail, the next connects clearly. The patrol ship breaks apart just off their six, sparks spinning into the void.

"Tail's clear. You're welcome." No answer. "Vashari?"

Comms' down. Great. He unclips from the harness and vaults the bulkhead. The lights flicker twice but hold. The ship smells like heat and ozone: cracking insulation, pressure bleed. The deck under his boots tilts just a hair to the left from drag. Something outside is pulling them.

Vashari's hands work the ship's controls in fast, decisive flicks, but her face is calm. Too calm. The sort of stillness brought about by freefall.

"We're locked," Tarek says, not a question. She doesn't answer. He leans forward to look out the viewport. The Dreadnaught looms in orbit, descending over them like a blade. No cartel markings, no mercenary scarring. Just clean black durasteel and the quiet hunger of authority. Sith.

"They're not supposed to be here," he says. His voice sounds small.

"No," Vashari breathes. "They're not." Tarek's stomach drops. He leans back to face her.

"You said they'd just flag us, flicker a couple of comms, try to pull us back to grid—"

"I was wrong." She turns to face him, expression stone. "They weren't actually chasing us." That stops him cold. She doesn't need to explain it. Of course they did – a pair of well-trained Jedi, perfect for extraction as a favor to a Sith Lord. No paperwork, no mess. He exhales sharply through his nose.

"We need to go now. Punch the ventral thrusters, force a roll. We hit atmospheric drift—"

"We don't have time."

"Then we split—"

"There's only one pod."

"We both fit."

"Tarek."

"We both fit, Vashari!" She stands.

“Then we both die.” He steps away from her, backing toward the viewport like distance might fix everything.

“Don’t you dare.”

“You need a distraction, Tarek.”

“I’m not a fucking child anymore,” he says. “You don’t get to throw me in a pod like some padawan who can’t handle the heat.” She takes a careful step forward, hands flexing into loose fists.

“I’m your superior, I can do exactly that.”

He lunges, fist swinging. She sidesteps, grips his jacket, and slams him sideways into the bulkhead. He hits back just as hard, grabbing her arm and trying to pivot her toward the floor. She drops, rolls, springs up behind him. They crash into the corridor wall.

“Please,” she pants, “stop fighting.” He throws his elbow back, connecting it with her cheek. She grunts but doesn’t break. Instead, she drives her foot into the back of his knee and drags him through the open hatch toward the pod bay. He claws at the walls. She knees him in the thigh again. His leg buckles. She gets him half-lifted, half-dragged to the outer ring of the pod chamber.

“Let me go!” he snarls.

“No.”

“You’re making a mistake—”

“I’ve made worse.”

They reach the pod. It’s small, barely a coffin with thrusters. The interior is dark, the screen flickering static. Tarek twists in her grip, trying to shove her off. She snaps her arms around his waist, pivots, and drives him into the pod with her whole bodyweight. He lands hard on the back panel; air knocked from his lungs. Before he can get back up, she hits the hatch. The seal locks with a hydraulic whine.

He slams both fists against the glass, shouting something that’s swallowed by the vacuum. Vashari’s stares back at him, face lit by red emergency backlight. Her cheek is bleeding, her jaw set.

“I’ll find you on the surface.”

She releases the pod.

The launch kicks harder than Tarek expected. Gravity slams into his spine and whiplashes him against the rear bulkhead before correcting with a mechanical hum. He shoves upright, ignores the ache in his ribs, and braces a hand against the side rail.

Stars spill open ahead. Nar Shaddaa glows below him, slick with atmospheric haze and light pollution. The Dreadnaught floats high above the moon's orbit, clean and angular. Vashari's ship tears out of the tractor field, arcing beneath the Dreadnaught's bow and flaring the engines. She pivots to whip the ship just above the bridge – ensuring all attention is on her ship. Something moves across the hull. A hangar bay, narrow and opening. A ship drops free, small and burnless. A retrieval vessel.

Tarek's heartbeat spikes. He turns to the pod controls, runs his hands across the interface. No response. He tries the manual override. Nothing. It's dead. He's a sitting duck. He takes a deep breath. Rolls his shoulder twice, tests his elbow, and unclips his lightsaber from his belt.

Outside, the retrieval vessel shifts orientation, drawing a clean line straight for the pod. Tarek slides his back into the wall, weapon in hand, and waits.

The pod jolts under the magnetic arms, caught and pulled like freight. Stabilizers whine faintly. The interior lights adjust with each correction, drifting right, up, right again, guided by a ship Tarek can't see. The stars wheel outside the viewport. The hangar bay yawns open like jaws, lit and waiting.

A flare cuts across the edge of his vision. Vashari's ship arcs beneath the Dreadnaught's midline, engines hot, flight path erratic, full of false momentum as she baits the tractor beam. He leans forward instinctively, palms braced on either side of the viewport as if he could will her to look left, to see the pod trailing beneath the Dreadnaught like caught meat. She banks again. Her path shifts, ship looping wide across the retrieval vector, and for one, frozen instant, she's directly in front of him. Full view, close enough to see the profile of her hull, etched scarring on the portside wing, the heat-shimmer of the rear thrusters.

She sees him. She has to. He exhales, easing his shoulders and loosening his grip on the lightsaber. She's going with him. They'll fight out of the hangar together. He shifts position slightly, letting the pull of the retrieval ship guide him. The Dreadnaught grows larger. The hangar swallows the pod. The lighting shifts to artificial white on gray, silent and pressure-balanced. The bay doors behind him close.

Then, a shift. Subtle. Internal. Like his bones drop half an inch out of alignment. The pull hits low in his spine, forward and down, then steadies. The soft, absolute lurch of a ship slipping into hyperspace. The pod vibrates once, then stills. Tarek doesn't breathe.

There's nothing to see now, no stars outside the viewport. Just the clean metal of the hangar, the closed doors behind him, and the stale, recirculated air inside a sealed pod.

Vashari's ship isn't here. They didn't catch her. Didn't even try. The hangar lights stay static: no alarms, no flares, no shift in pressure that might mean a second retrieval in motion. Just the slow, methodical repositioning of loading arms as his pod is slotted into place.

She's not coming. The Sith didn't give her the chance. They weren't greedy, they were confident. They'd made their choice the second the tractor beam locked. Split the pair, lock down the weaker ship, retrieve what they could. One Jedi is enough.

Tarek lowers his lightsaber slowly. His muscles don't ache yet. They will later. He leans back against the curved pod wall, eyes fixed on the sealed doors ahead. The Dreadnaught vibrates around him, quiet and total. It's not like flying commercial lanes or riding Republic ships. There's no thruster groan, no crew chatter over comms, no swell of engine banks cycling. Just that deep, arterial hum of something living beneath the walls.

He's alone. Vashari's ship is gone. Nar Shaddaa, the Republic border lanes, the outer moons, all gone. His pod is still sealed, untouched, but it won't be for long. There's no reason to rush. They have him now. Whole. Disarmed only by timing.

He rests his back against the wall. Closes his eyes. The Dreadnaught hums around him, patient.

Time slides strangely in the pod. Could be minutes. Could be hours. The lights don't shift. The air doesn't cycle. There's no sound but his pulse and the low machinery beneath his boots. Eventually, something changes. The pressure shifts in the airlock. The kind of calibration belonging to vaults and surgical bays. He knows the rhythm. He's breached bunkers with less precision. It's time.

Tarek stands. Turns the lightsaber once in his hand, emitter angled. He doesn't check it. If it fails, it fails. He'll use just the hilt if he has to. His feet square to the hatch. He exhales once as the doors behind to part.

Light floods in, harsh and white. A corridor opens before him, just wide enough to free movement. Two figures stand toward the end of it. No markings, no faces, just black plastoid, matte and thick. Enforcers. Built to contain Jedi.

He doesn't hesitate.

The first one lunges and Tarek slams the saber through his stunstaff, clean through the center, then drives the blade through the man's chest. He kicks him off and spins into the second. This one's faster. He sidesteps, bringing a chargepike up toward Tarek's ribs. Tarek drops low, slices across the weapon's shaft, then turns the edge and forces the man back with an aggressive swing. His saber hums like a promise, but the hallway's already filling.

Six more, at least. Probably more behind them. Black armor, closed helmets, stun pikes and bolts primed. They fire. Tarek deflects the first, the second bolt slams into his left shoulder, lighting up his nerves. He clenches on his saber, white-knuckled, and steps through it. They expect him to go low. He doesn't. He slashes across a faceplate, twists midair and lands hard, driving his elbow into someone's ribs, twisting his legs to force space. They swarm him.

Another stun bolt tags his back. Then one in the side. His body stutters. His grip tightens. A charge pike glances off his thigh. His leg folds. He goes down to one knee, snarls, pushes off the floor, and drives the saber straight up into a guard's shoulder. He stops tracking the number of soldiers. He just moves. Cuts. Bashes with the hilt when he can't get the angle. Eventually, they converge. Two pikes hit at once – his back and his side. Full current. His limbs lock. His jaw clenches hard enough to click. His swing slashes wide, clumsy and desperate. It drives them back a step, enough for him to half-drag his body upright. His vision tunnels.

He tightens both hands on his hilt, blade angled forward. His legs don't answer on time. Another jolt, direct to the chest. The muscles in his arms seize. He collapses hard onto the durasteel floor, knees, then ribs, then face. The saber thuds beside him, smoking from the emitter.

He tries to crawl. One elbow drags forward. His fingers twitch toward the hilt desperately. A breath rattles in his throat. One more second. One more chance.

He doesn't get it.

A boot swings into view, hard and precise. Full-body weight. It slams into the side of his skull like a closing door. Light shears sideways. The deck blurs. Sound crunches into silence. His limbs lock, then slacken. Everything caves inward into a long, falling dark.

Tarek wakes to the throb of his own pulse. It hurts to open his eyes – one of them is nearly swollen shut. His face feels split at the brow, damp with half-dried blood. The air around him is cold, not freezing but sterile. He tries to move, but his arms don't answer. They're bound, wrists pulled high above his head, legs slack beneath him. He hangs in a suspension field, energy crackling faintly at the joints, magnetic restraints biting just below his bone. Every breath drags across sore ribs. His shoulders ache. His saber is gone.

He blinks once. twice. The cell comes into focus: durasteel walls, an embedded strip of lightning overhead, a curved pressure field humming faintly between him and the door. It hisses open.

The man who enters doesn't look Sith. He's quiet. Neat. Mid-thirties, clean shaven, pale. No facial tattoos, no warped implants. He wears high-collared black robes with fine embroidery along the sleeves and a small insignia at the throat. It's expensive, but not ostentatious. His hair is combed flat. His boots are silent on the metal floor. He looks like a wealthy tutor.

"Did you know," he says, tone conversational, "that the Hutts still consider your people to be legally reclaimable property? There's a clause in the old Outer Rim Accords. Standard contract boilerplate, really." He steps closer to Tarek, eyes gleaming with a faint yellow glow.

"They could ask for you by name. Pay a few thousand credits, take you back in chains. Maybe brand you this time. But you're lucky," he adds, voice low now. "We got to you first."

Tarek closes his eyes. He doesn't need to hear this. The man taps something on the wall panel. The containment field tightens, not visibly, but Tarek feels it. A pull in his gut, a shift in pressure. Like gravity inverts inside his skin. Pain blossoms in the soft tissue beneath his ribs. His arms spasm in their sockets. He bites down hard and holds his breath.

"I'm not here to hurt you," the Sith says gently. "I'm just here to ask questions. If you answer them, the pain stops. That's the deal."

The field pulses again. This time it spikes hard through his spine, up into his shoulders, down behind his knees. Tarek cries out – he can't help it. It tears loose before he can stop it. His legs jerk, the back of his heel clicks into the containment field wall.

"Your master," the man says softly, watching him writhe. "The Twi'lek. A shadow, I believe. You were stationed together in Hutt space, under false names. What was hers?"

Tarek gasps through clenched teeth. He doesn't speak.

"No?"

A flick of the wrist. Another shock, sharper this time. Straight through the diaphragm. His lungs lock. The restraint field hums louder.

"I said I'd stop the pain. You only have to talk."

Tarek's body jerks again, sudden and graceless, like a fish on a hook. His chest heaves as the field relaxes. He coughs. His head lolls forward. Something warm drips from his ear.

"What was her name?"

The next jolt feels longer. It burns up through his stomach, his ribs, the back of his jaw. His teeth grind. His knees buckle.

"You don't have to do this the hard way," the Sith says. "You're not a soldier, you're just a kid."

Tarek tries to hold the silence in his mouth, but it's too much.

"...Aelis." His voice is barely audible. A whisper soaked in shame.

"And you?"

"Keir." It's not his real name, but it leaves him like truth. He feels sick.

"And the girl?" the man presses, stepping closer. "The one you split from." Tarek hesitates. He's shivering now. His tunic is soaked through.

"Vex," he chokes out.

"No other codenames?"

He shakes his head. His neck barely responds. The Sith logs the names without looking up.

“She’s not dead, for what it’s worth. We’d have felt it. Someone like that doesn’t disappear.” He touches the panel again. The containment field flares, not offering Tarek pain but more pressure, like a hand on the back of his skull, pushing inward. His vision dims.

“Who sits on the Jedi Council now?” the Sith asks, calm and measured. “I want real names, clearance designations, shadow permissions.” Tarek blinks through tears. The names burn behind his eyes. He can’t—

Another pulse. It folds him. A scream dies somewhere in his chest.

“I said it doesn’t have to be like this.”

Another jolt, this one breaks something in his leg. He hears it before he feels it, a clean, wet snap. He cries out again, hoarse and broken.

“Just one code,” he says. “A temple access sigil. One clean key.”

Tarek doesn’t remember saying it, but it leaves his mouth like blood from a wound. A code, one of the older ones, probably expired. He prays it’s expired.

“Good,” the man murmurs. “Very good.” He enters it into the panel. Tarek hears the tone confirm: access accepted.

The field relaxes just enough to let him sag forward, trembling in place. His knees dangle uselessly below him. His fingers twitch like wire-stripped nerves. His teeth chatter, even though the cell isn’t cold.

“You see how easy it is?” the Sith says. His voice isn’t gloating, it’s worse. Kind. “Now, let’s finish this strong. Who sits on the Jedi Council?”

He clamps his jaw shut. The pressure comes again, not as sharp this time, but persistent, gently pressing the bones behind his eyes. His vision swims. He chokes on his own breath. His left hand spasms open.

“Who sits on the Council, Padawan?”

“...Grandmaster Sunrider.” His voice is so quiet it barely registers.

“Go on.”

“...Vrok. Zez-Kai Ell.”

“And?” He blinks hard, trying to focus. His thoughts are sludge. Every answer feels like he’s coughing up teeth. He swallows bile. His throat is raw.

“Kaste. Master Sokarre.” His voice cracks.

“Who else?” He tries. He really does. He squeezes his eyes shut and reaches for names he’s heard in passing, in temple halls, in encrypted reports sent to Neryss late at night. But they don’t come. He can see their faces. A Mirialan. A Cerean. That Rodian with the carved staff. But their names are gone.

“...I don’t remember.”

“You do.”

“I don’t,” he croaks.

“You don’t want to. There’s a difference.”

Another pulse. He stifles a sob. His whole body shudders.

“Try again.”

“I can’t—”

“Do you know what they’ll do to you when they learn you gave this up?” he asks, tone strong but gentle. “Do you think they’ll forgive you? That they’ll welcome you home?”

Tarek’s throat works around a dry gasp. His mouth tastes like metal and ash.

“You’re alone now, Keir,” the Sith says. “No master. No temple. No escape pods.”

The pressure stops. His limbs feel cold in its absence now.

“Sleep while you can,” he says, lower now. “You’ll need your tongue for tomorrow.”

The door seals behind him.

Silence takes the room like fog, thick and invasive. The energy field buzzes at the edges of Tarek’s awareness, a cage of low vibration holding his limbs in strained suspension. His arms ache from their angle. His shoulders burn. Blood trickles from the corner of his mouth where a molar is cracked. He hears himself echoing in his head. The sound of his voice naming Council members, stumbling through clearance codes, failing to hold his tongue. Trying to measure which answers might be harmless. They weren’t. He knows they weren’t.

He blinks slowly. Sweat clings to his lashes. His vision swims with light and memory. Master Sunrider. Sokarre. Vrook. Zez-Kai Ell. And that Rodian. He doesn’t see her face clearly, just her staff, her soft-spoken questions. He sees her in flashes now, somewhere between a training hall and the gardens on Ossus, and it turns his stomach. He should know. Should remember.

You were never ready for this, he thinks, and this time, he can’t argue with himself. His jaw locks. The field hums. A part of him wants to scream, just to fill the silence, but he stays quiet. If he opens his mouth, he might not be able to close it again.

He gave up names. He gave up his Master.

His chest clenches, not from the bruised ribs, but something deeper in the part of him that once believed he'd make Knight someday. That Neryss would be there for the ceremony. That Vashari would joke about it, call him dramatic, ruffle his hair and remind him not to faint in front of the Council. But that was before.

A sick thought blooms at the edge of his mind: *What if this was always how it ends? Not in battle. Not protecting anyone. But strung up like a child, giving away the whole Temple.*

Neryss is more than likely dead. And he helped make it meaningless. And Vashari – if she knew what he told them, would she even come?

His breath shudders, but he forces it down. No. She's out there. She saw the pod. She looked at him. He repeats it in his mind, trying to outpace the fear galloping behind it. But something's already shifted, something vital and low in his gut; a shame he's never carried before. A quiet suspicion that maybe he's already too far gone. That maybe the Jedi don't want him back.

Maybe they shouldn't.

Tarek swallows hard, throat scraped raw. The sting of betrayal sits heavy behind his teeth. He closes his eyes, not in prayer or meditation, but to stop seeing the door in front of him and who might not be waiting behind it.

The days stop mattering. He counts jumps instead.

He doesn't know what system they're in, not from the inside of his cage. But the moment they slip to hyperspace, he knows. His gut pulls sideways, just enough to tell.

Twenty-two times. Tarek counts the shifts like clockwork. He doesn't bother tracking the hours between. There's no sun, no shift rotation, no schedule. Just hunger. Pain. Sleep when it claims him. Screams when they drag him out. The Sith doesn't ask the same questions anymore. He's already gotten what he needed: names, Council seats, their codenames from different Hutt territories. Tarek had given his own name away two days in, muttered between sobs and bile. The pain had stopped after that. For one night. Then new questions came. Movement patterns. Temple clearance levels. Assignments. Were there more Shadows embedded in Hutt space? What names did they go by?

When Tarek falters, he's beaten. When he lies, the cage tightens, a silent pulse through his spine that blurs his vision and wrings the air from his lungs. Somedays, they just use the field. Sometimes a blade. Once, a vibro-prod across the soles of his feet until they blistered. He tried silence once. They cut his shoulder open and left it to clot.

“You can stop this, you know,” the Sith says during the fourth session. His voice is always smooth and quiet. He sets tools down like a medic preparing for surgery. “You weren’t meant to suffer, not you, not your kind.” He steps forward, eye-level with Tarek’s broken form, fingers slick with something Tarek’s not ready to name.

“Pain isn’t your nature; you were bred to serve. It’s in your blood. You kneel better than you fight.”

Tarek says nothing. But his hands curl tighter in the restraints, even as his vision spots. Later, he dreams of the dunes on Sriluur. Of his cousin’s neck caught in a slaver’s chain. Of his mother turning away when the brand came down. Of the Jedi Temple. Of Neryss, trying to scrub out what history couldn’t erase. He wakes up with tears wet on his cheeks.

By the twentieth jump, they stop pretending it’s for information. The Sith comes and goes. Tarek learns to dread the sound of boots more than silence. There’s nothing they want now, just for him to break. And he is breaking. He can feel it in his breath, the way it stutters when he remembers Coruscant. The shame when he thinks of Vashari. The way he no longer rehearses her arrival in his mind.

They say she’s looking. They tell it to him like it’s a kindness. Like it should give him hope.

“She’s carved through three ships looking for you,” he says one day, trailing a gloved finger under Tarek’s chin. “We had to reroute. She’s predictable. Emotional.” He lets the words settle.

“She’s not getting to you.”

They dock on Nal Hutta on a wet morning, by Tarek’s best guess. The humidity hits like a punch, hot and heavy with the stink of rot thick enough to taste. They drag him outside. Barefoot. Filthy. Shackled at the wrists, ankles, and neck. His feet slip on the muck as the guards shove him down to his knees on a slick metal platform half-sunken into the swamp. The durasteel burns beneath him, hot from the smog-choked sun above.

A Hutt lounges beneath a stretched canopy, bloated and bored, glistening with sweat and oil. There’s raw meat on the low table beside it, wriggling. Flies buzz lazily around the carcasses. The Hutt’s voice rolls over the clearing in slow, slurred syllables.

“Thin. Filthy. What makes you think this one is worth returning?”

Tarek’s stomach turns. The words hit with a familiarity he despises; too fluent, too clean in his head. He’s spoken this language since he could speak, forced to learn it before he could learn his own. Forced to beg in it. Bargain in it. Listen to it shouted at his people while they knelt.

“We wish to honor the blood debt,” the Sith replies smoothly, speaking Huttese with the ease of a diplomat. He places a gloved hand on Tarek’s head like he’s showing off livestock. “This one’s a Jedi, caught during a covert operation on Nar Shaddaa. He was embedded with two others. One’s dead, the other’s still hunting us. If you want them both, keep him. She’ll come to you.” The Hutt scoffs.

“I don’t need to bait a Jedi girl. I want a return on my investment. You say this one’s a Jedi?”

“Trained, young, loyal.” The Sith smiles. “Still moldable, still new enough to break properly. You’ll have him singing by nightfall.” Tarek grits his teeth, nostrils flaring.

“You’re overselling,” he mutters in Huttese, voice quiet and cracked from dehydration. The Sith’s hand tightens in his hair. He forces Tarek’s face up.

“Look at him – he speaks your tongue. Even sounds native. This one knows his place, you just have to...remind him.” The Hutt wheezes a laugh, the folds of its belly quivering.

“He does have the eyes of a slave. You said the girl is still looking?”

“She’s carved through three of our ships,” the Sith says. “Likely won’t stop until she’s captured or killed. If you’d be so gracious, we’d like to buy him off you. Let us take him to Dromund Kaas. If she wants him badly enough, she’ll follow. And when she does...” He lets the implication hang. The Hutt considers.

“Three thousand.”

“Two and a kilo of spice.” A long pause.

“Fine. Take the whelp.”

Credits exchange hands. Not enough. Never enough. Tarek stares at the dirt and tastes ash. The Sith’s voice dips low in his ear, still in Huttese.

“You see? That’s how much you’re worth.”

He doesn’t remember standing, doesn’t remember being dragged back aboard the ship. Just the heat. The wet air. The feeling of being spoken about instead of spoken to. Like a beast in a pen. Like he was back on Sriluur.

They don’t speak to him on the ride back up. They drag him like refuse past the loading droids and rusted hull plating, back into the belly of the Sith vessel that’s been his coffin for nearly a month. He’s barely able to stretch his legs before they throw him back into the containment field. It hums to life with a high, eerie whine. The same blue light, the same restraints. His arms suspended just enough to ache, legs just short of support. He’s stopped fighting against the angle. The field wins every time.

He counts time by the vibrations of hyperspace. By the ache in his jaw. By how many times his cracked molar pulses. For three days, no one visits him. No water. No food. Just recycled air and the muffled sound of boots outside the walls. When he sleeps, he wakes gagging. When he dreams, he sees the Hutt's smile and hears the Sith's voice telling him how many credits he's worth.

On the fourth day, the ship slows. He feels the drop in speed – it rattles his ribs like a tuning fork. Another planet. Another cell. Maybe this time, they'll decide he's not worth it and just let him die.

The door slides open with a hiss. Two troopers unhook him from the field and let him fall. He barely catches himself on his forearms. They yank him upright and march him down a narrow corridor, then down again to a smaller transport in the hangar bay. One of the officers mutters coordinates to the pilot as they approach the ship. He tries to listen. The numbers mean nothing.

The interior of the shuttle is narrow, dark, colder than the Dreadnaught. There are no seats. No guards sitting nearby. Just hard panels of durasteel and a strip of low lighting along the floor like a warning line. Tarek's footsteps echo for only a second before they shove him to his knees. He doesn't even resist this time.

They work quickly. Lock a thick metal collar around his neck; it hisses as it contracts, then locks to the wall behind him with a grinding ka-chk. The pressure is constant, pressing into the base of his skull and the soft underside of his throat like a hand gripping him from behind. One Sith kneels beside him and drags his arms outward, shackling his wrist on either side, splayed wide against the panel like some effigy nailed in warning.

He can't breathe properly, not without stillness, not without perfect posture. The second he relaxes, even a little, the collar starts to bite.

The door hisses shut.

There's no sound now but the engines winding up. The ship shudders once, then again. Gravity shifts beneath his ribs as they descend through the atmosphere.

He could fight this. He knows he could. His heart isn't racing, his limbs still function, however sore. The Force coils behind his ribs like a muscle flexed out of habit. He could drag the cuffs from the wall. He could strip the bolts. Could rip the collar off and crush it with a single thought. Even now, the metal hums under his skin. It's not strong enough to stop him. Not really.

He doesn't move. He doesn't try. The air rasps against his throat. His vision flashes in gray. He chokes quietly for a few seconds, until he adjusts, finds the one position that lets him breathe without collapse. Eyes forward. Neck tensed. Arms slack but shoulders tight. Back curved into the pain. He stays there. Voluntarily.

He could break out. Kill every Sith on this ship and jump to Coruscant. But he doesn't want to.

The realization lands with a weight worse than the restraints. He doesn't want to move. He doesn't want to fight. He breathes through the collar. Slow, controlled, ugly. Shame wells in his throat like a gag. Vashari would fight. Neryss would fight. And he's here, bolted to a wall, praying not to move. He can feel the Force curling in his gut, patient and unjudging. Ready. Willing. But it doesn't come to him like it used to. He doesn't let it.

Because if he breaks out, where does he go? Not home. Not back to the Temple, not after what he's done. So he kneels. Quiet. Alone.

The descent begins fast, sharp. Through the narrow viewport, he sees jagged mountains, crimson sands. A desert that stretches past the horizon. And then, rising from the rock like it was built the day the planet was, a temple. It claws at the sky.

Tarek's stomach tightens. Dromund Kaas isn't a desert. He doesn't know how he knows, only that he's certain.

The Force slips through his bones like infection. It doesn't welcome him here. There's no light, no presence, no whisper of Vashari's mind, no distant warmth of the Temple. The Force wraps tight around the planet like a closed fist. He feels it press against his skin, inside his lungs. A seeping rot. He tries to open himself to it, to feel anything, but it curls back into his chest like a blade turned inward. An empty pit. Not even silence, just weight.

By the time they land, he can't stand on his own. The guards don't seem to care. They drag him out like cargo, shoulders slung over armored arms, feet scraping the ramp as they haul him from the shuttle. The air outside is arid and bitter. The sand whips sideways in the wind. He sees the Vault as they approach; a gash in the rock, dark and yawning. Like a wound never scabbed over.

They descend down a ramp of stone carved by tools, into a cavern beneath the earth, a place that smells of old things: blood, rust, incense, time itself. The torches along the walls burn unnaturally slow, flickering without heat. He sees shadows moving where no one stands, hears metal groan even when the walls are still. He's not in a prison; he's in a trophy room.

The guards don't speak. One unlocks a cell. Bare stone, a sloped floor, a single drain. No cot. No field. No chain to the wall. They throw him in.

His knees hit first. He curls inward, cheek to the stone, and stays there. They don't bother activating anything, they just leave him. Like meat in storage. The door slams shut behind them with a finality that echoes through the vault.

And just like that, he's alone. No signal from the Force, no feeling of Vashari out there, burning through ship after ship to find him. No light. Just the hum of old rot in the stone and the gnawing emptiness inside his own chest.

He stares at the ceiling. The carved stone looks down at him, cracked and leering.

Time ceases to pass in any way that matters. No light filters through the walls. No rhythm marks the days. Tarek exists in fragments: sleep, thirst, cold, nausea. Hunger sharpens into pain, then dulls to a throb, then returns anew. He chews the inside of his cheek until it bleeds, just to feel something trickle down his throat. Whenever the dizziness begins to fray his thoughts, he hears the grind of the metal hatch and the dull scrape of a tray being shoved through.

He never sees who delivers it. Just a slop of broth, or water that tastes faintly of copper and oil. Once, a few grey strips of dried meat. A cup so bitter he vomits it up half an hour later and cries from the exertion. He learns to sip water slowly, ration food in morsels. But sometimes he fails, devours it all, vomits afterward.

At first, he tries to meditate, to focus. He holds positions for as long as his trembling limbs allow, tries to reach for the Force. Finds nothing. Korriban swallows it whole. The Dark Side looms thick in the stone, humming just beyond the edge of comprehension, blotting out the light like ash in his lungs.

Weeks pass, or at least what feels like weeks. He marks the trays at first, tries to count them, keeps track on the wall in shallow nail-scratches. But his body betrays him. He loses time, loses memory. One day he wakes and half the marks are gone. He doesn't know if he made them up.

The first time he hears her voice, he thinks he's dreaming.

"Don't eat it all. You'll throw up again."

He startles, whips around. The cell is empty. He presses his fists into his eyes. Breathes hard. A few hours later, he sees her again. Vashari. Leaning against the opposite wall, arms crossed, lekku dark with sweat and dust. She doesn't look at him, just watches the door. He curls into himself, jaw clenched.

"You're not real," he mutters. She doesn't answer.

That night, Neryss sits beside him. Her hand is warm on his back. She hums a lullaby he remembers from Sriluur. He lets his head tilt toward her shoulder. When he opens his eyes, he's alone.

The hallucinations become regularity. Vashari crouches by the tray slit, inspecting the food before he eats it. Neryss paces in circles, lecturing about rationing, about resilience. Other times, she's collapsed at the edge of the cell, insides torn open, eyes glazed over.

"You left me," she says, voice like gravel. "I bought you time, and this is what you did with it?"

Then come the flashes. A youngling he once trained with, dead on the floor. His mother as she looked when he left Sriluur, face twisted in worry, lips mouthing his name in a voice he can no longer remember. His own reflection, bloodied and slack-jawed, chained to the ground like a feral cat. Neryss sits beside him while Vashari screams in the corner. Vashari rubs his back as his mother weeps through her fingers. They argue with one another over him. Over what he's done.

"Council names," Neryss says once, mouth pulled into a sneer. "Clearance codes. You gave them everything."

"I didn't mean—" Tarek croaks.

"You did," Vashari says softly. She isn't angry. That makes it worse.

Some nights he's curled on the floor, shaking, and one of them will stroke his hair, whisper quiet things. *Breathe. You're not lost yet. I'm here.* A comfort. A lie. But he clings to it.

His mind begins to warp the cell itself. The corners move. The walls lean closer some days, then drift wide apart. He dreams the floor splits open to reveal Coruscant beneath. He smells flowers, spice, blood. He wakes in the Temple archives. Then the streets of Nar Shadda. Then the quiet cell, shaking, alone, wrong.

The Force is gone from him. The planet itself devours it, swallows every feeling, every thread of presence. It used to hum in his chest like a pulse. Now, it's quiet. Like the breath of someone sleeping very far away. He misses it more than he misses food. More than sleep, more than safety. He misses being a Jedi. He misses being someone.

When sleep finds him again, he dreams of Vashari in the open doorway of the cell, looking down at him with pity.

"You didn't deserve this," she whispers.

He doesn't believe her.

The hiss of the lock is the first thing to snap Tarek awake. Not a memory, not a delusion, something solid. He flinches before he processes it. Light spills across the floor like acid. Boots follow. Heavy. Real.

He doesn't lift his head. He can't. When the first hand grabs his arm, his body tenses out of instinct, not conscious resistance. The strike to his ribs makes him gasp, brings his consciousness crashing back through his skull. Someone says something in Huttese, he understands the slur, even if the accent is foreign. Lazy dog. Worthless beast. He almost laughs. They're right.

They drag him somewhere new. Somewhere loud with footsteps and stale with air. He feels stairs, or maybe just the slope of the ground. He blinks and catches sight of a figure walking ahead of him. Pink skin, braided lekku. He blinks again, and she's gone.

The vault is colder than his cell. He didn't think that's possible. He's thrown to the floor and rolled half-conscious until iron clamps around his ankle. A collar snaps tight around his throat, pinching his pulse. That's when he sees her.

A woman in the center of the room, not a guard. Togruta. Black robes. Face carved of stone. He thinks she's Vashari for a minute before he catches himself. Different colors. Montrals less ears and more horns. She says nothing, just watches him with yellow eyes.

She doesn't speak on the first day. Instead, she examines him. Her hands are slow. Cold. She turns his face side to side like inspecting the bruises matters. Sometimes she kneels close enough that he can smell the oil on her robes, spiced and metallic. When he whimpers, she backhands him. When he sobs, she stuffs a cloth into his mouth and watches as he struggles, lips foaming red. She feeds him, though. By hand, like a beast. Places a bowl of water just far enough that he has to drag his aching body across the stone to reach it. Every time he moves, the collar cuts into his throat. When he lays still too long, she pours cold water down his back.

At night, the hallucinations return. Vashari sits near his head and tells him he has to hold out. That someone will come. That the Order would never forget its own. Neryss, standing with her arms folded, silent, shakes her head. Her robes are torn open, her chest concave.

"I'm sorry," he whispers to her. The slap isn't from Neryss, it's from the woman. She crouches over him like a spider and tilts his face back with a sharp nail.

Days later, she finally speaks.

"You're a Padawan," she says smoothly. "What master abandoned you here?" He tries not to answer, but his mouth moves anyway.

"Kralan. Neryss Kralan."

"Still alive?" He hesitates. Neryss is beside him again, half her face blasted beyond recognition. Watching him oh so gently.

"I don't know," he lies. The woman hits him hard enough to split his ear.

“Don’t lie to me.” Neryss glances over at Tarek. She extends a bubbling, scorched arm and caresses his cheek.

“It’s okay,” she says softly, voice crackling with pain. “You know it’s true.” He can’t meet her eyes.

“...No.”

“Good.”

She drags her nails down his back, slow and deliberate. When blood rises, she dips her fingers in a basin of saltwater and presses them into the wounds. He screams. When he looks up, Vashari is crouching in front of him, face twisted in pain. That night, he whispers apologies to her and feels the woman look up in warning. He doesn’t try again.

He loses track of how many days pass. The beatings become routine. Her footsteps always sound the same: slow, deliberate, clean. Eventually, she starts speaking to him again, asking him about his missions.

“Hutt space,” he mutters. “Weapons tracing. Shadow fieldwork.”

“A shadow,” she repeats, circling. Her presence is suffocating. “The irony never burned you?” He blinks up at her, uncomprehending. She leans in close enough for her breath to warm his cheek. “You. A Weequay. Sent to serve the Hutts.”

“I wasn’t serving—”

“No?” her voice turns glacial. “Then what was it? Did you kneel for them? Did they laugh when they saw your braids?” He clenches a fist, instinct more than rebellion, but she notices. She pulls a pin from her belt and, without ceremony, drives it through the webbing between his fingers. He screams, a high, unrecognizable noise. She leans in close.

“Say thank you,” she whispers, brushing the tears from his eyelids.

“...Thank you.” Vashari and Neryss echo his words. She smiles and strokes his hair.

“You’re learning.”

He starts dreaming of Sriluur again. His sister with no eyes, his father speaking with Vashari’s voice. Sometimes, the woman wearing Neryss’ robes tells him she is proud of him. He starts to believe it. When she asks who would come rescue him, he tries to lie. Fails. She brings the guards back in and they break his ribs again. Split his lips. Pop his shoulder halfway out of socket. Later that night, she returns alone. Quiet footsteps. A warm cloth. A plate of bread dusted with sugar. He weeps when she places it beside him.

“Who is coming to save you?” she asks, voice velvet.

“...Vashari,” he whispers. “Vashari Vex.” The woman’s expression doesn’t change. He keeps going because her silence terrifies him. “She took care of me. Stayed behind so I could run.”

She crouches low. Her hands are cold as they brush his jawline.

“And?”

“I don’t know what happened to her.” She lifts his chin gently.

“She failed.”

The words hit harder than her whip ever had. Something in his chest folds inward. His breath tightens. There’s no scream, no protest, just a hollow silence, too big to fill. For a second, he forgets how to move. He sees Vashari, just off to the side, face contorted in horror, tears streaking her patterns, eyes red from weeping. She’s shackled, bruised, reaching for him through the dark.

“No!” she screams. “I tried I tried I tried I—”

She’s gone.

The breath leaves him like a wound reopening. His vision blurs. He stares straight past the woman, trying to hold onto the memory of Vashari’s laugh, but all he can hear is her scream echoing through the cell like a ghost. No one’s coming. No one can come. She was the last soul in the galaxy who knew where he was and now she’s gone.

In the corner, Neryss watches him quietly, lips bloodless. She doesn’t speak, just shakes her head once and fades back into shadow. The woman’s grip tightens on his jaw. She yanks his face back toward hers.

“She failed,” she says again, slower this time. Crueler. He doesn’t blink. “She failed, and now she’s mine.”

That night, the floor is scrubbed with ice. They strip him without ceremony, rough hands peeling cloth from bone, leaving bruises where fingers dig. The cold doesn’t bite so much as settle into him, marrow-deep. He’s forced down onto the cleaned stone, wrists bound in front of him, ankles shackled behind. He has to curl like an animal to eat, leaning awkwardly on one hip, every motion painful. His cheek presses to the slick floor. There’s no cot, no blanket. Just the collar around his throat and the slow, wet burn of humiliation.

He doesn’t even feel the shame. Not in the way he used to. Shame is a distant thing now, something that used to live in him, something that was burned away weeks ago like muscle stripped from bone. What remains is quieter. Less real.

He starts thanking her, not because she demands it but because he means it. Because when she slaps him, at least he’s real. When her whip tears into the skin of his back, he cries out

with a voice that still belongs to someone. When she leans close to inspect the split along his cheekbone and nods, satisfied, he feels like he's done something right.

Recognition is spice in his veins, even in cruelty. Especially in cruelty. The warmth of her gaze, fleeting and frigid, becomes a substitute for the sun.

Sometimes, in the long silence between sessions, he curls against the wall and tries to remember who he was. He sees himself standing beside Neryss on the deck of a smuggler's freighter, lightsaber in hand, joking about ration packs and the stench of Hutt blood. He sees Vashari, younger, laughing as she pulls him out of a collapsed tunnel and tells him he owes her dinner. He tries to summon the feeling that used to live inside of him when his saber lit up, when his master smiled, when he thought he was doing good, but the feelings won't come.

He knows they existed, knows joy and purpose once filled his chest like breath, but he can't recall how they felt. He reaches for them and finds only static, only distance.

He wants to feel the way he used to. Wants to remember what it meant to care, to believe, to belong. But the memory is water slipping through his fingers. He's not even sure if it was ever real.

The next morning, he kisses the edge of the woman's whip. There's no prompt, no order. He leans forward, trembling, and presses cracked lips to the metal not for mercy but approval. She doesn't need to command him, he anticipates her. Presents his back. Thanks her. Kisses her hand when she passes him a bowl of water.

And then, without explanation, it ends.

A new set of guards come for him. They speak in clipped words, refuse to meet his eyes. He tries not to flinch when they touch him, tries to smile even, but they shove him back into his cell and slam the door shut without a word.

It's the same one. Solitary. He can smell his old blood in the corners. No torchlight. No voice. No sound but his own breath. The quiet hits harder than any blow.

The first two days, he waits for her. For someone. Anything. He counts the minutes between the drops of water they push through the floor hatch, licks the rim of the bowl for salt. Neryss sits beside him, stroking his hair, humming a lullaby from Sriluur that she never actually knew. Vashari paces near the door, muttering about broken circuits and escape routes, her voice brisk and fond. He murmurs to them between sips of stale water. He thanks them for staying.

But on the fourth or fifth day – he's lost count – they change. Neryss doesn't hum, she stares. Eyes dark. Voice guttural.

"You were supposed to protect each other," she says in Huttese, voice low and serrated. "You told me you could handle this job. And now look at you."

Vashari doesn't pace anymore, she crouches by his face.

"You kissed her whip," she says. Tarek forgets if she ever knew Huttese. She speaks with a native speaker's accent anyways. "You licked her boots." She laughs, sudden and shrill.

"My hero."

He shakes his head. Claps his hands over his ears. Bites down on his knuckles until blood runs down his wrist. They don't stop.

"Little slave," Neryss says, voice calm. "Is this who you wanted to be?"

"Did you kneel for the Hutts like this, too?" Vashari sneers. He curls into himself, shivering. He tries to tell himself they aren't real. Tries to recite the Code, but the words catch in his throat. There's no Force here. No light. No breath but his own.

Sometimes they argue with each other, Vashari and Neryss. Sometimes they whisper in tandem, circling him in the dark. Sometimes it's his sister, eyeless, mouthing curses in Huttese with a voice like gravel.

Eventually, he stops answering. Stops trying to tell them they're wrong. They aren't. They're right. All of them. Every word. He's a Shadow who failed his mission. A Padawan who betrayed and abandoned his master. A Weequay who kissed the leash of a woman who enslaved him.

He is pathetic. He is alone. He deserves it.

He's not in his cell for nearly as long the second time. Weeks in, or at least what feels like weeks, the door opens again. Two guards. Heavy boots. Shock pikes humming. One of them clicks a new collar into place at this throat, then jerks him forward.

They lead him up. Stairway after stairway. Door after door. When they finally reach the surface, the door groans open with a hiss of pressure and daylight punches through like a cannon blast.

Tarek gags. The sun isn't gentle. It doesn't warm, it flays. The air is too sharp, too clean. He inhales once and doubles over. Bile hits the sand at his knees, thin and sour. His stomach convulses again, though there's nothing left to vomit. The guards don't stop. One hauls him up by the collar like a bag of meat. The light sears into his skin. The sky above is enormous. Endless. It stretches farther than he remembers skies could.

"You're not ready," Neryss murmurs, crouched just outside the shade. Her voice is calm. Distant.

“Pathetic,” Vashari is beside her, arms crossed. “The sun hurts him. What kind of Weequay is he?”

He doesn’t answer. He can’t. The air tastes like ozone and old bones. He’s led, stumbling, to a shuttle, shoved into a chair, and strapped down. The vessel lifts. Vashari perches by the door to the cockpit, smiling. Her lekku are dusted, robes scorched at the hem like after a mission.

“You used to love flying,” she says, speaking with a Hutt’s deep voice. “Remember that canyon run we pulled on Tatooine? You screamed the whole way.”

She laughs. He doesn’t.

They break atmosphere with a rumble that is somehow familiar and foreign to Tarek’s empty bones. Through a small viewport to his left, he watches as the stars return. Pinpricks of light, silver and infinite. His breath catches in his throat. He’s crying. He doesn’t know why.

The planet below becomes a smear of red sand and old scars. The stars wheel above. A memory stirs: riding shotgun with Vashari in a stolen freighter, Neryss chastising them both over the comms. He’d joked about taking a detour to Sriluur. She told him to shut up and fly.

He grips the armrests of the seat until his knuckles whiten.

“You’re not crying for us,” Neryss murmurs, crouching beside him. Her eyes are dark and wet. “You’re crying because you miss the sky.”

“No shame in it,” Vashari adds softly. “They kept it from you.”

The shuttle pierces Dromund Kaas’ upper cloud layer. Storms churn below. Lightning forks through black sky. Rain hammers the windows like claws. He watches without blinking. The shuttle touches down at a private port; no terminals, no traffic, just steel and guards and rain.

The air hits him like a wall. Wet, hot, heavy with ozone and rot. A warehouse looms ahead, industrial and vast. Its roof is ribbed like a freighter hull, corrugated durasteel glinting under the storm-wracked sky. Rust streaks every seam. Thunder grumbles low and constant overhead. A sign above the gate reads **IMPORTS, SECTOR 7** in stenciled Aurebesh. Beneath it, a stylized snake wrapped around a blade, tongue flicked in threat. A crest. It’s everywhere: painted on cargo crates, stamped onto the floor, engraved into the armor of the guards. Watching.

Inside, the air shifts from rain-wet to stale. Tarek steps into a furnace of mildew, freighter exhaust, and the sour tang of disinfectant. The stench of blood lingers under it all, faint but present. Something mopped up, not forgotten. Rows of cargo pallets flank the entrance, stacked with crates labeled in dozens of languages. **MEDICAL. MILITARY. PERSONAL EFFECTS. ORGANICS.** Droids pace the aisles with scanners and stun batons. Chains hang from the ceiling, attached to hoists designed for bulk freight. They creak with the weight of empty space.

The lighting is low, flickering. Surveillance units hum from high corners, little red eyes watching without blinking.

The cages begin halfway down the central corridor. Galvanized bars bolted into concrete, a single drainage grate in the corner. Some of them hold prisoners, some hold animals. A few just hold piles of cloth and blood. Tarek doesn't look at the others.

The guards walk him past six rows. The furthest one is half-shrouded in shadow. Flanking snake insignia watch him from above the cage door. The floor is damp with standing water.

They shove him inside. He circles the cage once, then curls in the corner. The smell of packaging glue and oxidized metal fills his lungs. Every part of the warehouse feels borrowed. Neryss sits beside him, back against the bars, eyes on nothing. Vashari stands in the opposite corner, arms crossed.

"Warehouse like this," she says, "they're not keeping us long."

"Where are we?" he croaks.

"Dromund Kaas." He closes his eyes. The name burns.

"Capital of the Empire," Neryss murmurs. She chooses a derogative case when she says Empire. Tarek can't help but smile. "They brought you here for something. Someone."

"Why?"

"You'll see," they both say in unison.

Outside, thunder shakes the roof. Inside, something screams. He draws his knees to his chest and doesn't notice the tears until they ripple against the water at his feet.

They process him separately from the others. Not out of mercy, just procedure. He's tagged for private delivery. The datapad clipped to his cage reads *Dark Council Transfer: Priority Handling*. A different hallway is opened. A private bay cleared. He's shoved forward without ceremony, feet slipping on the wet floor. Two men in port uniforms flank him, gloves thick, faces masked. One presses a stunrod to the base of his spine, not active, just heavy and cold. A warning. The other reads from a slate.

"No facial bruising. No dental damage. No fractures." He clicks his tongue as if annoyed. "Council protocol."

They strip him fast. One hand tangles in his collar as they wrench the tunic off his back, tearing the thin fabric. Cold metal sheers scrape against his scalp, buzzing unevenly as they shave his hair to stubble. Another worker hoses him off with lukewarm water, sharp and antiseptic, and scrubs him with a rough cloth.

“Turn,” one orders, jabbing his ribs with the stunrod when he doesn’t move fast enough. He sees Vashari standing beside the crate of soap bricks, arms folded. She’s watching the way his fingers tremble, mouth tight.

“They don’t deserve your obedience,” she says. He doesn’t answer.

A second set of workers arrive. They dab antiseptic over his wrists, check for infections, inspect his teeth with a gloved hand. When it’s over, they fit a fresh collar around his neck; thicker with a silver clasp.

“Lord Kovar’s,” someone mutters. “Rich bastard.”

They don’t explain. They don’t have to. He’s not a person, he’s property. And property, if delivered damaged, means questions. Fines. Punishments from above. They don’t bruise him. They don’t touch his face. But the kicks come low, slaps on muscle, threats whispered sharp into his ear.

“You bite her, and we cut your tongue out.” He nods. Doesn’t flinch.

They feed him a paste, nutrient rich and flavorless. His stomach cramps as it expands. Neryss sits beside the crate they perch him on, robes immaculate, watching him eat like she used to during stakeouts, sharing ration packs in a filthy crawlspace.

“You’re being good,” she whispers. “Too good.” He swallows hard. His throat is raw.

“I don’t want to die,” he mutters.

“Then don’t forget who you are.” He looks down at his hands. They don’t feel like his. The callouses are wrong, the fingers thinner, trembling. He places them in his lap.

Someone pulls him to his feet.

The crate they load him into is pristine. Black durasteel, pressurized seals. Ventilated. Padded. As the lid closes, he catches a final glimpse of the warehouse. The cages. The snake insignia. A girl sobbing into her knees. Then the world goes dark.

Inside the crate, he can still hear Neryss breathing. Can see Vashari, crouched with her back to him, whispering something into her hands. He curls in silence, says nothing.

He arrives with a jolt. The crate rocks, tilted, lifted, set down again with a low hydraulic hiss. Cold air rushes in as the seal breaks. Harsh light stabs through the opening. Two attendants in matte black armor reach in. Their gloves are cleaner than the warehouse workers’. Everything about them is; polished boots, tunics sharp with red piping. They lift him without comment, one under each arm, careful not to scruff the collar at his neck.

They drag him across a bridge walkway flaked by autocannons and war banners that catch the wind and whip against their poles: black fabric with a mythosaur skull and blades

etched in red. Beneath each symbol are vertical lines of Mando'a in white block letter: *Tor cuyir te kal*. He doesn't know what it means, but the words repeat again, etched into the wall plates and bulkheads in every corridor.

The path leads to the largest of three structures, carved with brutalist angles and layered in blast-resistant plating. There's no visible ornamentation, no guards in ceremonial armor. Just functional black-on-black plates and people stalking across the halls.

Inside, the lighting is soft but directional, placed for maximum coverage. The floors are smooth but marred with use. Scuff lines, training marks, boot rubber melted into seams. Tarek stumbles past rows of rooms with heavy doors, inset control panels glowing amber. There's no signage, just numbers.

The hallway turns sharply, opening to a small open-air courtyard boxed between the buildings. The sky above is a tight gray slit. In the center of the courtyard sits a recessed dueling ring, low walls surrounding packed stone marked with concentric white circles. Scorch marks mar the edges. A crate of training sabers leans against the far wall beside a small shrine of sorts: a ring of durasteel carved with Mando'a prayer script. Tarek can't read it. Statues line the inner perimeter, all armored figures, helmeted, frozen in stances of readiness. No names, no plaques.

Beyond the courtyard, the path forks, one branch slopes upward to what looks like barracks; the other curves down into the dimly lit substructure of the estate. He's led toward the upper path. They pass small mess halls. Sparring rooms. Communal bathrooms. Every chamber is designed for multi-use. Everything folds, locks, tucks into steel. He notices each corridor has cameras. Every intersection has a pressure sensor. The doors hiss softly open and shut but they're not silent. The sound of a breathing machine, a beast asleep.

The main hall is broad, built like a dueling ring. Scorch marks stain the walls where sabers have been tested, banners hang from the rafters, heavy, ceremonial cloth. One shows the mythosaur skull and blades. Another bears a Mandalorian proverb stitched in blocky Mando'a and Basic: *Ijaat cuyir te kal Ni kar'taylir jatne. Honor is the blade I know best.*

Above the banners, a balcony rings the second floor. He sees shadows moving, observers or guards. Helmets glint. The attendants lead him through the hall to a central receiving room. Stone, sparse, cold. The ceiling rises in a dome. There's a single chair in the middle. Not a throne, but it might as well be. The man who sits in it stands before Tarek can fall to his knees.

His armor is obsidian black beskar alloyed with deep crimson seams, matte finished to avoid shine, as though even vanity has been disciplined out of him. The angular pauldrons sit wide on his shoulders, giving him a silhouette more war machine than man, while a subtle red glow pulses from the seams in the chestplate like a heartbeat. A Mandalorian helmet sits under his arm. But it is his face that truly demands attention.

One half is weathered, Human, stern but not unkind. Short-cropped beard, the occasional scar, brown eyes that observe without blinking. The other half, however, is fire and fury. Crimson fissures spiderweb out from his right eye, glowing faintly with some deep internal energy. The eye itself is not natural: a molten amber iris ringed by concentric Sith-etched lines, its pupil barely a spot in the center. The burn scars that surround it are old, long since healed, but still raw. The lines reach up into his scalp, threading through tight, disciplined braids that sweep his dark hair back from his temples. A single braid is left loose to dangle by his cheek.

He wears no crown, no Sith sigil on his brow, only heavy presence and kind eyes. Tarek's stomach knots. He stiffens as instinct drags him toward submission, but something stops him. Curiosity, maybe. Terror in a new shape. Vashari appears at his shoulder, arms folded.

"He's not what we were taught to fear," she murmurs. "Be careful."

Tarek doesn't respond. He's not sure he can. The man is still watching him.

"Tarek Ahok," he says. Tarek blinks. His name on another's tongue feels like hallucination.

"I'm told you've had a difficult year." His voice is calm. No rasp. No cruelty.

"You may speak freely here, son," he says. The word hits him. Son. He hasn't been called that since Sriluur. Neryss appears beside him, eyeing the man up and down.

"Don't trust him," she says. Tarek swallows.

"...Who are you?"

"My name," the man says, "is Dark Lord Kovar, if you care for titles." He smiles faintly. "I don't. They're for people who need to be reminded of who they are." He takes a few steps toward Tarek so he stands a head taller.

"I'm told you were once a Padawan." Tarek flinches. Vashari stands to his left now, robes ragged, voice quiet.

"He gave you permission to speak. That's more than the others did."

"I am," Tarek says carefully. Kovar watches him a moment longer, then steps back and gestures to the estate behind him.

"This place is not a cell," he says. "It is a crucible. A training ground. Soldiers, warriors, peacekeepers, I've trained them all." He turns slightly. "I know what the Jedi do to children like you. They took you from your family, filled you with code and conviction but little wisdom. When it works, it makes idealists. When it doesn't..." his gaze returns to Tarek. "They make slaves."

Tarek's breath hitches.

“She left you,” Kovar says gently. “the Togruta.” His mouth goes dry. Neryss leans in close, robes staining red with blood.

“She didn’t abandon you,” she says gently. Vashari looks away. “She failed.”

“She was captured,” Tarek says. Kovar steps forward, not looming. His tone lowers.

“And still, you survived.”

Tarek doesn’t reply.

“I don’t want another slave,” he says. “I want someone who understands what war costs.”

“You want me to be Sith.” Kovar pauses, then smiles. Not a cruel smile, not wide. Human.

“I want to make the Empire a better place.” He breathes a minute. “There’s no altar here, no blood rite. You don’t have to renounce your Code. Just follow my rules. Train. Eat. Learn how to wield what’s left of you. I’ve seen worse men rise from better.” Tarek wavers, mouth dry. He wants to believe that. He wants a bed that is softer than stone, food without mold, days without pain. He wants to stop seeing Neryss gutted on the floor. He takes a deep breath, then nods once, sharp and final. Kovar’s smile grows a fraction too large. He turns his attention to the attendants.

“Show Tarek to his room and get him some food. He starts tomorrow.”

The attendants start to lead Tarek back toward the main hall, but they stop when Kovar turns over his shoulder.

“Take the collar off too, Mand’alor’s sake.” Then, softer, “And Tarek. My name’s Aran.”

The doors hiss shut behind them.

The collar clicks loose just before the door seals shut behind him. It takes a second for Tarek to realize it’s gone. The weight’s been wrapped around his neck for a year, pressing into his spine, choking when he swallows, burning when he screams. And now it’s gone. He reaches up, fingertips grazing the bruise-ringed skin like it might still bite. It doesn’t.

He stands in his room. Not a cell. Not a crate. A room. It’s quiet. There’s no chains, no overhead restraints, no drains in the floor. He sways on his feet.

The walls are dark composite, steel-reinforced and sound-dampened but clean. There’s a small refresher in the corner, walled, private, with a mirror above the sink. A simple desk sits beneath a wall-mounted screen. Across from it, a cot with fresh sheets, neatly folded. A drawer unit under the bed. A black uniform folded precisely atop it. All of it untouched. Clean. It’s the most indulgent space he’s seen in over a year.

His legs give out. He doesn't collapse, not quite, just sinks. Slowly. Like a building giving way. He ends up on the bed, curled on the edge, arms braced against the mattress like he expects it to shift beneath him. It doesn't. The fabric is coarse but dry. The cushion has give. He presses his face to it.

He doesn't cry, but something inside loosens, like a hand unclenching.

"They want something," Vashari murmurs from the wall. He doesn't look at her.

"They always want something." He shifts enough to sit upright. His muscles don't trust the motion, but pain doesn't follow. No alarms blare, no collar surges.

"You should change," says Neryss. She stands near the clothes, arms folded, expression unreadable. "If you're going to become a Sith you might as well look the part."

"I'm not..." he falters. "I'm not becoming a Sith." Vashari sits down on the desk. Her legs swing through the drawer as if it doesn't exist.

"You also said you'd never be a slave again, didn't you?"

"I meant it."

"Then why don't you run?" He swallows. Because the guards around the estate are armed. Because he doesn't know how many corridors he passed. Because he hasn't seen the sky in over a year and when he did, he threw up from the light. Because—

"Because I don't have my lightsaber," he says. His voice sounds like gravel. "Because I'm tired, Vash."

"You're forgetting what they did to you," Neryss says, voice sharp. "To me. To her."

"I'm not forgetting." His hands clench against the sheets. "I'm never going to forgive them." Vashari's gaze softens.

"Then what is this?"

Tarek closes his eyes. The mattress is real. The air doesn't stink of blood. There's no footsteps echoing down the hall, no screams from the next cell over.

"I just need a day," he says. "One day. To feel like I'm not dying." He reaches for the clothes. Unfolds them gently. They're crisp and tight against his body but not restricting. They feel like his old Jedi robes.

"You'll pay for it," Neryss says. Tarek looks at her.

"I know."

There's a knock on the door, two sharp raps. Tarek freezes, still holding his old robes in his hand. He sets them down carefully. Vashari and Neryss glance toward the door but say nothing.

Another knock. Firmer. He swallows.

"Come in," he tries. The door hisses open.

An attendant stands framed in the hallway, backlit by clean corridor light. He's not armored like the guards from earlier: no helmet, no visible weapons, but his posture is just as exacting. Trim black uniform, red-piped sleeves, close cropped hair. The kind of man who was either raised military or rebuilt to resemble it.

"Evening, Apprentice Ahok," he says with a shallow nod. "I'm instructed to inform you that Lord Kovar has requested your presence in the mess for evening meal."

Tarek stares. The attendant raises an eyebrow, then continues with practiced ease.

"On standard days, you'll be given a choice. Meals may be requested privately to quarters, barring punishment protocols, or taken communally in the mess. All lords and apprentices take meals on a fixed ration. Tonight, however, is not standard."

"Why?" Tarek asks, throat dry. The attendant tilts his head slightly, as though confused by the question.

"Because Lord Kovar said." Tarek nods slowly.

"Do I...need to wear something?" The attendant glances at Tarek's new uniform.

"You're fine as you are. Uniform requisition will be assigned after initial evaluation tomorrow."

"Can I ask..." Tarek starts, voice tentative, "what happens if I say no?" The attendant smiles slightly, eyes glinting.

"Then I'll note the refusal and inform Lord Kovar. But I wouldn't advise it." Tarek glances back at the room: the cot, the walls. Neryss folds her arms again but doesn't shake her head. Vashari leans her elbows on her knees.

"What'd I say?" she says, quiet. "Just another cage." He looks back at the attendant and nods once.

"I'll come."

"Good," says the man. "Follow me."

The walk to the mess is longer than he expects. The hallways are quiet, but not silent. He hears the distant thrum of generators, the muted clash of training sabers somewhere above, the

click of boots in perfect rhythm against the floor. The estate feels different at night; cooler, more alive. Lights dim to a practical glow, striping the corridor in amber. At every corner, guards nod to his escort but not to him. Tarek walks like a shadow with no mass.

A low din rises to full-bodied noise as they approach. Laughter. Shouts. Plates clattering. The scent of food, thick and warm and spiced, hits him so hard he falters. His stomach twists in hunger and disbelief. His last meals had come in metal bowls, slid through wall slots with no sound but the hiss of repressurization. Nothing in his recent memory prepared him for noise, light, heat.

They round a final corner and enter the mess.

It's cavernous – wider than it should be, two stories tall with arching black-steel trusses and bannered beams. Red fabric hangs from the rafters, Mando'a proverbs stitched in black thread that glints when it catches the light. The scent is stronger here. Roasted meats. Spiced roots. Fresh bread. Dozens of long tables run parallel down the hall, flanked by uniformed bodies in varying states of armor: apprentices, soldiers, lords. Helmets rest beside trays. Sabers and gloves sit next to bodies. All of them eating, talking, laughing. Some bear training bruises. One is actively icing a burn. Tarek flinches at the sound of someone dropping a tray, but it's uncalled for. No heads turn his way, no one swarms to attack. The noise swallows him just like the dark did.

The attendant guides him toward the front. Not to Kovar's table, but near it. An adjacent seat at a smaller side table with only a few occupants, all older and quieter. Their eyes flick toward him then away. A tray is handed to him. Hot food: actual meat, thick bread, a drink that smells like broth. He stares down at it. He doesn't remember sitting.

"Eat," Vashari says softly from across the table. She's not real, but her voice is gentle. He lifts a bite to his mouth and pauses. There's no scent of mold, no bitter metal. The flavor overwhelms him. He chews too slowly, swallows too hard. Someone at another table knocks over a chair mid-joke, and he jumps so hard the broth sloshes onto his tray. He sets his fork down and breathes.

"You're doing fine," Neryss says beside him, hands folded. "Better than most."

A sharp tap to his right. Then another. Three in succession. Metal on metal. Glass on steel. The sound rolls through the mess like a ripple. Heads lift. Conversations pause. Somewhere to his left, a fist thuds against a table, once, twice, three times.

Gar solus! Gar solus! Gar solus!

The chant doesn't come from a mouth, but the rhythm itself: fists and boots syncing up, slamming down in time. At first just a few, then dozens. A low war cadence, vibrating through the benches. The hall becomes a drum, a machine with bones and breath. Tarek stiffens in his seat.

At the head of the room, Lord Kovar stands. He lifts his glass and slams it into the table. Silence snaps over the mess like a taut line. Then, casually, like he's done it a thousand times, he steps up on top of the table. His armor gleams in the overhead light, black and red beskar shaped not for royalty but for war. One boot planted, one hand holding a nearly empty glass. His presence pulls gravity. He raises his arms wide. His voice doesn't need amplification.

"Brothers!" he calls, voice booming across the hall, "Sisters! And the poor bastards who haven't figured it out yet. I know I said no speeches tonight—"

There's a round of groans across the hall.

"—but we have a guest!"

More groans. Someone throws a roll. Kovar ducks it and chucks his now empty glass back at the source. He gestures toward Tarek's table.

"That scrawny bastard over there? That's Tarek."

A few heads turn. The noise is just beginning again when Kovar raises his hand for silence.

"He was a Jedi," Kovar says, drawing out the word like a dare. Now the room quiets properly. Not with respect, more like watching a fire catch. Tarek feels the air leave his lungs. He straightens in his seat without realizing.

"He's fresh from Palide's coffers. Real pretty pedigree. You've heard the rumors." They have. It's written on their faces now. He sees someone at the back table shift uncomfortably. Another leans in to whisper to their neighbor. Kovar spreads his hands again, swaying slightly.

"I know what you're thinking. 'Another Jedi? Aran, didn't the last one try to choke out your adjutant with a serving spoon?'" Laughter, sharp and knowing. Kovar grins. "Yes. Yes, she did. But I have a good feeling about this one! He'll survive the year, I'm sure of it." He paces the tabletop with a theatrical swagger. "And if he doesn't, well..." he shrugs. "That's what the ring's for."

A few cheers. Someone slams a fist on the table.

"But until then," his voice hardens slightly. "Unless one of you lot thinks you can rip a Jedi's saber from his hands in a real duel, you give him the damn respect he's earned by surviving long enough to end up here." Kovar raises a hand, holding an illusionary glass high.

"Honor is the blade I know best." The hall echoes it back in a mix of Basic and Mando'a. Then, the room returns to normal. Kovar hops down from the table and gives Tarek a look as he passes, assessing. A man measuring a blade's weight. Tarek watches him go, noise around him rising like a tide. Neryss leans in close.

"You can still run," she says. He rolls his eyes at her.

Three days pass. The aches fade slower than he expects, but they fade. His body begins to remember the rhythm of movement, how to fall without breaking, how to rise without pause. Bruises darken, then yellow. Muscles tighten, loosen, adapt. The mess hall grows quieter when he enters now, still wary but not hostile. He's learned the names of a few other workers: Teyr, a Trandoshan who spars like she's been shot mid-fight and wants to take you with her, and Garros, who smells like oil and drinks with both hands. No one speaks of their past. They nod. They train. They eat. That's enough.

He trains in the courtyard, a generic red training blade in hand, sweat down his spine mixing with the Kaasian rain. The ring's circles blur with footwork. His form's sloppy, weight off-center, but it's serviceable. It's coming back. Vashari watches from the courtyard wall.

"You're over-correcting," she says softly, her lekku swaying in the breeze. "Your hip's too tight. You're afraid of falling." He nods without responding. Neryss leans forward on the other side of the ring. Her robes are the same travel-worn, brown-hemmed ones she was wearing the last day he saw her alive.

"You always had good discipline," she says, smiling faintly. "That hasn't left you."

He draws breath. Tightens his grip. The red saber ignites again. He moves.

"Better," murmurs Vashari.

"Much better." That voice was real. Tarek flinches, nearly tripping over his own feet. Lord Kovar stands at the edge of the ring, arms folded behind his back, watching with a neutral expression. He's unarmored today, but the beskar accents in his boots and shoulders remain. Even when he isn't dressed for war, the man moves like he was carved out of it. Tarek straightens instinctively.

"My Lord."

"Relax," Kovar says. His voice is low and even, like a command that doesn't need raising. "I'm not here to correct you." He steps closer. His face, half weathered, half scorched, is difficult to read, but the tone is gentler than it has any right to be.

"Ataru in the first pass," Kovar says. "Clean wrists. Weight on the balls of your feet. Who trained you?"

"Neryss Kralan. She said I was precise."

"She was right." Kovar gestures for him to keep moving. "Form over strength. You use finesse to do what most would try with brute force." Tarek hesitates, then resumes. A few more passes. He keeps his breath even.

"She also said I needed to stop apologizing with my blade."

"And did you?"

“No.” Tarek looks down. “I don’t think I ever did.” Kovar smiles faintly.

“That ain’t a flaw, not really. Mercy’s a tool, if you know when to put it away.” Tarek exhales, muscles relaxing slightly. He lowers the saber.

“You’re not afraid of me,” Kovar says, watching him.

“I think I am,” Tarek admits, quiet. “But not like...them.” Kovar tilts his head.

“They hurt you,” he says. Not a question. “Tried to break you. And you’re still standing.”

“I...” Tarek swallows. “I almost didn’t.”

Silence.

“Can I tell you something?” Tarek blinks.

“Of course.”

“I never wanted an army,” Kovar says, leaning back on his heels. “I know what people say about me. That I’m building a cult, a cabal of loyal killers. But I started this place because I couldn’t stomach the way the Empire handled its own. Warriors are a tool to most Sith. Broken, discarded, recycled. I wanted better. So I started small. One apprentice, then another. Then a dozen.” He folds his arms loosely and looks out toward the skyline.

“I’ve tried to train Jedi before,” he admits as if confessing a long-held regret. “Never worked out. Too stubborn, too loyal to ghosts.”

“I’m not like them,” Tarek says, too quickly. “I didn’t – I mean I never stopped believing, but–” Kovar waves him down gently.

“I know you’re different, son. You’re still fighting. That tells me everything I need to know.” A pause.

“They left you,” Kovar says, voice quiet now. “Didn’t they?” Tarek’s lips part. He doesn’t want to agree, but he does. Vashari looks away.

“I think... they tried,” he murmurs. “But no one ever came.”

“Because they didn’t know what to do with you,” Kovar says. “Because they don’t understand what survival means when you’re stripped of rank, robe, saber. But I do. I’ve seen it. I honor it.”

Tarek is staring at the dirt now. His chest feels tight.

“I don’t... really know what to do with me either.” Kovar’s hand lands on his shoulder, firm and warm.

“You fight,” he says. “You’re one of us now. Watch our back, we’ll watch yours.” Tarek’s throat tightens. He doesn’t know if it’s tears or something else.

“Even if I apologize with my saber?” Kovar chuckles.

“Even if.” He pauses. “You’re not a prisoner anymore, Tarek. Not a slave. You’re a student. And you’re doing well.” Tarek’s fingers tighten around the saber hilt. He nods, barely.

“You mean that?” he asks, fragile.

“I don’t say things I don’t mean.” Kovar’s eyes, one soft, one glowing amber, lock with his. Tarek bows his head, silent. His whole frame lowers, subtly, like he’s folding into the only warmth he’s been offered in his life.

“I won’t let you down, my Lord,” he says.

“I know you won’t,” Kovar replies. “Please, call me Aran. I don’t do titles.” A faint smile ghosts across Tarek’s lips.

“Yes, sir.”

The days blur. Morning bells. Dueling ring. Mess hall. Study. Sleep. Repeat. Tarek falls into the rhythm like it had always been there waiting for him just beneath the surface of the Vault’s long silence. His muscles remember before he does. Scar tissue stretches, callouses return, the tremor in his hands gives way to precision. By the second month at the compound, he is no longer gasping through footwork. By the fourth, he’s outpacing half the cohort. A year in the dark hadn’t broken him, not really. It had just pressed him into something sharper.

They start calling him *Kal*. The knife. He doesn’t ask for the name, but he doesn’t correct it either. The newer initiates whisper it after drills, some with admiration, some with caution. Tarek doesn’t mind. He has little interest in the camaraderie of the compound, but his dueling earns him nods in the halls, and that is enough. His style is quick, cruel, increasingly efficient. He baits guards into false openings, breaks fingers instead of disarming. He never fights clean, and Kovar never tells him to stop.

“Honor’s what you make of it,” the man says once after Tarek shatters an opponent’s knee instead of finishing with a saber lock. “Anyone who thinks there are rules in war hasn’t bled long enough.” Tarek smiles for real hearing that. Just once.

He starts calling him Aran a few weeks after that. It comes out accidentally at first. After a long sparring match, both of them sweat-drenched. Kovar blocks a strike with the back of his gauntlet and lands a heavy slap to the side of Tarek’s head in response.

“You call that form?” he grins. “I’ve seen half-drunk Cathar move with more grace.”

“Watch it, Aran,” he growls back. At first, it feels strange in his mouth, like desecration. But Aran laughs when he says it, claps him on the back and corrects his posture mid-swing.

“You fight like someone who knows pain,” Aran tells him. “That’s a strength, Tarek. You just have to learn when to lean into it.”

Training becomes his ritual. Dawn drills. One-on-ones. Tactical reviews. Duels in the courtyard. Tarek becomes the boy with haunted eyes and the sharpest edge. He’s not the strongest, not the fastest, but he’s the one who wins when the odds skew away from him. Elbows. Knees. Distraction tactics. Cheap hits. Neryss taught him how to fight dirty, and she reminds of him that daily.

“You’re welcome,” she tells him when he knees a Cathar so hard the fur on their jaw splits open. “Not my fault these warriors never learned how to duck.”

“She’s right,” Vashari adds dryly. “You’re a filthy little brawler. Disgrace to your old Temple.”

“Shut up,” Tarek mutters under his breath, heaving as he helps the Cathar to her feet.

“You shut up,” Vashari snaps. “You almost lost that match.”

“I still won, didn’t I?”

“You got lucky,” she hisses. “Your balance is off again.”

“She’s not wrong,” Neryss adds. “Also, I told you not to keep switching hands mid-fight. Looks flashy. Doesn’t land.”

“I like it,” Tarek growls.

“Then you’re an idiot.”

Some days he argues with them. Other days he ignores them. Some nights, he curls up on the cot in his room and talks to them like they’re alive. Like they might answer differently. They never do. Aran notices the muttering, but never asks. Once, when he catches Tarek whispering beneath his breath during a warm up, he only claps a hand on his shoulder and says,

“Good warriors talk to ghosts, Tarek. Great ones listen to them.”

Tarek nearly cries. Not because of the words, but because he believes it. Because in that moment, Aran isn’t a Sith Lord. He is Tarek’s. The first person to see him and his insanity and still stay.

The estate becomes home. Tarek learns its halls. The polished stone beneath his boots. The sharp curves of the outer compound. The flicker of Mando’a mottos carved into black durasteel banners. *Ni atiniir. Ni cuyanir.* I endure. I survive.

He takes meals in his room most nights, though sometimes Aran pulls him to the mess to sit near him at the table. He drinks too much for Tarek's taste, but Tarek stays late anyway. Listens to stories: tales of Mandalorian wars and broken empires. Aran's laugh is a bark, his scowl brief. He has a way of making cruelty sound noble. Necessary. And he always says we. We make order. We clean the rot. We keep the peace. No matter the cost.

The others treat Aran with a reverence Tarek doesn't yet understand. They don't bow, they don't kneel, they slam fists to tables in time. *Oya 'karir. Gar Solus* A warrior's rhythm, Aran calls it. A ritual drawn from old Mandalorian bloodlines, repurposed into something harder, sharper.

He doesn't think about what it means, not yet. He trains. He improves. He earns nods in the hall and space in the dueling ring. He finds small rituals: stretching before sunrise, meditating in the corner behind the hangars, brushing his boots clean each night. No one asks him to go on missions. Aran doesn't even mention it. Tarek tells himself that's good. It means he's not yet one of them. It means he still has a choice. Vashari calls it cowardice.

"You don't want to see it," she says once evening as he rests in his cot. "What they do. What you'll do."

"I haven't done anything wrong," he mutters.

"You think this place isn't Sith?" she snaps. "You think a black box in the middle of the Empire's capital can be neutral just because you get hot meals and a sparring partner?"

"I'm not hurting anyone."

"You're being trained to."

"Not yet." Neryss slides beside her.

"You're not ready," she says, almost kind. "And that's dangerous." He turns away, presses his face into the mattress.

"I'm not Sith," he whispers to the dark. He isn't sure who he's trying to convince, but in the morning, when he steps into the ring, they all greet him the same way.

"Kal."

He doesn't correct them.

It starts with a warrant. Tarek is handed a datapad and a badge. A new uniform. Aran walks beside him down the hall like an uncle explaining the rules of a family game.

“He’s ex-military, discharged dishonorably. When dark after a domestic abuse report. He’s killed at least two people since. There’ll be a squad, but I want you on point.” Tarek nods slowly, thumbing the edge of the datapad.

“You sure?”

“You’re ready.”

The man dies in a rooftop scuffle seven hours later, more accident than execution. Tarek doesn’t remember igniting the saber, just the heat of instinct and the sudden silence afterward. His heart pounds for minutes after the corpse hits the ground. No applause. No judgement. Just the backup team holstering their weapons and calling in cleanup like it’s routine.

Back at the compound, Aran reviews the footage and says nothing for a while.

“You moved like you’ve done this before.”

“I didn’t mean to kill him.”

“You didn’t mean not to, either.” Aran offers him a long look, then claps him gently on the shoulder. “You made the right call, Tarek. The law isn’t clean. But you protected people. I’m proud of that.” Tarek blinks hard. He nods, not sure why his chest aches.

Over the next few months, the missions grow more complicated. Cultists in the undercity. Arsonists targeting military depots. A kidnapping ring that trafficked younglings with low Force sensitivity. Tarek returns from each job steadier than the last, arms scraped and eyes sharp.

He starts cursing in Mando’a a few months in. He doesn’t even realize it. Aran never comments, but he smiles faintly when Tarek mutters *skanah* under his breath about a particularly smug bureaucrat.

“You’re settling in well,” he says one evening, after a report debrief. “The others look to you, y’know.” Tarek shrugs.

“I’ve been on worse teams.” That makes Aran laugh.

“You’ve led worse teams.” Tarek smiles despite himself.

He sees less of Neryss and Vashari for a while. They stop lingering in the halls, recede from his sparring sessions. But they always come back at night, sharp-eyed and angry, their voices clipped with venom.

“You could’ve stopped the execution,” Neryss whispers the night after he incinerates a bomb-maker. “You didn’t even ask for a trial.”

“He admitted it,” Tarek snaps. “He was planning another one.”

“So you get to be judge and executioner?” Vashari growls from the refresher mirror.

“I saved lives!”

“You killed a man.”

They vanish when he throws the soap at the wall. But they always return. Kovar notices the exhaustion, though he never names it.

“You’re carrying weight that isn’t yours,” he says one morning in the training ring, watching Tarek demolish a practice dummy with a barrage of brutal, low strikes. “Where’d you learn to fight like that?”

“Neryss,” Tarek says without thinking. Aran raises an eyebrow. “She said the noble Jedi forms were for galas and holos. This…” he gestures to the shattered dummy. “This is what works.” Aran hums, clearly amused.

“Pass her my thanks, then.”

They sit in the courtyard afterward, beneath the grey haze of Kaas’ sky. One of the other agents tosses a ball between their boots. Aran doesn’t speak until the sun dips low enough to bathe the buildings in rust.

“You’ve done good work, Tarek,” he says quietly. “Better than some of my lords.”

“I’m just trying to do the right thing.”

“You’re doing more than that. You’re doing what needs to be done. That’s rarer than you think.” Tarek looks away.

“I still don’t know if I’m a Jedi anymore.” Aran pauses, then leans in slightly.

“Don’t worry about the label, son. Jedi. Agent. Warrior, none of it matters.” Tarek frowns.

“Then what does?” Aran’s hand clasps his shoulder, warm and grounded.

“Doing the right thing. Doing it well. And,” he gives a half smile, “making the people who believe in you proud.” Tarek blinks. Something in his chest goes taut. “You’ve got that fire, *ad’ika*. I see it. The Emperor’s vision? You might not see the full picture yet, and that’s alright. Just keep doing what you’re doing.” He rises and dusts off his coat.

“You’re already making me proud.” He doesn’t say it with force, doesn’t drive it home like a command. He says it like a father would. Like it’s always been true and just now got named.

That night, Tarek doesn’t argue with Vashari or Neryss. He doesn’t dream of rooftops or temples or children screaming in a vault. He dreams of walking into a fire. Of Aran standing at the center of it, arms open, eyes warm, welcoming him home.

They give him the mission two days before departure.

“You’re not being deployed,” Aran says, seated behind his desk in the estate’s command room. “You’re being sent to speak.” Tarek stands at attention, still winded from drills. A faint bruise shadows his jaw from that morning’s sparring session, but his voice is steady.

“And who am I speaking to, my lord?”

“Slaves,” Kovar replies. “And a few civilians caught up in their mess. They’ve seized a refinery complex on the outskirts of Korriban’s Academy. Armed themselves, shut down fuel lines. The place is tactically irrelevant, but symbolically,” he taps his datapad, “it can’t stand.”

“Why not send a garrison?”

“We will,” Kovar says. “But first, we send you.” He leans forward. “They’ll know what you were. They’ll see you and think maybe this one will listen. This one has suffered, too. This one is not a stranger to a collar.”

Tarek swallows.

“I want you to talk to them,” Kovar continues. “If they surrender, this whole mess will be over without a massacre. Some might even be given clemency.” He rises and paces slowly toward Tarek.

“If they don’t...” He stops in front of him. “There’s a protocol. You’ll go in wearing your armor. The right gesture and the unit outside will execute the strike. Clean. Surgical. No survivors. Understood?” Tarek hesitates.

“And if I don’t give the order?” Kovar grins at him.

“Then you better be one hell of a negotiator.”

The refinery smells like old rot and dust. They land in a back corridor, one of the access tunnels that weaves under the compound’s rusted hull. He’s escorted by two silent troopers, each with black visors and itchy trigger fingers. They don’t go in with him, just hand him a commlink and leave him at the bulkhead.

The door groans open and Tarek steps into the heat.

The rebels are huddled in the central chamber, a fuel processing room now stripped of its function, littered with crates and overturned tables. A few have makeshift weapons. Most are gaunt, filthy. Children cluster behind mothers, some no older than ten. All eyes fix on him when he enters. He raises his hands, palms open.

“I’m not here to fight.” His voice echoes across the room. A woman steps forward. She’s missing two fingers on her right hand. Her voice is low with mistrust.

“You’re one of them.”

“I was a Jedi,” Tarek says, and the words come easier than he expects. “I was a slave. I know what it means to be—”

“To be what we are?” someone spits. “You walk in here fed and armored, carrying their blade!” Tarek breathes slowly.

“I came to talk. To listen. You don’t have to die today.” A young man, barely his age, stands up, shaky on his feet.

“You mean we go back in chains?”

Tarek falters.

“You mean they’ll sell us again, split us from our families, beat us until we forget our names?” The boy is shaking. “You mean we’ll go back to the pits, the mines, the fucking breeding cages—”

“I can make sure you’re not hurt,” Tarek says quickly. The room erupts; laughter, anger, grief. Someone throws a wrench that clangs against the wall beside him. He grips the hem of his sleeve. The access phrase falls from his lips like water spilled from a bowl.

A heartbeat.

Everything falls quiet. Then the ceiling tears open. Gunfire rains down through precision holes, clean and surgical. Screams twist into metal and blood. The woman with the missing fingers’ eyes go wide as a blaster bolt meets her forehead. The boy’s head is torn clean off by a blast. Mothers collapse into children. Fire sears the walls. A survivor tries to run and is ripped in half by a follow-up blast.

Tarek doesn’t move.

He watches it all. He sees the child, charred and motionless, face down in ash. The sobbing stops. The heat doesn’t. The smoke creeps low. Vashari is still beside him. Neryss won’t meet his eyes.

He falls to his knees in the ruin he has wrought. Ash on his boots. Blood on his sleeves. His chest is hollow, vibrating in the silence. Footsteps behind him. Armor. Kovar. The Sith steps in, surveys the scene, and nods once.

“You did what had to be done.”

Tarek doesn’t answer. Tears are welling in his eyes. Vashari kicks the limp corpse of a child. Kovar rests a hand on his shoulder.

“You made me proud, son.” And Tarek, weeping silently, doesn’t push the hand away.

It is raining when they return to the compound, a thin mist of metallic stink and ozone. Tarek sits at the edge of the courtyard steps, hunched, arms braced on his knees. Ash lines the seams of his clothes. His jaw clenches until his teeth ache. Vashari paces behind him barefoot.

“You hesitated,” she says, calm as always. “But you still gave the order.”

He doesn’t answer.

“You knew what the signal would do,” she continues. “You knew! And you chose it.”

“Shut up,” he mutters.

“Did you see their faces?” Neryss asks from his right, crouching beside him now. Her eyes are dead. “That woman with the child tied to her chest? Did you see how the light left her eyes?”

“I said shut up!”

“You did it like it was just another mission,” Vashari cuts in, suddenly vicious. “You let them turn you into this!”

“I was trying to save them!” he shouts. His voice cracks, loud and raw. The rain hisses in the silence that follows.

“From what?” Vashari asks quietly. “From slavery? From the Empire you serve now?”

“You’re being too harsh on yourself, kid,” Kovar says from behind him. Tarek flinches.

The Sith steps out from the archway behind him, cloak damp at the hem, expression unreadable. In one hand, he carries a cloth bundle. In the other, a flask.

“You’ve been out here a while,” he says as he approaches. “Thought you might need company.”

Tarek says nothing. Aran sits beside him, slow and deliberate. A soft grunt as his knees creak. He hands the flask over without ceremony. Tarek takes it. The liquor burns. Good. He welcomes the sting.

“They’re still with you, huh?” Aran asks. Tarek doesn’t answer. “I don’t mind. We all carry ghosts, son. You’re just talk louder.” He looks down at the flask in his hands.

“They say I failed,” he says. “That I betrayed everything we believed in.” Aran raises an eyebrow.

“We?” Tarek stares ahead.

“The Jedi.”

“The Jedi,” Aran echoes with a soft, almost fond chuckle. “You really think they would’ve done differently?”

“I don’t know.” The Sith leans back on his elbows, watching the light glint across the wet stone of the courtyard.

“You know,” he says conversationally, “I don’t think the Jedi were ever good to you.” Tarek stiffens. Aran doesn’t stop. “I mean, think about it. You, of all people, a Weequay, sent to the Hutts. The very bastards who’ve enslaved your people for centuries. You ever ask why it was you they sent,” he asks, voice softer now. “Because they thought it’d be poetic? A show of strength? Some kind of moral optics win? ‘Look how noble we are, sending a Weequay to make peace with his own peoples’ oppressors.’” He snorts. “Tell me that’s not its own kind of cruelty.”

“He’s baiting you,” Neryss hisses, but she sounds distant now. Fainter than before. Tarek presses his palms together and closes his eyes.

“They thought I could make a difference.”

“And did you?”

Silence.

“They believed in an illusion,” Aran says with the same dry calm he uses when talking battle formations. “They dressed it up as diplomacy, but what they really did was send you to drown in your own blood. You think the Republic cares about Hutt slaves? You think they care about your people?” Tarek’s jaw clenches even harder.

“They tried.”

“Then where were they when you were in the Vault?”

A pause.

“I know you think I’m trying to sell you something,” Aran says. “But I’m not. I’m just showing you what’s always been there. You see the galaxy for what it is. You’ve lived the lies, felt the leash. And if that makes you less of a Jedi, then I don’t think the Jedi deserve you.” He pulls the bundle into both hands and slowly unwraps it. Inside is a lightsaber. Dented. Familiar.

Tarek freezes. Aran lays it gently on his lap.

“Had to go digging through Palide’s archives to find it, but I thought you should have it back.”

Tarek stares. His hands tremble.

“I don’t deserve it,” he murmurs.

“I don’t believe that,” Aran says simply. “I think you deserve it more than half those bastards on the High Council.”

Tarek picks it up like lifting a memory. His hands curl around the hilt as if instinct. The cool metal buzzes through his bones.

“I feel like I’m becoming something I hate.” Aran nods matter-of-factly.

“That’s part of it, son. The price we pay for clarity.”

Vashari appears again across the courtyard, arms crossed, watching with a grief-stricken face.

“You don’t have to be this,” she whispers. “You can still walk away.”

“What’s she saying?” Kovar leans in, placing his cheek right next to Tarek’s. His gaze follows Tarek’s into nothing. Tarek swallows once.

“She’s saying I can still walk away. That it isn’t too late.”

“Walk to what?” Tarek turns to look at him. “You want to die for a Code that abandoned you? Waste yourself on a cause that left you to rot?” His voice shifts, low and final.

“You don’t have to be perfect, Tarek. You just have to do what’s right. Not what’s ideal, not what’s pretty. What’s right. For you. For the Empire. For the people you can actually help.”

“What if I don’t know what that is anymore?” Tarek’s voice shakes. Kovar smiles faintly and places a hand on Tarek’s shoulder.

“I trust you to find it.” Something in Tarek collapses inward, like a tide swept out. He cradles the blade in his hands and wonders what’s the point in swimming back to shore.

Six months pass like a blade sliding into flesh. Tarek rises through the compound like smoke; unnoticed, then unmistakable. The boy from the Vault vanishes piece by piece, muscle layering over bones, silence replaced with clipped commands. His gait grows heavier, his presence sharper. His name starts carrying weight.

And still, the ghosts follow him. Vashari stands in doorways, arms crossed, watching him lie. Watching him order a man’s death for crimes he’d only witnessed.

“So this is what you are now?” she murmurs, voice low and brittle. “You betray the living and wear armor to bury the shame.”

Neryss follow closer. She no longer looks tired or dead. Her robes are immaculate, her face sharp with accusation.

“Weak,” she hisses as he passes saluting soldiers. “All it took was a pat on the head and you rolled over for the Empire. You think you’re strong? You’re just a dog on a leash.”

Their words change a few months in. Twist. Neryss sneers at his memories.

“You begged me for guidance,” she says standing over his bed one night. “But I never believe in you. Not really.” Vashari appears behind a prisoner once, bloodied and shackled.

“You killed me the day you left me,” she says, eyes dark with scorn. “You always wanted to. You hated how I saw you.”

He screams at her to stop so loud the apprentice next to him flinches.

During one tribunal, Neryss sits beside the defense table, whispering poison into his ear as he drafts the charges.

“He’s innocent, but you’ll convict him. That’s what you do now. That’s who you are.” And he does, just to shut her up. It doesn’t.

“You never deserved to be a Jedi.”

By the third month, he sleeps in armor, eats in silence, stops explaining himself to anyone, not even Aran, who, to his credit, doesn’t ask. Instead, he praises. Encourages. Gives Tarek more. More oversight. More missions. More power.

“You see things clearly,” he says during a private review. “You don’t chase virtue, you enforce order. That’s rarer than you think.”

That week, Kovar takes him to Mandalore. They travel without escort, arriving not in the city, but in a fortress hidden among scorched ridges. Stone, iron, silence. The forge had been serving the clan for centuries. They strip Tarek of his uniform, place him bare before the hammer and flame. Vashari hovers in the corner of the room, gaze devoid of pity.

“I watched you die in that vault,” she says. “The thing that came out isn’t worth saving.” He doesn’t look at her.

He chooses blood-red for the armor, forges it over three days. Refuses the helmet.

“I want them to see my face,” he tells Aran.

“They will,” Aran says, clapping his shoulder. “And they’ll know it’s earned.”

That night, he kneels before Aran in the dueling circle. Behind him, the other apprentices stand in silence, watching. Above them, Mando’a banners ripple in the heat. Aran draws a pouch from his belt: Tarek’s crystal, removed hours prior, and drops it into the small crucible of ichor between them.

“Bleed,” he says.

Tarek reaches through the Force the way Aran had shown him. He presses not with pain, but certainty, not with rage but right. The crystal twists in the dark. Fights. Screams. Vashari screams too, from somewhere deep in his skull. Neryss spits in his face, snarling.

“I hope it hurts,” she screams. “I hope you choke on it.” Tarek doesn’t flinch.

When the crystal emerges, it glows red. Aran holds it high, blood-red glow casting his scarred face in firelight. He turns, takes Tarek’s hilt, scratched, scorched, forged and reforged, and fits the crystal home. He offers it with both hands, solemn as a benediction. Tarek rises to take it.

“Welcome, my apprentice,” Aran says, low and certain. “You are no longer a ghost of the past.”

Tarek ignites the blade. It bursts to life with a searing hum, crimson and hungry, splitting the dark like a promise. The circle is silent for a moment as Tarek swings the saber to and fro, testing his new blade. Then, a footstep behind him. A boot on stone. Another. A fist to chest, gauntlet on cuirass, ringing through the night.

More. Boots. Fists. Synching. A rhythm older than law, heavier than war. The sound rolls through the courtyard in waves, unrelenting. *Gar solus. Gar solus. Gar solus.* It echoes through the arena, through the bones of the estate, through the aching space in Tarek’s chest where doubt used to wedge itself. He lifts the blade high, above his head, like a torch in a storm.

Behind him, Aran steps forward. One hand rests on Tarek’s shoulder, steady and proud. There’s no speech, no command, just the weight of belonging settling over him like a mantle. Just the red light on his skin and the voices calling his name without speaking it.

The training yard is quiet, rain-wet durasteel dewing in the morning sun, mist rising in slow coils. Tarek stands in the center, armor half-stripped, lightsaber still humming in his palm from the last bout. He isn’t breathing heavily. He rarely does anymore.

He senses Aran before the man speaks. A ripple in the air, calm and solid.

“Hey, kid.” He turns, deactivating the blade. Aran stands near the edge of the yard, arms folded over his chest, expression unreadable.

“Walk with me?”

They move through the main corridor in silence, past the mess and war rooms, up the central stairwell and toward the upper terrace. Tarek doesn’t ask where they’re going. If Aran wanted to tell him, he would.

They emerge into a narrow overlook, facing toward the west skyline of Kaas City; a vertical forest of black towers and crimson banners. Below, the estate’s hangar bays gleam in the

haze, guards shuffling in changing shifts. Tarek leans against the rail and waits. Aran doesn't look at him when he speaks.

"Lord Palide is celebrating his fiftieth next week." Tarek grunts.

"Didn't know the Council was big on birthdays."

"They aren't. But the Kav'i's are throwing the celebration, ten years since he took his seat." His tone sharpens slightly. "A decade of corruption masked as progress."

Tarek says nothing. Aran's gaze stays fixed on the skyline.

"She'll be there, of course, they're hosting the gala at her estate. All the Spheres are invited." He drops his voice. "We're expected to bring an apprentice."

Tarek stiffens. The word isn't thrown but placed deliberately.

"I want you to accompany me." His brow furrows.

"To what? Smile and clap for the people who tortured me?"

"No," Aran says, voice steady. "To stand beside me as proof." Tarek turns, eyes narrow.

"Proof of what?"

"I want them to see who you've become." His voice is deep, full of resonant pride. "And I want you to see them for what they are. Not gods. Not monsters. Just aging predators, throwing parties to keep the blood on their hands from drying too fast." Tarek exhales through his nose.

"You think they'll even notice?"

"Palide might. But Serith will."

Tarek looks away. The name Serith scrapes against the inside of his skull like rusted metal. He still sees her in his dreams, smiling, cloaked in shadow, soaked in his own screams. A flick of her wrist, a command, a smile. Then pain. He clenches his jaw. Aran rests a hand on his shoulder.

"You don't have to speak, don't have to draw a blade. You just have to stand beside me." Tarek's throat works.

"Why?" Kovar doesn't answer right away. Eventually, he takes a long sigh.

"I'm fifty-two," he says, voice quiet. "I'm still strong, but I'm not going to be here forever. I've never had an heir, never trusted anyone enough."

Tarek stares at him.

"You're not saying—"

“I’m saying,” Aran interrupts, “that when I’m gone, someone will need to carry what I’ve built. That I’d like for it to be you.”

Tarek swallows. Vashari and Neryss are quiet, leaving him with just the wind and the rain fading on the rooftops.

“Alright,” he says. Aran’s eyes crinkle, the barest hint of a smile.

“That’s my boy,” he says. “You’ll need new armor, something formal. Nothing too extravagant, though, we aren’t politicians.” Tarek nods once.

The compound is quiet in the mornings, save for the whistle of drills and the distant clatter of sparring blades, but inside his quarters, the stillness is heavy. Tarek stands before the mirror, adjusting the fit of his armor. It had been polished, re-lined with deep red and black accents. The chestplate bears no crest, only the etched mark of the Sphere of Law and Justice down one shoulder guard, the way Kovar likes his symbols.

His fingers pause over the fastenings.

“She’ll be there, you know,” Vashari says behind him. “You’ve known since the second he said the name ‘Serith.’”

He doesn’t turn.

“You think you can carry that saber in front of her?” Neryss hisses. Her voice sharper. “Stand there wearing Sith colors like it doesn’t matter what she sees in your face?”

Tarek’s breath catches. He tightens the strap and reaches for the next.

“You’re shaking,” Vashari murmurs.

“I’m not,” he says aloud.

“You were the one who broke,” she continues softly. “I’m still me. Even in chains. Even in pain. I never stopped being myself.”

He grits his teeth, slamming the vambrace into its catch. “You’re not real.”

Neryss leans casually against the corner of the mirror. “We’re more real than anything you have now.”

His hand hovers at the lightsaber hilt clipped to his hip. It hums low when he brushes it.

“You loved her,” Vashari says, almost a whisper.

Tarek looks up sharply. His reflection stares back: hollow-eyes, too pale. Neryss is pacing now, armored boots echoing silently on the floor.

“You should’ve died in the Vault like the rest of us. But instead, here you are. Playing dress-up for Sith lords. Pretending you’re better because you kill with orders instead of instinct.”

He turns on them. “Enough.”

They don’t flinch.

“You think I don’t know what I’ve done?” he snaps. “You think I don’t wake up tasting their blood, seeing their faces, hearing the screams? I chose this. I chose to survive.”

Vashari steps closer. Her face is wrong: blurred now at the edges, like an old memory starting to rot. Her eyes are endless. Pitiless.

“No,” she says, “you chose him.”

Tarek stares at her. Then, with eerie calm, he turns away.

“You’re not people,” he says. “You’re ghosts. And ghosts can’t be disappointed. Can’t be betrayed.”

He slides the second vambrace into place. Buckles it.

“I did what you never could. I made peace with what I am.”

Behind him, the hallucinations watch quietly. Smiling.

The Kav’i estate shimmers like a blade dipped in oil, layered in deep golds and crimson silks, lit by torches that gutter against the storm-soaked skyline. Dromund Kaas never truly dries, but the rain holds off tonight.

The estate is split across tiers: the upper verandas with perfumed courtyards and stained-glass galleries where noble bloodlines sip poison and laugh too easily; the grand feasting halls where bodyguards loom like statues behind their masters; and the sunken coliseum at the heart of the manor, where the real show is.

Tarek walks a step behind Lord Kovar. His posture is tight, shoulders broad, back rigid, the lines of Mandalorian armor clean against his frame. His lightsaber marks him as more than an enforcer. He is an Apprentice.

They make their rounds with the Council. Darth Emmenas, cold as ever, Darth Vieron who calls Tarek a “curiously blunt weapon” with a diplomat’s smile, and of course, Darth Palide.

“So this is the apprentice I’ve heard so much about.” Palide’s voice is purring and full of static. His presence seems to suck the air from the corridor. His red skin is powered, his lekku and montrals decorated with silver bands. He wears no visible weapons, he doesn’t need them. Tarek stiffens. Palide smiles at Kovar, then turns his eyes to Tarek.

“Posture like that,” he says softly, “I’d wager he grew up a slave. They never quite lose the habit of being beneath someone.” Kovar’s mouth twitches, almost a smile.

“You have a good eye, my Lord. But Tarek bends the knee no longer.” Palide hums, unimpressed.

“Mm. I’m sure he truly believes that.” And just like that, he’s gone, trailing laughter and silk. Tarek’s jaw tightens. Kovar places a hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t let men like that get to you, son. You’ll outlive them.”

They descend into the coliseum after introductions are done, following the marble arcades down toward the sound of conversation. Tarek’s boots hit the steps and he falters. He’d expected spectacle: he’s heard stories from other Sith who’d visited, but this...

The coliseum is more cathedral than dueling arena. Wide, sunken, ringed with banners and braziers that glow softly. Stands lavishly decorated with Sith lounging and drinking while they watch. And in the center of it all, a masked fighter stands against a trio of cyber-hounds.

Tarek freezes.

She is leaner than he remembers. One arm and one leg gleam silver, jointed and cruel. One lekku is missing entirely. A black mask covers her face, but the way she moves is unmistakable. The whip-turn of her body, the sudden stillness before each strike, the weight in every motion like it is meant to end a war.

It’s her.

Even broken, even changed, even enslaved, he would never forget the way Vashari moved when she was fighting.

His blood goes cold. She tears through the hounds. The crowd applauds. Her saber spins, green, still green, how the fuck is it still green, and she falls to a knee in the sand, muttering something in High Sith as the gates open again. Tarek takes a step back. He turns before the gate can fully open and slips from the coliseum, pushing through silent stone halls until he finds a courtyard, dark and damp with moss. He braces a hand on the wall, shaking.

She hadn’t seen him. He tells himself that twice. Three times. She hadn’t seen him. And her fucking lightsaber was still green. She hadn’t turned. She’d been stronger than him.

He stands in the silence of the courtyard, breath ragged. Inside, the crowd applauds again.

“You ran,” Neryss says, voice low, cruel, far too close. “Didn’t even wait to see her fall.”

“He always runs,” Vashari adds, circling the edges of the garden like a phantom beneath the leaves. “It’s in his nature.” Tarek flinches, hands curling. He feels Kovar’s calm presence behind him.

“She’s alive,” he says hoarsely.

“I know,” Aran says, voice soft behind him. “I saw.”

“She fights for them.”

“She survives.”

“She shouldn’t have to survive like that!” Rain drips from the awnings overhead, slow and steady. Kovar comes to stand beside him, hands folded neatly behind his back. Tarek turns, wide-eyed, pointing sharply toward the coliseum.

“Did you see her? Chained. Cybernetics. They took her lekku, Aran! They butchered her!”

“And yet she stands,” Kovar mutters. “She fights. That takes strength.”

“She shouldn’t have to be strong.”

“She always was,” whispers Neryss from just behind his shoulder. “You weren’t.”

Tarek shakes his head hard.

“You were supposed to die in the Vault,” Vashari says, perched on the garden wall like a vulture. “We both were. But you clawed your way out and left us buried.”

“You don’t get to lecture me,” he hisses under his breath. “You’re not real.” Kovar glances sideways.

“They’re speaking to you again?” Tarek clenches his jaw, turning to face his master.

“You knew this was happening,” he breathes. “You knew, didn’t you?” Kovar doesn’t move.

“I suspected.”

“And you didn’t do anything?”

“I couldn’t.”

“Bullshit!” Tarek snaps. His voice rises a pitch. “You could’ve gone to the Council. You could’ve exposed her. You could’ve burned the estate to the ground—”

“I serve the Empire, Tarek.”

“You serve yourself!”

Kovar’s brow raises, just faintly.

“Do I?” Tarek steps forward, furious now.

“You’re one of them! Just like the rest. You watched her suffer and chose to do nothing. You let her become... that.”

“I let you survive,” Kovar says quietly. “You don’t know what I’ve given up to keep you alive.”

“Don’t you dare make this about me!”

“You’d be in a slave pen like her without me.”

“Maybe I should be!”

The words hang, sharp and awful. Tarek sways with the weight of them.

“You’re no better than Serith,” he growls. “At least she’s honest about what she is. You wear justice like a fucking cloak but you’re rotting underneath. You told me to see the galaxy clearly, well here it is! This is what you stand for! Blood and chains and ghosts and cowardice!”

Kovar is silent.

“You told me she was gone,” Tarek hisses. “Told me to move on. And now you expect me to just stand and watch while they parade her like a pet?”

“She made her choices.”

“She didn’t choose this!” Tarek’s voice cracks. “She didn’t choose to be a slave! She didn’t choose to have her body torn apart! You think I chose to live? You think I chose to be the one who got out?”

His voice is shaking now. Splintered.

“You told me I was the future, but all I’ve ever been is your fucking reflection.”

“He’s turned you into a monster,” Neryss spits. “It’s your fault we’re dead.”

Tarek rounds on her.

“Maybe it is!” he screams “You’re dead! You’re dead, Neryss! You died before I could save you and she... she...”

“You left her.”

“I didn’t know she was there!”

“Don’t lie to yourself, Padawan,” Neryss hisses. “You’ve known since the Vault. And you play ignorance.”

“Shut up.”

“You made yourself forget.”

“I said shut up!”

“You watched them carve her apart when you know it should be you in that pit.”

“You think I wanted this?!” Tears are flowing but Tarek can barely tell. He spreads his hands. “You think I’d ever choose this?”

“You revel in your power, Apprentice, don’t pretend you wouldn’t sell us a second time for it.”

Tarek doubles down, hands braced against his knees. They press in, faces he once loved now warped into sneering shadows.

“You think we ever believed in you?” Vashari says, stepping toward him. Her face is bloody, one lekku cut off and draining guts onto the floor. “You were always the weakest.”

“Shut up.”

“You couldn’t save anyone. Not me. Not Neryss. Not even yourself.”

“I said shut up!”

“You left me, Tarek. You walked away.”

He crumples into the stone with a strangled cry, breathing in wet, sharp gasps. Rain soaks through his tunic. He shivers and sobs and grips the hem of his robe like it could tether him to something. Anything.

“Make them go away,” he begs no one in particular. “Please.” Kovar kneels beside him, hand resting firm and warm on the back of his neck.

“I can’t,” he says gently. “They’re yours, son. Taking them from you would be taking a part of yourself.”

“I hate them,” Tarek chokes out.

“I know.”

“I hate myself.”

Kovar says nothing. He doesn’t need to. Tarek weeps, ragged, guttural sobs that shake his whole frame. Water laps faintly behind him, and, in the distance, the crowd applauds. Kovar stays with him, waiting, one hand on his apprentice’s shoulder, until the sobs slow to silence.

They leave before food is served. Kovar mutters apologies to the attendants, citing fatigue and travel. No one questions him, no one can. Tarek follows a step behind, cloak drawn high over his shoulders, face drained and stiff. The halls blur as they move, gilded murals and roaring laughter dimming into silence behind marble doors. They don’t speak until the shuttle doors seal. Kovar sits across from him, one hand on his knee, the other folded calmly in his lap.

“You did well.” He speaks softly. Tarek doesn’t answer. “I mean it.”

Tarek stares at his hands, still trembling faintly. His lightsaber rests on his hip, heavier than it should be. His fingers brush against it like it might vanish if he lets go.

“I should’ve gone to her,” he murmurs. “Done something.”

“And what would that have accomplished?” Aran asks, not unkindly. Tarek doesn’t answer. “Do you think she wants to see you,” he continues, “in that state? Bleeding. Collar on her neck. You would’ve humiliated her.”

“She didn’t see me.”

“That’s a mercy.” Tarek looks out the window at the passing trees, jaw tight.

“She was strong,” he says. “She was...herself. Still fighting like I remember.”

“Of course she was,” Aran replies, voice warm. “It’s all she knows.” Tarek flinches.

“She was always strong,” he whispers.

“And look where it got her.” Kovar leans forward slightly. “You know it’s true,” he says gently. “Serith broke her, and still, she thrives in servitude rather than learning to rise.”

“She doesn’t have a choice.”

“Didn’t she?” Kovar tilts his head. “You escaped. You made something of your pain. But she... she let it mold her into someone else’s weapon. That is a choice.” Tarek clenches his fists.

“She looked at home in that arena.”

“She is,” Aran says. “Because she chose to survive on someone else’s terms.”

“She always said... she always told me...” his voice trails off. He can’t remember the words now, only the tone. Calm. Detached. Distant in a way that had once comforted him but now feels cold.

“She never believed in you,” Neryss whispers from the shadows of the shuttle.

“I only ever pitied you,” Vashari adds.

“She left you,” they say together. Tarek shudders.

“I don’t think I hate her,” he says softly, “but I don’t... I don’t feel like I used to.” Kovar nods once, measuring.

“You’ve grown,” he says. “And growth brings clarity. You see her now as she is, not through the eyes of a child looking for salvation.”

“She’s not the same person I knew anymore,” Tarek says.

“No,” his master replies. “She’s not.”

There’s a long silence. The rain shimmers beyond the glass.

“I think...I think she’s better off there,” Tarek says slowly. “With Serith. At least someone wants her.” Kovar studies him carefully, then leans back in his seat.

“Maybe,” he says. “And maybe one day she’ll realize she was always meant to serve.”

Time passes, and, suddenly, Tarek isn’t a child anymore.

The change doesn’t happen all at once. It creeps in the way moss eats through stone: slowly, steadily, until the foundation reshapes itself. He doesn’t mark the exact day it happens, only that one morning he wakes and the lean angles of adolescence have been replaced by something harder. Broader shoulders. Heavier steps. Scarred knuckles. His voice carries weight now when he speaks. His men lower their eyes when they hear it. He stands straighter, shoulders set, expression still as glass, jaw squared by quiet certainty. His hair is braided back, his robes tailored close, his boots polished to a black gleam that mirrors firelight and blood. The boy who once vomited under open sky now stares down planetary rulers without blinking.

A decade passes beneath Lord Kovar’s shadow, and Tarek grows into it perfectly. Where he followed, he now executes. Where he listened, he now commands.

They call him Kovar’s Blade, out of fear mostly. But when he turns twenty-two, the title changes again.

The pyre is built by hand in the estate courtyard, a tradition as old as the sphere. Not of Kovar’s making, but his refinement. No servants touch it, no droids assist. It is the work of Tarek’s own men, those who’ve bled beside him and killed in his name. The wood is hauled from the outer jungle, the oil distilled from crushed vines grown only on Mandalore’s cliffs. Sacred things, for sacred rites.

They burn Tarek that night. The boy. The Jedi. The Apprentice. Clad in ceremonial black and red Phos steps forward with a torch in his hand. He says nothing. At the edge of the circle, Kovar watches with arms folded, eyes narrowed, face unreadable.

Phos lowers the flame to the pyre. It catches with a roar, the sky above glowing ember-orange. The flames lick upward, devouring old cloth and leather, the last trappings of the child who once knelt there. Heat washes over him. The wind whips ash into his braids.

Kovar approaches, slow and steady. He does not speak, not at first. He steps behind Phos, gauntlet settling on Phos’ shoulder.

“You are my legacy,” he murmurs, low enough only Phos can hear. “Now make them yours.”

He turns to the crowd gathered and raises a hand above his head.

“Brothers!” His voice echoes against the crackling of the flames. “Seven years ago, we accepted a stranger into our ranks. A child torn from war. Unmade. Unclaimed. You remember him: small, bitter, soft in the eyes. A Jedi.”

A ripple of low murmurs. Kovar’s grin is sharp and brief.

“We did not make it easy for him, nor should we have. Every man and woman here has bled for the right to call this place home. And so has he. Every rite we offered, he took. Every trial, he endured. He fought beside us, bled beside us, killed beside us. I called him apprentice. Our Emperor names him warrior. But starting tonight, we call him brother. He has burned the past that chained him. He has reforged his name with purpose and steel. He is not Jedi, he is Darth Phos. The last fire I will ever raise.”

He slams his fist to his chest.

“*Gar solus!*”

The cry tears through the crowd like lightning. Boots strike earth, fists hammer armor. The chant thunders from every throat, hundreds of voices, hands, striking in unison. A war drum. A heartbeat.

Gar solus. Gar solus. Gar solus.

Phos stands beneath the storm of it all, black smoke rising behind him like a crown. His face does not break, but something inside him sets. Resolves. Hardens like cooling beskar. He is not Tarek anymore, Tarek died on the pyre. What remains is forged, bound in iron, raised not by the Jedi, nor the Force, but by blood and ash and a name inscribed in the records of the Sith.

His work expands. He commands squads now, loyalists handpicked by Kovar, obedient and deadly. He leads them to the Empire’s deepest arteries: colonial sectors, outer holdings, frontline worlds too rebellious for diplomacy and too poor for mercy. Mandalore. Ryloth. Mon Cala. He’s a shadow in gleaming armor, a lawful terror that falls not just on insurgents, but the starving, the grieving, the exhausted. His signature is swift: trials held in repurposed temples, interrogations in silenced chambers, mass sentences scrawled across walls in black Imperial script.

Sometimes, a planet wakes to find their senator gone. Their children reclassified. Their food rations halved and redistributed. Sometimes, they wake to nothing at all, just silence and a flag planted where resistance once stirred. And Phos stands over it all, hands behind his back, posture immaculate.

“You brought this upon yourselves.”

The cruelty is no longer something he excuses. It's something he wields. He's grown beyond flinching, beyond guilt. The people who suffer under his hand are criminals. Or they will be. The line is blurred enough now that intent doesn't matter. Resistance is prelude, dissent is confession. If they starve, it is because they failed to adapt. If they rebel, it is because they weren't civilized enough to begin with. If they die, it's because they were meant to. And if he remembers who he used to be, he no longer says so.

Ryloth has already fallen by the time he arrives. The provisional government pledges itself to the Empire, ministers lined up in neat, trembling rows before Imperial banners. Phos isn't here to conquer, he is brought in to clean up. He is a message: compliance is not forgiveness. The loyal are spared, the defiant burned. And those who hide in the hills are not revolutionaries, but reminders in need of erasing.

The mountain breaks before they do. Seismic charges pound the ridge into ruin, swallowing the last of the Twi'lek holdouts beneath layers of stone and fire. Phos watches it collapse from the plateau's edge, silent beneath the roar. His orders are precise. The Empire always favors clean endings, but rebels are rarely so courteous.

Hours later, they're combing the rubble for survivors, dragging coughing bodies from air pockets, lining them up against charred walls. Phos walks between them like a shadow, breath drawn through scorched air. His boots crunch through ash and bone alike. A few mutter prayers. One spits blood at his feet. He doesn't flinch.

The leak comes from a ruptured coolant chamber. He's not sure who triggered it. One of the rebels, maybe, or an idle trooper kicking debris. It ruptures with a sound like breath catching in a throat. Caustic mist explodes outward. The first hit sears across his left flank. His coat hisses. His pauldron buckles. Flesh and armor fuse in a single agonizing flash. He smells burning leather, burning skin, then nothing but the bile in his lungs. Pain lances up through his side, raw and immediate. His vision blurs.

He drops to a knee, gritting his teeth so hard his jaw cramps. With his uninjured hand, he draws his saber and plunges the blade into the chamber wall at the valve's base, carving upward in a controlled arc. The heat flash-ignites the vapor, a burst of flame roaring up the corridor. Fire overtakes chemical in an instant, sealing the breach in a burst of fused metal. The air goes still. The hiss dies. His lightsaber drops from his fingers and clatters to the ground.

The pain comes in pieces as his adrenaline wears off. First his nerves. Then his skin. The arm isn't cut clean off, it's peeled. Metal plating from his bracer and pauldron liquified and folded into flesh, tendons warped, muscles unspooled, the limb sagging like wet cloth from bone.

By the time the medevac arrives, he's already cinched a tourniquet tight around his shoulder. His arm hangs like dead weight from it.

“Reconstruction’s possible,” the field surgeon says, hesitantly, picking through the metal-fused muscle. Phos doesn’t blink.

“It’s dead weight. Cut it off.”

Kovar meets him at the spaceport on Dromund Kaas. The sky is heavy with thunderclouds, the wind sharp with electricity. Phos steps off the ramp in silence, bandages wrapped tight, long coat folded over his uninjured arm. When Kovar sees what’s left of the arm, he exhales once, deep and annoyed.

“Damn it, Tarek.” Phos glances sideways.

“Don’t call me that.”

“You lose a limb and suddenly I’m not allowed to be sentimental?” Kovar gestures at the bandages. “You’re lucky you can wield with both hands. Retraining you would be a nightmare given how shit your footwork is.”

“Better than your footwork, old man.”

“You’re taking a month off,” Kovar continues, breezily. “Doctor’s orders.”

“I don’t need a vacation.”

“You do,” his master replies, tone quiet. “I’m not having you die on some rock because you were too proud to heal properly.” His tone lightens a bit. “Besides, you’re no good to me like this. You can’t even put on your own damn armor.”

They begin the design process in the estate’s archives, sprawled across holotables and old armor schematics. Phos drafts what he wants: a weight-forward arm with pressure distribution, reinforced plating, and a grip-response interface. Nothing ornamental. Every curve is function, every movement intentional.

“We’ll need a proper forger,” Kovar says when they’re done. “I’ll call the clan.” He tosses an old gauntlet plate on the table. “And I’ll donate this.”

Phos lifts the scrap. Kovar’s beskar, bent and half-destroyed. He sets it beside the commission specs.

“I thought you didn’t waste heirlooms.”

“I don’t,” his master says. “But you’re the closest thing I’ve got to a bloodline, and this thing’s too ugly to display.”

Mandalore is quiet when they land. The enclave sits nestled in a range of blackened hills, older than most of the settlements that survived the purges. One of the few forges still allowed to temper beskar by tradition.

Phos knows the path. The last time he walked it, he was gaunt, newly bled, half-convinced the forge fire would burn away what little he had left. That day, they had called him *ge'sol vod* – half-brother – not blood but close enough to stand beside them.

Today, there is no hesitation. The armorer steps forward, scarred helmet angled slightly as he takes in the red and black robes, the faint glint of cybernetic plating beneath.

“Brother,” he says, the word short but not unkind. Phos inclines his head and lifts the crate forward, presenting the beskar and schematic overlay with a precise movement. Kovar stands behind him, helmet on, arms crossed.

“He’s earned the forge, *vod*. Let him burn it right.” There is no further question. The armorer nods once, turns, and disappears into the smoke.

By morning, the arm is done. The plating gleams, polished and set over the synthetic frame with perfect balance. It’s heavier now. Final. He lifts it once. Flexes the hand, clenches his fist. The response is seamless. Kovar stands across from him, arms crossed.

“You look like a walking holo villain.”

“Good.” Kovar snorts.

“If it jams, you’ll wish you’d picked something lighter.” Phos turns the wrist, watching the light catch in the etched seams.

“If it jams,” he says, “I’ll use the other arm.”

Kovar doesn’t smile, but his eyes crease faintly.

The first time Phos raises the arm; it splits a rebel captain’s ribcage. The second time, it keys his clearance code into a Republic command station while the floor is still wet with blood. The third, he uses to silence to a screaming crowd.

Neryss paces him like a captain at inspection, arms crossed, eyes glowing with disappointed fury. She critiques his choices with surgical precision. Vashari stays closer. She crouches beside bodies as they fall. She doesn’t argue, just looks at him. Silent. Wounded. Her cybernetic limbs gleam in his mind like indictments.

He stops responding out loud. Now, it’s enough to simply think louder than them.

They don’t matter. They’ve never mattered. They broke. I survived.

Kovar encourages his growth. He sends Phos to sectors that need something more than order: something feared. And each time, he sends a short message afterward:

Efficient work. I’m proud.

Phos lives for it.

The old compassion is gone, if it ever truly existed. The Vault wasn't a crucible, it was a proving ground. His suffering had meaning only because it made him useful. Now, when he meets slaves, he doesn't flinch. He corrects their posture, inspects their collars, reminds them that silence is safer than freedom. When a Twi'lek child asks him what "Phos" means, he leans in close and says, "It means I burned everything that made me weak."

He visits Kovar less frequently, now that his authority reaches across entire sectors. But when he does, it's with reports in hand, armor perfectly buffed, boots clean. He stands before his master like a soldier awaiting inspection, and Kovar never fails to smile.

"You've made your Empire proud." Phos nods.

"I'll make them prouder next cycle."

At twenty-three, he's tasked with writing legislation for the classification of insurgent families. At twenty-four, he razes the refugee camp on Devaron after a group of ten individuals staged pro-Republic protests. At twenty-five, he gives a speech at the Kaas Citadel on the importance of moral efficiency in a wartime Empire. He speaks of logic. Order. Stability. He doesn't mention the thousands executed beneath his signature. He doesn't mention the girl with the scarred face and cybernetic limbs, still standing in the back of his mind, silent. He doesn't mention the dreams that still claw at him, where she reaches for his hand and he breaks her fingers instead.

It happens quietly. No assassination, no betrayal, no secret duel in the depths of the Citadel. Lord Aran Kovar dies in a medical wing on Dromund Kaas, curled sideways from a ruptured appendix while his aides bicker in the waiting room.

Phos is three sectors away when the message reaches him: encrypted, impersonal, final. He doesn't remember the flight home, only the silence of it. Only the way the stars kept streaking past like nothing had changed. Like Kovar never existed at all.

He arrives on Dromund Kaas too late to see the body, too late to close the eyes. The Citadel halls feel wrong without the sound of Kovar's boots. No voice waiting for him in the command vestibule. No call across the comms asking for updates. Just quiet.

The will reading is conducted by a bureaucrat from the Sphere of Intelligence, clean-shaven and exhausted, surrounded by half the Sphere's ladder. Lords and adjutants and rising warriors, all hoping, knowing, they're about to be named heir. But Kovar leaves no heir. No names. Just a line of protocol: "The seat shall remain unfilled until it is claimed."

The chamber boils. Phos watches, impassive, arms folded behind his back. He can feel the eyes on him: curious, uncertain, measuring. The Dark Council will not choose a successor, not until the Sphere presents one. And right now, there are a lot of contenders.

Phos doesn't speak, doesn't volunteer. He simply walks away. By the time he reaches his private quarters, a holoprojector is waiting. Not the one in his office – this one is personal, left by a steward. Small, old, etched with wear. A relic.

He doesn't activate it right away. He stands over it for a long time, armor still on, gloves creaking as he clenches and unclenches his fingers. The silence buzzes, heavy and wrong. The walls feel too close. His breath is thin.

When the door seals, he takes the projector in both hands and lowers himself onto the edge of the bed. He takes a deep breath, and presses play. The light flickers. Kovar's figure appears, lines deep, eyes sharp. He's seated, a glass in hand. No armor, just dark robes. Casual. Intentional.

"Tarek." The name lands like a stone in water.

"If you're watching this, I'm gone. Which, frankly, means I miscalculated my own biology. Apologies." He chuckles softly, then leans forward.

"You're wondering about the seat. So is everyone else. You want it, I know you do. And I want you to have it. But you don't get it just because I said so. This is the final test, Tarek. Prove to me that you deserve my seat by winning it."

Tarek's breath catches.

"Every lord who served under me received a similar message. Each one with a variation: 'I saw promise in you.' 'I want you to lead.' 'You could take my place.' And they'll believe it. They'll cling to it. That's the game."

He sets the drink down and stands, hands behind his back. Even recorded, his presence fills the room.

"This is your moment to cull the crowd. Burn the excess. If they believe the whispers of a dead man over the word of a living one, they're not worth serving under you. You don't need their loyalty, you need their obedience. Take it by force if you have to."

He pauses. His voice softens.

"I'm proud of you, son. You were more than what they made you in the Vault. More than what I shaped, too. You're the steel edge of the Empire and a far better man than I. Trust yourself. You see the galaxy clearer than most ever will. Don't look back. Make that seat yours. And when you sit in it, make them afraid of ever trying to take it back."

He picks up the glass to offer a toast.

"Keep well, Tarek. I'll see you in whatever comes next."

The holo flickers. Dies.

For a long time, Phos doesn't move. The room holds its breath with him. The heat from the projector fades from his fingers. He sets it down gently, like something sacred. Neryss leans against the back wall, arms folded, gaze softer than usual. Vashari crouches by the door. They don't say anything, for once.

He unbuckles his gloves with care, one, then the other. Presses his knuckles to his mouth. Stares blankly at the floor. There's a tautness in his chest, a pressure building. Something shifting inside him, warping quietly, making room for an absence too large to fit. He inhales shallowly, caught halfway through. The pressure builds. A tremble behind his breath. A weight in his ribs. The itch at the back of his throat that isn't sickness, just the warning of what's to come.

"Hell of a eulogy, wasn't it?"

Tarek flinches. The voice is impossible, not because it's ghostly, but it's warm. Rough. Worn in like an old coat. It makes his heart seize with how right it sounds. He lifts his head slowly.

Kovar is sitting in the armchair across from him. Legs crossed, brow raised. No armor, just the dark robes from the holo and that smiling familiarity, like this is just another post-op debrief.

"You're not supposed to be here."

"I'm dead, son, I don't think the rules apply anymore."

Tarek stares. He swallows once, hard. Kovar gestures lazily to the rest of the room.

"So, these are the ghosts you've been carrying around. Always wanted to meet them." Neryss nods in acknowledgement, arms still crossed.

"He talks to you more than he talks to us." Kovar grins.

"Jealous?"

Neryss snorts. Tarek doesn't laugh, but something loosens in his chest a fraction. Just enough to breathe.

"You left," he whispers. Kovar's smirk fades to something gentler.

"Yeah," he says. "I did."

"I wasn't there."

"I know."

"I should have been—"

“Don’t,” Kovar cuts in, quiet but firm. “Don’t make this into some kind of personal failure. I didn’t die on a battlefield, son, I died a man with bad luck and worse organs. You don’t get to carry that weight, not this time.” Tarek drops his eyes.

“It wasn’t supposed to end like that.”

“No,” Kovar agrees softly. “It never is.” A long pause.

“I wasn’t ready.” Tarek’s voice is low, almost broken.

“I know,” Kovar says. “But you’re never ready to lose that person who believes in you.”

Tarek breathes in, stuttering. His shoulders curl in slightly, the armor of his posture finally cracking. The tears come slowly, a line down his cheek.

“I tried to be everything you wanted.”

“You were more,” the Sith says gently. “You were always more.” Tarek lifts his hands to his face, palms brushing away the tears like they offended him. Kovar leans forward.

“Hey. Look at me.”

He does.

“I’m proud of you. Prouder than I ever knew how to say while I was breathing. You clawed your way out of hell and built something sharp. Something unbreakable. You think that came from me? Hell no! That was you.”

Tarek lets out a sound, half-laugh, half-sob. It shakes. Kovar smiles.

“There it is.” He wipes his face with both hands now, breathing unevenly.

“I don’t know how to do this alone.” Kovar shrugs.

“You’re not.” He glances toward the others. Neryss nods once.

“We’re still here.” Vashari gives a faint smirk, standing up on her haunches.

“Unfortunately.” Kovar chuckles.

“You’ve got more company than most Lords get. Use it.” Tarek laughs, a low sound, dragged up from somewhere raw. He presses a palm to his chest like it hurts. Kovar rises, slow and steady, like the motion matters. He walks to Tarek, kneels, and places a hand over his shoulder. Tarek doesn’t resist.

“You’ll make the Empire tremble, son. You’ll sit in that seat and make every last bastard regret not kneeling sooner. But tonight,” he squeezes his shoulder once, “you can cry. That’s not weakness, it’s what’s left of the soul I didn’t quite wring out of you.”

The sob that follows is quieter. Tarek doesn't collapse, he just folds forward, arms braced on his legs, and lets it come in waves: silent, shuddering, human. Kovar stays beside him. The others, too, hanging on the edges of his consciousness. And when dawn finally graces the Kaasian skyline, Phos is ready.

He doesn't announce himself, not right away. Three days after Kovar's will is read, the sphere fractures: voices rising in corridors, aides whispering names behind cupped hands. Two lords declare themselves heirs by the end of the week, one with a forged seal, the other with a symphony of titles. Both are dead within ten days. One chokes on poisoned wine at a tribunal banquet. The other's ship is breached in hyperspace. No survivors. Phos doesn't attend their funerals. He gets back to work.

His public duties remain unchanged: he delivers sector reports, oversees intelligence operations, sends out memos with crisp precision, never steps out of line. Never once claims authority beyond what he already has.

But privately, he moves. Schedules meetings. Quiet ones. Trusted ones. Speaks to former adjutants, aides, minor lords who once served beneath Kovar and walked away alive. He brings them in not with threats, but certainty. His reputation precedes him now. When he speaks, they listen, but not all obey. Some try to hedge their bets – split support between contenders. Some even begin making their own cases for the seat. Their names go on a list. And, one by one, they die. Sabotaged transports. Sliced banking codes. A corrupted droid that floods a pressurized home with monoxide while the family sleeps. No fingerprints, no announcements, just blood swept quietly into the gutters of Kaas City.

By the time a third lord tries to claim the chair, most of the sphere understands the pattern. One by one, the voices grow silent, not all out of fear. Some out of recognition. Because in the vacuum left by Kovar's absence, Phos is the only figure who doesn't falter. He remains a fixed point. A fulcrum.

Some approach him directly, pledge loyalty in guarded messages. Others wait for signs: a nod in the mess, a redirect of funding, a silence where there was once reprimand. Phos speaks rarely, but when he does, it lands like judgement. He doesn't raise his voice, he doesn't need to.

"I will not presume to speak for a dead man," he tells a gathering of internal enforcers after their hedged lord dies to a malfunctioned speeder, "but I will finish his work."

They don't argue.

It's not a coup, not officially. The Dark Council doesn't lift a hand. They're watching, waiting, curious to see who bleeds last. And Phos has no intention of bleeding. Instead, he meets with tacticians behind sealed doors, redirects funding to the Citadel's internal archives. He has

the guard rotation adjusted around the compound's hall, to 'ensure continued stability', and quietly commissions the reforging of Kovar's old seat.

Eventually, the whispers fade. The contests cease. The deaths grow more sparse, and the list shrinks to near nothing.

It ends in the old Citadel plaza, where Kovar once held sentencing trials. They bring the last holdout in chains: Lord Sebir, silver robed and slow to kneel. He's gaunt from arrest, lips cracked, but his eyes burn. He speaks as if the crowd should still obey him. As if the forged seal and phantom Council support isn't already dust and rot.

Phos doesn't let him finish the sentence. He steps down from the tribunal dais, walking with a calm that hollows the square. No fanfare. No declaration. Just movement. The guards part. The air tastes like rain. He stops inches from Sebir's bowed head, regards him for a moment, then speaks.

"The Empire does not reward inheritance, only strength."

His blade hums to life, red and exacting. It doesn't flash. It carves. The body falls without ceremony. The head rolls once.

The plaza says nothing, but every eye watches him as he turns, ascends the dais again, and leaves.

That night, the mess is full. Not rowdy, never rowdy anymore, but filled the way it used to be. Uniforms dark with stormsoil, armor stacked beside trays, weapons peace-bound by unspoken custom. Steam rises from ration trays. Metal cutlery clinks. Low laughter hums under breath.

Phos enters without ceremony. The conversation softens as he stalks across the room, but no one rises. His boots echo on the metal. His cloak brushes the floor. He says nothing, takes no escort, just lifts a tray from the line, nods once to the server, and makes his way to the head of the central table. Kovar's seat.

He eats in silence. Doesn't look up when a jug of dark ale is passed down the table. Doesn't acknowledge the three officers who shift one bench down to make room beside him. His posture is perfect, each motion controlled. The meal stretches. Conversations wind and thin.

A hand slams against a table. The sound is dull. Intentional. Then again. Harder. A mug slams down the table's edge like a war drum. Another. Across the hall, bodies turn. A pause. A breath. Then the first voice rises.

Gar solus.

Quiet but unmistakable. Another joins, then three. Bottles hit the table like blades sheathing into stone.

Gar solus. Gar solus. Gar solus.

Phos doesn't move. His eyes flicker to the shadows sitting at the edges of his vision. The chant catches like wildfire. Row by row, bench by bench, the sphere finds its voice again. The mess shakes with it. Fists slam in rhythm, helmets bang in ritual beat. It hasn't been heard since Kovar's death, but it's the same rhythm Tarek once heard years ago, the first night he sat in the mess, when he bled his crystal, trembling under a sky of storm, and the sphere declared him one of them. The same rhythm when he was made a warrior. Repeated nightly, like a heartbeat echoing from table to table. Kovar would rise, raise his drink, and the room would chant.

Phos stands. Slow. Measured. He plants his feet on the bench, then steps up onto the table. His boots land heavy. Final. He lifts his mug high into the air. The chant swells to a roar. They are not just hailing a Sith Lord, they are hailing their own. Phos holds still, silhouette lit by flickering lamps and the last embers of dusk through high windows. He is not smiling, but his silence is no longer cold.

An old man rises from the far end of the room, tall, broad, silver haired, his left pauldron etched with Kovar's sigil. He walks slowly. Purposefully. The room parts around him. His name is Bralor. He served Kovar twenty-nine years. Fought in the Siege of Mandalore. Lost a son in the campaigns. Buried another on Ryloth with Phos. And when Kovar died, he offered his own blade to Phos without a word. Now, he approaches the table. In his hands, cradled like a relic, is Kovar's helmet.

Black painted beskar, scorched at the crown, ringed in ritual carvings. The inside is lined with blood-sealed cloth, untouched since Kovar last wore it. He raises it gently, as if lifting a child.

"There's a reason," Bralor says, voice gravel and smoke, "he never let you forge your own." The silence stretches, heavy. Phos leans down and takes it in both hands. He turns it in his hands, slowly, then sets it down, carefully, on the table below him. When he looks up, the mess is silent in attention. He raises his chin. Breathes in the heat, the metal, the scent of broth and sweat and sharpened beskar.

"You all know who I was when I first arrived here." He speaks quietly, but his voice carries across the hushed room. "A half-trained dog. Some Jedi stray pulled from the gutter and dropped at Lord Kovar's feet."

A few gruff chuckles ripple through the hall, tight with memory.

"I expected him to kill me. He didn't. He offered clarity, structure, a path forward, if I could walk it." His gaze sweeps the benches. "And you all made room at the table for me. Let me bleed beside you. Train beside you. You made me one of you long before I ever deserved it. And I'll never forget that."

The words are simple, earnest.

“Kovar was our pillar. Our fire. The edge that cut first and deepest. I will not presume to replace him. But I will not let my people flounder any longer. We will not be caught in the decadence of the Council or the infighting of their parasites. We will be sharp. Precise. Unified. We will not suffer cowards for commanders or politics for policy. We will be the blade the Empire wields with both hands.”

He lifts his glass high.

“So hear this now, brothers! My loyalty is not to titles, not to the Dark Council, not even to Kovar’s legacy. My loyalty is to this Sphere. To this table. To the people who forged me when I had nothing by fire and fear in my hands. I will lead you, I will protect you, and if I ever falter, you will be the ones to cut me down. *Ijaat cuyir te kal Ni kar ’taylir jatne.*”

“Honor is the blade I know best.”

The doors to the Dark Council chamber groan open on ancient hinges. Twelve seats ring the chamber, vast and black and older than the empire they govern. Each throne rises like a tombstone, carved from obsidian and laced with inscriptions few dare read aloud. A dozen shadows seated in silence, watching.

Phos’ footsteps break the silence, measured and heavy, striking the metal like drums. He moves slowly, a long cloak sweeping behind him, hem still dusted from the soil of Kaas. Armor plates etched in Old Mando’a glint beneath the folds. His left arm gleams, dark beskar from shoulder to fingertip, fingers curling slightly as if always ready to strike. And covering his face is Kovar’s helmet. Reforged, modified into a mask. His inheritance.

The Council doesn’t speak. They watch as one might watch a blade drawn from a forge and laid bare on the table. Phos reaches the one vacant seat, stands before it for a moment, head bowed. The chair is enormous. Brutal. Cut from a single slab of obsidian and fused to the floor like it is meant to outlast suns.

He places a gloved hand on its armrest. The stone hums softly beneath his palm, an old, low vibration, like memory. Like a buried heartbeat. He sits. And, for the first time in months, the Circle of Twelve is whole. The Councilmembers glance between each other, some in curiosity, some in silence, some with calculations already moving behind their eyes. But no one protests.

He sits tall in the chair that once belonged to the man who remade him, and, in the polished black surface of the table, the faint gleam of his mask reflects a distorted crown of steel and shadow.

And somewhere, in the darkness of his mind, a familiar voice chuckles softly.

“About damn time.”