

The lights come on before the children are awake. They always do.

A low chime hums through the dormitory. The ceiling strips glow pale gold, the color of honey. Lirael blinks into the light. Around her, rows of narrow bunks fill the room from wall to wall: thirty girls, maybe more, all the same pale uniforms and tied lekku, all the same silence. The air smells of disinfectant and recycled heat.

“Up!” comes the voice from the corridor. Matron’s Tessk’s silhouette fills the doorway, long and thin as a shadow carved in glass. Her lekku are wrapped tight in gray silk, her expression a practiced mask of composure. The door hisses open and she sweeps inside, skirts whispering.

“Stand. Hands at your sides.”

The girls rise in unison. No one speaks – they know better. Lirael rubs the sleep from her eyes, fingers trembling, and falls into line. Tessk’s boots click along the desk plating, her gaze cutting down the row like a blade.

“Instruction room two,” she says. “You will eat after. And remember: when you are spoken to, you smile.”

A small droid hums to life near the door, sounding the soft trill that means *move now*. The children file out into the corridor, bare feet on cold metal. Lirael keeps her eyes on the collar of the girl in front of her. They’re not allowed to talk, not even to whisper. Once, months ago, she tried – just a question, a joke about the way Tessk’s lekku shook when she shouted. Tessk’s slap had been fast and quiet. No one laughed after that.

The instruction room smells of citrus polish. Rows of low tables gleam beneath the viewport. Beyond the transparisteel, Nar Shaddaa’s smog glows like a million tiny embers.

“Posture,” Tessk says. “You must look pleasant. Master Venn doesn’t like seeing the effort behind your service.”

Lirael straightens her back until it aches. She presses a napkin flat, folds the corner into a lotus just as she’s been shown. Across the table, a human girl drops her spoon. It clatters once against the floor. The room freezes. Tessk’s eyes narrow.

“Pick it up.”

The girl bends, hands shaking. Tessk’s hand flashes; a quick cuff across the back of her head.

“Sloppy. Again.”

The others keep working. Lirael does too. She’s learned the rules: silence means safety. She presses another crease, another perfect fold. Her reflection stares back at her from the polished surface, small and colorless.

It's half an hour before the bell that signals the end of lesson chimes, sharp and brief. The girls set their napkins down in unison and stand. Tessk's hand flicks toward the door.

"Dining hall," she says. "No talking."

The room beyond is narrow and gray, stripped of the perfume and warmth of the upper decks. A line of metal trays waits under the watchful eyes of two older slaves. Steam curls from shallow bowls of thin broth, the smell more salt than food. Each girl takes one and sits on the low benches that line the wall.

Lirael lowers herself onto the bench. The broth is barely warm, with a few pale grains floating on the surface. She eats in quick and small mechanical motions. Around her, the others do the same; thirty quiet mouths, thirty hollow bellies. No one looks up. The only sound is the clink of spoons against metal. Across from her, the human girl who dropped the spoon earlier sneaks a glance in Lirael's direction. Her eyes are red with tears. Lirael wants to whisper something, anything, but Tessk's reflection is visible in the viewport glass, pacing the aisle with folded arms. The moment passes.

"Finish," the matron says. "Return your bowls."

They obey. The droid emits another trill, and the lines divide: half the girls toward laundry, half toward the guest quarters. Tessk consults her datapad.

"Lirael," she says without looking up, "corridor sweep. Observation deck."

"Yes, Matron." Lirael bows her head and joins the group filing down the corridor.

The cleaning carts are already waiting at the deck junction, stacked with rags, solvent, and polish. The overseer hands each girl a rag and section number. "No streaks," he says, bored. "And stay out of the passengers' way."

The observation deck opens wide before her: floor-to-ceiling transparisteel, the planet below spinning slowly through the haze. Lirael drags her rag across the railing, counting strokes in her head: one, two, three, four. The metal catches her reflection: a small girl with hollow eyes and wrists too thin for the cuffs of her uniform.

When Tessk's footsteps fade down the corridor, she works faster, wiping each panel with hurried precision. The ship hums softly beneath her feet, a sound she has come to know like a heartbeat. The engines are due for calibration soon; she can feel the tremor in the deck plates when they cycle.

By the time the overseer returns, her section gleams. He nods once, disinterested, and marks her name on the datapad. "Done early again," he mutters. "Go help laundry."

"Yes, sir."

She bows her head and turns the corner, but instead of the laundry hatch, she slips through a maintenance access, the one with a loose panel she's been slipping through for the better part of a year.

The crawlspace is narrow and smells of hot metal. She moves on hands and knees, counting panels the way she does strokes. Twelve blue lights, then turn left. The sound of the engines grows louder as she descends, low and constant, a hum that settles somewhere deep in her chest.

When she reaches the vent that opens into the lower bay, she peeks through the grate. The world below her is fire and copper light: pipes, coolant lines, sparks jumping from a fusion coupler. Neb, the old Weequay mechanic who runs the maintenance deck stands at the base of a turbine, sleeves rolled up, leathery skin glistening with sweat. His thick fingers move with surprising care as he tightens a cluster of bolts with a wrench nearly as long as her arm.

"You planning to stare all day?" he grumbles without looking up. His voice carries over the roar of the fans, gravelly and dry.

Lirael startles. "You heard me?"

He snorts. "This ship talks, little spark. She tells me when she's got pests crawling in her vents."

She crawls out anyway, dropping lightly onto the deck. Her feet slap the metal and echo up the corridor. He squints at her, eyes like carved stone. "You're supposed to be polishing floors."

"I finished," she says. "Observation deck."

"Sure you did." He straightens with a groan, setting the wrench down. "If Tessk finds you down here again, she'll have you scrubbing the refresher drains for a week."

"I'll be quiet."

"You never are."

Lirael grins, small and quick. He sighs and waves a hand toward the nearest console.

"Fine. If you're here, make yourself useful. Hand me that calibration wand."

She scurries to obey, grabbing the long silver rod and passing it up to him. The ship vibrates faintly when he slots it into the socket near the turbine. The lights flicker from yellow to green.

"What does it do?" she asks.

“Keeps the drive aligned. Otherwise she shreds herself to bits when we jump.” He wipes his hands on a rag. “Everything in a ship’s got to be balanced. Heat, thrust, power. You push too much in one place, something else burns out.”

She nods, wide-eyed. “Like people?”

That earns her a glance, sharp and surprised. Then his expression softens. “Aye,” he says quietly. “Like people.”

He kneels beside her, tapping a finger against a line of gauges. “This one’s your core temperature. This one, your output ratio. Too high and you melt half the deck. Too low and you drift until someone decides you’re not worth towing.”

Lirael repeats the numbers under her breath, memorizing them. He notices. “You really want to learn this?”

“It’s better than folding napkins.”

Neb chuckles. The sound is rough but real. “That it is. But don’t let anyone hear you say so. The masters don’t like smart slaves. Makes ’em nervous.”

“I won’t tell.”

“I know.” He hands her a spanner half her size. “Try this. Loosen that coupling – no, other way – that’s it. You’ve got good hands, little spark.”

She glows at the praise. The metal squeaks as she turns it, then settles with a satisfying click.

“Did I do it?” she asks.

“Good enough.” He takes the tool back, pretends to inspect her work. “You’ll get the feel for it. Everything on a ship’s alive. You listen long enough; she’ll tell you what she needs.”

Lirael leans against the bulkhead, watching the rows of lights pulse in rhythm. For the first time all day, her shoulders unclench. The heat, the smell of grease, even the grime under her nails, it all feels honest. Not like the polished floors above, where every breath has to be measured.

“Were you always here?” she asks.

“Nah.” Neb wipes the sweat from his brow. “Started on spice freighters. Then a mining ship. Ended up here when my last owner lost a card game.”

“Did you ever get off?”

“Off?”

“Free.”

He stares at her for a long moment. “Once,” he says finally. “Didn’t last.”

“Oh.”

“I was a few years older than you, maybe. Thought I was clever.” He raps a knuckle against the deck plating. “One of my masters back on Ord Mantell kept a yard full of us. When he wasn’t looking, I stole a shuttle part by part, built her from scrap. Got halfway to the next system before they found me.”

“What happened?”

“What d’you think?” He shrugs, an old movement worn smooth by time. “They dragged me back, burned the ship, sold me to the next fool who’d pay. No one wants a ‘quay who runs. Costs too much to chain ’em.”

Lirael’s brow furrows. “But you still tried.”

He chuckles, rough and low. “Yeah. Tried. And learned something for my trouble: they’ll always pay more for a man who doesn’t fight the leash.” He turns slightly, tugging up the back of his grimy work shirt. “See that?”

Lirael leans forward. The skin at the small of his back is a lattice of pale, melted ridges that form the stylized crest of a bird mid-flight. The scar tissue gleams faintly in the orange engine light, old and deep.

“Venn’s mark,” he says. “Hot iron. Didn’t even blink when he did it. Said it’d keep me honest.” He lets the shirt fall. “He wasn’t the first to brand me, but he made sure it wouldn’t fade. I can’t reach it, can’t scrape it off.”

“That’s awful,” she whispers.

“Eh.” He gives a small, humorless smile. “I’ve had worse. Venn’s a bastard, but he’s predictable. Keeps the ship running, feeds us regular. I’ve worked for ones who’d vent a hold just to make a point. Compared to that, this ain’t so bad.”

She shakes her head. “You don’t sound happy.”

“I’m not unhappy,” he says, which somehow sounds sadder. “I got work to do, I got air to breathe, and no one’s shooting at me. That’s enough, little spark. That’s more than most get.”

“But... you could still try again. You could hide the brand.”

He laughs, a dry wheeze. “You think I ain’t thought of that? You can paint over a brand, girl, but folk still see what they want to. They see a mark and they remember who put it there. You can’t wash that off.”

He turns back to the console, the conversation already retreating behind the clatter of tools. “Best thing you can do is learn. Know enough to keep yourself alive. Maybe, one day,

when they're not looking, you can make a small change, something they don't notice right away. That's the only kind of freedom that lasts."

Lirael hugs her knees to her chest, watching the steam rise from the coolant pipes. "You don't think anyone really gets free, do you?"

Neb looks at her for a long moment. The fanlight cuts his face in half: one side all scar and shadow, the other soft and gold. "I think freedom's like space, kid. It's out there, sure. But you step into it without a suit, it'll kill you just the same."

She doesn't answer. The words settle in her gut like stones. He sees it and sighs, softer this time. "Don't let me scare you. You're young. You got time to figure out your own way."

She nods. "Maybe I'll fix a ship like you did."

"Maybe you will." He reaches over and ruffles the top of her head with a calloused hand. "Just don't build it out of my parts."

That earns a quiet laugh. He smiles at the sound. "Go on now, before someone catches you. If they ask, tell 'em I sent you for solvent."

She scrambles up into the vent again, glancing back once. Neb is already bent over the console, sleeve rolled high, branded skin peeking out from the base of his shirt. For the first time, she notices how he leans just a little to favor one leg, like the weight of the years has settled there and won't let go.

The crawlspace is dim and hot. She moves slowly, palms sliding over the metal, heart heavy with thoughts she doesn't have the words for yet. When she reaches the grate that opens into the servants corridors, she stops and presses her ear to the hum of the ship. Neb said every vessel is alive. If that's true, she wonders, maybe this one can hear her, too. Maybe it knows she doesn't belong here.

*One day, she thinks. One day I'll build one that's mine.*

Then she pushes the panel open and slips back into the lightless hall before anyone can notice she was gone.

The next few days pass in the strange rhythm that only slaves know, hours blurring into one another, marked by the tone of bells and the weight of footsteps outside the dormitory. Lirael works as she always does, hands folded, eyes down, voice kept small. She polishes tables until her reflection stares back at her from the surface, she folds napkins into perfect white shapes that look like flowers but smell faintly of metal and soap. When Tessk isn't watching, she studies the wiring in the wall sconces, traces the seams of the ship with her eyes and commits them to memory.

At night, when the dormitory lights dim and Tessk's shoes have stopped pacing outside, Lirael lies awake listening to the hum of the ship's engine. She imagines Neb somewhere below, tending to the machinery, his rough hands steady and sure. She sneaks down to visit him when she can, learn what he'll tell her. He shows her how to check pressure lines and coolant levels; teaches her which valves to bleed when the core overheats; how to listen for the difference between a healthy hum and one that's ready to blow. She learns the ship's moods, the way it shudders when they enter orbit, the way the air recyclers hiss when the nobles open the upper decks to guests. Each lesson feels like a secret he's giving her, a piece of the galaxy no one else could share.

The summons comes three days later. Lirael is cleaning up the threshold of the main hall when Tessk's voice cuts through the corridor.

"Lirael," she says. "Upstairs. Now."

Lirael wipes her hands on her apron, heart kicking against her ribs. "What for?"

"Don't ask questions," Tessk snaps. "The master wants you."

The air grows colder as she ascends the staircase, each step too loud beneath her bare feet. The upper corridor smells of expensive perfume and burned spice, the kind Venn likes to smoke after dinner. She can hear faint laughter from behind one of the salon doors, the sound of glasses clinking.

When she reaches his study, the guard outside doesn't move to stop her. He just presses the panel and the door slides open.

Inside, the lights are low and golden. Danuz Venn sits at his desk, coat draped over the chair, a glass of amber liquid in his hand. His skin is the color of pale ash, smooth and cool beneath the light, his eyes faintly red at the edges. Two heavy head-tails sweep down his shoulders, their ridged surfaces polished like stone. From his temples curve a pair of dark, gleaming horns, tapering wickedly to points. He wears his wealth like armor: embroidered silk robes in deep rust and gold, patterned with fine whorls that catch the light when he moves. He looks up when Lirael enters, smiling like someone who's already decided how the conversation will end.

"Lirael," he says, drawing out the syllables. "Come closer."

She obeys. The smell of the liquor makes her stomach twist. On the desk behind him lies a long, slender rod of metal capped with a gilded crest. The same bird she's seen embossed on the walls and uniforms. The same one branded on Neb's back. Its tip glows faintly orange from heat.

“You’ve done good work,” he says. “Tessk tells me you get your work done in half the time as the others. I like that.” He gestures toward the brand with casual affection, as though it were a gift. “I think it is time to make things official.”

Her throat goes dry. “Official?”

“A mark of trust,” he says. “A promise. I don’t sell the ones who serve me well.” He smiles wider, almost kindly. “You should be proud, girl. Not everyone earns this.”

The heat from the brand casts a faint shimmer across his desk. She stares at it, the realization dawning too slowly, like a ship breaking through fog. The humming in her chest – her connection to the ship – tightens until she can hear her own pulse echoing through the floor.

He stands, lifting the iron by its insulated handle. “It won’t hurt for long,” he says. “And after, you’ll always know where you belong.” His smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “Hold her.”

Two guards step forward from the shadows behind her. They smell of oil and cheap spice. Hands like clamps close around her shoulders and arms. She thrashes once, hard, but they’re grown men and she’s small. The desk looms in front of her; the brand’s glow blurs her vision.

“Be still,” Venn murmurs. “It’s over faster that way.”

The low hiss of iron fills Lirael’s skull. Her breath comes too quick. The room shrinks around her heartbeat. The smell of burned metal and cologne mixes into something sickly. When he reaches for her, something in her snaps. Pressure fills her mind. Heat. The hum of the ship in her bones roars to life, surging through her like a reactor core exploding behind her ribs. For an instant, she doesn’t see the room at all. Everything is red and bright and moving.

The guards jerk backward as if struck. One slams into the wall, the other drops her arm with a shout. The air tastes like ozone. The iron slips from Venn’s fingers, clattering across the floor.

She doesn’t remember bending down to grab it. One moment her hands are empty, the next the heat of the metal sears her palms. She spins, small and wild, and drives it forward with all the strength she has. The iron sinks into him just below the collarbone. The smell of scorched fabric and flesh fills the air. His scream is high and wet.

The brand clatters free again, rolling across the floor, still glowing. Lirael backs away, chest heaving, edges of the room trembling. Energy buzzes under her skin, too much, too big for her body. The lights flicker. A glass shatters on the desk.

The guards are shouting, scrambling to get up. One reaches for her, but the air around him ripples and flings him sideways into the wall with a crack. She doesn’t even see herself move. Venn drops to one knee, clutching his chest, his face a mask of disbelief.

“You—” he gasps, but the rest is lost in the gurgle of his breath.

Lirael runs.

Her bare feet slap metal. The hall blurs, all light and sound. Somewhere behind her, the alarm begins to wail, shrill and distant. She doesn't know where she's going, only down. Down to where the air smells of grease and heat and life.

She dives into the maintenance hatch, the same loose panel she's crawled through a hundred times. Her hands burn; she can still feel the iron's heat etched into her skin. The crawlspace trembles with a power beyond her still singing through it, rattling the pipes as if the ship itself is breathing with her. She doesn't stop crawling until the walls widen and the floor drops away into the copper light of the lower bay. Neb is there, hunched over an open panel, wrench in hand. He looks up when she drops through the grate, barely catching herself on the edge before tumbling the rest of the way down.

“Fuck – Lirael?”

She lands hard, knees skidding on the deck. Smoke still clings to her clothes; the sharp, acrid smell of burnt silk fills the air around her. Her palms are red and blistered. She stares at them like they belong to someone else.

“Neb,” she chokes out. “I – I didn't mean –”

He freezes, taking her in. She's shaking. There's blood smeared across her arms. Scorch marks along her sleeves.

“What happened?” he asks, rough and quiet. She tries to speak, but the words twist into sobs. When he steps closer, she flinches, then collapses against him, burying her face in the coarse fabric of his shirt. The wrench clatters to the floor.

“Hey, easy,” he murmurs, awkwardly putting his arms around her. His hands are big and warm, smelling of oil and metal. She sobs harder. “It's all right. You're safe down here.”

Her words come in gasps. “The – brand. He tried to – he said I should be proud – and then they –” She can't finish. Her whole body shakes.

For a long moment, he doesn't say anything. The only sound is the engines, low and steady. When he speaks again, his voice is soft but full of steel.

“What did you do, little spark?”

“I... I think I hurt him.”

That pulls his gaze sharply to her face. “How bad?”

She can't answer. She only holds up her hands, raw and blistered, streaked with black where the iron had touched her. Neb exhales through his nose.

“All right,” he says finally. “All right.” He grabs a rag from the workbench and wraps it around her palms, muttering to himself. “We’ll think of something. Just breathe.”

She tries. The air tastes of copper and dust. Energy still thrums in her chest like the vibration of the ship’s heart. Somewhere above them, a muffled alarm wails. Footsteps pound against the deck plating. Neb’s head jerks upward.

“They’re looking for you.”

Her eyes go wide. “I didn’t mean to—”

“I know.” He grips her shoulders, forcing her to meet his eyes. “Listen to me. You have to hide, understand? Don’t make a sound.”

He pulls her toward the rear bulkhead where the engine conduits weave together in a maze of pipes. Behind one of them, a narrow service cavity gapes open; empty space between the coolant lines, barely large enough for a child to fit.

“In here.”

She hesitates. The space looks too tight, too dark. “Neb—”

“Do it,” he snaps, then softens his voice again. “Please, little spark. Trust me.”

She crawls inside. The metal is warm against her cheek. He drags a panel halfway across the opening, leaving just enough of a gap for air. The sound of boots grows louder. Voices shout orders somewhere overhead.

Neb grabs his wrench, forcing his tone into something bored and irritated. “Every day with this shit,” he mutters loudly to himself, as if speaking into a comm. “Stars above, what is going on up there?”

The hatch at the far end of the room slides open. Two guards appear, blasters drawn. One of them has blood on his sleeve, the other’s tunic is half-buttoned.

“Niebia,” the taller one snaps. “Where’s the girl?”

Neb doesn’t look up. “What kind of girl we talking ‘bout? I got two on my crew, haven’t seen any others.”

The guard steps closer, the smell of burned silk and alcohol still clings to him. “A ‘lek brat. Purple skin. Ten years old.”

Neb snorts. “Got no kids on the maintenance roster. If she’s down here, she’s probably a smear on the turbine intake by now.”

The taller guard takes another step in, eyes sweeping the room. “You’re sure about that?”

Neb shrugs. “If you want to crawl in and check, be my guest. Just mind the plasma coils – temperamental bastards.”

The guard’s lip curls. “Smart mouth for a grease rat.”

Neb says nothing, just keeps working. The first guard’s eyes linger on the nearby vent grill, the one Lirael had just crawled out of. His gaze hardens, and, without warning, he slaps the wrench from Neb’s hand. The metal rings across the deck. Lirael flinches from her hiding place. Neb doesn’t move.

“Careful,” he says, voice low. “You dent my tools, we’ll be stuck halfway to Nal Hutta when the drive seizes.”

“Then you best talk. She’s been seen down here before, Niebia. Matron reported it herself.”

Neb picks the wrench back up, the knuckles of his hand a bright white. “Then she must like the smell of coolant. Don’t know what to tell you.”

The shorter one moves before he can finish. A sudden crack as the blaster butt breaks across Neb’s face. The sound rings off the metal walls. Lirael bites her wrist to keep from crying. The Weequay stumbles back against the engine housing, a thin line of blood tracing down from his temple. His jaw works, but he doesn’t look up.

The tall guard’s smile widens. “Nothing to say now?”

Neb wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “I said I ain’t seen her.”

The shorter one grabs him by the collar, yanking him upright. For a moment, their faces are inches apart: one scarred and leathery, the other smooth and furious. “If we find out you’re lying–”

“You’ll do what you always do,” Neb rasps. “I know, I know.”

The guard holds his stare another second, then shoves him backward. Neb catches himself on the console, breath ragged.

“Report if you see anything,” the tall one says, holstering his blaster. “And if you’re smart, keep your head down. Venn’s in no mood for mercy.”

“As your lordship demands,” Neb mutters.

They leave. The hatch seals with a hiss. For a long moment, the only sound is the hum of the engines and Neb’s rough breathing. He stands still, listening, until the echo of their boots fades completely. Then he limps to the wall and drags the panel aside.

Lirael blinks up at him from the shadows, eyes huge and wet. Her small hands tremble against the metal.

“They’re gone,” he says softly. His voice wavers just once. She crawls out, hands pressed against her mouth to keep from sobbing. Neb kneels, wiping his split lip with the back of his wrist, and forcing a small, crooked smile.

“Breathe, little spark,” he murmurs. “You did good. Didn’t make a sound.”

She nods, still shaking. Neb exhales slowly, his shoulders sagging. “All right,” he mutters. “All right. We’ll think of something.”

He looks around the bay as if the walls might offer answers. The deck is littered with tools and cable spools, the air still thick with the smell of coolant and sweat. Overhead, the muffled sound of the alarm still echoes, a constant reminder that the ship is bleeding from the upper decks.

“They’ll be on high alert,” he says at last. “Hangar’s probably shut down by now.”

Lirael swallows. “What do we do?”

He presses a hand against the paneling, thinking. “You stay put down here until we reach Nal Hutta. They’ll have to dock for supplies. We can move you then.”

Her voice is small. “What if they find me before then?”

Neb meets her eyes. His are tired but steady. “I’ll make sure they don’t.” He motions toward the maze of conduits near the engine housing. “There’s a service crawl under the secondary drive. Nobody goes down there unless the reactor’s blowing. You stay there. I’ll bring food when I can.”

Lirael’s lip trembles. “You’ll get caught.”

“Eh.” he shrugs, grimacing as the motion pulls at bruised ribs. “I’ve been caught before. I’ll be fine.”

She doesn’t understand the weight behind his words, not fully. She just knows the sound of them hurts.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I didn’t mean—”

“Quit it.” He reaches out, cups the back of her head, and pulls her against his chest. “Don’t say sorry for fighting, you hear me? He would’ve done worse if you hadn’t fought back.”

The words shake as they leave him. For the first time, she feels how much he’s trembling, too. His heart beats heavy against her ear, fast and uneven. When he pulls away, he won’t quite look at her.

“Come on,” he says, voice rough. “Before someone gets smart and decides to check the engines again.”

He leads her to a narrow hatch at the rear of the bay. Inside, the air is thick and hot, the glow of the reactor casting everything in red. He kneels, prying loose a small inspection grate.

“Here,” he says. “You’ll have to curl up, but it’s safe.”

She peers inside. The space is barely big enough for her to fit. “How long do I have to stay?”

“Until I say it’s clear. Couple hours maybe. I’ll come back when I can. Bring water.”

She nods, hesitates, then throws her arms around him again. “Don’t let them take you,” she says into his shirt. He lets out a sound halfway between a laugh and a sigh.

“Don’t plan to, little spark. I’m too old to fetch a good price anyway.”

He gently pries her loose, easing her into the compartment. She curls up, hugging her knees, the metal warm beneath her. Neb replaces the grate, leaving a thumb’s width of gap so she can breathe.

From the dark, she watches his boots shuffle away, hears the faint clatter of tools as he sets himself back to work. He’s louder than usual, the noise of a man trying to sound busy and harmless. Each clang echoes up through the hull like a heartbeat.

Lirael presses her cheek against the metal wall. It’s alive with vibration, the steady pulse of the engines. She closes her eyes and imagines it’s the sound of Neb’s voice, low and sure, telling her to hold on.

Time becomes a trick of the engines. Down in the crawlspace, days stretch and fold into each other: heat, hum, sleep, and the faint vibration of hyperspace pulsing through the metal. Lirael learns to measure the ship by its sounds. When the lights overhead dim, she knows it’s ‘night’. When the hum shifts higher and the engines settle into a deeper thrum, it means Neb is nearby, adjusting pressure valves. She sleeps most of the time, curled tightly in the little cavity behind the coolant line. Her burned hands have started to scab; every movement cracks the skin again.

Neb comes by when he can, always with a scrap of food or a small canteen of recycled water. “Slow,” he tells her every time she gulps too fast. “You’ll make yourself sick.”

They don’t talk much the first few days. There’s too much risk, too many boots in the corridors. But once the alarms fade and the routine resumes, Neb starts teaching her in low whispers while they sit behind the coolant pipes.

“Repeat it,” he says, lips twitching with a ghost of a smile. “*Oto do pankpa.*”

She frowns. “What’s it mean?”

“I need a ride.”

He chuckles softly when she repeats it wrong, correcting her accent with patient murmurs. Over the next few days, he teaches her other words: *go, run, water, ship, friend, danger*. When she asks why those words, he just says, “They’re the ones that’ll keep you alive.”

On the sixth day, the lights flicker differently, a soft warning that means the ship is coming out of hyperspace. Lirael can feel the change in the air before Neb even opens the panel. He looks older than before, the bruise at his temple faded to yellow, the circles under his eyes deep as oil stains.

“We’re close,” he says quietly. “Hutta orbit. They’ll make port soon for fuel and to... tidy up everything.”

“Tidy up?”

He doesn’t answer that. He just passes her a clean rag to wipe her face. “You’ll need to look like you belong on the docks. Grease on your clothes is fine. Dirt helps.”

She does as he says, smearing grime across her uniform. “What happens when we land?”

“I can get you to the spaceport,” he says. “There’s always freighters coming and going, usually running spice or salvage. Someone will take a passenger if they think she can scrub decks.”

Her heart leaps. “You’ll come with me, right?”

Neb goes still. For a moment, he just studies her: this small, scarred child crouched in the dim engine light, hope flickering behind her eyes like suns. Then he shakes his head.

“I’d get us both caught,” he says. “I’m branded. You’re not.”

“But they’ll hurt you if they find out.”

He shrugs, a tired motion that barely reaches his shoulders. “They’ll hurt me anyways. You still got a chance without me, though.”

She stares at him, throat tight. “You could hide with me. No one would know.”

“Someone always knows,” he says gently. “On Hutta, they keep ledgers of everything that breathes.”

He crouches, resting a hand on her shoulder. “Listen, little spark. When you see the towers, head east toward the old scrapyards. Find the ones wearing the gray bands, they’re traders, not slavers. Tell ‘em *pateesa Neb sent you*.”

“What’s that mean?”

He smiles faintly. “Means you’re trouble.”

Her laugh is small and wet, but it's a laugh. He ruffles her head. "You keep that. Don't let them take it."

Overhead, the engines shift pitch again, the long, low groan of docking clamps engaging. The ship shudders as it descends into Nal Hutta's heavy atmosphere. The smell of ozone leaks into the vents. Neb glances upward.

"That's our cue. You stay hidden 'till I come get you. And no matter what you hear, don't make a sound." He starts to move, then stops, looking back one last time. "You remember what I told you? Words in Huttese?"

Lirael nods, whispering them under her breath. "*Oto do pankpa.*"

He grins, soft and sad. "Atta girl."

Then he closes the panel, sealing her into darkness again as the ship rumbles toward the swampy world below. She lies curled beneath the coolant lines for hours, listening to the hiss of decompression valves and the hollow clangs of docking clamps. When Neb opens the panel next, his face is slick with sweat.

"We're down," he says. "Port three, Bilbousa spaceyard. Half the crew's ashore, the other half's drunk. It's the best shot we'll get." He helps her out, steadyng her as her cramped legs shake. "Can you walk?"

She nods.

"Good. Keep your head low and don't speak unless I tell you. You're just another tool I'm hauling for repair, understand?"

She swallows and nods again. Neb moves quickly, leading her through the tight maze of maintenance decks. Every turn smells of oil and heat. The corridors are dim, the walls humming with the echo of the ship's cooling systems. When they reach the cargo lift, he pulls an empty crate from its rack.

"In," he says. She climbs into the cart and curls up among the cloth covers and coiled wires. He tosses a tarp over her, careful to leave a gap for air. Then he grips the handle and pushes the cart out of the bay.

The route is long and slow. Each clang of his boots sounds too loud, every noise in the distance makes her heart jump. They pass through checkpoints manned by sleepy guards. Neb flashes his work tag, muttering about faulty couplers. No one looks twice. The slaves that keep the engines running are invisible by design.

As they reach the cargo hold, the smell of the planet thickens: swamp gas, spice smoke, the faint sweetness of decay. The ramp is down. Sunlight the color of rust spills across the deck.

Beyond it lies Nal Hutta: a flat, endless sprawl of green-brown haze and shanty towers, air thick with insects and distant engines.

Neb stops the cart. "Almost there." He looks around once, then nudges her ankle under the tarp. "Out."

She peeks up. No one is nearby except a pair of dockhands arguing over fuel canisters. Neb lowers his voice.

"You follow me close until we're in the yard. Don't run, don't look scared. You're just another errand girl, all right?"

Lirael nods. Her bare feet hit the warm metal ramp, slick with humidity. The sun blinds her after so long in the dark. She squints at the wide gray skyline, the sluggish rivers of sludge weaving between towers. It's ugly, but it smells like air and freedom.

They weave through the docks together, Neb walking like he belongs, pushing the cart full of nothing but rags and wires. Dockmasters shout orders in Huttese, freighters belch smoke into the haze, and traders haggle over crates of spice and droid parts. No one notices one more pair of workers.

The scrapyard sprawls across the edge of the port, a forest of old hulls and dismantled speeder frames stacked high under the amber sky. Neb stops beside a stall where an Ithorian sells hyperdrive components and grease-clogged tools. He picks up a part, turns it in his hands, and murmurs, "We're safe here for a minute."

Lirael hovers beside him, trying to disappear into the shadows of the broken ships. He sets the part down and crouches so they're eye level. The noise of the yard fades around them, just the rattle of chains and the hiss of steam in the distance.

"This is where we part ways, little spark."

Her eyes go wide. "No. I'm not ready."

"Has to be now." He shakes his head, eyes heavy but firm. "If they scan the docks and find me missing, they'll check the work orders. I'm supposed to be back aboard in twenty minutes."

"But—"

He grips her shoulder, not hard, but enough to make her look at him. "You listen to me. You run until you're free. Don't stop for anyone who promises to keep you fed, not until you find something that feels like yours. Don't settle like I did."

Tears well in her eyes. "You could still come. We could both—"

He cuts her off with a quiet shake of his head. “I’m branded, remember? They could peel the skin off my back and still see his mark. You’re clean. You’re nothing to them yet. That’s your chance.”

She throws her arms around him. For a moment, he just stands there, then folds her close, pressing his chin to the top of her head. His voice rumbles low and broken. “You were the best thing to happen to this old rust heap, you know that?”

She nods against his chest, tears hot on her cheeks. He pulls back first, forcing a grin that doesn’t reach his eyes.

“All right. East side of the port. Look for the traders with gray armbands. Tell ‘em *pateesa Neb sent you*. Don’t let anyone else hear that name.”

“I won’t,” she whispers. He squeezes her shoulder once, firmly.

“Get out of here. Before I lose my nerve.”

She hesitates a second longer, then turns and slips between the rows of broken ships, her small form vanishing into the haze.

The scrapyard swallows her whole. Heat and smog press down like a second skin. Lirael keeps walking east, the way Neb told her, small feet splashing through shallow puddles of greenish runoff. The towers of Bilbousa loom behind her, hazy and pulsing with distant shiplight. She doesn’t look back.

By dusk, her legs ache and her stomach twists with hunger. Every face that passes her looks dangerous: tall, gray skinned beings with tusks, humans in patchwork armor, droids with half-melted plating. She clutches the words Neb gave her like talisman. *Pateesa Neb*.

When she finds the gray-banded traders, they’re unloading power couplers from a skiff. Four Weequay, all scarred and leather-skinned, armbands made from strips of old shipcloth. She hovers at the edge of the light until one of them turns.

“You lost, kid?”

Lirael’s throat is dry. “Neb,” she croaks. “*pateesa Neb sent me*.”

The leader, a tall Weequay with a missing eye and oil-streaked hands, freezes mid-motion. His expression softens just a little.

“Neb, huh? That old fool’s still breathing?”

She nods quickly. “He told me to find you. Said you could help.”

The Weequay looks her over: burned hands, torn servant's uniform, dirt-streaked cheeks, and mutters something in his own tongue. "You look like trouble," he says finally. "Of course the bastard's sent you our way."

He waves her closer. "Come on, kid. We're headed for Sriluur tonight. You can ride with us if you keep quiet."

The cargo hold smells of fuel and salt. The Weequay crew talk little, voices low and rhythmic. Lirael spends most of the time half-asleep against a crate, listening to the engines and the faint, distant laughter of men she doesn't know but has no choice but to trust.

When she's awake, she plays with the air. At first, it happens by accident: a small bolt rolls across the deck toward her hand, and before she touches it, it stops. Hangs there for the smallest heartbeat, weightless, then drops again. She stares until the sound of the engines swallow it.

Later, she tries again. A scrap of wire. A ration wrapper. The lid of a storage tin. She doesn't know what she's doing or why it works, only that she can feel it when it's about to happen, the same slow pressure that had filled her chest the night she hurt Venn, but smaller now, quieter, like a whisper she can almost understand.

The Weequay notice. Their leader watches from across the hold, pretending to work on a fuse box while his eyes flick to the floating scrap of metal and then the child responsible. He says nothing. None of them do. They just glance at each other, an old, knowing look passing between them.

On Sriluur, they trade parts for food and fuel. The leader – she learns his name is Harro – hands her a small bundle wrapped in cloth. A ration pack, a water flask, and a single datapad ticket chip.

"Three-stop freight out of here," he says. "Sriluur to Alpheridies, Alpheridies to Chandrilis, then Chandrilis to Ossus. Pilot owes us a favor. Don't lose the chip."

"Ossus?" she asks. He nods.

"You'll be safe there. With your own kind."

She doesn't know what that means yet, but she takes the chip.

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me," Harro says, adjusting his band. "You got people watching. When you reach Ossus, you forget our names. You forget Neb's. Understand?"

She nods. He gives her a half-smile, all sharp edges and weariness. "Good girl. Now go make the old man proud."

The first leg of the trip goes smoothly. The freighter is loud, old, and smells of stale air and coolant, but no one bothers her. The captain, a tired Rodian, barely glances at the ticket. She sleeps in a corner between stacked crates, eating her ration bar in slow bites and watching hyperspace outside the viewport.

It's on Alpheridies that everything falls apart. The ship docks in orbit for customs inspection. Armored boots ring through the corridors. Sith troopers, black armor, red visors, and voices like machinery, board in formation.

“Line up,” one orders. “Keep your hands visible.”

Lirael joins the others, mostly traders, mechanics, two families. Her heart hammers. She has no papers. No name anyone should know. When the officer stops in front of her, datapad in hand, she can already feel the words dying in her throat.

“Identification,” he says.

She shakes her head. “I don’t... have one, sir.”

He glances at the datapad, then back at her small, dirt-smudged face. “Where are your parents, kid?”

“I just need to go to Ossus.” He pauses and tilts his head, scanning her with a small handheld device. The screen flickers, then beeps sharply.

The officer frowns. “Elevated readings,” he murmurs. “Wait here.”

They don’t let her go. Two soldiers escort her to a holding cell in the spaceport: bare walls, a cot bolted to the floor, one dim light. The door seals with a hiss.

Hours turn into a day. No one explains anything. She drinks the thin water from the tap and tries not to think about where they’re taking her. The second day, an officer visits. Different uniform, same expressionless mask.

“Name?”

“Lirael.”

“Surname?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t have one.”

He notes something on his pad. “Homeworld?”

She hesitates. “Nar Shaddaa.”

That earns her a look. “And you’re traveling alone?”

“I’m going to Ossus,” she says. The words sound smaller than she imagined.

He studies her a moment longer. “We’ll see about that.”

They move her the next morning into a shuttle with a different insignia stamped on the hull: the Imperial crest. Through the viewport, she watches the stars wheel and fade as the shuttle climbs.

The officer sits across from her. “You understand you’re being extradited?”

Lirael doesn’t answer. The word means nothing to her. He continues anyway. “The Hutt Cartel filed ownership claims after the death of one Danuz Venn. Your name is on his registry.” He glances up now, eyes pale and appraising. “You’re wanted for murder.”

Her stomach twists. “Am I going to die?”

The corner of his mouth lifts. “Not at their hand. The Empire has greater interest in you than the Hutt’s money.” He turns the datapad so she can see the screen: a grainy image of Venn’s lifeless body, the scorched mark burned through his chest. “This was your doing, yes?”

She shakes her head, tears pricking her eyes. “He tried to – he was going to –”

He cuts her off with a small gesture. “Save your explanations. No ten year old kills a full grown Chagrian with her bare hands.” He taps the pad. “Whatever you unleashed that day, our Lords would call it *promise*.”

Her voice is barely a whisper. “Promise?”

He leans back, folding his gloves with neat precision. “Power. Instinct. The kind the Sith value above obedience.” His tone is almost kind when he adds, “You’re not being punished, child. You’re being given a chance to become something better.”

The trip to Korriban takes three more days. The shuttle smells of metal and cold air. Lirael spends most of it watching the stars through the viewport, too numb to cry. She thinks about Neb.

When the ship finally descends into Korriban’s thin red atmosphere, the light bleeding through the clouds looks like the inside of her eyelids when she’s pressed them shut against bright light. A soldier touches her shoulder.

“Up. We’ve arrived.”

Through the forward glass, she sees the jagged peaks of the Valley of the Dark Lords, the crimson stone carved with tombs that look like open mouths. The shuttle lands among dozens of others, each one carrying new arrivals, new initiates, new property.

Outside, the air is hot and dry, filled with red dust that clings to skin and stings the eyes. The sky above is the color of blood-thinned smoke, the ground beneath her boots crunches with fine sand and ancient bone.

The other arrivals file out beside her, dozens of children, some older, some younger, most silent. Each wears the same plain gray tunic and blank expression. They're herded down a narrow causeway lined with black statues of hooded figures, stone sabers raised in eternal judgement.

Lirael keeps her head down. The smell of the place is strange: ozone and iron, as if the air itself resents being breathed. Every sound echoes. The hiss of the wind, the clang of metal boots, the distant crack of lightning in the red clouds overhead.

At the end of the causeway looms the Academy. It rises out of the stone like something carved by anger, sharp-edged and windowless. A gate of black iron yawns open to swallow them. Inside, the air is cooler, but heavier somehow, as if it's alive and waiting.

A man in black robes stands at the top of the stairs, hands clasped behind his back. His voice carries without effort.

"Welcome to Korriban," he says. "You are here because the Empire believes you might be worth the trouble of training. Most of you won't survive long enough to prove it."

No one moves. Lirael's heart hammers. The man's eyes sweep over the group and linger briefly on her, thin, bruised, burned. He gestures to a pair of attendants.

"Take them to the dormitories."

They wake before light. A horn – or something that sounds like one – screams through the corridor. Lirael jerks upright. She doesn't remember falling asleep.

The door's already open, half the room is emptied, the other half dressing fast. The veterans, barely older but already adjusted, move with easy confidence, pulling on tunics, wrapping hands in old cloth. Lirael sits up slowly, blinking at the pale red light leaking through the slits in the wall. The air smells of sweat and dust. Another girl, a Mirialan her age, whispers, "Do we line up?"

No one answers. Lirael just follows the current out into the corridor, past walls that hum with heat.

They end up in an enormous courtyard, ground glowing faintly beneath the surface with some mineral that gives off heat. Rows of initiates already stand waiting, older kids toward the front, wide-eyed newcomers clumped near the back. Their gray uniforms are already streaked with red dust and sweat.

Racks like the far side of the yard, filled with weighted rods and blunt sabers. A scarred instructor paces before them, lightsaber hilt hanging at his hip. His eyes are yellow; bright and cruel, like twin engine lights.

“You are not Sith,” he says. “You are nothing. The Force may flow through you, but it does not belong to you. You will earn the right to wield it.”

He gestures to the racks. “Take a weapon. If it feels heavy, good. The Force is not your crutch.”

The older initiates surge forward first, claiming the better-weighted rods, laughing as they shove the new arrivals aside. Lirael hangs back until the rush thins, then takes what’s left: a shorter rod, the metal cold and uneven. Her burned palms sting at the contact.

Around her, the seasoned initiates swing their weapons in practiced arcs, showing off form, comparing hits. The new arrivals just mimic them awkwardly, watching for clues. Lirael copies what she sees: feet apart, knees bent, but the motion feels wrong. On the ship, balance had always come from vibration and movement. Here the ground is still. Empty.

An instructor passes behind her. “Feel the weight,” he says. “And strike.”

She does. The rod hums faintly as it cuts the air. The sound reminds her of Neb’s drives spooling up, a vibration that starts in her arm and settles deep in her chest.

“Again.”

She swings once more. The hum deepens. That small, familiar pull, like gravity bending around her wrist stirs again. She bites her lip, terrified he’ll notice.

“Again,” he says, softer.

She obeys. The vibration sharpens, a whisper of something waking beneath her skin. Then it’s gone.

The instructor tilts his head. “You felt it,” he says quietly.

Lirael’s voice catches. “Sir?”

He leans close enough for her to feel his breath. “Don’t lie. You felt it push back.”

She nods, barely.

“Good,” he says, and moves on. Lirael exhales slowly. Her hands tremble.

By midday, her arms ache. Sweat stings her eyes. When the session ends, the older initiates break off into familiar groups, laughing, taunting, nursing bruises like trophies. Most of the new arrivals just stand there, lost, clutching their practice rods like they might vanish if they let go.

Eventually, an overseer barks an order and the crowd scatters toward the cisterns. The older kids jostle each other for space, trading insults like currency. Lirael hangs back, drinking

fast from the tepid water before someone bumps her shoulder. She flinches, half-expecting a strike that doesn't come, and retreats to the edge of the yard where shadows cling to the walls. She keeps her head down, listening. Names. Rumors. Who washed out last cycle. Who disappeared into the tombs.

That night, the dormitory hums with low voices and the crackle of old lights. Two long rows of bunks face each other across a narrow aisle, blankets thin, frames welded straight into the stone. Lirael finds hers and climbs up. The mattress still holds someone else's shape. The aisle smells like sweat, dust, and recycled air.

Across from her, a boy is sitting on his own bunk, back against the wall, long legs dangling over the edge. His skin is a muted yellow, patterned with Dathomirian tattoos that curl up his throat and along his jaw. Silver glints in the low light: rings through his ears, a line of studs down the bridge of his nose, a hoop at the corner of his mouth. He watches her toss her satchel onto the bunk, eyes the color of burning embers.

"You're new," he says, voice quiet, more observation than challenge. Lirael's shoulders hitch. She doesn't look straight at him, just nods once.

"Yeah."

He tilts his head, studying her. "Got here yesterday?"

"Yeah," she says, voice barely above a whisper.

He considers that, then reaches for a dented canteen hanging from a hook. He takes a drink, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, and lifts the canteen halfway in her direction.

"Water?"

She stares at it, half expecting him to yank it back or laugh. Her fingers curl into the threadbare blanket.

"Is it... yours?" she asks carefully.

"Sure," he says. "Depends how you look at it."

He doesn't push, just leaves the offer hanging there. After a few seconds, she climbs down, moves to the very edge of her side of the aisle, and reaches. She takes the canteen like it might bite and drinks the smallest sip she can manage. The water is warm and metallic, but it's the first thing all day that doesn't taste like dust.

"Thank you," she murmurs, eyes on the floor as she passes it back.

He accepts it, fingers steady. "Ire," he says after a moment. "From Dathomir."

"Lirael," she says, the word catching in her throat. "From... a ship."

That earns the faintest twitch of his mouth, not quite a smile. “You look like it.”

She doesn’t know what to say to that, so she doesn’t say anything at all. The room slowly dims to red as the overheads power down. Across the aisle, Ire lies back on his bunk, folding his hands over his stomach, eyes on the cracked ceiling.

“Try to sleep before the generators peak,” he murmurs, more to the air than to her. “They rattle the whole place at third watch.”

“How do you sleep through that?” she asks before she can swallow the question.

“You don’t,” he answers. “You just get used to pretending.”

She lies awake far longer than he does, listening to the low, steady thrum under the stone. It isn’t the clean, eager hum of a ship’s engine. It’s heavier, slower, like a planet grinding its teeth.

Time passes. The generators drone on.

At first, Lirael wakes each morning expecting to leave. Every dawn feels temporary, every sunset another unlucky roll. Neb’s voice echoes in her head: *keep running, don’t let them pen you*. She plans escape routes: counts the hangars when they march past, memorizes which gates face which direction, listens for the shift in engine pitch when transports spool up. Each night she falls asleep rehearsing how she’d slip out between shifts, how she’d slide past patrols, how she’d steal a ration pack and run.

Days fold into each other, and she keeps her eyes on the horizon.

Training becomes the rhythm of her life. Her hands blister, then scar. The bruises never fade, but new ones bloom, layering her skin until it feels like fabric stretched too tight. She learns how far she can push before an overseer’s shock prod bites into her ribs. Learns that “too slow” earns a backhand, “too quick” earns suspicion, and “backtalk” earns the kind of beating that leaves the sand red for hours.

The Force hums beneath it all, thin as a hairline fracture first, then thicker, cleaner, like an engine easing into the right frequency.

Her escape plans begin slipping. Not discarded, just... postponed. She tells herself it’s strategy, not defeat. She’ll wait until the bruises fade. Until her ribs stop aching. Until the overseers are in a better mood. Until she can see a day without throbbing pain behind her eyes.

Weeks become months. Her hope stretches thin.

The practice rods are replaced. They hand out vibroknives instead, short humming edges that vibrate against her palm. The first time one of the kids doesn’t get back up, nobody screams. Slaves drag the body away. An overseer makes a mark on a tablet. Drill moves on.

That night, she tells herself she'll leave on the next rest day. Just another week. But that week becomes two, then five. Her ribs bruise. Her blade steadies. Her legs strengthen and her breath stops hitching in the mornings. The horizon feels farther each day.

Each morning, the alarm shrieks. Lirael swings down from her bunk, jaw tight, the taste of sand still in her mouth from her dreams. Across the aisle, Ire is always already awake, sitting on the edge of his bunk, lacing his boots with careful motions.

One morning, as she drops down, he glances up at the sound and she flinches before she can stop herself. His hands pause on the laces, eyes flicking to her face and then away again, like he's politely pretending not to notice.

"You grind your teeth," he notes after a moment, tying a knot.

She stiffens. "What?"

"In your sleep," he clarifies, not unkindly. "I can hear it when the generators dip. Sounds like you're fighting someone in there."

"Oh." Her fingers worry the edge of her nightgown. "Sorry."

He huffs a soft, bemused breath. "Don't be. Better you fight in there than forget how out here."

They don't talk much beyond that. Names of instructors. Which overseers to avoid. Which kids are starting to break. He never asks about her. She never asks about him. They exist in the same small orbit, parallel; never intersecting.

By the end of Lirael's first year, the whispers start: culling. Ascension. The words change depending on who says them, but the shape of the fear stays the same. On the hottest day of the cycle, the Academy gathers in the central yard. The stone bleeds heat through their boots, the sky burns a flat, poisonous red. Overseers watch from the terraces, silhouettes cut against the light.

"The strong will serve," one intones. "The weak will fall."

Pairs are called. Blades hum. Bodies drop.

Lirael's name comes late. By then, the sand is already stained dark, and the air stinks of iron. Her opponent is just another human boy with a shaved head and shaking hands. She doesn't know his name. She never asks.

When the match begins, the Force overlays him in thin, bright lines: blue where his balance holds, red where it frays. His fear makes him sloppy. She doesn't think, just moves when the hum in her bones tells her to. One step, one twist, one quick drive of the knife into the gap between his ribs.

He gasps. Falls. The overseer marks his tablet.

“Duel to Lirael.”

Later, when she scrubs blood from her hands in the thin trickle of the cistern, she notices the shake in her fingers. She stares at the red circling the drain, willing herself to feel something sharp enough to name. Horror. Grief. Triumph. The only thing that comes is a tired, nauseous relief: it wasn’t her.

That night, the dorm is quieter than usual. Half the bunks are empty for good. No one says why. No one has to.

Lirael lies on her back, staring at the ceiling. The skin on her palms feels too tight. Across from her, Ire still hasn’t taken off his boots. He sits with his back against the wall, elbows on his knees, watching the door like he’s waiting for someone.

“You did well today,” he says after a while.

“So did you,” she answers, voice small. She’d watched his match from the edge of the ring. It was... efficient. Each strike placed like a tool in a familiar grip.

He makes a noncommittal sound. “I did what I had to. We all did.”

Silence stretches. The generators deepen into their third-watch vibration, the whole dorm thrumming around them.

“Do you ever think about leaving?” The question slips out before she can swallow it back. Her heart kicks hard. “Off Korriban, I mean.”

He turns his head, really looking at her now. There’s a long pause before he answers.

“No,” he says. “I don’t.”

She frowns, pushing herself up on her elbows. “Never?”

His gaze drifts to the ceiling. “I have dreams of returning to Dathomir, but those are fantasies I will never attain. My clan set me here. They chose this path. Running from it would shame them.” His jaw tightens slightly. “We don’t run.”

“What if the path is wrong?” she asks, soft.

“Then I will walk it well enough that the mistake is theirs, not mine.” There’s no bitterness in his tone, only a flinty certainty. “Korriban is a proving ground. If I die here, I die where I’m supposed to.” The words land like stone.

“You... want that?”

“I want to be worthy of who raised me,” he replies. “If that takes my life, then they spent it wisely.”

She has no answer for that. Her throat feels tight, like someone's pressing fingers against it from the inside. She thinks of Neb, of the way he'd spit at the idea of dying where he was 'supposed' to. Of how he'd tell her to get the hell out of dodge.

"I can't..." Her voice cracks. "I can't imagine choosing this."

"You didn't," Ire says quietly. "But you're here. So am I. The only choice that matters now is what we make of it."

The dorm sinks back into silence. Somewhere outside, thunder rolls over the canyons like a slow-moving engine. Lirael lies back and thinks: *I'll leave before the next culling. They won't expect anyone to run then. The chaos will help me.*

But when the second year rolls around, she is still there. The culling comes with the same heat, the same red sky, the same grim silence. The whole Academy packs into the central yard, rows of initiates stretching from wall to wall. The stone bleeds heat through their boots. The air tastes like metal and dust.

Lirael stands near the back of the cohort, vibroknife slick in her hand. Her fingers don't shake. That's new. Or maybe she's just too tired to shake.

Around her, she hears the same lines as last year, spoken by a different overseer in the same flat voice:

"The strong will serve. The weak will fall."

Across the yard, near the front edge of their line, shoulders square, face carved into seriousness, stands Ire. He looks exactly the same as he does in the dorm before drills: focused, profile sharp against the glare. For a moment, Lirael imagines walking over there, taking the space at his side. It would be steadier, she thinks. Less like floating alone in a vacuum.

Her feet point that way until she notices the boy next to him whisper something in his ear.

He's shorter than Ire by a head, all smooth angles where Ire is sharp. Curved Iktotchi horns jut from either side of his skull, ridged and pale against scrap-metal red hair braided between them. His face is a strange mix of soft humanoid features made sharper by angles that don't quite match. Freckles scatter across his cheeks like someone sprinkled him with rust. He looks like he was built out of pieces that shouldn't belong together and somehow still came out whole.

Lirael stops. The air feels hot in her lungs.

*Oh, she thinks, a little blankly. Oh.*

She shouldn't stare. She does anyway.

He stands in an easy fighting stance even at rest, weight settled, blade loose but ready in his hand. There's a lazy smirk playing at his mouth, like he's watching a game instead of an execution line. Lirael's heart does something strange and unpleasant and a little thrilling in her chest.

She doesn't move toward Ire after that. Instead, she finds a place near a cracked pillar at the edge of the yard and leans against it, crossing her arms to hide the way her hands want to fidget. From here, she can see the dueling ring clearly. She can also see Ire. And the boy beside him.

Names are called. Blades hum. Sand darkens a few shades nearer to brown.

“Vitro! Rax!” The overseer’s voice cuts through the heat. Lirael’s attention snaps to the ring as Ire stalks forward with that same unhurried precision he carries everywhere. Across from him, a Mirialan girl rolls her shoulders and lifts her blade, green skin a flash of color against all the red and brown. Her face is carved tight with determination.

The overseer gives a curt nod.

“Begin.”

The Mirialan strikes first. Her vibroblade whistles through the air, humming as it carves a line toward Ire’s ribs. He steps back, body fluid and calm, like he’s dancing to a song only he can hear. His own blade hums as he parries, angling her strike away with perfect form.

Lirael watches, pinned.

The girl presses. Her attacks come faster, sharper, but Ire never looks rushed. His eyes don’t leave her; he doesn’t waste a single movement. Every block is measured. Every counterstrike is deliberate. Lirael can see the moment it tips. The Mirialan girl’s breathing gets ragged. Her swings grow wilder, just a fraction off-center. The Force shows it to her in tiny flashes: the stutter in the girl’s balance, the red flare along a knee that’s turning wrong, the way her weight keeps pitching forward.

Ire steps into the opening like he’s been waiting for it for aeons. His boot slams into her chest, a brutal, efficient blow that sends her careening backward. Before she can regain her footing, he catches her wrist, yanks her forward, and grabs the back of her head. The motion is one smooth, vicious arc as he drives her face first into the sand.

Lirael hears the impact more than she sees it. A wet, ugly sound. The girl’s blade slips from her hand. Her arms splay uselessly.

Ire doesn’t hesitate. He plants his boot above the back of her skull and drives it down, hard. There’s a crack that Lirael feels in her teeth. Then stillness.

“Finish! Duel to Vitro.”

Lirael's stomach twists. She wants to look away. She doesn't. Ire steps off the body without fanfare. He doesn't raise his blade, doesn't grin. He walks back to the edge of the ring with the same stoic expression he had left with, viscera clinging to the tread of his boots.

As he returns to his place, the Iktotchi boy tilts his head toward him. From where she stands, Lirael can't hear the words, but can see the shape of the exchange: a nod toward the dragging body, the faint, humorless smirk, the way Ire's gaze drops to the sand as he answers. A small world they inhabit that she's no part of.

Jealousy burns under her ribs, quick and ashamed.

“Diisir! Daptau!” The overseers don't give anyone time to breathe. The Iktotchi's chest seems to lift on the inhale. He straightens, rolling his shoulders back, and steps forward into the ring. The smirk on his face sharpens, curdles into something hungrier.

Across from him, a Twi'lek boy with desert brown skin stretches his arms, trying to shake off stiffness. He looks nervous. *He shouldn't*, Lirael thinks distantly. Not with the heat like this, not with the overseers watching. Nerves get you killed faster than any blade.

The overseer nods.

“Begin.”

The Iktotchi moves first. He explodes across the sand, feet kicking up dust, vibroblade carving a bright line ahead of him. The first strike comes so fast the Twi'lek barely gets his blade up in time. There's a sharp clang, a spray of grit. The Iktotchi doesn't offer him a chance to reset. He presses in, blow after blow raining down with brutal precision. Each strike is meant to break something: guard, rhythm, bone.

Lirael watches longer than she means to. Where Ire was measured, the Iktotchi is overwhelming. He fights like a storm bottled into humanoid frame, every movement riding the edge between finesse and frenzy. The Force curls differently around him, too. Tighter, hotter, like a series of coiled springs constantly on the verge of snapping.

The Twi'lek fights back, more desperate than skilled. He parries once, twice, tries to sidestep and reset his footing. For a heartbeat, it almost works; his blade catches the Iktotchi's and shoves it away, offering a sliver of space.

The Iktotchi ducks under an overextended swing and drives his shoulder into the boy's ribs. The Twi'lek grunts, stumbling, but manages to shove back, spinning with a diagonal slash aimed for the torso. It's not a bad idea. It's just too slow. The Iktotchi's blade snaps up to catch the strike. Steel kisses steel, humming. Then, with a small, almost delicate twist of his wrist, he turns the block into a killing line and drives his blade straight through the Twi'lek's throat.

Lirael sucks in a breath she didn't realize she was holding.

The boy's eyes fly wide. His vibroknife clatters to the ground. Blood spills down his chest, steaming where it hits the superheated sand. The Iktotchi holds his gaze for a heartbeat, then he yanks the blade free in one clean motion.

The Twi'lek collapses. Crimson blossoms under him, soaking into the grit.

"Finish. Duel to Diisir."

Diisir turns away without looking back. Of course he does. He saunters back to the line, that same satisfied curl at the corner of his mouth. Lirael can't look away from him.

He shouldn't be breathtaking. He's all wrong angles and mismatched pieces, horn shadow cutting his face into odd segments, freckles scattered like blood across his skin. But the way his shoulders roll after the kill, the way his jaw flexes as he spins the blade once, casual, through his fingers, it all lands somewhere low and hot in her chest.

He takes his place beside Ire again, feet planted, both of them facing the ring. Ire says something, lips moving in a dry line. Diisir laughs, low and pleased. Then Ire's gaze flicks sideways, toward her. Their eyes meet, briefly, across the yard. For a moment she's sure she's imagining it, but then Diisir follows the motion, head tipping just enough to track Ire's line of sight.

He meets her eyes.

Lirael straightens without meaning to, one foot shifting forward, weight settling instinctively into a stance that feels suspiciously like readiness. Like she's about to step into the ring herself. She lets herself smile, just a fraction. His expression flickers. The smirk falters for half a heartbeat, replaced by something sharper, more curious. Then it returns, a little wider this time.

Lirael's heart hammers. The heat, the blood, the press of bodies fades to the edges of her awareness. For a moment, it's just the three of them connected by a thin, invisible line across the yard.

"Lirael!" Her name cracks through the moment like a whip. She jolts, the pillar solid at her back suddenly, painfully real.

The overseer scans his tablet, voice flat and bored as he calls the second name: her opponent's. The yard shifts, parting around the ring again, all eyes turning to her. The heat slams back into focus. So does the knife in her hand.

She pushes off the pillar, feet moving on their own, heart still pounding. As she walks toward the center of the yard, she looks once, quickly, toward the edge of the ring where Ire and Diisir stand. Ire's face is unreadable. Diisir's smirk has softened into something else. Appraisal. Hopefully interest.

Lirael swallows, fingers tightening around the hilt until the vibration of the blade hums up into her bones.

The overseer lifts his hand.

“Begin.”

The dormitory is dim when they return, the red emergency strips along the floor throwing long shadows across the bunks. The air smells like metal, sweat, and something faintly coppery tracked in on their boots. Kids move like ghosts, slow and exhausted. Lirael drops her knife under her bed with a clatter. Her hands are trembling again. She hates that they’re trembling.

She crosses to the washbasin. The water that sputters out is lukewarm and metallic. She scrubs her hands until the worst of the red is gone, but the stain under her nails clings stubbornly.

A shape steps up beside her. Ire. His horns are still dusted with sand; a smear of someone else’s blood streaks his wrist.

“You’re alive,” he says, like it’s a simple observation, not a relief.

“So are you.”

For a moment, they just stand there, rinsing the day off in silence. Ire finishes first. He pats his hands dry on his trousers, glances sideways at her, and says quietly, “You were staring.”

Lirael’s stomach flips. “What?”

“During the matches.” His voice is low, not accusing. “At Kariff.”

Heat floods her face. She turns sharply back to the washbasin. “I wasn’t – I mean – I was watching the duels.”

Ire snorts softly. “Sure.”

She glares weakly at the water. “Kariff,” she repeats, pretending she hasn’t memorized the shape of his name already. “That’s... his name?”

Ire nods.

“He fights well,” she murmurs. He hums in agreement.

“He should. He’s been fighting since before he could read.”

She looks over despite herself. “What do you mean?” Ire works his jaw once.

“He’s from Zygerria.”

Her breath stutters. Zygerria. The empire of chains, the throneworld of slavers. Neb used to curse that planet with a venom she'd never heard him use on anything else. Ire continues, voice low.

"He's half-blood. Iktotchi mother, Arkanian father. Zygerrians don't waste resources raising children who won't fetch a price or fit neatly into a role." He wipes a streak of dried blood from his sleeve. "He was sold off. Or just left in a pit to fight."

"To fight?"

"Yeah," Ire answers like her question is redundant. "Entertainment for the overseers. Sith recruiters found him during a sweep. Thought he'd be useful."

The basin water runs clear again. Lirael realizes her hands have gone still under the water. Ire watches her a moment longer, then says, almost softly, "You should talk to him."

Her breath catches. "Why?"

"Because you want to," he says plainly. "And he noticed you today."

Lirael's heart leaps and drops all at once. "You don't know that."

Ire tips his head. "I do."

Her lekku burn. She turns back toward the water, scrubbing again just to have something to do with her hands. "Even if I did want to talk to him, I don't know what I'd even say."

"Start with his name," Ire says. "Most people don't bother."

She hesitates. "And where would I even...?"

"South courtyard," Ire answers before she finishes. "The steps above the old training grounds." A pause. "He goes there after every match until he cools down."

Lirael dries her hands on her trousers, pulse loud in her ears.

"Do you think he'd... care?" she murmurs. "If I did?"

Ire gives her the faintest ghost of a smile.

"He watched your duel, too," he says. "Trust me. Go."

Lirael breathes in once, shallow and tight. Then she steps away from the basin and heads toward the courtyard door.

The south courtyard is cooler at night, wind curling around the stone pillars like something alive. Most initiates avoid this area; the sandstorms whistle strangely through the

broken arches, and the shadows cut too sharply across the steps. But someone is there, sitting on a step exactly where Ire said he'd be. Kariff.

He leans forward with his elbows braced on his knees, horns catching faint strips of moonlight, freckles burning like snow across his cheekbones. His braid shifts when the breeze hits it. His blade rests lazily against his leg, as if he's forgotten it's in his hand. He looks relaxed, but in the way predators do, coiled under the surface.

Lirael hesitates under the arch for a few breaths. Her heart beats too fast. *He's like me*, she thinks. *A claimed slave. A survivor. Someone who understands cages and the way out of them.*

For a dangerous, intoxicating moment, she imagines looking out a viewport with him, hyperspace stretched beyond, Korriban growing farther behind each second. The thought warms her, makes the wind feel a little less cold. She takes a step forward before she can lose her nerve.

Her footsteps are light, barely more than a whisper on the stone. He notices anyway. He doesn't look up until she's close enough that her shadow spills across the steps. When he turns his head, his eyes catch the faint starlight, bright and sharp.

Lirael shrinks down beside him without a word.

Up close, he's even more devastating. Bulkier than she expected when he stands. She realizes with a strange jolt that she's taller than him. Her muscles tighten when their shoulders brush. She can smell dust and metal and something faintly warm on his skin.

"You did good today," Kariff says, voice low and confident. "Didn't even look like a fight."

A flush crawls up her neck. She forces her voice steady. "He was slow. Arrogant. Didn't even need to make it messy."

Kariff flicks a pebble down the steps with his thumb. "Sometimes messy is fun."

She tilts her head toward him. "You're angry."

"Everyone's angry."

"No," she says quietly, studying the way his soft jaw shifts. "You burn with it."

He doesn't answer. His gaze drifts somewhere past the courtyard walls, where the dunes cut jagged lines against the sky. She watches him. Watches the tension in his throat. The way his brow tightens.

"They all think I'm just another slave boy grasping at delusions," he mutters. She shifts closer without thinking; their shoulders slide together again, warmer this time. He glances sideways. Her pulse stumbles.

“You’re not, though,” she says simply. “You are one of the few people who know what this place really is.”

He lets out a humorless laugh.

“Which is?”

“A meat grinder,” she whispers. “They’re not shaping Sith here, they’re passing us through blades. Seeing who survives.”

“I survive.”

“You always do.”

He turns to her, eyes narrowing slightly.

“Do you not like it?” he asks. Not softly, not hopefully. Just... testing. She looks away, toward the horizon blurred with sand and stars.

“I think about leaving sometimes,” she says eventually. “Somewhere warm. Somewhere no one knows me.”

He exhales sharply. “That’s not freedom. That’s hiding.”

Her yellow eyes lift, unblinking. “Maybe. Or maybe it’s survival without a leash.”

He shakes his head, the movement sharp. “Survival means nothing if it doesn’t come with power. I’m done begging. If this place is the price, I’ll pay it in blood if I have to.”

Lirael studies him, really studies him. His mismatched angles. His patchwork beauty. His brutal certainty. The monster he intends to become. How he hungers for it.

Something in her recoils. Something else leans closer.

“I hope it’s worth it,” she says.

“It has to be.”

The wind howls over the courtyard, carrying the cry of some distant predator. Sand flicks up in sharp little bursts, stinging her arms. She pulls her cloak tighter around herself, feeling suddenly too exposed.

“Do you really think you can win the game?” she asks.

Kariff watches a spiral of dust curl across the stone.

“I have to. If I don’t, I end up like the others. Buried. Nameless. Forgotten. I didn’t crawl my way out of the slave pits to be forgotten.”

She looks down at her hands. There's dried blood beneath her fingernails. She wonders if Kariff's looked like hers when he was ten.

"Sometimes I wonder if the galaxy remember any of us at all," she murmurs.

Kariff doesn't answer. Instead, he rises, stretching the stiffness from his limbs. He stands silhouetted against the stars, tall and sharp. His vibroblade catches the moonlight.

"You should rest," he says without looking back. "Start preparing for next culling."

Something wicked flickers through her chest.

"Yes, Instructor Diisir."

He pauses, just noticeably enough that she catches the ghost of a smirk on his face, then steps into the shadows of the corridor. The darkness swallows him one stride at a time.

Lirael stays seated on the stone long after he's gone. Then, without a word, she returns to her bunk and lays herself down to sleep.

Hours later, she wakes without knowing why. The room is washed in deep red from the emergency strips along the floor. Ire is awake, too, sitting on the edge of his bunk, lacing his boots in the dim light, his movements ritualistic.

"You're up early," she whispers, her voice rough with sleep.

He glances over, the tired half-smile flickering. "Discipline starts before dawn," he says, repeating some instructor's mantra. "Or so they say."

"You really listen to them?" she asks, more out of habit than challenge.

"Depends who's talking." He tugs the last knot tight and stands, stretching until his back cracks softly. "Couldn't sleep. Thought I might as well rot in the yard instead of my mattress."

He takes a few steps toward the door, then pauses and looks back at her. "You coming?"

Her first instinct is to say no. To curl tighter around the thin blanket and pretend she's somewhere else, somewhen else, until the alarm rips it away. For a heartbeat, she thinks of Neb again, of running, of all the exits she can't reach.

*You're not getting off this rock, something in her mutters. Not tonight. Maybe not ever.*

She swings her legs over the side of the bunk.

"All right," she says, barely audible. "I'll come."

He doesn't crow or tease, he just nods once, like he'd expected that answer, and steps out into the corridor. They move through narrow hallways lit by weak strips of red, Ire taking turns

without hesitation. Lirael memorizes the path as they go, the junction by the cracked pipe, the stairwell that smells of ozone, the side door that sticks before it opens to the outer courtyard.

Outside, the air is cold enough to sting her lungs. The sky is still dark, the horizon only beginning to bruise with red. The yard is mostly empty, but not quiet – there's always the low thrum of the generators, the whisper of sand across stone, a few early-rising initiates moving like shadows. Ire walks ahead of her with his usual sure steps. He doesn't look back, but slows enough to make sure he's keeping pace. Lirael pulls her cloak tight around her shoulders. Her breath comes out in faint white curls. The chill almost feels clean.

Kariff's already in the ring. Of course he is.

He's running drills, the practice blade sweeping arcs through dim air, muscles rolling under scarred, dust-streaked skin with brutal efficiency. His braid flicks behind him as he pivots, horns catching the early light like polished bone. The sight knocks something loose in her chest. A stupid, startled flutter.

Ire steps into the ring without announcement. Kariff doesn't even need to turn, he senses him and adjusts seamlessly, blades colliding in sharp blue-white hums. Their duel is fast enough to blur at the edges. Ire moves like water, smooth and coiled, while Kariff moves like a collapsing star: dense, inevitable, drawing every motion toward impact. Lirael watches the force of each blow vibrate up Kariff's arms, watches his footwork shift to compensate.

When he finally disarms Ire and glances her way, something hot and embarrassed jumps in her chest. He barely shifts his expression, but the look lands like a pebble dropped in still water.

“You watching for pointers or an opening?” he asks, tone dry but not unkind.

Lirael blinks. “... Both?”

A faint smirk. Barely more than a twitch at the corner of his mouth, but it feels like fingers curling around her ribs and pulling. He tosses the practice blade her way. The hilt is warm from his hand.

“Be my guest.”

Kariff steps aside. Lirael steps in. Her heart thunders so loudly she's sure both of them hear it.

They start slow. Ire fights with textbook precision; she fights with instinct, reading the rhythm the way she used to read engines. The subtle humming threads of the Force pull her weight where it needs to go.

She catches him off guard once. Just once. Enough to make him stumble. Kariff laughs quietly. It's low, unexpected, and hits her like a live wire.

“Not bad.”

Lirael wipes sweat from her jaw, pretending her pulse isn’t rattling her bones.

“You go easy on him like that, too?”

Kariff gives her a small grin, freckles shifting like scattered sparks. “He just doesn’t actually try.”

Ire rolls his eyes. “He means he’s tired of winning.”

She resets her stance, forcing her gaze not to drift to Kariff’s horns, to the speckles along his cheeks, to the way one of his braids is fraying like he cut it himself in a hurry.

Kariff trades the blade with Ire and steps in. His strikes land with the weight of someone who learned to fight before he learned to rest. Every swing comes with the thud of grounded feet, every pivot heavy with intention. He isn’t graceful, he is inevitable.

She doesn’t win. But she lasts longer than she expects, longer than Ire did, she thinks, though she’d never say it. The Force hums under her skin, matching his rhythm, countering his weight, keeping her upright even as her arms start to ache.

When it ends, Kariff lowers his blade a nods once.

“Not bad,” he says. “You don’t hesitate.”

Lirael drags the back of her hand across her brow, breath coming too fast.

“You don’t give me any time to.”

His mouth twitches. Almost another smile. “I’d be dead if I did.”

He tosses her a canteen.

“Keep showing up, then.”

She catches it, the cool metal kissing her palm. Something sharp and exhilarating lodges under her ribs.

She does show up. Not every day, but most. She tells herself that it’s just to help her train. For survival. For the culling. But the truth is simpler, quieter, embarrassing: she likes being around him. Or maybe she likes the version of herself that shows up around him.

Kariff treats her like she’s made of edges, not cracks. Like she’s a knife being tested, not a child pretending. It feels strange to train beside someone who kills with such ease. Every time she blocks one of his strikes, the vibration of blades rattles up her arms and lodges somewhere

beneath her ribs. It hits her – not fear, exactly – but the awareness that he could kill her just as quickly as he killed anyone in the ring.

And yet... she keeps coming back. And the edges of her unease dull faster than she expects. There's a strange comfort in the predictability of Kariff's violence. He's controlled, deliberate, violent in a way that is trained, not unthinking. And she finds herself comforted in the way the Force coils tight and hot around him, bright as a forge. In the way he talks about his past with no shame and no softness.

"My first kill I was five," he says one morning, shrugging off a question she didn't mean to ask, "they put two of us in a pit. Only one came out."

Lirael thinks of herself when she was five: smaller, thinner, scrubbing floors until her hands bled. How she snuck away and Neb would hold her up to the engine lights so she could point out what each one did. She thinks of her master, of the crackling heat of power she didn't understand.

Next to Kariff's story, hers feels... smaller. Less heroic.

Ire, for his part, acts like nothing has changed. He offers quiet pointers. Corrects her pressure when her balance tips. Nudges Kariff when he's being too smug. Their rhythm becomes its own little gravity well, and Lirael falls into it with startling ease.

One morning, instead of heading back inside after morning drills, Kariff jerks his chin toward the outer wall.

"Come on."

Ire follows without needing explanation. Lirael does too, though her legs feel suddenly, ridiculously warm. They climb a narrow path between two sandstone outcrops until the Academy sprawls beneath them like a living scar across the desert.

Down below, initiates shuffle between yards. Overseers bark orders. Smoke drifts from the cremation pits, faint and bitter. Up here, though, the wind feels almost clean.

Kariff drops onto a flat boulder overlooking everything. Ire sits beside him. Lirael hesitates only a moment before lowering herself on the other side, heart knocking against her ribs.

For a moment, no one speaks. The sun rises, slow and molten, turning the dunes to rivers of gold. Kariff breaks the silence first.

"When I was in the pits," he says, plucking a pebble from the rock, "we never got sunrise. No windows. No morning. Just bells." He tosses the stone into the sand below. "This is better."

Lirael stares at him, breath thin. “Do you... miss it?”

“No,” he says. “I’m better now. Stronger. They used me, now I use what they made.”

His words chill her, but she understands them more than she wants to. Ire shifts slightly, gaze fixed on the brightening sky.

“Dathomir’s mornings look like this,” he murmurs. “Red light across the jungle. We’d sleep outside, sometimes, on high cliffs during hunts.” A faint smile ghosts over his face. “It felt like the sun wanted to burn us awake.”

Kariff snorts softly. “Sounds like the planet’s trying to kill you.”

“Usually was,” Ire says. “But it was home.”

Lirael watches him. She’d never heard anyone talk about home in a fond way. The quiet cuts her in a different way than Kariff’s violence. A longing she doesn’t know how to name. She stares at the horizon until the red bleeds into the sand.

“I don’t know what that feels like,” she admits quietly. “Having a place like that. A people like that.” Ire glances over, thoughtful but not pitying.

“You never had one?”

She hesitates.

“Not really,” she says at last. “I had a father, kind of. His name was Neb.” Her voice softens. “He taught me everything he could. But he wasn’t my people. Just... the only good thing I had for a long time.”

Her throat tightens around the word ‘father’. Neb would have hated being called that. Or maybe he would have secretly loved it. Not that it matters now.

Kariff flicks a pebble off the ridge, jaw tightening.

“If I had parents, they weren’t worth shit.”

Lirael looks at him sharply.

“They shouldn’t have had me,” he continues, voice edged with something brittle. “They shouldn’t have left me. Shouldn’t have let the Zygerrians take me. Maybe they sold me. Maybe they just didn’t care.” He tosses another pebble, harder this time. “Either way, I didn’t have a family.”

Lirael stiffens. The words hit too close.

“My parents gave me away, too,” she whispers. “But... I don’t think they had a choice. They were probably slaves.”

“At least they didn’t abandon you on purpose.”

Lirael opens her mouth then closes it. She doesn’t know if they did. She’ll never know. Ire breathes out softly through his nose.

“Nightbrothers don’t know their parents either,” he offers. “Nightsisters don’t keep husbands. They take lovers when they want children and send their sons back to us. We’re raised by the clan. By each other.”

Kariff scoffs lightly. “Still better than being left in a pit.”

Ire doesn’t argue. He just watches the sunrise, hands folded loosely in his lap.

“You have a brother, now,” he says quietly. “Doesn’t matter how lonely the pits were.”

Kariff’s expression tightens, then softens with something raw, something akin to acknowledgement. Lirael wraps her arms around her knees. The Force hums faintly in the morning air.

Eventually Ire shifts, opening his cloak to expose his skin to the morning sun. “My brothers used to say red dawns meant strong days.” He glances at them both. “Good days.”

Kariff rolls a pebble under his thumb. “As long as no one slows me down.”

Ire snorts. “She isn’t slow.”

Lirael’s stomach flips. Kariff glances at her, sharp and evaluating.

“No,” he agrees. “She isn’t.”

Heat prickles under her skin. Below them, the Academy groans awake. Sandstorms gather in the distance.

A few mornings later, she finds Kariff sharpening his blade alone on the ridge, Ire nowhere in sight. He glances up when she approaches – just a brief lift of his eyes – but he shifts over on the boulder without being asked. She sits. They watch the sunrise in silence.

The next week, she shows up to early drills and Kariff wordlessly tosses her a canteen before Ire even arrives. By the second month, it’s normal for her to wander the yard, catch sight of him kneeling in the sand tightening his boots, and veer toward him without thinking. Sometimes they train. Sometimes they talk. Sometimes they sit in comfortable silence, sharing the same patch of shade like half-feral desert creatures learning not to bite.

Ire notices, of course. He has the decency not to tease.

One morning, the air is cold enough to crack skin, and the yard is still wrapped in shadow. She finds Kariff sitting on the low wall at the edge of the training pit, running his thumb

along the flat of his blade as if checking for invisible imperfections. No Ire. No one else awake. Just the hum of generators and the whisper of sand sliding down stone.

He doesn't look up at first. When he does, it's brief. His eyes flick to hers, then back to the blade, but he jerks his chin toward the empty spot beside him. She sits.

For a few minutes, there's nothing but the scrape of steel against stone and the soft rasp of her breathing. She watches his hands – steady, practiced, scarred in ways she cannot name – and wonders what they learned to hold before a weapon.

“Why are you up so early?” he asks finally, not looking at her.

She shrugs, staring at her fingers curled in her lap. “Couldn't sleep.”

“Nightmares?”

She shakes her head. “Just... thinking.”

He lets that hang. A soft silence settles over them. Eventually, he breaks it.

“Thinking sucks,” he mutters. “It just makes me angry. Or sad. Or both.”

Lirael wraps her arms around her knees. “I get sad when I think, too.”

Kariff shifts his gaze toward her, just briefly. Something in his face eases, just a fraction. He looks at the blade in his hands.

“There was a boy like that in my cellblock on Zygerria. One of those pensive types. One morning, I woke up and he was gone. Not taken, just... gone. I asked one of the guards what happened. He said the kid got tired of waiting and put his own throat on the electric fence.” He flicks a speck of dust off his blade. “Said it was the first smart choice the brat had ever made.”

Lirael's stomach twists. “That's horrible.”

Kariff shrugs, but the motion is tight, bitter. “That was life there. Think too long, and you die. Don't think at all, and you die anyway.”

The wind rolls over them, carrying fine red dust across the pit. Lirael presses her knuckles against her thigh until they blanch.

“How did you get out?”

Kariff lifts his eyes, studying her like he's surprised she bothered to ask. The answer that finally comes out is blunt, unpolished.

“Recruitment sweep. Sith came through looking for bodies that could fight. They saw me in the ring.” He taps the flat of his blade against his palm. “Thought I'd be useful.”

Useful. As if that were all his life amounted to. Lirael swallows.

“You didn’t try to run? When they took you?”

“No.” His jaw shifts, a muscle ticking. “I’d never have the chance at freedom on Zygerria. At least here, I’m my own person.”

She lets that sit. Then his gaze narrows, turning the question back on her.

“What about you?”

Her pulse stumbles. She looks down at her hands. Her skin remembers the heat of the brand, the grip that tried to hold her down.

“I...” she swallows. “I got picked up while fleeing the Hutts.”

Kariff watches her, eyes sharp with attention.

“My master tried to brand me.” Her throat tightens. “Like livestock.”

His grip on the blade tightens, knuckles whitening.

“I didn’t mean to kill him,” she says quickly. “He grabbed me, and something just... broke. Or woke up. I don’t know. I used the Force. I didn’t even think I had it.” She rubs her thumb over her palm, grounding herself. Kariff’s voice is instant, low and certain.

“You don’t owe him excuses.”

She lifts her head, startled. He stares straight ahead, fingers tight on the blade. “That bastard deserved it. He’s probably burning in hell for touching you.” His jaw flexes. “That’s the only mark he ever earned.”

A tiny breath shudders out of her. Relief and venomous gratitude twist together under her ribs.

“I wouldn’t have gotten away if it weren’t for Neb.” Kariff looks up slightly.

“Your father?”

“Yeah,” she says, still uncertain about the word. “He was... the only person who ever treated me like I mattered. Not as property. Not as something to use. If he hadn’t smuggled me out, the Hutts would’ve skinned me alive.”

Kariff’s brows pull together. “And the Sith grabbed you after?”

She nods. “Customs trying to get through Alpheridies. Wrong place, right time, I guess.”

“Saved by a slaver empire,” he mutters. “Lucky you.”

She huffs a humorless laugh. “I don’t know if I’d call it lucky.”

Kariff studies her for a beat, his expression shifting into something more curious.

“That’s why you want to run so bad?” he asks. “Because of him?”

Her throat tightens. She stares at the far ridge where the dunes lift like waves.

“I owe him everything,” she says. “If he’s alive, I have to find him. And if someone took him from me...” Her voice goes raw. “I have to make it right.”

Kariff’s gaze sharpens.

“And if you do find him?”

Lirael exhales, the breath trembling on its way out. “Then we disappear. Both of us. No more Korriban. No more Hutts. No more masters. Just hyperspace out the viewport.” She rubs her palms against her knees. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

He watches her for a long, long moment, then shakes his head.

“You’re not getting free of Korriban, Lirael,” he says, voice low and matter-of-fact. “Not unless the Sith let you. And they don’t let anyone go.”

Something in her stomach drops.

“But,” he adds, nudging her knee with his, “if the galaxy had been kinder to you? If you’d actually had a choice? You’d have made a damn good mechanic.”

She blinks. “Is that supposed to be—?”

“It’s a compliment,” he says, rolling his eyes. “Don’t get greedy.”

It startles a small laugh out of her. A real one, quiet and disbelieving. She studies him: the crooked braid, the uneven freckles, the bone-white horns catching what little light dawn offers.

“And you,” she says, nudging him back, heartbeat climbing for reasons she refuses to examine, “would’ve made a good... I don’t know... bouncer? Guard? Something where you could hit things without getting arrested.”

He snorts. “Flattering.”

“I meant it.”

Kariff tilts his head, considering her with a look she feels in her chest.

“I think I would’ve made a good gardener,” he says finally, shrugging like it’s nothing. “Water some plants. Trim hedges.”

“That tracks,” she mutters. His mouth twitches, almost a real grin.

The sunrise finally crests over the wrecked horizon, turning the Academy into long black shapes and painting their faces in red-gold light. They sit shoulder to shoulder, not quite touching but close enough that the cold doesn’t bite as deeply. Lirael knows he’s right. She knows she’ll

never leave Korriban. But the thought of graduating with Kariff, of getting lightsabers together and moving to Dromund Kaas to be apprentices – their own ships, their own rooms – soothes her more than she cares to admit.

A few weeks later, the overseers call a demonstration match. No stakes, they say. No blood. Just a test.

Everyone knows that's a lie.

The arena fills before midday, red stone baked hot enough to shimmer. Initiates crowd along the terraces, murmuring behind the iron rails. The overseers stand above in the shade, black robes heavy in the heat, watching like vultures over a carcass. The air hums with dust and anticipation.

A pureblood Sith stands at the center of the ring. Initiate Zhaka Tenab. Lirael's seen him before, usually surrounded by overseers, always walking like he already owns the place. The overseers' favorite. Their golden boy. The one who doesn't eat with the rest of them, doesn't sleep in the dorms, doesn't bleed where anyone can see it.

He looks the part: bright red arms wrapped in cloth, short, dark hair slicked back, body lean and controlled. Even when he stands still, there's a tension coiled in him, like a viper waiting to strike.

Across from him stands Ire. Shirtless as always, new and old bruises across his back, calm as ever. Kariff leans against a pylon nearby, arms crossed. Lirael stands beside him, chewing a stimstick down to the filter, eyes narrowed against the glare.

The overseers bark the start, and the match begins without flourish.

Both fighters bow shallowly, staffs at the ready. Dust curls between their feet, the hum of the generator fields far below synching with the sharp buzz of the staff's low-frequency edges.

Zhaka moves first. He's fluid, practiced, every step precise, every strike tight and symmetrical. His movements are artful, almost ceremonial, like he's performing a kata for an audience that already loves him. The overseers murmur approval. Their golden boy. Their perfect blade.

Ire doesn't fight like that. He's not refined, but efficient. His footwork is rough but deliberate, every strike born of weight and timing rather than form. He blocks late on purpose, absorbing hits that graze his arms or shoulders just to close distance. Zhaka lands the first clean blow, a sweep across the ribs that snaps through the air with a sharp crack. Ire doesn't flinch. He twists with it, lets it carry him forward, and plows his staff across the Pureblood's face hard enough to stagger him back.

Lirael's chest tightens.

Zhaka's expression tightens, too. He adjusts his grip, spinning the staff once in his hands before moving again, less composed this time. His next series of strikes come in a blur, arcing from every angle. Ire blocks most, tanks the rest, driving through each impact like a battering ram. Lirael can feel it in the air, the hum of the staffs, the faint pull of the Force wrapping around them, amplifying each movement. The dust begins to lift, swirling with every strike and counter.

Ire breaks the rhythm, ducking low and catching Zhaka's staff under his own. He slams the end of his weapon into Zhaka's gut. It lands solid, a brutal, physical hit. The boy stumbles, caught off guard.

Kariff grins beside her. "That's it. Make him bleed."

Zhaka regains his footing, but something in his rhythm has cracked. He strikes wide, misses high. Ire presses in, relentless, two quick hits to the shoulder, a third to the ribs. Zhaka reels, barely deflecting the last blow that would've taken him down.

Lirael's heart is pounding. The golden boy is losing. The overseers shift, uneasy.

Zhaka's staff hums higher, vibrating with a faint shimmer of power. He pivots sharply, letting the Force guide him. Ire lunges – too aggressive this time – and Zhaka catches the haft of his shaft under Ire's arm, twists, and slams the butt against his jaw.

The sound is sickening.

Ire drops to one knee, clutching his face. Zhaka presses forward, his movements no longer elegant, just desperate and fast. He brings the staff down once, twice, until the overseer calls it.

Both of them freeze. The air hums like a tuning fork. Zhaka steps back, chest heaving, blood dripping down from a split lip. Ire rises slowly. His face is bruised, one eye already swelling shut. He doesn't meet Zhaka's gaze. He just nods once, quiet and steady, before the attendants move in to separate them.

Kariff exhales through his teeth, eyes bright, almost feverish.

"Pathetic," he mutters. Lirael shrugs, glancing his way.

"He held his own."

"He hesitated," Kariff snaps. "He had the bastard down. You saw it. All he had to do was finish it."

"He fought well," she says, the defense automatic but unconvincing. "He—"

Kariff cuts her off, voice low and sharp. "—He *let* Zhaka win."

Lirael frowns. “You don’t know that.”

Kariff’s smile is thin, humorless. “If I had that chance, he wouldn’t have walked away.”

She blinks. “What?”

Kariff doesn’t look at her when he speaks, eyes still fixed on the ring. “I’d have taken him down. Staff to the throat. Kept pressing until I felt the bone give. You don’t stop until they stop breathing.”

The words are quiet, almost conversational, but something about the way he says them makes Lirael’s skin prickle. She forces a laugh, thin and uncertain.

“You best hope they pair you next culling, then.”

Kariff doesn’t answer. He’s still staring at the blood drying in the sand, jaw tight, pupils wide.

Off to the side, the overseers haul Ire toward the lower tunnels. He’s walking straight, but Lirael can see it: the stiffness in his shoulder, the small hitch in his step. They’re taking him down, not out. She knows what that means. The kind of lessons you feel for weeks, across your back, your ribs, the palms of your hands. She’s learned it herself more than once.

Lirael’s throat is dry. She looks away from Kariff’s profile, the strange, intent stillness in his eyes.

That night, they sit on the ridge, bottle of whiskey half full and untouched. The valley below glows red, the training yard still littered with scuffs of sand and blood. Ire sits with his back to the wind, bruised and stiff, right eye swollen shut. Lirael fiddles with her fingers, biting her nails until she tastes iron.

“Fucking unbelievable,” Kariff mutters. “He gets to win again?”

Neither of them answer.

“He walks around like he owns the place and we just – what? – watch? You saw it, Lirael. They let him win.”

She hesitates. “He didn’t look like he was holding back.”

Kariff turns on her, yellow eyes blazing. “He doesn’t have to! He doesn’t bleed like us. Doesn’t sleep where we do. But he gets to parade around like the rest of us are just there to test him?”

Ire’s voice comes quiet but steady. “I think he earned it.”

Kariff blinks. “What?”

Ire looks down at his hands. The skin across his palms is flaking and bruised.

“I said I think he earned it.”

“You’re joking.” Kariff scoffs. “Tell me you’re joking.”

“He fought better than I did. You saw the match. You know that’s true.”

“I watched him break you. That’s what I watched.” Kariff stands, spreading his arms. Lirael peels a cuticle, spilling blood across her fingernail. “You think that’s honorable? The overseers parading their little pet around while they drag you off to bleed in some empty corridor?”

Ire stands to tower over Kariff. His black tattoos blend with the night sky behind him. “That isn’t on him.”

“Isn’t it? He stood there while the overseers clapped him on the back. While you were being punished like a disobedient mutt!” His last few words are borderline screams. Lirael flinches at the sound, stomach knotting.

“You didn’t even look angry when they dragged you away,” she says before she can stop herself. Ire turns his head toward her, the bruised side of his face catching the dim moonlight.

“What?”

“You didn’t fight it,” she says, doubling down. “You didn’t even pretend to.”

Kariff gestures to Lirael as if she has made a fantastic point.

“Deep down, he thinks he deserves it. Zhaka’s the same as her,” he spits the final word like poison. “Your Nightsister. You talk about honor like it’s a chain you’re proud to wear.”

“Don’t,” Ire growls. His brows bend until Lirael can barely make out his yellow eyes.

“Why not?” Kariff demands. “It’s the same thing, isn’t it? Call it honor, it’s just obedience with a prettier name.”

“I’m not defending what the overseers did,” Ire growls, voice deep and low. “But Zhaka didn’t do it. He didn’t cheat. He didn’t hold back. I lost. That’s all.”

“That’s not all,” Kariff yells. “He gets to win because they chose him to! Because he fits whatever broken mold they’re building our futures on!”

“Maybe I don’t care!” Ire snaps, finally raising his voice. He takes a step closer to Kariff, now a full head above the Iktotchi. “Maybe I’m tired of pretending we’re all the same when we’re not. He’s faster. Smarter. He saw an opening and took it. Isn’t that what we’re all supposed to do?”

Kariff laughs, harsh and humorless. “You sound like an overseer.”

That freezes the air. Even the wind seems to stop.

“What did you say?” Ire’s voice drops low.

“You sound like an overseer,” Kariff tilts his head to meet Ire’s eyes. “Like you think the rest of us should just be grateful to stand in Zhaka’s shadow. You lose one fight and suddenly you’re ready to roll over and worship him?”

Lirael’s pulse hammers in her ears. She’s angry, too, though she doesn’t know at who.

“I fought him,” Ire says slowly. “Took every damn hit. Made him bleed.”

“Then why are you bowing now?”

“I’m not bowing!” Ire raises his voice, face burning. “I’m accepting it! If I cannot admit when someone bests me, when they’ve earned a victory, then that just makes me a liar in a losing game.”

Lirael snorts. “You say that like it’s a noble truth. Like you haven’t been bowing since the day they collared you.”

“Careful, ‘lek,’ ” Ire warns.

She bares her teeth at him. “I’m done being careful.”

“At least I have the guts to admit when I’m wrong. When I lose. You two would rather spit blood and call it defiance than ever face the truth. You think that makes you strong?”

Lirael narrows her eyes. “You think bowing makes you strong?”

“I think knowing the difference between pride and delusion makes me far stronger than either of you!”

“Then go,” Kariff spits. “Go bow to him. Go throw yourself at his feet, if that’s what you want. But don’t you dare stand here and pretend you’re one of us.”

Ire doesn’t say anything. He glares at Kariff, jaw tight, bruised fists trembling. Then he turns and stalks off.

“Go ahead!” Kariff calls after him, voice hoarse. “Run to your golden boy! See if he makes the bruises hurt less!”

Ire doesn’t look back. The echo fades down the rocks. Lirael stares down at her hands. The whiskey bottle sits between them, forgotten. She feels angry and tired and hollow all at once. Angry at Ire for yielding, at Kariff for pushing, at the overseers for making them fight in the first place. Angry at herself for not saying more.

She doesn’t move. The stars above shift behind the red haze. The valley glows faintly, alive and uncaring. After what feels like an eternity, she stands, brushing sand from her legs.

“You shouldn’t have said that,” she murmurs. Kariff doesn’t answer. His jaw is still tight, eyes still locked on the path Ire took. Lirael glances up at the stars one more time before heading back down toward the dormitories. The Force traces hyperspace lanes between the glowing dots, reminders of all that waits beyond for her.

The days pass slowly after that night. The ridge feels wrong without all three of them there. Lirael goes once, half-expecting Ire to show up with that quiet nod he always gives her, but only the wind greets her. The whiskey bottle is still there, half-buried in the sand like an artifact from a life that no longer belongs to her.

She doesn’t go back.

When Ire returns to the yard a day later, his stride is steady. He looks fine – better than fine – but Lirael knows the signs. The stiffness in his spine, the way he doesn’t twist too far, the hitch he hides with controlled breath. She’s walked like that before, after overseers “corrected” her form too enthusiastically.

He doesn’t look at her or Kariff. Doesn’t nod. Just heads straight for the upper ring. To Zhaka.

At first, Lirael tells herself it’s temporary. That Ire just needs space. That he’ll drift back once the shame fades, once the sting of the fight dulls. Kariff seems to believe that, too. The first time they spot Ire and Zhaka training together, Kariff spits into the dirt and mutters, “Traitor.”

The next time he laughs a harsh scraping sound with no humor in it. “Guess our Nightbrother found someone new to kneel to.”

Lirael shrugs like it doesn’t sting. “Maybe he’s just tired of fighting.”

Kariff’s jaw flexes. “Then he shouldn’t have come here.”

She doesn’t answer.

The next morning, she finds him alone by the lower ring, working through a vicious set of drills. She waits until he pauses for breath.

“You know,” she says carefully, “it won’t be long until they start looking at apprentices. You and I—”

Kariff cuts her off with a short, sharp bark of laughter.

“Apprentices? You think anyone would want us while that golden boy is around? You think they want the gutter scrap or the runaway slave when they can have *him*?”

“That’s not what I meant,” she mutters. But he’s already worked himself up, pacing in a tight circle, jabbing the air with his blade.

“They’ll take Ire first,” he snarls. “Just watch. Zhaka will whisper one word into the right ear and Ire will follow him like a tame dog.”

Lirael swallows. “He wouldn’t—”

Kariff wheels on her. “Don’t defend him!”

The weeks drag on and Kariff begins to rot. At first, it’s small things. He trains harder. Longer. Stays in the yard until his shadow disappears into the darkness. He picks fights with anyone who looks at him too long, even the younger initiates who aren’t actually challenging him. Lirael tries to pretend he’s just staying sharp, but the truth gnaws at her chest.

She watches him dislocate another boy’s shoulder, crack someone’s ribs, slam a girl so hard into the sand she doesn’t get up until the medic-droid buzzes over. The overseers don’t punish him. They praise him. “Good form. Promising work.”

Kariff grins when they say it, bigger than he ever did before. Like he’s starving and they’re feeding him scraps of rare meat.

Lirael tells herself she doesn’t care. He’s not her problem. She shouldn’t be upset. But every time she hears the crack of metal against bone across the yard, something twists low and painful in her stomach.

She finds him sitting alone behind the barracks at dusk one night, knuckles split open and still bleeding, breath heaving like he’s sprinted laps around the compound. His blade lies beside him, half-buried in dust. He doesn’t look up when she approaches.

“You’re hurting yourself,” she says quietly, sinking to a crouch beside him.

“I’m fine,” he mutters.

“You’re not.”

Something tightens along his jaw. She takes a deep breath, voice gentler this time.

“Kariff... come back to the ridge with me. Just once. We don’t have to talk, just... sit. Like before.”

“Like before?” he repeats, voice low and dangerous. “Before he abandoned us? Before he chose golden-boy over us? Before everything went to shit?”

Her hands go cold.

“That’s not what I meant,” she says. “I just... I miss you. I miss when—”

“When what?” he cuts in. “When we were pretending this place wasn’t killing us? When you still thought we’d all walk out of here as friends?”

“Kariff—”

“You’re naïve,” he bites out. “You think the galaxy cares what you miss?”

“I’m trying,” she says, almost a whisper, “to help. To remind you who you were before all this.”

“Who I was?” He laughs, a sound cracked and humorless. “You don’t know a damn thing about who I was.”

“I know you’re better than this,” she whispers.

He surges to his feet in a single violent motion, towering over her. His knife is in his hand. “Don’t you ever say that to me again.”

She freezes, heart pounding.

“You think you’re better from the rest of us?”

“That’s not—”

“You don’t get to play innocent!”

She flinches. “Kariff, please. I’m just trying to—”

Suddenly, before she can react, the blade is pointed, lifted a few inches from her throat. Her breath stops. For a terrifying heartbeat, they stare at each other, both frozen.

Kariff drops the blade like it’s burning him.

“Damn it,” he mutters, turning away, fists in his hair. “Damn it! Just leave me alone!”

She takes a step back, pulse stuttering, the image of the raised weapon burned into her vision.

She starts avoiding him after that. Extra drills. Water duty. “Instructor needed me.” Lies that she doesn’t even believe.

He calls after her sometimes, but his tone has changed. Clipped. Cold.

“You’re slipping,” he tells her one morning when she dodges another spar. “You used to care about getting better.”

“I still do,” she lies.

“Then stop running.”

She almost laughs.

Kariff doesn’t stop. Every morning he’s out in the yard before the horns. Every night, she hears the sound of his staff against the stone long after curfew. The rhythm is steady, mechanical,

like he's trying to beat the weakness out of himself. Sometimes, when he catches her watching, he smiles, but it's wrong. There's no warmth in it, just teeth.

And Lirael feels something cold unfurl in her chest: this was what she'd always feared he was. A killer wearing a survivor's skin. For a while, she'd let herself believe otherwise, that he was angry because he wanted to live, that they were fighting to stay alive together. She had pictured a future once, one with him at her side the way he'd been on the ridge. Where they'd survive long enough slip through a crack in the system.

But that truth evaporates like blood on the hot sand before her. Kariff is slipping into something she no longer recognizes, a shape made of fury and hollowed-out hunger. A version of himself that has no room for anything soft or shared or hopeful. And she realizes, with a quiet finality that aches in her chest, that she cannot follow him there. That path is not hers. It never was.

And in the space his absence leaves behind, Neb returns. His voice settles in the back of her skull like a long-dormant engine kicking back online, quiet and firm. *Don't settle. Don't let them pen you. Run.* It isn't comforting, but lands instead like a truth she had been trying to ignore.

She starts counting transports.

At first, it's a distraction. Something to quiet the noise in her head. But the more she watches, the more she starts to notice patterns: what time they come, which ports they use, how long the loading takes.

She starts spending nights near the hangars, tracing routes on the floor with her finger. The Force hums through her skin, following the invisible lines she draws, tracing connections between the departing ships and the stars above. Every night she spends near the hangars, a feeling in her gut grows heavier. The thought of leaving doesn't scare her anymore. What does is knowing she'll go with things unfinished, with that last argument still hanging between her and Ire like an unclosed wound.

She tells herself it doesn't matter. That he's fine, that he's moved on. But each time she sees him across the yard, laughing beside Zhaka, training until the light fades, her chest twists tighter.

When she finally decides to find him, it's not courage that pushes her forward, but exhaustion. The kind that leaves no room for pride.

She finds him with Zhaka after drills the next evening, still in the training yard. Zhaka's wiping sweat from his neck, spinning his knife lazily between his hands. Ire stands opposite him, silent, composed, the air around them still heavy from the spar.

Zhaka spots her first.

“Well, well,” he drawls, “look who finally crawled out of the shadows.”

Lirael freezes mid-step. For a moment, every instinct tells her to turn heel. But Ire’s gaze softens, faint but noticeable. He doesn’t wave her over, but watches, unmoving.

“I wanted to talk,” she says, voice low. Zhaka’s mouth quirks.

“Careful. That sounds serious.”

Lirael’s shoulders tense. “It is.”

That earns a grin. “Then by all means,” he says, voice smug. “Talk.”

“To Ire.”

Zhaka arches a brow. The silence stretches until Ire sighs quietly. “You could at least pretend you’re not an ass.”

“I could,” Zhaka admits. “But then she might think I like her.”

Lirael bites the inside of her cheek. “You don’t even know me.”

“That’s never stopped me before,” he says, leaning back against the rail. Lirael ignores him. Her pulse is too loud anyway.

“I shouldn’t have said what I did.” She turns to face Ire. “About you. About your people. About what being bound to them meant.” She forces the words out like she’s pushing a boulder. “It was cruel. And irrelevant to the argument we were having.” Ire studies her for a moment.

“You were angry,” he says finally.

“That doesn’t excuse it.”

“No,” he agrees, expression softening. “I shouldn’t have yelled, either. You were right about one thing: I am not as brave as you are. I don’t think I’ll ever be.”

Lirael shakes her head. “You’re braver.”

That earns a small, wry smile. Zhaka clicks his tongue softly.

“Touching,” he mutters, although it sounds more like a reflex than mockery. Lirael glances his way but doesn’t take the bait.

“I just didn’t want to leave with things the way they were,” she says.

Ire frowns. “Leave?”

She hesitates, then nods. “I’m getting off this planet. One way or another.”

Zhaka’s grin falters. He studies her like he’s not sure if she’s serious or just stupid enough to say it aloud.

“That’s not something you joke about,” he says finally.

“I’m not joking,” Lirael answers. Ire’s expression tightens.

“You mean to run?”

“Yes.”

Zhaka’s brow furrows, curiosity flickering beneath his usual arrogance. “You’ve thought this through?”

“I’ve been watching the transports for weeks,” she says. “I know the rotation schedules, fueling cycles, which ones head offworld and when.” She meets his gaze evenly. “If anyone could make getting on one easier, without setting off alarms, it’d be you.”

Zhaka tilts his head, grin spread across his thin lips. “Flattery won’t get you as far as you think, ‘lel.’”

“Call it what you want,” Lirael says. “But if anyone here could call a transport down to anywhere in the Empire, it’s you.”

“So you want me to steal you a ride,” he says slowly.

“I want you to make it easier for me,” she corrects. “I’m getting off Korriban with or without help. I’d just rather not make a spectacle of it.”

That earns her his full attention. For once, there’s no smirk, just interest. “You’re either brave,” he says quietly, “or suicidal.”

“Who said I couldn’t be both?”

Ire takes a deep breath, pinching the piercings that trail down his nose.

“You could stay,” he says, though his tone has already admitted defeat. “Train with us. Just until—”

“I can’t,” she interrupts. “If Kariff saw me here, he’d kill all of us.”

“Charming company you keep,” Zhaka mutters.

“He wasn’t always like that,” she snaps. Zhaka studies her for a long moment, the lazy spin of his knife slowing until the blade rests against his palm.

“If you’re so loyal to him,” he says finally, voice quieter now, “why isn’t he part of this grand plan? Seems like the kind of thing you’d owe him, if he’s half what you say.”

Lirael’s jaw tightens. The words form before she can stop them.

“Because if he knew,” she admits, barely above a whisper, “he’d kill me before I could make it to the hangar.”

The silence that follows is heavy. The wind cuts across the yard, tugging at the ends of her tunic. Zhaka doesn't smirk anymore, he just watches her, expression unreadable. Ire breaks the stillness after a minute.

"Tomorrow," he says, glancing toward the far side of the yard where the canyon lights flicker red against the dust. "Midday drills will be in the southern ring. Kariff's on rotation there all afternoon. We'll meet in the old storeroom under the hangar. Nobody checks it since the roof caved in."

Lirael nods, heart thudding. "I'll be there."

Zhaka flips the knife once, catching it by the hilt. "We'll see what's possible," he says. "If we're doing this, it needs to be clean. Quiet. No heroics."

"I'm not asking for heroics," she replies. "I just need a clean shot."

That earns her a faint, crooked smile. Ire steps closer, his voice softer now.

"Be careful, Lirael. If you think he's snapping, don't wait around to save him." Lirael nods.

"I won't," she says, though they all know it's a lie.

"Tomorrow then," Ire says. "We'll figure it out."

For a moment, no one moves. The air between them feels fragile, like glass straining under heat. Then Zhaka tucks the knife into his belt and turns toward the gates. Ire looks up at the sky, the last light fading into red dust.

The next day crawls by. Lirael keeps to the edges of the yard, careful to steer clear of Kariff. He's easy to spot. Too easy. Every blow he lands during drills echoes across the sand, the sound of someone trying to bury their own thoughts under noise. When his eyes sweep across the ranks, she ducks her head and keeps moving.

By the time the second horn sounds, the heat has turned the air to glass. The overseers call the older initiates to the southern ring, and she slips away in the commotion, past the outer barracks, through the cracked wall behind the mess hall, down the slope that leads to the disused hangar.

The doors gape like a broken jaw. Inside, the light is thin and red, the floor half-buried in dust. A collapsed section of roof lets in a beam of sun that cuts through the gloom, glittering off coils of wire and abandoned tool racks.

Ire's already there, sitting on an overturned crate with his arms folded. Zhaka leans against the far wall, messing with a small datapad. Both look up when she enters.

"Right on time," Zhaka says. "Didn't expect that."

Lirael gives him a look. “You said midday.”

“I said you were on time. It’s midday, no?” Ire shoots him a glance.

“Enough,” he murmurs. Then to Lirael: “You weren’t seen?”

She shakes her head. “Kariff’s still in the ring. Didn’t even look up.”

“Good,” Zhaka says, pushing off the wall. The datapad clicks as he taps through a list of transmission. “I put in a travel request this morning – lovely trip to see the folks back on Dromund Kaas. It’ll depart next weekend.” He pulls a small pouch from his belt and tosses it toward her. She catches it on instinct. The weight surprises her.

“What’s this?”

“Credits,” he says. “Five hundred. Enough to buy yourself a transfer once you reach Kaas. Cargo ships crowd that spaceport: just pick one, pay cash, and disappear.”

Her breath catches. “You’d do that? For me?”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Zhaka replies, but there’s no bite in it. “When the ship lands, I’ll tell the overseers I’ve come down with something ugly. Fever, maybe a rash if I’m feeling dramatic. I’ll stay behind. You’ll already be on board before anyone sends the orders to reroute home.”

Lirael turns the pouch over in her hands. “And once I’m offworld?”

“You’re free,” he says simply. “At least until someone decides to come looking.”

“Thanks,” she says, the words catching in her throat. “What do I owe you?”

Zhaka studies her, one brow lifting. “You think I’m charging?”

“I don’t know what people like you want.”

He tilts his head, grin flickering back to life. “Well, now that you mention it, I should probably charge you. Risk like this doesn’t come cheap.”

Ire exhales, long-suffering. “Can it, Zhaka.”

“What? Credits don’t grow on trees,” he says, though his tone’s more amused than serious. He jerks his chin toward Lirael. “Relax, I’m joking. Mostly. You don’t owe me anything.”

Lirael blinks, caught between confusion and disbelief. “That’s...generous of you.”

“Don’t let it go to your head,” he says, smirking again. “Generosity’s not a habit I plan on keeping.”

Ire shakes his head, the ghost of a smile tugging at his mouth. “Ignore him, Lirael. He helps people more than he wants anyone to notice.”

“Lies,” Zhaka mutters, straightening. “I just enjoy proving I can.”

Lirael clutches the pouch a little tighter. “Still...thank you.”

He waves a dismissive hand. “Don’t thank me yet. You still gotta get on the ship.”

“I will,” she says.

He smirks, half-sincere, half-taunt. “Guess we’ll see, ‘lek.’”

The days that follow move in uneven rhythm. Too fast when she’s alone, too slow when anyone’s watching. Lirael goes through the motions: drills, meals, curfew, but only because she has to. The overseers don’t notice her half-hearted swings or the way her eyes keep drifting toward the hangar whenever ships rumble overhead. When they’re not looking, she doesn’t bother training at all. Her callouses soften. Her hands forget the shape of her knife. None of it matters now.

She starts sleeping less. Nights stretch long and breathless. She lies awake tracing escape routes in her head, mapping every hallway between her dorm and the hangar. She times the guard rotations by the sound of the boots, counts the seconds between passes. Each night she runs the plan again and again, until it stops feeling like a fantasy and starts to feel like muscle memory.

Whenever she hears engines in the distance, her pulse jumps. She imagines the transport: gray hull, dull insignia, the smell of fuel and metal. Kass waits beyond it, rain, real air, a sky that isn’t red.

She doesn’t know what she’ll do when she gets there. For a while, she tells herself she’ll vanish into the crowd, hide in the undercity, maybe take work repairing freighters. Then another thought begins to creep in, quiet at first, then impossible to shake.

*Find Neb.*

It doesn’t make sense. He’d be old by now. He might be dead. But the thought takes root anyway. If anyone could help her start over, it’d be him. She imagines showing up grease-streaked and hollow-eyed. He’d laugh that same, dry laugh, saying something like, “*Took you long enough, little spark.*”

The idea keeps her steady. But between drills, when she crosses the yard and catches sight of Kariff, the steadiness starts to crumble.

He’s worse than before.

She can see it in the way he moves: faster, harsher, every strike a little too eager. The overseers love it. They praise his control even as he breaks bones and draws blood. His grin has sharpened into something brittle. Sometimes he laughs in the middle of a spar, and it chills her more than any scream. She avoids him as best she can, but it's impossible not to watch. Each time he drops someone, she feels the same sick twist in her chest: the same she felt when she and Ire fought. The thought of leaving without speaking to him starts gnawing at her.

Maybe Zhaka was right. If she really cared for Kariff, shouldn't she try to bring him with her?

But she remembers the knife pointed at his neck. The way his smile looked when he told her she was slipping. The way he's started to watch Ire across the yard, that predator's stillness in him. He would never want to leave.

Each night she changes her mind. Yes, she'll try. No, it's too dangerous. Yes, he deserves the chance. No, he'll ruin everything.

By the end of the week, her stomach is a constant knot.

The day before the transport is due, she can barely keep her hands from shaking. Zhaka hasn't given the signal yet, but she knows it's close; the hangar has been cleared, the air smells of fuel and ozone. Every nerve in her body feels wound too tight.

That night, she doesn't even try to sleep. She lies awake in her bunk until the others' breathing deepens, then sits up, the red light from the corridor bleeding through the cracks in the door. Her heart thuds like a countdown.

If this is the last night she ever spends on Korriban, if this is the last time she ever sees Kariff, she can't let it end with silence and distance.

By the time she leaves the dorm, the sky outside is almost black. The ridge waits beyond the training yard, jagged against the horizon, lit faintly by the pale shimmer of the moons. She takes the long way around the barracks to avoid the night sentries, her boots crunching softly on the gravel path. Her breath fogs in the night chill.

Ahead, she can just make out the silhouette of a figure sitting on the ridge's edge, knife in the dirt beside him. Kariff.

Lirael stops a few paces away, pulse hammering in her ears. She rehearses what she'll say, how she'll test him without giving herself away, how she'll gauge if there's anything left of the boy she once thought was worth trusting. Then, she starts forward, the sand shifting quietly beneath her steps, the words burning at the back of her throat.

The desert is quieter than she remembers. Even the wind seems tired, soft and uneven as it brushes sand over their boots.

They sit side by side for a long time, saying nothing. The ridge falls away before them into endless red dust. Kariff's profile is cut sharp against the dark, his knife resting across his knees, his knuckles pale from the grip.

Lirael breaks the silence first. Her voice feels strange in her throat: dry and unfamiliar.

"I used to think we'd get out together," she says, the words pulled from somewhere deep and aching. "You, me, Ire. That we'd take what we could, burn this place to the ground, and go find something better."

She watches the words fall between them like ash. He doesn't answer at first, and for a moment she hopes – naively hopes – that maybe he's hearing the same quiet dream she is. Then his shoulders tense, and the hope fades.

"Ire doesn't deserve that kind of happiness."

There's no hesitation, just bitter certainty. The kind that cuts deeper than anger. Lirael keeps her eyes on the horizon. She can't look at him.

"I'm happy for him," she says softly, though her chest tightens as the words fade on the wind. Kariff stiffens beside her. She doesn't have to turn to feel the shift in the air.

"You're happy for that traitor?" His voice cracks like a whip. "After everything he's done, you're happy?"

She closes her eyes. The exhaustion that's been building all week drags at her shoulders.

"Kariff, don't—"

"Don't what?!" His voice tears through the quiet. "You think I'm supposed to just sit here and pretend like I don't see what he's become? That I'm supposed to be okay with him, after everything?"

When she looks at him now, she doesn't see the boy who used to laugh when the overseers weren't watching. She sees what Korriban made of him: harsh brows, snarled lips, scarred cheeks. He's just anger now, a fixation more than a person.

"You're not hearing me," she says, forcing her tone to stay calm. "I'm not saying what he did is excusable. I'm just saying...I think he's found peace in his own way. He's not bound by the same anger you carry around. Maybe that's worth understanding."

He glares at her, but the fury in his eyes flickers for a heartbeat, uncertain. She sees the smallest crack in it: grief, maybe, or fear, but it seals over just as quickly as it appeared.

"No," he growls. "I understand him perfectly. He gave up. Let them win. And you're telling me you're just going to walk away, too? After everything? Just for peace?"

She turns toward him, the wind catching the end of her lekku. Her chest aches with how much she wants to say, how much she can't.

"I don't want peace with this place, Kariff," she whispers. "I just want to stop fighting. I'm done."

The words hurt as they come out. But they're true. She's been carrying this flight for so long she can barely remember who she was before it.

"It's not about giving up," she adds, gentler now. "It's about finding something worth holding on to. Maybe that's what Ire found. Maybe it's something I'm trying to find, too."

He turns on her then, voice raw. "What about us? What about everything? It's just going to fall apart because of him?"

She meets his gaze. For the first time, there's no anger left in her at all, only grief. "I'm not saying I want to. Maybe it's what I need, Kariff. Maybe it's what I've needed this whole time."

The silence after that feels endless. His face hardens, but she can see the pain behind it, the confusion of someone who's lost too much to know what love looks like anymore. She takes a deep breath and stands. Her hands shake, but she keeps her voice steady.

"I'll never forget you."

She turns before he can speak, heading back down the ridge. Behind her, Kariff doesn't move. The wind picks up again, pulling the sound of her footsteps into the empty dark.

She doesn't look back.

By the time Lirael slips back into the dorms, the hall is silent. The generator hum drowns out the sound of her heartbeat, but she still freezes when she sees a shape sitting on her bed.

Zhaka. He doesn't bother whispering.

"You've got an interesting definition of curfew," he says, voice low but steady. "Transport came in early. They'll be fueling it overnight and departing at dawn." He glances toward the door, lowering his voice. "You leave now, or you don't leave at all."

She blinks. "Right now?"

He nods. "Schedules change. Someone up the chain decided they need the ship back on Kaas early."

A quick movement in the corner makes her turn: Ire, sitting up on his bed, legs swung over the side.

“Thought you’d want help,” he says, “Getting ready.”

Lirael nods, too fast. Her hands are shaking before she realizes it. She doesn’t have much: a cloak, a cracked ration tin, her vibroblade, the small pouch of credits Zhaka gave her. She gathers them quickly, stuffing them into a worn canvas satchel while Ire checks the corridor for patrols.

Zhaka watches from the doorway, arms crossed. “You travel light. Smart.”

“Everything else here belongs to someone else,” she says.

“That’s Korriban for you,” he murmurs. “Even the air’s borrowed.”

They move in silence through the halls, keeping to the darker corridors between the dorm blocks. The temple hums faintly, alive with power and distance. Outside, the night sky is clear and cruel.

At the hangar gates, Zhaka pauses to check the sensor panel. “All clear,” he says. “Half the overseers are drunk on Lord Viris’ reserves. The other half are sleeping off the fumes.”

“Typical,” Ire mutters.

The transport stands ahead of them, sleek and silent, hull still steaming from re-entry. The air smells like ozone and metal.

“This is it,” Zhaka says, turning to her. “She’ll take the fastest way to Dromund Kaas. You’ll blend in there easy enough.”

Lirael tightens her grip on the satchel. “And you?”

Zhaka’s grin sharpens, not cruel but proud. “I’ll be right where I belong. Kaas will call for me soon enough, but not as cargo.”

Ire glances at him, then back to her. “He’s not wrong. We’ll graduate soon enough.” His tone is calm, almost serene. “You were born for this path, Lirael. Don’t let us pull you from it.”

She swallows the ache in her throat and nods. “Then I hope I see you both again. Maybe somewhere with less dust.”

Zhaka chuckles. “If you do, it’ll probably be because I’m conquering it.”

Lirael can’t help but smile. “I’ll look forward to that, then.”

For a moment, the three of them just stand there, wind pushing at their cloaks, red sand whispering around their boots. Zhaka gives her a small salute.

“May your next mistake be a big one, ‘lek. The small ones are never worth the trouble.”

Ire’s farewell is quieter. He places a hand on her shoulder.

“Stay alive, Lirael. That’s all that matters.”

“I will,” she promises. And somehow, just saying it to them makes it feel true.

She turns toward the transport. The engines thrum beneath the hangar floor, a sound that vibrates through her bones. She slips under the hull, finds the cargo ramp half-open, and crawls into the shadowed bay.

The air inside is cold and dry. She wedges herself between two stacked crates, clutching her satchel close. Through a narrow vent she can see the hangar lights dimming, the two silhouettes standing where she left them: one steady as stone, the other bright as fire.

When the ramp seals shut, she exhales slowly. The deck trembles, the hum rising until it fills her chest. Korriban fades behind her, swallowed by the sound of engines.

The hours in hyperspace stretch long and quiet. Lirael stays curled behind the supply crates, barely moving, counting the rhythmic pulse of the engines to keep herself awake. No one comes into the cargo hold, but a few footsteps pass outside. There isn’t much cargo, either: a few sealed containers, some covered cases that look more ornamental than useful. The walls are clean, the floor free of oil stains. It feels more like a private vessel than a hauler, every surface too polished to belong to freighter crews.

The descent burns gold through the clouds. Lirael clings to the metal brace behind the cargo crates as the transport shudders, its engines roaring against Kaas’ storm-slick atmosphere. The noise fills her chest, shakes her bones. It’s the most beautiful sound she’s ever heard.

When the ship finally settles and the engines die down, she waits. One minutes. Five. Ten. Then the ramp lowers with a hiss, flooding the hold with damp air that smells of rain and oil.

She slips out while the crew argues over a cargo manifest, moving fast and quiet. Her feet make no sound on the deck plating. The air outside is heavy, wet, alive, a stark change from Korriban’s choking heat.

She’s offworld.

She did it.

The spaceport stretches before her like a dream: lights glimmering through sheets of rain, voices overlapping in every language she’s ever heard and some she hasn’t. Freighters dock and depart in steady rhythm, their engines glowing pale-blue in the dark. For the first time in years, she feels small in a way that isn’t terrifying.

Her credits are still safe in her pocket. Five hundred of them to buy her passage to Nar Shaddaa. To Neb.

She weaves through the crowd, asking softly. Most ignore her. One woman points her toward Dock Six. "Freighter captains," she says. "They'll take you if the price is right."

Dock Six is quieter, darker, the rain pooling in shallow puddles around the landing struts. Lirael's voice is almost lost in the storm: "Excuse me, do you know anyone headed for Nar Shaddaa?"

Most just shake their heads. Some don't even slow down. She's almost ready to give up when a voice calls behind her, smooth and low.

"Lookin' for passage, sweetheart?"

She turns. The man leaning against the ramp of a small courier ship has a thin smile and eyes the color of wet stone. He's dressed like a spacer, though his coat looks too fine for the docks. A faint scar tugs at the corner of his mouth when he smiles.

"Yes," she says, hopeful. "To Nar Shaddaa."

"Big place for a little thing like you," he says lightly, glancing past her as though checking to see if anyone's following. "You got family there?"

"Yes," she lies. He nods slowly, like he's humoring her.

"Just you? No other passengers?"

She hesitates only a second. "Yes." His grin widens.

"Brave girl." He tilts his head, studying her face. "You don't look older than fourteen."

"Thirteen," she says.

"Thirteen," he repeats, the word drawn out like a taste. "Old enough t'know your way around, then."

She nods, smiling shyly. "I worked on a ship before. If it'll cover the cost, I'll work."

"You look like it." He rubs a thumb along the edge of his belt buckle, then gestures toward the ramp. "Nar Shaddaa's not an easy run. Lucky for you, I don't mind a bit o' company. How much you willin' t'pay?"

She opens up the pouch and pours the credits into her hand. "Five hundred."

"Two-fifty upfront," he says, snatching half her bounty and placing it into his pocket. "You work well enough on the ship, and I'll call it even there."

Her eyes light up. "Really?"

"Sure thing," he says, grin easy. "Just you, no baggage?"

"Just me."

“Perfect.” His gaze lingers a heartbeat too long before he turns toward the ship. “Go on up, sweetheart. Make yourself comfortable. I’ll finish preflight.” Relief floods through her.

“Thank you,” she says.

He chuckles, low and pleased. “Don’t mention it. I’ve always had a soft spot for kids like you.”

His ship smells faintly of spice and burnt oil. She finds a narrow seat near the viewport and hugs her satchel close. The rain streaks across the glass, glowing silver under the landing lights. She can hardly sit still. She’s going back to Nar Shaddaa. Back to where Neb might still be. Maybe he’s running some old freighter in the undercity, fixing drives and cursing rusted bolts. Maybe he still remembers her. She imagines showing up at his door, telling him everything she’s seen. How she escaped. How she learned to listen to the hum of the ships the way he taught her.

Maybe they’ll build one together. Just for themselves this time.

The deck trembles. Outside, the spaceport lights blur in the rain as the ship lifts from the pad, climbing through clouds dense enough to swallow the city’s glow. Her stomach dips as they breach atmosphere. A moment later, the hyperdrive spools up. The stars stretch into thin white lines, then dissolve into the swirling tunnel of hyperspace.

Lirael exhales. The hum of the drive steadies, a heartbeat in the hull. The quiet rhythm of engines and the ache of exhaustion settles in her chest.

She dozes, half-slumped in her chair. Then the footsteps return.

She looks up as the door to the cockpit slides open. The man fills the frame, a broad shadow against the dull light. He has to stoop slightly to fit through the door, the scar by his mouth deepening with his smile.

“Comfortable?”

Lirael straightens, forcing a polite smile. “Yes, thank you.”

He walks closer, heavy boots sounding against the metal floor. “Oh, don’t thank me yet. Still got your end of the deal t’hold up.”

Her pulse stumbles. “With the ship,” she says. “I can work the engines, cargo—”

He laughs, low and coarse. “Cargo, yeah. That’s one way t’put it.”

When she takes a step back, he moves faster. A hand like a clamp closes around her arm, forcing her against the bulkhead. He towers over her – she barely reaches his chest – his breath sour with spice and old drink.

“You said you’d work,” he murmurs, leaning closer. “I’m just collecting early.”

Her mind blanks. He stinks. His weight pins her shoulder to the wall. He grips her throat lightly, testing her resistance.

“Don’t fight, sweetheart. You’ll just make it worse.”

Her eyes flick past him, to the satchel lying on the floor, neatly set by her feet. The hilt of her vibroblade gleams faintly beneath the cabin light, just out of reach.

Her fingers twitch. She doesn’t reach for it. The Force moves through her like a pulse: invisible and absolute. The blade leaps from the floor into her waiting hand. He doesn’t even have time to turn.

The vibroblade sinks up beneath his ribs in a clean, practiced motion. The sound he makes isn’t human, but a guttural, wet gasp as she twists free of his grip. Then she’s on top of him the second strike driving into the base of his sternum, the third catching his throat. By the time the knife stills, he’s not moving. Blood runs down her wrists, warm and steady. The blade hums softly in her grip, a weapon made for precision, not the wild, unending frenzy she’s given it.

Her breath catches in the hollow quiet. The scent of ozone and iron fills the cabin. For a long moment, she can’t hear anything but her own pulse.

She wipes her hands on his coat and steps over the body, walking to the cockpit in a daze. The nav-console flickers, coordinates scrolling across the screen. Her reflection stares back at her: yellow eyes blank, a thin smear of blood at her chin.

The destination isn’t Nar Shaddaa. The lights burn bright on the console.

## ZYGERRIA

He was going to sell her. Again.

Her throat tightens, but no sound comes out. She lowers herself into the pilot’s seat, trembling. The controls mean nothing, just dozens of levers, lights, toggles she’s never seen, blinking in a language she’s forgotten how to read.

Neb used to tell her ships could talk, if you were quiet enough to listen. She closes her eyes. The hum of the hyperdrive thrums beneath her palms, steady but strained, like a heartbeat out of rhythm. For a moment, she isn’t on a stranger’s ship in the middle of nowhere. She’s in the engine room again, surrounded by coolant and smoke, his voice patient beside her.

Slowly, she breathes with the ship. The tension in her chest eases. The vibration evens out, aligning with the rhythm of her pulse. The sound of the engine deepens, then steadies. Her hands begin to move. Switches flip. Dials turn. She doesn’t think about what she’s doing, she just follows the sound, the feel of it. The Force winds through her like a current, cold and absolute, carrying her along the path the ship itself seems to choose.

Outside, hyperspace, ripples. The streaming lights bend, twist, and reform. When the hum quiets, she opens her eyes. The console blinks back at her.

## NAR SHADDAA

She stares at the display until the words blur. Her bloody hands won't stop shaking. The body in the corridor cools slowly behind her, and Lirael can't tell if she's trembling from fear, grief, or from the quiet, unfamiliar certainty that she'll never be naïve again.

The ship exhales around her and practical things snap into order: old habits that live in bone. Checking for a threat, securing the scene, taking what you need. The anger comes easier than the shock: not at what she's done, but that she'd let herself be fooled. On Korriban, she'd killed before; that part of her lives in a different register, a cold measure of efficiency. What cuts is trust. He'd sounded like someone who'd keep her safe, for a breath. That lie tastes worst of all.

She steps into the corridor with the same even calm she'd learned to use when a dueling partner missteps. The man is a ruined weight against the bulkhead, enormous and graceless. She flicks his coat open, fingers quick and casual: three thousand five hundred credits in two fat bags, a little packet of coarse spice folded into a seam, a blaster pistol with the safety shot out, the sort of jacket that speaks for the owner better than he did. She counts the credits as she tucks them away. The jacket goes over her shoulders; it hangs oddly on her small frame and smells like a life she refuses to live. The blaster goes into the satchel. The spice into an inner pocket. Everything that can buy her a meal, a berth, a patch of anonymity goes into the bag.

The cargo hatch yawns open when she keys it. The hold is small, a dim box of resin and star-heat, crates stacked with indifferent freight tags. Most of it is nothing: nutrient paste, cheap electronics, but one crate produces med-gear, sealed and stamped. She rolls it out, testing the weight, the seal. Enough to sell on Nar Shaddaa. She drags two lighter cases into the main room, stacking them near the door.

Moving him is faster than she expects. He's heavy, but she doesn't grunt or strain. She places her hands under his shoulders, breathes, and calls the Force as she calls engines and levers. The body slides like a log, the ship's skin and her will doing the heavy lifting for her. She rolls him into the hold, tucks a crate against his side as if making a bad bed, and seals the hatch.

She sets the vent controls with a steady thumb. **HULL PRESSURIZATION: DISENGAGE** flickers and then the hiss begins, sucking the hold toward vacuum. Loose crates flutter like dark moths and then vanish. The ship's tone thins as atmosphere bleeds away, the sound is oddly ceremonial, like a bell for the dead. She watches until only the faint echo of pressure changes and the click of coins in her pocket remains.

The captain's jacket hangs on her shoulders, the spice warming in a pocket at her ribs. She moves to the cockpit, to the console that now insists: **NAR SHADDAA**. She exhales and sinks into the captain's chair. The jacket smells of oil and smoke, still damp at the collar. Her

body feels heavier than the ship, hands bloody, heartbeat slow and steady. Outside, hyperspace folds in endless, humming light.

Lirael curls her knees to her chest, the stolen credits clinking faintly in her pocket, and watches the blue tunnel blur until her eyes can't stay open. The hum of the engines fills the silence. Somewhere between the heartbeat of the ship and her own, sleep takes her.

The stars fold back into being with a lurch. Lirael wakes to the ship's alarm whining softly, proximity sensors flashing in amber. Her neck aches from the position she'd slept in. The blue tunnel of hyperspace is gone; Nar Shaddaa hangs before her like a burning ember adrift in the dark. City lights and traffic lanes cover every inch of the moon's surface, a living organism of fire and metal.

She blinks sleep away, glancing over the controls. Half the panels mean nothing to her. No automatic landing queue, no comm signature registered: the ship's transponder is either dead or erased. She breathes in slow, pressing both hands flat to the console.

*Listen.*

The hum of the engines comes to her like a voice half-buried under static, tired but still responsive. She closes her eyes, lets the Force trace through the ship's bones, and feels the thrusters respond, hesitant, then obedient.

Her fingers begin to move without thought. The guidance sticks sway, the stabilizers groan, then correct. The descent burns red against the hull, the ship shuddering like a live thing until, by inches, the controls stop fighting her. They settle under her touch.

When the landing struts kiss durasteel, she exhales a laugh that sounds almost like disbelief. The engines wind down into silence.

The docking bay smells of rust and exhaust, all neon haze and rain leaking from the upper levels. A Nikto dockhand waves her toward the payment terminal, his posture equal parts boredom and suspicion.

"Five hundred to stay, another two-fifty if you want it watched," he grunts. She pulls the credits from her satchel and presses them into his palm before he can finish.

"Keep it safe," she says. "And I've got cargo to sell: medical crates with clean seals."

He eyes the stacked cases by the door, expression flat. "We don't buy without Desilijic permit. You got one?"

"No."

"Then you don't sell here."

She watches him walk away, then closes the ramp behind her. The jacket's too hot for the climate, but she doesn't take it off.

Nar Shaddaa doesn't sleep, it just changes color. The upper lanes glitter in endless advertisements while the undercity pulses in bruised red and violet. Lirael walks through it all, hood low, asking quietly at speeder stands, scrapyards, cantinas.

"Niebia," she says first, the corrects herself. "Neb. Weequay mechanic. Worked for Danuz Venn years ago. I'm looking for him."

Most shrug her off. A few mutter something about too many Weequay on this moon to count. But once, the name stirs memory.

One drunk spacer leans forward, squinting through the dim light. "Neb. Yeah, yeah, think I heard him workin' Desilijic lanes last cycle. Fixing skiffs. Or swoops. Maybe both."

Lirael's pulse jumps. "You saw him?"

The man nods, setting his cup down. "About a year back. Sector Seventeen, under the Desilijic docks. He was still fixin' engines, good with 'em, too. Hutt keep mechanics like that close. Might still be there if he's lucky." His eyes flick briefly to her lekku, then away again, careful. "You a friend of his?"

Lirael hesitates. "You could say that."

The Twi'lek bartender snorts softly. "If she's smart, she won't say much more than that. Finish your drink, Esto."

He raises his glass in mock salute. "Just tryin' to help the kid," he mutters, then drains what's left and slumps back into his seat.

The woman wipes the counter clean and looks at Lirael, the humor fading from her face.

"You don't look like you belong in Sector Seventeen, kid. It's Hutt turf. People vanish down there."

"I can handle it," Lirael says.

The Twi'lek studies her for a long, assessing beat: the scars across her face, the stolen jacket hanging too big on her frame. "Sure you can. What can I get you?"

"Whiskey. Corellian."

That earns a sharp laugh. "Hell no." The woman fills a glass from a pitcher and slides it across the bar. "You'll take water and be grateful it's clean."

Lirael blinks but drinks it. It's tepid, but it steadies her voice. "I just need directions. To Sector Seventeen."

“You need a reason to still be breathing first,” the woman replies. Then, softer, “What’s got you lookin’ for a Weequay slave, huh?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Didn’t say it was.” The Twi’lek leans back, eyes tracing the scars along Lirael’s wrists and the way she flinches at the question. “You look like you’ve been through hell. I can smell it on you.”

Silence stretches between them, filled by the hum of broken lights and the low chatter of the cantina. She finally says, “You carrying anything to sell? You look hungry and broke.”

Lirael’s gaze flicks down to her satchel. “Spice.”

That earns a low whistle. “You serious?”

“Just a small bag.”

“I’ll give you a thousand for it,” she says without hesitation.

Lirael frowns. “It’s not worth that much.”

The woman shakes her head. “I’m not buying the spice kid. I’m buying your luck. Maybe it rubs off.” She pulls out a pouch of credits and counts 1,000 on the counter. “Take it. And take the room upstairs, last door on the right. No charge.”

Lirael studies her warily. “Why?”

The woman’s expression softens, almost painfully. “Because someone once should’ve done the same for me.” Her voice drops to a rasp. “Didn’t. Maybe this makes up for it.”

Lirael nods once, pockets the credits, and stands. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” the woman says, eyes drifting to the rain-blurred neon outside. “Just don’t end up in another man’s cargo hold.”

Upstairs, the room is small and quiet. The hum of the city seeps through the thin walls, steady as a heartbeat. Lirael sets down her satchel, shrugs off the stole jacket, and sits on the edge of the bed. For the first time since leaving Korriban, she exhales without fear.

A month passes in a rhythm that almost feels like peace. Lirael wakes to the hum of the cantina downstairs, the shuffle of boots, the soft clink of bottles, the bartender’s voice drifting between customers in her thick Ryl accent. Her room is small enough that she can touch both walls if she stretches, but it’s hers. The bed creaks, the sink leaks, and the window barely opens, yet the air smells faintly of rain instead of dust. That’s enough.

The bartender – she introduces herself as Eshte the next morning – doesn’t ask questions at first. She brings water and food at dawn and dusk: bowls of broth, reheated stew, whatever she can spare. When Lirael tries to pay, the older Twi’lek just waves her off.

“You need it more than I do,” she says, as if that is the only thing that matters.

Lirael keeps to herself. She eats, washes, and slips out each morning toward the lifts that descend into Sector Seventeen. The air grows thicker the farther down she goes: oil, spice, sweat, and rot mixing with the heat of the undercity. She asks the same question every day. “I’m looking for a Weequay mechanic, Niebia, works for the Desilijic. You seen him?”

Most shake their heads. A few remember, but no one knows where he went. Some say he was shipped offworld. Some say the Hutts scrapped his shop and everyone in it. Lirael tries to listen for the lies, the stories that sound too clean.

Every evening, she comes back empty-handed. Eshte pretends not to notice the exhaustion in her eyes or the thin cuts on her knuckles. She just leaves a glass of water by the bed and says, “Eat first. Then you can talk.”

By the second month, Eshte starts teaching her things.

“You walk too straight,” she says one night, watching Lirael descend down the stairs. “Nar Shaddaa eats girls who look like they’re lost. You slouch. You pretend to be tired. You let them think you’re been walking these streets all your life.”

She demonstrates, letting her shoulders dip, her expression dull. It’s eerie, how quickly the sharp-tongued bartender vanishes into a mask of submission.

“You use it,” she says. “You smile when they think they’re clever. You make them comfortable. Then you do what you came for.” Lirael practices in the mirror later, hating how easily it comes.

In between refilling glasses and throwing out drunks, Eshte tells stories: half-truths of old smugglers, dancers who ran the Hutts blind, Twi’lek girls who vanished and sometimes came back as ghosts in the neon. When Lirael asks if she’s ever been to Sith space, Eshte laughs.

“Stars, no. But I’ve met my fair share of Sith. Hard eyes, strong arms.” She studies Lirael quietly for a beat. “You’ve got that look, too.”

That’s when Lirael tells her. Not all at once, but in pieces. That she ran. That she made it free before Korriban could finish breaking her. That she trained among monsters and learned to live as one. Eshte doesn’t flinch. She just pours Lirael another drink and says, “Then you already know what it takes to stay alive here.”

Some nights, when the cantina closes, Lirael helps Eshte clean. They move around each other in silence until the older woman finally says, “You remind me of myself, you know? Younger. Meaner. Still hoping the galaxy might care.”

Lirael frowns. “You don’t hope?”

Eshte chuckles. “I stopped hoping. Started doing.”

The more Lirael learns, the more Nar Shaddaa starts to feel like something she can control. She picks up Eshte’s tricks: how to haggle down traders, how to read a man’s fear by the twitch in his jaw, how to fight without drawing too much attention. The Force hums under it all, steady and patient.

Her search doesn’t stop. Every morning she’s back in Sector Seventeen, walking through its noise and chaos like a ghost. Some days she swears she feels Neb’s presence; a vibration through the floor grating, a voice just out of earshot. The locals say the Desilijic own everything down there: the people, the shops, even the air. Neb isn’t anyone’s slave now, they tell her. He’s just a number on a register of millions.

Lirael doesn’t sleep much that week. When Eshte finds her sitting by the lift, bruised and silent, she doesn’t scold the girl. She just sits down beside her, pressing a wet cloth into her hands.

“Someone hit you?”

“I hit him first.”

“Good. Just make sure you’re right before you do.”

That becomes the refrain. Make sure you’re right before you do.

By the end of the second month, the cantina feels like home. Eshte calls her *lek’ari* sometimes. Little one. Lirael pretends to hate it, but she never corrects her. The city’s noise outside no longer sounds like threat, but like a pulse.

Still, every night, when she lies down, she whispers the same thing into the dark. “I’ll find you, Neb. Or I’ll find the ones who took you.”

And somewhere in the depths of Nar Shaddaa, the lights flicker once, like a hum answering back.

The rain starts before midday, a slow, chemical drizzle that turns the undercity air slick and green. Sector Seventeen looks softer in it, the grime washed into sheen, the lights dimmed by fog. Lirael keeps her hood low as she moves through the alleys, boots splashing through shallow

runoff. It's been sixty-three days since she first landed. Sixty-three days since she last saw the Korribani sun.

The shift yards buzz with noise from engines. Most workers don't look up when she passes. But at the loading platform by Dock Eight, a voice cuts through the din.

"You lost, kid?"

Lirael turns. A Weequay woman leans against a crate stack, sleeves rolled up, a welding torch still hissing at her side. Her face is lined, half-burned from old work, but her eyes are sharp.

"I'm looking for someone. A Weequay mechanic, by the name of Niebia. Goes by Neb. You seen him?"

The woman stills. For a second, her expression flickers, something like recognition.

"Yeah," she says slowly. "Worked a shift crew here last cycle. Good hands. Always had a cough."

Lirael's pulse stutters. "He's alive?"

"Last I saw. Sick with something in the lungs but still pulling his weight. Told him to get it looked at, but he said he'd worked through worse."

Lirael can hear him say it. *Worked through worse, little spark.* Her throat tightens.

"You said last cycle. What happened?"

The woman wipes sweat from her forehead, hesitating. "He got moved. Some reshuffle in the Desilijic logistics. Whole crew reassigned to a different dock. Sector Twenty-Two, I think. Supervisor's named Jotzi Ozak. If Neb's still breathing, he'll be there."

Lirael nods, once, sharp, the motion cutting like a blade. "Thank you."

Sector Twenty-Two feels older, narrower, the kind of place that doesn't get mapped. The air smells like ozone and salt, the corridors dimly lit by half-dead signs. She keeps moving, asking for Ozak until someone finally points her toward a dock ringed with freight haulers and storage containers.

The quartermaster's office smells of oil and animal musk. Dim light leaks through a slit in the ceiling, catching on the Zygerrian's collar where it glints against his fur. He sits behind a metal desk that looks scavenged from a starship, datapad in one hand, drink in the other. When the door hisses open, he doesn't look up.

"We're closed."

Lirael steps inside anyway, the hum of the hallway sealing off behind her. “I’m looking for someone.”

That earns a glance, slow and deliberate. His eyes, gold and slit-pupiled, drag over her the way men here always do: assessing. Calculating.

“You don’t look old enough to be on my docks, sweetheart.”

She ignores him. “You’re Jotzi Ozak?”

The corner of his mouth lifts. “Depends who’s asking.”

“I heard you run the crews from Seventeen. There’s a Weequay, Niebia. Worked under you.”

He leans back, tail curling lazily around the chair leg, that thin, pleased smile spreading across his face. “I’ve got a lot of Weequay. You’ll have to be more specific.”

“Tall,” she says, pulse hammering. “Good with engines. Used to be on Venn’s ship.”

“Mm.” His voice is all velvet now. “Yeah, I remember that one. Why do you care?”

“He’s a friend.”

That makes him laugh, a low, rumbling sound that fills the room.

“Friend,” he repeats, tasting the word. “That’s a new one. Usually, when people come looking for property down here, they’re trying to buy it.”

Lirael doesn’t move. “I’m offering three thousand credits for him.”

Ozak blinks, then grins wide enough to show the points of his teeth. “You’ve got credits, do you? And what would a little thing like you do with a slave, hmm?” He stands now, stretching his height and stepping around the desk until he’s only a few paces away. “You’re what, twelve? Thirteen? Pretty little thing like you shows up alone with a sack of credits, saying she’s buying men. That’s rich.”

“Three thousand,” she says again.

He circles slowly, tail swaying behind him. “You must know what they’d pay for you. Not Desilijic, either. Private buyers. You’d fetch ten times that without even trying. You sure you want to spend your money instead of making it?”

The air tightens. The hum in her chest rises until it’s a soundless scream. The Force presses against her teeth, begging to break free. For a moment, she imagines it: his lungs collapsing, his smug smile curdling into silence. She can feel the exact pressure it would take.

But Neb would never be able to walk off the docks if she did something like that.

She swallows, unclenches her fists.

“Three thousand,” she repeats quietly, each syllable like a blade against her tongue. “He’s sick. You’ll get more from this than you will working him to death.”

Ozak watches her for a long time. Then he laughs again. “You’ve got teeth under all that dirt. Fine. Four thousand.”

“Three,” she insists.

“Four,” he says, leaning in, breath hot with alcohol. “Or I let him rot where he is. He’s trained, quiet, doesn’t complain. Men like that are rare. I’ll be sad to lose him, but not four-thousand-credits sad.”

Lirael stares up at him, pulse hammering. He’s too close. She can smell the copper tang of the ring in his ear, the wet musk of his coat. If she kills him now, no one would stop her. But she’d never find Neb.

She exhales through her nose. “Four.”

Ozak’s grin returns, wide and triumphant. “Good girl,” he murmurs, voice dropping lower. “You’ll learn that word serves you well down here.”

She drops the credits onto his desk, one by one. He counts them deliberately, savoring every second of her silence. When he’s done, he pockets the chips and leans his hip against the desk, suddenly all business again. From a drawer, he pulls out a small control slate; thin and greasy, its surface cracked from years of use, and taps a sequence on it.

“Sign here,” he says, tapping the screen once more before holding it out to her. “Hutts love their paperwork tidy.”

She takes it carefully, the surface still warm from his hand. The datapad lists Niebia’s serial number, species, work record, and a digital seal of Desilijic ownership. At the base, a line for her to sign on. Ozak grins as she scans the data.

“And this,” he adds, reaching into the same drawer. “unlocks his collar.” He dangles a small control fob from one finger, its red light pulsing faintly. “Press twice if you want to reset the restraint code. Three times and you’ll fry the poor bastard instead. Best keep steady hands.”

Lirael plucks it from his fingers before he can finish, slipping it into her pocket without looking away from him. Her voice is calm when she says, “I’ll manage.”

He chuckles, low and satisfied. “Dock Thirty-One. Graveyard shift. He’ll come in with the rest at dawn. You can wait there, if you don’t mind the smell.”

Lirael doesn’t answer. She turns for the door, every muscle trembling with the effort of restraint. Behind her, Ozak chuckles softly. “Pleasure doing business, little buyer.”

She doesn't look back. The door hisses shut, and she lets out the breath she's been holding, eyes burning. The scream in her chest fades to a whisper.

The dock is nearly empty when she gets there. The air tastes like metal and brine, every surface damp from the night rain. Crates stack along the bay walls, humming faintly from the freighters moored just beyond the gate. Lirael finds a place to sit near the cargo lift, close enough to see the dock entrance, far enough to stay unnoticed, and waits.

Hours crawl past. The noise of the city above rises and falls, a slow mechanical tide. Every few minutes a ship lands or departs, engines screaming through the smog before fading again. Lirael keeps her eyes on the gate. Her legs ache. Her stomach growls. She doesn't move.

She tells herself she's ready. That when she sees him, she'll be composed. She'll smile, explain, show him the fob, and then they'll walk out together. But the longer she waits, the less sure she becomes.

What if he doesn't remember her? What if he thinks she's just another slaver with credits and harsh eyes?"

She looks down at her reflection in the puddle beside her boot. The face that stares back doesn't belong to the child Neb once knew. Her lekku are scored with thin white scars from Korriban's training blades; one eye carries the faint outline of an old burn. Her arms are lean, stronger, her eyes harder. She touches the mark around her eye – one of the overseers left it there with an iron – and wonders if Neb will even see her through all that ruin.

A low horn blares through the dock. The gate lights shift from red to green. A transport glides into view, its engines coughing dust into the air. Workers begin spilling out, silhouettes against the floodlights: Weequay, Nikto, a few Rodians, all hunched and filthy, shoulders sagging from the weight of tools and exhaustion.

Lirael stands, heart hammering. She scans the faces as they pass, one after another, none of them him. Then in the back of the crowd, she sees him.

Older. Thinner. His skin dull under the grime, the lines around his mouth carved deeper. But it's him. The same heavy step, the same tired set of shoulders, the same scar under his right eye. Her breath catches.

"Neb," she whispers. He doesn't hear her. The noise swallows her voice. She takes a deep breath, steps forward and says it louder. "Neb!"

He freezes and turns slowly, brow furrowed, like a man caught in a half-forgotten dream. The workers stream past him, indifferent, but he stands still, staring at the girl in the nice jacket with her hood half-fallen and rain running down her lekku. His mouth opens, then closes again.

"...Lirael?"

Before she can think, she's already running. The crowd parts around her, muttering curses as she slams through them. She reaches him and throws herself forward, and for a moment he's too stunned to move. Then he's laughing, hoarse and incredulous, and his arms close around her tight enough to lift her off the ground.

"Stars above," he breathes, voice cracking. "You're alive."

She presses her face against his chest, tears already spilling. "I found you."

He pulls back just enough to look at her. His dark eyes are wide, shining under the dock lights. "What are you doing here? I told you to get clear of this place. You shouldn't be here, kid. If anyone sees you—"

"I'm not with anyone," she says quickly, breathless. He frowns, scanning her face, the scars, the callouses.

"You working for a crew now? Whose colors you under? Tell me they're treating you decent—"

"I'm not with a crew," she interrupts, pulling the fob from her pocket. "I'm with you."

He blinks. "What?"

"I bought you." Her hands tremble as she shows him the fob. "From Ozak. You're free."

For a long moment, Neb just stares at the fob. The rain drips between them, tapping against the metal. Then he lets out a sound that's half laugh, half disbelief.

"You bought me?"

She nods, smiling through tears. "Don't worry. I won't make you work too hard."

That pulls a real laugh out of him, weak but alive. Then his expression softens, and something wounded flickers around it.

"You shouldn't have done that, Lirael. I'm not worth that kind of trouble."

"You are to me."

He shakes his head, rubbing the back of his neck. "Shitload of money for an old mechanic who can't climb a ladder without coughing up rust? You should've bought yourself a ship with that money."

"I already have one," she says, voice small but sure. "Just needs fixing. That's why I need you."

That catches him off guard. "You have a ship?"

"Yeah. It's small. Old. Needs a bit of work."

He stares at her for a beat, then huff, a quiet, disbelieving laugh. “You really did it, didn’t you? You got free.”

“So did you,” she says.

Neb’s face softens. He reaches out, thumb brushing the scar over her eye. “Look at you,” he murmurs. “Stars, you’re tall. All angles and fire now.”

Lirael looks down, embarrassed but smiling. “You got smaller.”

He chuckles again, shaking his head. “Guess so.” He looks at the fob in her hands, then places his hand on her shoulder. “All right, little spark. You just bought yourself a mechanic. Lead the way.”

The walk back to the cantina feels unreal. Nar Shaddaa’s rain has slowed to a mist, turning the neon lights into smears of color across wet durasteel. Workers spill into alleyways for the morning shift, thugs sleep in doorframes, droids hum along scavenger routes. It’s the same city she’s walked every day for two months, but tonight it feels different. She’s not just a lost girl tonight.

Neb keeps her hand in his the entire time. His grip is firm, warm, the same calloused hold that once lifted her in and out of crawl spaces. Every few steps he glances over at her as if checking she hasn’t disappeared. Once, he coughs into his sleeve, a rough, rattling sound he tries to smother with his shoulder, brushing it off when she looks up at him.

“You okay?” she whispers.

“Fine,” he lies gently. “Just cold air. Been working in the steam all night.”

She squeezes his hand a little tighter. He squeezes back.

They stop at the final corner before the cantina entrance. The street is loud here, gamblers, dancers, late-night freighter crews flooding in for one last drink before dawn. A back-alley band plays something off-key. Lirael steps in front of Neb, pulling the fob from her pocket.

“Before we go in,” she says. “Hold still.”

Neb blinks. “What’re you—”

She presses the control fob twice. A soft click. A flash of red light. The metal collar around Neb’s throat unseals with a dull clack. He freezes, eyes wide, as it slides down his chest into his open palms. The skin beneath is raw in places, irritated from years of chafing. He touches the spot gently, like he’s not sure the absence is real.

“Well,” he says quietly. “I’ll be dammed.”

“What do you want to do with it?” she asks. Neb turns the collar over in his hands. The old tracking chip inside is cracked, the metal rusted from sweat. He lets out a small breath through his nose, not quite a laugh, not quite a sigh.

“Damn thing’s followed me half my life. Be a shame to throw it out now. Makes a fine wall piece, you think?”

“For your room?”

He snorts. “For *your ship*, little spark. Remind us where we came from.”

He places it in her hands. It’s heavy, thick metal with harsh edges. She tucks it into her satchel and follows him inside the cantina.

It’s packed, bodies shoulder to shoulder, music thumping too loud for the thin walls, haze thick with smoke and spilled liquor. Early morning hours, the place is always busiest. Eshte works her way down the bar like a storm, slamming bottles, wiping counters, snapping at customers. Her eyes lift when she sees Lirael, then widen at the Weequay next to her.

“Is that him?” she asks, drying her hands on an apron. “The ghost you were hunting?”

“Yeah,” Lirael says, making her way to the bar. “Eshte, meet Neb.” Neb gives her a polite nod.

“Sit,” Eshte orders, gesturing to a free spot at the bar. “Both of you. First drink’s free. Second, too, if you’re polite.”

Neb hesitates, just a flicker, the reflex of a man who’s only ever been handled, never hosted. But he sits. Lirael climbs onto the stool beside him. Eshte pours two glasses of something clear and sharp, then slides a steaming plate of fried noodles between them.

Neb’s voice is raspy from the shift. “You sure we’re not intruding, miss?”

Eshte snorts. “Intruding? Honey, half the people in here ain’t supposed to be here. You’re the least of my problems.” She jerks her chin toward Lirael. “She’s been tearing up my stairs for a month looking for you. ’Bout time you showed.”

Neb turns slowly to Lirael. “A month?”

Her cheeks warm. “Sixty-three days.”

He stares, stunned. “Stars, kid... you—” his voice breaks. He clears his throat. “You shouldn’t have done that for me.”

“I wanted to,” she says. “I had to.”

Neb quiets, eyes drifting around the cantina, taking in the noise, the lights, the crowd. When he finally looks back at her, it’s with that old, familiar concern.

“So,” he murmurs, voice low enough only she can hear, “what happened to you, little spark? You make it to Harro’s crew like we planned?”

She nods. “Yeah. They got me a ticket out. Ossus.”

“And the rest?”

“I’ll tell you once we’re on the ship,” she says. “It’s...a long story.”

He nods, accepting her response without pressure, then coughs into his sleeve, shaking it off with a small grimace. “Fair enough.”

She hesitates before asking, but the question has been burning holes in her for months.

“What about you? After Nal Hutta...what happened?”

Neb rubs the back of his neck. “Not much worth telling, to be honest. Venn’s daughter took over his assets. All official-like.” He snorts, humorless. “Didn’t have use for a mechanic, so she surrendered me and my crew to the Hutts. Desilijic took me in the sweep.”

“For three years?” Lirael whispers.

“Mm.” Another shrug. “It’s where most ‘quay end up. You work until they move you or until you drop.” His expression softens as he looks at her. “Didn’t think you’d ever come back this way. Didn’t want you to.”

“Well, I did,” she says, shrugging. “And I found you.”

Eshte watches them quietly, leaning on the counter. She doesn’t interrupt until the noodles are half gone and the drink is almost empty.

“So,” she says, wiping down the bar, “what now, kid?”

Lirael glances at Neb. “We’re going back to my ship. I want to patch her up. Then...I don’t know. Get offworld. Find a job.”

Neb gives a small, approving nod. “I’m handy with a wrench. We can get her running in no time.”

Eshte hums thoughtfully. “If you’re looking for steady work, kid, Republic smuggling pays clean. Not cartel kind, but aid running. They don’t ask for last names.”

Lirael’s eyes brighten. “Smuggling?”

“Honest smuggling,” Eshte corrects. “The Republic loves desperate captains with small ships and no loyalty to the Empire. You’d eat well. Keep moving. Stay off the grid.”

Neb whistles low. “You a bounty dealer, Eshte?”

“I’m old,” she says with a shrug. “I’ve lived every life there is to live on this moon. Get out while you’re young enough to enjoy it.”

A voice calls for Eshte from the far end of the bar. She waves them off. “Go on, you two. Before I start crying and embarrass us all.”

Lirael stands. “Eshte...thank you.”

“Don’t thank me, *lek’ari*,” she says. “Just come by whenever you’re onworld. Both of you.”

Neb nods, respectfully. “Thank you for looking after her.” Eshte gives him a quick bow.

“Someone had to.”

They step out into the damp night. Lirael adjusts her satchel, straightens her hood, and leads Neb back toward the spaceport, hand in hand again.

The walk is quieter this time. Neb coughs once, then again, into the crook of his elbow, but he waves off her worried glances. The higher levels of Nar Shaddaa begin to thin out until the crowds are mostly dockhands and pilots finishing the graveyard shift. Metal flooring gives way to the wide, echoing avenues of the port.

Dock 47-8B sits near the outer edge of the complex, half-swallowed in shadow. The hangar is mostly empty at this hour, leaving the little freighter in the center looking smaller than Lirael remembers. Neb pauses when he sees it.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he murmurs. “You got yourself a real ship.”

Lirael beams. “You like it?”

“Like it? Kid, this is a luxury cruiser compared to what I’ve been sleeping under.” He steps forward, running a hand along the hull plating, fingers tracing the rivets, the carbon scoring at the bow. “Solid frame. Engine’s old but she ain’t goin’ anywhere unless you tell her to. Corellians build ‘em stubborn.” He crouches to check the landing gear that she scuffed on her descent. “Needs some work, but... she’s good. Real good.”

Lirael glows under the praise. “I thought you’d say that.”

Neb straightens with a wince, rubbing his ribs. “Let’s check inside, then?”

They head up together. The ramp groans under their weight. The moment Neb steps inside, he stops dead.

The interior lights are dim, casting long shadows over the cramped room. The sealed crates sit by the door, where she left them. Behind it, leading to the cargo bay, is a dark rust-red smear trailing along the floor. Blood.

Lirael watches as Neb kneels down, touching the dried stain with two fingers. His voice is low, steady, but tight.

“Lirael...what happened?”

“The captain tried to hurt me,” she says. Her throat closes. “So I killed him.”

Neb absorbs the information in silence. Then, very gently, he says, “Did he touch you?”

“He tried,” she says. “Didn’t get far.” She wipes her palms on her pants. “He wasn’t as strong as he thought.”

He lets out a small breath, but there’s something else behind his eyes. A deep kind of worry. He steps a little closer.

“Lirael...what happened to you? After Nal Hutta? I know you said you tell me later, but I’m asking now.”

She looks down at her boots. Her voice thins. “A lot.”

Neb waits.

She starts talking. Halting at first, then faster, like the words have been caged for years and finally found the cracks. She tells him about Harro. About the officer who found her on the freighter. About Korriban’s red sky and the Academy’s humming generators. About the training, the beatings, the weapons that vibrate in her hands, the nights on the ridge with Ire and Kariff. She doesn’t hide the violence. She doesn’t soften the details. She tells him about killing in the rings. About learning to fight. About the hum of the Force that never leaves her bones now.

Somewhere in the middle of it, she starts crying. Not loud, just tears falling silently, soaking into her shirt like rain. Neb doesn’t interrupt. He just lowers himself to the floor beside her, legs folded, back against a cooling pipe, and waits until her words falter. When she finally stops, exhausted, he reaches out and wraps his arms around her. He’s warm in a way she remembers, steady and safe.

After a long quiet moment, he says softly, “I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you.”

“You couldn’t have been,” she says into his shoulder.

“Still,” he murmurs. “You shouldn’t’ve had to face any of that alone.”

She wipes her nose with her sleeve. “I think I might be a bad person.”

Neb’s breath catches. He turns her face gently until she’s looking into his deep brown eyes. His voice drops to a trembling whisper.

“Lirael...you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. You hear me?”

She flinches, shakes her head. “I didn’t do anything.”

“You did,” he says gently. “Kid, I had *nothing* before you. You get that? Nothing. No family, no home, no one who cared if I lived or died. You were the first person who ever looked at me like I was more than just a pair of hands.”

Her breath breaks, and she leans forward into him, forehead pressing against his. Neb wraps both arms around her and pulls her close.

“Whatever you think you’ve become,” he murmurs, “I love you all the same. I’ve always loved you.”

They sit there a long time, floor cold beneath them, the quiet hum of Nar Shaddaa vibrating faintly through the metal. Eventually, Neb clears his throat, coughing into his sleeve again.

“You still want me fixing this baby up, right?”

She nods, wiping her eyes. “Yeah. As long as you want to.”

Neb smiles, warm and breaking. “I’m not going anywhere, little spark.”

By the time they lift off Nar Shaddaa, the freighter feels different. It still hums the same, still rattles in the starboard ventral pane, but Neb’s presence changes the air. He sits in the pilot’s chair, wearing the only spare clothing they have: the captain’s coat Lirael stole. It hangs differently on him, broader across the shoulders, falling to mid-thigh instead of dragging. But the thing is ridiculous: deep aquamarine silk with gold thread embroidery and a collar meant for someone who wanted to be noticed. Neb, with his dusty boots and rough hands and grease-stained nails, looks like he’s wearing a curtain.

It doesn’t suit him at all. He’s far too gruff, too quiet, too dull colored to belong anywhere near something so loud.

Lirael likes it on him anyway.

She sits strapped in the co-pilot’s seat, legs drawn up to her chest, watching him run preflight checks as if he did it yesterday.

“You remember all this?” she asks as he flips a switch. He gives her a soft snort.

“Kid, this is the easy part.” His fingers trail confidently across the worn control panel. “Old Corellian layout. They made all these girls the same. This one just smells better.” He coughs, sharp and rattling, then clears his throat. “Stars. Forgot what clean air tastes like.”

He settles deeper into the pilot’s chair, scanning the array with a practiced eye.

“All right, listen up,” he says, tapping the thruster calibration screen. “Port engine’s a hair slow. We’ll re-tune it on Sriluur. Fuel mix is stable. Hull integrity...eh, she’s seen worse.”

He points to a row of ancient toggle switches above their heads.

“These run half your essential systems: life support, stabilizers, heating coil. You know which one to flip if the cargo hold depressurizes?”

Lirael points at one, faking certainty. “This?”

“That’ll do the opposite,” Neb says dryly. “Don’t touch that one unless you’re trying to murder someone.”

“Oh.”

He softens, tapping the correct switch. “This one. Blue strip. Remember that.”

She nods, leaning closer. He moves to the communications panel next. “This is your outbound comms: hailing frequencies, emergency channels, traffic control. And this—” he flicks the receiver toggle. Nothing. No hum. No lights. He tries again. “Huh.”

“What?” Lirael asks.

“Receiver’s dead.” He taps the casing with a knuckle. “Can’t receive transmissions without that. We’ll have to get a new one on Sriluur.”

The engines finally spool to life. He rests his hand on the throttle, glances at her one more time. She gives him a nod.

Neb eases them up. The freighter shudders, growls, then punches into the sky in a jerking ascent that knocks a laugh out of her and a cough out of him.

Sriluur is dry, cracked, and honest the way desert worlds tend to be. The city they land in smells of hot sand and engine grease, which comforts Neb enough that he relaxes some of the tension in his shoulders.

They trade the medical crates first. The buyer, a gruff Weequay merchant missing his left eye, haggles them down with impressive speed. Neb tries to negotiate; Lirael watches in awe as he manages to twitch the price up by twenty credits before giving up.

It nets them far less than they hoped. Still, they leave the dock with enough to buy upgrades: an ancient replacement receiver, two junction regulators, and a coolant line kit. They install it with giddy excitement, until Neb starts going over the remaining credits and realizes they have about thirty credits to their names.

“Shit,” he mutters. Lirael blinks.

“What?”

“Food,” he says. “Kid, we forgot food.”

They look at each other, then at the empty fridge, then at the piles of engine parts they don't regret buying even a little.

"...We're idiots," Lirael whispers. Neb drops onto a crate, rubbing his face.

"Stars, I ain't managed my own money before. How the fuck we going to afford that?"

"We could hunt?" she suggests.

"We're in a city, Lirael."

"...steal?"

Neb gives her a look. She shrugs. "I'm good at it."

"Yeah, but that ain't how we're starting our first week free." He coughs again, deeper this time, then waves off her frown. "I'm fine."

They stumble through it: cheap ration bars, an overnight job cleaning filters in a coolant bay, and Lirael sneaking away to fix a stranger's repulsorlifts for a tip. By the end of the week, they scrape together enough for a proper restock and a real meal. Neb watches Lirael eat like he's seeing something sacred. She pretends not to notice.

After their second week on Sriluur, Neb brings up Eshte's advice. "She said Republic posts are where the clean work is. You know any Republic worlds we could try?"

Lirael hesitates only a moment. "Yeah," she says finally. "We could try Kashyyyk."

Neb nods. "To Kashyyyk, then."

The planet's canopy is a roaring ocean of green and gold when they descend; trees so massive their crowns vanish into the clouds. Humidity fogs the viewport. The old stabilizers whine as wind shears off the upper branches, buffeting the ship until Neb trumps the console twice and mutter, "Piece of shit," just before the landing struts slam into a rain-slick durasteel pad.

The air is thick enough to drink. Water drips off cables overhead. Republic banners – mud-stained reds, frayed golds – flutter limply over aid tents and half-assembled staging platforms built between the roots of trees big enough to swallow starships.

Lirael presses her face to the viewport. "It's... wet."

"Step outside the comfort zone," Neb says. "No time like the present to grow, eh?"

They find the Republic contractor easily: a tired human with armor at least two sizes too big, datapad dangling from his wrist like a dead limb. He looks them up and down like he can't decide if they're a godsend or a headache.

“Medical shipments to Rroshh Stead,” he says. “Two-fifty a run. Don’t crash, don’t steal the cargo. Bring it signed for.”

They take the job. They nearly lose a crate to the crosswind – Lirael forgets to latch a cargo net, and the container slides halfway out of the hold before Neb lunges and grabs it by sheer panic and instinct.

“Stars above, kid,” he gasps, shoving it back into place. “You trying to kill us on day one?”

She winces. “I forgot?”

“Well,” he says, tugging the net tight, “now you won’t.”

They deliver the shipment. Two hundred and fifty credits in their pocket feels like treasure.

The next day, another contractor flags them down. Then another. Soon they’re running water filters to flooded villages, relocating families to higher tree platforms, ferrying medics and supplies. Workers wave when they see Neb approach. Someone calls him “captain” once, and Lirael watches him glow for the rest of the day.

At checkpoints, Lirael starts to recognize faces. A Rodian who always grins at her. A Wookiee medic who smuggles her extra ration pouches. An overworked quartermaster who only trusts Neb to carry fragile shipments.

Between jobs, Neb spends hours under the floor grates with a hydrospanner in his teeth, quietly rewiring the ship. He installs a stabilizer bypass, patches a cracked conduit, reroutes the coolant lines. He coughs more often than he wants to admit.

“You sure you’re okay?” Lirael asks once.

“Fine,” he lies. “Ship’s just dusty.”

The ship becomes lived-in in a way it was never before. Tools scattered across the engine room like a metal nest. Lirael’s spare clothes stuffed into storage compartments. Neb’s old slave collar hanging beside the cockpit door. The galley always smells faintly of whatever Neb burned last.

At first, Lirael sleeps in the crew cabin two doors from Neb’s. The bed is too soft, the room too quiet. The shadows make her jump. She keeps the light on for weeks. Then, one night during a sandstorm over Nabat, the hull groans loud enough to jolt her upright. The wind slams against the plating in sharp, rattling bursts that sound too much like metal against bone. Her heart spikes. She throws her legs over the side of the bed before she has time to think.

Her feet carry her down the hall automatically, bare and silent on the cold floor. Neb's door is half-shut. She hesitates only long enough to take a breath, knocks once, and slips inside when she hears his "Hm?"

Neb's room is dim, lit only by the readout panel above his bunk. His silhouette shifts slightly when she enters.

"Lirael?" His voice is thick with sleep. She doesn't answer right away. Instead, she climbs into the upper bunk above his without asking, curling onto the mattress on her side, facing the wall. The blanket is scratchy but familiar. Safer than anything in the room she's been trying to make her own.

After a beat, Neb swings his legs over the edge of the bunk and stands, bracing one hand on the wall as the ship shudders again. The dim cabin lights catch the cracks in his skin as he places a hand on the ladder beside her mattress. He looks up at her, brow furrowed in sleepy concern.

"What happened? You okay?"

Her fingers tighten in the blanket. "I don't... I don't like sleeping alone."

"Is it the storm?"

"Not just the storm."

He considers her, voice lowering. "Nightmares?"

She hesitates. "Sometimes." A beat. "It's too quiet."

He nods once, then places a hand on the mattress beside her.

"You feel safer in here?" he asks.

She nods again, smaller this time.

"All right," he murmurs. "Then stay."

She loosens, just a bit. Enough that her voice comes out steadier when she adds, "If I wake you—"

He cuts her off with a soft laugh. "If anyone's waking anyone up tonight, it'll be me. Coughing's been killing my sleep."

Her fingers tighten around the blanket. "Does it hurt?"

He rubs absently at his sternum. "Nah, it's alright."

She peeks over the edge of the bunk at him. He looks exhausted, but steady, braced like he's trying to make himself a barrier between her and the galaxy outside the hull.

Neb clears his throat. “Listen, if I get too loud, just kick the bunkpost. I’ll get the hint.”

“Okay.”

Another gust rocks the ship. She flinches. Neb reaches up and touches the railing lightly; a grounding gesture more than anything.

“You get storms like this on Korriban?” he asks, voice quiet.

She swallows. “Not really. But noises. Shouting. Metal.” Her voice thins. “It feels the same.”

Neb nods slowly. “Yeah. I get it.”

That’s all he says. It’s enough. He eases himself back down into his bunk with a wince.

“Sleep well, little spark,” he murmurs.

She listens to the uneven rhythm of his breathing long after he falls asleep. It’s not perfect, not steady, not painless, but it’s familiar. It’s real. It’s someone else in the dark.

When her eyes finally close, they stay closed. And in the morning, she doesn’t move back.

Days fall into rhythm. Neb teaches her how to plot routes without thinking, to feel the difference between a coolant leak and a loose conduit by how the vibrations change under her boots. He lets her fly sometimes, corrects her hand placement gently, tapping her wrists when she banks too sharp.

She practices with her knife in one of the storage bays, running drills until sweat drips down her lekku until the blade feels like it used to. Neb buys her a blaster and they practice shooting cans off the cargo ramp. She’s terrible at it, but by the end of the year, she can clip the top off a metal tin at twenty meters.

They sit in the cockpit almost every night, knees bumping, watching the stars smear across the viewpanels. Neb talks more in the cockpit than anywhere else. She listens.

At first, their conversations are simple. “Route’s clear.”, “Stabilizer’s whining again.”, “Don’t land on pad seven. They overcharge.”

But the more runs they fly, the more credits they stash in a battered lockbox under Neb’s bunk, the easier the words come.

They’ve been drifting from job to job for months when the refueling station comes into view: just another dusty stop on the rim of Hutt space. Lirael thinks nothing of it. Neb curses the ship while docking as he always does.

He's mid-sentence about stabilizer drift when he stops short, staring at a battered Weequay skiff parked two births over. A few workers man the loading ramp, grey armbands around their biceps. Neb's breath leaves him in a soft, stunned whisper.

"Well," he murmurs, voice breaking around the edges. "I'll be damned."

Lirael follows his gaze as a one-eyed Weequay steps down the ramp with a crate. He glances over and freezes. The crate thuds to the ground.

"Niebia?" Harro barks. Then, loud and delighted, "Niebia, you stubborn rat, I thought you were dead!"

Neb huffs a laugh that shakes in his chest before he even moves. When they reach each other, the embrace they crash into is half handshake, half collision. Harro thumps his back like he's trying to knock loose all the years between them. Neb wheezes and laughs at the same time, the sound breaking apart into a rough cough he tries and fails to swallow.

Harro pulls back first, gripping Neb's shoulders as if to check he's real. His single eye flicks over Neb's ridiculous coat, the ship behind him, the lack of a collar, and confusion deepens the canyon lines in his face.

"What the hell are you doing out here?" he asks. "Who're you working under? Desilijic? Shiosk?"

Neb barks a laugh so sharp it startles Lirael. "Working under? Harro, I – stars, no. I got free."

Harro goes still. His eye narrows. "Free?" he asks quietly, like the word might be a trick. "Don't joke with me, Neb. You were chained deeper than the rest of us. Last I saw you, Khasa said he'd—"

"I know what he said," Neb cuts in, softer. "He didn't have the guts to do more than threaten me." His hand finds Lirael's shoulder. "This one got me out."

Harro looks at her. "You?" he asks, baffled.

"She did," Neb says simply.

Lirael shifts, unsure what to do with Harro's stare. He shakes his head and laughs under his breath, a disbelieving, relieved sound. "Suns below, Neb, you always did fall in with the impossible ones."

A few workers on the ramp have turned to look. One mutters something in Sriluurian, low and stunned. Harro waves them back to work, but he can't stop staring at Neb like he's afraid blinking will make him vanish.

“Come on,” he says finally, gesturing to the skiff. “Tell me everything. I owe you a drink, anyway.”

Neb snorts. “You owe me more than a single drink.”

They follow Harro to his ship, and the two men fall into talk so effortlessly Lirael wonders if the intervening years ever truly happened. The stories come in bursts: names Lirael doesn’t know, places that sound more like word vomit than worlds.

“...remember the Kintari freighter?” Harro says. “Eoga shoved us into that reactor crawlspace for hours.”

Neb groans. “Stars, that pipe was hotter than Mustafar’s armpit. I still got scars on my elbows from that.”

“You got stuck,” Harro reminds him, smug. “Had to yank you out by your ankles.”

“You yanked me into a live conduit!” Neb shoots back. “I saw my whole life flash.”

Harro smirks. “You cried.

Neb points a finger at him. “You would’a, if it had been you! You’ve cried over less!” The protest ends in a cough; he presses his knuckles to his mouth, waving off Harro’s quick, worried glace. A few of Harro’s crew poke their heads out of a side compartment, drawn by the noise. Someone calls out a greeting, another gestures them toward the galley with a ladle. Neb welcomes Lirael forward with a tilt of his head.

“Come on, spark,” he murmurs, and when she sits beside him on a low bench, he lets her lean her head against his shoulder like it’s the most natural thing in the world. He smells like solvent, old leather, and a warmth she’s come to trust. The crew moves around them in practiced motions; pots clattering, bowls handed down a line of outstretched arms, steam fogging the cold spots on the walls. A lantern hums above them, throwing soft golden light over tired faces and scarred hands.

By the time they’re all gathered – Harro opposite her, Neb beside her, the Weequay settling into a loose circle of elbows and easy grunts – the conversation has cooled into something gentler. A stew is ladled into mismatched bowls, and the din fades into the soft clatter of spoons and the shifting of boots against deck plating.

Lirael watches them. Harro steals Neb’s bread roll without breaking eye contact. Neb shoves him in retaliation, someone cheers in Sriluurian. It feels like stepping into a performance midway through the act.

Finally, when the lantern flickers and the warmth of Neb’s shoulder steadies her enough to speak, she asks quietly, “How do you two know each other?”

Both men pause mid-bite. Neb glances at Harro. Harro lifts a brow as if to say, “*You tell it.*”, but Neb shakes his head. Eventually, Harro sighs and leans back against a crate.

“How do we know each other?” he repeats, picking at a charred chunk of meat. “Long story. Long damn life.”

Neb snorts. “Short version? We got sold in a bundle more times than I can count.”

Harro nods. “Same masters, same ships. Same whip when we pissed someone off.”

“And,” Neb adds, “Same overseers who thought we made a good pair for engine work.”

Harro lifts his bowl in a kind of toast. “He was wrong. We were terrible. Nearly blew up a cargo bay once.”

Neb wipes broth from his chin. “You welded your sleeve to the coolant relay.”

“You sneezed on me while I was holding a live wire!”

Lirael blinks. “That doesn’t explain how you... ended here.”

The laughter fades just slightly. Harro rubs the space above his empty eye socket.

“We got split up in a Besadii sale. Good price for a matched set, but better for selling us off singly.” He shrugs. “Didn’t see him again. Figured he’d died under some cruel bastard before the cycle was out.”

Neb mutters, “Nearly did.”

A few weeks pass, and Neb and Harro fall into a rhythm so natural it feels older than the stars: comm chatter in the mornings, engine diagnostics shared over crackling static, arguments about coil pressure that sound more like old men competing for sport than genuine disagreement. Neb’s voice comes over the line rougher some days than others, punctuated by the occasional muted cough. Harro never asks them to join his convoy outright, but they end up working with him anyways. One day Neb is helping weld a panel on Harro’s skiff, the next, Harro’s second in command is showing Lirael how to calibrate the navicomputer. By the end of the week, their freighter is flying in formation beside the Weequay skiff like it’s always belonged there.

The first time Harro’s crew gathers in a loose circle on a moonless outpost, they gesture Neb forward with murmurs of respect, shifting automatically to give him the seat at the head of the ring. A long-necked stringed hallikset is pressed into his hands before anyone else even reaches for an instrument. Neb pretends not to notice the honor, but his jaw softens. He flexes his fingers once, working out a stiffness in his knuckles, then settles the instrument in his lap with a small, tired sigh.

When he begins to play, the others tune themselves around him. Harro takes up the drum, tapping an easy rhythm that Lirael finds herself matching with the beat of her foot. She sits just outside the circle until Harro pulls her in by the elbow.

“Sit,” he mutters. She blushes.

The song they play is slow, aching, sung in long, winding Sriluurian phrases she can’t yet follow. Neb sings the lead: low, rough, carrying steady as an engine hum. Lirael feels the shape of the song before she understands a word of it. She wants, so fiercely, to know it.

Over the passing weeks, that wanting only sharpens. Lirael spends hours in Harro’s maintenance bay, grease on her fingers, his crew moving around her in easy, practiced lines.

“When you’re done pretending that bolt’s too tight,” he calls across a maintenance bay one afternoon, “you wanna hand me the right wrench?”

Lirael doesn’t look up. “If you don’t have the right wrench, stop trying to unscrew your bolts! You’ll strip the screws.”

A couple other Weequay snicker. One of them throws a comment in Sriluurian that makes the others bark with laughter. Lirael does too, because Harro does, but the words they used mean nothing to her.

Neb groans, getting up to hand Harro the wrench. “You two are going to kill me,” he complains. Harro grins over the top of the panel.

“Not before we fix these stabilizers, we’re not.”

Their bickering becomes a fixture: Harro barks instructions that Lirael makes fun of, all the while Neb mutters about how they’re going to drive him crazy. On good days, it feels natural, like she’s slipped into a role Harro had ready for her from the start. On bad ones, when she walks into a room and the Sriluurian conversation dips for half a heartbeat before picking up again, she feels every inch of her skin like it’s the wrong color.

At meals, they make room for her. She finds a bowl already waiting by Neb’s elbow, an extra ladleful of stew dumped in without comment. Harro’s second, a broad-shouldered woman with fading cheek tattoos, starts teaching her words between bites.

“That’s *nakh*,” she says once night, nodding toward the steaming pot. “Food.” She taps Lirael’s shoulder with her spoon. “You’re *shiraah*”.

“Friend?” Lirael guesses. The woman snorts.

“Clumsy. You’re *shiraah* when you keep dropping tools.”

The table laughs. Lirael does, too, cheeks hot, and repeats the words until her tongue remembers them. Later, laying on her bunk, she mouths them again and can't shake the unfamiliarity they bring.

Little things pile up. On a crowded dock, Harro is hailed in Sriluurian by an old Weequay with wind-burned skin. They clasp forearms, talking too fast for Lirael to catch any words. She stands just behind Neb, trying to listen. The stranger's gaze snags on her lekku. His expression doesn't change, but his next words are quieter.

Neb's jaw tightens. Harro's smile gets thinner. Their conversation finishes quickly after that. When they walk away, Lirael asks, "What did he say?"

"Nothing," Harrow answers at the same time Neb says, "Doesn't matter."

They share a look she can't discern. Her chest aches with something she cannot name.

She keeps trying. She learns which jokes land and which don't. She learns how far she can lean into Harro's shoulder before he starts grumbling about 'space-hungry children' and shoves her off with a smirk. She learns that Neb always gets served first without asking, that no one takes an instrument until his fingers touch strings, that the crew's jokes in Sriluurian get just a little louder when Lirael is laughing, too, like they're trying to carry her along even if she can't follow the current.

It helps. It hurts.

The second month traveling with Harro, she knows half a dozen Sriluurian words, three different ways to insult someone's ship, and that she will never quite move like they do: loose and grounded and rooted in a history that sings in their bones. She wishes she could, anyway.

That night they gather to play. Neb sings the same slow, aching song, the one that coils through her chest like a memory she's never lived. She knows the melody, can feel when his voice lifts and drops, but the words slip past her like water.

When the song ends and the night settles quiet around them, she leans toward Neb and whispers, "What does the song mean? The first one you sang."

Neb hesitates, rubbing a thumb along the hallikset's worn neck. "You really want to know? Sriluurian's not a pretty language, spark. It's all hard edges and old grief."

"Yes," she says a little too quickly.

Harro snorts. "Translate away, old man. You've been smug about your accent all evening."

Neb elbows him, then clears his throat and recites softly, shaping the lyrics in Basic as he remembers them.

“Chains took me from the cliffs of thunder, sold my breath to a stranger’s skies. They set my future on a barren road, but they cannot own where I will lie.”

He pauses, searching her face. “It’s an old song. Older than most of us. One of the few things we pass down.

“What about the part everyone sings with you?”

Neb hums the melody under his breath, then murmurs, “Take me home, when the dust winds call me, take me home, when the suns sink low...”

“I was born where the waves meet the desert, and the desert is waiting for my bones,” Harro finishes quietly, filling in the next line without being asked. Neb gives him a look and he shrugs, unapologetic. Lirael tries the Sriluurian words on her tongue. They tangle. Harro snorts.

“You’re mauling it,” he says. “Say the vowel or don’t bother.”

Neb waves him off. “Let her learn her own way.”

Lirael squares her shoulders. “I want to learn all of it.”

Neb chuckles like she’s joking. “No, you don’t. Sriluurian’s a mess of conjugations. It’ll twist your tongue in knots. Learn Huttese if you want something useful. Or Ryl – you should know your people’s language.”

Harro nods, tapping his fingers absent-mindedly on his drums. “Ryl’ll serve you better. That one’s worth the trouble.”

“I don’t want Ryl,” she says.

Neb frowns. “Then Huttese. Or – hell – binary. Anything else.”

“I said I don’t want that.”

Harro raises a brow. “Not even your mother tongue? It’s your blood.”

Lirael’s fingers curl around her bowl. “I don’t care about blood.”

Neb softens his tone. “Spark... the galaxy already treats Twi’leks like—”

“I know what the galaxy treats us like!” Her voice cracks sharper than she intends, and the two Weequay go silent. Harro sets his drum aside. Neb’s brows lift, concern prickling through irritation. She swallow hard, pulse pounding.

“I know what I am. I know what I look like. I know I’m not—” her throat tightens “—I’m not one of you.”

Harro opens his mouth, but she doesn’t give him the chance; words heat in her chest faster than she can control them.

“I know you only let me stay because of Neb. Everyone stares at me when I want into a room. I’ll never sing right or sound right or look like I belong next to you.”

Silence cracks open around them. Neb clears his throat. He huffs a deep breath, stands, and then places a hand on Lirael’s shoulder.

“Walk with me, spark.”

The aggression in her chest dives into anxiety as she stands slowly. He jerks his head toward their ship, into the cooler night air. She follows him to the ramp, where he stops to lean against a crate, crossing his arms.

“We’re going to split next cycle,” he says gently. She freezes.

“What? Why?”

Neb scratches at his jaw, eyes tracking the dark horizon beyond the landing pads. “Harro’s run takes them coreward. Past Trandosha, maybe further. Good work, but not where we need to be.”

Lirael swallows. “Where do we need to be?”

“Ryloth.”

Her breath stutters. “Why?”

He huffs out a slow breath, the kind he uses when he’s about to say something she doesn’t want to hear. “Because you’re Twi’lek, spark. Whether you like it or not. And you don’t know a damn thing about your people except what the Empire carved into you and what the Hutts profit from.”

“Neb—”

He holds up a hand. “Listen. You asked to learn Sriluurian. Fine. I’ll teach you every word I know. But you deserve to know what it feels like to walk on a world that looks like you. To hear people speak words shaped for your tongue. To not be the odd one out every time you enter a room.”

Her voice goes small. “I’m happy here.”

“I know.”

“We could come back,” she tries.

“We will.” He doesn’t even hesitate. “Harro owes me three drinks and a replacement wrench. I’m not dying before I collect.”

She lets out something halfway between a laugh and a strangled groan. Neb unfolds his arms, reaches out, and pulls her into him. One hand cups the back of her head, fingers sliding around the base of a lek with a care that makes her throat ache.

“Sriluur’s yours if you want it,” he murmurs into her forehead. “But don’t make it your only inheritance. Don’t starve yourself of places you belong.”

She sags against him, defeated. “Will it be long?”

“A few cycles. Enough to work, learn, meet people who aren’t me. Then we’ll see Harro again and you can butcher Sriluurian in front of him as much as you like.” He brushes her cheek with his thumb. “Let’s get some sleep. We’ve got a long flight to plan.”

Neb is true to his word. The next morning, after cargo is squared away and the crews have finished their first cups of terrible caf, he corners Harro by the fuel lines.

“We’re splitting off tomorrow,” he says like he’s talking about weather. Harro’s head snaps up.

“The hell you are.”

Lirael watches from the base of the ramp, arms folded, feeling like a child; ten steps behind whatever the adults are doing.

Neb shrugs. “Picked up a line of work that takes us in a different direction.”

Harro snorts, disbelieving. “From who? I see the same dispatches you do.”

“Private contract,” Neb lies easily. “Short haul. Good pay.”

“Where?”

“Ryloth.”

The name lands heavy. Harro glances at Lirael, then back at Neb. “You sure ‘bout that?”

Neb’s jaw tightens. “Yeah.”

Harro blows out a breath, raking a hand over his scalp. “You’re ditching me for a bunch of canyon brats?”

“You’ll manage,” Neb says. “You’ve got four pilots who think they’re better than me anyway.”

“That’s because they are,” Harro snaps back on reflex, then immediately looks betrayed by his own mouth. “I mean, they’re... adequate.”

Lirael almost laughs. Harro notices and pounces. “This is stupid. You’ve got work here. You’ve got family here.”

Neb glances at Lirael, then away. “She’s got family she hasn’t met yet. That matters.”

Harro swears under his breath in Sriluurian, something sharp and helpless. “She’s got us.”

“She still will,” Neb says. “We’re not ditching, Harro. We’re just... detouring.”

Harro throws his hands up. “Detouring! To a war-torn Hutt chewed rock with knife-winds and slavers in every canyon. Grand idea, Niebia!”

“We won’t be any more in Hutt space than Sriluur is,” Neb counters. “Republic’s got footholds in Lessu. There’s work. And Lirael’s people.”

His tone on the last sentence leaves no room for argument. Harro feels it. His shoulders drop.

“You’ve already decided.”

“Yeah.”

Harro stands there a moment, breathing hard, then jabs a finger into Neb’s chest.

“If you don’t come back, I’m hunting your ghost. You hear me? I will drag your miserable spirit off whatever dune it’s sulking on and make it fix my coils.”

Neb grins crookedly. “You’ll miss me that much?”

“I’ll miss the cheap labor,” Harro grumbles.

That night, they sing like they’re trying to bottle the sound. Neb sits in his usual place at the head of the circle. Harro hands him the hallikset without being asked. Lirael sings the chorus in Sriluurian with only two mistakes, and the crew roars approval loud enough to scare off whatever small creatures live in the dunes nearby. After the last song fades and people start drifting off to their bunks, Neb clears his throat.

“I’m taking the string,” he says to Harro, nodding at the hallikset. Harro hugs the instrument to his chest.

“Absolutely not. This is my ship, my—”

Neb just looks at him. Harro holds the stare for all of three seconds before he caves with a theatrical groan. “Fine. Take it. Thief.”

He shoves the instrument into Neb’s hands. The old man’s fingers run over the worn wood like he’s greeting an old friend.

“We’ll bring it back.”

“You better.” Harro’s voice is rougher than the words warrant. He turns abruptly to Lirael. “And you! Try not to get eaten by a rancor, yeah? Or whatever beasts they keep on that dust ball.”

“I’ll do my best,” she says. Harro hesitates, then pulls her into a one-armed hug that nearly knocks the air out of her.

“Don’t let him skip meals,” he mutters. “He lies about how much he eats.”

“I heard that,” Neb calls.

“You were supposed to,” Harro shoots back, letting her go.

They part on a crowded refueling pad at dawn, hulls gleaming faintly in the low light. The skiff lifts first, engines whining, Harro’s voice crackling over the comm with a string of insults that sound suspiciously like compliments. Then, it’s just their freighter, rising toward a stretch of stars that leads toward Ryloth.

It takes nearly two months of hopscotching through indifferent space to get there. They take short-haul work along the way: cargo moon bases, relay parts to Republic outposts, one terrible job involving *nuna* birds that Neb swears never to repeat. At night, in their narrow bunkroom, Lirael practices Sriluurian and the scraps of Ryl Neb remembers from overhearing conversations on Nar Shaddaa. His cough worsens in the dry air; she leaves syrups and teas on the galley counter like offerings. He complains about all of them and drinks them anyway.

When they finally touch down in Lessu, both of them step off the ramp like they’ve walked into another galaxy entirely.

The air is sharp with heat and spice so thick it feels like its own storm. Twi’leks move everywhere: traders hauling crates on their shoulders, children darting under scaffolds, aid workers shouting instructions over the hum of lift engines. Lekku in every shade of the spectrum flick and curl as people speak a rapid mix of Ryl and accented Basic.

Lirael freezes three meters from the ship. Neb runs into her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“Move, spark. We’re blockin’ traffic.”

But she doesn’t hear him, not really. She’s too busy staring. At faces shaped like hers. Skin tones like hers. Lekku like hers, but decorated, painted, wrapped in cloth or left loose to sway with every step.

A Twi’lek woman nearly runs into her before stopping short. “Watch your – oh!” Her eyes widen, taking in Lirael’s stunned expression. “Sister, you new here?”

Lirael's throat bobbles around the only word she can remember: "Yeah." The woman beams at her.

"Welcome. You lost?"

"Yes," Neb answers honestly. "Very."

She laughs and gestures them aside before a droid cart takes Neb's ankles off. "Aid crews are up that ramp. If you're here to work, they'll put you somewhere useful."

The aid crew does exactly that. Within ten minutes, someone has shoved a datapad into Neb's hands and a crate marker into Lirael's. Their questions about pay are waved off with, "We'll sort it out after shift – go, go, the medpacks need loading!"

They fly their first aid delivery by sundown, to a village carved into one of Ryloth's narrow plateau shelves, a cluster of stone dwellings built close enough that shade covers every walkway. The villagers greet them like friends, not strangers. Children swarm the ship before Neb even lowers the ramp. One small boy points at a scar on Lirael's lekku and proudly announces something in Ryl. She stammers out a, "thank you?" in Basic before he runs off, laughing.

"You from offworld?" an elder asks her in Basic as she unloads supplies.

"Yeah," she says. "Nar Shaddaa." The elder nods, flicking one of her lekku to the side as she does.

"Welcome home, then."

They end up staying. When they bring the second shipment, half the village cheers, and one of the aid workers tells Neb, "You're good hands. Stay awhile, distribute with us."

Neb mutters about schedules and fuel and unreasonable people, but he doesn't say no. They lock down the landing struts of their ship just outside the village, near enough to a cliffside that anxiety creeps through Lirael's mind her first few days there. For weeks, they wake with the sun and work until dusk, handing out medical kits, assembling shade awnings, hauling water tanks with the rest of the village.

Lirael thrives like a plant finally given light. She learns the names of the village first: Temra with the red-check cloth around her lekku; Biva, who teaches her to wrap a headscarf so it won't slip in the wind; Gorlan, who insists she tries every spice blend he owns, and a gaggle of children who claim her by sheer gravitational force. She learns a dozen Ryl words in the first week. Two dozen in the second. By week three, she can follow half a conversation if people talk slowly enough.

Every day, someone drags her into something. Preparing flatbread, learning old dances on shaded platforms, painting little dots across her lekku in local patterns, singing work songs with call-and-response she stumbles through but refuses to quit. And every time she laughs, every time she gets a step right or understands a phrase on the first try, Neb watches her with a look that softens his whole face.

He's everywhere and nowhere at once – fixing machinery, lifting crates, coughing into his sleeve when he thinks no one can see – but the villagers quickly fold him in, too. He pretends to hate the attention, but he accepts every meal and every slap on the back.

Still, the nights belong to them alone. The village sleeps early, shutters drawn against the rising winds, lamps dimmed to embers. On those evenings, when the air cools enough to breathe without tasting dust, Neb settles himself in the galley of their ship and pulls the hallikset into his lap without ceremony.

The first time he does it, Lirael pauses in the doorway.

“I didn’t know you were going to play,” she says quietly. He shrugs, plucking a soft, wandering test chord.

“Didn’t know either. Hands got ideas of their own tonight.” He tips his chin to the seat next to him. “Sit with me? ‘s better with company.”

She sits.

He begins with an easy melody, one of the working songs he used to hum absent-mindedly on Venn’s ship. Lirael sings along, nervously, slightly off-key. He smiles into the strings.

“Not bad,” he murmurs gently. “Keep going. It’ll settle in your throat sooner or later.”

Over weeks, she improves like a river wearing down stone. One night, after a long, meandering song that she managed to follow nearly the whole way through, Neb rests the hallikset across his knees and studies her for a long moment.

“You know,” he says, voice calm as the dimming light, “you’ve got the start of a leading voice.”

She chokes on her breath. “Me? Neb, I can’t – I don’t –”

He holds up a hand.

“Easy. I said ‘start.’ Leading’s not something you chase. It’s something that finds you when you’re ready.” He hesitates. A small cough catches in his throat. “Sides, singing’s getting harder on me these days. Might be time someone else took the first line once in a while.”

She stiffens. “Neb –”

He shakes his head gently. “Don’t worry. I’m not dying on you.” A wry smile. “Harro would never forgive me.”

“I’m not ready.”

Neb plucks a low, warm chord. “Then let’s practice until you are.”

He doesn’t push. And two nights, later, she whispers, “Okay. I’ll try.”

“Whenever you’re ready, spark.”

Her first attempt shakes. The second breaks. The third, something in her voice holds true, and Neb’s harmony joins her like a quiet hand at her back. When she finishes the verse, he exhales softly.

“There,” he murmurs. “Told you it would come.”

A few nights later, while Lirael helps an elder stack crates near the communal fire pit, a group of girls call her over with warm, beckoning hands.

“You and your father sing,” one says in heavily accented Basic. “We hear you at night.”

Lirael flushes. “Oh – we’re just practicing. He’s teaching me.”

“You’re a good singer,” another woman adds. She waves a hand to the dining tables forming. “Bring him tonight! And the instrument. We want to dance!”

Lirael hesitates, startled. “He... doesn’t like to perform.”

They laugh softly, knowingly.

“Then ask him!” one says. “A daughter’s request has weight.”

When she returns to the ship, Neb is in the crawspace under the floor, fixing a cracked panel. She sits beside him, picking a loose thread on her sleeve.

“Neb?” she says carefully. “Would you... maybe... bring the hallikset to dinner tonight?”

He freezes mid-turn of his wrench. “Dinner?”

“Yeah.”

“With people watching?”

“That’s usually what dinner means,” she says.

He groans softly, rubbing a hand over his face. “Spark, I’m not – I cough through half the lines. And they’ve got their own traditions here. Don’t need some off-world Weequay shaking dust over their meal.”

“It wasn’t my idea,” she says gently. “The village asked. They’ve heard us practicing.”

“They… asked?”

She nods. He looks away, swallowing something thick in his throat.

“Stars. They’re braver than I am.”

“Neb,” she says softly, leaning over to touch his wrist, “they want you there.”

He takes a deep breath, placing a palm over her hand.

“Alright,” he murmurs. “Alright, spark. We’ll try.”

The reaction is immediate the moment they arrive. Villagers cheer softly when they see the hallikset tucked under Neb’s arm. Children scramble for a better view. Someone drags a stone for him to sit on, and an elder offers him a woven cloth to place across his knees.

Neb sits like a man walking into a fire. When he lifts the hallikset and strums the first low, wandering chord, the courtyard hushes. Lirael stands beside him until he nods for her to join, and she slips into the melody with a steadiness neither of them expected. Their voices braid together: Neb’s rough-edged and warm, hers bright and trembling at the start but growing bolder as the song unfolds.

The three women who had nudged her earlier exchange glances, then one of them stands. With a soft woosh she steps into the open space near the fire and begins a loose, twirling step that sets her lekku swaying behind her. The others join immediately, stamping their heels in counter-rhythm. A green-skinned woman claps sharply, coaxing the beat from Neb’s motif.

Laughter ripples through the courtyard. As others rise to join the dance, the three turn to Lirael. They all smile, bright and conspiratorial. One beckons with both hands.

“Come!”

Lirael’s heart jumps into her throat. She shakes her head, mouthing *No, I can’t* –

One of them steps forward, grabbing her wrists gently, and tugs. “Come,” she repeats in accented basic. “Sister, come!”

The green-skinned woman circles behind her and nudges her forward with a laugh. “If you can sing, you can dance.”

Lirael stumbles into the circle. The movement swallows her. Rhythm thumping under her feet, scarves whirling around her shoulders. The women guide her arms, her steps, the tilt of her hips, each correction light as breath. Neb plays them through it, fingers steady even as his chest shakes with a quiet, stifled cough.

For a heartbeat, Lirael forgets herself – her offworld accent, her awkward steps, her fear that she doesn't belong – and moves the way they move: imperfect and joyful.

Neb's eyes shine in the firelight, warm and unspeakably proud. They dance until his fingers ache and the hallikset strings hum with dust and sweat. By the time they retreat to their ship, both of them smell of spice and campfire smoke.

“They liked you,” Lirael says softly as Neb sets the hallikset down by a crate. He clears his throat, flustered.

“They liked the music.”

“They liked *you*.”

They stay longer than planned. Weeks stretch into months, long enough that Lirael's fifteenth birthday arrives with little ceremony, just a warm canyon morning and the smell of frying rootcakes from a nearby hearth. Neb remembers. He slides a small bundle across the galley table at breakfast: a length of soft cloth dyed a pale aquamarine, stitched clumsily at the edges.

“For your lekku,” he mutters, pretending to rummage in a drawer so he doesn't have to watch her open it. “Everyone here's wrapping theirs. Figured you'd want one that isn't falling apart.”

Her throat tightens. “Thanks.” He waves her off, embarrassed.

“Just don't rip it your first day out. Took me thirty minutes to thread that damn needle.”

The village women coo when they see it. One adjusts the knot with deft hands and says, “Now you look like a local.”

But Neb's cough starts getting worse as the weather turns toward summer. The dry air scrapes at his lungs, the dust clings to everything. Some mornings he moves slow enough that Lirael pretends she isn't watching him struggle to straighten. When she asks if he's alright, he always says the same thing:

“Just dust, spark. Rylloth's full of it.”

But dust alone shouldn't leave him breathless walking up and down the ship ramp. And it becomes evident he can't stay.

They leave just before the next shipment rotation. The village gathers at the landing pad to see them off. They press packets of dried fruit into Lirael's hands, one hands her a string of beads for her overhead. Neb receives his own share of fussing: jars of herbal syrups, a shawl thrust onto his shoulders, warnings about keeping warm and avoiding desert worlds. He

grumbles, but doesn't refuse any of it. As they climb up the ramp, one of the girls calls, "Come back! Bring your father again!"

Lirael smiles. "I will!"

Neb coughs hard enough he has to brace a hand on the bulkhead. The cough echoes in her skull long after the ramp seals shut.

They mean to head straight for Harro. They really do. Lirael programs the skiff's last known coordinates into the navicomputer. Neb mutters something about Harro probably still using the same ancient transponder codes he stole years ago. They talk about seeing the crew again, about singing together, about showing how much better she is as Sriluurian vowels.

But the galaxy doesn't care about their plans. Two days out from Ryloth, Neb picks up a contract for emergency relief transport on Serenno. Then a courier run on Onderon, then a mechanic's call from a drifting freighter near the Hydian Way. Work becomes a tide, sweeping them from system to system before Lirael can pull them back to Harro's coordinates.

She keeps telling herself it's temporary – just one run, then they'll go back – but Neb grows worse as the weeks pass. At first it's just his cough, sharp but familiar, then one morning she hears something different in it. A wet, thick, low rattle like rust sliding through pipes. The Force slams her with a shimmer of fractured light beneath his ribs.

Each day, the cracks multiply. Sometimes she sees them without meaning to. While he leans over the engine, the Force pulls her vision inward, twisting light around the knot of pain hollowing his chest. Thin white fractures weave through his lungs, branching into places she doesn't have names for. His skin grows duller. His breath shortens. His complaints get quieter.

One night, while he sleeps, she reaches through the Force without thinking, and the inside of his body lights up in jagged constellations of pain. His ribs pulse with fractures, his lungs flicker with blackened pressure, his blood glows in places where it should flow smoothly, sluggish and thick around the edges like syrup. And the Force hums a single truth into her bones:

*This will kill him.*

She jerks back so hard she nearly hits her head on the doorframe. Neb stirs and mutters something incoherent. She bites her knuckles so she won't cry loud enough to wake him.

In the morning, she finds him in the pilot's seat, gripping an armrest so hard his knuckles blanch. His breath wheezes through something too narrow. The Force curls cold and certain in her belly.

"Neb," she says softly. "We don't have to take the next job."

He exhales without looking at her. "We do, kid."

“We don’t.”

“We need the credits.”

“We need you alive.”

He huffs a laugh, dry and papery at the edges, and pushes himself up from the seat, slow and stiff.

“C’mon,” he murmurs. “Let’s get the day started.”

He stops doing the heavy work first. He tires – stars, he tries – but when he bends to lift a crate, his breath snaps on a sharp edge of pain and he has to brace his hands on his knees until his vision steadies. Lirael pretends not to hover as she takes the load from him.

“I’ve got it,” she says.

“I can –” he starts.

He can’t. He knows it. She knows it.

“Let me,” she insists, and he lets go.

The next job, he doesn’t leave the ship. The one after that, he tries to help with the cargo clamps and nearly drops a thirty-pound case on his foot. After that, he doesn’t argue when Lirael says, “I’ll handle it.”

Instead of working in the engine room, he sits in the copilot’s chair – her old seat – watching her flip switches she used to fumble.

“You fly cleaner than I do now,” he says one day, voice thin but proud.

She snorts. “You’re delirious.”

“Sure I am,” he murmurs, watching her key in the next departure vector. “You don’t need me to half of this anymore.”

“That’s not true,” she says. He smiles faintly and doesn’t argue. She hates that.

She starts to do everything for him: file job reports, negotiate rates, secure cargo, run diagnostic loops, talk to station brokers. He praises her gently for each task she picks up. And as she gains more control, she uses every scrap of it to try and pull them back toward the one thing Neb keeps pushing aside.

Harro.

She sends out pings to their old convoy frequency.

*We're coming.*

*We need to see you.*

*Please answer.*

Neb doesn't stop her. He watches her work with tired eyes, like he knows he should argue but can't find the strength.

"Harro'll chew me out," he murmurs one day, adjusting the cyan coat around his shoulders.

"Good," Lirael mutters. "You deserve it."

Neb chuckles. It dissolves into a fit of coughing that bends him over. When it finally subsides, he wipes his mouth with shaking fingers and leans back, spent.

"You're getting bossy in your old age," he whispers.

"I'm fifteen."

"Old," he repeats with a ghost of a grin.

One night, after a long haul between dust worlds, he pats the edge of his bunk. "Sit with me a sec."

She does, folding her legs under herself, shoulder brushing his.

"I know you know," he says, not looking at her. His voice is gentle, but not weak. "You've been knowing for a while."

Lirael swallows. Her throat tightens. "You don't have to—"

"Kid," he murmurs, shaking his head, "let me say it."

She nods, staring down at her hands. The hum of the engines fills the silence.

"I'm happy," Neb says after a moment. "More'n I ever figured I'd get to be. These last two years? Flying with you? That's more of a life than I ever thought was in the cards. I don't regret one damn second of it."

She wipes her eyes fast, trying not to sniff, but he notices.

"Hey," he murmurs, touching her arm. "Listen to me. When I'm gone – and I am goin', Lirael, we both know it – I want you to keep running. Don't you ever settle. Don't tie yourself down for anyone. Don't stop flying, you hear me? You're not meant to rust on some dock."

Her voice breaks. "Neb..."

“I mean it.” He squeezes her hand. “You keep running until the galaxy gets tired of tryin’ t catch you. And listen—”

He reaches up, brushing a tear off her cheek with his thumb. “Don’t be afraid of what you got in you. You’re blessed, spark. Trust it. Trust yourself. You don’t need me to steer you anymore.”

Her breath hitches. She stares at the floor so she won’t start crying again. “And when I go...” he clears his throat carefully, hiding the strain. “I want you to take me back to Sriluur.”

She nods without breathing. “I will.”

“I know you will,” he says, and his smile is soft enough to break something inside her.

The night it happens, she feels it before she wakes. The Force moves strangely around her, a sudden stillness, like a breath held too long; a presence unwinding. Lirael opens her eyes slowly, dread pulling her into consciousness. For a moment, she lies still, listening to the space around her. The ship hums in its usual way: circulators rattling, coolant lines hissing faintly, the low steady thrum of the power core. But one sound is missing: Neb’s breath.

It had become part of the ship long ago, a soft, uneven rhythm she tuned her sleep around: the catch in his inhale, the shallow exhale through parted lips, the cough he tried to smother into his pillow. Now the air feels empty, too clean, like it’s been stripped of something warm.

She climbs down from her bunk in silence.

Neb lies on his side, one hand dangling off the mattress, his face turned toward the wall. Peaceful. Like he had just laid down to rest and forgot to wake.

Lirael doesn’t touch him. Not at first. She kneels beside him, watching the shape of his shoulders, the stillness of his chest. She waits for the Force to tell her she’s wrong. It doesn’t.

So she lies down beside him – she barely fits in his arms anymore – tucking her forehead into the space between his shoulder blades. She breathes against the fabric of his undershirt. It smells like soap, dust, and engine grease.

Her tears come quietly. Her breath warms the space around his chest. She closes her eyes and lets the ache do what it must.

Time stops meaning anything.

Eventually, the tears shift into thin, shaky sobs with no strength to them. She cries until her head throbs and her chest feels scraped hollow, until she has nothing left to give except silence.

When she finally rises, her legs tremble. She wipes her face on the back of her wrist, swallows the last raw sting in her throat, and climbs into the cockpit. The Republic job waiting on the comm blinks at her. She shuts it off.

Her hands move on their own, rerouting their trajectory. The ship feels different – hollower, heavier – but it responds to her as it always has.

She keys in Harro's old convoy frequency. The line crackles, empty. She doesn't bother with explanations, just takes a deep breath and says, "Meet me on Sriluur, please. I... I need to bury him."

She ends the transmission before she starts to cry again.

No reply comes. Not that day, nor the next. Not during the long hours she spends sitting next to Neb's still form, wrapped carefully, blanket tucked under his chin.

The journey feels endless. The ship groans like it knows what she carries.

Sriluur rises beneath them in shades of red and gold, the desert winds scattering dust across the landing pad. Harro is already there. He stands near the landing struts with four of his old crew, arms crossed, jaw set hard enough to crack. When the ramp lowers, he stomps up it before she even steps out. His voice is rough iron.

"Where is he?"

Lirael steps aside so he can see the wrapped shape behind her.

His breath shudders. He drags a hand over his face, then presses the heel of his palm to his empty brow like he's holding something in place.

"Miserable old bastard," he whispers, voice cracking on the last word. "Went and died before I got to yell at him one last time."

Lirael's throat closes around the sound she makes. Harro pauses, then reaches out and pulls her into him, steady and grounding, hand firm between her shoulders.

"You did right," he murmurs. "Bringing him home."

His crew moves past them with the quiet kind of respect that requires no orders. They carry Neb's body down the ramp, slow and sure, like they're afraid he'll wake and complain they're doing it wrong. Harro keeps a hand on Lirael's shoulder as they cross the dry earth toward a low mesa with soft ground. The wind circles them, hushed.

Lirael stands beside Harro, numb and aching as his men begin to dig. She watches shovel blades bite into the soil. Watches the dust clinging to her boots.

She doesn't cry. She thinks she might never cry again.

When the grave is ready, Harro steps forward. He rests a broad hand on Neb's covered chest.

"Stupid old man," he whispers. "Should've stayed with me when you had the chance."

His breath trembles, just once. Then he nods to the crew, who lower Neb gently into the earth.

Harro begins to speak in Sriluurian, a slow, rhythmic chant she's never heard. The others join in, voices low and grounded. Lirael catches only fragments: *Return. Rest. Your shadows walk with us. Your breath is carried on the wind.*

She tries to repeat the lines under her breath. The vowels snag, the consonants scrape. Harro glances at her but doesn't correct her. He just keeps singing until the last word fades.

The crew covers the grave, dust scattering across the mound like a blanket. When the last shovel of earth is laid down and then men step back, the group lingers in a solemn hush. Harro mutters another short line in Sriluurian, something like "*Go with the storm,*" and his crew answers with a low, harmonized breath.

One by one, they drift away, giving Lirael space. Long after the others have stepped back toward their ships, she stands alone beside the mount. The sun hangs low, the red light catching on tiny pebbles in the soil.

In her hands, she holds the extravagant coat Neb wore for two years. Aquamarine silk, gold-threaded edges, ridiculous on him in every way. She smooths it once, presses it to her chest, then lays it over the fresh soil like a blanket.

"I'll keep flying," she whispers. "I promise."

The wind shifts, bushing her lekku with warm fingers.

When she turns to go, Harro is still nearby. Not close enough to intrude, but close enough that she knows he waited. He walks beside her in silence until they reach their ships. Only then does she slip inside her freighter and return carrying the hallikset.

Harro stiffens. She holds it out.

"You said you wanted it back," she says. He steps back.

"No. Keep it."

"I don't know how to play it."

"Then learn," he says, voice low and sharp. Then, softer, "Make the old man proud."

She cradles the instrument against her chest. It feels heavier than before, but steadier, too. Harro clears his throat.

“Lirael… you don’t have to go it alone. If you want… there’s room for you. With us.”

The offer hangs in the air. For a moment, she almost takes it. But the sky above Sriluur is wide and bright and waiting. So is Neb’s old pilot’s seat. And in her mind, she hears him, quiet and fond and so certain it hurts.

*You’re ready, spark. You just haven’t noticed it yet.*

It settles in her chest like a steady hand, and she knows that the next piece of her life isn’t meant to be flown in someone else’s shadow.

“I can’t,” she says gently.

He nods once, slowly.

“I better see you around, then,” he murmurs.

“Yeah,” she whispers. “You will.”

He reaches out and rests a hand briefly on her shoulder before stepping back toward his crew. Lirael climbs the ramp, hallikset pressed close, Neb’s coat left flowing softly over the grave behind her.

For weeks she doesn’t take jobs. She can’t sit in the cockpit without Neb’s slow, gravelly commentary beside her. The ship feels hollow, a larger echo of the silence she carries in her ribs. She sleeps curled on the bunk Neb used, talks to herself without meaning to, repeats his old sayings under her breath.

The Force feels different. Not louder. Deeper, maybe. Like losing Neb carved out a space she doesn’t yet know how to fill.

She keeps her promise, though. She flies. Sriluur to Ryloth. Ryloth to Coruscant. Coruscant to Outer Rim stations who still owe her favors from two years of runs. She keeps her head down, takes simple jobs: just enough to keep her stomach full.

Little by little, she finds her rhythm again. Her hands grow steadier. Her voice returns. Her smile resurfaces in private moments.

It takes three months before she opens the cockpit hatch one morning and feels something like herself again.

She checks the job boards. Most posting are for local runs. Easy. Boring. Then one catches her eye: aid shipments to Arkania, medical relief for the outer tundra settlements hammered by a winter storm.

A long run. Cold world. Dangerous weather patterns. Neb would've cautioned her, then signed up for it anyway. Lirael sits in his chair for a moment, breathing in the faint ghost of his presence the Force still remembers.

“All right,” she murmurs. “Arkania, then.”