

The comm goes dead mid-syllable. No static, no interference, just gone. Like someone cut the line with a knife.

Neryss doesn't swear, though several words come to mind. She exhales once, slow and steady, and turns the comm face-down on the table as if that will keep it from bleeding through into her thoughts.

That's it, then.

They're clear or they're not. There's no fixing it from here.

She closes her eyes for half a second to picture the route she drilled into Vashari until it lived in muscle memory. The timing, the turns, the blind spots. If they're past Sector 3 by now, they'll be ghosts.

Good.

She steps to the window. Nar Shaddaa sprawls beneath her, tier upon tier of light and shadow, traffic threading between towers like glowing veins. The building opposite is close enough she could jump it if she had to. Further down, far below, the streets narrow into chutes of movement and noise. Nikto enforcers pour in from multiple directions, weapons already raised. More are flooding out of transports, fanning wide, sealing streets, locking exits.

And inside the building, they're coming up the stairs.

An indoor fight won't work. Too many choke points, too many weapons. They can pin her down easy and then peel off a force to chase the others.

Her jaw tightens. If she stays here, she can delay, but that's about it. They'll split their forces, send half after the ship, half to grind her down at their leisure.

She can't let that happen.

She takes another deep breath. Extends the Force just enough to feel the thudding of boots on the floors below her. She draws her vibroblade first and flips it once in her palm before clipping it into a reverse grip. The lightsaber comes second. Yellow ignites with a sharp snap-hiss, bright and unmistakable, washing the room in a harsh, industrial glow.

Vashari and Tarek need chaos. They need eyes pulled away. They need the Hutts to commit everything to her.

"Alright," she murmurs to no one. "Let's make some noise."

She plants a boot against the floor to brace, raises her saber hilt, and smashes the window. Transparisteel detonates outward in a screaming cascade, shards catching neon light as they rain down into the plaza below. Alarms erupt instantly, layered and shrill.

Every Nikto below snaps their head up. Weapons lift. Formations break. Neryss takes a step back, counts to three under her breath, and jumps.

Wind tears at her robes as she drops, yellow blade shining a vertical line of light through the smoggy haze. She hits hard, Force cushioning the worst of it, durasteel cracking beneath her boots as she lands dead center in their formation.

She comes up already moving. Yellow blade carves high and wide, impossible to ignore, while her vibroblade works low and close: tendons, joints, gaps armor can never fully protect. The first Nikto doesn't even finish shouting before his weapon comes apart in her saber's arc and the knife takes him behind the knee. He folds. She steps over him.

Blaster fire erupts, wild and panicked. She deflects it up and out, deliberately driving bolts into lighting rigs and exposed conduits. Sparks rain down. Smoke blooms thick and acrid. Alarms change pitch as systems fail.

The Hutts respond exactly the way she needs them to. Nikto shout over one another, collapsing inward as heavier units push through the confusion with charge nets and pikes raised. Someone barks orders in Huttese and the perimeter tightens around her.

Good. She thinks. Commit.

She drives into them, forcing as much proximity as possible. The knife disappears and reappears, wet and efficient, between ribs, under arms, hooking the bend of the knee. The saber follows, loud and industrial, carving through weapons, armor, and bodies that don't get out of the way fast enough. She Force-shoves a cluster of enforcers into a cargo hauler hard enough to cave the side in, then cuts down the ones still standing before they can recover.

Somewhere in the chaos, between the noise and the heat and the simple, brutal arithmetic of movement, she laughs. Restraint is a distant concept now, a silenced voice in the back of her head. She doesn't need to tally necessity and consequence anymore. She just needs to move.

A bolt clips her thigh. Her leg stutters. She compensates, pivots, takes another hit across the shoulder that turns her arm numb from elbow to wrist. She snarls and keeps moving, hurling another knot of enforcers back into a stack of crates hard enough to send them crashing down in a clatter of metal and bone.

The plaza lights flicker.

Someone fires a charge net. It snaps around her midair as she leaps, electricity biting deep. She twists, hurling her saber in a flat, vicious arc. It cleaves through two enforcers before embedding itself in a wall with a hiss of molten metal. She hits the ground hard, rolls through it on instinct alone, comes up on one knee already reaching.

They don't give her the chance.

Bolts slam into her back, her side, her shoulder in rapid succession. One catches her in the ribs and she feels something give, sharp and final. Another punches through her thigh. Pain detonates outward, white and absolute. Her body gives up the lie that it can keep going, and she collapses hard.

Smoke rolls over her. Alarms scream. Somewhere, someone says her name, but it's distant now, already irrelevant. And far above her, a ship breaches atmosphere, its engines a trail of light toward the stars.

The dark comes back in pieces. Not unconsciousness – she's been unconscious enough times to know the difference – but a shallow, half-lit awareness where time stretches thin and sensation leaks in without context. Pain is there like gravity pressing too hard on a body that hasn't earned the right to rest.

She tastes metal. Old blood.

Her eyes open eventually. Keeping them closed takes a patience she doesn't have.

Stone ceiling. Rough hewn, damp with condensation. The air is thick and sour, recycled badly enough that every breath feels borrowed. Her wrists are shackled above her head, arms stretched just enough to ache. Ankles locked to a floor ring. A heavy collar rests around her throat, faintly warm, humming with a low charge.

A shock collar. Manual trigger, if she had to guess. Old school.

She flexes her fingers experimentally. Finds a bolt on the mix-matched ceiling and twists it with her will, unscrewing it one row at a time. After a second, the collar snaps to life. Electricity rips through her neck and spine. Her muscles seize. She gasps despite herself, vision flashing white.

Behind her, someone laughs.

Neryss exhales once, shaky, and goes still again. Right. That's how they're playing it.

They've patched her up. Kolto residue itches beneath crude patches. A rib grinds unpleasantly when she breathes too deep. Her leg throbs where the bolt punched through muscle. She stares at the ceiling and silently curses whoever decided not to double-tap her, whatever asshole thought a Jedi prisoner was more worthwhile than a trophy. It would've been simpler if they had just decided to kill her; no chains to test, no time wasted enduring the slow stupidity of people who don't know when to stop.

Time blurs. She's fed. Hydrated. Given just enough kolto to keep organs cooperative. Someone cleans the blood from her face and leaves the rest. It's all very deliberate.

When they come for her, it's almost polite. Nikto guards unhook her chains and drag her upright. Her legs protest; one nearly buckles. They don't care. The collar crackles once, a warning spark that stops her reflexive flinch before it becomes movement.

She's hauled through steel corridors, past murals eroded into abstraction by centuries of humidity and neglect. She's walked these halls before with much nicer posture, a drink in her hand instead of restraints on her wrists.

The throne room opens wide and oppressive. Glowpanels throw uneven light across carved reliefs and piles of accumulated excess. And at the center, sprawled like a malignant god, Whoto the Hutt watches her approach with a lazy satisfaction, his bulk draped in enough silks and jewelry to fund a small war.

She's deposited at the foot of his dais. No one bothers to make her kneel; gravity and exhaustion handle it for them.

Whoto's laughter rolls out slow and wet, echoing off the durasteel.

"So," he drawls in Huttese, savoring every syllable, "the shadow shows her face at last."

Neryss lifts her head just enough to look at him. Her expression is flat. Unimpressed.

"Congratulations," she says hoarsely. "You caught me."

Whoto's eyes narrow in amusement. He shifts his bulk, chains sliding over one another with a wet clink.

"Aelis Patris," he says, almost fondly. "You wore that name well. I should be offended you didn't keep it longer."

Neryss huffs a breath that might've been a laugh if her throat wasn't so dry.

"It was getting old," she says. "Like you."

A Nikto behind her moves without waiting for instruction. A boot drives into her ribs, hard and practiced. The world lurches. She grits her teeth and absorbs it, breath hissing through them. Something twinges sharply where a fracture never quite set right.

Whoto raises a stubby hand. "Easy," he chides. "She's always been mouthy." He leans forward, eyes gleaming. "Tell me, *Aelis*, how long were you playing fixer?"

"A while," Neryss says.

Another blow. This one to her shoulder.

"A number," Whoto corrects mildly.

She swallows, adjusts. "Fourteen years."

“Mmm.” Whoto nods, pleased. “And your route? You moved a great deal of interesting cargo through my space.”

Neryss shifts her weight minutely, testing how much it hurts. “Outer Rim lanes mostly. Nothing worth telling.”

A pause. Whoto’s eyes flick to one of his enforcers and a shock cracks through the collar, enough to make her jaw clench and her vision stutter. Her hands curl reflexively against the restraints.

“Names,” Whoto says, still conversational. “Who helped you?”

She exhales through her nose. “Independent operatives. Desperate ones. People who don’t ask questions because they don’t want answers.”

The Nikto steps in again, boot driving into her gut this time. Pain blooms hot and sharp. She lets herself sag against the restraints until it passes, then straightens.

Whoto tsks softly. “You were always slippery. Even when you were useful.”

“I was always useful,” Neryss says. “You made money.”

Whoto laughs, delighted. “Ah, but I could have made more if you hadn’t been bleeding my assets out the back door.” His gaze sharpens. “Slaves don’t free themselves, Aelis. Someone had to be organizing it.”

Neryss lifts her chin. “You’re the one who let me operate. Sounds like a management problem.”

Another shock, longer this time. Her back arches involuntarily, a ragged sound tearing out of her throat before she can stop it. When it cuts off, she’s breathing hard, spots dancing at the edges of her vision.

One of Whoto’s attendants murmurs something in his ear. He waves them off.

“So,” he continues, “how many years were you planning to keep lying to me?”

“As long as you kept paying,” Neryss replies. “We had a deal.”

Whoto chuckles. “You stole from me.”

“I skimmed,” she corrects. “You didn’t miss it.”

A hand gesture. The Nikto grabs her lekku and yanks her head back, forcing her to look up at Whoto properly.

“Where did you send them?” he asks. “Those you freed.”

Neryss doesn’t hesitate. “Places you’ll never reach.”

Another blow, this time across her cheek. Her head snaps sideways. Blood tastes fresh on her tongue. Whoto sighs, disappointed.

“You see, this is the problem. You keep answering around the question.”

She spits blood to the side. “You don’t need names,” she says. “You just want revenge.”

Whoto leans back, considering. “Perhaps.” He studies her a long moment, then shrugs. “But revenge is expensive. Information is not.”

He gestures again. Two guards step in, fists and shock batons working over her in short, efficient bursts. She rides it out, counting breaths and clenching teeth. When it stops, she’s shaking, but upright. Whoto watches her with renewed interest.

“You disappoint me, Aelis,” he says. “I truly thought you liked me.”

She laughs then, a short, raw sound. “A compliment to my acting talents.”

That earns her another shock, brief and sharp. She hisses and stills.

Whoto’s tone shifts, turning almost indulgent. “But you are correct about one thing: killing you would be wasteful.” He leans forward. “You’re far more useful alive.”

Neryss lets her head tip back against the restraints, eyes half-lidded. There’s a bone-deep weariness settling in now. Of course she’s more useful alive. Of course he can’t just wash his hands of this ordeal and let them all rest.

“Is that all?” she asks. “Or are we still pretending this is a conversation?”

Whoto smiles wider. “One more matter.”

Something in his voice makes her focus sharpen despite herself.

“The Sith contacted me,” he continues casually. “Very polite. Very direct. They were very pleased with your... distraction. It helped them catch the boy.”

Her spine straightens despite herself. Her head snaps up. The fatigue doesn’t vanish, but it compresses into something sharp and cold behind her eyes.

“What,” she says, very carefully, “boy?”

“Kier,” Whoto clarifies, savoring it. “You hid him well. But a Weequay is a Weequay. Property, by birthright. By law.”

The room narrows. Sound dulls. Neryss’ pulse roars in her ears.

“What did you do with him?” she says, low and dangerous.

Whoto chuckles. “Sold him.”

Her restraints creak as she surges forward on instinct. “Where?”

The collar detonates. Agony rips through her nervous system, full power this time. She screams – she can’t help it – body convulsing as electricity hammers down her spine. When it finally cuts, she slumps, vision swimming, throat raw.

Whoto waits until she’s coherent again.

“I gave him to the Sith,” he says pleasantly. “Cheap too. Consider it revenge. They seemed eager.”

Her hands curl into fists despite the pain. “Which Sith?”

“What does it matter?” Whoto reclines, satisfied. “You should be grateful. Had I kept the boy, he would’ve worked the mines until his back snapped. The Sith will be more... creative.”

Neryss drags a breath. Then another. The world steadies; pain coagulates into something colder.

“You’re going to tell me exactly where they took him,” she says.

Whoto laughs, unbothered. “No.” He gestures lazily. “Take her away. I may yet find more uses for her.”

The guards haul her backward, the throne room doors grinding shut mid-laugh. Neryss closes her eyes, jaw set hard enough to ache.

Tarek’s alive, she thinks. Good. That means I still have time.

Her first escape attempt is careful. She waits. Watches. Learns the rhythm of the prison the way she’s learned a hundred hostile installations before. Shift changes, patrol overlaps, the subtle tells of bored guards, all the while she keeps her own head down and plays broken. Lets the collar buzz just enough to reinforce the illusion.

When she does move, it’s quiet.

A stolen tool, palmed during feeding. A loose panel she’s worried at for weeks. A maintenance corridor that smells like rust and rot and hasn’t seen real oversight in years. She slips free of her cell without triggering alarms and almost smiles when she makes it two levels up before a Nikto spots a shadow where there shouldn’t be one.

They dogpile her. She wakes chained tighter than before, collar recalibrated. A cracked rib re-broken for emphasis. She breathes through it and memorizes the mistakes.

Her second attempt is cleaner. She times it to a supply rotation, slips behind a pair of guards, disarms one without a sound and uses him as cover to knock the other unconscious. She

drags the bodies out of sight, takes a blaster she doesn't have time to use, and almost reaches an exterior access port before the lockdown slams around her.

Shock teams this time. She takes three of them down before the collar can subdue her. The pain drops her to her knees, screaming, muscles locking uselessly as boots crash into her ribs and spine.

Months pass. Her attempts blur together, marked only by escalation.

She stops trying not to be seen. Stops pulling punches.

On the fifth attempt, she kills her first guard; snaps his neck before the thought can catch up to the motion. She uses his body to block blaster fire long enough reach a junction she hasn't tested before.

She makes it farther that time. Far enough to feel recycled air shift, to smell a docking bay somewhere ahead. Then they corner her with nets and stun batons. Someone laughs while they beat her unconscious.

She wakes missing a tooth and with a new scar across her scalp. The collar hums louder now. Meaner.

Hopelessness presses in around the edges, thick and suffocating. She feels it in the long hours in suspension, in the way her body never quite finishes healing before it's damaged again. In the way the guards stop flinching around her and start anticipating her violence. But every time it threatens to settle, every time exhaustion whispers *this is pointless*, she remembers that the Sith have Tarek, and something hardens again.

By the twelfth attempt, it isn't really an escape so much as a declaration. She rips free during a transfer, Force-shoving one guard into another hard enough to pulp them both. She tears down a corridor in a storm of violence, alarms screaming, lights strobing red. She knows she won't make it out. She knows this one ends the same way.

She still tries. And they break her the same afterward.

When she wakes, she's barely breathing, pain threaded so deeply through her body it feels structural. A lump of flesh jostles before her, drenched in silk.

"You disappoint me," Whoto says conversationally.

She cracks a swollen eye open. "Get in line."

One of the guards lifts a baton. Whoto waves him down.

"Let her speak," he says. "It's been months since I've heard anything original from her."

He studies her, thick lips curling. "Twelve escape attempts. Thirteen if we count the one you just killed the guard and returned to your cell without incident."

She doesn't respond. Her throat is dry, anyways.

"I've been wondering," he continues. "why you persist. You know you won't succeed. You know the collar will stop you. And yet..." he chuckles. "... you keep trying."

Neryss opens both eyes fully. "You sold a child to the Sith."

Whoto beams. "Ah. There it is." He leans forward slightly. "I understand now. I've been too kind to you."

She laughs weakly. "You and I define that word very differently."

"Too much free time," Whoto agrees easily. "Left alone with your thoughts. Your guilt. Your hope." He clicks his tongue. "No wonder you keep gnawing at the bars."

He gestures, and the restraints release just enough to let her sag.

"So," Whoto says. "I've decided to put you to work."

"Doing what?"

Whoto's grin turns indulgent. "You fight well, even injured or restrained. My people talk." He spreads his hands. "It would be wasteful not to capitalize on that."

Understanding settles in slow and cold.

"You're serious?"

Whoto laughs. "Oh, yes." He tilts his head. "You'll fight in my pit. You'll entertain me until you are either trained enough or dead."

Neryss pulls against the restraints, just enough to make the collar crackle in warning. "I won't kill for you."

Whoto considers that, then shrugs. "You already have."

Silence stretches between them. Neryss breathes, slow and careful.

"You won't keep me forever."

Whoto chuckles. "No. Probably not." He gestures to the guards. "Prepare her."

As they drag her out, Whoto's voice follows down the corridor, rich with amusement.

"Rest while you can, Jedi. Tomorrow, you earn your keep."

They drag her through a different set of corridors, until the air smells less like rot and more like antiseptic and recycled ozone. Somewhere overhead, she can hear it: a low, distant roar that never quite resolves into words. The arena.

They strip her of the restraints piece by piece. Shackles off her wrists. Ankles. The moment her feet are free, the collar hums a warning note, sharp enough to stop her from testing it. For now.

They shove her into a holding cell and the door seals behind her. Not metal this time, but a forcefield that snaps into place with a faint shimmer. She can move freely inside it, pace, stretch, sit. There's no furniture, no fixtures, just a bare floor and walls worn smooth by other bodies waiting their turn.

They toss her clothes in after her.

"Put it on," someone says.

It's minimal, annoyingly so. A thin wrap that leaves her stomach exposed, fabric cut more for spectacle than decency. She stares at it for a long moment, jaw tightening, then pulls it on without ceremony. There's no point fighting that battle.

The forcefield hums softly as she moves, a constant reminder of its presence even when she's not touching it. She paces the perimeter, stretches her shoulders, rolls the stiffness out of her neck.

Footsteps approach. Different ones, not the heavy, bored tread of guards. A Weequay steps into view on the other side, pausing just short of the barrier. He's older than she expected. Worn in a soft way. Scar tissue maps his forearms. One eye is clouded, the implant around it outdated by decades. He carries a datapad in one hand and a pen in the other.

He looks at her. Takes her in. The collar. The bruises. The way she stares him down.

He sighs.

"Alright," he says in Basic, voice rough and tired. "This is what they give me."

Neryss lifts an eyebrow. "Should I apologize?"

He snorts, humorless. "Don't flatter yourself." He taps the pad. "Name's Vais. I handle a handful of fighters. You're my new problem."

She steps closer to the field, close enough that the faint shimmer cuts across his features. "A handler," she guesses.

"Unfortunately." He rubs his face with the pen hand. "I don't pick them, just keep them alive long enough to turn a profit."

She studies him. His tiredness, his cloudy eye.

"You're Weequay," she says, switching languages deliberately into one she put hours into learning for Tarek.

Vais freezes for half a second. Then he exhales through his nose.

“Yeah,” he says in the same tongue, “You have a keen eye.”

Her voice softens a tad bit. “Then you know what the Hutts do to our people.”

“Our people?” Vais’ jaw tightens. “You don’t get to say that.”

Neryss doesn’t push. She nods once. “Fair. *Your* people.”

He taps his datapad, stylus clicking once. “Speak Basic,” he says. “You don’t need to pretend.”

“I’m not,” she answers, still in Sriluurian. “I learned in for a Weequay kid I was training.”

That earns her a look. Brief. Assessing. Vais exhales through his nose.

“Congratulations,” he says. “You’re still in a Hutt arena.”

“He was sold to the Sith,” she says, keeping her tone level. “After I was captured.”

Vais’ pen pauses.

“So,” he says slowly, “you’re not asking for mercy. You’re asking for information.”

“Yes.”

He looks at her again.

“And what makes you think I have any?”

“Because you move fighters,” she says. “You talk to bookmakers. You hear where property goes when it changes hands.”

“Property,” he repeats.

“He’s Quay,” she adds. “That matters to you whether you admit it or not.”

Vais’ jaw works once. He doesn’t deny it, though he doesn’t agree either.

“Things work different here,” he says. “In the cells, you’re inventory. In the pit, you’re an investment.”

“So if I win,” she says, “you gain leverage.”

“If you win,” he corrects, “I gain credits.”

She nods. “Then we understand each other.”

He pockets the stylus. “Here’s how this goes. You fight the way I tell you. You don’t grandstand. You don’t die early. You make me money.”

“And in return...”

“If,” he says carefully, “you do that consistently... I’ll ask around about the Weequay the Sith bought. No promises, though.”

“I can work with that,” she says.

“And if he’s dead?”

Neryss doesn’t answer right away. When she does, though, her voice is steady.

“Then I keep fighting until I am, too.”

Vais inclines his head in agreement.

“One last thing,” he says. “Forget the Jedi act in the pit. Crowds don’t like that kind of righteousness.”

She meets his gaze. “I don’t need them to like me.”

“You need them to bet on you.”

He turns to leave, then stops.

“Whoto says,” he adds, not looking at her, “that if you perform well enough, you’ll get your lightsaber back.”

The words hit harder than anything her collar could deliver. She goes still.

“When.”

He shrugs slightly. “Depends how entertaining you are.”

She closes her eyes for a brief setting. Breathe in. Breathe out. When she opens them again, something sharp and deliberate has settled behind them.

“Tell Whoto,” she says, “that giving me my saber is a terrible idea.”

Vais almost smiles. Almost.

“I think,” he says, “that’s exactly why he’s considering it.

The waiting cage opens without ceremony. Heat rolls in first, dry and laced with sweat and blood. The roar she’s heard for days finally resolves into something coherent: thousands of voices layered into a single, hungry sound. Hands shove her forward. A vibrospear is dropped at her feet.

She looks at it. Simple. Functional. Weighted for brute force more than finesse. She grips it anyway, rolls her shoulders again, and steps out into the sand.

The arena floor is gouged and stained, churning into something halfway between dirt and meat. Across from her, the gates grind open. Three bruisers come out.

They're big. Armored. Professionals, judging by the way they spread out instead of charging. One carries a maul, another a cleaver thick enough to shear through bone. The third isn't visibly armed. Visibly.

The crowd surges, delighted. A horn sounds.

Neryss circles, spear held loose. The first bruiser lunges too early, eager to impress. She pivots aside and drives the butt of the spear into his knee. The joint collapses. He screams.

The second swings the maul. She ducks under it, slides in close, and rams the spear's tip up under his breastplate. The vibro-edge activates with a shriek. Armor parts. Organs offer no resistance.

He drops.

The third hesitates. Too late.

She steps inside his reach and takes his throat in a clean, upward thrust. Blood sprays warm across her stomach and thighs, stark against the thin fabric. He gurgles once and falls.

Silence. Then, the arena explodes.

Neryss stands among the bodies, breath steady, spear dripping red in the sand. She feels the weight of every eye on her and ignores it. High above, nestled among silk cushions and gold-lit excess, Whoto the Hutt lounges in his viewing dais, watching her with open delight. She meets his gaze, and, with exaggerated grace, gathers the edge of her wrap and dips into a curtsy.

The crowd howls. Whoto laughs. The horn sounds again. Guards flood the sand, cautious but not hostile. No one touches her. They don't need to.

She lets them escort her back without resistance, spear surrendered, blood drying on her skin.

The forcefield hums softly when she's returned to her holding cell. Water is shoved through a slot. Vais appears a short while later, datapad tucked under one arm.

"You didn't die," he observes.

She takes a long drink of water. "Disappointing, I'm sure."

He studies her, eyes flicking to the fresh bloodstains, the way her very revealed body is unscathed. "Odds spiked fast," he says. "Crowd liked your bow."

"Good," Neryss replies. "You should start asking."

He arches a brow. "Already?"

She meets his gaze. "I'm not planning on losing anytime soon."

A beat. Then he nods once. "I'll see what I can find."

She watches him go, then places the water down. Even with the arena roaring above her, the cell feels quieter than it ever has. She shifts her position to sit cross legged and closes her eyes.

There is no emotion, there is peace.

There is no ignorance, there is knowledge.

There is no passion, there is serenity.

There is no chaos, there is harmony.

There is no death, there is the Force.

She bows her head.

"For the lives I took today," she murmurs, voice barely audible over the hum of the field, "I am sorry."

She presses her forehead to the floor.

"And for the lives I will take," she adds, quieter still, "I promise it will not be in vain."

The arena becomes a calendar marked in bodies. Weeks turn to months without ceremony, and months into something heavier and harder to measure.

At first, they send her men like the bruisers. Mercenaries who've killed before and think that makes them dangerous. Slavers who grin when they see her and leer when they see what she's wearing, confident that size and cruelty will carry them through. Criminals dragged out of cells and told they can earn their freedom by breaking her.

She kills them cleanly. A spear through the throat. A snapped spine. A blade where the armor doesn't quite meet. She fights the way she always has: efficiently. She minimizes suffering; ends things quickly and she doesn't look back.

The crowd doesn't like that. Neither does Vais. So, begrudgingly, she adjusts. She lets the fights last a little longer. Lets opponents think they have a chance before she takes it away. She learns how to turn pain into a spectacle without compromising control. It makes her stomach twist at first. She tells herself it's strategy.

After every match, back in her cell, she recites the Code under her breath like something akin to a penance.

There is no death, there is the Force.

The words feel thin. She tells herself they always have.

A few months in, Whoto keeps his word.

The day they return her lightsaber, it's done like a gift. A guard carries it out on a cushion, ceremonial and absurd. Yellow blade, familiar weight, familiar hum. When she wraps her fingers around the hilt, something in her chest tightens painfully as relief and grief tangle together. For a second, she's not in the arena at all. She's back in a narrow training hall, lights dimmed, stone cool beneath her boots. Tarek moves across from her with clean footwork. He pulls a strike he should've finished. She disarms him anyway.

"You're apologizing with your saber," she tells him. "You need to commit when you see an opening."

He scoffs, resetting his stance. "Vashari says I should wait until the perfect moment."

"Vashari doesn't know what she's talking about," she says. "Hesitation gets you killed."

He smirks at her. "So mean to your own Padawan."

She almost smiles. "I'm just trying to keep you alive."

The illusion shatters under the weight of the arena. She tightens her grip and ignites the yellow blade. The crowd loves it.

From then on, she fights the way she was trained to fight. Lightsaber in one hand. Vibroblade in the other. Forms flowing together seamlessly, muscle memory refined by years of work now honed into something sharper. She stops holding back. Stops pretending restraint matters in a place built to devour it.

The first time she takes a head clean off to the roar of thousands, something inside her recoils. The second time, it doesn't.

Whoto escalates. Beasts. Tens of opponents. Force-sensitive captives thrown at her like toys. They try to overwhelm her with numbers, size, cruelty. She answers every challenge the same way.

Eventually, her reputation grows teeth. People start chanting her name, or whatever name Whoto's given her this week at least. Bets swing wildly in her favor. The arena masters grumble but keep feeding her harder fights, convinced something will break eventually.

It never does.

What breaks instead is quieter.

Between matches, in the silence of her cell, she stops reciting the Code after each fight. Sometimes she forgets entirely, sometimes she remembers and can't bring herself to say the words.

There is no death, there is the Force.

She laughs at that now, soft and bitter. She was never good at that line anyway.

Death is everywhere here. Tangible. Sticky. It gets under her nails and into the seams of her clothes. Pretending otherwise feels like lying to the Force itself.

It's during these long, empty hours that she notices a flicker in the forcefield, so brief it barely registers. A pressure shift against her senses. A heartbeat where the hum cuts out and snaps back in.

Microseconds. Too fast for guards. Too fast for cameras. But not for her.

She tests it carefully. Times the reboot cycle until she can feel it coming before it happens. And when no one is nearby, she leans against the field and loosens a screw by a fraction, nudging it with the Force so gently it barely qualifies as interference. The next reset stutters longer. Still useless.

She repeats it days later. Then again. Microseconds stretch into something she can work with. Not escape yet, but a flaw. For when she's ready.

She sits with that, back against the wall, hands still faintly humming from the field's interference. The smell of blood hasn't left her skin. It never does.

She thinks of the faces she didn't look at in the sand. Of the way the crowd screamed when she killed them. Of how easy it's become not to count.

The flaw in the field doesn't feel like hope. It feels like permission. If there's a way out, then what she's doing now has an endpoint. A purpose. She doesn't have to reckon with it yet. It'll be temporary, anyways. The Force understands pragmatism. Jedi have done worse in wartime and still sleep at night.

Most of all, she tells herself she's doing this for Tarek. Saving him will make the blood mean something. If she can pull him back from Sith hands, the monster she's becoming will have been a tool, not a choice.

That thought becomes a weight she leans on. A single, narrowing point of gravity.

Vais brings information in pieces, like crumbs scattered just far enough to keep her moving. Sith patrol movements. Rumors out of Korriban. A mention of a certain Lord Palide's holdings. He never frames it as certainty, always *might*, *possibly*, *heard from a guy*. Enough to sound useful. Never enough to act on.

Neryss turns it over obsessively.

Korriban. A world layered with secrets and graves. Does that mean the Academy? Its tombs? Sith don't waste Force-sensitives, they break them.

She sketches plans in her head she knows she can't execute. If she gets out, she could steal a ship, but where would she go? The Academy would be suicide. Every path branches into a dozen dead ends, each one demanding information she doesn't have.

And every night ends the same way: no closer than she started.

At first, she thanks Vais when he comes. Genuine gratitude. She asks careful follow-up questions, tries to draw lines between fragments without pushing too hard.

But her patience draws thin. She starts listening instead to what he doesn't say. The way he avoids specifics. The way his eyes slide away when she presses just a little too close to something real. The way his information always arrives just after it's gone cold.

She realizes slowly, he's feigning ignorance. Someone who knows nothing can't be *that* selective. And resentment seeps in where patience used to be.

She fights harder in the arena. Wins faster. Makes more money. Leverage piles up around her, and still the answers don't change. Still Korriban. Still nothing she can sink her teeth into. And her bitterness settles deep enough to taste metallic.

It's after a particularly brutal match that she snaps; four opponents, one of them Force-trained, another wielding a disruptor. She won, but it cost her. Blood still slicks her skin when Vais arrives, datapad in hand, expression tired as ever.

"I heard something," he says. "A transfer record. Months old."

"That's not new," Neryss replies. Her voice is mechanically calm.

Vais shrugs. "It's what I have."

She steps closer to the forcefield. Her lightsaber is gone now – always taken after – but the cup of water shatters into a fine enough blade. She thumbs the edge casually.

"You have more," she says.

"No," Vais answers.

She tilts her head. "You're lying."

His expression doesn't change. "Tough luck."

She moves faster than he expects, hand flashing out as she drives the glass toward the forcefield. Just as it approaches, the field dips, power rerouting, and the shard punches through

the gap before the sensors can fully register intent. It stops inches from his throat, field flaring violently between them.

His cloudy eye widens a fraction.

“You will tell me,” she says softly, “or I will eventually get out of this pit. And when I do, I will flay each braid from your hair until the only thing you can remember is how many years you chose the Hutts over your people.”

Silence stretches. The field hums. Vais exhales, long and tired.

“Put that away.”

“Answer me.”

He looks at her then. Really looks.

“He’s dead,” he says finally.

The words are small. Unadorned. For a heartbeat, Neryss doesn’t react at all. Then, she shakes her head once, very slightly, like she’s correcting a misheard detail.

“Wait,” she says. “You don’t know that.”

Vais doesn’t answer. He doesn’t need to.

“You’ve been telling me things,” she says slowly, each word deliberate, “for six months now.”

“I told you what kept you going,” he replies.

The arena noise bleeds faintly through the walls.

“He was alive,” she insists, voice thinning. “You said —”

“I said what you needed to hear,” Vais says. “He was sold to the Sith. You know that. After that...” he stops. “There’s no trail. No transfers. No rumors. That only means one thing.”

She stares at him, searching his face for hesitation, for cruelty, anything she can latch on to. There’s nothing there.

Her hand slides off the wall. Her knees hit the floor hard enough to jolt her teeth together. She doesn’t feel it.

Dead.

The word blooms outward, crowding the room, flattening everything beneath its weight.

She sees Tarek the first day she met him, defiant and terrified in equal measure. The way he'd held his practice saber too tight. The way he'd leaned into praise like he didn't trust it to last.

Every match. Every kill. Every night she whispered *this will be worth it* into the dark.

Her breath stutters, then fractures completely. She presses her fist into her mouth, but the sound still breaks free, raw and animal.

Almost an entire year. She has given them a year for nothing.

"You let me do this," she says hoarsely. "You let me become this."

Vais' voice is flat. "You would've anyway."

When she looks up at him, her eyes are wet and unfocused, stripped of the hard edge the arena carved into her.

"Get out," she says. He hesitates only a moment before obeying.

When he's gone, the silence rushes in too fast, too loud. Neryss folds forward onto the floor, arms wrapping around herself like she can hold herself together by sheer will. Her forehead presses into the cold metal. Her breath comes in jagged, broken pulls.

"I'm sorry," she whispers to the empty room. "I'm sorry."

The words keep coming, quieter each time, until they stop sounding like language at all.

There was time.

The thought splits her open. There was time, not much, but enough. Enough that if she hadn't believed Vais so eagerly – alive somewhere, just out of reach – she might have stopped waiting. Might have forced a reckoning earlier, before the arena hollowed her out. But she chose to believe she had time because it let her stay where she was, let her keep winning, keep killing, keep telling herself it wasn't in vain.

Tarek didn't need her patience. He needed her to move.

The realization sits in her chest like a weight she can't dislodge. He died while she was waiting for permission. While she was perfecting cycles and odds and leverage. While she was turning herself into something he would've flinched at.

He died, and she is still alive.

The thought turns on her, ugly and true. If she'd died on Nar Shaddaa, if she had bought more time, drawn more attention, he would be free. But instead, she's alive.

No Code rises to meet her grief. No calm. No Force to catch her when she falls. Just the truth, heavy and final: Tarek is dead. And she's still breathing.

The crowd roars overhead, celebrating another death.

Neryss stays on the floor for a long time. Long enough for the shaking to stop. Long enough for the grief to burn itself down to something heavier.

She rises without fury. Reality clicks into alignment, and she commits before her mind can fully comprehend the decision. If there is blood left to be spilled, she will spend it fast. If there is a price to be paid, she will unload her hand all at once.

The forcefield flickers on its cycle. She watches it hum, counts the cycle she's known for months. When it dips, she steps through as if the barrier was never there.

The collar fires.

Pain rips down her spine, brutal and bright, but she doesn't stop. She pulls and the Force answers her without hesitation, tearing the collar free in a spray of sparks and scorched flesh. She screams once, more in anger than pain, and hurls the ruined device down the corridor hard enough to crater the wall.

Alarms begin to howl. Good.

The first guards round the corner and die before they can react. She doesn't slow. She doesn't savor it. A blaster bolt bends, redirects into its owner's chest. A shock baton snaps in half, the newly formed point driven clean through a throat. She wades through them like they're made of paper, the Force turning bone into something brittle and unimportant.

She takes hits. Doesn't care.

Someone tries to run. She yanks them back with a jerk of the Force and slams them headfirst into the floor until they stop moving.

Her lightsaber waits where she knew it would be, locked away like a prized possession. The door doesn't stand a chance. When her fingers close around the hilt, it's like fitting a missing limb back into place.

The corridor becomes a slaughterhouse.

She cuts through blast doors instead of opening them. She doesn't fight with precision anymore, just power, raw and overwhelming. Bodies hit walls and don't get back up. Blood streaks the floor in her wake. The palace fills with smoke, screams, and the high, keening whine of systems failing.

By the time she reaches Whoto's dais, the guards are gone or dead. The silk hangings burn, curling back at the edges. Gold ornaments lie twisted and half-melted where her blade passed too close.

Whoto recoils as she approaches him, saber still humming.

“Well,” he says, trying for humor and failing badly, “this escalated.”

She stops a few paces from him. Her voice is calm.

“I’m going to kill you.”

Whoto swallows. “You already got what you wanted: freedom.”

“I want answers.”

She takes a step closer. The saber hum deepens.

“Who betrayed me.”

Whoto’s eyes flick toward the exits that no longer exist. “I don’t –”

“You want to live?” she says evenly, “You tell me who sold me out.”

He deflates, bulk sagging. “One of yours,” he blurts. “Republic connected.”

Her jaw tightens. “Name.”

“Nabe,” he says quickly. “Nabe Vevut.”

Neryss closes her eyes for half a second. She sees Nabe sprawled in a cockpit chair, Mandalorian armor glistening with the reflected light of hyperspace, boots on the console, grin sharp and unapologetic. The way she’d leaned too close when she talked, just to see if Neryss would react. The shared drinks after missions, the traded favors, the unspoken understanding that neither of them believed in causes so much as survival. Nabe had been competent and infuriatingly charming.

“She was good,” Neryss says quietly.

Whoto nods. “Very. You were in her way.”

Her hand tightens on the hilt.

“She said you were bleeding me dry,” Whoto adds. “Turning my council against me.”

Neryss opens her eyes.

“That’s all I needed,” she says.

Whoto exhales shakily. “You said you’d let me live.”

She tilts her head. “I lied.”

The saber carves deep, burning flesh, cutting away layers of indulgent excess until the massive body collapses in on itself. The sound is wet and obscene and final.

When it's over, Whoto lies dead in pieces on his own dais, palace alarms blaring around him. Neryss stands there, chest heaving, saber humming steadily in her hand. She feels a darkness coil tight and warm around her, answering without judgement.

She doesn't push it away.

For a moment, she turns as if to leave. Nabe's name is already forming in her mind, sharp and inevitable.

Then she stops. Her gaze drifts to the side table beside the gigantic corpse. Gold trimmed. Overturned. Among the scattered luxuries and half-melted ornaments lies a holocomm, its casing scorched but intact. Whoto's personal line. Unrestricted.

Neryss stares at it longer than she means to.

This isn't part of the plan. There was no plan past this.

Slowly, she reaches down and picks it up. Her fingers leave smeared red prints across the polished surface. She hesitates, then her helplessness gets the best of her, and she keys in a frequency she hasn't used in years.

The holoprojector flickers. Static for a minute. Then the image stabilizes.

Kaste appears before her, mid-motion, as if she'd been standing up from a desk or low seat. She freezes when she sees Neryss. The calm she wears so naturally fractures in an instant.

"Neryss?"

The word is sharp. Disbelieving. Her eyes track the blood, the smoke, the lightsaber still left in her former Padawan's hand.

"What —" Kaste stops herself, breath catching. "What happened? Where are you?"

"Tarek's dead." Neryss' voice doesn't soften. "The Sith have him. Had him. I couldn't get there in time. I don't know what to do."

The silence on the other end is total. Kaste closes her eyes, breath catching once before she reins it in. When she opens them again, she is composed.

"I need you to slow down," she says. "Tell me where you are."

"Somewhere you can't send anyone," Neryss replies immediately. "And somewhere I'm not staying."

Kaste's gaze sharpens. "That is not an answer."

"It's the only one you're getting."

Another pause. Kaste exhales through her nose, measured and grounding.

“Can I at least know what the fuck happened?” she says. “You vanished. We had no choice but to assume you were dead.”

Neryss swallows. “I wasn’t.”

“No,” Kaste says quietly, eyes flicking again to the blood drying on her skin. “I can see that.” Her jaw sets. “And Vashari?”

The question lands like a physical blow. Neryss’ mouth opens. Closes. Her brain scrambles for the answer she’s been carrying for a year, the one she never questioned because it kept her moving.

“She – she made it out,” Neryss says automatically. “Right? She made it to Coruscant.”

Kaste doesn’t react the way she expects.

“Neryss,” she says carefully, “Vashari never reported in.”

The world tilts.

“What?”

“She never reported. She is missing, too.” Kaste’s voice stays level, but her eyes search Neryss’ face now. “We had assumed she was gone, too.”

“Oh,” Neryss breathes.

Of course she didn’t make it back. She wouldn’t have abandoned Tarek to die.

“Fuck,” she whispers. The Force lurches, raw and uncontrolled.

Kaste’s voice sharpens.

“Neryss.”

“I assumed,” Neryss says, and the word tastes like ash, “I assumed she got out.”

Kaste says nothing. She lets it land.

“I was wrong.”

“Yes,” Kaste agrees, gentle and unyielding. “You were.” She straightens. “You need to return, Neryss. Ossus. Coruscant. Somewhere I can put eyes on you before you tear yourself apart.”

“No,” Neryss says immediately.

Kaste studies her. The blood. The blade. The way the Force coils tight around her spine like a drawn wire.

“This will not bring Tarek back,” she says quietly.

“I know,” Neryss answers. “But I can’t stop now.”

Another pause. Longer this time. Kaste exhales, the fight draining out of her.

“You did always hate waiting,” she says softly.

“Waiting killed Tarek,” Neryss replies. “I won’t let it kill her.”

“Then I cannot stop you,” she says. “I will not pretend otherwise.”

Neryss nods once. “I don’t want the Order looking for me,” she says. “Or waiting. If anyone thinks I can be brought back, they’ll try.”

Kaste’s gaze sharpens a fraction. “And you do not want that?”

“No,” Neryss says. “I don’t want rescue. And I don’t want someone standing on a platform believing I’ll come home eventually.”

Silence stretches between them, heavy but clear.

“I won’t report you alive,” Kaste says at last.

A faint, crooked smile touches Neryss’ mouth. “Thank you.”

Kaste inclines her head slightly, the way she used to at the end of a difficult lesson. “If you survive this,” she says carefully, “do not come looking for me.”

Neryss meets her eyes. “Wasn’t planning to.”

She leans in to turn off the holo. Kaste’s eyebrows raise for a second, giving her pause.

“Neryss...” she trails off. “Whatever you become, do it with your eyes open.”

Neryss nods. “I am.”

Kaste holds her gaze for another second, long enough to commit her to memory, then the image dissolves into static.

Nar Shaddaa doesn’t slow her on the way out, try as it might. Security locks cascade through the lower district as Whoto’s palace burns behind her, alarms bleeding into one another until the skyline itself seems to scream. Patrols choke the lanes. Transports scramble. Somewhere above, the rest of the Desilijic are already counting losses and deciding who to blame.

Neryss doesn’t care. She moves through service corridors and half-abandoned skybridges, cutting through doors instead of opening them. When she reaches the docking ring, it’s chaos; crews scattering, captains shouting, docking clamps releasing out of sequence as pilots decide getting out is worth more than clearance. She finds a freighter that looks unloved enough

to not be missed. Old Corellian make. Patched. Ugly. The kind of ship that's lived too long to have a clean record.

The ramp doesn't want to open. She lets herself in anyway.

The cockpit smells like oil and old caf. She drops into the pilot's seat, rips out the comm unit, and hotwires the ignition with practiced hands. The engines whine, catch, then roar to life as blaster fire splashes harmlessly across the shields. She lifts off hard and dirty, scraping past another ship's hull close enough to peel pain. Nar Shaddaa falls away beneath her in layers of neon and shadow.

She doesn't look back. It isn't until she clears the gravity well that she slows enough to think. Hutt space is out. Permanently. Whatever vacuum Whoto's death leaves behind will be filled fast and violent, and everyone syndicate with a memory will be looking for the thing that killed him. She needs distance. She needs a lead.

She plots the jump manually. Old habit. When the stars stretch and snap into hyperspace, she finally exhales.

The Curator's office hasn't moved. Thank the Force. A forgotten level of Coronet City, tucked between salvage brokers and antiques fences who don't ask where relics come from as long as they're interesting. The sign outside is unchanged: no name, no hours, just a stylized sigil that few recognize.

Neryss palms the door control and steps inside.

The space smells like dust and coolant. Shelves line the walls, crowded with artifacts that may or may not be real: helmets, datapads, bits of armor from wars long past. At the center sits a Duros behind a curved desk, skin a faded blue-grey, eyes sharp and amused beneath years of accumulated cynicism.

He looks up. Blinks. A reptilian grin splits his lips.

"Well," he drawls. "If it isn't Nadri."

"Curator," she replies, inclining her head.

"You look like hell," he says approvingly. "Which tells me there's a reason I ain't seen you since you took the job on Trandosha."

She doesn't rise to it. "I'm hunting an old partner."

That gets his attention. He leans back in his chair, fingers steepling. "Partner," he repeats. "That's a word you don't use lightly."

"I'm not in the mood for semantics."

“Pity,” he says. “They’re my favorite.” His eyes flick over her again, cataloging without comment. “Who?”

“Nabe Vevut.”

The Curator’s brow lifts, just a little. “That’s a name I ain’t heard in a while.”

“I doubt that.”

He hums, considering. “I got a lead,” he admits. “A year out of date, but you’ve worked with worse. She passed through the Perlemian fringe, burned a contact hard, and vanished again. Looked like she was trading up. New employers.”

“Who?”

He smiles thinly. “That’ll cost ya.”

“I don’t have credits,” she admits. “I need that information, though.”

The Curator studies her, waiting for a bluff. When it doesn’t come, he exhales through his teeth.

“You know better than to show up here empty handed,” he says.

“And you always said you preferred favors to credits,” she replies. “Credits run out. I don’t.”

A beat.

“That reputation of yours,” he says slowly, “is expensive.”

“I earned it,” she answers. “Fourteen damn years, Curator. Tell me one time I failed to repay a debt.”

He tilts his head. “And if I refuse?”

“Then someday,” she says evenly, “someone you don’t like will come asking questions you don’t want to answer. And you’ll wish you’d had me instead.”

Silence. The Curator snorts softly. “Still charming.” He taps a nail against the desk. Once. Twice. “Fine. She’s working under Black Sun now. Full assassin work. That’s all I have.”

Neryss nods. “That’s enough.” She picks a piece of armor off a shelf and inspects it. The dented pauldron bears half the insignia of the Republic, the rest worn to time.

“Another thing,” she says. “I need your last location for someone. Vex.”

That earns her a real laugh.

“Vex?” he repeats. “You’re kidding.”

“No.”

The Curator shakes his head, amusement lingering. “Didn’t think it was possible for the two of you to split. Not after everything.”

Her jaw tightens. “Do you have anything or not?”

He sobers. “Nothing solid. No bounties, no records.” A pause. “But I keep an ear out Hutt-side. About a year back, there was a frenzy in their holos. Ships full of people found drifting empty near Sriluur. No survivors except the cargo.”

Neryss stills.

“Sound like your Vex?”

“Where?”

“Rumors don’t come with coordinates,” he says. Fair enough.

She inclines her head again. “You’ve done right by me, Curator.”

“Don’t get sentimental,” he replies. “It don’t suit either of us.”

She turns to leave, then pauses. “One more thing – do you know where Isma is?”

His mouth curls into a knowing smile.

“Blue Hour off the western docks,” he says. “Careful, though. Showing up with questions about Vex is a great way to piss her off.”

Neryss looks back at him, expression hard. “I’m not looking to hurt her.”

The Curator shrugs. “Intent don’t always matter.”

“I know,” she replies. “But she’s going to have to deal. I have business that can’t wait.”

He studies her for a moment, then nods once, the humor fading.

“Fair enough,” he says.

Soft light spills through the wide transparisteel panels, tinted blue-violet, washing the dockside haze into something almost romantic. Music hums low and slow inside, all bass and restraint.

She steps inside. The room takes her in at a glance and then lets her pass. That’s the trick of places like this: nothing here reacts. No flinches, no stares that long. Everything is curated to feel effortless. The only eyes that remain on her are Isma’s.

She's behind the bar, leaning one hip against polished durasteel, posture loose but deliberate. Blue skin, cool-toned and immaculate under the lights. Her lekku are coiled high and forward, wrapped in dark bands and a small, jeweled circlet set where the flesh crests, catching the light when she moves. Her dress is deep violet, layered and flowing, cinched tight through the waist before spilling down in soft, structured folds. Her face is sharp and composed: high cheekbones, dark lips set in a heavy line, eyes rimmed in shadow, grey and assessing. They meet Neryss'.

The look Isma gives her is a cold irritation. Neryss exhales through her nose and moves to a small table near the edge of the room. She sits with her back to the wall. Old habit.

Isma makes Neryss sit there for near on ten minutes before she finally mutters something to the other server and turns her way. She walks over with all the grace of someone who has been admired her entire life and resented every second of it. Up close, the effect is worse. The kind of beauty that's structural. Clean lines. Intentional softness. Of course Vashari fell for this.

Isma stops at the table and looks Neryss up and down slowly.

"Didn't realize we started booking arena acts."

Neryss exhales through her nose. "Good to see you too, Isma."

Isma's mouth curls. "Why the fuck are you here?" Her gaze flicks pointedly to the blood. "Did you lose a bet?"

Neryss leans back in her chair, unbothered. "It's been a long day."

"Funny," Isma snorts. "You disappear for years, and this is what you bring back?"

They stare at each other, the air between them taut and unpleasant. Neryss takes a deep breath, biting a myriad of insults as they appear.

"I need your help," she says.

That earns an incredulous laugh. "You've got a fucking nerve."

"I know."

Isma's jaw tightens. "Yeah right." She folds her arms, lekku shifting with the motion. "Last time you needed 'help,' Vex walked out on me and never came back. So you'll forgive me if I'm not eager to repeat the experience."

Neryss' mouth thins. Of course that's how she frames it. *I made her*. As if Vashari didn't choose her own disasters.

"She left because she wanted to," Neryss says flatly. "Work comes first. You knew that going in."

Isma's eyes flash. "Don't you dare talk about her like that."

"I will talk about her however I like," Neryss replies, voice tinting towards aggression. "Because I'm the only chance she's fucking got."

That lands. Isma stills. "The only chance?"

"Yes."

A beat. Then another. "She didn't tell me anything was wrong," Isma snaps, defensive by reflex.

"She wouldn't've," Neryss says. "And she isn't telling anyone anything."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"It means," Neryss says carefully, "that the last credible sighting of her was near Sriluur. About a year ago. After that, nothing."

Isma's face drains of color. Her mouth opens, then closes again.

"No," she says. "No. She would've – she would've said something. She always –"

"She didn't." Neryss cuts in. "And I can't go back into Hutt space to look for her myself."

Isma laughs again, brittle. "So you came here."

"Yes."

"To me."

"Unfortunately."

The realization sets in, slow and ugly. Isma looks at her like she's seeing her for the first time.

"What the hell happened, Aelis?" she asks.

Neryss doesn't answer. Isma leans forward, palms on the table.

"What did you do? What did you drag her into this time?"

"I can't explain it," Neryss says.

"Try."

"No."

Isma straightens, fury flaring. "You don't get to show up here half-dead, say her name like a weapon, and refuse to explain yourself."

Neryss meets her glare evenly. “You’re in a hell of a lot more danger if you know,” she spits. “You want an answer? Fine. Aelis isn’t my name. Never was. And Vex isn’t hers.”

“...What?”

“You heard me correctly.”

Isma searches her face, desperately looking for a tell, but Neryss offers her nothing.

“You’re not a smuggler, are you?”

“Step in the right direction.”

“... What did you get yourself into?”

“Bigger shit than you can comprehend. And if Vex is alive, she’s facing it alone.”

The anger drains out of Isma all at once, leaving something raw underneath. She looks down at Neryss’ outfit again, and her mouth twists.

“Stars,” she mutters. “You look like you crawled out of slaughterhouse.”

“I did.”

A sharp exhale. Then, grudgingly, “You can’t walk around here like that.”

Neryss arches a brow. Isma gestures toward the back.

“I’ve got spare clothes. Not your style, but I don’t think you’re in any place to be picky.”

Neryss considers her for a minute, then nods. “That’ll do.”

Isma turns on her heel, skirt flaring. “You’ve got ten minutes,” she says over her shoulder. “Then you tell me everything you fucking know.”

She pauses, just long enough to add, bitter and quiet, “And if she’s dead, Aelis, if you made me believe she just walked away when she didn’t —”

Neryss’ voice cuts in, low and ironed flat. “I didn’t come here to lie to you.”

Isma jerks her head toward a narrow hallway behind the bar and says, “Back room. Don’t bleed on anything expensive.” Then she turns on her heel and disappears into a storage alcove before Neryss can reply.

The back room smells faintly of cleaner and ozone. Racks of spare uniforms line one wall. Neryss closes the door and piles a crate next to it to buy her seconds if someone decides to peek in. The gladiator wrap peels away stiff with dried blood, fabric cracking faintly as it separates from skin. She drops it on the floor and doesn’t look back. The clothes on the rack are simple: dark trousers, boots with real tread, a fitted jacket that smells faintly of machine oil. They’re too clean for her, but they sit right. Functional. Low-profile.

When Isma comes back, she's changed, too. The violet dress is gone, replaced by a sleeveless top, reinforced pants, and boots that have seen real miles. Her lekku are wrapped tighter now, pulled back instead of forward. She looks less like a lounge ornament and more like she used to. They look at each other across the crate.

"Better," Isma says grudgingly.

Neryss nods. "You too."

They leave through a side exit that opens onto the docks, the Blue Hour's music fading behind them into the constant industrial thrum of Corellia. Isma walks a half-step ahead, shoulders squared, the very picture of overconfidence. She stops before Neryss' dodgy ship and takes it in with a raised brow.

"Of course," she mutters, "you'd steal something like this."

"It flew," Neryss says.

"That's your bar now?"

"Always was."

They board. The ramp seals behind them, cutting off the noise of the docks. Isma pauses just inside the hatch, arms folding tight across her chest.

"Alright," she says. "We're alone. Start talking."

Neryss reaches into her jacket and pulls her lightsaber free. The hilt is scorched, the metal worn smooth by years of use. When she ignites it, the yellow blade snaps to life with a sharp hiss, flooding the hallway with light.

Isma freezes.

"You're fucking with me."

Neryss deactivates the blade and lets it hang loose at her side.

"No."

"You were a Jedi," Isma says slowly. "This whole time."

Neryss doesn't correct the tense. Isma drags a hand down her face. "And the outfit. The Hutts—" She looks back up sharply. "They found you out?"

"An old colleague let it slip. We'd be spoiling their operations for years."

Isma lets out a breath that borders a laugh, sharp and disbelieving. "Stars. Of course that's what you've been hiding." Her eyes narrow. "Was Vex one, too?"

"Yes."

“You trained her?”

“Yes.”

“And if Vex isn’t her name, what is?”

“Vex is her last name. Vashari.”

The name hangs in the air. Isma repeats it once under her breath, then turns her attention back to Neryss.

“And you,” she drawls the last word, “*Aelis*.”

“Neryss. Kralan.”

Isma tastes it silently, like it might cut. “You tell me now, after all this time.”

“I tell you because I need you,” Neryss says. “I can’t go back into Hutt space to look for her.”

“So, you pissed off the Hutts?”

“You could say that.”

“You killed someone important?”

“You could also say that.”

“And now every syndicate from here to Nal Hutta wants you dead.”

“They wanted me dead before I killed him, but yes.”

Isma laughs under her breath, brittle. “Stars above. She chose *this* over me?”

“A Jedi does not allow themselves to be anchored by anything.”

The hurt shows on Isma’s face before she can stop it.

“And you think she’s alive.”

“I don’t know,” Neryss answers honestly. “But if she is, she won’t last forever without cover.”

Isma looks at the hilt, then away. Her shoulders straighten more, if that was even possible.

“Sriluur,” she says. “If she was operating there, she’d have left a trail.”

“That’s why I came to you.”

Isma closes her eyes for a beat, then opens them.

“I despise you,” she says.

“I know.”

“And if she’s dead –”

“It’s my fault,” Neryss says. “I know.”

The first rule they establish is unspoken: Neryss does not exist. Not to docking officials. Not to anyone. In Hutt space, she becomes cargo, muscle, or shadow depending on what the moment requires. Isma does the talking. Isma signs the manifests. Isma smiles, bargains, flirts, lies.

It works. It works because Isma knows this territory in a way Neryss doesn’t: by understanding how exactly to please people who want nothing more than to feel clever. She presents herself as a broker, a fixer with just enough distance from her past to be interesting but not suspicious. A woman who knows how to move well and never asks for reason.

And Neryss hides behind her shoulder, silent and dangerous.

They drift from world to world in widening arcs, never lingering long enough to leave a shape behind. Nar Shaddaa-adjacent moons. Refueling depots that smell like rust and desperation. Dust-choked planets where Imperial patrols pass just often enough to keep the locals tense and the Hutts irritated.

It takes weeks before the pattern begins to emerge. Before they can pick up stories of Imperial couriers that never arrived, patrol ships found gutted, crew dead but not spaced, cargo and weapons untouched. No looting, no theft, just precise destruction and a strange, uncomfortable restraint.

Two months in, a name starts recurring in the margins of old data drops and half-drunk testimonies: Cartaj the Hutt.

Mid-tier. Ambitious. Careless in the way Hutts can afford to be. Known for hosting Imperials on Sriluur. The dates line up too neatly with the last cluster of incidents. And almost a year ago, the night after a supposed private meeting with a Sith Lord that Neryss cut a slicer’s fingers off to learn the details of, Vashari disappeared.

They sit with that information longer than either of them wants to admit, the ship idling in orbit over a dead moon while the data scrolls between them like an execution note.

“If she was there,” Isma says finally, voice low, “then Cartaj knows where she went.”

“He’ll know something.”

Silence settles between them, thick and unhelpful.

“So,” Isma says finally, squaring her shoulders. “We’re doing this.”

Neryss clicks her tongue, reaching for her jacket. She double checks her gear, lightsaber secure on her hip, vibroknife where her hand expects it. Isma watches for a moment, then frowns.

“That’s it?”

“Hm?”

“What’s your plan? We could go through the service levels —”

“No.” Neryss straightens and meets her gaze. “I’m going through the front.”

Isma blinks. “The front.”

“Yes.”

“That’s suicide.”

Neryss shrugs, already fastening her belt. “It’s faster.”

“And louder.”

“Good.”

Isma steps closer, nose flaring. “You said this was about information. About finding her. Walking through the main door waving a lightsaber is how you get every gun in that damn palace pointed at your spine.”

“I don’t care.”

“You don’t care?” she repeats. “How the fuck are we going to find Vashari if you’re dead on a Hutt’s floor in ten minutes?”

“I’ll get answers.”

“And what about me?” Isma demands. “You think I’m staying on the ship?”

Neryss hesitates just enough to be noticeable. “Yes.”

Isma stares at her. “No.”

“You can’t come with me.”

“You don’t get to decide that.”

“I do,” Neryss replies. “Once I start, I won’t be able to stop to make sure you’re safe.”

Isma laughs, humorless. “You think I don’t know how dangerous this is?”

“I think,” Neryss says quietly, “that if something goes wrong, I will choose the mission over you. And I don’t want to.”

That stops her. For a long moment, she says nothing. Then she exhales sharply and turns away, pacing once across the cockpit before spinning back.

“Five minutes,” she says.

Neryss looks up.

“You get a five-minute head start,” Isma continues. “You walk through those doors, you make as much noise as you want, and you clear the worst of Cartaj’ muscle.” Her eyes narrow. “Then I’ll follow.”

“No,” Neryss says immediately.

“Yes,” Isma snaps. “I’m not staying behind! It is this or side-by-side, Neryss.”

Neryss studies her. The set of her shoulders, the fear she’s disguising as anger, the resolve under both.

“Five minutes.”

Cartaj’s palace rises from Sriluur’s poisoned lowlands like a monument to excess and bad taste; layered terraces of stone and durasteel, shield generators humming lazily above it all. Guards cluster at the main gates, bored and over-armed.

Neryss doesn’t slow as she approaches. The guards shout warnings, demand names. She obeys neither. Hands go to weapons. One goes to shout an order.

The yellow blade ignites with a sharp hiss. The shout dies in his throat.

The gates become an afterthought, metal screaming as the saber carves through them. Neryss strides forward through smoke and sparks as blaster fire erupts around her. The Force winds around her, shoving guards into walls hard enough to leave impressions.

The courtyard dissolves into chaos in seconds. Cartaj’s mercenaries die loudly. A bolt hits her shoulder but can’t break her stride. Alarms howl deeper in the palace, too late to matter.

Five minutes.

Neryss moves like she’s on borrowed time. She tears through corridors meant to intimidate, through silks and gilded excess, through bodies that never had a chance. When a blast clips her thigh, the muscle seizes, torn and protesting. She forces it to keep pace anyway, pushing past the hitch in her gait.

Cartaj's audience chamber is sealed when she reaches it. She doesn't bother with controls. The doors scream as they're torn apart, durasteel buckling inward under an invisible grip. Smoke rolls across marble veined with precious metals, and at the far end of the chamber, Cartaj the Hutt recoils on his dais.

He's smaller than she expected.

"Wait – wait!" Cartaj bellows, voice echoing wetly. "Please – whatever this is – we can discuss –"

Neryss steps into the chamber, lightsaber casting sunlight around the room.

"You met a Togruta," she says. Her voice is calm. Even. "A year ago. Orange skin. Blue Montrals."

Cartaj blinks, confusion across his wide face. "I meet many people," he says quickly. "I don't remember –"

She takes another step.

"Think harder."

He swallows. "I swear, I don't know – no such creature –"

The Force tightens around him, just enough to make breathing labored.

"You hosted a meeting," she says. "Sith. A year ago."

Cartaj's mouth opens, then closes again. His tongue flicks nervously across his lips.

"Yes," he admits. "Yes, of course, that I remember. But she was Sith. A Lady. A Lord. Red with white montrals." His eyes widen as if the memory itself frightens him. "Serith Kav'i is her name."

"She wasn't alone."

"No," Cartaj says eagerly. "She had attendants. Slaves. A Jedi would never –"

She cuts off the sentence by placing enough pressure on his throat to make him cough.

"That's not who I asked about."

"I swear," Cartaj wheezes. "I never saw anyone like that. If there was a Togruta, she wasn't here. I would remember. I would never –"

"Quit lying."

"No! No, I'm not –"

She steps closer. The saber hum deepens, the sound filling the chamber like a held breath.

“You don’t forget something like her,” she continues, “Not unless you were told to.”

Cartaj’s eyes fix on her blade. “Please,” he whispers. “I’ll give you credits. Ships. Anything. I don’t deserve –”

She tilts her head slightly.

“You’re a Hutt,” she says. “That means you do.”

The saber moves. Isma reaches the chamber at a run, smoke trailing to her clothes and lekku. She has a blaster in her hand, breathing hard, eyes bright with the kind of fury that’s been waiting too long for a target.

“Where is he –”

She stops. Cartaj’s body lies crumpled at the base of the dais, a massive, unmoving sprawl of flesh and gold. The air smells of cauterized meat. And above him stands Neryss, lightsaber lit, yellow blade cutting harsh light across her red face.

For a second, neither of them move.

“... What kind of Jedi are you?” Isma asks finally, voice thin, edged with something close to fear. Neryss looks down at the corpse.

“I stopped being a Jedi,” she says, calm and terrible, “when the Hutts took my children.”

Isma swallows hard, eyes flicking again to the body, then back to Neryss. “What happened?” she asks. “Did he – did he say anything?”

Neryss deactivates the saber. The sudden absence of light feels like pressure.

“He wouldn’t talk,” she says. “Not about her.”

Isma exhales shakily, a sound that might be relief or dread. “Then why –”

“I got a name,” Neryss continues. Isma’s eyes snap back up.

“Who?”

“Serith Kav’i,” Neryss says.

The name hangs in the air, heavy and unfamiliar. Isma nods once, slowly, trying to steady herself. “Let me guess. A Sith.”

“Yes.”

Isma lowers her blaster slowly.

“Alright,” she says quietly. “Then we keep going.”

Neryss steps away from the body, already turning toward the exit.

“We keep going.”

The month that follows is one of Neryss’ worst.

They start with momentum; Cartaj’s death still rippling outward, Serith Kav’i’s name fresh enough to bruise. Isma leans on contacts she swore she’d never speak to again. Neryss reaches back out to the Curator. Between them, doors open that shouldn’t and others slam shut so hard they leave cracks in the frame.

They learn the broad shape of it within a week. Serith Kav’i left Sriluur not long after the meeting with Cartaj. A private departure. Her ship arrived to Dromund Kaas a day behind schedule, reporting casualties and damage to the hull. The trail of Imperial ships crippled around Hutt space ends there, abruptly.

“That’s where it happened,” Isma says the first time they see the report, voice flat. “Whatever happened to her.”

Neryss doesn’t answer. She doesn’t need to. The Force tightens around her like a held breath.

They chase the wreckage of that moment for weeks. The captain of the ship is alive. Retired, officially. Living under a new name on Lothal. Neryss gets them through the front door. Isma handles the talking.

He sweats. He lies. He insists he remembers nothing unusual. “A pirate attack,” he says, over and over. “Just a pirate attack. Lord Kav’i drove them off.”

Neryss stands behind him, unmoving. Eventually, the man’s resolve cracks. He weeps. He begs. He swears he’s never laid eyes on an orange Togruta. Never seen a Jedi. Only Sith. Only Serith.

They leave with nothing.

They find Serith’s former attendants next. Scattered across Imperial space, Isma tries empathy. Neryss tries intimidation. Neither works. And as the months grind on, Neryss grows sharper, leaner in a way that has nothing to do with hunger. She stops asking nicely. She stops waiting for Isma’s signal before stepping in. People stop meeting her eyes. Doors open faster.

Isma notices the change long before she comments on it.

“You’re pushing too hard,” she says once, late, after a contact flees rather than talk. “They don’t know anything.”

“They have to know something,” Neryss replies. “Otherwise they wouldn’t be so afraid.”

“You’re a Jedi,” Isma snaps. “They’re afraid of you.”

The cockpit hums low around them, a sound that usually soothes. Tonight it only sharpens Neryss' edges.

"They wouldn't be afraid if they didn't know something," she repeats, voice tight. "Fear comes from guilt."

"No," Isma says. "Fear comes from you breaking into places you don't belong and leaving corpses in your wake!" She turns on her, eyes bright with exhaustion. "You're not interrogating anyone. You're executing people."

Neryss scoffs. "And yet none of them say she just died."

Isma goes still. Then she nods once. "You're right. If Vashari died on that ship, someone would've sold that story by now. We've had heard it."

Neryss exhales, vindicated. "Exactly."

"Which means she's on Dromund Kaas." The words land heavy. Isma rubs her thumb along her fingers. "Under the thumb of a Sith Lord powerful enough to erase her from every record and scare everyone else into silence." She laughs once, harsh. "So, what now, Neryss? We just... go there?"

Neryss doesn't answer. In her mind, the picture has already assembled itself. If she had bought more time on Nar Shaddaa, if she had died, Tarek and Vashari would've made it out. They'd be on Coruscant now. Alive. Free. Angry, probably. Complaining about Temple food and pretending they're not shaken. But instead, Neryss lived. And look where it got them.

"We'd die before we cleared the spaceport," Isma says. "And don't give me any of that Jedi heroics. You know that."

Neryss' jaw tightens. "Then we prepare well."

"For what?" Isma demands. "For a miracle? For you to tear down the Sith Empire with a stolen ship and a lightsaber?"

Silence.

"This isn't a hunt anymore," Isma says, voice cracking. "It's suicide. And I'm not wasting my life chasing a ghost."

Neryss turns fully toward her now, eyes blazing. "So you're done?"

"Yes," Isma says. "I'm done."

The words hang between them, ugly and final.

"You don't get to be done," Neryss says quietly. "You agreed to help me."

“I did help you, jackass!” Isma fires back. “I burned every damn bridge I had left. I put myself in danger for your war!” She gestures helplessly around the cockpit. “And all we have to show for it is a certainty that she’s somewhere we can’t reach.”

Neryss shakes her head, almost violently. “I’m not giving up on her.”

“You have to!” Isma practically screams. She takes a breath. “You have to trust her, Neryss. The same way she trusted you. She’s been through hell before. She’s turn up eventually, when the time is right.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I don’t.” A breath. Isma’s voice softens. “Do you think she’d want you to destroy yourself like this?”

The question hits harder than any accusation.

“If the roles were reversed, if you were the one taken, would you want her burning through the galaxy, tearing herself apart, refusing to live until she’s died for you?”

Neryss opens her mouth. Stops. The cockpit feels very small suddenly. Isma sits for a second, then places a hand on Neryss shoulder and steps past her toward the living quarters.

“I need you to drop me on Sriluur,” she says. “I’ve got a friend there.”

Neryss doesn’t argue. She just nods once.

“But,” Isma says, pointing a finger at her, “you promise me something. If you hear anything – anything at all – about Vashari, you contact me. I don’t care how small it is.”

“I will,” Neryss says immediately.

“And I’ll do the same,” Isma replies. “If she surfaces, if I hear so much as a whisper, you’ll be the first to know.”

They don’t bother with goodbyes. Isma shoulders her bag and gives Neryss a nod as the ramp closes after her.

The cockpit feels larger without her. Empty. Neryss doesn’t allow herself to sit with that sensation. Grief is a luxury for those with the time left to process it. Instead, she simplifies. She opens a blank datapad and writes a list.

1. Kill Nabe
2. Get to Dromund Kaas
3. Free Vashari (or die trying)

There's no hesitation when her eyes reach the last line. No tightening in her chest, no spike of fear. It'll be a just end, either way. If Vashari is freed, the equation resolves cleanly. If Neryss dies in the attempt, then the cost is finally paid. The scales of the galaxy stop being tilted by her continued existence.

Tarek should be alive. Vashari should be free. She should be dead. Everything else is just noise.

Black Sun space suits her. It's loud without being honest, violent without pretending to be righteous. Cantonica and its satellites glitter with borrowed wealth, casinos stacked atop slums stacked atop forgotten service tunnels. Everyone here is running from something. Everyone here is for sale.

Neryss moves through it like a rumor. She doesn't announce herself a Jedi, doesn't flash a lightsaber or ask the kind of questions that make people nervous. She drinks. She listens. She watches armor walk past and discards ninety percent of it without a second thought. Painted plates on idiots who think Mandalorian aesthetics mean Mandalorian competence. Old veterans with dented chestpieces and sigils, selling war stories that don't line up under pressure. Mercs who want to be noticed, who linger too long in doorways and wait for someone to flinch.

She lets them pass. She knows what she's looking for.

Nabe wore her armor like a second skin, not a costume. She never overdressed it. Never polished it unless she was really bored.

Weeks pass like this. Neryss changes cantinas, changes jackets, changes names she answers to. She lets old contacts recognize her and newer ones underestimate her. She trades small favors for information. She becomes patient in a way that frightens even her. She has nothing but time, anyways. The only clock ticking down is the one reminding her that each day she stretches is another day Nabe is breathing, another day the balance remains unpaid.

Finally, a thread pulls taut. A friend of a friend of a friend mentions it casually over a cracked glass in a cantina that smells like bad choices. A bounty dealer tried to recruit her for a hit. A big one on a Neimoidian financier with big guns to protect him. The dealer wanted her to work with a Mandalorian.

Neryss doesn't ask for a description. She doesn't need one. She leaves before the glass is empty.

Cato Neimoidia is quieter, more dishonest in a way that suits crowds with money. Endless bridges over cloud-choked voids. Corporate facades polished to a sterile sheen. The financier is exactly where she expects him to be: high above the clouds, nested into a private complex built to hide the layers of hired security that decorate it.

Neryss goes in quiet. No alarms, no scorched walls, no bodies left where they'll be found too soon. Guards are disabled and dragged into blind corners. Cameras loop clean, seamless footage. The building never quite realizes it's been breached.

She reaches the Neimoidian's office while he's mid-call, gesturing irritably at a holocomm, complaining in a language she doesn't speak. He never sees her.

The kill is fast. Controlled. She powers down her lightsaber, hangs up the holo, and knocks the body out of the chair it occupies. She drags the chair up to the desk and sits.

Neryss settles into the seat like she belongs there, boots on the desk, lightsaber resting loose across her lap, and waits.

Time stretches. Minutes fold into hours. The building hums around her, oblivious. She feels the approach before she hears it, a familiarity in the Force that pulls a string at the tip of her spine.

Footsteps. The door slides open. Neryss moves.

She surges up and over the desk in one fluid motion, boots skidding across polished stone as the lightsaber snaps to life mid-leap. Gold light floods the room.

She hits Nabe hard, driving her back into the doorframe with enough force to rattle durasteel, forearm pinning her throat before the helmet even hits the floor. The visor clatters uselessly as it drops. Nabe's grey eyes go wide.

"Neryss –"

The word cuts off as Neryss places the lightsaber just to in front of Nabe's eyeball, sweat beading on the woman's shaved head.

"I should have killed you years ago," Neryss snarls.

She expects resistance. A hand going for a weapon. A sharp retort. That familiar, infuriating spark. She gets none of it. Nabe doesn't even raise her hands. Her breath comes fast and shallow.

"You're alive," Nabe whispers, voice breaking. "Stars above, you're alive."

The pressure on Neryss' forearm increases instinctively. Rage demands completion.

"You killed me," Neryss says. "You fucking worm."

Nabe nods, tears already spilling out of her ridiculously stunning grey eyes. "I did." Her voice breaks. "And I wake each night regretting it." Her hands tremble at her sides. "They had me on a leash, Neryss. And I fucked up. I know I fucked up. It should have been me, not you."

“You killed them,” Neryss snarls. Her forearm tightens. The lightsaber hum rises, unstable, whining as the blade wavers inches from Nabe’s eye. “You killed Kier. You sold Vex to the Sith.”

Nabe goes utterly still.

“Kier...?” she repeats faintly. “No... he had an exit. He would’ve —”

“He didn’t,” Neryss snaps. “The Sith got him. Vex, too.”

Silence slams down, heavy and suffocating. Nabe’s face collapses; a structure giving way under a heavy weight. The saber wavers violently. The hum screeches, unstable, as if it might tear itself apart. Nabe’s mouth opens. Nothing comes out. Her grey eyes are wide and wet and utterly ruined.

“I trusted you,” Neryss says, tears starting to form in her eyes. “I trusted you with them. My kids!”

Her arms start to shake, not from fatigue, but something deeper. Something she’d kept locked down by motion and violence and lists sharp enough to cut.

“You were there,” Neryss chokes. “You ate at my table. You taught Vex to shoot. And you —” Her voice breaks cleanly in half. “You couldn’t have just double tapped me?”

The pressure on Nabe’s throat vanishes all at once as Neryss jerks back like she’s been burned. The lightsaber drops a few inches, the deactivates entirely with a sharp snap that echoes too loudly in the room.

For a second, Neryss just stands there, chest heaving.

“I’m sorry,” Nabe whispers, barely audible.

Something inside Neryss breaks.

“No,” she snarls. “No, you don’t get that.”

She steps forward again, wild now, hands shaking, voice rising.

“You don’t get to be sorry,” she spits. “You don’t get to feel bad about it like that makes you human again! You ruined everything!” Her voice rises to a scream, tears spilling hot and furious.

“I’m supposed to be the one who’s haunted,” she sobs. “I’m the one who lived. I’m the one who thought I had time while they were taken!”

She slams a fist into the wall next to Nabe, hard enough to dent durasteel.

“They’re dead or captured and you’re sorry?” she chokes. “That’s mine. That pain is mine.”

Her knees finally give out. Gravity takes her body and she hits the floor hard, folding forward, hand clawing at her chest like she can tear her heart out by force.

“I threw everything away trying to fix what you broke,” she gasps. “Every step. Every body. And it was all useless.”

Nabe sinks down too, a few feet away. She presses her forehead to the floor.

“I know,” she says quietly. “I’d give anything to take it back.”

“That doesn’t mean anything!” Neryss screams into the floor, the sound raw and shredded. “There is no back! They’re gone!”

She curls in on herself, shoulders shaking violently, breath coming in ragged pulls like she’s drowning on air.

Nabe doesn’t move. She stays where she is, folded low, forehead to the floor, hands open and empty where Neryss can see them.

Minutes pass. Maybe more. Time loses its edges.

Neryss’ sobs come in waves: heavy at first, fists pounding against the floor, then collapsing into something smaller and wetter and more exhausted. Her breathing stutters, slows, then stutters again. Tears pool on the polished tile beneath her cheek.

Eventually, Nabe shifts. She sits beside Neryss, close enough that the silence between them feels shared instead of empty. She doesn’t speak, doesn’t offer any more hollow platitudes or excuses. When Neryss’ crying finally burns itself out, it leaves her hollow and shaking, throat raw, eyes swollen and aching. She lies there for a long time afterward, staring at nothing, like she’s afraid that if she moves the grief will come roaring back.

At last, she drags a forearm across her face and pushes herself up enough to sit, back against the wall opposite Nabe. Her hands won’t stop trembling.

For a while, neither of them says anything. Then, very quietly, Nabe speaks.

“...Do you want my head still?”

Neryss turns on her, sharp despite the wreckage.

“Don’t,” she snaps. Her voice is hoarse.

Nabe’s shoulders hunch. “I’m serious.”

“I know you are,” Neryss says. “That’s the problem.” She scrubs her face again, angry now in a different way. “You think offering yourself fixes it. Like that’ll balance the scales.”

Nabe lowers her gaze. “It’s all I have left to give.”

“Then keep it,” Neryss snaps. “I’m not turning you into a grave marker so you can feel honorable about it.”

“What then?” Nabe asks. “We part ways?”

Neryss exhales shakily. She stares at the floor between them.

“I can’t go back to the Jedi, even if they’d take me,” she says. “And I’m wanted in every Hutt territory since I killed Whoto.” Her hands curl into fists. “And all I fucking want is to go to Dromund Kaas and die tearing Vex out of their hands. But it wouldn’t work. I wouldn’t even get close. And even if I did, Vex wouldn’t have wanted that. She’d hate me for throwing myself away like that.”

“You’re talking like dying is the only honest thing you have left,” Nabe says. “Like it’s the only right you’ve earned.”

Neryss doesn’t look at her.

“It is.”

“Come on,” Nabe’s voice is back to its low, firm cadence. “You know better than that. You didn’t deserve what happened to you, to them. And you don’t deserve to die because of it.”

Neryss lets out a harsh, broken laugh. “You don’t get to tell me what I deserve.”

“I know,” Nabe says. “But I can tell you this: you didn’t fail Keir and Vex by surviving. You didn’t steal anything by still being here.”

Neryss eyes squeeze shut.

“You’re treating your life like a debt,” she continues quietly. “Like the only way to make things right is to zero yourself out. But you’re allowed to live, Neryss. I’m the one who should die for what I did.”

The words land gently. They feel undeserved. Neryss drags a hand over her face, breath hitching.

“I don’t feel like I am,” she admits.

“Doesn’t make it less true.”

Silence settles again, heavy on Neryss’ shoulders.

“I don’t know how to do this,” she whispers after a minute. “I don’t have anything outside the Order to live for.”

Nabe is quiet for a long moment. Then, she straightens, slow and deliberate.

“Then take me,” she says.

Neryss looks at her, sharp and incredulous. “What?”

“I ruined your life,” Nabe says simply. “I killed Kier. I shouldn’t get to just walk away from that.” She meets Neryss’ eyes, steady despite the tears still clinging there. “Let me serve you, as long as it takes to make this right.”

Neryss lets out a humorless laugh and wipes her eyes.

“You’re unbelievable,” she mutters. “You betray me, destroy everything I love, and now you want to help?”

“Yes,” Nabe says plainly. Neryss shakes her head, exhausted and furious and utterly spent.

“I should tell you to go to hell.”

“I’ll go wherever you tell me,” Nabe replies quietly. Neryss takes a long, deep breath.

“...Fine.” The word tastes strange. Heavy. “But don’t you dare think this means you’re forgiven.”

“I won’t.”

“And you don’t get to die for me,” Neryss adds, sharp again. “If you’re staying, you stay alive.”

Nabe nods. “Understood.”

Neryss exhales and leans her head back against the wall.

“Then we figure out another way,” she murmurs. “Something that doesn’t end with my corpse on a Sith world.”

They leave Neryss’ ship behind on Cato Neimoidia, share Nabe’s far nicer starfighter. It handles better than Neryss remembers. Nabe flies like she always had, boots kicked up on the console once they clear hyperspace. Corellia greets them with noise and grease on their fingertips. The Curator’s shop is exactly where she left it almost a year before, wedged into a forgotten level of Coronet City, between a salvage broker and a relic fence. The sign hasn’t changed, neither has the door, which sticks for half a second before sliding open.

The inside smells like dust and coolant. The Curator looks up from behind his desk, eyes flicking first to Neryss, then more slowly to Nabe. His brow lifts as she removes her helmet and tucks it under an arm.

“Well,” he drawls. “I’ll be damned.”

Nabe grins like she’s been waiting for that. “Miss me?”

“No,” he replies easily, “But you’ve always been hard to keep gone.” His eyes flick back to Neryss. “You, on the other hand, have people taking bets.”

Neryss inclines her head. “You always did underestimate my ability to be inconvenient.”

“Hm.” His gaze drifts down, stopping at the lightsaber resting loose on her hip. His brow lifts a fraction. Just a fraction.

“That’s new,” he says.

Neryss doesn’t look down. “Long story.”

“I imagine.” He pauses, then adds, dryly, “It’s not for sale, is it?”

“No.”

“Fair.” He leans back in his chair, interest already moving on. “You look like shit.”

“Been a year,” Neryss replies.

Nabe plants her elbow on the counter. “You should see the other guy.”

The Curator snorts. “I usually do. That’s how this works.” He taps his finger against the desk twice. “Do you need something, or are you here for a hit?”

Nabe grins at him. “We need to get Nadri back in action.”

He rolls his eyes and reaches under the desk, pulling out a datapad and sliding it across with little ceremony.

“A Hutt,” he says. “Mid-tier. Republic doesn’t want the mess, Empire doesn’t give a fuck. Leaves him irritatingly untouched.”

Neryss scans the file. Her jaw sets.

“I can do that,” she says.

“I know,” the Curator replies. “That’s why it’s on the table.”

Nabe leans over Neryss’ shoulder, reading. “Oh, I despise him already. That’s promising.”

“You would,” the Curator mutters. Then, to Neryss, “You ever find Vex?”

The question is casual. Asked the same way he’d ask about a missing ship or a bad investment. Neryss stills. Nabe places a hand on her shoulder.

For a long moment, she doesn’t answer. The shop hums around them, unconcerned.

“No,” she says finally. “I couldn’t get to her.”

He studies her for half a second, tapping his finger against the desk in a rhythm while he does.

“She’s on Dromund Kaas,” Neryss adds. “If you hear anything about a Togruta matching her description outside Sith space – anywhere she shouldn’t be – I want to know. First.”

The Curator considers that. “Dromund Kaas,” he says slowly, drawing out each word. “Hm. If something like that crosses my desk, it’ll come to you first. Now, are you taking the hit or not?”

Neryss nods, lifting the datapad into both hands. “I will.”

He stands, nodding once. “Do the job. Don’t bring heat back to my door. And if you’re going to carry that thing around –” his eyes flick briefly to the saber again, “Do try to avoid Sith lanes.”

Neryss’ mouth tightens. “When have I ever, Curator?”

He cracks a toothy smile. They turn to leave. At the threshold, the Curator adds, “Stay safe, Nadri.”

Neryss pauses. A few days ago, she would’ve dismissed the thought outright. But it doesn’t hollow in her consciousness like it used to. She knows the road ahead is long, uneven, and will demand more of her than dying ever would have. But she never needed certainty to commit to anything before.

“I’ll do my best,” she says.