

Quick FYI: this story does contain some pretty graphic depictions of sexual assault. If that ain't your cup of tea, avoid the following pages:

26-27, 36-37, 90-91

There's also depictions of suicide on page 91 so avoid that if it's triggering too

“Serith, say goodbye! We’re leaving.”

The words come from behind her, sharp and absolute. She doesn’t look up right away. Her baby brother is nestled against her chest, arms curled loosely around one of her lekku. He gurgles as she bounces him gently on her knee, oblivious to the storm moving around them. Distant voices murmur from the tents, but the clearing is still.

Her brother looks up at her, blue-green eyes bright with the soft trust of a child too young to understand cruelty. She’s held all of her siblings like this at one point or another. Bathed them, fed them, wrapped them against the wind. This one, the youngest, started clinging to her fingers before he could crawl. She taught him to hum lullabies through his teeth, the way her mother used to do when she was strong enough to sing.

Her uncle stands at the edge of the circle, posture regal despite the ash and dirt that clings to his boots. His robes are travel-worn but finely tailored, every detail deliberate. Red and black, high Kaasian design. Dark Lord Palide. They all know why he came; a rare visit from the only surviving scion of House Kav’i, her mother’s highborn cousin and a Sith Lord of rank, was never going to be ceremonial. He had tested each of Serith’s siblings, measured their Force sensitivity, their reflexes, their obedience with sleek devices.

Her mother grips his sleeve, tears already streaming.

“He’s too young,” she cries, “Please, cousin, he’s still nursing—”

“He’s the strongest of your litter,” her uncle says, brushing her mother aside with effortless disdain. “I will not squander such potential.” He reaches for the child.

Serith tightens her arms. Her brother squirms and laughs, reaching to tug at the Akul teeth tied around her collar. She feels heat rise behind her eyes, not from fear. From knowing what he would become if her uncle took him. Not a warrior, not a hunter. A vessel. He couldn’t survive that, but she could. She’s been surviving her whole life.

She stands. Her uncle’s hand freezes in midair.

“You’re making a mistake,” her voice shakes, despite herself. Her uncle sneers, yellow eyes bright against his dull red skin.

“I don’t repeat myself,” he says. “Not for children, especially not for weaklings.” Serith’s jaw tightens. She steps forward, squaring her shoulders.

“I’m not weak.” He opens his arms to take her brother, pointedly, inviting her to surrender the child. She doesn’t. Her grip tightens. “Ajid is strong in the Force,” she says, “but he’ll shatter. You know that.” He hesitates, just a breath, and she jumps on the opportunity, heart pounding in her chest. “He can’t speak Basic. He still wets the bed. He cries when the fire pops too loudly. He’s not ready.” Palide’s gaze lingers on her, inscrutable.

“And you are?” he asks dryly. She lowers her eyes just enough to meet Ajid’s bright gaze, then she looks back up and meets his stare.

“I killed my first Akul at seven,” she says, flatly. “With a broken spear. Dragged the corpse two kilometers through storm-wet brush. I wear its teeth on my brow. Its brother’s across

my collarbone.” Her uncle blinks once, slowly. Interest flickers in his gaze like ember catching wind.

“So you wish for me to take you instead then?” he asks, voice unreadable. She doesn’t answer. “You know what that means, yes?”

“I know.” Palide’s head tilts, just slightly. His tone sharpens.

“I will return for him,” her uncle says, “when he’s old enough to be shaped properly. But, in the meantime—” he studies her, deliberately. Coldly. “If you prove useful, you may buy him a few years.” Her breath hitches, but she keeps her chin high.

“Thank you, Uncle.”

“You’ll obey without question.”

“I already do.”

“You’ll serve without love.”

“That’s easier.”

A pause. Thick. Heavy with decision.

“You’ll bear my name.” She nods.

“And lose my own.”

Palide lifts his hand. Serith doesn’t hesitate. She turns to her mother and places Ajid in her arms. Her mother’s hands are shaking, her eyes wide. But she doesn’t speak, doesn’t offer a last-minute rescue or protest. Serith leans down. Touches her brother’s cheek, smiles so he won’t cry.

Palide takes her wrist with certainty. The ramp to his ship hisses open. She walks up without waiting for orders.

The shuttle smells of cold metal, nothing like smoke, sweat, or earth. Just sterilized steel and the faint ozone burn of repulsorlift cores spinning up beneath them. The seats are clean and hard-edged. The air inside tastes like it was filtered through a dozen machines. Even the silence feels engineered. Serith hesitantly lowers herself onto a crash seat beside the viewport, moving like a machine. She sets her hands in her lap, then moves them to her knees, then back again. Her heart is still pounding from the ache of Ajid’s weight no longer resting against her ribs.

The ramp seals behind her with a hiss. There’s a vibration moving through the floor. The first jolt catches her breath. The camp drops away beneath them with terrifying smoothness. No wind, no rocking, just elevation. The treetops lift, then vanish. The firelight she’d spent her entire life staring into becomes a scattering of embers. The plains, once endless, shrink to a smudge. Her lungs press against her ribs as gravity shifts. She swallows hard, feeling the unnatural tug of acceleration.

They pierce the clouds. She grips the edge of her seat as the world falls away. Her lekku twitch involuntarily. Above her, stars burn in ways she’s never imagined, lacquered across an

infinite sky. The curvature of Shili rolls away behind them, green and gold and blue, wrapped in mist. From up here, her entire world is a pebble. The edge of atmosphere glows like a blade.

She presses her forehead briefly against the viewport.

He's safe, she reminds herself. She exhales, slow and full, watching the planet slip behind them like a closing door.

Palide shifts across from her, stretching his legs with casual elegance, gloved hand brushing at invisible lint.

"Thank the stars we're out of that sinkhole," he mutters to himself. "My skin still smells like woodsmoke and fermented hide." Serith looks up.

"The scene of a hunt. It's how we—"

"I know what it is," he says sharply. "The scent of sweat and ash and whatever died last under your boots. A fine cologne, if one's goal is to be devoured by flies."

She shuts her mouth, pulse fluttering.

"It's not that I mind tradition," he adds, almost absently. "I mid how little you expect from it. We're a proud people, niece. Sharp instincts. Beautiful physiology. A natural connection to the Force. And yet you drape yourselves in bones and brag about killing a cat like that's the pinnacle of achievement." Serith swallows.

"It's not about achievement, it's about discipline. Respect."

"It's about settling," Palide cuts in, voice sharp. "You survive when you could conquer. You remember roots when you could plant flags. It's mediocrity, dressed in hunting paint and sour pride." She looks down.

"Shili raised me," she says quietly.

"And, if not for me, it would have wasted you," he replies. Silence thickens between them. Palide shifts, subtly but intentionally. "I could still turn back." Her heart jumps. She looks up. "Ajid's young. Untouched. You've already been...weakened by dirt and sentiment."

"No," she says quickly. "You won't." His eyes find hers again.

"Then earn his freedom. Because I swear to you, girl, if you fall short, I will collect him. And I will not be nearly as forgiving." She holds his inferno of a gaze.

"I understand, Uncle." He leans back, content again.

"Good. Then sit still and don't complain."

The descent into Dromund Kaas makes Serith's stomach turn. She presses her palm to the viewport, watching as the sky dissolves into black clouds laced with violet lightning. There's no open horizon here, no stars. Just a rolling ceiling of storm and shadow. The air itself looks angry.

“This world doesn’t care for visitors,” Palide says idly from across the cabin. “Which makes it well suited to the Sith.” She doesn’t respond. He’s reclined with one leg crossed over the other, reviewing something on a datapad.

Outside, the planet’s surface skims into view: jagged ridges of dark stone cut by deep canyons, rivers that gleam like oil, towers rising like fangs. The Kav’i estate emerges near the base of a plateau, a stark silhouette of black stone and red-lit glass. It looks like it had been carved into the world, not built atop it. The landing pad shimmers with rainfall. Palide sets aside his datapad as the landing gear hisses to life.

“Don’t gawk when we disembark,” he tells her. “It’s provincial.” She swallows hard and nods. The ramp opens.

Serith’s soaked instantly by the downpour, cold and sharp against her skin. Her boots squelch on the slick platform as she follows Palide toward the gate. There’s no welcome party, no crest banners, just two guards to flank them to the heavy doors.

It’s warm inside, too warm. The walls are obsidian veined and glowing faintly from lit braziers. The floor is polished durasteel, carpeted down the center of each hallway. It’s smooth enough she can see her reflection as she walks. There’s no scent of food or woodsmoke, no skins drying in corners, no tools left on hooks. Everything is symmetrical. Sharp. Wrong. Her uncle doesn’t slow until they reach the central atrium. A servant waits for them there, robes perfectly pressed, a folded set of Sith garments in his hands.

“You’ll bathe and change,” Palide says, not turning to face her. “You must be clean for supper.” Serith blinks at the robes. The fabric looks smooth. Too smooth. She hesitates. Her uncle turns to face her fully, face a half-assed scowl. “You’re not bringing your jungle linens into my estate.” She looks down at her own dress. The fabric is handwoven, shaped by dozens of tiny stitches. The skirt is wrapped and fastened with old ivory beads carved by her brother.

“This was made by my mother.”

“Donate it to a museum,” he says, voice clipped. “You are not here to honor your mother’s stitching.” Her hand rises instinctively to the leather at her collarbone. The Akul teeth, rain slicked and heavy, click faintly with the motion. Palide’s gaze lands on them like a weight. His eyes narrow.

“You’ll have those restrung.” Her throat tightens.

“They were made for me this way.”

“They look like they were chewed off a corpse,” he says flatly. “They will be remounted. Gold, durasteel, something befitting the Kav’i name.”

“I—”

“It is not a request,” he cuts her off. “You may keep the teeth, that much I will allow. But the leather goes. You will not track the stench of tribal nostalgia through these halls.” Her fingers curl around the cord.

“Yes, uncle.”

He turns, nodding to the servant. The man gives him a bow and then gestures to Serith to follow him. They walk in silence. Her footsteps echo too loudly off the metal halls. When they reach the washroom, the door slides open with a whisper. It's too large, too quiet. There's a recessed basin in the center of the floor. Metal panels line the walls with blinking lights and narrow tubes. The servant steps forward and presses a panel. With a soft chime, the sonic hum begins. A subtle vibration fills the space. Serith flinches.

"It's the sonic," he says gently. His voice is low, careful. "It will clean you, Lady. You'll step into the center. Remove your garments. The system will do the rest." She hesitates. He doesn't push. "It doesn't hurt. I promise."

She nods stiffly and begins to undress. The leather cords are last, she folds her robes over them protectively. When the cleansing is done, the hum fades. She's left standing in the middle of the chamber, skin raw with silence. The servant returns, carrying the estate robes. He helps her step into them carefully, fastening the wide sash, folding the stiff collar into place. His gaze falls to the teeth she clutches in her hand.

"If you allow, Lady, I will bring those to the jeweler's wing. Lord Palide has already made the arrangements."

Her grip tightens around the cords.

"They're fragile," she says quickly. "Some of them are cracked. The front left canine, don't polish it. It's already worn down. And the one with the split at the base, if it gets set wrong, it'll fall apart. The brow piece is bound in an older knot. If it's cut, the alignment won't hold." The servant nods. Patient. Listening. "They're not symmetrical," she adds. "They're not supposed to be."

"They will be treated with care," he says. "You have my word." She doesn't respond, but after a moment, she hands them over slowly, like letting go of breath held too long. The servant wraps them gently in a silk cloth, tucks them into a small case, and bows.

"I will return them to you as soon as they are complete, Lady."

He leaves her alone in the chamber, standing in clothes that don't belong to her, in a world that doesn't want her. She breathes it in.

Just for now, she tells herself. Just until I have a way to fight back.

The dining hall is long, narrow, unnecessarily tall. A single obsidian table stretches down its center, inlaid with crimson veins and set with sharp-angled silverware that glints like blades. Candles hover in glass cylinders, flickering with red flames. The chairs are too upright. The walls too quiet. Even the shadows look arranged.

Serith lingers just outside the arched entryway, dressed in her new robes. Her shoulders itch beneath the heavy fabric. A servant stands beside her, middle-aged, calm.

"Your seat will be three places to Lord Palide's left," he whispers. "You do not eat before he does. You do not speak before he speaks. If you are spoken to, answer with formality." She nods. "Main fork on the left, secondary beside it. The main fork is for meat, this is for—"

"I'll figure it out." He pauses.

"I meant no offense, Lady." Her fingers twitch.

"I'm not offended, sorry. I'm just...working."

She can hear voices echoing from within the chamber: Palide's unmistakable drawl, and another she doesn't recognize. Deeper. Male. The servant offers a final adjustment to her collar.

"You are being introduced as his ward, not his kin. You will refer to him as Lord Palide unless he mentions your relation to him."

"I understand." The servant bows and steps aside. Serith takes a deep breath, and enters the room. Palide sits at the head of the table, draped in a new set of robes; richer fabric, embroidered with a subtle thread that shimmers when the candlelight shifts. Across from him lounges another man. A human, older, face marked with pale scarring. A Sith Lord, by the look of him. He lounges, one hand lazily circling a wine glass. His eyes light up when Serith enters.

"There she is," he says, voice light and coarse. "The little jungle pledge." Serith bows shallowly.

"My Lords." Palide doesn't look up.

"This is Serith, my ward. Serith, this is Lord Janrek, a good friend." Lord Janrek smiles, more to Palide than to Serith

"You're indulging yourself, Palide. Next thing I know, you'll be keeping strays." Palide gives Janrek a sidelong glance. They watch Serith take her seat. The first course arrives, some kind of garnished meat with a glossed surface. She reaches for a utensil, hesitates. Right or left fork? She goes for the one on the right.

"Wrong fork," Janrek chastises her from across the table. She switches silently. He leans in. "You know, if you're going to speak Basic, girl, you may want to enunciate more. Your accent is...barely decipherable." Serith blinks.

"I am speaking clearly."

"Sure you are," he replies, swirling his glass. "I've heard drunk spice smugglers with better dictation." Her jaw tenses at his smug smile.

"Then perhaps you should listen harder." Janrek grins.

"There's that fire. I was worried the polish might wear it out of you."

"I was told to mind my tongue," she says evenly, taking a sip of the wine. It stings her throat and dries her mouth.

"By who?" he asks. "That posh asshole?" Palide sets down his glass with a quiet clink.

"Janrek." The human raises his hands slightly, unbothered.

"Just having fun."

“She knows the stakes,” Palide says. “The leash is hers to test.” Serith clenches her hands around her utensils. She can feel every word on the tip of her tongue, coiled like a lash. She thinks of Ajid. Swallows them whole. Drops her gaze to her plate and starts cutting her meat. Janrek lets her be, watching like a child with a pinned insect. Then, as the second course arrives, he leans back and addresses Palide instead.

“You have to tell me what you thought of Shili. I imagine the humidity alone nearly killed you.” Palide takes a sip of wine.

“I’ve worn armor through volcanic siege zones with less discomfort. Mud, noise, bare feet. The whole place feels like an over-the-top simulation.”

“I assume you went with your guard.”

“No,” Palide says, “I went with my lightsaber. Only had to ignite it once.”

They both laugh softly. Serith chews and swallows, letting their words skim past her montrals. She doesn’t understand most of the references they make – governors, coups, a mining blockade in the Yarro system. But she catches the undertones. At one point, Janrek gestures vaguely toward her.

“Did she even know who you were when you arrived?”

“No,” Palide replies, “but she and her family knew to kneel.”

“They learn that in the jungle?”

“They learned it because they know the cost of refusing.”

Their plates are cleared. Serith keeps her hands folded as the next setting is placed in front of her.

“Too stiff,” Palide murmurs, eyes on his wine. She straightens, then regrets it almost immediately.

“Now you’re posing,” Janrek adds with a grin. Her throat tightens. She considers a thousand biting remarks, but catches herself before any of them pass her lips. Palide doesn’t miss it.

“I encourage silence,” he says, “but if you insist on speaking, make it worthwhile.”

There’s a long pause. Both her uncle and Janrek’s eyes fall onto Serith. Her next words are quiet and composed.

“I will let you know when I hear something worth responding to.”

Janrek leans back, laughing. Palide sneers at her.

“She has your fire, Palide,” he chuckles.

The rest of the meal passes without direct address. The conversation drifts to ships, apprentices, a recent assassination on Ziost that had proven unexpectedly dull. Serith sits in silence, mimicking their rhythms, adjusting her posture, learning the game by watching them play it.

The hall dims as the final candle gutters, snuffed by some unseen hand. Janrek stands with a smooth flourish, wine glass abandoned half-full.

“Well,” he says, stretching with idle pleasure, “that was charming. You’ll do well with her, Palide. Polish her just enough to glint.” He casts Serith a final, indulgent smile. “Don’t let cutlery ruin you, girl.” Palide doesn’t rise.

“Safe travels, Janrek.” Janrek dips into a mocking bow and sweeps out without waiting for escort. The door hisses closed behind him. Silence follows. Palide sips his wine.

“You held your tongue longer than I expected, niece.”

“I was listening.”

“Mm,” he sips. The candles are dimmed, the light throwing stark lines across his face. “You sat too stiffly.”

“I don’t want to slouch.”

“You want to look controlled, but you look braced.” A pause. He sets the glass down with soft finality. “You speak when prodded, but not too quickly. That’s good. Most children babble like they’re afraid the silence will eat them.”

Serith doesn’t answer. He studies her a moment longer.

“Your accent is noticeable. You’ll need to work on clarity. Enunciate. Be slower if you must, but always precise.” She nods once. “Janrek took interest in you. He’s rarely subtle, but he’s useful.”

“Is that why you let him speak to me like that?” The rest of the table is cleared by a servant neither of them acknowledge.

“I let him speak to you like that because I wanted to know how far you’d let him go.” A pause. “You did not disappoint.” She blinks.

“I wasn’t trying to impress him.”

“You weren’t trying to impress anyone,” he says. “Which is the only reason you might survive.” She doesn’t respond. He doesn’t need her to. “You have presence,” he adds. “That’s more than most in your position. Your tongue is sharp, so sharpen it further. And wait until it matters.”

“Yes, Uncle.” Palide reclines slightly in his chair. The silence settles again, barely comfortable.

“You’ll be sent to Korriban tomorrow,” he says casually. Serith’s throat tightens. She says nothing at first.

“To be trained?”

“To be tested,” Palide replies. “You’ll be inserted into the twelve-year-old cohort. The rest have been training since they could walk. You haven’t. That puts you at a disadvantage.”

“They’ll be better than me.”

“Smarter, faster, more practiced.” He takes another sip. “But not necessarily more desperate.”

“And that matters?” He looks at her like it’s a trick question.

“It matters to corpses, and to those who don’t wish to be one.” He sets the glass down again, slower this time. “They will try to kill you, not because it’s instructed. Because that’s the system. The Academy weeds out weakness by letting students remove it for themselves.” Serith’s fingers curl into her lap.

“If you’re clever, niece, you’ll learn fast.” Her breath catches.

“And if I don’t?” Palide stands smoothly.

“Then I was wrong to invest in you.” He turns to leave, then pauses. Looks back at her. “If you haven’t been taken as an apprentice by your thirteenth birthday, I’ll return to Shili and take your brother.” He doesn’t raise his voice or linger. “You bought him a year, that year ends with failure.”

The doors close behind him with a hiss. Serith remains at the long, too-quiet table, plate scraped clean, wine glass half-full, hands motionless. She waits until his footsteps fade, then stands, slowly, and begins memorizing everything she said wrong.

The Valley of the Dark Lords stinks of heat and death. The air hits Serith as she steps off the shuttle, thin and dry, hot enough to burn the inside of her nose. Wind sweeps across the landing pad in sharp, seething gusts, dragging red dust across her boots and up her new sleeves. It scratches her throat, lifts the hem of her robes, tries to strip them bare. She does her best to ignore it. The Sith Academy looms ahead, jagged and enormous, a pyramid of black stone carved into the canyon. It looks like it’s been there longer than time itself. An Overseers waits at the base of the ramp. He doesn’t introduce himself, just asks her name in a hushed voice.

“Serith Kav’i.”

He scans his datapad and raises an eyebrow.

“Cohort Seven. You’ll report to the dueling grounds in forty minutes.” That’s her welcome.

Inside, the Academy is colder than it looks. The air hangs thick, heavy with power and something more: blood soaked too deep into stone to ever be scrubbed out. Red light bleeds from the ceilings. Statues stare from the corners. She can feel the whole building watching her. The dormitory is a cracked stone box with iron cots jammed together and half the lights already flickering. Ten other acolytes look up when she walks in. None of them speak. A few stare, one laughs under his breath. She doesn’t respond. She picks a cot near the back wall, drops her satchel, and runs her fingers across the newly strung akul teeth along her collarbone.

The dueling chamber is circular, ancient, ringed with torches that make the sand beneath her boots look wet. Overseers stand around the ring like vultures. They call out a name opposite hers. A human. Tall. Broad. Confident. He grins when they call him. She doesn’t smile back.

A training saber is tossed her way. Light, humming, strange in her grip. She curls her fingers around it tightly. It has no weight, no real bite. She hates it immediately. An overseer raises his hand.

“Begin.”

The human lunges without hesitation; practiced and fast. She twists away from the first strike but not the second, which slices across her hip, just shallow enough to avoid her muscle. Pain blooms like heat through her ribs. She grits her teeth. He smirks.

“Dog.”

She doesn’t answer. He swings again, she ducks under it, closes the distance, and slams her shoulder into his gut. His breath leaves him. She pivots, kicks the back of his knee, and brings the saber down across his collarbone as he falls.

“Point to Kav’i.”

She steps back, blade humming in her grip. Her heart pounds so hard it hurts. Her vision pulses around the edges. Blood runs down her side in slow, hot lines.

She’d won.

Back in the dorm, no one looks her way or offers anything. Not respect, not challenge, not warning. Just silence. She claims her cot again and sits down. Sleep doesn’t find her. Not with the echo of the human’s smirk in her head. Not with her hip aching and her saber hand trembling. Not with Ajid’s eyes rising behind hers like a star she can’t reach.

One year. That’s what Palide gave her. One year to survive, to be chosen, to justify all of this. And she’d almost died on day one.

When the lights dim, when the others turn over and drift into uneasy sleep, Serith rises quietly. She takes the training saber from her satchel and steps into the shadowed corner near the stairwell. She doesn’t stretch, doesn’t breathe too deeply. She strikes over and over again. Each motion is jagged, improvised. Her footwork is wrong, blade edge off, balance flawed. She starts correcting it through repetition.

She trains until her hip burns and her shoulder aches and her lungs beg her to stop. She trains because she has no choice. Because Ajid is home, still breathing, still untouched, and that means she has no right to rest. Because every hour she keeps breathing could mean another inch of distance between him and Palide’s hand. Because if she dies, no one will carry her name back to him.

She trains until she can barely see, then she returns to her cot, lays flat, eyes wide open in the dark, and whispers her siblings’ names into the quiet until her body finally shuts down.

The Korriban sun is cruelest in the courtyards. Even in the shade of a ruined pillar, Serith feels sweat sticking her collar to her neck, grit working its way into every seam of her tunic. Her ribs ache from a morning duel that left her breathless and half-blind from a strike to her temple. She’d won. Barely. Again. Every win feels like she has to break something new just to get it.

The others have years. Drills. Forms. She has two weeks and a hunter's instinct, and the difference is starting to really sting. Her saber doesn't sit right in her hands; she grips it too tight, steps wrong. She tries to compensate with speed and stubbornness, but she can feel the edge closing in. Someday soon, that won't be enough.

She's trying to catch her breath between drills when the girl approaches.

"Your guard's collapsing by the third strike." Her voice is cool and unbothered. "Might've worked in a forest. Won't save you here." Serith turns slowly.

The girl is already standing in the shade like she owns it. She's taller than Serith by a hand, posture straight as a spear shaft. Her gray hair is tied back in a low, ruthless knot, and her pale face is marked with dark ritual ink, symbols too neat to be Sith. Her eyes are pale. Unreadable. Serith doesn't blink.

"Were you watching me?"

"Unfortunately," the girl sighs, folding her arms. "Hard not to. You swing like someone who's trying to carve a meal out of a duel." Serith exhales slowly.

"It worked."

"That kid had no footwork and a glass jaw. I could've knocked him over with a training remote."

"You're awfully arrogant for someone who hasn't offered a name." The girl gives Serith a half-smile.

"Ilya Venras," she says. "Nightsister. I've been here a while." Serith crosses her arms.

"Let me guess. You've been training since the womb."

"Eight," Ilya says. "But close." Serith gives her a noncommittal hum, jaw tight. The burn in her shoulder from the last match is flaring again, but she keeps her arms tightly crossed. Ilya's gaze flickers down, then up again. Measuring. "You've got instincts," she says, tone even. "It's your rhythm that's missing." Serith shrugs.

"I'm keeping up."

"For now." Her eyes narrow.

"Did you follow me out here just to critique me?"

"No," Ilya says. "I came for the quiet. Found you instead." She steps closer, into the same strip of shade. Their silhouettes cut sharp against the wall. "You're hunting with a blade that doesn't want to be a spear. You're adapting fast, I'll give you that, but you're still guessing." Serith bristles but doesn't deny it.

"I've seen worse guesses," the Nightsister hums, "but soon you're gonna run out of luck." Serith's silence is sharp-edged now. Calculated. Ilya watches her, reading the resistance. Then she leans back on her heels slightly, casual again. "I train in the upper ring after dinnertime. If you're interested." Serith's brow lifts, skeptical.

"You're offering to be an Overseer now?"

“No,” Ilya says, smirking. “They get paid. I’m just bored.” Serith doesn’t smile, but something in her posture eases, just slightly. She studies Ilya’s stance again. Light. Balanced. Trained.

“Fine,” Serith says. And just like that, Ilya turns to leave, steps efficient, presence already melting into the heat and dust.

It hasn’t broken by nightfall. Korriban’s moons hang low and red, casting long shadows across the Academy’s outer rings. The upper platform is mostly empty, too remote for most acolytes, too exposed for comfort. Which, Serith is learning, means it is one of the few places she can actually breathe. She climbs the slope in silence, boots scuffing against ancient stone. Sweat clings to the hollow of her back. Her robes are still damp from supper drills. A bruise is forming beneath her ribs from a blow she hadn’t dodged fast enough.

Ilya is already there. She stands in the center of the ring, blade drawn, stance sharp. She turns when Serith approaches.

“You came,” she says simply. Serith shrugs.

“Didn’t have anything better to do.” Ilya smirks.

“Lie better. I might believe you.” She takes up a form, holding the blade in both hands and spreading her legs to shoulder length. “This is Form I,” she says. “Shii-Cho. The basics. Everyone starts here.”

“I know the basics,” Serith mutters. Ilya gives her a sidelong glance but doesn’t rush to argument.

“It’s not about style,” she continues. “It’s about discipline. Center. Flow. When you swing like you’re trying to cleave through bark, you leave your ribs wide open. This teaches you how not to die when your first strike fails.” She demonstrates a sequence, fluid and minimal. Guard, sweep, block, recovery. Serith watches, then mimics it. Her grip is too tight, steps too heavy.

“Relax your back foot,” Ilya says. “You’re planting like a sprinter.” Serith adjusts. Tries again. “You hunt with your body.” The Nightsister walks slow circles around her. “This isn’t about instinct, it’s rhythm. Knowing where your blade will land before you move.” Serith glances sideways.

“This how Nightsisters fight?” Ilya’s eyes flicker to hers, unreadable.

“It’s how Sith fight.” They circle each other. Serith tries the sequence again, this time smoother. “You lean fast,” Ilya admits.

“I have to.”

“You always have to?” Serith doesn’t answer at first. Her voice is quiet when she finally gives.

“I made a deal. I get strong or my brother pays the price.” The girl stills in front of Serith.

“You what?”

“He’d die here,” Serith says, voice low. “He’s still suckling. I offered myself in his place.”

“You gave yourself up...for a brother?” Serith looks sideways, defensive but calm.

“Yeah.” Ilya blinks.

“Why?”

“I’m older. I can take it.”

“That’s...” Ilya starts, then trails off. “not how it works.”

“Not for you.”

“No.” Her voice softens. “Not for me.” They stand in silence for a few minutes. The wind kicks up dust across the platform. Serith resets her stance. Ilya does the same.

The continue drilling, blades humming in counterpoint. When they finally stop, the moons have drifted higher, shadows longer now. Sweat clings to Serith’s spine. Ilya leans on her blade, just enough to show she’s tired but not enough to admit it.

“You did alright,” she says, eyes scanning Serith’s frame. “Your grip’s still fighting you.”

“Everything’s fighting me.”

“That’s not always a bad thing.” A flicker of something passes between them. Amusement, maybe. Or respect. “Same time tomorrow?” Serith nods.

“Yeah.” Ilya turns to go, then pauses a second on the outskirts of the ring.

“For what it’s worth...he’s lucky.” Serith looks down at her blade.

“I know.”

The days bleed together into grit, bruises, breathless drills beneath a blood-orange sky. Serith wakes before the first bell, run forms until her feet blister, eats fast, fights faster. She loses most of her matches, then replays them over and over in her head, studying the places she slipped. Her peers have seven years behind them. She has instincts. And Ilya.

At first, their sessions are sharp and recurrent. The upper ring after supper. A sequence repeated until their shoulders ache. A correction delivered in clipped words. A quick nod. No thanks. Then they start eating together.

They don’t speak when others can hear them, they just sit shoulder to shoulder near the back wall of the mess hall. Serith grows used to the way Ilya slides second cups of broth into reach without comment. Once, she mutters a sharp joke under her breath about a loudmouth across the room and Serith chokes on her drink. Ilya doesn’t laugh, but her smirks stays until the meal ends.

It’s sometime around then Serith starts watching her more than she means to. She starts noticing things. How Ilya eats quickly but never messily, how she always ties her hair the same

way, how she moves during drills: not just cleanly but beautifully. Like she belongs there. Like she was born for this. Unlike Serith, who's clawing her way up with bloodied palms and borrowed time.

Her thirteenth birthday is four months away.

The nights stretch longer as the drills get harder. The herd of acolytes thins. Serith and Ilya start slipping out after curfew. Initially, it's just more training; stolen hours in the tomb courtyards where the moonlight paints long shadows through ancient pillars. Serith's palms tear open one night from gripping her blade too tight. Ilya wraps them in torn sleeve cloth without speaking. Later, as they cool down, Serith turns to the girl.

"You didn't have to do that," she says. Ilya doesn't look over.

"You'd bleed on your blade. Bad form."

"You care about form now?"

"I care about keeping you alive." Serith tries not to smile. She fails.

Sometimes, they don't train at all. They just sit on the stairs by the dueling ring, watching the moons drift and the torches burn low. One night, Serith asks, "Do you ever think about what'll happen to us after?" Ilya scoffs.

"After what?"

"This."

"Not really," the girl says. "I mean, there's no point to."

Serith doesn't answer. She thinks about after constantly. It's not just some distant dream, it's the next step. The deadline. The clock ticking behind her ribs.

Sometimes, she lies awake at night and imagines Palide's voice, imagines him stepping off the shuttle, saying, "*You weren't enough*," and reaching for Ajid's pudgy hand. She can't let that happen.

One night, after sparring, Ilya slumps beside her, closer than usual. Their knees touch. She doesn't pull away. Serith doesn't either.

"Your guard's getting tighter," Ilya says, flicking a pebble off the sandstone stairs.

"Your footwork's still lazy."

"You're just mad I landed that hit."

"I let you." Ilya snorts.

"You tripped."

"I let myself trip."

"You're the worst liar I've ever met." Serith grins without meaning to. Ilya notices. Her smile fades into something quieter.

“You okay?” she asks.

“Yeah,” Serith says, taking a deep breath. Ilya nudges her shoulder.

“Still breathing,” she says softly. “That counts for something.”

Serith finds herself lingering a little longer at their table in the mess hall. Walking a little slower beside her after drills. Noticing the shape of Ilya’s laugh when it breaks through her usual calm like a cracked bell. She doesn’t quite understand the feeling in her chest and cheeks whenever her friend smiles, but she knows it makes everything hurt a little less. And it terrifies her, in a way Palide never has.

The Academy feels different the next day. It’s quiet. A cold, stretched silence that settles across the halls like dust after a storm. Overseers move faster. Conversations cut off the moment footsteps echo too close. Even the mess hall feels dimmer, like the shadows are watching back. Serith hears the first whispers over a cracked spoonful of broth that morning.

“A Sith Lord arrived last night.”

She doesn’t look up. She knows how to listen with hands still moving.

“Not just a Lord, an alchemist. One of the weird ones.” Ilya’s beside her, methodically peeling bread apart. She doesn’t glance up, but Serith can feel her attention shift.

“She came alone. Walked right through the upper wing like it belonged to her.”

“She’s here to take an apprentice,” someone else says, voice low. Serith’s gut tightens. Her spoon halts midair. Ilya breaks the silence between them, voice barely above a whisper.

“How long?” Serith doesn’t need to ask what she means.

“Four months.” Ilya gives a small nod.

“Then we get you chosen.” Serith blinks, the words sharper than she expected.

“We?”

“You didn’t think I was teaching you just for fun, did you?”

“Yeah, kind of.” Ilya stands.

“Come on.”

“It’s morning.”

“I’m aware.” Serith hesitates, then rises. Her legs are already sore, shoulders already aching. None of it matters. She doesn’t know what a Sith Alchemist looks for in an apprentice. Brilliance? Brutality? Obedience? But she knows how to be seen. She’s going to make damn sure she is.

With the Alchemist’s arrival, the cohort erupts. Every acolyte with delusions of power starts posturing; fighting harder, louder, meaner. Every match becomes a performance. Serith and Ilya start pushing. Hard.

First, it's defensive. Countering every acolyte who corners Serith during drills. Then, it's deliberate. Targeted. Ilya whispers names to Serith before each fight, details weaknesses like she's reading prey patterns from a blood map. Serith listens. Learns. Hits first. Some of the fights are sanctioned. Most aren't.

There's a moment near the start of week two when a boy from one of the older cohorts corners her near the supply hall, flanked by two others. Ilya steps up beside her before he finishes threatening them. Serith doesn't remember the rest of the conversation, only that when it was over, the boy is on the ground, dead, and Ilya is cleaning her blade on her robes, muttering, "Told you his balance was trash."

It spreads.

By the end of the month, the whispers shift. They're not about the Alchemist anymore. They're about Serith.

"She's picking off challengers."

"She's trying to clear a path."

They're right. Time is bleeding out. Four months becomes three, then two and a half. The pressure lives in her chest now, like a second heart. She's going to become that Alchemist's apprentice, or she's dying in the process.

It's Ilya who suggests forging a lightsaber. They're sitting beneath a lower tomb archway, a half-dead torch flickering above them, both of them scraped and sweating from another unofficial match. Serith cradles her burned palm. Her vibroblade sits on the floor between them.

"You need a real weapon," Ilya says.

"I have one."

"No. You've got that piece of shit." She nods toward the training saber like it's something that personally offends her. "If she calls on you tomorrow, you think that'll impress her?" Serith goes quiet.

"We're supposed to wait until we're graduated to get lightsabers." Ilya shrugs.

"We can make our own."

"How?" The Nightsister stands, brushing dust from her robes.

"We'll figure it out."

They start gathering parts in secret. A cracked emitter salvaged from a droid storage cache. A discarded focusing lens from the overseers' workshop. A power cell that only hums if you wire it backward. None of it is elegant, but it fits. They borrow soldering tools from the supply wing, patch wires from old vibroblade grips. Ilya carves stabilizing etchings into the hilt's inner housing with a bone-handled knife and a quiet prayer in Dathomiri. Serith doesn't understand the words, but she listens.

It's careful work. Rough work. The kind of forging made work by desperation and calloused hands. By the end of the second week, they've built the shell of a weapon. It's heavy.

Blunt. Solid. Serith cradles it in both hands in the silence of their makeshift workshop: a sealed-off tomb chamber, lit only by red glowrods and handheld lamps.

“We need a crystal,” Serith says. Ilya nods.

“Then we find one.”

“Where?”

“There’s only one in this Academy that matters.”

They don’t say his name. A boy, older. Eighteen, maybe nineteen. He’s already passed three trials. The acolytes talk about him like he’s untouchable. They say the Alchemist’s been watching him since the day she landed. Serith stares down at the empty core of her saber. Her hands tighten around it.

“We take him off the board.”

They don’t rush it, they prepare. It takes two days to get close enough. The older acolyte is strong, smarter than most, cocky but not careless. He’s in her way.

She trails him between drills. Notes the pattern of his movement. His stops, where he trains, where he sleeps. Where he shaves. She finds a handful of wiry black strands caught on the bristles of a shared comb. She wraps them carefully in cloth, tucks them into her belt, and slips out after lights-out. Ilya lights a fire in the tomb alcove they use as a meeting ground. She draws a circle in ash and bloodroot, paints a line down Serith’s knuckles, another over her brow.

“This’ll only work for a minute,” she warns, placing the last pin into the effigy’s joint. “Two, if you’re lucky.”

“That’s all I need.”

Ilya holds a crude doll between her palms. It’s made of bone-splinter and cloth, stitched tight with gut string, and now his hair, wrapped around the base of its throat.

“You sure you can take him?”

“He’s the one they’ll pick. If I don’t kill him, they’ll never see me.” Ilya nods once.

“Then we do this right.”

They wait until his routine pulls him toward the western tombs again. He comes alone, as always. Overconfident. Lose in his grip. Saber in hand, humming with red fire. He’s mid-sequence when Serith steps into view.

“Kav’i,” he sneers, turning her way. “What a pleasure.” She doesn’t answer, only pulls out her vibroknife. He stalks closer. “You don’t get it, do you? This isn’t a fight you can win. You’re a filler name. A footnote.”

He charges her. Behind the pillar, Ilya twists the doll’s wrist. The boy’s arm spasms. His swing veers wide. Serith takes the opportunity to slip inside his guard. She lunges, not straight, not head-on. Curved, like a predator. He swings again. Ilya jabs the doll’s shoulder. His saber

jerks downward too fast. He overcorrects, loses his balance. Serith slashes low with her vibroblade, carving across his thigh. He tries to turn, she meets him head on. Plunges the blade into his chest and rips it free in one clean, final arc. He drops. The doll burns in Ilya's hands, curling into ash as its usefulness ends.

Serith doesn't blink until the silence catches up with her. Until his breath doesn't come back. The blood on her hands feels no different than it did when she was seven, standing over her first Akul. When the beast goes still, you cut out what you came for.

Ilya steps forward, already dismantling the saber hilt. She cracks it open with calm fingers. The kyber crystal is red, bright and cracked. Serith doesn't speak. They watch it glow in Ilya's palm, not like a prize, but a fang. Pulled from the mouth of the beast they brought down.

His body's found by morning. They don't hide it. Whispers bloom before the second bell. Serith doesn't say anything when the Overseers glance her way during drills. She doesn't flinch when they murmur to one another, or when her name is spoken under breath. She just waits. Her saber hangs on her belt. Heavy. Real. It hums differently when she touches it, like it knows who she had to kill to finish it.

Two nights later, a black-robed attendant finds her outside the mess hall.

"You are to report to the upper chamber at sunset," he says. "Lord Delrith requests your presence." He doesn't wait for her answer. He doesn't need to.

Serith stands in the courtyard long after he leaves, hands curled into fists, wind biting against her knuckles. Ilya steps up beside her.

"Is this it?" she asks. Serith's throat feels too dry to answer. "I'll be there when you're done," she adds. Serith nods once, then turns toward the stairway that leads to the heart of the Academy. Toward her future.

The upper chamber is warm. Too warm. Not the kind that invites, but the kind that swallows. Serith steps through the metal doorway alone. The doors seal behind her with a hiss.

Darth Delrith is waiting, standing by a long bone-inlaid table, draped in black and deep red, sleeves pinned with bone clasps that gleam like teeth. Her skin is crimson, marbled with old alchemical scars that crawl from her jaw up past her right eye. Two large circles, the memories of horns, pierce her forehead. She studies Serith a minute as she stands at attention in the door.

"You're a Kav'i." Serith answers carefully.

"Yes."

"His ward?"

"Yes."

"Bullshit." Delrith moves forward, slowly. "You're blood. I see it in the jaw. The posture. The need to prove."

“He didn’t want that known.” The Sith circles her, fingers brushing lightly over Serith’s sleeve, inspecting the fabric, the cut, the way it fits her frame. She lifts the hem of the sleeve, pushes it high to expose muscle and faint bruises. She reaches for Serith’s lekku next, trailing one gloved hand down the curve of it gently.

“He did always hate being reminded where he came from.” Serith doesn’t move. Her jaw is tight. She doesn’t speak. Delrith stops in front of her again. “I knew him,” she says, “Back when we were both apprentices. He wanted to be obeyed. To be envied.” She tilts her head, eyes narrowing as a smile crawls its way across her cheeks. “You scare him. Not because of what you are. Because you might embarrass him.” Serith swallows.

“I’m not trying to—”

“Spare me,” Delrith interrupts. “You want to perform because he told you that’s what you want.” Delrith doesn’t wait for a response. She walks slowly back to the table and lifts a strip of black silk from a case. She sets it neatly on the table beside a glass flask filled with red-gold liquid that moves too slowly to be natural. “You want a master. You’ll have one.”

She turns back to face Serith. Her eyes gleam. “You’ll wear what I give you, present how I require. Lean when to speak and when to smile.” A pause. She takes a step toward Serith. “You will be mine. Utterly.”

Serith doesn’t respond. Delrith steps in close, watching her face. “You understand what that means.”

It’s not a question. Serith’s voice is thin as she forces it to escape her closing throat.

“Yes.” Delrith reaches up and touches Serith’s jaw. She tilts it slightly, just enough to examine the light in her eyes.

“Good,” she murmurs. “You’ll make him furious.”

She lets go, then turns back to the table.

“You’ll begin tomorrow. Enjoy your last night as an acolyte.”

The sky above Korriban is the color of cooling coals. It’s cloudy, the stars hidden behind a low boil of clouds cut now and then by the sandy wind. Serith sits on the edge of the ruined courtyard wall, legs drawn up, saber across her knees. The hilt feels new, sharp, like it hasn’t learned how to rest in her hand yet. A draft brushes her jaw and tugs at the hem of her tunic.

Footsteps crunch behind her. Light. Familiar. Ilya drops down beside her, uninvited. She doesn’t need an invitation. Her hair is loose tonight, wild from the wind. She smells like ash, old leather, and something bitter: whatever salve the medics are hoarding in their flasks. Neither of them say anything for a long time. Then Ilya shifts on her seat.

“She picked you,” she says, not quite a question. Serith nods. “Congratulations.” Her tone is hard to pin: not cold, not jealous, just... resigned. Serith runs her thumb along a groove in the saber hilt.

“She knew about Palide.”

“Of course she did.”

They lapse into quiet again. Down below, the tomb grounds are still. The wind shifts dust across the sandstone like it’s trying to cover something.

“I should feel lucky,” Serith says eventually. “This is what I wanted.”

“Is it?” Serith glares at her friend. The Nightsister meets her gaze. “Do you want it?”

She doesn’t answer right away.

“I don’t want Ajid to suffer like this.” Ilya nods.

“Then you’ll survive.” Her words land heavier than any promise. Their shoulders brush. They don’t move apart.

“You think she’ll hurt you?”

“She won’t have to.” Serith looks down at her hands. “I’ve nothing left but myself to offer her.” Ilya doesn’t flinch. She leans back on her palms, looking up at the dark sky. Her voice softens.

“You’ll always be mine, Serith.”

Serith pauses. Not because she disagrees, but because it is the only thing that really does feel like it belongs to her. Palide, Delrith, they all selected her. Curated her. Ilya...she picked. Serith turns toward her slowly.

“Say that again.”

Ilya doesn’t. She just leans in.

They don’t kiss like it’s urgent, they kiss like it’s inevitable. Like something they’ve been working their way toward for months. Serith closes her eyes and lets it happen. She takes in everything that’s hers.

Later, when they’re lying beneath the shattered overhand, Ilya’s fingers trailing faint patterns across Serith’s facial markings, Serith watches the slow-moving sky. She’ll be handed off tomorrow. But, right now, Ilya’s breath is warm against her collarbone. She can’t find it in herself to brace or feel for her future self. She just feels held.

The sun rises too fast the next morning, bladed and red. Serith doesn’t eat. She doesn’t train. She’s called straight from her quarters to the upper chambers, where the light is filtered through thick glass and everything smells faintly of incense and copper.

Delrith waits with a crate. Matte back, a foot long. Polished. Sealed with a lock that opens as Serith steps close. Inside it is cloth. Dark, red-tinted silk. A dress.

“Take off the uniform,” she says calmly. “It’s not yours anymore.” Serith hesitates, not long but long enough. Delrith tilts her head. “Try to humor me, Apprentice.”

Serith reaches for the fastenings of her tunic. Peels it off, slowly. Mechanically. Like shedding a molt she never meant to outgrow. She sets the pieces aside, layer by layer. When she stands bare, the air feels cold against her skin, the stone floor harder than before. Delrith assesses her. Every scar, every line of muscle. She walks circles around her apprentice before finally handing the dress over.

“You’ll need to learn to walk in that,” she murmurs. “With purpose, ease. As if you were born in it.”

The fabric clings. It’s low at the neck, high at the thigh. It leaves too much skin exposed: shoulders, collarbone, the curve of her back. She adjusts it twice. The third time, Delrith slaps her hand away sharply.

“No one trusts a woman who fusses with her image,” she says. Serith’s voice is hoarse.

“Why?”

“Because you’re a girl in a world ruled by men who think they rule themselves,” Delrith replies. “And there is no sharper blade than a body well-honed.” Serith doesn’t respond. Her hand finds the necklace of Akul teeth she wears around her throat. The gold chain and inlay match the dress like flowers on a grave.

They leave Korriban by mid-afternoon. There’s no ceremony, no goodbyes. Ilya doesn’t come to see her off. Serith doesn’t blame her. The shuttle is sharp-lined and silent inside. Serith sits with her saber across her knees, the silk fabric wrinkled under her legs, posture too stiff to be elegant. Delrith doesn’t speak for most of the flight. She sips from a silver flask, reviews dossiers on a datapad, and hums under her breath. When the towers of Dromund Kaas rise from the stormclouds, she finally stirs.

“You’ll live at my estate,” she says, taking a sip. “You’ll be given clearance to two private rooms and the main parlor. The rest of the estate is off limits.” Serith watches her master with placated eyes.

“Two rooms? Why?”

“One for you to live in,” Delrith says, “and one for you to be seen in.”

She doesn’t explain. She doesn’t have to. Serith’s hand curls around the silk.

The estate is a palace of stone and sharp light. Its walls are engraved with gold runes and framed with black drapes. The windows are trimmed with gold. The servants wear silk gloves and speak only when spoken to. Serith is led to her quarters by a mute girl in mirrored bracelets. The first room is plain. A bed, a desk, a training mat. The second room is different: painted, furnished, perfumed. A wardrobe already filled with dresses in red, black, and gold. Jewelry boxes, satin gloves, powders and glosses. A full length mirror with a seat before it.

Serith doesn’t dare touch any of it. She stands in the doorway and breathes shallowly. Her saber weighs more than usual on her back. Her Akul teeth feel out of place.

That night, she stands by the hearth, arms at her side, dressed in black silk. The mirror behind her reflects only parts: her shoulder, her hip, the sharp line of her collarbone. She stares at the wall instead. Her breath is shallow.

She hadn't been given instruction. No one told her what it would feel like, what she should say, how she should stand. All Delrith had said was "*Be still, soft, and quiet,*"

The door opens behind her. She doesn't turn. There's the sound of boots on fabric. The slow drift of a cloak set aside. Then quiet.

"You're nervous," the voice says. Low. Calm. Serith doesn't respond. He steps closer, slowly, practiced. She wonders how many others have stood where she does now, waiting.

"It's alright," he says gently. "You don't have to say anything." She stills further, breath locked behind her teeth.

"You're beautiful," he murmurs. "Delrith chooses well." The words land like frost on her skin. He moves to stand behind her, watches their reflections in the mirror. She's rigid, wide-eyed. He is calm. Pleased. Composed.

"You don't have to be afraid of me," he adds, as if that's meant to be reassuring. She doesn't answer. Can't move. He touches her, lightly. His hand rests at the small of her back.

"It's your first time," he says like a secret shared between them. "That's okay." She nods. Once. Her voice barely finds her,

"I don't know how."

"You don't have to," he assures her. "I'll take care of it."

She lets him guide her. She doesn't know what else to do. The parts of her body he claims burn, then numb. Her thoughts shrink. Her fingers dig into the silk of the bed. Her eyes fix on a single point of shadow on the floor and stay there. The world narrows. Time drags. Each second stretches out like a corridor with no doors. She walks them, barefoot, until even the sound of her own breath feels like it belongs to someone else.

He whispers to her. Nothing crude. Comfort. "*You're doing well. That's it. Just like that.*"

When it's over, he helps her sit. Pulls the silk over her shoulder. Kisses her cheek like she's a favorite servant, then leaves.

She sits for a long time. Alone. The mirror catches her face. Her eyes are dull, mouth smeared, lekku hanging ajar. She doesn't see herself. She doesn't feel real. The silence wraps around her like smoke. Her hands are clenched in her lap. The silk bunches beneath her palms. Her shoulders shake. She doesn't cry, but she doesn't breathe right either. A minute passes. Then another. The door opens again.

It's not him, but two servants, women in pale robes, in their early forties. Their faces are lined from endurance. They move with practiced efficiency, eyes softening when they land on her. She shut the door behind them. One exhales gently.

"Alright, darling, let's get this off you." Serith blinks.

They help her stand. The black dress slips from her shoulders, puddles at her feet.

“She’s still shaking,” one murmurs.

“First time,” the other replies, barely above a whisper. They clean her slowly, speaking only to guide. The water is warm. The clothes soft. One woman hums under her breath, an old tune with no name. Serith doesn’t ask.

They wipe her lekku like she’s a child, rub balm into her wrists and shoulders, adjust the Akul teeth with careful, reverent hands.

“Let’s get you to the fresher,” one says. “Come now, sweetheart. You don’t want an infection.” Serith follows. Her body moves, but her mind stays curled in a tight, breathless corner. When she returns, they have a fresh dress waiting: silk again, softer, golden at the hem. They dress her like she’s glass. One buttons the back, the other pulls a blanket around her shoulders. They kneel beside her. One wipes the smeared gloss from her mouth. The other holds her hand.

“You did what you had to,” she says.

“You’re not dirty,” the other adds. “You’re just young.”

The door clicks open and they straighten immediately, falling silent. Delrith enters in full regalia, high-collared and sharp-edged, eyes sweeping the room like an executioner. She doesn’t acknowledge the women, only Serith.

“Stand,” she says coolly. Serith rises. Delrith circles her once, inspecting her posture, her skin, her silence.

“You held up,” she says, voice devoid of warmth. “Good.” She reaches forward. Adjusts one of the Akul teeth at Serith’s collar, not unkindly, but not gently either.

“This is how it will be. Often. You will have 15 minutes’ warning, typically.” Serith doesn’t flinch. Delrith’s voice drops, a cruel softness finding its place.

“You wanted to be noticed, yes? Now you are.” She turns and walks away. The door hisses shut behind her. One of the servants places a hand on Serith’s shoulder. She threatens herself with an Akul tooth to her throat if she starts crying.

By the end of her first year, Serith learns the rhythm. Mornings begin with saber drills. Delrith doesn’t train like the instructors on Korriban. She doesn’t explain footwork or forms, just circles Serith in silence, corrects her stances with the flat of her hand. One mistake earns 15 repetitions. Two earns a slap. Three, a dismissive wave: “Come back when you’re worth my time.” Serith rarely makes three.

Afternoons are for the other curriculum. One of the older women, a former consort now employed as an instructor teaches Serith posture, footwork, dances. Another teaches her to sing; which tones catch attention, which vibrato to use when she’s meant to sound haunting, reverent, or pliant. Her voice becomes a tool. So does her body. By the second year, she’s given a place

among Delrith's estate performers, called upon to sing or dance at feasts, in the cellar halls, during rites. Always seen, rarely acknowledged.

Evenings belong to the work. There's a knock on the door, a servant with a name. A time. Fifteen minutes' warning, sometimes less. Her servants help her change: each gown tighter, each layer meant to be shed quickly. They clean her, paint her mouth, straighten the Akul teeth strung around her throat and atop her forehead. They never ask if she's ready. After, they clean her.

Sometimes, not often but enough, Delrith gives her a different instruction.

"This one cannot leave the room."

Serith knows what she means.

It's never planned in detail. No tools are provided, just Serith's lightsaber and the opportunity.

Sometimes she kills them before they can pull out, while their focus is elsewhere, when they've let themselves believe her moans mean safety. Other times, she waits until after, when they're cleaning up. Standing at the basin, relaxed. Disarmed. She makes it clean when she can. Quiet, always.

The handmaidens know. They clean up with different rags after. Wash the sheets in silence. No one speaks of it.

Late nights, if she does well, she is invited to the cellar to learn alchemy. The only place Delrith speaks like a teacher is at the ritual table. She teaches slowly. Cuts no corners. Allows Serith to ask questions, though never the same one twice. She learns to bind flesh, to purify toxin, to diagram curses so precisely that they could be etched into fingernail. She finds control in alchemy. Precision. Power she doesn't have to borrow from her body. She learns to like the way her fingers blacken from ashroot. How to grind salts without spilling. How to love the quiet, because the quiet means no one watching her.

Three years pass in that rhythm. She is twelve when she first kneels for Delrith. She's barely sixteen when she stops thinking of herself as a girl at all. Her body changes, fills out. Curves where there weren't curves before, sharp lines where softness used to be. Her walk changes, her voice lowers, her lekku thicken and lengthen. She doesn't feel older, just better decorated.

She learns to dress herself before anyone else can, to hold eye contact until her clients look away first, which songs disarm rooms, which parts of her appearance make them forget what they were about to say. She uses all of it. Delrith calls it progress.

No message ever comes, not from Ilya, not from Palide. That silence should be a relief. She told herself this would work, that giving herself away would buy Ajid time. But as the years drag on, the silence feels less like success and more like being buried alive. She prays he still sleeps under Shili's moons.

Her dreams shift. She stops dreaming of Shili, of her siblings, of the wind through the grass. She sees herself, walking down corridors in silk with no expression. Waking in beds she doesn't remember crawling into. Mixing blood into glass bowls. Smiling on command.

She's in control. She's in control. She has to be.

She gets better with the blade. Still not a true duelist, she was trained too late for that, but she's fast. Predicts better. Cuts cleaner. Sharpens herself in every sense: body, posture, tongue. Delrith teaches her to hold a man's gaze while hurting him. To wear beauty like a sheath. To make silence feel like dominance. She believes her. She has to. If power lives in her body, then at least she owns something.

Each morning, her handmaidens lace her up. Each evening, they pull gold jewelry from her montras. They call her darling, wipe her eyes when she forgets not to cry.

The summons come two weeks after her sixteenth birthday. A new dress waiting, midnight silk that clings like promise, the hem etched in gold. Her handmaidens don't speak as they cinch the bodice, paint her lips in lacquered crimson, polish the Akul teeth at her collar and forehead. Serith doesn't ask what is happening, she already knows.

Delrith enters like always, without preamble, already dressed in sleek gray robes lined with alchemical script. She adjusts Serith's necklace with a gloved hand.

"You'll attend a gala tonight, with me." Serith nods once. "Palide will be there," she adds, tone light. "Make him proud." Serith doesn't speak, but her throat tightens.

The Imperial citadel gleams like a scar under stormlight, polished durasteel and rain-slick banners, crimson hanging heavy in the atrium air. A colossus of metal and memory. Thunder cracks like applause beyond the skyline. Serith steps from the shuttle, trailing silk. Her saber hangs ceremonially at her hip. Her dress fits like strategy. Black and gold, slit high enough to invite interest, cut sharp enough to suggest danger. Delrith barely pauses. She's greeted by a trio of Sith alchemists near the dais and disappears into their murmured conversation without a glance back. Serith doesn't follow. She's not here to observe, she's here to be seen.

The anniversary of the Empire's founding draws every kind of predator. Nobles, warlords, ministers, rising Sith and their curious sponsors. Their eyes find her fast: Delrith's apprentice. Palide's blood. House Kav'i reborn in silk and sabermetal. Serith moves through them like a tactician. She joins a table with three minor House lords, all sons or uncles of someone irrelevant. They stop speaking when she arrives. One offers her a seat. She takes it. Within minutes, they're leaning in. One tries to start up conversation about her master. Another tries to impress her with knowledge of binding rituals. She lets them speak. Asks a question or two: sharp and genuine, and listens to their answers with her chin propped lightly on her hand. He grows louder, more eager. His hand rests close to hers. She doesn't pull away.

A senator's heir passes by and does a double take. She beckons him without moving her hand; just a glance.

They gather around her. Not because she's Delrith's, but because she speaks rarely enough, cleverly enough to make them want more. Because she touches their sleeves when they flatter her and lets her gaze rest a little too long. Because she asks the one question each man secretly wants to be asked.

The minor lords love her. The sons of bureaucrats pass her drinks. She's halfway through a teasing comment about ritual bloodletting when she feels the shift. A silence too practiced to be polite. A presence too heavy to ignore. Serith turns, and sees him.

He moves like he owns the space between his footsteps. Draped in slate-gray robes trimmed with scarlet, the Dark Council insignia gleaming at his collarbone. His hair is greying, neatly combed, face all austerity, sharpened by years. She's seen him before. Unrobed. Silent. One hand at her throat. She never learned his name. Now, he walks straight toward her.

She doesn't move, but the men at her table part like fabric torn down the seam. She keeps her glass steady, mouth even.

"Apprentice Kav'i," he says, inclining his head. "A pleasure."

"My Lord," she replies evenly. He offers her a hand.

"Lord Vieron, Dark Council Sphere of Diplomacy and Expansion." Serith's lips part slightly, but her eyes don't change.

"An honor," she says, voice silken. He gestures gently to a side corridor as if asking for a favor.

"A walk? I promise to return you safe." She considers him a moment, then steps beside him.

They walk at an unhurried pace. Behind them, the buzz of the atrium fades. The corridor is high, arched, trimmed in old Republic marble. A display of wealth stolen long ago. Vieron says nothing at first, just walks with his hands clasped behind his back.

"You've risen well." Serith gives him a glance.

"I wasn't aware I'd fallen." He smiles, graciously.

"Forgive me, I only meant to say that it is rare to see someone come through Delrith's sphere with that much clarity intact."

"I clean up well."

"I recall." Her mouth goes still, as does her gaze. He doesn't pause. "I always admired how composed you were. You knew what was expected of you, and made it...artful."

"You give me far too much credit, Lord Vieron. I only did as instructed."

"That makes it no less impressive."

They reach a curve in the hall. Lanternlight paints the stone in blood-orange. He stops beside a recessed archway, offering no command. Serith stops beside him.

"You've earned options, Apprentice Kav'i." She crosses her arms lightly, using it to prop her breasts up.

"Have I?" He chuckles slightly.

“You have. I am prepared to buy out your apprenticeship.” She raises an eyebrow. A smirk graces his thin lips. “I have influence with Lord Delrith. Enough to make this transition easy for both of you.” Serith takes a sip of her champagne and sets it down on a marble rail.

“You mean to say you’ll free me from one leash so I can wear yours.” His eyes narrow.

“I mean to offer you elevation.”

“You mean to strip me of my proximity to Palide,” she says. “I know where you sit.” He doesn’t deny it. She takes a step toward him, allowing one shoulder to drop. “I know what it means when a man like you asks for me in private,” she continues. “What part of my resume do you find most compelling? The alchemy? The hunting? Or the part where I keep my mouth shut as to let you indulge your own moans?” His nose crinkles.

“You’re sharp, Apprentice Kav’i,” he says.

“You paid for sharp,” she replies. “Don’t act surprised.” A pause.

“I could make you a Sith Lord by the end of the year.” She laughs. Soft. Deadly.

“Don’t indulge me, my Lord. You could polish me up, walk me around council chambers like a pretty pet. Whose lord would I be?” Her eyes flash. “I’d rather win my title.” He studies her for a moment, then nods once, like noting a piece on a board he’ll come back for.

“Very well. At the very least, consider my interest,” he says. “Lord Delrith knows, as do I.”

“I will consider your request,” she says, stepping back toward the atrium. “Once I’ve forgotten what you look like underneath all that regalia.”

She doesn’t wait for permission to step back into the crowd.

The invitation comes in a whisper, from one of the Emperor’s black-armored guards. He leans in close, speaks four words: Lord Palide requests you.

Serith goes still. Her breath catches in her throat. It’s time. Finally. Four long years since she saw him last, four years since she was sent to Korriban. Four years since she heard his voice not in memory but through her montrals.

She composes herself in a blink and follows the guard.

The private chamber is high up in the Palace, paneled in black durasteel and trimmed with crimson. Rain lashes against the windows. Lightning blooms on the horizon. Serith stands just inside the threshold, watching her uncle pour himself a drink. He looks...settled. Older than she remembers, but solid in a way that unnerves her. She takes a deep breath. Steadies her voice.

“Uncle,” she says, tone silky smooth. “I hear you ascended.” Palide turns to face her, a brown raising.

“You keep informed, niece.”

“It was all over the broadcasts. ‘Dark Councilmember Palide, Sphere of Production and Logistics. Bit long of a title.’ He gives her a look that might be approval.

“I hear Lord Delrith hasn’t gotten you killed yet.” He gestures toward the decanter. “Drink?” Serith hesitates.

“I’m on duty, my Lord.”

“So was I, once,” he says, and pours her a glass anyway. “Sit.”

She does. They drink. Not comfortably, but civilly.

“You’ve proven yourself,” Palide says after a pause. “Enough that I’m willing to bring you back in. You’ve outlived your usefulness to Delrith anyway. I want you overseeing the Kav’i estate; I’ve inherited my former master’s holdings near Kaas City. I don’t trust bureaucrats with the estate. I need someone who understands and respects legacy.” Serith raises an eyebrow.

“You’re offering me a job?”

“I’m offering you purpose,” he says. “An anchor. You’d carry weight, not just Delrith’s perfume.” Her throat tightens at the phrasing.

“I’ll consider it,” she says quietly, taking another sip. Palide blinks slowly.

“Consider quickly, niece.” Serith stands, setting her drink down.

“If I agree, return to man the estate, will I get to see them?” Palide doesn’t look up. After a moment of silence, she presses again. “Ajid. My mother. The village.”

“No.” She stills.

“Why not?”

“Because I said no.”

“You promised—”

“I made no such promise.” Her voice sharpens.

“What else do you want, Uncle? I bled for you, cut myself open for you, gave myself to Delrith for you!”

“And I regret it,” he growls. “I should’ve never let that witch claim you. You were supposed to be a warrior, not a whore with a lightsaber.”

Serith’s whole body goes still.

“Say that again,” she says, voice shaking.

“You heard me.”

“I’m happy,” she snarls. “You just hate to see me comfortable, don’t you?”

“I hate what you’ve become.”

“I’m strong.”

“You’re spoiled. Painted like a gift and passed around like a cup.”

“You gave me no other choice! One year to get a master, and you’re upset I didn’t land a Councilmember? I do what I need to survive!” Palide slams the glass of liquor down, hard enough to crack it. He stands, now only a head or so taller than her.

“You’re a Kav’i, Serith, and you chose to strut around like a bitch in heat.”

“Then you shouldn’t have let her take me!”

“I should have burned your cradle.”

The silence that follows is brutal. Palide’s hand arcs clean across her face, open-palm, cold and final. She stumbles. Hits the floor. Her vision blurs. He stands over her.

“You have until the end of the month,” he says flatly. “Kill Delrith. Ascend. Become a warrior.” His voice drops. “Or I’ll return to Shili myself and burn that pathetic clearing you called a home until the only blood you have left is mine and ash.”

He turns. Struts out of the room. Leaves her shaking on the floor, blood trailing down her chin.

She doesn’t cry right away. She stares at the door. The cracked glass. Her own reflection in the black floor. And, finally, when the silence holds long enough, she presses both hands to her mouth and screams.

The slap echoes in her bones long after the sound fades. She doesn’t remember leaving the chamber, doesn’t remember walking back into the lights. All she knows is she’s gliding, face smoothed, posture perfect, through the thunder-lit halls of the Imperial gala like a porcelain figure. She smiles. Nods. Even laughs once. It all sounds foreign in her ears.

The music plays. Silver trays pass. Her fingertips curl around another glass of wine without thinking. It tastes like nothing. Delrith finds her near the eastern overlook, speaking to a senator’s nephew. The Devaronian’s expression is unreadable. Pleased, maybe. Satisfied.

“Enough,” she says gently, placing a hand on Serith’s back. “We’ve made our impressions.” Serith follows without a word.

The shuttle ride back to Delrith’s estate is quiet. Delrith drinks something clear and expensive. Serith watches the lightning rake the horizon. She doesn’t know she’s speaking until the words leave her mouth.

“When will I ascend?”

“To Warrior?” Delrith asks, lazily. “Not for a while.” Serith’s stomach twists.

“Why?”

“You’re useful now,” Delrith says. “You haven’t mastered my rites, you’re still learning how to wield your power.” Her throat tightens.

“Palide spoke to me,” she says quietly. Delrith’s expression flattens instantly.

“Of course he did.” She waves a hand like brushing dust. “He wants you back, doesn’t he? Now that you’re presentable. Typical. Men like him only value what they don’t have.”

Serith doesn’t respond. Delrith gives her a long look.

“You’re better off without him.”

Serith’s hands curl in her lap. The rest of the shuttle ride passes in silence. When they land, Delrith disappears into her study. Serith climbs the stairs alone. The door to her room shuts with a soft click. The sound is deafening, followed by hollow silence. It hums in her bones. Pushes at her skin like pressure in a sealed hull.

She stands in the center of her chamber, staring at the opposite wall like it might dissolve. Her hands are still curled into fists. Her cheekbone pulses where Palide struck her. The taste of blood sits stale on her tongue. She breathes in. Out. Tries again. Something’s wrong with the rhythm. It’s too shallow, it won’t anchor. The air is thick. Her dress clings. The gold trim bites at her thighs, the silk a second skin she suddenly can’t bear. She moves to the mirror. Stops.

There she is in her reflection: lip bruised, eyes smeared with a liner, a trickle of wine still staining her lower lip. The Akul teeth at her collarbone are crooked. The dress doesn’t sit right. It looks like someone else. Someone weaker. Someone she buried years ago.

She reaches for the hem of the dress. Fumbles. Freezes. Something inside her claws up like bile. A scream tries to make its way to her throat, but it doesn’t come clean. It curdles in her chest. She rips the dress down from the neckline, tearing it at the shoulder seam. Her breath comes sharp now, too fast. She stumbles backward from the mirror. The eyes of the terrified girl follow hers.

Her hand shoots out. The silver vase on her desk crashes to the floor. Water spills. Flowers scatter. The mirror still stands. She throws a book at it. Then her chair. Nothing breaks. A sob rips free, half-choked, furious. She charges the mirror and slams her fist into it, again and again, until the glass finally fractures under her knuckles.

A crack runs across her reflection. She stands, panting. Blood wells at her fingers. Her shoulders shake.

“I did everything you asked,” she whispers. “I gave you everything.”

The cracked reflection doesn’t answer. She turns away. Staggeres to the corner of the room. Drops. The rug scrapes against her knees. She leans forward and presses her forehead to the floor, like it might absorb all the noise in her head. But it doesn’t. The room spins.

Four years, and she doesn’t know if Ajid is alive.

Four years, and the only thing she’s earned is the right to be abused. Palide won’t let her go. Delrith won’t let her go. No one is going to save her. Ajid probably doesn’t even remember her.

She breathes into the rug until she can’t anymore. Then she lifts her head. Takes her lightsaber off her belt. The weight of it centers her.

She wipes her bloody hand on her thigh. Smooths her Akul teeth. Her mouth is dry. Her face is wet. But she's calm. Focused.

She bathes slowly. Dresses deliberately. Black silk robe. Loose, but flattering. One Delrith had chosen for her months ago, with sheer sleeves and a slit up one thigh. She wears nothing underneath. She applies makeup carefully, just enough to catch the light. Just enough to seem familiar. Her lightsaber hides inside the folds of her robe, magnetized to the silk at her hip. She tests the mechanism. Silent. Steady.

She pads barefoot down the hall, her breath soft in her chest. The servants are asleep or stationed far below. Delrith's quarters are open to her. They have been since year two. She doesn't knock, she doesn't have to. The doors open at her approach.

Inside, the chamber is dim, smelling of perfume and alchemical smoke. Delrith reclines on her lounge, still dressed in the remains of her gala regalia, boots removed, outer coat hung on a stand, hair let down. She lifts her head when Serith enters.

"Couldn't sleep?" Serith lets the robe fall slightly off one shoulder. Lets her voice dip.

"No." Delrith smiles lazily.

"Poor thing." Serith steps closer. Delrith watches her, bemused. "If this is about earlier, you were exceptional. Vieron himself said so."

"I'm not thinking about Vieron," Serith says softly. She kneels beside the lounge, places a hand on Delrith's thigh. Delrith lifts a brow.

"Well then. Show me what you've learned." Her hand slips to the back of Serith's neck. Serith leans in. Their mouths meet.

It's slow at first, deliberate as all things between them have been. Delrith kisses like she tastes obedience. Her hand tightens around the base of Serith's neck, guiding her. And Serith lets her, just long enough. Delrith's eyes are half-lidded when she moves.

The saber ignites in one clean motion, red light screaming to life as she drives it up into her master's chest. Delrith jerks. Her mouth opens in shock, lips still brushing Serith's. Her fingers spasm against Serith's nape. For a moment, her gaze is nothing but confusion. Then understanding. Then, finally, nothing. Serith pulls the saber free. Delrith collapses backward, robes smoldering, blood hissing on the metal edge of the lounge.

The room is silent, save for Serith's breath. Her master's body settles awkwardly on the lounge, one leg twisted beneath her, robe rucked up to her ribs, face slack and parted, mouth half-formed around a command that never came. Serith stares. She doesn't feel triumphant, doesn't feel anything but the slow, uneven rhythm of her heart still beating. She lowers herself to her knees beside the body, hands trembling, and leans in. Rests her forehead against Delrith's collarbone for just a moment. Tries to remember the words. The prayers her mother taught her, the ones whispered over kills and graves.

She opens her mouth, but nothing fits. The syllables are foreign now, the sounds misshapen. Her lips fumble. Her tongue refuses the rhythm. She's forgotten her mother tongue.

Something hot coils behind her ribs. She doesn't scream. She doesn't shake. The fury presses down on her like a weight, a coal in her chest that glows, steady and constant.

Palide did this. Ripped her from Shili. Handed her to a woman like Delrith and never looked back. Dangled Ajid over her like a leash. Built a future where she is meant to crawl, kneel, please, and thank him for it.

She curls her fingers into Delrith's robe. Closes the woman's vacant eyes. Arranges her like a corpse given proper rites, though Serith offers none. Not in the tongue of her people, not in the tongue of her masters.

She stands. Takes a deep breath. Makes a vow to herself under her breath.

She will not run. She will not weep for what she was or mourn what she has become. She will carry her rage. Smile when told. Bow when commanded. Accept her role like she was bred for it. And when the opportunity arises, she will bury him.

Her saber hums quietly in her palm before vanishing back to her belt. She leaves the room without looking back.

Time doesn't move cleanly in the months that follow. It folds, unfolds, bleeds into polished stone and pressed uniforms, into torchlight reflected in high windows and dark wine poured into delicate glass. Serith inherits the Kav'i Estate the way one inherits a wound. A stronghold in the country near Kaas City, an old complex of red-boned stone and heavy columns, complete with symbols older than most of the city's walls.

In Palide's absence, Serith is named Stewardess of the House. Not Lady. Not Heir. It doesn't matter. The staff defer to her. The guards obey her. The estate's pulse beats in rhythm with her voice, and that is what really matters.

At first, she moves through its halls like a shadow, learning the systems, mapping the web of power embedded in tradition. But soon, she begins to shape it. She alters room placements. Renames the wings. She commands servants to adjust the lighting to flatter her colors, the music in the main wing to play when she enters.

But it's not enough.

Palide expects fear. The Kav'i name demands it. So one morning, when a servant fumbles her tea tray and the burn spills across the hem of Serith's gown, she strikes her. Flat palm, across the face. Not hard enough to draw blood, but loud enough to silence the room. The girl staggers. Gasps. Cries. No one moves. Serith watches her for three long seconds, then says quietly, "Bring another."

The next day, the tray is perfect, as is the gown. No one meets her eyes for the rest of the week. She tells herself it's a show. An act. A calculated warning, but it sits in her chest for days. Heavy, then lighter, then almost...pleasing. That feeling, the way the silence bends around her, comes back in a rush the next time someone errs. A flinch when she enters, a bruise offered in apology. By midseason, the blows are no longer rare. She strikes not in rage, but in rhythm. Not to punish, but to prove. To mark her presence in the halls. To remind them that worship is born of silence, and silence is born of fear.

The bruises grow patterned. One servant forgets to call her Lady and is made to kneel under Serith's heel until her knees crack audibly against the durasteel. Another is too slow to dress her and loses a tooth to the back of Serith's hand. She doesn't scream, she doesn't scold, she doesn't repeat herself.

The servants begin to treat her like a myth. They whisper to each other in the kitchens, in the linen halls, about how her eyes never blink when she's upset, how she hums softly afterward, as if violence is music. She begins to notice the look they give her when she enters a room: a flash of dread immediately masked by obedience.

She likes it. She needs it.

She starts wearing her saber not for defense, but as an accessory. Her silks are cut higher, heavier, sharper. She changes her dining schedule without notice, watches which servants adjust quickest, which falter, which tremble in anticipation of punishment they might receive. Sometimes, she doesn't even need to hit them, the threat is enough. A glance, a smile, a single whispered word. Their fear becomes a perfume that follows her. And she inhales it like incense. Ritualistic. Intoxicating. Palide visits from time to time, commends her for her efficiency, her discipline, her ability to "command silence and submission". His words barely reach her ears.

By the time her seventeenth birthday arrives, the Kav'i estate no longer feels foreign. It feels like a body, and Serith, its beating heart.

That morning, the estate is quiet. The servants leave offerings, cut fruit, a ring of blackroot smoke coils, a new gown folded at her bedside, black velvet with onyx fastenings, and a note: *Be present in the atrium at midday. A delivery is expected.* The handwriting is Palide's.

She wears the dress.

The courier arrives at midday, exactly when Palide said. A sleek transport bearing his sigil lands soundlessly on the east pad. A single figure escorted up the path. A woman. Theelin. Dressed in glimmering silks, not unlike the ones Delrith used to make Serith wear.

She watches from the window at the top of the stair. She's young. Slender. Beautiful in a way that requires no translation: wide eyes, painted lips, the practiced sway of someone who has been trained to enter rooms like she belongs in them. She doesn't move until the knock behind her arrives. A servant speaks in hushed tones.

"A gift, Lady Kav'i. From Lord Palide."

Of course it is.

She descends slowly, each step sharpening beneath her heels. The parlor is dim. Red-light filtered and silent. The girl barely makes it past the door, back straight, chin lifted. She's not frightened, but uncertain. A familiar expression. One Serith's worn too many times.

She doesn't rise from her seat. She doesn't need to. She watches the girl like a predator, chin perched on her hand, eyes half-lidded.

He thinks I'm still owned.

The thought coils tight in her throat. He's mocking her. Reminding her. *This is what you are. Just another pretty thing in silk. Another whore parading as a lady.*

She should laugh. She doesn't. Instead, she looks the girl over, slowly, weighing a gift she never asked for.

"So..." she says, voice soft as silk dragged over a blade. "This is the plaything my dear uncle thought would amuse me?"

The girl doesn't flinch. She stands perfectly still, the exact way Serith once did. She sees it now: the performance of poise. Of readiness. She sees herself. And for a single moment, one exhale, the mask cracks.

She's beautiful. The kind of beautiful that gets you noticed. Serith's mouth goes dry. She wants to strike her. To kiss her. To pull her into her lap and scream into her mouth until her own name echoes back. She wants to watch her kneel. Wants to see her cry. More than all that, she wants her to look at her with nothing but awe and fear.

"A toy from Nar Shaddaa," she scoffs, rising to her feet. Her voice turns cold, distant, mechanical. Like pulling a trigger. "Hardly what I had in mind, but I suppose even novelty has its appeal."

The girl doesn't move. Serith waves a servant forward, tone clipped.

"Take her to the prison on Korriban. I'll find something to do with her later." She doesn't look at the girl again. She can't. The words sit like stone in her chest. They taste like Delrith's perfume. The pain has no exit, the fury no target. So it finds the softest thing in the room.

Palide sent her a reflection. So she'll smash the mirror.

As the footsteps fade down the corridor, Serith sinks back into her chair, motionless. The parlor hums with silence. She puts her head in her hands.

That night, wine-soaked and impulsive, she sends an invitation. The draft reads simply: *You are invited to dine at the Kav'i estate. No need to dress up.* She stares at it for nearly an hour before hitting send. She doesn't expect a reply. Of course she receives one.

Ilya arrives late, as always. Her cloak is too heavy for the Kaas humidity, dust curling at the hem. Her face is sharper than Serith remembers, less moonlight, more blade, but the way she stands is the same. A spear haft. Unbent. Serith greets her in the entry hall, hand resting lightly on her hip.

"You came," she says, tone neutral, montras tipped slightly toward her. Ilya shrugs.

"You've earned a reputation for spectacle. I had to see if the rumors were true." Serith's smile doesn't quite reach her eyes.

"You'll have to let me know which ones are most amusing."

They dine in the western gallery, where the windows open into the jungle's breath and the stormglass chandeliers flicker with muted red. The servants move in silence, trays balanced between fingers, heads bowed as they pass. Ilya's eyes linger on them.

“You’ve built quite a court,” she murmurs after the third course, tone unreadable.

“I was told the house needed a lady,” Serith replies, slicing through her nerf steak. “So I became one.”

The food is rich, the wine darker than blood. Ilya drinks slowly, her gaze drifting along the vaulted ceiling, then to Serith.

“It suits you,” she says.

“It shouldn’t.”

“But it does.”

They speak of everything and nothing. Delrith’s death comes up, but not the method. Ilya doesn’t ask how. Serith doesn’t offer. The silence between them is neither cold nor warm, just familiar. Eventually, they talk of Ilya’s master. Her voice darkens when she speaks.

“She’s old,” the Nightsister says, “but sharp. My clan sent me because I wasn’t going to rise there. But she sees something in me.”

“What kind of training?”

“Magiks, mostly. Combat in the fog, poisonwork, the like. She doesn’t like bladeplay, says it’s predictable.” Ilya’s mouth curls faintly. “She’s always liked how I learn.”

“And you like her?”

“She’s not kind, but she’s better than most.” Serith nods. There is nothing better than better than most.

Later, they move to the high window hall, where the stormlight paints gold across the flood. Serith leans on the marble sill. Ilya stands near her, watching the jungle sway below.

“You’re planning to kill Palide,” Ilya says.

“Yes.”

“Then get a better weapon.”

“I have one.” Ilya raises an eyebrow at Delrith’s saber on her hip.

“You have a symbol. You need something you’re good with.” Ilya turns toward her, expression sharp. “A pike. Something tailored for your style.” Serith lets her eyes drift toward her saber.

“This is comfortable.” Ilya frowns.

“We both know you’re not a duelist, Ser.”

They linger near the window until the wine settles into silence. Ilya steps close, closer than necessary. Her hand brushes Serith’s hip. Serith lets her hand slide up Ilya’s side, fingers tracing the hem of her robes, then dipping slightly under. Ilya’s skin is warm. Steady. She leans in slowly, tilting her head just enough to brush their mouths together.

The kiss feels fine. Like memory. Like imitation. Serith lets her hand cup the back of Ilya's neck, pulling her closer. Her other hand slides down her waist, practiced in its pressure, in its angles. Every motion intentional. She leans back a few inches and smiles.

"Most people pay good money for this, you know." Ilya blinks.

"What?" Serith smiles, thinly. Sharp-edged.

"You're getting a good deal."

"You're joking." A pause. Serith doesn't reply. "Serith, did your master... prostitute you?" Serith pushes off the girl.

"No."

"Then what? Who pays for your affection?"

"It was strategy, alright? Delrith needed someone who was useful." Ilya stands to mirror Serith.

"Useful? She pimped you out!"

"Don't say that," Serith turns, jaw tight. "You don't get to say that."

"She did and you know it."

"Shut up!" Serith spits. "You think I had a choice? Your Sith Academy turns all of us into tools and now you're upset I was used like one?"

"You were a child."

"And now I'm not. So stop treating me like one."

"So what? It was all fine because you're the lady of a house now? Was it worth it? You've changed, Serith."

"I have," Serith says flatly, crossing her arms over her chest. "You're clinging to the girl who cried when you wrapped her hands. She died in the tombs, the bedroom. Take your pick." Ilya's mouth tightens. "What?" Serith presses. "You thought we'd have dinner, fuck, and pretend we're back in the tomb courtyards again?"

"No," Ilya bites, "I thought we could talk. I thought maybe I could hold you without feeling like I'm grabbing broken glass."

"I didn't ask to become this."

"But you're sure as hell enjoying it."

The words land hard. Serith looks away. Her throat aches. Ilya steps back.

"I don't know what you want from me, Serith."

"I don't either."

The silence stretches. Ilya puts a hand on Serith's shoulder. Kisses her cheek lightly. Serith bites back tears.

“You deserve someone who can love you properly,” she whispers, voice soft and gentle. Ilya exhales, tired.

“Maybe.” She runs a hand down one of Serith’s lekku. “But I never cared much about what I deserve.” She turns, cloak catching the low light. “When you figure it out, what you want, let me know.”

She leaves Serith alone in the hall, velvet wine dark against her lip, heartbeat echoing like footsteps down the hall.

Weeks pass. The Kav’i estate moves around Serith like clockwork: gates open at dawn, shipments unload, servants bow in unison when she passes. The rain falls every evening like ritual. Her hands no longer tremble when they sign off executions. But nothing feels right.

Since Ilya left, silence follows Serith like a shadow. It fills her quarters, her hallways, her head. She throws herself into routine: schedules, inspections, brutal performances of discipline, but none of it quiets the ache she doesn’t want to name.

It isn’t longing, or grief for that matter. It is need. Not for Ilya, not anymore. Ilya had seen to much, and worse, she’d tried to understand. Serith doesn’t want to be understood. She wants to be seen. She wants devotion, mindless and untainted. She wants someone to look at her with reverence, not recognition. Someone who doesn’t remember who she used to be.

The thoughts return slowly. At first, they flicker through mirrors, velvet flashes. Then they creep into the quiet hours, like music from a forgotten room. Sometimes, she hears it in her sleep: laughter that doesn’t belong to anyone in her memory. Bright as glass. She finds herself thinking about the red-haired girl at odd hours. In briefings, between combat drills, during long, luxurious dinners where she smiles at ministers with blood on her gloves. The thought of her bowing, violet eyes filled with awe and fear, settles in Serith’s sternum like a hook.

She rises from her chair late one night, robe trailing like shadow behind her, and calls for her pilot.

“Inform the Temple,” she says. “I’m retuning to Korriban.”

She arrives unannounced, robes sharp, saber sheathed but singing with heat at her hip. The guards know better than to question her. Her name is carved into the foundation stones now. The vault is hers.

She descends alone.

The air thickens as she walks. Incense and bloodroot. Sweat and salt. The scent of past lives unraveling. When the vault doors open, they groan like beasts resisting their cage.

The torturer doesn’t hear her enter. He’s too focused on the chair, on the silhouette crumbled in its iron jaw. She waits. He doesn’t feel her presence.

“I told you to condition her,” she says, voice low and curved like a blade pulled free of its sheath. The man stiffens, back half-turned, fingers still red. “Not to gut her like a nerf.” He bows, too fast, too late.

“My lady, she is nearly ready—”

Serith doesn't answer. The Force answers for her. He rises with a scream cut short in his throat. Blood pours from his nose, his ears. He flails, then stills. She doesn't even watch him drop. Her eyes are on the Theelin.

She's strapped upright, head bowed, body trembling under silk matted with blood, skin a map of punishment. Her once-glossy red hair is shorn close to the scalp. Serith moves forward, slow and quiet. She stops before the Theelin like a priestess before an altar. Her hand rises and curls beneath her chin. The girl flinches. Her eyes flutter open.

She expects hatred. Terror. Resistance. What she finds instead is something better. Submission. Fragile. Worshipful. Broken. The girl blinks up at her. Her lips crack open. Her voice, raw, thin, fraying at the seams, breaks into the stillness.

“I'm sorry. I tried to be good.” Serith freezes. She stares into the Theelin's eyes, sees the flicker of devotion there, something deep and aching. Something formed in the kiln of suffering.

“You lasted longer than most,” Serith whispers, almost reverently. “Do you remember your name?” The girl tries to nod. It's pitiful. Beautiful.

“Araj, Lady.” Serith leans in, lowering her voice until it is a secret meant only for Araj.

“I gave you away once, Araj. I won't do that again.” The manacles release with a hiss of hydraulics. Araj collapses forward, a bundle of trembling limbs and blood-wet silk. Serith catches her without strain, folding her into her arms. She feels the weight, the warmth, wraps the cloak around her. Araj presses her face into the hollow of Serith's neck like she belongs there. And Serith feels something settle. Not pity, possession. She turns without a word and leaves the vault behind.

Araj sleeps in Serith's bed the first week. Not because she's earned it, but because Serith wants to watch her when she wakes. The Theelin breathes like an injured bird, her voice threadbare, limbs hesitating. But she clings with the instinct of someone who knows pain means attention and attention, survival. Serith gives her both. She feeds the bird by hand, bathes her in silence, lets her cry. Not out of pity, but because worship, when properly sculpted, requires gentleness.

The estate shifts around them. Servants begin to address Araj by title: the Voice, though Serith uses her given name in private. They clean her gently, dress her in silk again. She's never sent to the kitchens or asked to sweep. Her purpose is not utility, it is presence. Serith studies her every motion. The way she kneels, the way her breath catches when Serith enters a room, the way she leans into her hand. She studies until she is satisfied that what Araj is, is devotion.

When Serith travels to Cantonica, a world in Palide's network, it is meant to be a diplomatic inspection. She's expected to smile, make requisitions, tour a factory. Halfway through the tour, a Mandalorian raid hits the southern compound. She doesn't flinch. She cuts through two, wounds another. A grunt tries to slip behind her. Young. Overconfident. She crushes his foot, breaks his collarbone, and stuns him cold. She drags him into the estate at dusk, bloodied, bound, armor cracked and half-missing. She tears his helmet off, leaving him bare-

faced, sweat and dirt smeared across his skin, jaw locked tight. He snarls something in Mando'a, but she interrupts him by elbowing his broken collarbone, hard. His knees hit the floor. The guards say nothing. The servants look away. Arajj watches from the stairwell, violet eyes wide.

Serith doesn't take him to the basement crypts where most slaves are broken. She takes him to the arena; the coliseum behind the eastern wing of the Kav'i estate, carved into the cliffside. It's an ancient dueling ground, oval in shape, ringed with pillars and black iron-torch stands. Serith has it swept. Restored with surgical precision. A single stone platform sits at its center, elevated and bare.

She chains him upon the stone. Arms raised, spine exposed, legs half-collapsed from exhaustion or pain. A servant brings her a collar that snaps around his neck with a magnetic hum. The shock device fused to the base flares red. Arajj stands behind Serith, hands trembling slightly where they rest on a banister. Serith gives her a quick glance of acknowledgement.

"Sing," she says. Arajj obeys. Her voice is soft at first, breathy, unsteady, but it gains strength, slow and sharp as a knife being unsheathed. An old song, low and winding, something suited to firelight and ruin.

Serith circles the Mandalorian. Her boots drag faint lines through the sand. She leans in, lifts his head by his hair to get a good look at his dull grey eyes, then strikes him. A backhand across the mouth. A heel to the ribs. The crack of a whip, then another. She doesn't yell. She doesn't gloat. She watches his pain like a blade forged, measuring how much heat it takes to soften beskar.

She names him in the old tongue: Fist. Not a man, not a person. An extension of her will.

He fights, of course. Rages against his bonds. Calls her a coward, worse. She lets him. Her silence is louder. Each time Arajj's song rises above his curses, he grows more frantic.

She leaves him there that night, alone, upright in the center of the sand, face lit by torchlight, a shadow cast long behind him. The next day, she returns. Again. And again. For eight days. Each morning, Arajj sings. When Fist begins to weep at the first sound of her voice, Serith tightens the collar until he stops. By the fifth day, he flinches when she raises her hand. By the eighth, he bows his head when she enters.

She moves him to the estate vaults, down in the old crypt corridors where the walls bleed with heat and echoes. Torture becomes ritual, practice, reverence. She rewards him now, with small things. Water from her hands, balm for his wrists, bread pressed to his mouth like a blessing. And she introduces the next phase.

Before Arajj sings again, Serith takes her aside, hands her a scrap of paper and a data slate. Ancient Mandalorian songs: war chants, lullabies, fragments she'd commissioned a linguist to dig up.

"Learn them," she says. Arajj doesn't ask why. She just nods. For three days, she practices, then, finally, Serith calls her forward. Orders her to sing.

Fist freezes. His knees buckle, his throat clenches. He stares, not at Arajj, not at Serith, but inward, to somewhere no one could follow. When Arajj stops singing, he trembles. Not from fear, from something worse: remembrance.

For three days, Arajj sings in Mando'a exclusively. Serith allows it. She lets Fist sleep beside her chair, lets him eat without chains, watches him lower his eyes when he hears her footsteps, watches him whisper pieces of the lullabies when he thinks she isn't listening.

On the fourth morning, she sits across from him, cross-legged on the warm stone.

"Tell me your name." A pause. His jaw tenses.

"I had a name," he says.

"You did," she agrees. Another pause. She reaches out and adjusts the edge of his collar, not the shock band but the silk hem she had sewn into it. Her fingers brush his skin. She watches him flinch, then lean forward, barely, instinctively.

"I don't need it anymore," he says.

"Then what are you?" He looks up, not at her, but through her.

"Fist." She smiles. Small, sincere, reverent.

He cries in her arms that night. Quiet, stifled sobs, buried in the curve of her shoulder. She holds him like a weapon, like something forged, not born. When Arajj sings in that old, useless language, he doesn't flinch. He bows.

The years stretch without much ceremony. Time folds itself into patterns of conditioning and punishment. Ilya visits once or twice a year. She gives Serith a day's warning before she arrives.

By the time Serith turns eighteen, Ilya is made a Warrior. Her master dies peacefully, a rare thing, and her clan sends a Nightbrother to the Korriban Academy as tribute: an initiate for her to take as apprentice. Ilya calls him a gift, treats him more like a hunting dog. When they speak of him, it is in a shared language: blood, loyalty, leash.

Before one such visit, Serith receives a sealed crate from the estate's lower vaults, one she's left untouched since the day Fist first bled for her. Inside lies his beskar armor, battered, heavy, still painted in the muted sigils of a forgotten clan. The helmet rests on top like a severed relic. She summons her metalsmith.

"I want it stripped," she tells him. "Everything. Symbols, paint, history. Burn it clean."

They're polished, reforged in Kav'i black with the serpent crest etched deep. The helmet is rebuilt to seal cleanly over his permanent shock collar, fitted with a breath control mechanism tied to Serith's Force signature. No external ports, no fail-safes, only her will. She doesn't present it to him with ceremony. She simply orders him to the atrium, where the crate sits open.

Fist stops when he sees it. He doesn't move closer, not without permission, but something cracks quiet and deep behind his grey eyes. A breath catches. His jaw shifts, once. He drops to his knees. She says nothing at first, just walks in a slow circle around him and lets him look at it. The armor gleams like something resurrected, holy and cruel. His fingers twitch against his thigh.

"You recognize it," she says softly.

“Yes, Lady.”

“It was yours.” He swallows. Doesn’t speak. She steps closer. Lowers herself until she’s in front of him, crouched with one hand against the edge of the crate. Her tone turns velvet-sharp.

“I’ve reshaped it. Like I reshaped you. No more clan paint, no sigils. Just my mark and your place beneath it.” He nods. Barely breathes.

“You may wear it,” she adds quietly, “if you can show me who it belongs to now.” He looks up, slowly, carefully, only to her mouth, never her eyes. And in a voice tight with restraint, he whispers,

“Yes, Lady.”

She stands.

“Then dress.”

His hands move with reverence; every buckle fastened like a vow, every plate a memory rethreaded into obedience. When he lifts the helmet, almost trembling, it’s not fear in him, it’s something older. Deeper. He places it over his head, and the collar seals beneath him with a low click. His breathing stutters once, then steadies. Serith watches him for a long moment.

“Good,” she says at last. Her voice threads through the helmet’s audio feed like a tether. “You wear my armor well, Fist.”

She begins to train him shortly after, partly to perfect herself. Delrith gave her a blade but no doctrine. What she knows, she learned through necessity: survival, spectacle, violence. But now she studies, quietly and obsessively. She watches old dueling holos, raids the estate’s archives, commits footwork diagrams to memory. Not to become a duelist herself, but to become a master through him. He will be everything she wasn’t allowed to be. Sharp. Beautiful. Precise. A weapon drawn in her image.

She calls him to the torch-ringed coliseum. He kneels in full armor, helmet sealed, collar fused beneath the jawplate. His breath rasps faintly through the rebreather system: steady and regulated. He is already hers, yes, but he is not good enough yet. She brings two sabers: Delrith’s, heavy and cruel, and her own, slimmer and worn smooth. She extends the latter without ceremony.

“You’ll use mine,” she says. “If you break it, I’ll peel the pieces out of your skin.”

“Yes, Lady.”

They begin with Form I. She teaches him steps in short sentences. When he fails, she strikes. A poor block earns a blow to the ribs. A wrong step, a crack to the shin. When his instincts falter, when he hesitates, when his form slips, she cuts his air.

At first, it’s partial. A squeeze around the lungs. A tightening of the mask. But on the third day, after a sluggish rotation and a misjudged block, she stops him mid motion, not with words or a block, but a flick of her fingers. The airflow shuts down completely.

He doesn't react at first, just braces. Tries to finish the pattern. But she sees the shift, the stumble in his balance, the tremor in his hands. He continues for thirty seconds. Forty. His breath grows ragged, his shoulders strain. Sweat pools at his collar. His motions slow. He clutches the saber with fingers turning pale. A minute passes. Then another. He falls fully to his knees.

The saber slips. He gasps behind the helmet, sharp and panicked little pulls that draw nothing. His body begins to shake. Serith watches, calmly. She tilts her head and studies him like sculpture.

"Still too sloppy," she murmurs. His hands brace on the sand. He sways. Another few seconds and he's barely upright. The sound of his lungs clawing for oxygen echoes faintly through the helmet's seal. She waits until his head lowers, until he teeters on the edge of collapse, then she releases the valve.

Air floods in with a sudden hiss. He chokes on it. Gasps. Collapses forward, hands splayed against the floor as he draws breath in wild, desperate gulps. She steps closer. Places a single finger under his chin and lifts his helmeted face so he looks her way.

"Again," she says softly. "Do not make me repeat this lesson." He nods, still panting.

"Thank you, Lady," he whispers, hoarsely. Reverently. She smiles.

"You're welcome."

From then on, he learns to crave breath like praise. Air is no longer survival, it is a privilege. Mistakes, hesitations, and imperfections earn him a helmet of carbon. But when he executes flawlessly, footwork perfect, blade angled sharp and true, she lets him breathe freely. And it feels like worship.

They move to Form V; she chooses it deliberately. He's built for it, broad shouldered, heavy-footed, all muscle and momentum. There's no point refining him into something graceful, so she leans into his nature instead. Teaches him to catch blows and return them twice as hard, to let the opponent think they have him, then punish them for it.

She uses Delrith's saber now. He uses hers. His strikes grow heavier, more deliberate. She gives no praise unless it's earned. He fights harder. Smarter. Not to win, but to deserve. One day, he blocks too late. A glancing blow cuts shallow along his arm.

She halts. Walks to him. Grabs his forearm hard enough to leave bruises. Her voice is cold.

"Who gave you permission to scar my body?"

"I'm sorry, Lady."

"That's mine that you've marked. Do you want me to look weak?"

"No, Lady." She doesn't strike him, just tightens the airflow again. His breathing slows. Shudders. He trains through it, choking, dripping sweat inside the sealed helmet, until the form is executed perfectly. Only then does she let him choke on oxygen again. He kneels low.

"Thank you, Lady." She strokes the crown of his helmet once, as if calming an animal.

“Good,” she says. “You’re learning.”

The next day, she pushes harder. He disarms her once, knocking her cleanly wide. He rises his saber, then stops. Drops it, lets it clatter across the sand near hers, disarming himself. His knees slam into the ground. He bows his head, holds his hands out empty. His breath catches from behind the mask, not her doing, but terror. Reverence. The unspoken question: *Did I go too far? Did I forget who I belong to?*

She walks slowly to him. Picks up both sabers. Rolls them over in her hand. He stays bowed. She steps behind him, lays a hand on his helmet. Gently, deliberately, tightens the airflow just enough to notice.

“I want you to win,” she says, voice almost kind. “I want you to be better than me.” She leans down closer to him. “But never forget,” she whispers, “that every victory belongs to me.”

“Yes, Lady,” he breathes. She restores the airflow. Full. Deep. Free. He gasps once, then whispers, low and grateful, “Thank you, Lady.”

She smiles.

“Again.”

Ilya visits the next day. They walk the estate that night, Fist trailing behind them in his new gleaming armor. Arajj hums somewhere distant in the atrium, her voice winding like incense through the halls. Ilya pauses. Listens. Glances at Serith.

“You’ve made them part of you.” Serith doesn’t deny it. Ilya lifts a hand to caress Serith’s cheek. “They’re as beautiful as you, Ser.”

Their visits grow more frequent after that. They stop pretending they aren’t proud of each other. They train when Ilya visits. Exchange gossip. Share rumors of apprentices gone rogue or lords fallen from grace. Sometimes they spar. Sometimes, they watch Arajj sing. By the end of Serith’s eighteenth year, a courier from Palide’s estate arrives bearing a long, narrow crate and a handwritten note in Palide’s calligraphy.

“A weapon more befitting of your station.”

Inside is a Togruta spear: metal polished, durasteel threading the wooden haft, tip etched with her clans mark, recast in gold. It’s an insult. She says nothing. That night, she carries it to the coliseum. Her form is rusty and instinctive. She moves through memories: wide arcs, tight pivots, low stances carved from childhood hunts. The spear fits her hand like a long-lost memory.

A few days in, she calls Fist. He kneels when she enters, armor shining, collar gleaming beneath the gorget, helmet off at her command. His hands are folded behind his back. His breath is shallow but controlled.

“Stand,” she says. “You’ll be my quarry.”

He rises. Silent. Ready.

They start slow. He’s strong but careful. Too careful. She allows him to land hits, small ones. She watches him hesitate with every opening: gauging her expression, her silence, her

breath. When he lands something solid, when he dares strike, she praises him with a nod, a hand through his hair, a quiet “good.” Each word lands heavier than the last.

He fights not to win, but to shield what belongs to her. Every strike he avoids becomes an act of worship. Every dodge, a preservation of her property.

Their sessions become ritual. A flash of spear. The sharp crack of sabers. Arajj sings from the balcony above, sometimes the Mandalorian war chants, sometimes melodies that twist like old prayers. Fist never breaks rhythm.

Serith finds she likes it best when he nearly defeats her. When he knocks her weapon wide and drops to his knees before following through. When his breath is ragged and posture perfect, arms lowered, saber discarded without command. As though the act of nearly harming her dirtied his hands. She steps close. Places a hand to his temple. Kisses the side of his face.

“Beautiful,” she whispers. “Just like that.”

She doesn’t send thanks to Palide for the spear. But she holds it like a promise. Trains with it until her arms ache, until her spine runs slick with sweat, until the bruises Fist gives her become invitations to strike harder next time. She dreams, sometimes, of using it on Palide.

And when she does, she wakes smiling.

Six months before her nineteenth birthday, Serith commissions a gift for herself. For Arajj. She calls in a favor through Palide’s Sphere, pulling rank quietly, carefully, and selects an Arkanian cyberneticist from the prison corps: a geneticist turned jailor, brilliant but tightly leashed. She offers him freedom from the biometric ring. Promotion to Head Jailor. A fully funded lab. Private subject access. Salary.

All he has to do is build something for her.

A vocal-control prosthetic, pain-responsive, precision tuned, to punish dissonance and reward harmonic discipline. It will replace Arajj’s left arm entirely. The neural responses must be instant, the pain excruciating without risking vocal cord failure. The Arkanian agrees. He doesn’t need to ask why.

A week before her nineteenth birthday, Ilya sends her a message.

Come to Korriban. My gift’s ready for you to see.

It’s not signed, but it doesn’t need to be. Her Nightbrother is ascending to apprentice, and Ilya wants Serith there to witness it. She accepts, of course. Schedules Arajj’s arm installation for the day of her departure. Tells the girl nothing until the night before, then hands her over with a single sentence: “You’ll be more perfect when I return.”

The Arkanian meets her on the private speeder platform. His voice is clinical, emotionless.

“I’ll need her for five days.” Serith nods.

“Don’t waste them.”

She brings Fist to Korriban, leaves the estate in the care of the head servant. He boards the shuttle without question. It is the first time he has left Dromund Kaas since his capture above Cantonica. Back then, he was a raider. A mercenary. A name. Now, he is something else entirely. He rides in silence. Armor pristine, helmet sealed. Midway through the jump to Korriban, Serith enters the cabin.

“Remove your helmet.” He obeys. The hiss of the seal releases. He shifts carefully, methodically, sets the helmet in his lap like its breakable, sacred. Light falls across his face, and for a moment, he looks younger than he should: pale and gaunt. Curls fall loose against his forehead, damp from the helmet. His breath is too quiet. His eyes flick up and away in cautious intervals, as if unsure whether looking at Serith directly is allowed here, in this space outside the estate. Serith sits across from him, silent for a minute.

“What clan were you?”

A blink. He wasn’t expecting that.

“Vevut, Lady.”

“By birth?” His brow pulls faintly.

“No. I was taken in. After...after my village was gone.”

“Gone how?” A longer pause. He swallows.

“Wiped out,” he says. “I don’t know who. Empire, probably. Could’ve been a bounty. Could’ve been nothing. I don’t remember much from before.”

“You were a child.”

“I think so,” he murmurs. “I mean... I must’ve been.” She watches him.

“And Vevut made you what?” He hesitates again. Not from fear, but from absence. The language doesn’t come easily. It feels borrowed.

“I was...useful. Loud, sometimes. Quiet, if paid better.”

“And you weren’t just a mercenary,” she says. “You were part of something else. Above Cantonica, you weren’t just hired, were you?” He shifts slightly.

“No, Lady.”

“Then what was it?” He doesn’t answer right away.

“I was part of a rebel remnant. After the Mandalorian Wars. What was left of us. A few scattered cells. We targeted Imperial ships when we could. Tried to draw the Emperor’s attention.” She raises an eyebrow.

“That seems like a poor strategy.”

“It was all we had left,” he says. “We wanted him to see us.”

“To punish you?”

“To remember us.” She leans back.

“Did he?” He exhales slowly.

“You did.” She’s quiet for a beat. She takes his helmet from his hands and inspects the mechanical rebreather around the base. Her voice quiets.

“What was your name?” His jaw tenses.

“I...I don’t know if I remember it right,” he says.

“Say it anyway.” His fingers tighten into fists.

“Utari.” The sound sits awkwardly in the air. He says it like he’s naming a ghost. Like the syllables are guesses. She studies him.

“And what do you care about now?” His voice lowers.

“You, Lady.”

“Are you sure?”

He doesn’t answer. She leans forward. Her voice softens, not cruel but coaxing.

“You don’t trust yourself, do you?”

He shakes his head, slowly. Not in refusal.

“I remember things in pieces,” he says. “I remember the helmets. Fire. The smell of ship metal. I think I had a brother. Or maybe that was someone else’s memory...I don’t know. It’s all blurred. Sometimes I try to put the pieces together and it feels wrong. Like I’m stealing someone else’s life.” His voice borders on cracking, but doesn’t. “And then I look at you and it’s...quiet. Clean.”

Serith watches him, still and sharp.

“Do you want the memories back?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “I don’t think they’d fit.” His voice is low, tentative. Serith watches him for a long moment, like he’s lit a candle and she’s deciding whether to let it burn.

“I don’t think they will,” she says at last. Utari exhales slowly. She leans forward, resting his helmet gently on her knees, voice soft as dusk.

“I know what it is like,” she says, “to be broken open and told the pieces were your fault. To claw through the wreckage, thinking you’re rebuilding yourself, only to find it’s someone else’s shape you’ve stepped into.” He lifts his gaze just slightly, enough to see the expression in her eyes. It isn’t cruel, it isn’t testing, it’s something worse: kind.

“You were born into noise,” she continues. “War, duty, borrowed codes. The Mandalorians shaped you into something strong enough to fight, then left you when the smoke cleared.” She tilts her head.

“I didn’t.” Utari’s fingers run along his thigh plates. His eyes search her face like a man who’s been blindfolded too long. “I kept you,” she says as if it’s a small truth. “I let you rest. Let you quiet the fire. I didn’t erase you. You let yourself go, piece by piece, until there was room for

something new.” She stands, gracefully, like rising from a throne, helmet held between her hands. Her voice softens further.

“You care for me now,” she says. “Because you know I wouldn’t abandon you like that.” He blinks hard, like something stings. She crouches to meet his eyes, brushes her fingers along his jaw. He leans into her touch like a man reaching for sunlight after years underground. His breath shakes. She cups his face gently. Her thumb grazes his cheek.

“You don’t need to carry what came before,” she says. “You don’t need to remember. You don’t need to mourn.” A pause. “You only need to trust me.”

“I do,” he breathes. His voice cracks. “I do, Lady.”

She stands. Places the helmet back in his hands.

“You can put it back on,” she says. “If you want.” She doesn’t look at him again. But as she moves toward the cockpit, her voice drifts back like something she didn’t mean to leave behind.

“Utari.”

Behind her, he closes his eyes like it hurts.

They arrive on Korriban at dusk. The sky is bloody, streaked with stormdust and fading heat. The shuttle’s descent kicks up a veil of grit, but Serith doesn’t flinch. She stands at the open hatch before the ship fully settles, her silhouette sharp against the dustlight. In her hand, she holds the spear Palide gifted her, gleaming like a promise.

Behind her, Utari re-seals his helmet without being told. The hiss of the lock is soft, practiced. His posture shifts: taller, tighter. Faceless again. The armor is safety. Distance. Performance.

They descend together.

Ilya waits at the edge of the canyon, standing in the wind like she’s always belonged to places carved by pressure. She’s dressed simply, saber slung along her hip. When she sees Serith, her grin tugs wide.

“Happy birthday, Lady Kav’i.” Serith arches an elegant brow.

“You remembered.”

“I only forget things that bore me.” She nods toward the spear. “What’s that?”

“Palide’s gift,” Serith replies. “I thought we could train.”

“Sure,” Ilya says, already turning toward the path. Her eyes pass briefly over Fist as she turns.

They walk together down the stone trail, past jagged ridgelines and into the canyon’s rim. The Sith Academy towers in the distance, but it is quiet in the canyon. Far from the chaos. Nestled between redrock sits Ilya’s cottage, a simple three rooms carved into the cliffside. Sand-

worn floors, deep shadows, desert air thick with the heat of fading sun. Inside, Fist remains by the door, still as sculpture. Serith leans her spear against the wall. Ilya shrugs off her cloak and gestures loosely to the space.

“Tea?” Serith nods.

They sit together near the hearth while water warms in a cracked iron kettle. The firelight paints soft amber along Serith’s jaw, catches the glint of her earrings, makes the gold on her spear shimmer where it rests. Ilya hands her a cup and settles beside her.

“How’s your grip?” Ilya asks. “The last time we sparred, your lower stance was off.”

“I’ve corrected it,” Serith replies. She takes a sip of the tea. It’s bitter and soft, a far cry from the wines she serves on Dromund Kaas. “He’s helped.” She tilts her montrals toward the silent figure at the door.

“Ah,” Ilya says. “So your training dummy has improved.”

“He’s learned Form V well enough to break my guard.” Ilya exhales a quiet, impressed laugh.

“I assume he apologies after?”

“He drops his saber before it can hit me.”

“Unusual technique,” Ilya grins. “You’ve taught him well.” Serith shrugs.

“He’s mine in every breath.” Ilya’s smile softens, almost fond.

“You’ve made him your spear.” She leans back, legs folded beneath her, expression thoughtful. “You know...my Nightbrother’s almost the opposite. He still fights like he thinks it’ll win me something.”

“Does it?”

“Not yet. But I like the shape he’s taking.” Serith nods.

“You’ll have to break his will before you shape it.”

“I know, I know. I just haven’t decided how I want him to love me yet.” Serith sips the tea again.

“That’s the trick.”

They fall quiet. Not distant, just settled. The warmth between them is familiar as the desert heat.

“I missed this,” Ilya says after a while. “You.” Serith looks at her for a long moment.

“You could stay.” Ilya’s grin lifts, crooked.

“You’d chain me to the doorframe.”

“I’d give you a room.” That stills the Nightsister briefly. Her voice quiets.

“I’ll think about it.”

They don't say goodnight. When Serith rises from the hearth, Fist moves with her, silent and precise, a shadow stitched into her step. They cross the threshold into the guest chamber, the woven curtain falling shut behind them, muffling the soft crackle of the fire. The room is quaint. Dim golden light. A bed carved from stone, low and cool. A water basin. A narrow ledge with folded linens. Her spear rests in the doorway, polished haft gleaming faintly in the dark.

Fist remains standing just inside the room, helmet sealed, armor untouched. Waiting. Serith turns slowly to face him, unfastening her outer robe and folding it neatly over the stone bench.

"You can rest," she says softly. He exhales. Removes the helmet first. Slowly. Reverently. He cradles it like an offering as he sets it down. Then comes the armor: chestplate, pauldrons, gauntlets, greaves, each piece lowered to the floor with the same deliberate care as sacred objects unburdened at a shrine. By the time he kneels, only his underlayers remain: close-fitting black fabric, sweat-darkened at the spine. His breath is steady. Focused. He doesn't look up, doesn't speak.

Serith approaches the spear. Runs her hand along its shaft once, then lifts it. She holds it out to him.

"Keep it safe," she says. He lowers to a knee, head bowed, arms extended to receive it. When she places the weapon into his hands, he grips it with silent precision. Holds it upright, resting against his shoulder like a banner. He doesn't dare move.

Serith watches him for a long moment, then turns away, stepping lightly toward the bed and settling onto the cool stone. Behind her, Utari stands ready. He does not speak, does not ask for sleep. He waits, just as she taught him.

She wakes early. The sun has barely begun to rise, but the warmth in the stone is already familiar. She sits on the edge of the cot, crimson robes drawn over her shoulder, hood lying in her lap like an unopened secret. Behind her, Fist rises without command.

"Armor," she says quietly.

"Yes, Lady." He leans the spear against the wall next to him cautiously. Moves with quiet efficiency. Piece by piece, the plates return to him. The final hiss of the helmet marks the moment the man disappears and the performance returns. She crosses to the wall and lifts the spear. Her fingers trace the etched crest once. She turns and holds it out to him. Fist kneels to receive it, bowing his head as his hands take the shaft.

"Do not let it touch the ground."

"Never, Lady."

They walk the old road on foot. The Academy rises in the distance: dark, jagged spires against the pale light. Serith doesn't slow as they approach. She doesn't look at the shattered pylons or cracked walls. She remembers it all too clearly. Delrith. The heat. The moment she ceased being a person and became a weapon.

At the gates, they are directed silently through a side entrance, into the lower arena, far below the primary training halls. The witnesses gather in cloaks and hoods, anonymous. The arena is circular. Torchlit. Stone-ringed. Braziers cast long shadows across carvings of pain and

power. In the center, seven initiates. Their faces are bare, their bodies smeared with dust and ash. Each holds a saber of their own finding.

She spots the Nightbrother immediately: Dathomirian yellow skin and black tattoos make him easy to distinguish. A double-blade rests heavy across his back. His shoulders are squared with discipline.

The overseers begin to speak. Their chant is old, deep, resonant. Initiates. Acolytes. Sith. They name the seven. Call them forward one by one. Each steps into the ring, ignites their weapon, and kneels. First, a pureblood Sith. Then the Nightbrother, then the next. It isn't until the seventh that her attention catches again.

He steps forward, expression carved in iron. He's small. Togruta. His robes are oversized, the sleeves bunched at the wrists. He moves without hesitation. Lifts his saber.

It does not ignite in a clean beam. It coils around his feet, red and flickering, snapping the air as he flings it once in demonstration. Elegant. Chaotic. A weapon of motion, not of power. Serith's breath catches. Her stomach drops.

The montrals. The pattern. The old scar on the underside of his left lekku. The white line that runs from forehead to lip. The bone shape of his chin.

Her vision tunnels.

Ajid.

No. This can't be happening. Her mouth goes dry. Her pulse screams. Her hands, folded in ritual stillness, begin to tremble. She can't breathe.

He's not supposed to be here. He's not supposed to be here! He was too young. She gave herself to Palide, offered her body, her mind, her name, for him. That was the deal. That was the entire reason she let herself be broken.

But he is here. Which means he's been here. For how long? Months? Years? Was he ever spared at all? Did Palide lie to her? Did he laugh while she bled for nothing? Did her family send him anyway, grateful to be rid of two mouths instead of one?

She doesn't know.

The overseers chant. The acolytes kneel. Serith can barely hear them. Her heart is thundering in her ears. Her hood suddenly feels too tight. Her lungs are burning. It takes everything she has to not rise. Not run. Not break rank. The pain is worse than any blow Palide ever gave her. Worse than Delrith.

The liturgy ends. The initiates rise. Ajid's yellow eyes scan the crowd, briefly. Her hood covers her face, but for a split second, Serith imagines he feels something. Some echo of what she gave. It's gone in an instant.

As the witnesses begin to file out, she doesn't move. Not right away. Not until Fist shifts quietly behind her, spear still raised. Only then does she stand. Ilya joins her in the corridor. Serith's voice is barely audible. She doesn't look at her friend.

"I need to speak to an overseer." Ilya's already studying her closely.

“About the kid?” Serith nods. Her voice nearly breaks.

“Ajid.” A pause. Ilya says nothing for a beat.

“I’ll take you.”

They walk. Fist follows, spear never touching the ground. Serith’s hands shake under the folds of her robe. Her teeth won’t unclench.

The corridor behind the arena is dim, quiet. The stone still carries heat from the braziers above. Most of the observers have already dispersed. Serith walks with hood drawn, steps unnaturally precise. They find an overseer near the stairwell. A robed pureblood, older, carrying a data-slate, walking as though nothing sacred has been desecrated. Serith stops in front of him.

“You,” she says. “Who brought the Torguta here?” He glances up.

“Those records are sealed. Why—”

Her hand rises. The Force clamps down. He lifts off the ground, gurgling. The slate clatters to the floor.

“You knew,” Serith hisses. She barely recognizes her own voice. He kicks uselessly. Claws at his throat.

“Ser,” Ilya says softly. “Let him speak.” A long beat. Serith releases him. He drops hard, coughing.

“I asked you a question.” The overseer barely manages to breathe.

“Came almost seven years ago. Lord Palide sent him directly.”

“And now?” Serith cuts in.

“Lord Palide is set to arrive tomorrow. He’s naming the boy heir of the Kav’i estate.”

Silence. For a long moment, Serith doesn’t move. She just stares at the pureblood, frozen except for her shallow, ragged breaths. Then she takes a single step forward and kicks him in the chest. He grunts, collapses backward against the stone. She follows. Another kick, this time to the ribs.

“You let him,” she growls. A third kick, sharper. The sound of bone, maybe.

“You let him replace me!” He tries to crawl away, but she’s on him. Kicks his thigh, then his spine. Her hood falls back as she moves, face flushed and brutal.

“You let him send my brother here!” Another strike. The heel of her boot cracks across his shoulder.

“You let him lie! You let him train my replacement—”

“Serith,” Ilya says, softly now. Serith doesn’t stop. She drives a knee down into the man’s chest, pinning him, and places a hand on his throat.

“Do you think you’re safe behind robes and orders? You think that makes you innocent!?” He whimpers.

Fist steps forward, kneels beside her. He holds out the spear. The gold tip gleams in the dim light. Serith sees it. Pauses. Her weapon. Her name. her history. Palide.

She stands, breathing hard, jaw clenched, eyes bright with unshed rage. The overseer moans on the floor, bleeding from his mouth, arm bent wrong at the elbow. She takes the spear from Fist, slowly. And walks away.

The sun has climbed high above Korriban's jagged skyline by the time they emerge from the catacombs. The Academy is quiet in its upper halls, its violence hidden beneath ceremony, its cruelty made clean by stone. Serith walks ahead of Ilya, flanked by Fist. Her hood is pulled back now, Akul teeth askew. The spear in her hands gleams with reflected sun through tall arched windows. They pass training chambers, dormitory doors, statues of lords long dead. No one speaks. Eventually, in one of the high gallery corridors, Ilya breaks the silence.

"Sit down," she says gently. "You need to breathe."

Serith doesn't sit. She stands at the railing, eyes fixed on the central atrium where she once trained. Her jaw is tight, her arms folded as if that could keep her emotions in check. Ajid's face floats in front of her. The whip in his hand. The steadiness of his stance. The way he belonged in that ritual, in that room, beneath those lights in a way Serith never did.

He shouldn't belong. He shouldn't be there at all. She'd given everything so he wouldn't be. And still...

Her chest twists, tight and sudden. Her jaw locks. She doesn't realize she's biting her cheek until she tastes blood. The thoughts come fast now. Frantic. Unreachable.

She can stop this. Before the collar. Before the darkness. Before Palide makes him kneel. Before he forgets their mother's songs. Before he wears the Kav'i name like a crown of knives.

She gave her body. Her voice. Her name. She let Palide abuse her, let Delrith use her, let the estate eat her alive. She paid. And Ajid still ended up here. Too young. Too bright. Too clean.

She trembles. She clamps her arms tighter across herself.

It should've meant something. Her sacrifice, her silence, it should've been enough.

"You're not thinking clearly." Ilya touches her elbow gently. Serith jerks from her like the touch burns. She doesn't respond. She can't. Her throat is tight. Her eyes sting but won't water. She is not going to cry. She is not going to beg. Not from Ilya. Not from anyone.

There's only one thing left she can do to save him. Save what they'll make of him before it happens, before he becomes another thing she failed to stop.

Ilya speaks again, low and careful. "Ser—" Serith turns. Her face is blank. Too blank. Porcelain.

"Don't," she says, barely above a whisper. Not a plea, a warning. Ilya looks at her. Looks through her. Takes a deep breath.

Serith walks away. Her steps are even. Her shadow is long. Fist follows a pace behind. The spear never touches the ground.

The dormitory wing is quiet. Stone corridors run narrow and cool, lit by flickering wall sconces. Most of the new acolytes are napping, exhausted from a night in the tombs fetching their lightsabers. They walk the hallways alone, stop at a door marked only by a symbol carved into the frame: a rising blade. Acolyte quarters. Serith places her hand on the stone and breathes once.

She can hear him inside. Ajid. He's moving softly. Water running in the basin. He's cleaning himself, rinsing blood and dust from the ritual. Alone.

She lifts her hand. Fist freezes in place, turns from the door to the hallway, to stand guard. She steps inside. The door seals behind her.

The room is spartan. One cot. One basin. A small alcove for robes and weapons. Ajid stands with his back to her, shirtless, drying his face with a cloth. His montrals twitch slightly at the sound of her entering but he doesn't turn.

"I'm not supposed to have visitors today," he says. His voice is still high, still young. She isn't used to hearing words come from his lips.

"I know," Serith answers. He frowns. He doesn't recognize her voice. She steps closer. Quiet. "You fought well today." Ajid tenses slightly. Turns to glance her way.

"You watched?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world." Something flickers in his expression. Curiosity. Caution.

"Do I know you?"

"You used to."

That gives him pause. The cloth lowers. His eyes meet hers for the first time and narrow.

"Wait..."

Serith moves. One hand clamps around his throat. He chokes, instinctively throwing his weight back, but she's stronger. She slams him against the wall. The basin topples with a clang. His eyes lock on her face. The Force punches outward, hard, a burst of raw panic. It sends Serith flying back into the wall with a crack, her shoulder colliding hard enough to bruise. She drops her grip. Ajid stumbles forward, coughing, clutching his throat. Blood streaks down his temple. He turns, sees his lightwhip on the cot next to him.

He gets it in his hand before Serith catches him. She slams into him from behind, a blur of motion and hatred. One arm locks around his chest, wrenching him off balance. The other hand lifts the spear.

In one clean, terrible thrust, she throws it up through the base of his neck. It rips through his throat, exits just below his head and buries itself in the wall behind him with a brutal crack. Ajid's body jolts. He spasms, then goes still. The whip he barely grasped his fingers around falls loose at Serith's feet. His heels dangle an inch off the floor. Blood slides down his chest in thick, wet streams.

The room is silent but for the sound of blood dripping from his corpse onto the stone floor. His face is slack. His eyes wide. A child crucified by the hands that loved him. Below him, Serith sobs. She doesn't scream. She doesn't weep like a Sith, she sobs like a child. Whole body shaking, hands over her mouth, forehead to the floor. Her voice cracks every time she tries to breathe. The sound of her grief echoes in the chamber like it has nowhere else to go. She claws weakly at the stone, fingers groping blindly until they find Ajid's lightwhip. She drags it toward her chest and pulls it close. Curls around it like it's his body. As if she could hold it long enough to undo what she's done. Her voice is ragged. High. Barely there.

"I tried...I tried..." She rocks, clutching the whip tighter. "I'm sorry..."

She doesn't hear the door open, but she feels the shift in the air when Fist enters. He stands there a moment, frozen, then, slowly, he kneels. Sets his helmet down.

"Lady," he whispers. She doesn't look up. "Please," he says, softer now. "Let me... let me help you." He reaches toward her. She turns, face streaked with tears, eyes swollen, skin pale and blotched and faltering in its divinity, and throws herself into his arms, collapses against his chest, sobbing anew. Her fingers find the gaps in his armor and pull fists from the cloth in his tunic. Her face presses into the base of his neck.

He holds her. Tight. Like she's everything he's ever been allowed to love.

"I didn't want to," she chokes.

"I know," he whispers.

"I had to save him."

"You did what you had to," he says. His voice wavers. Her body shakes. He cradles the back of her head with one hand, the other around her back. "He's safe, now."

She doesn't respond. After a minute, he reaches for his helmet and places it gently in her arms, beside the whip. She clutches both instinctively, presses them to her chest like sacred things. Without asking, he lifts her, one arm under her back, one beneath her knees, and carries her out of the room, away from the pinkish sound of Ajid's blood. She doesn't resist. Her body rests against his like she belongs there. Like she has belonged there for longer than either of them were ever allowed to say. Her head nestles beneath his jaw. The tears don't stop, but they slow.

The wind scours the path behind them. Stone crunches beneath Fist's boots as they cross the final rise. The canyon walls glow faintly with dusk. Ilya's cottage sits low and warm, firelight flickering through the thick windows, smoke curling from the chimney like an offering.

Serith lies quiet in Fist's arms, limp and trembling in places she doesn't feel anymore. The Akul teeth around her neck are coming undone. Her robe is soaked through. Her eyes are open but distant. She's gone somewhere deep, and the world around her is happening without her permission.

The door opens before she reaches it, Ilya standing the doorway, outlined by firelight, one hand braced on the doorframe. She sees the blood, sees Serith's blank stare, sees the helmetless man carrying her like a relic too fragile to kneel. Her voice sharpens, not with accusation but alarm.

“Serith... what?” She rushes forward, reaches for Serith but stops short. Her fingers hover near Serith’s face, unsure where to land. There’s too much blood. Too much silence. Serith doesn’t respond. Her gaze drifts past Ilya like she’s made of smoke.

“She’s not hurt, Lady,” Fist says quietly. His voice is hoarse. Ilya turns toward him. His face is bare, shoulders squared, arms still braced under Serith’s weight. She nods once. Swallows hard, then glances back toward the main room.

“Ire,” she says, already raising her voice. “Clear the chair. Now!” The Nightbrother obeys at once, emerging from the shadows of the hearth to strip the chairs and fold back the blankets. His eyes flicker over Serith as he passes, but he says nothing. Just moves carefully, like the room is a temple and she a wounded god.

Inside, the fire crackles low. Serith’s hands tremble faintly. Her breathing is thin, like she’s trying to join Ajid. Like she might succeed. They reach the chair. Fist stops, then slowly kneels to lower her. She doesn’t resist. Her body settles into the cushions like something gently laid to rest. The whip and helmet stay clutched to her chest. She doesn’t blink.

Ilya crouches beside her. Straightens the Akul teeth with gentle fingers.

“Ser,” she murmurs. “Can you hear me?”

Serith doesn’t answer. Her breath catches slightly, but she doesn’t speak. Her body curls faintly, almost imperceptibly, around the weapon. Ilya sighs, turns to Fist. Her voice steadies.

“Tell me what happened.” Fist hesitates. His hands fall to his knees. His eyes lower.

“I...Lady,” he begins, slowly. “She went to him. Alone. In the dormitory. Her brother.” Ilya’s brow creases.

“She killed him?” she asks. No accusation, just the quiet question of someone who already knows the answer. Fist swallows. Nods.

“She used Lord Palide’s spear,” he says. “Through the throat.” He pauses, like speaking more would be a sin. “Left him impaled to the wall.” Ilya exhales, long and low. Her fingers run across Serith’s lekku.

“And you?”

“I didn’t know what to do,” Fist says, voice barely audible. “She was... she wasn’t speaking. I don’t think she really saw me. I just...brought her home.”

Ire runs past and places a wool blanket over Serith’s shoulders. Disappears another minute and returns with a steaming mug of tea by her knee. Ilya kneels to Serith’s height.

“Drink, Ser,” she says softly. “Even just a little.” Serith doesn’t move. Ilya kisses her forehead lightly, then stands and turns back toward Fist. Her voice is still quiet, but fast now. Urgent.

“She killed a Sith acolyte,” she says. “Not just any one at that, Palide’s future apprentice. Do you understand what that means?” Fist nods.

“Yes, Lady.” Ilya paces a few steps across the stone floor, fingers threaded through her hair. Ire watches from the doorway, silent eyes flickering between them.

“She’ll be executed,” Ilya mutters. “There won’t even be a trial. He’ll bring half the Council down on her head. We have to get her out of Sith space, now.”

Fist watches her. Glances at Serith. Nods.

“Lady...” she turns toward him and he lowers his eyes. “You could blame me.” Ilya blinks.

“What?”

“Tell Lord Palide I killed the boy. Lady Serith was too late to stop me.” He shifts his weight slightly, shoulders braced. “If she’s seen as trying to protect the estate, he might hesitate. Or he might kill me instead.” Ilya stares at him.

“You want to die for her?” He nods slowly.

“I want her to live.” She exhales. Runs a hand down her face.

“This is Palide we’re talking about.”

“I know, Lady.”

“You won’t just die. He’ll make an example of you. Torture. Public execution. Maybe worse.”

“I know, Lady.”

“And you still want to?”

“I am hers,” he says simply. “If I can trade my breath for hers, then that is what I want.” Ilya watches him, then looks at Serith. Still unmoving. Still cradling the whip like a body. When she speaks, her voice is low. Measured.

“Serith may have made you obedient,” she murmurs, “may have shaped you into something loyal and quiet and hers.” She looks back at him. “But this...” she gestures faintly to the space between them, to the weight of his offer, “this kind of selflessness? That’s yours. Not hers. She couldn’t have carved that into you if she tried.” Her tone softens further. “I hope you know that.”

He doesn’t answer.

Two days pass. Serith doesn’t remember the first one. She knows only pieces, the weight of the blanket, the steady hum of the ship’s engine, the flicker of light across the ceiling of her private chamber. Fist is always nearby. She doesn’t have to look to know it, she can feel his warmth across the room, quiet and unmoving, watching her with that same, reverent stillness. He doesn’t sleep once. He brings her water. Replaces her blanket when she drops it.

On the second day, she blinks awake and doesn't feel hollow. She sits up. The blanket slides off her shoulders. Her hands are still curled around Ajid's lightwhip, tucked beside her on her bed. She exhales, just once. The breath burns on the way out.

"I told them it was me." She looks up. Fist stands at the far end of the room, arms behind his back, gaze low. "Lady Venras agreed. Lord Palide already knows." Serith's stomach tightens.

"No," she says, voice rough. "No...you don't...you don't get to do that." He steps forward slowly.

"I'm sorry, Lady," he says. "But it is done."

"Retract it," she snaps. "Send a correction. Tell them – tell them it was me. I'll go back to Korriban. I'll kneel in the arena." His face softens.

"Then they will kill both of us, Lady."

"Then—" He cuts her off quietly.

"You gave your brother mercy." He steps closer, kneels by her side. "Let me give you the same."

She looks at him. Really looks. His armor's still scratched from Korriban's rock. His gloves are dirty. There's dried blood on one of his palms. She wants to argue, to scream, but her voice fails. So she just looks down at her hands and says nothing.

The estate feels colder than it should. Fist doesn't leave her side. He makes sure she eats, bathes, sits by the fire when she forgets to light it. She feels like an empty cathedral, all echo and dust and ruined silence.

The afternoon of the third day, a package arrives at her estate. No courier. No message. Just a long, lacquered box wrapped in deep crimson silk. She opens it with her own hands.

Inside lies the spear she used to kill Ajid, polished and clean. And beneath it, charred bones. Several bodies folded into blackened rags of what must have once been clothing. Scorched leather. Shili beadwork. Akul teeth fused to bone.

The smell hits Serith first, then the weight of it. She doesn't cry, she just closes the lid and waits.

When Palide arrives, she's folded over her knees in the atrium. Fist kneels behind her, silent and unarmed. Palide says nothing at first, but his fury hangs around him like ozone; the sharp, electric hush before the storm breaks.

"I should have killed you when I saw what you were."

His hand lifts and the Force slams into her chest. She flies backward across the atrium floor, ribs cracking beneath the invisible blow. Her shoulder hits the stone and dislocates, sending shock through her nerves. She gasps, only half-aware. Then, a sharp wrench at the base of her skull. Her lekku twist sideways, too fast, too hard. Her vision goes white, then black. She hits the ground again.

Palide stalks forward, hand raised lazily as if conducting a slow, cruel symphony.

“You killed my heir,” her says. Her right arm jerks upward midair, then twists. A clean, spiral fracture. She screams now, a sharp, choked sound torn from somewhere deep in her throat. No one moves. Fist trembles where he kneels. Palide circles her again.

“Do you want to beg?” he asks. Serith spits blood. He closes his fist. Her ribs compress inward. Something inside her pops. She chokes on her breath. Her legs kick once, then go still.

“You want to die for a slave?” he murmurs. He lifts her off the ground by her throat. Her legs dangle, her spine arches. He slams her into the floor. The impact cracks tile. She collapses sideways, barely conscious, body twitching faintly.

“The coliseum...” she whispers. Palide stops, looks down at her. Her lips move again, bloodied and slow.

“Let him die in the coliseum.” She sways. “He’s strong. Let them see what happens to strength. Let it be yours. Not mine.” She breathes through cracked lips. Palide takes a breath, then laughs sharply.

“Of course you would ask for a spectacle.” He steps back. “Very well.” He turns to his guards. “Throw him in the cells. Schedule a match.” He turns back to Serith. Tosses something beside her. Ajid’s lightwhip.

“Your inheritance, niece.” And with that, he leaves.

Serith doesn’t move for a long time. The blood on her lip dries sticky and cold. She curls one arm around her chest, but can’t lift the other. Her ribs crackle with every breath. She lifts her head only once. Reaches for the whip and drags it to her chest. It’s all she has left. It is her penance. She deserves this.

She lies like that for hours. The pain dulls, settles into her body like memory. She waits until the sun sets, then sits up. Slowly. Carefully. Each breath is a crack in her ribs. Her right arm is still half-dead. Her lekku aches with bruised pressure. But she dresses herself. Walks barefoot to her room, and begins again.

A servant gets in her way that night, a young man, barefoot, carrying linens, eyes downcast. He rounds the corner near the coliseum corridor a second too slow. Doesn’t kneel fast enough. Her eyes narrow. She raises her good hand. He lifts off the ground, choking before he can drop the sheets. She doesn’t yell, doesn’t curse, simply twists her fingers and his shoulder dislocates with a wet pop. She leaves him there without a word.

That night, she has one of the dancers flogged. He missed his cue during the last song Aradj recorded before leaving. No one else had noticed, but Serith had. She turns down the power on Ajid’s whip: not enough to rend flesh but enough to burn. He weeps before she strikes the first time. By the third lash, she feels the rhythm of it again. Starts to remember who she is.

She eats dinner in the center of the long table. Speaks to no one, watches the slaves bow, watches their eyes flicker away at the first sign of hesitation. That night, she sleeps deeply.

By morning, she’s flawless. Monstrals decorated. Lips painted. Robes clean and pressed. The estate is silent when she walks. They know she’s recovered.

Arajj returns the next day, disheveled, hollow-eyes, voice cracked from silence or too much screaming. She drops to her knees the second she sees Serith.

“You’re late.” Serith raises an eyebrow. Arajj nods, doesn’t speak. “Clean yourself up, then report to the arena balcony.”

Arajj bows.

“Yes, Lady.” Serith watches her leave with a cruel smile forced upon her face.

She begins training with the whip the next morning. Clears the arena before dawn and works alone for hours. The weapon is temperamental, reactive, aggressive, wild. She burns herself twice the first day, but doesn’t stop. The second day, it feels more natural. The third, more than the second.

The match is scheduled for nine days after Arajj returned. Fist will face his death at sundown. The outer families are already sending messages: will there be food? Can they bring guests? Will Serith perform? She sends back: Yes. Yes. No. She will attend, she will host. She will look perfect.

When a steward delivers a message to Serith the night before the execution, permission to see the traitor before the match, she doesn’t flinch. She folds the message, sets it on the edge of her desk, and says nothing. But later that night, when no one is watching, she practices saying his name.

The day of the execution begins like any other performance. Servants sweep the coliseum floor at dawn, scattering fine white sand between the marble inlays. The blood pits are drained and refilled. The braziers are polished. The chains are tested. Every link must gleam. Musicians rehearse on the balcony under Arajj’s direction, her voice clear, sharpened by discipline and silence. Serith oversees the work from the upper box, robed in deep violet and bone-white silk. the fabric cuts clean against the bruises still healing along her ribs and throat. The scars are deliberate, displayed like relics. Her whip lies coiled beside her.

By midday, Palide arrives. Fist is escorted in with three guards: two at his sides, one at his back with a control rod slotted into the base of his shock collar. He wears his beskar, shoulders bearing the estate’s crest. At his hip hangs Serith’s old lightsaber. He had requested it.

He doesn’t look up as he’s led into the arena’s lower corridors. But he walks without being dragged. Silent. Heavy. Whole. They place him in a cell beneath the western gallery, one once used for apprentices in pre-duel meditation. The stone is cold, the air smells of oil and blood. Palide joins her in the box like he owns it, which he does, and leans one palm against the carved railing. The torches flicker below. His voice is calm.

“Elegant for a slave’s death.” Serith doesn’t look at him.

“House Kav’i has standards.” That earns her a faint smile. He glances sideways.

“You and I are the only ones to remember them now.” She says nothing. He sighs and waves a hand.

“You may visit him. Five minutes.” A pause. “He chose your blade, you know.” She knows.

“He’ll die holding something beautiful.” Palide pauses.

“Don’t get sentimental, niece.”

She doesn’t. She rises, smoothly, quietly, and walks toward the stairs that lead her below.

The cell is cold, the torches in the corridor outside sputter and hiss. Somewhere above them, the coliseum floor is being polished. It waits.

Fist is already standing as she opens the cell door, in full armor. His helmet rests beside him on a bench. He doesn’t kneel when she enters, he simply looks at her and waits. She closes the door behind her, steps inside.

“You know how this works, yes?” she asks. He nods, but she doesn’t let that slide. Her voice lowers.

“They’ll start with beasts. Not trained beasts, rabid ones.” She folds her arms. “Three or four of them, enough to watch your form, study your blood, all that.” He tilts his head slightly.

“Then soldiers?” She nods.

“Lowborn. No armor. Standard blades. Trained to fight dirty. They won’t die easy. They’ll send more beasts after that. Trained ones.” She takes a breath. “No one survives the third wave.” He nods as if she’s reading him the daily news. She studies him a long time before her thoughts get the better of her. Her voice drops low.

“I thought I was making something holy,” she says. “When I made you. When I broke you.” She swallows. “But maybe it was just vanity. Maybe I just wanted something to bleed for me. To prove I mattered.” Her throat tightens. “If what I made was suffering...if I made a thing I had no right to...” She steps closer. Kneels. “I’ll take the blade for it.”

Her hands rest in her lap, open. Her voice cracks.

“Punish me. I won’t stop you.”

Utari looks at her. Steps forward. Crouches, face close to hers.

“I wanted it,” he says, quietly. Serith blinks. “Even when I didn’t understand it. Even when I screamed. I wanted it.” His voice thickens. “I didn’t know what I was. You showed me.”

Her eyes glisten, but she does not cry.

“You gave me shape.”

He bows his head.

“Name me,” he whispers. “Tell me how to die.”

She rises. Stands before him. Cups his jaw in one hand, tilts his face to hers.

“I want Palide to run out,” she says. “I want the first beasts to fall too fast. The soldiers to panic. The guests to stop drinking.” She takes a deep breath. “I want him to run out of beasts, and send more. I want the reserve pens emptied. The floor to stain red.” He nods.

“Yes, Lady.” She lifts his helmet. Places it into his hands. Leans forward and presses her lips to his brow.

“...Utari.” He looks up. She stands, turns toward the door. “Make them remember you.”

She doesn’t look back. By the time she reaches the stairs, her spine is straight, eyes unreadable, breath perfectly measured. She walks into the light.

The guests begin arriving before second bell. Serith stands at the top of the marble steps in full regalia, every inch of her sculpted, painted, adorned. Her robes are layered obsidian and dusk violet, slashed through with golden thread. The whip curls like a predator at her hip. Her jewelry gleams under torches, bones, metal, teeth, a flash of Togrutan gold at her collarbone. Her voice is low, pleasant, her face unreadable.

She greets them all, lords and ladies, generals and ministers, bored nobility with wine on their breath, families hoping to ingratiate themselves with Palide’s inner circle. They bow, kiss her hand, compliment the architecture. She says very little. Smiles even less. When the last guest passes, she turns without a word and descends the grand stair to the coliseum balcony. The procession follows in murmuring waves.

The coliseum floor glows beneath torchlight, freshly scattered with white sand and broken glass. The braziers hiss. The music begins, low strings, Araj’s voice floating somewhere above the far arch. And in the center of the area, kneels Utari, chained to the centerpost. His armor shines with Kav’i silver, blackened from use but flawless in its bearing. Her saber hangs from his belt, perfectly aligned. His helmet masks everything but posture, and that, too, is flawless. Even with the collar in place, even with the chain secured at his back, he looks more like a monument than a man.

He looks like he did the first night she dragged him through the estate and left him chained there.

Serith watches from the private box. She does not sit. Palide lounges beside her, theatrical in his leisure, robes outlining him in sculpted folds. He takes a sip of wine, then stands and walks to the edge of the box.

“This one,” his voice silences the conversation around the ring. He nods toward the centerpost. “This one was forged under the roof of our great House. He was given armor. A name. A home. And he betrayed it. His hands spilled blood he had no right to touch. His blade moved without permission, his loyalty bent backwards.” A pause. “He has asked for death in the arena.”

Palide turns toward Serith, voice thick with formal disdain.

“By the grace of my niece, Lady Serith Kav’i, he has been permitted it.” Serith inclines her head once. No emotion passes her face. Palide raises a hand, and the chains snap open.

Utari’s blade ignites at his side, red and steady, casting light against the white-slick sand. He does not look up at the box, where Serith watches him. Every inch of her is composed: the arc of her chin, the lacquer of her nails, the way her breath never hitches. Not as the gates open.

The first wave breaks around him like water against stone. Beasts snap and bleed at his feet. He moves with force, not elegance, as if the saber is an extension of pain and obedience both. The crowd roars. The nobles cheer. Palide says nothing. Serith doesn't breathe.

The second wave comes. Soldiers this time, meant less to kill, more to wound. They come fast, loud, coordinated. One catches his ribs, another his leg. He staggers. Bleeds. But still, he rises. The saber moves slower now, but more deliberate. Each kill is a statement, each body that falls around him a sentence without punctuation. The crowd begins to shift. Some stop drinking. Others lean forward. Their bets falter. No one claps anymore.

The gate opens again. The third wave is beasts trained for execution, massive, armored things with sigils branded into their hides and shock collar embedded in their necks. They'd killed better men. Louder men. Nobler ones.

They can't kill Utari.

They tear into him. They slam him against the arena walls. They shatter parts of his armor. They bend him to the ground more than once. But he rises. At the end, nothing moves on the floor but him. Limping, bleeding, slumped slightly from the weight of a shattered shoulder. But he stands regardless. Alive.

Serith says nothing. Palide leans beside her, cool and effortless, and gives a little breath of amusement.

"You do know how to sculpt." She doesn't answer. She can't. The arena is silent. Not reverent, horrified. She watches him, her Fist, her work, her ruin, and in that moment, she swears she believes in gods. The silence holds like breath in a sealed room. Everyone waits for the gate to open again and announce what they all know is coming: the end. But it doesn't. Instead, Palide rises.

One gesture, easy as breath, and a new gate opens. The reserves. Serith's gaze doesn't falter. The crowd shifts, murmurs. This isn't custom. The reserves aren't for show, they are for civil uprisings, for the worst of criminals sentenced by the Emperor himself. But the beasts come anyway. Utari doesn't react. He stands there, posture uneven but ready, red blade humming.

They come in waves, some small, some monstrous. Droids are added next, blade resistant and fast. Then mercenaries. Then former acolytes with shock collars around their throats. Everything. All of it, thrown at him. And still he fights. Not cleanly, not quickly. His rhythm slows, his footing gives out, but he rises again. His left arm drags, almost limp. His helmet is cracked across the jaw, visor smeared dark with blood spray. Each breath that comes out of his helmet is slower now, but steady. He knows his lungs, knows how to draw them just shy of failure.

The crowd doesn't cheer anymore. They just watch. Serith's whip hangs heavy at her side. She can't feel her hands.

The last of the reserves fall. Blood pools deep beneath its carcasses. Limbs twitch. The air reeks of scorched flesh and cracked bone. And still, Utari stands. He doesn't raise his arms, doesn't cry out in triumph, only adjusts his stance to lower the saber and waits, chained to silence, just as he'd been trained.

The crowd says nothing. Even the nobles, blood soaked and empty-eyed as they are, know the weight of what just happened. There are rules here, old ones, binding ones. Arenas are ancient, an execution, yes, but also covenant. Trial by ordeal. Survival by absolution. If the condemned endure, they leave alive. Often promoted. Sometimes revered. Serith had seen it once before, when she was in Delrith's apprenticeship. She remembers how the victor had been led, limping to the gates. How the crowd had roared. How the overseer had lifted one hand and shouted, "Free!"

This time, no one speaks. Palide rises, slowly. Serith turns sharp, too sharp. He is composed, as always, but his eyes are narrowed, shoulders held just slightly too high. He's going to refuse it.

She steps closer to him on the balcony, lowering her voice to a tone just shy of dangerous.

"You'll lose your standing," she says, "if you deny the ritual. They'll remember." Palide doesn't look at her. "They'll talk," she says, "You'll be the Lord who broke the arena, who bent the old rites for a slave." He turns to face her and smiles.

"No," he says simply. "You will be."

She freezes. Palide lifts his voice, smooth and resonant, filling the coliseum.

"This slave is not merely strong. He is sculpted to be strong." A murmur begins in the crowd. "He was trained by the Lady of this estate. Given armor. Discipline. Identity. And when that identity turns on us, when the sculptor's creation becomes defiant, who else to undo the work but the hand that made it?"

Serith's stomach drops. Palide gestures and four guards descend into the arena. Utari doesn't resist. He lets the saber be taken from his hands and placed reverently on the ground before him, lets them bind his arms behind his back and drag him back to the centerpost, knees pressed into the now red sand. He doesn't look up, doesn't move.

Palide sits back down beside Serith. His voice lowers to a whisper only she can hear.

"You'll kill him," he says. "because I say so. No one else gets to finish your art but you." He leans back, smiling.

Serith doesn't move for a second. She feels the ripples even where she stands, the crowd shifting in discomfort, not because they mourn the slave, but because the arena is sacred. And Palide just pissed on its stone and pointed fingers at Serith.

This will be remembered. The nobles will talk, the off-world courts will whisper. The Academy will take note.

She steps forward, down the marble stairs, down into the pit. Her breath is steady because she has to be. She will not be remembered for faltering, not here, not now. She steps into the arena. The blood greets her. She walks through the stillness like a blade drawn from a sheath. The silence presses like a collar against her throat.

Serith reaches the center of the arena as if in a dream, every step heavier than the last, the weight of torchlight and expectation turning the air to liquid. The crowd holds its breath. Even the lowest servants still. Utari kneels at the centerpost.

His armor is a wreckage. The breastplate caves partially at the left side, where a beast's tusk had struck full-force. Blood soaks the fabric beneath, turning black by heat and exposure. One pauldron has been torn off entirely. The gauntlet on his left wrist is fused to his arm, melted where it must've blocked a blaster at point-blank range. His leg armor is dented and sharp, cracked like eggshells at the knee joint. Every seam oozes. And still he kneels.

Serith drops to her knees before him. The heat from his body is startling, fevered from sheer effort. His breath rasps through the modulator, uneven and shallow, but his posture remains. She reaches up. Her fingers, delicate with effort, find the latches on either side of his helmet. She unfastens them slowly, lifts the helmet off his face, and looks at what remains.

Blood mats the hair at his temple. A deep slit cuts diagonally across his scalp, crusted over black. One eye is swollen shut entirely, the lid purpled and misshapen. The other, barely open, searches her face with a kind of fragile awe. His lips are split at the edges, his chin shakes slightly. She had never seen him more beautiful.

He blinks once.

"...Did I do good, Lady?" he whispers. Her voice catches. She touches the line of his jaw, thumb trembling slightly where it rests against his cheek.

"You were perfect," she says. "You were always perfect." He closes his eyes, like that is all he needs.

Her hands move next to the collar. It has never been removed, not once since she fastened it around his throat all those years ago; a shackle forged for obedience. She undoes the clasp carefully, then yields it with a click.

The skin beneath is raw, darkened by years of pressure and contact shock. The muscles of his neck jump involuntarily, adjusting to the sudden freedom. His next breath comes deeper. Shakier. Serith looks at him, something inside of her cracking like bone. Her voice breaks as she leans close.

"I owe everything to you, Utari Vevut," she says softly. For him alone.

She rises. Turns slightly toward the box above, toward Palide. Her voice carries across the arena.

"May this kill be yours, my Lord," she says, "As am I."

She turns back, unclasps her whip. It crackles free in the air with low energy. She steps behind Utari. Slowly, reverently, she reaches down and wraps the unlit cords around his throat. Not tight. The lowest power setting buzzes against his skin, a heat like prophecy, not pain. He inhales.

"Turn away. Please."

It is a whisper. A plea. She does. She closes her eyes. Her fingers find the dial by the ignition. She hears him take one last, full breath, and then turns it all the way up. The whip screams.

His head drops with a soft thump onto the sand. The body follows slowly, like a marionette released mid-performance. There is no cry, no shudder, just the soft collapse of something sacred. Serith stands above him, breath held, hand on the whip. She powers it down, curls the chain back into her palm, clean and hot. She does not turn around, does not look at the crowd.

Servants come, two of them entering the arena before she's even bent down to lift up his helmet. They take what remains of his body by the shoulders and ankles, more like a crate than a man. The head is scooped up in a cloth bundle. They do not meet her gaze. They do not ask where to take it. She doesn't give orders.

Let them dump it with the rest. Let the worms fight for the privilege.

She holds the helmet close, hands cradling the shape of what once had shielded him from the world.

She brings it back to her chambers as the crowd disperses. Places it on the stand beside her vanity, where she used to hang her Akul teeth.

It's past midnight when Palide summons her. Not formally, just a word from a servant, just a gesture in the eastern study. She comes, repainted. Every ring in place. He doesn't rise when she enters, doesn't even look up. He's signing something with a stylus, an estate ledger by the looks of it.

"You will need to review these by morning," he says. No greeting, no mention of what just happened. She inclines her head. He clicks something closed and sets the stylus aside.

"Lord Voath is expecting us to close negotiations on Sriluur within the week. You'll be traveling there on my behalf." She nods.

"When?"

"Two days. Pack appropriately. You'll meet with Cartaj the Hutt. He'll like it if you show your chest." She says nothing. He finally looks at her, eyes narrowed slightly.

"You did well tonight, niece," he says finally. "Don't mistake that for praise. It simply means I can use you now without interruption." Her hands remain still, breathing measured.

"Of course, Uncle." He stands.

"Rest while you can. The court will expect performance again soon," he says as he brushes past her. The scent of his robes stays behind. She doesn't speak, doesn't scream, only walks back silently through the corridor. Sits beside the helmet when she reaches the room. Lights a candle on the mantle. It flickers low, casting slow-moving shadows across the fabric. The estate grows silent as she waits, no servants, no music, only her and the helmet. The candle wax pools slowly across the table like melted ivory. She folds her hands in her lap, bows her head low, and closes her eyes.

Softly, she begins to speak Togruti. Or at least, her best version of it. The words come in fragments, half-remembered syllables and broken cadences, the rhythm of something sacred she no longer fully understands. Her accent is wrong. The tenses slip. Some phrases she has to fill with Basic because her tongue has forgotten the shapes. But she speaks an old funeral rite anyway. A farewell from a world she barely remembers. She pauses only once, lays each word carefully at his feet, each mistake as an offering. When she reaches the final lines, she bows her head until it touches the floor.

“This body was yours. You were never meant to belong to me.” The tears come without warning. Hot. Unhidden.

“I know I won’t see the Beyond. But you...” she swallows. “You might.” Her fingers caress the crown of the helmet. She finishes her prayer in a voice wrecked by silence. Stays kneeling there long after the wax cools.

The journey back from Sriluur is quiet. Too quiet. The negotiations went predictably well, the Hutt had bowed under the weight of Palide’s offer and the presence of Serith’s whip. No one resisted. They never did anymore. It leaves Serith bored.

The silence of the ship is well-regulated. Her attendants move as they should: silent, useful, invisible. The slaves are kept belowdeck. The whip rests at her side, untouched.

The ship alarm chimes. She turns toward the sound without urgency, already expecting nothing.

“Proximity breach,” the pilot reports from the front console. “We’re being boarded.” A pause. “Single lifeform.” Serith stands. The whip coils at her hip.

Her pace toward the docking corridor is slow, measured. The ship’s lights flicker once as she moves through the main hallway, footsteps echoing across metal, presence quiet as the grave.

The docking hatch hisses open with pressure and smoke. Serith doesn’t blink. The figure that steps into her corridor is tall, fierce, and very clearly at her limit. Sweat slicks her orange skin to the collar of her robe. Her montrals twitch unevenly, her boots drag slightly. But her posture is straight, saber already lit. Double-bladed. Green.

A Togruta. A Jedi, not a learner at that. A Knight. Her age. Serith tilts her head, a smile creeping its way across her lips. Perfect.

The Jedi charges. Form V, heavily modified. The kind of brute-force saber work that would’ve shattered a lesser opponent. She fights like Fist did, using strikes Serith beat into him. She comes in high, then low, then arches both blades in a tight, spinning cleave meant to separate head from torso. Serith lets her come, lets her burn through those last embers of energy. She ducks once, steps back, catches a blow on her vambrace and lets the other pass through empty air. The girl doesn’t stop. Her saberstaff spins arcs of green light, pressure relentless, but Serith can see the cracks forming. Her footing lags on the third pass. Her shoulder slows on the return sweep. Her breath hitches with fatigue, not rage.

Serith makes her move. Cracks the whip once to the left, a feint. The Jedi pivots, showing her open side, and Serith slams the Force down like a door falling shut.

The girl goes down hard. Not cleanly, not gently. Her body crashes against the durasteel floor with a snarl, lightsaber clattering wide. Serith steps forward. Raises her hand again, and crushes her flat, every limb pinned. The Jedi spat a glob of blood and saliva just short of Serith's boots. Serith smiles, lazy and precise.

"You missed." The girl glares up at her, breath sharp and labored.

"Wouldn't want to ruin your polish," she bites out. Serith crouches, one hand still holding the pressure down.

"You're the worst kind," she murmurs. "Exhausted and proud. Too stubborn to die cleanly." She plucks the saberstaff from where it rolled, turns it in her hands. It's a simple hilt, slight scarring near the emitter. Wrapped in Akul leather. Personal. She stands.

"You fight like you've got something to fight for." The Jedi growls through her teeth. Serith calls the guards to bind and muzzle the Jedi. Only when the restraints click shut does she ease the pressure. The Jedi sags but doesn't flinch. Doesn't look away.

Serith walks back to her, lets the green blade cast light across her face.

"Rest now," she says, quiet and certain. "You'll need it." She hooks the saber alongside her whip and leaves, robes whispering behind her like smoke. The Jedi lies still, breathing hard through muzzle-bound teeth, so beautifully doomed.

The skies over Dromund Kaas are black when they arrive. The guards drag the Jedi into the coliseum without fanfare. There's no crowd tonight, just torches. The whisper of warm rain. The bloodstained floor beneath them. The Jedi stumbled once, but didn't fall. Her arms are bound above her head, tethered to the ring at the center of the arena. Her tunic is stripped. Her lekku hang heavy from exhaustion, sweat streaking the orange of her skin into pasty peach.

Serith circles her once, then again. She moves without haste. Lets the silence tighten like thread. She steps in close. Brushes the girl's jaw with the back of her hand.

"Your name?"

No response. Serith circles again, a cruel smile playing on her lips.

"I can spend all night with you, and I will. But names are a polite place to begin."

Still silence. Serith raises her hand. The first strike lands with a hiss, a heat-reactive edge, serrated and calibrated to split the skin without cutting too deep. It drags along the Jedi's shoulder, flaying the strip clean. The girl hisses. Serith strikes again, and again. Her back splits open in shallow layers, blood dripping down her spine like slow ink.

"Just two words," Serith whispers. The Jedi's lips part, just slightly.

"Vex." Serith smiles.

"There it is." She paces now, slower. Lets Vex sag.

"I know the clan," she muses aloud. "Nomads. Spirit-guided. Tame. What made you leave them, I wonder?" She strikes again, high, under the ribs, then presses the tool to the inside of the elbow and drags it down.

“Did the Council find you too wild to control? Or did your clan give you away like livestock?” Vex flinches under the knife’s edge but says nothing. Serith chuckles a little to herself.

“You intercepted a Sith vessel alone. That takes guts. Or stupidity. Did you come here hunting someone? One of your little lost padawans? Someone soft, someone weak? Do you really think I’ll let you rescue them?” Still no response, just blood. Serith’s voice curls low.

“They’re probably dead. Or broken. Maybe they beg for it now.” Vex hisses, just once, but it’s enough. Serith smiles and strikes again.

She loses track of time. Of the cuts. Of the slow spread of red across the Jedi’s back, chest, thighs. Her arms tremble now, knees buckle and lock, but her eyes, stars, those eyes, still burn. It makes Serith want to break something. Her mind starts to spiral. She catches herself. Summons Araj.

The girl enters quietly, dressed in violet, cybernetic arm catching the torchlight. Her voice waits in her chest. Serith barely looks back.

“Sing.”

Araj obeys. The melody unspools, low, mourning, perfect. A shroud of sound. It wraps the space around Serith like a net.

Vex raises her head to Araj, not fully. Just enough to see. The Jedi’s breathing changes, not from pain, but something else. Recognition. The beginning of attachment. A new idea forms in Serith’s head. She draws more lines down Vex’s back, until Araj’s melody ends, before she turns around.

“You’ve been watching so closely,” she says, tilting her head. “Listening so well. Why don’t you come show us what you’ve learned?” Araj freezes. The music dies. Vex’s eyes hold hers; Serith watches a thread pass between them, silent, aching, almost holy. Araj reaches for the tool, then stops. Her fingers curl inward gently.

“Tch. Ungrateful.” She turns toward the guards. “Take her downstairs.” They drag Araj downstairs. Her silence doesn’t save her. Serith turns back to the Jedi and resumes her work, this time without words. Just strike after strike until Vex’s shoulders tremble, her body sags, and her legs give out entirely. The chains catch her weight. Her head hangs low. But still, no reaction. Serith stands over her, breathing slow and controlled. Quietly, she reaches for the girl’s forehead. Runs her fingers across the Akul teeth woven into her crown.

“You don’t deserve these.” She slides them off the forehead, strings them along her belt. Vex’s head snaps up, not in pain but anger. Serith drinks it in.

“You remember how it felt to kill and Akul?” she asks softly. “I’ll remember this forever, too.” Then, to the guards, “Take her to the dungeons.”

As they drag Vex away, Serith watches the blood trail vanish into shadow, and smiles.

The year passes slowly, like oil through a narrow pipe. Vex lasts longer than she should have. Longer than any before her. She screams less. Moves less. Thinks more. But she doesn't break easily, which only makes Serith stay longer.

Every morning begins the same: blood-warm stone beneath bare feet, the sound of cuffs tightening, and a whisper of breath behind her. Vex walks now, not free, but unchained, wrists locked by the Force-dampening cuffs Serith had forged herself. The process had nearly unmade her.

She'd gone back to Delrith's journals, to the thick red pages filled with equations written in blood and perfume. She hadn't touched them in years, she hadn't needed to. She remembers the nights Delrith made her mix salts and bone dust naked, kneeling on stone. The way she touched her shoulder with ash-stained fingers and whispered, "The things you own must hurt before they serve." It makes her nauseous, but the work needs doing.

She carves the sigils into the cuffs herself, burns her fingers aligning the delicate lattice of Force-nullification. When she finally fits them around Vex's wrists, she feels something go quiet inside the Jedi. Not broken, but muted.

She stops dragging Vex after that. Now, the girl stands behind her, in red or black, head bowed. Silent. Breathing. Watching.

She'd make Vex recite the Code to her as the whip falls across her back. Again. Again. The girl would tremble, breath coming in gasps, but she's speak.

"There is no emotion, there is peace.

There is no ignorance, there is knowledge..."

Serith would correct her posture between verses, place her fingers against open wounds.

"There is no passion, only peace."

"Only serenity," Serith corrects. "Say it properly or I'll split you open like a scroll."

The Code became a ritual, a mantra turned curse. Serith makes her speak it because she needs her clean. No one fears a Sith prisoner. But a Jedi, tamed and collared? That turns heads. That is beauty.

She discovers Vex's Togruti by accident. The girl mutters something during a night of fever, too quiet, too fluid to be Basic. She recognizes it, not from use, from memory. Her childhood. Shili. The sound of her mother whispering lullabies as she dresses Serith's scars with ash and fat. Stories told during Akul hunts. Words too sacred for war.

She doesn't ask Vex to translate, she doesn't care what it means. But weeks later, during a spiral: fists clenched, teeth locked, breath a stutter, she snapped.

"Speak it."

Vex blinks. Serith kneels beside the fire, trembling.

"The language. Yours. Mine. Read, tell me a story, I don't care."

Vex obeys. Her voice, thin at first, grows stronger with rhythm. She recites a tale of forest lightning, of a boy who ran faster than the wind. Serith doesn't understand most of it, but it feels right. It feels like home.

She does it again. Whenever she wakes screaming from dreams of Ajid, whenever the burn of Delrith's memory leaves her skin crawling, she summons Vex and says nothing. It soothes something inside Serith, something she didn't know needed soothing.

Let her be my cradle, Serith thinks as she speaks. *Let her carry what my blood cannot*.

Palide comes and goes, uninvited, unstoppable. He arrives in the dead of night, robes clean, smile cold. He never touches Serith, he doesn't need to anymore. He raises brows at her balance sheet, sneers at her slave's posture, trails fingers along the Akul teeth at her hip.

"Nice collection," he murmurs. "It's good to know the family's legacy is safe in such lovely hands."

After each visit, Serith doesn't sleep for days. She stops eating, watches Arajj sing and flinches alongside the slave when he voice cracks. She takes Vex to the arena and punishes her until her lips turn white and her breath wheezes.

"Do you think I'm weak?" she asks once, mid-blow. Vex says nothing. Serith screams, then whispers.

"Say it. Tell me I'm not." Vex's voice rasps, dry and hollow.

"You're not."

It isn't enough to break Vex. Serith has to carve her, shape her. Pain isn't enough. Silence isn't enough. Even the Force cuffs, which strip her breath and balance, can't make her kill. She fights, disarms, but doesn't kill. Not for Serith. She watches her resist through lashings, through hunger, through hours kneeling in water, through lightning-struck rituals of pain. So she changes tactics.

Two pawns: Arajj who understands silence, and Mida, a servant girl no older than sixteen, bright-eyed and dutiful. Serith watches how Mida flinches when Vex limps past, how she holds cloth gentler than most, how she asks for nothing.

Perfect.

She brings the girl in, tells her to be kind, to bring food, to clean wounds. To speak like a sister. And when the time comes, to offer escape.

"Tell her Arajj will help," Serith whispers. "Tell her the guards can be avoided, tell her she has one chance."

Mida shakes. Her voice cracks.

"But... my Lady, she'll—"

"She'll hesitate," Serith says softly. "That's all I need."

Mida obeys, as does Araj. It takes a few months, then one night at dusk, they try it. Make it as far as the west corridor. Then, guards. Cuffs. Collars. Back to the coliseum. She throws Mida forward first, beats her without a word. First, fists, then her whip. She beat her boot to ribs, temple, lip, spine. Mida screams. Araj sobs in silence. Vex stands, shaking, her cuffs half-lit with strain. When Mida can barely hold herself off the pool of blood at her feet, Serith draws out Vex's lightsaber. Places the crystal gingerly into the core, and holds it out.

"Kill her," she says. Vex doesn't move. Mida gasps through bloody teeth.

"Please..."

"Kill her," Serith says again, quiet as the grave. Vex's fingers close around the hilt. Her eyes lock on Mida's, wide, pleading, barely human.

She ignites the blade. Green light casts shadows on the sand. Serith doesn't speak again. One clean stroke. One muffled breath. One body, still. Silence. Vex deactivates the blade. Her hand trembles. She turns, holds the weapon out. Serith takes it.

Palide's next orders arrive by courier. No preamble, just a sealed instruction.

There is a boy for you to break, Vault C-7 on Korriban. A Jedi Padawan. I want him broken clean. No attachments this time.

At the bottom, in a stroke of ink too sharp to be anything but a smile:

Don't bring your pets.

Serith reads the message in silence. Then again. Then drops it into the fire. She feels the tremor settle in her chest long before it reaches her hands. Korriban. She hasn't said the name aloud since Ajjid. Since Fist.

She calls the ship herself, gives orders in clipped tones. Makes arrangements for the Padawan to be beaten senseless before she arrives. "Soften the bone," she says flatly, "but leave the mind intact."

She doesn't go to the vault that first night. Instead, she sends a message ahead, then turns toward the canyon road.

Ilya's cottage hasn't changed. The same thin walls, the same dry heat. The same strange stillness of sand that remembers pain better than people do. When she knocks, Ilya answers in a sleeveless tunic, hair damp from training. Her Nightbrother lingers in the back, silent as always.

"You look like shit," Ilya says gently.

"I'm fine," Serith lies. Ilya doesn't believe her, but she steps aside to let her in.

Dinner is smoked meat and pickled root. The Nightbrother cooks. Serith sits with her whip across her knees and stares into the heart. She barely spoke, not until Ilya poured them wine, the kind from their year at the Academy, the kind they'd stolen and swore tasted like molten copper.

“Palide doesn’t want me to bring anyone.” Her voice is quieter than she intends. She takes another sip.

“You shouldn’t go alone, Ser.”

“I have to.”

Later, when the Nightbrother retires, Serith lingers by the fire. Her body still hasn’t adjusted to the heat. Her shoulders ache. Her montrals itch. She doesn’t want to sleep, doesn’t want to dream without Vex or Araj down the hall if need be. Eventually, Ilya touches her hand.

“Ser,” she says gently. “What’s going on?” Serith takes a deep breath, hands tightening around her wine glass.

“I’m tired, Ilya.” She says. Her voice is low, fragile in a way it rarely is. “I’ve been holding things together with twine.”

“You don’t have to hold anything here.”

“You know that’s not true.”

“I love you, Serith. You can be as broken as you need, here.” Serith turns her head to look at Ilya. The firelight catches the slope of her cheekbones, the little scar at her brow, one Serith had given her in a sparring match when they were thirteen. She remembers the blood, the way Ilya had laughed. They’d always been like this, quiet in the dark. Too many years of war between them, too much silence after. Ilya reaches up, gently, and touches Serith’s hand.

“Come to bed.” It isn’t a command, but it feels like one. Serith follows. The bed is narrow, the sheets coarse, the mattress thin enough that every movement sinks into the other. They lay side by side, quietly. Ilya turns toward her.

“You know,” she says, “I used to think about this. Not like this, exactly. Just...being close with you.” Serith doesn’t respond. Her breathing slows.

“I’m not trying to make it mean anything,” Ilya adds quickly. “Not unless you want it to.” Serith rolls onto her side, face close enough to Ilya’s now to see the flecks of red in her irises. The desert heat makes her skin smell like copper and sage.

“I don’t know what I want,” Serith says finally.

“That’s fine.”

“No,” her voice drops to a whisper, “it’s not.”

A breath passes. Then another. Then, without knowing who moves first, they are kissing. Not feverish, not slow, just...there. Mouths touching, fingers curling, a moment suspended between desperation and something gentler. Serith’s hands shake. Her body responds like it’s supposed to, but her mind wanders. Ajid’s neck. Fists’s body in the dust. The sound of Vex reading the old tongue. Delrith’s hands around her hips.

When they finish, Ilya curls into her, one hand on Serith’s hip. Serith doesn’t cry. Doesn’t speak. Doesn’t feel anything but the hollow silence where her chest should be.

They don't speak of it come morning. Serith dresses in silence. Her skin feels too tight for her body. Her mouth tastes like iron. She fastens her headpiece with mechanical precision, dresses her montrals, and secures her Akul teeth at her hips like a belt of trophies. Ilya makes breakfast, but Serith only drinks tea. She leaves without looking back.

The guards at the Academy don't ask questions. Palide's seal brings silence. One of them hands her a datapad containing vault access, blinks twice at her lack of escort, then says nothing more.

The vaults are claustrophobic. Stale air. Dust-thick stairs. A door that opens only after a biometric scan and an unspoken threat. Inside, it is cold. Serith stands in the center of the vault a long moment before she moves. She stares at the shadows, at the iron ring bolted to the stone floor. At the blood trail that leads nowhere. She exhales, once, slow and quiet.

"Bring the Padawan." The guards obey. She watches them throw him to the floor, watches the guards lock the ring around his ankle, tighten the collar, display to her the number burned into the durasteel band. Seventeen. No name, he doesn't deserve one. Serith turns. Closes the door.

The work begins.

Seventeen isn't allowed to speak the first day. She keeps him chained to the vault floor, no cot, no light. Just blood-wet bindings and the silence of his own breath. When he whimpers, she slaps him so hard his ear rings. When he sobs, she stuffs a cloth into his mouth and leaves it tied there until he starts to choke on his own blood. She feeds him with her hands like an animal, gives him water from a bowl left on the floor just barely within reach. Wakes him every ninety minutes with cold water down his spine. By day two, he begins shivering between sleep cycles. On day three, she starts speaking.

"You're a Padawan. What master abandoned you here?" she asks, circling him like a vulture. He blinks slowly, lips broken from biting them.

"Kralan," he rasps. "Neryss Kralan."

"Still alive?" He pauses.

"I don't know." Serith slaps the side of his head.

"Don't lie to me."

"...no."

"Good." She drags her nails down his back, slow and sharp until blood beads where skin splits. She dabs the wounds with saltwater. When he writhes, she shoves his face into the stone and holds it there until he stops fighting. That night, she lets the lights stay off.

Day five, she asks him about his old assignments.

"Hutt space," he says. "Weapons tracing, shadow fieldwork."

"A shadow," she echoes. He nods. She walks behind him, tracing the ridges of his skull, then leans in close. "The irony never burned you?"

He blinks.

“You. A Weequay. Sent to serve the Hutts.”

“I wasn’t serving—”

“No?” her voice turns icy. “Then what was it? Did you kneel for them? Did they laugh when they saw your braids?”

Seventeen didn’t answer, so she grabbed a rusted pin and shoved it through the webbing between his fingers. He screamed. She let the pain settle, then leaned in.

“Say thank you,” she whispers.

“...Thank you.” She pets his hair.

“You’re learning.”

Day ten, she asks again.

“Who would come to rescue you?” he shakes his head, dazed.

“No one.” Wrong. She brings in two guards, nods once. They beat him senseless. Re-break his ribs, freshen his bruises. She watches from the corner, sipping wine. The next night, she returns alone. Soft steps, a warm cloth. A plate of sugared bread. He stares at her like a dream.

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

“...Vashari,” he whispers. “Vashari Vex.” Serith’s face doesn’t move. She just listens. “She took care of me,” he adds, quieter. “Stayed behind so I could run.” Serith crouches low.

“And?”

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

“She failed.” He looks away. She grips his face until his gaze meets hers. “She failed, and now she’s mine.”

That night, she strips him, has the cell floor scrubbed with ice, and ties his wrists to the ground so he has to lean on his side to eat. He doesn’t fight. Doesn’t cry. By day fifteen, he thanks her for every injury. By day eighteen, he kisses the edge of her whip before every session. Day nineteen, she authorizes his resale, under Palide’s name. To who, she can’t care less. Her whip yearns far too much for her own blood to worry about such things.

Three years pass like smoke through a cracked urn, thick, acrid, slipping through her hands. Palide’s visits become less frequent, more violent. Each visit hollows her further. Each time he leaves, she buries herself in the only things that make sense anymore: Blood and Voice. They are mirrors, broken at different angles. One silence, one fire. One to sing, one to bleed.

Serith makes them spar together, sometimes with wooden staffs, sometimes with blades. Arajj never won. Vashari never lost. She teaches Blood to fight as an executioner, carves the emotion out of her form, punishes flourish, outlaws hesitation.

“Kill clean, Vashari,” she tells her slave. “Or I’ll make it dirty.” The name still makes the girl flinch, but it is Serith’s now. And she makes sure Vashari hears it when she pleases her.

Four years after taking Vashari, Serith summons the Arkanian back. The man doesn’t blink at the new commission. He takes the molds, calibrates the nerve endings, asks nothing. Two prosthetics, an arm and a leg. To correct sloppiness, punish overreach, fry nerves when balance fails. She designs the leg to be two inches shorter than Blood’s real one. Not enough to cripple, but enough to force a limp, a recalibration with each step.

She sends Vex away for five days. The girl fights like vengeance incarnate when she returns. No opponent lasts more than four minutes, no beast survives longer than three. Blood becomes undefeatable, a myth in green light and ragged breath. And, with it, Serith begins to recover.

Her whip no longer feels like Ajid’s. It curls around her wrist like a lover’s ribbon. She hosts her first gala. Then another. By the third, DARTH Vieron attends and stays late, asking about her estate’s surplus. Serith begins drafting her own contracts. Sealing deals under her own name. She stops asking Palide’s approval for every transaction. He doesn’t comment, but Serith doesn’t trust his silence. Not yet.

Still, the seed takes root. Every time Blood steps into the coliseum and raises her saber in a perfect guard, no tremor, no doubt, no mercy, Serith’s shaking fingers steady.

The fourth gala Serith plans was supposed to be perfect. Every detail studied, curated, enforced. The color of the silk, the burn of the braziers, Blood’s posture at her side, everything carved to reflect her strength. Her dominion.

Of course Palide arrives. The chamber constricts the moment he steps through the threshold. Conversation thins to murmurs. Serith stands to greet him. He praises her court with his usual venom-veiled sweetness. She answers in the cadence she’s perfected, cool and deferent. He doesn’t want words, he wants her to bend the knee.

“You forget who made you,” he hisses.

“You forget what I’ve become.”

He strikes her. Open palm. Quick. Efficient. Pain blooms against her cheek bright and hot. Iron touches her lip.

It should’ve ended there. She could’ve smiled through it, taken it like she always does. But Arajj moves.

Serith feels it before she sees it, the shift in the air, the sharp gasp of muscle and breath before Arajj’s voice breaks the room like a mirror shattering. Serith’s mind freezes as Arajj’s cybernetic arm cracks into Palide’s ribs, a clean, furious hit.

Palide strikes back. Arajj flies across the room, slammed into the banquet table. Silver and glass explodes around her. Her body twists unnaturally. Sparks light her shoulder like flares, and still, she scrambles to her knees.

“You HIT her!” she screams. The arm punishes her instantly, her whole body seizing, spasming involuntarily. She slams it against the wall over and over, trying to kill the pain with blunt force.

Serith doesn’t move. She can’t. her vision narrows. Her throat clenches. Eventually, she forces herself to move. She descends the dais one step at a time, heart lurching unevenly in her chest. Her feet feel miles away from her body. She walks past wine-stained marble and broken crystal, unable to process any of it.

Her court is watching. The Empire is watching. Arajj is on the floor, twitching, crying for her. Serith kneels.

“I was—my lady—he hit you—he—” Arajj’s voice breaks into gasps. Serith wants to scream at her, to grab her by the collarbone and demand to know how Arajj could do such a thing. But she doesn’t. She slaps her. Silences the girl, resets the room.

“Enough,” she whispers, but the damage is done. She stands, mind racing. There’s still time. This can be salvaged, if she punishes Arajj enough. Makes it theatrical. Locks her away. She doesn’t have to...

“Blood,” she says, voice hollow. Vashari steps forward, unreadable behind her mask. Arajj backs away, broken. She pleads, begs, voice raw with terror. Serith’s fingers tremble behind her back. Vashari lifts the broken girl like a corpse, unsheathes her sword with a whisper of inevitability. Serith takes a deep breath, then raises her hand. The blade freezes mid-air.

“She acted without instruction,” Serith says, voice eerily calm. “She believes she is protecting me, poor thing.” The words echo. They’re not hers. Palide dabs a bruised cheek.

“You have made her too bold, niece.” Serith’s stomach twists.

“Then perhaps it is only fitting you remind her of her place.” Palide smiles.

“As you wish.”

And just like that, it is done. Serith doesn’t blink, doesn’t move. Her mind screams at her from behind her eyes. The strings resume somewhere around her. Someone laughs. Her hands curl into fists at her sides, nails digging crescent moons into her palms. After a minute, she summons the guards. Arajj is silent as they bind her arms. Her feet stumble once on the marble, but she doesn’t cry out. They override the cybernetic so it lays limp, heavy at her side. Her dress is half torn, stained with blood. They drag her to the dungeon. Palide follows. Serith remains aboveground with Blood. She doesn’t allow herself to imagine what Palide will do to her, but she still feels the weight of his expectation, his hunger for pain meted out slowly.

The gala ends hours later. Serith returns to the cell when the last candle in the colonnade guts. The air inside is cold, the light barely reaches the floor.

Arajj lays curled like a child, bruises painted across her side in deep purples and greens. The restraint cuts across her back, the cybernetic sparks faintly but doesn't respond. Her breath comes thin and uneven. Her mouth is split. Serith stepped inside. Closed the door.

Voice was hers. Hers to shape. Hers to protect. And she failed.

She reaches out and runs her fingers through Arajj's tangled hair. The girl twitches at the touch, then stills.

"I'm sorry, Lady," she whispers. Her voice cracks. Serith doesn't let herself cry. She won't cry.

"I know," she murmurs instead. Her hand drifts to Arajj's cheek. "You served me well. You made a beautiful mess of him." A ragged sound escapes Arajj's lips. She doesn't move, but her body trembles. For a long moment, Serith just watches her breath, watches her blink slowly through the pain, the bruises, the blood. She looks smaller than usual.

She should have protected her. She should have gutted Palide there and then. But she did nothing.

Her lips brush Arajj's forehead in silence, then she stands. The door closes behind her with a final hiss, and for the first time in years, Serith doesn't feel like a sovereign, but a coward.

Palide takes Arajj that night and does not return her. There are no messages, no updates, no promises. Serith doesn't ask about her.

For weeks afterward, she barely sleeps. She wanders the halls at night, feet silent on marble, whip coiled loose at her hip. Sometimes she finds herself standing in Arajj's old room without remembering how she got there. She has it torn down.

Blood becomes her only comfort. Not openly, but in presence. In gravity. Vashari's silence becomes her balm, steady and solid. She follows Serith from chamber to chamber like a shadow cast in perfect obedience. Serith begins to speak to her more. Sometimes she whispers things that aren't orders. Sometimes she kneels beside her and runs fingers down her cheek, or curls up against her side and just breathes. On gentler days, she holds Blood's hand during court. On crueler ones, she whips her for the way she blinks.

When the worst of her thoughts come: Ajid's eyes, Fist's breathless silence, Arajj's sparking arm and bloody mouth, Serith slips. She wanders the estate in wordless spirals, drifting down long corridors with eyes unfocused, mouth slack, hands twitching like they remember pain but can't find where to place it. Vashari follows, always. A few steps behind. Never speaking. She guides Serith when needed, one hand on the small of Serith's back, gentle but insistent. Sometimes to a bench, sometimes to the garden, often to Serith's private quarters, where she lays a hand on the threshold and wait for her to cross. Serith never acknowledges it, but when her body collapses onto the bed and her eyes finally close, she sometimes feels the faintest touch of fingers brushing her Akul teeth into place.

She begins plotting Palide's death. Silently, of course. Every time she holds her whip, every time she turns away summons from him with a feigned illness, every time she catches

herself fantasizing about his blood on her floor, it grows closer. She studies the Dark Council, weighs alliances. Imagines every step. She needed her patience.

In the meantime, she turns to the Arkanian. Calls him back with a specific request: the erasure of Blood's scars. He balks at first. "A Jedi wears her scars like clothes," he says almost cynically. Serith had told him hers don't. He complies.

The process takes weeks; slow-grafted synthetic skin, cellular restructuring. Burn damage reoxygenated. Healed. Hidden. Then, Serith begins again with lightning. She presses her fingers to Blood's bare skin and lets the current rip through muscle and nerve. She sears paths across her cheek, her collarbone, her ribcage, elegant spiraled lines like the paths of alchemical sigils. It must've been agony. Even with Blood's endurance, even after years of discipline and silence, she flinches. Once, then again. Each time she does, the lines grow crooked, asymmetrical, imperfect. Serith stops, makes the Arkanian wipe the skin clean. Begins the process anew.

When she finishes, when Blood finally remains motionless through the storm, her body still as stone, her face blank despite the blistering, Serith leans down and kisses the top of her spine.

"You're perfect," she whispers. Blood doesn't answer.

It takes three months to set the stage for Palide's assassination. Three months smiling at his envoys. Three months coordinating tributes, returning his messages with perfect deference, hosting his allies with flatteringly modest grandeur, pretending the whip at her hip was for display, not defiance.

Vieron gifted her a toxin smuggled in via a spice courier from Corellia – a compound that triggers delayed paralysis, only lethal once it reaches the lungs. It needs to reach his blood, but even skin contact can buy her ten seconds. Ten seconds is all she needs.

The dagger she chooses is thin, old. One of Delrith's, reclaimed from a chest she hadn't touched since her death. She has the edge honed until it can split hair. It fits into the narrow hem of her outer robe, just beneath the silken cuff.

She arranges a celebration. Nothing grand, just a private feast. A small guest list, mostly Outer Rim traders. Palide likes an obedient court. Blood stands beside Serith, masked and still, as always.

Serith wears her finest robes. Gold thread, dark violet silk. Her montrals dressed in tiered gold. Akul teeth across her brow, her collarbone, her hips.

As his attention flickers to the violinist on the balcony, she moves. Quick. Precise. The blade slips into her palm in a single breath. Her steps are smooth, unhurried, like she is leaning in to whisper a soft joke in his ear. She reaches for his shoulder. Drives the blade forward, and his hand snaps up and catches her wrist.

His fingers curl with unrelenting force, not flinching, not surprised. He turns to face her. She sees his eyes, yellow and red flaked, dull with disappointment. Her bones scream. The dagger clatters to the floor with a delicate clink. She tries to summon the Force, anything, but it's gone. Crushed beneath the weight of Palide's presence.

“Niece.” His voice is calm, firm. The room spins like something carefully unwound. She’s bound. Dragged to her knees by her own guards. Face down, arms twisted behind her, legs crushed under her own weight. Her cheek grinds into the cold stone of her receiving chamber. Her mouth tastes like copper. Palide stands over her.

The Force coils around her ribs like wire and tighten. One snaps, then another. Her jaw locks. A tooth comes loose and falls into her throat. She coughs it up.

He speaks to her the entire time.

“You think you’re owed something now?” Her shoulder pops out of the joint.

“You mistake curation for power.” He pulls her lekku down like reins, twists them until her vision dances. Her spine bows backward under invisible pressure. She bites her tongue to keep from screaming. The Force finds her lungs, wrings breath from them with slow, suffocating, grace. Her fingers twitch as she slowly asphyxiates. She sees Ajid’s eyes in front of her, green and beautiful.

“Coward.”

The words cut across the chamber like a throw knife. Serith jerks instinctively toward the sound, heart stuttering. Palide pauses, releasing Serith’s breath. He turns. Blood is kneeling, shackled, in the corner. Barefoot, mask smashed on the ground, eyes sharp as fire.

“You think you’re powerful?” she says, voice hoarse but clear. “You’re just a frightened old man breaking things smaller than you.”

The silence that follows is total. Then, Palide laughs. A soft, unpleasant sound. He gestures. Two guards move immediately. Blood doesn’t resist, but her head snaps to look at Serith one last time as they grab her by the arms. Her stare is defiant.

Palide follow them out. He doesn’t say a word to Serith, just leaves her there, broken and bound. She waits. One minute. Two. Five. Ten. Fifteen. The silence is oppressive. She strains to hear. For the longest time, nothing. Then, a sound. A choked gasp. Muffled. Then, a scream.

It doesn’t sound real. It sounds like something ripped open from the inside. Serith flinches. Her body jerks forward against her restraints. That was Blood. She was screaming. A second passes. Then another scream. A third, shorter, choked off at the end. Serith’s body trembles. She wants to beg, to plead for her uncle to spare Blood. She claws for the Force and finds only static, her concentration shattered by the sounds from the other. They keep going. On and on. A sob. A plea; not words but a sound like something near death but not allowed to reach it. Serith pulls at her cuffs. She can’t breathe. Can’t move. Minutes pass. Maybe twenty. Maybe more. By the time the door opens again, she is full-body shaking, muscles locked, vision swimming. Palide steps through the threshold. He is calm. No sweat. He moves like a man returning from a quiet supper. He walks right up to her and drops two things.

One of Blood’s lekku. Severed at the stump, flesh torn, nerves exposed like filaments, still twitching. And a steak knife from the kitchen table, bloody and broken at the handle. He dusts his gloves.

“Next time,” he says coolly, “don’t fail.” He straightens his cuffs. “And if you put a prosthetic on her,” he adds as he turns to go, “I’ll take yours the same way.”

The door closes behind him. Serith doesn't move, doesn't cry, doesn't speak. Her whole body hums with silence. The blood from the severed lekku touches her knee. She barely notices. The only sound left in her head is Blood's scream, raw and ragged, still echoing down the corridor like a curse. She blinks. Once. Twice. Then again, slower. Her body shudders. She rolls sideways and vomits bile on the floor.

She knew. He touched her. He had touched her. She knew.

She lay there in her own filth, shaking. The taste of copper and perfume and shame blooms behind her teeth. Ajid's corpse in a vault. Araj torn away. Fist bled on the sand. And now this.

She doesn't remember crawling to her whip, but suddenly it is in her hand. It hums against the stone floor, uncoiling like a second spine. She drags herself upright with it. Her arms burn. Her ribs scream. The leash of the Force still throbs through her marrow. But she stands. Walks, barefoot, blood slick, legs uneven, down the hall, to the door. It sits ajar.

The scent hits her first. Not just blood. Her body recoils. Perfume. Sweat. A tinge of musk. The stink of forced intimacy. Her legs give out before she crosses the threshold. She catches herself on the doorframe and nearly throws up again.

The room is dim, curtains drawn. Blood lies on the bed, naked, arms still bound, lekku uneven. Her back curls toward the mattress like a crater. She's covered in bruises. Small ones. The kind Serith remembers, sharp pointed, thumb-pressed, intentional. Between the legs. Along the ribs. Dotting the collarbone.

Serith staggers forward like a drunk. Falls to her knees beside the bed. Blood doesn't stir. Her breath is shallow, mouth hanging open slightly. One cheek is crusted with something Serith refuses to name. Her mind splits down the center.

She's fifteen again. Bent over Delrith's desk. Her breath in her ear. Her words in her mind. The sense of her body not being hers.

"I've made you beautiful," she used to say. "I've made you wanted."

Serith's hands shake as she reaches for Blood. Her cheek rests on her stomach. Her ribs scream from the pressure but she doesn't dare move. Her breath catches, then, finally, she weeps. Howls. Claws at the sheets. Beats her fists against the mattress like it had betrayed her. Screams until her voice breaks in her throat and then continues until she chokes on it. Until she becomes that girl again. Alone. Hurt. Used. Blood was supposed to escape that fate. To be what Serith couldn't have ever become. Powerful. Feared. Faceless. And now Palide has taken that, too.

She doesn't remember picking up her whip. Only that it is in her hands again, warm and familiar. She looks at it for a long time. The way the hand sits against her palm, the gentle curve of the coils, inert and silent. The cord that had once danced fire through the air.

She loops it once around her neck. Then again. Tighter. She sits down beside Blood's limp form, bed dipping beneath her weight. The girl's blood stains the sheets. Her thumb overs over the activator. One push. It would be painless. Poetry. Justice. She inhales.

“Lady.” The word is quiet. Hoarse. It startles her. She turns her head, whip still looped around her throat. Blood moves, just barely. Her body trembles as she pushes herself upright. Serith’s thumb presses down harder.

Blood’s hand shoots out, fast, too fast for a body that broken. She slams her palm against the activator just before it clicks, wrenches the hilt from Serith’s hands. The whip clatters to the floor, coils still looped at Serith’s neck, now inert. Slowly, carefully, Blood leans forward and wraps her arms around Serith’s shoulders. The motion is stiff. Pained.

She holds Serith like she means it. Serith freezes. Her body stills, like a small, cornered animal uncertain whether this is mercy or a final blow. She takes a breath, then melts. Collapses into the touch like it is air and she hasn’t breathed in years. Her forehead hits Blood’s collarbone. Her fingers curl into skin. She sobs against her, muffled and shaking and wordless.

Blood doesn’t speak. Her hands simply stay, one against Serith’s back, the other anchoring them both upright. Blood from her lekku trickles down their chests. She’s barely able to sit upright.

Time passes like static. A scream held behind the teeth. Eventually, Serith shifts. Lifts her head. Her face is soaked. Her lashes stick. Her eyes are ruined.

“We need to clean you up,” she says. Blood doesn’t resist when Serith gathers in her arms. Her skin is hot to the touch. She’s feverish. The wound is still bleeding. Serith carries her like something sacred, like a temple about to collapse. They reach the fresher. The lights are too bright. The air smells of sterilizers and salts. Serith lowers her gently to the stone bench and gathers a medkit. Her fingers are slow, deliberate. Still trembling.

She begins by unfastening the blood-soaked remnants of Blood’s robe. Peels it away like a second skin. She does not comment on the bruises, on the dried streaks at her thighs, on the shape of the wound carved through her missing lekku. Her hands twitch once.

“I should’ve stopped him,” she whispers. “I should’ve killed him.” She wets a cloth and begins to wipe the blood away, gently. Reverently. Her touch a prayer.

“I thought I could protect you,” she continues, quieter now. She cleans the wound. It’s jagged, torn, muscle and nerves sliced like fruit. “You’re mine. Nothing should ever touch you again.”

Blood’s breath hitches, just once. Serith reaches for the stitching kit. Her hands don’t shake this time. She threads the needle in silence. Begins the work. The skin around the stump is hot. Inflamed.

“I’ll kill him,” she says, voice low and firm. “For this. I swear it.”

“I know.” Blood’s voice is small. Serith looks up. Their eyes meet, and for a breathless moment, Serith sees Ajid’s eyes. Quiet. Hollow. Brimming with something too large to name. She turns her head.

“Don’t look at me,” she whispers, “please.”

Blood obeys. The stitching continues. Serith’s jaw locks. Her fingers work quickly, precisely. After a while, she speaks again.

“I’ll make this right,” she murmurs, “I’ll kill him. And then I’ll burn this whole fucking house down.” Blood says nothing, but she stills. When Serith’s hands begin to shake again, Blood’s fingers tighten briefly around her wrist. The kind of comfort Serith doesn’t know how to ask for. The kind she doesn’t deserve. But she lets it happen anyway.

The rain is soft on Dromund Kaas. For once, it isn’t storming. Just rain, warm and ceaseless, misting against the coliseum walls and trailing down the windows like threads of breath. Serith curls in the corner of her room, barefoot, whip coiled like a sleeping snake beside her. Vashari is sleeping.

She hasn’t spoken much since that night. Her body still trembles when the wind blows too loud, when metal clinks, when someone knocks too hard at the door. The stump where her lekku had been is healing. Slowly. Serith cleans the wound herself, stitches it each morning, kisses her temple each night. Sometimes, when the shadows close too tightly, Vashari rests her forehead against Serith’s shoulder. Serith lets her. She doesn’t know why.

Tonight, she sits in silence, stylus in hand. A datapad blinking open across her lap. One of the few legal documents Palide doesn’t already own: her will. She rereads it, then deletes it. Starts over. She doesn’t own much, not really. The estate belongs to Palide. The servants, the wine, the crimson velvet lining the halls, it is his. Her title, her holdings, even her birth name; it could all be erased with a signature. But he doesn’t own everything.

Upon my death, I, Lady Serith of House Kav’i, bequeath all titles, honors, holdings, and effects within my legal possession to Vashari Vex, known colloquially as Uluwi M’Seritok, hereby recognized as my ward, heir, and successor. She will be granted full autonomy, to become a free citizen of the Empire. She will retain the name Kav’i, should she wish it. She will not be held accountable for any acts committed in my service. She will not be bound to any Lord, House, or claim. She will be her own.

She pauses, then adds:

All of this upon a fulfilled condition. My body is to be buried beneath the roots of a jungle tree on Shili, preferably one with fruit bearing branches and a view of the canopy. I would like to be able to hear the birds. If such a request is deemed heretical or treasonous, so be it. Let it be my final offence.

She signs it. Dates it. Seals it with biometrics. Slides it into the lockbox hidden beneath her floorboards. Outside, the rain deepens. Soft thunder rolls across the hills. Serith doesn’t cry, though part of her wants to. She rises, crosses the quiet room to where Blood lay curled beneath warm sheets, and pauses. Watches her. The steady rise of her chest, the faint furrow between her brows. Serith slides in beside her, careful not to jostle her wound. Blood stirs, then turns toward her, eyes still closed. One of her hands finds Serith’s hip. Serith lets out a breath she didn’t know she was holding. She leans her Akul teeth against Blood’s bare forehead, and whispers so quietly she doesn’t know if it is heard.

“I’ll make this right.”

The rain answers for her. And for the first time in a long while, Serith sleeps peacefully.