

The snow never stops on Arkania. It doesn't fall, it drifts slowly, precisely, like everything else on the planet. Outside the crystalglass windows of the observation wing, the world gleams white and undisturbed, a single perfect freeze-frame of nature at equilibrium. The'izer likes the way it silences everything.

He is reviewing tissue degeneration reports in the north annex when the first tremor hits. Not local. Orbital. His datapad blinks red, then flickers. Something above the planet has cracked the network grid. He sets the datapad down and moves to the window.

In the distance, over the spine of the ridge, the sky stutters, low and unnatural. Faint streaks of fire fall through cloud cover, the kind of chemical glare that doesn't belong to civilian traffic.

By the time the bombardment reached his valley, twenty minutes had passed. Emergency signals flicker across the estate's walls. Most of the staff are already gone. They're not fighters, most aren't even residents. Just contracted data engineers and surgical assistants with no investment in the bloodlines whose name they transcribe. The'izer moves quickly but precisely. None of the archives were fully uploaded, there's too much raw data. He bypasses the cloud uplinks and starts shunting core memory blocks to a sealed drive, something local. Portable. A final, narrow strand of everything his family spent centuries preserving. DNA arrays. Clone markers. Neural maps. He's halfway through sequencing when the impact hits.

It's not direct, but a proximity blast. Low yield, deep impact. It strikes somewhere beneath the estate's sublevel, vaporizing the geothermal line that runs beneath the genetics wing. The'izer doesn't hear the explosion, but he feels it. The floor cracks like bone beneath pressure. He's thrown sideways, slammed into a diagnostics table. The metal edge catches him under the ridge and pitches him forward. He lands wrong, no balance, no time to correct himself.

The ceiling support buckles. The structural panel above him, eight centimeters of composite alloy and plasteel insulation collapses with surgical indifference. It strikes him, pins his leg, edge first, slicing through his calf like a guillotine. He hears the bone snap before he feels it, a wet concussive crack. Then comes the pressure. His tibia is driven backward into the meat of his own calf, fibula shattered into pulp. The femur cracks at the joint from the force of torsion. Skin ruptures. Nerves scream. The pain doesn't surge, it spikes, straight from the meat into the mind, bypassing breath, skipping language entirely. He gasps.

Blood is already pooling around his leg, dark and hot. Bits of cloth cling to the skin where it hasn't been flayed away. The muscle is exposed in places, dull red laced with white. It's charred in others, blackened and bubbling. His foot, what's left of it, hangs askew by a single strip of tendon. The toes twitch. The'izer exhales, a quiet sound. Tries to move. The crushed leg stays put, dead weight. Heat presses at his chest like a second skin. His whole body trembles from physiological failure. He begins to catalogue.

Compound fracture most likely, both tibia and fibula. Irreversible thermal necrosis along the lateral calf. Primary arterial rupture imminent. Tissue rot within 30 minutes. Walking, not possible. Dragging, unlikely.

He reaches for his belt, opens the kit secured there. Checks the cautery blade's charge. Still good. He's breathing in fast, staccato pulses now. Pain rises, but it's useful. Pain is a signal. He knows what it means, has taught himself and others to survive worse. And yet, beneath it all, something primitive whispers in his ear.

This will hurt in ways you cannot cleanly predict.

He steadies his hand. Reaches for the nerve stabilizer.

The cautery blade sears cleanly through flesh. He starts at the lateral side of the thigh, cutting a deep diagonal across charred muscle. The tissue peels back like wet paper. White fascia curls around the blade, blood bubbling up in thick, arterial rhythm. He can smell himself burning, a cloying mix of copper, smoke, and cooked nerves.

His breath rasps, teeth baring. His hands shake, not from fear, but from the effort of holding them still. He reaches the femur. The cautery blade meets bone and stops. Heat licks the surface. Scorching. He grits his teeth, adjusts the angle, and presses harder. The blade skips off the edge of the bone, grinding into the marrow. The'izer screams.

The sound ripples from his chest with a violence that startles even him, deep and raw. His hand recoils, blade falling from numb fingers. Blood sprays across the wall in uneven arcs. For a split second, he feels nothing but the inside of that scream.

He was seven. Strapped to a sensory relay chair in the lower lab, bare chested and upright. The stabilizers at his temple buzzed softly, tuned just enough to disrupt involuntary memory consolidation. Not enough to erase, just...blur. A second chair sat across from him, occupied by an older boy, maybe ten or eleven, breathing fast, eyes wide. The'izer recognized the signs fast: early stress reflex, dilated pupils, pulse rate climbing.

“He’s from the mines,” his father said, checking the readings without emotion. “Low-caste. Functional pain threshold, high resistance. You’ll learn well from this one.” The’izer’s jaw twitched.

“I’d prefer simulation, Father.”

“You’ve already done simulation. We need to calibrate, now.”

A technician moved beside the older boy. He’s shaking now, only slightly, but enough to make the straps creak. His wrists were bare. His breath fogged against the glass.

“Begin incision,” his father ordered. The blade entered the boy’s forearm, and The’izer felt it. Pain snapped into his wrist like a viper strike, precise, burning, uninvited. His fingers clawed reflexively against the restraints.

“Do not flinch,” his father snapped. “If you flinch, you misread. You contaminate your observations.” The blade slid deeper. Tendon split. The’izer screamed, short, hoarse, involuntary, then bit down on it. The pain didn’t subside, it nested. Crawled up his elbow, into his shoulder, where it pulsed against the bone like a heartbeat in the wrong place. He looked across the glass at the boy. Watched as he fought to hide it. Cheeks twitching. Eyes wet.

Another cut, across the lower ribs this time. Not deep, just shallow enough to cause confusion. Neural misfire. The boy whimpered. The’izer shook. He wanted to close his eyes. His instincts begged him to. But he didn’t. He opened them wider. Watched. Catalogued.

Pain across muscle sheath. Rib slice triggers tear reflex, not scream.

He blinked, breathed in. By the fourth incision, he no longer cried out. Not because the pain had stopped, no, it burned through every fiber of him like wire coiled too tight. But because he had found the pattern. The boy’s breathing. The order of incisions. The way the technician angled the blade to nick muscle without compromising structural integrity.

“Tell me what you are observing.”

He coughed once, tasted blood in his mouth. His spine arched involuntarily against the restraints, then stilled.

“The pain response between incisions two and three dropped,” he rasped. “Spinal arching’s compensatory, not a withdrawal. His breath control increased. He’s adapting.”

“And what about you?” The’izer blinked sweat from his eyes.

“The same.” There’s a pause.

“Good.”

The relay shut down. The boy’s sedated, technicians moved in. The’izer sagged in the chair, muscles trembling under the ghosts of wounds he’d never actually received. His bones ached from strain. Every breath came thin and glass-edged. But his voice, when he finally spoke again, was clear.

“I would like to try it again, Father. From the beginning.” His father stepped forward.

“We will,” he said, placing a gloved hand on the boy’s shoulder. “But next time, we’ll let you make the incisions. That way you can feel both sides.”

The'izer didn't answer right away. He watched the sedation gas drift against the glass. The boy's eyes fluttered, half-lidded, lips parted in a soft, exhausted moan. The traces of pain still lived in his body but now muted. Stored.

"I want to know how long it lingers," The'izer whispered. His father smiled.

"You will."

The holding cell smells like rust and disuse. It's not blood, that would've been cleaner. This is the scent of flaking iron and ancient rot, the kind of decay that settles quietly like mildew. The'izer sits on a bench, hands neatly folded, coat still stained at the collar with old smoke. His left leg has been replaced with a temporary prosthesis, standard Sith military issue, modular and crude. It clicks slightly when he breathes. Three Sith stand before him. Only one speaks.

The Sith is young, smug, and ornamental. He wears a single pauldron of gleaming black obsidian etched with the sigil of the Dark Council. A political hound. He hasn't looked at The'izer since entering the room.

"Doctor The'izer of the Varr Biogenetic Institute," he says, reading from a datapad like he is naming a corpse. "Head of the Varr Line. You stand accused of anti-Imperial conspiracy by means of noncompliance, biological subversion, and refusal to submit archived research to state hands."

"I have submitted everything that wasn't incinerated," The'izer says evenly. "Twice."

"You've also submitted multiple patents under anonymous authorship in non-Sith registries. Third-party Imperial audit confirms your family's work supported unauthorized offworld research. Unsanctioned organ scaffolding, clone autonomy protocols...shall I go on?"

"None of which were authorized by me."

The Sith finally looks up. His yellow eyes glint with practiced contempt.

"No?" he says, stepping closer. "Then perhaps you'd like to explain why, when the Sith finally descended upon Arkania, yours is the only estate with encrypted internal firewalls and a failsafe purge system specifically built to prevent Imperial salvage." The'izer's jaw flexes, just slightly.

"That was all my father's doing," he says. "He and my mother were paranoid beyond belief. If you're here to interrogate ghosts, I suggest you hire a necromancer." A flicker passes through the Sith's face. Not anger, but amusement.

"You expect us to believe you were not complicit?"

“I expect you to believe the data,” The’izer replies, voice sharper now. “I have never once filed anti-Imperial ideology. I have never voted. I do not leave the planet. The only thing I’ve ever cared about is the body.”

“Convenient,” the Sith mutters, “But the Empire does not distinguish between living and dead. Treason is hereditary.” The’izer leans forward, slowly, until his hands rest on his knees. The prosthetic winces under the shift.

“If you think I am a threat,” he says softly, “then waste no more of my time. Execute me.” The silence stretches thin. The Sith stares at The’izer for a moment longer, then lowers the datapad.

“You’re not a threat,” he says quietly. “You’re contaminated. But waste is still product, when properly handled.” He turns to the guards.

“Process him for planetary transfer. High-risk status. Strip titles, clear his lineage. Let Dromund Kaas sort him out.” The’izer doesn’t speak, he simply nods once. The doors hiss behind the Sith with a vacuum seal.

The’izer doesn’t remember boarding the ship. The sedation had been efficient, even he notes that in hindsight. No lingering side effects, no nausea, no disruption to memory outside the intended blackout window. He respects the precision, even as his cheek presses against the chilled plating of the crate. It’s barely wide enough to sit in. The walls are sweat-slicked with condensation, insulated in a way that makes recycled air taste faintly of coolant and something older. Metal, maybe. His wrists are bound behind his back. A magnetic lock anchors his temporary prosthetic to the floor. It whines softly when he shifts his weight. It doesn’t hurt but presses where the replacement doesn’t fit. There’d been no proper integration, the Empire doesn’t waste upgrades on war prisoners.

The muzzle collar at his neck pulses every few minutes, a steady, low-frequency reminder that he is no longer a citizen. He doesn’t sleep. He doesn’t blink much, either. Instead, he catalogues symptoms. Tracks muscle deterioration by observing tremors in his hand. Accesses blood loss from the scent of the gauze over his thigh. Phantom limb spikes occur every seven minutes: intense, stabbing jolts that curl his fingers against the floor until his joints lock. He doesn’t cry out. Pain is information. Noise is not.

When the ship breaches atmosphere, he feels the pressure shift behind his eyes, subtle and wrong. The static bite of Dromund Kaas’ storm system bleeds through the hull like leaking poison. There’s no windows, just the sound of power systems adjusting to cloud cover and the distant scream of the world.

The crate opens with a hiss and light, real light, blinding and unnatural, cuts into his eyes. Rain hits him like needles.

They drag him across a landing platform flanked by statues, carved faces streaked black with runoff. Towering monoliths rise behind them, half-swallowed by jungle growth and stormclouds. The skyline cracks with lightning. The air is wet and warm and smells of ozone. It disgusts The'izer.

The guard leading him wears standard black armor, no insignia. No words, either. Just a gloved hand gripping his collar and the soft electric whine of the shock prod hovering centimeters from his spine. His prosthetic clicks against the durasteel with each step. It's too short by half a centimeter.

They take him down, beneath the city proper. Into ancient stone corridors lined with soft red glowpanels, lit like blood vessels. The further they go, the quieter it becomes. The halls are carved from some mix of rock and old alloy, etched in forgotten Sith dialects. No modern systems. No surveillance he can discern. They bring him to a cell. Three meters by two. No sink. No bedding. A drain in the floor. They leave him there.

He marks time by the flicker in the overhead lights. Every four hundred counts, they buzz, either power fluctuations or a wiring issue. Doesn't matter. Food comes through a panel, always the same: tasteless beige matter on a heartless tray. He waits until starvation begins to affect him until he eats it. He doesn't sleep. He shuts his eyes in exact ten-minute intervals and imagines anatomic drawings. When his body trembles, he catalogues it. When phantom pain flares, he maps it. He says nothing aloud, not even to himself. They're waiting to see how long until he breaks. He waits longer still.

On the thirtieth day, the door opens without a sound. The figure who steps inside wears black, layered with slate gray. No rank pins, no saber drawn. His presence is quiet, practiced. Not the loud arrogance of a young Sith. He regards The'izer for a long moment.

"You've held up well," he says at last. "Twelve days without incident. Longer than most." The'izer tilts his head against the wall, voice dry.

"I am not most." The Sith allows himself the smallest of smiles.

"No," he agrees. "You're not." He takes a single step forward. The door seals behind him. "You've published over sixty accredited papers. Made at least fifteen contributions to biogenetic theory that our top institutions are still trying to unpack. Your pain compliance systems are in use in nine strongholds, even if they no longer bear your signature." A pause. The'izer lifts an eyebrow.

"And yet here I am."

"That," the Sith says, "is bureaucracy. And legacy." He folds his hands behind his back. "Your parents made the wrong enemies. You made the right results." The'izer lets the quiet sit.

"Results aren't enough, apparently."

“They are,” the Sith replies, “when properly redirected.” He begins to pace, slow, deliberate steps that measure the room like a ritual. “You’re not being punished. If we wanted you erased, you’d be carbon.” The’izer exhales.

“Then this is containment.”

“It is leverage,” the Sith stops in front of him, yellow gaze sharp. “You are a precision tool with no handle. A knife with no sheath. Left alone, you are dangerous. Unused, a waste. And the Empire does not waste minds like yours.”

“Then stop posturing to me and make your offer.”

“We’re assigning you to a jailor. You’ll work under his clearance but not his command. Your lab. Your tools. Prisoners brought to you for refinement.”

“You mean interrogation.”

“No,” the Sith says. “Engineering. You’ll build mechanisms of obedience. Design systems of pain that learn. All of your research will be given to the Empire.” The’izer’s eyes narrow faintly.

“I want autonomy. Full access. No limits on subject profile. No interference.”

“And the subjects?”

“Yours to send. Mine to study. I don’t care about their politics, just their structure.” The Sith studies him.

“Your demands border on insolence.”

“I have no illusions of rebellion,” The’izer says. “No cause. I’ll serve until I’m dead. All I ask is comforts so I may work my best until then.” A long silence. Then the Sith nods.

“You’ll have your lab. You’ll have your quiet. But if your results falter, if your attention drifts—”

“It won’t,” The’izer cuts in softly. The Sith leaves something on the floor between them. A small case. Sealed. Authorization keyed to The’izer’s biometrics. He turns to go.

“Welcome to Kaas,” he says, voice low.

The door hisses shut behind him. The’izer stares at the case. It’s unassuming, a matte black, palm-length. He places his hand on it without ceremony. It hisses open. Inside it sits a datapad, a clearance chip, and a surgical-grade biometric ring. No weapons, no tools. Just a monitor and the means to request them. The datapad opens to his fingerprint. A single message renders in Imperial red:

You have been granted conditional access to Sublevel 9-C. You may requisition materials through encoded channel 43. Request records will be monitored.

He reads it. Removes the clearance chip and slides the biometric ring over his finger. It fits too tightly. The pressure grounds him.

Two hours later, guards return. They lead him through the corridors like a package. He counts the turns. Sublevel 9-C is beneath the prison, beside but not in it. The walls are older than the Empire. Some parts look like they were carved out of the rock itself, stone veined with glinting red alloy that pulses faintly under the lights. They lead him to his room. He steps inside alone.

The lab is...adequate. Two prep tables, one operation slab. A sterilizer cabinet, six sealed drawers, a terminal with no uplink. The lights hum a few hertz too high, grating but fixable. There's a faint smell of oxidized metal and vacuum-sealed polymer. He walks the perimeter once. Notes the asymmetry in the ceiling panels, the subtle incline in the floor. No surveillance nodes that he can see, but there will be something. Audio, most likely. He sets the datapad down on the central table. Then, finally, he sits.

His leg groans under him. The joint whines, hydraulic fluid leaking in slow pulses against the metal sleeve. He's put up with it for a month. Long enough. His first requisition is short.

*Prosthetic enhancement kit, high-grade. Full neural interface calibration suite.
Biocompatible grafting sealant. Microframe precision tools.*

He sends it without fanfare, then strips the temporary prosthetic from his thigh. The skin beneath is raw and bruised. Friction burns along the edge where the Empire's "accommodation" ground bone against alloy. He brushes a hand over the end of the stump. Tender, yes. Still healing. But he's mapped worse. He leans back. Breathes. Waits.

The door hisses again a few hours later. A silent droid enters. Places a sealed case on the table. Leaves. He doesn't watch it go. He opens the case, and smiles. Genuinely. The tools are clean. Fine. Exact. Someone either respected his list or feared what would happen if they didn't. There's a full-frame socket, precision needles, modular grip extensions. A bone saw, the correct kind. Enough parts to build a limb worth of the mind that lost it.

He works in silence. The old prosthetic is unbolted first. Then the implant contacts are cleaned, rinsed and sanitized. The new interface fits flush against his femur. Clicks once, then twice. The grafting process burns. It's not the kind of pain that invites screaming, it burrows. Climbs up his spine, through the teeth, into the back of his eyes. He records it. Maps it. Traces the curve of nerve response against his breath.

The first step feels right. The second doesn't. It's not the hardware. The prosthetic responds perfectly, torque fluid, microflex sensors fire at full resolution. Everything is working, but his body...isn't. The'izer reaches the end of the lab and freezes.

Pain blooms at the top of the stump. Deep. Dull. Wrong. Not surgical pain, not residual trauma. Structural. Damage beneath the skin. Pressure where there should be clearance. Scar tissue inflamed from two weeks of steel grinding into his bone. He exhales slowly, stiffly. Then shifts weight onto his other leg. And limps.

The realization hits with sterile violence. He is limping. The'izer looks down at his leg, as if the limb itself has betrayed him. He spent years refining cybernetic integration algorithms. Designed his first adaptive nerve loop at fifteen. And now he can't walk without favoring one side like a wounded animal.

He grabs the wall, presses his fingers into the cold alloy to steady his breath. Thinks a second. Damage is to the remaining femoral structure. Deep bruising in the stabilizing muscles, irregular scar tissues, misalignment in the surgical anchor. Soft tissue inflammation. The leg isn't failing. He is.

He shoves himself upright and moves to the drawer where the droid left supplies. Finds a cane: standard issue, steel-handled walking stick designed for aged soldiers and low-grade trauma patients. It's a humiliation. It clicks with each step as he paces the room in short, economical passes. The sound is loud, slow. It interrupts him.

He stops at the central table. Grabs the datapad. His next requisition request is queued in seconds.

High-grade cybernetic tissue simulators. Neural socket test beds. Joint resistance variants (3-axis). Limb balance microreactors. Dual-specimen control chambers. Biological stress testing rig. Humanoid subject (unstable gate walker or equiv.)

He types a line into the notes:

Corrective research required. Beginning with load-bearing asymmetries in failed military prosthetics. Personal application forthcoming.

The subject arrives just after the lights reset. A full twelve hours since The'izer submitted his requisition. A fast response. Too fast. Someone's eager to see what he does when handed a live subject.

Two guards wheel the prisoner in on a restraint slab. They do not speak to The'izer, or look at him for that matter. They place the body at the center of the room, unbuckle the locks, and leave. The door hisses shut behind them.

The'izer stands over the body. Humanoid. Male. Late thirties. Roughly two meters tall. Lithe frame gone to wiry tension. There's a dull, old scar bisecting the man's brow. His right leg is half gone; amputated mid-femur. Sloppily. The cut is jagged, healed wrong. A scavenger's work. He twitches when touched but does not wake. The'izer checks vitals. Sedation is wearing off. Good. He retrieves his scanner. Logs data. Circles the slab slowly, watching for symmetry.

The remaining leg is overcompensating. Muscle density in the gluteus and lower lumbar suggests long-term adaptation. That means the limp isn't injury, it's habituation.

He kneels beside the slab. His fingers press into the subject's hip, along the line of an old scar. The flesh tenses. Not fully unconscious anymore. The'izer doesn't look up.

"You've been walking wrong for years," he murmurs, "and your body has convinced you that it's correct." The prisoner groans. The sound is raw and low. The'izer opens the sealed case on the slab beside him. Inside, the components of a new limb glimmer. Unfinished. Experimental. Precision-forged at the joint. The beginnings of a solution not just for the subject, but for himself.

"Consider this a correction," he says. "Yours will help build mine."

He gets to work. The initial anchor is difficult. The man thrashes, even half sedated. The'izer straps him down: torso, wrists, remaining ankle, then begins the graft. The drills whine, low and clean. The mounting plate clamps against the raw end of bone. Screws bite into old scar tissue. The subject screams. The'izer tunes it out. It's not about cruelty, it's about observation. He marks muscle flinches, joint recoil, nerve patterning. Records torque resistance along the upper femur. Logs ever twitch, every breath. He attaches the neural cradle last; thin spider-like threads curling into the subject's skin, ready to read and reroute instinct. The limb responds, almost immediately. It flexes, twitches. The foot rotates 15 degrees off neutral.

The balance is wrong. The'izer sees it instantly. He leans forward, watching the motion of the hip, the slight flare of the subject's nostrils as nerves recalibrate. The posture is wrong. Familiar.

The'izer's hands didn't shake. He was elbow-deep in the calibration cradle, adjusting torque distribution across the false knee. The prosthetic was his work entirely. Crude by his parent's standard, but it functioned with no assistance from their staff, no design templates. Only his own math. His own hands.

The girl sat where they'd left her. 14, a year younger than him. Quiet. Low-caste Offshoot. They'd assigned her to his lab rotation as "biological reference." One leg amputated mid-femur. She never complained. Just stood when told, limped where directed, bit the inside of her cheek when the socket burned too much.

He noted her performance. The imbalance of her spine, the shallow limp in her surviving foot, the way she flinched when the knee hinge bit down too fast. By the third fitting, she was stable.

"Walk," he instructed. She did. Carefully. Slowly. The false limb hissed softly with each step, but she didn't falter. Her gait adjusted after five strides. By eight, it was almost efficient. He

watched, fascinated at his own work. The way the system had integrated, the way her body had accepted the design. He hadn't been sure it would. He'd planned contingencies. But she moved.

Something stirred within him. Something adjacent to satisfaction. A hunger he hadn't felt before. Not to study, not to deconstruct, but to restore. She turned back toward him cautiously. He opened his mouth, words forming before he could filter them.

"I think...I think this could help you. If I adjust the response time, just a bit."

He didn't know where the idea came from. It felt strange on his tongue. Improper. But not incorrect. The girl blinked. Her lips parted.

The door opened behind him. His mother stepped inside. Surgical white coat, datapad in hand. She took in the sight: her son standing beside a low-caste offshoot in a working limb. Her expression didn't shift.

"Help, who, exactly?" she asked, voice dry. The'izer turned. Faltered.

"If I refine the design, if I model out the failure tolerances...I could improve it. Mass produce it. Offworlders. Laborers. Clone stock—" His mother held up a hand. His voice died in his throat. She walked slowly across the room, circling the girl like a biometric scanner.

"She's a reference unit," she said. "You were supposed to learn from her structure. Not augment it."

"But she'll walk better now."

"And she'll limp again," his mother replied. "Remove it." The'izer's fingers curled.

"She can work more effectively like this."

"She's not yours to improve."

The girl stood still. She didn't meet his eyes. His mother stepped to him, laid a gloved hand on his shoulder.

"You will help people, The'izer," she said. "But not her. Not ones like her. You'll help by researching, publishing, refining the genome of those who matter." The'izer looked down at the limb.

He obeyed. Undid the straps he had measured so carefully. The socket hissed as it disengaged from her skin. The girl didn't flinch. She just looked away. His mother nodded once.

"Good. We elevate systems, not individuals." She turned and left. The lab went dark behind her.

The'izer watches the prisoner walk. The prosthetic adjusts well enough; the joint cycles with minimal deviation. The step patterns are coarse but mostly consistent. When they fail, it is the subject's fault, not the limb's. His breath comes hard and wet, the rhythm uncoordinated. Sweat gathers at his brow, running along the scars that crisscross his face.

The'izer stands still, leaning on his cane, observing the slight rotational error in the ankle every time the subject's foot meets the floor. The leg is functioning, the body attached to it is not. He staggers. The balance gives. His body twists and crumples sideways. He hits the floor on his bad hip, hard enough to crack his shoulder against the stone. His hands splay out for support but shake too violently to hold him. His jaw clenches in a silent, involuntary spasm. One ragged gasp slips free. The'izer doesn't move until the twitching begins. He sighs, faintly, then raises a hand.

A pair of support droids activate from the corner of the room and cross silently to the collapsed subject. One grips him beneath the arms, the other by the good leg, and they pull him upright with mechanical precision, holding him just high enough for the prosthetic to settle against the floor. He groans through clenched teeth. The'izer steps forward.

The graft housing is red and bruised from the pressure. Skin's inflamed at the upper thigh where the socket meets raw muscle. Not a failure, a friction issue. He'd overestimated the man's pain tolerance and undercompensated for heat retention. He reaches into the cooling tray and retrieves a sealed injector. The subject flinches when it touches skin. The'izer doesn't comment, he simply presses the needle in, depressurizes the vial, and removes it cleanly. He tilts his head slightly.

"You will remain conscious," he says, calmly. "If you pass out, the readings become inconsistent, and we will need to start all over again." The subject's mouth moves. No sound comes out. The'izer moves to the leg. He adjusts the ankle tension, cycling the servo with quick, practiced hands. Blood streaks the inner joint. He wipes it with a gloved thumb and doesn't bother cleaning further. He'll need to remove it again to properly work on it. He leans back.

"Reset him." The droids do as instructed. One resecures the chest brace, the other braces the arm. The subject's breath rasps again. The'izer turns away before they lower him back onto the slab. Self-experimentation was never below him, but he hesitates when dealing with something as damaging as prosthetics. He'll endure this pointless readjustment until he can be sure the prototype will work.

He works through the night. The lab is quiet, silent in the way that only subterranean rooms can be. The air doesn't move, the walls don't creak. The only motion is the subject, still strapped to the surgical table in the center of the room. His chest rises and falls in shallow rhythm. One arm twitches now and again, nerves spasming from irritation. His face is slack, glistening with sweat. Conscious, but not fully present. The'izer hadn't checked in nearly an hour. He'd passed from subject to obstacle. The surgical table should be available for work, real work, not occupied by meat still twitching from overexertion.

The'izer sits at the far table, one leg braced stiffly beneath him, the other, his better one, flexes beneath the stool. His coat lays discarded over the backrest. The sleeves of his tunic are rolled to the elbows, exposing pale forearms mapped with old scars from a lifetime working with fine instruments and heat tools. He doesn't notice them. They're dust to his stone. Before him sits the dismantled prosthetic, laid open like scripture.

This place is far from his family's lab on Arkania. No echoing halls filled with genome charts, no ancestral helix trees carved into stone. This is quieter. Cleaner. And the work is better. Cybernetics breathes differently than genetics. The genome hides, lies, builds its failures in silence over generations.

Something tightens behind his eyes. He blinks. The feeling passes.

He was trained to splice chromosomes, to quantify blood, to predict deformation three generations in advance. But his true love is the machine. He adjusts a servo with a jeweler's torque spanner, muscle in his jaw tight with focus. He's realigned the lower housing twice already and still isn't satisfied. The ankle articulation hadn't failed in the traditional sense, but it had responded to instability in a way that implied too much forgiveness. He'd fix it.

He doesn't mind the subject groaning behind him. He's just background noise. He sketches with one hand, the other still adjusting the limb. The redesign is clearer now: torque distributor restructured as a pressure-dispersing wedge. A skeletal rib through the arch of the foot to channel weight away from the socket. The kind of limb that won't fail under pressure. The kind of limb he should've had from the beginning.

He glances toward his own prosthesis, braced beneath the workbench. It aches a dull, grinding ache near the mounting point. He shifts his weight, feels the stab up through the hip. Unacceptable. He picks up the stylus again, sketches a variant of the design for his own frame. Narrower socket, magnetic cradle around the femur to allow for dynamic muscle expansion. All adjustable without surgery. He works quickly. Obsessively.

The subject groans again. The'izer doesn't look up, but after a moment he frowns. Pauses. Taps the stylus once on the table, then looks across the room at the slab. The man is stable enough, but the table is occupied. His workspace disrupted by a variable he no longer needs active. He considers the unused space along the left wall. Structural support columns, room for custom installations. He'll need holding cells. Cages. He can't lose operational space every time a subject fails to recover fast enough.

He makes a note in the corner of the sketch, then moves on. The foot of the new limb glistens under the red light. He adjusts the central core with a soft click and watches the synthetic muscle coil neatly along the inner support frame. He takes a deep, satisfied breath, and continues.

The subject takes a deep, sharp breath. It isn't the sound itself, but the cadence: off-beat and familiar. The noise is too human. He tightens his grip on the stylus. It clicks softly in his hand. He adds two lines to the design without seeing them.

A memory surfaces uninvited: skin under floodlights, gloved fingers pressing the edge of his jaw. He blinks. The table returns. His hand has paused mid-line. The stylus waits. He sets it down with deliberate care. The'izer exhales slowly, giving him a breath to reset.

He works for seven days without interruption. He prints components: a frame, the first of many magnetic plates. Then his first orders arrive.

A droid places the sealed datapad beside his sketchbook and leaves without a word. The'izer stares at it for a moment, then opens it. Inside is a requisition order: a neural shock rig calibrated for juvenile subjects. Spinal arrestor with minimal pain bleed. It comes along with two dozen failure logs and seven test cadavers. He reads it with glazed eyes. Sets his stylus down. Wipes his hands. Pulls up the fabrication queue.

He spends the rest of the night converting his printer to Sith parameters.

Time shifts after that. His prosthetic isn't abandoned, but it falls behind. His hours become rationed. He works the daylight hours on the shock rig, refining the lattice grafts and adjusting nerve thresholds until the body responds exactly when and how it's meant to. It goes from sketch to prototype to deployment within four months. He receives no confirmation when it's used. He doesn't need one.

The evening belongs to him, though. He sketches new limb mechanics and prints new parts. His new prosthetic lies half-assembled, always just on the edge of complete. Some nights, he doesn't touch it at all, just stares.

He starts running out of time. The requests change, come faster. Bone-sheath shock anchors. Vocal-chord compliance meshes. Juvenile spinal arrestors with minimal pain bleed. They don't send him blueprints, just failure logs. He strips them down and rebuilds them. When he sends them back, they don't fail.

The ache in his leg worsens. Some days, it's a dull throb, others a stabbing reminder with every step. The cane becomes a necessity. He uses it first with resentment. Then habit. Eventually, he stops noticing the sound of it, just the pressure of his hip when he forgets it for too long. By the end of the second month, he admits the prosthetic won't be completed anytime soon. So he opens a blank schematic and begins drafting something simpler.

A new cane. He outfits it with a stabilizer core. Weight-balanced plating. Finger pressure sensors. A high-voltage channel into the spine, just to feel it hum. He calls it temporary, but the drawing is one of his most elegant.

His lab changes. The left wall fills with cages. The surgical slab is never unoccupied for long. The workbench carries three simultaneous schematics at any given time. His desk grows thick with styluses, grease-stained gloves, and a growing stack of archived logs no one but him will ever read. His results come faster and faster.

Eventually, they start asking for him. Not officially, not through channels, but it appears in the margins of requests.

Have the Arkanian revise this

Use the Burna model. Varr's version only

Spinal feedback should be consistent with 12-series.

One request arrives with a message not in code, but in plain Basic:

No one else is to touch this.

The'izer doesn't react when he reads it. He doesn't need to. He just sharpens his stylus and turns to the next page. His hand trembles. He tells himself it's fatigue.

His next subject arrives already prepped. Female, human, early thirties. He scans the intake file briefly: prior compliance issues, two failed installs, he doesn't read the rest. She's wheeled in unconscious, strapped to the slab. When she stirs, it's with a start. A convulsive tightening of her shoulders, a thin, raspy sound clawing its way from her throat before falling silent again. The droids lock her limbs in place.

The'izer moves without hurry. Calibrates the neural net, adjusts contact points, and prepares the spinal harness with practiced ease. This version has been refined twice since its initial deployment. The mounting anchors align automatically. The pain bleed should remain below vocal level.

The clamps hiss as they engage. The subject jerks once against the restraint harness, then stills. Not a struggle, just an involuntary spasm as the rig cinches down against her spine. Thin lines of blood bead beneath the surgical contacts. The mesh implants flare, pulsing soft blue under the skin.

The'izer watches the readout on the diagnostic screen as the spinal rig calibrates. The core aligns to vertebrae T4 through L1. Internal latches pulse into place. The shock distributor activates, feeding baseline voltage into the body. The vitals spike, predictably so. A tremor rolls through her lower limbs, one foot twitching against the slab's edge. The'izer taps the side console. Increases nerve isolation by two percent. The twitch stops.

He steps closer to observe the rig's fit, one gloved hand braced on the edge of the table, the other hovering above the subject's shoulder as he monitors her breath pattern. Still too fast. The system isn't synching properly with the diaphragm. He'll need to adjust the sensory filament

placement again, only by a couple millimeters or so. He keys it in. The clamps shift with a series of soft clicks. The rig tightens.

The subject doesn't scream. She exhales. A slow, unsteady breath that deflates her body all at once. Her shoulders lower. Her eyes, dry and flickering, turn away from the overhead light. Not toward anything in particular, just...away. Her hand curls slightly inward, not in resistance. Not even in pain. Her face is pale. Blank. Set in a mask of exhaustion too controlled to be unconscious resistance. She stares off to the side, lips parted. No words, no sound. A look like air leaving a room.

The 'izer watches her.

He went late at night. Not late enough to be suspicious, just after third bell, when the senior researchers returned to their private wings and the gene-vaults cycled into lockdown. The halls were quiet, the lights dimmed to maintenance mode. His boots made no sound on the composite tile. The biometric scanner outside her door still read his clearance. It shouldn't have.

The room was smaller than he expected. Bare, windowless, barely functional. A cot. An empty shelf. One wall panel for basic hygiene. No personal effects. She was sitting on the cot, watching him. He shut the door behind him. She said nothing, neither did he: not right away. She looked thinner in private light. Less like a reference unit. He spoke quietly and flatly.

"I need to run scans." She blinked slowly.

"I thought you were told not to."

"I was." A pause. He averted his eyes. "I came anyway." Her gaze dropped to the floor. "I reviewed the footage from your walking trial," he said. "Your balances shifted inward after your second step. The limb responded too quickly, trying to compensate for your muscle assignment. The fault's mine." She shifts her weight on the cot. "You didn't tell me it hurt." Her mouth twitched but she didn't speak. "I could've recalibrated it. If the socket was off, or the tendon response was too aggressive—"

"I didn't think it mattered," she said quietly. He stilled. The tone was bitter. Not quiet. Not tired.

He didn't answer. Instead, he stepped forward and set the portable scanner on the floor. Pulled out the prosthetic. Knelt and held it up under the overhead light. The polymer had cooled, the ankle brace gleamed faintly where the metal had been retooled. He looked up at her.

"I can't leave it with you," he said.

“I know.” She extended her leg without being asked. He slid the limb into place. His fingers moved carefully, efficiently, as he locked the strap across her thigh, then adjusted the fit at the calf. She twitched once, a sharp breath through the teeth. He frowned.

“Too tight?”

“No,” she murmured. “Just cold.” She was watching him. He didn’t know what to say to that. So he leaned back, eyes scanning the limb.

“Stand.” She did. The weight settled differently this time, more centered. Her spine lengthened, shoulders adjusted instinctively. She wobbled once, then caught herself.

“Walk.”

She moved. Slower than in the lab, more cautious. But cleanly. No limp. He tracked the motion: the way her knee moved, the quiet tap of the prosthetic foot on the tile. The calibration held. Still imperfect, he could feel it in the timing, but vastly improved. She reached the wall. Turned. Looked at him. He stepped forward, scanner now in hand.

“May I?” She nodded. He scanned the limb, marked joint pressure and torque resistance. Cleaner than the first model. She stood still, breathing quietly. He lingered longer than he meant to.

“What happens now?” she asked.

“I take it back.” He crouched. She didn’t stop him. He unlaced the straps. Removed the limb. Held it between both hands. “I’ll find another solution,” he said. She didn’t answer. She stood on one leg again, crutch forgotten, posture angled slightly from the strain.

He didn’t mean to look at her face, but he did.

Up close, her features came into focus. Not as a data point, not as a model to fit or a posture to correct, but as...a person. Her face wasn’t symmetrical in the way his parents taught to value; her right cheekbone sat a touch higher than the left, her lower lip had a natural curve that made her look perpetually cautious. A scar, not dramatic, just a sliver of texture, ran near the hairline above her temple. And her deep black eyes...he didn’t know how to categorize them. They weren’t bright, weren’t luminous, just...tired. He hesitated.

“Do you have a name?” Her expression didn’t change right away, but something in her posture softened, just slightly. She met his eyes. Fully.

“Eda.”

It was the first word she had said that felt like a response. He nodded. Filed the name away. The sound of it stayed in his chest longer than expected.

“Thank you.” He turned to leave, the prosthetic in his hands, and stopped at the door. Words bubbled in his chest before he could stop himself.

“I’m sorry.”

He didn’t look back, but he waited long enough to hear the silence that followed. Not quite rejection, not quite forgiveness.

The’izer blinks once. The lab is quiet again. The overhead light buzzes softly, the diagnostic monitor hums its slow, familiar rhythm. The subject lies motionless on the slab, her gaze turned to the wall, fingers curling loosely against the restraint cuff. He’s still standing there, one hand on the spinal rig’s mount, the other braced against the surgical bench. He’s been there too long.

He straightens. His knee clicks, not the joint but the pressure in the scarred flesh around it. His cane rests beside the table, exactly where he left it. He doesn’t reach for it yet.

He exhales. Not heavily, just enough to release something caught behind his teeth. It’s not the memory itself that irritates him, it’s that he allowed it to surface at all.

He taps the rig’s diagnostic panel again. It blinks green. Stable readings. The procedure is complete. And yet, he doesn’t move to dismiss the subject. He looks at her face. Not long, just enough to confirm that it’s not the same. Not the same bone structure, not the same eyes, not the same—

He stops the thought. She is no one. The work is what matters. He turns away, too fast to be casually, and returns to the bench. The stylus waits at the edge of his schematic pad, exactly where he left it. He doesn’t pick it up, not yet. Instead, he leans on the table and closes his eyes for three seconds.

One. Two. Three.

He opens them. Focus returns like a blade reset in his grip. He will finish the refinement tonight. He will not think of Eda again. He hasn’t in years, there is no reason to start now.

Three nights later, it happens again. Not as a flash, but a thread. Weight shift, socket tension, five degrees inward. He hears her voice, not in words, but in the silence between them. Feels the subtle give of the first prosthetic strap against her skin. The way she looked at him.

The dreams begin shortly after. Her face in profile. Her eyes catching the edge of his gaze. Her limp. The prosthetic falling apart in his hands under sterile light. Sometimes she speaks, but the words are nothing he remembers. He wakes breathless and uncertain whether he ever fell asleep. He spends twenty minutes proving to himself the sheets are dry. That he is alone.

By the third week, he stops sleeping. He wouldn't be able to survive without some sleep, but he cuts it into shifts. Two hours. Ninety minutes. Forty-five. Long enough to rest the eyes, not long enough to fall into anything. When the droids dim the lights for evening schedule, he overrides it. He logs thirty-four straight days without a full sleep cycle.

He begins researching alternatives. First, basic stimulant regimens. Mild and controllable. Then neurochemical suppressants to mute REM intrusion. Then he pulls old Arkanian sleep modulation journals from the off-record archive. Text-heavy logs, genome references from failed military trials, half-corrected formulas. The early models are crude: blunt force hormone reducers, cerebral hardeners that atrophied memory and emotion. He reads them. Begins sketching modifications.

They're simple at first, targeted edits in fatigue recovery centers, attempts to reroute protein degradation into denser muscle tissues and rewire sleep signals into immune recovery triggers. But genetics isn't his specialty.

He was bred to understand genomes, but understanding is far from mastery. And building a body that runs without rest, that forgets how to dream, is more than shifting products on an assembly line. Every attempt he makes behaves unpredictably.

His first simulated model, designed to block REM cycle neurochemistry, renders the simulation catatonic after 83 hours. The second causes tissue necrosis along the spinal sheath. The third doesn't fail, exactly, but inhibits mitosis induction pathways among stem cells within the neural niche. He loses four days to backtracking. Discards half his work. It doesn't stop him.

His first tests are run in vitro. Sample strains grown in isolation. He tests induction of post-adolescent neural cell differentiation, tracks neural activity under hormonal triggers, adjusts regulatory cascade paths to balance induced cognitive clarity with emotional flattening. The data is incomplete, but not unusable.

He tells himself not to test on live subjects, but he does. Quietly. He uses the third cage from the left. The subject is unregistered, disposable. He introduces the modified retrovirus to the carotid artery. Monitors it over the next two days. The subject's sleep cycle vanishes, blood pressure steadies. Brain activity flattens, then spikes. Seizure.

He records time of death, logs it under spinal rig failure. No one questions it.

The next tests last longer. The third one screams for sixteen long hours. The fourth doesn't scream at all. He begins to adjust the feedback loops to slow synthesis of stress induced hormones. Specifies the virus toward neural stem cells. Modifies apoptosis triggers during cell division. By the tenth subject, the body stops rejecting the modification. By the twelfth, the mind stops noticing. No one notices the missing. No one checks the cages unless he flags them. He doesn't.

His own regimen of alterations is still a schematic, refined nightly. He keeps the injector casings on the corner of the bench, empty and waiting. He sleeps less and less, remembers less and less. *This is the goal*, he reminds himself. The thinning of memory. The refusal of dreams. He breathes easier when he doesn't think of her.

The prosthetic in the corner gathers dust. The cane hums in his hand.

His next request, sent down without command, demands a collapsible forearm unit with retractable blades and spinal-linked control relays. The schematic is far too heavy. The'izer studies the projection on the workbench display. It's excessive. Indulgent. Not understanding of weight distribution or neural delay. He strips it down to framework. Redraws the spine, maps the flexor armature for proper mechanical collapse. The trick is folding three layers of synthetic tendons without losing rotational tension.

The lab is quiet. His cane rests beside the bench, stylus scratching slow, deliberate lines into the schematic. He works on the hinge: a three-part rotation, reversed fold anchor. The lines come naturally. Too naturally.

He's done this before. Not with weapons, but with weight. With something meant to bend and lock and carry human balance. He stops. The stylus stills above the page. Something tightens in his chest.

He can hear the memory before it reaches him. Metal under the skin, the soft click of a collapsing joint. Not factory produced. Handmade.

He worked at night. Not in the lab or the sterile clarity of the academy fabrication wing. In his quarters. The desk was narrow, fixed to the wall beneath the vent. Never intended for real work, but for data review. The legacy he was supposed to inherit. But it belonged to him.

He'd stripped it clean. Padded the surface with sterile cloth to dampen the sound of his tools. Covered the overhead light with a thin polymer sheet to cut glare. His portable toolkit lay open beside him: torque wrenches, miniature servos, folded alloy strips, a micro-welder borrowed from the assistant maintenance wing. No one had noticed it was missing.

He was building something delicate. Forbidden. A collapsible prosthetic. Not a commission, not a refinement of someone else's work. Not part of the genetic interface assignment his mother left on his desk three days ago, untouched. This was his.

He'd been at it nearly a week. A limb designed to fold cleanly into itself. Thigh casing compressed by spring-loaded plates, knee joint double-hinged, able to collapse backward, foot separated into three interlocking pieces, held tight with tension locks. Fully modular, easily hidden. Something she could keep without being noticed.

His parents would never allow this work. Cybernetics was practical, they said. Necessary, but not noble. Not worthy of his intellect. He'd been bred for genome purity, taught to trace bloodline mutations. He was supposed to be rewiring species, not limbs. They expected chromosomes, he gave them servos. Every adjustment to the flexor band felt like a correction, not to the prosthetic, but to his own purpose.

By the third night, he had the schematic encrypted and hidden behind six dummy folders on his datapad labeled "cortical sheath dampener." It would never pass peer review. It wasn't meant to.

He tested each part in darkness. Folded the casing down, heard the soft click of the locking hinge. No grinding, no drag. Smooth like a breath. He rewired the ankle three times until it could rotate thirty degrees without stress on the tendons. Artificial, yes, but modeled after organic muscle. His model.

He carried the limb in two pieces. The thigh casing inside a false panel in his satchel, the foot compressed inside the frame of an unused biometric scanner. The assembly tools tucked inside the lining of his coat. He had memorized the camera sweeps. He knew where the stairwell blinked during coolant flush, how to pass through the reference wing undetected. Eight and a half seconds between visual resets. Hall light reflections masked retinal tracking. He timed the angle of each turn.

He never told himself this was rebellion. He wasn't trying to undermine anything, not consciously at least. He was just correcting a mistake. Improving the design. But as the final piece of the foot clicked into place, as the hinge tightened and held without recoil, he allowed himself a thought.

They would never have approved this

And, somehow, that justified it entirely.

He wrapped it in sterile cloth. Carried it as he always did. Moved through the corridor like he belonged there. Her door still opened to his clearance. He had a sliced keycard in his satchel just in case.

The room was dim, not dark. Quiet. She was sitting on her cot, amputated leg slightly beneath her. The skin around the stump was mottled red, pressure-swollen from walking without support. The'izer shut the door behind him. Set the scanner housing on the desk. Opened it.

"This one folds," he said. She blinked.

He pulled it out, unwrapping the cloth and laying the parts out in sequence. Thigh, knee, ankle, foot. Each piece clicked softly as he assembled it. The joint contracted with a soft snap and expanded again without delay. Eda moved to the edge of the cot. He knelt down below her, avoiding her dark, staring eyes.

His fingers moved efficiently as he adjusted the socket fit. He could already see where the swelling would alter her gate – the thigh band needed loosening, the arch more reinforcement. When he was done, he knelt back on the flat of his feet.

“Stand.” The knee flexed once as she did. She exhaled, not quite a sigh, as he circled her. Watched the foot respond. She tested the weight cautiously, artificial toes shifting as she rolled pressure back and forth. She took a few steps, then folded the limb. It collapsed cleanly into itself, tucking metal against her thigh. Her eyes flicked to him.

“How did you hide this?”

“It wasn’t hard,” he said. A beat. “You cannot wear it in the labs, of course. But you can have it now.” She flexed the joint and the cybernetic descended back into form. The ankle coil hummed faintly as it re-engaged.

“They’ll notice,” she said.

“Not if you’re careful.”

“I’m not stupid.”

“I know.”

She looked at him differently. Still cautiously, but differently. Like she was adjusting to a weight that hadn’t been there before.

“Thank you.” It wasn’t warm, just clean. He studied her face, not the shape of it, but the way it moved.

“I need to adjust the arch. You’re still tilting.” She nodded. He retrieved the stylus from his coat pocket and started logging the changes on his datapad. She took another step.

He left her the spliced keycard, tucked it under the thin pillow on her cot. When he returned a few days later, the key was gone and the logs showed no alerts.

That night, he sat across from his mother at the Dejarik board. The sitting room was curated down to the humidity. Precise. Unnervingly quiet. Between them, the board shimmered in clean light, projecting holograms of warriors and beasts locked in war. The’izer played red, she played white. She always did. He opened with a Kintan strider, center right. Aggressive, not direct. She responded with a slow outpost crawl. Measured. Classic.

“You’re testing something,” she said. He didn’t answer, just moved his Grimtaash into position.

That night, Eda met him in the abandoned filtration alcove near the western wing. Her gate was smother, prosthetic folding and releasing with quiet, confident rhythm. He was midway through recalibrating the knee coil when she handed him a thermal-wrapped ration bar.

“Don’t get sentimental,” she said as he took it.

“I don’t.”

“Good. It’s half-melted.”

“I can adjust that.” She rolled her dark eyes at him.

“You can adjust everything,” she muttered.

His mother advanced her Mantellian Savrip. A dare. He ignored it, shifted his Houjix outward, giving up space to stage a tighter interior hold.

Eda met him in the third sub-basement barefoot. Her boots were tucked under her arm. He didn’t comment. She curled up in the heat duct beside him, prosthetic folded beneath her like it belonged there.

“Do you ever sleep?” she asked.

“When necessary.”

“Do you dream?” He hesitated.

“No.” She exhaled.

“I do. Sometimes.” He looked at her. She was watching the ceiling, voice low but not fragile. “I dream I have a tooka cat. One that sleeps at my feet. I keep thinking I hear it, when I use the limb. The hum is the same pitch as his breathing.”

“I can adjust the frequency if you’d like.” She shook her head.

“Don’t.”

The board shimmered. His mother captured a flank piece. A strong move, but expected. He responded with a lateral shift, his Monnok doubling back to intercept the Savrip. She didn’t blink.

“I taught you the spiral collapse, didn’t I?”

“You showed it to me.”

“Are those not the same?”

“No,” he said. “One is the transfer of knowledge, the other surrender of credit.” She smiled tightly.

“Well said.”

In the access crawlspace behind the secondary lab, Eda met him with tightly-braided hair. He handed her a heat-mapped schematic, showing which halls bled blind spots.

“This is for tonight?”

“No. That is the whole lab.” She blinked.

“You mapped the entire lab for me?” He gives her a real grin.

“I mapped it for the limb,” he says between teeth. “You just...also benefit.” She watched him longer than usual. Then she reached out and touched his wrist. He didn’t pull away.

For his final move, he executed a double-blind collapse. His Grimtaash bypassed her Monnok, while his Molator redirected into an exposed center line. The trap was clean. Precise. His mother didn’t blink.

“Interesting,” she said.

“You’re not surprised?”

“I’m rarely surprised.” She stood. Adjusted the sleeve of her robe. “You’ve been studying, The’izer. Not just the game.” He held her gaze.

“Some pieces are worth more than they look,” he said.

“And some moves,” she replied, “can’t be undone.” She left him at the board. The lights dimmed. He sat in the quiet, staring at the final position. Then, slowly, he smiled.

The lab lights buzz as they reset to full brightness.

The’izer sits alone at the bench, stylus held too tightly between his fingers, a residual ache lingering in the base of his thumb. His whole body feels off-balance, like it expects to wake up. The memory, of a folding limb, of the girl is was meant for, recedes from his consciousness. He blinks once, then turns back to his work.

This one is unlike the one he made before. It is cleaner, crueler. The blade mechanism rotates through the elbow joint and flushes with the tricep coil. It’s lightweight, fluid, and beautifully overengineered. Exactly what they want. He doesn’t remember finishing the last coil. He re-checks the diagram – his handwriting is there, but he doesn’t recognize the notes.

Weeks pass. He stops counting. At first, he keeps a logbook, but it disappears somewhere in the lab. He starts a new one. The dates don’t match.

The genome project remains open, always in the corner of his interface, flickering with unresolved flags. The progress is slow, slower than it should be. Every test brings failure in a new shape. The body didn’t respond the way cybernetics do. It misbehaves. It adapts. It lies.

The learning curve is steeper than he cares to admit. Codons refuse to hold. Protein chains unravel in simulation. His attempts at live trials don’t last long. Sometimes the subjects

seize, other times they go quiet and don't wake again. He adjusts. Re-adjusts. Reverts the changes without realizing. The logs start contradicting each other. He starts deleting them entirely. It's easier that way.

The commission from Lady Serith of House Kav'i arrives not long after. It isn't a datapacket, not an encrypted message sent over channels, it is delivered by hand by an armored courier droid. It places a lacquered datapad on The'izer's workbench without ceremony and departs without explanation. He doesn't open it right away – he finishes the final circuit test on a spinal mesh rig first. Watches the monitor hold green for a full minute. Then, finally, he picks it up, opens the only file on the pad.

Two cybernetic arms. Full forelimb assembles, nerve threaded. Responsive to pain input. Integrated nerve compliance anchors at wrists and shoulders, no secondary bypass. If the user does not suffer, the arms do not obey.

There is a diagram attached, an intricate one at that. He'd seen similar concepts before, briefly, in military compliance programs: arms meant to bind instead of augment, but never this...personal. It reminds him of something he didn't build. Something he watched break. The image flickers in his head, inches away from clarity.

He works in silence for six weeks. He doesn't break his pattern, doesn't miss any assignments, but his focus is razor-thin. Every torque band is exact, every anchor coil polished until it hums when moving. He logs no comments when he's done. They're collected without acknowledgement. He doesn't expect any.

Two days later, a message arrives. Not encrypted, not anonymous, printed directly onto white synthweave and folded once. Delivered by a second droid. He opens it.

Your work is elegant, doctor. You will present yourself in person tomorrow at 1200. A droid will receive you. Prepare accordingly.

He reads the message three times, then sets it down. He hasn't been summoned in person in almost a year, not by anyone that matters at least.

He stands in one corner of his habitation quarters, the side chamber off the lab that he hasn't inhabited in almost a year, and stares at his reflection in the matte alloy wall panel.

His hair had grown longer than he remembers. Uncut, uncombed, pushed back behind his ears in a way that abandoned symmetry months ago. The ends are frayed, scorched slightly on one side from a smoldering accident he hadn't tended to. Lightning scars branch like pale veins from his right temple, spiraling through the skin around his eye. A faint glow still pulses under the tissue. There are dark rings beneath his eyes, settled like sediment. He looks less a man, more a cadaver.

His clothes are worse. Stained at the shoulder with dried blood, he doesn't know whose, and cuffed with ash. The right elbow is patched with surgical mesh from a day he didn't want to stop installing a compliance rig long enough to change sleeves. The fabric smells faintly of antiseptic and burn gel.

His hands, though clean, are callused in uneven places. His nails are cracked. Two bear the outline of old lab gloves melted into the skin after an overheated plasma coil misfired. He hadn't reported it; he'd wrapped them and kept working.

He sheds the coat first, then the tunic. His cane clatters against the wall as he leans it aside. The prosthetic aches with a quiet pulse, like remembered pressure. He hadn't retooled it in weeks. The joint catches as he lowers himself to the floor. He exhales through his teeth. Pulls off the rest of his clothing with mechanical effort.

He steps into the decontamination chamber slowly. The door seals behind him, the sterilizer humming to life with a faint whine. Light fills the vertical seam lines. Steam rolls up from the floor vents, biting at the edge of breath. A spray of near-scalding mist hisses from above and coats his shoulders, back, thighs. It hits the prosthetic with a sharp ping. The metal shivers under his skin. He doesn't move.

The mist intensifies. The first cycle burns, the second stings. By the third, the cleaning agent beads against the grime along his collarbone. He closes his eyes. Lets the steam bleed into his pores.

The water was already running. Warm. Too warm. The'izer stood inside the narrow cubicle, steam curling around his neck. The light was dimmed from the haze clinging to the walls. Eda stood in front of him, her back to the spray. She leaned against the tile, arms loose at her side, dark hair hanging in sheets across her shoulders. Her clothes lay in a small, neat bundle just outside the door. Inside the pocket of her tunic sat the spliced keycard he gave her. His clothes were folded with similar care.

They'd been meeting for months. Slipping through gaps in patrol, disabling cameras, moving through assistant corridors like shadows. Sometimes they walked. Sometimes they sat in silence, sharing the kind of stillness that wasn't available anywhere else. Tonight was different. Not planned, but still...happening. His pulse felt strange, slow and fast at the same time.

The collapsible limb was soaked, water slipping down the alloy in narrow rivulets, pooling where the calf met joint. It let out a faint thermal exhale as she shifted her weight, balancing easily between metal and flesh. Like it was no longer his work and now simply her body.

He stepped in farther. The door slid shut behind him with a damp hiss.

They stood that way for a while. Silent but present. When she moved, it was slow. Measured. She raised one hand and pressed her palm to his chest. The'izer didn't pull away. He wasn't sure what to do with the moment, but he let it be. Her fingers slid up, resting over his collarbone. She stepped forward. Closer still.

Their hands were unsure. Not clumsy, just...untrained. Eda's palm rested briefly against his jaw. His hand settled on her hip, not to correct or assess, but to hold. Her forehead tilted against his temple. The curve of her prosthetic knee bumped softly against his thigh.

She kissed him without ceremony. His breath hitched, his hand tightening fractionally at her side. He didn't catalog the motion, didn't quantify it. For once, he just let it happen.

It wasn't practiced. Wasn't graceful. Their hands moved in imperfect fits, bodies unsure. Her forehead rested against his jaw as water traced lines down his spine. Her breath hitched once, not from pain, but the surprise of something unfamiliar. He catalogued the pressure behind his ribs, the tremor in his leg, the steam across his shoulders. The way she leaned in after they were done, wet skin against his chest like it was allowed, hair dripping slowly across his collarbone. Her body rested against him like someone uncoiling after bracing for too long. He didn't know what to do with that, so he just stood there, one hand flat against the curve of her spine, listening to the way her breathing evened out.

She never spoke. Neither did he. The prosthetic clicked once, softly, as she shifted her weight off his chest. The metal held up perfectly. Heat hadn't softened the hinges. He made a mental note to re-check the tension when they returned. If they returned. He wasn't sure he wanted to.

The morning after the shower, they sat in silence on the floor of the auxiliary wing, backs to a coolant duct that hissed faintly behind them. A ration bar sat in front of their boots. Eda broke it in half without ceremony and handed him the larger piece, then chewed hers slowly like it was less a meal and more a task. He didn't thank her.

They kept meeting. Again. Again. Their physicality continued without comment: her legs draped across his lap while he worked, his hands resting on the arch of her spine while she read aloud from a salvaged memoir. Their bodies molded to each other like repetition had rewired them. When she curled into his side, her head beneath his jaw, he held her without thinking. When he pressed her against a wall and kissed her, she clutched his coat like she was afraid he'd vanish. They never talked about what they were, but they kept happening. Again. Again.

She started watching him work, not as a subject but an observer. She'd ask questions about the torque distribution in her knee joint. Suggested he reverse the coil sequence on her calf bracket after it misfired once in a stairwell. He revised the model that night.

He showed her his notes, just a little. Sketches, concepts, "this is what your ankle's doing when you pivot left." She'd lean over his shoulder and mark things in the margin. "Too much

tension here.” “Feels wrong when I brace.” He didn’t argue. He’d write her changes into his logbook each night.

They kissed with frequency but never routine. Each time was unexpected, a new discovery. One night she undressed without words and pulled him down beside her. Their bodies moved like they’d done this a thousand times and were only just remembering. Afterward, she fell asleep across him like gravity had chosen him specifically. He didn’t move for a long time.

The biometric monitor on her nape remained a dull, constant hum of ownership. He never touched it, but he studied it from a distance like a flaw in her perfect system. At night, he mapped its pulse rhythm, its security threading. He requisitioned a spinal node for prosthetic testing and hollowed it out. Inside, he built a proximity override. Silent. Hidden.

He didn’t tell her.

She stopped waiting for permission to move, and he stopped giving her orders. Their time became negotiation; he would sketch an improvement, she’d revise it. He’d propose a diagnostic change, she’d test it and reject it if it didn’t feel right. He let her. He showed her the original blueprint, once. She examined it, then him.

“You designed this for someone else,” she said.

“No,” he replied. “I designed it for you, before I knew you.” Her expression shifted, just a little. Just enough.

That night, she pulled him onto her cot without asking. Wrapped around him like wire, breathed into his throat like she was trying to plant something under his skin. And he let her. Every part of him let her. After they had finished, he braided her hair in the dark.

“Do you ever think about leaving?” she whispered. His response came without hesitation.

“Only with you.”

She pressed her mouth to the hollow of his throat and stayed there.

She started calling him Zari after that. Quiet at first, half-mumbled when she leaned into him, or muttered while she tested her weight on a new footplate. But it settled into familiarity. A name reshaped by her breath. Zari. She never asked if she could use it. He never asked her to stop.

The shuttle sent to retrieve The’izer bares the Kav’i crest etched in low-relief durasteel. The’izer doesn’t sit during the short flight, but stands near the rear stabilizer, one hand on the brace bar, the other tucked into the fold of his coat. The city blurs beneath him through slits in the shuttle’s walls. Dromund Kaas remains half-swallowed by stormlight, dark clouds and black spires, everything drowning in wet air and wealth.

Serith's estate rises like a sculpture from the canopy. Black stone polished to a mirror's sheen. The landing pad is empty save for two ceremonial guards in silk-wrapped armor. They do not move. The doors open at his approach.

Inside is a gallery. Marble with obsidian inlay. Hanging drapes the color of fresh blood. Lighting that curves upward, not downward, casting each figure's face in soft shadows and exaggerated cheekbones. At the center of it all, a Togruta. Lady Serith Kav'i. She sits like she is floating, wearing a gown of ceremonial red silk that leaves her shoulders bare. Her skin is polished like sculpture, montrals adorned in gleaming gold filaments that trail into her jewelry. She is tall, not by stature, but composition. She doesn't rise to meet him, she doesn't need to. Her eyes, black ringed and glowing with Sith yellow, watch him with a gaze that feels remarkably familiar. She smiles.

"Doctor Varr," she says, voice like burning silk, "your reputation precedes you." The'izer adjusts his posture, bowing slightly over his cane. He is far more comfortable with academic speech than political discussion, but he will manage.

"I trust the commission was to your liking, Lady Kav'i." She laughs softly, a slight chuckle.

"You could say that." A pause. Serith sits up slightly, one hand under her chin to support her head. "I have been an admirer of your work for years, Doctor. You could imagine my delight when I learned you were employed here on Dromund Kaas." The'izer clears his throat.

"Employment is a...generous term, but I am honored to have drawn such attention." Her eyes flick to his cane and prosthetic with catlike hunger.

"Ah, that," she sighs, dramatically deflating. "The Empire's slave labor system is quite a frustration, is it not?" He tenses at the word. While not entirely untrue, he hesitates to liken himself to a slave. "I could help you with that, Doctor. The jailor who oversees you is quite a nasty man. No care for the art of creation, like us." The'izer studies her for a minute, her gleaming eyes, barely-visible smile. A sadist. Typical Sith.

"Am I correct in assuming this help is reciprocal?"

"You are."

"And what shall I be trading for my freedom?" She laughs again.

"I wouldn't say freedom, Doctor. You'd get your mobility back. Less orders from above. But you'll still expected to work." He raises an eyebrow, waiting for her to answer the question. She lays back slightly, leaning heavier on her palm.

"I would like a new arm, for one of my slaves. A singer. It should respond to her breath, pitch, all that. When she errs, it will correct her through pain." He places his free hand behind his back.

“You want a cybernetic limb with a vocal feedback loop,” he says. “That would require a cybernetic with a mind of its own. That is no simple mechanism.”

“I have the money to ensure you are comfortable while you work. In your new lab, of course.”

“I will need six months to craft the cybernetic, at most. And I must be there to oversee its installation.” She waves a hand like swatting flies.

“You will have both, Doctor. But I expect updates. And results.”

The biometric ring was gone. He leaves it on the table when he enters the new lab for the first time, stripped from his finger with the same quiet finality as an outdated scalpel. His hand looks strange without it. Free, yes, but wrong in its symmetry. He’d adjust.

The new lab is three times the size of his last. Reinforced floors. Two operating slabs. A dedicated spinal frame. A separate specimen intake room, sealed and soundproofed. The walls are lined with black alloy, cool and matte under the lights. The systems: state of the art. Precision tools, biometric coils, a fresh interface terminal calibrated to his print. The lighting could be adjusted by breath. He does compulsively. Too dim, and memories creep back. Too bright, and the light leaves carvings under his tired eyes.

He sees Eda everywhere in the new space, not as a ghost – he doesn’t believe in such things – but as an interruption. Her voice in the pitch of a servo motor. The warmth of her skin in the pressurized hiss of sterilizers. A phantom weight leaning against his back when he crouches to recalibrate a limb. She is not welcome, but she arrives anyway in fragments and flashes. Her hand sliding beneath his coat. Her breath against his clenched jaw. Every time it happens, it leaves him unmoored: angry, unsteady, aching in ways that don’t show up on his scans.

There are hundreds of prisoners in the jails, all assigned to him. A credit stipend, deposited at midnight. He is, finally, not an indentured mind but a salaried professional.

The commission lays open on the terminal, Lady Serith’s request written with her usual affectation. He reads it once more for clarity, then rewrites it into real terms. His own handwriting has started to curl at the ends, uncharacteristically so. He types it out instead.

He starts with the socket: a triple-anchored shoulder mount that interfaces with the clavicle and extends into the C6 nerve bundle. Standard implants can’t accommodate the bandwidth he needs, so he starts designing a synthetic nerve braid, one that can transmit error signals at 2ms intervals. Next, the audio intake array. He embeds three directional sensors into the wire harness, two to capture sound resonance through the throat and ribs. He scraps a laryngeal harness when his first test subject loses all vocal capabilities entirely after installment. Sensors aren’t enough, though, he needs pattern recognition. Software that can learn her voice. It

needs to catalogue the baseline and adapt over time, punishing not by absolute standards, but by her own past precision. Each error, each breath deviation, each imperfect vowel triggers a response: thermal coils along the bicep. Microcurrent surges in the flexor tendons. Torque pressure in the wrist.

He rebuilds the socket three times, each version lighter and thinner, hollowed to make room for the tension capacitors. The pain could be high. It could be constant. But it can't kill her. That's the only line he refuses to cross. The limb would obey vocal calibration: pitch deviation, breath inconsistency, stuttered phrasing. Each error registers in the microneural array that would wrap her collarbone and sink threads into her spine. It wouldn't just listen, it would learn. Every scream, gasp, sharp intake is data. The longer she suffers, the more precise it becomes. That's the art of it.

The promotion to Head Jailor comes with more than space, it comes with access: files, specimens, the authority to assign and rotate prisoner stock, to determine which bodies are used, which are kept, which are moved to holding for further study. None of the prisoners are released, that was never part of the system. They come in, are used, and vanish. He makes sure the records are clean, the numbers even, the subjects rotated for consistency.

He works quietly, with purpose. The days stack into weeks, the weeks folding into each other like unnumbered pages. He begins to dream with his eyes open; daylight hallucinations like static around the edges of his vision. The droids remain, silent and obedient, tasked with preparing fresh subjects for each iteration. They come in upright, they leave slumped.

He sees her sometimes in those slumped forms. Just for seconds, the angle of a collarbone, the catch in a breath. It's enough. He blinks and she's gone, but the damage lingers. He works faster after that, sometimes. Others, he sets down his tools and walks circles around the surgery slab. Sometimes, he just sits in the dark, hands shaking imperceptibly in his lap.

The third month bleeds into the fourth before he realizes how long it's been since he's left the lab. The spinal interface comes next. Delicate, sleeved in synthetic nerves, woven tight to prevent signal lag. He threads it along the dorsal sensory column until he reaches a point where her pain can resonate even if the body is in motion. Especially if it is.

At one point, he rebuilds the vocal response software from scratch. The first version was too static, lacking nuance. He tunes the amplifier last. A low-hum regulator embedded in the bicep joint, just enough to let her feel the tension build before it is released. A quiet warning that something is coming – that's the most important part. Fear has to precede pain. The body has to anticipate punishment to learn from it. He says it aloud, when the thought comes. A part of him really believes it. Another part of him traces the scars along his right temple. He bites the inside of his cheek until it bleeds.

By the time the fifth month ends, the limb no longer feels like a machine. It feels like an extension of discipline. A tool that can hear, judge, and sculpt behavior. He stands before it in the

quiet, his own breath thin. He imagines her voice behind him, teasing. “You’re not as objective as you like to think you are.” He closes his eyes and hates himself for how much he wants to turn around.

Serith authorizes the transfer with a wave of her fingers and no further instruction.

“Five nights,” she says. “Return her intact, or close enough.”

The droids bring the slave to the lower levels, escorted in full restraint. She is quiet. Hollowed out. Her body is angled awkwardly in the transit frame: jaw locked, shoulders pulled tight, legs bound at three points. Her slave collar buzzes faintly. She’s a Theelin, with mottled green skin, hair the color of dying fires, deep violet irises. Her fingers twitch – two sets. Serith expects him to amputate the arm.

They bolt her to the slab. One of the droids locks her head in place while he prepares the bone saw. Her scream is delayed by a few seconds, like her mind needs time to catch up. Her arm detaches cleanly, with strong tendon recoil. He wraps the stump in synthcloth and leaves her twitching on the slab.

The prosthetic gleams under surgical light, plating humming softly. He anchors the socket with three titanium screws: shoulder, clavicle, scapula. The implant settles into muscle like it’s always belonged there. He feeds the braided interface down her spine, threading the synthetic nerves between vertebrae, through each of the cervical nodes. Takes a step back. Activates the limb.

The fingers twitch. The wrist contracts. Heat flares from the shoulder coil. She jolts, eyes widening. He stets the calibration window: roughly 72 hours, dims the lights, and leaves the system to listen. He tells himself he’ll sleep during that time, but he doesn’t. He sits in the dark instead.

He observes the data from afar. It logs her reactions in real time. In the morning, he reads the outputs: neural misfires, synaptic delays, sleep-disrupted breath flares. Pain responses, vocal tremors, everything as expected. She’s adapting. Slowly. By the third day, the system shows early success. Less noise during rest cycles, fewer violations. He prepares a tone analyzer, a small black orb about the size of a palm. Pairs it with a portable recorder. Two droids follow him to her cell.

She’s curled near the back of the cage, jaw still tight, eyes dull with exhaustion. The green of her skin looks sunken beneath the strain. Her hair clings to her cheeks in wet coils. The restraint system locks her down as he enters.

“You’re going to vocalize,” he says, tapping the datapad without looking at her. “Sing, speak, whisper, whatever passes for natural vocal range in your species. I will adjust the arm accordingly.” He sets the recorder down, then the analyzer. The scanner lights blink red, then green.

“I’d recommend starting with scales.”

She says nothing. Her lips press together tightly. He watches her for three full seconds.

“Noncompliance will delay adaptation. Delayed adaptation means continued punishment.” She still refuses. He sets the datapad aside. Raises a hand and strikes her across her face. Hard. Open palm. Enough to catch her off guard. Her head jerks. She gasps. That’s all it takes.

The arm clamps down. Her body seizes. Her muscles lock. She screams. The feedback loop kicks again. Another spike, another convulsion. He watches it spiral, watches her body become a resonance chamber for error. Her voice tears in the center. Her legs twitch against the floor. The arm doesn’t relent, it performs perfectly. Through it all, The’izer records the data. Pressure feedback, nerve spike rate, oxygen saturation. The sounds are irrelevant, until they’re not.

One scream, midway through the sequence, fractures. Not just tonally, emotionally. It catches somewhere in her throat, not raw but soft. It reaches into the marrow of his body like a wire being pulled tight, dragging him back through time with all the precision of the lash itself.

It sounds like her.

He was seventeen, kneeling in the main annex of the lab. Marble beneath him, cold and veined with black like dried blood. The walls were stone carved from Arkania’s inner quarries, polished until they gleamed with light reflected from nowhere. His arms were bound behind his back, tight enough to pop his shoulder blades just out of place. His tunic had been stripped away, and the fabric on his trousers was already stained with blood from the scuffle that preceded.

Someone had seen, had whispered, had followed. And now a crowd gathered to witness them: assistants, house staff, gene stewards and junior observers. All here, pretending to observe protocol. None of them spoke.

The’izer knelt perfectly upright. Every instinct in his body told him to bend. He didn’t. His lip had split earlier; he tasted iron in his mouth. The blood had dried along the ridge of his jaw.

His mother circled him, robes immaculate, tone glacial.

“You were bred for brilliance, and you squander it on sentiment. You, who were made to refine our bloodlines, have chosen to degrade it instead. And for what? A sexual impulse?”

She stopped behind him.

“You were taught better, my son. You were made to be better. And you gave it away to a lame, low-caste entertainment piece.” She turned to the impromptu audience. “Let this serve as proof that intellect does not equate to worth.”

His father stepped forward, holding a cable rod. The coils at its head hummed softly, already warm, glowing with surgical grade conductivity. His mother bowed her head and stepped back.

The first strike landed across his back and sank. Electricity bit into his spine like teeth, wrapping around nerves and locking his breath in his chest. The pain was sharp, yes, but more than that, consuming. Like hot metal poured through his blood, coiling around his ribs. He convulsed before he could think.

The second strike came before he could recover; lower, across the hip. It drove a noise from his mouth, a fractured, shuddering exhale that he didn’t recognize as his own. The third strike hit higher, at the base of his neck. He arched back, vision sparking white. His father raised a foot and put it to his ribs. His body hit the marble with a sickening thud. Skin tore, blood smeared. He couldn’t breathe.

“Stop!” Eda screamed. It tore out of her, loud, cracking, alive. She was on one leg, wobbling slightly with each breath. The’izer’s stomach flipped. Cold panic gripped his lungs, worse than the rod. She was screaming. In front of them. In front of everyone.

They would kill her for this, surely.

He wanted to scream at her to stop, to just shut up and play the part she’d been taught, but he couldn’t. His mouth was filled with blood and bile. He’d planned for this, laid the pieces: her keycard, the spinal node to override her biometrics, make it impossible for them to track her. If she could just remember, just see it...

“You—” she choked, breath hitching. “You sick bastards!” She staggered forward, nearly slipping. “He’s your son!” Her voice cracked. “And you’re – you’re skinning him!” She took another step, fingers pointed at the crowd. The guards behind her started to move.

“Look at them! Watching, smiling! You’re parasites! You’re all parasites!” Her words came faster, more frayed. “He chose something kind and you—” she jabbed her finger toward The’izer’s parents. “—you are butchering him for it!” One of the guards grabbed her arm and tore her back. She didn’t flinch.

“Fuck your name! Fuck your blood! Fuck every one of you who watches and calls this order!”

The strike came fast. Backhanded. Her mouth burst red. She dropped. One arm caught the floor. She clawed back to her elbow.

“You’re monsters, all of you!” she spat. Blood and saliva spread across the polished marble. The’izer’s mother stepped forward and hit her square across the cheek. Her braid swung, cheek blooming red. Her dark eyes locked with The’izer’s and she whispered his name.

“Zari.”

The next lash caught him across the spine. Then the ribs again. Then the shoulder. His muscles convulsed. Blood soaked into the marble. He felt nerves misfire, arms jerk behind him like they were trying to escape his skin. The world spun. His father adjusted his grip on the rod. Pressed it against the base of The’izer’s neck and activated the full arc. A direct current. The’izer’s body jerked like a puppet yanked on rusted strings. His teeth cracked together. He heard something in his chest give.

He didn’t pass out. It would have been so much easier if he did.

Another strike, this one across the kidney. Another. He couldn’t even scream.

Behind him, the guards started dragging Eda out of the room. She screamed again, louder.

“No! Get your hands off me! Don’t you dare touch me! Let me go! Let me see him – Zari!” Her heel scraped the marble behind him with a pathetic squeak.

“Zari!” A wet sound behind him. She went limp. The echo of her voice screaming his name held, even when he stopped feeling his hands. His breathing was wet, ragged, shallow. Each inhale was a needle. The rod hissed.

And, somewhere under it all, a thought surfaced.

I should have known better.

He woke later on a surgical gurney somewhere deep within the estate’s private lab annex. It was quiet. He couldn’t move. His limbs didn’t respond the way they should. His fingers twitched, but his arms felt like they were packed in ice. Something burned in his chest when he tried to breathe too deeply. His skin felt wrong, too. Numb and burning all at once. A light flickered overhead. He could hear his parent’s footsteps across the room. His mother’s voice was calm.

“You are supposed to die.” He blinked slowly. She adjusted her glasses. “If we follow protocol, that’s what will happen. Disgrace requires execution. That’s the expectation.”

His father stood at her side, silent as always.

“But,” she continued, “you’re valuable. Intelligent. So we’ve decided to preserve what’s useful. Refine what’s left.”

The’izer tried to speak, but his throat fought each breath.

“You’re going to be corrected. Properly this time.” His father keyed something into the terminal as he spoke. “We’ve designed an electrogenic recalibration protocol. It’ll target the amygdala, the hippocampus, the insular cortex; regions tied to emotional recall. Sentiment. Empathy.”

“The areas that failed you,” his mother added.

“It will not erase anything,” his father said. “But it will render you immune to the worst of its effects.”

“Emotion makes you inefficient,” she said. “Inconsistent. Prone to deviation.” She leaned over him, eyes sharp. “When this is done, you’ll still be you, my son. Without such sentiment to distract you. You should be grateful.”

His vision blurred. The machine behind him began to warm, a slow surge of current blooming through the wires. He clenched his jaw, forced his voice to work.

“I don’t regret it,” he rasped. “What I did. Her.” His mother didn’t flinch.

“You should.”

“She’s different.”

“She’s a derivative,” his mother said. “A bio-recreational offshoot with just enough reflex to mimic sentience. She cannot be held responsible.” He blinked hard. His throat clenched. “We expected better from you, The’izer. You were born into function; she was not.” His father adjusted the calibration on the terminal

“For what it’s worth,” he said mildly, “she’s gone. Escaped late last night, slipped through a service vault.”

He didn’t respond. It didn’t matter, they weren’t going to wait for his permission or compliance. The machine clicked. The power surged.

The’izer closed his eyes as the lightning arched through him and burned everything soft inside to ash.

He doesn’t go back to his quarters that night. He tells himself it’s because of the calibration data, because of the limb, because he wants to monitor the Theelin’s pain response in real time. But it isn’t. He’s not even looking at the data anymore. The screen blurs when he tries. His fingers shake when he logs the voltages. He sits in the dark instead, hands steepled in front of his mouth, elbows planted on the steel worktable like he’s trying to hold his own skull in place.

It's not the scream itself that lingers, it's the silence afterward. The echo of it left hanging in the cage. The way her eyes went wide, then blank. The way her knees curled up to her chest, involuntarily, like a child trying to hide. He catalogued it, he always does, but this time something didn't file away. This time, something stayed lodged behind his ribs like shrapnel that won't dissolve.

It sounded like her.

Not in pitch, not in cadence, in the way it reached him. The way it grabbed something long-frozen and twisted. He tries to bury it, but the memory is invasive. It roots in deep.

Her body on the marble floor, face red with the heat of humiliation, braid swinging as she screamed his name. Blood on her lips. Cracked skin along her cheekbone. Her voice, high and ragged and alive in a way he hasn't heard anything sound since.

“Zari.”

He stands abruptly, knocking the stool over. The clatter breaks the harrowing silence, but it doesn't help. His breath comes ragged. His fingers tremble. He tries to steady them against the table, but the metal feels too slick, too clean. He's shaking. It hits him suddenly: he doesn't know how long it's been since he touched someone without the intent to harm them.

He paces the lab. Again. Again. The walls feel closer now, the air too still. He presses his palms against his eyes and exhales through his teeth.

This was the plan. Efficiency. Obedience. Strip the memory down to nerve. Let only the function remain. But it didn't work properly. He rebuilt himself out of steel and wire and blessed silence, and somehow her fucking voice still made it through.

He's not better. He's worse.

The body obeys, yes, but the mind? The mind is leaking, slipping. It drags her back with it now, always. He sees her in every broken scream, every wince, every subject too quiet to be only afraid. He can't close the door anymore, it's rotting at the hinge.

He realizes suddenly that he doesn't want to remember anymore. He doesn't want to feel how she looked at him like he was worth it. Like he was his own. That just makes everything else harder. That makes everything he's done since unforgivable. So he makes the only rational choice left.

He doesn't knock.

The doors to Serith's estate part like a wound, slow and hissing, red sconces inside casting long shadows across rugged floors. The air smells of incense and scorched power. The Sith doesn't rise as he limps into the sanctum. She's seated at the center of her throne-space,

robed in violet and black, lekku coiled around her like living ornament. A single datapad glimmers beside her. She looks up as he enters, sharp eyes narrowing when she sees who it is.

“Doctor Varr,” she says. “You arrived unannounced.” The’izer walks straight toward her, until her is standing before her throne, and then kneels. Bows low, touches his forehead to the ground. She studies him, slowly, like a rare experiment that’s suddenly begun behaving off-protocol.

“I need something,” he says. Her brow lifts, faint and amused.

“You are a man of solutions. What could you possibly need from me?” He lifts his gaze.

“There’s something in my mind that doesn’t belong there.” Her eyes flicker with interest as she leans forward.

“A memory?” He nods slowly.

“A girl.” That gets her attention. “She’s gone,” he adds, quietly. “But my mind won’t let her stay that way.” He swallows. “I am no good like this. Not in the work, not anywhere.”

Serith rises, slowly, with grace sharpened to a point.

“You came to me for Alchemy,” she says. “To cut it out.” He nods.

“I want her gone.” She circles him, slow and calculating.

“I barely know you, Doctor.”

“You don’t need to.”

“No, I suppose I don’t.” She stops behind him. “But if I take this, if I burn her from your mind, I will be the one who decides what replaces her.”

“I don’t care.”

“You should.”

“I have already lost what matters. I need what is left to function.” She smiles at that, sharp and thin.

“Then swear.” He exhales slowly.

“I am yours,” he says, steady now. “Whatever is left of me.”

“Say it properly, Doctor Varr.” He closes his eyes.

“Mind, body, work, will. I am yours.” Serith hums, satisfied.

“Good.”

She extends one hand, palm up. Her voice shifts, show and ancient. The air thickens around them. Magic, coiled like wire. Her other hand moves to his brow.

“And now,” she whispers, “let us perfect you.”

Darkness curls under his skin like smoke. He closes his eyes, and in the last fleeting moment of darkness, sees Eda’s crooked smile.