

The heat of Korriban seeps its way into Kariff's bones. Harsh. Slow. Consuming. In one hand, he grips his vibroblade. In the other, sand falls slowly between fingers. It had taken over an hour to climb the ridge above the academy. He's not supposed to be here, but the screams inside the training hall had kept him from sleep one minute too long. He couldn't take it. Not tonight. The stars overhead offer no comfort. Not on this world. They look down on him like judges.

The sand is gritty with the remains of a thousand forgotten acolytes. He lets it pour from his palm, imagining each grain a name. Each one, a student. Cut down in the dueling ring, vanished into the tombs. He will not be one of them. Below him, the statues of the ancients loom, jagged silhouettes etched against blood colored rock. He wonders if they had once stood where he does now, broken boys clinging to vibroblades, pretending to swallow their fear. A cold wind brushes the ridge, sharp with the scent of metal and ozone. Kariff tightens his grip on the vibroblade.

Below, the academy pulses with crimson light. A scream cuts through the wind, shrill and short. Then silence. Kariff doesn't react, only listens. He imagines Zhaka standing over someone in the dueling ring with that stupid, perfect smirk of his as the instructors nod in approval.

Kariff spits into the sand.

Behind him, the sand moves. He hears footsteps. He doesn't need to turn to know it's Ire.

"You skipped dorm checks," the Dathomirian says, settling beside him. "Again." Kariff doesn't answer, he just lets the sand fall between his fingers. "You're going to get noticed. One of the overseers saw me heading this way. I told him I was checking for strays." He snorts.

"I'm a stray?" Ire shrugs.

"We're all strays." Kariff lets out a short breath, something that could have been a laugh had he cared more. He leans forward, gaze drifting over the statues below.

"They talk about Zhaka like he's the next Naga Sadow," Kariff says quietly. "You heard what Lord Sythris said today? 'Perfect form. Natural command.' He stumbled through the sixth sequence. I could have done far better."

"It doesn't matter," Ire says. "They see what they want to see." For a moment, nothing but the wind moves. The stars overhead blink like distant eyes. Cold. Unfeeling. Kariff presses his vibroblade into the sand beside him. The hilt is warm and sticky from his grip.

"One day, I'll cut that smirk off his face." Ire looks over, voice low.

"Not if he gets you first." Kariff meets his eyes.

"He won't." They sit together in the dark. Far below, another scream splits the silence. Kariff smiles.

They slip back through the academy perimeter in silence. The dormitory door hisses open with a reluctant groan. The air inside is thick with heat and the smell of two many bodies packed too tight. Most of the other initiates are asleep, or pretending to be. A single overseer stalks the far hall, robes trailing, eyes sharp. Kariff lowers his gaze and slides into his bunk without a word. Ire follows.

Kariff lies back, eyes tracing the marks on the ceiling. His hands still sting with sand. In his mind, he sees Zhaka's face. That smirk. The instructors nodding like puppets with cut strings. Tomorrow, the duels begin again. He doesn't know who the overseers will pair him with, but he hopes it's Zhaka. He wants to make that perfect boy bleed. Wants to drag him down off that pedestal and into the dust like everyone else.

The dueling arena is carved into the cliffs, open to the burning sun. There are no shade canopies, no rest benches. Just sand. Scorched stone. Overseers line the perimeter, dark robes fluttering in the hot wind. They stand like vultures, arms crossed. Silent. Still.

Kariff stands near the edge of the arena, warming up with slow, precise movements. Each strike of his vibroblade is deliberate. Measured. He rolls his shoulder, cracks his neck, turns to survey the others.

Ire is stretching at the far side of the arena, horns poking up like jagged spears against his shaved scalp. His yellow face is chiseled with the dark tattoos of his people, his movements quiet with an unpredictable intensity to them. He is quick. Efficient. He keeps his blade sharp.

At the far end of the ring, a Twi'lek the color of deep amethyst swings her blade through the air. Lirael. There is an edge to her eyes, a hunger Kariff recognizes. She is fast. Ruthless. She doesn't hesitate. She gives him a slight smile when she notices his eyes. He cannot hide his blush.

His attention is drawn from Lirael to Zhaka. The golden child. He stands off to the side, blade resting against his shoulder, barely listening as a tall, robed instructor leans in to whisper something in his ear. Kariff's eyes narrow. His anger bubbles up from deep in his chest. Zhaka's robes are clean. His stance is sharp. Precise. Like it was drilled into him before he ever touched a blade. He's not sweating under the sun.

The announcer calls out the first names. Two initiates drag themselves into the sand. Kariff barely pays attention during the short duel. One screams. The other walks away. A trail of blood stains the sand red where the loser fell. Kariff closes his eyes for a moment. Breathes in the blood-warm air.

“Vitro! Rax!” The overseer calls the next duel. Kariff straightens, snapping to attention. His gaze locks onto Ire. The quiet, unassuming Zabrak. Ire steps forward, usual stoic expression unwavering. Across the arena, a Mirialan stands, face tight with determination, green skin a flash

of color in the harsh light of the arena. The overseers give a brief nod, signaling the start of the duel. Kariff leans forward slightly.

“Begin.”

Rax strikes first, her vibroblade humming with a whistle as she swings it toward Ire with practiced precision. Ire steps back, body fluid. Calm. Like dancing. His own vibroblade hums as he parries her strike with perfect form. She presses, attacks coming faster, but Ire isn’t rushed. His eyes never leave her. His strikes are measured. Focused. Deliberate. Rax stumbles. Her attacks grow more frantic. She tries to regain control, but Ire is one step ahead. His boot crashes into her chest, sending her stumbling backward. He doesn’t give her the chance to recover. Before she can regain her stance, he grabs her by the wrist and pulls her forward. His other hand grabs the back of her head. He slams her face-first into the sand, in one brutal motion. Eyes hardened, he brings his boot down on the back of her head, driving it into the sand with a crack. She goes still.

“Finish! Duel to Vitro.” The overseer calls out. The initiates murmur to themselves, but Kariff doesn’t join them. He watches Ire, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. Ire doesn’t bask in his victory. He walks away with the same stoic expression, coming to stand next to Kariff.

“You did well,” Kariff says, nodding toward the body of the Mirialan as it is dragged from the ring. Ire offers a brief smile, yellow eyes focused on the sand beneath his feet.

“She wasn’t ready,” he says quietly. Kariff chuckles, spinning his vibroblade around his first finger.

“Could’ve ended it less...messy. But whatever.” Ire glances at him now, expression stern.

“If you hesitate, you die. You should know that by now.” Kariff’s jaw clenches.

“I know. I’m not dumb.” Ire opens his mouth to speak, but his words are stopped in his throat as the overseer calls out.

“Diisir! Daptau!” Kariff’s chest tightens. Not Zhaka. He flashes Ire a quick, cocky grin.

“Guess that’s my cue.” Ire nods to him, gaze unwavering.

“Stay focused. Make them bleed.” Kariff winks at him and steps toward the arena, feet sinking slightly into the hot sand. The overseer gives him a bored look, nodding slightly. Across the arena, his opponent stretches. A Twi’lek with desert-brown skin. No one Kariff knows. No one important. He slides into a fighting stance, blade humming through his bones.

“Begin.”

Kariff moves first, his feet kicking up sand as he rushes forward, vibroblade slicing through the air. The Twi’lek barely blocks the first strike. Kariff presses, blow after blow raining

down with brutal precision. Each one is meant to break. To overwhelm. The Twi'lek fights back, more desperate than skilled. He parries once, twice, tries to sidestep. But Kariff is faster. Smarter. He ducks beneath an overextended swing, drives his shoulder into the Twi'lek's ribs. The Twi'lek grits his teeth and pushes back, trying to shift the momentum. He spins, aiming a diagonal slash at Kariff's torso, but he is predictable. Kariff's blade snaps up to catch the strike, then with a dainty twist of his wrist, he turns the block into a blow and drives his blade through the Twi'lek's throat.

His eyes widen, a half-formed breath caught in his lungs. His blade clatters useless to the floor as blood trickles down his chest, steaming where it meets the sand. Kariff holds the boy's gaze for just a moment. Enough to let him know exactly who it is he dies to. He yanks his blade free in a clean moment. The Twi'lek collapses in the sand. Lifeless. Crimson soaks the grit beneath him.

"Finish. Duel to Diisir." Kariff turns without looking back, satisfied smirk curling across his face. He makes his way back to Ire. The Zabrak hasn't moved. The barest hint of a grin curls at the edge of his mouth. Kariff stops beside him, both now facing the ring as the Twi'lek is dragged from the center to a shallow grave off to the side of the cliff.

"You're getting better," Ire says, tone dry. Kariff chuckles under his breath.

"He almost got me. Tried to get clever."

"Didn't try hard enough," Ire's gaze shifts sideways, just briefly. "You see Lirael?" Kariff's brow furrows.

"What about her?"

Ire doesn't answer at first, just tips his chin toward her and mutters, "She's looking at you like you're a blade she wants to steal." Kariff follows his glance. Lirael leans against a pillar, arms crossed, eyes locked onto him. Her expression is calm. Confident. But her posture has shifted slightly. One foot forward. Weight poised. A predator's stance. She doesn't flinch when she meets his gaze. She doesn't look away. Instead, she smiles at him, like she's savoring something. Kariff's chest tightens for a moment. He forces a grin, trying not to think too much about it.

"She's into you," Ire mutters.

"Shut up," Kariff says, bumping his shoulder. Ire grins, satisfied. Kariff's gaze drifts past Lirael to Zhaka. The golden child is quiet now, standing with perfect posture, arms folded behind his back. The instructor whispering in his ear has moved on; he stands alone, untouched by the heat, yellow eyes watching the arena with surgical detachment. Watching Kariff. There is no recognition on his face. No disdain. No amusement. Just quiet calculation. Like he already knows the outcome. Kariff's smile fades.

“Someday,” he says quietly, more to himself than to Ire, “I’ll beat him.” Ire follows his gaze, then nods.

“Can’t wait to see it.”

The academy is quiet that night. The silence of aftermath. Blood scrubbed from the sand. Bodies taken. Names struck from the roster. Kariff sits on the steps behind the eastern hall, silently. The stone still holds the day’s heat. The stars peer down like indifferent gods. His vibroblade lies beside him, polished and sharp. He hasn’t slept. He won’t sleep. Not tonight.

Footsteps behind him. Light. Soft. Not Ire. He doesn’t look up until the shadow lingers too long at the edge of his vision. Lirael. She sinks down beside him without a word. She’s taller than him by a few inches, purple skin polished like amethyst. Her lekku curl around her shoulders. A scar cuts across her cheek. She smells of metal and dust. Her blade still rests at her hip, untouched since her duel.

“You did good today,” Kariff says, voice low. “Didn’t even look like a fight.” Lirael hums to herself.

“He was slow. Arrogant. Didn’t even need to make it messy.” Kariff flicks a pebble down the steps.

“Sometimes messy is fun.” She tilts her head, yellow eyes inquisitive.

“You’re angry.”

“Everyone’s angry.”

“No. You burn with it.”

He doesn’t answer. He thinks of Zhaka, the way the overseers watch him. Like he’s already been chosen. The way they watch Kariff. Like another grain of sand.

“They all think I’m just another slave boy grasping at delusions.” She shifts closer. Their shoulder brush in a warm slide. He glances sideways at her.

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

“Which is?”

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

“I survive.”

“You always do.”

“Do you not like it?” he asks. Not softly. Not hopefully. Just a question. She doesn’t answer at first. Her gaze drifts to the horizon, where the stars blur into the sand.

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

“That’s not freedom. That’s hiding.” Her yellow eyes stare through him.

“Maybe. Or maybe it’s survival without a leash.” He shakes his head.

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

“You wouldn’t come with me,” she says. Not a question. An admittance of truth.

“No,” he replies. “This is the only place I’ve ever belonged. I’d rather die here becoming something than fade away being nothing.” She studies him, looks through his eyes.

“I hope it’s worth it,” she says.

“It has to be.”

She doesn’t say anything after that. Somewhere beyond the academy walls, a predator howls in the distant dunes. The wind picks up, dry and sharp, kicking sand across the steps. Lirael shifts, pulling her cloak tight.

“Do you really think you can win the game?” He watches the wind spiral a trail of dust across the courtyard.

“I have to.” There’s no doubt in his voice. No hesitation. Just the same fire, raw and ugly. “If I don’t I end up like the others. Buried. Nameless. Forgotten. I didn’t crawl my way out of the slave pits to be forgotten.” She looks down at her hands. There’s dried blood beneath her fingernails.

“Sometimes I wonder if the galaxy remembers any of us at all.” Kariff doesn’t answer. Instead, he rises, stretching the stiffness from his limbs. His silhouette stands tall against the stars. His vibroblade catches the moonlight.

“You should rest,” he says without looking back. “Start preparing for next cull.”

“Yes, Instructor Diisir.” The ghost of a smirk traces his face, then he disappears down the hall. Somewhere down these corridors, freedom waits. Or death. Or something in between.

The next week, Ire and Kariff begin to spar outside the overseer’s schedules. Quiet drills in the early morning, before the heat seeps into the cliffs, or late at night on the training pads. They don’t speak much, just duel. Rhythm and form. Blade and body. Kariff starts to see the way

Ire moves as control. Precision. A style born of discipline. He learns to adjust his own footwork, fewer flourishes, more weight. Ire, in turn, grows more aggressive. More edge. They push each other. Sharpen each other.

Lirael joins them on occasion. She doesn't ask, just shows up, vibroblade humming in the low light. She smiles too easily. Watching. Weighing. There's a heat in her voice when she spars. A hunger in the way she talks afterward. Freedom. Offworld.

"You know," she says one night as they sit beside the perimeter wall, legs dangling over the edge, "the Sith don't want warriors. They want weapons. Tools they can use and toss." Kariff picks at a scab on his knuckle.

"What else are we supposed to be?" She shrugs, lekku shaking as she moves.

"More. There's more out there than Korriban. The galaxy's wide. Ugly. Free." He doesn't answer. Something in Ire's eyes flicker.

"Freedom's a lie outsiders chase when they've got no one worth dying for." Lirael glances sideways, brows furrowed.

"Easy to say when you've never been sold."

"My bond is not chain. It is purpose." Kariff looks at Ire like his horns have grown a few inches too tall.

"You're proud of that?"

"I'd rather bleed for something sacred than for these Sith bastards who think power is earned by screaming loud enough." Ire leans back on his hands, face calm. "At least my people do not lie about what they are." Lirael throws a pebble off the cliff.

"Sounds like a pretty cage."

"Maybe," Ire says. "But it is mine." Kariff leans forward.

"All cages feel different on the inside. Doesn't change the bars." He stares out across the ridge. "The Sith talk about power like it's something pure. It's not. It's a bloody tool. Rusted cage doors."

That night, Lirael passes around a stolen flask of Corellian Whiskey. It burns. Kariff coughs. Ire doesn't flinch. They sit in silence, passing it back and forth like a shared secret.

The nights on the ridge become ritual. Sometimes they train. Sometimes they just sit. Ire talks about Dathomir. Red jungles. Red rivers. Chants carried on the wind. He speaks of his Nightsister as if she's a myth. Her voice, he says, could peel truth out of bone. She visits the academy on occasion, cloaked in smoke and veil, to check on his training.

“She said my footwork was soft,” Ire murmurs, staring at the distant stars. “Watched me spar, then tied blades to my calves and ordered me to run drills.” He flexes his ankle, covered in shallow and thick scabs. “She said pain teaches faster than praise.” Lirael stills. “To rise stronger next time or not rise at all.”

“She sounds like a bitch.”

“She is my Sister,” Ire says with that same unfathomable calm. “My body is her right.”

“That’s not how family is supposed to work.”

“I chose this,” Ire snaps. There’s something small and fragile under the edge of his voice. “They raised me. Gave me my honor. That matters.” Kariff frowns, turning a stone over in his hands.

“Honor doesn’t mean much when you’re bleeding on the dirt.” He throws the stone hard. “I had honor once. A pretty word some rich bastard used when he dressed me up and told me to smile for his friends. Said I was lucky. Said I should be proud to serve. Didn’t change the fact I was still a slave. Just meant I was supposed to like it.” Lirael tips back the flask and lets the burn wash through her.

“My last owner tried to brand my back. Said it was an honor. A mark of loyalty. I stabbed him in the chest with his own iron. Ran through four systems before the Sith picked me up. I thought they’d kill me,” She grins. “Still might.”

They start to show up to each other’s matches. Lirael cheers. Ire stands still, watching. Kariff takes comfort in their presence.

When he cracks a training blade across a pureblood’s face and doesn’t get punished, Lirael smirks and says “Told you. You’ve got fire.”

Zhaka remains untouchable. A golden thread in a tapestry of dirt. Overseers let him glide, walk tall above them all. Kariff watches from the shadows, fingers itching for the moment he stumbles.

The weeks stretch on. They laugh more now. Argue sometimes. Lirael swears she knows someone who can get them a ship. Ire just shakes his head.

“You really want to run?” he asks.

“I want to live,” she says. Kariff lets them argue, thinking about it. Somewhere cold. Somewhere clean. Where the stars don’t look like judges. Where his name might mean something. Korriban is a fire. It eats the weak. But then he thinks of Zhaka. Of his fiery eyes and guiltless smirk, and he knows he cannot leave.

The next week, the overseers call a demonstration match. Not a formal duel, no stakes, no blood to stain the stone for good. Just a test. A spar. Kariff doesn't believe that for a second. Zhaka stands at the center of the ring, silk robe discarded, bruised knuckles. He looks like a prick – sharp cheek, eyes that burn like they know your parent's holo. The overseers don't hide their pride. One of their own. Their rising flame. Their precious little monster.

Across from him stands Ire, quiet and still, shirtless in the heat. His body is all lean muscle and scars, wide shoulders, arms coiled like springs. Kariff leans against a pylon at the edge of the ring, arms crossed. Lirael stands next to him, chewing a stimstick and squinting in the sun.

“You think Zhaka stands a chance?” she mutters. Kariff doesn't answer, though a smile flickers across his lips.

The match begins without flourish. No salute, no words, just the shift of feet against red dust. Zhaka moves fast, like he'd been born with blood on his hands. Tight footwork, perfect balance, effortless speed. His strikes come in clean, layered, mathematical. A storm dressed in silk.

Ire doesn't fight like that. He doesn't have Zhaka's elegance, but he has timing. His instinct. He doesn't let fists do the talking for him. He moves in close. Takes hits on the shoulder just to land a punch to Zhaka's gut. He ducks, weaves, slams an elbow into the side of the golden boy's jaw.

Kariff catches the way Zhaka flinches. Not from pain, but surprise. Like he isn't used to being touched. That surprises Kariff. He'd watched Zhaka duel. Seen him leave initiates sprawled on the ground like broken dolls. He'd never seen someone wail on him the way Ire does. He doesn't fall like the many other initiates Zhaka had broken. He bleeds, sure, but doesn't break. He gets in close again, catches Zhaka's extended arm under his and drives a knee into his ribs. Zhaka snarls. Kariff smiles.

The duel doesn't last long. Zhaka shifts tactics, going low, fast, cutting in hard with a feint to the left and brutal upper punch. Ire blocks the hardest hit, but staggers. Another hit, aimed at the side, forces him back. Another strike, a hook to the ribs. Zhaka grabs Ire by the back of the neck, yanks him forward, and drives his knee up into Ire's face. The sound is ugly. Bone on bone. Ire crumples. The overseer calls the match.

Kariff sees the blood curling around Zhaka's mouth. A split lip. A bruise blossoming across his cheeks. The golden boy looks mortal.

That night, they sit on the ridge in silence. Below, the training ring is empty. Kariff's mind hasn't left it. He stares out over the jagged horizon, Corellian whiskey passed around once

but untouched since. Lirael fiddles with her teeth. Ire sits still, back to the wind, watching the stars.

“Fucking unbelievable,” Kariff mutters, voice shaking. “He gets to win again? After everything?” No one answers. “He walks around like he owns the place and we just let him? They let him win, Lirael. You saw it.”

“He didn’t look like he was holding back,” Lirael offers carefully. Kariff turns, jaw tight.

“He doesn’t bleed like us. Doesn’t train with us. Doesn’t sleep with us. But he gets to parade around like the rest of us are just there to test him?”

“I think he earned it,” Ire says without turning around. Kariff blinks.

“What?” Ire looks down, fingers clenching around the bottle.

“I said I think he earned it.”

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

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

“I watched him break you. That’s what I watched.” Kariff stands, fury rising in his chest. “You think that’s honorable? The overseers parading their little pet around while they drag you off to bleed in some empty corridor?” Ire stands slowly, voice tight.

“That isn’t on him.”

“Isn’t it?” Kariff snaps. “He stood there while the overseers clapped him on the back. While you were being punished like a disobedient mutt!” Lirael flinches.

“You didn’t even look angry when they dragged you away,” she says quietly. Ire turns to her.

“What?”

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

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

“Don’t,” Ire growls.

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

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

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

“Maybe I don’t care!” Ire snaps, stepping close. He stands almost a head higher than Kariff. “Maybe I’m tired of pretending we’re all the same when we’re not. He’s faster. Smarter. He saw an opening and took it. Isn’t that what we all are supposed to do?” Kariff’s voice falters.

“You sound like an overseer.” That freezes the air. Even the wind quiets.

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

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

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

“Then why are you bowing now?”

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

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

“Careful, ‘lek,’ ” Ire warns. She bares her teeth at him.

“I’m done being careful.”

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

“You think bowing makes you strong?”

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

“Then go,” Kariff spits. “Go bow to him. Go throw yourself at his feet if that’s what you want. But don’t you dare stand here and pretend you’re one of us.” Ire doesn’t say anything. He glares at Kariff, jaw tight, bruised fists trembling. Then he turns and stalks off.

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

Ire doesn't look back. Lirael stares down at her hands. The bottle sits between them, forgotten. Kariff stands there alone, eyes on the path Ire walks, heart thundering in his chest like a war drum.

They don't speak after that. The stars overhead shift as the night drags on. The whiskey bottle stays untouched. The ridge grows colder. Eventually, Lirael stands and walks back to the dormitories without a word. Kariff stays. Long after the moons have dipped below the sand, long after the last fires around the arena die out. He glares into the dark, like if he stares hard enough, he can will Ire to come back. But he never does.

A year passes. Zhaka and Ire train together. At first, it's subtle. Ire lingers at the edge of Zhaka's sparring matches, arms crossed, silent. Then, he's in the ring, trading blows. It's all technique. Calculated. Efficient. Zhaka favors speed, Ire counters with raw force. They circle each other like predators unsure whether to fight or mate.

Then they start talking. Laughing. They leave drills together, side by side. Whispering. Sharing drinks in the mess hall. There's a look Zhaka gets – half amusement, half admiration – whenever Ire corrects or beats him. Ire, for all his stoicism, starts walking lighter. Like the weight pressing on him has been lifted. Kariff watches the two become inseparable with bile in his throat.

He trains harder. Sleeps less. Pushes himself past breaking. Overseers start to praise his brutality. How he dislocates joints with one twist, how he kicks ribs until they break like dry branches. He eats the compliments like they mean something. Like they'll matter when Zhaka still gets the top scores. Still gets called first during evaluations. Still stands untouched at the center of attention. And now Ire stands beside him. The overseers speak about them like they're Sith Lords already, waiting to be handed a seat on the Dark Council.

Kariff dreams of snapping Zhaka's neck with his bare hands.

Once, in the courtyard, Kariff passes them standing side by side. Zhaka says something soft and quiet, and Ire smiles. Genuinely smiles. Kariff nearly loses his mind there. He doesn't remember walking away, only how his fists shook for hours after.

Lirael starts vanishing. At first, she makes up petty excuses. Solo drills. Overseer tasks. Then she goes a full day where no one sees her. When she returns, she looks different. Colder. Tighter. Like something inside her is winding up, preparing to snap. She stops sparring with Kariff. Doesn't sit with him in the mess hall. Stops laughing.

He catches her staring at the landing pads one day, eyes fixed on the transports lifting into the sky like something divine. When he calls out to her, she doesn't answer. That night, he finds her rolling credits in her hand, over and over like she's testing the weight of escape. He finds

things hidden under her bunk: ration bars, a forged identity card, a folded schematic of a fuel depot near the outer wall. She never asks him to escape with her.

He starts spending more time on the ridge. Alone. The whiskey stays untouched. The training ring below him flickers with yellow light. Most nights, it's empty. Once, he sees Ire and Zhaka standing there long after everyone else has gone. Talking. Heads tilted toward each other like conspirators. Kariff doesn't sleep that night. The next morning, he nearly kills a boy in the sparring ring. Not on accident. The overseers clap him on the back for his fury.

Another week passes. Then two. Lirael refuses to look at him. Ire and Zhaka stay a system of moons pulled into each others orbit. Kariff watches from the shadows, each and every word they say digging into his skin like splinters. No matter how hard he fights, how many bones he breaks, the air around him remains cold. Empty. Even Lirael, his last tether, drifts farther and farther out of his reach. He starts dreaming of her absence like a prophecy.

Then one night, she finds him on the ridge. The desert wind stirs around them. The stars are dim that night, as if even they have begun to lose interest in Korriban. Kariff and Lirael sit side by side for a while. The empty desert stretches out behind them, vast and heavy.

"I used to think we'd get out together," Lirael says, voice tinged with unspoken regret. "You, me, Ire. That we'd take what we could, burn this place to the ground, find something better." The words settle into the space between them like dust. Anger hitches in Kariff's chest, harsh and familiar.

"Ire doesn't deserve that kind of happiness." Lirael doesn't shift her gaze from the horizon. She holds the whiskey in her hands.

"I'm happy for him," she says softly. Her words are light but there's a weight to them she keeps from her tone. Kariff's fist tighten at his sides.

"You're happy for that traitor?" he spits, voice rising. "After everything he's done, you're happy?" Lirael's expression softens.

"Kariff, don't –"

"Don't what?!" Kariff interrupts, voice seething. "You think I'm supposed to just sit here and pretend like I don't see what he's become? That I'm supposed to be okay with him, after everything?" Lirael shakes her head, calm but firm.

"You're not hearing me. I'm not saying what he did is excusable. I'm just saying... I think he's found peace in his own way. He's not bound by the same anger you carry around. Maybe that's worth understanding." Kariff's breath quickens, but his rage has nowhere to go. His words choke in his throat.

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

“I don’t want peace with this place, Kariff,” she says, turning to face him fully. “I just want to stop fighting. I’m done.” She watches him seethe, expression soft but resolute. “It’s not about giving up. It’s about finding something worth holding on to. Maybe that’s what Ire found. Maybe it’s something I’m trying to find, too.”

“What about us?” Kariff snaps, voice cracking with frustration. “What about everything? It’s just going to fall apart because of him?” Lirael doesn’t back away. Her gaze is tainted with something like sorrow.

“I’m not saying I want to. Maybe it’s what I need, Kariff. Maybe it’s what I’ve needed this whole time.” Kariff’s mouth dries as the anger churns his gut. Her finality hangs in the air, thick and suffocating. Lirael takes a deep breath and adds, almost casually, “I’ll never forget you.” The words strike like vibroblade to his chest. He wants to scream at her, tell her she’s making a mistake, tell her everything will fall apart without her. But she doesn’t give him the time. Instead, she turns and begins walking slowly back toward the path.

He doesn’t move. The wind brushes past him, carrying the smell of the desert. He waits until the sun peaks above the horizon before he makes his way back to the academy.

Lirael cot sits beside Ire’s. She always left it a mess. Said it felt like rebellion. A blanket half thrown to the floor, her toolkit open and scattered like bones, a ration bar tucked under her pillow. Now it sits empty. No boots. No datapad. No mess. Kariff stands over it, unmoving. Something behind his ribs tightens, pulling a tight garrote around his heart. Ire shifts behind him. Not stirring from sleep. Waiting. Watching.

Kariff’s voice comes in low. Rough. “She’s gone.”

“Yeah.” No shock. No hesitation. Kariff’s stomach drops.

“You knew.” His voice is sharp. Brittle.

“I did.”

“And you didn’t tell anyone?”

“There was nothing to tell.” Kariff turns around to face Ire. The boy’s stoic eyes stare through him.

“Don’t play wise with me.”

“I’m not,” Ire replies. Calm. Steady. “She made her own choice. I respected it.” Kariff lets out a bitter laugh.

“You don’t respect jack shit. You submit. There’s a difference.”

“She needed help, so we helped her.” Kariff’s mouth tightens.

“We?” Ire’s pause tells him everything he needs to know. “That smug little coward. Of course it was him.”

“She needed it to be clean,” Ire says. “No alarms.” Kariff’s fists clench so hard his knuckles crack.

“You’re proud of that?” Ire stands.

“She’s free. That’s more than most of us will ever be.”

“Because of him,” Kariff snaps. “Because he just waves his fucking hand and the galaxy opens up! What did he trade? What did he promise to keep it quiet?”

“He didn’t trade anything.”

“Liar.” Ire’s gaze sharpens.

“Believe what you want. She’s gone.”

“Because you let her,” Kariff snarls. “Because you helped her. None of you had the spine to stop her.” Ire’s voice drops, like stone dragged across steel.

“She didn’t ask you to come. That wasn’t an oversight.” Kariff flinches. There it is. The truth, laid bare. Cruel. Final. She’d chosen.

He turns without a word. He can’t stand to look at the empty bed. At Ire’s calm, sanctimonious silence. At the fact Zhaka’s name has once again come crawling into his ribs like rot. Lirael had left. He takes one step, then another, then another. Fury claws at his throat like bile. They were supposed to leave together. The promises they made under the stars well up as tears in his eyes. Back then, when they believed escape was something to be earned. To be bled for. Not a gift to be handed out by someone like Zhaka. His anger curls in his head like a brand as a thought rises above the din of his mind.

*She doesn’t deserve to get away from me.*

Kariff’s mind consumes him as the days drag on. Without Lirael, time thins and bitters, stretching across the bones of Korriban like flesh left out too long in the sun. The desert changes. Grows grey. Even the wind starts to sound tired.

Kariff trains harder after she leaves. The instructors don’t offer grief. They give more sparring drills. More tomb dives. More violence. Kariff pushes himself to the edge every day. Finds more and more edge to give them. Their final trial comes a month after she leaves. Without fanfare. Names pasted into the assignment board like a kill list.

They are sent into the catacombs buried beneath a collapsed temple far outside the academy's gates. The instructors call it a test of instinct. Kariff sees it for what it really is: a test of hunger. They enter with vibroblades. They leave with lightsabers.

Kariff finds his at the base of a shattered statue, buried in ash. A crossguard hilt. Rusted. Jagged. Side vents that spit red plasma like teeth grinding bone. The crystal fits his hand perfectly. The blade doesn't hum when ignited. It screams. When he returns, he sees Zhaka's perfect, obsidian hilt and quiet blade. Ire's long and heavy double staff. Four others survive the trials. Kariff doesn't care to remember their names.

That night, they are summoned to the dueling arena under the moons. Seven initiates become acolytes. The overseers chant a liturgy older than the stone walls. They grant Kariff a new name. Sith. The word doesn't comfort him. That same night, Ire leaves. His Nightsister picks him up in a small black ship. Kariff doesn't look for him. What matters is who remains.

The air changes. Without Ire to buffer them, the academy becomes smaller. Tighter. Their paths intersect more often. Sparring rotations. Tactical briefings. Shared silence across mess tables. Zhaka becomes a constant. Sharp. Still. Golden in the worst way. Kariff tracks his breathing. Counts the number of times he blinks during duels. Watches the exact angle he holds his saber when resting. Tells himself it's for strategy. He know it isn't.

Zhaka doesn't speak to him, but Kariff catches the way his gaze lingers just a second too long in every shared room. How he keeps his back to the wall. How his steps quicken, just slightly, whenever Kariff enters from the other side of the hall. Like stars, burning into each other's orbit.

A month later, a Dark Council member arrives. Darth Vieron. Everyone stands straighter when he enters the room, even the overseers. He stalks the yard without acknowledging anyone. Robes embroidered with gold thread. Pureblood skin the color of dried blood. Eyes burning like coals left too long in a furnace. He declares his search for an apprentice.

They begin competing without admitting it. Each day, Vieron watches Kariff and Zhaka from the shadows. Observes training drills, combat simulations, history lectures, language recitations. He says nothing. Takes no notes. Only watches.

Kariff feels him constantly. Every strike. Every breath. Every mistake. Zhaka adapts fast. Changes how he speaks. How he stands. Wears his saber high on his hip. Speaks less, with slow, deliberate precision. Sharpens. Polishes. Controls. Kariff stops sleeping. Fights too long. Bleeds too much. Pushes his training partners to the brink of death and then further. He wants Vieron to see his hunger. Wants him to feel it.

He dreams of Zhaka's death. Of him kneeling, throat exposed, lightsaber straight through the base of his skull. Choking on his own spine. Nailed to the dueling platform like a warning.

Kariff wakes with smiles. Then shame. Then nothing at all. His hate settles in his marrow. Heavy. Familiar.

Three weeks into Vieron's stay, the Councilor finally speaks. He declares his apprentice. Zhaka. Kariff's lungs stop moving. The other acolytes whisper. The overseers avoid his eyes. His jaw clenches. His stomach burns. He returns to his bunk that night, and begins to plan a murder.

Zhaka's boots echo off stone as he rounds the bend, cloaked in that same posture that haunts Kariff's waking hours. Spine straight. Gaze forward. Like nothing touches him. He stops mid-stride when Kariff steps in front of him. His yellow eyes narrow.

“Kariff.” Kariff doesn't answer him. He activates his lightsaber. The crossguard vents flare wide. Zhaka's hand goes to his hilt. His blade is thinner, steadier, a line of red light in the gloom. They stare at each other.

“You didn't earn him,” Kariff growls. Zhaka raises an eyebrow.

“I didn't need to. He's smart enough to know the difference between a weapon and a liability.” Kariff lunges. He fights like an animal. Shoulders square, body low, every strike a blow meant to break. He uses his size, driving Zhaka back step by step, forcing him to dodge low, pivot, roll. The crossguard hisses past Zhaka's cheek, nearly taking his nose off. He recovers fast. Uses his speed. Cuts angles. Redirects Kariff's blows. A flick of the wrist there, a twist of the hips here. When Kariff drives forward again, Zhaka rolls under the blade and lashes out with a precise slash toward Kariff's thigh. The hit lands. Kariff grunts.

He pivots into the wound and slams Zhaka into the wall with the weight of his whole body. Zhaka's breath punches out of him. Kariff pulls back, swings again, and Zhaka ducks. Kariff's blade carves a line into the stone behind him. They step back, both panting.

“You're going to kill me over a title?” Zhaka asks. Kariff's eyes blaze.

“You've never bled for it.”

“Oh, I've bled, Kariff. You'll just never see it.”

Kariff narrows his stance. Lunges at Zhaka's saber arm, trying to wrench it sideways. Zhaka kicks him in the stomach, breaks free, and lands two quick slashes, one across the shoulder, one across the ribs. Kariff surges forward. Punches Zhaka hard across the jaw. Zhaka staggers. Kariff tackles him. Zhaka's saber clatters across the floor. Kariff raises his own for the finishing blow, blade flaring with his fury. Zhaka's hand shoots up, slams into Kariff's wrist and twists. The Force floods the motion, giving him brutal precision. Kariff's lightsaber drops to the ground. Like a dam broken open, Zhaka pulls on the Force, lifting Kariff off his feet, suspending him in midair.

“You’re weak,” he spits, voice cold as ice. Slams Kariff into the stone wall with a flick of his wrist. The impact reverberates down the corridor. He pulls his lightsaber back into his hand, strides toward Kariff, blade humming low and steady. His posture remains composed. Of course it does. His gaze is cold. Kariff’s head spins. His body refuses to move.

“Enough!” A voice booms across the corridor. A pair of overseers, black robes faded into the dim light, emerge, hands raised.

“Tenab, step back.” Zhaka barely glances at them. With a sharp motion of his hand, he flings Kariff back toward them, sending the Sith crashing at their feet. Kariff’s vision swims as he’s hauled to his feet. The overseers’ hands grip him. Strong. Rough. Blood and sweat cling to his body. His limbs feel like lead. Zhaka’s gaze doesn’t meet his. His posture is perfect as Kariff is dragged away.

*He’s better than you. He’s always been better.*

The doors of the holding chamber slam shut behind Kariff. The overseers drag him to the center of the cold, sterile space. He can barely stand. His body shakes with exhaustion. His muscles scream. One of the overseers, voice cruel, steps close.

“You failed,” he says coldly, hands flexing. Kariff’s head lolls to one side. He tries to focus through the haze.

“I tried...” he mutters, but the words are weak. His throat feels honeyed. The overseer scoffs.

“Trying isn’t enough. You failed.” With a swift motion, his fist crashes into Kariff’s stomach, cutting through the haze, barely, and forcing a grunt from his lips as the air is knocked out of his lungs. He can barely stand upright. The floor tilts beneath him, the overseer’s hand grabs his head and slams it into the cold stone. He can hear the sickening crack of bone reverberating through the chamber, but doesn’t register that it’s his own. He thinks he might pass out. The overseer delivers another crushing blow. His chest feels tight. His breath shallows. They don’t stop.

“You should have known better than to challenge Zhaka,” the overseer hisses, voice venom-filled. “Now, you learn your place.” Another blow delivers Kariff a moment of clarity.

*All this rage, and I’m still here.*

The overseers don’t give him time to dwell on his thoughts. They’re relentless. With each strike, the world grows dimmer. A fist to the side. A boot to his chest. His body bends beneath their cruelty. He tries to gasp for air, but can feel his own ribs collapsing in.

*It will never be enough. I’ve never been enough.*

The old Corellian whiskey bottle has a layer of dust covering it. Kariff makes his way up to the ridge, limping. He can barely breathe. He brushes it off with the edge of his sleeve, uncorks, places it under his nose. Still bitter. He takes a harsh swig.

Below him, the academy breathes in the same cruel rhythm. Lights flicker through the dormitory windows. The dueling arena is dark for once, washed clean of blood. Somewhere, the wind catches on the edge of a training pylon and screams like something old and wounded. He sinks to the ground, feet dangling off the edge and takes another drink. It burns, but doesn't stop him. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, leans forward, and stares at the stretch of desert beyond the academy. The night air is cold. The stars above blink like gods turning a blind eye. He talks to them, anyways.

"I'm a failure." He laughs, short and ugly. It hitches at the end and catches in his throat like glass. He tilts the bottle again. More fire. His rage is slow to reach him. Thick. Oil left in the heat. It pools in his guts and holds position. He thinks of Ire. The way he used to correct his form. Quietly. Without judgement. And Lirael. The way she made danger sound like freedom. The scent of ozone and metal. Like a starship's engine. He thinks of himself. Of Zhaka. Tilts the bottle. Deeper this time. Longer. Until his throat is raw and the glass is nearly empty. He imagines Lirael's face disappearing into the shadows. Ire's back turning one last time. Zhaka, in the training yard like a ghost wrapped in gold. Clean. Above him.

He throws the empty bottle into the darkness. It shatters a second later, a sharp pop of defiance that echoes down the valley like a scream that cannot escape in time. He doesn't cry. He shakes. Shoulder hunched, fingers digging into his scalp, nails leaving crescent wounds along his temple as he curls forward on the ridge like he's trying to disappear. Something hot crawls behind his eyes. He chokes them back.

"They all left me," he whispers. "Left me here." His voice is hoarse. Thin. "They're all gone." He looks out again. The ridge falls away beneath his boots. A long enough drop to turn bone to dust. Peaceful, maybe. Fast. A step. That's all it would take.

He stands.

The wind howls around him, dragging the hem of his robes toward the open air like it wants him gone. The ledge feels thin beneath his feet. The sand loose. Inviting him. He stares to the ground far below him. Letting go doesn't sound like weakness right now. It sounds like freedom. He sways forward.

The sound of laughter echoes through his mind. Soft. Rare. A shared night with Ire. The stars were kinder then. Lirael's heat nudging his shoulder. The dry scrape of Ire's voice calling his footwork sloppy, even when it wasn't. Then, Zhaka's voice. Not raised, never raised. Present. Calm in that perfect, calculated way.

“You don’t belong here, Kariff. You’re not one of us.” It was never said aloud, but lived in every glance, every silence. In the way Zhaka never looked at him long enough to leave a shadow. Kariff sees him now in his mind. Hands clean. Posture pristine. Eyes like a ruler who’s never seen the blade he swings. Suddenly, Kariff isn’t cold anymore. The rage floods him fast, sharp. His fingers twitch like they’re remembering his weapon. His teeth bare. He steps back from the edge. One foot. Then the other. His heart pounds.

“I hope you’re not planning to jump. It’d be a pain to scrape you off the canyon floor.” Zhaka’s voice cuts through the wind like it belongs there. Bored. Dry. Coated in the lacquer of indifference he wears like armor. Kariff’s knuckles whiten at his sides.

“Come to gloat?” Zhaka snorts.

“Hardly. Ire said you’d be up here. Figured if you were going to kill yourself, I should at least get a view.” Kariff turns just enough to glance over his shoulder. Zhaka is there, arms crossed, cloak barely stirring in the wind. He’s not smirking, like usual. Kariff notices a bruise peeking out from his collar. One he didn’t give him.

“Don’t say that,” Kariff forces out, voice strained. He glares at the ground below him. “Don’t stand there like you give a damn about me.” Zhaka’s voice is flat, but different. Less cold.

“I don’t give a damn about you, Kariff. That doesn’t mean I want you dead.” Kariff lets out a harsh laugh, bitter and short.

“Aren’t you the savior,” he spits, voice dripping with ivy sarcasm. “You took everything from me. Ire. Lirael. You didn’t even –” his words choke off as his breath catches in his throat.

“I didn’t take anything. You think I wanted to see you abandoned? Ire and Lirael left on their own accord. You drove them away.” The truth hits Kariff harder than whiskey. He clenches his jaw. The taste of metal in his mouth returns.

“I drove them away?” His voice is low, barely controlled. “You left me in the dust! Stood there like I didn’t matter. Nothing ever matters in your fucking perfect little life!” Zhaka looks at him, eyes tilted downward in something like sympathy. He steps forward.

“You think I’m perfect? I’m not above all this! I just don’t wallow in it. I don’t drown in the messes I make. I clean them up.” Kariff’s body trembles.

“Clean it up? What the fuck are you on?” Zhaka’s gaze softens.

“I didn’t want things to work out like they did. And you know what? I don’t think either of us are gonna get any better by holding onto this mess.” He gestures to the desert below them, the abyss that Kariff stands above. “You’re right, Diisir. I took everything from you. But you’re still standing. That’s more than I can say for half the people I know. You’re better than them.” Kariff shakes his head. He takes a step back.

“You don’t get it, do you?” His voice cracks. “I don’t need your pity! I need... I need everything to stop. You don’t understand what it’s like to be trapped in this fucking cage! You think I had a choice to do this? To become this?” His chest rises and falls, cracked ribs aching with each breath. Zhaka eyes the dust below them.

“You think I wanted to become this, either?” His voice is low. “The perfect little soldier? Everyone watching me to wait for me to fall?” Kariff’s jaw tightens. His mind struggles to reach around Zhaka’s words. Zhaka’s eyes flicker with a glimmer of something – understanding? Regret? “I’ve spent my whole life convincing myself that I’m better than all this. That being perfect, detached made me strong. Ire helped show me how wrong I was.” For a long time, Kariff says nothing. He just stands there, the desert endless and cold below him. His chest aches with something beside the bruises. Regret, maybe. Anger. Zhaka’s presence.

“I’m tired,” he says finally. “I can’t even be the monster. I should have run with Lirael.” Zhaka doesn’t reply right away. He just watches Kariff, gaze soft.

“It’s not too late,” he says quietly. “You’re still standing.” Zhaka’s words linger in the air between them. He doesn’t want to hear it. Doesn’t want to believe it. But it doesn’t matter – the words are there now, worming their way into his skull. Zhaka watches him, silently. The ground beneath his feet feels unstable. For a moment, Kariff thinks of stepping off, but something pulls him back.

He takes a deep breath. Then another. Slowly, he steps back from the edge. One foot, then the other. He plants himself on solid ground. He doesn’t look at Zhaka. Not yet.

“You don’t get it,” he says finally, voice raw but steadier. “I’m not doing this because you said so. I’m not done yet.” He turns to face him, eyes hard. “I’m not your fucking charity case. Don’t expect me to thank you.” Zhaka nods, face unreadable. He stalks past Zhaka, down the ridge, back to the academy.

The next day, Zhaka leaves. Kariff finds him near the edge of the landing pad, staring out at the horizon. His shuttle sits behind him, engines humming. The late morning casts long shadows across the pad. They still for a moment. Neither of them move. Neither of them speak. Finally, Kariff breaks the silence.

“You’re leaving already?” His voice is quiet. Zhaka’s shadow falls across Kariff’s form. His voice is steady.

“Yeah. Back to Dromund Kaas.” Kariff exhales. He stares down at the dust beneath his boots. His hands curl into fists at his side.

“I guess we’re both getting what we deserve, huh?” Zhaka steps closer to him. Close enough Kariff can feel the heat of his presence. His gaze flickers over the horizon, words low and clear.

“It’s not about what we deserve. It about what we make of it.” The wind kicks up, carrying with it the shuttle’s engine roar. Zhaka turns to the shuttle.

“You ever gonna stop pretending you have it all figured out?” Kariff asks, voice rough and strangely calm. Zhaka gives him a final smirk, raising a hand.

“Nope!” He walks to the ship, the cold indifference settling into his posture with each step. He climbs the ramp, pauses, and looks back to Kariff.

“Take care. Kariff.” The ramp closes. It’s the closest thing to an apology he’s going to get. The shuttle lifts off the ground with a steady hum. Kariff stands there, eyes following it as it disappears into the atmosphere. His hands relax.

The next three years fly by. He’s picked up by a master of his own, Darth Cin. An Arkanian with harsh yellow eyes and harsher hands. He drags Kariff through the dueling arena before he agrees to hear him speak in his chambers. His shoulder-length hair recedes around his temporal hairline. His voice is silky smooth.

“Kariff Diisir,” he says while Kariff stands at attention in front of his desk. “Your surname is Arkanian.” Kariff nods slowly.

“My father, Master.” Cin nods slowly, scrolling on his datapad.

“An offshoot, then.” Kariff’s blood bites him. He holds back a scowl.

“Yes, Master. Born offworld.” Cin’s eyes snap up from the datapad, cold smile prying his lips apart.

“How...quaint,” he murmurs, “a bloodline mixed with impurity.” The word hangs heavy in the air. Kariff’s breath tightens. “We shall work together, Apprentice Diisir. We shall correct the flaws in your blood.”

Kariff slips further and further into Cin’s cold embrace as the months bend. He brings Kariff to Arkania to stay while they train. Cin is demanding, but patient. He doesn’t rush Kariff. Then, they start tests. Minor things, at first. Blood samples taken routinely. Genetic tests. Cin’s experiments are always presented as progress. Enhancements. He’ll be faster. Stronger. More in tune with the Force.

The tests start to shift following his first year as an apprentice. They become more invasive. More intense. One day, Kariff wakes to find himself strapped to a cold metal table. Cin stands beside him, datapad in hand.

“This will hurt, but it is necessary,” Cin explains, voice flat and emotionless. “We must perfect your reaction to pain. It is your greatest weakness. You must learn to endure. See it not as a burden, but a tool.” Kariff’s mouth dries.

“Pain...?” Cin’s expression is cold.

“Yes. You will learn to transcend it.”

He keeps Kariff there for days. Tests his nerves. At first, the pain is unlike anything he’d felt. Then, it fades. His body no longer reacts the way it should. His mind numbs itself to his suffering. Each time the pain spikes, he feels less. Each shock is met with less resistance. His screams, once wild and frantic, fade into the mechanical hum of the lab. Cin watches with cold satisfaction. His yellow eyes gleam while Kariff endures, body twitching under the strain. When he is finally allowed to rest, Cin stands over him, voice a low, measured cadence.

“You will be a slave to it no longer, Kariff.”

The next few weeks are a blur of cold, detached training. Each day, more of Kariff’s body is lost to him. The injections continue. Alterations pile up. His muscles grow stronger. His reflexes sharpen. The pain is ever present, but quiet. More manageable. Every nerve ending, every sensation, dull.

He grows more powerful but cannot seem to enjoy it. There’s a hollowness that he can’t place, a pit in his chest. His missions blur together into a nauseating rhythm. He leaves Arkania, spills blood in the name of his master, returns to Arkania, bleeds in the name of his master. One day, he is sent to the spaceports of Adascopolis, to investigate a Republic vessel. Light cargo, no manifest. Aid smugglers. Cin wants him kill the crew. Keep the Republic off his turf.

Kariff walks the station with purpose, tension coiled under his skin like durasteel wire. The robes itch. The collar’s too tight. His black robes brush metal railings, his boots are soundless on the grated walkways. Cin had told him once “noise is a byproduct of error.” He descends the loading sector, air warming with the stink of metal and ozone. Junkers work in lazy motions around him. Humans, some Weequay, a Besalisk shouting from atop a half-assembled hauler. Then he feels it. A warning in the Force. A sound. A laugh. Familiar. A chill skates down his spine, then melts into something hotter, heavier. His heart lurches. He turns before he can stop himself, eyes track the source without thought.

She leans on a dented shipping crate, mid-conversation with a grimy-looking mechanic. Lirael. Her skin is still the color of indigo robes, lekku tied up around her head. She wears a dust-streaked coat and a blaster rig. A satchel hangs against her hip. The sound of her name doesn’t echo in his mind like it used to. It sinks. Like stone dropped in still water. She sees him out of the corner of her eye and turns. Her expression doesn’t shift at first. Then confusion flickers across it. Tension. Her body straightens. Her fingers drift toward her belt, where a blaster hangs low, worn from use.

“...Kariff?” she says, voice tight. He doesn’t speak. Not yet. He studies her, the slope of her shoulders, the scar near her jaw, the disbelief in her eyes.

“I should’ve known it’d be you,” he says quietly. “Only you would fly into a Sith port and expect to be allowed off easy.” She exhales quickly, sharply.

“I didn’t expect you.”

“Clearly.” He glances over his shoulder. No Republic soldiers. Just workers. Civilians. “Your ship?”

“Yeah.” There’s little pride in her voice. Her gaze doesn’t waver. “What are you doing here?” He gives her a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes.

“My master sent me to clear it. No survivors.” She doesn’t flinch.

“Of course.” They stand in silence a minute. Overhead, a starfighter takes off with a screech. Kariff leans against a railing, shoulder to durasteel.

“I think about the ridge sometimes,” he says, voice low. “You. Me. Ire. How you’d laugh at me when I coughed while drinking.” Her expression cracks, just slightly. A crease in the corner of her mouth. Her arms fold across her chest.

“I think about it, too,” she says softly. “When I’m left alone too long. I miss it. I missed you. Him.” She glances down at the grate between them, then back up. Her words come gently, like she’s bracing for something. “What happened to Ire?” Kariff’s jaw clenches.

“I don’t know,” he admits. Not angry – hollow. “He left a day after initiation. Took a ship with his Nightsister. Haven’t seen him since.” She nods once. Slowly. Like it confirms the worst. Her gaze lingers on the floor.

“And Zhaka?” she asks. The name hangs like smoke in the air. Kariff huffs out a short joyless breath. She flinches.

“We came to an...accord.” Her demeanor changes. She raises an eyebrow, a smirk crossing her face.

“Is that a new Sith word for beating each other senseless until one of you gives up?” His lip twitches. Almost a smile.

“Something like that.” There’s a long pause. The air around them warms. “Why didn’t you ask me to come with you?” She sighs. Her eyes dim, just slightly.

“I was scared you’d stop me.” He nods.

“I would have.” The silence after that is heavier than the air. She reaches into her jacket. Pulls out a holochip. Holds it out between them like a fragile thing.

“If you ever change your mind,” she says. He looks at it. Hesitates a minute, then takes it. Tucks it into his belt like a secret.

“You think I want out?”

“I don’t think anything.” He doesn’t answer. “I don’t expect you to use it. But I hope you know it’s not a weakness to ask for help.” She turns toward her ship. Pauses at the base of the ramp.

“You were always chasing something bigger than yourself, Kariff. Just...don’t lose the parts worth saving in that process.” She disappears into the ship. The hatch seals shut with a hiss. Kariff stands there for a long time. His hand drifts to the chip on his belt, just briefly. He turns his back to her. His footsteps sound distant on the grated walkway. One step after another.

He’s fifteen when Cin starts acting up. He spends long nights buried in old texts, pacing the manor. His tone becomes distant. Distracted. He summons Kariff less and less often. Once, he goes two months without seeing him. Then, he’s finally summoned to Cin’s laboratory.

He finds his master hunched over a six-pronged relic suspended in a statis field. Its shape is asymmetrical. Alien. It glows with a dull white light. Vibrates when Kariff draws near.

“Do you feel it?” His master’s eyes are alight with a fever Kariff hasn’t seen before. He shrugs.

“It’s loud.” Cin smiles.

“Good. It knows you.” Kariff’s gut twists in on itself.

“What is it?” Cin circles the relic like a predator circling a wounded animal.

“A relic from the Infinite Empire. The Rakata...they were millennia ahead of us in biology, in augmentation. They could shape the Force as easily as clay.” He exhales. “Now, it speaks to me.” Kariff says nothing. He’s learned the hard way not to interrupt his master when he is lecturing. “Their technology did not just harness the Force, it infused it. Into flesh. That was their secret. Symbiosis.” He looks to Kariff. The temperature drops. There’s a gleam in Cin’s gaze that drills holes through Kariff’s intestines.

“You have always been promising, Diisir,” Cin says softly. “But you are flawed. Tainted. Weak in places you cannot understand.” Kariff stiffens.

“You have made me stronger, Master.”

“I’ve patched leaky holes. Temporary measures. Tools for lesser men.” He gestures to the relic. “This will change that. This will remake you.” Kariff’s stomach knots.

“Remake...?” Cin’s smile is slow. Serpentine.

“You’ll thank me when it’s over.”

Kariff doesn’t thank him. He screams, at first. Then stops. Forgets why he screamed at all. The procedure spans weeks, not that he remembers them. He wakes in fragments. Half-memories, like picking up glass shards across tile. The cold table. Straps. The scent of antiseptic. The hum of machinery. Sometimes he wakes mid-procedure, eyes fluttering open to see Cin’s pale fingers threading strands of code.

He doesn’t ask questions. Stops trying to count injections. His veins are a roadmap now, glowing with each new chemical pumped into them. He can feel something shifting. Not muscle or bone – deeper. His blood. A low hum pulses through his chest, beneath his ribs, something ancient whispering a language too old to be understood. Cin is careful not to say too much, but Kariff catches fragments.

“Resequencing stable...genome rewritten.” Cin never tells Kariff what he really did. But Kariff feels it. The absence of something that was once a part of him. The tendrils of something buried deep within him. A presence folded into the marrow of his bones, twisting through DNA like ivy. Ancient. Alive. Waiting to be found. Waiting to be used.

Cin watches him closely in the weeks that follow. Kariff starts hearing voices. At first, only when he’s dreaming. Garbled whispers, distant voices chanting in impossible tongue. Soon, they bleed into waking hours. When he’s alone. When he hurts. The voices call his name. A sound he cannot replicate. Something in his chest answers, even when he wills it not to. He tries to fight it. Stops sleeping. Trains. Starves the thoughts out. But the more he resists, the louder they become. They wrap around his spine, coil behind his eyes. They show him flashes of ancient stars, broken thrones, temples buried beneath stone. They tell him Cin is lying. He’s always lied. He’s scared of you. He’s trying to bury you.

One night, he finds himself standing outside Cin’s laboratory. Barefoot. Half-dressed. He doesn’t remember walking there. In his hand, he holds a scalpel. Blood drips down his fingers where they squeeze the blade. Slow. Hot. The voices murmur to him. Soft. Coaxing. The stasis field around the Rakatan relic pulses with gentle light. It hums in time with his heartbeat.

Cin is hunched over a console, back to the door. Kariff doesn’t think. He moves like a creature born of reflex. The lights flicker. The hum of the relic spikes in pitch. Kariff’s hands reach for Cin’s shoulders, to steady himself. He drives the scalpel straight into the base of his master’s skull. A wet gasp. Cin stiffens, legs shaking weakly beneath him, eyes wide with shock. The relic sings.

Kariff watches the blood pool around his feet. His hands are wet with his blood, but it doesn’t feel like his own. It feels wrong. His eyes find the console Cin was working on. The screen is lit with a chat log.

“Diisir is progressing well. The cypher has been placed, with minimal setback. The Emperor will be pleased. As per request, I will remove extraneous limbs to ensure compliance for shipment and display.”

Kariff’s breath hitches. His mind races. *What the fuck did that Arkanian do to him?* The voices scream louder now, buzzing in his skull like a swarm of insects. He doesn’t recognize his own blood. Doesn’t feel his own pain. He stumbles through the manor, hand leaving blood trails across the pristine white rugs and hardwood floors. He should clean it.

The faucet is warm as it drips water onto his fingers. He cannot look down at it, instead his attention is drawn to the mirror above the sink. He stares into it. The face that looks back isn’t a boy’s face. Not anymore. His horns curve out from his skull like they always have, but they feel heavier now. Everything does. His skin is too pale, artificial in its smoothness. His cold, Arkanian blood pulses underneath everything. He used to wonder what it would feel like to grow into his features. Now he knows. It feels empty.

His golden eyes lock with his reflection’s. Unblinking. Focused. Sharp. He remembers when they were warm. Curious. All that’s left now is rage. He raises a bloody hand to his face. There are no scars, no freckles. No trace of the slave he used to be. Not even a shadow of the boy who once whispered to Ire in the dark or held Lirael’s shoulder beneath flickering corridor lights. The water drips. His breath fogs the glass.

“I should feel something,” he whispers. “Fear. Regret. Anything.” His words don’t spark any waiting emotion. Just the thrum of ancient power in his chest, the slow steady burn of hatred pulling his insides taut. He sees Cin’s face again. Hears the gurgle of a man too arrogant to see death coming. *The Emperor will be pleased.*

His breath catches. Something twists behind his ribs. They were building him for the Emperor. As a trophy. Kariff tilts his head, then he laughs. Runs fingertips along his jaw. The skin feels like someone else’s. Alien. Perfect. Just how they want him. The corner of his mouth stretches into a sneer.

“They made a god,” he mutters. “And thought he’d serve.” The voices rise in agreement, a chorus of the forgotten. His reflection meets his eyes. Unblinking. Burning.

“I’m going to kill the Emperor.”

“I didn’t think I’d hear from you so soon,” Lirael’s voice is dripped in honeyed sarcasm. The blue of the holoprojector taints her lilac skin. His lips twist into a smile, but there is no real amusement in it.

“I need your help. I’m going to kill the Emperor.” The words land like a missile. Her eyes widen, disbelief written across her face in ancient script.

“Are you insane? Why?” He takes a step forward, as if the space will convince her.

“I won’t be free until he’s dead.” Lirael’s mouth tightens. Her fingers twitch. She shakes her head slowly.

“Do you really think killing him will fix anything?” He clenches his fists.

“I don’t need you to lecture me about morality. I need you to help me get to Dromund Kaas. That’s all.” She stares at him, gaze hardening.

“You want me to help you murder God almighty.” His eyes narrow.

“I don’t need you to do anything. Just get me there.” She’s quiet for a while. Her eyes watch him, look through his fire.

“I’ll get you to Kaas City. But that’s as far as I go. After that, you’re on your own.” He exhales, relief flooding him.

“That’s all I need.”

She finds him on Arkania, on a landing pad high above Adascopolis. The ice howls across the steel deck, wind shrieks between scaffolding like a chorus. Kariff stands alone in the cold, robes flaring in the wind, hood pulled low over his hair. His presence in the Force is no longer a song of rage, but something quieter. Colder. Frost creeping across the hull of a ship. She lands with a quiet roar. Opens the ramp and meets him at the base.

“You’re sure about this?” she asks, voice low. The wind threatens to steal her words. He looks past her, to the rickety ship she calls her own.

“Yes.” Her brow furrows.

“You don’t have to –”

“I do.” He stalks up the ramp until they’re face to face. The scar along her jaw twitches as she chews the inside of her cheek.

“You’ve changed,” she says.

“I know.” She takes a breath like she wants to say more, but stops. She steps aside. The ship smells like oil and metal. The pilot’s char has a tear in the leather that’s been patched with cloth. A string of Twi’lek beads hang from the overhead. They clink quietly as the ship takes off. Lirael’s hands fly across the controls with practiced confidence. He watches, silently, from the co-pilot’s chair as they exit atmosphere, as the stars draw lines across the horizon. Lirael leans back in her seat, boot tapping a rhythm on the floor. She takes a deep breath.

“You’re sure this is what you want?” She’s asked it twice now. Kariff doesn’t answer at first. He watches the streaked blue of hyperspace like it might change if he stares hard enough.

“More sure than I’ve ever been,” he says. Lirael turns to face him, searching his hooded profile for something. Doubt, maybe. Fear. The boy she knew, hiding somewhere between the silence.

“I could turn this ship around,” she says quietly. “We could go anywhere.” Her hands reach to the beads dangling from the overhead. She runs her fingers over them. Kariff’s mouth lifts, barely, at a corner. Not a smile, something colder.

“You could,” he agrees. “But you won’t.” Lirael says nothing more. She just turns back to the stars, knuckles white on the yoke. The hum of the engines stretches long. Domund Kaas draws closer with each breath.

The landing pad on Kaas City is slick with rain. The ship settles with a wheeze, landing struts creaking like old bones. Lirael makes it to the ramp before Kariff. She doesn’t say anything when he steps past her. But her eyes search him one last time. Like she’s memorizing him. He pauses at the bottom of the ramp, rain just starting to dot his shoulders.

“You don’t have to wait,” he says. “I know what comes next.”

“I’ll be here two days,” she says. “Just in case.” A beat. He nods. Kaas City looms ahead of him like a weapon. Everything is metal. Walkways suspended above chasms. Buildings like blades stabbing skyward. Lightning arcs across the heavens in eerie silence. Kariff walks with purpose, past troopers in gleaming black armor. Past Sith apprentices, some barely older than him, dueling beneath the open sky. Past the broken statues of Jedi saints turned to conquest monuments. His boots echo on the metal, muffled by the rain.

Above it all stands the Imperial Citadel. It reaches the heavens above, doors taller than ships stand open, flanked by guards in robes, unmoving as statues. At the Citadel’s perimeter, he does not slow. The first checkpoint calls for clearance he does not have. A red-robed attendant steps forward, hand raised to stall him. Kariff’s saber ignites with a hiss. One stroke. The body crumples before the alarm begins to scream.

By the time reinforcements arrive, he is already past them. The Force moves with him, around him. Bodies fall. Blood hisses on hot metal. Doors sealed to all but the High Sith split under his will, molten edges glowing. He stalks through vaulted corridors like a specter, flinging aside apprentices, gutting guards. They try to stop him. They fail. He counts bodies. Moves forward. Higher into the Citadel. Until the metal gives way to soil.

The garden levels suspended high above the city are quiet. Estate grounds for the Dark Council. They wind like a jungle through the heart of the tower. Rain drips from glistening leaves. Thorned flowers bloom in vibrant colors, fed by lights too bright to be suns.

Kariff steps through the archway, boots trailing mud and blood over ivory pathways. The quiet here is surgical. No alarms, no nothing. Just the hush of rainfall and the hum of distant power cores. He knows he's being watched before he sees him.

Zhaka stands beneath a twisted flowering tree. His cloak is dry. His posture is easy. Like he's been waiting. Kariff stops a few paces away. His saber is still in his hand, low but alive.

"I was wondering how far you'd get," Zhaka says, reclining against the bark. "But I should have known. No one tears things down like you do." Kariff doesn't answer. Rain hisses on the edge of his blade.

Zhaka steps out from under his tree onto the ivory path. "So this is it, then? Come to finish what you started on Korriban?" Kariff's voice is low.

"You think this is about you?" Zhaka raises an eyebrow.

"Isn't it? You burned your way through the Citadel. You can't think I'm just going to let you walk to the throne?"

"I'm not here for your throne." Zhaka laughs, sharp and humorless.

"You're not here for me, you're not here for power." He raises both hands "Should I call you Darth Righteous?" His expression hardens. "You murdered half the Citadel, Kariff. What in the galaxy are you expecting to find up here?" Kariff takes a step forward. His sword arm is sore but twitching with excitement.

"I'm here for *him*." Something flickers behind Zhaka's eyes. He shakes his head.

"No," he says. "I won't let you take another step." He finds his saber on his hip. It glows with the same dainty, red blade Kariff once despised. Rain slicks the leaves. The air hums with ozone. Their sabers meet like thunderclaps. Kariff presses forward, strikes sharp and powerful. Zhaka parries with elegance, gives ground but doesn't yield.

Kariff doesn't back down. His strikes are powerful, a low swipe designed to cleave through legs. Zhaka dances back, narrowly avoiding the strike. In that same motion, Kariff uses the Force to tear a large chuck of earth from the garden bed. He hurls it at Zhaka, who answers with a twist of the wrist. Soil explodes midair, fragments scattering like ash.

"You're still just rage," Zhaka growls, sliding low and swinging upward in a move meant to gut. Kariff leaps, powering his muscles with the Force, into the twisted branches of a gnarled tree. The leaves snap and crackle beneath his weight, a web of broken twigs and damp wood swaying beneath him. Zhaka follows with a fluid leap, landing nimbly atop the branch.

Kariff's moments are quick, relentless, each strike full of the weight of years spent building toward this moment. Zhaka counters, blade precise as ever, but Kariff can feel the strain in his movements as he steps back across slick bark. He takes advantage of the tension. Swings

his saber downward, with a sharp twist, catches Zhaka across the shoulder. The strike is deep, jagged. Zhaka snarls, twisting to deliver a retaliatory blow. But Kariff isn't finished. He knocks Zhaka from the tree with a sharp pulse of Force.

The pureblood crashes down into a reflecting pool below, shattering the still surface. Kariff drops after him like a guillotine, landing with a splash. Water steams where his saber touches it. Zhaka surges up, drenched, hurling Kariff backwards with a shout. He hits a pillar, offhand pinned between his body and the column. His bone crunches with a loud *pop* sound. He barely feels it. Rain and blood mix at his feet.

"I'm not here to kill you," he says, voice trembling with restraint. His chest fights each breath – he must have shattered most of his ribs. Zhaka snarls.

"Then you came to die."

They rush again. Sabers blur. Sparks fly as they carve stone walls. Kariff ducks under a swing, throws Zhaka back with a shove that craters the far wall. Ivy burst to flame. Roots tear from soil. Zhaka wipes blood from his mouth.

They circle each other. Kariff's breath is ragged. Blood seeps down his side from his arm. It hangs heavy, useless. His steps falter. Zhaka limps, too, holding his thin saber in both hands now to steady it. His shoulder wound smolders. Zhaka lunges, faster than Kariff expected. He barely manages to twist aside, but his slow legs don't move fast enough. Zhaka's saber carves a brutal line across his hip. His leg nearly gives, his saber drags low. Zhaka bears down, pressing the advantage, strikes vicious and desperate. Kariff digs deep. Meets Zhaka's blade, catches it, twists, slams his forehead into Zhaka's nose. The pureblood stumbles, dazed. Kariff spins, using the motion to bring his saber up in a blinding arc that cleaves through Zhaka's hilt.

The red blade flickers out. Metal clatters into water. Zhaka falls to his knees, blinking blood from his eyes. Kariff stands over him, swaying. His saber hums, tip hovering inches from Zhaka's throat. The voices in his head reach a cacophony. The choir sings for blood. Rain steams where it meets his hip. He doesn't feel it.

Zhaka looks up at him. His yellow eyes dare Kariff to kill him. Kariff refuses to move. The blade wavers. Then deactivates.

"I said I'm not here to kill you," Kariff rasps. "Even if you want me to." He stumbles back, takes a step. His leg gives out. His saber slips from his grip. His breaths are shallow and broken. Zhaka stays kneeling in the shallow water, head bowed beneath the weight of defeat. He looks uncertain. Human. The garden smolders. Kariff takes a deep breath. Then stands, one hand pressed to his burning hip. The other hand hangs limp. Each step is a gamble. His muscles tremble under the weight. He spares Zhaka a final glance.

“Don’t try to stop me,” he murmurs. Zhaka’s eyes flick upwards. There is no fury there. No disdain. No hint of Korriban. Just the scared eyes of a thirteen-year-old boy who was turned away by death himself.

Kariff reaches the edge of the garden path. Cracked tile. Fallen stone. An elevator to the Citadel’s inner spire. He doesn’t hesitate.

The throne room is as old as the Empire. Pillars are carved with a language no longer spoken. Lightning coils through the glass above like veins. Beneath it all, stands the Eternal Emperor. He does not wear armor. He does not need to.

His robes are black, stitched with ancient sigils that writhe when the light glances off them. His skin is deep crimson, smooth and unblemished. The ageless hue of pure Sith blood. No wrinkles mark his brow, no weakness clings to his frame. He stands perfectly still, as if the air around him bends to keep from touching. His eyes are gold and fathomless. Not burning, devouring. The kind of gaze that doesn’t see flesh but instead pierces essence. That looks beyond self and finds subsistence. His presence is a pressure in the bones, a gravity that pulls the world inward. The Force coils around him like a serpent, vast and ancient.

Kariff staggers in like a dying animal. One leg drags behind him. His blood leaves a crooked trail across the black floor. His saber buzzes faintly in his hand. His body is fire and ruin. The voices in his head are soft, soothing. They guide his broken form forward. His eyes burn.

“You,” he rasps. The Emperor doesn’t move. Kariff limps forward. His dulled nerves scream. He’s dying. He has to be. “You took everything from me.” The Emperor’s gaze settles on him. It glows like twin suns.

“And still you stand before me,” he says with a voice like Corellian Whiskey. As if he’s observing a broken instrument, something once finely tuned, now rusted by misuse. Kariff’s hand trembles. His saber casts long shadows across the floor. His muscles coil with the Force, every ounce of his fury directed into one final thrust. He charges. The voices shriek in unison.

His lightsaber cleaves through air with brutal speed, aimed at the Emperor’s neck. The floor beneath his boots cracks as he leaps. As his blade sings through the air, the Emperor raises his hand. The world slows. The air thickens around Kariff. The Force clamps down on him like a vice. It steals the breath from his lungs. Suspends him in mid-air. His lightsaber falls uselessly from his hand. The Emperor tilts his head. Kariff can feel his bones bend, his muscles snap under the pressure.

“You really think you can challenge me?” The Emperor’s voice fills with disdain. “You are nothing but a slave to your rage. A fractured wretch of power.” With a flick of his wrist, he slams Kariff into the metal floor below him. His body crumples, sprawled and broken, unable to even twitch as the Emperor steps forward, boots clicking with cruel finality. The weight of his

will crushes Kariff, pull him under. His world spins, then quiets, save for the distant, mocking echoes of his mind.

Rain slams against the prison spire like it's trying to wash the world clean. Kariff lies on a slab of cold durasteel, staring at the ceiling like it might open up and swallow him whole. His ribs knit wrong. His leg doesn't move.

He should scream. Curse the gods. Spit in the face of fate. But he has no rage left. Nothing to give. He closes his eyes. Dreams of blood. Of Lirael. Of Ire. Of all the lives he could've lived if he hadn't been Kariff.

He feels empty. Without his rage, his stomach breathes simpler. Quieter. The voices have hushed, leaving him defenseless to his thoughts. What was he fighting for? What was he trying to prove? The boy who crawled from the depths of the slave pits, who burned and bled for a false crown. The Sith who wanted so badly to matter and instead became nothing more than the debris of his own mistakes. Dust on a prison bunk.

Those questions are useless now, ghosts in the back of his head. He'll never have an answer, not really. His chest aches. The ceiling blurs with the rain. It's so cold. He's so tired. He could sleep for years. Maybe he already has.

He hears laughter in his ear. Defiant. Sharp. He can see Lirael standing in the shadows of the landing pad, waiting for him to return. He remembers the look in her eyes when she offered him an escape. She had nothing to prove. Nothing to lose. He could've gone with her. Been someone else. Someone better. Someone who never existed.

He doesn't wish for anything. Not for a way out. Not for redemption. He doesn't deserve that. Lirael is gone, waiting on that landing pad for an old friend who she'll never see again.

A light shines on him from the cell door. He opens his eyes as it opens. A figure stands in the doorway, a tall Arkanian. Pale skin and lightning glow under the dim light. He looks Kariff up and down, blue eyes detached and cold. Then gives him a slight smile.

“Welcome to paradise, Subject 82.”