

**Dark Crusade Episode III**  
**"Legacy of Darkness"**

# Prologue

The world was dark. Muted greys flowed together in patchwork images. Cut up scenes of violence and death, broken only by the brilliant flashes of crimson followed soon after by blackness. An utter and inescapable blackness that threatened to overwhelm her mind.

Shadow Taldrya stood on a snow-covered precipice. In his hands he held a solitary blade. The image twisted and she could see another figure in the distance. The face was blurred, but she felt it had to be a man. The man had an odd, twisted presence in the Force that could only be described as brilliant madness.

The sights and sounds bled together for a moment, as if she were watching frames of a movie playing too quickly, skipping over the important parts.

She could sense the end, his impending death.

The scene slowed down again. Shadow's weapon was destroyed as he failed to parry an attack. The twisted man flickered in and out of vision, as if he were an illusion seen out of the corner of her eye. He blinked into sight again, only for a moment, but it was long enough for his blade to slash across Shadow's chest. Crimson blood spurted into the sky, dying the washed out greys in red.

It was a shallow cut, but it was just the beginning. Shadow was reeling backwards, a mixture of shock and pain flashed his dark features, but it was his eyes that scared her. They were... empty, as if his soul had been ripped from them. She couldn't remember ever seeing him like that. And she had seen all there was to see of him... it was her gift.

The scene twisted once more, causing her head to swirl. The pain in her mind was growing stronger and she fought the urge to retch. The images refocused and she knew it was reaching the end. Again.

Shadow had fallen to one knee, his fingers clutching helplessly at the wound on his chest. The twisted man appeared again, darkness surrounding him. He smiled with cruel lips. His eyes gleamed with pure pleasure as he stood over the defeated Shadow.

"No!" she screamed, but she couldn't stop it from happening again.

Power swelled around the man as he laughed at Shadow's fallen form. Then, an overwhelming burst of Force slammed into Shadow's body, sending him mercilessly over the edge of the cliff. The dark abyss swallowed him whole. The vision turned to black.

The scream was still coming from her lips when Maxyn woke up. She had seen *it* again. Sweat had drenched her from head to toe and she shivered in the coldness of the dungeon. *Another* vision. This one more clear than the rest. Maxyn didn't know why she was linked to Shadow, or why she was seeing visions of him... as him... She could only grasp at the same truth she had known since the vision first assaulted her.

Shadow Taldrya was going to die.

# Maxyn

A piercing scream tore through the room. The sound reverberated around the damp, stone walls, a gut-wrenching cry that was drenched in pain and despair. Maxyn Vonnisia's entire body was held taught by the pain. The scream cut off suddenly and her body sagged in relief. Her dark, red hair hung limply over the bruises of her beautiful face. Blue eyes, once filled with pride and power, had been cowed by fear and shame. The pain was not a physical thing, but maybe that was why it was worse. A horrible power was ripping memories from her mind.

The torture chamber, for that was all it could be called, was located deep under the surface of Antei, in the most restricted level of the Codei Prison. There, Maxyn had been subjected to powerful unending torments that assaulted her mind. Soul-crushing pain had consumed nearly all that she was, and there was little left for her to give.

It had been nine months. Nine months since she had been captured during the Battle of Rhelg. Nine months held within the desolate pit of despair on Antei. No reprieve. No escape. No death. Just the savage tortures mercilessly inflicted upon her.

"Nothing," the Inquisitor cursed. He tugged violently on Maxyn's hair. She let out a ragged gasp of pain as the muscles in her neck screamed in protest. "Give me something I can use," the man demanded, screaming in her face.

During her captivity, Maxyn had been used by the Brotherhood's leadership as an information nexus on the One Sith, their members, and their activities. Utilizing her natural powers of psychometry, the Dark Jedi exposed her to countless items and artifacts they had secured from the battlefield—even some of the lowlier members they managed to capture alive—and ripped from her mind all the information she could see with her gift. With the insight gained from her power, they had moved mercilessly against their enemy, striking devastating blows one after the other.

Though she was unable to understand why, something about the last couple of months had been different. There was an almost fanatical edge to the Inquisitor's pursuit of a being he called "Esoteric". Whoever he or she was within the One Sith, it was clear Esoteric was proving to be a dangerous foe to the Brotherhood.

Maxyn closed her eyes and the Inquisitor released her with a vicious curse. She instinctively reached for the Force to diminish the pain but, just as it had when she first arrived, the power eluded her. She clenched her teeth against the moan pressing at her bruised lips. She would give the Inquisitor no more satisfaction than he'd already had.

In the brief lull between assaults—the Inquisitor was cataloguing more items—Maxyn's mind annoyingly drifted back to the person who was responsible for her current situation. Shadow Taldrya. He had managed to overcome their dire situation on the snow-swept wilds of Rhelg and turn the tides of war against her.

She should hate him.

But she didn't. Seemingly, against her will, she could not blame him for the outcome of her duplicitous actions. In fact, she had delved deeply enough into his psyche to know he would have had no desire to see her in this situation. But, like her, he was nothing more than a soldier... a small cog in the grand scheme of things. And soldiers were the expendable pawns of their masters.

The Inquisitor must have finished his preparations—or he was just eager to get back to his beloved work—because he returned swiftly to Maxyn's side with a new gadget of random and unknown origins. His earlier anger eased from his overly fleshy features at her visible distress over another round of interrogation.

However, before he could start anew, a sharp beep warned of an incoming communication. Maxyn audibly sighed in relief at the brief reprieve, but her relief was short-lived. The Inquisitor managed to drop to his knee just as the holographic visage of his patron appeared. Darth Pravus.

Rage filled Maxyn's heart at the sight of the man who had ordered her imprisonment and torture. Dressed in his resplendent black and gold armor, the Grand Master cut a striking figure even as a projection. His mask was off, revealing the hard lines of his face and the cold, blue-grey of his cruel eyes.

"My lord," the Inquisitor simpered without raising his eyes from the floor. "I am honored by your illustrious presence. Please, make your will known to me so I may carry out your bidding."

"Inquisitor." Pravus' voice was deep and cold, the briefest hint of annoyance clouding his features. "Have you managed to uncover information on the target?" The war was progressing swiftly and he had little time to waste on the banter of sycophants.

The Inquisitor blinked and seemed to grow smaller under the Grand Master's gaze. He raised his head as he pleaded. "My... my lord, forgive me. I have not yet been able to—"

"Another failure then," Pravus immediately cut the Inquisitor off. Though his face remained impassive, his rage was almost palpable even through the holo-communicator. "You have been at this task for *months*, and we are no closer to uncovering the true identity of Esoteric."

"But, my lord," the Inquisitor shouted, frantic. "It's *her* fault," he pointed angrily at Maxyn who continued to hang from her bonds. Her eyes narrowed dangerously at the Inquisitor before returning to glare at Pravus. "She has been withholding the information we need. If you would allow me to use all means of persuasion at my disposal—"

"Enough."

The Inquisitor's words weren't merely cut off. They ended in a high-pitched scream of agony. The man fell to the ground, his fingers clawing mindlessly at his face and eyes. His body convulsed violently as if he were being gutted by rusted knives. Maxyn watched in horror as the Inquisitor's scream reached a volume loud enough to damage her ears.

The hologram of Pravus impatiently waved a hand and the noise was silenced, though the Inquisitor continued to thrash around from whatever delusions the Grand Master had implanted in his mind. Maxyn attempted to push herself further away from the sight and the image of the Grand Master, but she was brought up short by her chains.

She felt the weight of Pravus' steely gaze as it turned to her. Though she didn't want to, she forced herself to look him in the eyes. She was bruised, bloody, and beaten, nearing the limit of her will to live, but he looked at her as if she were a mere oddity he was growing tired of.

"It would seem that Esoteric is more careful than I had thought. He has gone to great lengths to hide himself... even from your unique 'gifts'." Maxyn didn't say anything. She was sure her mind would soon be torn asunder in turn, joining with the fallen Inquisitor. But Pravus simply sighed. "We'll have to move ahead with our plans."

Feeling that was the end of the conversation, Maxyn suddenly snapped. "Wait!" she screamed, before his image disappeared. "What happened to Shadow Taldrya? Where is he?" The question burst out of her before she realized what she'd asked. She clenched her teeth together tightly to prevent herself from saying more. For some reason, that vision was still tearing at her.

For a split second, Pravus' cold expression slipped, revealing something close to surprise, but he quickly masked it. "He is no longer a concern of yours. I suggest you prepare yourself for the next round of interrogation... You will have the answers I seek, or you will no longer be *necessary*."

The image disappeared. The Inquisitor had stopped moving, most likely dead. Alone, Maxyn twisted in her shackles and gritted her teeth. She had to escape. Unbidden, the vision of Shadow falling into darkness returned, playing on an infinite loop. Maxyn hissed out a curse. Without access to the Force, she had no means of escape. She was trapped. And it was only a matter of time before a new Inquisitor turned up to replace the old. She was running out of time.

*He* was running out of time

# Vokun

Altai Vokun eyed his opponent with a sharp, calculated stare. His dark eyes took in his opponent's movements, his breathing, even the stale stench of sweat the man was emitting as he spun and jumped around the room. No emotion could be seen on Vokun's face—not a trace of empowering rage, anger, or hate. Nor were there the crippling emotions of disgust, misgiving, or fear... his face was simply a cold, expressionless mask: the face of a killer.

The vivid sparks of lightsabers striking together was near blinding in the darkness of the training grounds. In fact, but for a few carelessly scattered torches, most of the catacombs on Korriban were buried in complete and utter darkness. The darkness was both a test and way of life for those who called the Sith World their home. But it had no effect on the fighters. They moved with deadly grace despite the stygian void.

His opponent wasn't much different from him, Vokun understood. They had similar builds—large, but lean; powerful, but quick. The man wore the traditional black tunic of a Sith apprentice, but his features were hidden by the black mask of a Mandalorian—a trophy he had obviously won in battle. The unknown and unnamed man was Vokun's rival. They had known each other for exactly twenty-seven minutes. They had been fighting for twenty-six. And they were dueling to the death.

Vokun ducked under a powerful slash of the double-bladed lightsaber, placing himself to the left side of his foe. A chance: the apprentice had over-extended, moving quickly to correct his mistake. But it was too late. Vokun's right foot shot backwards, into the weak part of his opponent's knee. The sound of the bone snapping signified the end to this pointless match.

As the apprentice's leg crumpled beneath his own weight, Vokun continued the attack with a savage, spinning kick. His left foot connected with his rival's midsection, crushing the floating ribs inward. Sharp pain caused the rival to gasp, a pitiful sound that only incited disgust: another failure in the eyes of Vokun and their shared master.

Weakness was a flaw. The One Sith followed the path of absolute strength. Weakness was purged. Thus the purpose of their master's test—to weed out the weak, allowing only the strongest to become Sith.

Vokun's kick spun him in a perfect one hundred and eighty degrees, placing him squarely behind his rival's back. The man was kneeling now, incapable of standing. The Force stirred around the apprentice as he attempted to suppress the damage, but it was too late. Vokun looked down upon the nameless man's back, an emotion welling up within him to replace the coldness he had felt for the duration of their battle: contempt.

"No..." the apprentice shouted. Vokun paid him no heed.

With a vicious slash of both his weapons, Vokun's twin, crimson blades sliced instantly through the apprentice's unprotected neck. Time seemed to slow as he watched his rival's head fall to the ground with a sickening thud, the squelching flesh of his throat instantly cauterized by the searing heat of the lightsabers. The mask he'd once worn with so much undeserved pride fell, revealing a bald, tattooed head and pale green eyes dull with the film of death.

Beheaded, the apprentice's lifeless body slumped to the floor. Those unblinking green eyes stared at Vokun. Ignoring the fear and pain etched on his former rival's face, Vokun bent to retrieve the mask—the spoils of battle—and returned to his full height. The crimson blades deactivated with a simultaneous whoosh and the lightsabers returned to his side. Soft applause reached his ears at the same time he sensed the presence of his master.

Darth Silas absconded the traditional tunic and robes of his fellow Sith. Instead, he was wrapped in a patchwork cloak fashioned out of the scraps of cloth he had ripped from the bodies of those who had fallen to his blade. He was tall, towering over Vokun (and most others) and, despite his rail-thin appearance, was one of the most powerful members of the One Sith.

Silas laughed coldly, twisted amusement was etched across his face. His dark, brown eyes gleamed with excitement as he took in the sight of Vokun standing over the freshly killed former apprentice. Silas was a psychopath: a peerless genius who glorified killing. Because of his uncanny skill and martial brilliance, he had been named as Krayt's Executioner—the Sith's most powerful assassin. It was a title which he had practically been born for.

"Well done, my apprentice," Silas' applause faded. He gestured at Vokun to follow and swept from the room. "At long last, your journey is nearing its end."



Having succeeded in his mission to kill his rival, Vokun kneeled before his master. They had ventured from the catacombs to Korriban's surface. The sky was dyed a deep purple as twilight fell across the ruins of the ancient Sith Academy. His master referred to their location as the ritual chambers, a place where Sith alchemy and sorcery had once brought to life the most twisted of dark side beasts.

Vokun could almost feel the old power—an echo of what once was—that had saturated deeply into the crumbling stone around them. It slithered across his skin, giving rise to haunting, fragmented visions of the past. He could see blood and violence: testament of the academy's purpose to train the strong and dispose of the weak.

Silas stood before him, uttering words in an ancient Sith tongue. The strange, guttural sounds seemed to pass through Vokun as he waited. The purpose of the ritual was to further bind him to his master. Soon, he would be complete.

"Now, Lord Vokun," Silas ordered in basic. "Rise!" His master draped a voluminous black cloak upon Vokun's shoulders. Having completed the trial, he had earned the coveted title of "Lord", and become a fully-fledged member of the One Sith. "There is but one task remaining of you before you can prove yourself truly worthy as my apprentice."

Vokun rose to his feet and bowed deeply. "My life is yours to command, master."

A small smirk flashed on Silas' face, but his voice was cool. "You will travel to Dromund Kaas, the former throne world of the mighty Sith Empire. There, you will destroy the Brotherhood forces seeking to lay claim to the planet and defeat our order."

Vokun's eyes flashed in the night and he clenched his fist. "Not a single pretender will escape my blade," he vowed. His voice rang loud in the haunting silence of the ritual chamber. The spirits of Korriban seemed to shudder at his words, reveling in the darkness he emitted.

# Maxyn

Maxyn woke with a start. Fragments of the vision flickered in her mind, but she pushed them away. She was where she had been left, hanging from the ceiling of the dungeon in stone chains. Each link had runes carved into them—alchemical symbols that held her powerless, cutting her off from her connection to the Force.

Something was different. The corpse of the old Inquisitor had disappeared some time ago, but not a soul had tried to disturb her nightmare-wracked sleep. A new Inquisitor had yet to arrive, which seemed odd. Maxyn had no idea how much time had passed since two men in white had dragged the cold corpse from the room, nor was she sure when the torment would begin anew. What had startled her awake wasn't the dream, nor the entrance of a new interrogator. Someone else was in the cell with her.

She felt a quiet presence standing near the entrance, directly behind her. Unable to see who it was, fear gripped at her chest. Struggling to calm her rapidly rising heartbeat, Maxyn forced the calm into her mind as she had been taught. Then, she tried to swing around to see who was standing behind her.

Before she could properly twist around, her bindings were unlocked, dropping her onto the floor. Her legs hit the ground first, but the surprise coupled with her exhaustion caused them to crumple beneath her. She fell unceremoniously on her rear end with an oomph. A sharp, burning anger ignited in her chest at the stranger's soft chuckling.

The anger brought with it another sensation, one she had not been able to feel for so many long months—her connection to the Force. Letting the power rush through her sore limbs, she drew in strength from her rage and pushed herself to stand, turning towards the stranger who had released her. Her hands clawed into fists, ready for a fight, even though she knew her body was not. But her hands dropped quickly to her sides at the sight of the stranger.

She stood frozen. She *knew* this person. The realization swept over her as her mind raced. They had never actually met, but she had learned of the man from the memories she had ripped from Shadow Taldrya.

Benevolent Taldrya Whiner was a member of Taldryan. He was quiet, and odd, but powerful in his own way. He was wearing a dark grey cloak, almost black, with wide sleeves and a deep cowl that kept his face buried in shadows. Shock and confusion danced across Maxyn's face, struggling to determine what would have brought such a person to this place.

Benevolent must have seen the questioning look in her eyes, because he shook his head. "We don't have time for that."

Maxyn quickly reined in her emotions, dampening her rage at her captors and imprisonment. Whatever his reasons, Benevolent was someone she could trust. She knew that much from Shadow's memories.

"How... Why are you here?" Maxyn croaked out passed her chapped and bleeding lips.

Benevolent frowned at her, most likely annoyed that she hadn't listened to what he had said. But, when her brow drew down in a glare, he sighed and began to explain. He seemed to know who she was, somewhat, and quickly described the events that had transpired on Rhelg after her capture.

Shadow and a team of Taldryan Elders had captured Ludo Kressh's old fortress. While the Dark Jedi were together, he had divulged some of the adventure he had shared with Maxyn in the mountain wastes. Apparently she had left an impression on him. Unfortunately, that was all Benevolent could tell her, and it didn't explain a lot. Suddenly eager for information, Maxyn demanded to know where Shadow was now.

"He's missing," Benevolent said simply.

"What?" Maxyn's voice cracked, causing her swollen throat to convulse. "Since when?"

Benevolent sighed again. "Since Rhelg. Which is why we need your help tracking him down." The words were blunt, almost tinged with sarcasm, as if he thought they should have been obvious.

The sight of Shadow falling in battle flashed through her mind again. Could it already be too late? But then, why would she be seeing visions of that now? The Taldryan Elders had had months to search for him with no luck. What chance did she have after so much time had passed. Maxyn was a professional tracker, a bounty hunter. She knew the odds of finding someone decreased the longer they remained missing. Nine months was a long time for a trail to be cold. And why would she want to help the Dark Jedi anyways?

Benevolent was suddenly standing beside her, throwing a dark cloak over her shoulders and Maxyn realized that she was cold (and not wearing much more than scraps of cloth). She frowned at the Dark Jedi, but pulled the cloak around herself. She willed away the brief, psychometric visions as a force of habit and started walking with the clearly impatient Benevolent.

"How did you know I was here?"

Benevolent shot a look at her and continued walking. "At first, we assumed you had been killed off." Maxyn frowned as he once again made reference to "we", which must have meant the Elders. "It took time for us to realize the Brotherhood's overwhelming victories during the Crusade stemmed from impeccable intelligence."

Wars were won or lost on a force's ability to gather intelligence. She of all people knew that. And now she knew what her interrogators had been doing with what they had forcibly stolen from her. The rage within her flamed up again, but she pushed it down. She followed alongside Benevolent as he led her through the twisted catacombs beneath Codei Prison.

"Pravus is good," he continued, "but this goes beyond simple intelligence gathering skills. No one can predict an enemy with that much accuracy."

Their walk finally took them to a guarded corridor. Two men stood at attention, eyes wary for any sign of trouble. Maxyn couldn't understand why they had yet to notice the pair. In fact, as she looked around the halls, she realized there were security cameras and hidden turrets everywhere. She immediately tensed for battle, but Benevolent waved her to be still.

She realized the guards still hadn't moved. Sirens weren't blaring, and the turrets weren't ripping them to shreds. "How..."

Benevolent's face lit up with a brief, mischievous grin. For a moment it gave him an almost boyish appearance. "I simply sliced into the prison's network during a... routine inspection a few days ago," he explained. "Surprisingly, I still have the access codes they gave me. The security systems have been running on a closed loop for the last twenty minutes."

"But, the guards?" Maxyn waved at the men as they passed by them.

"Same thing, I guess?" he responded with a shrug. "They're currently seeing and hearing the last five minutes before I entered the prison on a continual loop."

Maxyn blinked at that. Benevolent had clearly used some application of mind control... or illusions. But to do it in such a way as to emulate a slicing technique? That was strange. Few would have wasted the effort doing something so roundabout. She supposed it fit with Shadow's memories of the man.

"So," Benevolent continued as if they weren't simply taking a stroll through a high security prison. "We decided to break you out to help us track Shad down. It seemed like the easiest way."

*Easiest?* Maxyn couldn't help but be astounded. But she couldn't press him about that. Sirens began to blare a warning and the emergency lights came on, casting a crimson glow across the corridors. Benevolent was smiling again.

"No worries," he reassured her. "Just a little distraction to draw their attention elsewhere."

Maxyn just shook her head and they picked up the pace. "I remember when they brought me here," she muttered. A sense of futility was starting to darken her thoughts. "There is no escaping from this prison."

It was true. Codei Prison had been built to be inescapable. Aside from the sheer amount of guards and thick, durasteel walls, surrounding the facility were a myriad of active volcanoes, which would be suicidal for anyone attempting to make an aerial approach. The only viable entrance was by vehicle or foot, and required passing a gauntlet of security gates, inspections, and electronic identification. Maxyn knew that Benevolent's tricks could only go so far.

"I have a shuttle waiting," he said, as if that solved the problem.

"What kind of pilot would be insane enough to fly here?"

Benevolent gave her a weird look, but didn't answer the question. They were nearing their destination—a large, transparisteel observation port that overlooked the bleak, mountainous volcanoes and the impossibly long drop to certain death below them. The Dark Jedi whipped out his lightsaber and nonchalantly began cutting a large circle. He kicked the transparisteel away and looked into the ash-filled sky, his eyes darting around impatiently. Maxyn could barely keep up with what was happening, but she, too, turned to look out of the facility.

A ship suddenly appeared in the darkness. A beat up, rusted out shuttle from at least three decades ago, was flying haphazardly through the volcanic eruptions towards them. Several times, she saw spewing lava actually come into contact with the ship, but the pilot simply rolled with the pressure and spun in dizzying barrel rolls. It didn't take long for the ship to finally complete its suicide run and hover outside the impromptu doorway.

"Here's your ride," Benevolent called out over the sound of the twin engines. His blasé attitude about all the insane things happening was starting to give her a headache.

"You're not coming with me?" Maxyn finally asked, confused.

A bit of darkness clouded Benevolent's features. "Unfortunately, I have to play out my role." She didn't know what role he meant, or why it mattered, but she gave up on getting understandable answers from him.

He gave Maxyn a boost as she jumped into the opening hatch. In that brief moment of physical contact, Maxyn flashed on Benevolent. She saw him severing ties with Taldryan and abandoning the fight. He had left his House, his identity behind, and returned to Antei alone to serve as a quasi-Dark Councilor.

He had gone rogue... to save her? To save Shadow?

Benevolent smiled at the perplexed look Maxyn gave him, instinctively understanding exactly what she had seen. "It's what we do," he explained, as if that answered everything. Before she could respond, he turned and began walking deeper into the prison. The shuttle's ramp began to close as the pilot leaned on the throttle. Then he was gone. Safely ensconced within the shuttle as it exploded from Antei, Maxyn let the realization wash over her.

She was free.

# Vokun

Dromund Kaas: the former throne world of the old Sith Empire, and a living monument to the seductive power of the dark side of the Force. Though it had once sat at the heart of an Empire, Dromund Kaas had always been a wild, untamable world. The dark side had given rise to many powerful beasts, twisted by the Force, and had reclaimed the land when the Sith had fallen so many millennia ago.

Lord Vokun swept his gaze over the vast landscape beneath him. The jungle world was lush, seemingly untouched by sentient beings. The skies ahead were filled with an impenetrable grey. Bolts of lightning flickered back and forth through the clouds, only occasionally plummeting down into the earth. Power emanated from the planet: power that was currently contested.

Behind him, Vokun's ship remained hidden from view in a dense stand of trees. The heavily modified transport had been equipped with a cloaking device, allowing him to slip under the sensors of both the One Sith and Brotherhood forces that hovered over the Sith World. He had no allies here. Only his master's mission.

Wasting no more time, Vokun slipped a small holo-communicator from a pouch on his belt and placed it on the ground. He knelt passively as the device activated. The figure of Darth Silas materialized in the darkness.

"Apprentice," Silas greeted him, cold affection in his words. "You've arrived."

It wasn't a statement. Vokun's orders were absolute, and in all his time serving his master, he had never deviated from or failed to complete his missions. The figure of Silas smirked at Vokun's bowed head. He was practically giddy.

"Master, command me," Vokun whispered.

"My spies inform me that a contingent of Brotherhood Jedi are set to explore the catacombs beneath the ruins of the Sith Academy." Silas gestured vaguely off-camera and a soft beep was emitted from Vokun's communicator. "Follow these coordinates. It will be the perfect place to start the slaughter."

Vokun bowed his head deeper. "Yes, my master."

"Make the catacombs their tomb," Silas commanded and his image abruptly disappeared.

Having confirmed his orders, Vokun quickly stashed the communicator in his belt. A light breeze brought the scent of the wild air, and the distant sounds of battle. With swift steps,

he walked towards a pristine air speeder. A *Balutar*-class swoop—a gift from the One Sith's allies—it was matte black and trimmed in red. There were no weapons installed on the small craft, but Vokun had no need for additional firepower. The swoop was merely an overpowered engine with a seat, and that was all he needed.

The craft dipped slightly under his sudden weight, but quickly adjusted itself as the repulsors kicked in. Pressing his fingers to the instrument panel, the swoop roared to life, bursting with barely restrained power. In some ways, the swoop was much like him. They were both built for a single purpose, and few could outmatch them. A small smile flicked on his lips, but disappeared just as quick.

Vokun entered the coordinates he had been given into the computer and waited for it to compute his position on the nav computer. Only a moment passed before his objective was displayed and he revved the swoop's engine a few times before letting it take off. The swoop exploded with speed, carrying its rider swiftly towards his objective.



The Sith Academy on Dromund Kaas was built along the lines of most such places of "higher learning". Constructed on a massive scale, it was easy to form a picture of what the structure had once been. The pyramid-shaped stone walls would have stood in defiance against the rugged wilderness of the planet. Filled with an outpouring of dark side energies, it would have been a place where children learned to harness the true power of the Force.

Once upon a time, the academy may have trained men and women who now existed as legends in the annals of the Sith; but no longer. The academy was a ruin. The savage effects of time had stripped the slick veneer from the place and left it nothing of its former glory. The great walls had long fallen and been overgrown by the jungle. The dark nexus it had been built on was weak and fading.

Vokun stared at the ruins, but he failed to see the academy for the grandeur it once possessed, or even the wreckage it currently was. His mind swept over each crevasse and fractured wall and stored it all away. Escape routes. Hiding places. Potential death traps. He catalogued only information that could prove necessary to complete his objective. But mostly, he observed the movements of the handful of guards hovering around a makeshift excavation site.

Three guards patrolled the perimeter of the Brotherhood encampment at regular intervals. Vokun counted the seconds between each rotation as a reflex, but the men didn't overly concern him. The surface held a distinct lack of Dark Jedi presence, which meant there would be little to no resistance. His wait was merely to make matters more... efficient.

He was sitting and counting the seconds. At nine hundred, Vokun unclasped his weapon and bolted forward between two of the guards as they made their pass. Before anyone noticed his presence, he activated his crimson blade and slashed it through the torso of one of the military officers standing over the dig site. There was a strange, pregnant pause as the man fell to the jungle floor before screams and curses split the night air.

Vokun moved like the wind. He swiftly dodged the stutter of blaster fire from the three guards, instead slicing through a small group of defenseless researchers. Before they fell, he waved his hand and sent their bodies hurtling through the air. With loud thuds, two of the bodies made contact, striking the guards he had thrown them at.

The last guard was still standing, but his clip had run empty. Vokun took two running steps and leapt at the man as he struggled to reload. The soldier was stopped cold with a knee to the chest and then silenced with a stab of the lightsaber. Seventy-nine seconds had passed since the first attack, and the makeshift camp was quiet.

It had been easy. *Too* easy. The men on the surface had obviously been the reserve team and they had felt safe, far from the danger hotspots on the planet. But his master had sent him to these coordinates for a reason, and he doubted it was to eliminate normal soldiers. The gaping hole in the earth beckoned to him. The little camp had been made around that hole, which must be where his true objectives lay.

Returning his saber to his belt, Vokun walked to the edge of the pit and looked down into the abyss below. Without wasting a second, he nimbly leapt over the edge and plummeted down into the unknown.



The area below the academy was a mass of tunnels and caverns. It reminded him of the network of catacombs beneath Korriban and it was clear that the two buildings had shared much more than simply their architecture. Vokun stalked silently through the dark tunnels. He had willed his eyes to adjust to the lack of light the moment his feet touched ground. He could sense sentient beings ahead... and power.

Dark Jedi.

His blood boiled as he neared his objective. He could sense them. He could feel them. And soon, they would feel him as well. His training had pitted him against innumerable types of foes, but this would be the first time his blades had a chance to drink the blood of members of the Dark Brotherhood. And he knew that there were two of them who would soon serve as a pleasant memory as the firsts.

The passage he stalked began to widen rapidly. Pale, artificial light illuminated the large cavern. The rocky ceiling was easily six stories above him, and he could just make out the wickedly sharp stalactite formations that hung dangerously overhead. The corresponding stalagmites across the ground served as a natural maze of rock.

The Dark Jedi had obviously sensed him coming because orders were being shouted at the other members of the expedition team. Vokun ignored the anger and fear and pulled his twin lightsabers from his belt. They activated with a soft explosion of crimson that further pierced the darkness. Two soldiers were running forward, each with blaster rifle in hand.

Vokun didn't wait for them to get into firing position. He leapt instantly, surging a dozen feet through the air to close the gap between him and the first line of defense. Before he landed, his left lightsaber had already left his hand. The blade flashed brilliantly in the darkness as it arced through the distance between him and the soldiers and cut them down.

Their screams lasted until the spinning hilt slammed back into his hand. The other soldiers formed a barrier around the non-combatants and unleashed a volley of blaster bolts. Vokun spun behind a stalagmite formation to avoid the attack.

"Not yet!" A voice thundered as Vokun counted breaths as he waited for the blaster fire to recede.

The presence of a Force user tingled upon his senses and Vokun almost smiled. He spun out of cover and rushed towards the entrenched non-Jedi. Behind them, a man wearing armor styled after the ancient Sith was igniting his orange blade. The armor was black, naturally blending in to the darkness of the cave, and the face was hidden from view behind a helmet. As Vokun watched, the man seemingly disappeared behind a cloak of blackness.

Un-phased, Vokun continued with his attack. He thrust out with his left hand again and the deadly stalactites shook ominously above the cluster of non-Jedi. A warning shout was loosed from a different Dark Jedi who remained hidden in the back, but it was too late. The massive rocks fell to the earth and pierced through the soldiers and the people they had tried to protect. Screams filled the cavern as nearly a dozen men and women suffered in agony at their mortal wounds.

Vokun had no chance to savor the twisted tableau. He instantly spun and parried the flashing orange blade. The armor-clad Dark Jedi, Anubis, had re-appeared behind him and attacked at the perceived opening. But Vokun had sensed the slight movement of his opponent and reacted instinctively. The two warriors crossed blades again and again, the sights and sounds of the three lightsabers proving to be a sensory overload in the near-dark of the cave.

"You bastard," the Dark Jedi hissed at him. Their blades locked and Vokun stared from behind his own mask into the black faceplate of his opponent. "You'll die for this, Sith," the man spat.

Vokun snarled in response and pushed him back. He struck outwards with his offhand. The Dark Jedi twisted to avoid the blow, and disappeared again. He had wrapped himself in the Force and effectively become invisible. Vokun tempered his rage and waited. He reached out with his senses and frowned as they slithered across the other Dark Jedi—a male Twi'lek who had yet to enter the fray.

Putting the Twi'lek aside for now, Vokun jumped back in a high flip to narrowly dodge a blast of telekinetic power. Again and again, bursts of pressure flew across the cavern at him. He grunted as he twisted and leapt out of the way, forcing his mind to focus. It didn't take long. As he dodged the invisible attacks, a humanoid shape appeared in the black. Darkness gathered upon darkness until the figure was a visible silhouette of shadows, separate from cave.

Vokun willed power into his limbs. The Force boiled within him as he shot forward at blinding speed. The silhouette made a small jerk of surprise as the crimson blades slashed towards him. The Dark Jedi managed to parry the first attack, but the second slipped past his guard.

"Dammit," he cursed as he brought his left hand up as if to block the weapon. The faint pressure of the Force flickered to life as an invisible barrier, but it wasn't strong enough to resist Vokun's rage-filled strike.

His lightsaber sliced easily through the armor plating and cut into soft, weak flesh. The blade passed through diagonally from shoulder to hip, practically slicing the Dark Jedi into two parts. The stink of fear polluted Vokun's senses for a moment as the realization of his death claimed the Dark Jedi's mind. Then it was gone. The sweetness of the kill rushed through him, but he couldn't savor it. Another blade hummed to life only a few yards away.

The other one had arrived.

"Too late to save your friend," Vokun informed him in a cold, uncaring voice.

The Twi'lek stood stoically. A silver blade illuminated his pale, amber skin and cast shadows on the strange markings etched into his lekku. He was dressed all in black, similar to Vokun, but with purple trim marking him as a member of the Brotherhood's Krath Order. Unlike his ally, the only armor he wore was shoulder pads and gauntlets.

"He served his purpose admirably," the Twi'lek's deep voice held no emotion. "And now, you will die by *my* hand, Sith."

Vokun didn't wait for the Twi'lek to make his move. He jumped the short distance between them, slashing his two lightsabers in a furious combination. His opponent dodged right and left to avoid the blows, slashing with his own silver blade as Vokun spun a quick semi-circle. His opponent was already a dozen paces away, jumping nimbly around the stalagmites.

Intrigued, Vokun couldn't refrain from asking the man a question. "I thought you Dark Jedi were all brothers," he raised an eyebrow behind his mask. "Why would you let him die like fodder?"

The question seemed to stump the Twi'lek, for he tilted his head as though confused. "In war, all that matters is victory," he explained. "He died so that I could live and defeat you. He served Taldryan well by dying for the cause." He jumped out of the way of another attack. "There is no greater honor."

The Twi'lek switched up his style and bolted forward to attack. When he was within striking distance, Vokun felt it. Something was piercing into his mind. His vision went dark first, followed by his sense of sound and touch. He quickly flipped back, high away from the attack he could only feel was coming.

"I know your type," the Twi'lek's voice suddenly taunted him in the black prison of his own mind. "Strong, powerful... physical. Your strength is impressive, but your mental fortitude is lacking in the extreme."

A blast of Force suddenly threw Vokun across the battlefield. He slammed into the cave walls, but he couldn't experience it like normal. He couldn't feel the pain as he normally would. His mind was being twisted by dark illusions. Illusions were a powerful ability to wield and, with the proper mastery, were almost limitless in their possibilities. But realization flashed through his mind as he pushed himself back to his feet. He couldn't see, hear, taste, touch, or smell.

But he could still *feel*.

Casting outwards with his senses, Vokun let the Force guide him. Rage coiled within him, light a tightly wound spring, but his mind was clear with purpose. He could feel the Twi'lek sprinting towards him, lightsaber held high. The attack came swiftly. A slash that would cut him down the same way he had cut down the other Dark Jedi. Vokun held still until the last moment, and then sidestepped left, out of the path of the blade.

He could sense his opponent's surprise. As the blade swung passed him, Vokun slammed his elbow into the Twi'lek's neck. The sudden attack stunned the Dark Jedi and left him vulnerable. Vokun spun to the side and thrust backwards with both his blades. A grunt of pain sounded behind him and the smell of burnt cloth and flesh suddenly violated his awakening senses. Leaning forward, he pulled the blades out of the Dark Jedi's chest and spun with a roundhouse kick, sending the Twi'lek flying into a formation of stalagmites.

His chest was heaving and his eyes shone beneath his mask with exhilaration. He had tracked down and killed two Brotherhood members. He had completed the first objective his master had set out for him. His blades disappeared with a whooshing sound just as a soft beep sounded from his belt

"Master," Vokun muttered, trying to catch his breath. His new orders had arrived.

# Maxyn

The dark blue marble of Dromund Kaas filled the shuttle's viewport, spinning majestically as if it remained untouched from the ravages of war. But she knew otherwise. Despite the seemingly tranquil sight, she could almost feel the pitched battles as the One Sith and Brotherhood fought over the contested Sith World, like children fighting over a prized toy.

Her pilot, a surly man of few words and frequent scowls, was transmitting security codes to a fleet of ships—Taldryan ships—to gain access to the planet's surface. They had arrived in the Dromund system to find a small blockade of cruisers in their path, but the pilot merely grunted as if he had been expecting them.

The flight from Antei had been swift and conflict-free. Maxyn had spent over an hour in the refresher, washing away the filth from her body over and over. Unfortunately, the vivid memories were not so easily wiped away. After, she had collapsed in the medical bay as a 21-B medical droid started administering treatment for her wounds. She had quickly passed out. She had slept for hours.

Now, standing behind the pilot as they waited for clearance, she felt the urge for action. She glanced at the man and was again surprised he had had the skill to fly a ship through the natural defenses of the prison. He hardly looked like a crack pilot. If anything, he looked... sleepy and irritated. Like sitting there and piloting the ship was nearly all he could force himself to do.

"Where are you taking us anyways?" Maxyn demanded for the umpteenth time. "Who am I supposed to meet here? How are we going to start a search after nine months?" The pilot gave her a bored look and grunted again. She almost reached over to shake him by the collar, when the comms pinged.

"Shuttle *Arentar*, you're clear to pass the blockade. Sending coordinates for the base camp to you now," a voice crackled through the decrepit speakers.

The pilot didn't acknowledge the words. Instead, he eased the throttle forward and dipped the ship towards the planet's surface. Maxyn sank down in the co-pilot seat in a huff and watched as the viewport filled with the black and blue landscape of Dromund Kaas. Thunder and lightning danced around them, buffeting the small shuttle back and forth. It had been years since she had last been on the ancient Sith throne world, and its raw power and majesty still overwhelmed her.

The ship leveled off a few thousand feet above the ground, practically skimming the surface as it hurtled towards its destination. The monitors were already displaying readings on

life signs and technology picked up by their sensors. Maxyn squinted and could almost make out the makeshift encampment that served as the Taldryan base.

A slight shiver of anticipation shook her as the pilot set them down near a row of other shuttles. They could both see men and women moving frantically on the ground. Soldiers, Dark Jedi, and all the other necessary personnel to conduct a war, flittered back and forth at their unknown tasks. The shuttle touched down with a soft thud and Maxyn jumped to her feet, eager to breathe some fresh air.

Before she could reach the opening hatch, men burst into the shuttle with blasters drawn.

"No sudden movements," a crisp voice ordered, blaster trained somewhere in the middle of Maxyn's chest. She frowned at the men, her hands itching to drop to the lightsaber she no longer carried.

"We have orders to take you in."

"Why?" Maxyn demanded. If they had allowed them to land, why would they pull something like this now?

"This shuttle belongs to the Dark Council," the man, obviously the soldier in charge, explained. "But you were broadcasting a Taldryan code. That doesn't sit well with our commanders."

Soldiers swept around her, an armed escort, and forced Maxyn to disembark. She cast an angry glance back at the pilot, but he had been ignored. It seemed he was fast asleep, and the soldiers didn't consider him a threat.

"We don't have time for this," Maxyn shouted. "I was sent by Benevolent." She tripped as one of the soldiers pushed her forward. "I need to speak to Jac Cotelin!"

The soldiers ignored her, but her words drew the attention of the Dark Jedi. Suspicion clouded their faces as they took in her appearance and felt her Force-aptitude. A large Pantoran stepped forward, separating the crowd with his massive, blue bulk. The others stepped back respectively, signaling to her that he was the one in charge here. The small group waited on his orders, blasters still trained at Maxyn's back.

"Very well," the man nodded. His eyes shown with understanding... He was not confused like the others. He knew why she was here. "We'll take you to him."



Accompanied by a young warrior that served as an escort/guard, Maxyn was traveling to the frontlines on a 74-Z speeder bike. The pair of bikes zipped across the jungle landscape at a

breakneck pace. From the knowledge she had gained from Shadow's memories, she knew Jac Cotelin was a powerful master in the Force. One of the Brotherhood's few actively serving Grand Masters—and a constant thorn to the One Sith's plans.

Despite her constant fear of a sudden attack, the trip to the forward command center was short and uneventful. The same couldn't be said for the battlefield. The pair pulled short of the camp as several mortar shells impacted upon the defenses the Taldryan Jedi had constructed. Voices screamed and blasters screeched as the One Sith and Brotherhood forces crashed together.

Maxyn swung her legs off the speeder and hit the ground running. Her guard drew his weapon and charged forward, leaving her to fend for herself and join the fray. The entire area was in chaos as the Sith, Dark Jedi, and Mandalorians fought for control in the carcass that had once been Kaas City, capital of Dromund Kaas. In the distance, like a backdrop to the violence, the fallen spires of the Imperial Citadel reflected the bolts of lightning that flickered across the sky.

Weaponless and still too weak for battle, Maxyn dashed through the warzone as carefully as she could, her serpentine path taking her from cover to cover. She needed to find Cotelin. It seemed like an impossible task in the legions of men and women she had seen fighting. She wasn't even sure he was here. Until she felt it.

Felt him.

Drawn by the overwhelming sense of power, Maxyn turned from the debris she had kneeled behind and found herself watching a lone figure standing only a dozen yards away. Before him an entire squadron of Mandalorian commandoes rushed with their weapons blazing.. He stood motionless as the warriors advanced, looking regal in his black and gold tunic. Blaster bolts seemed to disappear before they hit him. Missiles were sent careening off course and flamethrowers were sucked into whirlwinds of invisible power. The man seemed untouchable.

Maxyn watched, spellbound, as he raised his two hands to the sky, the hilts of twin lightsabers radiant in the eerie light of Dromund Kaas. Before him, a terrible wave seemed to rush across the battle field, the squad of Mandalorians heading towards him were lifted up into the air, as if the area around them had been stripped of gravity.

Panic seemed to take hold of the mercenaries as they reached their apex, dozens of feet in the sky. They froze there for only a moment, when the man's hands swung down with haunting finality. After a brief, horrible pause, gravity seemingly returned, but exponentially stronger. The squadron of commandoes brutally smashed into the earth, their vaunted armor crushed under the force of the man's power.

The display was astounding, but it appeared to have taken its toll. Or maybe the entire war has been taking its toll. The figure sagged, his shoulders drooping as if exhausted or disgusted with himself. No other enemies appeared willing to take him on, though.

Suddenly, the man stiffened and turned his piercing gaze on Maxyn, eyes narrowing dangerously. Before she could react, he leapt across the distance between them. A shockingly display for his advanced years, and grabbed her by the throat with the Force. Maxyn gasped as she was raised off her feet, fighting off the pain and encroaching blackness as the former Grand Master glared at her. His brown eyes crackled with power and rage.

"Why are you here, Sith?" his voice boomed.

"I need... help," Maxyn managed to gasp, but everything faded to black.



She woke with a start. Maxyn lay on a small bed in what appeared to be a rather large field tent. Her mind was sluggish, but the memories of her last few days returned in a vivid flash. Her hand went to her throat and she winced at the bruised flesh. Her eyes flashed around trying to figure out where she was or how she got there. The room she was in was obviously not a medical station—there weren't any wounded—but the sounds of the battle raging outside were muted, as if separated by an impenetrable barrier.

Then her eyes turned towards the darkened corner of the tent. A lone man stood there, his eyes gazing at her, as if measuring how many more seconds she had to live. The Grand Master looked angry, and his rage seeped into the Force like an unstoppable geyser. He didn't even bother to shield his emotions from her.

"So," he finally spoke. "What brings a Sith Lady to see me?"

"I'm... no longer... Sith," Maxyn managed to croak, each syllable a chore to get through her damaged throat.

A single eyebrow arched at this response and Maxyn forced herself to take a slow, deep breath. She exhaled slowly and began telling the Grand Master all that had occurred between herself and Shadow Taldrya on the frozen world of Rhelg. He never said a word; never moved a muscle. He remained standing as he was, his anger not abating in the least.

Finally, Maxyn finished her tale and locked eyes with Cotelin. "He handed me over to that man. Pravus," she uttered his name like a curse. "Shadow believed I would be safe. That is what I saw from him... but it didn't turn out that way." Her mind flashed to the past nine months. Nine long months of having her mind shredded and her pride ripped from her. "He was given another mission and disappeared. And that was the last I heard from him.

"I was taken to Antei and... interrogated." She didn't go into details and Cotelin didn't ask.

"And?" he spoke. He shrugged off her capture and subsequent torture as if it were nothing. Perhaps to him, it was. "So why are you here now?"

"He... Shadow's in trouble. For the past few weeks I've been plagued with a vision. A vision of him being slain by a mystery assailant and falling to darkness." Her bright, blue eyes burned with determination. "Benevolent believed I could help save him. I have to save him."

Silence fell between them as Maxyn awaited the Grand Master's decision. In her current state, she wouldn't even be able to put up a fight if he were to decide she was no longer necessary. At the very least, she took some small measure of comfort knowing, given the emotions fluctuating from the man that at least she would not be returned to Antei.

Whatever he was thinking, she could probably guess. He wouldn't understand her desire to help. She could barely understand it. But something had happened to her on that snowy mountain. The time spent on Antei only heightened that feeling... She didn't belong with the One Sith. She didn't belong anywhere anymore.

"What's wrong?"

Pain seemed to flicker across Cotelin's face. Or maybe it was grief. Whatever it was vanished so quickly she didn't understand what had happened. Instead, anger, white-hot rage burst from the Grand Master and caused her to shrink back. The fact that not a trace of it showed on his face was more unnerving than if he had rushed to attack her again.

"Shadow will have to wait," Cotelin spoke through gritted teeth.. His voice was tight, carefully controlled. But she sensed the façade was breaking.

He turned to stalk out of the tent, but Maxyn jumped from the bed and grabbed his sleeve. Instantly, her mind flashed on his most recent memories. She saw killing. The brutal slaying of two Equite—the old guard of Taldryan. He had sensed their deaths from across the planet.

The mental intrusion was detected by the Grand Master and he slammed her out of his mind. Maxyn reeled back in shock. No one had ever forcibly pushed her away from the visions of her psychometry. It was clear he knew what she had glimpsed in that moment of contact, but he was rushing out of the tent.

"But what about Shadow," Maxyn demanded, hurrying after him.

"We never abandon our own," Jac told her. "But there is a monster killing members of my family. Shadow will have to wait."

# Vokun

The body of the nameless Dark Jedi fell from Vokun's grasp as he dropped it to the ground. Around him fires burned in the ruins of the Dark Temple. The stone floors were littered with bodies. Sith. Jedi. He had slain them all. The reek of smoke and blood was thick, almost like a drug that fueled him with strength.

Each fight had been quick, but he had taken great pleasure in the kills. Each warrior that succumbed to his blade would bring his master even greater satisfaction. The teams sent to investigate the temple were wiped out. Whatever secrets the temple held were being consumed by flames. Vokun didn't care. He wasn't capable of caring.

As he stood in the pitch black of the Dromund Kaas night, Vokun sheathed his lightsabers and sank to the ground. His mission complete, he would wait to receive new orders from his master. It would only be a matter of time before he was sent to a new location to end the Brotherhood forces seeking to rob the One Sith of their birthright.

After a while of meditation, Vokun cocked his head, as if listening to the sound of the wind playing through the trees. He felt great power coming towards him, power that could possibly rival even his master's. Finally, he understood why his master had not contacted him. His fight in the temple was unfinished. Soon, he would face a great opponent and strike a powerful blow for the cause.

Vokun rose to his feet, a grim specter looming over the fallen. He turned and drew his lightsabers. The crimson blades flashed slowly into existence, eager the flesh they were about to taste. A solitary figure strode into the lights of the fires. His face was grim, but tired. Waves of rage rippled through the Force, almost visibly. Such was the power of the man standing before him.

Neither of them moved from their positions. Vokun waited for the customary opening remarks. The Dark Jedi had been very prone to speeches before they attacked. Maybe the man would offer some bravado—or some sort of vicious threat. After the useless exchange of words they would get to the good part.

He was pleasantly surprised. The Dark Jedi said nothing as he launched an attack. Gouts of lightning leapt from his fingertips, arcing across the distance at Vokun's chest. Vokun kicked off the ground and nimbly dodged the attack. The blast went wide and slammed into a pillar of stone, causing it to explode into dust.

Not wasting a moment, Vokun rushed forward. His burst of speed closed the gap between him and his opponent. The Dark Jedi activated twin golden blades and deflected Vokun's low

slash, and launched a series of attacks. Vokun parried each blow with his offhand, and spun out of reach.

A clout of invisible force smashed into him and threw him backwards through the air. Vokun willed himself into a mid-air spin and landed in a crouch, sliding a good dozen feet from the strength of the attack. Shaking it off, he sprinted at his opponent. More goutts of lightning hurtled towards. Vokun ducked under the first then spun his lightsabers to deflect another. Making use of his forward momentum, he launched himself into a leap, using the Force to push him the rest of the distance to the Dark Jedi.

He flew towards his opponent with a powerful, overhead slash. The Dark Jedi crossed his golden blades to block, holding Vokun suspended in the air for a second. The Dark Jedi kicked out, catching Vokun in the stomach. He coughed as he hit the ground, laughing as the pain fueled him. He blinked out of sight in an instant, faster than his opponent could track, re-appearing from behind. Vokun lunged with his crimson blades, thrusting for the heart.

But the Dark Jedi must have foreseen the attack. He had already jumped high into the air with an elegant flip. Unrelenting, Vokun threw his offhand lightsaber. The Dark Jedi parried it in midair and sent it flying off into the darkness. Vokun cursed and lashed out with the Force just as the Jedi landed and attacked in kind.

The power of the two blasts hit at the same time, blowing the two back. The Dark Jedi sailed out of the light, while Vokun flew directly towards a pillar. He barely managed to correct his posture, landing horizontally with his feet pressed to the stone. He kicked himself off and rolled across the floor. Jumping back to his feet, he rushed the Dark Jedi who had already returned to the fight. Holding his remaining lightsaber in both hands, Vokun slammed the blade at his opponent's chest.

A heavy fragment of stone appeared in his path to absorb the attack. His crimson blade sunk a foot deep into the stone, holding him immobile. Vokun flexed his muscles against the mental will of the Dark Jedi who was holding the stone aloft with telekinesis. He pushed against the power, forcibly taking small steps forward, while his blade melted through the barrier.

Before he could reach his opponent, the Dark Jedi flicked his wrist and sent Vokun flying backwards. Vokun quickly deactivated his blade and deflected the stone with the Force before it crashed into him. He barely managed to avoid the blow, taking a hit on the left shoulder.

The Dark Jedi moved in while he was unbalanced, but Vokun blocked a slash. Their lightsabers sparked as they slammed together again and again, blows that shook them both. His opponent crossed his golden blades and slammed them down. Vokun intercepted them, and the three blades locked together with crackling sparks.

Vokun saw the finely controlled rage etched in the man's sharp features. An almost maniacal anger had taken control of the man. Vokun was slowly pushing back against the Dark Jedi's strength, but then lightning exploded in his face, sending him staggering back in pain.

Free of the lock, the Dark Jedi sent Vokun flying with another burst of force that couldn't be seen. The overwhelming power smashed into Vokun and sent him flying. His body crashed into the remnants of a stone wall and collapsed. But the Dark Jedi wasn't finished. He raised both hands forward and sent another blast of lightning. Dark energy caressed Vokun's skin as he screamed in pain. Instead of abating, the power increased, searing his every nerve.

The cacophony suddenly stopped, but the Dark Jedi wasn't done. Raising a clenched fist, Vokun flew high into the air, only to be slammed painfully back into the stone floor. Bones snapped as he hit, wrenching a howling roar of anger from him. He was lifted again. And again he was slammed pitifully into the ground. Over. And over. And over. The murderous rage of the Dark Jedi would not be satisfied by any less than his complete destruction.

# Maxyn

The masked man was defeated. Sprawled across the ground. His body was broken, but he was still alive. He continued to cling desperately to life. Cotelin picked his way across the temple floor, a single golden lightsaber still ignited. Maxyn emerged from the darkness at the edge of the fight, taking slow steps towards the Grand Master. Her eyes darted towards the Sith's fallen lightsaber. With a single touch she could learn so much about the One Sith during the nine months she was gone. She hoped it would contain some answers to help her on her quest.

Her fingers gingerly touched the cool metal and the visions hit her. She could see the man, Vokun, as he killed the Taldryan Jedi, reveling in their deaths. She saw him on Korriban, slaying his rival apprentice and learned of his master—Silas. She knew of Krayt's executioner, but had never crossed paths with him. Few ever did. He was nothing more than a killer and the others stayed clear of him.

Then she saw more. The months of training and isolation. Months spent enduring pain to increase his endurance and power—to drive him mad. These were not the teachings the One Sith embraced. They were... too cruel, even for the Sith. Finally the images started to flicker more slowly. Gaps began to appear along with stretches of darkness.

"No," she whispered in disbelief.

She was witnessing her vision again. But it was no longer a jumbled mess of fragmented images. Instead, it was a crystal-clear recollection of the desperate struggle between Shadow Taldrya and the unknown Sith. This Sith... The one who had dragged him forever into darkness. The one that had killed him.

Cotelin was standing over the body now. His breathing came in ragged pulls as anger pounded in his head. Maxyn knew. Knew that the One Sith had killed so many of his allies... his friends. But this one—*this one*—had killed members of his family. She stood there, frozen, as he swung the blade and raised it above his head. She knew what was about to happen. He was going to avenge their murder, as if his death would be able to offer them some measure of peace.

"Nooooooooooooooooo," Maxyn screamed again. She flew instantly across the ground and threw herself over Vokun's body. Cotelin froze, confused by her sudden actions, but she was screaming at him. Screaming impossible words.

"You can't kill him. He's—." The black mask was torn off and hurled to the ground revealing the pale, bruised face they both knew so well.

Shadow Taldrya.

## Epilogue

The silence was deafening. Jac Cotelin stood in a dark, windowless room, appearing both mentally and physically exhausted. The features of his face were pulled tight, betraying his sixty-plus years now more than ever before. Everything... everything had taken its toll on the man. Behind him, Maxyn sat quietly next to a small bed.

"Will he ever... be the same?"

Cotelin drew a sharp breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. "He won't be the same. He can't be," he shook his head. "Shadow Taldrya was killed in battle against the One Sith. He died on Rhelg, fighting for our cause."

A slow shudder ran through Maxyn at the finality of those words. It was the only way to protect his memory, but it still made her feel ill. She was still unable to accept all that had happened. No one would have been able to accept the current situation. Even the Grand Master, for all his power and wisdom, was suffering. She could feel it even as she kept her eyes glued downwards.

The dark, roguish features that the man on the bed had once possessed were no more. In their place was a gaunt, harsh face: all sharp angles and a long, hooked nose. Even the eyes were a different shade, a more muted, paler brown. He was shorter and carried less weight. Muscles gained from arduous training were slimmer, but more defined.

"It was the only way to allow him to live."

*Mask.* An alchemical technique of the Sith that could completely alter the physical form of a being, reshaping physical appearance at will. It could even alter the body down to the molecular level. It was an application of alchemy that could permanently, and flawlessly, alter the appearance of a person. Even his closest friends and allies would have no idea who he really was. No one would.

"And what happens now?" Maxyn asked. Despair wracked her voice.

"For now, he will remain here. In time, once this crusade has settled, I will bring him to Taldryan. I'll have to introduce him as my apprentice."

She understood the reason for that. It would be difficult to explain the sudden appearance of a Dark Jedi with his power joining the Brotherhood so late in life. For the Grand Master to play a role in this to such an extent, going so far as to create a fictional, secret apprentice... it was astounding to Maxyn. Even having delved deeply into Shadow's memories, she could not understand the bonds of loyalty that bound the Taldrya together.

The One Sith had wrought havoc on his mind, destroying nearly all of what he once was. Nine months of brutal torture, mind manipulation, and conditioning had robbed him of who he was. The only option, the only way to keep him alive now, was to erase his mind completely and reprogram him with a new identity. One that would have no recollection of the atrocities he had committed as Vokun. It was both a mercy and a cruelty.

Cotelin finally turned around and faced the still form of the man who had once been Shadow Taldrya—a friend. A brother. He scanned the foreign features that had once been so well known to him, but had been remolded by his own hand. He quickly turned away.

"Though I've done what I can for him," Cotelin continued his voice rough. "His mental condition remains unknown. For the time being, I must keep him," his voice trailed away for a moment. "Close. Somewhere that I can keep watch over him in case..."

Maxyn's grip tightened on Shadow's hand. "In case... what?"

The silence lengthened ominously. But she knew what the Grand Master would say without having to hear it. Instead of answering, he swept out of the room leaving the two of them alone. She realized that so much had changed in the last nine months. Everything had changed. But, for the time being, she had a place where she was needed. A place to belong.

And when she could... she would help him return.

**The End**

**Shadow Taldrya  
House Taldryan**

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