Sphere of Influence: Promotion Time

*“Failure By Design”*

By Braecen Kaeth (4520)

**Lethra City, Cadinth**

**The Light Rail, Route 3**

The sky was awash in tones of amber and violet as the sun set on Lethra City. Swirls of sunlight painting the evening sky like a brush to canvas interrupted only by the bold, rigid lines of the city skyline. Illuminated in harsh neon lights, the train bolted across the backdrop of dark buildings toward the heart of the city. Once known as the mono-rail, the population had adopted the slang name of Light Rail due to the abrasive colors of the externally mounted lights; each route dripping in a different, excessive color. It remained the most efficient mode of transportation to move people from one end of the metropolis to the other. It was rumored that Hyperdyne even ran freighter trains along the same tracks to move supplies and finished product from the warehouse districts to the export spaceports.

 The Krath Adept sat aboard the train – a bullet zipping down the line – with his ice, blue eyes pinned on the person before him. He held his emotions in check, a façade of calm presented to the Sith before him. Secretly, Braecen Kaeth hid the rising adrenaline surging through his body. His skin was alight with anticipation and the hair on his arms raised from the rush; concealed by the dark folds of cloth that adorned him. A grin crept onto his face as he spoke, *“As an Elder, I only want to see what is best for Clan Plagueis.”* The Sith nodded, his expression guarded. To Braecen Kaeth, an Elder of the Clan, he was an open book*. “Ajunta Pall can have this victory, young Sith. You are better equipped for a smash and dash operation.”*

 Braecen withdrew a datapad from within the folds of his robes. His pale, ivory skin appeared to be drawn taunt over his bones. The Sith instinctively withdrew his own hand, a mix of surprise and disgust flowing through the Force. The Adept wickedly grinned. The power of the Dark Side of the Force was not without a price. One he had eagerly paid when given the choice. *One I would eagerly pay again,* he thought.

 “This has all the blueprints, security protocols, and patrol routes?” The Sith asked, his brow knitted with concentration. “If this information proves to be false…” his voice trailing off, leaving the threat to linger, unsung.

**Hyperdine Technologies**

**Personal Quarters of Lorainne Korn**

Claxons blared in the dead of night. Lorainne awoke startled by the suddenness of the alarms, flashing lights, and footsteps outside her residence. She lived on campus to better monitor the security and business of Hyperdine. And to keep a watchful eye on Corvin Zexx.

 Corvin had proven himself a capable entrepreneur and a savvy businessman; however, he had come into the industry at a very early age. It was difficult for Korn to separate her protective, motherly nature of Zexx and Hyperdine – both were her children. She had ruthlessly cut through the administration to rise to her station within Hyperdine. Even the design of the main campus had been a result of the insistence and instruction provided by the older woman. She had become overly cautious with age. Her attention to detail, and Zexx’s integration of advanced technology, creating redundancies that laid over one another to insulate the corporation from threats within and from without. The result was a building that stood out, and above, all others in the downtown corporate sector.

 Lorainne pulled herself out of bed, hastily rushing towards the bank of monitors in the room adjacent. *Damn these rebels*, she thought. It was the third such intrusion on their security within the past week. *“Status report,”* she barked into a com-link, *“I want these bastards caught!”*

 Reports began to flow through her earpiece while information flashed onto the monitor banks before her. Instinctively, her hands flew over the controls as she rotated cameras and played back feed from the attack. She cursed through her teeth. *Blank, blank, blank,* she cursed. The video, on playback, appeared fine before suddenly turning to static then reverting back to perfect clarity. *This cannot be happening,* her teeth grated, *this surveillance system is the best – BEST – money can buy.*

 Despite several attempts, though, the assailants had not breached the inner circle of Hyperdine defenses. There were no records of the inner sanctum except the copies possessed by Zexx and Korn. Lorainne was concerned, though. Hyperdyne’s enemy had easily bypassed the outermost ring of security. Shadows in the night, unseen and unheard in their assault. Their initial insertion against the campus had driven into the building like a stake into a vampire’s heart. It had granted them access to the vaults just below the campus housing. Lorainne shuddered at the realization her enemies had been so close on their initial attempt.

 Subsequent attempts had stalled further and further out. *As if two separate entities were attacking our company*, she silently pondered. The thought lingered for a moment before she dismissed it, *Occam’s Razor: the simplest answer is often the best answer.* It would be foolish to think two competing interests were vying for the inner workings of Hyperdyne. Audibly, she exhaled her frustrations and weariness as she rubbed her eyes.

 Only once she had moved her hands from her eyes down her face did she notice the flashing com-link. It flashed twice red, once blue to indicate it had received a burst transmission, but only a recording; not live feed. She pushed the message into the mainframe and began a search on the origin of the communique. It beeped a negative tone indicating it was untraceable. Suspicious, she brought the recording up and began to play it back. Her eyebrows raised as it began to play before her gaze turned stern and thoughtful.

**West Side, Lethra City**

**Plagueis Staging Point**

The Dread Lord was displeased and his Wrath had been unleashed. The Proconsul dutifully strode up and down the ranks of collected Plagueis Disciples. He looked from face to face, measuring the fear he felt rushing to the top through the Force. The fear gave him strength; strength gave him power; power allowed him to manipulate both Houses against one another.

 The Journeymen had been dismissed and the Elders had been corralled in the rear of the room. The eager Equites and House Leaders looked onward, expectant. The Pontifex spoke plainly to his Quaestors, *“Failure is not acceptable. Nor is it tolerated.”* He paused to compose himself and inflect his voice through the Force, *“You, Sons and Daughters of Plagueis, are held to the highest standard.”*

 *“I assure you, My Lord,”* Teylas defiantly countered the authority of the Proconsul, *“that our assault failed due to the weakness and incompetence of House Karness Muur.”* His eyes drifting to the back of the room and falling on the Krath Adept Kaeth. *“Should others take as much pride in their work as they have in their boasts, there would have been no delay, Wrath Lord.”* The Wing of Dread smirked. He had, in one stroke, cast doubt on his rival House and incompetence onto the Elder. Smugly, he straightened his attire and turned to receive the blessing of Koth.

 The Sith withered under the glare of the Proconsul. The Krath Pontifex was in no mood for petty squabbles at this time. He was on a deadline to deliver to the Dread Lord. *That is my utmost priority,* he thought, *should I find myself ahead of schedule… then, only then… can I allow such pettiness.* Koth turned his withering gaze upon Kz’set, *“And these other raids that Teek has informed me of?”* He felt confusion flood through the Quaestor of Karness Muur.

 The Verpine bobbed his head, his antennae wiggling back and forth, as he considered his response*. “This one would not be so clumsy, Proconsul. It is not the way of Our House to be so bold or blatant.”* He panned his head towards his rival Quaestor, *“Subtlety, deception, misdirection. These are the things we value. We are not mere tools; not every problem a nail, not every solution a hammer.”*

 *“Clearly, the blunt approach has not worked,”* the Pontifex cooed. *“I would strongly recommend that someone take charge of the situation and bring glory unto Plagueis.”* The Proconsul turned on his heel and marched towards his private chambers. The Houses had been dismissed.

**Lethra City**

**Circle Center**

At the heart of the city, the natives of Cadinth had erected a war memorial to commemorate the fallen during their brief Civil War. The spire reached nearly two hundred feet into the sky with a circular road about it. Looming over this symbolic icon were the Corporate Campuses of major corporations. A high reaching building that stood like an isosceles triangle was coated In white marble; radiant in the sunlight, elegant in the moonlight. It’s perfect surface broken only by the many rows of transparasteel that etched through the building to emit sunlight.

 Lorainne noted that no moon appeared in tonight’s sky. She was unsure if the creeping darkness was some unnatural phenomena or her paranoia. The anonymous communique had plainly stated that information about Hyperdyne’s attacker could be had… for a price. *Extortion,* she laughed, *the oldest blackmail in the book. These damn hackers had better have good intel.* She rued to pay for information, but the attackers had been ghosts. Her own security detail unable to track them beyond their original point of insertion.

 A double click of a com-link notified her that forward security elements had established a perimeter around the meeting point. Normally, she would not take meetings outside of the established security protocols of the Hyperdyne Headquarters. To discover the bastards whom had wounded her company’s self-confidence thrice, she would gladly travel to Nar Shadda and trust a Hutt with her life. Her utmost goal was to end this siege and protect her company. *And Zexx.*

 Another click notified her that her armored transport would be arriving within thirty seconds. As the vehicle drew to a halt, she heard doors open and the tell-tale shuffle of boots on the ground as security created a perimeter. Her own door opened and the transparent skylight became opaque, forcing her line of sight out of the door. She squinted attempting to discern anything in the dark, but failed miserably. Resigned, she marshalled herself out of the vehicle and began to march toward the assigned meeting point.

 *“I said to come alone,”* a voice emerged from behind a minute statue. *“This is not what we had agreed upon. It is bad business.”*

 *“This whole ordeal is bad for business,”* the Senior Vice President quipped. *“I do not take my personal security lightly, nor do I take threats to Hyperdyne any less severe.”* She stiffened her back, raising her posture along with her tone. She would not be padding the pockets of a two-bit slicer tonight beyond what was fair.

 Blackness crept further in on the small congregation at Lorainne’s heels. The inky dark obscuring sight and causing the outer perimeter to raise alarm as their firing solutions evaporated. Chatter over the com-link indicated that soldiers were repositioning to reacquire firing lanes. A woman of considerable life experience, she felt the tension of the men and women behind her; their breathing coming quicker, their steps landing harder, and safeties being toggled off.

 *“I have your ten thousand Republic credits.”* She opened a case that had been in her left hand. The lid flipped over and the cred chips were nestled tightly into their home positions.

 “More.” Came the hidden voice once again.

 “What more could you want?” Outrage flared into the tone of the Senior Vice President. Her ire beginning to eclipse her paranoia of the situation. “This is far above what I am willing to pay!” she barked. “What more could you ask from me?”

 “Your life.” Whispered the Verpine as he revealed himself to Lorainne. A firefight broke out behind the Hyperdyne Executive. Crimson and emerald bolts blasting into the darkness from both the boots on the ground and snipers above. Their blasts tearing through the quiet of the night. Crying out in alarm, Lorainne discarded the case and began to run towards her personal transport. If she could just make it to the vehicle, she could retreat to the confines of the Corporate Campus. *Foolish,* she cursed, *so damn foolish!*

A dozen hooded figures emerged from the darkness. *Snap-hiss.* A white pillar of light emerged from the pitch black. A tumult of cracks followed as fiery blades of multiple colors erupted in the night. The blades whipped around Lorainne as she made a beeline for the vehicle.

 The silence halted her before the door. The quiet was deafening in the moment. The door clicked open before her. Shock mixed with recognition as the Verpine emerged from the vehicle. A lightsaber held before him with its ominous tone – *vvvmmm -* and threat of lethality.

 *“Why?”* she cried out before the blade removed her head. Hooded figures began ebb into the darkness cast out by the Force; their mission complete and glory for their House secured. The Quaestor deactivated his lightsaber and placed it back onto his belt. His antennae, then his head, turned as Braecen Kaeth came to stand beside him.

 *“Good work with the snipers,”* Kz’set gave the compliment grudgingly. He had, for so long, existed as the sole bread winner of fame and glory within the House. Desperately, he wanted assistance, but on his terms.

 *“It was a well-conceived plan, Quaestor.”* Braecen reflected on their initial meeting several days prior. *“I was unsure that the Agent of Ajunta Pall would bite on the initial offering.”*

 *“Teylas is a blunt instrument. Your work with the follow-up assaults drew the ire of the Consul onto Ajunta Pall. Now, once more, follow my lead, Adept.”*