**I**
======

*District Six.*

A carrion stench lingered on the wind, pushing at his wrinkles and furrows. It threatened to worm its way into his pores, saturating his skin. It wanted to taint his anima and transform him into one of *them* -

Poor. Disheveled. Weak. *Unworthy*.

The wretched souls eking out an existence here were the sycophants and grime-lords of the slums. They were pretenders to power, sniveling vassals and levers for the Clan’s benefit. He would not so much as grant them the opportunity to kneel .

Not today.

Refuse circled dilapidated lampposts like nervous tumbleweeds, and he yearned to escape the yoke of such dross. He heard the familiar hum and watched his communicator blink to life. Inspecting the screen, he frowned, dropping the weight of his massive boot on the accelerator.

His great-cloak cracked and whorled, its length twisted by an ominous gale which penetrated the colorless landscape. As the Starhawk carried Thanadd Mawgath out of District VI, he was relieved.

====== **II
======**“…end disk log 6732-B.”

Haal Galniss was pleased. The element was even stronger than they anticipated. He knew there was no end to what they could do with it!

Of course, protecting such proprietary information was critical to the program’s success. Learning to encrypt the holodisks was a work in progress, but that was a risk they would have to take. This needed to be documented. All would know what he had done – eventually.

He smiled. The crow’s feet which emphasized his sunken eyes seemed to stretch the corners of his mouth. His grin remained as the laboratory doors – the portals his holy sanctum – hissed to consciousness.

The person who entered was secretly thankful for the old man’s apparent mood. Hathral Kalniss was known as a demanding and particular individual, and he had certainly not made the task of organizing and reinforcing the archive an easy one.

“You know what to do,” Galniss advised the young man, his combed hair as white and immaculate as the room surrounding the pair.

“Yes, of course. I’ll classify it right away.”

Blue eyes shined with an eager purity, one which Haal appreciated. The boy reminded him of himself, once upon a time.

“Thank you, son,” he replied, meeting him on the shoulder with a firm, comforting hand. This kindness was the one moment of joy he had allowed any of the new converts. Such benevolence was not distributed carelessly; the initiates needed to prove themselves worthy.

Much trust had been placed in this one. So far, he had risen to the task.

The boy tucked the holodisk into his tunic, the white collar grasping the nape of his neck. The pocket was discreet, as if it had been sewn in later, inserted not far from where his sidearm sat on his hip. He turned from his mentor with a nod, smiling as he exited the sacred room.

Haal sighed, worried for the boy. His faith would soon be tested.

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**III**
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**KRAK!**

The smashing of his open palm against Kadne’s jaw forced him to recoil a moment, wringing his hand from the impact. It stung.

He looked upon the helpless woman with contempt; she had forced him to such measures. It was too late to go back. They couldn’t. Not now, when they were so close!

Kadne’s head hung nearly into her lap, now, her legs tucked beneath her haunches. She breathed slowly and desperately, spittle and blood trickling from a now swollen bottom lip.

“Do you know *now*, child?” he growled, impatiently. He squeezed his hand into a fist, forging it into an anvil. Kadne was a keen observer; she watched his fingers curl, knowing what would come next.

Recovering from the last blow, somehow finding equilibrium, Kadne smiled. She spat, sucking in through her teeth and swallowing hard. Her tongue cleared mucus and debris from her throat.

The large man – the Anvil – simply stared.

“Okay, okay, I…”

The Anvil stirred with excitement.

“…wait, no – I still have no idea!”

Kadne grinned even wider, pleased to let him down. “*When I get out of these…”* she promised, silently.

“PETULANT WOMAN!”

Rage coursed through the Anvil’s massive frame, cumbersome muscle now being coordinated into what promised to be a crushing blow. Watching him swing his gigantic arm back at the shoulder, Kadne squeezed her eyes, waiting for blackness. It came with the territory.

“YEEaaraghACK!”

Screams of final agony echoed somewhere nearby, snapping both Kadne and her captor out of the moment. Both listened with widened eyes, jolted to life by the horrific wail and what seemed like earth-shattering impacts. Blaster fire called out in urgency, a sonata of distress composed by some unlucky wretch.

….and then silence.

The Anvil disappeared from Kadne’s view, but she heard his heels clicking against the concrete beneath them. They stopped not far from where she knelt. Only her labored breathing persisted. Carefully, nervously, Kadne turned her gaze over her left shoulder. A few feet away, the Anvil stood quietly.

His hands were open.

Eternity lingered in the passing moments, before what must have been an explosion sent Kadne reeling. Thrown forward, she braced against the fall, trying her best to absorb the shock. Coughing, she blinked dust out of her eyes, specks of duracrete that seemed to twirl to the tune of her ringing ears.

She pulled her eyelids back in time to see the Anvil tossed, like so much detritus, against what remained of the walls around them. He lay still, lifeless, just inches away, his eyes frozen in surprise. Somewhere, singed flesh still burned a little. She could smell it.

That was when she felt it. Felt *him*. His presence was forceful. Invasive. Choking the room with a cold, baleful puissance.

*Tarenti*.

Kadne’s blood seemed to curdle for just a moment, and she resisted the call of her spine to shiver. The soft thrum of power-driven respiration whispered on the edge of her perception. It built to a lingering tension, finally broken by the deep murmur of a voice modulator.

She didn’t dare turn around.

“What have you done, *Kadne Jax*?”

The words were guttural and deep, as if spoken from some abyssal realm.

“What did they ask of you?”

The question was arcane, but calm. She could feel…*whoever* towered over her struggling to maintain his tranquility, grasping at frayed threads and just barely restraining buried rage.

“I…I haven’t told them anything!”

Kadne rushed to decide whether or not she should panic. Neither Hades nor Scion had exactly inspired confidence in her safety. Her eyes widened.

Silence again.

This time, it was broken by the sibilation of a lightsaber, the hot blade humming in the soot and fog of the demolished room.

Kadne panicked.

“I swear, I didn’t say anything! They kept asking me about somebody I have never heard of…some…”

She stammered, unable to spit the syllables out quickly enough.

“Kard! Jahad Kard!”

The deadly instrument purred, its wielder having raised it for a measured blow.

“NO! I don’t know who it is! I told him that! The man you…you killed him! I never met him! I don’t know!”

This was it, Kadne knew. The end of the line. The Harbingers of Tarentum had always warned her that they could collect her life, like some paltry debt, at any time. They were fickle masters. Cruel. Irascible.

“You’re going to do this over a phantom? Who is he, that he is worth such a price?”

She didn’t plead, didn’t beg any longer. She closed her eyes. Finally, peace would come.

Thanadd Mawgath brought his weapon down with unhurried precision, lining up the perfect strike. It met its mark, and Kadne Jax was now free.

Free of her restraints. The collar and cuffs which bound her now waited at her feet, cauterized and useless. The mechanical voice spoke in somber clicks.

“…he’s *me*. I am Jahad Kard.”

The siren screamed.

=====
**IV**=====

“WE HAVE A BREACH! THIS NOT A DRILL! I REPEAT – NOT A DRILL!”

Jornat squinted, wishing there was some kind of *volume* on the thing. He hated the way they were always *just there*, as if waiting for the perfect moment to break his peace. At least Forebearer Galniss had inserted the comlink personally. Yet another way he could *get under one’s skin*.

Today, he was grateful. “*Thank the Light for small moments of joy.”*
“SECTOR 3-G, CASUALTIES CONFIRMED! ALL NON-ESSENTIAL PERSONNEL MUST EVACUATE IMMEDIATELY!”

The Seekers were so regimented, and that is how he knew they were real. Focused. Enlightenment could be both quantified and discovered, they said. Measured and granted, or found in great moments.

He chose to ignore the mandate. Fingering the disk in his pocket, he began to pick up speed, breaking into a sprint. This would be his great moment – and the Forebearers would be proud. If he didn’t find enlightenment here, they surely would grant it.

**======
V**
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Kadne Jax could not believe what she was hearing – at least, before the siren destroyed any hope that the pain in her temples would not grow.

“An alias,” he explained, adjusting his pauldrons. “We got too close.”

The Dark Jedi’s words were frozen, but fire burned beneath the glassy sheets through which he bore into Kadne’s soul. She felt it, and barely had time to process the monstrous revenant, clad in black armor, which clambered over hewn bricks before her.

A Monster which had saved her life – probably because he was responsible for endangering it.

She nearly lost it a second time, a bolt of searing energy just missing her skull.

“BASTARDS!” she heard her savior call out, leaping out into the plumes of smoke which rolled through the corridor ahead. The lights were much too bright, as if beacons to those in their last moments.

With a familiar poise, Kadne raced out into the blinding hallway, dodging blaster fire and charging to keep pace with her rescue team – which she now realized was more than a lone Knight of Tarentum.

A pair of operatives, clad in black fatigues and adorned with skull motifs, raced down the corridor alongside their *foxtrot uniform*. Clearly veterans, they moved with practiced agility and flawless suppression, pinning a more numerous but clearly inferior enemy for the Dark Jedi to finish them off.

Kadne wondered who was responsible for breaching the room.

Not some mere distressed damsel, she sprung to her feet, gritting her teeth and peering through the uniform lack of color to search for a weapon of her own. She thought nothing of the corpses, hurdling over expiring human beings without a second thought. Her survival instinct had almost completely taken over -

- and then she saw him.

A young man, clutching his blaster, lay prone against the wall. He gasped and gargled, waves of crimson rushing from his mouth. Adrenaline had already begun to wear off, and he was in great pain. He would not live long.

For a moment, Kadne felt pity for him. She remembered herself at his age, the things she survived. Experiences this one would never live to see. It broke her heart.

Just for a moment.

“LET’S GO!” she heard the Tarenti call, his dark eyes sunken far into azure-grey flesh.

She hurried, reaching to grab the young man’s weapon – and realizing it had never made it out of the holster. Popping the button, she gripped the handle with a finger on the guard, unsheathing it from dark brown leather which glistened with thick, dark blood.

He clawed for her with desperate lunge, trembling as he began to lose the battle against unconsciousness. Out of the corner of her eye, Kadne caught the glint of fresh metal, peeking out from where his outstretched hand had been.

A holodisk.

The boy had not yet died as she dug the delicate circle from his tunic. As his eyes began to roll, he saw only light.

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**VI**
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“Sir, we are tracking them now. Team is en route to extraction location.”

The Prince of Yridia nodded, his hands clasped behind his back, sending the man away as quickly as he had come.

======
**VII**
======

Tranh Walq basked in the glow of the chamber, a false ceiling filtering the beams of fluorescents which imitated the sun’s natural illumination.

He had heard the call of the Forebearers. There was only one way out for the intruders. He lamented that he would have to defile his temple with the blood of lost lambs, but it was a burden he would carry.
They had given him the gifts of the Light, and now darkness would recoil.

Time seemed to slow around him as he stood from his pew. He took no pleasure in turning weapons against living creatures, but he had little choice. The skull-bearing strangers were too easy to destroy, a testament to the power of radiant faith. Like quarreling brothers, the two turned their hatred towards one another – and pulled the trigger.

The avatar of blackness, the foretold adversary of enlightenment, soon followed. The foul being bore the countenance of death, a promise to the weak and unfaithful. As an anointed Saint, it was his duty to expel such evil. His calling. His fate.

The girl surprised him. He did not sense wickedness in her.

Perhaps, he thought, he might spare her life.

======
**VIII**======
Kadne Jax watched the troopers fall, cast aside like Hutt goons.

Not good. Ahead, a figure in a simple white tunic waited for something. Was he looking at her?

“Who...the hell is that?”

The black knight – Mawgath, he called himself – barreled past her, stomping through the rows of benches in a center line.

Right for the mystery man.

The lumbering warrior leapt into the air, a baleful howl projected through the cybernetic collar which concealed half his face. His crimson blade crackled as it missed its target, the quiet man rolling through the lightsaber’s path far too easily. He carried no weapon, but hardly seemed disadvantaged, leveling strikes at the wrathful Tarenti.

The pair danced a terrible waltz, far too intimately for Kadne Jax to get a clear shot…

…at either of them.

She wondered if now was her chance to rid herself of Tarentum. Of the terror they inflicted. She swore she saw the man in white look at her. It was jarring.

Suddenly, the tide of the battle seemed to turn. Heavy blows bore down on the Sith, who seemed to withstand each one less and less. She heard him groan, collapsing beneath the weight of *inhuman* attacks. A knee buckled, his posture beginning to buckle.
Kadne’s mind raced. How was this possible? How could this one man perform such feats? She had seen Jedi. Seen Sith. This one was *neither*.

She made her choice.

“Hey!” she cried out, forming a tunnel over her lips with her hands. The battle raged. She tried again.

“HEEEY!”

Thanadd Mawgath, soldier of Tarentum, now knelt. His lightsaber hilt hung loosely in his hand, his hairless skull circling and dropping into his chest. The man in white paused, producing a pair of shivering fists. Just like the Anvil.

Kadne fired.

The bolt froze, held in place by its intended target. The man in white clenched his jaw, swallowing as he shifted his focus to Kadne. She watched him flick the beam over his shoulder, and he stood up tall, looking into her eyes.

It was the moment the Tarenti needed, who thrust his weight from a deep lunge into his opponent’s solar plexus. The temple pews broke like toothpicks as Thanadd Mawgath drove his would-be killer through, one by one. The logical conclusion of such brute force was the collapsing of the altar around the two of them, burying them both in polished stone and broken wood.

It felt like days before Kadne saw the Tarenti pull himself from the wreckage, debris falling from his figure the way fighter vessels broke apart upon Star Destroyers. He was exhausted, hunched over, gasping for breath inside a dented and scarred exoskeleton.

Bolts of white cloth could be spotted between fragments of the cave-in, but nothing else stirred.

Kadne Jax waited for the hulking Dark Jedi to get close. She threw the bloody blaster to the ground, the way surrounded legions might surrender their weapons.

“We’re even.”

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**IX**
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“Bring them in.”

Scion Altera waited patiently as Thanadd Mawgath and Kadne Jax entered the throne room. Approaching his superior, the battered Tarenti took a knee – this time in reverence.

The Prince fixed a stern gaze on the knight of House Mortis, who did not dare meet his liege’s gaze.

“Your team has perished, I presume?”

“Yes, sir,” he admitted, embarrassed.

Scion leaned forward, grasping his finely trimmed goatee.

“Tell me, Knight – who has brought so low the champions of Tarentum?”

Thanadd Mawgath restrained his anger. He seethed, but knew his place. Responsibility was his.

“I…I do not know.”

He chose to remain terse, not wishing to test the Prince’s patience. Excuses, he knew, would not be tolerated.

“Of course you don’t.”

Scion rose from his seat, walking a few paces before stopping to pour a drink. His back was turned to his guests, but they would wait.

He sipped the cocktail, a stiff but satisfying relief. He would not reward the knight’s incompetence with a debriefing. Disappointment and defeat, like other trials, were effective tools. Teachers.

“You are *dismissed*, Knight.”

Thanadd Mawgath lurched as he rose, a massive fist supporting the weight of his frame. He said nothing, but waited for a moment, as if expecting something more.

Whatever it was, it never arrived, and Kadne Jax watched the man who saved her life saunter out of the dark room. She wasn’t sure which was the more broken shell – the man, or his armor.

Scion took another sip.

“…and what of you, Kadne Jax? What have you brought me?”

She countered with her own question.

“How did you know where I was?”

Scion turned back around, his ponytail draped over his shoulder. He smiled, without a care in the world.

“You think we’d let you just *leave*? The chip has been in you for weeks.”

He finished the drink.

“You understand. Now, what have you learned? Are you going to tell me, or do I have to *figure it out myself*?”

Kadne wasn’t sure what the words meant, but she knew it couldn’t be anything good. She pulled the holodisk from her pocket, tossing it to the Prince.

“I already watched it. They’re giving people *Force powers*.”

Outside the throne room, Thanadd Mawgath chuckled to himself. All was going according to plan. He thrust his cloak behind him, retreating from the door with a hurried gait.

Sith Bloodfyre waited.