**“Brutal Beginnings”**

By Braecen Kaeth (4520)

*Great Jedi War XII: Phase 1 Fiction*

*Objective 3 - Extraction*

**Vindicator-class Heavy Cruiser *Invicta II***

**The Dajorra System**

Sergeant Tolliver cursed his squad mate under his breath. He was supposed to be completing his rounds accompanied with Corporal Smith, but the man had not signed into his post for their duty. “Likely drank himself stupid,” he moaned, “again.” His E-11 Blaster Rifle hung loosely before him from the sling wrapped over his shoulder. Tolliver squeezed the weapon in both hands to bring him a measure of familiarity to an unfamiliar situation.

He rounded a corner and closed in on the communications relay. The Sergeant expected to see a pair of sentries stationed at the entrance, but they were suspiciously absent. A skeptical look furrowed his brow and twisted his face into an expression equal parts confusion and concern. He shifted the weapon in his hands and raised it before him. “You are over reacting,” he told himself. As he entered the secure area, he trained the lethal end of the blaster in a sweeping motion as he ‘cleared’ the area.

Security had been dialed up aboard the *Invicta II* with a pending summit between Clan Arcona, Clan Scholae Palatinae, and Clan Tarentum. A previous attempt against the Iron Throne had been perpetuated by Clan Arcona and Clan Tarentum; authorized by a treatise called the Declaration of the Damned. Clan Scholae Palatinae had been extended an invitation due to Braecen Kaeth’s former alliance with Clan Arcona. In death, Atyiru bound together the most unlikely cast of Champions across the Dark Brotherhood.

Extra soldiers had been brought aboard from the Dajorra Defense Force: more patrols, more checkpoints, and more ‘security’. Tolliver laughed at the absurdity of that particular thought. Despite their best efforts, he found himself in a situation that undermined all of their preparations. He raised his left hand to his ear and activated his comlink.

A bored voice responded with a lazy, “Yes, Sergeant?”

“Security breach at the communication relay on Deck C, Bay 22. I have not encountered any stationed guards, Control.”

“Proceed with Corporal Smith and secure the location, Sergeant.” The Control Room operator said nonchalantly.

“Err…” Tolliver hesitated. “I am… uh… a-lone.” He braced himself for the forthcoming reprimand.

“What?!” Control retaliated before he broke into a tirade. Sergeant Tolliver flinched at several choice words aimed at him over the secure comlink. In the background, a solid figure melted from the darkness and solidified into a visible threat. Distracted, though, the Arconan Soldier was unaware of his assailant’s approach until the *Shikari* sent an arrow from her Energy Bow through the center of his chest. Tolliver looked down in confusion at the protrusion. *Odd,* he thought, before he pitched forward to the floor with a solid **thud.**

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The stars twinkled in the forward viewpoint. Jewels beset into the inky velvet of deep space. Regardless of war or strife, they continued to exist in serenity. Unlike the current meeting between three allied-rivals: Arcona, Scholae Palatinae, and Tarentum.

Kordath and Uji – the current and former Proconsul, respectively - presented a unified front as the leadership of Arcona in the wake of Atyiru’s death. Uji had become a rock; both unfeeling and unyielding in his pursuit for revenge. Kordath, for once, was attempting to step into the responsibilities of his office. The Ryn was attempting to lessen the sting of losing of his close friend and Consul.

A pair of too blue eyes drank the entire scene in before him. His former mentee, Uji Tameike, yelling at the top of his lungs at the Tarentum Consul for having no initiative. Bloodfyre yelling back and beginning to inadvertently draw powerful amounts of the Dark Side of the Force into his body. Kordath sensing the danger, but unsure of how to head off the situation before it escalated to a deadly level. The Ryn was now interposing himself between them both. “Gentlemen, stop. Gentlemen, please!” he pleaded to no avail.

“Damnedest t’ing ain’t’it, sparkie?”

Braecen recognized the voice, but had not sensed the Fade’s approach. He owed this particular Fade a life debt for pulling his lifeless body from an enemy stronghold as it collapsed around them. During the campaign known as the ‘Fall of SCEPTER’ the crew of the *Perdition* – a long time enemy of House Galeres – had captured and incapacitated the Quaestor, Braecen Kaeth. It had been a small collection of Mandalorians that had been successful in infiltrating and securing the Elder before the stronghold exploded.

“Just shows, Satsi, that we cannot be trusted to do the right thing,” Braecen said as he pulled himself away from the viewport. He walked several steps before turning back towards the Reaver. “In a world of darkness, when one blows out the only flame of light, we are left with only darkness.” The Adept spread his arms wide and bowed his head before he spun back to the convened parties.

Kordath had finally broken up the fight and nursed a flask in his right hand. Uji stood facing away from the holo-display, obviously upset and disgruntled. Braecen veered in that direction first. While Kordath had invited Braecen, his Consul had sent him as the Clan’s emissary so the Empress could limit her exposure and continue to advance other strategies against the Collective.

“How are you holding up, Uji?”

Tameike grunted what Braecen equivocated as ‘I’m alright.’

“How is everyone else holding up?”

A double grunt. Double confirmation that everyone was ‘hanging in there.’

“Do you have a plan – beyond irritating a Dark Jedi Master to the point he kills you – to rally Arcona behind?” Braecen questioned in a very monotone voice before adding, “Other than getting the Shadow Clan trapped between the Collective and Tarentum, of course.”

*That did it,* Braecen thought as the man turned a pair of red, angry eyes onto him.

“I will *not* let this Clan destroy itself or be destroyed by anyone. We *will*honor Atyiru by doing what we have always done – dominating the Brotherhood as First Clan.” He shrugged off the hand that Braecen had put on his shoulder. “And I do not need a goddamn mentor anymore, Braecen. Stop trying to fill that role in my life.”

The words stung, but Braecen retracted his hand into the folds of his dark clad robes. He bit his tongue and prevented any further escalation for the moment. There were enough issues getting three Clans to work together against a superior foe with unknown motivations and endgame. Instead, Braecen half turned towards the holo-display and beckoned. “Shall we?”

Bloodfyre had begun an earnest discussion about the readiness of his forces and what he could provide from the Clan of Death. He was just beginning to pick up steam when a general warning siren screeched through the comlinks of everyone aboard.

“ATTENTION CREW: SECURITY LEVEL DELTA INITIATED – LOCKDOWN WILL BEGIN IN FIVE MINUTES.”

“What is the meaning of this?” inquired the Tarentum Consul. The aides that had accompanied him aboard began to close ranks around Tarentum’s Patriarch. Despite the intensity of the moment, he remained calm and collected.

“We initiate *Delta* when there is a suspected intruder or saboteur aboard one of our vessels,” Kordath sounded almost bored as he recited protocol. The Ryn turned to both Bloodfyre and Braecen, “Is there anyone missing from your entourages or did you sneak someone else aboard? I swear, Dark Jedi are almost predictable these days.”

Braecen opened his mouth and closed it. He wanted to choose his words with care, “I believe that I am alone and that I am not responsible for any nefarious activity aboard this vessel.”

Uji, Kordath, and Bloodfyre turned with incredulous looks towards the Proconsul of Scholae Palatinae. “Sounds like the honeymoon for the new Consul and Proconsul is over, eh?” Kordath’s words mirrored what the other two were considering silently.

“What happens next?” Bloodfyre was methodically assessing the situation and all of the potential forks in the road as they occurred in real time.

Uji responded offhandedly, “We lockdown the ship and sweep the vessel.” His eyes grew larger with as realization dawned, “And we broadcast the emergency alert that brings other elements of our fleet together around the flagship.”

“Contact!” yelled a nearby Communications Officer. “We are seeing numerous reversions from hyperspace – Quadrijet spacetugs accompanied by modified Strike-class Cruisers and Dreadnaught-class Cruisers!”

Kordath sighed, “Fwec me.”

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Rayze Erinos Arconae sat in the cockpit of his T-70 X-wing as the Collective Forces began to tumble out of hyperspace. He tightened the grip on the stick and pulled it back towards his chest to immediately invert his flight path. His right foot pushed the rudder and swung his ship’s backend around in a maneuver that pointed the nose of the snub fighter directly at the enemy. As the preeminent pilot of the now defunct Void Squadron, he was running Combat Air Patrol for this mission as the leader of Defiant Squadron.

“X-wings into attack position, Defiant.”

“Defiant two, ready for battle.”

“Defiant three…” The rest of the pilots checked-off in order as they came about on his heading and prepared their ships for combat. Starfighters began to spill from the larger capitol ships and create a screen before the smaller frigates and suicide bomber space tugs.

“*Invicta II* this is Defiant Leader, get yourselves out of here!” He wanted the flagship to be as far away from this conflict as possible. The remaining leadership was aboard that vessel. Should they fall, the Clan would be pitched into anarchy and the Shadow Hearts – the Patriarch Arconae – would seize control of the Clan’s war efforts. Rayze, a member of that circle, was unsure if they were capable of being objective in the pursuit of what was best for all members of the Clan versus the beliefs of the traditional Arconae.

“Negative, Defiant Leader. Those i40’s have already fired up their gravity wells and shut down all hyperspace lanes in this vicinity.”

“Sithspawn!” Rayze cursed in frustration.

“Agreed, Defiant One.” The Equite’s face flushed with the realization he had left the channel open. “Proconsul-err-former Proconsul Uji Tameike has-uh-ordered that we tuck our tails and run towards out of the sphere of influence those gravity well projectors create.”

“Negative, *Invicta*. Arcona Expeditionary Forces are in route from the distress call. They will be falling out hyperspace early – due to those projectors – and will be positioned behind Collective Forces. We have to execute a pincer attack.”

The voice of Uji Tameike interrupted their dialogue, “Belay that order! We have a joint order for forces of all three Clans to surround this vessel. We are going to punch our way through that formation and rally with our arriving forces until we can withdraw from the combat zone.”

Rayze was enraged, “You are willing to sacrifice valuable ships and countless lives to protect your own ass, Uji?!”

“Yes. Yes, I am” came the cool voice of the former Obelisk and now Commander of the Dajorra Defense Force. “We will lose ships from three Clans today, but we will have cemented an alliance between three Clans for a lifetime.”

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Kordath was surrounded by a variety of Bridge Command officers shouting various reports in a cacophony of confusion. He tried to focus on what each of them was saying, but it was apparent that too many voices were vying for the attention of their Commanding Officer.

“Shut the frak up!” Satsi’s voice rang clear as crystal. “He ain’t got e’nuf ears to lis’en to y’all at once.” The Reaver pointed at the first person to Kordath’s left. “You first!”

Satsi was a beautiful woman in her own way. She was not unattractive, but she lacked the delicate and soft features that Atyiru had possessed. Her strength and conviction were simplistic, but attractive in a world where complex and nefarious were far too commonplace. Her lips were painted red and contrasted with her sharp, chocolate eyes that bore into people as they spoke.

“We’ve had multiple reports of a Kiffar with tanned skin and dreadlocks fleeing from our patrols across the ship. We are unsure of how she is getting from one end of the ship to the other in mere seconds.”

Kordath lowered his flask, “You idiots! It’s not *one* woman, its *several* individuals that all have similar appearance!” He began directing small squads of twelve soldiers to key locations in an effort to tighten the net around several of these reported individuals. When he began deploying Force Users from Clan Arcona to accompany teams, Braecen raised his hand. “Yes, Kaeth?”

“I’d like to be with one of those teams. I served with the men and women of the D-D-F when I was Quaestor.”

“Yer funeral, sparkfinger.” Satsi nodded to Kordath and he nodded back in mutual understanding.

Kordath surveyed the holo-projection for several seconds then pointed with his prehensile tail. “You are deploying with Hotel Squad of Echo Company to the Communications Relay. Double time, if you want to make it there before the fighting starts.”

The Sith Adept spun on his heel and began to run from the room. With the Dark Side at his aide, he accelerated to an unnatural speed as he exited the bridge. Kordath watched him go then turned his attention to Satsi. “You heading that way, too?”

“Of course, but I am going to use the turbolift. I’ll beat him there by two or three minutes. Stupid sparkie.” She eyed the Consul of Tarentum. “You want in on the action, too?”

Bloodfyre’s eyes moved from one to the other deliberately as he considered everything. “The Proconsul differs to you,” he stated to no one expressly. He narrowed his eyes on the thirty something human. “I am honored to work with the new Consul of Arcona.”

“Bah-“ Kordath spat. “I told you that we could not keep this a secret for long.”

Satsi flashed a white, symmetrical smile between her red lips towards the Dark Jedi Master. Then tossed him a wink. “Stay here and help my Proconsul get us out of this mess. I’ve got a date with a clueless Elder.” She hesitated, then laughed, “No offense meant, of course, Master sparkfinger.”

“None taken, *Shadow Lady.*”

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Braecen reached the rendezvous point in time to see Satsi barking orders to the soldiers of Echo Company. She gave short commands and directed their positions by pointing at specific locations on a map projected from a data pad. The troops rallied to her orders immediately. “Bout time, eh?” She half nodded in the direction of the Sith.

“Better late than never, I guess.” He breathed heavily. Despite his speed being augmented by the Force, it had still taxed him incredibly. “Turbolifts?”

“Turbolifts,” she confirmed.

Echo Company split into smaller groups of two surrounding the exits to the Communications Relay. One soldier took a knee and the second positioned themselves over their shoulder for overlapping fields of fire. It was a tactic from the Wilderness Rangers urban warfare handbook. When all of the soldiers had taken their positions, Satsi secured her data pad within her belongings and drew an Enforcer Pistol that had been blacked out from tip-to-tip. She waved the Sith Adept forward with the weapon, “Yer wit’ me, sparkie.”

He withdrew twin lightsaber hilts of ebony and bronze from the belt at his waist. He thumbed the activation buttons and bright white flames erupted forth. ***Snap-hiss!*** It was a sound that still caused his the hairs on his neck and arms to stand up in exhilaration. His black boots pounded on the metallic flooring of the ship as he advanced forward with Satsi at his back. Braecen’s keen eyes darted left and right as he attempted to drink in the surroundings. He relaxed for a moment and the tension left his body as he turned towards the Reaver. *Now!* His instincts screamed as he snapped his torso backwards with such severity that he toppled to the ground behind him. A small dart passed through the position that he had previously occupied a moment ago.

Satsi caught a glimpse of a metallic flash where the Sith had previously been standing. Not waiting on an invitation to join the fight, she charged into the room. Her pistol was raised before her as she entered the narrow corridor that led into the room. She calculated the angle of the shot and the time it would take to make before an assailant could retreat a safe distance. Naturally, her hand adjusted her aim to the left and she squeezed the trigger as she emerged into the room proper. **Bang-bang-bang!**

The weapon made a lethal, terrifying sound compared to the more commonplace blasters aboard the ship. The powerful shots were soon dampened by the twin lit lightsabers of the Sith Elder as he moved into the room just behind her. He snapped a pillar of flame forward before her and caught a second dart on his blade. He slid past the Reaver and snapped his second blade up in a defensive position.

Braecen halted his forward advance as smoke filled the room. “What the f-“ Satsi interrupted as she pulled him forcefully to the ground. For the second time within a minute, Braecen’s bottom smacked hard against the metal floor of the ship. She put a finger to her lips then moved it to her ears before she covered them. The Elder’s eyes widened as he heard the *clink-clink-clink* of a small metal sphere bouncing across the surface of the room. He was a moment too late to get his hands up to his ears before the concussive wave snapped across the room.

His ears popped as a wave of pressure slapped down on him. The sounds of battle replaced with a humming in his ears. He wiped away the snot at his nose and was alarmed to find his own blood on the back of his hand. He touched his ears and found more blood had stained his fingertips. Acutely aware of his mortality, he swooned for a moment while he fumbled with his link to the Force. He almost laughed at the worn out narrative that – as an Elder – it was at his beck and call to be shaped and molded as he saw fit. He struggled to open a conduit between himself and the mystical energy to heal his most serious wounds. He looked nearby to see if Satsi required medical attention, but the woman had disappeared.

Braecen forced himself onto his feet. He wobbled before he fortified himself with the Dark Side to hold his ground. His eyes scanned the room frantically as he sought out Satsi’s outline. His blue eyes landed on the silhouette of two lithe figures battling through the smoke. One lifted the outline of a blunt weapon high above her head. The second figure dipped low and threw an elbow into the other’s midsection before she followed up with an uppercut. The first figure appeared to stagger backwards for a moment before she countered with a series of jabs of her own.

As the smoke cleared, Braecen witnessed the Technocrat Huntress continuing to focus on the left shoulder of the Arconan Reaver. Satsi’s eyes grew wild with lust from the combat as she welcomed the pain and used it to channel her own counterattack. She grabbed the woman by her dreads and ripped her to the ground by her hair. She pinned her knees on the woman’s shoulders and began to savage her face with repeated right-handed blows.

The entire ship shook violently. Gravity generators strained under the momentary loss of power and the viciousness of the attack. Satsi was tossed from her advantage across the floor. Braecen hurtled into a series of modules face first. The Huntress laughed sadistically as she howled, “Blow them up! Blow them all to hell!” Sparks erupted from various power points and the room was pitched into sudden darkness. A pair flames ripped across the darkness. Braecen assumed secondary explosions had begun across the ship and in moments would lead to their demise.

Blaster fire erupted from the hallway. It perplexed the Elder that just moments before their horrendous deaths, the Arcona soldiers would empty their weapons. In the same moment, the ship compensated from the initial Quadrijet bomber’s attack and restored power across all decks. The lights snapped back on and Braecen found himself alone in the Communications Relay. He hastened his departure from the room to find Satsi standing over the prone form of the Huntress with her dagger in hand. She drove the point into the already dead woman’s chest.

When Braecen adverted his eyes, he noticed the jetpack thrusters at the Technocrat’s feet. He laughed at his own stupidity. *Secondary explosions,* he shook his head. Despite being a veteran of the Brotherhood, he still had plenty to learn. Satsi had flushed the woman out of the room into Echo Company’s field of fire. As always, the boots on the ground had secured the victory. *Something to consider when we think a Brotherhood can be run on mysticism alone,* he considered as he limped towards the nearest turbolift.

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The bridge of the ship was in disarray from the original blast of the suicide bomber. The space tug had not been able to completely penetrate the shield of ships surrounding the *Invicta II* but it had gotten within their inner ring of ships. The lifeless husk of a Corellian Corvette and a Quadrijet fell into their wake as the ships continued to move through the Collective formation. Six ships had already fallen to the merciless suicide runs and only three ships remained to safeguard the Arconan flagship’s escape.

Sith Bloodfyre-Tarentae rested at the forward most viewpoint on his knees. His eyes were closed, but his mind was open to every detail of the battle. At the beginning of the onslaught, he had remained with Kordath on the bridge to ensure he could contribute. From the onset, he had sculpted their escape by demoralizing the Collective forces and empowering those from all three Clans. What could have been a harrowing defeat had shifted into potentially a grave loss for all of them, but one in which they could escape with their lives.

“Multiple contacts!” shouted a nearby Officer. A Venator-class Star Destroyer flanked by identical EF76 Nebulon-B Frigates. “The Venator has identified itself as *Titan.*” Bloodfyre could not help but crack his carefully crafted image of control with a smile. *His* ships, Tarentum’s Fleet, had finally arrived. He had positioned both elements of his Navy at opposite edges of the star’s gravity wells. It had been a maneuver meant to safeguard against Brotherhood politics and treachery. It was a survival trait bred into every Consul – past and present – of the Clan of Death.

Kordath stood near the Dark Jedi Master, “So much for trusting one another, eh?”

“We aren’t out of this yet, Ryn.” Bloodfyre moved to get up, but stumbled forward. Kordath wrapped his tail and arms around the man to steady him. The Proconsul of Arcona eyed the Consul of Tarentum suspiciously. Sith raised a hand to stall any further questions. “I might have misjudged how much I exerted myself during the initial engagement.”

A husky voice at the entrance of the bridge announced Satsi’s arrival. “Who we got at our front?” She waved her index finger towards the forward viewport. Kordath moved towards his Consul to bring her up to speed about their extraction.

The ship tilted violently to the right, then the left, as another powerful blast erupted across the darkness of space from a Quadrijet space tug going nova. “That was the last of our escort!” called out the Commanding Officer. “Rotate shields full aft and dump all power from weapons into propulsion.” The order was crisp and the soldiers obeyed within seconds as the *Invicta II* advanced towards the Tarentum picket line.

Braecen limped forward to join the cadre of Clan Leaders. “Did anyone from Scholae Palatinae respond to my emergency request?”

Kordath opened his mouth to respond then closed it in a contemplative frown. He simply shook his head from left to right. “Afraid not, mate.”

Uji slapped the Elder on the back heartily, “You make friends wherever you go, Kaeth.”

The Tarentum forces moved to parallel the *Invicta II* and cover their retreat. A mixture of triumphant shouts and silent tears were painted across the canvas that was the crew. All of them – even their Dark Jedi overlords – were overjoyed with escaping the onslaught. The nagging suspicion of *how* and *why* the Huntresses had been aboard still lingered in all of their minds. The Brotherhood forged allies by necessity during major conflicts, but it could never create trust amongst the rival Clans.

The distrust would topple the Iron Throne and throw the Clans into disarray.