***Dark Encounters***

**Kiana**

Kiana lifted the mug to her lips and took another sip. She did not normally drink, but had come to this cantina anyway because a contact had requested it. To not do so would be suspicious. The air was thick with haze and the distorted, cringeworthy scent of half a dozen different alien aromas. She could hear loud speech and shrill noises from some of the patrons. She was also sure that at least some of the men were leering at her, but Kiana had gotten used to that over the years.

Still, she was surprised that there were so many aliens here. She would have thought that with her brother's blockade, their would be less, but it seemed more were now trapped in the system than she had expected. There had been few on Aeotheran, but this was Tarthos, and it was generally the first world outsiders stopped on when they came to the system.

She let her cloak fall away from the suit she wore, ensuring the knife and blaster she had on her belt would be visible. They were next to her datapad, voice recorder, and comlinks. If anyone saw them and then tried to approach her or pick a fight with her, they would be a fool. She would win that fight, but it would also draw undue attention.

In her cover life as a liaison for the Orian Assembly to the Warhost, she had been able to get close to her brother and positioned on the *Reaper's Call* when he had been Aedile. That had allowed her to watch over him and learn about his actions. While he was still the boy she had left at home all those years ago before the Vong War began, he had evolved in other ways. Locke had become more than a leader than Kiana had honestly expected. Their mother would be proud, as she had retired from political life on Bakura and been a pretty good politician.

Kiana felt something slowly approaching in the Force. It was like a creeping darkness, a sense of *wrongness*. It was what she had felt from Locke when she knew he was channeling the dark side, only in greater strength. She glanced over her shoulder and saw nothing out of the ordinary, just a new figure entering the cantina, a cloak wrapped around his body far more tightly than Kiana was wearing hers. Even here on Tarthos, that indicated to her that he was hiding something. Others might notice that as well, but this was a cantina; anything could be going on here.

The figure was much too large for a woman, so Kiana assumed they must be a man. He approached the bar and sat right next to her, without so much as glancing in her direction. The feeling of *wrongness* was now almost overwhelming, and Kiana immediately knew that this was her contact. The Force seemed to scream in her soul, warning her that this was an agent of the dark side, fully steeped in it's malice. Whereas she believed there was hope and redemption for her brother, and Kiana would always try to draw one back to the light, this man seemed too far gone.

Still, her Master had taught her to always try, even if she was positive she would fail. *The difference between victory and defeat sometimes hangs on the edge of a hair,* he had said. It was true. Kiana attributed some of her survival in the Vong War to him. When she was behind enemy lines, with Voxyn and Peace Brigade agents closing in, she had maintained her focus and never given up hope. When she had been captured by the One Sith, she had never given up hope. And she was still alive. Inwardly, she shuddered at that experience, but she still lived. She had never lost hope, just as she hoped for this man.

For awhile, he said nothing. He ordered a drink and let the hood of his cloak slide back, revealing a ghastly scarred face, burn marks streaking across one cheek. Though a thick beard covered most of his neck, Kiana could see the edges of a scar there as well, and noted a cauterized wound that could have been caused by a lightsaber. There was something dark and off about his eyes, even from the slight side angle Kiana saw them at. Suddenly, she felt the gravity of his presence. It was haunting. Kiana had faced dark side users before, when fighting the One Sith and insurgents in Kel Rasha, but she had never been this close. She wondered how the Jedi of old had handled it, when the Jedi and Sith had waged war far more openly and been major forces in galactic politics.

Her musing was cut short as the man opened his mouth. "Kiana, is it?" His voice was cold, almost emotionless. It was like his soul was somewhere else. *Tortured by the dark side, perhaps*, Kiana thought. Was this what her brother would become if she did not help him?

She held her mug tightly, not daring to raise it. It was not that she was scared, but she was surprised he knew her name. She had used a cover identity until actually arriving on Locke's ship, and he had not addressed her by it in public. How had this man learned of it.

"Yes," she whispered.

"You work for the Assembly, right?" the man continued. "I am Maelous Ascarend. You may recognize that name, but do not speak it aloud here or I will end your life."

He held nothing back, and she passed over the threat without flinching. It was not uncommon to be threatened by thugs and criminals when dealing with them. Why would a Dark Jedi be any different?

"Yes, I do," she said. "I am a liaison to the Warhost."

"Yes," Maelous said, "and I have a mission for you. The Consul will be visiting Tarthos tomorrow and meeting with the Quaestor. I want you to find out what they're talking about and report to me." He spoke the word Quaestor with an unmistakable hint of disgust that was drastically different from his usual distant tone. Kiana wondered why that was, but did not mention it.

"Why would I want to do this thing?" Kiana said. It was bold to question one such as this, and he was likely not used to it. Still, she was not keen on spying on her own brother. She was here to protect him and keep him out of the depths of the dark side, not to help his followers plot against him.

"Because I know that you are his sister, and that you are a Jedi," Maelous said.

That statement made her blood run cold. Kiana's hand dropped to her belt and her senses went on full alert. Suddenly, she felt very vulnerable. She had not brought her lightsaber to this meeting, not wanting it to be seen in public. Maelous pulled his cloak back slightly now, revealing a curved hilt at his waist. A Makashi user, perhaps? She knew Makashi well, but it would be useless without her weapon. All she could do was talk.

"Okay," Kiana said.

Maelous continued at the same cold, distant tone. "If you do not do this thing, I will reveal you to the Clan. Imagine what the Clan would do with such information. You would be killed, or worse. I know that Macron Sadow would be most pleased to have such leverage against his enemy."

"My brother would never let that happen," Kiana whispered firmly. She did not know if he was aware of her own combat abilities, but she knew of the more powerful members of the Clan, and wasn't confident she could defeat them one on one, let alone if they came at her in a group.

"His control is not as complete as you think. He walks a path of daggers, and he may slip at any moment. If that happens, you would be an even easier target."

Kiana saw no point in arguing. Maelous obviously knew she could get close to her brother and he did not seem the kind to mess around or make idle threats. It still made her nearly panic to know that a Dark Jedi knew of her existence and what she was, but she was beginning to reign in her terror. She was a Jedi Knight. She had fought and killed more Vong than many of her brethren. She had seen the horrors of war and genocide, and faced horrors that would give even the most stalwart soldier nightmares. Kiana would not be overcome by this man.

"Alright, I'll do it. What do you want to know?"

"I want to know what he and Sanguinius talk about. Sang is a light Jedi, an abomination like yourself. If Locke is leaning in that direction, it may not favor me."

"Fine, " Kiana said.

"Remember, if you do not please me, your life will come to an end." Maelous raised his mug and downed the drink in one go, before leaving it and a few creds on the counter. Then he was gone, and the darkness receded like the slow death of a strong flame.

Kiana breathed deeply. This man was a Dark Jedi and hated her. He would only keep her secret as long as she remained useful to him. Regardless of if she helped him or not, Kiana's world had just changed significantly.

She would have to talk to her brother, but for now, she needed to complete this mission.

**Sanguinius**

As the shuttle landed and air hissed out of it's support struts, Sanguinius Tsucyra Entar waited for his Consul to disembark. On one hand, Sang had been dreading this meeting, but on another, he saw it as an opportunity to influence the other man. Locke seemed to be on a tipping point between the dark and light. He could go either way, and had not been guilty of atrocities as many Sadowans had. Thus, Locke was likely to be easier to redeem. The fact that he was Consul was an added bonus; if Sang would win over the Consul, he could do so much more than at present.

At first, two soldiers came down the ramp and stepped to either side of it. Next came a YVH droid, armor branded with some notation an ancient script. If he reached out, Sang could feel the dark side around that droid, and the script seemed to pulse with the dark side essence of the Mechu Deru that had enhanced it. Even though it was nighttime, and the shuttle's lights merely caused night blindness, Sang could see that darkness emanating from the droid.

Finally, Locke descended. He wore a suit, and his blond hair was cut short and his face shaved. Though his outfit seemed ridiculous compared to the more traditional cloak and tunic most Force users wore, he looked every bit a businessman and a politician. Locke smiled as he approached, waving his guards to ease. The YVH droid followed, surveying the area behind Locke.

"My Consul," Sang said, bowing.

"Please, no need," Locke answered. "Let us walk."

"Agreed," Sang said. "You will find that Kar Alabrek is well under control, though other elements of Tarthos will still take time."

"I see, " Locke said. "Let's go into the city."

Sang thought a trip into the city wasn't the best idea, but he didn't question it. If they were walking, that would give him more time to learn about Locke. If he learned, he could influence.

**Kiana**

Kiana followed her brother and the Quaestor into the city. It was fairly easy, in truth. It was a failing of Locke's that he was willing to travel with so little guard. He had some notion about being seen by his people, but this was at night, and who knew what would be out here at night? Anything could happen. Kiana had brought her lightsaber, and decided she would try very hard not to be without it after the encounter with Maelous.

She leaned against the wall of some structure, listening to her brother and Sanguinius talk. A lot of what they had said had been idle chatter, and she was getting frustrated that they had not said something she could take back to Maelous. The thought of spying on her own brother made her stomach twist, but Kiana would try to find a way to please Maelous without weakening Locke's position.

At her current position, she could easily see up the street behind Locke and across to the next street. She glanced up that street, seeing nothing as she attempted to listen in. She could feel Sang in the Force, a light pulse that reminded her of some of the Jedi she had trained with. Still, she was unsure of his motives, but saw him as a potential ally. She could not reach out to try to sense his emotions, or Locke would no doubt notice her, and that was not a conversation she wanted to have right now.

"We need to have order on Tarthos soon, " Locke was saying. "but the people here must like us, " he continued. "I know if anyone can find a solution that will please the largest amount of our population, it is you."

"Yes," Sang's voice said. "I have some thoughts on that."

"And what of Maelous, " Locke asked. "Are you managing him alright?"

Ears perking up at mention of the Aedile, Kiana struggled to listen in. She placed her ear at the very edge of the building, staring up the side street.

It was then that she saw movement on the next street. It was just a shadow, but it was creeping. Then she had a feeling. A normal being might call it a hunch, or a gut feeling, but she knew it was the Force giving her a hint: something was not right.

Frustrated, she debated whether to stay and listen or to investigate. It didn't take long for her concern for Locke's safety to win out, and Kiana quietly slipped away from the main street, investigating the side one.

She stepped into the empty street and peered around. The din of the city was audible in the distance, like a loud murmur that drowned out any sound beyond the immediate area. She focused with the Force, drawing on it lightly, and heard...scuffling, then a *snap-hiss.*

Kiana responded immediately. *Dreamshear* leapt from her belt, pale blue blade springing to life in her hands. She immediately fell into a Makashi parry. With minimal movement she narrowly deflected a violet blade that had not been there a moment earlier. She tried to reposition, but the assault was immediate and intense. The owner of the blade obviously knew what they were doing. They struck out repeatedly, maneuvering her into a corner. She parried each strike, but never noticed the fist coming in the darkness. It smashed into her gut, knocked the wind out of her, and sent her sprawling onto the ground, lightsaber clattering near her.

Gasping, Kiana forced herself to sit up, watching as the figure entered the light of a street light. It was man, and he had a confident grin on his face. He held his lightsaber down and ready, blade still ignited.

"You attacked a Revenant in the middle of the night; you didn't even try to escape. You're a brave woman, but you're also a fool."

Suddenly, another figure materialized, as if from thin air, this one a woman. Kiana thought that must have been some trick of the Force. The woman knelt next to her, mouth open in a wide grin.

"You know," she said, voice casually malevolent, "we eat your kind, and you look positively delicious."

Kiana wasn't sure whether the woman really meant it. "Who are you?" she managed, wincing from the ache in her side.

"You've never heard of the Night Walkers?" the man said. "Well, we have hid in the shadows, but our time will be soon-"

"Grevak!" the woman hissed. "don't say too much. Did you place the charges?"

"Yes," Grevak said. "When that damned droid comes to investigate, the building will fall on it."

"Excellent," the woman said. "Then we will see how powerful this so-called Consul is."

Looking between the two, Kiana was dazed at the rush of fresh information. Night Walkers? Revenant? "You want to assassinate Locke?" she asked.

"Not want. We *will*," the woman said.

Gritting her teeth, Kiana mustered her strength. She seemed defeated, but her Master's words rang in her mind.

*Then you'll have to go through me.*

**Locke**

"Did you feel that?" Locke asked.

"Yes," Sang said. "Force usage, and a lot of it."

"I could swear I heard a lightsaber," Locke added. "Biggs! Investigate!"

The YVH droid responded and began heading down the side street Locke indicated.

Sang cocked an eyebrow. "You named him Biggs?"

"After the Rebellion hero," Locke said.

"Right," Sang answered.

Locke knew that Sang probably thought that silly, but he had bigger issues at the moment. Who was using the Force nearby? Was Sang up to something? No, Locke didn't believe that. The Jedi's intentions were too pure. Was it someone coming to assassinate them?"

"Be ready," Locke said.

"Of course," Sang answered.

Then, suddenly, Locke felt a familiar warmth blossom from the next street over. It was still nearly pitch black outside, but in his heart he could see that light. Instantly, he felt the familiar connection, the link that he shared with only one person. One emotion flooded that link: determination.

*Kiana!*

Locke stepped toward the street, but Sang grabbed the sleeve of his suit. "It could be a trap."

"Bloody hell I'm sure it is!" Locke growled. He wasn't mad at Sang. The Quaestor was just looking out for his health, but Locke had to help his sister.

**Kiana**

Kiana leaped up, lightsaber already in hand. She brought it down in a cross slice, completely disregarding her own health. Grevak was closest, and Kiana's blade ripped through his abdomen. As he screamed, the woman glared, her own violet weapon coming to life in her hands.

"Are you sure you want to fight me?" Kiana asked, hiding the pain she felt as it shot from her ribs. "The Consul will have sensed me. I made sure. He is a powerful warrior."

The woman hesitated.

"Well, do you think you can take him *and* me, alone?"

"No," the woman said. "That would be foolish. You haven't seen the last of me."

Then she faded into the darkness, as if disappearing. A few moments later, all traces of her were gone.

Kiana groaned, and forced herself to move. She shut *Dreamshear* off and moved into the darkness, further away from the main avenue. She did not want to meet Locke, to talk to him right now. That could wait for later.

**Locke**

Locke dashed into an intersection, lightsaber ignited. He saw a body, sprawled across the ground in the light of a lone lamp. The man's body bore a cauterized wound across it's abdomen. Locke reached out with the Force, but sensed no one else nearby. Kiana's presence had effectively vanished, so she must have hid it.

Sang rushed into the intersection a moment later, holding his own lightsaber. Locke's guards were behind him, glow lamps in hand, looking about. They found nothing.

*Kiana, are you still watching over me?* Locke thought. He had told her not to, but she was stubborn, if nothing else.

"I wonder who killed this man, " Sang said.

"A guardian angel," Locke whispered.

"Huh?"

"Nothing." Locke gestured to the soldiers. "Move out, find whoever did this, if you can."

He knew they would not. If Kiana did not want to be found, she would not be.

**Kiana**

Sometime later, Kiana found herself back in the same cantina. Maelous sat next to her, dark as ever.

"Well?" he said.

Kiana pushed a datacard across the bar between them. "Locke wants Sang to secure the system so he doesn't have to worry about it, and is worried about Sang's relationship with you."

"Thats it?" Maelous asked.

"Someone tried to have them killed, or Locke, at least. They call themselves Night Stalkers. I found no information on them, but they seemed confident and indicated that they are a larger organization. Both members that I encountered were skilled at cloaking themselves within the Force, and hiding from sight. One is dead, another is missing."

Maelous grunted. "I will need to learn more. For now, you are free. Take this, and if I call, you had better come."

He passed a comlink across the bar. "Right, " Kiana said. "Thinking you can use these people against my brother?" she probed.

The Dark Jedi ignored her, tossing his creds on the bar and walking out. His drink sat there, untouched.

This time, Kiana downed hers in one gulp.

**End**

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