**“Beneath the Mask”**

By Braecen Kaeth (4520)

*A Dark Brotherhood Competition: “The Magical 1%”*

**The Citadel**

**Estle City, Selen**

She made her way through the vast complex by twisting and weaving through a series of corridors and hallways. It was not the *most* direct route, but she could not overcome her fascination with exploring the castle. *Fortress,* she corrected herself mentally. *While this has trappings and fineries like a castle… it is decidedly guarded and secured like a fortress.* She absently rubbed her left shoulder with her right hand as she thought about her trip the previous week. Danialla had taken a decidedly wrong turn and been forcibly detained by a pair of security guards stationed deep within the interior keep.

 It was not her first, nor would it presumably be her last, run in with the security that patrolled The Citadel. Despite being given security clearance and attached to the retinue of the *Darkest Night’s* Commanding Officer, she had not exponentially grown her access to the building. As a linguistics expert, she knew that there must be immense amounts of history stored away within. Perhaps legacy that could unlock her research on Arconae Primus. She had come so far in deciphering the runes scattered within the shadows of the planet, but *still* something was missing from the equation.

 Her most recent thesis on the runes – holding to a wild, but possible belief – were that they were similar in nature to those discovered by her colleagues. She had not crossed paths with her classmates in some time, but a chance meeting on Coruscant had been the spark she had needed. He had shown her images from an Outer Rim planet known as Moraband in the Horuset System. As soon as she had submitted her findings, she had been detained and questioned by Agents of the Dajorra Intelligence Agency. After their inquiries, she had been questioned by a Neti that was prone to tangents before a final man had come to see her.

 He had been unassuming in appearance. One might even have labeled him as gaunt and emaciated, but his eyes – bright blue eyes – held a fire that had unnerved her. His questions had been simple independently, but *– together –* she felt that he had taken a great deal of information from her without sacrificing any about himself. It was not uncommon for her to have these feelings when working with the Trustees Committee concerning her research. Those *individuals* sent a chill down her spine whenever she had accompanied the Lead Archaeologist to present their findings. They would feign interest in their findings, but the question always came back to profit.

 Now, after her brief interrogation at the hands of a former Principal Trustee, she felt that their ignorance and disinterest had been a ploy. They were extremely invested in the research she had been doing, but they did not want her to know it. *Why?* She mused. *Why would you not want to share these historical treasures with the entire galaxy?* Her reverie was interrupted by a corridor that dead ended. A single door stood before her. It was simple wood, but worn by time and use. She rubbed her hands over the wood and found it surprisingly warm and delicate to the touch. It, like much of the fortress, were well maintained despite its Spartan nature.

 She continued her motion before pulling her hand away. Her fingers curled inward and she struck the door three times in perfect rhythm. ***Knock, knock, knock.*** She half expected the greeting to go unanswered, but a muffled voice from the other side responded. *“Come in!”* She opened the door by turning the handle. It was such a simple, antiquated thing that she barely missed the significance – this portal was not powered by hydraulics or mechanics. She reveled in the simplicity and elegance of it before she stumbled through the door.

 *“Watch that first step,”* a man chuckled, *”it can be a bit of a dozy.”* With her feet back underneath of her, she turned her attention to an older man sitting behind a desk. His ice blue eyes peered over the top of a datapad he held before him. Unlike the other man’s eyes that had been alight with fire and intensity, his appeared worn and exhausted. She broke her gaze from his eyes and truly took in the room for the first time. It was an odd collection of artifacts, gadgets and – primarily – books. He was either a collector or a scholar, but Danialla was excited to simply see the collection before her. Without thinking, she moved to the bookcase and began to run he fingers along the leather spines of the books as she mentally catalogued their titles.

 A small cough drew her attention back to her immediate surroundings. *“Sorry,”* she blushed. *“I forget myself sometimes when I see history so well preserved.”* She crossed the distance between her and the man before taking a seat before his desk. She chose the seat on the right despite the pair matching. It felt, to her, the proper side to be seated – near the books.

 With his mouth half open, she interrupted him, *“Are you a member of the Trustees Committee?”* Her question seemed to surprise the man. It emboldened her to stick with the current line of questioning.

 He gave a patient, knowing smirk. *“I am, unfortunately, not a member of the Trustees Committee. I am, however, tasked with safeguarding the Keadean Confederacy as one of the Dajorra Defense Forces’ Commanding Officers. I lead a… small… contingent of individuals whom are members of the Freeholders Assembly tasked with the protection of the Dajorra System, as well.”* He raised a hand to ward off any further questions she had been about to ask. *“Today, though, we are here for you to present your findings from Arconae Primus, Miss Danialla.”*

She blushed again. How foolish of her to pry at the affairs of the Trustees Committee, the Freeholders Assembly, or the Officers of the Dajorra Defense Forces. She was quite content with her life and the peace that had come with the Doto Accords just a few years back. No longer was the system torn apart by war, it had begun to heal. And here she was, a foolish girl with a wild curiosity trying to disrupt a situation that been nothing but beneficial to her. Since her commission to the H.W. Jones Archaeological Society, she had been elevated frequently from intern to a Senior Leader under the Lead Archaeologist. Gathering her composure, she activated her datapad and began to speak, *“As you can see, Mr. Braecen, the runes we have been studying on Arconae Primus have a distinct similarity to those found on Moraband or – I believe someone once called the planet Korriban…”*

The Adept continued to nod when it was deemed appropriate and smile when the situation called for it. He had been tasked to oversee the collection and cataloguing of Force Artifacts and other occult, or arcane, knowledge by the Shadow Lady and her Scion. If he could definitively, for the first time in Clan history, link the ruins on Arconae Primus to the Sith of Korriban, he would hold a powerful chip. He had seen much potential in the lithe female before him. Her innate curiosity was unchecked and without limits. She would prove the origin of those ruins in time. He just hoped that it would be knowledge *– and power –* that would benefit the Serpentine Throne.

 Silently, he pitied the woman before him, she was another asset developed by the Shadesworn to further their agenda. And she, like so many others, were clueless to know the true intent and reality that sat before her. She could not see under the mask, because she did not know that her entire world – the entirety of Dajorra, in fact – was hidden from her.