

Daughter of the Empire

Book 1

Written by F. Messer 2005-2006

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CHAPTER TEN

The Warm Beneath the Winter 1

It was not until I was actually back on Coruscant that they informed me that I had been relocated. My flat had been deemed unsafe and I had been given a new home. My father would have called that shutting the cargo door after all the shipment has fallen out. Human Resources gave me two days to pack my world and move it from the place I had called home to the new one. At first I had been angry and was more than a little vocal about it but when I saw my new home I decided that I had gotten a better deal. It had taken me only a few hours to pack my belongings and move them with the help of a small repulser cart. I didn't have that much and most of what I had acquired in the last year were clothes.

My new home was in the older part of the palace, closer to my favourite balcony and the secret library the Emperor had given me access to. I loved the architecture in this part of the palace, the high ceilings and the large windows. It was a larger space, with a better view, a nice kitchen and a really amazing bathroom. It was bright and cheerful and because it was in the old part of the palace the floors were of antique polished wood. I instantly felt at home. It took me about as long to unpack as it had to stuff all my things in the boxes provided. I had poked through the cupboards and discovered where the dishes, pots, pans, kettle, tea pot, cups and glasses were kept. I would have to rearrange everything again, but I didn't really mind that, it kept my mind busy.

Lord Vader had been true to his word and for the two weeks I was on board the *Executor* he had trained with me physically. I had missed training with someone during my captivity. The energy exchange and adrenaline rush. Of course being taught by and allowed to spar with Lord Vader was like nothing else imaginable. He was as fast as he was unforgiving. If you did not learn swiftly from the mistakes you made then you paid for them dearly. He had no tolerance for weakness especially when he knew if he pushed at you, you would do better. Part of me welcomed this because it was easy to focus on the deep seated rage this stirred up inside.

He had attempted to teach me about control but the lessons frustrated me almost as much as they did him and usually ended up in a screaming match or a nasty sparring bout. I was a difficult student, I always wanted to run before I could walk and learning to control something that had been stifled and uncontrolled my whole life was just

not easy. Now, it was even harder to deal with because I could not find any peace from within, no matter how much I meditated I could not maintain that stillness. I could call up the emotions I felt and I could send them flying about the room until one would swear one could see sparks flying but it was a wild sort of magic and I had no ability to control it. It was either all or nothing. We fed off each other, my fear and hesitation against his anger and impatience. Yet for all the conflict, I learned and much to my surprise made some progress in what Lord Vader said was actually a very difficult field to master. Despite his words to the contrary he did not seem displeased with my progress. I was under stern orders to continue practicing everything he had taught me. Lord Vader and his fleet were off hunting rebels somewhere near Reytha and I was supposed to stay on Coruscant, catch up with the office work and most of all recover.

Recover. It was a simple enough word but its implications were anything but. I wasn't sleeping well and I seemed to spend a great deal of time in a weird state of expectation. Waiting for the other shoe to drop, waiting to wake up and find myself still back in that darkened room on Mattri, and waiting for some sort of bad news or unexpected and unpleasant event. I spent time in the office but often I would look up from my desk to discover the day had passed by and I could not remember what I had done or what I was in the middle of doing. It was frustrating and baffling. I had been back on Coruscant for little over a week yet it felt like forever on the one hand and a split second on the other. I had hoped to resume training under Master Kjestyll but he had sent word that he would be unavailable for the next few weeks and I was to practice on my own, to train for the next test, the next level. He had said I was ready for it but I was not so sure. I had sent Shiv a message saying I was back only to learn he was currently on Naboo at the retreat, sorting out the year's events that would be taking place there. He would also not be back on Coruscant for another week or so. He had dropped me a quick note to say he was glad I was back and safe and sound and when he got back we'd get together for lunch.

I was missing people. For the first time in my life I craved company and no one was there. I had replied to my father's message and it had been a difficult letter to write. I had told him what had happened in brief form, leaving out the details and then warned him about Jyrki. *He's changed, papa. He's become dangerous and feral. I don't think that he will try to hurt you but be wary of him.* It had taken me two days of stressing out before I had hit the send button. His reply had been short and reassuring but underneath the words I felt his own anger. I

did not know how to cope with that or the guilt that brought with it. So I did what I always did when I couldn't face my father, I ignored the situation and hoped it would bury itself and just go away. He was every bit as bad as I was in doing this.

Most of the time things in the office were quiet. Life just went on and it was a little surreal to me how while I had gone through this terrible event, everything else was just business as usual. Well, most of the time. I was in the middle of sorting through the huge pile of internal memos and trying to find my coffee when a knock on the door nearly scared me out of my skin. My droid shuffled over to answer it. The young delivery girl smiled as she handed me a huge bouquet of flowers in a vase all wrapped in some pretty pink paper. I cleared off a corner of my desk and unwrapped my gift. Corellian Stars, pale blue star shaped flowers, mixed with tiny Jin-Jin flowers which were almost pure black and Nubian roses that were a deep almost glowing red colour. It was a strange combination but very beautiful. Hidden in the bouquet was a small card with handwriting I recognized at once.

I am not that easy to kill so do not worry when you hear the news.

Of course I immediately had to turn on the internal news net and after some digging through the bulletins discovered much to my horror that the *ISD Vengeance* had been reported destroyed. There were few details on what had happened and there was no word yet on survivors. I looked at the bouquet and smiled, sometimes Thrawn had a strange sense of humour and now he had some explaining to do but I was grateful and relieved. I decided that this was reason enough to just go home. I took my gorgeous flowers with me and decided to spend what was left of the afternoon with the holonet on in my flat to hear more on this whole *Vengeance* destruction thing. Naturally there was no more news to hear on this topic but a lot of news about Prince Xizor and his latest girlfriend, some famous actress. I gave this relationship a month at best. That man went through girl-friends the way Lord Vader went through battle droids. Lord Vader hated the Prince and could not keep the contempt from his voice when ever he spoke of him. I had no idea what anyone saw in Xizor, he was just plain creepy and then smiled to myself since that was probably the same thing that often got whispered about Thrawn. Alien beauty, I guessed, was definitely in the eye of the beholder. I absently brushed the flowers with my fingertips. I wondered where he was now and when he would show up on my doorstep.

My days and nights blended one into the other. Since sleeping seemed to be a thing of the past I had taken to curling up on the couch

which was way more comfortable than my old one, drinking cups of tea and watching the Holonet. It was not as though there was anything all that interesting on most of the time but it was better than being left to my own thoughts. I was in the middle of some terrible film that was on the late night show when there was a soft knock on my door. When I opened it there was no one there but sitting on the door mat was a very pretty crystal glass. I grabbed my key and the glass and went to find the drink that matched it.

He stood leaning on the balcony ledge with both hands watching the city. I stopped and looked at him. This was what I should have been doing the night Jyrki had come and snatched me away. I wondered if it was possible to somehow erase the last two months of my life and go back in time, I wished it was. Seeing him made my heart ache and suddenly I was nervous but not in any good way. It seemed strange to me that all the while I was being kept prisoner thoughts of this man had helped to keep me alive, had given me hope and now that I was face to face with him again I didn't know what to do, what to say. I was about to slip back into the darkness of the room when he turned around and saw me. Our eyes met and time seemed to pause for a moment. He reached out his hand to me and as if I were drawn on a string I went to him. He took the glass from my hand, poured brandy in it then handed it back to me. He touched his glass to mine in a toast and then said;

"Welcome back."

I sipped my drink and nodded. "It's good to be back." This had become my standard, guarded answer.

He studied my face carefully and then reached out to touch it. Without even thinking about it I took a small step back from him, then realised what I had done.

"I'm sorry." My hands were shaking. "I don't know why I did that."

"I do and I understand." He said. "It's alright I did not expect you to fling yourself into my arms. I imagine it must be a hard readjustment to return to normal life. Trust after such a betrayal will be difficult to give. I truly do understand."

I didn't sip the brandy this time I finished it off in one gulp and held my glass out so that he could give me a refill.

"I got your message." I said changing the subject. "Very interesting method you have of allaying rumours of your demise." I said. "The flowers are beautiful, thank you."

He nodded. "Did they make you smile?"

"You know they did." I replied. "What happened?"

“To make a very long story short the ship ended up in an asteroid field filled with Space Slugs with which she argued and lost. It was a bloody mess,” He said angrily. “and a ridiculous waste of life and equipment! After the inquiry and when I am not so furious about it I will tell you exactly what happened.”

“I’m sorry. What will you do now?”

Thrawn sipped his brandy. “I’ll be offered a new commission but I am not entirely certain exactly what that will be yet.”

“Well, thank you for letting me know. I’d have worried.” I said. “A lot, actually, so it is nice to see you looking so...alive.”

He smiled slightly and then became serious again. “You, on the other hand, look exhausted and you are far too thin.”

“Well, you know... I tried out a new fitness programme; the sleep deprivation, bad drugs and darkness diet.” I told him as I studied the contents of my glass. “Worked wonders don’t you think? Don’t believe it will be a big hit though.” I could not keep the bitterness out of my voice and had to grit my teeth to keep from saying more stupid comments.

His expression became unreadable, but the hardness that flashed in his eyes told me he didn’t find my attempt at humour all that funny. I didn’t flinch or shy away from his caress this time but I had to make a conscious effort not to. I didn’t want to be touched. I didn’t want contact. I wanted to wallow in what ever hole it was I had locked myself into.

“What did that pash’kja’anta do to you?” he asked. I was pretty certain the word he had used was not very complimentary to Jyrki.

I turned away from him and leaned against the balcony. I didn’t want to cry but his tenderness made that hard to stop. I bit back the well of emotion, shoved it deep down into the pit of my belly and drank the brandy. Its bite and burn helped me steady myself.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I said, the words sounded shaky to my ears. “There is nothing much to say really.” I finished the brandy in the glass and then handed it to Thrawn. “I’d better go. I’m not the best company at the moment, I’m afraid.”

He watched me for a moment then nodded. “This will not go away on its own, you know.” He said quietly. “You will have to come to terms with it before you can move on.”

I wondered what he knew about such things, what he knew of captivity and isolation but I didn’t ask. “How long are you on Coruscant for?” I asked.

“A few days perhaps, it depends on a couple of things.”

“Maybe we can have dinner or something?” I said.

He smiled but it never reached his eyes. “If you would like that, I am sure it can be arranged.”

I nodded and then without any further ado I turned and left. I felt his eyes follow me but I didn’t turn around. I just wanted to be left alone. I just wanted to curl up in a corner and do nothing. Recover. I was starting to wonder what that word meant and I was certainly starting to hate it. I reached the sanctuary of my flat, slammed the door behind me and let out the breath I felt I had been holding since forever. I didn’t think, I just went to the kitchen and dug out a glass and the bottle of brandy Thrawn had once left in my flat and poured a large amount in it. I curled up on the couch and cradled the glass in my hands. I felt like a bloody idiot. I turned on the holonet and began to sip at my drink.

I had no idea what time it was but someone was knocking on the door. I woke up groggily, shut the holonet off, glanced at the clock and went to open the door, anything to stop the pounding sound. Thrawn didn’t wait to be asked, he just brushed past me and came in. “I like your new place.” He said coolly.

I was still trying to wake up and break through the brandy induced fog that had settled around my brain. “What in the name the almighty sarlacc are you doing here? It’s five in the morning.” I said slamming the door behind him.

He surveyed the living room, eyeing the empty glass on the table and the almost empty bottle of brandy that sat beside it. I followed his gaze and saw through his eyes the mess that I just had not gotten around to sorting out. It was a wreck, I was a wreck.

“Pack your things, enough for two weeks, clothes for a cold climate. As of now you are on leave.” He spoke with a crisp authority that was a little startling.

“What?”

He handed me a data pad. I looked at it and then handed it back to him. He hadn’t been kidding. The order had been approved by Lord Vader and I was officially on leave. “This is your doing?”

“Yes”

“Why?”

“Because you are no good to the Empire in this current state and it is obvious to me that you will not deal with this on your own or seek help. The longer you dwell in this pain the worse it will get. So go and pack.” He said in a voice that I was certain he used to give orders on his ship.

I went into my bedroom and just stared at the mess. Thrawn

stood in the doorway, arms folded across his chest. It dawned on me he was out of uniform. "Cold climate? I don't have clothes for a cold climate, I come from a bloody desert world and I live in climate controlled housing." I said bewildered by this turn of events and the fact that the room was spinning was not helping matters any.

He tossed a travel bag at me. "Well, pack what you think will do and come along. What you need will be provided for you after we arrive." He told me crisply. "Oh and where are your Dantassi things?"

"On my ship." I said as I started to pack random clothes, underwear, socks, and most of my Tatooine wardrobe. I slipped the little wooden box I kept his letters, my hair sticks and the gifts he had given me into the bag, there was no way I was leaving that behind. I shoved past him and went to the bathroom to pack my toiletries and stopped when I saw my reflection in the mirror. I looked like a ghost, absolutely awful and it was the first time I had noticed. With a sigh I cleaned my teeth, my mouth felt like rats had nested in it. I brushed my hair and put it up. When I was finished packing I joined Thrawn who had been waiting in the living room. It did not escape my notice that he had cleared away the dirty glasses and cups.

"Ready?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Right," He said as he took my bag from my hands, "Let's go."

I had to trot to keep up with him. "Go? Go where?"

He stopped and looked at me. "That," he said with a slight smile, "would spoil the surprise."

"I do believe, right at this moment, I almost hate you." I said.

"Well," He said as he held the door open for me. "That is a step away from feeling nothing, perhaps there is hope for you after all."

I opened my mouth to reply but he placed a finger on my lips.

"Hush." He said firmly. "Not one word." And with that he ushered me outside.

I watched with a mix of astonishment and annoyance as Thrawn punched in a code and opened my ship.

"She's all set to go, Sir." The young landing dock worker told him.

"Thank you, Mr. Keach." Thrawn replied taking the data pad from the young man's outstretched hand. He didn't say anything to me at all; he just walked on board with my stuff leaving me to follow him before the door closed. He made his way to the bridge, dropping my bag outside the crew quarters door. I tagged after him.

"How the hell did you open up my ship? I changed all the

codes." I asked as he began the pre-flight check list.

"You should know the answer to that." He said as he sat in the pilot's seat.

"You're sitting in my chair and last time I checked the registration papers, this was still my ship." I said crossly, my hands on my hips.

He sighed, stood up, took me by the shoulders and pushed me into the co-pilot's chair. "You are still half cut on brandy which means you are not flying. So sit down and enjoy the ride." Before I could say anything else he had strapped me into the seat as though I were a small child and then sitting back down in the pilot's seat, slipped on the head set and was setting take off procedure.

I looked at him, watching him start the engines and set the flight plan. "You had a black backdoor installed in my ship." I said. "That's how you could override the new codes."

"Thought it might be good to have options." He answered. I felt my stomach do a little lurch as we lifted off from the docking pad.

"A black backdoor code is illegal! You gave this ship to me, you had no right!"

He glanced over at me and raised an eyebrow. "Yes, it was given to you, but you still work for the Empire and the Empire likes to keep its options open. So, before you get yourself worked up into a complete knot about it, you should be aware that only I knew about the backdoor and it was a precaution in case something happened to you. I've seen you work on ship's computers remember, you are good at what you do so it seemed like a smart idea to have an extra key, in a manner of speaking, one you would not find right away."

I didn't say anything as the ship shuddered its way out of the atmosphere. I knew he wasn't lying and I knew that he had been well within his rights to do what he had done. I watched how he handled the *Ahnkeli' Su'udelma*. I could tell by the sureness of his touch, by how he manoeuvred the ship that he was good at this too. There was nothing for me to do except sit back and enjoy the ride, so that's what I did. I loved it when the ship passed through the upper atmosphere and the shaking stopped, when the air gave way to space and instead of a hazy blue there was a deep velvety black littered with billions of stars. I never tired of that moment when we broke free from the planet's gravity and soared smooth. Once past the atmosphere the ship levelled out and I unstrapped.

"Where are you going?" Thrawn asked as he set the nav computer.

“As far away from you as I can without having to wear a suit!” I was still cross and my head buzzed.

“Well while you are getting away from me, you can make yourself useful and make some coffee.” He said.

I spun around and with hands on hips stared at him. “This is MY ship! You don’t own me and you don’t order me around.”

He smiled coolly. “Not this trip, my dear. This time I am in command and you will do as you are told.”

I stood and stared at him. I wasn’t sure I knew this man. “When did you get so bossy?”

“You have no idea.” He said more to himself than to me then relented a little. “If I say please, will you make coffee?”

“You’re going to let me operate the stove?”

“I think you can manage not to blow us up and it’s not as if you’ll lose your stove operations certification if you make coffee under the influence.” He smirked as he set the last of the controls. We’d be heading into hyperspace in a few seconds. I waited for the hyperdrive to kick in, listened to the pitch of its whine and smiled. It was in good shape, sounded perfectly normal. The stars stopped for a split second and then elongated. The ship lurched and then we slipped into hyperspace. I never ever tired of it. Thrawn glanced up at me and arched an eyebrow. “You need instructions on how to find the galley?” he asked.

I opened my mouth to reply and then shut it again. I wasn’t going to win this conversation so I gave up. The truth of the matter was I wanted coffee too. It was early and I was starting to feel the effects of a hangover coming on. “Fine.” I said and stomped off to the galley.

Making coffee was relaxing, actually and while I was waiting for it to brew I poked around to see what he had done to my ship. Certainly there were new supplies on board and I smiled when I saw the fresh milk, fruits and what looked like meat for supper in the small refrigerator. I was sitting at the small dining table when Thrawn joined me. He poured two cups of coffee, dug out some sweet rolls and set them on a plate.

“Breakfast.” He said offering me a sweet roll. “Eat.”

“So, where are we going?” I asked sipping at my coffee. It was hot, creamy and the best thing I had tasted in a while.

“Hjal.” He said.

“Navaari? We’re going to see Navaari?”

He nodded. “When he learned that you had been found he sent word that now was a good time to pay a visit.”

“He knows what happened?” I asked wearily.

Thrawn nodded. “I sent word to them shortly after I found you missing. The Dantassi are among the best trackers and hunters in the galaxy. I didn’t think it would hurt to have extra eyes and ears keeping a look out for you.”

I nibbled at the sweet roll. “How long till we get there?”

“Present course and speed, around forty six hours or so.” He said.

“Two days.” I sighed. “I just got away from being cooped up.”

He cocked his head to one side. “I thought you loved being in space. I thought you loved this ship.”

“I do.” I said. “But I like the open sky even more at the moment.”

He nodded. “Hjal has plenty of that.”

“But it’s cold, right?”

He grinned, got up poured us both a second cup of coffee and sat back down again. “Yes, it is cold, although it’s actually late spring at the moment so it’s not quite so bad.”

“Define ‘not quiet so bad’.” I said sipping my coffee.

“In the winter, the temperature on Hjal is somewhere around minus forty to fifty degrees centigrade and in the summer it sometimes can get as high as ten degrees above the freezing point. Of course this depends on where one lives. Navaari’s clan live closer to the Northern pole, so right about now during the day it might get up to five above and at night, if the weather is good, hover somewhere around the minus twenty or thirty mark, depends on the winds.”

“Blessed almighty sarlacc that’s cold!” I whispered. “I’ll freeze to death.”

“I doubt that will happen. Kirja’navaar’inkjerii will see to it that you have the right clothing for traveling outside. I hope you do venture out because it is an extraordinarily beautiful place. I am quite certain you have never ridden a sled pulled by snow wolves across ice tundra before. And this time of year you might see the auroras that dance in the sky.”

“Auroras?”

He smiled. “Sky-fire, dancing lights in the night sky caused by the collision of electrons and atoms of the upper atmosphere. While Hjal’s sun doesn’t provide much heat it sends out intense solar winds and the planet has a powerful magnetic field. The best time to see them is spring and autumn so I am hoping you will be treated to a show.”

“We don’t get anything like that on Tatooine.” I said. “At least I have never seen anything like that on the planet and never heard tell tale

of it.”

“Well, Tatooine, I am sure, has other amazing natural phenomenon.” He said.

“Yeah, heat.” I said tersely.

He laughed. “I’ll make certain you are not cold.”

I gave him a look.

He gave me a slow lazy smile. “Finish your breakfast.” He replied, getting up from the table, refilling his cup and headed up to the cockpit. “Oh I brought some books for you to read, electronic form I’m afraid but I think you will find them interesting. They’re on your bunk. When you’re done eating, I suggest some rest.

“All I have done for the last two months is rest.” I snapped.

“That wasn’t rest.” He replied as he left. “That was imprisonment.”

“What the hell do you call this?” I yelled after him.

“A holiday!” came the answer.

I sighed. There was just no winning with that man. I finished my coffee and the roll then decided that my bunk took precedence over everything else and I went to lie down. I grabbed my bag and settled in for the flight. I looked at the books Thrawn had brought for me and smiled. I tucked myself into the upper berth and started to read. The book was good but I was more tired than I thought. I didn’t remember falling asleep but the next thing I knew was Thrawn shaking me gently on the shoulder, waking me and asking me if I wanted to get up for supper.

“I slept?”

He nodded.

“How long?” I asked getting up.

“Almost seven hours.” He said giving me a hand down from the bunk.

“Seven hours straight, I didn’t wake up screaming or anything?”

“No, you slept. I did check several times to make sure you had not suddenly vanished.”

I frowned at him. “What did you put in the coffee to make me sleep?”

“Nothing.” He said coldly at the suggestion. “But you feel safe here and you like being on board this ship, maybe it was just the sounds of the engines that were soothing.”

“I always did sleep well on board ships.”

“I know people like you, more at home in space on a ship than planet side.” He said, his expression softening. “The food is getting

cold.”

“I haven’t slept like that in a long time. In fact I don’t remember the last time I slept for nine hours straight through.” I said digging out my toothbrush. “I’ll be there in a moment.” He smiled and left me to wake up. Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad after all.

It was a little surreal to be back on board my ship with Thrawn. It brought back a lot of memories and the ship was not so big that I could avoid him all the time. I tried as much as I could to stay out of his way, preferring isolation to company. I read the books he had brought for me and did my duties when I was called on to do so. I spent a lot of time in the engine room where it was warm and I felt my most comfortable. The first seven hours of good sleep were also my last and after this I slept fitfully often waking up, if not screaming, thinking I had, gasping for breath. More than once I had woken Thrawn as well and it had taken him some time to calm me down. I had always been prone to night mares but this was worse than ever. I had taken to dozing in the engine room because at least there when I woke up yelling blue murder it was drowned out by the noise of the hyperdrive itself.

Thrawn had tried to talk to me about it, tried to draw out from me what had happened, what Jyrki had done but I would not and could not speak about it. We fought a lot and these fights usually ended up with him being tight lipped and terse and me yelling and throwing what ever was handy at the time. I did not understand how things could have gotten so bad between us because he was the one person in the entire galaxy I trusted, the one person I wanted to be with in every way possible but I could not talk to him about what I had gone through and I didn’t know why.

We were a couple of hours away from Hjal’s atmosphere when he came to find me. I didn’t hear him come and I got a start when he hunched down at my side and touched my arm. I was deep into the book I was reading and the engine hum blocked out anything else.

“Come with me, I have something for you.” He said helping me to my feet. Wordlessly I followed him up to the mess area. He was fully dressed in his Dantassi clothing, he looked elegant and mysterious all at the same time.

“You know enough about the Dantassi to know that when we land you will need to have your face covered.” He said. I nodded. “The last time I saw Kirja’navaar’inkjerii he mentioned that only children paint their faces and he gave me something to pass on to you.” He said handing me an animal skin bag. I took it gingerly and gasped when I opened it up. The bone mask was very beautiful.

“He made this especially for you. No one has ever worn this mask before.” He explained.

I turned it over in my hands, touching the surface that had been polished until it was glass smooth. The markings that Thrawn had drawn in blood upon my face when he had given me my name were etched into the bone and were coloured black. The inside of the mask was lined with what looked like animal hide which was soft and buttery, but I could not see how it was worn, there were no visible straps.

“It used to be that the masks were tied with leather strips but the Dantassi have combined nanotechnology with the craftsmanship of the ancients. It will feel a little strange at first but the mask will meld with your face. Don’t fight it let it do its work.”

I was a bit sceptical but I did as he asked and placed the mask over my face. It was very odd. The leather, which wasn’t really leather at all, shifted and formed, somehow sticking, if that was the right word, to my face. It wasn’t painful or uncomfortable it was just strange, as though I had suddenly grown a second layer of skin.

“How do I get it off?” I asked unable to keep from touching the smooth exterior of the mask.

Thrawn guided my fingertips to the upper left edge of the mask, at my temple. There were three tiny notches carved into the bone. He placed my three fingers and pushed them into the notches. The mask peeled away from my face as though it were nothing more than a light cloth instead of bone.

“Well, that’s different.” I said.

He smiled. “The Dantassi are unafraid of technology and this makes wearing the mask so much easier.”

“But you tie yours.

“Mine is an antique which I have not yet altered.” He said, “And I am used to it. Kirja’navaar’inkjerii thought that this would be easier for you.”

“It certainly beats the face paint. I take it I should get changed and that the clothes you gave me are suitable?” I asked.

He nodded. “We will be landing in about forty minutes. Kirja’navaar’inkjerii will be waiting for us and we will be taken by sled to the village. The housing complex, the village is underground for the most part. It is bright and spacious but not outside. No locked doors, I promise.”

“I guess I will just have to deal with that.”

“I know this trip has not been easy for you,” he said gently, “but I think this will do you the world of good and it will stop

Kirja’navaar’inkjerii from nagging at me.” He wanted to say more but instead there was just a silence that was neither comforting nor awkward. I held the mask in my hands and studied his face, trying to read his emotions and thoughts. There was concern in his eyes and other things I could not decipher. He caressed my face with the flat of his hand. I had to move away from his touch. The emotion that caress brought to the surface was almost physically painful. I couldn’t deal with it. I saw the flash of hurt in his expression but he hid it swiftly and well.

I went to apologise for what would have been the billionth time but he placed a fingertip upon my lips. “Stop. You have done nothing to say sorry for so don’t say it.”

With a sigh, I nodded. “I guess I’ll get dressed now. I take it you are piloting us down?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “So you have lots of time to get ready. Come and join me on the bridge when you are done”

I took my time as I got into the Dantassi clothes. The finishing touches were the necklace amulets that I had been given. I still wore the ma’arilite necklace though and I wasn’t taking that off. I tucked it under all the layers of clothing. With my mask in hand I made my way up to the bridge and took my seat in the co pilot’s chair. As we made the very bumpy ride down through the atmosphere I placed the mask over my face and became Akiana’myskh’apavjäska. It was a strange transformation and suddenly I was nervous about facing Navaari again. Nervous about the whole idea of everything this trip entailed. Thrawn must have sensed this because he looked at me as we touched down on the snow covered landing pad.

“You have nothing to fear here.” He said as he turned off the ship’s controls. “This is a safe place. I cannot think of any place safer at the moment.” He unstrapped, got up and offered me his hand. “Come on, time to see what you think of life in the cold.” He said. I watched as he slipped into a fur lined coat and heavy gloves and knew I was indeed, going to freeze my butt off.

It was cold. Rothana had been cold but this was colder. The sky was a weird silvery grey colour. The wind was strong, sharp and cutting plus it had started to snow. I was not dressed nearly warmly enough for this. I could see Navaari was waiting for us just across the landing pad. I hid behind Thrawn as he walked down the ship’s ramp so that he would shelter me just a little. The ship closed up and he slung the bags over his shoulders. I followed his steps exactly so I would not fall knee deep into the snow. My head was hunkered down and I had bundled myself up as much as possible because I was freezing. The wind was so cold it hurt. It

was a completely new experience for me and I wasn't sure what to make of it. I bumped into Thrawn's back when he stopped and fell back landing on my ass in the snow. The snow was cold and I tried to shake it off my hands before it made me even colder.

"You look like a jax with wet paws." Navaari's deep bass laughter boomed around me as he picked me up effortlessly and set me on my feet. "Welcome to Hjal!" he said. I could not see his face but I could see the twinkle of merriment in his eyes. I brushed myself off and watched as he grasped Thrawn by the shoulders and they touched Forehead to forehead. Navaari was much taller than I had remembered. They spoke to each other in Dantassi-Cheunh and laughed. Then Thrawn moved aside and Navaari came to me. He tucked two fingers under my chin and raised my face. I was shivering despite the cloak I was wearing.

"We are well met Akiana'myshk'apavjäska. It is good to be seeing you alive and well. Come, I have brought clothings to keep you warm." He said as he led us to where a long, low to the ground, sled was sitting on the snow, there were small furry shapes curled up on the snow in front of the sled but I couldn't see exactly what they were. He took something from the box on the back of the sled and handed it to me. It was a heavy fur lined coat made of animal skins, large and long. He helped me slip it on and showed me how to use the bone toggles to fasten it. He pulled the fur trimmed hood up over my head and fastened it so that it would not slip back when the wind blew. I felt like a little kid.

"You lose most of your body heat through your head so keep the hood up, the mask is protecting your face." He said. He handed me a pair of mittens that were made the same way as the coat and then handed me a pair of skin and fur boots.

"Those boots you wear will not keep this cold out. Change now. You will thank me later. It is unpleasant to get ice-burn."

So I did as he said and watched as he tucked my boots, along with our bags in the box tied on the sled. I had to admit I was a great deal warmer now that I was wearing better clothes.

"We go now. You arrive just in time. A big weather system is moving in and this storm will bad, at least three days it will lock us in." He said. He nodded at Thrawn who sat on the sled with his back against the box. Guided by Navaari's hands, I sat between Thrawn's legs and he wrapped his arms tightly about me.

"This way, Tjällh, you will not fall off." Navaari said with a chuckle, patting me on the shoulder. "Nikätza'arth'pavjäska, hold on to her now. She is so small we will lose her in this weather if she comes off the sled!" He said. I remembered that here no one knew him as Thrawn.

I was not prepared when Navaari gave a yip sound and what had been small furry bundles of snow suddenly stood up and became very large wolf like animals that howled as they shook the snow off themselves, I jumped. With another slightly different sound they suddenly began to move in unison. The sled lurched and I was utterly grateful for the strong arms that held me in place and the legs which braced at my sides. I glanced back and looked at Navaari. He was standing on the ends of the sled's runners, behind the box, holding on the back brace that arched over the box at the back of the sled. I turned my glance to Thrawn who, in his mask, was Za'ar. He just gave me a tight squeeze and pulled me back against his body. There was nothing else to do but hold on, sit tight and enjoy the ride.

The sled moved at a surprisingly swift pace, the wolf-hound like creatures, harnessed two by two, ran as a perfect team, it was amazing to watch. The wind rushed past us and the snow was falling faster and faster. It was a little like being in a sand storm except that snow was cold and everything was white. I was glad of the bone mask which kept the wind off my face. I huddled as close to Za'ar as I could. We were going so fast and there was nothing to see except white, so I closed my eyes and found myself relaxing. It was the weirdest place in the world to fall asleep but that is what I did. It reminded me of when I was a small child and had gone travelling on some cargo haul transports with my father. I almost always used to fall asleep on the way home, that not quite deeply asleep state that children often find themselves in. I was aware of my surroundings, I was aware that I was travelling. I could hear voices speaking but could never recall what was said afterwards. We would arrive home and my father would lift me out of the seat and carry me into the house. There was something magical about these moments that whispered of being safe. I was aware that Navaari and Za'ar were talking but their conversation was just words lost on the wind. The journey felt as though it had taken an hour or more but I couldn't tell for sure. I dozed in and out of the world. At one point I remembered smiling because this was not the first time I had fallen asleep in this man's arms, it was a nice sensation and for this pocket of time, I didn't want to be any place else in the entire galaxy.

I knew we had stopped. I could hear the yip and yowls of the wolf-hounds as they settled. I could hear Navaari talk to them. I felt Za'ar move but he didn't get up. He spoke to Navaari in their language and the next thing I knew was a pair of strong arms lifting me up.

"Tjällh, you are as light as a snow flake, lucky for you the wind gods did not want to steal you away." Navaari whispered in my ear as he

brought me inside where ever it was that we were. I wanted to open my eyes but they were just so heavy. He laid me down and got me out of the heavy coat which he then put over me like a blanket. I just curled up and drifted in and out of a dozy sleep.

“The ceremony is planned for tonight in three hours.” Navaari said to Za’ar in basic. “Let her rest until then. It will be a long night.”

“That she sleeps at all is a blessing.” Za’ar replied quietly. He sounded tired. There was a moment of silence and then they switched to Dantassi-Cheunh. I listened to the sound of their voices. Theirs was a musical language and it was pleasing to hear but I understood nothing. The conversation turned serious at some point and from the tone of Navaari’s voice he and Za’ar were not in agreement over something. Maybe it had to do with me because I had heard my name but mostly it was just tone and words. I tuned them out and eventually slept for real.

I woke up slowly on my own. No screaming, no nightmares. The first thing I realised was that my face was bare, I wasn’t masked but I didn’t remember taking it off.

“How do you feel?” Za’ar asked. I looked up and saw him sitting quietly in the chair across from the couch I was on. He had been reading a data pad.

“I’m not wearing my mask.” I said, the grogginess making me slow.

“I took it off after Kirja’navaar’inkjerii left, more comfortable for you.” He said coming to sit next to me. “How do you feel?” he asked again.

“Sleepy, waking up, where’s the ‘fresher?” I asked.

“Through that door there.” He said, pointing.

When I came back he had poured me a cup of tea.

“We have about half an hour before the ceremony. Once that happens we will move. This is just a guest house, separate from the main complex. Navaari has a place for us in his home when this is over with. He already took the bags with him.” He handed me a cup of hot liquid.

I cradled the cup in my hands. The tea had a smoky flavour to it that reminded me of a camp fire. He had sweetened it with honey.

“The ceremony will be in Dantassi-Cheunh, I will try to translate as much as I can for you and tell you when you need to say anything but it is straight forward enough.” He said. “Just follow my lead.”

I nodded and finished my tea. I must admit it helped me to feel better. A few moments before there was a knock at the door, he handed me my mask which I slipped on.

“This is a good thing, A’myshk’a. Do not be nervous, or

worried.” He told me as he put on his own mask. “This ritual is rare and for one such as you, unheard of. It is a great honour for both you and me. Enjoy it.” He opened the door and Navaari motioned for us to follow him.

I had not felt this sort of nerves since the first time I was to dance in public. I remembered my training and I did the only thing I could, I breathed deeply.

“Let us go, it is not wise to keep the High Elder waiting.” Navaari said. “Do not worry, Tjällh, he will not be biting you!” he chuckled, patting my shoulder.

We followed Navaari through a series of underground passages. It was hard to tell if they had been dug out from the ice and snow or constructed. Touch confirmed they were not created from ice. The walls were smooth and white, lit by small luminous globes that adorned the walls. They reminded me of moonlight.

I gasped when we walked through a set of large and ornate, double doors into a huge hall. It was as full of people as it possibly could be. Each and every one of them was masked. They looked like ghosts in the flickering light that came from the large fire which blazed in the central fireplace and the torches that adorned the walls. The ceiling was high and arched. This hall had been build from wood and stone, and it was cooler than the small guest room we had been in. I marvelled at the high beamed ceiling. I could only assume that the hall was above the surface of the ground and not below it as the rest of the complex was. Intricate tapestries adorned the walls depicting hunting scenes and daily life in the Dantassi world. The details were astounding and beautiful. I wondered how they had been made.

We walked into the sea of people who stepped aside, making a path for us as Navaari led us through the crowd. There were whispers and comments as I passed with Za’ar following behind me. I was an oddity, the outsider who was to become one of their clan. I sensed a strange mix of curiosity and trepidation which dominated the atmosphere.

Navaari brought us to the dais where the man I guessed to be the High Elder stood. I looked up at this imposing figure who stood three steps up on the stage. He was clothed in very ornate robes, and around his shoulders and covering his head was what looked like a wolf skin, complete with head. His bone mask was the most elaborate of any I had seen so far, covered with all kinds of symbols and carvings. It was very beautiful. Around his neck he wore many amulets and pendants and in his left hand he held an incredibly ornate culling staff. I hoped it

was used primarily for ceremonial purposes but some how doubted that. He remained silent and motionless while Navaari placed me where he wanted me to stand. I was side on to the High Elder, facing Za'ar. Navaari stood directly behind me. For a moment there was absolute silence and then the High Elder began to speak.

His voice rang through the hall like deep clear bell. The cadence of his words rippled like music and I was mesmerized by it despite the fact that I could not understand what he was saying.

When he had finished speaking Za'ar translated. "He welcomes all to this celebration. He gives the reason for this gathering. He explains to the people who you are, that I am your Ta'kasta'cariad and that you will become a part of Kirja'navaar'inkjerii's family."

I glanced up at the High Elder who waited for Za'ar to finish the translation then continued. He gestured with his hand to me and spoke at some length, then gestured to Za'ar and spoke for even longer. Then he waited for Za'ar to tell me what had been said.

"He told everyone how you have earned your name and the story of your hunt. Then he explained that I had chosen to name you and take you as mine, that I accept responsibility for you and that you are under my protection. He spoke of my connection with this clan, this planet and of the relationship with the family of Kirja'navaar'inkjerii."

The High Elder looked at me directly and motioned for me to come closer to him. When I hesitated Navaari nudged me from behind. I turned to face the High Elder and moved as close as I could without walking up the steps.

The High Elder leaned down and placed three fingers on my forehead and he began to speak. While he was looking directly into my eyes he was also speaking to the crowd. He said something that made everyone laugh.

"He speaks of your spirit which he says he can feel. He is telling everyone that he thinks you are both brave and graceful. That you have a good spirit but it is touched by much hardship and sorrow. He speaks of a long road ahead and of many choices laid before you. He says that he believes you will be a good addition to the clan and given time you will not be so ignorant. He says that you are also very young and are to be forgiven for not knowing their ways. He points out that this is my fault." Za'ar said. I smiled.

The High Elder removed his fingers from my forehead and used them to raise my chin upwards. This time he spoke only to me. His voice softened becoming gentle and kind.

"He asks, if you understand what it means to become part of this

clan, a part of the Dantassi and if it is what you wish?" Za'ar translated when the High Elder had finished speaking.

I nodded. "Yes." I whispered. The High Elder nodded and let go of my face. He then turned to Za'ar and spoke to him. When there was silence Za'ar looked at me.

"He asks if I am ready to take my duty to you fully upon my shoulders. He has explained to me at great length what my duties to you are."

Za'ar and the High Elder then spoke at great length and none of what was said was translated. I glanced at Navaari but he gave nothing away, if anything I sensed that he too, was puzzled by this conversation. When they were finished speaking the High Elder turned to me and asked a single question.

"He asks if you accept." Za'ar said.

"Accept what?"

"Accept the tribe. Accept me." He answered. His voice was cool and steady but I felt something underneath his words and there was an anticipation, a tension. As though there was a lot more than just being unmasked riding on my answer.

"How do I say yes in this language?" I whispered.

"Tja." He whispered back. Teeya, it was a pretty word so full of promise and hope.

I turned to the High Elder and spoke that word in a clear loud voice. I knew that there was more to this than what Za'ar had explained but I could not dig deeper and figure it out so I accepted everything at face value, at least it wasn't trying to kill me. There was a collective sigh from the crowd.

The High Elder spoke to Navaari who answered with yes. The Elder then turned back to Za'ar and with a nod and a hand gesture gave him permission for the moment everyone had been waiting for.

I was surprised at how nervous I was. Za'ar removed his own mask first and then with a practiced ease he found the release notches and drew the bone mask from my face slowly. He handed the two masks to Navaari and then before I could move or say anything he cupped my face in both his hands. I could not read the emotion that played across his face, in his eyes but I felt the heat of it and it was unnerving.

He whispered. "You honour me greatly." And then much to my great surprised he kissed me passionately on the lips in front of everyone who was in the hall. I was so stunned by this turn of events that I did not notice that all around me each and everyone in the hall had also removed their masks and that the atmosphere in the hall had gone from

austere and serious to charged and celebratory. The cheering was deafening.

I might have stayed locked in Za'ar's embrace forever, searching his eyes for answers to what exactly had just occurred but Navaari was not letting that happen. He pulled me in to a crushing hug and then pushed me back held me by my shoulders at arm's length. For this first time since I had met him I got to look at his face. He was a lot older than I had imagined. His strong featured, square jaw face was weathered and lined and there were snow white streaks in his long blue black hair, beginning at his temples and trailing to past his broad shoulders. He was a mountain of a man. He grinned at my expression.

"Not what you expected?" he asked.

"No." I reached up to touch him then hesitated, unsure if it was allowed. He caught my hand and completed the motion so that my palm lay flat against his cheek. He cupped my hand with his.

"But good, yes?"

I nodded not trusting my voice. How was it that I could have formed such a powerful connection with this person I barely knew?

"Tjällh," he placed the flat of my hand against the center of his broad chest. I could feel the beat of his heart through the soft fabric of his shirt. "This bond, it is a gift, rare and precious. I feel it. It is as though we have known one another for many years. Accept it, do not question it. This Universe is full of strange and magical things, it has always been so. This is simply one of the wonders. We find friends, family, bond mates and there is no why there only is."

I fought the tears that welled up in my eyes, too much emotion and I felt it keenly. His face softened and he nodded. "We are now family. This is a good thing." He pulled me into another rib cracking embrace and then let me go. I looked at him then looked around me. He and everyone else around me had the same beautiful pale blue hue to their skin, long black hair and the same eerie glowing red eyes. It was a little unnerving to be the only one who was different. He patted my hand and smiled. I nodded and drew a deep breath. How was it that I could be such an outsider and yet feel as though I had found a home? I didn't understand it.

"Come I will show you to where you stay with us and you can get ready for the celebration. No masks, no hiding. Now we will eat and dance and enjoy everything life has to offer. There is a storm howling outside but we will be louder inside." He said. "Now, follow me."

With Za'ar following very close behind me I followed Navaari out of the main hall down through a series of deeper tunnels to an area

that opened up on to a large, bright space. I had not imagined that despite being underground the rooms would be so airy and spacious. In the center was a fire place that was unlit and all around were doorways. He led us to the door on the very left. The doors were old fashioned and had handles to open them. It led to a small suite with a small sitting area and a tiny kitchen.

"Your room is here, A'myshk'a." he said opening up a door to a small but amazingly cozy little bedroom. Yours," He said to Za'ar, "adjoins through that door and opens to the living area there." He walked through the living area and showed me where the 'fresher was and how everything worked. "We heat from geothermal source." Navaari explained. "This complex is mostly under the ground."

I looked around. It was beautiful. The furniture was carved and made from either wood or stone. The lighting was the same glowing globes and candles that I had seen before. There were beautiful carvings and sculptures decorating the shelves and tables. I was beginning to realise that not only were the Dantassi great hunters and trackers but they were also capable of producing the most astonishing works of art as well.

"I shall let you get yourselves ready, A'myshk'a, there are clothes for you in your room." Navaari said, "I wait for you out there." And he turned and left us alone, closing the door behind him.

I turned and looked at Za'ar who in turn looked at me. The silence was palpable and I was the one who broke it.

"You kissed me." I said.

He smiled. "Yes, I did."

"In front of all of those people."

He nodded.

"I thought we were supposed to be keeping that aspect of what ever this thing between us is a secret." I asked.

"It was appropriate to the situation." He said in that tone of voice which told me he wasn't going to elaborate. "Get dressed, something you can dance in, there will be a lot of that." And he vanished into his room.

With a sigh and shake of my head I went to my own room to get changed. Navaari had not been joking about the clothing, there was a closet full of things to wear. They were not new though and as I brushed my hand over them I picked up images and sensations of a pretty young woman with long black hair and laughing eyes. I wasn't sure who she was but she had been happy here.

The clothing was an assortment of hand woven cloth or softened

animal hide and each piece was in its own way elegant. There were shirts and trousers, skirts and blouses and dresses. I chose a mid calf length dress and leggings to match that had been made from a soft, fine leather. The dress was dyed a deep forest green colour and had been decorated with intricate embroidered patterns of spirals and flowers, embellished by tiny glass beads. It was beautiful. There were slipper like shoes that had tiny beaded flowers decorating them, which matched the dress. To my surprise they fit as though they had been made for me. I took my hair down and let it fall about my shoulders and face. When I felt ready I left the room and joined Navaari and Za'ar.

Navaari smiled when he saw me. "I hoped the clothes would fit you." He said, and then before I could ask he continued. "They belonged to my daughter, when she was about your age. It is good to see them being used again."

I didn't know what to say. I felt suddenly very shy.

"Come, we go now, or you will miss this celebration and it is for you!" Navaari said, breaking the awkward silence.

The great hall had been filled with tables. Navaari led us to the one that was ours and we sat. The food was unlike anything I had ever eaten before, and while some of the meats and sauces were for me a bit of an acquired taste, I tried a little of everything that was offered. The water was cold and clear and was the best I had ever had in my life. The wine was a similar pale blue to the wine from Csilla that Thrawn had once shared with me. It was neither sweet nor dry and had the flavour of berries. It was very strong and heady.

People kept coming up to the table and touched both Za'ar and I on the shoulders, on the hands or making that strange three fingered touch to the forehead. It was a little unnerving and I had to fight not to shy away from them.

"It is their way of welcoming you." Navaari explained. "They mean no harm and most here do not speak basic fluently. We do try to teach it but many of our people do not leave this world and see no use for the learning of a language they feel is harsh and ugly."

Once the feasting had finished, people began to clear away the tables and I watched as musicians began to pull out their instruments and warm up. There were drums and stringed instruments that were either plucked or played with a bow depending on their size, strange wind instruments that created an eerie almost howling wind like sound. I watched with fascination as they began to play and suddenly understood where the music that I had danced to on Myrkr had come from. I looked at Za'ar but his face gave nothing away.

I was surprised at the speed and volume at which the music was played, and it was not long before the dancers took to the floor. At first it was a performance and the steps were memorizing. Some were intricate circular dances that involved the weaving in and out of each other's arms, while others were more sets of four and the patterns square and box like. I had never seen anything like it and I was drawn in by the complicated beauty of it all.

Suddenly the show was over and everyone who had been watching joined in the dancing. I stood back, observing, would have stayed that way but Navaari wasn't going to let that happen. He did not even ask, he simply grabbed my arm and swept me into the whirling circle of people. The music was infectious and while I was uncertain of the steps at first, they were easy to learn. Something I discovered about this was that once you were on the dance floor it was very hard to actually escape from it. Every time I tried to make my way back to the corner I had been standing in, hands grasped mine and hauled me back into the next set. I kept looking for Za'ar and once or twice I caught sight of him weaving in and out of a circle. I could not have imagined him laughing as he was or being as relaxed as he looked in this place. I could not superimpose the image of this man I was here and now with over the one I knew from the Empire in his perfect Imperial uniform and impeccable manners. I knew in my heart that they were the same person but it was two utterly different pictures. I wondered what the Emperor would say if he could see Thrawn now, then it occurred to me that perhaps it was this strange duality that made Thrawn so unique. Thinking about the Empire led to thoughts of Jyrki. Perhaps it was these thoughts which instilled the sudden sadness within me, I was not really sure. I just knew that suddenly the laughter and the music, the noise and the whirling motion of all these people dancing was too much for me and I had to get away. I broke away from the hands holding mine and slipped through the twisting, turning crowd to find myself at the front of the great hall. I felt a strange sense of panic rising in my chest and without really thinking about it fled from the hall altogether.

I found the main entrance and slipped through the great doors. Outside the storm howled and raged but I was sheltered by a large porch like structure so I could stand and watch the wildness without being in it. I was struck first by the cold, and then by the utter opaqueness of the snow. The wind was like a living creature and it was furious. The noise of it was so familiar to me, sand storms sounded very much like this, yet the mournful quality or perhaps the coldness of it instilled a melancholy in me that was hard to shake. I breathed in and out, fascinated by the

white lacy mist of my own breath that hung on the air for a second only to be whipped away by a gust of stray wind that flung snow into my face. I was glad of the solitude but it did not last long.

Navaari slipped a blanket over my shoulders. Then he lit the pipe he had brought with him and took a long thoughtful draw from it. The tobacco was sweet and strong and made for a strange mix with the icy scent of the snow. I cuddled into the warmth of the blanket. I was colder than I wanted to admit.

“Good that you did not venture too far away, easy to get lost in a storm like this. When the white-outs come, you cannot see past your hand sometimes.” Navaari said. “And you should dress better when you want to go outside.”

“How cold is it?”

“By your reckoning, around minus twenty but with the wind it feels much colder.” He smiled slightly. “And this is by our standards warm.”

I looked at him. “How long could a person live in weather like this?”

He shrugged. “Depends on what clothings are worn. Like you now are dressed,” he shook his head. “Perhaps a few hours not more and you not long at all, you are unused to this cold. Look, already you shiver. With the proper clothings, in the right layers then who knows, hours or maybe days? You must keep your head, your neck and wrists covered. Then it depends on how well fed and watered you are. Energy is needed for the body to stay warm and it takes a lot to stay warm in such cold as this. You would not last so long, tiny little thing. You are too thin.”

“Have you ever been out in weather like this?” I asked ignoring his comments.

“Many times, but I have learned since a small child how to live in this environment. I know how to survive here. I would say that if I were to be on your home world then you would know what to do and I would be lost. I am unused to extreme heat.”

I laughed. “I think you would survive just fine.”

He just smiled and smoked his pipe. “Are you cold enough now to wish to return indoors?”

“Not yet. Too many people, it’s too much. I needed some quiet.” I said trying not to shiver.

“And this is not loud?” he asked with a smile, indicating the wind and the storm.

I just smiled because I was certain he already knew the answer to that then asked. “Why did he bring me here?”

Navaari was silent for a long moment. “Because I requested it.” He said. “And because he has fear.”

“Afraid? He’s not afraid of anything.” I said.

Navaari gave me a long steady look. “Of course he is. All living creatures know fear. Some just hide it better than others.”

“What was he afraid of?”

“You need to ask Nikätza’arth’pavjäska this question.” He answered simply.

Men and their secrets. I just sighed and looked out into the darkness and watched the swirling snow.

He tapped his pipe against the wall, knocking out the last of the smouldering tobacco and then tucked it back into his coat. “He worries for you, Tjällh. As do I.”

“He told you what happened.” It wasn’t a question.

“Only what he knows, yes. He says that you will not speak of it.”

I shrugged and pulled the blanket closer around my shoulders. “There is nothing to speak of.” I said coldly.

Navaari nodded. “When you are ready there will be words enough.” He said sagely. “Now before you freeze to death will you please come inside?”

I did as he asked, grateful for the sudden warmth. Back in the main hall the celebration was in full swing but I didn’t much feel like joining in, so I watched. The sea of people, blue skinned, black hair and glowing red eyes, swirling about the great hall, their laughter and their voices carrying over the music. It was a peculiar feeling to be the single outsider. I had never thought about being alien before, but here that is exactly what I was. Even though I had grown up on Tatoonine and lived most of my life in Mos Eisley, perhaps the city most heavily populated by many different alien species, I had never felt as though I were on the outside. Here, with my pale pink skin, red hair and grey blue eyes, I stood out. I wondered why Thrawn and Navaari had brought me here, why making me a part of their people’s culture and lives had been so important, and what it all meant in the long run. I knew this was supposed to be a night of great celebration and that everyone seemed genuinely pleased to welcome me into their tribe but it made me despondent. I had no idea why though which was even more depressing. I looked over the mass of people for Navaari and Za’ar. They along with several other men were standing in the far corner having what looked to be a deep and maybe even heated conversation. I wondered what they were talking about. It became clear to me that I would have to learn this language sooner rather than later. My mother had once told me that one

of the most important keys to understanding an alien culture was to learn its language. She had never been more right than now. Thinking of her made me even more morose, I was just not in a celebratory mood. I looked once more over at where Navaari and Za'ar were and then, like a ghost, I slipped away.

The little guest quarters were warm and cozy. Someone had lit a fire in the small fireplace and there was a tray of food and drink set up on a table in the corner. I looked around but I was alone and I was relieved for it. I changed out of the clothes into a long night dress and with a datapad book I curled up on the small couch in front of the fire and began to read but I could not concentrate at all. After an hour I gave up, went to bed and tried to sleep. That was also a complete failure. Instead I lay, straining my ears to hear when Za'ar returned. I had kept a single candle a light in my room, because I could no longer bear to sleep in a dark room with no windows. I watched as the dancing light from the flame created strange shadows on the walls. Eventually, I drifted into an uneasy sleep that was plagued by fragmented dreams and a nightmare which eventually woke me, gasping for breath like a drowning man. The candle had gone out and I had to fight the panic that rose in my chest to choke me as I searched for light.

I had no idea what time it was and I didn't care. I only knew I needed to get out. With a grim determination I dressed warmly, remembering all that Navaari had said. I put on layers of clothes and finished with the warm boots, the mitts and the long heavy coat he had given me when he had met us at the landing pad. I slipped my bone mask in its satchel and slung it over my shoulder. It was not my intention to stray far from the main entrance but I wanted to be outside and I could stay out longer with better clothing. I left my room quietly, noticing that the door to the room where Thrawn slept was open. I had not heard him come back and for a moment I hesitated near the doorway torn between looking to see if he was really there and wanting to just leave. In the end I just slipped away.

The whole place was quiet, as though the energy of the celebrations had given way to restful exhaustion. I stood in the great hall for a moment surveying the chaos left behind. The Dantassi certainly knew how to celebrate. The hall was huge when it was empty and strangely peaceful. I sighed and turned away from it all and made my way to the main entrance and then I went outside. The storm raged still, if anything it seemed to have gotten worse. It was as beautiful as it was fearsome and I marvelled at its power.

As a child I had always loved storms. I had loved everything about them, the wildness, the ferocity and the sheer pure energy. My mother had once come into my room when I was very small, worried that I was scared by a particularly bad sandstorm only to find me standing on my tip toes to watch it through the cracks in the shutters of the window. I wondered now, as I stood in the archway of the front entrance if this love of storms was somehow connected to my own weirding ways. I wondered if some part of me fed off the wild energy such weather had to give. I knew that I felt more alive when I was in the middle of some wild weather than when skies were clear and calm.

I wondered, suddenly, what it was like to stand in the middle of this howling blizzard, to be engulfed in its natural and blind fury and without considering the consequences I stepped out of the shelter of the entrance and into the storm. The wind stole my breath and the snow stung my face as it smashed against my skin. I drew out the bone mask and placed it on my face. I drew the hood of the coat tightly around my head and turned around. I could still make out the vague shape of the Main Hall entrance way and the lights that adorned it but every now and then a huge gust of wind would sweep more snow around me and I would see nothing but the snow. I stood in wonder at this and without understanding why I turned my back on the entrance and began to walk. In the back of my head I knew this was not very smart but I was beyond caring. I was so tired of the nightmares and the fear. I was so fed up of everything and this strange numb sensation that had over taken my life. I just wanted an out and vanishing into this storm and snow was the perfect way to go. I was not cold and I just kept walking. Had I stopped for even a moment to think, I would have been appalled at what I was doing. Sometimes, I was just so incredibly stupid.

I had no idea how long I had been walking for or even which direction I was heading in, I just walked or rather tried to walk. There was no road or path and although the snow was hard packed about every fifth or so step I kept sinking knee deep into where it had drifted and was softer than the rest. It was a struggle to get through. The wind made it difficult to stand up straight and when I turned to head back to what I thought was the village and have the wind at my back somehow that didn't seem to work either so I just kept moving aimlessly really, and as I walked, my thoughts turned inward.

I went over and over in my head what Jyrki had done. I could not wrap my brain around it and I didn't understand what had motivated him. He had been my best friend, my first love and my teacher in so many things. No matter how much I worked it all through I

could not come up with a reason good enough to justify his actions. I tried to imagine conversations with him and I am sure that I spoke out loud as I stumbled my way through the howling storm. I was angry with him and the more I went over and over everything in my mind the angrier I became. At one point I stopped and I just screamed out loud because I didn't know what else to do. If he had been there in front of me I would have done him serious bodily harm.

I thought about the Emperor and his machinations. There was a man I could learn to hate and I wasn't sure that I didn't already feel that way. He was a poison and a darkness and he terrified me to my very core. I wondered, as I sank once more knee deep in icy snow and had to get out of my mitts so that I could scoop the snow out of my boot, why he took such delight in playing these games with everyone. I was certain that I was alive and doing as well as I was in my small part of the Empire only because he wanted something from me. I just did not know exactly what that was. Lord Vader had said often enough that it was my talent, my force abilities that made me unique and I had sensed no lie in that but I didn't believe it entirely either. There were others far more talented than I was and far more willing to play the game, far more willing to suck up to the Emperor and do what ever he asked with argument or question. I could not seem to sort out the tangled web that was being woven about me and I didn't understand it. If he wanted something specific from me, then why did he simply not make his demands known? Why the games? I knew that my abilities were getting stronger and that all the training and teaching that I was being given were helping to sharpen my skills but I did not know why. Lord Vader had talked about the peculiar combination of gifts that I had but he had never explained why this was special. I wondered as I slogged through the snow how I was useful and what that meant exactly because it was starting to take on a sinister tone to it. In the last year I had learned that I was not the only person Lord Vader had taken under his wing, oddly enough this knowledge did not really bother me too much, in some ways I was glad for it. In the end it changed nothing between he and I, the bond that had been forged was there and was strong. I did not understand it but I didn't question it either. There were many layers to the Empire and I was only now beginning to grasp this. It was not very comforting.

My thoughts turned to the dancer, Lianna and her part in all of this. Her strange connection with the Emperor, her love and devotion to him was almost familial. Navaari had called her a predator and I knew he had been right but I had not wanted to see it, or know about it. She was threatened by me even though she had no reason to be. What ever

she was to the Emperor I was not going to replace her. I had seen a fear in her eyes when she had met me the first time and she saw me as some sort of rival even though I knew that was impossible. That would have been like pitching a wamp rat against a Krayt dragon. I had sensed the Force about her but it was not an obvious thing. She had been trained in everything from an early age and it showed. I was a stumbling child next to her, yet she was afraid of me. It occurred to me that maybe the Emperor played on that as well, enjoyed watching how we circled about one another, against one another. I wondered why he would do that to someone who so obviously adored him.

I stumbled and fell and for a moment considered if it was actually worth getting up. My survival instinct was almost as strong as my stupidity factor and I struggled against the snow to my feet. I was tired though. My fingers were starting to feel the nip of the cold and the first inklings of what I had done, what the situation I was in actually was, were starting to sink in. I was not so much afraid as I was sad.

Trudging through the drifts and against the winds was extremely hard work. I had no idea where I was, what time it was or when it would be day. I imagined my home world and its unbearable heat and it made me laugh to think that chances were I would die by freezing to death. The irony of this was not lost on me. It made me wonder who my birth parents had been, where I had actually been born. These were questions I was betting I would never find answers to. I had not lied to Thrawn when I had told him that I knew who I was just not where I had come from but now the deeper consequences of knowing that the people who had raised me were not the same people who had given me life were beginning to sink in. Had they too been force users? What planets had they come from? I didn't even know what they looked like. That last thought had made me shake my head. My red hair had often been a source of many questions, neither of my adopted parents on Tatooine had red hair. My mother used to explain it away that I was a throw back to her great aunt, and for the most part this was accepted because my mother had eyes a similar colour to mine. Thinking about her made me ache with a sorrow that never fully seemed to leave me alone. It led me to thinking about my father and all my friends back at the docking bay.

My father and I had had a difficult relationship but I knew he would be sad if I died and I felt a pang of regret at that. I was a wilful, stubborn child and he was every bit as wilful and just as stubborn. We were well matched. We had often locked horns even when I was small, then my mother had been around to sort out the arguments and play

mediator. After her death it was very bad for a long time and only in the last two years had we made any real headway in being able to actually seriously talk to one another without it ending in a fight or a frustrated shouting match. I hoped that with me so far away Jyrki would leave them all alone. I stopped for a moment to catch my breath and looked around me. I wasn't sure but I thought it was starting to get lighter out. All I could see was waves and swirls of snow that writhed about me. It was as though I were dancing with ghosts and there was a stunning beauty in it. With a heavy sigh I forced myself to go on but I was so weary, my limbs and my lungs ached and it was getting harder and harder to think straight.

My thoughts turned to the ceremony I had just been through. I had not understood its full significance, I was certain of that fact. I knew that for Navaari it had meant one thing but for Thrawn as Za'ar it had quite a different meaning. I was sure that something deeper more important had happened but I was too blind or too stupid to put two and two together. I thought about Za'ar's kiss, a thought that warmed me from the inside out. He was a strange man in many ways, intelligent, cool headed, logical and utterly alien. Most of the time unreadable to me, yet there was a spark to him, a genuine warmth that hinted at a deeper passion he kept tucked away. I could not fathom his attachment to me but on the other hand, I could not figure out my feelings for him. No matter which way I considered it, our relationship was complicated but I knew with absolute certainty, it was also a gift. One I was now throwing away.

I thought about my last conversation with Navaari and I knew he would be furious with me for doing this but in the end, I rationalised with myself, it was better for all, if I was out of the picture. I seemed to be no end of trouble to everyone around me and gone was a good thing. I really wasn't thinking very clearly any more. I fell, once again sinking into the snow and this time I didn't get up. Instead I lay there, burrowing into it a little and curled up into a little ball with my back to the wind. I pulled my heavy coat close around me, shutting the storm out. I had been cold but now lying in the snow I felt a surreal sense of warmth and I was very drowsy. My thoughts drifted back and forth but mostly they centered on Thrawn. I was a little sad that for all the back and forth, for all the teasing that had gone on between us, we had never finished what we had started. I wondered what that might have been like and it was the last thing I remember thinking before I drifted, like the snow, in and out of a hazy consciousness.

I have no idea how long I lay buried in the snow. I had lost all

sense of time and place. I thought that I was dreaming when I heard someone speaking to me and felt myself being hauled out of the snow. I struggled against this and I didn't want to be moved. I was warm where I was. Strong hands caught my flailing arms and held them tightly.

"Idiot child! Stop struggling!" Said a very familiar, very angry voice.

I did as I was told and with a deft movement my bone mask was removed. I gasped as the cold bit my skin. Warm hands touched my face and then my mask was put back on me. I was lifted up and bundled on to what felt like a sled. My mittens were pulled off and warm hands felt my own. Mine were cold but I wasn't sure how cold. I couldn't feel much. He put my mittens back on. I felt the sled move and closed my eyes.

I woke up in warmth but I was shivering. I sat up slowly and realised several things at once. One, I wasn't dead. Two, I was mostly undressed and had been wrapped in warm, dry blankets and a heavy fur. And three, my feet and my fingers itched and burned. I went to scratch at my toes and a hand smacked mine away.

"Do not scratch, you will make it worse!" Navaari scolded.

I tucked my hand back under the blanket and endured the awful prickling, itching sensation as blood found its way back into my extremities. I watched as Navaari set up a small brazier and cooked something in a pot on it. I looked around me and took stock of where I was. There wasn't much to see. We were in a small domed structure that looked a lot like it had been made from snow. There was a ledge that ran around the inside edge and then the floor had been dug out so that the inside was deeper and larger than it appeared on the outside and had been lined with thick animal skins, the fur side up. There was a small tunnel as an entrance and ventilation holes in the ceiling. Lanterns had been lit and the inside was surprisingly warm and cozy compared to the howling storm outside. Navaari ignored me while he moved around the small space. For such a large man he moved with surprising ease, readying this and that, taking things out of a large bag he had tucked over on the other side of the floor.

He tossed me some clothes. "Put those on, you should be warm enough now." He barked. I wriggled into the top, trousers and slippers and said nothing. Finally when he could keep it inside no longer his anger exploded around me like the storm outside.

"Idiot child! What were you thinking? You could have perished in that weather! By all rights you should be dead!"

I looked up at him, meeting his seriously hard stare with my

own. "That was more or less what I was thinking." I answered quietly.

He just stared at me, wanting to ask why but instead he just sighed. "How are your hands and feet, still itchy or just warm now?" he asked.

I flexed my fingers. "They feel thick, funny, but warm." I said. "How long was I, I mean how did you find me?"

"The thick feeling is normal, it will pass in a while. You are lucky to have no real damage." He sighed. "By the time we realised what you had done over four hours had passed. You travelled surprisingly far for someone walking without the right shoes." He poured some of the tea he was making into a cup and handed it to me. "Drink it slowly." He said and he sat down across from me with a cup of his own.

"Lucky for you when I made your mask I added a tracking chip to it. We do that for children. Without it I would not have found you before the storm had ended and even then, there was little chance to find you alive. At least you were intelligent enough to have listened to what I said about clothings before going on your death walk." He stared at the contents of his cup for a moment. "A few more hours and ice burn would have taken your fingers and toes. You live under a lucky star."

I wondered about that. I didn't feel lucky, I just felt stupid.

"A'myshk'a, why?" he asked after a long silence.

I shook my head. "I just had to get away."

"In the middle of a blizzard?" anger crept back into his voice.

"Wasn't any place else to go." I said quietly.

He made a face. "You think that death would solve what ever it is you run from?" he asked.

I shrugged.

"I did not think of you as selfish." He said, his words laced with a quiet fury, "But this was a selfish act."

I felt the sting of shame and concentrated on my tea. "Does Thra, I mean Za'ar know?"

"Of course he does, Tjällh. He was the one who alerted me you were missing."

"He didn't come with you?"

Navaari shook his head. "No, I am faster alone and he knows that, plus I thought you might want someone neutral to talk with. He was very angry and that would have been unhelpful in this time.

I sighed. "I keep making the wrong choices." I said. "I seem to excel at pissing people off."

"Well, this was not a very clever move, but you let your passions and your emotions rule your actions. I cannot say that, in the end, it was

not unexpected. You remind me very much of my daughter, sometimes."

"Why did I not meet her or your family at the celebration?" I asked.

He weighed the question for a moment. I wondered if he would actually answer. I was so used to Thrawn's evasiveness on questions he deemed too personal or that he just did not want to answer that I expected the same from everyone else.

"She left Hjal some years ago. Married a Chiss scholar and moved to the home world." He said after a long silence. "We do not see each other often; she has walked away from this culture, this life and does not look back." He drew a deep breath. "My wife passed onto the next world almost seven years ago, an illness we could not cure took her. It is the way of things. Family moves on, the ones we love move on. My daughter is happy with her life now, just as she was happy here as a child. As a father it was hard to let her go but to do other wise would have been wrong."

"You seem so pragmatic about it all."

"It is what it is, Tjällh." He said with a sad smile.

"But you miss them?"

"Every day." He said. "But that is part of what it means to love someone."

I made a face. "Love!" I spat the word out. "I don't even know what that means."

Navaari looked at me with a mixture of surprise and puzzlement. "You have family, do they not love you? You have friends, and you have Nikätza'arth'pavjäska do they not also in their own way love you and in turn, teach you what this is?"

I had to fight from raising my voice. "Friends who love you do not betray you. Family that loves you does not lie to you about the most sacred of things and men who have stars in their blood only love their freedom." I could not keep the bitterness from my voice.

Navaari refilled my cup and handed it to me. The expression on his face told me he waited for an explanation.

"A year ago, just as I was to start working for the Empire my father told me that I was not his or my mother's child, that I had been abandoned and left behind on one of his freighters by someone too damned scared to take responsibility for what I was. I know nothing about what I am, where I come from, or who created me. So for all of my life I have lived in a lie, believing I was one thing to discover that I was something else." I said. I was angry over this but I had not realised it until now. How deeply did I shove these feelings down?

"The people who raised you as their own, did they not love you and care for you?"

"Yes, but they also lied to me."

"I will not debate their reasons, that is not my place but I am certain that their motives were based in love and nothing else." He said.

I shrugged. "Maybe." I said. "My father and I don't always see eye to eye and there are many things he will not speak of. The peace that we have now, such as it is, is based on a mutual desire not to get into screaming matches. We agree to disagree. My mother died a long time ago. My birth parents left me nothing but an antique book, a legacy of dangerous talents and strange abilities which seem to land me in more trouble than they are worth."

"What of this betrayal from friends?"

My jaw clenched and I stared at the tea in my cup. When I didn't answer he continued.

"Very well, what of Nikätza'arth'pavjäska?"

"I have known men like him my entire life, pilots, captains, spacers. He finds me intriguing and perhaps at some point this game we play will get intimate and even more interesting, if you know what I mean. But I will never be more than a pleasing distraction for him. To try and place any sort of claim on him would be like trying to stop a star from going supernova. I have no illusions about that. He has made space for me in his life and he is kind to me. I would even venture to say he has some feelings for me but love? For men such as he, love is a luxury that is found only in ridiculous romance stories." I sighed and fiddled with my cup. "The minute you try to tie someone like him down you destroy what makes them special. I may be young and naïve but I do know this, were I to try and claim that man as mine, put a binding on him in any way I would be left with a handful of sand in the wind. No, even if in his own way he cares for me a little, sees something in me that pulls at him, attracts him the way peko-pekos like shiny things, it is a small thing compared to who and what he is. I can live with that and I expect nothing from him" I shrugged. "I understand my place in his life," I sighed and added almost wistfully, "But I like that he smiles when he sees me."

Navaari looked at me for a long time. "How is it that someone so young can be so...I do not have the right word, like sour fruit...?"

"Cynical." I said sensing the word he sought.

He tasted the word and repeated it to get its feel and then nodded.

I shrugged. "It isn't cynicism, it's being realistic. I lived and

worked at a docking bay, I saw it all the time, crying girlfriends clinging to men who would rather live amongst the stars than be planet bound, men bound to their ships and that way of life, leaving empty promises of love and marriage whispered and the women who fell for them left behind in a pathetic puddle of tears." I sighed at the memories my words conjured up. "I swore I would not be like that."

"I think you underestimate the depth of his emotions." Navaari said quietly.

"Do I?" I asked honestly. "Maybe, who knows? I find him incredibly difficult to read. I wonder sometimes if the Chiss even have emotions. But I can tell you this, I make no claims on him and in the end, for both of us, duty comes first."

Navaari sat back and studied me carefully. "You surprise me at every turn."

"Za'ar says exactly the same thing. You all think you know me, you all think that you have me figured out but you know nothing!" I said coldly. "Just like Jyrki, you both think of me as some stupid, pathetic child."

"That is more untrue than you will ever know." He said firmly, and then asked. "Who is this Jyrki?"

"Didn't Za'ar fill you in?"

"He has mentioned the name, said this is a man from your past and responsible for what has recently happened but he gave no details."

"Then you know enough." My voice as cold as the air outside. "But you met him once."

"The man from Rothana." He nodded, suddenly starting to put things together for himself. "The longer you keep this locked up inside of you, the deeper this poison will go." He said. He was right and I knew it but I didn't want to go to that place so I sipped my tea instead and then asked.

"What is this place?" Steering away from the topic at hand.

He stared at me for a long time as if to gauge how far he could actually push me and then decided that now was not the right time. "It is a snow house. We make them when we go on long hunts. Lucky this one still stands from a hunt a few months back and was very close, efficient, easy shelter from the weather."

I nodded and drank the rest of the very sweet tea.

"We will stay here until the storm has blown itself out. Foolish to travel back in this." He told me.

"Does anyone know you found me?"

He shook his head. "We have a good comm system here but this

weather interferes with it. They will know when we return.” He looked at me as I yawned. “You should rest now. We will talk more when you have a clearer mind.”

I handed him my empty cup and curled up in the huddle of blankets and furs, turning my back to him. I knew he was watching me, trying to find answers but I didn’t have any to give.

I woke screaming, half in half out of the nightmare whose images I would thankfully not remember when I had broken free from its grip. As I became aware of Navaari at my side, doing what all parents do for terror stricken children, I wondered if this would ever end. His whispered gentle words which won over the unnamed fear and when I had calmed down enough he let go of me and lit one of the lanterns. Light helped. He got the small brazier going and put water on to boil. The small space filled with the scent of what ever tea it was he was making and it was good smell. I watched, huddled in the warmth of the blankets as he fixed me a cup.

“These night terrors, you have them often?” he asked, pouring himself a cup of tea as well.

I nodded, cradling the warm cup in my hands, welcoming its heat. “I have always had bad dreams on and off, but not like this and not every night.”

“Why will you not speak of what happened to you?” he asked getting straight to the heart of the matter.

I shook my head. “I can’t.”

“Why not?” he was going to push now, I knew that. There would be no avoiding this conversation and there was no place to run. I shut my eyes tightly and gritted my teeth.

“Stop fighting against what will happen anyway! Why will you not open up and talk to me?” I heard him move closer to me. “Why?”

“Because I am ashamed.” I whispered. Letting out the awful truth I had locked away inside myself.

He had not expected this answer and he knelt in front of me, taking my face in his hands and holding it so that I could not avoid looking in his eyes.

“Look at me , Tjällh, you have done nothing to feel that way.”

I tried to turn away from his gaze but he would not allow me to. With his eyes and his hands he made me face not only his questioning stare, but my own fears. I struggled to get the words out, but they tangled on my tongue. The deep shuddery breath I took was not enough to quell the rising sense of disproportionate panic.

“Do you know what I used to tell my daughter when something

had her so tied up in knots she could not even speak?” he said gently. “Start at the very beginning and do not stop until the words have done their job.”

I shook my head and struggled to get clear from his grasp. He did not let go.

“Tjällh, there is only you and me here and we are in the middle of nowhere surrounded by the snow and wind of a spring storm. There is nothing and no one who will hurt you. So speak to me, tell me this thing that destroys you from the inside out before there is nothing left of you and I must mourn another loss.”

His words sank in slowly, he saw this and he let me go. I trembled as took a small sip of my hot tea and then without further games or hesitation I began to talk. I told of everything that had happened and I left absolutely no detail out. My voice trembled when I spoke Jyrki’s name, when I recounted his violence and his silent, brutal anger. I faltered when I spoke of the filth and the disgrace I had felt at being so dirty and so weak, of the humiliation and the despair. I side tracked a little and told him everything about my relationship with Jyrki, as I had known him, as I had wanted to know him. All the secrets I had been carrying for so long right from my earliest memory of Jyrki through to the most recent of hurts and the terrible sense of loss came tumbling out. All the things I just could not seem to come to terms with. I poured my soul out to Navaari in a way I had not ever done with any other person before, not even Thrawn, and he listened without comment or interruption. When I was finished and there were no more words left inside I just looked at Navaari, waiting for him to respond. I huddled into the blanket around my shoulders. I felt for the first time in a very long time, a deep sense of stillness, of emptiness as though the white noise in my head had suddenly been switched off. Navaari took the empty cup from my hands and refilled it for me. I accepted it gratefully.

He was silent for a very long time and I realised that I could no longer hear the wind outside either. The silence was deafening I was glad when he broke it.

“No one should ever have to go through such a betrayal.” He said in a voice that did not hide his own anger. “This terrible sense of guilt you carry is not yours to bear. You did nothing to deserve this, you did nothing wrong.” He said.

“Then why did it happen? Why did he do this to me?” I was on the verge of tears but I bit them back. Tears would come later, in private when I could let everything go with no one around to watch.

“I cannot answer that, only Jyrki Andando can.” He said. “But

this I do know, you must understand what happened was not your fault. You need to stop blaming yourself. He had no right to harm you in this way, no matter what he thinks you have done, or have become." He shook his head. "This man you once loved, I do not even think he sees the person you are now. If he had he would know that you are not evil or even shaped by it. That you have a lovely spirit touched by difficult times. You did what you had to do and you acted with great courage." He cupped my face once more in his hands and made me look at him. "I am so honoured to know you, to have you be a part of my family, of my tribe. You may not be my daughter by blood but in my soul I know that we are bound by something powerful and I tell you this as I would were you my own, I am proud of you."

He pulled me to him and held on to me tightly. I had not realised how much I had needed absolution, how much I had needed for someone to tell me these things. With a sigh, after a long pause, I pulled away from his embrace and sipped at my tea.

"You miss her very much." I said wanting to talk about something else other than me.

"Yes, I do. My wife and I thought that we could not have children, so when Il'yar'ea was born, we knew she was a gift from the gods. Do not all parents think this way?" he added with a smile. "She was a cheerful, happy child but her eyes always looked to the far away and I knew that even though she was raised with us she would not stay with us forever. She longed for more, she longed for the stars. She was always looking past the now, beyond my shoulder into the future." He said. "I should not have been surprised then, when a young scholar came to Hjal to study the Dantassi way of life and I watched as he stole my daughter's heart." He shook his head. "I do not mean that in a bad way. She was happier than I had ever known her to be and when, one night she came to my wife and I to tell us that she wished to marry this man and leave us, we both knew that no matter what we said we would lose her. It was better to give her up gracefully with our blessings than to will for her to remain here and have her leave in bitterness. So, after we convinced her to have a traditional Dantassi bonding ceremony, she left to start her own life on Csilla. She returned only once, when her mother was dying and we knew there was nothing to be done about it. Those were difficult days. I know she felt guilt and remorse about not being here for most of the illness and I was so tied up in my grief that I could not help her through her own. When she left after the death rites, many words had been left unspoken that should have been said. We have not seen one another since, although we keep in touch. I feel the distance

between us keenly but I am unable to bridge it"

I looked at him. "Fathers and daughters." I said. He nodded with a slight smile because he understood exactly what that statement meant.

"I am quite certain that this is a dance that will always be so, for eternity and it should be no other way. But it is a hardship that is sometimes difficult to bear." He said. "Without these hurts and these terrible times, how can we know joy and peace?"

"It seems like an awfully high price to pay, though." I said.

"Everything comes at a price, A'myshk'a." he said.

I nodded and not knowing what else to say commented. "Storm's died down."

"Aye, and once we have eaten we will head back. It will be very late by the time we reach the village but you will see it is a different world outside." He told me and set about making some sort of food. We sat and ate the stew in silence. It was hot and surprisingly good. Once we were finished and everything cleaned and put away, I helped Navaari pack.

"Put your warm clothes on, it will be cold outside. After a storm like this the wind drops and so does the temperature. It will be very cold and, A'myshk'a, it will be very beautiful." He said handing me the clothes I had worn when I had left the village.

The world that awaited me as I crawled through the entrance tunnel was vastly different from the one I had walked out into the day before. Where there had been wild winds and blinding snow was now an eerie stillness and a crystal clear night. I breathed the night air in deeply and it was a sharp, icy shock. It made me cough. Navaari laughed as he packed the sled. The wolf-hounds were happily chewing on what ever food Navaari had given them. I wondered how they survived the storm.

"They curl up in the snow and their fur keeps them warm. They are born and bred in this climate." He explained reading my thoughts. "Put your mask on, it may not be windy but the cold will still freeze your flesh."

I drew the mask from the satchel across my shoulder. Navaari grinned when he saw my reaction when I saw it.

"It is tradition to write one's history upon one's mask. I carved your story while you slept." He said. "Now any Dantassi will know who you are and where you have come from by the symbols." He tapped two of them. "This one says you are part of my family, and this one is for Nikätza'arth'pavjaska."

My fingers traced the new marks he had carved. They had been

made black by some sort of soot and then sealed with a waxy substance.

"I guess every time I need my story updated I shall have to come back to see you. I can't carve to save my life." I said as I slipped it onto my face. I drew my hood up and took my place on the sled. It was exhilarating and this time I was wide awake. The wolf-hounds were swift and, in the moonlight, glorious. The scenery was breathtaking. All around me was pristine white snow that glittered in the moons' light. It was beautiful. I lifted my face and gasped at the clarity and sheer numbers of the stars that shimmered in the sky. Their formations were foreign to me and I wondered if the Dantassi who lived on this planet had names for the patterns they created. After about an hour Navaari stopped the sled, the hounds sat on the snow, their misty white breath decorated the air as they panted. He motioned for me to get up and follow him a little ways from the sled and the hounds.

"Lie down and look up, Tjällh." He said. I did as he bid and could not keep the gasp of wonder from escaping my lips.

"The sky, it's dancing!" I whispered.

Navaari chuckled as sat in the snow beside me. "I am certain that Nikätza'arth'pavjäska has told you the scientific reasons behind this but we call them *Kiana sukaj'taiva*, heavenly dancers. My people know why they happen but we still see the magic. We tell our children if you whistle the lights will dance for you and sometimes they even whistle back."

I laughed and whistled and sure enough the lights of deep turquoise green and pale yellow rippled and shimmered across the sky. Navaari pointed out some of the patterns the stars made, telling me the stories behind them. I lay in the pristine snow, bathed in the twin moons' light watching the shimmering lights in the sky until Navaari pulled me to my feet.

"We should go, before you get moon touched." He said. "While I am selfish and wish to spend as much time with you as possible sharing the wonders of my world, your ta'kasta'cariad will be waiting and he will be worried beyond reason now."

"I doubt that." I said under my breath as I took my place on the sled.

Navaari laughed. "You are far too hard on that man." He said and he signalled for the wolf-hounds to run. I threw back my head and laughed. It had been a very long time since I had felt so free, so light, and so alive. It lasted until we reached the village and I had to face Thrawn, angrier than I had ever known him before.

I followed Navaari into the sitting room. I felt the tension in the

air crackle before I ever saw Za'ar's face. When our eyes met I felt the full heat of his anger and I had to look away. I heard Navaari speak to him and looked up to see the two men face each other off, Navaari with his hand on Za'ar's shoulder.

"A'myshk'a, go and clean up," he said in a tone of voice that brooked no argument. I glanced at him and then again at Za'ar, hesitating.

"Now, Tjällh!" Navaari hissed.

I hurried past them both to my room and then to the fresher. By the time I closed the door of the bath room the argument was underway and their voices carried low and hard. I was grateful that the water drowned out the discussion. Even though I didn't understand the words, the tone was unmistakable.

I showered. The hot water felt good and I scrubbed myself clean. By the time I had finished and dressed the heat of the argument had gone leaving only a cold silence in its wake. I wrapped the warm robe over my night dress and walked into the sitting room. Both men stopped speaking and stared at me. It was unnerving.

"Better?" Navaari asked.

I nodded.

"Well, then, I shall go to bed." He said getting up out of the chair he had been sitting in. "Nikätza'arth'pavjäska, remember well all that I have said." He came over to me and gave me a kiss on the cheek and then without saying anything else he left us alone, closing the door firmly behind him. The silence he left behind him was the worst I had even known. I could not look at Thrawn and I could not turn and run. His quiet manner was unnerving and while yelling at me would not change anything, that was simply not his way, it would have been so much easier to deal with.

Finally when I could bear it no longer I whispered. "I'm sorry." The words knotted in my gut and choked in my throat.

He stood up and folded his arms across his chest. He took a deep steady breath and said in a cold, hard voice. "Merlyn, what were you thinking?" He only ever used my first name when he was displeased or being formal.

"I wasn't." I answered.

His jaw clenched. "No. You were not." His quiet anger hit me like a wave. He was still but his fury was not.

I looked away from his hard stare. A great lump rose up in my throat from my chest as though one of my nightmare monsters was trying to claw its way out from the inside. The grief burned and the more

I tried to stop the tears that welled up in my eyes, unwanted, unbidden, the worse the ache got. I tried hard to fight against it but it was a losing battle. I was too tired, too wrung out to control any of my own emotions any more. I knew I simply could no longer stop this tempest from breaking. I turned my back to him and clenched my fists, struggling against the one thing that would finally help to free my soul. I had no idea why I had such a hard time letting go but it always came down to a fight.

“Let it go.” He said not moving from where he stood.

It was emotional vomit and when it hit, it was a kick in the belly. I went to my knees and buried my head in my hands. Sobs which sounded ugly and raw, burned in my ears and tore at my throat. The dam broke and I cried. Vicious, gut wrenching bawling, the kind that made one’s nose run and face blotchy and red. I did not notice him kneel down at my side but when, after a few moments, he pulled me into his body and cradled me against him, stroking my still damp hair I cried even harder. I felt as though I were broken from the inside out and nothing in the galaxy would ever fix it.

He held on to me tightly, whispering in his language words I did not understand but the tone said, ‘there, there child everything will be alright’. I didn’t believe him; I didn’t think that anything would ever be alright ever again. I cried until there was nothing left, until there were no more tears just shuddering, hiccupping breaths. My own body spasming against the sudden release of emotion it had been carrying around for far too long. I had not wept like that in a very, very long time and Jyrki had been the reason for it then as well.

“I hate him.” I said when I finally found my voice.

He tried to lift my face upward but I fought him. “No, I’m all splotchy.” I said.

“Look at me.” He commanded in a quiet voice. I did as he asked. He wiped away the remnants of my tears with his thumbs. He held my gaze as he spoke. “I would kill this man with my bare hands for what he has done to you, but that will not change what has happened.” He said. “Hating him will solve nothing and such a strong word should not be bandied about lightly. It will eat you up inside and turn you into the darkness you try so hard to avoid.”

I looked at him and it occurred to me as he spoke these words that this is what the Emperor wanted from me. Slowly I began to understand, wondering if Thrawn had known this all along. I nodded and looked away from his steady gaze.

“I made your shirt all wet.” I said.

He smiled. “I think I will live.” He tucked two fingers under my chin and made me look up at him again. “Why did you venture out into the blizzard?” he asked.

I shrugged. A dozen answers went through my mind all of them truthful to some degree or another but the one answer that leapt to the forefront was also the simplest. “I wanted to see what it was like.”

He gave me a look. “Even though you knew it meant possible death?”

“Part of me knew,” I said. “But I didn’t care, that was not important.” He frowned but I continued. “I have no good answers, I know you want one but I don’t have any. I wanted to walk away from everything and the storm, well, it called to me. I didn’t think, I just reacted.”

“Have you ever done such a thing before?”

“Yes, but that is a story I don’t want to tell you right now.” that memory made me smile.

He nodded. “There are those among my kind who seek answers to the questions that have no answers. They go to extraordinary lengths to look within themselves and find peace. Sometimes you remind me of these people. We call them *Tyn k’etsja tavi vai’jash me akia*, the seekers of beauty and light.” He sighed. “You do not understand the reasons for why you do these things because you act on instinct and you trust to something that is indefinable. Your journey takes you far and wide and the path is hard.”

“Seems odd to hear you sum it up like that but, yes that’s more or less what it is like.” I sniffed. He handed me a handkerchief and I used it gratefully.

“Did your walk in the blizzard give you any insights?” he asked after a while.

“You mean aside from the fact that snow and wind is cold and really hard to walk through?” I asked.

He made a face and arched an eyebrow.

“Yes, but don’t ask me what they are because I am still trying to sort that all out.”

“Tell me,” he asked in a tone of voice which said he already knew the answer. “Did you like being in the middle of the snow fury?”

“How did you know that?”

“Recognition.” He said cryptically and then gently added. “Kirja’navaar’inkjerii was right about you when he said he saw in you a, how would you put it, kindred spirit. You and he are much alike. He thinks that you are blessed by the snow gods. Most humans would have

perished in that storm, tracer chip or not.”

I sighed a deep shuddery breath. “I would never argue with Navaari, but I don’t think acting like an idiot counts as being blessed by anything other than an incredible lack of brains.”

“Do not underestimate faith, A’myshk’a, it is a far more powerful thing than most beings ever give it credit for and you seem to have it in abundance.”

“I have faith? Faith in what?” I asked. I didn’t understand what he meant bit this.

He just smiled, but he didn’t answer. I leaned my head against his chest, suddenly weary beyond imagining. “Why is it that when ever I am with you I always end up either falling asleep or crying?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Well, firstly, that is not always the case. Sometimes we dance or have the occasional silent but interesting conversation and secondly, I would venture to say that somewhere deep down in that addled brain and soul of yours, you trust me enough to let go and be yourself. I take it as a great compliment, if you really want to know.” He drew a deep breath. “However, I have to tell you, you are a most frustrating creature.”

“Why?”

“Because just when I think I have worked out how you will most likely react you do something utterly contrary to what I expect.”

“You mean you hadn’t foreseen my taking a walk?”

“Not exactly.” He said. “But I am learning that you do have a flair for the dramatic.”

I nodded and sighed. He got to his feet and pulled me up with him. “You must be very tired.” He said. “I know I am.”

“Yes, you’re right.” I agreed.

“We can speak more tomorrow,” He said. “if you want to.”

I paused for a moment. “Navaari told me you knew what it was like to be isolated, to be imprisoned. “

He looked at me for a moment and then nodded. “In a manner of speaking, I do. It is a very long story and I promise one day I will tell you but not tonight.”

“We seem to have many long stories to share with each other, then.”

He smiled slightly. “Well, as long as you do not take any more suicidal walks in violent weather, perhaps we will have time to share them as well as other things.”

I nodded and reluctantly went to my room. I left the door open a little and put the lantern I had brought with me on the bed side table.

My mind whirled and I couldn’t still my thoughts. I lay in bed I listened to the sounds of Za’ar moving about the sitting room, turning off lights and also going to bed. Even though everything was quiet, the noise in my head just seemed to get louder. I tossed and turned until I couldn’t stand it any more. Making my decision I got out of bed and quietly opened the door that separated our two rooms. I stood in the doorway backlit by the lantern on my bedside table. He was lying on his back. I thought he was asleep but then he opened his eyes and stared at me. For a moment I hesitated uncertain of his reaction. I was about to go back to bed when he leaned up on one elbow and cocked his head to one side in question.

“I don’t want to be alone.” I said by way of an answer.

He patted the empty side of his bed and pulled the covers back. I went to him without fear and curled up by his side as he lay back down. I rested my head in the hollow where his arm and his shoulder met. He wrapped his arm around me and pulled me close. His skin was warm and he smelled like home. I looked up into his face and for a moment our eyes met. Desire flared like blaster fire, making me gasp. Suddenly all I wanted was to kiss him, was for him to kiss me. It was a greedy, desperate need and I looked to him for answers. He read this easily in my eyes and stroked my hair.

“I know what you want,” he said quietly, “I want it also but now is not the right moment.”

I knew he was right, we were both exhausted but I asked the question anyway. “Will there ever be a right moment?”

He arched an eyebrow and gave me one of those looks. “Yes, do not doubt that.”

I sighed and nestled into the warmth of his body, breathed in his scent deeply. I traced my fingers absently up and down the center of his bare chest from the hollow between his collar bones to his abdomen. He caught my hand with his and kissed my palm. “You do not make waiting easy, though.” He said, shifting so that he was lying on his side. He wrapped himself around my body and he held on to me tightly.

“Good.” I whispered back sleepily, burrowing into his warmth.

He chuckled as he caressed my back with the tips of his fingers. In the grace of his embrace, I fell asleep.

It was the sound of talking that woke me up. Half awake I listened thinking that perhaps it was Navaari but it was not. My skin crawled as the familiar voice, distorted via the holonet filtered through the half open door. I could only hear on side of the conversation, Thrawn’s and it was the tail end.

“Yes, Your Highness, I understand.” He said and then closed the

connection.

I watched as Thrawn entered the room and stood at my side. “Good, you are awake. We need to return to Coruscant. I have been recalled to duty, my leave cut short.” He said.

“When?”

“Immediately. I’ll let Kirja’navaar’inkjerii know we must go now. Get dressed and pack.” He didn’t sound very happy about it though and he added. “I’m sorry.”

“I understand, duty calls. You have to save the galaxy from evil.”

“Something like that.” He smiled slightly and left the room.

Getting ready quickly was easy to do and I didn’t have much to pack. I was ready by the time Navaari came into the sitting room carrying a tray of breakfast things.

“Nikätza’arth’pavjäska will return shortly, he had business with the Tribal High Elder before you both leave. I thought while he was gone you and I could share breakfast.” He said.

I was grateful and I was hungry.

“Are you alright? Is everything settled between you two?”

Navaari asked handing me a cup of very sweet tea.

“I think so. He doesn’t ever really let me get away with feeling sorry for myself.” I said.

“Good.” He nodded. “As soon as he is ready, I’ll take you both out to the landing pad.” He told me. “Are you all packed?”

I nodded. This conversation felt stilted and sad. I didn’t want to leave this place and didn’t know how to say what I really wanted to.

“A’myshk’a, I have something for you.” He said suddenly and he handed me a small leather pouch. “It is a way to keep in touch.” he said.

I slipped the small metal disk that was attached to a leather thong, like one of the amulets I wore, out of the bag. It looked more like beautiful jewellery than a transmitter or holonet device.”

“How does it work?” I asked turning it over.

Navaari smiled and took it from my fingers and showed me then handed it back.

“That’s very clever and I can always reach you?”

He nodded. “Unless the weather is really bad and I am out on a hunt in it.” He sighed. “I wanted to give you an option should you ever need help again. You can wear it like a pendant or hide it in something. My people often keep them as a part of their masks. It can also work as a tracking device and most seeker machines will not find it.”

“And people think the Dantassi are a backwater race.” I said.

“We promote that idea, Tjällh. The less the rest of the Galaxy

knows about us the better, when you are a thing of myth and bedtime story then you are both quietly respected and left alone to your own devices. Our technology is kept secret for a good reason. The Chiss are much the same. We keep ourselves to ourselves.”

I nodded and slipped the tiny disk over my head, tucking it under my clothes. “Thank you.”

Navaari nodded. “Do not be sad, we will see each other again.” He said. I was about to answer when Za’ar, looking more Imperial and Thrawn like than he had in the last few days, walked back into the room.

“Ready?” he asked as he picked up his things and began to slip on the warm clothes against the journey to the landing pad.

I finished my tea and with help from Navaari got into the long fur coat. There was little to say and the mood was heavy and quiet. Navaari and Za’ar spoke to one another in Dantassi–Cheunh completely ignoring me. It sounded serious. I sat on the sled, as I had when we had arrived and watched the world of white whip by us. It was cold and over cast, the sky a foreboding colour of grey. I wondered if there was another storm coming in. The trip seemed faster than I remembered and before I knew it we had arrived at the landing pad. It was strange to see my ship all covered with snow. I took off my mask and tucked it away in the satchel slung across my shoulder. Thrawn had already opened the ship up and was loading the bags inside. He and Navaari said their goodbyes and then he went onboard.

I looked at Navaari and didn’t know what to say. So much had happened and it seemed like a dream. He moved to me and pulled me into a bone crunching hug.

“Ariathe’Ka Ia.” He whispered in my ear. “If you need me, I am here for you.” He said holding me at arms length and holding my gaze. “Do something for me?” he asked. I nodded. “Talk with your father. Do not lose that contact. Perhaps he did not give you life with his seed, but he raised you and he loves you. Do not throw that away.” He said.

I nodded. “I promise.” I said.

“Do not forget,” he said urgently. “Your job is not who you are, it is what you do. Do not let it destroy you.”

“You sound like Za’ar.” I said.

He smiled. “I shall take that as a compliment.” He said. “You had better go. Do not look back, that is bad luck. We will be meeting again, I promise.”

“How?”

He smiled. “I am Jhal’kai, I will find you.” And he placed three fingers up on my forehead then touched his own.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

He smiled. “I tell you the next time I see you.” He said. “Now go.” I did as he asked and I didn’t look back. Thrawn already had the engine on start up and by the time I stripped off the heavy coat and had made it to the bridge we were already styling to take off.

The engines blew snow all around us and even though I looked for him I could not see Navaari as we left the planet’s surface. I felt that awful ache of letting go, of already missing someone before you have even left them behind. I sat in the co pilot’s seat and strapped in. The ship began its fight against the planet’s gravity and I closed my eyes. When we had broken through the atmosphere and he had set the nav computer I got up and went back to change out of the layers of clothes into something easier to travel in. I made tea and brought a cup to Thrawn. He was broody and silent and I wondered how serious the conversation with the Emperor had been.

“We should arrive on Coruscant in just under thirty five hours.” He said.

“You’re pushing the hyperdrive awfully hard.” I told him, after doing the calculations in my head.

“I have an excellent mechanic on board.” He told me and smiled for the first time since last night. “Thank you for the tea.”

I sat down and nodded. “Is everything alright?” I asked after a long silence which I could no longer stand.

He was thoughtful for a moment. “Yes, I believe so.” He said, and then added. “Things will change when I return to the Imperial City. I have been given command of a new ship and the duties I now have will take me very far away from the core planets for long periods of time.”

“So what you are telling me is that we will not get see each other very often.” I said.

He smiled. “It is sometimes very hard to hide anything from you.”

“On the contrary.” I replied a little testily.

He nodded. “Of course I tell you this in confidence because I need for you to understand that duty comes before everything else.”

“I do understand, perhaps much more that anyone will ever give me credit for.” I told him tartly. “Is this something you wanted, this assignment?”

He took a deep, thoughtful breath. “Yes. It is necessary for the safety of my people as well as for the security of the Galaxy.” He said.

We sat in silence for a while sipping on hot tea, watching the swirl of hyperspace until I broke it.

“May I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“If we had stayed on Hjal one more night would we have ... I mean would you...?” I stumbled, trying to find the right words, feeling very awkward and blushed.

“Would I have bedded you?” he asked simply.

I nodded.

A very slow smile played across his lips. “Miss Gabriel, from the moment you joined me in my bed last night, the plan was to not let you out of it for at least the next twenty four hours.” I blushed even more and that made his smile widen. Then he said. “Sadly, things did not turn out quite as I had imagined and unless you find this ship, good as she is, a suitable place for such a union, I am afraid it could be some time before we have the opportunity for such a precious, intimate ... conversation,” He shrugged ever so slightly. “I would prefer that both the timing and place were special instead of one or the other.” Then he added a little too casually, “Although, I am certain you have plenty of handsome, younger suitors who would wish to share this honour with you.”

“Maybe I do, however I prefer wait.” I told him a little airily.

“Why?” He asked, sipping his tea.

I looked at him for a moment wondering if he was asking this as a serious question or if he was playing with me. I decided he was being serious, genuinely curious and not wanting his ego fed.

“Because, Captain, as you so very eloquently put it some time ago, there are some things in this galaxy worth waiting for and you are one of them.” Then added, “And whether more handsome or younger, know this I do not want anyone else. So, unless you change the rules of the game, it stays like it is.”

He opened his mouth to say something but I reached over and placed a finger upon his lips. “The sand people have a saying; *Desire is good for the soul.*”

He nodded slowly and when I withdrew my fingertip he asked. “How is it that you can be so fragile one moment and so strong the next?”

I grinned. “I think that’s called being female.” I said and I got up to return to the galley. He laughed that deep rich laugh that warmed my being. I took the empty cup he offered me and went to get more tea. I hoped that this return trip would be uneventful and as good as the moment we had just shared.

In difference to the journey leaving Coruscant, the journey back to the core planet was a lot more fun. Thrawn was a good travelling companion and the conversations were as varied as they were

interesting. I badgered him to teach me more about his mother tongue and we spent a large amount of time engaged in Cheunh language lessons.

“You certainly do have a gift.” He told me after a particularly intense session. “Most beings have a great deal of difficulty managing to even pronounce our names correctly.”

“It’s a beautiful language.” I told him honestly. “Like music in some ways, one just needs to get the phrasing, the intonation just so.”

That had pleased him and we had continued. I had to laugh though, like with every other language I had ever had to learn the first things I was taught how to say were, ‘Hullo my name is, I come from and where is the nearest docking bay, cantina, hotel.’

When we were not engaged in discussions and language lessons, we were taking watch and or sleeping. My sleep patterns had not really changed much and I still woke up, more often than not, bathed in cold sweat, gasping for breath. It was frustrating more than anything else.

“These episodes, they will abate eventually but that will take time. The ordeal you suffered is not easily forgotten. The body remembers and it takes time to let go. On Hjal you made the first steps in this particular journey but you cannot expect to be free so quickly.” Thrawn had said as we sat at the small dining table after a particularly bad episode that had me screaming blue murder. He had poured me a shot of brandy and watched as I drank it with still shaky hands holding the tin cup. “Humans are so full of strong emotions, and you are like a wild storm. It is a curiosity to me how you can be so conflicted, so full of such feelings and still be rational and even logical. Your dreams are perhaps a way for you to come to terms with these conflicted emotions, and maybe you should pay attention to what it is telling you.”

“I don’t even know what they are of.” I said with a sigh. “I just wake up terrified, there are no images to remember, nothing concrete to hold on to and analyze. It’s just fear. How do I fight that? How do I get past that?”

He had shaken his head. “Well, I do not know.” He said honestly. “Nightmares are not something I have much experience with and I am in no position to give you advice on how to cope with them. Perhaps you might want to talk with Lord Vader on this subject, after all he is also Force sensitive and maybe he has a better idea of where the dreams come from and why you do not remember them.” I had said nothing to this. The thought of having a conversation on the topic of night mares with Lord Vader was about as appealing as having my hands chopped off.

We were twenty seven hours into our trip back to Coruscant and

I was just tired of being tired. I lay my head on my arms on the table and listened to the hum of the ship. It took me a few seconds to realise that something was not quite right with the pitch of that hum and there was a slight, almost imperceptible shimmy that shouldn’t have been there. Thrawn went to say something but I shut him up suddenly with a wave of my hand and then before he could even ask what was wrong I raced to the bridge and looked over the consol. The read outs confirmed my fears and I was in the middle of shutting down the hyperdrive when Thrawn caught up with me.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Hear that sound?”

“I hear engines.”

“Hyperdrive’s overheating.” I said hoping I had initiate shutdown in time. The ship shuddered more violently. Hyperdrive malfunctions were usually fast and fatal.

“What was that?”

“Not sure, if we’re lucky it is...” but I never got my sentence finished, we suddenly dropped out of hyperspace just as a very large resounding bang came from the stern of the ship and we rocked about like a repulsor with a bad lift.

“Buggery sandrats!” I swore and raced to the engine room. I opened the door and stepped back quickly. Smoke poured from the small room and it stank of over heated machinery and hydraulic fuel. I hit the vents and grabbed a filter mask, took the flashlight off the hook and opened up the engine hatch. I was ass up and head down in the pit when Thrawn came in and squatted down beside me.

“So what is the news?” he asked calmly, cupping the second mask over his mouth and nose.

“Wait a second...” I said Squirming further down the pit wall trying to peer under the hyperdrive. My arm brushed the engine and I yelped as it burned me.

“Merlyn...?”

“Shut up and let me do my job, damn it!” I yelled at him. “Grab a hold of my legs will you!”

He did as I asked and I slid further down along side the engine and twisted underneath it. I shone the light across the still steaming machinery and sighed when I finally found the problem, or at least what I figured was the problem.

“Up, up.” I said reaching my arm up for him to grab. He was strong and hauled me to the floor with ease. I sat with my legs dangling over the edge and brushed sweat and hair from my face.

“Well, we were incredibly lucky.” I told him trying very hard to keep the anger from spilling over into my voice.

“Define lucky.” He said as I got up.

“Lucky, as in still alive and not obliterated into tiny bits.” I replied crossly.

“What is the problem?” he asked ignoring my snippiness.

I began looking through my spare parts chest and getting tool kit out. “I think we blew one of the transpacitors and the hyperdrive over heated. If I hadn’t started shut down procedure when I had, we’d be space litter now.”

“How did you know, was it your force sense?” he arched an eyebrow.

“No.” I sighed and shook my head. “I know my ship, Captain, as you pointed out I am an excellent mechanic. I heard the problem; she told me what was wrong.” I said patting the bulk head. “I told you to watch pushing the hyperdrive that much.”

“This ship was refitted with a top of the line engine, one that we should be able to push past specs for a decent amount of time.” He said with a hint of annoyance.

I nodded. “Yep, one should be able to do that but not with sub standard transpacitors in it.”

“Substandard?”

I nodded. His jaw clenched and he was clearly angry.

“Can you fix it?” he asked.

“I can, lucky for us I have a spare transpacitor on board but we’ll be on auxiliary power and life support till I can get this fixed, can’t run the sublight engine either I need to get right underneath everything, can’t do that while she’s running, too damned hot and,” I added. “I’ll need your help.”

“What ever you need me to do just tell me.” He said.

“Well it’s not complicated; I need you to hold on to me.” And I grinned at the expression that flashed across his face. “Hand me those coveralls, please?”

I stripped out of my dress and stepped into the coveralls. Laid all the tools I was going to need out beside where Thrawn was, still heel to haunch staring at the hyperdrive as though just looking at it would fix the problem. I had the spare part in my hand and sighed. I really hated this particular operation. Transpacitors were in the worst place on an engine and an absolute bugger to get to. In order to fix this I had to hang upside down with my back to the pit wall. Usually the hyperdrive would be lifted out while in space dock or ground based dock but that would just take far

too long in our case and we didn’t have the equipment on board for it either. One could if one was small enough slide in under the entire engine and work there but I never liked being under an engine that way. I had seen a man pinned when the whole engine block came down on him and after that incident I never wanted to risk it. Usually, there wasn’t much on that side of the hyperdrive that could really go wrong. Transpacitors, even when they were not that good, rarely blew.

“Just make sure I don’t fall into the pit.” I said as I explained what needed to be done. “Or else it will take you until you are an old man to reach Coruscant.”

“What do you usually do if you are alone and this happens?” he asked coolly.

“If I was on my own it wouldn’t have happened, I am not the one pushing the engines over their limit.” I said more tartly than I had meant to, “But usually there would be grab bars I’d hook my feet under to brace myself, however when the ship was refitted some moron saw fit to have them removed without thinking about engine repairs! So now you will have to sit and somehow hang on to my legs so I don’t split my skull open fixing this engine. Think you can handle that?”

“Yes.” He said. And I shimmied backwards, upside down to work in the small space under the hyperdrive engine while he made sure I didn’t fall in.

I love engines. I love everything about them, the feel, the smell, the complexity, but I really wished that who ever designed them thought about having to fix them on the fly as well. The HWK series ship was well loved but there was some design flaws that made it interesting to mess about with. Whoever had done the refit and overhaul of this ship had really not given any thought to repairs, and it annoyed me to no end that in order to replace the transpacitor I had to be an acrobat with contortionist abilities.

Hanging upside down in a tiny space next to a hot, oily engine that smelled like a cross between over cooked hyper drive fluid and burnt metal, was not my idea of fun. The Transpacitor was right underneath and I had to twist to work on it. It took a lot of cursing and swearing to get the part off. When that was done I had Thrawn pull me back up and I showed him my find.

“Blown.” I said, annoyed. “I hate it when people put crap on a good engine.” I grabbed the new part and the tool I would need to attach it and with a deep breath, bent backwards as Thrawn eased me down carefully.

It was fussy work to attach the new transpacitor and more than

once I was certain my colourful language made him wince. Not for the first time did I wonder why everything had to be so small, hard to get at and annoyingly difficult to reattach.

“Hand me the sealant will you, small tube of yellow stuff to your left.” I yelled, shifting enough so that I could hand him the small spanner I didn’t need any more. He placed what I had asked for in my hand and I finished the work. When that was done I took a good look at the rest of the engine from this angle, it wasn’t often I nose dived into the pit so it was a good opportunity to check everything out. I didn’t see anything unusual or out of place. This was a new engine and as Thrawn had said, top of the line. The use of substandard external parts was a bit worrisome though. I handed back the sealant goo and asked for the hydro-spanner again to make some minor adjustments here and there. When I was done, and Thrawn had helped me back up I just sat for a moment, a little dizzy. We were now sitting legs locked over legs, the way circus artists who fly on swings did. It was a good way to support my weight while I was upside down but now it meant I straddled his lap. I looked straight into his face, while he held me, hands on my hips. There was a moment when I wondered if we would blow the engine up with the tension that had suddenly flared between us. I didn’t take my eyes from his until he broke the moment.

“Everything under control?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Think so.” I nodded finding my voice. “Just can’t feel my legs any more.” I patted his arm to let me up. I had to shake the pins and needles out.

“So, what is the status, are we good to go now?” he asked, watching me put my tools away and clear up.

“No, not yet. Need to wait another hour, to let everything cool right down. I don’t want to risk damage to the second transpacitor. I don’t have any more spares.” I put the tool box back in its cubby hole. Once I was done clearing up, I unbuttoned the coveralls, I was sweating to death. I stripped off the top half and tied the sleeves around my waist. I was glad the little undershirt I wore had no sleeves.

“No way to push that?” he asked.

I turned around and caught him looking at me intently. There was a flash of hunger in his expression and while he masked it swiftly with a raised eyebrow and a slight smirk I still felt it. It made my heart race.

“What?” I asked testily.

“Can you speed up that start estimate any?” he repeated, ignoring the question behind my question.

I picked up the transpacitor. “See this? We don’t want another to blow. By rights we should be dead. Under normal circumstances I would recommend we stay dark for three or four hours so that I can run some serious diagnostics but you are in a hurry so I calculated I can push it to two. Now, I’ve already spent one hour hanging up side down fixing this thing so that leaves another hour for cool down. When we start the drive up again it has to be slow and easy. I know you are in a rush to get away from me and back to saving the galaxy from evil, but this is the best I can do. If you think you can do better, you are welcome to try.” I stood with my hands on my hips.

He took a few steps towards me, I backed away. “Miss Gabriel,” he said with a slow smile. “I would not presume to question the quality of your work or risk raising your ire.” He reached out and took the blown transpacitor from my hands and studied it. “Good that you had a spare.”

“I don’t like being caught out; it can lead to ... unpleasant situations.” I said backing up a few more steps as he manoeuvred me slowly against the bulk head so that he could put the broken part he still held in his hands on the shelf to the left of me.

“So I infer.” He said softly. There was look in his eyes that made my stomach drop. “You have grease on your nose.” He pointed out.

I wiped at it with my fingers and this only made him laugh.

“Now you have more grease on your nose.” He told me. We were standing very close to each other and I had no place to go. The bulk head at my back was warm.

“Well, think of it as a fashion statement then.” I told him as casually as I could.

“Suits you.” He told me. “Flattering accessory to your...” he gave me the once up and down, “elegant outfit.”

I scowled at him, he was playing games. “Don’t you have work to do?” I asked.

“I thought we now had an hour of down time?”

“That’s right.”

“So that means I have an hour of nothing specific to do.” He said softly, leaning with both hands against the bulkhead, trapping me in between his arms.

“I am certain you could find something to pass the time.” I said trying to ignore the sudden swell of sandjiggers fluttering in my belly.

“Well, I had thought perhaps we might continue a much earlier conversation.” He told me casually but the tone of voice didn’t match the predatory look in his eyes. With the fingers of his left hand he traced the skin of my right arm. His touch gave me goose bumps and that made him

smile.

I swallowed, my mouth was dry. "I'm not feeling that chatty right now."

"Pity, I thought you enjoyed a heated debate." He whispered, brushing his lips against mine.

"Well," I conceded, "the taste of certain words can be stimulating."

He smiled. "And you certainly do have a talent with an alien tongue."

I made a face. This was a dangerous game he had started. "You know this constitutes serious verbal abuse, right?" I asked.

With a twitch of his lips, Thrawn leaned against my body with his and the heat between us rivalled the heat from the cooling engine. He watched my face, studied my eyes and then shook his head. I tried, without a lot of success, to get my breathing and my heart rate back under control, wondering what had brought this sudden passion play into game. He hesitated for just a moment and then he growled softly, "That's enough oral foreplay, don't you think?"

I am certain, that had I been given enough time to think of it, I would have come up with a suitable reply. He moved swiftly, smoothly wrapping one arm around my waist and the other hand he slipped behind my head pulling me to him. In the same graceful motion he brought his mouth crashing down on mine. Words, all thoughts of words, all consideration of spoken conversation were suddenly driven from my mind.

I loved how he made me feel. His mouth, his hands, my body, I lost myself to his beguiling attentions and just enjoyed it for what ever it was, hoping he did as well. This was not the first time we had done this, I hoped it would not be the last and each time we took it just a little further. His affections sent me reeling and left me utterly breathless. Time spun around us, warping forward and before I knew it he had drawn back from me and was caressing my face with his hands. I did not need to see any physical tell tale signs to know how he felt; I could sense the desire in him as certainly as I could taste my own. It built and gathered within us, between us, swirling about like smoke. I could feel the wildness, the hunger of it. I took a deep steadying breath to try and control it, pull it back so that, unlike last time, I didn't shower him with it. I know he was aware of this but he didn't say anything about it.

"I thought this was not the place for such... discussions." I breathed against his chest.

"My dear," He chuckled. "This was merely a minor discourse.

Consider it a reminder, if you will, of how interesting our conversations can and will be." He brushed his face against my hair.

I sighed. "For someone whose billionth foreign language is basic you use it with remarkable skill." I told him.

"It was a good way to pass the hour, was it not?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh I see, small talk. Just a minor distraction against the boredom of waiting?"

"Something like that." He smiled disengaging himself from me. "You know what they say, practice makes perfect."

I wondered just exactly what it was we were practicing. "Either that or one of us will spontaneously explode from all this... tension."

"That will be most interesting to observe." he said.

"These games are driving me crazy, you do know that right?"

His smile was slow and easy. "Perhaps that is the idea."

I shook my head. "You are so impossible."

He laughed out loud and then kissed my forehead. "Small moments such as these are rare. They remind me that I am more than just a member of the Imperial Navy, that there are distractions worth stopping for every now and then and that hidden under layers of dirty work clothes and engine grease are treasures well worth finding" He spoke softly. "These moments of stolen pleasure are precious." And then he left abruptly.

I took a long, deep, steadying breath and stripped out of the overalls and back into my dress. It took my body longer than my brain to calm down and I was grateful when my knees stopped trembling. I went the fresher and washed the grease off my face. I looked in the mirror and sighed, shaking my head. I was playing with fire, bound to get burned in the worst possible way and I was encouraging it.

I made my way to the bridge where Thrawn sat waiting for me. With a silent tiny prayer that the busted transcapacitor was the only problem with the hyperdrive I started up the engines and listened to its whine. I didn't even realise I was holding my breath. The sublight engine revved and when that was hot I began the start up sequence for the hyperdrive. It sounded okay so I hit the switch. The ship shivered a little and the stars did what stars always do when one slipped into hyperspace. Nothing sounded out of the ordinary and I let go the breath I was holding.

"Seems okay." I said.

"As I said before, you are an excellent mechanic." He told me with a cool smile.

"I am glad one of us has some faith in my skills. Now, I think I

need a cup of tea. Want one?"

"Of course."

"Just do me a favour?" I asked.

He arched an eyebrow in reply.

"Do not run her hot. Don't push our luck any further." I said.

He gave me a little mock salute. "Aye, aye captain."

I just stuck my tongue out at him and with a sigh went to make tea. I sat down at the little dining table and rested my chin on my arms. I loved fixing engines but it was hard work. I listened to the sounds all around me and smiled. Everything was normal. I just hoped it stayed that way.

The rest of the journey back to Coruscant was uneventful. I babied my engines although they didn't really need it and Thrawn indulged me on this. We spent the remaining time easy with each other's company. The language lessons continued only now it was my turn to share my knowledge of Huttese. I was surprised at how quickly he picked up on what I had to teach and only a couple of times did I catch him out, laughing at the funny things he had said.

"Huttese is mostly a spoken language but I do have some data that might help you if you really want to learn more." I told him.

Thrawn smiled. "That would be most helpful, but I do enjoy our joint language lessons and nothing can substitute learning with a native speaker."

"True." I agreed. "Will I be able to understand Navaari if I become fluent in Cheunh?"

He nodded. "Probably, while the two languages have splintered and the dialects have distinct differences, they do share the same base. You have a good ear, it would not take you long to pick those differences up," he said. "But you will have to work hard to be fluent, it is not an easy language for non Chiss to attempt, let alone master, even for someone as gifted as you."

"Too bad you are not sticking around." I grinned.

He just nodded. "Well, as you so aptly put it, duty calls."

The sudden passion and heat of our wordless conversation in the engine room was not spoken of but also not forgotten. Certain glances and smiles hinted at the heat beneath the winter and more than once I had wanted to ask him about it but there was just never the right moment. In the end I was glad of this, some things were better left just enjoyed and not analysed to death. I liked his attention, his affection but I respected his distance. I also, oddly enough, understood it.

We arrived on Coruscant very early in the morning. The tall

buildings were half buried in a sea of cloud. The sun was just beginning to show itself and everything was bathed in a beautiful pink light that danced about us as we made our descent to the landing pad.

"I have made arrangements for ship repairs." Thrawn told me after the ship had touched down and the engines were shut off.

I nodded. "I hope this crew will know what they are doing."

He gave me a tight smile. "Well, if they do not then there will hell to pay."

For a moment we stopped what we were doing and just looked at each other, words were not necessary.

"If there is time I will try to see you before I leave but I cannot promise it." He said.

"Then say goodbye now and leave it at that." I told him.

He smiled. "In Cheunh there is no word for goodbye. We say *a'chitra saftyn'oni*, which means something like, until the next moment."

I nodded and repeated the words, tasting them. He gave me one of those rare smiles that reached his eyes and lit up his face. His kiss was passionate and full of promise. "You will hear from me, the usual way. Jarack will see to it that your correspondence reaches me." He said, opening the main hatch.

I nodded. There was nothing else to say and he left the ship without looking back.