

# Daughter of the Empire

Book 1

Written by F. Messer 2005-2006

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**This story contains spoilers so you have been warned!**

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **The Ashes and the Fire 1**

The day to day office work was mostly sorted out. It seemed to me that the weeks that followed after the Grand Ball were mostly quiet and uneventful. All the excitement and buzz now gone and the intrigue and general plotting returned to its behind doors state of affairs. This meant that for people like me, life was fairly dull.

It was more than dull it was frustrating to be honest. In spite of his promise to teach me in the ways of the Force and to guide me further in the studies he had suggested, Lord Vader had all but ignored me. He was busy. I understood that especially since I was the one who set the appointment calendar and knew his schedule. It didn't change the fact that I was also being ignored. Three times we had made arrangements to spar and three times he had stood me up, not even bothering to leave a note or a message to say he had been called away on Imperial business and would not be back for a few days/ weeks/ what ever.

To get rid of the frustration I would go to my quiet spot in the old part of the Palace, pretty much certain that now Thrawn was also off somewhere in the galaxy doing his thing no one would bother me. Even Shiv was not around at the moment having been sent of the Emperor's retreat on Naboo to do some redecorating, apparently the Emperor likes to spend a great deal of time there and it is Shiv's job to get it ready for his arrival.

In the time before the sun sets but after the high bright light of the afternoon is my favourite for practice. Not that I find it hot here or anything but the brightness of the light is unappealing and I prefer to fight in the late afternoon evening especially in twilight.

I swiped a reinforced fighting stave from the combat practice room and stored it in the room I now used for dance and martial art practice. It was a large quiet space and I could work out for hours without being interrupted by others wanting to share the space or worse have it for themselves. Sometimes there was a class held in the main practice room and sometimes I would watch them. Many forms of martial arts were practiced here and many combat forms as well. While there were also several practice areas, it seemed that people liked the one in my part of the palace because it was very spacious and well lit. So far no one had minded me just observing their classes but then again I hadn't done that all that often either. I watched what was taught and tried, when I was on my own, to imitate the moves. This was not always so easy without a teacher or someone to spar with. In the end I mostly ran through the entire move forms Jyrki had

taught me and tried to add on what I had seen, often landing on my ass in the process.

This evening had been no different. Bored and frustrated I made my way to my room and began to warm up and work out. I liked the simple grace of Jyrki's training but now that I had seen other forms of movement I felt this lacked power and was less about offence than they were about defence. Which, I suppose, would make sense given that Jyrki was a Jedi.

I have been trying to gather information of the Great Jedi Purge but the records are hard to get at and the information scattered and encrypted. My skills as a slicer are non existent and I had not yet gotten up the courage to ask Lord Vader to grant me even more access. I had settled for the main archives and reading about the history of the Empire. Much of that, I suspected, was created by the Emperor and his historians, after all history is written by the winners. There was no mention of the killing of children.

With a sigh I began my routine. It was difficult to concentrate on what I was doing because my annoyance and frustration kept getting in the way, making focus hard. Mostly I didn't want to find my inner calm I wanted to beat things to pieces. It's hard to do that when there is no sparring partner or droid and no hanging sparring bag around so I settled for a solid warm up and then straight into the fight routine. About half way through my routine I found my rhythm and began to get lost in the movements. Finally found my center of being so to speak. I don't know why I can do this easier when I dance than when I practice the fighting forms. It always seems to take me twice as long when I am working through the kata forms.

In dance, a spin is a thing of grace in the fighting forms it is a deadly weapon. In dance I spot so that I don't get dizzy, in the fight I focus on where my enemy is so that when I come out of the spin I know exactly where to hit him. I suppose it is the same principle. I often used to think how close the two forms were to each other. If I am in the right mood I can get them to flow from one to the other, but tonight was not like that. I was having a hard enough time concentrating as it was. Several times I had to execute the same move just to get it right. I was so deep in concentration that I never noticed the figure in the doorway watching me. I was in the middle of the third try of a spin when I caught the shape out of the corner of my eye. I wasn't expecting anyone and it broke my concentration in the middle of the spin, setting me off balance and I landed flat on my ass on the floor, I was furious and was about to unleash my temper in all it's glory when I recognized the shape of the cloak and immediately got to one knee.

"Do get up, my dear." He said coming towards me. "In this place I

think we can dispense with court formalities.”

“Yes, your Excellency.” I murmured a little unsure of why he was here.

“I enjoy watching you, girl, you have an aggressive energy I find refreshing, Lord Vader was right to want to keep you to himself. You are as passionate in this form of movement as you are in dance. It is very stimulating.”

I made a face.

“You are unhappy? I sense much frustration in you.” He said looking at me. “Walk with me, there is something I wish you to see and I would enjoy the company of such a lovely young lady without the oppressions of court etiquette.”

I put my hands behind my back and walked beside him as he left the room with the balcony and walked down the hallways into a part of the palace I had not yet explored.

“Tell me, my dear, what is frustrating you.” He asked as we walked.

“I wish to learn more about the weirding ways Lord Vader calls the force, he said that he would teach me but he is kept very busy. I do understand this but it is frustrating all the same.” I said. I didn’t see the point in lying about it.

The Emperor nodded. “Yes, indeed, Lord Vader has many demands on his time and little left over for a student. I have been thinking about this since our last conversation. I have spoken with him about you.”

I looked up at him and listened.

“I sense that you have formed a bond with him that will be difficult to break. Yet, I wonder if he is the right person to teach you in the ways that would be most beneficial to you. Like my apprentice, you are ruled by your passions, but where his stem from anger and hatred, yours arise from desire and a hunger, a yearning for more, you thirst for much. You have skills and talents far suited to a different kind of instruction. You require a more subtle hand as well as strength. Under the correct guidance you could reach your true potential, I fear that under Lord Vader's guidance alone this might not be possible. He has a tendency to be ....”

“Abrupt?” I finished for him.

He laughed softly. “Yes, yes indeed, that would be an apt description of his ways. I could arrange for someone to guide you in a more suitable direction if that would be your wish.”

“I would like that very much.” I said honestly. “But wouldn’t that make Lord Vader angry?”

The Emperor gave me a shrewd look and shook his head. “That is

not something for you to worry about. Lord Vader knows I have only his best interest at heart, this includes those under his protection.” He paused. “Of course, there are also other avenues of work here at the palace open to you should you wish to explore them. I am always on the look out for keen young people such as yourself.” He said

“That is very kind of you, but I like the job I do now.” And it was true.

The Emperor nodded. “I thought as much still from time to time I might have need of your skills and should I call upon you. I know I can count on your help?”

“Of course, Your Eminence.” I said.

“You will be a unique feature among those that work for me.” He said and I caught the scent of a lie, there were others like me, force sensitive and useful.

I glanced up at him and he smiled at me. It wasn’t an altogether pleasant experience. “That's not the truth.” I said. “Why would you lie to me about that? I don’t mind if I am not the only one.”

“Ah yes, I was not certain if Lord Vader had read your little talent in this area correctly, forgive the test, my dear, I had to be sure. “

“Did I pass?” I asked a bit annoyed.

“In more ways than one.” He said with a smile I didn’t like at all. He was playing the benevolent old man with me but underneath it all was something I could not put my finger on and it was very scary. “What sort of things would I be doing for you?”

“I have need of messengers willing to travel and deliver and pick up dispatches which I deem too important to be sent via normal transmissions. You have skills in piloting, you are able to dissemble truth from lie and you have force talent in certain areas which make you the ideal candidate for such a job. With some training to hone your skills you could be a very valuable member of the Empire and of even greater use to Lord Vader in the capacity of personal Assistant as well as to me.” He said.

“I would be honoured.” I said. It did sound interesting.

“I had hoped so. It would be such a shame to see your talent wasted on just a mindless office job.”

We had walked for a long time through the old hallways until we came to a doorway which he unlocked with a slight movement of his hand.

“I know of your love for the older part of this place and thought you might enjoy this. It was once the main site for the library but has been long abandoned. Lord Vader mentioned you had an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Many of the archives here have not been touched in a long time.

I am giving you complete access, a place for you to study in peace. I feel the training which you will undergo will only serve to make you thirstier for the academic studies to supplement them.”

I looked around in awe. He was right about no one being in this room for a long time it smelled of disuse and dust. I let my fingertips brush the shelves closest to me and felt the room call to me. There was more here than just old archives, there was power here waiting to be found. “Why are you giving this to me?” I asked suddenly.

He looked around and then back into my eyes. “If I had found you at an earlier age you would have come to me for training and perhaps even outshined my best pupil. You would have joined the ranks of my best courtesans and Concubines.” he shook his head and smiled. “But now I do not think such a position would suit you and as we have observed you have bonded with another, making it difficult for me to train you personally. While I am certain we could break that tie binding you with my apprentice, it might damage you in the process. You more useful alive to both of us and I enjoy seeing pretty things such as you in my presence. It would be a shame to waste. You are refreshingly different from most of the fools I must suffer daily. It will be interesting to hear what you learn from these old archives. And,” he said in a quiet voice, “I am not as evil as everyone makes me out to be. I enjoy being a patron of the arts and guide to those who need some guidance.”

There was a hint of untruth about what he was saying yet I could not figure it out and so I kept silent.

He lifted my chin with his fingertips. They were icy cold and he nodded slowly to himself. “I can see what draws him to you, why he likes you so much.” He said softly. “Doesn’t know he’s playing with fire, though.” He caressed the side of my face and then patted my shoulder. I was not sure who The Emperor was referring to and wasn’t about to ask. I was glad when he turned toward the door indicating it was time to leave.

“I am granting you access to this place and the area here. I enjoy the peace here in the old part of the palace and suspect you do as well, that is something we have in common.” He said as he closed the door. He handed me a key. “Keep it safe.” He said and we turned to head back the way we came.

“Tomorrow when you come for your practice I will arrange for an instructor to be here to meet you. The art form I am thinking of will be difficult and hard but I believe it will suit you best of all.”

“I am most grateful, your Excellency.” I said.

“Of course, and this will keep you out of trouble until Lord Vader

returns then you both will accompany us to the Retreat on Naboo, I am sure you will enjoy it there and Lord Vader and I have much business to attend to.”

“I have never been to Naboo.” I said.

He nodded. “I know.” He patted my arm. “Goodnight, my dear. You might want to rest, tomorrow will be strenuous.” And with that he left down a corridor I had never noticed before.

I had never been more grateful for a hot bath in my entire life. There were muscles in my body I never knew existed and they are complaining loudly. The Emperor had not been joking when he said it would be strenuous, in fact the last three days have been hell. As well as keeping up with the office work, arguing with Lord Vader and dealing with a fussy droid, I have been taken under the wing of a trainer in a martial art form I had never seen before. I mean, in the end the only really experience I have had with a fighting form was from Jyrki and I am not an expert. I met up with the trainer the Emperor had told me about at the balcony room shortly after I had finished work.

When I got to the room there was already another person there. Kneeling on the floor, his head bowed, facing towards the doors that led onto the balcony. He was a slight man with long silver hair tied back in a long tail. He was dressed in black and red and he did not move when I entered the room.

It seems to me that it is a common theme among people who teach these sorts of arts that speaking is not really involved and mostly the student learns by following and doing. I am not sure how I like this method but in the end when the Emperor sets you up with a master teacher it is probably best not to argue too much about it.

I stood and watched him for a few moments but he neither moved nor acknowledged my presence. I sat down next to him and imitated his position. It was surprisingly comfortable to sit like this, both knees on the floor, heel to haunch and hands resting on the hips with the elbows pointed outward. I tried to match his breathing but I couldn’t do it so instead I just concentrated on my own. In and out, slow and steady.

At first it was difficult to concentrate, I have never really been good at any form of meditation. I noticed how the floor bit into my knees. How holding my body still seemed to create havoc with my muscles. My thoughts would jumble and become chaotic instead of quiet and restful. It was almost as if the very act of being still created unrest and turmoil. I much preferred to move my body, letting the energy flow outward not try and calm it from within. For what seemed forever I fought against myself, and became more

and more agitated.

Jyrki had tried to teach me this inner stillness, finding your center he had called it, but I was a fidget and sitting still was almost impossible for me. The trick, he has said was to not focus to being still, to not concentrate and force the quiet to come but rather to allow the stillness to enter oneself and surrender to it. I never surrendered to anything in my life. I was not about to start with surrendering to myself.

I would storm off in frustration and annoyance and go work through some more of the vigorous moves he had taught me. I would feel better afterwards but not calm and usually after one of these frustrating sessions Jyrki could beat me easily, I always ended up flat on my ass.

The time ticked by slowly and as it did so I felt something shift. I was determined to stay the course and show this strange man that what ever it was that the Emperor had seen in me wasn't false. Gradually, I felt myself let go of some sort of tension I had been holding. My breathing which had been forced, steadied and I began to feel order in the chaos. I closed my eyes and allowed time to pass. It was not easy but in difference to my attempts to center with Jyrki, this felt right, as though I were collecting energy, like a ball of light, in the very core of my being. I was lost within myself and did not hear the man at my side move. When he touched my shoulder I did not jump in fright as I usually would have, but simply looked up. Two hours had flown by and I had not even noticed.

Not one word passed between us. I did not even know his name, but I could feel his strength and power. I tried to touch him with the force but there was nothing to find. I could sense the Force around him but it was some how different from what I felt from Lord Vader and from the Emperor. This man did not use the Force but he was somehow surrounded by it. I didn't understand this but I didn't want to break the silence either. It was somehow refreshing. He began to move one extraordinarily simple motion which he repeated over and over. I began to mirror him. In silence we moved in tandem me trying to imitate his ease and grace repeating the same simple movement again and again. We did this for two hours straight. Not one word spoken. It was as strange as it was somehow comfortable. Like slipping back into a routine I had left behind but had never really forgotten.

Once, I guess, he felt I had the move down well enough to satisfy him, he stopped. My limbs were trembling and I was soaked with sweat while he did not even appear to be breathing hard. He was not a tall man and when we stood face to face I looked him straight in the eyes, which were a deep steel grey, matching his hair.

I did not know what to do. Speaking to him before he spoke to me first seemed wrong so I put my hands together and bowed. A move I had seen the students do in the training room to their teacher. It was the appropriate thing to do because he smiled and returned the bow.

"I accept you as my student." He said in a surprisingly deep, gentle voice. "We will continue tomorrow, Merlyn Gabriel." He bowed and then he left. I still had no idea who he was. I went to bed exhausted and woke up late enough that I had to rush to get into the office on time, not that anyone here seemed to care, especially with Lord Vader away at the moment.

When Lord Vader is away we communicate via holonet. I loath this technology, by the way. You stand on a designated platform and transmit your message. You appear on the other side where the transmission ends as a hologram, and vice versa. I usually give him his messages and agenda sometime around midday, my time, when I know what is what and have sifted through the crap. Sometimes he accepts transmission sometimes not. When he does we talk, when he doesn't the comm officer will usually alert me when Lord Vader is ready to receive the transmissions, sometimes at the weirdest of hours. It doesn't do much for regular sleep patterns. Most of the time our transmissions are short, to the point and sociable but sometimes they are not. Occasionally, we argue, and it gets loud. I am quite sure he could crush my trachea if he wanted to but I get the impression he rather enjoys fighting with me, or rather getting me wound up. This was one such day and while it was not a long transmission, it was a heated one. These arguments usually end with Lord Vader ending the transmission in the middle of one of my sentences. I know he does that deliberately and he knows it makes me furious but the fact that he hasn't killed me yet also tells me this amuses him. He has a singular sense of humour. So my second evening of training with the mysterious man whose name I didn't yet know began with me being really annoyed.

I know that when I am angry I send sparks all over the place. Jyrki used to tell me this all the time. He said it was like standing next to a faulty generator that couldn't ground. Sparks all over the shop, was his favourite phrase.

I stomped into the place that had now become my training room once again to find my teacher meditating in that strange kneeling position. I stood there for a moment trying to unwind. It seemed to me that just being in this man's presence was calming, as though around him was a void where all emotion seemed to sink. I took my place next to him and began to imitate his kneeling position, when I felt I had found it and bowed my head, closing my eyes to try and relax, I felt him move. He said nothing and I

didn't look at him. I tried not to jump when I felt his hands touch me. A small correction here and there with hands that, while gentle, had a steel like strength to them. He must have felt my own tension and with two fingers he began to put pressure on certain points on my back, it was as if a storm had been released and the emotion that flowed through me brought tears to my eyes. How had he done that with just a touch? I broke my concentration and looked up at him.

"The body stores everything." He explained. "You must release these emotions and be empty as wind. A body full of emotional clutter wastes energy. You will not learn when you come to me full of passion and anger. These things you will need but not here."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I don't know what he had done to me but I felt about ten kilos lighter than before.

"Now, again." He said and I went back into the meditation position. Once again he made small corrections.

"Breath from here not here." He said showing me. "Breathing is the key to all motion. Without the proper technique you will fail in your defence."

I did as he asked and he continued correcting me until he felt I had it more or less the way he wanted. He sat next to me while I slowly found my center and watched as I made that transformation from agitated annoyed office assistant to calmer willing to listen student. When I felt ready I stood up and we began to work through the motion from the day before. This time he corrected my position and stance and added two new movements. For hours we went through these three motions until I understood that this was the beginning of a language and in order to speak it fluently the motions had to sing to each other. It was a lot like dance.

Each move had a name and a story behind it, as I went through each movement he spoke its name and told me its story. The flow of his voice matched the flow of the motion so that after a while I no longer knew where one began and the other ended.

This time we ended the session with a series of slow stretching movements and quiet meditation. "To reflect on that which you have learned." He said. When we were done he allowed me a question.

There were so many things I wanted to know but the most important was also the one I was most nervous about asking.

"I should very much like to know your name." I said after a long silence.

He nodded slowly. "Names hold great power. To know a thing's name is to hold power over it." He said. "Anonymity among my brethren is

treasured but it is only fair that as my student you have a name by which to call me master." He paused. "I have been given many names in my life, some no longer hold meaning and others are to remain secret. The one I give to you is old and singular, an honoured name among my kind. I am Taisto Kjestyll." He bowed to me and I returned it with one of my own. There was so much formality surrounding everything this man was teaching me and under normal circumstances it would have annoyed me, yet, I found peace in his presence and strength in the formal manner he taught with. The Emperor had chosen this teacher with great care and not for the first time did I wonder what motive lay behind it.

"Master Taisto Kjestyll." I said testing it out. "Thank you for this honour."

He nodded. "We will continue tomorrow." He said and he left.

The next day we continued in the same manner as before with three new moves being added to the ones I had already learned. Again, each new move came with its own name and story. I recited the names and stories of the moves I had already learned and paid great attention while the new ones were told to me. Unlike the teaching from Jyrki, this was far more involved and in depth. The time passed so quickly that I almost wished I didn't have to work so that I could spend more time with this man and learn all he had to offer. The contrast of his quiet, calm ways to Lord Vader's chaos was stark. I wondered how I would ever find balance, or even if there was such a thing. I guessed I would find out as Lord Vader was due back on Coruscant tomorrow. Perhaps, we would continue our argument face to face. Those were always interesting. In the mean time I unwound in a hot bath too tired to read or even think. My muscles sore and aching, yet I did not mind. I finally felt I was learning something that was useful to me even if it did not really seem Force directed. I wondered then about how complicated my life had become. On Tatooine everything had seemed pretty simple, I did my job, I had my friends and my life and that was that. Here, life was chaos and ever changing there was no certainty at all. I would have been really worried about it if I had not been so damn tired.

Why does everything always happen at once? Lord Vader returned late last night and demanded an update on everything, this took a while and he was not in a good mood. I am beginning to wonder if he is ever in a good mood. Maybe the bad moods are his good mood. If this is the case, I sure don't want to see him really pissed off at someone, especially not me. Of course, it wouldn't occur to him to come to the palace and deal with all the stuff there, nope instead I get told to high tail it over to his Coruscant residence and bring all the pertinent information with me. I have to say it is

almost impossible to get a taxi at that hour of the morning and even harder to get anyone to go there. So by the time I go there I was well and truly riled up.

I have never been to Lord Vader's home before, there was never any need. But time is of the essence at the moment, as we got word that the Emperor will be moving his entire court to Naboo by the end of the week, which is now tomorrow. Apparently this happens twice a year for a couple of months depending on the Emperor's whims. He likes to be on Naboo for festival week, the only exception being New Year's for which he and the court are always on Coruscant.

This has meant a lot of mad scrambling and packing and since Lord Vader hasn't been on planet it meant a large logistical nightmare for me, never having done this before. I was hoping for some help but so far none has shown up. What a surprise.

So, at some Sarlacc forsaken hour it in the morning I was woken by Lord Vader informing me to meet him "Now, Miss Gabriel!" at the given address.

His house was located as much in the middle of nowhere as one can get on this wretched planet. It was more creepy mansion like than anything else I have seen, and he needs to consult an exterior decorator. It is heavily guarded and I was escorted in by enough Troopers wearing enough fire power to take down a small army. For a man who is the second most powerful in the whole galaxy I think this is over-kill.

The inside of the house is a strange blend of expensive art and stark, ultra utilitarian furniture that probably cost more for one piece than I make in a year. I guess when you are as wealthy as the rumours say Lord Vader is you can do what you want, but I found the place grim. Cold and unfriendly...it said a lot about its owner. I was led up the main staircase into a fairly large study like room. Sparse furniture, the only exception being the large antique desk which took up space near the ornate windows. The walls were bare and the bookshelves were dusty. The fire place had been sealed with dark coloured bricks. I guessed that Lord Vader wasn't one to enjoy a good fire or a nice book.

He was standing with his arms folded over his chest looking out of the window. I don't honestly know why he bothers to buy chairs because he never sits.

"Leave us." He barked at the guards and as they did he flicked his hand at the door shutting it with the force. It made me jump and that annoyed me even more. I hated it when he did that.

The room was cold and still. The dim lighting made it oppressive.

This was not helped by the regular sound of his breathing. I stood there waiting for him to say something. When he didn't, I lost my temper.

What I wanted to say was, "What can I do for you, my lord?" what came out of my mouth was "Is there a reason why you dragged me out of bed to come all the way over here at this ridiculous hour of the morning or did you just miss me?" Too tired to connect my brain to my mouth I suppose. If, as Thrawn said, seduction was an art form, I must assume that so was dying and I was looking for some practice in learning to do it well.

To my surprise there was no internal strangulation or even a marked change in Lord Vader's breathing he just stared out of the window until breaking the silence by saying.

"I see Master Kjestyll's teachings have not improved your temper any." He said.

I wasn't certain how to answer that. "Well, he doesn't wake me up at three in the morning." I said with a shrug. "You could have gotten these updates in the morning, why am I here?" I asked.

"Sit." He said so I did. He hadn't tried to kill me yet and I wasn't going to push my luck.

"I take it you have dealt with all the preparations for the move to the retreat?" he asked.

"Yes, as much as I can. There are things which need your approval." I told him.

He nodded. "It will be taken care of." He paused. "Naboo is a planet I prefer to avoid but this time the Emperor has insisted that we attend the court and base there for the duration of his stay." He did not just want to avoid the planet, when he spoke of it, I got the deepest feeling of anger and pain. He hated to go there. "I do not plan to stay on that planet any longer than necessary and if you wish you may accompany me but I shall leave this up to you. The Emperor has taken an interest in you it seems. He does not, as a rule, send one of his best Teräs Käsi instructors to teach just anyone. You will learn much from Master Kjestyll, but not everything. You still have much to learn in the ways of the Force." He said.

I nodded and felt a little chastised. It annoyed him I was learning from someone else, I could sense that. It annoyed him that the Emperor was interfering but there was something else bothering him as well and I could not put my finger on it. I had never even heard of Teräs Käsi, Master Kjestyll had not once named the skills he was teaching me. I had asked once and been told it was just a mix of various techniques and teachings. I knew that he had been lying to me but under the lie had been a great fear. I never

pushed because I always got the sense that I was not supposed to know this but I could never say why. There were so many things going on that I did not understand. They were all around me like little mysteries waiting to be unravelled. As if the Emperor were weaving them all together in a pattern only he saw. I did not like being a string on this loom but I had no idea how to undo the knots already there.

“Should you choose to accompany me on some of my own missions I will be able to further your training in this area.”

“I would enjoy that, lord Vader.” I said and I meant that. It would probably be a good thing to get the hell away from the Imperial court for a while.

He seemed to be seriously thinking about something else and I sensed he was greatly troubled by something. All this chit chat about me and my teaching was avoidance. Finally, after a long silent wait he turned around and picked up a small silver box from the desk. From the box he took a tiny object and handed it to me.

“You are from Tatooine, this should be known to you.” He said.

I looked at the object he had just paid in the palm of my hand. It had been a long time since I had seen one, especially one so intricate. The last time I had one of these in my hands was at the funeral for my mother. A Japor snippet that had been hand carved. They were often used as a talisman against evil, or a good luck charm but in many cases they were often a token for remembering the dead. I don't know where the tradition came from although I suspect the Sand People had much to do with it. They are a deeply spiritual people although violent. I know that I had seen Sand people wearing such a talisman around their necks from time to time. My father had carved the two we had laid in the grave with my mother. One had borne the symbol for rebirth and the other for a safe journey.

I ran my fingers over the one I now held. It had been made with great care, all the roughness polished silken smooth and the delicate patterns carved with much skill. The small symbol in the center of it surprised me. “Forgiveness.”

“I know what this is.” I said after a long while. There was much sorrow bound into this piece and my heart ached just touching it. I felt him force push at me and I caught flashes of images in my head, the face of a young woman I did not know, extraordinarily beautiful, a lake side, an embrace and many more so many I could not make sense of them. I shook my head, I didn't want to see this. The sheer emotions behind these images physically hurt.

“Stop it!” I said shakily. The images vanished as abruptly as they

had intruded.

“There is a memorial to this woman in Theed. I wish you to lay the snippet there.” He said. I waited for an explanation because this was the most unlike Darth Vader behavior I had ever seen and it was worrying me.

I looked at the snippet again. I so wanted to ask ‘why?’ but I knew there would be no explanations.

“It will be done.” I said as he handed me the small silver box to put the snippet in. It was as if once out of his hands he could no longer bear to touch it. “What was her name?”

“Amidala Naberrie.” He said. “Miss Gabriel, in this matter, I expect the highest level of confidentiality. No one is to know of this. No one.”

I nodded. “I understand.” And now I knew why I had been hauled all the way over here at three in the morning. In this house he knew no one would hear our conversation. At the Palace no place was really safe. Surveillance was everywhere. I was astonished at the level of trust he was giving to me and more than a little scared by it. I could not help but wonder what this woman was to Lord Vader and why there was so much sorrow surrounding her. It made me think about the time he had asked if I had been in love with Jyrki and vice versa. Perhaps at one point in his life Lord Vader had also loved someone. It seemed really hard to imagine this now but it explained a few things.

There was a moment where we said nothing to each other. Connected by more than just a mysterious power I did not yet understand. It was unbearable so I tucked the small box away in my satchel and pulled out the data pads I had prepared.

“I don't suppose there is any Jawa Juice here?” I asked. “This may take a while.”

I had mixed feelings about going to Naboo. I was just getting used to Coruscant and here we were uprooting and moving. Seemed a bit silly if you had asked me, but no one did, probably a good thing. I suppose I should have been grateful for small mercies, instead of being on the main ship with the full court I tagged along with Lord Vader. I was not unhappy about this but it would have been better had he been in a more forgiving mood. He had already killed one officer and terrified several others. I saw many of those ‘poor you’ looks as I trotted after him down the corridor just to keep up after we had disembarked from the shuttle.

“You know, it causes a ton of paperwork when you do that.” I told him after we were in the briefing room.

“Do not try my patience.” He snarled.

I drew a very deep breath. “May I ask why you are so ...angry?”



“Incompetence angers me!” he said, not really answering the question at all. He was sending sparks all over the place, just being in the same room with him made all the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

“If you didn’t keep killing people off maybe they would learn from the mistakes they make instead of new people making the same ones all the time.”

“They should not make these mistakes in the first place!” he yelled. “We are delayed because of incompetence. I will not tolerate it!”

He paced from one end of the room to the other like a caged wild animal. I thought he would drive me mad if he didn’t stop but before I could say anything he grabbed my arm and dragged me out of the briefing room down the corridors to the ship’s recreation and sport’s room.

‘Oh no, not good.’ I thought because I knew what was coming and sparring with him on a good day was rough enough but sparring with him on a bad day was suicide.

“Now we will see what you have been learning while I have been gone.” He growled.

I stood there and stared at him for a moment and then I went into meditation pose. I would need all the concentration I could get if I was to get out of this without a trip to the med-center, which, I didn't think likely. I am pretty sure this sort of thing is NOT in the Personal Assistant job description. I was surprised that he allowed me time to center and when I was ready he handed me a long wooden quarterstaff and before I had time to think he attacked.

Even if I had been ready I still would have landed on my ass because he was just bigger, faster and stronger. I got up and we did it again. I did not have time to think or feel or even consider what my next move would be. I was on the defensive and that was that. He was making me angry though. I had never seen anyone move as fast as he could. Last time we had done this he had been playing with me, taking it easy. This time he was venting all his anger on me. Night and day difference.

After the third time of being knocked flat on my ass by a blow that would not only leave a nasty bruise but also hurt like hell, I just sat there and stared at him.

“If you want to kill me, why don’t you just strangle me like you do everyone else?” I asked.

“Defend yourself, you are better than this.” He snapped.

“How?” I asked. “You move too fast.”

“Use the passion inside to tap into the Force, you will see what is coming before it happens.” He replied. If only it was that easy, I thought.

I shook my head. “How do I do that? When you move that fast I don’t have time to think...”

I never got to finish my sentence. He reached over and hauled me to my feet.

“That is your problem, you are thinking and not feeling. You need to let go and fight with the Force not against it.” He said. He was calmer now, not quite as riled up and furious. “I know you can do this, you have done it before.” He said.

I took a deep breath. Done it before he said, yeah when I wasn’t really aware of what the heck I was doing. Disconnect, master Kjestyll had said, although we had not been talking about the Force, it applied. Do not concentrate on the moment, be the moment. It was a difficult lesson to learn. How can you be the moment when the moment doesn’t stay still?

“The force is always there, all the time. You must attune to it, like a beacon . When you are passionate, angry it flows faster with more strength.” Lord Vader said. “You think too much. You need to let go.”

“Bad things happen when I let go.” I told him.

He laughed. “What do you think will happen if you allow your feelings to become one with the Force? You are no match for me. You will do no real harm here. It is I who will harm you if you cannot learn this. If you truly wish to be a student then you must let go and you must find the power within you and you must fight back.” He leaned in close. “We all have our dark places, Merlyn, I know you have yours, it is easy to see if one knows what to look for. Learn how to use it and you will be stronger and faster. It might even save your life.”

He stepped back and before I had time to consider what he had told me he lunged at me with the quarterstaff. I took a hard hit off the hip and staggered backwards.

“Stop thinking!” He snapped. “React, feel, and let the force guide you.”

I took a deep breath, I could feel that thread of anger and the control surrounding it was tenuous. He smacked at me again and the thread snapped. Anger flowed through me. It was like sand fire.

“That anger you keep within you, I feel it, now use it, direct it, own it, not the other way around.” He goaded, circling around me. “You complained about me not teaching you, now I am doing so. Learn” he said and landed a vicious blow on my thigh. It hurt like hell and I was genuinely pissed off. Tap into the Force, it wasn’t as easy as it sounded but I could feel it there. When he came in for the next attack I saw it happening from a place beyond physical being. I countered and avoided and this time stayed

on my feet.

“Better.” He nodded. “Do you begin to understand?”

I nodded. We repeated this exercise again and again. Each time it became easier to find that thread of power and tap into it. When I found it and used it he was pleased when I faltered and lost it he sent me flying. On the whole I preferred Master Kjestyll's teaching method but I was certainly learning fast. I could see how the moves that I had been learning from Master Kjestyll made a difference. I was surprised at how it all fit together, this magical dance full of wonder and pain. My body ached and I was tiring but Lord Vader wasn't ready to finish just yet. Each new bout we fought had a lesson in it that was taught with punishing blows and savage words. My anger gave me strength and the teachings from Master Kjestyll gave me endurance and agility. Although I was just a beginner I noticed a marked difference in my own skills. Painful as it was, Lord Vader was helping.

They say when one is learning something that it is a curve and when you reach the crest of it a light goes on somewhere. There is a moment of clarity when everything suddenly makes sense and you just get it. I suppose this is what Lord Vader had been trying for with me and he was doing it the only way he knew how. Somewhere in the middle of a particularly nasty attack I got it, I stopped thinking at all, there was nothing just a white sort of noise and a kind of ease that made the world seem slow. The Force, when you find it or better to say when it finds you, fills you up. If it were a light source you would be blinded by it. It is so powerful and so all encompassing that it would be easy to lose one's soul to it, perhaps even go mad. I just let it flow through me, I moved and it moved and we were one. I knew where I needed to be and acted accordingly. It was the most extraordinary sensation I had ever experienced, like tasting cold, fresh water after being without it for too many days. Once you have had this you only want more. You ache and thirst for it. Now, I had tasted this power, I had a glimpse of what it could be and I wanted more. Lost in the intensity of it I did not want to stop and it was only a severe blow which caught my shoulder and sent me sprawling across the floor that brought me back to reality.

Vader nodded. “Well done, but you need to learn to control the power not let it control you.” He admonished.

I sat up slowly, that last blow had truly hurt and I wondered if he had broken my arm. He walked over to me, picked up my quarterstaff and put them both back on the rack where they belonged. He came back to me and squatted down to look me over.

“Now, meditate.” He ordered, standing up again.

I looked up at him as though he were the insane one.

“Do it.” He said. “Then you will understand.”

I struggled to get into the right position, just moving my left arm sent screaming agony through it. I gasped at the exquisiteness of the pain. I took a deep breath and went into meditation, just as I had been practicing. Perhaps because I was so tired, or maybe I was actually getting better at it, I don't know but it was easier to slip into this state of non being. I closed my eyes and shut the rest of the world out. When I came back to myself I was alone. The room was dark and quiet. I had not even noticed Lord Vader leaving. I stood up slowly, I was stiff and I ached but to my great surprise it was not as bad as I thought it would be. I looked at my left arm, the bruise there was a beauty and it still hurt but I no longer thought it was broken. I moved slowly stretching out the stiffness and made my way out. I had no idea what time it was or where we were but I wanted to shower and change before we reached Naboo, I felt like a filthy wamp-rat.

I found my assigned quarters and threw off all my clothes in a pile on the floor. I went into the shower and stood under the pounding water with my head resting against the wall. As I stood there I wondered how Lord Vader knew so much about this martial arts form I was learning. He did not seem to use the same forms Master Kjestyll was teaching me yet there was a similarity to his own way of fighting that made me wonder about how and where he had learned to fight. It stood to reason that he would know of the master that the Emperor had assigned to me, after all Lord Vader was the Emperor's second in command but things were not adding up. I felt as though I was being kept in the dark about a great deal. I stood there under the shower and sighed, too tired to think. When I went to bed I fell asleep almost at once. The dreams that came were disturbing and haunting. I had thought, after waking up for the third time that maybe it might have been more advantageous to travel with the Court entourage after all. I was pretty sure the Emperor would not have spent half the time beating me up with a big stick. But then again.... There are worse things. The fourth time I went back to sleep I did not dream and it was the sound of the comm system waking me up. In an hour we would be on Naboo.

Naboo is beautiful. It is lush and green and full of life...did I mention that it is green? I stepped out of the shuttle and the first thing that hit me was the scent of living things, plants, sweet and humid. Everywhere I looked there were trees and flowers. Even the architecture here matches the landscape. The buildings were all stately and elegant, with high copper covered domed roofs that had turned green with verdigris. The stone work walls on all the buildings had intricate patterns carved into them as decoration. There was a feeling of age here, of peace and quiet and maybe

even sanctuary. I could see why the Emperor liked to be here, it was a haven in comparison to Coruscant.

The retreat is in a quiet area away from most of the major cities, but with a shuttle service it is easy enough to get to the capitol, Theed and the nearer city Nabubu. We flew over Theed on our descent to the retreat and it looked stunning. I was looking forward to exploring it.

The retreat is a vast complex hidden in the hills near a gorgeous lake. There are a couple of Imperial outpost bases near by where some training goes on and I guess it is always good to have a few garrisons at hand. The main building is built up out of the surrounding hill and most of it is underground. Surrounding it are the residences for the support staff, the concubines and courtesans and so on. The houses and living quarters all look out over the lake and it is all very serene.

In the off seasons when the Emperor is not here this place is run by a skeleton crew but now it was a hustling, bustling place and as we flew in on approach to the shuttle landing pad I could see we were probably among the last to arrive.

I was tired and every bone in my body ached. Lord Vader was in one of his not speaking to anyone don't bother to ask or even think about asking me anything moods. I followed him into the main reception hall as we went to essentially check in. He told me to talk to the person behind the reception desk to obtain my living quarters while he spoke to one of the Imperial Officers on duty.

The man behind the desk was tall, elegantly dressed and had manicured nails. The look on his face when I approached told me right away that we were not going to get along.

He gave me one of those snooty glances that said 'and just how are you going to bother me today?'

"Good morning," I said. "Merlyn Gabriel, Lord Vader's Assistant checking in." It doesn't hurt to be polite.

He twiddled with his data pad stared at it for a few seconds and shook his head. "No, sorry that name is not on my list."

"Could you please check again? Perhaps I am listed under Lord Vader?"

"Spell your name please?" he said with a sigh.

I did. He checked again and shook his head. "No, sorry you are not registered."

"Well, I am here now so where am I staying?" I asked.... That twinge of impatience and annoyance starting to creep in.

"I am sorry Miss...er... Gabriel was it? You are not listed I cannot

issue a residency pass. Who did you say you were with?"

"Lord Vader, I am his personal assistant." I said trying to remain calm and polite.

He shook his head again. "Lord Vader? No, I have no record of him sending in a residency request for you. Lord Vader never stays here, we do not have accommodations set aside for him or his party. And," he added. "We are full up now you will need to find accommodations elsewhere."

I looked behind me, Lord Vader was still on the other side of the foyer talking to the Officer. I pointed to him. "Well, he is here now, and so am I and I need a place to stay. You must have something." I asked.

He began to shake his head again and I lost it. I was tired and cranky and I hurt. I wanted a hot bath and a decent bed because I really wanted to sleep. I reached over the counter and I grabbed him by his clothes and dragged him to me. Anger made me fast and strong.

I brought his face as close to mine as was possible with the reception desk between us and I said between clenched teeth.

"I would very much like to have my accommodations now, if that is not possible then please let me speak to someone who will make this happen today!" I was sending sparks all over the place and I didn't really care.

He glared at me and shook his head then his eyes moved away from my face to something behind me. I heard the tell tale breathing and felt the hand that was placed on my shoulder. Lord Vader's fingers bit painfully into my flesh.

"Release him." He commanded.

I did.

The receptionist had turned an even paler shade of bone white but remained as dignified as he could, straightening out his collar and clothing.

"Is there a problem?" Lord Vader asked.

"No...no.... Lord Vader...no problem.... We were not expecting you or your..." he gave me a dirty look. "Assistant so er...uhm...soon."

"Your expectations are not my concern, you are wasting my time!" Lord Vader snapped.

The receptionist looked from me, to Lord Vader, to the hand gripping into my shoulder and back again. He swallowed and hastily consulted his data pad once more. "Ah yes, we do have one place open." He nodded. "At the other end of the complex I am afraid, by the lake. It is about thirty minutes walk from the main buildings."

"It sounds fine." I said. I waited as he fussed about with the data pad and encrypted the key for me. He reached under the reception desk and

brought out a small folder and handed them both to me.

“The shuttle will take you to your accommodations, Miss Gabriel, Lord Vader. I wish you both a pleasant stay here.”

“Thank you, have a nice day.” I said as we turned to leave. Once outside Lord Vader turned to me and said. “There will be a reception tomorrow night in the main hall at nine, dress accordingly and do not be late. As it appears accommodations are in short supply this year I will be onboard my ship. Unless anything of importance arises I expect to be undisturbed.” Which was Vader speak for do not bother me unless it is life or death or it will be you will suffer the consequences, “There is an office set aside for you in the main building and here is the data you will need.” He handed me a data pad. “We will discuss matters of your duties here tomorrow, for now I suggest you improve your temper and get some rest.” And with that he turned away and headed back into the main building, off to see the Emperor I supposed.

The drive to the place where I was to be living for the next couple of months was short and silent. The driver dropped me off and took my meagre luggage to the door, which was followed by my protocol droid and left with saying a word.

The receptionist had been right it was certainly far away from the main complex, although I could see the backside of it, where the big bow shaped balcony was. I guessed that was where the main hall was, it would make sense, over looking the lake and all.

I unlocked the door and went inside. The house smelled musty and was cool. It had not been used in some time and I suspected was only ever occupied when there was nothing else available. Most people I guessed liked to be in or very near the main buildings, to see and be seen. I went through the house and opened up all the windows to let the fresh air in. While it had not been used, the little house was clean and tidy, and I was grateful for small mercies. I was happy to have a place to myself.

There was something nice about the stillness here, it reminded me of Tatooine. I wandered about the place looking to see what was where. There was a small kitchen with a tiny dining area, a decent sized living room space, sort of open plan with doors leading out to a nice balcony which over looked the lake. I went out onto it and stood there staring out onto the shimmering water. I could hear the wind rustling through the leaves in the trees and the sounds of birds. It was amazing. I went back inside and explored the rest of the house. There was a guest bathroom downstairs and then upstairs there was a nice sized bedroom with another small balcony that looked out over the lake, a bathroom with a bath and shower and a

small study sort of room. It was the perfect size for one or two people. I guessed that usually they bunked two in such a housing unit. I was happy I did not have to share.

I went back into the kitchen, searched through all the cupboards and found the kettle. I had brought some things with me and my Tatooine mint tea was one of them. While the water heated up I unpacked my things which didn't take long. I had not brought everything I owned and even if I had it still would not have been that much.

I found bedding in a linen closet and made the bed up, as soon as I had some tea I was going to sleep. I told P2B4 to check through the house stuff and see if there was a grocery service, there was. I made a list and got the droid to do the ordering. One thing you can say about the Emperor, when his entourage moves en mass, everything is well organized.

I made my tea, dragged a chair out onto the balcony, sat down with the book I was currently reading, one of the ones Thrawn had given me, and relaxed. I didn't get days off all that often and I really needed this one. It occurred to me that I would have to dig through the clothes I had brought with me to find something with sleeves to hide the bruises that were now becoming really amazing colours on my arms. I had not had time to think about Lord Vader's lesson, but I was reminded of it every time I moved my arm. I put the book down after reading the same line five times straight. I was tired and my thoughts kept straying. Looking at the book in my hand made me wonder where Thrawn was and what he was up to.

I shook my head. I didn't want to think about him, men like him were a breed apart. I was not sure what to make of him at all. He was educated and intelligent, powerful and arrogant, sexy and detached all at the same time. His cool reserve and sharp wit were things that I didn't usually find attractive yet I was drawn to him as a sand- moth to flame. If I closed my eyes I could still feel the touch if his lips upon mine and still felt the ache of longing it had given me. I did not know how to feel or think about him. I could not begin to imagine what someone as sophisticated as he would even begin to find attractive about someone like me. I wondered, and not for the first time, if he was playing games with me. I could not figure him or his motives out. If seduction was an art form then what happened once the piece of art was completed? Was it put up on display or left and forgotten? My instincts said stay the hell away from him but my heart just wanted more and more. I neither knew him nor trusted him yet I yearned, ached for his presence. It was just an awful sensation and I knew it to be nothing but bad news.

I sighed and decided that thinking about him would get me

nowhere. He had not been in contact with me and I had not tried to figure out where he was. Our relationship, if you could even call it that, was based on chance meetings and moments of such intense passion that anything more would probably drive me insane.

I had met men such as him before, married to their ships, to space, their careers, yet, there was more to him, a back story I didn't know but suspected was there. He was a man who had many tales to tell, someone who was deep and careful about almost everything. I could not see Captain Thrawn doing anything in haste. I wondered what it was in me that brought him into my life because, after all, he was the one doing the chasing. If I was just a conquest then this affair would be short lived and probably not sweet, but I did not think he was the type to do that. He was a still, thoughtful man and they had a tendency to run deep. I could see him standing up to Lord Vader and even the Emperor and living to tell the tale.

I was tired and I needed to sleep. I took the chair and my book inside and then I went to bed. I thought that, with my mind in turmoil, it would take me ages to fall asleep, but I was wrong. I lay down curled up on my side and that was all I knew until my droid woke me the next morning.

It's been a busy, strange few days, and it was about to get a whole lot stranger. Why was I not surprised?

My first day on Naboo was for the most part quiet, but then that's how it always starts isn't it, quiet. I got up very early and walked to the main Retreat building. It was extremely empty at that hour and it was easy to find the office assigned to me. The one furthest away from anything, no one it seemed wanted to talk to me or Lord Vader should he, by chance, happen to grace the retreat with his presence. I was pretty certain given the amount of negativity surrounding his feelings for this planet. He would not be showing up that often, not unless the Emperor required him to do so. That meant I was on my own. I kinda liked it that way so, no big deal.

I sat and waded through the mail, the junk and the fan mail. Yes, Lord Vader got fan mail. Hard to imagine, I know, most of the time I answered these letters with a form letter and stamped signature. He wasn't the only one either, many of the Imperial Officers received fan letters. I found that a little strange to deal with at times, especially the professions of love and desire to have offspring. If Lord Vader received fan mail then I could only assume the Emperor did as well, and I was very glad I didn't have to deal with that.

Some of the letters had a tendency towards the weird, though. For example, To'kaey from the Coruscant wrote:

*Dear Lord Vader,*

*I have long been an admirer of you and your work. I feel that law and order is a valuable commodity in this galaxy and one that is sorely undervalued. I have applied several times now the Imperial Academy but they turn me down because of my tentacles and my three legs. I understand that there is a policy against tri pods but could you not in may case make an exception? I promise not to get slime every where and I would polish my storm trooper amour every day. Do they make storm trooper armour for beings with three legs? I was hoping you would put in a good word for me with the Emperor because I would really like to work with you one day, and do your bidding.*

*Thank you for listening I remain a loyal fan,*

*To'kaey de Merituzs*

*Corscuant.*

*Ps. Can you send me an autographed picture of you in your armour?*

*Thank you.*

And as if that were not bad enough he also gets a lot of letters like these:

*My dearest Darth Vader, Lord of the Sith,*

*How I have long thought over the words I should use to write once again to you of my undying love. Have you no idea of the effect that you have upon the hearts of women such as myself when you stride through the streets on Empire day with your armour shining and your cloak flowing. Every time I hear your name my heart beats with anticipation of the latest news of your works.*

*Do you not get my letters? Do you not read how much I need you and long for you? I am certain that we are meant to be together and I dream of our union every day. I have decorated what will be our bedroom and living quarters in imperial red and black, I hope they will be to your liking and I have fashioned my self a gown in a similar style to your own handsome black outfit. Do you not understand that as each moment ticks by it is a moment lost in which we could be together, surely the Emperor could find another to help him run the galaxy, I need you here to run my heart! Oh dearest Darthy, please write to me and tell me that you also love and desire me, and we can run away to the furthest reaches of the galaxy and be married. I wish for nothing else. I enclose a small holo of myself so that you might see me for yourself.*

*Anxiously awaiting your reply,*

You get the idea. Some of these letters were just down right strange and some of them I had to wonder if these people really knew who Lord Vader really was. I would just shake my head and sigh, send out a form letter or pass the really weird letters along to the Imperial Intelligence network. He got death threats and marriage proposals and offers to father a multitude of children as well as normal every day run of the mill fan mail.

It was amazing how much of this sort of mail there was and how much of my day it took up to deal with it. More than once I have handed this job over to my droid because the letters either make me really cross or I end up laughing so hard I can't do anything else.

I sorted out Lord Vader's appointments for the next couple of days and made note of the official functions where his attendance was required, such as the reception held in the evening. I suppose this was the welcome to Naboo, festival kick off reception. Have I mentioned I hate these sorts of things? Have I mentioned that Lord Vader hates them twice as much as I do? Just imagine the fun we both have.

Actually it was boring. Well, almost boring.

After the Holo meeting with Lord Vader to discuss his agenda which after he had added an item is now my agenda I went back to the house to sort out my stuff. Unpack and put things away. I went through every dress I had and found one with long sleeves and long skirt that was formal enough to get me through the reception but not over the top.

The reception was held in the main hall, a wide open room with beautiful marble decorations and an intricately patterned stone floor. When I got there it was already full of people mingling, eating the vast array of finger foods and drinking what ever it was that was being carried around on silver trays by very serious looking waiters and waitresses.

I scanned the room for people I knew and saw no one. I had not heard a word from Shiv or any of his group and my guess was that they were either very busy or had gone back to Coruscant. Lord Vader had not arrived yet, the word I had gotten from him was he would be coming later and would meet me here. So like the rest of the finely dressed people here I grabbed some food and after making sure there was not funky additive in the drinks either I managed to snatch a glass of wine from a fast moving waiter and headed straight for the other side of the room to where the ornate glass doors were open leaving out on to the enormous balcony, well it was more like a wide and very long terrace really except it was high tip off the ground and over looked the lake. I could see my house from here. I had left a light

on.

It was pleasant to stand outside, the breeze was gentle and cool and although there were enough people outside that one did not feel alone the lighting was low and people spoke in hushed tones as opposed to inside where there was much more chatter and laughter going on as well as music. I hoped the Emperor would make his entrance soon, so we could hear the speeches and then I could go home and curl up with my books. I was not the best example of a palace courtesan I guessed. Not interested in intrigue, not interested in fashion, not interested in flirting and carrying on about the court and I wasn't terribly terrified of Lord Vader.

I heard the crowd suddenly quiet down and thought that it was the Emperor but no, it was Lord Vader and walking beside him having a heated discussion was Captain Thrawn. I slowly made my way indoors I would be rude not to acknowledge Lord Vader and I was most curious to know what they were talking about.

"Ah, there you are." Lord Vader said to me as I reached them.

"My lord, good evening I trust your trip here was uneventful." I said cheerfully. He never wasted time of pleasantries such as hullo, how are you, have you settled in and so on. "Captain, welcome back, I trust you had a successful mission saving the galaxy from evil doers?" I turned to Thrawn with an equally cheery smile. Lord Vader regarded me with one of his long hard stares. I ignored it.

"It was most interesting, Miss Gabriel." Thrawn said with a slight smirk. "Perhaps I will regale you with some tales of adventure later if you are so inclined."

What I really wanted to say was 'oooh I love it when you use those big words.' But I just smiled and said, "Something to look forward to then."

Thrawn gave me a look I could not decipher and smiled. "Perhaps, more so than you bargain for. Excuse me." And with that enigmatic statement he strode off into the crowd to talk to one of the officers in uniform, someone I didn't know.

I looked at Lord Vader. "What was that supposed to mean?" I asked.

Lord Vader just turned his head and looked at me. "I am certain when the time comes you will be given the necessary information required to perform your duties." He said tersely.

"And what does that mean?" I said becoming a little more annoyed. They were playing games.

But I didn't get an answer because just at that moment the Emperor arrived and everyone dropped to one knee and the hall was filled with awed

silence. I had the feeling this was going to be an annoyingly long evening.

There are many things in this galaxy that I love doing, attending long boring Imperial social functions is not on this list. This one was especially dull as there was no dancing and no real entertainment to speak of, it was, in its truest form, a reception, lots of blah blah blah.

I listened to the speeches and clapped and smiled and even made small talk with a few people, most of which was mindless. One person in particular was most annoying, a lower clerk for the Emperor named Isti'mar T'garrel. He simply would not shut up and I could not get away from him. I thought it was a wonder he didn't blow up he was so full of himself. I stood and smiled till my face hurt, nodded and agreed until I felt a hand on my arm.

"I am afraid I must steal Miss Gabriel away from your fascinating company." Thrawn said.

"Oh yes yes, of course Captain I completely understand... until next time then Miss Gabriel you can tell me what you think of my ideas for office revampment." Isti'mar said and as Thrawn led me out of the main hall to the balcony Isti'mar went off in search of another victim.

"You looked like you needed rescuing, that man can talk the fur off a Wookiee." Thrawn said with a smile.

"I guess I owe you one." I said.

"Ah, a delightful position for me to be in. Walk with me, Miss Gabriel." He said.

He was silent for the first little way nodding politely to the people we passed and soon enough we were away from the main part of the huge balcony-terrace thing and wandered along the narrower walkway. It was quiet here, the view over the lake was stunning especially at night. It was cooler now and a slight breeze had picked up, making the leaves in the trees rustle. It was so very different from Tatooine, where the nights were cold and the air was dry. There were no sounds of leaves in trees but only the hiss of shifting sands or the howling of the winds when the storms came. I missed my home but I could get used to this kinder place.

We stopped at the far end of the walkway, and both leaned against the balustrade and stared out over the lake.

"How do you enjoy living here?" he asked.

"It is one of the most peaceful, gentle places I have ever been to." I said. "I never thought I would ever get to live by a lake. That's a new experience."

"Yes, it is a wonderful lake for swimming in. Especially early in the morning or at twilight." He said.

I looked at him as though he were joking. "Swimming?"

He looked at me and for a moment there was a question in his eyes but he was a smart man and he figured it out pretty fast.

"Of course." He said with a chuckle. "Not much need to learn how to swim on a desert planet is there."

"My mother often talked about it. She swam as a child on Alderaan, she loved it but I never learned, even when I went off world I never thought about it." I said. "But I take it you enjoy it."

"It was part of our physical training at the academy. Some people preferred weight training and team sports while I must admit I enjoyed the water the most. It is a solitary sport that gives you over all fitness while allowing you time to think. I often used the pool at night when it was empty. When I am here I swim in the lake. You should take the time to learn." He said.

"Well, if I ever find someone to teach me I will think about it." I said. I was not about to tell him the thought of immersing myself in the lake scared the heck out of me. It was one thing to lounge in a bathtub full of water, the lake was a whole other herd of banthas.

"You live in the house at the very end, yes?" he asked pointing to the little house with the light on.

I nodded. Wondering just he knew that.

"Tomorrow morning at six am I will come by and teach you." He said very matter of fact. "You'll enjoy it." He said. "There is nothing to fear."

"If you insist." I said, not feeling all that enthusiastic about this.

"I do, Miss Gabriel, call it repaying the debt you owe me for rescuing you just now."

"Remind me not to ever be in your debt again." I said a bit more snarkily than I meant to but he just laughed.

We were silent once more. I did not know what to say to him and was happy just to be in his company. It was he who spoke first.

"May I ask you a question?" he said.

I looked into his face. "Yes."

"Do you know any bounty hunters or smugglers?" he asked and then smiled, because my reaction told him that I had not been expecting this question at all.

"Yes, I do actually, to both." I answered after a few moments.

"How well?"

"Well enough to steer clear of the subject." I said. "There are some people who owe me favours." I added by way of explanation.

"How well do you know Boba Fett?"

I made a face. "Fett." I shrugged. "Well enough to know one does not talk about him. I used to see him at Jabba's Palace sometimes, he would chat up some of the dancers, nothing serious, just chit chat. A real loner he is. Smart too, one of Jabba's favourite bounty hunters. He uses our docking bay on and off when the occasion calls. Said he liked the way my father did business. He does not owe anyone any favours." I said. I had spent some time with Fett, mostly at the docking bay in the capacity as mechanic. He didn't speak much and I knew enough not to ask questions. I liked his efficiency though. He knew what he wanted, what needed to be done, he gave you a list and that was that. No dickering around with price or anything. He was true to his word. I suppose in some ways I admired that about him. I wasn't too enamoured with his profession though.

"What do you know about Jodo Kast?" Thrawn asked breaking my thoughts.

"Never heard of him." I said.

He nodded. "What about smugglers."

"What about them?"

"I need some names of people you would trust, smugglers who get the job done." He said.

"You know, I am quite sure the Empire has lists for this sort of thing. Why are you asking me?"

"Because you will give me an honest opinion and you seem to have good instincts and you have first hand experience with these people without the problem of being affiliated with the empire."

"then, yes, to answer your question, I know a few smugglers, a couple I would trust and who I know to be ...reputable, if one can use that word for such a profession." I said. "But I am not giving you names here in this place."

He inclined his head. "That I can respect and you can tell me when you come with me in two days time."

"Run that by me again?"

"Lord Vader will inform you tomorrow that I have need of your services for a short while. Details I will leave up to him to tell you or you will find out when you come aboard the ship." He said.

I looked at him and put my hands on my hips. "You know..." I started but before I could get any further he put his forefinger on my lips.

"Hush." he said. "Something came up suddenly, you have a skill I need and I know I can rely on your discretion. Lord Vader speaks quite highly of you. I trust you would not wish to make a scene here because you are not kept in the loop." He smiled and the finger on my lips moved to

brush away hair from my eyes. "Trust me, you will know all you need to know when the time is right. In the meantime why don't we enjoy the evening?"

"Just what did you have in mind?"

He smiled. "Well, I thought we might finish the conversation we started on Coruscant." He said, his hand caressing my face.

I stepped back from him. "No, bad idea." I said shaking my head. I turned to walk away from him. He made my knees weak and my head spin and I was not up to dealing with that here in the presence of the Emperor, with Lord Vader close at hand. He caught my hand and pulled me to him.

"Why is that?" he asked.

"It is forbidden for members of the Imperial navy to fraternize with Imperial office staff." I said repeating Shiv's words verbatim.

"Do you always obey all the rules, Miss Gabriel?"

"Not always." I answered, it was the truth.

"Then shall we go for a walk?" the look on his face was feral. He tugged me by the hand and I followed him. There was a small half hidden set of stairs that led down from the balcony to the gardens below, over looking the lake. The pathways walked along side the water, amongst the trees and carefully tended gardens of sweet smelling flowers and manicured grass. I could really understand why the Emperor wanted to come here. It was as quiet and soft as Coruscant was noisy and hard. Even at night it was lovely. We walked beside each other in silence, I, with my hands behind my back and he, with his arms at his sides, true military style. When we came to a small cove like area he stopped.

On Tatooine most people's idea of romantic was taking a couple of speeders up into the dunes with a bottle of something illegal and sitting on the cool sands under the moons, hoping you didn't get attacked by either critters, dragons or sand people. Others went to the local cantina and bought cheap Corellian beer, the theory being that if you gave your date enough beer she'd be easy. Trust me it is not romantic when your date throws up on you and no it wasn't me. My experiences with romance and men were not vast and not the best so it was little wonder I was as nervous as a wamp rat in a Krayt dragon's nest.

The cove was quiet and secluded. The manicured garden had given way to more unruly wild plants and the trees were not pruned. The sleepy willowy trees with their long drooping branches that swept the ground rustled and sighed gently in the wind. The grass gave way to a small beach of round stones and the moonlight glittered off the water.

"You are nervous of me." Thrawn said breaking the long silence. He



picked up smooth, flat stones from the beach and flicked them in a way that made them skip across the water. "Why?"

"You chase me, why? I countered.

Three more stones skipped across the waters competing with the ripples from the wind.

"If I knew the answer to that I would most likely not be interested." He said. "You remind me of the sculpture in my flat. Every time I see it I see something different. You arouse my curiosity in many ways"

"And when you no longer see anything that interests you? Then what?" I asked.

He stopped skipping stones and turned to look at me. The night was cool and with the wind off the water I was starting to feel the chill. He took off his dress jacket and slipped it over my shoulders. His warmth, his scent lingered in the cloth.

"Who was he that hurt you enough to make you so afraid of this?" Thrawn asked and then shook his head. "I am not that man."

"I know that." I said. "But you so often say, trust is a delicate matter."

"I am not making any promises or commitments either." He said. "You know very well what my life is about as I, yours. No point in denying that."

I nodded. I did know and I did understand, probably more than most people ever would. Perhaps that was part of the attraction.

"So why are you afraid of this?" he asked again.

"It has been my experience that things like this usually have a very messy and unhappy end." I told him.

"There is that possibility." He said as he moved closer to me, I did not step back from him. "But if you never try how you will ever know? If you let your fear rule you, you will spend the rest of your life wondering what if and I know that is not who you are." He caressed the side of my face with his fingertips. I closed my eyes and followed the motion with my head.

"Desire is a powerful tool and we play with it like fire, but it is also a wonderful gift." He murmured. "I desire you as I know you do me and if that leads to something we can share even for a short time, would you have it any other way?"

I looked up into his face, searching for some hint or sign that he was mocking me or somehow making fun of me but I saw nothing of that in his eyes. Instead he was giving me the option to back away gracefully. The trouble was I have never backed away from anything in my entire life, even when I probably should have.

I wanted to say something clever as an answer but there were no words to say, witty, stupid or otherwise. He was right. I desired him in every way possible and to deny that was to go against everything I was. It didn't mean I was not scared to death though.

He smiled and took my silence for the agreement it was, cupped my face in both of his hands. "Shall we continue our previous conversation?" he whispered in my ear.

I nodded.

He drew my face upward and he began to kiss me. Gentle, breath-taking kisses. Tentative, inquisitive and oh so intense. Nothing more and nothing less. He wrapped one hand around the back of my neck and the other around my waist and pulled me to him, I held on to his shoulder with one hand and the other was pressed against his chest so that I could feel the beat of his heart, fast and strong. I do not know how long we stood there in the quiet of the night wrapped in each others arms talking with our lips but saying not one word. It felt like hours and perhaps it was. When we finally broke apart I was dizzy and felt more alive than I had ever felt in my entire life. I rested my forehead against his chest and he stroked the back of my neck. He steadied his breathing.

He crooked a finger under my chin and drew my face up so we looked at each other. I could not read his face at all.

"That was probably one of the most interesting conversations I have ever had without even saying a word." I said.

He laughed and the tension broke. "You do have a flare for understatement, Miss Gabriel."

"Docking bay humour." I said. "It's late I should get back home." I didn't want to go but it was the right time to.

"I will see you to your door." He said in a way I knew there would be no arguing against. He did not wrap an arm around my shoulders or try to hold my hand and I did not expect him to. We walked side by side as we had earlier. I did not think that either of us was the holding hand type.

When we reached the house I returned his jacket. We had not spoken one word the entire way. Now I stood on the doorstep looking at him as he looked at me. He smiled.

"Until tomorrow morning, then." he said.

"Oh." I had forgotten about that. "Maybe not such a good idea, I don't even know what to wear and maybe it will rain and..." he put a finger on my lips and silenced my babble of excuses.

"Tomorrow at six am. Do not concern yourself with anything else. Just be awake and ready to learn something new." He said.

I nodded. He smiled.

“Good night, Miss Gabriel.” He said and he turned and walked back the way we came before I could answer.

I went inside the house. I did not think I would be able to sleep at all but I was wrong about that, I did not even dream. The next thing I knew it was way too early in the morning and the doorbell was ringing.

I mostly enjoy my job. It is interesting and challenging. I get to meet people I would never normally meet and do things I would not under most circumstances ever dream of doing. I get to travel and go to elegant social functions at which I am encouraged to converse with courtiers, important officials and guests of the Emperor himself. I work with the second most powerful man in the known galaxy and he is, for the most part, satisfied with my work, I think, it's a little hard to tell with Lord Vader sometimes. It was not in my job description, however, that I would also be loaned out to other members of the Imperial navy for unexplained missions to which I am not privy to any information about.

I received a transmission from Lord Vader early in the afternoon informing me and I quote, *‘Be ready to embark on board the ILC shuttle FuryII at the retreat landing pad at 04:00hrs CST. Pack enough for at least two weeks including semi formal wear as you will be expected to dine with the captain. More information given will be at Captain Thrawn’s discretion.’* End transmission.

I was a little puzzled by this I must admit and replied to the transmission with a bunch of question about the work that would need to be done, who would be taking care of the office, what about my work here and so on. The answer I received was this. *“I survived without the aid of an office assistant before you arrived, I shall do so for two weeks. You can catch up when you return. Anything important will be transmitted to you. Do not bother me with stupid questions again.”*

I sat at my desk staring at the message with my head in my hands. Two weeks in space with that man. What annoyed me the most was no one was telling me what all this was about or why me. It was not as if I was a trained operative or even remotely related to the military in any way shape or form. I was a little unsure of what I could add to what I was fairly certain was a large list of more qualified highly trained people for some sort of a mission somewhere deep in space with one of the most talked about captains in the Imperial navy. I was damned sure this had nothing at all to do with what appeared to me to be a blossoming affair of some sort. Thrawn did not strike me as the type who would cart his mistress, lover, girl friend or what ever label you could stick on this thing we had embarked on, off

into space with him. In fact I was pretty sure that would be the very last thing he would want. I could not for the life of me figure any of this out.

In the end I went home early and packed what I thought I would need and a few more things besides and tried to sleep because the 3am wakeup call did not sit all that well with my normal routine. Instead I lay in my bed thinking about the morning's adventure in the water and what the hell this mission could be about. Being forthcoming about information was something lacking in the Imperial world, this seemed to be the norm rather than the exception.

Then of course there had been this morning which had been mostly about me trying not to swallow the entire lake in one go. I would never have imagined that trying not to sink would be such a chore.

I was not awake when Thrawn had shown up and had greeted him with a growl and a scowl when he handed me a very neatly wrapped box. Inside was a swimsuit, a one piece racer he had said. Something modest. I had laughed. Modest.... He had never seen what the dancers at Jabba's had worn then, me included.... This swimsuit was a ball gown compared to those outfits. I had changed in the bathroom and wrapped a robe around me because at 6am it was still cold, grabbed a towel and followed him down to the water.

He undressed and I have to say he was in mighty fine shape. I guessed swimming was a good sport. I just stood there and watched him until he got impatient with me. Then I slipped the robe off and his face gave me the answer I had been afraid of. Of course the thing about wearing a swimsuit is while it covers the torso it doesn't cover shoulders, arms, legs, hips and so on and so the exquisite bruises I had received from Lord Vader's charming little training session were not just in full view they were also in full bloom.

He had walked over and taken a good look at me especially the massive deeply dark purple bruise on my arm.

“I don't have to ask who is responsible for these, do I?” he said coldly. He was really angry but I wasn't sure why or at whom.

“Sparring.” I said by way of explanation.

He had simply clenched his jaw and taken a deep breath. “Did he break your arm?” he asked.

“I don't know. I don't think so.” I said. “I can still move it and the pain is not as ... intense any more.” I wasn't about to explain the whole story, it was just too complicated.

“Hard to learn how to swim with a broken arm.” He said tersely. “You are angry.”

"I disagree with brutality for the sake of being brutal. Was there a lesson involved in this?"

"That was part of the objective, I think, mostly he was angry and in a bad mood." I shrugged. "Sometimes that happens."

"Did you learn the lesson he was trying to get across?"

I had to think about it. "Yes." I said after a moment. "I suppose I did."

"Well then, you can learn this one too and I promise it will not leave you looking like a refugee from the slavers." He said.

And that was all that was said about the awful bruises but he was angered by it.

Thrawn was a good teacher. He was patient and gentle and at the same time firm about me getting on with it. No messing about, no fear, no hesitation. Before I even had time to consider the consequences I was in the water and learning. It took a little while and many attempts to self drown but eventually I got the idea. By the time an hour had passed I could swim, not very well and certainly not very elegantly but I would no longer drown instantly if I were ever to fall in the water. At the end of it all when he was satisfied I would not die in some catastrophic water incident we called it a morning. I sat on the shore wrapped in my towel and robe and watched as he swam laps. It was as though he became part of the water and wondered if he excelled at absolutely everything he did. When he was done we went up to the house, changed, and dried off then I made tea.

I dressed in work clothes, a long skirt and long sleeved shirt and wrapped a towel around my hair and sat with him drinking the tea, its warmth was wonderful after the coolness of the water.

"What, no towel dress?" he asked with a smirk.

"I think you saw enough today." I said and then instantly regretted it. That look had come back on his face again.

"It is not my place to say anything, however..." he began.

"No, it is not so don't." I cut him off. I just did not want to get into this conversation. I would get cross.

"You would defend him no matter what wouldn't you." He said.

"It would depend. If I thought he was wrong, no. I have a tendency to say what I think and knowing me I would probably not defend him, but in this case I choose to let him spar with me."

"You have a choice?" he asked arching an eyebrow in disbelief.

I thought about it for a moment. "With regards to this particular aspect of my relationship with him, yes, I think I do. And I choose to be trained by him. I don't always enjoy the method much but I learn from it. If

he had wanted me dead I would be dead." I rubbed the shoulder Lord Vader had almost broken absently. "Usually, he is not as angry as he was this particular time, usually he is not as ...." I searched for the right word.

"Abrupt?" Thrawn asked.

I smiled a little. "That is one way of putting it." I nodded. "Usually, he has more self control when it comes to sparring with me and venting his anger, at least that has been the limited experience so far."

He steepled his fingers together and stared at me for a moment. "Lord Vader and self control, interesting choice of words. You really do have a unique way of looking at the world." He said.

I could not think of how to reply to that so I just said nothing, sipped at my tea and watched as he watched me. When we had finished the tea he got up to leave. I still had some things to do before I went into the retreat office, like my hair.

I saw him to the door. "Thank you, for teaching how not to inadvertently drink half the lake."

He smiled. "You are welcome, but don't go swimming alone for a while, you are not that good yet. It would be a shame if you drowned." He said.

"Well, drowning isn't on my plan for the day, so I guess maybe some other time." I shrugged.

"When there is time." He answered. "Tomorrow, neither of us will be here."

I nodded. "Ah, yes, this top secret mission."

"Something like that. In the meantime, Miss Gabriel, do try to stay alive." He said as he left.

Fifteen minutes later I too, was on my way to work. Wondering what surprises the day had in store for me. It occurred to me that I still had the carved Japor snippet to deal with and had to find this memorial in Theed. I wondered if when there would ever be time for a side trip into the capitol city. There were too many things to think about, too many side lines and distractions. My life, working for the Empire was complicated. I had made a mental note to send word to master Kjestyll that I would be gone, although for how long I was not sure.

There was only me and a lot of cargo waiting at the landing pad by the retreat at 3:30am. It was dark and cold and I was very tired. I watched as two Imperial soldiers loaded the shuttle and then waited until the pilot showed up. At ten minutes to four he was there. Apart from the slight nod of acknowledgement he all but ignored me until he had done his external preflight check and then when he was finished and satisfied with it, he

asked for my documents, which I gave him. He was an older man who gave me a brief once over and a curt nod.

“Captain Tjenn Wolfhr,” he said shaking my hand. “Better get onboard then, Miss Gabriel. Looks like it is just you and me and this pile of stuff. You can ride up front if you like.” He said gruffly. I liked him immediately.

I sat in the co-pilot’s chair and had strapped in by the time he finished making sure everything was ship shape, so to speak. I watched as he went through the checklist before requesting departure clearance. He smiled as he noticed my undivided attention.

“Don’t suppose you’d let me fly her would you?” I asked quickly before I had a chance to think about it and not ask.

“Can you fly her, would be the question Miss Gabriel.” He said with a grin.

“Lord Vader seemed to think I could when he let me pilot out of Coruscant.” I said with a smile.

To my great surprise he laughed. “Yes, I heard about that, didn’t realize that was you.”

“You heard about that? What exactly did you hear?”

He punched a few controls and spoke with flight control and started the ascent. “Just that Lord Vader seemsto have great trust in you. You gave a few of the noncoms a good scare though. Buddy of mine is on board the ISD you landed on, said you put the shuttle down like a pro. Only afterwards found out you’d never flown one before. People talk you know and that story has gotten around. Lord Vader doesn’t usually like to be piloted around although much of the time he doesn’t have a choice.”

“Oh.” I said. “Well, it is not as if I had never flown anything before.”

He smiled. “If you wish to practice, I don’t mind.” He said switching over the controls to me. “I used to teach at the academy before I was reassigned. Usually, I shuttle the Emperor around, this is a nice change in routine.” He said. “Get ready and I will pass off control to you.”

I put on the second headset and took over the shuttle controls. The flight was a long one. We were to rendezvous with the *ISD Vengeance* which was currently near Corellia. The journey would take almost six hours even with Hyperspace.

Captain Wolfhr was a good teacher. Unlike Lord Vader and his learn by being thrown into the fire method, the captain was patient and made lots of corrections. Explained things and seemed genuinely happy to be teaching someone. I wondered why he had left the academy but wasn’t going to ask that. I learned a lot about the finer art of flying a lambda class

shuttle and with a whole lot less panic. He even taught me some of the tricks the better pilots used to get past some of the more cumbersome controls. The time passed surprisingly quickly. He was easy to be with and easy to talk to.

I learned that he was married, lived on Naboo with his wife and had two children, a son and a daughter. His daughter was almost the same age as I was and had just entered the Academy as an Intelligence Officer. His son was still too young but would be following in his father’s footsteps as a pilot in the Imperial Navy. He showed me holo images of them both. I talked about Tatooine and my father and my life as a docking bay brat. I talked mostly about my mechanic work and my own love of ships and flying. While I would never be the best pilot in the world, I loved it. He told me I had a natural touch for it almost as if I could talk to the ship. Lambda Class shuttles, he had said, were notoriously picky to handle and so far I had done well considering how little flying time I had ever had in one. I wondered if he had ever flown some of the older freighter ships, now they were not only picky they were fat sluggish bantha cows.

I was almost surprised at how fast the time had gone by and jumped when the nav computer gave the alarm for the exit from Hyperspace. There was that amazingly dizzying swirl of stars and hyperspace and sub-light met and then we were in Core space. Captain Wolfhr punched in the co ordinates for the *Vengeance* and the last half hour of the trip was basically me trying not o get nervous.

“You want to land her?” he asked.

I grinned. “You trust me enough?”

“You have a nice touch with her. Just remember to watch the dorsal wing.” He said.

He had just finished pointing out some very clever tricks when the Landing control from the *Vengeance* came over the comm requesting Identification and clearance codes.

“ISD *Vengeance*, this is Imperial shuttle *FuryII* requesting docking permission. Identification code being transmitted now, over.” I said as captain Wolfhr transmitted the codes.

“Copy that *FuryII*, stand by for clearance code confirmation, over.” Said a very bored sounding voice.

“*FuryII*, standing by.”

And we waited for what seemed forever but were only about a couple of minutes.

“*FuryII*, this is the *ISD Vengeance*, you are cleared to land in the main hanger bay, *Vengeance* out.”

With a nod from Captain Wolfhr I started the whole landing bay entry procedure. He talked me through it and kept me calm. It was a nice change from the last time I had done this. He even taught me how to style the ship so that it faced the right way for departure. That was a cute trick. I almost wished I could have seen the maneuver being done.

Once she was safely down and the engines shut off, I unbuckled myself and got up and stretched. He did the same, grabbed his flight data pad and made his way to the gangway. I followed behind him, picking up my travel bag along the way.

The deck officer saluted the Captain who saluted back. "Welcome on board the *ISD Vengeance*, Captain Wolfhr." He said and then with a curt little nod to me extended the same courtesy. Wolfhr handed the deck officer the data pad and told him about the supplies in the cargo hold. They saluted again and the deck officer vanished inside the ship.

"Captain Wolfhr, a pleasure to see you again." said a voice that brought goose-bumps to my skin. Captain Thrawn stepped forward and the two men shook hands. They obviously knew one another and seemed to actually get along.

"A pleasure as always Captain Thrawn." Wolfhr said. "I see the *Vengeance* is treating you well."

Thrawn smiled. "Space treats me well, Captain, as well you would know." Then he turned to me. "Miss Gabriel. I trust your journey here was a pleasant one?" he said with just a hint of a smile on his lips and something else in his eyes.

"It was an excellent journey, Captain Thrawn." I said in a tone of voice that made him arch one of those blue black eyebrows at me.

"Indeed," he smiled, giving me the full benefit of his eerie red eyes. "Then I shall look forward to hearing about it later, during dinner perhaps. Captain Wolfhr, will you be joining us this evening or must you return to Naboo?"

"Ah sadly I must return. Another time perhaps." Wolfhr said, then turning to me he extended his hand and I shook it. "It was a genuine pleasure to fly with you, Miss Gabriel and any time you wish to get some more experience in a shuttle I would be delighted to give you space time in the *Fury* there. You have a genuine touch with her and you are a most enjoyable co-pilot. I wish you well on your journey with the Captain here, he is a good man."

I blushed at his praise. "Thank you Captain Wolfhr, you are too kind. I would love to fly with you again sometime, I learned a lot." Thrawn merely watched the whole exchange with a bemused look.

Wolfhr gave me a nod, turned and gave Thrawn a salute which was returned and then vanished back into the shuttle to prepare her for the turn around journey. I did not envy him this was a long day's work.

Thrawn surveyed the amount of cargo being unloaded and frowned. He looked at the large travel bag at my feet. "Wait here a moment please, Miss Gabriel." He said and before I could reply he was off to talk to the deck officer and examine the data pad. After some serious discussion he left the deck officer and the men who were helping unload and came back over to me.

"That is all you brought?" he asked.

"Yes."

He was about to say something more when Captain Wolfhr appeared again holding a rather large flat box.

"I almost forgot, this was sent up for you, Captain. Corellian Spice cake I believe. Came from the Emperor's Kitchen, a gift, although there was no name attached to the requisition slip but the seal is genuine."

Thrawn smiled. "Ah, our chef no doubt, thought to honour our guest. I hope you enjoy Corellian Spiced cake, Miss Gabriel."

"I am not sure I have ever tasted it, Captain." I said. I had actually never even heard of it.

Wolfhr grinned. "Then you are in for a real treat. I hope the Captain sees fit to open a bottle of that fine brandy he always hides away, the two go well together." He said. The two men exchanged a look and a smile that made me so curious about their past friendship I had to bite my tongue to keep from asking.

"Enough of this chatter, I need to be back on Naboo and fit for work by tomorrow evening." Wolfhr said and with a nod to Thrawn and a wink thrown in my direction he walked back into the shuttle and the gangway closed up behind him.

Thrawn handed the cake box to one of his men with strict instructions that it was to be hand delivered to the chef and then he picked up my bag.

"If you will follow me, Miss Gabriel, I shall show you to your quarters." He said.

He was quiet for the walk to the quarters that had been assigned to me. I got the impression that there was something on his mind but he was not about to speak about it and I wasn't going to ask. Only when we walked down a very quiet, deserted part of the ship did he say anything at all.

"I took the liberty of giving you quarters in the quiet part of the ship, I know how you value your privacy and quiet. There is a training room

just down the corridor from where you will be staying and a small recreational room as well.” He said opening the door to my assigned quarters with a keycard which he then handed to me.

I followed him in. These were VIP quarters, I knew that from my time onboard Lord Vader’s ship. Impressive, large and quiet. There was an enormous view port and plenty of space. It was a bit of over kill really, I did not need all this space but I was fairly certain he had not assigned me to these quarters for the space but rather for their location, away from the main part of the ship, away from prying eyes of the crew.

“I trust you will be comfortable here.” He said dropping my bag at the door of the bedroom. He opened all the doors to check that the quarters were in suitable condition, clean sheets on the bed, towels and so on. He was being a little scary, but then I had never seen him truly at work or on board his ship before. It was a whole new side of him.

“It is fine thank you.” I said.

“There is a small kitchen facility just down the corridor where you may make tea if you wish. There will be a formal dinner in the Captain’s dining room tonight at 18:00 hrs and I expect you to attend, please dress appropriately. I will send an officer to escort you.” He said.

I nodded.

“I will have some food sent to you, you must be hungry after your journey.” He continued.

I nodded.

“You also look tired, perhaps you would do well to rest before he dinner this evening.” he said a little less formally.

I nodded.

“Do you have any questions?” he asked.

“Yes.” I said and wanted to continue with asking about food instead what popped out was “What the hell am I doing here?”

For the first time since Captain Wolfhr left Thrawn smiled. “All in good time, Miss Gabriel.” He said almost smugly.

“Yes, of course.” I replied. He was right though, I was tired. “It is pleasant to see you again, Captain.”

He laughed. “Miss Gabriel, it is always a delight to be in your presence.” He said more gently stepping a little closer to me.

I fought the urge to back away one step from him. He saw that and grinned.

“I must return to the bridge, I have much to attend to, I do however look forward to dinner this evening. You will get to meet some of the fine Officers who serve aboard this ship. I trust you will enjoy it. I know they are

all curious about you”

“I am certain it will be very interesting,” I said. “Although I am not entirely sure what there is to be curious about me.”

His smile turned feral and broadened. “You work closely with the Emperor’s Iron fist and you live to tell the tale. I expect they are all dying to know your secret.”

I raised my chin a notch defiantly. “Oh? And what about you aren’t you also dying to know that as well?” I asked.

He stroked the side of my face making me shiver. “Oh, eventually I will unravel that little mystery on my own.” He said softly. “All in good time, my dear.”

I stepped back from him, my heart suddenly racing, annoyed that he could do that to me with the barest of touches and tone of voice. The tension between us was sparking, and I knew he felt that too. We stared at each other for a moment until I looked away.

“Until later, Miss Gabriel.” He said. I nodded at him and watched him leave.

After taking a few deep breaths, the first thing I did was unpack and sort out my things, hung up the clothes that need hanging up and put away everything else. The second thing I did was lie down and nap, I was exhausted. I did not think I would get much sleep but I did and woke up with just enough time to shower and dress before this stupid dinner thing.

The dress I had brought was one that Cati had made. A pretty purple dress that draped over one shoulder while leaving the other one bare. The one sleeve hid the bruise on that arm and that was what I wanted. The dress was feminine and elegant. I hoped it was not too formal but since the word formal had been stressed I wasn’t going to worry about it too much.

I put my hair up with the Silver zenji sticks from Thrawn, a touch of my favourite perfume and applied enough make up to take away some of the oh-my-stars-when-did-you-last-sleep look I always got from traveling. I was just finishing up when the door chime rang.

The young midshipmen who did not say a single word after “Good evening Ma’am, I have been assigned to escort you. Please come with me.” From the shake in his voice he had been practicing these lines a lot and he was scared to death of me for what ever reason.

I could only assume it was because of who I worked for. Anything remotely connected to Lord Vader inspired fear. This included me as well, I guessed. I did not think I was actually all that scary, but I could never really tell how others saw me, so it would have been hard to say.

I was met at the dining room by Thrawn who did not hide his smile when he saw me. He offered me his arm which I took. It was all very formal. He introduced me to the other five officers. I would never remember their names but I smiled at each one as they each in turn did that heel snap together polite nod thing. I think they were even more nervous about having me there, a woman and Lord Vader's assistant than I was nervous to be there. I was seated next at the left hand side of the Captain and as he pulled my chair out for me to sit down I was grateful for all my mother's lessons in manners and etiquette.

The dinner started off with soup and was very nice. Served by silent waiters and followed by a nice meat dish that was so elegantly prepared it seemed almost a shame to eat. All the way through out the dinner I was asked polite questions which I answered with polite answers. It was all very polished- glass pretty but I was very much aware that all eyes watched me. I suppose as Lord Vader's Personal Assistant I was as much a curiosity as anything else. I am pretty sure what they really wanted to ask me was something no one would dare ask. What was it really like working for Darth Vader and why was I not dead yet. Everyone followed Captain Thrawn's lead and he was the very model of elegant, courteous, politically correct politeness. Manners were a big thing at this dinner table. I was glad I had remembered to pack mine.

As the main course was done and the dishes cleared away, the wine glasses removed to make way for a dark some what bitter version of Jawa juice, so the men decided it was time to ignore me and get down to business. I was not giving them any news of information about what they really wanted to know so they turned their conversation to other topics, such as ship news and work and although they were very careful not to exclude me, they no longer made me a part of their conversation. I was grateful for this and happy to be left to my own thoughts. I caught bits and pieces of information that was interesting and some gossip that was meaningless to me. All the while I was being studied by the captain who I thought looked very amused by the whole turn of events. The only moment of silence came was when the Chef himself brought in and served the Corellian Spice cake that had been delivered earlier.

Thrawn smiled and complimented the chef on his forethought to have it made.

"I cannot take the credit for that, Captain." he said with a smile as he sliced the delicate looking cake up and served it. He left as soon as each person had been served and we waited for Thrawn to begin.

"Please, Miss Gabriel, you must tell me how you enjoy this delicacy,

seeing as how you have never had it before." He said.

I looked around the table. This little bit of information surprised everyone there and I wondered just how special this desert was and why it was so coveted. I took my cake fork and neatly sliced a small section off and ate it slowly.

The cake was truly like nothing I had ever tasted before and I could understand why it was so popular but when the delight of the new taste suddenly gave way to the sensation of something I could not describe but was definitely not pleasant I guess everyone thought I hated it at first. That would have been simple.

"Is the cake not to your liking Miss Gabriel?" Thrawn asked sounding a little displeased.

I wanted to answer him, but now I had broken out into a clammy cold sweat and I was having trouble focusing on his face. Breathing was becoming difficult. He was speaking to me but I could not seem to understand him clearly and I could not speak to tell him something wasn't right. I guess it didn't take him long to figure out something serious was going on.

"Miss Gabriel, are you alright?" he had gotten up from his chair and was at my side. "Jenson, get the Doctor now." He said with remarkable calm.

I felt as though my heart were about to burst its way through my chest. Anxiety and fear flooded through me and I felt as though I were being strangled from the inside. I was struggling against the fight and flight sensation that rushed through me while desperately trying to get air into my lungs. It was as if I were suddenly drowning. I stood up too quickly, knocking the chair backwards, dizzy and unsteady on my feet. I could not breathe and I was panicking. I felt the room spin and felt the brush of Thrawn's hand as he tried to grab for me but I collapsed on the floor before he could catch a hold of me, there was a terrible sensation of nausea and then mercifully everything went black.

The world became a series of disjointed images and a scramble of voices. I surfaced from the blackness that had swallowed me whole to experience pain and fear. I know I flailed about because a man's voice, one I wasn't familiar with, kept yelling for someone to hold me down. My heart beat so wildly and erratically that it hurt. There was brilliant white light in my eyes when they opened and I could not focus on any of the faces that peered down at me. I knew I was in trouble but I didn't understand it. I felt the sting of injections in my arm while the sensation of the world spinning out of control got worse and worse. There was a terrible taste in

my mouth I could not get rid of and my chest felt as though someone was ripping it apart from the inside. I could hear someone saying something about losing her and the world of pain, bright lights and anxious voices vanished.

If I was dreaming I didn't know. I found myself in a place of quiet and ease. There was no one there but me and nothing tangible to see. All around me was a pale glowing sort of light and it seemed to ripple about as if it were alive. It was peaceful. I breathed deeply and watched in wonder as the light around me danced. I wanted to move with this beautiful light and reached out to it but suddenly a great rift opened up in the space where I was. A terrible pain seared through my chest as though lightening were slicing me in two. Inwardly I screamed and as suddenly as I had found myself in this secret place of serenity I was bounced back out of it into the turmoil of what I suspected was the ship's Med-lab.

My eyes opened to a face I didn't know and could not make out clearly. He was shining a bright light in my eyes and the set of his mouth was grave.

"Welcome back, young lady." He whispered.

"Will she live?" I heard a familiar voice ask from a distance.

"Captain, I thought I asked you to leave?"

"You did Doctor, I ignored it. Will she live?"

The doctor looked at me. "Yes, Captain she will live, but she's going to be out for a while so get out and leave us to do our jobs in peace."

I wanted to say something but before I had a chance I felt the jab of a stim in my arm and once again the world swam and went black.

I don't know how much time had passed between the sedation and the waking. When I came to, it was not a happy thing. It was slow and painful. My eyes fought to open and my head ached. I was unbelievable thirsty and it hurt to move, it hurt to breathe. I must have made a sound because someone was at my side by the time I had managed to get my eyes open. I recognized the doctor but I didn't know his name.

"How are you feeling?" he asked taking my pulse and looking in my eyes with that awful bright light of his.

"Thirsty." I managed to croak out.

"Yes." He vanished for a moment and then came back with a cup of water, helped me sit up slightly so that I could sip at it. "Just a little or you'll be sick." He said setting the cup aside.

"What happened?" I asked.

"You had an adverse reaction to something you ate." He said.

"My head hurts." I said.

"Yes, to be expected. Sleep will help that. Close your eyes and get some rest." The doctor said gently. I did as he said and slipped back into oblivion.

As a child I had, for the most part been unusually healthy. Only once was I seriously ill. Ill enough that I don't actually recall most of the time I was sick. I had caught a rare variant of Tourning's Fever. Something that comes from being bitten by the little black flies called Mawlgwies. It affects maybe one out of a hundred thousand people and it can kill you. It's called Tourning's fever because he was the doctor who not only discovered the disease but also came up with the cure. I was ill for well over a month with fevers and chills, taking a medication that did almost as much harm as the illness but in the end I survived. I remember that time in flashes only. The dreams that came with the fevers still haunt me though, almost as though the dream world was more real than the one I actually lived in. I remember my mother's cool hands on my forehead. I remembered the injections and the maddening itch they caused. I also remembered the sensation of drowning in time, never knowing where or when it was. I would wake from the dreams soaked in fever sweat not knowing if it were night or day. I lost only a month or so but it felt like a year or more.

I was reliving this weird time warp sensation now as I woke again. I felt a whole lot better though, the headache had subsided and the exquisite pain in my chest was now down to a dull ache. It felt late, the lighting in the med lab was very dim and the place was very quiet with the exception of some humming machinery. I let myself come back to the world slowly. I had been dreaming but the memory of what the dreams were about faded as soon as I began to surface.

I sensed him before I turned my head and saw him sitting in the chair by the bed. He sat slouched back, his elbows on the armrests, his fingers steepled together with his fore fingers resting against his chin, he was deep in thought. His face was all shadowy lines and angles. My movement brought him out of his reverie and his eyes caught mine, they seemed to glow in the dim light.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, Miss Gabriel." He said quietly. Before I could ask he had picked up the glass of water for me. He waited for me to sit up a bit and then handed me the glass. I drank a little but my hand shook so much I was afraid I would just drop all the water on me instead. I was glad when he took the glass back and set it on the table again.

"What happened?" I asked lying back down again, trying to sit up took too much effort.



He leaned forward in the chair and stared at me. "How are you feeling now?"

"Like I just went head to head with a Krayt Ancient and lost." I said. "What happened?"

He took a very slow deep breath. "It appears the Corellian Spice cake that was sent up here with you was laced heavily with glow spice and as glow spice is not a poison for most people it did not register on the poison sweep. Glow spice also doesn't glow in opaque food stuffs which is why it is normally only used in drinks as a visual additive. It serves no other purpose than to make drinks sparkle. Thus I can only conclude that someone knew about your allergy and tried to poison you." He said, there was ice in his voice. "You had a severe reaction to the spice, sent you into anaphylactic shock and your heart stopped. Doctor Thracer was able to bring you back but you gave us all a good scare."

"Poison me? What for?" I asked in complete disbelief.

"Now that is the question, isn't it?" He said coolly.

I closed my eyes still trying to wrap my head around the fact someone had done this deliberately.

"How do you know this was not just an accident?" I asked.

"There was enough glow spice in that cake to make all the drinks at the Emperor's grand ball glow for a year. Whoever put it in there made sure there would be enough to bring about a severe reaction. It was not an accident." He said in a quiet, even voice. "I will find out who is behind this and they will be brought to justice."

I sighed. This was all too much to digest and it was making my head hurt. "What time is it now?"

He looked at the chronometer at his left wrist. "A little after five in the morning." He said. "The doctor says you should be well enough in three days."

"Well enough?"

"We have work to do, Miss Gabriel." He reminded me with a slight smile.

"Ah yes, this secret save the world but don't tell anyone about it mission." I said.

He shook his head and gave me a real smile. "You have the strangest sense of humour."

I wanted to reply but was saved by the Doctor.

"Captain, I thought I made it clear the patient was not to be disturbed." He said, annoyed.

"Doctor, may I remind you that I am Captain of this ship and as

such am responsible for all the lives on board her. It is my duty to check up on Miss Gabriel as she, too, is a member of this crew for the time being." Thrawn said coolly. I got the impression this was an old argument that these two men had rehashed over and over again.

"Then I should not have to remind you that, while you may run this ship Captain, the medical labs are my domain and as such, here, I am god and as god I am telling you to leave. If you insist on dragging this young lady on some off world mission she will need to be well rested and strong enough to survive your pig headed leadership. Now get out of my med-lab before I call in security and have you removed." The doctor stood in front of Thrawn with his arms folded across his chest, and although he was a good deal shorter than Thrawn was I was pretty certain he would carry out his threat regardless.

I kinda liked this doctor and I got the impression that Thrawn did too but he was never going to admit that. The two men stared at each other for what seemed like ages and I so wanted to tell them to quit the pissing contest, it was boring, but I didn't think that was a good idea.

"Captain, can you please take this discussion outside? It is very loud and my head hurts." I said instead.

He gave me an even stare with one eyebrow raised. "Yes of course, Miss Gabriel, my apologies. I shall check on your recovery later, with the good doctor's permission, of course."

The doctor watched Thrawn's face intently until the Captain, with a non too happy look, stalked out of the med-lab with a sharp turn of his heel

I couldn't stop the little giggle that escaped. Men are sometimes very funny. Doctor Thracer gave me a speculative glance and then went about doing a check up. "It is a good job that you have a strong will to live, young lady, I am quite sure had I not been able to save you he would have had me shot on the spot."

"It would have displeased Lord Vader if I had died." I said, but I didn't really believe this.

The doctor gave me a knowing look. "Lord Vader, I think, has little to do with the Captain's desire to see you live."

"Hmm, well then maybe it is it this mission he has planned." I countered, ignoring the insinuated meaning in the doctor's words.

The doc shook his head in resignation. "Rest or you will not be going anywhere and I will have to post armed guards at the door."

"That would be fun to watch." I said sleepily. "People would pay..."

The doctor sighed. "You are as bad as he is. Go to sleep before I sedate you." He said and left me to do other things near by. I drifted off to

sleep with the sound of him pottering about near by.

For the next two days that was my life, lying in bed, with occasional trips to the bathroom just to keep it interesting. I slept a lot and when I wasn't asleep then I read the book that a certain someone had left for me by the bed. It was mainly a collection of Galactic myths and legends, quite interesting really. It did not really surprise me that during this time I saw nothing of Thrawn and I was glad of the peace.

By the third morning I had had enough of med-lab, I asked the doc if I could just go back to my own quarters and sleep there and was grateful when he reluctantly agreed. I was glad to be back in a space free of people, beeping machines and the awful antiseptic, clinical scent that seemed to permeate everything in the med-lab.

The nice thing about a VIP suite on an ISD is it has all the comforts of home and this included a bathtub. It was the first thing I did after making myself a nice hot cup of Tatooine mint tea was lounge for over an hour in a bath full of hot bubble covered water, shampoo makes great bubble bath in a pinch. I wanted rid of the med-lab smell and my hair needed washing so badly it was scary. It was a welcome change to the last few days of my life.

After I had gotten out dried off and changed into clothes that actually covered all of me and were a lot less drafty and scratchy I curled up on the couch with the book of myths and began to read. The story I was just about to finish had completely piqued my interest. It was about a planet near the borders of Old Republic space that had been completely avoided, so much so that all reference to it had been lost. It was said to be haunted by creatures that could do strange things with the force such as push it away or even hunt it down. The details were a little sketchy but the stories intrigued me. Even the thought that there might be creatures who could also manipulate the force to their own means was an idea I would never have thought of. If these stories were even remotely true, creatures like that would be a good reason for anyone remotely force sensitive to stay away from this place. It was no wonder all references to this place had been quietly lost. The force worked in the strangest of ways and suddenly the reason for why I was here became a little clearer. I felt the Captain's presence and before he could knock I used my own small force abilities to open the door. He walked in closing the door behind him before I could show off any more.

He looked at me and then at the door but said nothing. He handed me a small slender box that contained my Zenji Hair sticks. I took them out of the box and put my still damp hair up. I was very glad to have them back.

Thrawn smiled watching me. "I thought you might like to have

them returned to you." He said sitting down across from me.

"The doctor said you had them but what happened to my dress? It was a Cati original" I asked.

"It was cut off you so that the doctor could restart your heart." he said coolly. "Dresses can be replaced, you can not." He said.

I just nodded. We sat in silence for a moment and then I said. "You found it didn't you."

His smile was slow and almost lazy. "Clever girl."

"You think they exist?" I asked touching the book.

"Myth usually has some sort of basis in truth. There are reasons why Myrkr was avoided by the Jedi, why it is not on any star-chart." He said.

I looked at him. "This little trip isn't sanctioned by the Emperor is it?"

An eyebrow arched. "What makes you think that?"

"Creatures that have force powers or the ability to perhaps even repel the force would be a great threat to him. He would destroy that planet rather than even look to see there were any truth to the myths regardless of any argument to the contrary you could give." I said quietly.

He was quiet for a moment. "I shall be very careful about how I word things, Miss Gabriel, but in the interest of law and order neither the Emperor nor Lord Vader are privy to everything I do. It would not be the first time I have worked behind the lines, so to speak." He paused. "I do not always agree on our Esteemed Emperor's way of doing things, that is no secret but I serve the Empire to the best of my abilities, never question that." There was a glittering edge of steel in his words and I knew then I never wanted to be on the wrong side of him.

"But this little trip you and I are about to take is a secret." I pressed.

"I informed Lord Vader that I required the use of his force sensitive assistant to help me in some personal matters. Given that my interest in you is not such a great secret to him, he saw fit to give you time away without asking why." He said a little coldly.

"You are using me, in other words." I said equally as coldly.

"Yes and no. I require your skills as a force sensitive. I chose you because I do not trust anyone else." He stressed. "While you remain loyal to Lord Vader, I sense that you also do not agree with everything the Emperor does. I am not asking you to betray any loyalties and if you choose to share any information we should happen to find then that would be your choice." There was a "but" in that last sentence and he did not have to fill in the blank for me. I knew if I broke his confidence he would vanish from my life

as certainly as if he had never been there to begin with. "This trip is merely a fact finding mission. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Oh, so we are just satisfying your curiosity." I said more snarkily than I had meant to.

He smiled. "You could put it that way, but now we are also satisfying yours as well." and he was right about that.

"Does everything with you have an ulterior motive?" I asked looking into his eyes. I could read nothing in them. He was a locked door for me.

He was silent for a moment and sat back in the chair, countering my own stare with one of his own. When he finally did speak he chose his words with great care.

"Men in my line of work rarely have time for pleasure, Miss Gabriel, we are married to our careers, to our ships, to our commands. If I were to tell you that I genuinely enjoy your company, that I expect nothing from you when I am with you in an unofficial capacity but that sometimes I wonder if there could be something more, would that answer your question?" Before I could answer he continued. "When you are onboard my ship, you become a part of my responsibility, you are under my command which makes this is about work regardless of whether it is officially sanctioned or not. In the end there is only one truth, that I serve the Empire, not simply the man alone, but the idea. In order to do that sometimes, I will go to extreme measures. Information is the most useful currency we have, my dear."

I nodded slowly because I got what he was talking about and he had known that all along anyway or we would not have even be having this conversation.

"Then we understand each other." He said standing up.

I stood up as well. "Yes, Captain. I believe we do."

He nodded. "Tomorrow we will take a small ship and see what we can find out about this mysterious place. I trust you feel well enough."

"I expect the fresh air will do me good." I said.

He chuckled. "I will come for you when it is time to leave, some time early in the morning. Be ready, wear something you can travel inconspicuously and move quickly in." He said turning to leave. I followed him to the door, intending to open it the old fashioned way. He turned to face me just before I could do so. He wanted to say something more, it was written on his face but instead he just searched my eyes looking for an answer to some unasked question. If he found it I never knew. He walked out leaving the wordless question hanging. I stared at the closed door for a moment before going back to the book so I could reread that whole chapter again. Any information was good information and I had the nasty feeling we

would need all the help we could get our hands on.

I had packed a small back pack with the bare essentials. I was ready when Thrawn came for me. Wordlessly, we walked through the corridors of the ship in the very early hours of the dawn watch. The deck officer greeted him with a salute which Thrawn returned.

"Everything is as you requested, Sir." The young man said.

"Very good, Athael, thank you." Thrawn said and I wondered if he knew the names of everyone on board this ship. It would not surprise me at all if he did. The young man saluted again and left smartly.

"Well, Miss Gabriel, there she is." He gestured towards the scruffiest looking ship I had seen in a long while. "The *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma*." He said.

I raised both eyebrows. "Big name for a little ship." I retorted looking at the little HWK light freighter. "Where on earth did you dig this up from? It must be at least ten years old."

Thrawn smiled. "I take it you are familiar with this kind of vessel?"

I nodded. "More than I would prefer to say actually, saw a lot of them before the newer freighters came out, more people used them because they had better shielding, heavier fire power. Does she even still have her hyper-drive?"

He nodded. "There have been significant modifications to this ship, I am sure she will surprise you."

"She looks like a wreck." I told him flatly.

He purred in my ear "Looks can be deceiving, Miss Gabriel."

"Hmm!" was my only reply. I did not doubt that this little ship was probably wired and fired up to the teeth. The HWK series were, despite a bad reputation for being touchy little ships with big personalities, a line of tough, fairly versatile freighters, which was why many smugglers used them.

I dropped my back pack at his feet and began to do my own fairly serious preflight check on the ship, I hadn't asked if I could but I didn't care. I had been taught never to fly a ship I had not personally gone over and I wasn't about to start changing that now. I figured out pretty quickly there had been some substantial modifications done and most of them would not be picked up by a standard Imperial patrol. She was the perfect smuggler's vessel. It made me raise my eyebrows even more. I wondered exactly who he thought we would be going up against, if anyone at all.

When I was satisfied I walked back to where the Captain was standing watching me with a thoughtful expression on his face. I picked up my backpack.

"Shall we?" I asked. He gave me a slow smile.

“After you, Miss Gabriel.” He said and we walked up the small gang way.

The *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma* was a fairly small ship, room for six passengers plus a crew of two, usually, a pilot and a co pilot. There were no extra places for gunners and turrets, this was a ship for drop and go. She could carry up to one hundred and fifty metric tons of cargo if the holds had not been altered, which in this case they had. I walked through the ship and checked her out from the inside. I tweaked some of the engine systems and Thrawn had watched me with his usual raised eyebrow. I had cut my mech teeth on ships exactly like this. It was a sort of home coming. I tossed my backpack on one of the bunks in the small crew cabin and headed up forward to the cockpit. I was surprised to see the captain sitting in the co-pilot's chair.

“You seem to have far more experience with this type of vessel than I do,” he said. “That makes you the designated pilot.”

I grinned. Sat down strapped in and got my headset on. We were cleared for departure and we left quietly. It didn't take me long to sort out exactly what he had meant by significant modifications. Her engine was twice the power it should have been, I wasn't even sure it was possible to do that and her hyper-drive had been jacked up to the max. Forward fire power had been boosted and the regeneration rate made my eyebrows rise as did the included counter measures.

“You expecting trouble?” I asked. This little ship was armed to the teeth, should not be someone's prey but rather the predator if we got into a fight.

“Covering all possibilities.” He quipped as he programmed the nav computer. “We will make several hyper jumps, no direct line.”

I shrugged. “What ever you say, Captain.” I maneuvered the ship away from the *Vengeance* and got a good view of the ISD in the process. I whistled softly. The ISD was a thing of deadly beauty. “Before you hit the go button I want to test her out a bit, she has a touchy feel to her and I need to get used to that.” he nodded his consent and I took the *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma* for a quick joy ride. She was fast and responsive and I think I made him a little space sick.

“That's enough.” He said tersely and punched the nav computer's go switch.

I laughed. This was sheer joy and I had forgotten how much I loved just flying. The nav computer ticked over and the stars distorted as we went into hyperspace. Once we were in the hyper space lane I unclipped and got up. The ship was on autopilot and I wanted to make some Jawa juice.

According to the nav computer's calculations the next jump would be in five hours. I did not know the coordinates he had punched in and I didn't ask. He had his reasons for being secretive and I just didn't feel like arguing with him about it.

The *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma* had a small galley, well it was more like an after thought of a galley actually, but good enough for two people, a pain when you had to cook for passengers, though. It had been well stocked and it didn't take me long to get Jawa-juice sorted out. While it was brewing I fetched the book I was reading from by backpack. I poured two cups, remembering how Thrawn had taken his the day he had taken me to lunch, strong and black. I handed it to him and sat back down. He nodded his thanks and went back to studying the data pad he had in his hand. We were not really very conversational and hyper-space was very dull so I was glad I had brought a book to read. I sat the same way I always had when I was flying, feet wedged up on the consol, slouched back in my chair, my nose in a book and a cup of sweet milky Jawa juice in one hand. If my complete lack of military decorum bothered him, he didn't say anything.

Every hour on the hour I got up and wandered about. Ship-check, my father had always called it. He had drilled that into me from the very first time I could ever remember flying with him. Always check the ship, he had said, always, even if everything seems to be running in perfect order. System fail and things can go wrong very quickly, just keeping an eye on stuff once an hour might save your life.

He had shown me what to do and made it a point that all his pilots implemented an hourly check. A walk-through the ship, a look at the systems readouts, smell for leaks and simple things, get a feel for the ship and know when stuff was just not right. It was as if by doing these little checks you developed some sort of relationship with the ship and got to know her well enough so that when things did happen and go wrong you were not scrambling to find things or know where what was. It seems like such a small thing and most pilots would say they know their ship inside and out but I have been in the co-pilot's seat on a couple of runs for Jabba's people and I can tell you when a pilot doesn't really know his ship but thinks he does and something goes wrong you are so screwed. They all laughed at me for doing my routine ship checks but in then it saved our lives and they stopped laughing and started doing checks of their own.

Plus it helps to pass the time if you have some sort of routine scheduled thing to do, because any trip longer than two hours in a small ship is dull, even with a good book or board games... that is if you have someone to play games with. Thrawn was silent almost the whole first jump.

Deep in thought and studying the various datapads and books he had brought with him.

We ate cold sandwiches for lunch that I had made from the tin of mystery meat and bread from the supplies on board and all I got out of him was a polite thank-you.

The route he had chosen had taken us just off the main trade routes into quieter space. Not so back water that we would look suspicious but off the main pathways. When I checked the star chart as we came out of hyperspace I saw we would pass near Kuat. We cruised at sub-light for about half an hour and then Thrawn punched in the second set of hyperspace coordinates and we jumped again. This time we would be traveling for six hours.

“How long will we be gone for?” I asked after cleaning up the lunch dishes.

Thrawn thought about it for a moment. “If the calculations are right not more than seventy two hours.” He said. “But of course there is margin for change depending on circumstances.”

I nodded.

“What languages do you speak, Miss Gabriel?” he asked suddenly.

I had to think about it for a moment. “Basic, High Court basic thanks to my mother, Huttese, Rodese, Rodese thieves’ cant, some Bocce , and some pirate and smuggler cant.” I said.

He raised an eyebrow. “Impressive list, most humans speak one maybe two languages. You seem to have a gift for them.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know about that, it was never really hard for me to learn a new language, it is a little like music I sort of see it rather than hear it.” I could not explain it better than that.

“Interesting, but you left one out of that list.” He said.

I looked at him, wracking my brain trying to think what other language I knew. Nothing came to mind so I shook my head, biting my lip in the process, “No, I don’t think so.”

He smiled slowly. “Now, that is very interesting.”

“You’ve lost me, Captain.”

When he spoke next I knew he was no longer speaking basic but I still understood him and the language he spoke made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I just sat in the chair across from him and stared into his eyes.

“That book about the myths I gave you to read, Miss Gabriel, is unreadable by most people and yet you did not even seem to notice this, but that was not my first inkling that you are not all you appear to be.”

My heart had begun to speed up a little. I did not like this little turn of conversation much and I still was not sure of what he was getting at.

“Any time you wish to get to the point Captain...”

He smiled and nodded. “The night you were in my flat, you picked up a book lying on the table and flipped through it.”

I remembered, just in passing, because it was sitting there and had a beautiful old binding. “The little book with fables in it, I remember you asking if I wished to borrow it.”

“And your reply was not, that you did not wish to take it because you could not read it but rather that you didn’t wish to borrow something so old and precious. How you would know that it was both old and very precious was beyond me at the time, but you were nervous enough and I thought perhaps you were just being shy about not wanting to admit you could not read it. Now I understand the truth of the matter you truly don’t see it do you?” he said more to himself. “You hear and see this language as if it were basic.”

My father had said more or less the same words to me just before I had left Tatooine.

“Mandalorian?” I asked feeling suddenly very afraid of him. I got slowly out of the chair and backed away.

He sat there quietly. “I was not certain until now.”

“So, I understand Mandalorian, so what?” I asked standing there with my arms folded over my chest.

He was going to say something but he changed his mind, I read it on his face and felt it in the air as certainly as if he had held up a sign. Instead he said, “Where we are headed will be an outpost for smugglers and thieves, people on the fringe of society who do not wish to be noticed. I wanted to know if my theory was right because I will need a way to communicate with you that no one else will understand. I am quite certain that none of these people we will encounter will speak Mandalorian, much less Old Mandalorian which was what I spoke to you just now. While you have an extraordinary repertoire of languages to call on, all of them are used by these people in some form or another. I had to be sure.” He spoke quietly, calmly as if he were speaking to some frightened animal, trying to sooth it down.

I remained standing. “You could have just asked.”

“You would have lied about it.”

“What makes you say that?”

He shook his head slightly. “You carry some secret about with you

as though it were an ice-bear on your shoulder. I don't even think you realise it, but it is there sometimes, in your eyes, a haunted uncertain look. It seems to crop up when you are near Mandalorian artifacts."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You study me like I am one of your pieces of art."

"I make it my business to know all I can about the people who are close to me."

"Then what?"

"Merlyn, we have already had that particular conversation." He said gently.

I nodded. So we had. "So, you know all there is to know about me while you remain a big mystery is that it?" I was angry now and glad of it. Anger was easier for me to cope with than that gut culling fear I had felt a moment ago. Even the name Mandalore seemed to cast some dark shadow over my heart.

"I remain a mystery to you because you never ask about me." He said softly. "What do you want to know?"

I opened my mouth and then closed it again. He was right I never asked but how could I explain that he always appeared closed to me that his body language and manners almost screamed do not ask anything personal. That I was scared to shatter what seemingly fragile bond there was between us by prying.

He got up and walked over to me. "You question nothing about me, someone you allow such close physical intimacy with." this puzzled him.

"Physical intimacy is one thing." I said with a shrug. Not that my experiences in this particular area were vast, and most of what I had experienced had not been pleasant. Tatooine is a rough place especially if you are female and if you are stupid enough to dance for a living.

"Are you saying you would allow anyone to be this close?" he cupped my face with his hand.

"No, in fact, I usually go out of my way to avoid it." I said backing away from him a step.

He smiled slightly. "Easier to break away from physical contact than to tear away from someone you allow into your soul, is that it?"

I was not at all sure where this turn of conversation had come from or even why. I looked away from him. He had a nasty knack of breaking down my walls and seeing the truth beyond. I shuddered to think what he would have been like had he been even the slightest bit force sensitive. He studied my face for a very long time.

"I forget that you are so young." He said quietly, more to himself.

"And just how old are you then?" I asked, hating to be called young, I had never felt young, not even as a child. As though I had somehow been born with a different sense of what age and responsibility meant.

He smirked. "Old enough to know better than to get tangled up with you." He quipped. "Is age important?"

"You brought it up." I snipped ignoring his first remark.

"Yes, yes I did." He acknowledged. "Merlyn, what do you want to know about me that will settle some of this angst?"

I stared at him because now, put on the spot I couldn't think of the right questions to ask.

He sighed and walked over to the galley to make some tea. He poured two cups and motioned for me to sit with him at the small dining table.

"I am a very private person. I have to be. Too many people pry into everything when you have been noticed by the Emperor. I am sure you have your own experiences with this. It is neither in my nature nor my upbringing to be open and giving with information I deem unnecessary, this includes all personal information. The less people know the better. I notice you are also fairly careful with what you tell people about yourself. I often get the feeling that you grew up very quickly, did not have much of a childhood on Tatooine, perhaps that is in part what draws me to you." He paused to sip at the tea. "My home world is old and steeped in tradition. Discipline and self responsibility are highly valued among my kind. Children are taught from an early age to view the world with logic and a cool head. We also do not have much of an adolescence."

I watched him as he thought about what to say next.

"My full name is Mitth'raw'nuruodo, a far too complex name for most of the morons at the Academy so I shortened it for them. Not many people know this or know what it means. That Mitth is my birthright name, Raw is the primary one, you might say it is what my mother calls me when she writes to me, and Nuruodo is the family line I was born into. I come from a long line of warriors and strategists. Believe when I tell you, I am very very good at what I do." He paused. "Some time ago I was banished from my home world because the ruling families were too short sighted to see the choices I had made were in their own best interest. A great deal of this has to do with Jedi Masters on something they named the Outbound Flight project, so you must understand I have little faith and less trust in the words of those who call themselves Jedi light, dark or otherwise." He said with a slight shrug. "It was shortly after this I chose to work for the Empire."

He stopped. He had given me a brief outline and left many many details out. I felt this but still it was more than I suspected he had told anyone else and I knew that was all he had to say unless I asked something.

“Do you miss your home?” I began, knowing I had asked this question before but wondered if this time the answer would be different.

“Sometimes, about as much as I suspect you miss yours. I have family there and those ties are not easy to cut, but the Chiss prize intense focus and logic and suppress emotions that are considered hasty such as anger, hate and so on. I draw on this training to avoid longing for a home that is no longer my own.”

“Family?”

He smiled. “I have parents and an older sister, who is an artisan, as well as far too many extended family to mention. My people are very family oriented. Chiss families have long histories and value this greatly”

“Then you are lucky, I don’t know where I am really from.” I told him.

He watched my face carefully and held his silence, waiting, knowing that I would tell him what it was he had wanted to know right from the start of this whole conversation.

“Just before I left to work for Lord Vader my father told me that I was not his or my mother’s child. I am a foundling, left behind on one of his transports during Jedi Purge. The only thing I have to tie me to my true past is a journal written in Mandalorian and that I am force sensitive with some abilities that probably should have been kept quieter than they have.” I paused. “No one but I, my father and now you know this.” He nodded, letting me know he understood the trust I was giving him.

“And you were the only one who could read this journal?” he asked.

I nodded. “The book would not even open for my father.”

“Does it hold any clues about who you are?”

“I know who I am.” I said sharply making him raise an eyebrow, “What I don’t know is where I came from.”

He smiled slowly. “At every turn you continue to surprise me.” He said.

“Well, keeps you interested I guess.” I said wearily.

His smile turned a little predatory, making me shiver. “Many things about you keep me interested, Miss Gabriel.” And I wondered how long we could keep playing this particular game before one of us caved in, went mad and shot the other.

“You didn’t answer the question.” He reminded me.

I shook my head. “None that I can decipher, it is very old, older

than my birth parents I am guessing and written by someone studying the arts of a Jedi but he was failing. Maybe one day I will show it to you seeing as how you can read it and you can tell me what you think.”

He gave me a solemn look. “I should be honoured to do so.”

“I don’t know how it ties in with the language though.” I said.

“Neither do I but that would bear investigating, perhaps there is something in the Mandalore gene that makes the language a racial memory. You do seem to connect with the artifacts from that culture.” He said.

I sat back and drank the rest of my tea. I was suddenly exhausted, having forgotten the ordeal I had been through three day previously.

“Go and rest.” He told me. “I will take the next watch.” He paused and then said, “Your father and the other pilots you have flown with have taught you well, but you are no good to me tired. Later on we have much to discuss as I can fill you in on what we have ahead of us.”

I nodded, and was not going to argue with him about it. I crashed almost the moment I lay down on the bunk and slept through the next two hyperspace jumps. When he came to wake me up we were three hours away from Myrkr and he was no longer wearing an Imperial uniform.