

Daughter of the Empire

Book 1

Written by F. Messer 2005-2006

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CHAPTER 8

Predators and Prey 1

Chut chut, Captain,

I apologise for the long delay in replying to your letter, I started one about a billion times but somehow just never seemed to be able to finish it. It is difficult to sort out my thoughts when it comes to communicating with you.

First I should probably apologise for falling asleep like that. Odd really, I don't think I have actually slept curled up in someone's arms since I was a small child. It's a little embarrassing, to be honest, so thank you for being so understanding. And, I slept like the dead.

There are things you wrote about in your letter which have been stuck in my head. I think about them over and over again. The primary one being, how did Jyrki know? I have no answer to this. Aside from you, I discussed what I was doing with no one. Not even Lord Vader knew the exact nature of my job. He said, and I quote, "the details do not concern me. As long as you do your job for me, I do not care what else you do." I don't argue with him when he gets in one of those moods. Certainly these people are getting information from somewhere inside but whom, where and how... I don't know.

You know, I am not Intel so it's not my job to sort this out. It does make me wonder if I should be writing some sort of a report or something. This is not exactly my area of expertise. I would be glad of any guidance you should have in this matter. I will take you up on your advice and speak with Lord Vader about it all. However, as I wish to do this in person rather than any other means of communication, and, he doesn't want me to join him until after the relocation, this presents a bit of a time gap. How long can one sit on information like this before the higher ups get cross? If I lose my job because of Jyrki, I swear I will kill him. I am grateful for your discretion in this matter but do not ever question my loyalty to the Empire, to Lord Vader. Maybe my hesitation seems as though I am torn, I can tell you that I am not. Jyrki burned his bridge with me the night he broke into my flat. I don't think I love him anymore but sometimes it is hard to let go of what he meant to me. How does one let go of the past when it keeps showing up on one's doorstep?

You asked me about Jyrki and after lying awake pretty much every night ever since thinking about it, I guess I should try to clarify some of it all for you, and for me. Oddly enough it all seems bigger, more devastating in my head than when I try to write it out. In the end there is not much to tell, really. I was just a kid when my father hired him but we got along right from the very start. Jyrki taught me to fix ships and defend myself. He was the first person who took my love of fixing things and interest in mechanics seriously and didn't just blow it off as a young girl's whim. He listened to me and he was kind. I suppose, looking back, it was only natural that he was the first man I ever utterly fell in love with. I gave my heart away with out thinking, pretty much worshipped the ground he walked on. I was a teenager and he was hiding a great big secret. I thought he loved me as well but I believe he loved his secret more. That's not very fair but I think it is the truth. He has a past that is very dark and, I think, quite scary. I know there were a lot of things that he never told me or even hinted at, but he was hard and he was dangerous. I just never saw that side of him before. Things happened to him that I cannot even begin to imagine. He never spoke of any of his past while we were still speaking to each other. I had no idea what his motives for the things he did were until, perhaps the night he came to save me from the Empire. I never knew or put two and two together that he was force sensitive and that he was quite powerful, powerful enough to be able to hide it from me until very recently. His reasoning behind not being able to return my feelings for him had something to do with a Jedi code of not being allowed relationships, at least that is what he implied. He seemed to think that what he is would have placed my life, my family's life in danger. I don't actually know that much about it. Jedi Lore, it seems, is a bit of a taboo subject. Lord Vader gets very tetchy when I bring it up.

I wish I knew how to put into words how I feel. I can't say that I really understand any of it, to be honest. I absolutely do not know why I am telling you all of this but you asked and you seem to care.

You talked of my strange habit of keeping secrets and it made me think about it. Ever since I can remember I have been different. I have always been able to 'hear' people's thoughts, sense things and do things that were unusual. As a small child I learned that this was not a good thing and I learned to keep it hidden, all of it. I suppose I got

used to being a keeper of secrets. I talk to you, not only because you somehow have this magical way of pulling information out of me but because, for what ever misguided reason, I actually trust you. And maybe I just like making you work for it, but the court is still undecided about this. When keeping secrets becomes a habit, sharing them is a very difficult thing to do, even perceived ones. I am strangely grateful that you do push, although I am never certain of why. It is a kind of game playing, though, isn't it?

The past week has been a bit chaotic here. The Imperial Court will be moving back to Coruscant soon so all preparations are now in full swing. I find it sort of strange how crazy some people get over the smallest things. I have had some interesting run ins with a Grand Admiral named Zaarin. His manner is somewhat abrupt and extremely arrogant. He gets cross that I can't tell him where Lord Vader is. He is a little scary and very oily. Oddly enough, when he shows up I find myself thinking of you. How strange is that? He gives me the creeps, to be honest. I hope he won't be attending the Nubian Gala because I don't much feel like being polite to him. I actually don't feel much like going but I will be there at Lord Vader's insistence. Imperial protocol really annoys the sandjiggers out of me sometimes.

I guess I should wrap this up since the courier will pick it up shortly. I didn't think I would write such a long letter. Maybe it is easier to talk to you through a piece of paper? Or maybe it is just that we don't really get that much time to talk? I suppose that's normal in our line of work. I feel I know so little about yet you have become a part of my life here. I also know that when you are around me, my life is anything but boring. I am just not sure this is a good thing.

I hope that you are well and, as usual, saving the galaxy from evil doers. Again, thank you for your kindnesses.

*Kaniwaturiki kinkin,
Kakunap,
Merlyn*

There are days when this is all I seem to do. I walked into the office early this morning and discovered a ton of mail already waiting for me as if I had done nothing the day before. My droid brought me Jawa juice and I sat down to get work done. It had been about a week since I had written and sent off my letter to Captain Thrawn and since

then life had been very, very busy with office work. I can't say that this was a bad thing but the first memo I read made me roll my eyes...

TO: Lord Darth Vader

FROM: The Imperial Social Division

RE: The Annual Nubian Gala, Theed, Naboo, 2nd reminder.

Your Lordship,

As you know it is almost time for the annual Nubian Gala which, as you know, is held each year to celebrate the Emperor's visit to Naboo and to wish him a safe return to Coruscant. As always the Gala will be held at the Imperial Palace in Theed. Formal dress is required. It would add greatly to the atmosphere if you would grace us with your presence. Should you be unable to attend then please indicate who shall be representing you in your stead.

We would be greatly appreciative of an answer in this matter at your earliest convenience.

Yours Truly,

Marlann Taralae

Imperial Social Director.

Outgoing scandoc transmission[timestamp 09:43 cst]>>> Lord Vader, Here is the current list of things that need your attention.

---Invitation Response for the Nubian Gala in Theed. I have received the second reminder now and need to know what to tell them.

---Meeting reminder: Prince Xizor, at 13:00hrs CST, tomorrow via holo. This meeting has been postponed twice. His office is getting tetchy about it. Do you wish me to confirm or reschedule?

---Imperial Court will be relocating back to Coruscant in seven days; do you have any wishes or special requests with regards to your office in this matter?

---Can you please send me an updated schedule? I have had G.A.

Zaarin asking for your whereabouts several times in a row now and I think he is getting tired of me telling him I do not know where you are, how long you will be gone for and when you will be back. He says he has important news for you which he will only deliver in person. You don't want to know the reply I gave himJ the last time he accosted me about this, suffice to say he is a little annoyed. Can you please either contact him at your earliest convenience or let me know when he will be able to speak with you directly?

--- Is there an ETA on when I will see you in person again? <<< **End transmission**

Incoming scandoc transmission[timestamp 10:38 cst]>>> Miss Gabriel, thank you for the fifth reminder about this up and coming event, however, I shall not be attending this season's Nubian Gala no matter how many times you inform me about it. As you are well aware, I have better things to do with my time than watch the entire Imperial Court fawn over itself. You may make the appropriate excuses as you see fit, although you should be aware that while I do enjoy the use of your 'He's hunting rebels' line, it is not standard protocol when turning down an invitation. Try to be a little more diplomatic in your responses. As my Personal Assistant, you will go in my place and represent me. An expense account has been created for you should you require appropriate clothing for this event and HR will send you the details. Alert me if they do not. Do not bother me further with this particular matter.

--- The meeting with Xizor can be confirmed but at 14:30 not 13:00.

--- Imperial court office relocation is your job deal with it as you see fit.

--- G.A. Zaarin has the ability to reach me at his leisure and the information as to my whereabouts is available to him. He does not need to talk to you to schedule a meeting with me he can easily obtain that information from my aide-de-camp. Why he should be asking you for this information when he has clearance to obtain it himself is beyond me. Maybe you should stop smiling so much, you do seem to attract a lot of attention.

--- Once the relocation to Coruscant is completed I shall request your presence. Curb your impatience. <<< **End transmission**

TO: Miss Merlyn Ty'Erijann Gabriel

FROM: The Department of Human Resources

RE: Expense Account

Miss Gabriel, at the request of Lord Vader an expense account has been created in your name. Enclosed in the following package are the details you will need in order to activate it. Please be aware that while the account has granted you a certain amount of freedom due to the nature of the requesting party, your expenditures will be monitored for abuse. If you have any questions regarding this or any other HR issues

do not hesitate to ask. Please assure Lord Vader that we will do everything we can to accommodate his wishes regarding your well being.

Yours sincerely,

Prissta Torrsett

Human Resources and Development Manager

IMS:to mgabriel[timestamp 10:45 cst]>>> Hey! Sorry I haven't been in contact, been away mostly on Coruscant getting things ready for big E's return. Dropped by the office a couple of times but your droid said you were away on business. Will you be at the palace gala in Theed? I hope so; I have not seen you in months! What have you been up to? By the way, the theme this year is pre clone war fashion. If you are coming, give me a shout maybe I can slip away and we can go shopping or something, after all I do know where all the best shops are and the gala is only three days away. Hugs, Shiv. <<<

From: srimanata

Outgoing scandoc transmission[timestamp 11:02 cst]>>> Lord Vader, Prince Xizor's office has asked that the meeting that was scheduled for tomorrow at 13:00 and then changed to 14:30 be postponed until three days from now at 10:00 am. They have expressed their regrets that the Prince is unavailable for the time requested and stress that due to the importance of the matter at hand a suitable and convenient time for both parties be found. Please let me know when you are able to meet with him, his secretary was very abrupt. I don't think they are very happy with me these days. <<< **End transmission**

IMS:to srimanata[timestamp 11:08cst]>>> Shiv, holy sarlacc where have you been hiding? Yeah, been busy with office work, you know how it goes. I am obligated to attend the gala in Lord Vader's place so you will see me. I don't need to buy any new dresses but shopping with you sounds like fun, pick a time I will rearrange my non existent schedule. What the sandjiggers is pre clone wars fashion??????? As long as there are no metal bikinis to wear I am game. Send me a time! Looking forward to it. /hugs back , Merly. <<< **From: mgabriel**

Incoming scandoc transmission[timestamp 13:07 cst]>>> Miss

Gabriel, inform Xizor's people that I will be available to meet with him tomorrow at 13:30. If he cannot arrange his schedule to allow time to meet with me then I question the seriousness of his desire to do business with the Empire, you may quote this if you wish. Inform his secretary that I will not be available for any time other than this for the next two weeks. They can take it or leave it. I have better things to do that accommodate spoiled, wealthy aristocrats. If his office is unhappy with your work then you may inform them they can discuss the matter with me. You are doing what I have told you to do and their like or dislike of this is irrelevant. <<< **End transmission**

Outgoing scandoc transmission[timestamp 14:23 cst]>>>Lord Vader, Prince Xizor will be available to meet with you via holo tomorrow as newly scheduled at 13:30 cst. <<<**End transmission**

IMS:to mgabriel[timestamp 15:43 cst]>>>Hey what are you doing this evening? Due to this gala thing many of the shops we use will be open tonight and if you wanted to we could maybe go browse? I have some last minute things to pick up for a couple of the high maintenance courtesans so it would be nice to have company. Just you and I, the rest of the gang are either busy or back on Coruscant. <<<**From:srimanata**

IMS:to srimanata[timestamp 15:52cst]>>>Sounds great, where do we meet? <<< **From:mgabriel**

IMS:to mgabriel[timestamp 16:04 cst]>>> I'll swing by the office and pick you up at around 17:00, okay? <<< **From:srimanata**

IMS:to srimanata[timestamp 16:10cst]>>>Perfect see you then!<<< **From:mgabriel**

I sighed. At least I would not be sitting at home alone this evening. My lessons with Master Kjestyll had been cancelled, he was away and most likely I would not be training with him again until I returned to Coruscant. I practiced on my own but I missed his gentle guidance. I wondered if I would ever have any normalcy back in my life at all. This uneven schedule was a bit hard to deal with sometimes. Though, really I could not complain. A day such as this was nice

though, and I got to catch up on all the really annoying stuff, like sorting out a meeting between Prince Xizor and Lord Vader. They could not ever agree on a time to meet and it took days before either one of them would compromise on a time and place and method. They drove me mad with this game. I am quite sure the who ever the secretary in Xizor's office was, she too got tired of this game. After Shiv's last message I decided that I needed a break, went to grab a cup of tea and when I came back to my desk there was a letter waiting for me all wrapped up in an Imperial Courier envelope. These things are security sealed and encoded to match the Thumb scan of the receiver. I smiled as I opened it up. Inside was a plain cream coloured envelope with my name written in exquisite hand writing. This was the perfect end to a busy day, a letter from Captain Thrawn. I opened the envelope carefully and with my cup of tea in one hand, read his letter.

A'mia Tekari,

What a delightful gift. You surprise me at every turn and that is not easy to do. I trust that you are well despite the chaos being caused by the move back to Coruscant. No matter how many times the Imperial Court does this, it never seems to go smoothly. Bureaucracy it seems, does not learn from its past problems, but rather invents new ones along the way. I do not envy you.

It is quite late here right now and while an ISD's captain is never truly off duty I do have a few moments of quiet to reply to your lovely letter.

There are some things that need to be cleared up. Firstly, you fell asleep because you were exhausted. That is nothing to be embarrassed about. I did try to wake you but it was rather like trying to wake a hibernating Telatt Bear. I must admit that I was flattered that you felt safe enough with me to "curl up in my arms", as you so elegantly put it. As a matter of fact the word flattered does not do it justice; I was touched by that small moment of trust.

Secondly, I apologise for your sleepless nights. It was not my intention to create conflict by my questions, but in the end it seems to have done some good. You carry a lot on your shoulders for someone your age, and while I know you hate it when I mention this, you are very young to have such weighty secrets.

Your friend, Jyrki, was a fool in more ways than one. Do not shed tears for the past, A'myshk'a, he chose his path and chose not to

share it with you. His error is my fortune. Believe me when I say I am far more attentive when it comes to taking care with beautiful, fragile things and before you start to protest, which I know you will, let me clarify. A heart is a fragile thing. You are a creature of extraordinary grace and I am honoured by your presence in my life.

You asked for my advice so I will give it to you. Speak with Lord Vader about the incident on Rothana and let him take it to Intel. Waiting until you can see him in person does not sound unreasonable to me. Aside from the name of your mechanic friend, there are not many details you can give. I also would venture to guess that a full and detailed report on what happened would come from the Emperor's dancer. I suspect that she will probably leave certain details out and one of those details would be your presence and part in what happened. It is entirely probable she knew exactly who and what you are; to you she was and remains just a dancer. Intel sometimes has a nasty habit of making mountains out of ant hills. Your job was to get her in and out and you did this. In all honesty you have no proof that this attack was in any way rebellion related. You have no evidence as to why these people were on Rothana or why they were after this dancer. You speculate, and I suspect that you are not wrong in the train of thought, but you have no hard evidence to support any of it. You must remember that on paper at least, you are, first and foremost Lord Vader's personal assistant, nothing more, nothing less. Lord Vader has had far more experience dealing with this sort of thing and I do not think he would be adverse to your telling him in confidence what you think or suspect.

I personally believe it would be better that, if Intel were to learn about your extra curricular activities, they should do so from the Emperor himself. In the end, taking out your personal feelings and speculation, the facts, as you have presented them to me, say very little except that information is somehow being leaked from the Imperial Court. Where you see rebels could have been a mere kidnapping attempt to obtain a professional dancer. There are many ways to read the situation and none of them or perhaps all of them could be correct. Without the whole story it is impossible to tell. You are reading more into this because you happen to have a relationship with one of the attackers, but in all honesty, how well do you really know him? How well can you guess his motives for what he was doing? I think that you worry a little too much about it because of

your personal ties with this man. If the Emperor had wanted you to be more involved or to know more about the exact nature of the mission at hand and the young woman you were transporting he would have told you. The Emperor does nothing without reason or forethought. I am quite certain that should he wish more information he would not hesitate to question you. This is, of course, just my opinion.

I did not mean to give you the wrong impression with some of my words; I most certainly do not question your loyalty to the Empire or to Lord Vader. I was merely pointing out that trying to serve two opposing ideals is almost impossible. It was not meant as an insult.

Be very wary of Demetrius Zaarin, my dear. He is extremely intelligent and very ambitious. It does not surprise me that he has decided to seek you out. Aside from the fact that you are quite lovely, you also have the ear of the Emperor's Iron Fist. Zaarin will use any advantage he can in his quest for power. He probably thinks that you are an easy mark, I should dearly love to see his face when he realises that is not the case. He is a worthy opponent, to be sure, but I wonder a little about how he makes you think of me. Perhaps it is that you have a tendency to see men as predators and you are not altogether wrong in this thought. Trust your instincts, A'myshk'a. They serve you well.

I think I have addressed all of your concerns and questions, I hope so. I am quite certain you will tell me if this is not the case. One of the things I admired about you from the very first moment we met was your ability to be straight forward. While I have told you that learning the ways of the Imperial Court are vital for one's survival in the Empire, your stubborn refusal to play these subtle games is a most endearing feature.

You wrote that you hoped I was well and, indeed, I am. I must admit I much prefer the straight forwardness of captaining an Imperial Star Destroyer to the petty political bickering that seems so prevalent within the Imperial Court. While playing such games can be interesting from a strategic point of view they do have a tendency to become tedious. I am quite sure you would not argue with me on this point.

We have been spending some time in the Ishanna System. Fairly routine I am afraid but one thing of note is the Planet S'krrr

and the famous Sikadian Gardens. It is supposed to be a place of perfect ecological balance. I am hoping in the next couple of days or so to be able to explore this place further and will let you know how it is. Apart from this little diversion, life has been fairly routine and there is not much of interest to tell. You have experienced what life is like on board an ISD so you know what I am talking about. On a side note Dr. Thracer asked me how you were doing and wished me to convey his best to you. You do seem to have a way with people, my dear it is not often the good doctor expresses such concern for a patient once they have recovered and after they have left his sick-bay.

*Now, I am afraid I must finish up. I have no answers as to why you would find it easier to write your thoughts rather than speak them with me, but I will not complain. I have always thought that written correspondence was an elegant way to get to know someone and there have been many books published on this subject. If I can find a copy of Tristyl Da'hlena's book: 'Seraina and Damiano, an Intimate Portrait of the Lives of Two Space Traders in the Old Republic.' I shall send it to you. It is a very well done study of correspondence between two freighter pilots who, after only ever having met face to face once, spent the first five or so years of their relationship together solely through the art of writing letters to one another. They would eventually marry, and although their jobs as pilots continued to separate them they had a rather astounding life together through the writing of letters, and dairies. It is a lovely book and a very intriguing look at just how intimate the art of letter writing can be. I do believe that more often than not one can learn a great deal more about a person by reading their words than by being a room with them for an hour. Then again, maybe it is the combination of both that works out best of all. Either way I am delighted that you decided to write. Thank you.
Ilath'mera'talashti'la,
Mith'raw'nuruodo*

I wondered as I read his letter how it was that even though he was light years away, he could make me blush, manage to read my thoughts and still know exactly what to say to somehow sooth my fears. His letter was like a caress and as I folded it up, tucked it back in its envelope then slipped it into my satchel, I knew he was right. Such

correspondence was precious. I was in the process of washing out my tea cup and shutting down the comp systems when Shiv waltzed in. I was so glad to see him.

"Ready to go?" he asked after giving me bear hug and the obligatory kiss kiss on either cheek.

"Of course! I even have Lord Vader's permission to buy new clothes for this little shin-dig, expense account and all. Can you believe it?" I said getting my coat and satchel.

"In that case we best get started, if I remember right, you are fussy about your clothes." He grinned. I had forgotten what a sweet grin he had.

As we walked to his ship he slung his arm over my shoulder. "Missed you, rim-girl. This Naboo stint was really weird and there was just no time to socialise at all. So, come on, gossip...what has been going on in your life?"

I opened my mouth but had no idea where to start. I decided it best just to banter about the things that would have been common knowledge because as much as I adored Shiv, half the things that had happened was stuff I just couldn't discuss. What I lacked in gossip he more than made up for and by the time we reached Theed my ears were ringing from all the strange goings on. I was looking forward to the evening though and knew we were in for a fun time the moment we entered into the first dress shop.

I sat alone in the darkness of my unlit living room sipping my tea, ignoring the mess of expensive gift bags and tissue paper. I had unpacked and put away the new clothes and shoes wondering with a touch of guilt how anyone could say that the amount of credits I had spent was 'just a drop in the bucket.' The cost of one dress alone would have bought a Tatooian slave's freedom for sure, maybe even two. I wasn't sure how I felt about it but Shiv had brushed off my concerns.

"You think this is a lot?" he had asked. "HR will probably look at the bills and wonder why you didn't spend more, look into it all to see if you are somehow hoodwinking them and stealing from the expense account."

In the end I had bought three exquisite formal dresses with shoes to match and some more casual clothing that looked as Shiv put it, less sand-rat and more imperial. I also bought a new pair of boots because after the jaunt to Myrkr my old ones didn't look so hot any more. Perhaps I hadn't been extravagant but I still felt it wasn't quite

right some how. People in the galaxy were starving and I knew that for a fact. Under the surface of the shining Empire was a darkness that wasn't good and I knew that too. It was somehow difficult to justify, even though, I knew I worked hard for the credits I earned and if Lord Vader chose to supplement that with an expense account because in the end when I was obligated to attend the stupid Imperial function I needed to look my best and looking my best meant spending a lot of money... but I wasn't sure I liked it all the same.

This, however, was not what had me sitting in my living room at three am unable to sleep.

After the two and a half hours of manic shopping, Shiv had decided a stop at a small quiet café was in order for spiced coffee and desert. Over the most amazing Nubian cheese torte I had ever tasted Shiv had surprised the sandjiggers out of me by asking how I had enjoyed not only my visit on board the *ISD Vengeance* but the Corellian Spice cake as well.

"How did you know I was on board *Vengeance*?" I had asked hoping to keep the shock out of my voice.

"Bobbyn told me." Shiv had said with a shrug. "He's in charge of all planet to ship special catering requests. One came through with your name on it as a VIP. He mentioned it in passing, laughed actually because he said you must have done some pretty nifty filing to get such special treatment."

"Special treatment?" I'd asked.

Shiv had nodded. "Corellian Spice cake is a very expensive desert. Bobbyn thought it was a bit strange because normally such requests will come from the Captain of the ship but this one came from higher up. He told me he figured someone wanted to impress your boss by impressing you, or maybe the ship's captain or something."

"Why would they do that?" I had asked. "I mean really, Shiv I am no VIP."

"Yeah, well someone thought you were. Bobbyn said they even took care to ask about allergies?"

My heart skipped a beat. "Allergies?"

"Yep, he said that was unusual because most people don't think about stuff like that, usually he has to do all that sort of research himself. He told them that the only thing he knew of in your case was Glow spice..." He paused. "Hey are you okay, you look like you're going to be sick."

I shook my head. "I'm fine, really." I had concentrated on breathing as I'd asked the next question. "Who ordered it?"

Shiv had shaken his head. "Don't know, the request just had the official seal but no specific name, why?"

"Just curious. I could have sent who ever it was a thank-you." I smiled. "What about who made it?"

"I'd have to ask Bobbyn. Corellian Spice Cakes are made to order and there are only one or two specialized bakeries that will make it on Naboo. It's very expensive due to some of the ingredients and apparently very tricky to make just right. Only certified bakery chefs are allowed to make it."

"Can you find out for me?" I had asked.

"Sure, but I have to warn you, if you are thinking about ordering one, they are really, really expensive. That's why it's VIP treatment only.

"I'll keep that in mind."

"So was the cake good?"

I'd shrugged. "I actually don't like Corellian Spice cake."

"Oh, well I guess the Captain and his officers must have loved you then, most people would kill for a slice of spice cake."

I had grimaced at his choice of words and I had been evasive when he had asked why I was on board the *Vengeance* and down right curious about Captain Thrawn.

"He seems to have taken a liking to you. I heard that you accompanied him to the ballet at the Grand Opera house opening." Shiv had said casually but with a look in his eyes that said "come one tell me..."

I had shrugged, why was it everyone wanted to know about this? "What do you want to hear? I was sent to the *Vengeance* on some consulting work, they needed me to sort out some office stuff. It appears I have a reputation for being efficient. He requested my services and Lord Vader told me to go. I do what I am told."

"And the ballet?"

I'd shaken my head. "This place seems to run on gossip. I was asked at the last minute. I suspect that either no one else would attend with him because he is not human or his original date backed out. Either way it was not a big deal. The ballet was wonderful though, were you there? I didn't see you."

Shiv had shaken his head. "Nope, I had to deal with some

emergency on Coruscant. Antygra was there though, said she had seen you together with Captain Thrawn.”

“You have spies all over the place!” I had laughed. “I don’t get asked out often and I have not been to the theatre in a long time. I wasn’t going to say no, besides he’s not so bad. I have heard there are worse sharks out there in the Imperial pool. He has always been the perfect gentleman to me.”

Shiv had nodded. “It is true that some of the officers who like to be with the courtesans and girls that work for the Empire are not so nice. I hear things, get comm calls in the middle of the night and have to sort out messes, arrange for medical treatment. It isn’t very pretty and it gets covered up. You’d tell me if something wasn’t right?”

“Honestly, you don’t have to worry; I was just decorative fluff at the Opera. It was a last minute thing. He is very fixated on his career not palace pretties.”

He had nodded. “That’s what I thought; the rumours say he is very ambitious, that’s why he volunteered for the job of ferrying Lord Jerec around when no one else wanted to do it.” Then he had grinned at me. “And you, little keeper of secrets, I know there’s more you’re not saying about this but I won’t push.”

“Good.” I said.

Shiv had laughed. “You do so remind me of my little sister, though.”

I had only nodded and after we had finished our coffee he had taken me home.

Now I sat in turmoil. After thinking about it and pacing about the room until I was sure I’d worn holes in the carpet I decided to talk to the only person I felt I could trust. I grabbed my coat and ran out of the house to the office. I didn’t have a holo terminal in my home and the only secure one I knew of was in the office where I worked and Lord Vader sometimes visited. I followed the instructions I had been given to the letter and then waited.

When the holo image of Thrawn appeared I knew instantly I had woken him up.

“You were asleep, I’m sorry.” I said before he’d even had a chance to ask what was wrong.

He smiled. “And you were not sleeping at all. What is on your mind?”

I took a deep breath, unlike when we were together in person,

I knew that time was important and wasting it was bad. I got to the point and told him everything Shiv had told me about the spice cake order. When I was done and he said nothing it suddenly dawned on me this was not news to him.

“You already knew this, didn’t you?” I asked, running my hand through my hair which for once was not knotted up with Zenji sticks.

He gave me that infuriating raised eyebrow look. “I would not be very good at my job if my people could not at least discover this.”

“Why did you not tell me?” I was a bit surprised.

“Would it have made a difference?” he asked, frowning. “You are already stressed enough over all the things that have happened to you, would this piece of information help settle you or would it just make it worse? I think judging by the look on your face and the tone of your voice the answer to that is perfectly clear. No, knowing this small thing would not have helped. The information in itself does not give concrete answers.”

“But it’s a place to start.” I said.

“Yes and it will lead us to more information. Unfortunately, someone decided that it should be very difficult to discover the source and most of the paper trail has been destroyed. I would be most interested in hearing if your friend can discover more, although I would caution you that so far anyone who has been officially connected with this particular cake order has also conveniently disappeared.”

A sudden horrible thought struck me. “You don’t think Shiv or Bobbyn are involved do you?”

He shook his head. “No. Siavaan Rimanata has been with the Empire for a very long time. While he can appear a bit scattered and fluffy, he is anything but. If he has chosen to take you under his wing and befriend you then I am comforted by that. As for Bobbyn Mattikarae, all reports indicate he was just doing his job. He has been questioned about this, although in a manner that would lead him to think it was nothing more than standard follow up.” He paused. “If this did come from higher up, and I suspect it did, then the person responsible has the means and the power to erase all evidence that would lead to directly them. This is the reason that this particular investigation is being done quietly and to a certain extent, very slowly. Sometimes slow and quiet can lull one’s opponent into thinking he is safe, maybe he will get sloppy and make a mistake. In the mean time

we keep digging.”

I sighed. I suspected that he also had an idea in which direction to look but I was betting if I asked him he would not tell me anything further.

“You should go home and rest, my dear, especially if you are to look your best at the gala.” He said with a smile.

I made a face.

“You do not wish to attend? It should be a fun evening, it usually is. The Nubian’s pride themselves on such festivities. You could use some fun.”

“I’d rather play with Kratt juveniles in the Dune Sea than go socializing with the likes of certain Grand Admirals that have been pestering me.” I said crossly. Thrawn gave me a look that said ‘explain, now!’

“Why is it that men of rank seem to think they can have anything they want at the snap of their fingers? I think he was shocked that I would turn down his invitation to be his escort for the evening.”

Thrawn’s face hardened a little but before he could say anything I continued.

“I told him I already had a date, funny enough he assumed it was you. Guess, he will be a bit surprised when I show up with Shiv, who offered to play chaperone when he heard the story.”

“I do not doubt it.” Thrawn nodded thoughtfully. “Heed my words; do not provoke this man. While you have a great deal of protection from Lord Vader, if this GA chose to he could make life very difficult for you. My guess is he wants something from you and he can be very single minded until he obtains it.”

“What in the name of Sarlacc could he possibly want from me?”

Thrawn gave me a look.

It took me a few seconds. “You have got to be joking. He can have anyone he wants! There must be a dozen girls in the Court who would die to hang off his arm.”

“It is amazing how desirable something becomes when one is told that one cannot have it.” He said carefully.

I sighed and nodded. “You know, it’s not my intention to make enemies.” I said.

“Well, that just means you are interesting.” He said with a smile “Try to enjoy the gala, my dear. If there is one thing the Empire

knows well, it is how to throw a party.”

“It’s a shame you will not be attending, I will be wearing a new dress.” I told him a little more coyly than I had meant to.

His smile turned feral. “Yes, that is a shame, but I am sure there will be other opportunities for me to see you in pretty dresses.”

I swallowed back a smart retort and nodded. “Well, then captain I will let you get back to bed. I am sure you have a busy day ahead of you saving the galaxy from evil doers.”

“No more so than usual.” He replied airily.

I went to sever the holo connection but he made a gesture with his hand and I stopped.

“I do have one question for you. What does *Kaniwaturiki kinkin* mean?” he asked.

It was my turn to smile. “You will have to learn Huttese to find that out, Captain.”

He raised his eyebrow, cocked his head slightly and purred. “Why, Miss Gabriel, I thought you didn’t enjoy these games.”

“You seem to bring out my sense of play.” I told him with a little grin. “Besides you started it.”

His smile made me shiver and my heart skipped a beat. “I look forward to our joint language lessons then. A foreign tongue can be an interesting thing to master.” He said with a perfectly straight face.

Okay, I was so out of my depth with him sometimes it was scary. I opened my mouth to say something but thought the better of it and shut it again.

His expression softened. “Go home and get some sleep. Do not worry about things you have no control over. This investigation is ongoing and when I know something concrete and useful I promise I will keep you informed. I trust, should you learn more, you will do the same.”

I nodded. “I shall, thank you. I’m sorry I woke you for nothing.”

“My dear, if it was of concern to you then it was not for nothing. I did not give you the ability to contact me in this manner so that it could be saved for a rainy day.” His expression softened slightly. “And, I can’t think of more pleasant wake up call than the sound of your voice.”

I blushed and was thankful that the blue glow nature of the holo transmitter would not show this. “Good night, Captain.” I said

and severed the connection before I could get myself into more trouble. I stood in the quiet darkness of Lord Vader's office. Thrawn was right and I was tired. I left for my house as quietly as I had come in, locking the door behind me.

Chut chut, Captain,

I suppose that until I am able to learn your lovely language, you will have to put up with mine. I learned Huttese at the same time I learned basic. I think this was at my father's insistence rather than my mother's. It is the language most used on Tatooine so I guess he had a point but I find it coarse, harsh, much like the desert. While I have not heard a lot of Cheunh, what I have heard sounds like music, so all innuendos aside; I would very much like to learn it fluently some day. Perhaps you could start by telling exactly what A'mia Tekari means and the literal translation of what ever it was Navaari kept calling me. Come to think of it, I am curious why it is that you don't call me that as well?

I thought that you might like to hear how last night's Nubian Gala went, seeing as how you missed it this year. You were right about one thing; the Nubians sure know how to hold a grand event. The palace is stunning. I wished I had had more time to spend just looking at some of the paintings. I had only been in the library before so I missed this the last time I was here.

The grand ball room was decorated with the most beautiful pale white flowers and floating lanterns made from some sort of delicate tissue paper that held little twinkling lights in them. From a distance it almost looked like the room was filled with stars, something to do with the representation of all the members of the Empire, Shiv said. Unlike the Emperor's grand Ball, Shiv doesn't have anything to do with the décor for this event so he was just as surprised as I was when we walked in the main entrance and were announced.

There was an orchestra and a very large buffet set up. I don't think in my life I have ever seen so much food, you could have fed an army. The orchestra was very good, not sure if it was the same one from Coruscant or not. They didn't play the Kai'y'en-sai Waltz. I did get to dance though, and to be honest that was one of the more fun things about the entire evening. GA Zaarin was also there and, yes he did ask me to dance several times throughout the evening. He is

actually not too bad on the dance floor but he lacked something I couldn't put my finger on. He knew all the steps and was competent at leading but it was very mechanical. So, you owe me a dance when you come back.

Mostly, I stuck to myself and watched people. Shiv, as always, had to sort out small emergencies through out the evening. It can't be easy what he does, dealing with the courtesans and such. I did ask how he managed but all he said was he enjoys the drama. You would have smiled when he nudged me to go and mingle though.

I was surprised by the number of Gungans attending. I was under the impression that the Emperor was not overly fond of non humans but he seemed to rather enjoy mingling and talking to some of the more prominent Gungan leaders. In difference to the Grand Ball on Coruscant, he was very approachable and spent a lot of time actually talking to people. Well, important people that is. I stayed away from him; he scares the sand jiggers out of me and I get to see enough of him as it is.

It is the first time I've seen Queen Kylantha up close as well. She seemed very sad and maybe just a little bored to be honest but then again it is hard to tell under all the make up that she wears. Shiv mentioned that all the Royal clothes and the face paint are very ceremonial and representative of Naboo's history. I know that in one of the books I had read on Queen Amidala they touched on this as well, I should probably re read it again. I think it would be interesting to know what the clothing and the facial paint means. Every culture does this though, I mean the Sand people have their clothing and mask rituals as do the Dantassi. I never really gave it much thought before and speaking of Dantassi clothing, just so as you know, hand washing them is a big pain!

There was lots of idle chit chat going on and I am sure you would have enjoyed all the banter and it's associated under currents. Me, I can't make heads or tails of that stuff most of the time. Many people asked me why Lord Vader had not come, it seems that while people fear his presence they question his absence more. I gave them my standard answer. People's faces do funny things when the word rebel is uttered.

The strangest thing about the whole evening though was meeting a young man named Tlokal Idanjay and his mother, Ilara. He and his family are from Alderaan. He was studying off world at

the time of the “accident” and his parents were visiting the school. It seems that, after a lengthy conversation which started because of the paintings in the great hall, his mother knew my mother. It was just plain weird. I had not visited Alderaan since the death of my mother. I know I had family there but we were not close. Her family were not happy that she married my father, married beneath her they all thought. She had been born into one of the noble houses and was supposed to enter into an arranged marriage. Guess no one there was too happy when she fell in love with my father and married him instead. It was only after I came on the scene did her family contact her. No one knew that I was adopted so they all thought I was the last of the blood line. How ironic. She was invited back home to visit with me in tow, everyone wanted to see “the baby”. I think I was about 3 at the time, I have vague memories of that particular visit; a lot of aunts, uncles and cousins. My grandparents argued with my mother a lot and I remember her crying. I went back to Alderaan with my mother two more times before she was killed and both times we stayed away from her family. It seems strange to me now that the destruction of the planet did not have a greater effect on me. After all, they were family. I wonder why I don’t mourn their loss more. It was very surreal to hear Ilara tell me stories about my mother from when they were young. It seems as though my mother was quite outspoken and a bit of a tomboy. She told me that everyone was very saddened by the news of her death. I didn’t have the heart to ask her why it was then that no one came to my mother’s memorial on Tatooine. I got the feeling she didn’t exactly agree with how my grandparents handled the whole situation. Are large families always this messy? She asked to keep in touch with me and I told her yes, but I don’t really know why. She seemed so sad when she spoke of my mother and I felt as though it were my job to comfort her. I was relieved when Shiv came to the rescue and asked for a dance.

Another nice part of the evening was meeting up with Sola Naberrrie again. It should not have surprised me that she and her family were there because this gala was pretty much a who’s who of Naboo and her family have a big name in politics here. Her youngest daughter, Pooja, was a member of the Imperial Senate until it was dissolved. Anyway, I met Sola some weeks back when I went to visit her sister, Padmé’s grave. She was very kind to me that day and, as it happens sometimes, I felt this strange, strong connection with her. I

think people were shocked when she hugged me. She was very surprised to see me and even more surprised when Zaarin, who was standing next to me at the time, informed her of just who it was I worked for. Although, I didn’t get the feeling she disapproved. It’s hard to know how to deal with that sort of thing because; after all, as you so aptly put it I am just an office girl. When I said this to Sola, the GA nearly choked on his drink, I thought he was going to snort champagne out his nose. Does he know something I don’t or was he just being a poodoo head?

Anyway, we managed to speak a little more later on out on the terrace and the upshot of this is I have a standing invitation to visit the next time I am here. I have really mixed feelings about leaving Naboo. How is it possible to fall in love with a planet that one has no real ties to? Don’t get me wrong, Tatooine will always be home and there are so many things I love about it that I could not possible name them all, but this place has a magic I can’t define. It does seem a bit odd that the two planets Lord Vader despises above all else are the two that I love the most, and he hasn’t killed me yet...how about that?

Something else I found out last night, did you know that the wee house I currently live in is supposed to be haunted? Shiv told me. The story is good and the way Shiv tells it you almost believe it could be true. I must admit I have never felt or sensed anything strange there but it could be that I am so at home with ghosts and other weird things that I wouldn’t notice?

So, now the focus is on packing up everything and getting it ready for the move which starts the day after tomorrow. HR asked if I wished to relocate to housing away from the palace and I think I surprised them by saying I’d rather stay. There are places in the palace that I have grown to love and I am, believe it or not, looking forward to seeing them again. Shiv was telling me that people have gotten lost in the Imperial Palace and that the children of families who live there are not only allowed to play hide and seek they are encouraged to do so. I think it would be fun to learn some of the Palace’s secrets, don’t you?

Anyway, I hope that you are well and that your visit to the Sikadian Gardens was everything you expected. I look forward to hearing about it. Gardens are not something I have a lot of experience with; they are not very common on Tatooine, but I

*imagine they must be very peaceful and gentle places to visit.
Kaniwaturiki kinkin,
Kakunap,
Merlyn*

A'mia Tekari,

Your letter arrived yesterday and it was a bright moment in what has been a difficult week. I was happy to hear that you enjoyed the Nubian gala and managed to find some joy in what I suspect you would normally call a stuffy, boring night full of over dressed diplomats and Imperial courtesans. Perhaps there is hope for you yet.

I am certain that by the time this reaches you, the mass return of the Imperial Court will be complete and you will be once again settled in your home in the Palace. I hope that the move was not too stressful and less chaotic than usual.

You asked what A'mia Tekari means. I shall endeavour to explain but keep in mind I am not a linguist by profession, so bear with my clumsy explanation. It is a fairly informal written greeting used between friends and family. A literal translation would end up along the lines of to the person for whom I have fond feelings, so to simplify you could say it means to my dearest. If you should wish to use this in writing to me you would use the masculine form and drop the 'a' in front of the word Mia (the possessive form of me) and add the letter 'e' before the word Tekari. Mia e'tekari is how it would be written. Tekari as a word on its own can mean many things, as so many words are apt to do in Cheunh, but its core meaning is beloved. This meaning, however, waxes and wanes depending on use and context.

Tjällh is a little more difficult and I have already explained its limited use but the absolute basic translation would be 'little one' or perhaps since this is the feminine form 'little girl'. I don't call you that for the very obvious reason, in my eyes you are not a little girl. Given the nature of our relationship, it would be inappropriate for me to call you that. Cheunh is a very complex language. I am afraid I could not begin to teach it to you, and while you will no doubt pick up a word or a phrase here and there from me, teaching you to speak it

is beyond my abilities. However, I will see what I can do to help you study the language should you truly wish to do so.

I really enjoyed reading your description of your Gala night out. I almost felt as though I was there myself. I could see it very clearly through your eyes, which is delightful. It would have been a most pleasant evening to have spent with you, especially as you mentioned that you had not seen the paintings that hang in Theed palace. I smiled at your description of dancing with Demetrius Zaarin. Many of the Imperial Officers are from wealthy families and learn the finer aspects of courtly behaviour from early childhood; this includes learning how to dance. Many men find dancing to be beneath them and an activity that while it is a requirement of court, must not need be enjoyed. I sometimes think that some of these men approach the dance floor as though it were a battlefield, something to be conquered. Unlike many of my fellow officers, I actually enjoy the art of dance; it is a most pleasant art form that gives many insights into one's partner. It is one thing to know the mechanics of the various dances; it is another to be able to feel the dance's soul. For a dancer such as you, a partner who cannot get beyond the mechanics of the dance to feel its soul must be a most unsettling thing. As far as this subject is concerned, I am happy to owe you a dance or two. It is possible that I will be returning to Coruscant for Winter Fete Week and I am certain there will be ample opportunity then for you to collect on this debt then.

It was refreshing to hear that His Excellency, the Emperor was in good spirits and was mingling with his subjects. This puts the rumours of his failing health to rest. I can certainly understand your fear of him, he is very powerful in many ways but you appear to have his favour at the moment so I don't believe you have anything to worry about.

Gungans and the regency of Naboo have long been favoured by the Emperor. I must admit I do not know the story behind this but I am sure given your love of reading and research, you could probably find out. I was under the impression that many Gungans had become reclusive since the dawn of the Empire, however perhaps this is just rumours and bad gossip.

You mentioned the ceremonial wear of the Queen. Indeed every item of ceremonial clothing has some historical meaning attached to it. I do know off the top of my head that the red mark that

divides the Queen's lips is called the Scar of Remembrance, but I am not sure what it is in remembrance for. Clothing plays a very important role in most species lives, at least those that wear some sort of clothing. I don't know much about the significance of it for the Sand People though, perhaps you can enlighten me. On another note, you do know that the fabric used in Dantassi clothing can be machine washed.

You have piqued my curiosity now ... why would you be mentioning the word rebel at an event attended primarily by Imperials?

It must have been very surreal for you to meet a childhood friend of your mother's but what an opportunity to learn more about this woman you loved so much, who shaped who you are with her life. I can certainly understand your hesitation about befriending Ilara Idanjay but bear in mind this woman probably misses her friend as much as you miss your mother. I have often observed that family members who have lost a loved one seem to end up comforting those outside the family who would mourn the loss as well. Families no matter how small or large are complex, my dear. I won't bore you with details from my own familial experience but needless to say you are not alone.

I don't believe I have heard the name Sola Naberrie before, but I am not up on all the great families of Naboo. It sounds as though you have made yourself a good friend on the planet and I am glad to hear it. As you have mentioned in passing before, because you work for a man who commands much respect and fear, you are also ostracised by many of your peers. It is comforting to know that not everyone in the galaxy transfers their fear of Lord Vader onto you. Ignore Zaarin, he has some difficulty understanding why you not only seem to survive working for Lord Vader but also appear to have his confidence. You have quite the reputation among the Imperial officers for being somewhat of an elusive mystery. You would probably laugh yourself silly if you were to hear half of the speculation and rumours that are whispered about you. It would have been very amusing to watch the GA snort champagne. I doubt very much that he 'knows something you do not'; he was more likely, as you so eloquently put it, being a poodoo head. You spurn his attentions so that makes you a frustration. Men of power do not like to be frustrated, especially by young women.

You seem to have that rare ability to see past the negative and accentuate the positive. It does not surprise me that you have fallen in love with Naboo. It is a stunning, lush planet full of beauty and life. That you should love your home world so much is not unexpected. I could not even begin to guess what it is about these two worlds that Lord Vader despises so much but I suspect your affection for these places has little effect on his feelings towards you. You stay alive because so far you have given him no reason to eliminate you. I would venture to guess that your love of both Naboo and Tatooine is a source of some amusement and, at the same time, some annoyance to him.

I did indeed know that your little home by the lake was supposed to be haunted and I also know the story behind it. Ghost stories it seems run rampant on Naboo, both the Nubians and the Gungans have a strong history of such stories and belief in the supernatural. You might want to ask your friend Sola about the Night of Lights and Spirits, the one night of the year where the dead are able to walk among the living. I am not sure how rich the storytelling culture is on Tatooine but on Csilla we also have a strong oral tradition and many of the tales also involve the supernatural world. There are some amazing stories of ghostly happenings; this is of course doubly important in the Dantassi enclaves. Perhaps one day, when there is some time, I will share some of the more interesting ones with you. I will warn you in advance though, storytelling is not my forte. I am willing to wager that Kirja'navaar'inkjerii is an extraordinary storyteller, just as his grandfather was. It is a vital part of being a Dantassi hunter, the ability to retell the hunt in an exciting and captivating manner. A culture's oral history is quite fascinating.

Your comments about the Imperial Palace brought to mind the story of the unfortunate woman, Frona Zella who was found dead at her desk a year after she had died. This caused quite a stir and was the reason behind the wearing a com link at all times rule. The Emperor does indeed encourage the palace children to play Hunter as a method of learning the Palace lay out, although I am in still a little unclear how this helps the muddled adults find their way about. I am quite certain that you could spend a lifetime exploring the palace, looking for its secrets and still only scratch the surface. There are many rumours about hidden passages and entrances and

exits and one has to work hard, I think, to separate truth from fiction. You, my dear, stand a fair chance of finding one or two with your gifts and your astonishing sense of direction. I look forward to hearing about your finds.

You asked about my visit to the Sikadian Gardens and there is much to tell. After some delays, I landed on Sk'rrr near the Gardens, with two junior officers, Wolver and Tier. There I met with a Shi'ido named Hoole and two human children, Tash and Zak. The young girl, Tash reminded me sharply of you, fearless and outspoken. It would have amused you to hear her grill me on my reasons for visiting the gardens. Of course little did any of us know that what I thought would be a pleasant side trip to learn a little about the Sk'rrr turned into something out of a very bad horror holo.

I don't know how much you know about Sk'rrr but they are an insect based life form descended, as it turns out, from the drog beetles. The Sikadian Gardens were based on a delicate balance between the beetles and their predators the Shreev. The beetles eat, well, everything and the shreev eat the beetles. Without the Shreev the beetles would pretty much overrun not only the garden but the planet, so you would think that this planet and its inhabitants would have a vested interest in keeping this balance in check. This, sadly, was not the case.

The Sk'rrr have an interesting duality in their culture. On the one hand they greatly value art in its varied forms but on the other hand they also value the art of warfare. As one of their kind informed me, many of their artists are also poet warriors who have mastered both the light and the dark side of their personal natures. This could be seen in the layout of the gardens, it was most intriguing until it took a turn for the surreal and life began to imitate art.

To make a long story short, it seems that the caretaker of the garden went mad and through his actions created a dreadful imbalance in the beetle population. The beetles, as I mentioned before eat anything and they devoured Lieutenants Wolver and Tier. It was most disturbing. I lost two good men all because of a madman. Needless to say leaving the gardens became a bit of an adventure as both my shuttle and the ship belonging to Hoole were disabled. What the Shi'ido and his two young charges were doing there I have no idea but I got the distinct impression there was more to their story than they were letting on. I would have found out had there been

time; however surviving the beetles seemed a tad more important.

It never ceases to amaze me how short sighted fanatics are when it comes to the object of their beliefs. Had the Vroon, the garden's caretaker, not taken it into his head to upset the balance between the Shreev and the Beetles, none of the unfortunate and unnecessary deaths would have occurred.

I managed to learn a great deal about the Sk'rrr from the small amount of time I was able to spend in the garden before it was overrun and subsequently destroyed. I was also reminded of the short sightedness and closed mind views that seem to be quite prevalent about the Empire amongst its citizens. I do not know how many times I have heard and continue to hear that the Empire is evil and 'up to something.' How many times can one say the Empire is merely a system of government? That many, many worlds rely on this system of governing for law and order. That many hundreds of planets have never even see a Storm trooper garrison or the Imperial navy does not seem to enter into the minds of such people. It does not occur to them that all the planets under Imperial rule rely on the Empire for supplies, food, clothing and so on. The ridiculous propaganda being spread by the members of the insurrection known as the rebellion is most annoying. I have to wonder if, while they are fighting for their beloved beliefs, they have thought about what will happen to law and order should the Empire collapse. Running an Empire or for that matter any system of government is no easy matter. One can read many accounts from many worlds about governments being toppled and the aftermath of chaos that follows because there was no coherent plan in place for taking over. While freedom, which is a most intriguing word and concept in itself, is a desirable thing it becomes quite secondary when there is no food or shelter being provided and when infrastructure vanishes. There will always be someone who opposes the party in rule; it seems to be the law of nature, balance and opposition, predators and prey. The incident in the gardens only served as a reminder to me of what happens when that balance is upset. Anyway, my dear, I must end this letter and shall not bore you further with my musings on governments and those who dislike them.

I trust that you are keeping well and staying out of trouble. I very much look forward to spending some time with you when I return to Coruscant. Perhaps we can arrange to visit the Art Gallery

together or go out to dinner. Think on it and let me know you there is something in particular that you would like to do. I will get in touch when I arrive and we can arrange something.

*Ilath'mera'talashTi'Ia,
Mitth'raw'nuruodo*

I missed Naboo and its quiet. Coruscant was a never ending buzz of traffic and people. I had forgotten how busy and full it was. The move itself had gone smoothly enough and for the most part there was very little disruption in my work, of course, since no one wanted to upset Lord Vader this made sense.

As Winter Fete Week drew nearer so did the gear up for end of year. The office was inundated with memos and reminders about the various reports that had to be filled out and sent in. I was also busy sorting out the usual plethora of fan mail, junk mail and stalker mail that had not been sent to Naboo and had managed to pile up while I was there. I was grateful for the massive amount of work because it took my mind off missing Naboo.

It surprised me that I would actually feel some sort of attachment to the apartment I lived in, but oddly enough it had been strangely comforting to return. As I had unpacked my things, my clothes and my books I felt a strange sense of belonging creep into my actions. A couple of days after returning to Coruscant, I had sat in the comfy chair by the huge picture window and re read all of Thrawn's beautiful letters to me. The next day I had gotten a hold of Shiv and we had gone shopping for stationary. He had dragged me to many wonderful little stores and it was a nice way to spend a late afternoon. I ended up buying in addition to some very expensive but exquisite paper, an ornately hand carved wooden box. It was the perfect place for me to keep Thrawn's letters in. All of this had made Shiv extremely curious but he was getting used to my secrets.

It had taken me longer than I had expected to reacclimatize and I seemed to spend more time awake at night wandering around the old parts of the palace than sleeping. I had gone back to working out, both in dance and in the martial art Master Kjestyll had been teaching me. I had been secretly pleased to find the rooms I used to use in the older disused part of the palace still there, untouched, dusty and for all intensive purposes mine.

I loved the stillness of the old part of the palace and thanks to the generosity of the Emperor I had access to a small but incredible library that was hidden away. I spent many hours after work in this library reading about history of various worlds in the Galaxy, lore, stories and tales from all kinds of cultures and peoples and most amazing of all, a history of the rise and fall of the Jedi. More than once I woke up, not in my bed, but curled up in the big old fashioned chair that was tucked in the corner of the library with a book.

Time slipped away from me when I read. There was a kind of magic to sitting alone in the old unoccupied part of the palace with my nose buried in a book. I was in the middle of reading a short tale about Freedom Nadd, a Sith Lord from ancient history when I felt a presence enter the room. I barely had time to stand so that I could kneel when the Emperor appeared.

"My dear," he said. "Such formality is not necessary in this place."

I stood up and curtsied then gestured to the chair I had been sitting in. With a smile the Emperor sat and motioned for me to sit on the lush carpeted floor at his feet.

"I was hoping to find you're here. I have not had a chance to properly thank you." He said.

"Thank me?"

"You did an excellent job bringing my dancer back in one piece. She was very impressed with your piloting skills." He said.

"I was just doing my job, your Excellency." I said, daring to glance up to look into his eyes.

The Emperor chuckled and patted my shoulder. "Yes, *little one*, indeed you were." He said slowly, placing great emphasis on the words little one. I wondered if he read the surprise in my eyes and then realised that he had not only read it but had expected it. I looked away from his piercing yellow eyes. I felt as though he could read every inch of my soul and it was not a pleasant feeling. I wondered how much he really knew about what had happened on Rothana. He had never called me 'little one' before.

"I hope I have not displeased you, your Excellency." I said quietly.

"On the contrary, my dear, you surprise me at almost every turn and surpass my expectations." He said with a smile. "Tell me, what are you reading?"

I picked up the book and showed him.

“Ah yes, *Sith Legends and Lore*. What do you think of it?” he asked.

“It’s fascinating.” I said honestly. “I had no idea the Sith had such an interesting history.”

The Emperor smiled. “Sith culture is rich and diverse. It was suppressed for centuries during the rule of the Jedi Knights.”

“Why?” I asked.

The Emperor gave an almost imperceptible shrug. “The Jedi decided that only their history and tales were worthy of note. They were afraid that anyone learning about other ways to use the force would be tainted. Sith history was almost eradicated but I was able to save it.”

“That makes no sense. Why would learning about other methods of the Force be a bad thing? Shouldn’t history reflect all sides and not just one?” I asked.

The Emperor’s laughter echoed about the room. “You really are delightful, my dear, no wonder you are such a source of fascination to certain members of my staff.” He said. “History is always written by the victors to reflect how they wish the galaxy to be seen.” He leaned forward and lifted my chin with the tips of his fingers. “Your naiveté is most endearing. You are quite the contradiction in terms, most amusing to watch.”

I didn’t know how to respond and so I lowered my eyes and looked away. The Emperor sat back in the chair. “Now, how about you make this old man happy and read to me from that book you are enjoying so much. To hear the old stories told by such a lovely young lady such as your self would be a most enjoyable way to pass time.”

I smiled, opened the book and began to read.

It was almost three in the morning when I went to bed. The Emperor had listened with an almost eerie stillness while I read some of the stories aloud. Many questions about the Jedi and their kind had come to mind as I read, perhaps the Emperor had sensed this disquiet and as I finished reading the third tale he had asked me what I was concerned about. I had taken a chance that perhaps in the quiet of this room and the dark of the night I could ask without fear of punishment, asking Lord Vader anything about the Jedi usually resulted in some sort of angry outburst.

“You have many questions.” He said softly when I put the book

down. “Yet, you are afraid to ask me, why?”

“When I bring the subject of the Jedi up with Lord Vader he...” I searched for a diplomatic way to say he usually smacked me across the face or sent me flying into a wall.

The Emperor smiled. “Ah yes, Lord Vader’s temper does have a nasty habit of surfacing when the name Jedi is mentioned. You must understand, girl, that Lord Vader’s relationship with the Jedi was not a happy one.”

“Relationship?”

“Lord Vader was trained as a young boy in the Jedi ways. They tried very hard to indoctrinate them into their narrow minded view of the world and the Force. He has every reason to despise them. You are lucky to have been born in an age where the Jedi no longer rule.”

I looked up at his face and found his eyes boring into mine. The question on my lips was never spoken but he answered it anyway.

“Had you been born in an earlier time the Jedi council would have discovered that you were connected to the Force and they would have sent someone to extract you from your parents while you were still an infant. There would have been no choice in this matter. They would have come, you would have been taken and all contact with your parents forbidden. From that moment on the only life you would have known would have been the one the Jedi chose for you.” He explained.

“That doesn’t sound very fair. What if I had not wanted to become a Jedi?” I asked.

The Emperor chuckled. “Choice.” He snorted. “Do you think the Jedi would have cared about what you wanted? In their eyes it was a great honour to be chosen for the Jedi Order, why should you or your parents have any choice in this matter?”

“That sounds very arrogant to me.” I said tartly.

“It was their greatest failing. They were blinded by their arrogance and their narrow minded view of the Force.” He replied. “You would have been taken away and indoctrinated into a world without love or possession, without belongings or even a sense of self. You were there to serve the Jedi’s perceived greater good. Individuality had little to do with the matter. For one such as you, this would have been a hard road I think.”

“How so?”

“My dear girl, you are a creature of great passion. It is this emotion which rules your actions, your heart, your very being. I have

seen it when you dance, when you fight and when you are with the people you care about. Such emotion was distasteful to the Jedi. They believed that to feel passion, or love, that to attach one's self to another through a bond of emotion was to lead to the dark side of the force. This they feared greatly."

"Is the dark side bad?" I asked.

The Emperor smiled slightly and shrugged. "That depends greatly on your point of view, doesn't it?" He said. "Is it bad to wish for the power to do good? Is it bad to use what ever means are available to one for this ability? The Jedi despised the Sith because the Sith found a way to harness the power of the dark side, this power gave the Sith access to many abilities the Jedi considered to be unnatural and wrong." He sighed. "But let me ask you this; is it wrong to use a power that already exists in nature simply because it is contrary to the doctrine of a certain belief? Who decides such things and why?" He continued. "The answer is no, it is no more wrong to use the power granted to us through our deeper passions and our anger than it is to harness the power of a powerful and devastating storm and use it to our advantage, in, for example, powering the city's lights. On the one hand the storm's power is terrible and something to be feared on the other hand it is a source of energy and light. How does one decide what is good and what is bad?"

I didn't know how to answer that question but I could hazard a guess. "Would fear play a part in that?"

He nodded. "Yes, fear would be a deciding factor. The Jedi feared the Sith, feared their ability to use the darker nature of the Force. They feared their own passions and stifled all such emotions. Yet in doing so they closed a door way to understanding the nature of all things and were lost to their own arrogance that they were right in these things. Their methods did not work as well as they thought and in the end they were destroyed by their own short sightedness." He paused. "Now the Sith rule and the Empire is glorious. We have peace, law and order throughout the galaxy. People such as you now have great opportunities to become anything you wish rather than stifled in within the confines of the Old Jedi Temple. You are free to live as you choose, love whomever you wish and express yourself through your emotions and still learn the ways of the Force under such masters as myself or Lord Vader, should that be your wish."

I nodded not know what to add or to say. I was tired, it was

late. For every question the Emperor had answered another had sprung to mind in its place. He believed passionately everything that he had said and while he had not lied to me there was a ripple underneath his words that I could not put my finger on, as though the words were somehow being bent to fit the story and not the other way around. He must have sensed my feelings. I was more certain now than ever before that there was very little if anything I could ever hope to hide for this man.

"People fear what they hate, and they hate what they do not understand." He said. "They do not understand that which is different from what they know. It is a simple enough thing yet it causes chaos. Take Lord Vader for example, he is feared and thus hated. You see that every day in the death threats that you read through then pass along to Intel. Now this hatred and fear has been passed along to you, I have been informed that you too have been receiving less than pleasant mail. How does this make you feel?"

I glanced up at him in surprise. Certainly in the last week or so I had also been surprised by the fact that some of the hate mail had been addressed solely at me, strange letters really, that had said such things as, '*We know who you are and we know what you are*' and, '*we will come for you*'. I had passed them along to Intel along with the rest of the usual nonsense. I had not taken the notes seriously but suddenly I wondered if I should.

"I honestly didn't think about it" I said frowning, "Should I worry about such things?"

The Emperor smiled and it made me shiver. "Not at all, after all you are safe here. No intruders could get into the palace to harm you." He said with an edge to his voice I didn't really understand. "I consider you a daughter of my empire and as such you are under my protection. I thought that would have been perfectly clear after the Grand ball." I sighed. His words twisted in my head and my gut. Jyrki had managed to sneak into the palace, if he could do it so could others. If I said something would I not also get into trouble for not reporting the incident earlier? I was sure that if the Emperor had known about it he would have said something, yet it had never come up. I feared the Emperor even in this benevolent guise in which he chose to spend time with me. There was something deep and dark in his being that frightened me more than anything else ever had. I did not want to do anything to earn his displeasure so I held my tongue

and said nothing.

“It is late and you must be very tired, child. While I do so enjoy these little chats of ours I would not want to be responsible for you not being able to perform your duties properly and efficiently. I am quite sure that neither Lord Vader nor Captain Thrawn would wish to see you in a state of exhaustion.” He said. I glanced at him sharply wondering what exactly he meant by that but he simply chuckled. “While you do work primarily for Lord Vader have you not also done some work for the captain?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Then it is reasonable to state that you should be in good health should they be in need of your services again. Both men have spoken highly of you. I am certain you would not wish to let either of them down.”

“No, of course not.” I said.

The Emperor stood up and motioned that I do the same. “Walk with me to the entranceway and then go to bed, my dear. Do not worry your pretty little head about these weighty issues. I assure you I have everything well in hand.”

Winter Fete Week is a crazy time on Coruscant. It seems that almost everyone takes the week off from work and celebrates as much as they can. There are parties almost every night of the week and various organised celebrations and parades throughout the week itself all ending in a huge spectacular event that consists of dancing, music, fireworks and of course dressing up. It is a time when people forget their problems, and conflicts and just get on with the business of having a good time.

I avoided it all as much I could. It was enjoyable to have peace and quiet. Most of the other departments had shut down for the duration of fete Week so the palace felt very deserted. I spent a lot of time in the office sorting out stuff, dealing with Lord Vader’s appointment calendar and his endless lists of things that needed to be done. It seemed to me that, as of late, Lord Vader had become distant, withdrawn, and pensive. He was single minded in his determination to find out who it was that destroyed the Death Star.

While he never actually speaks of it, sometimes I pick up these thoughts from him, much to his annoyance. He has decided not to return to the planet for any of the Fete Week festivities, which is

probably a good thing since he tends to put a damper on the happy party mood when he’s around. I want to talk with him but not via holo transmitter but he’s not exactly been in the chatty mood.

Shiv, fearing that I was becoming as antisocial as Lord Vader, has dragged me off with his gang for several lunches and an evening out. This has been fun but exhausting. I don’t know where he gets all his energy from really. We mostly hang out in the fashion district because that’s where Shiv has most of his contacts and knows the best places to eat or party depending on the time of day. Mostly, hanging with him and his friends is fun, it’s light hearted and anything but serious. Sure makes a change from my job and my training.

Master Kjestyll has been working hard with me and our sessions have taken a turn for the weird. Lately the emphasis has been on survival techniques and some very odd training exercises. I am not sure what is going on but shortly after I got back from Naboo, he told me that we would start to concentrate on other aspects of staying alive. The most recent exercise was to have me wear a blindfold while he took me someplace. I had no idea where I was being taken but when we arrived and he removed the blindfold I still could not see.

The only thing he said to me was. ‘Use all your senses to find your way out.’ It had been a frightening experience. The room was darker than anything I had ever experienced and it took me what seemed forever to trace my way around it, to ‘feel’ the walls and learn about the space. Only once I had done that did it occur to me that I could perhaps use my weirding ways to ‘see’. I found the key to the door that had been hidden in the wall only because it felt different. Even then it had taken me several hours to figure that bit out. Sometimes I think I am really slow but Master Kjestyll had been pleased with me. Saying I had actually figured it out a lot faster than others who were, in theory, a lot more talented with the force than I was.

I asked him if this was normal training for someone like me and his reply was that the Emperor had requested it. I guess I must have made a face because he had gone on to explain that the Emperor had said it might be enjoyable for me to learn something more challenging than the kata forms we had previously been working on. I told Master Kjestyll that being blindfolded and stuck in a black room with no way out was not my idea of fun.

“But you were challenged by it were you not?” He had said.

I had nodded. It certainly had been challenging as well as unnerving. It would not be the last time I would go through such an exercise either. We spent long hours talking about what had happened and how I should and could deal with the exercises better. Each time I was placed in one of these scenarios it was different and each time I learned something new. Sometimes I was required to fight my way out of a labyrinth and sometimes I was required to memorise the way in and out of a building. Sometimes it was the black room again each time with a different solution to getting the door open. When I asked why I was being put through all of this Master Kjestyll had shrugged. He surmised that perhaps the Emperor felt that as someone who worked closely with his right hand man such training would not be so out of place, but it was not his place to question the Emperor. I thought it very strange that a Personal Assistant be put through this sort of training at all and it made me nervous.

In the quiet of the night when I was safe and in my own flat, usually recovering from aching muscles and frayed nerves I wrote to Captain Thrawn of my experiences along with many other things. It seemed that writing to him became easier and easier and I looked forward to being able to put my thoughts down on paper. I had not heard from him since his last letter describing his trip to the Sikadian Gardens and that had been a couple of weeks ago. We were now three days into Fete Week and I hoped that he would somehow make it back for at least the latter part of the festival but so far I had heard nothing from him.

Today in the office absolutely nothing was going on. Even my droid was bored so I packed it in early and went home. Since everything, including my sessions with Master Kjestyll were on hold till after Fete week and I had turned down Shiv's offer to go out partying with him and the others. I decided to have a nice bath and relax with a good book. Somewhere between ten and eleven at night my doorbell rang. When I opened the door all that was there was a glass on the foot mat and a small hand written note that said. *'I know I owe you a dance but would you settle for a drink instead?'* It made me smile. I knew where to go.

I stood, leaning against the doorway to the balcony and watched him for a moment. It felt to me as though we had been apart for years not weeks and it puzzled me how much I felt for this enigma of a man. He was considerably older than I was and alien in more ways

than I could count. Yet, standing there seeing him again made my heart race and my knees tremble. I wanted to rush up to him and throw my arms around him but something about his stance and manner made me rethink that urge. Instead I waited until he turned around to watch me watch him, smiling as he did so.

"Good evening, Miss Gabriel." He said. "You are just in time for the fireworks."

"Captain, when did you get back?" I replied hoping to match his even polite tone. We were playing the formal game again. It was almost a competition to see who could out-polite the other. While it puzzled me I never got tired of it.

"My shuttle landed less than two hours ago." He said taking the glass I was clutching from my hands.

I watched as he poured a pale pink liquid from a beautiful bottle into it and then took the glass back when he handed it to me. He filled his own and we touched glasses and drank, well sipped.

This drink was like nothing I had ever tasted. Sweet and tart all at once, with a wild sort of flavour, fruit like or perhaps berry like I didn't know. It was cold as ice and very potent.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

I took a second sip and shivered involuntarily, letting it sit for a moment on my tongue, in my mouth.

"It's extraordinary." I nodded. "Yes, I do like it."

"It is a gift from Kirja'navaar'inkjerii, Cracker Berry Liqueur." He said.

"You saw him?"

Thrawn nodded but gave no details. "He wished you well, extended an invitation to visit his home on Hjal and said I was to share this with you."

"I take it the hunt was a success?"

Thrawn shrugged. "He did not say and I did not ask. Our meeting was very brief."

"How was he?" I pressed.

Thrawn gave me a look "He appeared to be in good health." He said. "But I did not come here to talk about him, you know." He added.

I would have found a suitable retort I am sure of it but the sudden crack of fireworks that exploded around us cut off my train of thought. They were amazing as usual. Each night of the week there was an astounding display of fireworks at midnight. Coruscant, the center

of all things in the Galaxy spared no expense on showing its citizenry that it could celebrate with the best of them.

We watched in silence as the night sky lit up with every colour imaginable. Blooms of light in patterns I would never have thought possible decorated the city. On every available space people stood, just like us, and watched. Their eyes turned upwards marveling at the spectacle, unaware of anything else around them except the brilliant fireworks. I sipped at my drink until the glass was empty then turned to put it on the small table that sat in the corner of the balcony. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him and the fright made me drop the glass. It would have shattered on the ground but the Emperor, with a subtle move of his hand caught it with the force and set it upon the table easily. For a moment I just stood there like an idiot then more out of reflex than thought I genuflected and bowed my head. The Emperor walked over to where Thrawn was standing and all but ignored me. I guessed he wasn't in the benevolent old man mood this evening. For a moment the silence was deafening. I dared to look up at them and found the Emperor staring at me. His gaze was hard and unreadable. I shivered.

"Leave us." He said coldly to me.

With my heart pounding I did as I was told. I was more than relieved to be back in the relative safety of my apartment. My hands were shaking as I made myself a cup of tea. I sat in the quiet, dark living room half expecting a knock on my front door but it never came and after an hour or so I went to bed. It took me a long time to fall asleep and when I did I dreamed.

I knew this place but what I was doing there and how I had gotten there were a bit of a mystery, the Dune Sea, a vast expanse of sand, dunes and not much else. I could feel the wind against my face and the heat from the suns but despite the heavy hooded cloak I was wearing I was chilled to the bone.

I walked forward. The wind became stronger and the sand whipped up to form a veil around me. It stung my face and my hands and made it hard to breathe. It howled around me like a Krayt Dragon, pushing and pulling until I stumbled to my knees.

I huddled in my oversized cloak but to no avail. Stuck on the Dune Sea in the middle of a terrible sand storm I was going to die. Oddly enough this thought did not instill fear in me instead I felt a

strange sense of peace. I closed my eyes and concentrated. Meditation the way I had been taught by Master Kjestyll. Look inward his voice said so I did.

When I opened my eyes all was silent and dark. The suns had set and the stars shone. I stared at the man kneeling across from me. Like me he too was wearing a heavy brown hooded cloak. When he raised his head I read surprise in his brilliant blue eyes. His hair and beard were the same colour as the sand and his face lined with age and time. He was familiar to me but I was sure I had never met him before.

"You are not the chosen one." He said. There was such sadness in his voice I felt tears well up in my eyes.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I am the teacher awaiting the student, the student awaiting the teacher." He said cryptically.

I looked around me. "What happened to the storm?"

He smiled. "When one stills one's own fears, one stills the world around them."

"Are you saying I caused the sand storm? Am I dead?" I asked.

"No, in this place you are not dead, nor am I alive." He said. "You brought the storm with you but you also stilled it."

"Why am I here?"

He sighed. "You are on a journey. You are seeking guidance."

"Are you my guide?"

He shook his head. "I do not know. I do not know who you are or how you came to be in this place. I was not expecting you."

"Then why am I here?"

"A circular argument." He remarked. "You are not the chosen one, yet you bear his mark, his touch. You must walk your path with care. The trial before you will take you deep into darkness but remember...in the darkness there is light and without the light there is no darkness. Be careful. Do not forget who you are."

"I don't understand." I said feeling a sense of panic rise in my gut.

He began to fade and became ghost like. "Be wary of hate and be mindful of your passions, they are your greatest source of strength and your greatest weakness..." he said, his last words drifting off into the wind which had picked up again. As I knelt there

watching his physical body melt away I felt an unreasonable fear well up in me. His body was replaced by the outline of the Emperor but before I even had time to scream it was not the Emperor who stood before me but Lord Vader. He did not speak but his hand reached out towards me and as it did so the wind once again became a howling storm. The sand whipped about me, it got in my mouth and in my nose. No matter how hard I tried I could not help from breathing it in. I began to choke. I wanted to scream but I could make no sound. I reached out to grasp Lord Vader's outstretched hand, seeking his help but my hand passed through his incorporeal body. The Emperor's laughter filled my ears, drowning out the wind. That was when I found my voice and screamed, drowning in sand as I did so.

I woke up gasping for breath. I was shaking and soaked with sweat. My own screams still echoed in my ears, had I yelled out loud or had that too been just a dream. I didn't know. With a sigh I heaved myself out of bed and stared at the clock till the time of 4am registered. Usually I had no recollection of my dreams but this time I remembered every single detail. I wrapped a blanket about my shoulders. I was freezing cold and went to make tea. There would be no getting back to sleep now.

Just before the dawn, when I could stand it no longer I made my way through the empty hallways of the palace to Lord Vader's office. The polished stone floor was cold on my bare feet and it had not occurred to me that running around the palace in my night dress and dressing gown would be considered more than just a little unusual. I hesitated only a few seconds before activating the holo transmitter. If Lord Vader was awake and not occupied he would answer if he was busy or meditating he'd ignore it. He was awake.

"What is it?" he barked. Never any time wasted on pleasantries.

"My lord, I hope I am not disturbing you." I said.

"No more so than usual." He retorted. "What do you want? This is not our appointed time to discuss matters."

I went to speak but suddenly I did not know what to say or how to put into words what it was I was feeling and fearing.

"Spit it out girl, do not waste my time!"

"I need to speak with you in person." I said quickly, the words tumbling out. "I... I need your guidance, my lord, but not over the

holonet. There are things... well you need to know, I need to tell you..." I felt like a wayward child asking for help from a stern, unyielding parent. It was not the first time I had contacted him out of schedule, nor would it be the last but it was the first time I had felt so helpless. Perhaps, it was something in my voice or stance, something in my manner or maybe he could sense my inner turmoil, I do not know but what ever it was it made him pause. Instead of his usual impatience or anger he answered thoughtfully.

"I shall be returning to Coruscant in three days, we will talk then."

Three days? I opened my mouth to protest but he raised his hand to shut me up.

"I am currently at the other end of the Galaxy, even if you were to take a shuttle out to meet me, the journey would take you at least three to five days, probably more." He admonished. "What ever it is that troubles you enough to bother me with now has been on your mind for some time, I have felt this. It will not hurt you to wait a few more days. You need to learn the value of patience."

"Yes, my lord." I nodded pondering his right to even use the word patience but didn't say that out loud.

"In the mean time, I believe it is customary during Winter Fete to take time off. I suggest you do so. You are no good to me stressed out and losing sleep."

"Yes, my lord."

He stared at me for a moment and then severed the connection. I shivered in the coolness of the office and wondered what I was supposed to do for the next couple of days. With a sigh I went home, maybe I didn't know what to do for the next few days but at that moment all I wanted was a cup of tea, a hot bath and some sleep.

Some time in the afternoon, after I had woken up from a dreamless nap, someone knocked on the door. I opened it half expecting to find some token or a glass or something sitting on the doormat but instead I stared into the face of a young man not much older than me. He smiled as he handed me an envelope.

"I have been told to wait for an answer, my lady." He said.

I had to bite my tongue. I never could get used to being called my lady, it wasn't something happened on Tatooine all that often. On Coruscant it was the norm.

I took the envelope from the young man's hands and turned

my back to him while I opened it and read the hand written note.

Join me for dinner tonight at 7pm in my home. I promise there will be no interruptions or unexpected visitors.

“You may tell the Captain the answer is yes, I’d be delighted to join him for dinner.”

“Very good, my lady. He said to inform you, should you agree to his request that a driver will be here to pick you up at a quarter to seven.”

“Thank you.” I said and watched him leave before closing the door. I looked at the note in my hands. Thrawn’s handwriting was always so elegant and precise, reflecting his personality. I glanced at the clock and sighed. I had four hours to figure out what to wear.

Five changes of clothing and an hour’s worth of fussing with my hair later, I arrived at Thrawn’s flat. He opened the door and smiled. I had only been here once before and that had been many months ago. It was a beautiful place, high up in the building with a stunning view.

“You look lovely.” He said as he took my wrap and hung it up. I had decided on a simple, ankle length dress made from layers of some light, flowing material the colour of viridian. It was pretty, yet comfortable.

“Thank you and you look very...non military.” I said with a grin.

“You prefer the uniform?”

“No, not really.” I shook my head. He was dressed in a form fitting, long sleeved shirt made from a fabric which was so black it seemed to absorb the light and a pair of tailored trousers that matched. He looked refined and handsome.

“Would you like something to drink?” he asked.

I nodded. He smiled and went into the kitchen. What ever he was cooking smelled wonderful. I wandered around the large airy living room and stopped at the ma’arilite sculpture. It fascinated me, this strange stone that refracted light in so many different ways it was as if I were watching an aurora trapped within its core.

“It calls to you that piece, does it not?” Thrawn asked. I took the glass he offered and nodded slowly. A call was not really the right word, this sculpture sang to me. I just did not quite understand what it was singing about.

“Kha’säri’mahr.” He touched his glass to mine. I sipped the

light sparkling wine and looked around the rest of the room. Nothing had changed since I was here but he had added a new work of art. It was a painting, abstract, strange and eerie. I didn’t really have words to describe it. He had not hung it on the wall but had it sitting on a bookshelf leaning against the wall as though he were still thinking about what to do with it and where exactly to hang it. I stared at it.

“What do you think of it?” he asked.

“At first glance it reminds me of some of my nightmares.” I said.

“And on second glance?” he pressed.

“I wonder how the artist managed to create something that seems to move. It’s fluid in a really unnerving sort way.” I said. “Where did it come from?”

“I bought it at an auction. The artist is not known to me and it is believed to have come from the Unknown Region of space.”

“Does it really move or is that just an optical illusion?” I asked watching as the rounded shapes of black and white seem to shift and shimmer. It was as though the painting were more a living breathing thing than a simple work of art

He shook his head. “I am still trying to figure that out myself. I have never seen anything quite like this. It makes me most curious and I might add cautious about the race of beings that could create something such as this.”

“Well, it’s just plain creepy.” I told him flatly and it was.

With a smile he walked to it and turned the painting around so it faced the wall. “Better?”

I nodded. It was a strange sensation to see a work of art that sent shivers of fear down my spine. Thrawn placed a hand on the small of my back and guided me to the dining room. The table had been set beautifully and the candles warmed the room, stealing away the chill I had just felt.

“I hope you brought an appetite with you.” He said as he politely helped me to sit. I was unaccustomed to these gentlemanly manners. I felt remarkably awkward despite all my mother’s lessons. I must admit I did enjoy the fuss he was making, though. I had never had a man cook dinner for me before at least not like this.

We started with a salad and then came the main meal, a fish dish. I had not eaten much fish in my life. It wasn’t something natural to Tatoonie. I was surprised at the lightness of the flavour and

complimented him on it. He smiled as he told me about the recipe, his mother's. Fish were a staple part of the Chiss diet. They were grown and cultivated in underground lakes, several species which were well suited to the warmer waters deep under the planet's crust had been transplanted from other worlds.

"I have not met many men who could cook like this." I said, actually I had not known any man who could do that. "How did you learn to do it so well and better still, why?"

Thrawn shrugged slightly. "The answer to the 'why' is it was a matter of survival." He said enigmatically. "As for the how, well, one can learn anything if one puts one's mind to it. I firmly believe that if you are going to learn how to do something then learn to do it to the absolute best of your abilities. I discovered I enjoy the subtle art of cooking. It is a pleasure to be able to share this once in a while. More wine?"

The meal ended with desert, a plate of sliced fruit most of which I had never tasted before, then a thick, sweet and spiced dark coffee which he served in the sitting room.

All through dinner he had kept the conversation fairly light. No discussion of politics or Imperial work. I had wanted to press him for more news on Navaari but that too seemed some how forbidden. He had steered the conversation in the direction he wanted it to go, subtly and cleverly. As we sat in the sitting room I asked him about it.

"Meal times in my culture are times of peace and harmony. Discussion of weighty topics is to be avoided, most of the time. It is a nice custom and when I can I try to uphold it. Arguments and heady conversations are bad for the digestion." He said with a smile that made me wonder if he was not half joking.

I shook my head and laughed. "Meal times at my house, as you discovered, are full of all sorts of weighty topics and such. It was the only time we ever discussed anything mostly because it was the only time we were almost all together."

"So what you are telling me is you have mighty things you wish to discuss?" he arched an eyebrow.

I sipped the coffee thoughtfully. "More like nosey." I said truthfully.

"Ah, well, curiosity does seem to be one of your more prominent and, I might add, delightful traits." He teased.

"Well, I was going to ask about Navaari." I said. "You were not exactly forthcoming last night or did you know the Emperor would show up like that?"

"No, I didn't know but I suspected he might want to see me."

"He didn't seem very happy."

"He wasn't. In fact he was most displeased." Thrawn said airily.

"Okay, I'll bite." I said. "Why?"

Thrawn leaned back into the couch we were sitting on. "The Emperor is a man of great wisdom and power but even he does not always see beyond the grandeur of his own scheming. He does not like it when someone refuses him or tells him something contrary to what he believes." He shrugged. "I will not risk the lives of men in the Imperial navy on ideas and plans I know will ultimately fail. It is a waste of resources. It does not please him when I say no to a plan of his and it is made all the worse when I am right about its eventual outcome. He wanted to discuss this last night."

"You say no to the Emperor?"

"When it is necessary, yes. I often disagree with him." Thrawn said.

"And you are still alive." I shook my head.

"I am useful to him." He said coolly. "The Emperor uses fear to rule. It is an interesting tool although not always appropriate. I suspect he was making a point with the entrance that he made last night; wishing to instill fear in you and place me in what could have been a compromising situation."

"Well, he instills fear in me alright." I said.

"And fear makes his subjects blind." Thrawn countered quickly.

I glanced at him trying decipher what he meant exactly by that but he didn't elaborate. I shrugged. "I doubt that simply watching fireworks with me is a particularly compromising situation."

"Well," said Thrawn with a wolfish smile. "It could have been."

I fiddled with my empty cup and tried to ignore the flush I felt in my face. "So, how is Navaari anyway?" I asked, not so adeptly changing the subject.

Thrawn laughed and took the cup from my hands. "I'll tell you everything you want to know over brandy."

We had talked until dawn. He had been true to his word and over a large bowl shaped glass with a small amount of brandy in it he told me about his meeting with Navaari. I soaked up each word eagerly because despite the fact that my time with the Hjal Dantassi hunter had been very short he had, oddly enough, had a large impact on my life. But there wasn't much to tell in the end, the meeting really had been short and Navaari had mostly grilled Thrawn about me.

"He was curious." Thrawn had said. "You were not what he expected." And before I could ask what that was supposed to mean he continued. "Kirja'navaar'inkjerii is somewhat old fashioned. He was surprised that I would choose a non Chiss female to...", he searched for the right word. "...to join my clan. He was surprised at how young you are. He asked me why you and I told him. He asked me why I had not prepared you better and I gave him my reasons. He listened and then he proceeded to tell me off as though I were a young child not a respected hunter in my own right and I took it gracefully because he is my elder and I honour him greatly and..." he added. "He is also right."

I just looked at him as he spoke. "You won't elaborate on the details for me, will you?" I asked.

"No." he said firmly. "Kirja'navaar'inkjerii impressed upon me that we must visit Hjal, that you must be presented to the clan and given the right to unmask. I told him when the time was right."

"And he said?"

"He said nothing, he merely smiled. He placed both of his hands upon my shoulders and he touched his forehead to mine as is custom between hunters and then we parted ways. It was, as I told you before, a very brief, chance meeting."

"Navaari told me that the Dantassi do not believe in chance."

Thrawn cocked his head slightly and raised an eyebrow. "Nor do they but sometimes it happens anyway."

I finished my brandy and set the glass back on the table.

"What does it mean the right to be unmasked?"

"You are asking for details again, yes?"

I nodded.

"It is the ceremony which allows a member from one clan to go unmasked within the confines of another clan." He said. "You would be brought before the entire clan, your face still hidden, to stand in front of the Tribal Elder. The ceremony entails a sponsor, which would be Kirja'navaar'inkjerii and the Ta'kasta'cariad, which will be me. The

Ta'kasta'cariad presents you to the clan and the sponsor accepts responsibility for you on behalf of the clan. There are words spoken which you repeat and then I lift the mask from your face and show your true self to all, they in turn do the same for you. It is a momentous occasion. There is much celebrating afterwards."

"That's it?" he was leaving some things out, I could feel that.

"More or less."

"What are you not telling me?"

"Are you using your witch ways to read my mind?" he asked with a slight smile.

"No, but I feel it when someone is not entirely truthful." I said openly.

He nodded his understanding. "Well, the ritual changes depending on circumstances, so I am vague about it because I have no real idea exactly how it will go, when we actually go through with it."

"You mean, you'd consider doing this?"

"It is not wise to displease a Dantassi elder, which Kirja'navaar'inkjerii is."

"Oh." I nodded. "And just for the record I don't use my witch ways on you, at least not since Myrkr and you deserved that."

His smile was slow but his eyes burned. I fought the urge to scuttle away from him on the couch instead I raised my chin just a notch and matched his gaze. He reached out to me and I held my ground. He took my chin, gently, between his thumb and forefinger. "That was a powerful little magic trick you pulled back then." He whispered leaning in close to me.

"I was cross." I said.

"You need to watch your temper, then." He said softly. He released my chin but caressed my face with the back of his forefinger.

"So I am frequently told." I said tartly. He grinned. I loved this tension that welled up between us. I never took my eyes from his and we stared at each other for a very long time. He brushed his finger across my lips but then abruptly sat back.

"Would you like more brandy?" he asked as the tension receded.

"No." I shook my head, more to clear it than to negate his question. "I think I have had enough, maybe a cup of tea?"

He got up taking the empty glasses with him and went to the kitchen. I followed. I watched him as he moved about the kitchen and

set water to boil, readied a tea pot which looked very old, cast from a dark, heavy metal. Like everything he owned it was exquisite and beautiful. Its metal body decorated with ornate patterns.

“You wrote in your last letter that you had been undergoing training in the Center.” He said as he readied the tea leaves.

I frowned. “The Center?”

“From your description, your master is having you go through training exercises at what is commonly referred to as the Center. It is a teaching facility used, in part, to help train the Emperor’s private guard and his agents.” He said pouring the water into the pot. The scent of the tea rose in the air and it was soothing. “In that cupboard, second shelf, you’ll find cups and saucers.” He said nodding his head in the general direction. I followed him back into the sitting room and set the cups on the table.

“White chaeya leaf tea from Malastare.” He said as he poured two cups. “It has calming properties.” I wondered who exactly it was that needed calming but let it slide.

“What do you know about this Center?” I asked taking the cup he offered. The tea had a sweet, fragrant scent. It tasted a little like Corellian Jasmine and wild apples.

“It is a secret training center for the best of the best, those who will serve the Emperor closely. It is used to train his spies, agents and, as I said, the Royal Guard. It is some place deep in the underground part of the Palace and not many outside this circle of people know of its existence.” He said.

“You know.”

He smiled. “I have undergone some of the programs and training regimens that are done there.”

“Is that standard procedure for a member of the Imperial Navy?” I asked.

“No, but then I am not your standard Imperial Naval officer either.” He said. “The man who found me and played a large part in my academy instruction felt it would be useful for me to be tested through the Center’s programme.”

“That was Voss Park, wasn’t it?” I asked.

He arched an eyebrow. “Yes, a good man, an intriguing man to say the least.”

“So, what did you think of the training that you went through there?” I asked.

He sighed. “It was interesting. Some of the exercises were challenging and some of them were stupid and ill conceived. I made suggestions as to how they could be improved. I did not spend a great deal of time there. I am a little surprised that you are undergoing Center training but I assume, as in all things, the Emperor has his reasons for requesting this.”

“Well, if he does, I don’t know about it.” I said not hiding my annoyance.

“Then my suggestion would be to learn all you can from what you are asked to do, enjoy it.”

I made a face. “Enjoy it?” I let out the breath I had been holding. “I am Lord Vader’s personal Assistant not a bloody spy or secret agent! Running around like a wamprat in a sand maze is not fun.”

He laughed.

“It’s not funny.” I told him.

“No, probably it is not, but sometimes you are.” He said gently. I gave him what I hoped was an indignant look. “Glad I amuse you.”

He sat back and regarded me evenly for a moment. “Are you scared by the exercises you are doing in the Center?”

“Yes, but not so much by the trainings themselves but what they represent.” I answered.

“I can understand that, but perhaps you might want to let that fear go and concentrate on the lessons learned.” He said.

“You sound like the Jedi Master in the Mandalorian Journal I have.” I said. “Good advice, in theory, but hard to put into practice.”

He nodded. “Over coming fear is always difficult, it is a very powerful thing. Perhaps that is the purpose of your time in the Center, to over come your fear.”

“Fear of what?”

He gave me a speculative look. “That is something only you can answer. What scares you the most?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged.

“Of course you do.” He chided.

I frowned and thought about his question. “Failure.” I said after a long silence.

He nodded. “What else?”

“Being helpless.” I told him. “I am not overly fond of the idea

of being trapped and I do not like losing control either.”

“Does anything you have gone through at the Center address any of these things?”

I nodded. “Yes, but how...?”

“The Emperor knows many things. He has ways of seeing past the face and into the soul. Perhaps it is his wish that you face your fears. I am guessing, of course, but it would be the logical assumption considering he has expressed a wish that you be more than simply Lord Vader’s go-to girl. Your place in the Imperial Court is unusual, you are privy to information on many of the high ranking officers, members of the Imperial navy among other things. You have a fairly high profile in the public arena. Lord Vader does not lightly allow anyone near to him and you have managed to be one of the few, much to the concern of some. While you might not have thought about it, this does place you in an interesting and somewhat precarious position. Just something to consider.”

I sipped my tea thoughtfully. “Cheery dinner-date conversation this.” I told him after a moment. “Is there something going on that you know about and I don’t?”

“My dear, I know many things you do not but with regards to this particular topic, the answer would be no. I speculate and make educated guesses based on facts.” He stated coolly then added. “And you are right, it isn’t particularly cheery date conversation, but it is on your mind. Have you spoken your concerns with Lord Vader at all?”

“He said we will meet when he returns to Coruscant in a couple of days from now.”

He nodded. “Good. Perhaps that will help.”

“I doubt it.” I said dryly, pouring a second cup of tea. “After all, it is Lord Vader we are talking about here.”

To my surprise Thrawn burst out laughing. I watched him for a moment in astonishment and then giggled with him, his laughter was infectious. It broke the strange tension that had dampened the evening and the conversation shifted to art and music. We talked for a very long time and it surprised me when I suddenly realised it was no longer late evening but early morning. I watched as Thrawn spoke about an artist we both liked. He was animated and passionate. His hands, large and long fingered, moved as he spoke accentuating his words. As I watched him I realised that over the months that we had known each other I had begun to feel much more for him than just the

sparks of desire he ignited in me. It occurred to me that this was not a very good thing and my mind said back off and get out but my heart said something utterly different. Something of these thoughts must have shown on my face because he stopped mid sentence and looked at me.

“What is it?” he asked. “Is something wrong? Can I get you something? Is there something you’d like?”

What I wanted to say was ‘I’d like to go home, it’s late, and I need to sleep.’ But what came out of my mouth was “I’d like you to kiss me.”

He sat very still for a moment then smiled slowly. “I had wondered if you might make such a request.” He said softly.

“You were waiting for me to ask?”

He leaned in very close to me and whispered in my ear. “It is not always about what I would like, Miss Gabriel. Sometimes I wish to know what it is you want.” His voice was velvety and his breath was warm against the skin of my neck. It made me shiver. I looked to his face to try and decipher this mystery of a man I sat next to. He simply smiled and then he did as I had asked. He kissed me. No mysteries in that, I did my best to kiss him back and gave up thinking about anything else.

Desire is a strange thing. It curls about inside your body like a dragon and breathes its fire until it feels as though you will burn from the inside out. It is a drug though, and once tasted, one generally wants more and it is a power that once tapped is hard to turn off. I could feel it all rise up and crash around me. I was true to my word and I did not use my weirding ways on Thrawn but I felt his desire keenly and I fed on it, I fed on my own as well and it spiraled out of control showering us both. I could no more stop this than I could stop breathing. If this had been a tangible thing we would have been surrounded by a dancing, fiery light, least that is what it felt like. He broke from me, mid kiss, surprise in his eyes. He pushed back, holding me at arm’s length. He worked to control his breathing.

“What is this? Is it your doing?” he asked,

I nodded. “I’m sorry...I can’t control this...you, I mean I ...” I stopped and also tried to remember to breathe. “Oh boy...”

“This power you have...” He could not finish his sentence. He looked quite intoxicated but it had nothing to do with wine or brandy.

I swallowed trying to get my heartbeat back to some sort of

normal. I took a deep, steadying breath and shook my head. "This is something new, I have never felt this, well quite anything like this before, I don't know how to ..." I shrugged. I had no idea how to even describe what this was, how it happened. We stared at each other for several long wary moments and slowly the energy receded.

He got up and walked to the window. He was very quiet. After a moment I followed to stand at his side. We watched the night sky slowly give way to the dawn. I wondered if I had done something wrong, this was new territory to me. I wanted to ask but feared his answer so I stayed silent and brooded.

When he finally looked at me it was with a smile. He caressed my face gently. "Do you have plans for this evening?" he asked.

I raised both eyebrows in surprise. That was the last question I had expected. "What did you have in mind?"

"Tonight is the final evening of Winter Fete, there will be a large celebration in the Imperial palace, the same place the Grand Ball is held. I believe I owe you a dance or two and this would be the perfect venue to repay this debt."

"This is an Imperial Court event?" I asked. I had not been aware of it, but that was not a big surprise, I had been ignoring some of the internal memos lately.

He nodded. "Yes, although it is not a required attendance event. I am quite sure Lord Vader was not sent a reminder. The Emperor will most likely not attend this year either but many others will. The orchestra will be the best and the dance floor, as you know, is large."

"So, there will be lots of people?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes." He said. "You'd prefer something less formal, less crowded?" he asked but before I could answer he continued. "I don't think it would be so wise for me to spend another night all alone with you. I only have so much self restraint and while, my dear, I can and will give you half a chance, spend hours kissing you there will come a moment, a time when that is not enough." His voice was a husky purr.

"Is that so wrong?" I asked.

He sighed. "If I were to pick you up right now and carry you to my bedroom would you be afraid?" he asked.

"A little." I nodded.

He shook his head. "You are such a distraction." He muttered.

"Is that good or bad?"

He drew a deep breath. "Bad for my self control. Good for my ego." He said with a slight smile. "What you and I feel, it isn't bad or wrong but the timing is."

"Oh? Why?" I asked, folding my arms across my chest.

"Because, my dear, when I bed you I want that we have the whole night before us not already behind us." He whispered in my ear. "And there will be no fear just anticipation."

My mouth formed a silent "Oh!" and I suppose the sudden blush I felt rise in my cheeks told him all he needed to know.

He chuckled and went back to looking out of the window. "You never answered my question." He said after a while.

"Which was?"

"Do you wish to attend the festivities with me tonight?"

"Oh right, well it could be fun." I nodded.

"I'll take that as a yes?"

"On one condition." I said.

He arched an eyebrow.

"That we slip away and watch the fireworks from the balcony in peace and quiet."

"I think that is a condition I can acquiesce to." He said. "And now I think it is time I took you home. I have some things to do and you have work, do you not?"

I stifled a yawn shaking my head. "No, I have been granted some time off for Fete week."

"Then I suggest you get some rest for this evening." He said.

"Aye, aye Captain." I said, but what I was thinking was what in the name of Sarlacc was I going to wear to this thing. My life, it seemed, had sadly become a strange mix of the sublime and ridiculous. The ridiculous being my sudden need to be fashionable and worry about dresses, shoes and such and whether they would please this man or not.

I smiled when Thrawn placed my wrap across my shoulders and without much further ado he took me home.

The first thing I did when I got back to my flat was make an appointment to see Cati, the Rodian seamstress whose dresses I adored, later that afternoon. The second thing I did was have a long, hot bath. My mind buzzed because I was over-tired and unable to

unwind. I could not think straight. This was not what I had wanted or expected. Every time I closed my eyes I could hear his voice, feel his touch, taste his lips and it was absolutely all I could think of. It was driving me mad. I did not like this sensation of spiralling out of control. That one person, this one man, had such a bewildering influence over me. I was scared to death of it all but like the drug it was, I was beginning to crave it as well. It tugged at me. It pushed at my self control which I had totally lost. I had tapped into the desire, the power that we had created and I had sent it flying like a wild wind all around the two of us. It had been so strong he had not only just felt it but it had hit him like a sand storm. That was the thing that worried at me the most. How did I learn to control that? Lord Vader had spoken of passion, saying it was a power and it should be used not shoved aside and stifled. The Emperor had said much the same thing, I was a creature of passion and I should tap into this power but when I did all manner of chaos seemed to break loose. I wondered if this intensity was normal but I had nothing except my experience with Jyrki to base it on and, well, that was not the greatest example in the galaxy.

I lay in the bath and worked on letting it all go, concentrated on my breathing, but the relaxation techniques didn't work and the only thing that happened after a while was the water got cold. Frustration eventually gave way to exhaustion as I argued with myself over and over about everything and anything. When I did fall asleep it was a mercy.

I woke mid afternoon from a restless dream. The strange man in the desert from a previous nightmare haunted me in my sleep. The things he said, the images he showed me made no sense. Like most dreams they were jumbled and confusing yet real enough that I remembered them up on waking. I woke troubled and fuzzy headed. It took several cups of thick, sweet coffee before I felt like myself and ready to face Cati and her almost overwhelming enthusiasm.

Cati's shop was in the fashion district off the main strip. She was a pretty woman from the planet Rodia and she recognized me instantly as I walked through the doors. Her mohawk hair had been dyed a bright red and it matched her outfit. A genuinely cheerful grin split her snout. I was surprised that she remembered my name and even more surprised that she remembered exactly what dresses I had from her. The conversation was light and airy until she commented on

how tired I looked while taking new measurements.

"Late night." I said making a face and not quite managing to hide a smile.

She grinned as only a Rodian can. "Oh, I hope he was worth it." She said.

I looked at her for a moment and then threw caution to the wind asked. "How did you know there was a he involved?"

She gave me an 'I know all sorts of things' look. "Miss Gabriel, I have been doing this dress making thing a long time. I have learned to read people pretty well over the years and that look on your face, that spark in your eyes says there was a man involved."

"Ah, well it's not what you think." I frowned.

She stopped what she was doing and put her hands on her hips. "And just what do I think?" she asked.

"Erm..." I opened my mouth then shut it again. Rodians could be fierce when they wanted to be and Cati was no exception.

"Well then! No actually, I wasn't thinking *that* at all." She told me tartly going back to taking measurements. I sighed, remembering that Rodians could also be very forward when they wished to be. "Actually what I was thinking is, it is nice to see someone enjoying the company they keep rather than it being a job. You are not a courtesan so I didn't assume you were sleeping with him, who ever it is." She said with a grin. "Besides you don't have that slept with him look in your eyes."

"Erm..." I started and then stopped. We were the only two in her shop, it was quiet and calm and she was chattier than I remember her being. "No, I am not a courtesan and yes he was worth it." I could not help my smile. "I have no idea what I am getting myself into though." I added.

"Hrmph, I can see that." She said. "Now, what do you need from me today?"

"I need a dress." I said.

"You wouldn't be here if you didn't, details would be helpful." She said.

"For tonight." I added.

"Ah, I knew there was a challenge in this. Am I to also guess that you wish it to please this gentleman?"

I began to ask how she knew that but she just laughed. "Yes." I replied.

“What sort of venue is it?”

“The Fete festival at the Palace. So it’s formal, even though they say it isn’t and there will be dancing, lots and lots of dancing.”

She grinned widely. “Oh, I have just the perfect thing then and it should fit you with some minor adjustments.” And before I could say anything she vanished and returned a few moments later with an armful of pale pink fabric.

“Try this on.” She said handing me the big pile of pink.

I did as I was told. I didn’t think I had any right to argue with her seeing as how this was really short notice. The dress was surprisingly stunning and the colour was perfect. It was a strapless dress without a whole lot of back to it either. It was made from a beautiful silk that shimmered with pale purple highlights. The Bodice was snug and gave me cleavage yet was still amazingly comfortable. I wasn’t sure how she had managed that trick. The front of the gown where the bodice ended had tiny, almost invisible pleats allowing for a flat clean look over the hips but the fabric flared towards the floor giving the skirt itself a lot of material. For fabric that looked heavy it was surprisingly light and soft. The entire dress had been hand beaded with tiny, pale iridescent beads. It was stunning.

I walked out of the change room and Cati whistled. “Yup.” She said. “Needs to be hemmed though, you’ll trip and fall on your face with that length.”

“It’s strapless, how on earth will it stay up?” I asked tugging a little at the bodice.

“Goodness, you are not going to fight a war in it or wrestle gundarks, are you?” Cati shook her head. “You should learn to trust more. I am very good at what I do and believe me that bodice isn’t going any where, don’t worry nothing will pop out!” I must have had a look of disbelief on my face because she told me to move around, stretch, twirl...do what ever it was that dancer did. So I obeyed and after five minutes of wild movements I was reasonable sure the dress would stay put.

“Right, now that that worry is over with, hop up on the platform so I can hem this dress or you won’t have it in time for tonight. When do you need to be there?”

I stood on the platform so that she could do her work. “He’ll be picking me up at eight tonight.”

“Lots of time then, do you have shoes to match?” she asked.

“Uhm, that would be a no, unless black pumps or boots count.”

She sighed and promptly vanished into the back room for a few moments. I could hear her talking but I didn’t know the language. When she came back she continued to set the hem. About ten minutes into the process someone came into the store and yelled for her. She came back with a box in her hands.

“Try these.” She said taking a pair of shoes out of the tissue paper they were wrapped in.

“How do you do that?” I asked as I tried on the shoes. “They match the dress perfectly and they fit as though they were made for me.”

She nodded. “I have an arrangement with the shoe maker down the street he matches dye lots with me and I use his shoes exclusively. He remembered your shoe size from your last visit.”

“Cool.” Was all I could think to say. She chuckled as she finished pinning the hem.

“Okay, Miss Gabriel, you can get out of the dress now.”

I slipped off the shoes and got down off the platform. Wriggled my way out of the dress in the small change room and put my street clothes back on.

“I’ll have it all sent over when it’s done. Just give me the address.” She said.

“Thank you for everything. I owe you one.” I said as I wrote the expense account number on the bill.

She smiled. “My pleasure. Most of the time I get bored courtesans coming in and saying things like ‘He likes black or he wants me to wear something backless. As a rule they are fussy and difficult to work with and so are most of the wealthier clients I have. Don’t get me wrong I love them all they pay the bills but...” She shrugged. “, every now and then it is nice to fit someone who actually looks forward to the evening. How were you planning on wearing your hair?”

“Oh probably similar to how I am now, just tucked up with Zenji sticks.”

She shook her head. “Let it down, sweep a little off your face, tie that up with a nice clip or something. You have lovely, long hair and your gentleman will like that if you don’t often wear it down. You do have some decent hair clips don’t you?”

I nodded. “Thank you.” I said genuinely grateful and totally on

impulse I hugged her.

She grinned. "I will have your dress finished and delivered by six pm, so enjoy the evening." She said.

True to her word, the dress and the shoes arrived at my door by six pm. I unwrapped the dress from the tissue paper and held it up. In the privacy of my own home it looked a lot more revealing than it had in the shop. I laid it over the chair and took a look at the shoes, they seemed a little higher than they had before and I bit my lip. What had I been thinking? It was just as I was about to go through my closet to see if there was anything else I could wear that I noticed the extra envelope with my name on it. Inside was a hand scribbled note from Cati and a delicate hair clip that matched the dress.

Don't you dare get cold feet. The dress and shoes are perfect. The hair piece is a little gift just to make sure you actually get that right and don't use some sort of paper clip or something. Next time you come to the shop I want to know how it went. - Cati

The note made me smile and wonder how it was she really did know so much. It took me two hours to fuss with my hair, get my make up just right decide what perfume to use and get into the dress. I was an absolute wreck by the time the doorbell rang.

We had been through this before. There was a sort of routine to it now, me opening the door, letting him in then waiting to see his face, his reaction to me. I stepped back as he entered the flat. He was wearing his dress uniform and he carried it well.

His eyes looked me up and down. "Pretty dress." He said with a wolfish smirk.

"Cati made it." I said for lack of anything else to say.

"Ah yes, your favourite tailor. I'll have to send her flowers as a thank you or something. She has a very good eye, you look quite ..." He paused, "stunning."

I was genuinely nervous. I wasn't sure why exactly. Usually we bantered cheerfully back and forth and it was easy. Suddenly, now I felt incredibly awkward. I could and would stand up to Lord Vader even argue with him, but right in this moment I wished the ground would devour me, or something anything to not have to face Thrawn. I smiled shyly, fiddled with my hair and looked away, glancing at my shawl and purse. I didn't see him move and I gasped when his hands slipped about my waist pulling me tightly to him.

"A'myshk'a, look at me." He commanded. I did as he bid. I

don't know what he read in my face and I could not decipher his own expression but the kiss he gave me was easy to understand. Time stopped, my heart raced and when the kiss ended I felt a lot less nervous. I wasn't sure how or why that worked but I wasn't going to argue and I was thankful that I had chosen a clear lip gloss over lipstick.

"Better?" he asked.

I nodded.

"I have something for you." He said placing a small box in my hand before I could say anything.

I opened it and smiled. It was a pendant. "You give me so much..." I said quietly. I took it out of the box and studied it.

"It has a name, this piece." he said, "and it is quite old."

I let the light play with the stone, which was a simple, round piece of polished Ma'arilite. I could just make out the flash of blue, the colour of twilight night as I moved it back and forth."

Thrawn watched me and then when he saw from the look of surprise on my face that I had found the thing that made this piece special he took it from my fingers and fastened the delicate silver chain around my neck.

"It is very subtle." He said as he moved my hair aside, his fingers brushing the sensitive skin of the nape of my neck. "Most people would not value such a pale example of Ma'arilite, but the woman who sold it showed me its treasure and I knew you had to have it. She said that it was called *Rishi-estalliana*, which means evening star. It is not as flashy as some pieces of Ma'arilite that I have seen but then again, sometimes the most beautiful things are hidden until someone uncovers their secrets." He said gently.

I picked it up and looked at it, it took a little bit of work to find that singular flash of brilliance and colour which twinkled just like a star in the blue

"Thank you." I said. "You keep giving me beautiful things and I don't know what to say."

He arched an eyebrow. "You don't need to say anything, just enjoy them. Now, shall we go?" he asked offering me his arm.

The air buzzed with excitement and good cheer. People were out in full force all over the city celebrating Winter Fete. We made our way into the great hall and I marvelled at how many beings attended this particular event. The hall was alive with laughter and chatter.

Palace courtiers and courtesans, Imperial officers of all ranks, many Imperial Palace workers, civilian and military, human and alien alike all seemed to be enjoying and taking part in the party.

With my hand lightly placed on Thrawn's arm, we walked down the main stairs into the crowd. There were many faces I recognized and many members of the Imperial Navy and military nodded or saluted Thrawn as he passed by.

"What would you like to drink?" he asked me as we neared the buffet table and bar.

"Something that won't go straight to my head." I told him, looking around. Thrawn nodded and moved away from my side to go and fetch something to drink. I drew a deep breath and watched the crowd around me. Already people were dancing. The music was good and cheerful. I was caught up observing the swirling dancers when someone touched my arm.

"Hey, I didn't expect you to be here!" Shiv said happily giving me a hug and a kiss on each of my cheeks.

"Last minute decision." I said. "I tried to comm you two days ago but they said you were unavailable."

"Had to go to Corellia for a project. Was it important?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Nope, just wanted to chat."

"Good evening Siavaan." Thrawn said from behind me. I took the pale blue coloured drink he offered me.

"Tanji berry juice, no alcohol, no fuzzy head." Thrawn said to me as I gave the drink a questioning look. Shiv raised his eyebrows.

I looked at both men. "I can't dance if I am drunk." I said tartly, sipping the strange berry juice.

"We have a table reserved over there," Shiv pointed out, "If you want to join us, it will get very crowded soon and it's good to have a place to put your stuff, drinks, purses what ever..."

We walked over to the table to claim two seats and Shiv introduced Thrawn to Antygra, Bobbyn, Maxxi and Ynyth. They all hid their surprise at seeing the Captain joining their table really well but I knew there would be many, many questions as soon as Thrawn was not at my side. I laid my shawl over the back of the chair and my little purse on the table beside my drink as we got through the greetings and pleasantries.

"Captain, I believe you promised me a dance." I said before

anyone could say anything else. Thrawn simply smiled, offered me his arm and led me to the dance floor where we joined in on the waltz currently being played.

"Your friends are nice but nose-y." He said and we circled around the dance floor.

"How can you tell that, they never asked a single question?"

He laughed. "Was written all over their faces, and you cannot tell me that they will not ask a single question about me and you as soon as you sit down and I am not with you,"

I gave him my best innocent look. "Guess you should probably stay very close to me then, shouldn't you?"

"You play a dangerous game, Miss Gabriel." He said with that smile I had come to associate with his teasing.

"I am learning from the best." I retorted.

"Touché." He laughed.

We danced easily together and I loved the sensation of whirling around the dance floor in his arms. As we moved about he pointed out many of the military and naval officers to me. He began to teach me about how to identify the ranks from the insignia worn and the differences in the uniforms, the most notable being that Grand Admirals wore white. I didn't tell him that I had already known that. I didn't want to spoil his fun because he enjoyed teaching me. There were several men wearing the white uniform to be seen and he knew who they all were.

"In the corner, the Grand Admiral with the brown hair, next to the blond courtesan is Rufaan Tigellinus. He was appointed two years ago to the circle of twelve. Not the best military genius among us but he plays the court politics very well. He likes to be seen with the elite circles of the Imperial Court, the ruling families and Coruscant's wealthy." He said in my ear as we danced. "He is oily and does not like non humans but he tries to hide this fact."

I glanced at the man he was describing. He was not particularly handsome and had an air of haughty boredom about him. The young courtesan who hung off his arm also looked disinterested in anything going on around her.

"You know Grand Admiral Demetrius Zaarin already." Thrawn said, nodding over to where the Grand Admiral stood, talking with a small circle of lower ranking naval officers. "He is a brilliant scientist, very gifted, very intelligent and remarkably at ease with court society

etiquette. He is the leader of the Starfighter Research has helped design some of the Imperial ships. He is working on upgrading some of the older model TIE fighter. He can be very charming when he wants to as you have already discovered.”

I nodded. The music changed and so did the dance. Under Thrawn’s leadership I didn’t stumble over my own feet.

“By the bar is Nial Declann. It might interest you to learn that he is force sensitive and he has been well trained in the arts you would know as Sith, that however, is not widely known.” He told me with a slight smile, “He is known for his use of something the Emperor calls battle meditation, the ability to manipulate and help aid the troops during manoeuvres and actual offensives. He is moody and unpredictable, though. Very loyal to the Empire and not particularly interested in the inner intricacies of court politics, he and Tigellinus argue a lot.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about them all.” I commented as he guided me through a complicated set of steps.

“I make it my business to know as much as I can about my enemies and those who regard me as a threat.” He said coldly. “Make no mistake, Miss Gabriel, the Imperial court and all its manifestations is a vicious creature. It is as much about survival of the fittest as it is about survival of the smartest. Do you see the Grand Admiral over there, the one next to Moff Kaine, well that is Ishin-Il-Raz, probably one of the only Grand Admirals who was promoted purely for his ability to play the political games. He has absolutely no military or strategic knowledge what so ever. He helped to co-found COMPNOR. He has attempted to try his hand at the military game and failed miserably. His failures brought about certain atrocious acts and massacres which have helped to alienate certain members of the Empire against Imperial rule. He admires the Emperor above all other beings and tries to emulate him in many ways but fails to see the bigger picture.”

“Sounds charming.” I said flatly, glancing at the small man with black curly hair and cruel looking eyes. “Why are you telling me all of this?”

He smiled at me. “It is always good to know a little about the people who live in your world.” He said. “These men are powerful and have influence. Even Lord Vader will, on occasion, listen to them when he feels they have something to contribute.” He said leading me off the

dance floor towards our table but before we could reach it we were intercepted by two young naval officers who wanted to talk to the Captain.

“Run along, my dear,” he said in that cool tone he reserved for when we were in public. “I’ll join you shortly.”

“Yes, Captain.” I said meekly, I could play this game too. I made my way back to where Shiv and Antygra sat. Bobbyn and Ynyth were dancing. I sat, took a sip of my drink and made a face.

“So you and the Captain, huh?” Antygra asked. “He took you to the Opera on Theed too didn’t he?”

I rolled my eyes. “You were there, you spied on me.”

“Oh please, it’s not spying if I didn’t know you were going to be there. But you know, you are his favourite, I have not ever seen him attend these sorts of functions before unless it was absolutely mandatory and never with anyone of the female persuasion.” Antygra said, waving his hand at me to shut my protest up.

I shrugged and Shiv poked my arm. “Our Merly is just full of secrets.” He said.

“So, what is he like?” Antygra asked. Everyone asked this. I gave him my usual reply and Shiv poked me in the arm again.

“Ow!” I poked him back.

“That’s your standard answer, Merly. Now truth!” Shiv said.

I sighed. “Well, he is a very good cook.” I said and then giggled at Shiv’s expression.

“How do you know that?”

I looked at Antygra. “Not telling.” I answered. “He is also a very good dancer and he has exquisite taste in wine and art.”

Shiv shook his head in mock despair, “Oh dear.”

I laughed.

“Anyone want something else to drink?” asked Antygra, getting up, with a shake of his head.

“Sparkling water, please, anything but this awful berry stuff.” I said.

Once he had left, Shiv cornered me. “Okay, out with it.” He poked my arm. “What is going on with you and that man? And don’t tell me ‘nothing’ because I simply won’t believe that. You blush when you’re asked about him and you were positively glowing as he swept you off to the dance floor.”

“Shiv, you know it is forbidden to fraternise with members of

the Imperial navy.”

He gave me a look. “Okay, okay we’ll go out for coffee tomorrow afternoon, someplace private and you *will* tell me everything.”

I just raised my eyebrows at him and accepted the drink Antygra gave me. I was certain that Shiv would have pressed further but Thrawn picked that moment to rejoin us.

“So did I arrive in time to save you from the inquisition?” Thrawn asked me, pointedly looking at Shiv and Antygra. They both tried to look innocent and failed. Thrawn smiled. “I see that is a yes.”

“We are just looking out for our girl here.” Shiv said defensively.

Thrawn arched an eyebrow. “Indeed. Well then, Siavaan, what would you like to know?”

I looked from one face to the other waiting to hear what the outcome of this would be but before I could find out someone tapped me lightly on the shoulder. I turned around to see Grand Admiral Zaarin standing there, asking me to dance with him. It would have been rude to refuse. I got up and placed my hand gingerly in the Admiral’s. I looked back as I was escorted to the dance floor, they were all laughing. I was pretty certain that what ever Shiv, the Captain and Antygra talked about, they would not tell me afterwards.

The rest of the evening was a dizzying blur of dance and chatter. I suppose because it was Winter Fete and the last night of the celebration, as it got later in the evening so the party got wilder, louder and more out of control. It surprised me a little when several fist fights broke out among junior officers and palace civilian workers. More than once I found myself being taken for a palace courtesan and having to fend off unwanted attention from some very drunk men. Usually these matters were resolved amicably enough and only twice did Thrawn step in and enforce my refusal firmly enough to get the point across. By eleven o’clock I had had enough.

“Can we go now?” I whispered as we danced to a slow piece of music. It was difficult not to forget where we were and lay my head against his chest as he held me close.

“If that is your wish.” He said with a lazy smile.

“Well it is either that or I kill the next silly idiot who tries to kiss me, or grab at me and that would make a scene.” I said sweetly.

Thrawn chuckled. “When we finish this dance, say goodbye to

your friends and I will have the speeder waiting.” He said.

It was raining. I hurried into the waiting speeder so I would not get my dress wet. It had seemed a bit silly to me that we should go to this fete thing in a vehicle when I only lived a short distance away but now I was glad, my feet ached from all the dancing in new shoes and the rain would have ruined my dress.

As soon as we stepped inside my part of the palace, I kicked off my shoes. Barefoot felt like bliss. Thrawn smiled watching me.

“You go on ahead, I’ll join you in a moment I need to change shoes and visit the refresher.” I said as we reached my flat. “Should I bring something to drink or do you have that sorted out?” I asked opening my door.

“I have that well in hand, my dear.” He said.

“Then I will be with you in a few minutes.” I said.

He arched an eyebrow and gave me one of those looks that somehow managed to make my knees weak. “If you have not joined me in five minutes I shall have to come looking for you and that could get...interesting.”

I stood up on tip toes and kissed him lightly. “Interesting could be fun.” I said.

“Miss Gabriel, the fire works will begin very soon.” His hands cupped my face gently.

Without meaning to I replied. “I hope so.”

He gave me a slow feral smile and his eyes glowed. “Careful...” he said.

I swallowed and backed off a space. “I’ll be quick as a pod racer!”

He turned away, laughing as he walked down the hallway towards the older part of the palace where our balcony was. I smiled as I walked into my flat. It didn’t seem out of place to me to think of that quiet place and its stunning balcony as ‘ours’. I wondered what this night would bring. Anticipation, not fear.

Quickly, I slipped into the refresher and did what I had to do, brushed my teeth and refreshed my perfume. Then I went into my bedroom to find a more comfortable pair of shoes.

I wasn’t expecting to see anyone there so when I came face to face with two large men I had never met before standing in my bedroom I was momentarily shocked. It took the nearest one lunging for me to spring me into action. I kicked him as hard as I could and ran

from the bed room. I was not expecting to encounter someone else in my flat so the man who had been waiting in the quiet of the living room took me completely by surprise when he backhanded me across the face and sent me flying across the floor. I didn't even get to see him. Before I could get up the other two were upon me. I yelled and kicked and fought using everything I had ever been taught but one small woman against three very strong men was a bit unfair. They had the advantage and I was hindered by vast amounts of beautiful and expensive silk. It was a short fight. In the end I felt someone grab my hair and yank back my head, his hands grazing the chain from my pendant and breaking it. I reached up to catch the necklace before it fell to the ground just as a hypo-spray was jabbed into the side of my neck.

“Just like you said, Captain, she fights like a wee devil.” said the voice at my side.

“Just dope her!” The order came from the man who had been hiding in the living room.

I felt the pressure of the spray against my skin and then I felt the drug. It was very strong and it made my skin crawl from the inside out. I wriggled and struggled as much as I could but who ever held me had me locked fast in his arms and I was losing consciousness. I felt myself being lifted up and slung over someone's shoulder, I felt him duck to go under something and I then felt the darkness come for me. I struggled against it but lost. The last thought I remember having was that I had dropped the necklace Thrawn had given me and it would be lost. After that was only blackness and nothing more.